Campaign Issue Knowledge and Salience: Comparing Reception from TV Commercials, TV News, and Newspapers*

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Theory: The impact of media sources including televised political commercials, television news, and newspapers on candidate issue position knowledge and issue-based candidate evaluations is explored.

Hypotheses: From previous research, we expect that citizens who recall political TV commercials and are more attentive to newspaper political coverage will have greater knowledge of candidates’ stances on issues than those watching political news on TV. Citizens recalling political ads and those reading the newspaper are also expected to be more likely to evaluate the candidates using substantive issues.

Methods: Regression analysis of the 1992 American National Election Study data.

Results: Citizens recalling political advertising have the most accurate knowledge of the candidates’ issue positions and are the most likely to use domestic and foreign issues to evaluate the presidential candidates. Consumption of negative advertising is also associated with greater issue knowledge and use of issues in evaluations late in the campaign.

The mass media are widely recognized as providing the primary sources of political information for most citizens. Political communication research after World War II turned from a focus on political persuasion toward an examination of the relative levels of knowledge gained from various mass media (McQuail 1977). An informational advantage was commonly attributed to newspaper reading in early works. Yet, until the 1970s, few studies attempted to account simultaneously for the independent effects of newspapers, television news, and television advertising on citizens’ awareness of candidates’ issue positions. This research dearth is all the more surprising in light of the central importance of these three information sources in the late 20th century. An early finding that viewers learn more about candidates’ issue positions from televised campaign ads than from television

*All data and the documentation to replicate this analysis are available from ICPSR (#6067). We are grateful to the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research for providing us with the 1992 American National Election Study. The data were originally collected by Warren E. Miller and the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. Neither ICPSR nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretation presented here. All statistical analyses contained in this study were performed using SPSS release 6.0.

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news (Patterson and McClure 1976) is still among the most frequently cited in the literature, but has yet to be systematically retested. Much research has focused solely on the various media’s relative information transmission advantages, leaving aside the more central question of which medium contributes more information to citizens’ political decisions. This question links mass media influences and information with viewers’ and readers’ underlying reasoning processes that produce the vote decision. In this paper we reexamine and clarify the part each medium contributes during a campaign to citizens’ political issue knowledge and the use of substantive issues to evaluate presidential candidates.

Patterson and McClure’s (1976) study evaluating learning effects from TV ads, TV news and newspapers during a campaign asserted the informational importance of political TV advertising. Although this panel study of the 1972 United States presidential election is still considered a path-breaking work, it does have several methodological weaknesses. First, Patterson and McClure used a sample of just one city, raising external reliability concerns. Second, the 1972 election was unusually issue-oriented, as was the political advertising used in the campaign (Joslyn 1984, 196; Graber 1993, 248–9; Miller et al. 1976). Third, viewers’ exposure to television political advertising was inferred from prime-time viewing logs rather than from direct questions about ad recall. This subtle measure has the methodological advantage of not prompting viewers’ attention to ads. A disadvantage, however, is that viewers could still record watching TV even if they left the room during commercial interruptions or did not pay attention to ads. Fourth, respondents were grouped into dichotomous media use categories, thus limiting the strength of the statistical analysis.

More recent survey and experimental research fails to seriously challenge or even closely replicate Patterson and McClure’s controversial findings, although a large literature has further explored the media’s role in political learning. Subjects’ newspaper reading consistently predicts higher levels of political knowledge in both surveys (Robinson and Davis 1990; Chaffee, Nass, and Yang 1990) and experiments (DeFleur et al. 1992). In addition, content analysis demonstrates that newspaper articles contain more in-depth information than TV news reports (Robinson and Davis 1990). Most information transmission research agrees that television news

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1 For example, Diamond and Bates (1992) are typical when they acknowledge Patterson and McClure’s findings, but remain skeptical without retesting. More recently though, in an article published as this paper went to press, Zhao and Chaffee (1995) begin to address this deficiency. They combine data from a number of new and previously analyzed regional surveys, concluding that both TV news and campaign ads contribute to citizens’ political knowledge. This study neither utilizes open-ended responses nor analyzes the viewers’ use of issues in evaluating candidates.
viewers seem particularly disadvantaged in political conceptualization. Not only do TV news viewers see fewer differences between candidates than do newspaper readers and have poorer information recall, but television news viewing also has been negatively associated with policy knowledge, regardless of viewers’ educational or political interest levels (Wagner 1983; Gunter 1987; Clarke and Fredin 1978; Neuman 1976). On the other hand, TV news viewers can identify more candidates for regional and national office than do ad watchers (Hofstetter, Zukin, and Buss 1978), and a recent survey suggests that TV news contributes to citizens’ policy issue information (Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994).

