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## What Voters Learn from Media

By DAVID H. WEAVER

**ABSTRACT:** Numerous studies of learning about politics from the media suggest that in spite of criticism of election news coverage for being superficial and preoccupied with campaign strategy, voters do learn, especially from television news, newspapers, and televised debates. Most likely to be learned are awareness and concern over certain issues, candidates, and traits of candidates. Specific positions of candidates and parties on issues are somewhat less likely to be taught by media. Contrary to popular belief, media exposure seems to have little relationship to voters' images of candidates; prior political attitudes and educational levels are much stronger predictors of these perceived images. Exposure to media coverage of elections, especially television coverage, is likely to reinforce interest in politics and voting turnout, although heavy media emphasis on campaign strategy and maneuvering can make some voters more cynical and less likely to vote. Newer forms of media, such as radio and television talk shows, seem to have notably weaker and less consistent links to voter learning of any kind.

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VOTER learning can be considered one type of media effect, and media effects have been a concern of many scholars, citizens, and politicians for most of this century, especially since the use of propaganda in World War I and the rise of huge advertising companies to help sell nearly everything, including political candidates.<sup>1</sup> This concern over media influence has intensified since the rapid diffusion of television in the 1950s. It has also coincided with a change in scholarly research and thinking about media effects in the past fifty years or so from a view of rather minimal influences to a more recent view of fairly powerful, but not unlimited, media effects.<sup>2</sup>

There are different reasons why thinking about the power of the media has changed, but one of the major contributions has been a shift from studies of opinion change to studies of learning during the past quarter century.<sup>3</sup> These studies have suggested what many people have intuitively suspected for decades:

that the mass media do have important effects on society in general and on elections in particular but that the strength of these effects depends on a variety of conditions, including the length of time being considered and the kind of effects being measured.

Many of the earlier studies of media effects in elections were concerned mainly with short-term changes in opinions, attitudes, and behavior. Some changes were isolated in experiments,<sup>4</sup> but few were found with large-scale surveys, leading CBS researcher Joseph Klapper, in a review of media effects studies in 1960, to conclude, "Mass communication *ordinarily* does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences."<sup>5</sup>

This conclusion was comforting to those in the media who sought to disclaim any responsibility for possible harmful effects of violent programs, biased news reporting, stereotypes, and misleading advertising, but it did not satisfy those who believed that media were important forces in society, especially those who suspected that the media might have more long-term cumulative effects on the way people viewed their world and constructed meaning from pic-

1. Shearon A. Lowery and Melvin L. DeFleur, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research: Media Effects*, 3d ed. (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1995); David H. Weaver and Richard G. Gray, "Journalism and Mass Communication Research in the United States: Past, Present and Future," in *Mass Communication Review Yearbook 1*, ed. G. Cleveland Wilhoit and Harold de Bock (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980), pp. 124-51.

2. Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

3. Lee B. Becker, Maxwell E. McCombs, and Jack M. McLeod, "The Development of Political Cognitions," in *Political Communication*, ed. Steven H. Chaffee (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1975), pp. 21-63.

4. Carl Hovland, A. Lunsdaine, and Fred Sheffield, *Experiments on Mass Communication* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949); Carl Hovland, Irving Janis, and Harold Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953).

5. Joseph Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (New York: Free Press, 1960), p. 8.

tures in their heads that were at least partially painted by media words and images.

Klapper's conclusion of limited effects also did not mesh well with the popular view that mass communication exerted tremendous political influence. Joe McGinniss's book, *The Selling of the President 1968*, was on the best-seller list for weeks and attributed a decisive political role to television and to professional image makers.<sup>6</sup> Since that presidential election nearly thirty years ago, popular concern with image making and manipulation of voters by television has increased dramatically.

Given this gap between the popular view of media influence on politics and the limited effects found in the election studies of the 1940s, some scholars began to suspect that they were not measuring the right things or that their study designs were too crude to detect more long-term and subtle effects of the media. The emphasis of many of the earlier studies was on conversion—the changing of political attitudes or voting choices—but there was little evidence that conversion, in fact, occurred.<sup>7</sup> Only 3 percent of the respondents in the Elmira study of the 1948 presidential campaign shifted parties between August and October.<sup>8</sup>

6. Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969).

