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**Effects of General Presidential Campaigns on Voters, 1980-2000**

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**Abstract**

We used National Election Studies (NES) data from the six most recent presidential campaigns to ascertain the effect of campaigns on issue knowledge, evaluations of the Republican and Democratic candidate, issue salience (the number of issues used to evaluate the two candidates) and character salience (the number of character traits used to evaluate the two candidates). The analysis correlated the days passed in the campaign with levels of the dependent variables. Results show that campaigns are capable of, but do not necessarily, affect each of these variables. Furthermore, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents usually exhibited different effects. Effects related to policy (issue learning, policy salience) occur more frequently in voters than effects related to character (character evaluation, character salience). Implications for campaigns, and the study of campaign effects, are discussed.

**Key Terms:** Campaign effects, issue knowledge, character evaluation, issue salience, character salience, political party

### Introduction

The quadrennial selection of the president of the United States is an extremely important event in the life of our democracy. Although presidential candidates at times adopt similar policy positions (who would oppose protecting Social Security?), there are differences between them. In 1996, for instance, President Bill Clinton favored selective tax cuts whereas Senator Bob Dole advocated a 15% across-the-board tax cut. In the 2000 contest, George Bush recommended privatizing (at least some of) Social Security, a proposal Al Gore rejected. These examples highlight the fact that it can make a difference who is elected president.

This raises the question of how our citizens learn about the candidates for the Oval Office and their policy positions. In the most recent campaign, the Democratic nominee was Al Gore, and Vice Presidents are simply not as well known as their running mates. Governor George W. Bush was not very well known outside of Texas. Relatively few voters can be considered “political junkies” who actively search for information about the candidates; most voters learn about the two candidates for president from whatever information they happen to encounter before election day. In contemporary society, virtually no citizen learns about the candidates’ policy proposals, or forms impressions about the candidates’ character, from direct, face-to-face contact with candidates. Political knowledge and attitudes, therefore, arise from media campaigns.

Figure 1 depicts the flow of information in a presidential campaign. Candidate messages and the news media are the primary sources of information (and are depicted on the left; information tends to flow from left to right). Some of what the candidates say is filtered or interpreted by the media (arrow 1). Candidate messages (arrow 2) and news messages (arrow 3) at times reach voters directly (individual voters, of course, are exposed to different amounts and combinations of these messages). Both candidate (arrow 4) and news (arrow 5) messages are filtered and interpreted by other people, ultimately reaching voters through political discussion (arrow 6).<sup>1</sup> Notice that there are multiple forms of candidate messages (e.g., television spots, debates) and of news messages (e.g., television news, newspapers). There are also multiple instances of each (usually more than one debate, different television spots, daily newscasts or newspapers with different content). Each voter encounters an individual amalgamation of campaign messages.

Of course, the modern presidential campaign is an intense (and lengthening) period of messages from candidates, news media, and others. Early scholars advocated the “limited effects” model of the mass media in general, and presidential campaigns specifically (see, e.g., Campbell, et al., 1960; Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; but cf. Holbrook, 1996; Zaller, 1996). More recently, Lichtman (1996) declared, “Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars and months of media attention lavished on them, general-election campaigns don’t count” (p. 5). We take the contrary position on this issue, offering evidence that general election campaigns are capable of influencing voters.

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<sup>1</sup> This diagram does simplify matters in places. For example, it omits messages from third parties like special interest groups (but of course those messages are mediated as well). Similarly, occasionally some information will flow in other directions (e.g., candidates can make use of, or respond to, information initiated by news media; both candidates and media solicit information from voters, particularly using polls). Nevertheless, we believe it is a useful model of how information reaches voters.

Specifically, we will employ American National Election Studies (NES) data, a national sample of adults, from the last six presidential campaigns to investigate the effects of campaigns on voters. Other studies have used NES data to examine the effect of particular sources of information on voters, like newspapers, television news, television spots, debates, or political discussion (e.g., Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2003). However, rather than try to identify the specific source of information, we seek only to discover changes in voters that occur during the course of the campaign. These data sets are valuable because they represent national samples of adults and may be considered to be a set of six replications. The

