When I first dropped in on Paul Tsongas' campaign, his primary election had been going for 8 weeks and primary election day was 8 weeks away. (In a situation of periously low name recognition, he was prospecting for money and workers.) Tsongas was running third in a field of 5 candidates, and 24 points behind the front runner in both public and private polls—"It scared the hell out of us," he said later, "so we didn't tell our campaign workers." His name recognition was so low that he described himself at the time as having "campaign paranoia." The first time I saw him he was shaking hands at 6:00 in the morning at factory gates in the city of Fall River. After an hour and a half, 3 factories, and several hundred textile workers, I asked "Did anyone recognize you?" "No" he answered. "Why should they?" Main thing Tsongas had going for him in terms of generating some initial momentum was fact that he had run for office several times before and was an incumbent congressman. That meant he had a strong electoral base, a primary constituency to start with—his congressional district, which constituted one-twelfth of the state's population. "In the primary," says his campaign manager, "we knew we had the Fifth District as a base." And, when asked about their strongest supporters after the general election he said the same thing, "Our strong base is the 5th District. I doubt we have any outside the 5th District." Furthermore, a large proportion of his hard core volunteer group was recruited from the 5th District. The district contained his home city of Lowell and a ring of Boston suburbs—whose liberals, Tsongas considered his natural constituency. This combination helped him identify with and reach the cities and the suburbs of the state later on. Aside from this geographical hard core, Tsongas drew
solid ethnic support from the Greek community—small in numbers but a major 
source of his campaign funds. "This was the first time the Greek community 
has been important to me politically. And did they come through. Whenever 
I wanted anything... I could go to...the Greeks. I spent a lot of time 
with my roots." Equally important, as a Congressman, Tsongas had the nucleus 
of a campaign organization. His campaign manager, his headquarters manager, 
his issues man and pollster and one of his three media experts came directly 
from his congressional office. These, plus a second member of the 3 man 
media team had worked together on his two congressional campaigns. This 
gave them experience and experience working together. As Tsongas put it, "If 
we had not had the experience of 4 years in Congress and the experience of 
running for Congress, we could never have hoped to put it together." His 
top staffers emphasized the importance of the close working relationships 
they had developed as minimizing if eliminating internal friction that 
can be costly to campaigns. "There's an integration in our campaign that's 
hard to understand if you operate a hierarchy of consulting groups that 
operate by memo. Our great strength is informal contact." "The amazing 
things about the campaign was not that there were 4 or 5 or 7 or however many 
people who were very good at what they do. It was the organic quality 
of the effort—the batting back and forth, the constant interaction among 
us—that was the secret of it as far as I was concerned."

Such early momentum as Tsongas had was also due to a lucky but crucial 
strategic move. He had entered the Senate race against Republican Edward 
Brooke before Brooke's financial troubles became known and hit the headlines. 
By contrast, the man who was leading Tsongas by 24 points in the polls had 
decided to enter the race only after Senator Brooke's troubles had become
daily fare in the Massachusetts media. This candidate was Paul Guzzi, a young carbon copy liberal reformer and friend of Tsongas. Guzzi was an elected statewide official as Massachusetts Secretary of State. Tsongas' early entry into the race not only gave him some precious organizational lead time, but cast him as the sincere, sacrificing candidate as opposed to the calculating, opportunistic candidate—all of which gave Tsongas a necessary legitimacy, a credibility boost with the activist liberal constituency—a constituency, which under other circumstances would have taken the popular, statewide officeholder much more seriously than the obscure Lowell congressman. That is to say, they would now, at least, listen to Tsongas. The Boston Globe, for example, began speculating that Guzzi and Tsongas would split the liberal vote—a boost in legitimacy and credibility for Tsongas, considering how far behind he was. If a candidate is to survive in the early going when he is way behind, he has to get someone to take him seriously. Otherwise, he cannot gain momentum. As one of his top staffers said with regard to the Globe's assessment: "We feared that Guzzi would be perceived as the liberal vs. Brooke, that Paul would be shut out and that would dry up our funds... We were afraid that the media might write us off and paint Paul as a minor candidate... That Globe analysis bought us the time we needed." Tsongas' early entry into the race even though he was very far behind. As the Globe's chief political writer put it on July 31st "Tsongas hopes to break through with his experience in Washington... But the candidate best known, Mr. Guzzi, will be the one to beat the early line shows."

