The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior
We can perhaps best sum up recent research on campaign effects with the adage, "We've come a long way, baby." Just a short decade ago, political campaigns research would typically begin by describing an academic conventional wisdom of minimal effects. As Thomas Holbrook described this once-prevailing scholarly view: "the voting decision largely is a product of long-standing predispositions (party identification) and retrospective evaluations of the performance of the parties. There is little room here for the campaigns to change minds or influence behavior" (Holbrook 1996, 10). In the last decade or so, dozens of studies have since offered compelling evidence that campaigns can and do have a measurable influence on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the voting public. Whether looking at the effects of television advertisements (Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004; Shaw 2006), campaign events (Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Holbrook 1996), candidate endorsements (Lau and Redlawsk 2001), or personal canvassing (Gerber and Green 2000), scholars have found that campaign efforts can have a significant impact on voters' turnout and candidate choice decisions. We can safely say there is no longer a scholarly consensus of minimal effects.

In truth, a case could be made that there never was such a consensus in the first place—the "conventional wisdom" may have just been an oversimplification of the existing empirical research on the topic. Recent studies now conclude that campaigns matter in part because of a shift in thinking about what constitutes a meaningful campaign effect. Early research defined campaign effects very narrowly, as they were evaluating the potential for campaign propaganda to persuade individuals to vote against their political interests. In a context in which Hitler had risen to power amidst an unprecedented propaganda campaign and an Orson Welles radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds had created mass panic, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues were concerned that campaigns could manipulate the public. Instead, these early studies found that most people did not change their minds over the course of the campaign, and those who did were doing so in a way consistent with their predispositions (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). This conclusion was later bolstered by research showing that vote choice was predictable by long-term characteristics about an individual, especially party attachments, group identities, and retrospective evaluations (A. Campbell et al. 1960).

More recent research, in contrast, has expanded focus beyond evaluation of persuasive effects to consider a wider range of indirect campaign effects, including learning, priming, and mobilization. Yet, it is worth pointing out that the early campaign research—the so-called minimal effects body of research—often recognized and documented many of these same indirect campaign effects. The Columbia school studies, for instance, offered some of the first evidence that campaigns can change the relative weight of some vote considerations more than others, a priming effect: "What the political campaign did, so to speak, was not to form new opinions but to raise old opinions over the thresholds of awareness and decision. Political campaigns are important primarily because they activate latent predispositions" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, 74).

In The Changing American Voter, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976) argued that the campaign environment contributed to greater levels of issue awareness and issue voting in the electorate—a campaign learning effect. They conclude that "the political behavior of the electorate is not determined solely by psychological and sociological forces, but also by the issues of the day and by the way in which candidates present those issues" (319). And Kramer (1970) argued that campaigns work not by changing minds, but by increasing the number of party supporters in the electorate, a mobilization effect. By further documenting these indirect effects,
recent research has built on and expanded this classic research rather than directly refuting it.

The task of this chapter, however, is not only to document how far this literature has come, but also to suggest where it should go. It seems clear that the effects of campaigns are more constrained than often presented in the media, although it is also clear that we are a long way from fully understanding campaign effects, especially campaign persuasion. But rather than continuing the "do campaigns matter" debate, the field would most benefit from the development of a more comprehensive theory of campaign dynamics that helps to shed light on the conditions under which campaign information can shape voter behavior. In other words, scholars should move beyond trying to estimate the effect of campaigns, and instead should study for whom, when, and in what ways campaigns matter.

THE "MINIMAL EFFECTS" PERSPECTIVE

The "minimal effects" hypothesis dates to the early voting studies of the 1940s, but decades of political behavior research since then implicitly advanced the perspective by ignoring political campaigns in models of vote behavior. After accounting for such long-term forces as party identification, sociological, and demographic characteristics, campaigns simply had little room for making much of a difference.

With the development of forecasting models, political scientists were able to predict aggregate election outcomes using just a few fundamental variables such as presidential approval and economic conditions (e.g., Rosenstone 1985), again ignoring campaign factors.