Several recent studies report interesting results on the informative characteristics of political advertising, although the research is in its infancy (Graber 1993, 248). Political ad viewing is associated with conveying more accurate candidate issue positions than televised debates in an experimental setting (Just, Crigler, and Wallach 1990). Viewers often more accurately recall the ads placed by their preferred candidate than his or her opponent’s ads. On the other hand, about one-third of viewers do not recall anything from campaign ads running during times they reported watching TV (Faber and Storey 1984). Negative advertising, in particular, generates considerable attention during election campaigns, but little research evaluates its role as a political information medium.2 Research has shown that negative advertising increases political cynicism, produces negative affect toward candidates, and may reduce citizens’ interest in voting (Basil, Schooler, and Reeves 1991; Merritt 1984; Garramone 1984; Garramone 1985; Ansolabehere et al. 1994). Although these studies suggest that negative ads produce unsympathetic emotions, content-based analyses of negative advertising find that negative spots have significant informational potential. There is evidence that political ads were becoming more factual by the 1972 election (Jamieson 1984, 450–1), and that negative ads increasingly emphasized performance and policy-based themes during the 1980s (West 1993). As evidence of ads’ informational components, West finds that from 1952 to 1992 most of the presidential candidates’ “substantive appeals come in negative spots” (1993, 51).

From this brief review, it appears that TV political ads, newspaper political coverage and TV news, to a lesser degree, all have the capacity to convey considerable political information to viewers and readers. There is

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2 Negative advertising has been defined in various ways, but West’s (1993) definition (containing an unflattering or challenging statement—policy or personal) seems most useful because it is simple, intuitive, and seems similar to the way viewers are likely to perceive negativity.
little agreement, though, on which single information source is superior. Only two studies (Hofstetter, Zukin, and Buss 1978; Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994) since Patterson and McClure's (1976) have simultaneously controlled for these three media sources, but each contains serious weaknesses. Focusing on the 1972 presidential election, Hofstetter, Zukin and Buss (1978) conclude that TV news and newspapers contribute more political information than do political ads. This study, however, operationalized 'information' as how many congressional and vice-presidential candidates they could name, and TV news viewing was measured with a trichotomous exposure variable, lacking a political news attention dimension. The more recent study (Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994) also emphasizes TV news' informational role, with little contribution by political ads. It suffers from weaknesses both in terms of statistical methodology and research design. The study employs step-wise regression, includes at least 19 variables in a single regression equation, and TV ad use is measured by a single trichotomous response 'attention' question. The survey data consists of samples of the North Carolina general public and California registered voters, each with a small sample size, and inconsistent questions across the samples (Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994).

While the above mentioned studies have apparent weaknesses, any comparative analysis of electronic and print media's information transmission is complicated by the possibility that each mass medium invokes differential cognitive involvement. The literature from business advertising studies developed over the last 30 years propounds that newspaper reading is more cognitively involving than television viewing. This work is most notably associated with Krugman's (1977) brain hemispheric theory differentiating recall from recognition. Krugman hypothesizes that reading involves higher cognitive involvement, making it more amenable to recall, while television viewers' knowledge is better tested using recognition because their medium requires lower involvement than does reading.1 This explanation has fallen into disfavor in recent years, but the relative merits of recall or recognition measures are still hotly debated (e.g., Dubow 1994; Gibson 1994; Ross 1994).

Involvement theory suggests caution when directly comparing divergent media to one another—specifically, electronic versus print mass media. On the other hand, while an awareness of this research is useful, its

1 The term hemisphere comes into play because it was hypothesized that TV viewing involves the right side of the brain and reading involves the left side of the brain. For a useful review and critique of this entire literature from an advertising assessment perspective, see du Plessis (1994).
negative implications may be empirically mitigated. This might be accomplished by shifting the focus from which medium provides the most information to a consideration of which medium supplies more information "that will be useful in making political decisions" (Schoemaker, Schooler, and Danielson 1989, 101). This approach has the advantage of explicitly linking mass media use to political action—a connection left implicit in the issue knowledge research. Two methodological advantages recommend more directly evaluating the mass media channels through which citizens gain information used for their political choices. First, although minimal recall information is used—typically just the candidate’s name—it is the only salient kind for political participation. If this provides an insufficient prompt, then they will have considerable trouble expressing their choice at the polls. Second, in responding to open-ended questions, subjects provide their own relevant issues. The substantive issues they spontaneously cite in support of, or in opposition to, a given candidate are closely related to their vote choice (Kelley 1983).

