

October 24, 1994

TO: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies

FROM: Shanto Iyengar
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RE: Suggestions Concerning the "Campaign Effects" Study

The prospect of a national election survey devoted primarily, if not exclusively, to the study of campaign effects is exciting indeed (and long overdue). Ideally, the survey should be based on the existing body of scholarly research into the nature of campaigns and campaign effects. The purpose of this memorandum is to offer some specific suggestions regarding survey design and instrumentation based on the results of an extensive program of experimental research carried out in Southern California over the last four years.

Campaigns As Information Environments

Every political campaign is an evolving information environment that begins before the first candidate announces his intention of seeking public office. This information environment is interactive and complex. As the candidates seek to influence voters, the impact of their efforts depends on a constellation of factors including voters' predispositions, the candidates' need to respond to competing campaign messages, and the filtration of messages through news organizations. The content of political advertising and "free" news coverage shifts rapidly as the candidates and the media respond to each other and the flow of events.

The conventional way of thinking about campaign "effects" has been to assume that incoming messages affect voters independently of each other (the so-called "hypodermic" approach). Our studies suggest that this approach has limited explanatory power. While we

have found that the main effects of campaign messages can be quite powerful, it also appears that some of the most important dynamics of campaigns derive from interactions between the candidates, the media and the voters. For instance, the effects of one candidate's advertising are typically conditioned by the actions of the opponent. Moreover, the impact of advertising and news coverage depends on their congruence or resonance with voters' pre-existing beliefs, concerns, and expectations. More on these interactions later.

Background on Southern California Experiments

Since 1990, we have been employing experimental methods to study campaigns. These studies focus primarily upon campaign advertising, but also consider the effects of different forms of news coverage. The UCLA studies have employed two basic variations -- the "dominant advertising" and "competitive advertising" designs. In the dominant advertising design, participants have typically watched a single ad sponsored by one of the competing candidates. This approach is designed to explore the effects of "dominant" (or one-sided) advertising. For the 1994 cycle, our basic one-ad format was modified to increase the range of the manipulations by including conditions in which participants watched two ads, each sponsored by the same candidate. The competitive advertising design, on the other hand, requires that participants be shown two advertisements, one on behalf of each of the competing candidates.

Variants of these designs were used to capture various qualitative aspects of the campaigns, including the "tone" of the campaign (positive vs. negative advertising) and the specific political issues addressed by the candidates and the news media. In one dominant advertising study, for example, we used a 2 X 2 X 2 design. Participants watched an ad dealing with the subject matter of either crime or unemployment; the ad was presented in positive and negative versions, and was sponsored by either a Democrat or a Republican. These designs were used in connection with a wide variety of races including two California gubernatorial campaigns

(1990 and 1994), both 1992 California Senate races, the 1992 presidential election, and the 1993 election for Mayor of Los Angeles.

The pros and cons of experimentation are well known. Our studies are distinctive because of the unusual degree of realism which we have been able to attain. First, our experimental participants were not uninvolved college students, but rather a cross-section of the Southern California electorate who, on election day, would have to choose between the candidates whose advertisements they watched.¹ Our participants came from two locations -- West Los Angeles and Costa Mesa (in Orange County). In both locations the experimental facilities consisted of a four-room office suite housing two viewing rooms, a separate room for completion of questionnaires, and a reception area. The viewing rooms were furnished casually to minimize the aura of an office or research laboratory. In most cases participants came accompanied by a friend or co-worker. Second, each study took place during an ongoing political campaign and featured real candidates (Democrats and Republicans, males and females, incumbents and challengers), all of whom were investing heavily in television advertising. Third, all of the experimental advertisements were either professionally produced for purposes of testing