A variety of theoretical explanations have been offered to explain the conclusion that campaigns are little more than "sound and fury signifying nothing." One explanation is that presidential campaigns have a small net effect on electoral outcomes because the candidates are typically balanced with respect to skill and money. Thus, the opposing campaigns neutralize each other, and the aggregate effect is near zero (Finkel 1993). Others contend that any dynamics during the campaign are predictable (e.g., partisans are activated), so there is no need to consider campaign variables in the empirical models (J. E. Campbell 2000). Finally, some have suggested that it is unnecessary to focus research on campaigns because the effectiveness or success of campaigns themselves depend on non-campaign factors such as the economy or presidential approval (Fiorina and Pechner 2002).

3 See Holbrook (1996), Iyengar (2001), or Shaw (1999) for more thorough discussion of the minimal effects perspective.

In other words, presidential candidates will always run optimal campaigns, subject to the constraints of existing social and economic conditions.

In response, campaign scholars have pointed out that predictable outcomes and campaign effects are not mutually exclusive. So, election outcomes are predictable because the campaign provides voters with the information that helps them to vote in line with their predispositions (Gelman and King 1993). Moreover, because elections play out near the 50-yard line in the US two-party system, it is not that surprising that forecasting models can get close to the right answer since the popular vote is rarely lopsided at the national level.

Scholars interested in the effect of campaigns on individual-level voter behavior have countered the minimal effects hypothesis with new data and better methods. But they also have shifted to better documenting indirect campaign effects, such as learning, priming, and mobilization. Since other chapters in this volume are focused on turnout and mobilization, I outline below the state of research regarding the influence of campaigns on vote choice (rather than turnout), including campaign effects due to citizen learning, campaign priming, and, more directly, voter persuasion.

LEARNING

Despite the common lament that contemporary campaigns focus only on the horse-race, sound bites, and scandal, there is now a large body of evidence showing that the information-rich environment of a political campaign increases voters' knowledge of the candidates and issues. As the campaign progresses, voters reduce their uncertainty about the candidates' policy positions and ideology (Alvarez 1998; Bartels 1993; Franklin 1991; Popkin 1991). Although there are many different sources of information in the campaign that can educate voters, research has shown learning specifically associated with presidential debates (Chaffee 1978; Holbrook 1999), news coverage (Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004), television advertising (Johnston et al. 2004; Ridout et al. 2004), and interpersonal discussions (Beck et al. 2002).

One unresolved debate in this literature concerns the particular source of campaign information that produces the greatest learning effects. Some argue that television advertising has greater informational value (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Mondak 1995; Patterson and McClure 1976), while others find more learning effects from news coverage (Chaffee and Zhao 1995). Unfortunately, the methodological difficulty of measuring and isolating the impact of each source has limited our ability to identify the "best" source of political information. And just
as pedagogical research finds that different people learn best from different teaching styles, so too might we expect variation in the most effective information sources. This debate also generally fails to consider the nature and influence of the new media. There has been an explosion in the number of sources of political information available—on the internet, cable TV, and so on—which undoubtedly complicates the study of campaign learning effects. In Post-Broadcast Democracy (2007), Markus Prior makes a compelling case that the expansion of media choice has exacerbated the knowledge gap in the electorate. The information age enables political junkies to follow the political world more closely than ever before, but it also allows others to avoid it altogether. In the 1960s and 1970s, the public had little choice but to watch the network news if they wanted to watch television at dinnertime; today, the viewing options are endless. As a consequence, a large portion of the electorate is actually less informed even as general education levels have risen and the volume and scope of available political information has expanded.

A related debate is whether the electorate can learn from entertainment or “soft” news programs, like David Letterman or The Daily Show (Baum 2003; Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2004; Niven, Lichter, and Amundson 2003; Prior 2003). A recent Pew survey finds comedian John Stewart to be the most admired “journalist” among young people (and tied for fourth among all respondents), suggesting this is an especially consequential topic. More generally, the fragmentation of the contemporary information environment raises interesting questions about how characteristics of information source (e.g., mode, bias, quality, etc.) might shape campaign learning.