In contrast to the substantial issue knowledge literature, surprisingly little research specifically assesses the direct association between particular mass media use and amount of issue-based reasons underlying political choices. In a rare study assessing mass media influences on political reasoning, Clarke and Fredin (1978) find that consistent television news viewers are no more likely to offer reasons for vote choice than those watching little news. On the other hand, frequent newspaper readers offer more reasons for their political choices than infrequent readers. This study, however, was limited to these two media and the survey research focused on United States Senate candidates in 1974.

In sum, previous research established that all three of the mass media channels (TV news, TV ads, and newspapers) have the potential to transmit candidates’ issue positions that citizens can use in making their political choices, although TV news seems particularly disadvantaged. We propose testing this connection between the mass media in two principal ways. First, an issue-based analysis will determine each medium’s contribution to readers’ and viewers’ knowledge of the candidates’ policy positions. Second, an analysis partitioning each medium’s contribution to citizens’ substantive reasons underlying their candidate choices will limit the possible influence of differential cognitive involvement levels between the media. Additionally, the informational characteristics of negative advertising will be separately appraised.

**Study Design and Data**

Our research questions, as well as methodological considerations raised by a review of previous studies, lead us to identify a number of components
that an analysis of mass media effects on voters’ informational characteristics should contain. First, to accurately gauge each medium’s effect, subjects should report on their exposure in everyday life. A large, representative national sample will boost reliability over regional surveys or experiments. Second, the research design should allow for continuous or at least ordinal level measures of media use, instead of the dichotomous groupings used previously. Third, there should be controls for other factors affecting media consumption and information processing. For example, previous research finds that education and gender influence mass media usage (Yum and Kendall 1988). Fourth, general political knowledge should also be controlled for, given that Price and Zaller (1993) find it is one of the best indicators of one’s capability to learn during a campaign. Fifth, interview month is an important control variable because campaign media coverage and advertising gain in intensity as the election nears (West 1993, 18).

Our analysis is able to incorporate the characteristics noted above, using the 1992 American National Election Study (ANES). This representative national survey interviewed 2,485 individuals and includes a wide variety of demographic, political, and mass media measures. These data have many strengths and are well suited to address the research questions, but two concerns may stem from their use. First, political information questions were only asked in the pre-election wave. Thus, we are unable to dynamically measure political learning occurring over time. Second, when using a survey asking media use questions just weeks prior to an election, it is conceivable that interview timing could unduly advantage TV ads over other media sources. This could occur if respondents are more aware of campaign ads as they increase in broadcast frequency as election day approaches, but actually gained their political information from other information sources, possibly even earlier in the campaign. Two factors mitigate this concern. First, those paying more attention to one media source do not also give higher levels of attention to other sources. For example, people recalling political ads are not likely to be avid newspaper readers \( (r = .11) \). Second, while there is a positive relationship between recalling political ads and election day proximity, this factor is easily controllable in the multivariate analysis used here. These empirical precautions should largely obviate concerns about timing and media favoritism.

The 1992 ANES contains data on the consumption of a variety of media, but the most detailed responses are for televised political ads, TV news,

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4 The media variables are not completely pure and unaffected by one another. The TV news watching and newspaper reading indices are much more related \( (r = .39) \). Watching TV news is less highly related to recalling ads, though \( (r = .23) \).
and newspaper use. When measuring media use, both exposure and attention are important variables (Chaffee and Schleuder 1986). Thus, we created indices for newspaper reading (Cronbach’s alpha = .61 [Cronbach 1951]) and TV news watching (alpha = .65), combining frequency of use with attention paid to political coverage for each medium (Price and Zaller 1993). Offering substantive comments to an open-ended question asking what people recalled about televised presidential political ads forms a dichotomous ad reception variable. While this measure may be conservative in that it does not measure a subject’s total advertising exposure, it captures the ads’ conscious and enduring impact. The possibility that it benefits the politically or cognitively more sophisticated requires the use of general political knowledge and education controls.

Three indices compile respondents’ knowledge of candidates’ issue positions, issue-based reasons for vote choice, and general political knowledge. Knowledge of candidates’ issue positions is an additive scale, based on the number of correct responses given to questions about President Bush’s and Governor Clinton’s stands on policies during the 1992 presidential campaign ranging from defense spending to the government’s role in the economy (alpha = .69). The Appendix contains a listing of the percent correctly answering these policy questions. A similar issue knowledge dependent variable has been usefully employed by other researchers (e.g., Robinson and Levy 1986, 89; Zhu, Milavsky, and Biswas 1994, 317). Reasons for vote choice are coded as the total number of comments about domestic and foreign issues respondents offered when asked what he or she liked and disliked about Bush and Clinton, which might influence their vote. This substantive issue-based evaluation index is quite similar to an earlier ANES measure (Clarke and Fredin 1978, 148). A control variable, general political knowledge, measures objective knowledge using specific questions about the United States political system and the offices held by government officials, such as Tom Foley or William Rehnquist (alpha = .77). Indices constructed from these ANES questions are valid and reliable measures of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, 1200–02; Delli Carpini, Keeter, and Kennamer 1994, 449). The Appendix contains a more detailed description of variable construction.