¹We recruited subjects by advertising in local newspapers, distributing flyers in shopping malls and other public venues, and by publicizing the studies in employer newsletters. Subjects were promised payment of \$15 for participation in an hour-long study of "selective perception" of local news programs. Although our sample was not randomly selected, our participants resembled the typical resident of the greater Los Angeles area in background. The median age of our subjects was 34, compared with 31 in Los Angeles and Orange counties. Forty-eight percent of our respondents identified themselves as Democrats, and 22 percent as Republicans. In LA and Orange counties, 47 percent of the registered voters are affiliated with the Democratic party and 28 percent are registered as Republican. Fifty-five percent of our sample were females versus 52 percent of the local area. Also, 54 percent of our subjects were white, compared with 47 percent of the population. Using a weighted average of Los Angeles and Orange counties as the criterion, our experimental participants closely matched the local population in age, gender, percent white, and partisanship. Our participants deviated from the local population in two important respects -- they included a higher percentage of African Americans and a higher percentage of college graduates.

specific propositions or were taken from advertisements actually being aired by the candidates. Fourth, the manipulations were unobtrusive: the experimental advertisements and news reports were embedded in a fifteen-minute videotape recording of an evening newscast. Significantly, the use of local news as the vehicle for the advertising manipulation permitted us to incorporate important elements of news coverage into the research. For example, we were able to look at the impact of naturally occurring events such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the L.A. riots, and the Hill-Thomas hearings. Thus, we were able to study the independent and interactive effects of advertising and news coverage.

Our experiments all followed a "post-test only" design. Participants first completed a brief background questionnaire and then watched the videotaped newscast. Depending on the flow of subjects, participants either watched the tape alone or in groups of two or three. Random assignment of participants to experimental conditions was used throughout. The thirty second campaign advertisement was inserted into the first commercial break, and appeared in the middle position of a five-advertisement break. In studies featuring two advertisements, the second advertisement appeared during the second commercial break. After watching the videotape, participants completed a lengthy post-test questionnaire in which they indicated their opinions on current issues, evaluated the major candidates, and recalled particular stories and advertisements from the newscast. Finally, all participants were debriefed (the true purpose of the study was revealed) and paid \$15.

Summary of Results

Our evidence indicates that campaigns have three classes of effects -- learning or information gain, mobilization or demobilization of voters, and changes in voter preference.

Learning

We investigated the effects of issue-oriented advertisements on the voters' ability to identify correctly the positions taken by the candidates. In the various races we examined, the issues included crime, the environment, unemployment, and abortion. (We are using the term "issues" to refer to substantive policy areas.) The results indicated that with the exception of the presidential election, exposure to campaign advertising significantly increased the percentage of voters who could correctly rate the candidates' positions. In both 1992 California Senate races, a single campaign advertisement provided a significant impetus to voter learning. In the 1990 gubernatorial race and 1993 mayoral race, exposure to advertising sponsored by both candidates was necessary to raise the level of issue information. Information, of course, is rarely neutral. In several of the campaigns we examined, awareness of the candidates' issue positions significantly influenced voting preference. (To be seen as tough on crime, for instance, increased the sponsor's share of the vote.)

The distinctiveness of the presidential results is understandable. Obviously, presidential candidates generate vast amounts of news coverage. Voters (and candidates) are thus less dependent upon advertising. It is also clear that voters attain a much higher level of familiarity with the presidential candidates; some two-thirds of our experimental participants could correctly place Bush and Clinton on the issues of abortion and unemployment. In contrast, less than one-third of the sample could identify where Senate candidates Feinstein and Seymour stood on the issues of crime, abortion, and unemployment.

As a second approach to voter learning, we focused on a more subjective form of political information. We asked our participants the standard "likes and dislikes" question, tallied the number of likes and dislikes that referred to specific issues, and examined whether their frequency was affected by exposure to campaign advertisements. Here the results were even

more clear-cut: spontaneous references to the candidates' positions on issues in voters' lists of likes and dislikes were significantly increased by exposure to issue-specific ads. Even the highly visible presidential candidates elicited a greater outpouring of issue-oriented comments when they advertised. Averaging across the studies, the number of references to issues in voters' lists of likes and dislikes was nearly doubled when participants watched an advertisement sponsored by each of the competing candidates.

Recommendation 1: NES should monitor/track what people learn about the various candidates. An open-ended approach (e.g., "What have you heard about _____?" would be especially advantageous. This question should be supplemented with a battery of ratings in which respondents place the candidates on the issues.