What Tsongas was saying—in Fall River anyway—emphasized his accomplishment in getting Lowell designated the nation's first urban national park with a downpayment of 40 million, plus his liberal voting record in Congress. Before every group he also discussed the campaign, "My problem is recognition.
People don't know who I am or what my record is. Our polls tell us that among people who know all the candidates, I'm favored. But I'm way behind Paul Guzzi in name recognition." "But" he would add, "Television will change all that.... That's why television and the money for television is so important to me." Tsongas had decided on an early two-week TV blitz to increase his name recognition and reach out for broader support.

The crucial decisions of the Tsongas campaign were made in its earliest days, and the campaign was never blown off course thereafter. As one top staffer said afterward. "Our campaign ran in a straight line from May 17 to November 7." So far as I could tell, it did.

The first key decision--at least in retrospect--was to get into the race as soon as Tip O'Neill's son announced after looking at his polls that he would not run against Brooke--and, incidentally, after Paul Guzzi had given Tsongas some pretty strong assurances that he would not run--a fact which made the Tsongas campaigners extremely bitter about Guzzi throughout the primary. The second key decision was to go on television and go on early before anyone else was on. This decision was based on two poll findings hinted at by Tsongas in Fall River. (1) that Tsongas had very low name recognition--12% statewide in June--and therefore no visibility--just as he was saying publicly (2) Guzzi supporters had more reservations about their candidate than Tsongas supporters did about theirs. Among people who recognized both Guzzi and Tsongas, the two were even in support. It was among those who did not know Tsongas, that Guzzi's lead was virtually unanimous. Tsongas' pollster discussed their interpretation of the findings this way. "It was important to read the polls right since we were so far behind them. The obvious instinct was to attack. But our
interpretation was that there was no need to attack. We believed that Guzzi's support was soft and would melt away if we could increase Paul's visibility." And Tsongas campaign manager put it, "We felt Guzzi's support was soft, that he was ahead because he was known, and that if Paul become known we would have a fight. It would be close, 3 or 4 points we thought. But Paul's recognition was low, very low. Everything we did was to raise his recognition."

"Everything they decided meant a heavy, early commitment to television—to make television "the main medium." It was, they realized a gamble. Looking back, the pollster commented. "The most important strategic decision was the decision to go on television early. It was in line with our decision to go for visibility and get on before Guzzi. We knew he was having trouble raising money. But it is axiomatic that if you don't save money for the end, you don't win. So everybody saves something to use for TV at the end. We put all our chips on two weeks of early TV and gambled that the increase in visibility would produce enough momentum so that we would raise more money for the last couple of weeks."

The man who actually bought the TV time and decided where to put the ads agreed: "We needed to get a jump on Guzzi, hoping that the campaign would pick up steam and the money would come in. It was gamble. Sometimes you blow your whole wad and nothing happens." (That is exactly what does happen - Leone.)

The next question facing the Tsongas camp was what kind of image do we want to project on television? What is the message we want to get across about our candidate. Or, how do we want to make him visible to Massachusetts electorate. At this point, I think it's very important to emphasize that
the Tsongas campaign was a home grown campaign, put together not by a nationally known team of Public Relations, Campaign Consulting, Polling and Advertising firms, but by a group of half a dozen people who had known Paul Tsongas and worked with him mostly on his congressional staff. The TV campaign was done by these people with the help of a man who named Lew Barlow came to the campaign by responding to an ad in the Boston Globe, who came to headquarters and was addressing envelopes when someone found out one day that he had been associate producer of Sesame Street! The Tsongas campaign and the Tsongas TV was not therefore the brainchild of David Garth. It was the brainchild of a couple of guys named Fred—"Lew and the Freds". I emphasize this point because they did not have to worry about just what it was they had for a candidate or how to package him. They felt they had the best qualified candidate, that they had a candidate who would come across as both qualified and nice if they just let him be himself on TV. They decided to make the campaign totally positive—a "pro-Paul Tsongas campaign" as one put it, with nothing negative about the other candidates. One of the ideas they kicked around and then discarded was doing what they called "symbolic" TV ads, stressing the relative inexperience of other candidates by featuring a school for politicians, or showing the cockpit of an airplane or showing an operating room. But they decided that as one of them put it "We wanted people to get to know Paul Tsongas as he is. He's quiet, he mumbles and stumbles, doesn't look energetic, doesn't smile a lot, but he cares and he has more integrity than other politicians and people like him and trust him. He gets things done."

Or "The idea of a campaign is to get out of the way and let the candidate communicate with the public. In order to do that you have to know your candidate well. And if the media tends to color or distort the
candidate you know, you have to make sure the true picture comes through. If Paul were to do a TV spot all by himself it should be the same as Fred and Fred did. And it was." A third strategist highlighted the integration of the TV ads and the personality they wished to publicize, by saying "There's a big difference between a commercial and a campaign."