General political knowledge was assessed in the post-test, while the rest of the variables used are from the pre-test. One’s level of knowledge about the political system and its participants is unlikely to be greatly influenced by a given election. In this analysis the possible exception would be Dan Quayle, as he was on the ticket. This concern may be alleviated by the fact that almost 90% of those asked correctly identified his job, allowing this question little opportunity to confound this scale. The Appendix contains the questions comprising the objective knowledge index.
Data Analysis

Before analyzing each media source’s relationship to political knowledge and issue-based evaluations, a brief analysis of what respondents recalled about the 1992 presidential ads will add depth to later interpretations of media effects. Respondents were first asked if they recalled any ads from the campaign, and if so, what they recalled. It seems likely that more memorable commercials have a better chance of influencing viewers’ knowledge of candidates’ issue positions. Certainly this is the candidates’ goal. Experimental research shows that negative ads are more memorable than positive ones, with issue-based messages from negative ads also remembered better than positive ones (Shapiro and Rieger 1992).6

The 1992 ANES data seem to support these experimental findings, demonstrating that negative ads were more frequently recalled.7 In Table 1 the single most common substantive comment mentioned is that the televised presidential campaign ads were too negative, comprising about 13% of the total comments. This might be dismissed as little more than a reflexive response, if not for the fact that more than half of those mentioning that the ads were excessively negative also commented on individual ads they recalled. Comments about specific ads constituted about 24% of the total responses, with all five of the most frequently mentioned political ads being attack ads. Of the specific ads recalled, fully 77% of the responses involved an attack ad. Specific ads run by Bush were almost twice as likely to be commented upon than Clinton’s, with the majority of each candidate’s memorable ads involving an attack on the other. Interestingly, only one of Perot’s ads appears among the most frequent responses. This was not an ad attacking another candidate, but rather one where he mentioned problems with the economy and the deficit. Perot’s unorthodox advertising production methods, such as the use of charts, were more memorable than his specific message. Overall, though, viewers’ recollections of political commercials from the 1992 campaign were dominated by negative ads.

The positive impact that these political ads may have on knowledge about the issues and use of them in their evaluations of candidates can be seen in the two models presented in Table 2. The first model examines knowledge of candidates’ issue positions depending on how much attention

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6 Although not specifically researching ability to recall information, Behnke and Miller (1992) report that experimental subjects are significantly more interested in negative news stories.

7 Of course, the frequency of airing and the proportion of negative ads among those aired might distort this result. According to Rosenstiel (1994, 289), 11 of the 24 TV ads produced by the Clinton campaign were negative while 12 of 15 of Bush’s ads attacked Clinton.
Table 1. Most Frequently Mentioned Substantive Television Advertising Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Percent$^a$</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too much negative campaigning in ads</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>281$^N$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ads too negative</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>120$^N$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—no details</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton ad—attacking Bush’s broken tax promise</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>81$^{NN}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—attacking Clinton’s draft record</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>80$^{NN}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—attacking “two faces of Clinton”</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>78$^{NN}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—attacking Clinton’s Arkansas record</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>76$^{NN}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton ad—attack on Bush’s handling of economy</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>74$^{NN}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton ad—no details</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton ads too negative</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>57$^N$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perot ad—no details</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perot ad—production details</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—economic plan</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>37$^S$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—production details</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perot ad—used charts</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—saying he’ll never again raise taxes</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>26$^S$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton ad—need for change</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>26$^S$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perot ad—on economy</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>24$^S$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush ad—people questioning Clinton’s abilities</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>13$^{SN}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$Percent of total ad responses.  
$^S$Specific ad mentioned.  
$^N$Negative mention.  
Note: Of the 2,485 respondents interviewed, 1,263 recalled seeing televised presidential political ads and they offered a total of 2,129 ad comments. This table is coded from those comments. The Appendix contains question wording and other coding details.

is given to televised political ads, newspapers, or television news broadcasts, while controlling for several demographic and political variables. The second model substitutes the use of substantive issues to evaluate candidates as the dependent variable.