A follow-up question asking respondents where they acquired the information in question should also be asked.

Mobilization or Demobilization?

It is generally taken for granted that political campaigns boost voter turnout. However, the validity of this assumption can be questioned on several grounds. The assumption that political campaigns would boost voter turnout rested on a relationship between traditional campaign organizations and voters that has largely been eliminated by the ability of candidates to communicate directly with the electorate. Also, these direct communications have turned increasingly hostile and ugly. In light of the absence of any personal contact between voters and the parties or candidates, and the emergence of negative advertising as a staple of contemporary campaigns, one may well question (particularly in the current political cycle) whether campaigns still have a stimulative effect on citizen involvement in the electoral process.

In several of our studies, we sought to examine whether campaigns might in fact have a demobilizing effect on voters. Specifically, we manipulated advertising tone while holding all

other features of the advertisements constant.² We found that exposure to negative advertising significantly decreased voter engagement and motivation to vote. We corroborated this result by demonstrating that turnout in the 1992 Senate campaigns was significantly reduced in states where the tone of the campaign was relatively negative.

To assess demobilization in our experiments, we determined participants' intention to vote following exposure to the experimental treatment. Not surprisingly, the effects of advertising tone on likelihood of voting varied across campaigns and candidates. To estimate the average effect, we pooled the different studies into a single data set. We then compared the percentage of viewers classified as "likely voters" among participants who watched the positive and negative versions of the experimental advertisements. We found that among participants who watched a positive advertisement, 64 percent intended to vote, while among participants who saw a product advertisement instead of a political ad (i.e., the control group), 61 percent intended to vote, and among participants who were exposed to the negative version of the campaign advertisement, only 58 percent were classified as likely to vote. After controlling for various predispositions (such as prior voting history and education) and the type of election involved, participants exposed to the negative version of the advertisement were found to be 2.5 percent less likely to vote than those exposed to no political advertisement. Conversely, the

²In the 1992 California Senate primaries, for example, viewers watched an ad that either promoted or attacked on the general trait of "integrity." The visuals featured a panoramic view of the Capitol Building, the camera then zooming in to a close-up of an unoccupied desk inside a Senate office. In the "positive" treatments (using the example of candidate Dianne Feinstein), the key words read by the announcer were as follows:

As Mayor of San Francisco, Dianne Feinstein proposed new government ethics rules. She rejected large campaign contributions from special interests. And Dianne Feinstein supported tougher penalties on savings and loan crooks.

In the "negative" version of this Feinstein spot, the text was modified as follows:

As State Controller, Gray Davis opposed new government ethics rules. He accepted large campaign contributions from special interests. And Gray Davis opposed tougher penalties on savings and loan crooks.

positive version of the advertisement increased voting intention by 2.5 percentage points.³

In addition, we examined individual differences in susceptibility to the demobilizing effects of negative campaigns. As might be expected, the effect was magnified among "peripheral" voters -- those with lower levels of interest and information and with weaker ties to the parties. In our studies, the distribution of candidate preference was not distinct among the relatively uninvolved; were this is not the case, however, demobilization would tilt preferences towards one of the candidates with resulting impact on electoral outcomes.

Recommendation 2: The tone of statewide campaigns varies considerably from state to state. We suggest incorporating detailed information regarding the candidate's media buys (within individual media markets) and the ratings points for each of their ad purchases. This information is available from private sources. We understand the price is in the range of \$75,000.

Persuasion

In the final analysis, the fundamental goal of all campaigns is to shift voters' preferences. We assessed the persuasive effects of advertising on candidate preference (and numerous other indicators). In our dominant advertising (one-ad) studies, we computed the increase in the sponsor's share of the vote -- if any -- attributable to exposure to the sponsor's ad. In each of seven studies, we detected significant effects. The estimated effect was fairly stable across different issues, candidates, and elections. The weighted average gain in the share of the vote going to the sponsor was 7.7 percentage points.⁴ Thus, exposure to broadcast advertising directly increases the number of viewers who want to vote for the sponsor.

