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AUTHOR Nayman, Oguz B.
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ABSTRACT

During the recent election campaigns in the United States, speculative arguments about the use or the abuse of televised political spot commercials to "package" and "sell" the candidates to the public were widespread. With this popularly held belief in mind, the present study concerned itself with the reactions to and utilization of televised political advertising by the electorate during the 1972 presidential campaign. Findings of this survey indicated that the campaign strategists in 1972 presidential elections had a relatively small margin of "undecided" voters to work with. However, to a certain degree the political advertising was functionally utilized by most to obtain information about the presidential candidates while not necessarily yielding to the persuasive intent of the message. (Author)

TELEVISED POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND THE VOTER: A SURVEY OF VOTER ATTITUDES IN THE 1972 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

By

Oguz B. Nayman

Kenneth J. Berry

Dan L. Lattimore

Colorado State University

Presented to

Advertising Division

Association for Education in Journalism

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The use of television in political campaigns gathered momentum during the 1950's when the medium was capturing the attention of millions of Americans throughout the country. Capitalizing on the evergrowing popularity of television, political strategists attempted to use this new medium in order to advance the "penetration" of their campaigns into American homes.[1]

The now classic postulate of Marshall McLuhan, "The medium is the message," had become a modus operandi to many campaign managers and thus an era of "tube rule," with its Orwellian images flashing from the home screen in ten, thirty, and sixty-second spot commercials seemed to be replacing the old-fashioned, barn-storming, face-to-face campaign methods of American politics.[2]

Advent of the 1960's saw a whole new breed of campaign strategists. These electronic messengers of the McLuhan Era were busily engaged in creating "images" and "packaging" candidates, as if they were items to be sold, and justifying their work in Madison Avenue candor of low-cost per-voter ratios. However, not everybody in the advertising business was in agreement with the new trend of condensation of complex, difficult national and regional issues, into the short-span of spot commercials. For example, John E. O'Toole, president of Foote, Cone & Belding Communications, Inc., in a speech to the San Francisco Advertising Club, criticized the inadequacy of spot commercials by stating:

> Equally important is the kind of message to be used. Notice(*) the word 'message." The idea and terminology of political TV 'spots' should be dumped forever. Ten-second, thirty-second, even sixty-second lengths are inadequate and inappropriate for presenting a

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(*) The emphasis is Mr. O'Toole's.

candidate to the voter. These lengths defy a discussion of issues and encourage the shallowest kind of imagery, the shoddiest kind of logic, and the most reprehensible mudslinging.[3]

Among many who cast a suspicious eye on the "new" political strategists and the expanding role of spot commercials in election campaigns, few looked at the voter in an attempt to systematically and quantitatively determine if electronic campaigning actually influenced voting intentions of the American electorate.[4]

In respect to effectiveness of political advertising there seems to be two different schools of thought. On the one hand, professional communicators contend that the greater the frequency of short commercial spots, which they claim reach a larger proportion of the electorate, the better will be the service to their clients. On the other hand, the outcome of empirical studies in the field of mass communication mostly indicate: (1) exposure to most types of information is highly selective; (2) level of message availability is an important determinant of audience reception patterns; and (3) concept familiarity leads to positive evaluation.[5]

Since the publication of The People's Choice by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in 1948, the literature in mass communication research mostly undermined the direct effects of the mass media in political decision-making.[6] The contention of Lazarsfeld et al., and their followers was that rather than directly influencing the electorate in political campaigns, media mostly serve as "reinforcing" agents in decision-making and therefore have a rather limited effect on the voting public. Of course the basic premise of the Columbia "school" was that people selectively expose themselves to that media content which agrees with their previously held beliefs and opinions and ignore the ones that present opposing views. Therefore, the long standing

hypothesis was formulated that despite the availability of information representing the different sides of an issue, the selectivity process mainly directs the patterns of exposure, thus decreasing the effects of the media messages.[7]

Almost a twenty-five year long domination of Lazarsfeld et al., "selective exposure-limited media effects" view has been recently challenged by scholars who point to the existence of other factors alongside the selectivity process to shape the media exposure of people. For example, Sears and Freedman in a revealing article argued that under some circumstances, people seem to prefer information that supports their opinions; however, under other circumstances, people seem to prefer information that contradicts their opinions.[8] On the other hand, Blumler and McLeod, and McLeod et al., in their recent cross-cultural and comparative studies of the media and political campaigns in England and the United States found that the agenda setting function of the media was powerful enough to take another critical look at the claims of selective exposure exponents.[9] In their summary of comparative data, McLeod et al., state that the information collected in England contradicts Columbia "school's" proposition that committed party voters would be highly selective in their exposure to the mass media during a political campaign. As a matter of fact, according to the findings, "...while young British voters did increase viewing of their own party broadcasts late in the campaign, their viewing of opposition broadcasts increased even more sharply."[10](*)