The first model in Table 2 shows that ad watchers are somewhat better informed about candidates’ issue positions than newspaper readers or TV news watchers. All of the media use variables are statistically significant, but ads are more significant than are newspaper reading and television news watching. In addition to assessing the impact of media use, this model simultaneously controls for educational attainment, age, political campaign interest, and level of objective political knowledge—all of which are highly significant. These controls alleviate the possibility that the relationship be-
Table 2. Predicting Issue Knowledge and Issue-based Candidate Evaluation by Media Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Knowledge of Candidates’ Positions</th>
<th>Candidate Evaluation Issue Salience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Ad Recall</td>
<td>.247** (.084)</td>
<td>.363*** (.101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper Index</td>
<td>.010* (.005)</td>
<td>.003 (.006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News Index</td>
<td>.011* (.005)</td>
<td>.004 (.006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.268*** (.028)</td>
<td>.024 (.034)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (female)</td>
<td>−.079 (.082)</td>
<td>−.004 (.098)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in Years</td>
<td>−.016*** (.002)</td>
<td>−.018*** (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Interest</td>
<td>.183*** (.033)</td>
<td>.260*** (.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Political Knowledge</td>
<td>.449*** (.030)</td>
<td>.291*** (.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Date</td>
<td>−.088 (.080)</td>
<td>.028 (.096)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.410*** (.183)</td>
<td>.978*** (.219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>1,809</td>
<td>1,809</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Figures are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses.

*Variables defined and missing data cases explained in the Appendix.

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

***p < .001.

two-tailed test

tween media use and issue knowledge is driven by demographic or attitudinal differences in each medium's audience.8

The second model in Table 2 explores the relationship between individuals’ attention to each mass media source and their use of substantive issues in candidate evaluations. When asked a set of open-ended questions con

8 Age is significantly negatively associated with knowledge of candidates’ positions and issue-based candidate evaluations. Although this unexpected directional relationship raises the specter of multicollinearity, no supporting evidence was found. Testing for collinearity, age is correlated −.11 with ad recall, .24 with newspaper reading, and .30 with TV news watching. Additionally, all of the coefficients in the regression equation have large
cerning what people like and dislike about Bush and Clinton, there is considerable variation in the degree to which people offer comments concerning which domestic and foreign issues may influence their vote choice. In the second model in Table 2 the number of issue-based comments respondents provide about Bush and Clinton is strongly related to recalling televised political advertisements. Neither newspaper reading nor TV news watching are significantly related to the number of issue comments offered about the candidates. As in the first model of this table, education, campaign interest and objective political knowledge are controlled for, although in this case education is not a significant predictor. Comparing the two models, it is apparent that the media variables (and their controls) explain the variance in respondents’ knowledge of candidates’ issue stances (adj. $r^2 = .40$) more successfully than they account for variance in issue-based evaluations of candidates (adj. $r^2 = .16$).

The basic relationships that we find between media use, issue knowledge, and evaluation are likely to evolve during the course of a campaign. In particular, one might expect people to learn more from their attention to the media during the campaign’s intense final stages. As the general election approaches, viewers also have more exposure to political ads on television. Respondents were interviewed over a two month period before the election in 1992. Only about 39% of respondents interviewed in the first two weeks of September commented on political advertising compared to 65% of those interviewed during the final two weeks of the campaign. In Table 3 the sample was divided into two temporally equal parts for each of the independent variables to demonstrate the effects of varying levels of media campaign exposure.11

 tolerances (all but objective knowledge are over 64%, and it has 57% tolerance). Following Fox’s (1991) recommendation that the square root of the Variance Inflation Factor is a superior predictor of multicollinearity, we computed age’s square root VIF at 1.148—substantially below the cautionary range of 2.0.

Multicollinearity concerns aside, an alternate explanation is that older citizens draw on their longer term political knowledge, giving less attention to election-specific information. This insight was offered by an anonymous reviewer.

9 Not all respondents were asked open-ended questions about Perot due to his late re-entry into the campaign. Responses for him were not included in this analysis. For the two major party candidates, respondents were asked the question: “Is there anything in particular that you like(dislike) about [each candidate] that might make you want to vote for(against) him?”

10 The relationship between this dependent variable and the previous one concerning knowledge of candidates’ policy stands is a modest .35. Thus, they are clearly measuring different, though related, concepts.

