

Politics As Usual

The Rise and Fall of Candidate Perot

by

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1. Politics as Usual
2. Unmediated Politics
3. Mediated Politics
4. The Effects of Mass Communication
5. The Fall Campaign: The Outsider vs. The System
6. The Popularization of Politics

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Chapter One

Politics As Usual

From the announcement of his presidential candidacy on the Larry King talk show, Ross Perot refused to play by the rules of politics as usual. Except for a brief, unhappy interlude, he shunned the advice of recognized political professionals, and he defied conventional wisdom by staking his fall campaign on half-hour television advertisements. Alone among recent independents, Perot didn't run in a traditional party primary before launching his own party, and he didn't even participate fully in the general election. After dropping out of the presidential race in July, he rejoined it in October at the half-way point of the fall campaign.

Most strikingly, Perot refused to court the conventional press. He ignored queries he didn't like, ridiculed reporters as irrelevant to the process, refused to serve up a steady flow of staged spectacles for the media (especially TV) to cover, and refused to arrange for a press plane to accompany him to those few campaign events he did hold.

Even by the standards of anti-politics, this was unconventional behavior. Even George Wallace was nice to reporters when he was running for president; even Jerry Brown had a press plane when he could afford one.

Most conventions, especially in domains as competitive as presidential politics, exist for a reason. In this case, the reason is that they tend to assure good publicity and a core of loyal public support. Thus Perot's refusal — and probably to some extent inability — to play politics as usual cost him both publicity and the votes that such publicity normally attracts. Meanwhile, the voters he could reach by unconventional means were too few to sustain a successful presidential campaign. Only the conventional political system can deliver voters in sufficient numbers to win a presidential election.

Our aim in this book is to show how this conventional political system works. The fact that Perot's campaign violated many of the rules of "politics as usual" makes him especially valuable for this purpose. How, after all, can one tell the effects of conforming to the rules if everyone conforms? How can one tell the effects of candidate behavior if all the candidates are doing the same things?

Perot's television advertising is a small case in point. In most presidential elections, the opposing candidates fill the airwaves with 30-second and 60-second advertisements, increasing the intensity of their advertising blitzes as election day approaches. But since both candidates follow the same advertising strategy, it is hard to tell what effect, if any, the ads have.

Contrary to conventional practice, Perot supplemented his standard spot ads with lengthy "infomercials," typically half an hour long, which ran on 10 different nights on national TV. By concentrating such heavy doses of advertising on a few particular dates, Perot made it possible to gain a much clearer idea than is normally possible of whether the ads have any effect.

Perot's status as an independent candidate who nonetheless managed to get the press to take him seriously — the first independent to do so since 1912¹ — is likewise analytically priceless. When only the Democratic and Republican parties receive serious coverage from the press, it is impossible to tell whether voters have any particular attachment to their candidates, or support them only by default. Perot's unusual candidacy, thus, makes it possible to see just how strong the attachment of voters to the existing party system really is.

Some readers, we recognize, may be skeptical that the operation of the political system can be explained by general rules that apply not only to Perot's candidacy but to those of all other presidential candidates as well. Politics, they may believe, is too disorganized and idiosyncratic to yield to such attempts at general explanation.

From our perspective, such skepticism is another reason for studying Perot. His campaign seems to exemplify all that is serendipitous in politics. Hence any rule that can cover both his campaign and those of other, more typical candidates will have an unusually strong claim to general validity — and therefore, we anticipate, a better chance of convincing both our own colleagues and skeptical outsiders that politics is not so deeply mysterious as it often seems.

Among the phenomena which we shall be seeking to explain by means of general rules are the following:

- Each presidential season, the press ignores the large majority of candidates who offer themselves for president. At first it ignored Perot as well. But gradually, reporters changed their minds and began to cover Perot. What changed their minds, and what general rules of press behavior, if any, can explain the change?
- In its initial stages in spring 1992, Perot's candidacy benefited from lavishly positive press coverage, but later, as we show below, it suffered the most heavily negative coverage of any major presidential candidate in the contemporary period. What general rules of press behavior, if any, can explain this pattern of coverage?
- Public support for Perot rose rapidly in the period in which press coverage was favorable, surpassing support for Bill Clinton and George Bush and feeding the impression that Perot was a super-candidate. But support for Perot fell just as quickly when Perot's press turned sour. Did the public's hyper-responsiveness to press coverage of Perot indicate unusual fickleness, or was it simply the public's normal response to the ebb and flow of press enthusiasms?
- Perot was, as we shall show, extraordinarily effective in persuading voters to support him when he was able to appeal to them in a largely unmediated fashion. In the present age of weakened parties and "media politics," one might have thought that great skill as a mass communicator would be sufficient to assure electoral success. Yet clearly it was not, at least in the case of Perot. Why not?