7. Maxwell E. McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns: Information, Gratification, and Persuasion," in *Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research*, ed. F. Gerald Kline (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1972), pp. 169-94.

8. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, *Voting*, p. 23, tab. 3, as cited in McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns," p. 171.

Nor was there any significant evidence of a bandwagon effect from polls and election projections. The conclusion from the 1940 and 1948 election studies was, in the words of Bernard Berelson and his colleagues, that mass communication "crystallizes and reinforces more than it converts."<sup>9</sup>

But where reinforcement means buttressing existing attitudes and opinions, crystallization refers to the *learning*, or sharpening, of such attitudes and opinions, implying a teaching role for mass communication. Attitudes and opinions are not constructed from thin air but rather from the information that people believe to be true and that is most salient or easily accessible to them.

The early election studies suggested that voters did indeed learn about politics from the mass media, even if very few changed their opinions or attitudes as a result. The 1948 Elmira study found that those with the most exposure to the mass media were more likely to know where the candidates stood on different issues. Even the person with little interest in politics inadvertently acquired some political information, and nearly everyone acquired much peripheral information. Because the cognitive aspects of political attitudes typically are built up slowly over time, this information did not lead immediately to attitude change. In addition, the stability of cognitive systems acted as a brake on attitude change, especially among those more knowledgeable about politics. A shift in basic political opinions and attitudes, if it

9. *Ibid.*, p. 248, as cited in McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns," p. 171.

does occur, is likely to happen gradually over time.<sup>10</sup>

#### AGENDA SETTING

One form of learning about politics is simple awareness of (and concern over) which issues seem to be the most pressing or important at a given time—the political agenda. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw conducted a study of the 1968 presidential election that focused on the agenda-setting effects of mass media rather than on opinion and attitude change. To put it another way, McCombs and Shaw were interested in seeing if voters' ideas about which issues were most important were shaped by the amount of news coverage of these issues rather than the nature of that coverage.

Instead of measuring the opinions that voters had regarding various issues and candidates, McCombs and Shaw were interested in what voters thought about—and whether there was a link between what was being emphasized by the media and what the voters considered important.<sup>11</sup> Bernard Cohen succinctly described this distinction in his oft-quoted phrase that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”<sup>12</sup>

10. I am indebted to McCombs, “Mass Communication in Political Campaigns,” for many of the ideas in this section.

11. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36:176-87 (Summer 1972).

12. Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press, the Public and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 13.

#### Issues

As it turned out, McCombs and Shaw found very strong correlations between the media rankings of issues and voters' ranking of these issues, suggesting either media influence on voters or media sensitivity to voters' concerns, or both. They concluded that mass communication may have little direct effect on opinions and attitudes but a significant cumulative effect on cognitions, especially on the agenda of various topics that voters might have opinions about.

Since that study of the 1968 election, published in 1972 in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, there have been scores of similar studies of media agenda-setting using different designs, time periods, measures, and data analysis techniques. Most of these have been conducted during election years, especially the presidential election years of 1976, 1980, 1984, and 1988.<sup>13</sup>

In previous U.S. presidential elections, especially those before 1984, the focus of most agenda-setting

13. Everett M. Rogers and James W. Dearing, “Agenda-Setting Research: Where Has It Been, Where Is It Going?” in *Communication Yearbook 11*, ed. James Anderson (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), pp. 555-94; Everett M. Rogers, James W. Dearing, and Dorine Bregman, “The Anatomy of Agenda-Setting Research,” *Journal of Communication*, 43(2):68-84 (Spring 1993); Maxwell E. McCombs, “Explorers and Surveyors: Expanding Strategies for Agenda-Setting Research,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 69(4):813-24 (Winter 1992); Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas,” *Journal of Communication*, 43(2):58-67 (Spring 1993); David L. Protess and Maxwell McCombs, eds., *Agenda Setting* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991).