In addition to the aforementioned arguments on selective exposure and the effectiveness of the media in political campaigns, it needs to be pointed out that there is a distinction in communication research between "reception"

(*) The emphasis belongs to McLeod et al.

and "acceptance" of information. Theoretically, as well as empirically, reception indicates attention to, and comprehension of, a given persuasive communication. On the other hand, acceptance means yielding to the conclusion of the message.[11] Therefore, both concepts must be investigated if the effectiveness of persuasive communication is to be totally understood.

In their recent article on political persuasion Sears and Whitney define selective exposure in two categories--de facto selectivity and motivated selectivity. De facto selectivity refers to the situation where the voluntary audience for the mass communication message tends to be initially biased in favor of the message. Motivated selectivity, on the other hand, concerns those people in the audience who deliberately seek supportive information or avoid non-supportive information.[12] Studies of exposure patterns of media content indicate evidence of motivated selectivity.[13] The data from these studies underline that most voters are exposed to material about both candidates (or all candidates), but tend to select greater amounts of supportive information. However, findings from these studies also cast some doubts on the idea of selective avoidance as a way of ignoring the media messages. In short, research in political advertising should not totally concentrate on the relationship of partisan predispositions and exposure patterns to the exclusion of political interest and exposure patterns.

The main purpose of this survey was to examine the exposure patterns of the voting public to televised advertising in a presidential campaign. We have also considered the relationship of exposure to political advertising to such factors as amount of TV viewing, interest in the campaign, and candidate preference.

In the 1972 election campaign between $400 and $500 million was spent on every type of political advertising by candidates at all levels of the

political spectrum. This represents a rise in political advertising from $200 million in 1964, and from $300 million in 1968. Roughly $80 million alone was spent on advertising by the two parties in the presidential race in 1972.[14]

A significant aspect of the 1972 campaign was a trend toward longer messages. Nixon campaign strategists ran nearly twice as many network ads of five minute and half-hour length as the traditional sixty-second spot announcements. McGovern supporters ran 58 of the longer ads (49 five-minute broadcasts and 9 half-hour ads), while airing only 36 one-minute spots.[15]

METHOD

A total of 300 telephone numbers were randomly drawn from the Fort Collins, Colorado telephone directory. Twenty-five student interviewers recruited from the senior author's journalism class were trained in the use and administration of the telephone questionnaire. Of 250 interviews obtained from the telephone survey, 226 were usable.

Interviewers were instructed to achieve a reasonable balance in terms of a male-female ratio by simply asking for a male or female voter in the household contacted. As a result 47 percent of 226 respondents were male and 53 percent were female.

The interview schedule contained items designed to measure the following: (1) exposure, and avoidance patterns with regard to televised advertising; (2) self-reported learning of candidate qualifications and issue positions; (3) candidate familiarity and preference; (4) interest in the campaign and intention to turnout on Election Day; (5) self-reported impact of ads on voting intention and decision-making; and (6) standard demographic items.[16]

The interviews took place on November 4 through November 6, the final three days preceding the election. The average interview lasted eleven minutes.

FINDINGS

The demographic characteristics of the sample reflected the dominance of a major university in a small town. Forty-two percent of the sample was made up of professionals or white-collar workers while 28 percent were blue-collar and 16 percent were students, with the remainder distributed between farmers, housewives, and retired. The sample was also young (48% under the age of 30), educated (36% had a college degree), and slightly in favor of Democratic party (33% indicated a preference for the Democratic party in comparison to 29% who claimed to be Republican). At the time of the interview, 38 percent of the respondents in the sample described themselves as Independent; favoring neither of the two major parties.

The remainder of the discussion in this section focuses on variables such as the frequency of exposure to political advertising, attention given to ads, and voter reactions to the paid political messages on television.

Exposure to political ads: During the interviews only 77 percent of the respondents specifically recalled seeing television advertising for both Presidential candidates in the 1972 campaign.

Table 1 provides information on three different variables in relation to exposure to political advertising: amount of TV viewing, interest in campaign, and candidate preference. As expected, the amount of TV viewing is an

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TABLE 1 about here

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indicator of exposure. Those respondents who limit their exposure to TV are also light viewers of political commercials. Only 66 percent of those viewers reported seeing the ads for both candidates in contrast to 90 percent exposure of the heavy viewers.