¹ George Wallace managed to attract significant media attention to his independent candidacy in 1968, but we count his campaign as an essentially regional effort.

- At the peak of his public support in mid-June, Perot had the support of nearly 40 percent of registered voters, compared to about 30 percent for George Bush and about 25 percent for Bill Clinton. If parties are as important as standard accounts of American politics suggest, why was Perot able to attract so much support?

As we attempt in this book to show, there really do exist general rules capable of explaining each of these occurrences. Despite Perot's deep unconventionality, reporters did not throw away their rule books when it came to covering the billionaire Texan, nor did the majority of voters abandon life-long patterns of media attentiveness ~~and party affiliation~~ when Perot entered the race. Rather, most reporters tried to treat Perot as they would any serious candidate for the presidency, and most voters continued to respond to press coverage in the way that they normally do — which is to say, they believed quite a bit of what they happened to notice.

Perot's unusual candidacy did, of course, force some alteration of standard behavior. Because he did not compete in the state-by-state primaries that normally structure press coverage of presidential hopefuls, but instead chose to organize much of his campaign around TV interview programs, reporters had to figure out new ways of covering his campaign. Voters, for their part, had to figure out how to follow a campaign that was not organized around dramatic visuals on the evening news. In the end, however, the adaptations proved relatively minor.

The principal aim of this book, therefore, is to show that Perot's candidacy represents, despite the candidate's best efforts, an unexpected case of "politics as usual." In demonstrating that a variety of political actors — at both the elite and mass levels — responded to this highly atypical candidate in an essentially standard fashion, we hope to shed unusually clear light on the forces that give to "politics as usual" the form that it normally has.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

We have said that the aim of the book is to explain how "the conventional political system" works. At the heart of this political system is political communication. We shall therefore focus in this book on what we take to be the two central issues concerning mass communication — how it is generated at the elite level, and how it affects opinion at the mass level.

In the past, studies of presidential politics have tended to focus more on political parties than on political communication, and quite reasonably so. Until fairly recently, leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties were able to decide among themselves who their party nominees would be. Little besides their own judgments about who would make the best candidate constrained their action. The public, for its part, took party labels seriously, often voting a "straight party ticket" for offices from dog catcher to president.

Those days, however, are gone. The party reforms of the 1960s and 70s vastly reduced the power of unelected party leaders to influence, much less to dictate, presidential nominations. Nominations are now made through a system of state-by-state primary election contests in which the masses of ordinary voters are sovereign

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

The book alternates between reviews of how, in general, a part of the political system works and how it worked in the particular case of Perot. Chapter 2 deals with the origins of Perot's campaign on the Larry King show and other non-news programs, showing (to the extent data permit) the effects of this activity on Perot's earliest support. This was the unmediated phase of Perot's campaign, in the sense that he was able to speak directly to the mass audience and largely on his own terms.

Chapter 3 takes up the mediated phase of Perot's campaign, dealing with how, in general, the press covers presidential aspirants in the initial phase of their campaigns and with how it covered Perot in the takeoff phase of his campaign. In order to create a basis for evaluating both the coverage Perot got and its effect on the public, the chapter presents data from several other candidates to whom Perot can plausibly be compared.

The most important argument in Chapters 2 and 3 is that, although Perot's unmediated communication was highly effective in the sense of converting a high percentage of viewers to support of his candidacy, it reached too few voters to be able to account for the support he had in the earliest opinion polls, let alone his rise to leadership in the three-way race with Bush and Clinton. Rather, it was his mediated communication, as conveyed to the public by the conventional press, that fueled both Perot's initial rise in the polls and his subsequent, rapid decline.

Chapter 4 is an extensive examination of the dynamics of media influence. It begins with an examination of how, in general, political communication affects public opinion and ends with an application of its argument to the case of Perot. Public opinion, as this chapter shows, was about as responsive to positive and negative coverage of Perot as it had been to such coverage of previous presidential contenders. Also in keeping with past research, individual voters responded to press coverage of Perot, whether positive or negative, in rough proportion to the amount of it they received.

Chapter 5 focuses on the general election campaign, showing how Perot gradually built up public support through his debate performances and infomercials, but was undone by his refusal (or inability) to play the game of politics as usual with the conventional press. This chapter shows that voters' attachments to traditional parties were an important impediment to Perot's success, but that the flow of mass communication was the more important determinant of his fate.