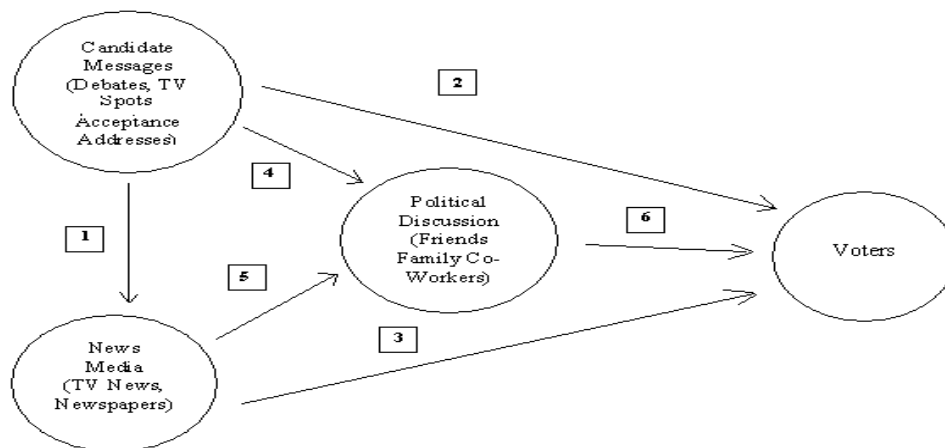


Figure 1: Campaign Information Flow

combined *N* for the six campaigns we studied is 11,909.

### Theoretical Underpinning

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (e.g., Benoit, 1999; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998) argues that political campaigns help citizens decide how to vote by providing them with information about two topics: policy and character. Benoit and Harthcock (1999) posit that policy concerns “governmental action (past, current, or future) and problems amenable to governmental action,” while character concerns “characteristics, traits, abilities, or attributes of the candidates” (p. 346). Of course, there can be overlap between these two concepts (see Hacker, Zakahi, Giles, & McQuitty, 2000), but the concepts are distinct conceptually and content analysis reliably distinguishes campaign messages discussing the two topics (e.g., Benoit, 1999). Accordingly, this study will investigate possible effects of presidential campaigns on policy, or issue knowledge, and character, or evaluations of the candidates. We also investigate issue salience and character salience, which are measures of the number of issues or character traits used by voters to evaluate the candidates. Furthermore, we are interested in the question of whether campaign effects are the same for different groups of voters (Republicans, Democrats, Independents). We answer six specific research questions:

- RQ1.** Does issue knowledge of the Republican candidate increase during the general election campaign?
- RQ2.** Does issue knowledge of the Democratic candidate increase during the general election campaign?
- RQ3.** Does evaluation of the Republican candidate’s character increase during the

general election campaign?

**RQ4.** Does evaluation of the Democratic candidate's character increase during the general election campaign?

**RQ5.** Does issue salience increase during the general election campaign?

**RQ6.** Does character salience increase during the general election campaign?

These questions will be answered using NES data from the 1980-2000 presidential campaigns.

#### **Method**

Our method will be to correlate the days passed in the campaign with the level of these variables (more precisely, the number of days that have passed from when the NES began collecting data in that campaign). If campaigns increase knowledge (or candidate evaluations, or salience), the correlation will be positive. If there is no change in these variables as the campaign progresses, the correlation will not be significant (and negative correlations would mean that the campaign reduced knowledge, hurt evaluations of candidate character, or reduced salience). Of course, this approach cannot identify the *source* of changes in these dependent variables. If knowledge of the candidates' issue position increases, that learning could come from news coverage, candidate speeches, debates, political advertisements, political discussion among voters, or other sources. However, our purpose in this study is not to *ascertain* whence changes (if any) arise, but *whether* changes occur in the campaign. We believe that if *significant* changes in the levels of these variables occur over time, some source or combination of sources must be responsible. The question we take up is whether campaigns affect voters, not how or through which media.

#### **Dependent Variables**

The following dependent variables were measured in the pre-election phase for each NES general campaign survey.

**Issue knowledge:** Issue knowledge was the sum of items that asked respondents to place each candidate on a scale (most often from 1 to 7) to demonstrate the level of support they believe the candidate had on a particular issue. We used only those issues where the two major party candidates clearly differed in their positions stated during the campaign. The number of items used for each level of issue knowledge varied across data sets, ranging from four items in 1992 to nine items in 1996 (see Table 1). Responses that indicated a correct identification of a candidate's stand on issues were given one point. "Correct" answers were defined as reporting any level of agreement with an issue for which the candidate is in favor or any level of disagreement with an issue for which the candidate is not in favor (for 7-point scales correct responses ranged from 1 to 3 or from 5 to 7, depending on the issue and the candidate). "Incorrect" items were given a 0.