Another relationship investigated in this survey was interest in the campaign and exposure to political advertising on television. In this respect a "low" interest in the campaign indeed made a difference in terms of exposure. Those voters who reported a low interest in the election campaign had a lower rate of noticing political ads than the more interested respondents.

The data obtained in this present study do not indicate a pattern of exposure in relation to candidate preference. As can be observed in Table 1, those who favored either one of the candidates viewed both Nixon and McGovern commercials during the campaign. Furthermore, respondents who did not indicate a favorite candidate and/or were "undecided," also exposed themselves to TV advertising for both candidates.

Interestingly though, when candidate preference was contrasted with selectivity of exposure, people who favored McGovern tended to be quite partisan in the attention paid to political advertising. McGovern supporters watched more of their own candidate's commercials than those who favored Nixon (45% to 17% respectively). But a reverse pattern emerges in the case of Nixon backers,who practically ignored their own candidate's advertising and selectively exposed themselves to the opposition candidate's ads. Seventeen percent of Nixon supporters had seen more Nixon ads while 50 percent had watched more McGovern political commercials. One explanation of this finding could be that people do not expose themselves to political messages disseminated by the media in a partisan manner, but try to use these messages functionally. Therefore, a well-known incumbent presidential candidate's messages attracted fewer Republicans than did the opposition candidate McGovern's commercials, who was practically a newcomer to national politics. Nixon partisans in clear defiance of partisan "selective exposure" patterns abandoned their candidate's

commercials and watched more McGovern ads in order to obtain information about the opposition candidate.

Attention to political ads: Table 2 presents correlations between the level of attention paid to political ads and a number of predicator variables.

TABLE 2 about here

These data indicate that relative availability was related to attention level on the average, with a significantly large positive correlation for Nixon ads and practically no correlation for McGovern commercials (+.45 and +.08 respectively). In other words, the relative availability in the case of McGovern messages did not dictate the voter attention paid to his ads. However, the electorate paid attention to Nixon ads because they were available and perhaps they simply could not avoid them.

Most voters were impressed only slightly with the entertainment value of either candidate's advertisements. Averaging across the reactions of respondents, it was found that only 36 percent thought the ads were "generally entertaining," and the rest considered them either "generally boring," or "in between."

The entertainment value of political commercials as an influencing factor in terms of attention paid by the voters to political advertising also tends to be low. Those who thought Nixon ads were more entertaining paid only slightly more attention to his ads than did those who found McGovern's commercials entertaining (+.37 and +.23 respectively).

The two variables, discussion of campaign and information-seeking mode appeared to be the strongest predictors of attention. About 70 percent of the respondents discussed the election "quite often," and 26 percent said

they talked about it at least "once or twice," and only 4 percent "never" talked about it. On the other hand, when offered three possible reasons for viewing, 57 percent of the respondents indicated that they "could not avoid" them, and the remainder watched either for "information" or for "information and enjoyment." Thus, in an "unusual" campaign such as the one in the fall of 1972, the factors such as interpersonal communication and the need for information gathering appear to be critical determinants of message reception.

One other factor, the strength of candidate preference, has a particular influence on McGovern followers (+.99) in the sense that their strength of preference prompted them to pay more attention to his ads than those of Nixon followers (+.12).

Somewhat surprisingly, demographic variables such as occupation, education, and age did not have much impact in terms of attention paid to political commercials in 1972 Presidential campaign.

It can be inferred from the data shown in Table 2 that the relation between the level of attention paid to political advertising and interpersonal communication, information seeking, preference of candidate, and strength of preference is significant enough not to be ignored. However, from the correlational data presented in Table 2 it is quite impossible to draw conclusions in terms of causation and directionality of the relationship mentioned above. But, Table 3 provides certain insights with regard to motivations of

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TABLE 3 about here

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some respondents included in the present sample. Table 3 shows that most of the respondents (87%) decided on their candidate preference before seeing

televised political advertisements. Thus, only 13 percent indicated that they made up their mind after they were first exposed to televised political advertisements. This indicates the limited size of the late-deciding group which is so highly sought after by the campaign strategists. The effects of advertising on this type of voter appears to be somewhat substantial. Table 3 also shows that 52 percent of the late-deciders reported that the chosen candidate's ads were helpful in coming to their decision to vote for him. Interestingly, 73 percent indicated that the unchosen candidate's ads helped them to decide not to vote for him. This was particularly true for Nixon's partisans, as more than three-quarters reacted negatively to McGovern's commercials, thus utilizing their exposure to McGovern ads functionally.

Among voters who decided on a candidate before seeing campaign advertising, 39 percent felt that their own candidate's ads served to weaken their intentions. Again, opposition ads were a source of strengthened intentions.

