ED346527 1992-00-00 The Media's Role in Political Campaigns. ERIC Digest.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

ERIC Identifier: ED346527
Publication Date: 1992-00-00
Author: Gottlieb, Stephen S.
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills Bloomington IN.

The Media's Role in Political Campaigns. ERIC Digest.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC

Much is written about the effect that the mass media have upon the presentation, and the outcome, of political campaigns. Frequently, critics charge that news reporting focuses on the superficial, personal characteristics of candidates and ignores the issues underlying elections. Observers of the process also target advertising, which they say

distorts positions and trivializes important issues. At the same time, it is suggested that the predominance of polling by news outlets turns elections into popularity contests and causes candidates to follow rather than lead voter opinion on contemporary issues. This ERIC Digest looks at these and related questions about the relationship between the political process and the media.

"PAID FOR BY THE COMMITTEE TO ELECT..."

Advertising, by its nature, takes positions. Commercials suggest that the advertiser's product is better than a competitor's or is important to the viewer's well-being. Such a claim may or may not be true, and the question is not always so easy for the reader, viewer, or listener to evaluate. While the results of a bad choice about which brand of soap to buy may be inconsequential, a wrong decision about whom to elect to a position of public trust can have far-reaching consequences.
The ramifications of advertising in politics are not all negative. Advertisements can help the public become aware of political candidates and issues and educate would-be voters about what is at stake in campaigns. In fact, commercials can be more instructive in that regard than debates (Just, 1990).

As is true of other types of human relationships, first impressions can be very important as voters form their opinions about political candidates. A study of the 1976 U.S. presidential race between Carter and Ford indicates that voters' initial reactions to Carter's image shaped their later voting behavior. For Ford, initial reactions to issues played a larger role (Oshagan, 1988).

Research on Australian elections suggests that candidates' use of the media can have a strong impact upon those who make up their minds about candidates during the campaign. Such voters are more likely to be swayed by political appeals than are people who have decided whom to choose before a campaign starts. While partisan voters use the media because they are interested in politics, undecided voters refer to media sources for information about parties, candidates, and issues (Blood, 1991).

THE ROLE OF THE TELEVISED DEBATE IN ELECTIONS

Many observers consider the 1960 debate between U.S. presidential candidates Kennedy and Nixon to be a textbook example of television-age political campaigning. It has often been asserted that differences in the two candidates' television personae accounted in part for Kennedy's election victory. Some, however, dispute the significance of the televised 1960 debates, suggesting that while visual cues undoubtedly have the potential to influence voter perceptions, the nature and extent of the influence remain a matter of speculation (Vancil and Pendell, 1987).
Debates involving candidates for the 1988 presidential nomination carry a similar

message. Results of a study of college students revealed the finding that the winner of the 1988 debate was predicted by perceptions of the candidate who projected the strongest personal image, the greatest credibility, the most logical arguments, and the strongest emotional appeals. Furthermore, voter preferences expressed after a first debate were strong predictors of eventual candidate choice (Keyton, 1989).

In some political campaigns, even the lack of debates can have significance. George Bush's successful 1988 presidential campaign employed debate avoidance, a reliance upon emotional appeals and ridicule, and a de-emphasis of issues. Both of the major U.S. political parties have used such strategies, considered to be departures from ethical behavior (Kelley, 1990).

INDIVIDUAL VOTER CHARACTERISTICS AND THE MEDIA

Men and women react differently to the media analysis that generally follows political debates. A study conducted at the University of Florida during the 1988 vice-presidential debates showed that females took less extreme views of candidates after viewing post-debate analysis. By contrast, such analysis had little effect on the extremity of views expressed by politically involved males (Engstrom, 1989).
During the 1988 presidential campaign, the "gender gap," a perception that men and women viewed the leading candidates differently, was much discussed. George Bush's campaign planners were able to battle the gap through the way in which the candidate was portrayed in advertising. One advertising approach was to represent Bush as a law-and-order "Equalizer," who shared women's concerns about street crime. Another technique was to underscore Bush's belief in traditional family values. Thirdly, the campaign used ads that underscored the candidate's ability to laugh at himself, as a way of showing his human side (Nelson, 1989).

Like gender, race plays a role in how people view social issues and even how people respond to questions about such issues. Various studies have indicated that a member of one race will answer questions from an interviewer of another race in such a way as to avoid alienating the interviewer. It can be argued that even when an interviewer and interviewee are of the same race, survey results should be scrutinized carefully when the interviewer's questions concern a candidate of a different race. What remains to be explored is whether race should be treated as an uncontrolled variable in political surveys involving at least one white and one black candidate. (Loge, 1989).