**Table 1: Issue Knowledge Items by Election Campaign**

1980	defense spending government services inflation/unemployment abortion income taxes	1992	defense spending government services/spending abortion job assurance
1984	governmental services/spending minority aid involvement in Central America defense spending social/economic status of women cooperation with Russian standard of living	1996	defense spending government services/spending health insurance job assurance social/economic status of blacks crime environment environmental regulation abortion
1988	governmental services/spending defense spending government-funded insurance standard of living social/economic status of blacks social/economic status of minorities cooperation with Russia	2000	government services/spending defense spending job assurance social/economic status of blacks abortion environment gun control environmental regulation

**Character evaluation:** Character evaluation was an index computed as the mean of responses to items that described character traits for each major party candidate. The number of items used for each level of character evaluation varied across data sets, ranging from six items in 1996 to 16 items in 1984, and included such characteristics as intelligent, compassionate, moral, weak, power-hungry, etc. Items were measured on 4-point response scales anchored by “extremely well” to “not well at all” and were recoded where necessary such that a higher value represents a more positive character evaluation. The *alpha* for character evaluation scales ranged from .79 (Carter in 1980) to .96 (Reagan in 1984). See Table 2.

**Issue and character salience:** Each respondent was asked if they “like anything about (candidate’s name),” for each candidate. They were also asked if they “dislike anything about (candidate’s name),” for each candidate. If the respondent replied “yes,” they were probed for details (up to 5 mentions for each candidate). Each detailed answer was coded such that mentions about issues were coded differently than mentions about character. Each issue mention was given a 1, then all mentions were summed across candidates for a total issue salience score. The same was done for character salience.

### Grouping Variable

**Party identification:** NES asks respondents a series of three questions to determine party identification (one ID question, then two follow-ups to determine strength). From those

items, NES creates a summary party ID item (range = 0-6, where 0 is strong Republican and 6 is strong Democrat) that formed the basis of our analyses. Zero and one were computed as Republicans, five to six were computed as Democrats, and three to five were computed as Independents.

**Table 2: Character Evaluation Items by Election Campaign**

1980	Moral Dishonest Weak Knowledgeable Power-hunger Inspiring Strong leadership Republican $\alpha = .82$ Democrat $\alpha = .79$	1992	Intelligent Compassionate Moral Inspiring Strong leadership Cares about people Knowledgeable Honest Gets things done Republican $\alpha = .90$ Democrat $\alpha = .91$
1984	Hard working Decent Compassionate Commands respect Intelligent Moral Kind Inspiring Knowledgeable Sets a good example Cares about people Strong leadership Understands people Fair In touch Religious Republican $\alpha = .96$ Democrat $\alpha = .94$	1996	Moral Inspiring Strong leadership Cares about people Knowledgeable Honest Republican $\alpha = .86$ Democrat $\alpha = .90$
1988	Intelligent Compassionate Moral Inspiring Strong leadership Decent Cares about people Knowledgeable Honest Republican $\alpha = .91$ Democrat $\alpha = .89$	2000	Moral Really cares Knowledgeable Strong leadership Dishonest Intelligent Out of touch Republican $\alpha = .83$ Democrat $\alpha = .83$

### Control Variables

NES sampling procedures do not guarantee that respondents are randomly selected by time of interview. Accordingly, we controlled for age, gender, race, education, and household income in order to control for possible confounds with date of interview. The wording and measure of these items were fairly consistent across the six elections from 1980 to 2000. The description of these measures were taken from the 2000 NES data, but are representative from the earlier data sets.

**Age:** Age was calculated by subtracting the year of birth from 2000. For cases where the respondent refused to give year of birth or year of birth was not available in the survey variable, a check was made of Household listing information. If age of respondent was included in the Household listing, it was included.

**Gender:** NES asks respondents for their sex, where 1=male and 2=female. This coding was maintained in our analyses.

**Race:** Race was recoded as 1=white, 0=nonwhite.

**Education:** Education was measured from three questions, then summarized into one measure. The education data used in our analyses are from the summary item.