studies was on whether the media agenda influenced voters' agendas.<sup>14</sup> But since 1984, there has been more interest in studying the forces shaping the media agenda, especially political candidates and their campaign staffs, because of a realization that the media are not completely independent organizations immune from the control of powerful news sources.<sup>15</sup>

The studies before 1984 suggested that the influence of newspapers and television on public perception of which issues are important is greatest during the spring and summer, and least during the final few months of an election campaign.<sup>16</sup> These studies also found that media influence seems to be greater for those issues least likely to have a direct impact on most voters' daily lives—the so-called unobtrusive issues such as foreign policy, military controversies, Washington scandals, and the qualifications of national candidates.<sup>17</sup>

14. Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul, MN: West, 1977); Jack M. McLeod, Lee B. Becker, and James E. Byrnes, "Another Look at the Agenda-Setting Function of the Press," *Communication Research*, 1:131-65 (Apr. 1974).

15. Holli A. Semetko et al., *The Formation of Campaign Agendas* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991); David Weaver and Swanzy Nimley Elliott, "Who Sets the Agenda for the Media? A Study of Local Agenda-Building," *Journalism Quarterly*, 62(1):87-94 (Spring 1985); Judy Van Slyke Turk, "Information Subsidies and Media Content: A Study of Public Relations Influence on the News," *Journalism Monographs*, 100:1-29 (Dec. 1986).

16. David H. Weaver et al., *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images, and Interest* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

17. Harold G. Zucker, "The Variable Nature of News Media Influence," in *Communi-*

What difference does all this make in an election? Even though the majority usually do not vote on the basis of a candidate's stand on various issues, those who are most interested—and thus most likely to vote—and most uncertain about which candidate to support—the so-called attentive independents—are also the most likely to base their choices on issue stands rather than on political party affiliation or candidate image.<sup>18</sup> In several U.S. presidential elections, such as in 1976, even a relatively small number of such voters could mean the difference between victory and defeat. If the media play a major role in teaching these voters which issues are most important and how the candidates stand on them, the media's selection of issues to emphasize in news coverage becomes very important.

### *Candidates*

There is another important agenda-setting effect of media coverage, which has little to do with issues and candidates' positions on them. Just as one can conceive of an agenda of issues, it is also possible to think of an agenda of candidates, ranked in terms of how much coverage they re-

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*cation Yearbook 2*, ed. Brent D. Ruben (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978), pp. 225-40.

18. David H. Weaver, "Political Issues and Voter Need for Orientation," in *Emergence of American Political Issues*, by Shaw and McCombs, pp. 107-19; David H. Weaver and Maxwell E. McCombs, "Voters' Need for Orientation and Choice of Candidate: Mass Media and Electoral Decision Making" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Roanoke, VA, June 1978).

ceive, and an agenda of characteristics of candidates, some emphasized more than others.

Our 1976 study suggested that the press plays a major role in making some candidates, and certain of their traits, more salient or prominent than others.<sup>19</sup> In fact, this kind of learning from media probably has more impact on voters' early perceptions of the campaign, and the final choices available at election time, than does issue agenda-setting. Like issue agenda-setting, however, image agenda-setting is often not simple or direct. It varies according to a number of conditions, including the media exposure patterns of voters, frequency of discussion with others, prior knowledge and opinions, and levels of motivation to follow the campaign.

### *Images*

We found, for example, that prior knowledge, high interest, and frequent media exposure were all correlated with learning about the personality traits and campaign styles of the candidates. In the primaries, especially, those candidates who receive the most media coverage are likely to become the most well known. At the same time, those characteristics, or image qualities, of candidates that are most heavily emphasized in the press are most likely to be cited in voters' descriptions of the candidates.

Voters in our study also thought it easier to learn about candidate images than about issues, especially personality traits and styles of the

candidates rather than job qualifications and ideology.<sup>20</sup> It seems likely that with limited time to devote to thinking about the election, most still find it easier to learn about the personality traits and styles of the candidates than about complicated issue positions, especially if they rely on television for most of their information about the election.

