The Issue of Issues
September 18, 2002

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

The influence of issues in electoral outcomes is often confusing—even contradictory. Do they play an important role in voting? If so, what is the link between a specific issue and voting for a specific candidate?

Candidates confront the issue of issues daily. They are admonished to "discuss the issues" more—or to run more "issue oriented campaigns." Editorial writers wax eloquently about the importance of "debating the issues." And voters themselves often express a desire to "hear more about the issues."

But much of this is public rhetoric, unmatched by the private views widely held in the political community. There, candidates and their handlers often privately discount the importance of campaign issues—maybe they're good PR, but they're not necessarily good politics. Just as real men don't eat quiche—real voters don't vote issues. Legendary political consultant Lee Atwater probably summed this attitude up best when he declared "Image will trump substance every time."

So, campaigners may talk the issues talk—because it is expected—but when push comes to shove, they give issues short shrift in favor of campaign tactics that emphasize candidate qualities or partisan loyalties. In the end, electoral choices are presented to the voters not in terms of issue A or issue B—but in terms of candidate A or candidate B—or as party A or party B.

But this year something interesting and, perhaps, unprecedented is happening in the Pennsylvania gubernatorial election. A well-funded and prestigious think tank, the Pennsylvania Economy League, is aggressively insinuating campaign issues into the race. By commissioning issue polls, sponsoring issue debates, and generally promoting issue discussion, the Economy League has raised issue awareness higher than it has been in any election in memory.

In addition, many state newspapers and television stations have increased their efforts to provide issue coverage, both in field reporting and on their web sites. And the Pennsylvania Cable Network (PCN) is airing almost round the clock coverage of the state's elections this year.

The question is: will it all matter? Will the unprecedented discussion of issues produce more issue voting in Pennsylvania's 2002 gubernatorial contest?

First, a definition is needed—issue voting is voting based mainly or exclusively on a voters awareness and evaluation of campaign issues. Three conditions are necessary for issue voting to occur: (1) a voter must be aware of the issue and possess some understanding of it; (2) then a voter must feel some intensity about the issue; (3) finally a voter must perceive a difference among competing candidates on the issue and vote on the basis of that perception.

Issue voting thus understood poses a stiff challenge to the average voter. Take the education issue in the context of the current gubernatorial campaign. It is inarguably a top tier issue in the campaign: candidates talk about it, significant constituency groups disagree about it, and voters (in polls) say they care about it.
But will voters cast a vote based on it? For that to occur voters have to: (1) be reasonably versed on the fundamentals--such as funding sources, equity issues, school district concerns, and policy options, (2) feel some definite intensity with respect to public policy on the issue, and (3) know enough about the candidates positions to perceive how those position fit their own views.

In short, they must be informed, feel strongly, and vote consistently on the basis of their knowledge and feelings. Whew!

It has been estimated that on average about one in five voters meets this three-part test--knowledge, intensity, and voting follow through. They are the true "issue voters," meaning they are informed on particular issues, feel strongly about them, and vote on the basis of their knowledge and feelings.

So, some 80 percent of the electorate are not "issue voters" and by any measure that is an overwhelming proportion of voters. But this does not mean that issue voting is unimportant in elections.

First, the obvious arithmetic: roughly 20 percent of all voters can be decisive in a close election, and Pennsylvania statewide elections are typically close.

Furthermore, some voters really do care about issues. Polls done for the Pennsylvania Economy League (IssuesPa) and at Millersville University's Center for Politics and Public Affairs (The Keystone Poll) clearly illustrate the saliency of issues like the economy, education, health care, and property taxes.

And so we seemingly have a paradox. Voters care about issues--but most of them (80 percent) aren't issue voters. The paradox, however, is spurious. It is explained by the difficulty voters have in gathering information as part of the process of deciding how to vote.

The types of information voters seek ranges from collecting sophisticated data on issues to picking up facts casually, such as a candidate's name or a ballot position. For most voters, information seeking is an arduous time consuming process--and so they tend to minimize the burden. They learn about the candidates and their positions in dribbles--a bit here, a bit there--nothing very systematic.

Issues pose the highest information costs. Here the sledding gets tough. Issues are rarely simple or straightforward, and voters have to exert effort to master them. In addition, candidate and constituency groups sometimes distort and even dissemble on the issues. The bottom line: voters are often on their own if they want to be issue voters.

This is why efforts to systematically disseminate issue information like those of the Economy League and PCN are so promising. They advocate not a special interest issue--but issues themselves. And they provide voters with enough information about the issues and the candidates--that being a true issue voter becomes feasible for more and more voters.

Will it have that effect? It's too early to tell. But there is reason to be optimistic. Statewide, political journalists are covering issue events to an unprecedented degree. Both major gubernatorial candidates are talking about issues more--and voters this year are getting more information about the issues than ever before.
The real test, of course, comes on Election Day and beyond; in terms of how much interest voters have in the election, how political leaders respond to a much more informed electorate, and what quality of public policy we get. But long journeys begin with single steps. We're stepping.

---------------

*Politically Uncorrected™* is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2002 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.