The two people who wrote the ads and the man who produced them all thought of the set of 5 primary campaign ads as dealing not with the issues but with the candidate—his qualifications, his personality. The first "tickets" ad ran for two weeks in late July and early August. The porch, park and energy ads ran one week each. (or were scheduled to do so—the porch ad had to be taken off the air when the money slowed down in late July and early August while the tickets ad was on—the only time when the campaign lost momentum.) "The mobile van ad ran only in the Springfield (western) area and the final ad—known as "son of tickets"—ran during the week before the primary.

Re TV campaign "It was a characterization—qualified. The point is, here is a guy who is really qualified, who can really talk to you, who has depth. If we thought it was specific issues, we wouldn't have talked about photo election cells in the ad. We'd have talked about his position on the natural gas bill... We were lucky. He was the only congressman in the race. There's a certain stature that comes with that... It was important that he was "Congressman Tsongas." That alone wasn't enough. If it weren't for the fact that he was more substantive, the cutting edge with Guzzi wouldn't have worked. It opened the door. When people learned he was the Congressman from Lowell, they tended to take him seriously and then listened to his message."

Their calculations were fortified, as the comment suggests, by the feeling that in a confusing field of 5 candidates, you must be able to
distinguish yourself for the others and that an emphasis on issues would not do the trick. That is why they decided at the end of the primary campaign to return to the tickets theme. Two of the strategist and writers talked about this last decision.

"I felt the race would be decided, in the end, by people electing someone who wouldn't be known all that well. The best thing was to tie Paul back to that kid without any issues or cutting edge. He's a nice guy who can laugh at himself. In the beginning, I said this would be won by the nicest guy—by the person who was known as the nicest guy in the race."

"Which name do you think people could remember, the guy who sponsored the asbestos law, the one who is against taxes or the guy with the funny name, the one who laughs at himself and is the nice guy?... At the polls (on election day) whenever the kids came by they would pronounce the name right or say "tickets." It shows what a subliminal medium TV is that it takes an 8 or 9 year old to say that. But the others must be thinking the same thing."

It was three weeks after my July visit—on August 10th—when I next dropped in on the Tsongas campaign. His two week TV blitz with the tickets ad had ended and a follow-up poll (August 5-7) just completed showed a spectacular change—Tsongas had gone from 12-42% name recognition and the vote intention pattern had changed drastically. In June it had been Guzzi 39, Tsongas 14, Alioto 11, Noble 8, Phillips 0, 21% undecided. Now, in mid-August, it was Guzzi 21, Tsongas 19, Alioto 14, Noble 2, Phillips 4 and 40% undecided. Campaigning in the city of Springfield that day, (after having made his mobile van TV ad in the morning) Tsongas recalled my earlier visit. "When we were in Fall River no one at the factory gates knew
who I was. Now after the TV ad has run for 2 weeks the difference is phenomenal."
His advisers interpreted the poll results as vindication of their strategy. "Our August poll showed that everything we had projected was happening. We wanted to see what impact the media had had. We wanted to know whether the visibility ad was working and we saw it was. It was the time I stopped worrying about the race. I thought it was right on the track."
Everywhere he went he used the poll results to establish the fact of his momentum. Opening his Springfield party headquarters, he said, "I'm up from 14 percent and I'm taking support from Guzzi. The poll shows that my support is the most solid of any of the candidates. More are shifting into the undecideds. But a 23 point net shift in the middle of the summer is unheard of." At a fundraising function he said, "Guzzi's coming backwards and we're going forward and we're not far behind. The momentum is ours and it's ours because we've spent 200,000. My opinion has been that if I could get known and get my record across, we would win. You can't penetrate people with a record if they don't know who you are." This momentum, he added, had given him broader credibility as a candidate. "The knock on me has always been 'good congressman, would make a good Senator, can't be elected, can't raise money, can't organize.' That's buried. The last nail in the coffin are these poll results." Now, the point is, he expected to be taken seriously by Massachusetts Democrats outside the 5th Congressional District. When I left him he was exultant. "That was a great day. When I think there are only 37 days to the primary I get nostalgic. It's been the most enjoyable race I've ever run. We've had more money, we've made great progress. We haven't had any wasted days for quite a while now. The first few weeks were a disaster. We'd get places late, nobody would
be there, we went to the wrong place. You wanted to blow your brains out."

From mid-August to primary day, Tsongas raised another 250,000, for a total of 450,000. The TV "gamble" had paid off.