All of this suggests that media agenda-setting is an important influence in presidential elections, whether the agenda concerns issues, images, or candidates themselves. By making more salient certain issues, candidates, and characteristics of candidates, the media contribute greatly to the construction of a secondhand reality that is relied upon in making decisions about whether and for whom to vote. In addition, by devoting large amounts of coverage to the election, the media can contribute to raising the salience of politics on a larger social agenda.

### ISSUE POSITIONS

Another form of voter learning involves the positions taken on issues by various candidates and groups. This is the kind of learning often mentioned in discussions of classic democratic theory, where voters are assumed to be informed, that is, to know where various candidates and political parties stand on the important issues of the day. This kind of learning goes beyond that measured in most agenda-setting studies. Learning about the positions taken by candidates and parties on issues is a more specific and demanding

19. Weaver et al., *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election*, pp. 185-92.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

task than that of learning to be concerned about certain issues, and one that might be more dependent on non-media sources of information: formal education, candidate speeches and voting records, party platforms, and so on.

### *Television*

Several studies of this kind of learning have been conducted during the past decade, including those by Dan Drew and me regarding the 1988, 1990, and 1992 elections, and those by Steven Chaffee and his colleagues regarding the 1984, 1988, 1990, and 1992 elections. As Chaffee and Frank indicate, one of the surprising findings is that viewing television news is a fairly consistent predictor of knowing the issue stands of candidates across elections;<sup>21</sup> by contrast, the influence of televised commercials has fluctuated from one campaign to another.<sup>22</sup>

This finding contradicts Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure's generalization, from the 1972 U.S. presidential election, that American voters learn issue information from televised advertisements but not from television news.<sup>23</sup> Other evi-

21. Steven Chaffee and Stacey Frank, "How Americans Get Political Information: Print Versus Broadcast News," this issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

22. Xinshu Zhao and Steven H. Chaffee, "Campaign Advertisements Versus Television News as Sources of Political Issue Information," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 59(1):41-65 (Spring 1995); Steven H. Chaffee, Xinshu Zhao, and Glenn Leshner, "Political Knowledge and the Campaign Media of 1992," *Communication Research*, 21:305-24 (June 1994).

23. Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Tele-*

dence on this comes from studies by Dan Drew and me that found a significant influence of television ads on issue knowledge in the 1990 off-year election for U.S. senator in Indiana, but no such influence in the 1988 presidential election.<sup>24</sup> In the 1992 election, we also found no significant influence of attention to television ads on issue knowledge, but we did find that exposure to TV news significantly predicted such knowledge, a finding consistent with that of Chaffee and his colleagues.<sup>25</sup>

### *Newspapers*

These findings are a bit surprising to those who have assumed that newspapers are the main providers of political information in election campaigns, although as Chaffee and his colleagues note, "That is not to downgrade the contribution of newspapers, which as in virtually all studies seem to have increased voters' political knowledge."<sup>26</sup>

It may be that as newspaper circulation and daily reading decline, tele-

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*vision Power in National Elections* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1976).

24. David Weaver and Dan Drew, "Voter Learning in the 1990 Off-Year Election: Did the Media Matter?" *Journalism Quarterly*, 70:356-68 (Summer 1993); Dan Drew and David Weaver, "Voter Learning in the 1988 Presidential Election: Did the Debates and the Media Matter?" *ibid.*, 68:27-37 (Spring-Summer 1991).

25. David Weaver and Dan Drew, "Voter Learning in the 1992 Presidential Election: Did the 'Nontraditional' Media and Debates Matter?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 72(1):7-17 (Spring 1995); Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner, "Political Knowledge and the Campaign Media of 1992," pp. 313, 318.

26. Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner, "Political Knowledge and the Campaign Media of 1992," p. 318.



vision is becoming the more important source of information for voters, not only for images and personal characteristics but for learning positions on issues as well, although this may apply more to positions of individual candidates than to positions of political parties, as Chaffee and his colleagues note.