11 The relationship between interview date and each of the mass media independent variables is more intuitive when the actual interview data is used to create this control variable. There is not a perfect correlation, though, between being assigned to the first pre-
Turning first to knowledge of candidates’ positions, the first two columns of Table 3 show both the effects of election proximity on ad recall and other media reception measures, and the independent effect of each media source on knowledge of the candidates’ issue positions in each interview period. As expected, when the election draws near, the impact of televised political ads on knowledge of the candidates’ stands increases. In fact, political ad recall is significantly associated with a greater awareness of presidential candidates’ policy preferences only when the campaign reaches its final stages in October. Neither newspaper reading nor TV news watching achieve significance when interview month is separately evaluated.

As predicted, the relationship between recalling political ads and making more issue-based evaluations of candidates is highly significant in the final month of the campaign. On the other hand, neither of the other media sources significantly contributes to issue-centered evaluations of candidates in either of the two periods presented in Table 3. The same control variables used in Table 2 are used here, and their relationships to each dependent variable remain consistent for the campaign’s final two months.

Both dependent variables share the same pattern with respect to the media variables. When regressions were performed separately by interview data, recalling political ads is significant in the final month of the campaign, but the newspaper reading and TV news viewing fail to gain significance. Two factors may drive this relationship. First, the reduction in case numbers when the sample is divided in Table 3 makes achieving significance more difficult. Second, given the first consideration, the fact that ad recall maintains the same, significant relationship previously displayed in Table 2 underscores the strength of its relationship to issue knowledge and issue salience.

Since political advertising is the only medium consistently and significantly associated with both higher levels of issue knowledge and more issue-laden candidate evaluations, it should be illuminating to look more closely at the particular role of negative advertising, which so dominated people’s impressions of the 1992 ad campaign (see Table 1). We therefore coded a negative advertising recall dummy variable and recalculated all of
election wave and a September interview date because of interviewee contact problems for some cases. Of the 2,485 cases interviewed, 319 were not interviewed in their scheduled month and were deleted from the analysis to strictly maintain the sample frame in the results presented here. Statistically, the significance of the dependent variables is only affected slightly whether interview data is controlled using the two pre-election releases employed by the principal investigators or the actual date of interview. The newspaper index is significant at the .05 level in the second period, when using actual date of interview. It fails to gain statistical significance in the two proper samples.
<table>
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<th>Candidate Evaluation Issue Salience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Ad Recall</td>
<td>.166 (.121)</td>
<td>.331** (.120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper Index</td>
<td>.013 (.008)</td>
<td>.008 (.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News Index</td>
<td>.013 (.008)</td>
<td>.009 (.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.255*** (.042)</td>
<td>.276*** (.038)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (female)</td>
<td>−.107 (.120)</td>
<td>−.052 (.113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in Years</td>
<td>−.019*** (.004)</td>
<td>−.013*** (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Interest</td>
<td>.161*** (.047)</td>
<td>.204*** (.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Political Knowledge</td>
<td>.445*** (.044)</td>
<td>.449*** (.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.683*** (.269)</td>
<td>1.064*** (.244)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>953</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Note: Figures are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses.

*Variables defined in the Appendix.

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

***p < .001.

two-tailed test

the estimations from Tables 2 and 3. This variable only measures those mentioning a specific negative ad. It is found that recalling negative political ads is significantly (p < .05) associated with higher levels of both issue knowledge and issue-based candidate evaluations, but only in October. Neither of the other media variables achieve significance when negative advertising is included in the model. Thus, negative ads—though so often decried as harmful to democracy—may play an important role in promoting knowl-
edge of issues and active use of them in evaluation of presidential candidates.

Conclusion

This paper’s findings support the conclusion that political advertising contributes to a well-informed electorate. When responding to open-ended questions, a substantial proportion of those commenting on televised political advertisements mentioned a specific presidential candidate’s campaign advertisement. Recalling political ads is more significantly associated with knowledge of candidates’ issue positions than is reading the newspaper or watching political news on television. Of the media variables, recalling political advertisements becomes significantly related to issue knowledge in the final stages of the campaign. Remembering televised political advertisements is significantly related to the number of issue-oriented reasons for voting for or against Bush and Clinton. As with knowledge of candidates’ policy preferences, the impact of political ads on issue-based evaluations is only significant in the campaign’s final month. The other media fail to gain significance during any period of the campaign season. Finally, volunteering comments on negative ads is significantly associated with greater issue knowledge and being more likely to make issue-based candidate evaluations during the campaign’s closing stages.

These results support several more general conclusions about the comparative roles mass media may have in fostering increased political knowledge and use during a campaign. First, although many political analysts denigrate political ads, and negative political ads in particular, we find that they likely contribute to accurate information about the issues, as well as active use of issues in candidate evaluations. Secondly, this paper’s analysis supports previous empirical research finding a weak association between television news watching and political knowledge. Increasing attention and steady viewing of TV news is not associated with evaluating the candidates via issue criteria. Third, and most surprising, attention to newspaper political coverage fails to improve one’s knowledge of candidates’ stands over viewing TV news. Additionally, consistent newspaper readers fare no better than the most attentive TV watchers in issue-based candidate evaluations.