One way of stating the condition of the Tsongas primary campaign in its later stages is to say that it had developed a key ingredient in every successful campaign—momentum. Perhaps we should say second stage momentum. For probably every credible campaign develops a first stage momentum in which it "gets off the ground" by securing hard core primary constituency—to provide an organizational nucleus and money. Without that core support or initial momentum, no campaign can get started. But momentum must be maintained, or better, it must be thought by people inside and outside the campaign that it has momentum if it is to continue on an upward rather than a downward spiral. Momentum is measured, as I have suggested, in things like favorable poll results and the flow of money. And those indicators remained positive for Tsongas right up to the September 12th primary. On August 20th Tsongas was 22%, Guzzi 18%, Alioto 16% with 39% still undecided. Thus, while Tsongas was finally ahead, the size of the undecided vote was nearly as large as it had been in June. It was the Tsongas' peoples view that the undecideds were heavily former Guzzi supporters now up for grabs. Whether this was true or not, it meant that momentum was important to the very end. A third indicator of momentum is media coverage—which, in Massachusetts means very much the Boston Globe. And here Tsongas had not done well at all until the very end of the campaign. "The Globe didn't take me seriously," said Tsongas. "In terms of their coverage they were fair. But in terms of their editorials and what their editorial writers were saying, they assumed Guzzi would win. We really spent May, June, July and most of August...
wandering in the wilderness. The Globe wasn't alone. It was the prevailing wisdom." Toward the end of the campaign the Globe did say something positive about Tsongas, which they used on a handbill. (Show handbill.) And the Globe's chief political writer wrote of the campaign that the evaluation of Tsongas as "the heavy weight" and of Guzzi as "the light weight" had become "the centerpiece of the campaign." While the writer deplored it, that is exactly the way the Tsongas people wanted the choice to be perceived. Candidate credibility is intertwined as both cause and effect of momentum and the two usually go up and down together during a campaign. Just as the light weight "heavy weight" distinctive was pushing Tsongas up, it was pulling Guzzi down. The last time I dropped in on the Tsongas campaign it was 37 days later on primary night September 12th and Tsongas was claiming "a classic victory." He got 35% of the vote; Guzzi got 31%. He won by 38,000 votes and his margin in his home congressional district--his strongest supporters--was more than enough to guarantee the win. He carried the 5th by 47,000 votes.

The next day, I hung around the headquarters while he talked to friends and hold a press conference. "This is a time for great savoring" he said to his friends, "we took on Guzzi, Martilla (the biggest polling firm in Boston) and Hill-Holiday (the biggest advertising firm in Boston) and the Boston Globe. If we win in November, that will be nice, but it will never replace this one." Then "We'll have to take a conciliatory attitude toward the Globe, even though they pushed for Guzzi." Then "Martilla will have to explain how he lost with a candidate who was 24 points ahead in the polls and indistinguishable from all the others." Then "We can plan strategy in half an hour. If we don't know now how we're going to deal with Brooke, we never will. Who's Ed Brooke."
At the Press Conference he said "If my name were Smith, I probably would have lost." And in explaining his victory he gave first mention to "the media campaign Mr. Barlow put together for me." Clearly, the tickets commercials and the strategic thinking that lay back of the had been the crucial turning point of the campaign. I did not go back to Massachusetts again, so that I did not drop in on the Brooke-Tsongas campaign. Senator Brooke was in a good deal of hot water and tied down in hearings before the Ethics Committee until the last two weeks of the campaign. Then the Ethics Committee gave him a clean bill of health and he returned to Massachusetts to campaign with a momentum of his own. Tsongas' polls showed the two dead even on September 27th, with Tsongas pulling ahead to a 9 point lead in October and then dead even again 4 days before the election. Interestingly, in an ironic reversal from the very first poll in June, which Tsongas said he had kept from his campaigning workers, Tsongas' campaign strategists kept these last November poll results from the candidate—and for the same reason—to keep up morale." Dennis and I sat down and asked ourselves if there was anything we could do about it. It was 4 days before election. We thought hard about it and decided there was absolutely nothing we could do about it. So we lied to him. We told him he was four points ahead. Then we got our wives and went to the movies." Brooke's polls had him 5 points ahead at the time. The central figure of the general election campaign was not Tsongas, but Brooke, a Massachusetts, indeed, a national institution—his supporters called him "a national resource—and a man in trouble. It is my view that a strong Ed Brooke could not have been beaten by anyone. But Ed Brooke had begun to show weaknesses before his marital and financial problems surfaced—not irreparable weaknesses, but weaknesses nonetheless. That is why Tsongas had entered the race against him in the first place. Brooke's support, Tsongas felt, was both because he had not accomplished a great deal in the Senate and because
first place. Brooke's support, Tsongas felt, was both because he was not keeping in touch with his home state.

