

# DEVELOPING AN ISSUE MATRIX

THE ART OF DEFINING  
YOURSELF AND YOUR  
OPPONENT



INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE  
BEIRUT, LEBANON  
AUGUST 2007

# THE LANGUAGE WE SPEAK DEPENDS ON SHARED DEFINITIONS.

- Shared definitions allow us to convey arguments, share jokes and inspire action – basically to understand one another.
- The more concrete something is, the easier it is to define. Conversely, the more abstract or complex something is – whether an idea, emotion or person – the more difficult it is to define.

# CAMPAIGNS MUST DEFINE THEIR CONCEPTS, PEOPLE AND ACTIONS

Candidates, parties and political initiatives are designed to inspire a large number of people to:

- **Share** similar concerns
- **Perceive** people similarly
- **Act** the same

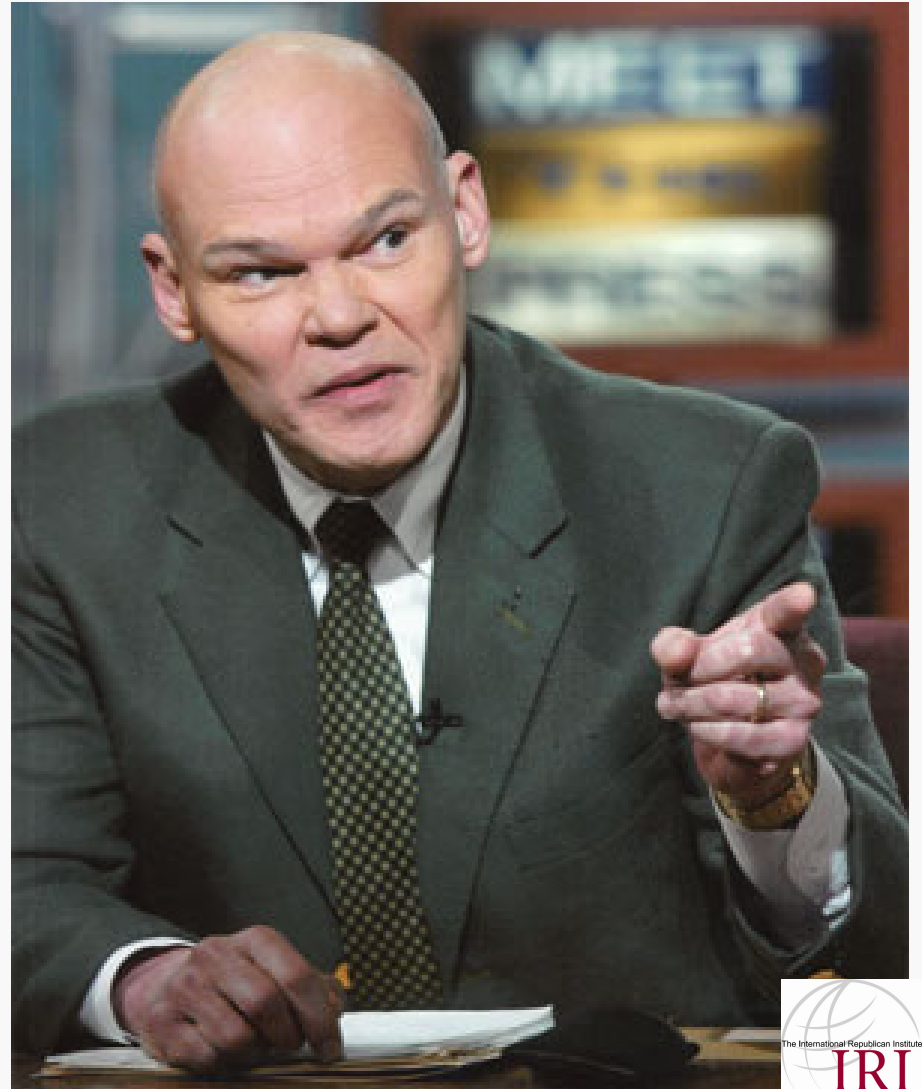
Candidates, parties and political initiatives  
must also take care to define the concepts,  
people and actions of their opponents

... before their opponents do.

“Our opponent  
won’t be able to  
criticize us if our  
fist is in his  
mouth.”

- James Carville

American Political Consultant



# PLANNING YOUR MESSAGE

Candidates and parties should ask themselves the following questions before undertaking an initiative or campaign:

- How do we define ourselves?
- How do our opponents define themselves?
- How do we define our opponents?
- How do our opponents define us?

# ISSUE MATRIX

+/+

How do we define ourselves?

+/-

How do our opponents define  
us?

-/-

How do our opponents define  
themselves?

-/+

How do we define our  
opponents?

Assume a candidate made of Fire is running against a candidate made of Water for public office. Fire is the incumbent and Water is the challenger. Here's how their matrix might look:

**Fire +**



**Fire -**



**Water +**



**Water -**





## **Fire +**

Cooks  
Warms  
Purifies



## **Fire –**

Destroys  
Burns  
Pollutes



## **Water +**

Life giving  
Cools  
Cleans



## **Water -**

Drowns  
Freezes  
Rusts



# USING THE MATRIX, FIRE MIGHT DESCRIBE HIMSELF THIS WAY:

Today our people are being asked to make a historic decision about leadership. And we have a clear choice in this race. I have demonstrated a record of keeping our nation's families **warm** when the winter comes. Consistent with my long record of keeping people nourished, I have **cooked** our food and boiled our water. I will continue my proven ability to **purification** – consuming our garbage, our dead crops and keeping pestilence from our community. I am asking you to re-elect me to **warm**, to **cook** and to **purify**.

# USING THE MATRIX, WATER MIGHT DESCRIBE HIMSELF THIS WAY:

Don't you believe it's time we elected someone who can keep people **cool** in the summer – someone who can **clean** and **give life** to this community? Our current leader is hot-headed. He **burns** us when we get too close to him, he **destroys** our homes, and he **pollutes** our environment. It's time we elected **cool, life-giving** leaders whose efforts will **clean** rather than **burn** and **destroy**.

# FIRE MIGHT RESPOND THIS WAY:

Thankfully my constituents won't be misled by the allegations of my opponent. They know my record of **heating** our homes, business and mosques in our community has kept people alive. By **cooking** our food and making tea and coffee, I have kept our people nourished. I have repeatedly **purified** our community by ridding us of germs (most of which are found in Water!) The relationships I have created while in office have helped our community grow prosperous. Do we want to elect a **frozen-hearted** leader who floods our communities, **drowns** our children, and **rusts** our cars?

# WATER'S RESPONSE:

I regret my opponent's implications that my **responsibility for drowning** and **floods** will affect my ability to lead. You have to take a little of the bad with the good. The image of the **cold-hearted, frozen headed** Water candidate is racist and I won't stand for it. Sure there have been times when a car or a factory was **rusty**, or a flood **destroyed** our community or a child **drowned** by accident, but I had nothing to do with any of this. I have so much to offer our community other than these **dangerous traits**.

# THE RESULT:

- The **Water** was drawn into a defensive position and forgot his message.
- He was tempted by the **Fire's** attack to respond using the labels that benefit his opponent instead of the words that favored him.

# THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Not only must you decide the labels that define you favorably and your opponent negatively, it is equally important is to anticipate the labels your opponent will use to define him/herself and you.