**Income:** The data for income were selected from a summary measure of household income.

### Results

We discuss the results for each Research Question in turn.

#### Issue Knowledge

The first two research questions asked about changes in issue knowledge concerning the Republican and Democratic candidates during the campaign. We want to caution that our results do not answer the question of whether voters were well- or poorly-informed about presidential candidates. It is likely that voters came into the general campaign already possessing knowledge about one or both of the candidates (a possibility that seems particularly likely in years when a sitting president runs for re-election, as with Jimmy Carter in 1980, Ronald Reagan in 1984, George Bush in 1992, or Bill Clinton in 1996). Our analyses only answer the question of whether knowledge increased or decreased during the course of the general campaign.

In 2000, Independents learned about the Republican candidate, Governor George W. Bush, but not the Democratic candidate, Vice President Al Gore. Neither Republicans nor Democrats learned significantly about either candidate. No increase in issue knowledge occurred in any group of voters in 1996. In the 1992 contest, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents displayed *less* knowledge of Bush as the campaign unfolded; Independents has *less* knowledge of Governor Bill Clinton (only). No significant changes in knowledge levels occurred for all respondents in the 1988 and 1984 general campaigns. Finally, during 1980, no significant change occurred for Republicans or Democrats in their knowledge of either Governor Ronald Reagan or President Jimmy Carter. Independents, however, showed in an increase in knowledge for Carter. Levels of knowledge about Reagan did not change significantly during the 1980 general campaign for any voters. See Table 3.

**Table 3:** *Relationship between Issue Knowledge and Date of Interview in General Campaigns*

Party	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
<b>Republican Candidate</b>						
Democrat	.038	.001	-.018	<b>-.102**</b>	.059	.030
N	550	709	634	783	585	548
Republican	-.010	.013	.014	<b>-.082*</b>	.031	.056
N	303	511	506	549	434	385
Independent	-.013	-.035	.052	-.069*	.064	<b>.103**</b>
N	481	671	640	843	496	615
All	.008	-.001	.018	<b>-.082***</b>	.035	<b>.064**</b>
N	1376	1941	1825	2221	1547	1586
<b>Democratic Candidate</b>						
Democrat	.031	.057	-.016	-.026	.077	.078
N	550	709	634	783	585	548
Republican	.010	-.005	.062	-.051	-.003	.062
N	303	511	506	549	434	385
Independent	<b>.130**</b>	-.045	.009	<b>-.110***</b>	.005	.055
N	481	671	640	843	496	615
All	<b>.060*</b>	.012	.019	<b>-.064**</b>	.034	<b>.065**</b>
N	1376	1941	1825	2221	1547	1586
<b>Combined Knowledge</b>						
Democrat	.042	.032	-.019	<b>-.078*</b>	<b>.078*</b>	.060
N	550	709	634	783	585	548
Republican	.000	.004	.044	-.076	-.019	.065
N	303	511	506	549	434	385
Independent	.066	-.048	.035	<b>-.109**</b>	.046	<b>.091*</b>
N	481	671	640	843	496	615
All	.039	.007	.021	<b>-.087***</b>	.041	<b>.073**</b>
N	1376	1941	1825	2221	1547	1586

*Note.* Within each cell, data are 1) partial correlation coefficients, and 2) sample size. Each correlation coefficient represents the association between issue knowledge and the day during the campaign the respondent was interviewed, controlling for age, gender, education, race, and household income. “All” N’s reflect total sample and include party responses other than those shown, including other parties, refusals, and don’t knows. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Examination of Table 3 also reveals that Republican voters in these six campaigns never exhibited increased knowledge of Democratic candidates and Democratic voters never increased their knowledge of Republican candidates (although we argue next that these data are probably a conservative estimate of the amount of issue learning that occurs during presidential campaigns). In one case, Democrats showed reduced knowledge of the Republican candidate: Bush in 1992. It is quite possible that partisans pay less attention to messages from (or about) the other party’s candidate.