Chapter 6 concludes with some general observations about the political system which Perot attempted to circumvent with his anti-politics campaign but in the end fell victim to. Surveying the American presidential politics from the inception of the Electoral College in the 18th century through the era of strong parties in the 19th and early 20th centuries to the present era of very weak parties, it argues that Perot's independent candidacy should be understood as merely the latest development in a historical trend toward popularization of presidential elections. Popularization, as the book will have by then made clear, is by no means the same as popular control. It is a peculiar hybrid of elite initiative and mass response that has as much order and regularity as the more formal political institutions it has displaced.

Note

Chapter 3 may be skipped by readers rushing to get through a large packet of conference materials. The reason for including Chapter 3, which is mostly about elite politics, is to provide a basis for my argument that the effects of mass communication on public opinion cannot be understood independently of the elite rules that generate this communication.

Chapter Three

The Boom-and-Bust Cycle of Mediated Communication

The reporters who cover electoral politics are a group of highly professional players who adhere to strong if sometimes hard-to-define rules. These rules, the norms of their profession, exist independently of any particular candidate, but carry implications for each new candidate that comes along.

We wish now to establish the nature of these rules concerning two key aspects of candidate coverage: Which candidates get extensively covered and under what circumstances? And, for candidates who get extensive coverage, what is the nature of that coverage?

Having established the general rules, we shall show that the press applied them in a fairly straightforward fashion to the Perot campaign, and that the coverage generated by these rules had its usual important impact on public opinion.

Which candidates get covered by the press.

In some cases, the reason the press pays attention to some candidates and largely ignores others is obvious. In 1984, for example, Walter Mondale ran 20 to 30 points ahead of other Democratic hopefuls in polls conducted before the first primary contest in New Hampshire. With Mondale so far ahead of his opponents that his nomination appeared almost inevitable, the press had little choice but to pay attention to him, and little reason to be overly concerned about the others.

Another reliable way of capturing the attention of the press is to do "better than expected" or "surprisingly well" in some contest or event. Gary Hart, in a pep talk to fundraisers when he was still a dark horse candidate in the 1984 race, showed that he was acutely aware of this dynamic:

You can get awful famous in this country in seven days. I mean, it's phenomenal. It doesn't take much... The pattern is, you do better than you're supposed to do in the early states. That is reported in the analysis of the caucus and primaries. People then get excited about the campaign, begin to talk about you, you're on television more, you're in the newspapers more, your name recognition [in the polls] goes up, and the money begins to come in.¹

Hart achieved political stardom in just this way following his unexpectedly high finish in the Iowa caucuses and his even more startling victory over Walter Mondale in the New Hampshire primary.

¹ *Ibid.*

But political success, expected or unexpected, is by no means the only determinant of press coverage. The press is also highly attentive to indicators of likely future success. Such indicators include solid financial backing, prior success in a nomination contest, organizational strength, and almost anything else that might augur strong future performance. In 1988, for example, reporters were attracted to the candidacy of Michael Dukakis because they believed that, as governor of neighboring Massachusetts, he would have a major advantage in the lead-off New Hampshire primary.

Reporters also attend to two less readily measurable indicators of future success — the political context in which candidates compete, and a candidate's raw political appeal. With respect to context, Arterton (1984) has written:

In coping with the uncertainties of the horserace, reporters and correspondents advance statements about ... the dynamics of the race as a whole. Elaborate scenarios are usually developed ...

...these scenarios, once adopted by news organizations, take on a life of their own. They provide a general theme that organizes news coverage... (p. 48)

Insofar as these scenarios advantage one candidate over another, as they typically do, the advantaged candidate becomes more likely to receive coverage. In 1976, for example, reporters appear to have decided early on that outsider candidates would be better able to appeal to voters in the aftermath of Watergate than would candidates who had made their careers inside the Washington beltway, and this appeared to contribute to their willingness to cover Jimmy Carter. In most other election years, Carter's status as a one-term governor from a relatively small state might have been a political liability, but in 1976 reporters regarded it as a plus.

Reporters are also impressed by a candidate's capacity to give a good speech, please a crowd, and perform well in front of television cameras. Judgments about a candidate's mass appeal are, of course, also influenced by polls, but in the early phase of a campaign so few voters have exposure to the candidates that poll results mean little. Reporters know this and try to compensate by use of their own judgment. Here, for example, is how veteran reporter Jules Witcover explains his decisions on which presidential contenders to cover and which to ignore:

... If a guy is a bomb, it's our job to ignore him... If I have decided that a guy doesn't deserve any more attention than I give him, it's not because of the polls. It's because I've been out there... I've heard what people say, and I've heard what [the candidate is] doing, and I've made a judgment that this guy is just not cutting it.²

There is an obvious chicken-and-egg problem here. If reporters ignore a candidate because they think he is a loser and the candidate fails to take off in the polls, it may be because the candidate was weak to begin with, or it may be because the candidate has been ignored by the press.