It is important to understand campaign learning effects not only because the normative ideal assumes campaigns serve a civic education function in American democracy, but also because campaign learning directly shapes how voters make up their minds (Popkin 1991). By providing much-needed information about the candidates, campaigns help voters to make an “enlightened” vote decision—a decision that more closely reflects the voters’ fundamental predispositions (Gelman and King 1993). And because voters are generally risk averse, campaign learning helps to decrease the incumbency advantage (Alvarez 1998; Bartels 1993; Brady and Johnston 1987; Holbrook 1999) and increase issue voting (Kahn and Kenney 1999).

Another body of research has shown that the campaigns affect vote choice through priming—changing the weight voters attach to different considerations (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). By calling attention to some matters and ignoring others, the campaign can shape the standards by which candidates are evaluated (Druckman 2004; Johnston et al. 1992). For example, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues argued that Truman was able to win the 1948 election by increasing the salience of New Deal issues, which benefited the Democrats. Evidence of priming effects has been found in experimental and observation studies alike, making it one of the rare findings that cross methodological divisions in the field (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Johnston et al. 1992; Krohnick and Kinder 1990; Mendelberg 2001).

Research has found a wide variety of considerations activated by the campaign, including party identification (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), ideology (Gelman and King 1993), economic evaluations (Vavreck 2009), policy issues (Johnston et al. 1992), race (Mendelberg 2001), gender (Kahn and Goldenberg 1991), candidate images (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004), and emotion (Brader 2006). Still unclear, however, is which particular considerations are most susceptible to campaign activation and exactly how voters manage the relationship between these various considerations. It has long been thought that campaigns were especially likely to activate party attachments (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; McClurg and Holbrook 2005). According to this perspective, campaigns largely served to bring home wayward partisans by reinforcing partisan attachments and reminding voters why they affiliate with the party (Berelson et al. 1954; Finkel 1993; Kramer 1970). As James Campbell puts it, “Campaigns remind Democrats why they are Democrats rather than Republican and remind Republicans why they are Republicans rather than Democrats” (J. E. Campbell 2001, 13). But other research finds ideology or issues more likely to be activated than partisanship (Bartels 2006; Gelman and King 1993; Hillygus and Shields 2008).

The existing literature is also unclear about the cognitive process by which priming works (Peterson 2004). It is typically assumed that priming makes some information more accessible in the memory (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). According to this view, individuals call upon “top of the head” considerations in making decisions (Zaller 1992), so the frequency and recency of exposure to particular stimuli determines the likelihood it is used in the vote decision. Yet, there are other possible ways for considerations to be brought to the foreground of an individual’s decision making. We know, for instance, that people who see particular issues as important (those in “issue publics”) are more

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5 There is also a long-standing debate about how voters process information they receive, whether memory-based or online (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Zaller 1992).

6 Lent (2009) argues that some of the observed priming evidence actually reflects rationalization, in which a voter changes his or her attitude to match that of her preferred candidate.
likely to use those issues in their voting decision irrespective of campaign attention to the issue (Converse 1964; Kroonick 1990). It seems possible, then, that the campaign might also be able to increase the intensity, certainty, importance, or relevance of a given consideration. If so, characteristics of the campaign message beyond just frequency or recency might also shape how it influences the electorate.

**Persuasion**

In justifying the focus on indirect effects like learning and priming, research too often simply concedes that campaigns have minimal persuasive effects. Yet, persuasion is arguably the campaign effect that deserves the greatest scholarly attention. Persuasion, after all, is the primary motivation of candidates’ campaign efforts—they want to convince more voters to support them than their opponent. But the study of campaign persuasion has been hampered by the lack of scholarly consensus on the definition of a persuasive effect, and how best to operationalize and measure it.