The first conclusion may be addressed simply through a (possibly reluctant) acceptance of the informational role of televised political ads. The acknowledged bias of political spots may stimulate political thinking and cognitive struggles in several ways. Media-based experimental research shows that receiving conflicting, inconsistent information forces one “to think more deeply about the incoming facts . . . [leading] to greater recall” (Wicks and Drew 1991, 163). Additionally, leaners may internally argue against ads with which they do not agree, pushing the undecided toward
a somewhat more preferred candidate and reinforcing distinctions between
the candidates (Atkin et al. 1973). The effect of ads as a vehicle of candidate
campaign information has also probably gained importance in light of the
continuing decline in importance of United States’ political parties as an
information conduit to voters (Wattenberg 1994; Burnham 1970).

The second conclusion is particularly troubling in light of experimental
research on the informational potential of television news. It is generally
accepted that TV news can provide good retention in experimental settings,
but in field research it rarely does (Graber 1990; Berry 1983; Robinson and
Davis 1990). Previous research suggests two factors that may contribute
to this situation. Television viewers are often less cognitively sophisticated,
and they self-select to receive their news from this medium (Neuman, Just,
and Crigler 1992). Unlike the experimental programs providing consider-
able learning and retention, actual television broadcasts rarely provide ade-
quate context for the stories they present (Graber 1990; Neuman, Just, and
Crigler 1992). Graber (1990) further suggests that without appropriate con-
text, viewers get lost in the barrage of unexplained factual information con-
tained in a typical television news program. This experimental work and our
findings suggest that television news suffers from its unrealized potential.

The third conclusion, undermining the special place long reserved for
newspaper readers in studies of political learning, may stem from one or
all of the three processes. Simultaneously controlling for other variables
associated with newspaper reading (e.g., education, campaign interest) may
dissipate the medium’s explanatory value, particularly when assessing ac-
tive issue-based candidate evaluation. Alternatively, newspapers’ ability to
transmit the information people use in evaluating politicians, or individuals’
ability to receive political information in print, may have eroded since ear-
ier research was conducted. Today’s political context could be less amena-
to this medium. Decomposing this complex relationship clearly requires
further research. On the other hand, newspaper content has changed in re-
cent years. Few newspapers print candidate speeches anymore, follow-
ing campaigners’ and TV news reporters’ lead by abbreviating coverage
(Jamieson 1988, 6–7). Furthermore, candidate quotes have become much
shorter in recent years (Patterson 1993, 76). As print media increasingly
mimic TV news, guided by USA Today’s style of brief and colorful presenta-
tion, newspaper readers’ political knowledge may be slighted.

While the evidence supports an acknowledgment of the informative
role of campaign TV ads, no causal claims should be made absent precise
knowledge of all the information viewers were exposed to and the dynamic
changes in their political understanding. Facing a similar concern, Robinson
and Levy’s (1986, 27) thorough analysis notes the unfortunate absence of an
“information meter” that might provide such insight in natural settings.
Lacking this type of equipment, they still choose to actively research information flow and understanding, using the best available survey tools. In this paper we pursue a similar goal.

Although the strength of our findings is necessarily limited by the static nature of our data, we have confidence in the empirical finding that watching televised political advertisements leads to being more accurately informed about candidate issue positions than watching television news. Likewise, those who get some political information from televised political ads, including negative ads, are more likely to evaluate candidates in issue-oriented terms. The fact that much of viewers’ knowledge comes from negative advertising should serve to reassure critical observers who fear that political attacks harm the American viewing and voting public. Quite the opposite view emerges from this study.

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APPENDIX
Measurement of Variables

General Variable Coding:

Knowledge of Candidates’ Issue Positions: Coded from 0 to 8 based on the number of correct responses to questions asking about presidential candidates’ issue stances. Question wording is below.

Candidate Evaluation Issue Salience: Coded from 0 to 13 based on the number of issue-oriented candidate comments respondents offered as reasons for their vote choice. Question wording is below.

Political Ad Recall: A dummy variable coded 1 for yes, and 0 for no, reflecting comments made about presidential election ads in response to an open-ended question. Question wording and frequencies below.

Newspaper Index: Coded from 0 to 28, with 28 denoting the highest attention to politics in the newspaper and daily readership. It is a multiplicative index combining a frequency and an attention measure.