Looking at all three groups of voters (but not considering the analyses using all voters) for issue knowledge about the Democratic and Republican candidates, we find 5 of 36

correlations significant (14%). However, as just suggested we suspect more learning occurs than these data indicate; our results are limited by the questions asked in the NES surveys. NES tends to ask about the same issues each campaign (presumably to provide longitudinal consistency) even though the issues discussed in the campaign vary. For example, the NES did not ask any issue knowledge questions about education in 2000. However, content analysis of campaign issues revealed that in the general election, education was the most frequently discussed issue in Bush's television spots and third most frequent in Gore's ads; education was the second most frequent topic for Gore in the debates and third most frequent issue for Bush (Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, & McGuire, in press). Thus, we consider these NES variables to provide a conservative estimate of the amount of issue learning because the questions, while pertinent, were not specifically designed to measure learning from topics most frequently discussed *in campaign messages*.

### **Character Evaluation**

Research questions three and four concerned evaluations of the Republican and Democratic candidates' character. Just as many voters probably come into the general campaign with some level of issue knowledge, many voters presumably had some impression or evaluation of the two main candidates at the beginning of the presidential campaign. Again, we investigated whether these evaluations change during the course of the Fall campaign. In the two most recent campaigns no change in character evaluation occurred for any group. Neither Democrats nor Republicans substantially altered their evaluations of Bush in 1992, but Independents' evaluations of the President became more negative. Democrats' evaluation of their nominee in 1988, Governor Michael Dukakis, became more negative during the campaign. No significant change in evaluation of Dukakis occurred for Republicans or Independents. Evaluations of Bush did not change during the 1988 general campaign. No significant change for any group of voters in 1984 was detected for Reagan's or Senator Walter Mondale's character. Similarly, in 1980 no significant change in character evaluation was detected for any group of voters' evaluation of both Reagan and Carter. These data are displayed in Table 4.

If we consider only the three groups of voters (not the analyses of all voters), character evaluation showed significant changes in only 2 of 36 correlations (6%), which could mean that these results are due to chance. Unfortunately, we do not know the frequency with which campaign messages discussed the specific traits asked about in the NES surveys, so we do not know whether these data should be considered a conservative estimate of changes in candidate evaluations (as we argued for issue knowledge). However, it appears that campaigns may exert less influence on character evaluations than on issue learning—i.e., it may be more likely that voters *acquire* new information than *change* their attitudes about the candidates' character.

**Table 4:** *Relationship between Character Evaluation and Date of Interview in General Campaigns*

Party	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
<b>Republican Candidate</b>						
Democrat	-.002	.004	-.019	.003	-.057	-.061
N	535	626	631	783	579	538
Republican	.063	-.028	-.083	.009	-.066	.027
N	301	462	506	549	429	379
Independent	.014	-.030	.008	<b>-.067*</b>	.040	.004
N	473	592	640	940	490	606
All	.012	-.022	-.029	-.023	-.024	-.021
N	1342	1722	1812	2221	1528	1556
<b>Democratic Candidate</b>						
Democrat	.039	.011	<b>-.100*</b>	.086*	.002	-.024
N	542	618	626	776	585	545
Republican	.041	.045	-.062	-.023	.026	-.040
N	301	456	499	549	434	379
Independent	-.054	-.033	-.013	.015	-.088	-.016
N	476	576	621	833	495	602
All	.007	.012	<b>-.051*</b>	.026	-.021	-.018
N	1352	1692	1766	2201	1547	1560

*Note.* Within each cell, data are 1) partial correlation coefficients, and 2) sample size. Each correlation coefficient represents the association between issue knowledge and the day during the campaign the respondent was interviewed, controlling for age, gender, education, race, and household income. “All” N’s reflect total sample and include party responses other than those shown, including other parties, refusals, and don’t knows. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Issue Salience

As with knowledge and character evaluation, we assume that voters enter the general election with some level of issue salience (RQ5). There was no significant change in issue salience for any group in 1996 or 2000. In 1992, Democrats showed increased issue salience as the general campaign progressed, but Republicans showed decreased issue salience. There was no difference for Independents. Democrats and Republicans increased issue salience during the 1988 campaign. No significant change in issue salience was found for any group of voters in 1980 and 1984. See Table 5.

A closer look at Table 5 reveals that, if we look just at the results for the three groups of voters, 4 of 18 correlations are significant (22%), and occurred only in 1988 and 1992. This could mean that campaigns, under some circumstances, could have a priming effect, altering (increasing the number) of issues that are salient when voters evaluate Republican and Democratic candidates for president.