³In this multivariate analysis, the coefficient for tone was significant at the .05 level.

⁴There are two possible estimates of the variability of this average effect -- the weighted average of the standard errors of each of the studies and the variance in our estimates across studies. Using either approach, the average effect of the experimental ad is statistically significant.

Advertising may also exert a more subtle influence on voters. Since advertising provides a good deal of "information," we anticipated that exposure to advertising would "prime" voters' attitudes. That is, by directing voters' attention to particular personal attributes of the candidates or to particular campaign issues, we anticipated that advertising would cause voters to rely more heavily on these attributes or issues when they chose between the candidates.

We tested for the priming effects of advertising in both primary and general election races. Although significant priming effects were detected in both types of campaigns, the discussion that follows is limited to the general election studies where the manipulations focused on issues. The "target" issues were crime, unemployment, and women's rights. Participants indicated their positions on the death penalty, government-sponsored job training programs, and abortion rights. These opinions exerted powerful baseline (e.g. unprimed) effects on voting preference -- opponents of the death penalty and supporters of government jobs programs and the right to abortion were far more likely to vote Democratic. With the exception of the sexual harassment study (where exposure to campaign advertising did not affect the already strong impact of the abortion issue on voting choice), there were significant priming effects associated with advertising. In fact, advertising on crime and unemployment doubled the effects of participants' issue opinions on voting choice. When we pooled across the three target issues, the priming effects of advertising were significant for virtually every indicator of electoral preference.⁵

⁵The baseline effects of abortion (a four point pro-choice vs. pro-life rating) on a trichotomized indicator of voting choice (-1 Republican, +1 Democratic) was .34(.05). The priming coefficient (pro choice rating x news coverage on women's issues) was -.05 (.08). The same pair of coefficients for the "jobs programs" rating were .10 (.03) and .15 (.07). In the case of support for the death penalty, the baseline effect was .19 (.04) and the added effect due to news coverage was .18 (.06). The N in this OLS analysis was 1213.

Campaign Interactions

For those contemplating NES studies of campaign effects, the most important aspect of our research is that campaign advertisements, television news, and voters' prior beliefs jointly influence voter choice. Since the mix of advertising, news, and prior beliefs varies from area to area, we strongly recommend that the NES survey be designed to capture this variability.

There are several interactions of interest. The focus of news coverage may influence the persuasiveness of advertising -- campaigns will tend to reap greater returns when they dwell on issues or topics "in the news." In addition, sustained emphasis on a single issue by candidates may produce increased news coverage of this issue which, in turn, energizes advertising on this issue. A more specialized interaction between news and advertising deals with coverage of campaign advertising. Do "ad watch" reports that scrutinize the accuracy and fairness of campaign advertising strengthen or weaken the advertisements under review? In addition, the "issue ownership" hypothesis, which presupposes that campaign messages (both free and paid) are most persuasive when they resonate with voters' stereotypes about the parties and candidates, directs attention to the interaction between the content of the advertising campaign and voters' prior beliefs. Finally, the "competitive advertising" hypothesis asserts that the impact of one candidate's advertising is contingent on the opponent's advertising. Taken together, these hypotheses advance the argument that candidates are interdependent actors and that the effects of their campaigns are interactive rather than autonomous.

We have tested the hypotheses stated above, some more systematically than others. In the case of the news x advertising link, we have been unable to detect consistent traces of the interaction in our individual studies (a failure we attribute to the relatively minute scope of the news manipulations). At the aggregate level, however, we have compared the effects of our experimental advertisements dealing with particular issues with the overall issue emphases of the

campaigns under investigation. The 1992 California Senate races are particularly interesting. With the novel phenomenon of two women running, there was a tremendous degree of news coverage accorded the "year of the woman."⁶ During the course of the dual campaigns, we tested the effects of ads dealing with crime, unemployment, and women's issues. Our experimental ad on the subject of gender produced the strongest effect (by far) on voting preference.