In July in Fall River he had said, "We think Brooke is...vulnerable to a viable candidate. Some people are invulnerable; but some don't work. We thought he was vulnerable before his trouble started. He's a classic case of the Washington-Carribean shuttle. He can't make up for 5 1/2 years of absence in 6 months." And wherever he went that day, he attacked Brooke, saying "Ed Brooke has to answer two questions. What has he done? When was the last time you saw him? His problems are performance and accessibility."

These were Tsongas' themes early and late against Brooke (as in the mobile van ad and as in the emphasis on qualification and accomplishment in other ads) which was why he said the day after the primary that he already knew how he was going to run against Brooke and didn't need plot strategy. In many respects, as his campaign manager described it, the campaign kept on in the same vein--on the "straight line" we described earlier.

"The basic thrust, in terms of the image we were trying to project was the same. We emphasized what Paul Tsongas had done. We emphasized accessibility more than in the primary. Everyone knew who Brooke was; but we continued to raise Paul's recognition. If Brooke and Paul had started with the same level of recognition, I think we might have lost. For weeks, the campaign revolved around Ed Brooke and his fight with the Ethics Committee. The media treated it as the Brooke campaign. The major thing we still had going for us was Paul's low recognition in some areas. We figured we could get lots of people whom we hadn't hit in the primary--to raise their consciousness really--in places like southeast and central Massachusetts. That basically dictated our strategy. We put more TV and more
organization into places like Fall River, New Bedford and Worcester than before. And it worked, beyond anything we expected. We did poorly in all those places in the primary, but we did very well in the general."

And they were now aided in this by expanded media coverage. Campaigners distinguish between paid media and free media. In the primary the Tsongas people paid for the media coverage they got; in the general election more of it was free. As Tsongas said, "I wasn't the unknown anymore." "I spent one half of my days with reporters in the car--local, state and national."

The key course was whether Tsongas would be perceived, in his words, as a viable candidate. Or, as I would prefer, a credible candidate. I do not believe Brooke could have been beaten by any Democratic candidate--only one that could be viewed as credible. The effect of Brooke's personal troubles was to make people willing to listen to an alternative--not rush to it, but consider it. They tarnished an untarnished here. "It was a circuit breaker--those suburbanites have cut out and won't come back to Brooke. There's a share of his previous vote that is lost to him. People aren't shocked by criticism of Ed Brooke. Tough criticism is less shocking today than it was a year ago... The crucial group is the independent, issue-oriented Route 128 ring around Boston segment that votes Democratic but comes over to vote for Brooke." The Tsongas view was that Brooke's troubles gave him a chance to make his case to these voters--it guaranteed they would listen--just as his early entry into the primary and his early money and TV gave him a chance to make his case in the primary. In one case the problem was to get recognized; in the other case the problem was to show
well against an incumbent. Both were what I call legitimacy-credibility
problems. Tsongas had a Washington record, a liberal Washington record
which helped, and a knowledge of national issues which also helped—
especially in their two debates. In Tsongas' later assessment, "The
turning point (of the general election campaign) was the debates. We
started even and were ahead all the way. Everybody agrees that the debates
were the turning point.... No one says he beat me in both debates. Mary
McGrory says she thinks I beat him in the second debate. Others say vice
versa. It wasn't winning that counted so much as the avoidance of getting
wiped out. Everyone expected me to lose and there I was holding my own
against a 12-year incumbent. Everyone agreed because of the accessibility
issue and his troubles, people would choose me so long as they didn't have to
pay a price. The debates eliminated that concern. In other words, the
debates established him as a credible alternative to an incumbent with
potentially, but not necessarily, fatal liabilities.

On November 7th Tsongas received 55% of the vote, Brooke 45%. Of Tsongas
voters the major issues in campaigning were either effectiveness 16%, or
accessibility 14% or personal qualities 12%. Of Brooke voters the major
issues were his record in general 23%, experience 20%, seniority 10%. A
month later, Tsongas summed up his 6 month campaign: "It was perfect. We
didn't make one mistake. Oh, maybe little things that nobody would notice.
But you couldn't point to one thing that people would know about and say
'That was a mistake.' It was incredible." And he concluded—looking backward
and forward. "Winning the primary was more meaningful to me in terms of
enjoyment. Winning the general has been an exercise in feeling the weight of
what that all means."

Next time I saw him he was a U.S. Senator—but that is another story.