**Table 5:** *Relationship between Issue Salience and Date of Interview in General Campaigns*

Party	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Democrat	-.051	.062	<b>.099**</b>	<b>.092**</b>	.056	-.022
N	550	721	634	783	585	548
Republican	.064	-.060	<b>.137***</b>	<b>-.101**</b>	.057	.032
N	303	515	506	549	434	385
Independent	.047	.049	.068	-.021	-.027	.026
N	481	680	640	843	497	615
All	<b>.053*</b>	.028	<b>.101***</b>	-.005	.030	.014
N	1376	1974	1825	2221	1547	1586

*Note.* Within each cell, data are 1) partial correlation coefficients, and 2) sample size. Each correlation coefficient represents the association between issue knowledge and the day during the campaign the respondent was interviewed, controlling for age, gender, education, race, and household income. “All” N’s reflect total sample and include party responses other than those shown, including other parties, refusals, and don’t knows. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Character Salience**

The final research question addressed character salience. Once again, we take for granted the fact that voters will have some level of character salience when the general election campaign commences. In five campaigns (1980, 1988-2000) there was no significant change in character salience for any of the three groups of voters during the campaign. In 1984, independents increased character salience, but not Republicans or Democrats. See Table 6.

**Table 6:** *Relationship between Character Salience and Date of Interview in General Campaigns*

Party	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
<u>Democrat</u>	.010	.065	-.019	.027	-.072	.002
N	550	721	634	783	585	548
Republican	-.061	-.001	.053	.077	-.022	.022
N	303	515	506	549	434	385
Independent	.008	<b>.075*</b>	.012	.061	-.010	.069
N	481	680	640	843	497	615
All	-.011	<b>.053*</b>	.009	<b>.057**</b>	-.034	.028
N	1376	1974	1825	2221	1547	1586

*Note.* Within each cell, data are 1) partial correlation coefficients, and 2) sample size. Each correlation coefficient represents the association between issue knowledge and the day during the campaign the respondent was interviewed, controlling for age, gender, education, race, and household income. “All” N’s reflect total sample and include party responses other than those shown, including other parties, refusals, and don’t knows. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

We looked to see how common effects on character salience were in these six elections. Considering only the three groups of voters, only 1 of 18 correlations was significant (6%, at chance level). Lack of effects on character salience may well be consistent with few changes in candidate evaluations.

### Implications

Although our design does not permit us to identify the source of these effects (e.g., television news, newspapers, televised debates, televised advertisements), we can safely assume that these are effects of the *campaign*. It is unreasonable to assume that increases in knowledge or changes in candidate evaluation would occur *sui generis*. Given the fact that virtually no one today learns about candidates' policy proposals, or forms impressions of candidates, from direct face-to-face contact with candidates, changes surely must arise from some aspect of the campaign.

First, these data show that campaigns can increase, decrease, or have no significant effect on a variety of variables. For example, Independents had *more* knowledge of Bush's issue positions in 2000. However, there was *no change* in issue knowledge for either Dole or Clinton during the 1996 campaign. Issue knowledge among Democrats and Republicans actually *decreased* in 1992 (suggesting that, intentionally or not, some campaign messages may have been misleading). Nor do other variables reveal a consistent pattern of effects. Similarly, in Therefore, presidential campaigns appear *capable* of influencing all of these variables; when effects occur the variable can increase *or* decrease, and campaigns will not *necessarily* have these effects. Another way to look at this is that each campaign is unique, influencing some variables but not all, and not always influencing variables in the same direction.

Second, particularly if our argument that the NES data provide a conservative estimate of the amount of issue learning in presidential campaign is correct, then there appears to be more effects on issue learning and issue salience (policy) than on character evaluation or character salience. Nine of 54 policy correlations (11%) were significant, but only 3 of 54 character correlations were significant (6%; again, barely more than what might be expected by chance). Content analysis has shown that at the presidential level, candidate messages discuss policy more than character (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit, et al., in press). Furthermore, public opinion poll data from 1980-2000 show that a larger group of voters consider policy, not character, to be the most important determinant of their vote for president (see Table 7). This could mean that they pay more attention to discussions of policy than character during the campaign. Benoit (2003) provided data from 1948-2000 encompassing primary and general television spots and debates as well as nominating convention acceptance addresses, that candidates who discuss policy more (and character less) than their opponent are significantly more likely to win the election (or the nomination in a primary campaign). We believe that policy is more important to voters than character and it makes sense, both because voters consider policy more important and because candidates discuss it more frequently, for more campaign effects to occur with policy than character.