### *Debates*

Another important source of knowledge of the issue positions of individual candidates has been televised debates. Overall, the many studies of the effects of viewing such debates have concluded that they are not likely to influence candidate evaluations or voting intentions much, especially when compared with party identification and prior candidate preferences. Debates can be helpful, however, to undecided voters who are more interested in specific issues than in party affiliation and who pay close attention to them. For example, studies provided evidence of learning of candidate issue positions from the 1976 Carter-Ford debates among voters who had been unfamiliar with this information earlier.<sup>27</sup>

Not all studies have found debate effects, but Kathleen Jamieson and David Birdsell's review of the research concludes that "the educational impact of debates is surprisingly wide," and "the ability of viewers to comment sensibly on the candidates and their stands on issues

27. David O. Sears and Steven H. Chaffee, "Uses and Effects of the 1976 Debates: An Overview of Empirical Studies," in *The Great Debates: Carter vs. Ford*, ed. Sidney Kraus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 223-61.

increases with debates."<sup>28</sup> In the 1988 debates between George Bush and Michael Dukakis, Dan Drew and I found that exposure to these televised events was a stronger predictor of knowledge of the candidates' positions on the issues—but not candidate images—than any of the other media exposure or attention measures.<sup>29</sup> In 1992, Chaffee and his colleagues found that debate viewing was among the stronger predictors of knowledge of party issue positions in California.<sup>30</sup>

### *New media*

Several studies have looked at the effects of nontraditional campaign media, such as television and radio talk shows, in the 1992 and 1994 elections. Although there was considerable speculation during the 1992 election that these newer media stimulated interest in the election and helped to increase voter knowledge,<sup>31</sup> the evidence from the studies is mixed.

For example, after controlling for exposure and attention to the more traditional news media, we found no

28. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and David S. Birdsell, *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 127.

29. Drew and Weaver, "Voter Learning in the 1988 Presidential Election," p. 34.

30. Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner, "Political Knowledge and the Campaign Media of 1992," p. 313.

31. See, for example, Dan Balz, "In Media Res: If You Can't Beat 'Em, Bypass 'Em," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 25-31 May 1992, p. 12; Jonathan Alter, "Why the Old Media's Losing Control," *Newsweek*, 8 June 1992, p. 28; Richard Harwood, "The Waning Power of the Press," *Presstime*, p. 25 (Aug. 1992).

evidence of increased learning of issue positions from exposure and attention to talk shows or morning television network shows in Indiana during the 1992 election.<sup>32</sup> Jack McLeod and his colleagues also found no significant direct effects on knowledge from the nontraditional media in a fall 1992 study of eligible voters in Dane County, Wisconsin.<sup>33</sup> Using National Election Study survey data from nearly 2500 respondents, Laura Waluszko found a slight negative effect of exposure to television and radio talk shows on political knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

But Chaffee and his colleagues, in that same election, found that attention to talk shows in North Carolina did predict increased knowledge of how the candidates stood on various issues, even after exposure and attention to the more traditional media were controlled statistically.<sup>35</sup> In a panel study of 142 Ohio adults that took place from May to December 1992, Karin Sandell and other Ohio University researchers found in open-ended interviews that not one person mentioned a single pundit, news analyst, or commentator in

talking about how and where she or he learned about the candidates. Instead, these Ohio voters mentioned the television talk shows, the early-morning television shows, and the candidates' own programs, leading Sandell and her colleagues to speculate that "the more open text of the talk show may afford greater voter learning than the more closed text of traditional information content."<sup>36</sup>

Although these findings were weak at best, several of these studies found that exposure to newer forms of campaign media correlated with things other than increased knowledge of issue positions, such as more interest in the campaign and a greater intention to vote. These and other findings do suggest that other kinds of learning besides awareness/concern and detailed knowledge of issue positions occur during elections, including learning to be interested in campaigns and voting, as well as the images and characteristics of candidates.