Some scholars define persuasion as any campaign-induced changes in the attitudes or considerations that underlie the vote decision. For instance, Adam Simon (2002) looks for evidence that a television advertisement about the death penalty changes the voters’ position on the issue. Although revising an individual’s policy attitudes is certainly one type of persuasion, campaign communications are fundamentally directed toward influencing the public’s vote decision rather than their underlying predispositions. It is important to recognize that the campaign need not manipulate a voter or change her underlying predispositions for it to influence her vote choice. For instance, the wayward partisan who returns home in response to the party conventions might be considered evidence of campaign persuasion. So, too, is the voter who moves from being undecided to making a candidate choice because of information learned during the campaign. Campaigns do not typically get individuals to vote against their predispositions, but they do help voters sort through diverse and conflicting predispositions, shaping which ones voters bring to bear in selecting a preferred candidate (Hillygus and Shields 2008). This means, then, that learning and priming could be the mechanisms by which individuals might change their vote choice (persuasion). In other words, the lines between the standard typology of campaign effects are quite blurry.

Although some scholars have found null persuasion effects (e.g., J. E. Campbell 2000; Cardy 2005; Finkel 1993), there is a growing body of evidence that campaigns can change voters’ minds. The persuasion effects have been linked to specific campaign events, such as conventions and debates (J. E. Campbell, Cherry, and

Wink 1992; Geer 1988; Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Holbrook 1996). Others have found that television advertising can shape individual vote choice (Brader 2006; Valentino, Hutchings, and Williams 2004) and aggregate vote share (Althaus, Nardulli, and Shaw 2002; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Shaw 1999). Using market-level ad-tracking data to evaluate advertising’s impact on individual vote choice in the 2000 election, for instance, Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004) find that ads increased the probability of supporting Bush. Research has also found a persuasive effect from direct mail (Gerber, Green, and Green 2003), personal canvassing, and phone calls (Arceneaux 2007).

Despite these advances, we are still a long way from fully understanding who is persuadable, under what conditions, and why.

**Measurement and Analysis of Campaign Effects**

Too often, the literature on campaign effects feels a bit like a “back and forth” of competing empirical models and methodological approaches rather than a coherent body of research that is steadily advancing our understanding of political campaigns. For instance, Gerber, Green, and Kaplan (2004) dismiss most of the existing evidence of campaign effects on methodological grounds. To be sure, no methodological approach is immune to criticism. Lab experiments, panel surveys, rolling cross-sections, field experiments, and qualitative interviews all have their own strengths and weaknesses (and can be implemented well or poorly). As a discipline, it is important that we do not dismiss out of hand one approach or another; rather, we should insist that all scholars be transparent in the methods that they use and cognizant of the limitations for their design.

In many respects, the way campaign data have been collected and analyzed has had a profound effect on our conclusions regarding the influence of campaigns on the electorate. Our research questions about campaigns—as well as the answers—have shifted as social science research methods have developed and evolved. The early Columbia school studies relied on detailed panel data of respondents in a single community, which allowed for an examination of individual-level dynamics in the campaign but were not generalizable beyond the one community. Such a format was conducive to looking for evidence of campaign persuasion since individual-level changes in candidate choice could be tracked over the course of the campaign.

But as social science survey methodology progressed, the discipline moved towards studies that were representative of the entire population but were largely
inadequate for directly linking campaign efforts with voter behavior. The cross-sectional surveys (and two-wave National Election Study) that dominated the study of political behavior for much of the twentieth century encouraged focus on the correlates of the final vote decision rather than the dynamics of the process. So our theories of voting behavior focused on the long-term attributes measured in the surveys—things like party identification, ideology, and the like. As others have discussed in more detail, such data have many limitations for evaluating the influence of campaigns on voter behavior (e.g., Iyengar 2001).

Experimental design emerged as one alternative for evaluating campaign effects (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lupia and Philpot 2005; Mendelberg 2001), but some have discounted such evidence because it was not clear the effects would hold outside the laboratory. Innovations in field experiments and survey experiments have allowed for cleaner assessments of voter exposure to and reaction to campaign activities. Recent field experiments, in which campaign treatments are randomly assigned in an actual campaign setting, offer greater control over the causal effects of a campaign treatment without the concerns of an artificial laboratory experiment, but this method too has limits to generalizability (Brady, Johnston, and Sides 2006).