The overall impact of opposition advertising was somewhat less counterproductive for voters who had previously made up their minds; only 36 percent said the opponent's ads stiffened their opposition to him. In fact, 18 percent felt that these ads eroded their support for the favored candidate to some extent.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the most interesting findings of the present survey is that in 1972 election campaign Nixon supporters viewed considerably more McGovern ads than they did their own candidate's. The high exposure of the Republicans to McGovern ads indeed casts a doubt on the long maintained selective exposure

process; in this respect we tend to agree with Sears and Freedman that people under certain circumstances prefer information that contradicts their opinions. Indeed the reception of McGovern commercials by Nixon partisans was high. However acceptance of information aired by the McGovern commercials tended to be quite low. The Republicans wanted to know more about candidate McGovern but not necessarily accept his views.

On the other hand, certain voter characteristics seem to be more influential than partisan preference in determining attention patterns. For example, personal interest in the campaign was the motivating force, as those with low interest in the campaign paid little attention and the highly interested voters tended to give closer attention to televised political advertisements.

Furthermore, informational and enjoyment needs were also relatively important--as mentioned above--determinants of message reception patterns; and those who watched mainly because they could not avoid the ever-present commercials also paid little attention. The significant and positive correlations between attention given to political ads and frequency of discussing the campaign and information-seeking mode also reflect voter needs for information to use in the decision-making process or in social-interaction with regard to the election. In this case, as Sears and Freedman pointed out the exposure and attention paid become quite utilitarian in nature. The information obtained by exposure can be practical and useful for the voter in political decision-making.

Finally it was found that although the actual number of voters affected by the televised advertising tends to be small--because of the majority of voters make their minds up before the campaign--there is still a possibility for the candidates to activate some potential supporters with the influence of TV commercials to take part in the election process.

This exploratory survey has raised more questions than it has answered. We have observed with the aid of systematically collected data that the impact of political commercials is not as purported to be by the professional communicators. We have also found that the exposure patterns do not always lend themselves as postulated by Lazarsfeld et al., to a rigid division of partisanship. The voters indeed quite flexibly cross party lines in exposing themselves to opposing views and utilize the information obtained. However, yielding to opposing candidate's view is not necessarily a result of exposure.

In order to clarify some of the issues raised in this small scale study, we certainly recommend more investigations on the same goals to reach more plausible and quantitatively convincing generalizations.

FOOTNOTES

1. Charles K. Atkin, Lawrence Bowen, Oguz B. Nayman, and Kenneth G. Scheinkopf, "Quality Versus Quantity in Televised Political Ads," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2 (Summer 1973), pp. 209-224. The present survey is a replication of Atkin et al., study conducted in 1970 in Wisconsin and Colorado. In 1972 Presidential campaign the measuring instrument from Atkin et al., study was administered-- with some modifications--in four states: Maryland, Illinois, Colorado, and California. The present article is based on data collected in Fort Collins, Colorado. The authors extend their thanks to Dr. Lawrence Bowen of University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, for his advice on the data collection.

2. Rosser Reeves, an ardent apologist of political spot advertising, was among the pioneers of this technique. For a summary of Reeves' opinions on political spot commercials see Martin Mayer, Madison Avenue, USA (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 297-311. The presumed impact of televised political commercials in 1968 and again in 1970 elections in the United States prompted cover stories in leading national news magazines. For a popularized version of the issue see: "The Selling of the Candidates 1970," Newsweek, October 19, 1970, and "Electronic Politics: The Image Game," Time, September 21, 1970.

3. John E. O'Toole, "Let's Abolish TV Political Spots," Columbia Journalism Review, Vol. X, No. 5 (January/February 1972), pp. 56-58. For the uses and abuses of political advertising also see: Dan Nimmo,

The Political Persuaders (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Joe McGinniss, The Selling of the President 1968 (New York, Trident Press 1969); Gene Wyckoff, The Image Candidates (New York: Macmillan, 1968); and Robert MacNeil, The People Machine (New York: Harper, 1968).

4. Atkin, et al., op. cit.: and see also: Jonathan L. Freedman and David O. Sears, "Voters' Preferences Among Types of Information," American Psychologist, Vol. 18 (1963), p. 375; Kenneth G. Sheinkopf, M. Timothy O'Keefe, and Milan D. Meeske, "Issues vs. Images in the 1972 Presidential Campaign Strategies," paper presented at Association for Education in Journalism, Fort Collins, Colorado, 1973, and Herbert Krugman, "The Impact of Television Advertising: Learning Without Involvement," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. XXIX (1965), pp. 349-356.