#### CANDIDATE IMAGES

Scholars and politicians often assume that the media—especially television—provide voters with information about the images of candidates, including their perceived honesty, intelligence, compassion, and experience. Certainly there is no doubt that prospective voters can get a better idea of how a candidate looks, talks, and interacts with others from television coverage than

32. Weaver and Drew, "Voter Learning in the 1992 Presidential Election."

33. Jack McLeod et al., "The Impact of Traditional and Non-Traditional Forms of Political Communication in the 1992 U.S. Presidential Election" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research, Chicago, Nov. 1993).

34. Laura Waluszko, "Radio and Television Call-In Shows and Their Impact on the Public in the 1992 Presidential Campaign" (Paper prepared for "Government and Mass Media," seminar taught by David Weaver, Indiana University, spring 1995).

35. Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner, "Political Knowledge and the Campaign Media of 1992," p. 313.

36. Karin Sandell et al., "The Media and Voter Decision-Making in Campaign 92" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Miami, FL, 1993), pp. 23-24.

from newspapers and other printed media. It is not clear, however, whether the learning of candidate images is influenced more by what the media report than by the prior beliefs and attitudes of voters.

As mentioned earlier, our 1976 election study found that the image qualities of candidates most heavily emphasized in the press were most likely to be cited in voters' descriptions of the candidates, and voters thought it was easier to learn about candidate images than about issues.<sup>37</sup>

But in our studies of the 1988 and 1990 elections, we found that exposure and attention to various media were not significant predictors of the images that voters held of the candidates. Instead, in 1988, political party identification and level of education were by far the strongest predictors of voters' images of George Bush and Michael Dukakis.<sup>38</sup> In the 1990 midterm election, political party identification and knowledge of issue stands were the only significant predictors of U.S. Senate candidate images in Indiana.<sup>39</sup> In the 1992 presidential election, using data from the National Election Study national sample of nearly 2500 adults, Waluszko found that party identification was the strongest predictor of the voters' images of George Bush and Bill Clinton, with measures of media exposure and attention showing almost no correlations with these images.<sup>40</sup>

37. Weaver et al., *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election*, pp. 185-92.

38. Drew and Weaver, "Voter Learning in the 1988 Presidential Election," pp. 35-36.

39. Weaver and Drew, "Voter Learning in the 1990 Off-Year Election," pp. 362-66.

40. Waluszko, "Radio and Television Call-In Shows," tabs. 1 and 2.

These findings suggest that what people bring to the media is more important in their learning of candidate image qualities—trustworthiness, competence, empathy, honesty, experience—than what the media actually present.

How can we reconcile these apparently conflicting findings from the 1976 and the more recent 1988, 1990, and 1992 elections?

We noted in the section on media effects that even the earliest election studies from the 1940s suggested that voters do indeed learn about politics from the mass media, even if very few citizens change opinions or attitudes. Information does not lead immediately to attitude change, because the cognitive aspects of political attitudes typically are built up slowly. In addition, the stability of cognitive systems acts as a brake on attitude change, especially among those more knowledgeable about politics. If a shift in basic political opinions and attitudes does occur, it is likely to be gradual—and to be influenced by family, friends, and real-world experiences as well as media messages.

In short, it is possible for voters to learn image characteristics of candidates from media coverage in a campaign and to use those characteristics to describe candidates, as in 1976, but this learning does not mean that voters' opinions of the candidates will change. In many cases, what is learned from media presentations will be used to reinforce previously held opinions, much in the way that a sports fan who supports a particular team sees a different game from that seen by a fan who supports the

opposing team. Thus, while media do matter in the learning of candidate images, the information learned from them often seems to reinforce previously held beliefs and feelings, rather than change them.

#### POLITICAL INTEREST AND VOTING

Still another learning effect of media is a general interest in following elections and in participating by voting. Because political interest, voting, and learning from the media reinforce each other over time, it is difficult to tell whether additional exposure to media results in increased interest and intention to vote, or whether the opposite is true.