The recent evidence of campaign effects largely reflects the availability of better data and more sophisticated research designs. Improvements in the data available both about campaign activities and voter behavior have allowed scholars to more closely and carefully examine the link between the two. On the campaign side, it has become much easier to find and collect information about the campaign efforts being used to try to influence voters. Because of advances in computing and information-sharing technology, as well as the innovative data collection efforts of various scholars, it is now easier to get quantifiable data about a wide range of campaign activities, including television advertising (e.g., Goldstein and Freedman 2002), campaign visits (e.g., Shaw 2006), and political mail (e.g., Magleby, Monson, and Patterson 2006). There have also been a number of important changes in the data available about individual voters as well. There are now a number of alternatives to the ANES surveys, many with large enough sample sizes to identify even small campaign effects (e.g., Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004). To the extent that campaign scholars have been constrained in the questions they ask by the available data, these new sources of data (as well as more sophisticated analytical approaches) mean a richer campaign research agenda is now possible.

7 Although most field experiments have focused on non-partisan get-out-the-vote efforts (Gerber and Green 2000; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003), more recent experiments have also attempted to measure the effects of persuasive messages (Arceneaux 2007; Gerber, Green, and Green 2009; Nickerson 2009).

8 For a more thorough discussion of data advances see Brady, Johnston, and Sides (2006).

TOWARD A NEW STUDY OF CAMPAIGN EFFECTS

As a field of study, though, it remains unfortunate that our research questions have been more often dictated by data rather than theoretical expectations. A clearer understanding of campaign effects not only requires richer data, it also requires a theoretical recognition that campaign dynamics reflect an interaction between voters and candidates. Recognizing this link and taking into account the interest, abilities, and incentives of the relevant actors in a political campaign should help us in developing broader theoretical expectations about when, why, how, and for whom campaigns matter.

In particular, for the field to move beyond the basic documentation that "campaigns matter" toward a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of how and when campaign information influences vote choice, we need to step back to consider the reciprocal flow of influence between candidates and voters in a political campaign. And we should start with clearer expectations about the decision-making process of both candidates and voters in a political campaign. This perspective highlights the fact that there is no one campaign effect. Rather, for any campaign effect—especially persuasion—we should expect that it may be larger or smaller depending on characteristics of the campaign information and characteristics of the respondent. In other words, variation both in voter decision making and in candidate strategy should shape our expectations about observable campaign effects.

HETEROGENEITY IN VOTER DECISION MAKING

Although the early research on voter decision making often described it as a static decision linked to socio-demographic characteristics (Berelson et al. 1954), party loyalties (A. Campbell et al. 1960), or material interests (Downs 1957), research today recognizes that these perspectives offer too simplistic a view of how voters make up their minds. Rather, we should think of voter decision making as a dynamic process in which voters have a set of predispositions—existing beliefs, attitudes, interests, and attachments—and they are charged with the task of matching those predispositions with a candidate selection. And for some individuals, campaign information helps to connect those predispositions with

9 A handful of recent works are notable exceptions: Carsey (2000), Hillygus and Shields (2008), Shaw (2006), and Vavreck (2009).
vote choice. It seems clear that heterogeneity in voter decision making (Leighley 2004; Peterson 2005; Rivers 1988; Zaller 1992) should influence our expectations about how voters will respond to campaign information. Unfortunately, there is no consensus in the literature as to how various voter characteristics shape campaign responsiveness.

Since John Zaller’s seminal work, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992), scholars have often looked at variation in responsiveness to campaign information based on political sophistication or knowledge, but there is no consistency in the expectations or findings about how it shapes responsiveness. Some argue that the least sophisticated respondents should be most persuaded by campaign information because they are least equipped to resist persuasive appeals (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Zaller 2004). Others argue that the most sophisticated are more likely to be persuaded because they are better able to understand and remember persuasive messages (Hillygus 2007; Krosnick and Brannon 1993). And Zaller (1992) and Converse (1964), of course, argue that those with mid-levels of sophistication are most likely to change their mind in response to new information.