5. Joseph T. Klapper, "What We Know About the Effects of Mass Communication: The Brink of Hope," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. XXI (Winter 1957-1958), 453-474; Charles K. Atkin, "Relative Availability and Selective Exposure to Information," paper presented at Association for Education in Journalism, Berkeley, California, 1969; Bernard Berelson and Gary Steiner, Human Behavior (New York: Harcourt, 1964).

6. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, The People's Choice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948, 2nd edition).

7. Ibid. Theoretical contributions of Paul F. Lazarsfeld, the founder of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, and his colleagues, among others include "the two-step flow of information," limited media effects, and selective exposure mechanism. Researchers who either participated in Columbia's Applied Social Research Bureau investigations or followed the Bureau's theoretical

principles are referred to as Columbia "school" group. For further information on this subject see Wilbur Schramm, "Communication Research in the United States," in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), The Science of Human Communication (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 1-16.

8. David O. Sears and Jonathan L. Freedman, "Selective Exposure to Information: A Critical View," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. XXXI, No. 3 (Fall 1967), pp. 194-213.

9. Jay G. Blumler and Jack M. McLeod, "Communication and Voter Turnout in Britain," and also see Jack M. McLeod, Lee B. Becker, and James E. Byrnes, "Another Look at the Agenda Setting Function of the Press," papers presented at Association for Education in Journalism Convention, Fort Collins, Colorado, 1973.

10. McLeod, et al. Ibid.

11. David O. Sears and Richard E. Whitney, "Political Persuasion," in Ithiel de Sola Pool and Wilbur Schramm (eds.), Handbook of Communication (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), pp. 253-289.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. E. B. Weiss, "Political Advertising Blackens the Other Eye of the Ad Business," Advertising Age, Vol. 44, No. 7 (February 12, 1973), pp. 35-40.

15. Broadcasting, Vol. 83, No. 20 (November 13, 1973), pp. 18-20.

16. Those who are interested to obtain a copy of the measuring instrument should write to senior author of this article.

TABLE 1

PROPORTION NOTICING POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS ON TELEVISION,

BY AMOUNT OF TV VIEWING, CAMPAIGN INTEREST, AND CANDIDATE PREFERENCE

	AMOUNT OF TV VIEWING:		
ADS NOTICED	Light Viewers (n=73)	Moderate Viewers (n=67)	Heavy Viewers (n=71)
Both candidates	66%	81%	90%
McGovern only	5	13	6
Nixon only	3	4	1
Neither candidate	25	2	3

	INTEREST IN CAMPAIGN:		
	Low Interest (n=11)	Moderate Interest (n=69)	High Interest (n=132)
Both candidates	64%	81%	78%
McGovern only	--	7	10
Nixon only	9	3	2
Neither candidate	27	9	10

	CANDIDATE PREFERENCE:		
	Favor McGovern (n=66)	Favor Nixon (n=109)	Won't Say, Undecided (n=22)
Both candidates	76%	77%	81%
One candidate only: McGovern	9	11	--
One candidate only: Nixon	2	3	4
Neither candidate	9	14	14

TABLE 2

CORRELATES OF ATTENTION TO POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS(+)

Correlation coefficiencies between level of attention to each candidate's ads, and:	Nixon Ads	McGovern Ads
Relative Availability	+.45*	+.08
Entertainment Value	+.37*	+.23
Interest in Campaign	+.23	+.37*
Likelihood of Voting	+.47*	+.25
Discussion of Campaign	+.57*	+.55*
Information-Seeking Mode	+.62**	+.58**
Candidate Preference	+.15	+.62**
Strength of Preference	+.12	+.99*
Occupation	+.36*	+.11
Education	-.03	+.18
Age	+.07	+.21

(+) Gamma values were computed for the preparation of this table.

(*) $p < .05$

(**) $p < .01$

TABLE 3

SELF-REPORTED IMPACT OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON CANDIDATE PREFERENCE

Voters who decided before seeing political ads--		Favor Nixon (n=91)	Favor McGovern (n=54)	Total (n=145)
Favored candidate's ads:				
Strengthened intention		30%	56%	39%
Had no effect at all		64	40	55
Weakened intention		6	4	6
Opponent's ads:				
Strengthened intention		37%	34%	36%
Had no effect at all		40	57	46
Weakened intention		23	9	18

Voters who decided after seeing political ads--		Favor Nixon (n=17)	Favor McGovern (n=6)	Total (n=23)
Favored candidate's ads:				
Helped in making voting decision:	Yes	47%	67%	52%
	No	53	33	48
Opponent's ads:				
Helped in making voting decision	Yes	76%	67%	73%
	No	24	33	27