² From "The Campaign for Page One," PBS Frontline documentary report, 1984.

Yet despite this ambiguity, reporters do clearly try to develop independent judgments of candidates' raw appeal and then use their judgments as a basis for awarding or withholding coverage. When, for example, Paul Tsongas won the New Hampshire primary in 1992, reporters refrained from lavishing as much attention on him as they customarily give the winner of the New Hampshire primary because of their judgment that Tsongas lacked the political charisma to go all the way to the nomination. Instead of competing with one another for a spot of the Tsongas press plane, they were competing to be assigned elsewhere (Rosenstiel, 1993, p. 135-6).

The common thread in all of these "rules of thumb" by which reporters decide whether to give serious attention to aspiring candidates is extremely simple: Reporters want to cover candidates who, independently of the amount of coverage they receive, seem destined to succeed, and to ignore candidates who appear doomed to fail. Their feeling is that candidates likely to succeed are "news," while candidates likely to lose are not.

The most systematic evidence for this proposition comes from Michael Hagen's (1991) study of coverage of the 1984 campaign. Hagen used independent coders to rate the extent to which the press, in its unattributed statements of a candidate's viability, felt the candidate was likely to succeed or fail. Comparing the press' viability judgments with the amount of attention candidates received, he found that "[j]ournalists allocate coverage among the candidates on the basis of their judgments about the relative standings of the candidates in the race, at least while more than two viable candidates are in the race" (p. 197).

Reporters recoil at the notion that their decisions to cover or not cover a candidate might affect the candidate's fate.³ They want only to figure out what is likely to happen as soon as possible and to get to the story before their competitors can. But in their rush to beat their competitors to the big story, and notwithstanding their desire to be unobtrusive, reporters cannot help being influential. They may be only minimally influential, as when they accelerate trends already under way and likely to continue. But they may well be, at least occasionally, highly influential, as when coverage affords an essential advantage to a candidate who, if press attention had been directed elsewhere, would have fallen by the wayside.

Altogether, then, we conclude that getting the press' attention depends on passing a set of reasonably clear tests concerning likelihood of future success – demonstrated mass appeal, financial viability, organizational strength, and consistency with reporters' scenarios of how the nomination process is likely to work in a given year.

A candidate's success naturally depends on more than just the amount of coverage he or she gets. Slant and tone also matter. Perhaps surprisingly, the press' implicit rules for determining the slant and tone of coverage are, if anything, clearer than those for determining amount of coverage.

The nature of press coverage of presidential hopefuls.

³ As Arterton (1984) puts it, journalists "are disturbed by the proposition that news reporting itself contributes to the growth or decline of political support" (p. 21)

As a simple first-approximation of press coverage, the following generalization appears to hold fairly well: The better a candidate's prospects, the more critical the press is likely to be (Robinson and Sheehan, 1984, chapter 5; Hagen, 1991, chapter 3; Patterson, 1993, chapter 3).

This shorthand rule, however, is misleading as it applies to a dynamic situation in which candidates' prospects are changing rapidly. When a contender's prospects improve from "non-entity" to "viable," and especially if the candidate pulls off a performance that is "better than expected," the initial reaction of reporters is to explain why the candidate's prospects have improved, and this coverage tends to be at least initially positive. As Patterson finds:

The news of a candidate who has gained momentum and is rapidly gathering support takes the form of a compelling drama, particularly when the candidate has come up from far behind. The portrayal, to be sure, is not entirely positive... [But in] comparison with the coverage received previously, he [the candidate] is suddenly more decisive, committed inspiring, and in general a better candidate and person.⁴

Once a candidate's rise to respectability has been adequately explained, negative coverage sets in. Over the field of Democratic candidates in the 1984 presidential primaries, Hagen found that "the better journalists judge a candidate's chances to be, the more negative other news about him will be" (1991, p. 198). The principal reason, Hagen found, is that, while other candidates rarely bother to criticize opponents who are no threat, they do criticize stronger and more viable candidates, and the press reports these criticisms.

But more seems to go on. Reporters have a norm of being tougher on front-runners. CBS news correspondent Bill Plante told Robinson and Sheehan, "The degree of scrutiny a candidate receives increases in direct proportion to his standing in the polls" (p. 116). Commentator Jeff Greenfield elaborates:

...with higher visibility comes a higher standard. Now the press is not looking for a glimmer of excitement surrounding a candidate, now they are looking with more critical and skeptical eyes at a figure who may well hold the power of life and death over the world" (cited in Robinson and Sheehan, 1984, p.107).