Research on priming effects has reached similarly mixed conclusions, with some finding stronger priming effects among the least politically sophisticated (Iyengar et al. 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990), others finding stronger priming effects among the most sophisticated (Miller and Krosnick 2000), and still others finding no relationship between priming and sophistication (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

A parallel debate is active in the campaign learning literature. Some argue that the campaign serves to bring the unsophisticated up to speed with the sophisticated so that they are able to make informed and rational decisions (Fournier 2006; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Norris and Sanders 2003; Popkin 1991; Valentino, Hutchings, and Williams 2004). Others find that campaign learning is most pronounced among the most sophisticated respondents, so that the campaign serves to widen the knowledge gap in the electorate (Craig, Kane, and Gainous 2005; Holbrook 2002; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien 1975). It seems likely that the way in which political sophistication matters for voter responsiveness might depend on a variety of factors, including campaign context (e.g., competitiveness of race), the complexity of the message, the mode of the message, the timing of the message during the campaign, among others.

Strength of partisanship is another characteristic that is thought to influence receptivity to campaign information. Again, however, the theoretical expectations are underdeveloped and the empirical findings inconsistent. Some scholars contend that political independents will be most influenced by the campaign because they are less likely to be committed to one side or the other and less inclined to resist campaign information (Kaid 1997; Zaller 1996). But others emphasize that partisan activation is the primary dynamic of the campaign, implying that partisans should be most susceptible to campaign effects (Gerber and Green 2000; Holbrook and McClurg 2005). Again, future research could shed light on the conditions under which one group or the other might be more responsive to particular campaign efforts. We might expect, for instance, that some messages or activities are more likely to resonate with independents and others with partisans.

Beyond partisanship and sophistication, though, there may be many other sources of voter variability that could mediate campaign responsiveness, including the strength of existing predispositions (Krosnick and Petty 1995), the relationship between competing predispositions (Alvararez and Brehm 2002; Basinger and Lavine 2005; Hillygus and Shields 2008), or voter personality (Forehand, Castil, and Smith 2004). Rather than trying to classify one group of individuals as persuadable or not, a research agenda that focuses on the conditions under which campaigns can influence vote choice will ultimately provide a better understanding of why particular individuals do or do not change their minds. And, in the end, we might very well conclude that *all* voters are potentially persuadable under the right set of conditions. Harry Daudt reached this conclusion in his classic study:

Is it perhaps so that everyone is a potential floater? ...Saying that all enfranchised persons are potential floaters is not the same as saying whether persons actually float and, if so, how many of them. This will depend on the political problems, the ways the political parties propose dealing with them and the voters' reactions to these proposals. Consistent voting behavior on the part of persons or groupings may, then, imply that they are satisfied with the way in which their party approaches the political problems. (Daudt 1963, 160–1)

**Heterogeneity in Campaign Messages**

In addition to individual-level variation in the way voters process campaign information, there is also variation in the particular campaign messages they receive. If different voters are receiving different messages, it complicates estimation of campaign effects. Previous research has focused on how variation in campaign exposure reflected characteristics of the individual voter—especially levels of political interest, knowledge, or motivation (Zaller 1992). Yet, in today’s campaigns there is considerable variation in the messages that individuals received because of the strategic decisions of the candidates. Thus the volume and content of campaign messages will differ across geographic areas, communication modes, and different households.
We know, for instance, that campaign efforts vary across states and media markets, with candidates focusing their attention and money in the most competitive states. In the 2004 presidential contest, thirty-three states received no television advertising dollars from the presidential campaigns or the national parties, while battleground states received on average more than $8 million, and Florida alone received $36 million. Scholars have leveraged this variability to study campaign effects, most commonly by comparing voter behavior across battleground and non-battleground locations (Holbrook and McClurg 2005; Just et al. 1996; Shaw 1999, 2006). In a recent article, Greg Huber and Kevin Arceneaux (2007) use a clever research design that takes advantage of the fact that media markets overlap state boundaries, enabling them to isolate the effects of television advertisements and demonstrating notable persuasion effects.