Obviously, the issues that preoccupy the media vary from time to time. The ever-shifting focus of news coverage represents a short-term or "contextual" determinant of advertising effectiveness. However, voter responses to campaign advertisements are also conditioned by longer-term or "dispositional" factors. Long-held beliefs about the parties or candidates are especially important, including expectations regarding the relative capabilities of the political parties to deal with specific issues. For example, the public generally considers Democrats more able than Republicans to deal with the problem of unemployment. Conversely, Republicans are seen as more effective than Democrats at fighting crime.

These existing stereotypes are important filters for assimilating specific campaign messages. We have found that the effects of campaign messages (both ads and news) tend to acquire added value when they address issues or themes "owned" by the sponsor. The issue of unemployment was more profitable for Democrats, while gender-related issues proved more persuasive for women. Similarly, viewers exposed to the a news story on the political mobilization of women became more likely to vote for candidates Boxer and Feinstein, but not Clinton. These results suggest that advertising and news are both interpreted within the context of partisan stereotypes or existing beliefs about the candidates. A message on sexual harassment

⁶Our content analysis of seven major state newspapers revealed that abortion was in fact the single most covered issue in both campaigns.

is more credible when it is a woman who calls attention to the issue, and a call for increased job training programs evokes particularly strong responses when used by a Democrat. Candidates are thus constrained by their reputation and image.

Recommendation 3: The mix between advertising, news coverage, and voters prior beliefs varies from state to state. The candidates' advertising buys need to be classified into content matter categories on a market-by-market basis. In addition, NES should obtain and code (into the relevant subject-matter categories) television and newspaper coverage of the campaign in several markets. Newspaper coverage can be obtained relatively efficiently and inexpensively from three major public affairs databases (Lexis/Nexis, Datatimes, and Dialogue). NES should subscribe to these services.

Recommendation 4: NES should add instrumentation addressing the parties' and candidates' reputations, i.e. a battery of question on the party and candidate best able "to handle" various issues.

The final set of interactions involve the contestants themselves. Our research has examined the effects of different combinations of advertisements. We have varied the issue content and tone of these opposing advertisements so that some voters watched ads on particular issues which were either positive and negative in tone. The principal result of our two-ad studies is that advertising is competitive -- the effects of any particular advertisement depends importantly upon characteristics of the opponent's advertisements. For instance, there is an incentive for candidates to run on issues on which they enjoy a positive reputation. For candidates who are perceived negatively on some issue, there is an incentive to "re-frame" the issue to better suit their candidacies (in the case of gubernatorial candidate Kathleen Brown, for instance, one way of dealing with her disadvantage on the issue of crime is to discuss crimes against women). We have also found, contrary to the "Roger Ailes axiom," that a counter attack is not always the best response to an attack. In the 1992 Senate and presidential races, we found that Democrats were better off ignoring the attack and maintaining a positive message, while Republicans maximized their share of the vote when both candidates were negative.

Recommendation 5: NES should obtain precise measures of the content and tone of the individual advertising campaigns. Different media markets across the country can then be categorized into appropriate "pairings" of competing ads. These pairings can then be used to examine voter response.

Summary

The study of campaigns and their effects will necessitate systematic monitoring of three interwoven components of the information environment -- campaign advertising, news coverage, and voters' prior beliefs. Electoral fate is determined by a series of interdependencies within this continually shifting environment. One opportunity for capturing some of these interdependencies would be a design that maximizes variability in these constituent elements. Some media markets, for instance, are characterized by relatively high levels of news coverage of "law and order" issues, others are characterized by alternative patterns of news. Similarly, the themes addressed in campaign advertising (as well as the volume of the advertising campaign) tend to vary dramatically from market to market. Obviously, prior predispositions are similarly variable. Accordingly, we believe that the most effective way to study the effects of campaigns is to sample different campaign contexts.

Recommendation 6: The sampling frame for the NES survey should be stratified by state or media market. A panel design which tracks respondents through the primary season into the closing stages of the general campaign would be optimal for enabling researchers to map out the different "pairings" of news coverage, advertising and voter predispositions.