Those who have examined this relationship over time generally conclude that both processes are at work, implying that media often reinforce political interest and voting intention.<sup>41</sup> In our panel study of the 1976 election, we found that television news exposure during the spring primaries played a significant role in stimulating later voter interest in the campaign, but the relationship was more mutually reinforcing for the rest of the election year, with cam-

paign interest often stimulating television news viewing.<sup>42</sup>

In our Indiana study of the 1992 presidential election, we found that paying attention to radio and television news, and watching the televised debates, far exceeded demographics as predictors of interest in the campaign.<sup>43</sup> Using national data from the National Election Study, Waluszko also found that paying attention to television news was one of the strongest predictors of campaign interest, even after controlling for demographics, political discussion, and political knowledge.<sup>44</sup> In another study using the National Election Study panel data from 1992, Wei Wu found that partisanship, political knowledge, political interest, previous voting behavior, paying attention to television news, and reading newspapers were significant predictors of reported voting in the 1992 election, even after controlling for demographics.<sup>45</sup> Wu concluded that paying attention to mainstream news media is more likely to involve voters than to alienate them.

The nature of the news coverage seems to matter. Two recent field experiments by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella suggest that news coverage emphasizing campaign strategy over issues results in

41. See, for example, Charles K. Atkin, John Galloway, and Oguz B. Nayman, "News Media Exposure, Political Knowledge and Campaign Interest," *Journalism Quarterly*, 53:231-37 (Summer 1976); Maxwell E. McCombs and L. Edward Mullins, "Consequences of Education: Media Exposure, Political Interest and Information-Seeking Orientation," *Mass Comm Review*, 1:27-31 (Aug. 1973); Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election* (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 67-75. Patterson concludes that although the relationship between election interest and media exposure is reciprocal, media exposure is more powerful.

42. Weaver et al., *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election*, pp. 61-74.

43. Weaver and Drew, "Voter Learning in the 1992 Presidential Election," p. 13.

44. Waluszko, "Radio and Television Call-In Shows," tab. 5.

45. Wei Wu, "Alienation or Involvement: A Discriminant Analysis of Media Effects on Voter Turnout in the 1992 Presidential Election" (Paper delivered for "Government and Mass Media," seminar taught by David Weaver, Indiana University, spring 1995).

somewhat more voter cynicism about politics and even a tendency to be less likely to vote in an election.<sup>46</sup>

Thus there is recent evidence to support our 1976 conclusion that the media can raise the salience of politics in general on people's larger agendas, especially during presidential election campaigns. None of the 1992 studies, however, found any notable effects of this kind for the newer campaign media of television and radio talk shows, despite popular speculation about the role of these nontraditional media in 1992.<sup>47</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In short, recent studies suggest that potential voters do learn from

46. Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "News Frames, Political Cynicism, and Media Cynicism," this issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. See also Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, "The Effects of a Strategy-Based Political News Schema: A Markle Foundation Project Report" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC, Sept. 1993); Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Public Cynicism and News Coverage in Campaigns and Policy Debates: Three Field Experiments" (Paper delivered to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, Sept. 1994).

47. In Dane County, Wisconsin, in the autumn of 1992, Jack McLeod and his colleagues did find a correlation between viewing television talk shows and greater political interest after controlling for demographics and traditional media exposure/attention. McLeod et al., "Impact of Traditional and Non-Traditional Forms." In North Carolina in Oct. 1992, John Bare found a link between paying attention to television talk shows and intention to vote, but only for infrequent newspaper readers. See John Bare, "The Role of Non-Traditional News Sources in the 1992 Campaign" (Paper delivered to the annual meeting of the Ameri-

television and newspapers not only which issues and candidates are most important but also more detailed information about issue positions. The evidence of this kind of learning from the newer forms of media, such as talk shows, is notably weaker and less consistent.

In general, it seems that voters are most likely to learn the relative salience of issues, candidates, and traits of candidates from the media—as documented in scores of agenda-setting studies—and less likely to learn the specific issue positions of various candidates and parties. This could be due in large measure to the way that political campaigns in the United States are covered, with an emphasis on conflict and personalities, as well as on campaign strategy and the game of winning and losing.<sup>48</sup>

But it is probably also attributable both to the limited time and effort that most people put into following political campaigns and to the stability of the beliefs and attitudes that people bring to the coverage.<sup>49</sup> Some

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can Association for Public Opinion Research, St. Charles, IL, May 1993).