MEDIA COVERAGE AND CAMPAIGN AWARENESS

Whatever its positive or negative effects, exposure to the news media does influence

public awareness of elections. In a study of the 1988 Southern "Super Tuesday" regional primary, researchers found exposure to all media to be positively and significantly related to voter awareness of the campaign, as well as to voter perceptions of increased campaign activity and perceptions of increased Southern political prominence. Exposure to partisan political information was found to be significantly related only to perceptions of increased campaign activity (Walker, 1990).
Educators need more information about the role of television in elections, and particularly how television influences young voters. Among future voters, television appears to affect their political attitudes. A study examined the political views of 10- to 17-year olds and their parents before and after the 1988 election. While parents' attitudes seemed to be the greatest influence upon the political socialization of the younger children, television appeared to be the greatest influence upon the older ones (Sears and Weber, 1988).

The effect of media coverage of elections is visible on the local level as well. Newspaper stories and advertisements can raise public awareness of municipal and school board elections, to the extent that voter turnout increases as a result (Luttbeg, 1988). Interestingly, a study of Philadelphia voters suggests that media reliance (defined as identification of a particular medium as one's main source of campaign information) is unrelated to campaign knowledge and activity (Rosenberg and Elliot, 1989).

Between 1972 and 1988, there was an increasing tendency among the major news outlets to report on the content of the political advertisements themselves. By presenting segments of negative ads during newscasts, such news reports may have had the effect of promoting the candidates whose commercials were being discussed and legitimizing political advertising as a basis for political decision making (Garner, et al., 1990).

In the 1992 presidential primaries, the public perceived the campaign as a largely negative one, with candidates trading criticisms and allegations. As the campaign has unfolded, would-be voters have given low marks to the news media. An LA TIMES-MIRROR poll reported in the NY TIMES indicated that a majority felt that the press had "too much" influence on who became President. The same NY TIMES article cited a poll of Boston area residents, half of whom ranked news coverage of the 1992 race as "fair" or "poor." A somewhat more generous view of the news media emerged from a national survey by the Center for the People and the Press, in which 65% of respondents described the 1992 election coverage as "good" or "excellent." Still, a third of those surveyed called the reporting "fair" or "poor" (Kolbert, 1992).

REFERENCES

Blood, R. Warwick (1991). "Time of Voting Decision: Knowledge and Uncertainty." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association.

[ED 332 246]
Engstrom, Erika, et al. (1989). "Evidence for Differential Effects on Males and Females in the Wake of Post-Debate Analyses." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. [ED 311 485]

Garner, Jane, et al. (1990). "Television News and Presidential Campaigns: The Legitimization of Televised Political Advertising." Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Communication Association. [ED 323 146]

Just, Marion, et al. (1990). "Thirty Seconds or Thirty Minutes: What Viewers Learn from Spot Advertisements and Candidate Debates." Journal of Communication 40(3), 120-33. [EJ 414 667]

Kelley, Colleen E. (1990). "Bad Men 'Speaking' Well: A Case Study of Political Campaign Ethics." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association. [ED 324 261]

Keyton, Joann, et al. (1989). "Political Values and Political Judgments: Analysis of Responses to the 1988 Presidential Debates." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association. [ED 305 696]

Kolbert, Elizabeth. "As Political Campaigns Turn Negative, the Press Is Given a Negative Rating," The New York Times, May 1, 1992.

Loge, Peter (1989). "Candidates of Race and Political Poll Results." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association. [ED 305 697]

Luttbeg, Norman R. (1988). "Role of Newspaper Coverage and Political Ads in Local Elections." Journalism Quarterly 65(4), 881-88, 897. [EJ 408 441]

Nelson, Victoria (1989). "The Gender Gap and Women's Issues in the 1988 Presidential Campaign." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association. [ED 314 797]

Oshagan, Hayg (1988). "Looking at Voting as a Decisional Process: What Factors Determine Initial Preference?" Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. [ED 301 911]

Rosenberg, William L. and W.R. Elliott (1989). "Comparison of Media Use by Reporters and Public during Newspaper Strike." Journalism Quarterly 66(1), 18-30. [EJ 398 868]

Sears, David O. and J.P. Weber (1988). "Presidential Campaigns as Occasions for Preadult Political Socialization: The Crystallization of Partisan Predispositions." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. [ED 306 148]

Vancil, David L. and S.D. Pendell (1987). "The Myth of Viewer-Listener Disagreement in the First Kennedy-Nixon Debate." Central States Speech Journal 38(1), 16-27. [EJ 368 620]

Walker, James R. (1990). "Developing a New Political Reality: Political Information and the 1988 Southern Regional Primary." Southern Communication Journal 55(4), 421-35. [EJ 412 972]

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

—

Title: The Media's Role in Political Campaigns. ERIC Digest.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Available From: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
Descriptors: Audience Awareness, Audience Response, Debate, Mass Media Effects, Mass Media Role, Media Research, News Media, Political Attitudes, Political Campaigns
Identifiers: ERIC Digests, Media Coverage, Political Advertising, Political Communication, Voters
###

—

[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]