**Table 7: Most Important Determinant of Presidential Vote**

Campaign	Policy	Character	Poll
2000	90%	8%	Princeton Survey Research Associates 10/7-11/99
1996	65%	27%	NBC/ <i>Wall Street Journal</i> , 10/19-22/96
1992	143%*	16%	Harris Poll, 11/3/92
1988	59%	16%	<i>USA Today</i> , 1/21-28/88
1984	87%	7%	<i>LA Times</i> , 2/4-9/84
1980	59%	34%	<i>LA Times</i> , 10/5-9/80

*Note.* \*Respondents were allowed to pick the two most important factors in this poll. “Don’t know” and “unsure” responses also occurred.

All polls obtained from Lexis/Nexis Academic Universe on-line.

Third, our data make it plain that campaigns may influence one variable but not others. For example, Independents learned about the Democratic candidate in 1980 and the Republican candidate in 2000, but there was no change in any of the other variables we studied for Independents in either campaign. The fact that a campaign influences one variable does not mean it can be assumed to influence other variables.

A fourth implication is the fact that these campaigns often have different effects on different groups of voters. For example, in 1988, issue salience increased for Republicans and Democrats but was unchanged for Independents. Similarly, issue knowledge about George Bush, Jr. increased in 2000 for Independent voters but not for Republicans and Democrats. In fact, these data make it clear that when campaigns do have effects on voters, those effects are unlikely to be experienced by all voters. In no case out of 36 possibilities (6 DVs, 6 elections) was there a significant effect on a dependent variable for all three groups of voters.

Up until this point we have not discussed the analyses for All voters. Notice that had we not analyzed the data for each group separately, our results could have been misleading in important ways. For example, in 1980, there is a significant correlation among all voters of knowledge of Jimmy Carter. However, there is no significant correlation for Democrats or Republicans; Independents (with an  $r$  of .13;  $r$  for all voters .06) appear to account for most of this relationship. Nor can this be attributed to  $n$  (the  $n$  for all voters is 1376;  $n$  for each group of voters is obviously smaller). The  $r$ s for Democrats (0.031) and Republicans (0.010) would not be significant even if the  $n$  for either group had been 1376. On the other hand, the correlation for all voters for character evaluation of Bush in 1992 is not significant ( $r=-0.23$ ) but the correlation for Independents was significant. Similarly, in 1992 the correlation for issue salience for all voters was not significant at  $-0.005$ , but this masked the existence of both a significant negative correlation among Republicans and a significant positive correlation among Democrats. So, conducting our analyses on all voters, rather than on each group of voters separately, could have led to both Type 1 and Type 2 errors.

Of course, the idea that different audiences can react differently to media messages is hardly news. However, this study provides clear evidence that it can be a mistake to assume that what we know about all voters is necessarily true of salient groups of voters. One implication of these data is that researchers studying the effects of political campaign messages would be well advised to check to see if results—both significant as well as non-significant results—for voters generally also hold true for voters with different political party affiliations.

### Conclusion

Using national surveys of adult voters during the presidential elections from 1980-2000 (NES), we investigated the effects of campaigns on voter knowledge and attitudes. Voters are capable of being influenced on several variables: issue knowledge, issue salience, character evaluations, and character salience. Again, this analysis does not report total knowledge gain -- some voters surely had knowledge (from primary, of incumbent, even of challenger) before NES started collecting data in the fall. Also, NES scores should be considered conservative estimates of knowledge because items were not optimized to measure issues discussed in the campaign.

It also appears that campaigns can have negative effects, misinforming voters and reducing evaluations of candidates' character as well. This study also suggests that campaigns appear to be more likely to influence issue knowledge and issue salience than character evaluations or character salience (perhaps because a majority of voters indicate that their vote for president is based more on policy than character grounds). We also provide evidence that voters with different political party affiliations react differently to campaigns. Insignificant effects with all voters (combined) may mask significant effects for some groups of voters; significant results for all voters may not translate into significant effects for key groups of voters. Clearly, presidential campaigns are capable of influencing voters on a number of variables, but the nature of this influence appears to be rather complex.

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