TV News Index: Coded from 0 to 28, with 28 denoting the highest attention to politics on TV news and daily news viewing. It is a multiplicative index combining a frequency and an attention measure.

Education: A summary variable ranging from 1 to a high value of 7.

Sex: A dummy variable coded 0 for male and 1 for female.

Age in Years: The respondent’s reported age in years.

Campaign Interest: The respondent’s interest in the presidential campaign, ranging from 1 to a high value of 5.
**General Political Knowledge:** Coded from 0 to 6, based on the number of correct responses to questions about government operation and political actors. Question wording is below.

**Interview Date:** A dummy variable coded 0 for those assigned to the September subsample and who were interviewed in September. Coded 1 for those in the October subsample interviewed October through election day. Of the 2,485 cases interviewed, 319 were not interviewed in their scheduled month and were dropped from the analysis to strictly maintain the sample frame in the results presented here.

**Selected Variable Questions and Frequencies:**

*Knowledge of Candidates’ issue positions* is measured using a summary scale comprised of the number of correct responses to the following questions, which were asked separately for each candidate. Although we only report on the results obtained with these codings as the correct responses, the basic relationships between the dependent and independent variables are fairly insensitive to minor (one position either way) variations in defining the correct answers. Candidate questions about Ross Perot are not included in the analysis because only about half of the sample (October interviews) was queried about him, following his re-entry in the race (Miller et al. 1993). All respondents were asked the questions about the other two candidates (2,485 cases). The question prompt used in the interview precedes each question.

1. Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale at point 1. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

   Where would you place George Bush (Bill Clinton) on this scale?
   1—Government provide fewer services, reduce spending a lot
   2
   3
   4
   5
   6
   7—Government provide many more services increase spending a lot
   ----> 1.2 or 3 were coded as correct for Bush. (42%)
   ----> 5.6 or 7 were coded as correct for Clinton. (46%)

2. Some people believe that we should spend much less money for defense. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased.

   Where would you place George Bush (Bill Clinton) on this scale?
   1—Greatly decrease defense spending
   2
   3
   4
5

6

7—Greatly increase defense spending
   —>3 or 4 were coded as correct for Bush. (26%)
   —>1,2 or 3 were coded as correct for Clinton. (38%)

3. Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own.

   Where would you place George Bush (Bill Clinton) on this scale?
   1—Government see to job and good standard of living
   2
   3
   4
   5
   6
   7—Government let each person get ahead
   —>5,6 or 7 were coded as correct for Bush. (56%)
   —>1,2 or 3 were coded as correct for Clinton. (39%)

4. There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years.

   What do you think is George Bush’s (Bill Clinton’s) position? You can just tell me the number of the opinion you choose.
   1—By law, abortion should never be permitted
   2—The law should permit abortion in case of rape, incest or when the woman’s life is in danger
   3—The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established
   4—By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice
   5—Rejects concept that abortion should be regulated at all by law
   —>1 or 2 were coded as correct for Bush. (69%)
   —>4 was coded as correct for Clinton. (48%)

Candidate Evaluation Issue Salience was measured using a summary scale comprised of the number of responses to the following question, asked about each candidate, allowing for up to five answers to each question: “Is there anything in particular that you like/dislike about [each candidate] that might make you want to vote for (against) him?” The responses were coded for domestic issue or foreign policy content, crediting each respondent with her or his total number of issue-based answers forming a scale. Original ANES codes used were 800-1199 and 1300-1303.

Political Ad Recall: The filter question “Do you recall seeing any presidential campaign advertisements on television?” was first asked of 2,310 respondents (177
of the total 2,485 respondents interviewed using a short form or in Spanish were not asked this question). The 1,667 interviewees responding favorably were then asked “Please tell me, what do you remember about any of these ads?” This was followed by “Do you remember any others?”, allowing for up to five responses (Miller et al. 1993). 1,263 respondents offered substantive presidential ad comments, including the ones listed in Table 1.

*General Political Knowledge* was measured using a summary scale comprised of the number of correct responses to the following questions. Percent of correct responses is in parentheses following the answers. The sample size for the general knowledge question is 2,255, because not all of the 2,485 persons in the pre-election wave could be recontacted.

- What job or political office does he now hold?
  - Dan Quayle (88%)
  - William Rehnquist (8%)
  - Boris Yeltsin (45%)
  - Tom Foley (26%)
- Who has the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not?
  - President (58%)
  - Congress
  - Supreme Court (58%)
- And whose responsibility is it to nominate judges to the federal courts?
  - President (58%)
  - Congress
  - Supreme Court

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**REFERENCES**