Beyond geography, though, there are many other sources of variation in the campaign efforts of the candidates. Often again, the literature offers no consensus about who is receiving what campaign messages. Goldstein and Ridout (2002) argue that campaign efforts have increasingly been targeted to previous voters and strong party loyalists. Holbrook and McClurg (2005, 689) similarly conclude that "core party voters are more likely to receive and respond to campaign information." Others, however, contend that campaign efforts are primarily targeted to swing voters and independents (Downs 1957; Hillygus and Shields 2008; Shaw 2006). Thus, in resolving the previously mentioned debate about which of these groups is most persuadable, we should take into account who is actually receiving campaign messages. There can be no campaign effect if the voter does not receive the campaign message.

To the extent scholars have considered variation in campaign exposure, it has typically focused on differences in volume—campaign spending, gross point ratings, the amount of campaign coverage. Much less is known about the nature and influence of campaign content (see Ken Goldstein and Matthew Holleque’s chapter in this volume). Is it consequential, for instance, not only that Bush ran more ads than Kerry in Ohio in 2004, but also that those ads focused primarily on issues of national security? In other words, how does the message matter? Some scholars have hypothesized that individuals are more susceptible to messages on issues that are personally important to them (Hutchings 2003; Krosnick 1990), but there has been little empirical evidence testing this expectation.

Others argue that messages that reinforce existing stereotypes about a candidate’s affiliated party should be more persuasive (Iyengar and Valentino 2000; Petrock 1996; Riker 1986). According to this perspective, Democrats should focus on the issues on which their party has a strong performance record—education, health care, and social security, while Republicans should focus on the issues they “own”—taxes, national security, crime. Yet, recent research has challenged the idea that candidates are actually following such a strategy (Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006). And, of course, the content of the message is not likely to be static; it will likely change as the candidates react to each other, polls, media, and the broader environment—another source of variation that has rarely been accounted for in academic research.

It is also the case that campaign messages have grown more complex and fragmented with changes in the information environment. New computing and statistical technologies have made it possible for candidates and parties to narrowly target messages to specific groups of voters based on information about those voters (Jacobs and Shapiro 2007). The political parties have built enormous databases with information about every registered voter in the United States, and they use this information to determine who should be targeted with what messages. The cornerstone of these databases is voter registration files, including a voter’s name, home address, vote history (in most states), party affiliation, phone number, date of birth, and other information. By matching polling data and consumer information to these voter files, candidates can personalize campaign messages to different voters. In the 2004 presidential election, for instance, the candidates took positions on some seventy-five different issues in political mail sent, with very different messages sent to different voters (Hillygus and Shields 2008). The fragmentation of the content of campaign messages makes it difficult for scholars to measure who is being targeted with what messages. Yet, this variation in messages undoubtedly affects the patterns of campaign responsiveness we observe in the campaign. For instance, personalized messages might well increase effectiveness compared to generic TV appeals.

Ultimately, the great variation in candidate strategy and voter decision making should be viewed as both an opportunity and challenge for campaign scholars. Inevitably, we will confront issues of measurement and statistical estimation in trying to assess the impact of heterogeneous campaign efforts on a heterogeneous electorate. But these empirical challenges should not prevent us from acknowledging and examining how this variation in both sets of actors shapes when and how campaigns affect vote choice. Whereas the field once trumpeted every new piece of empirical evidence that "campaigns matter," it is no longer enough for scholars to simply look for new and better ways to document that campaigns matter. The task of future research is to move beyond this stale research agenda to more fully examine the nature of the interaction between candidates and voters (as well as parties, interest groups, and the media) in political campaigns.

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10 Estimates based on numbers reported in Shaw (2006).

REFERENCES