48. For a detailed examination of patterns of coverage of U.S. presidential elections from 1960 to 1992, see Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993). For a more general discussion of coverage of politics, see Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993), pp. 260-75.

49. Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz, eds., *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1974); Karl Erik Rosengren, Lawrence A. Wenner, and Philip Palmgreen, eds., *Media Gratifications Research: Current Perspectives* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985); Lynn Vavreck "Campaign News and Political Predispositions: A Multiplicative Model of Candidate Evaluations" (Paper

research on information processing from the field of psychology suggests that previously held information and its organization in the mind affect what is learned and how it is categorized, or grouped, with other information.<sup>50</sup> More salient or accessible information is often used for “short-cuts” in forming political opinions and judgments.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, reader-response research in literary criticism suggests that the meaning of a message occurs not in the text but in the reading of it; in other words, people can and do read newspapers, watch television, and listen to radio in strikingly different ways. People make sense of a particular message through “interpretive strategies” provided by “interpretive communities.”<sup>52</sup> In politics and elections, an important interpre-

tive community may be others with similar political views, especially others belonging to the same political party or interest group.

Regardless of the reasons for differences in political learning, the media are most likely to matter to voters in making them aware of and concerned about certain issues, candidates, and traits of candidates. Media are somewhat less likely to teach more specific information on the issue positions of candidates and parties, even less likely to directly teach attitudes and opinions, and least likely to directly influence behavior such as campaigning or voting.

Thus the question of how the media matter in voter learning during elections can be answered by the simple diagram in Figure 1, which shows (from left to right) the most likely to the least likely kinds of learning from media. Although this ordering does not hold in all elections or for all media and candidates, it is a guide to estimating what voters will learn from the media during elections—and also in the periods between elections. Awareness and more detailed information can help form or reinforce attitudes and behavior, but sometimes previous attitudes and patterns of behavior lead to the learning of certain information. The influence is seldom one-way, but the likelihood of learning from the media does seem to follow this pattern much of the time.

This should not be taken to mean that media coverage of elections has little effect on political opinions and attitudes. By making some information more salient and thus more easily *accessible*, news reports can influ-

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delivered to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, Sept. 1994).

50. See, for example, Doris A. Graber, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*, 2d ed. (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1988), esp. chap. 6; Sidney Kraus, ed., *Mass Communication and Political Information Processing* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990), esp. chaps. 5 and 6.

51. David H. Weaver, Maxwell E. McCombs, and Charles Spellman, “Watergate and the Media: A Case Study of Agenda-Setting,” *American Politics Quarterly*, 3(4):471 (Oct. 1975); Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 63-81.

52. Thomas R. Lindlof, “Media Audiences as Interpretive Communities,” in *Communication Yearbook 11*, ed. Anderson, pp. 81-107; Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Robert A. White, “Audience ‘Interpretation’ of Media: Emerging Perspectives,” *Communication Research Trends*, 14(3):1-47 (1994); Norman N. Holland, *The Critical I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

FIGURE 1  
SEQUENCE OF LEARNING FROM MEDIA

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Awareness —————> Information —————> Attitudes —————> Behavior

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SOURCE: Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press," in *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul, MN: West, 1977), p. 4.

ence voter opinions and evaluations *indirectly*. Although much recent research refers to this process as "priming,"<sup>53</sup> the idea is at least twenty years old, as indicated by this quota-

53. Vincent Price and David Tewksbury, "News Values and Public Opinion: A Theoretical Account of Media Priming and Framing" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Albuquerque, NM, May 1995); Iyengar and Kinder, *News That Matters*.

tion from an article I coauthored with Maxwell McCombs and Charles Spellman in 1975: "In fact, the media may teach . . . the audience the issues and topics to use in evaluating certain candidates and parties, not just during political campaigns, but also in the longer periods between campaigns."<sup>54</sup>

54. Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman, "Watergate and the Media," p. 471.