If, because of heightened scrutiny or any other reason, a leading candidate falters in the polls or in a particular state primary, the press hastens to explain the reason the candidate is "loosing ground," and its explanations are rarely flattering. As Patterson (1993) writes:

...there is no good news in electoral weakness. The decline in the candidate's self-confidence and his desperate attempts to reverse the slide

⁴ This generalization is based on coverage of major party nominees in *Time* and *Newsweek* between May and October in elections from 1960 to 1992. The average increase in positive stories during the bandwagon phase was 15 percent; see Figure 3.2.

become major news topics. The candidate's attacks on the opposition are thus depicted as increasingly wild and irresponsible... The only saving element is that it [the negative coverage] does not last forever. Once the candidate's free fall ends, the bad news slows down. While it is happening, however, the candidate faces a flood of negative coverage embracing everything from his poor choice of issues to his lack of good sense. (p. 119).

If a candidate falls all the way down and out of a race, coverage often turns positive again, at least for the purposes of the political obituary.

The tendency of the press to ignore candidates it thinks are doing poorly, to lavish mostly positive coverage on those who do unexpectedly well, and then to scrutinize those who seem, for the first time, viable candidates for the presidency gives rise to an easily recognized cycle of boom-and-bust coverage that is a staple feature of the presidential nomination process.

The boom-and-bust pattern does vary across candidates. Some candidates — Ronald Reagan in 1980, Walter Mondale in 1984 — enter the nomination process after having survived an earlier round of press scrutiny, and in such cases reporters may not force them to undergo double jeopardy. A candidate's skill in handling press inquiries, as well as the number and prominence of skeletons in a candidate's closet, may also affect coverage. In 1992, for example, negative coverage of Bill Clinton's draft status and alleged extramarital affairs began relatively early in his campaign — before his boom phase had fully gotten under way — because his vulnerabilities were widely known before the campaign began, making it easy for reporters to begin writing about them as soon as he emerged as a clear front-runner. The fact that his alleged paramour, Gennifer Flowers, went public with her charges against him before the New Hampshire primary further accelerated the onset of press scrutiny.

The two-phase cycle is clearest for candidates who burst suddenly and unexpectedly onto the scene. Having been surprised, reporters are challenged to explain why the candidate has done so well, and this normally produces positive coverage. At the same time, surprise candidates are normally relatively unknown candidates, which means that the press are likely take the job of scrutinizing their backgrounds especially seriously.

Despite such differences, the following generalizations appear to hold: The critical obstacle for every candidate is to engage the attention of the press. Though not easy, getting the press' attention depends on passing a set of reasonably clear tests having to do with likelihood of future success. Candidates who pass these hurdles normally come in for a cycle of boom-and-bust coverage in which their candidacies are first touted and then more critically examined.

Although this general account of press behavior in the presidential nomination process could have been written prior to the 1992 campaign, it turns out to be a good fit with its behavior in the nominating phase of Perot's campaign. The only thing prior research fails to anticipate is the role of television interview shows, which, aside from

ritualized interviews with the winner of the New Hampshire primary, did not play a prominent role in presidential nomination contests before becoming involved with Perot. We shall therefore deal with these shows separately.

Getting the attention of the press: Perot and the interview shows.

According to Sharon Holman, press secretary for United We Stand, Perot made no effort to promote his candidacy in the days following his appearance on the King show.⁵ He came to work as usual and concentrated on running his business. But two things diverted him. One was a flood of phone calls to Perot's business offices in Dallas, as discussed earlier. The other was that, according to Holman, Perot was "inundated" by requests from producers of major interview programs to appear on the programs. Although functioning as Perot's press secretary at that time, Holman stated firmly that she did absolutely nothing to instigate the interview requests. She also stated that, although having no certain knowledge of Perot's personal activities, she does not believe Perot instigated the requests either. "I'll just bet you a dollar he didn't," she said. "That's not the way he operates."

Producers for two of the major interview shows on which Perot appeared confirmed Holman's statements. One producer described herself as "extremely aggressive in booking him," adding that she had to be "because he was very busy."⁶ This producer went on to say that "I'd call Sharon [Holman] at the office several times, at home, on the weekend. I sometimes even called Perot." She said she "pitched" Perot in the way she would pitch any other desirable guest. The other producer said essentially the same thing.

But although Perot apparently had to be induced to appear on interview shows, the particular inducements that were necessary do not indicate a deeply reticent candidate: He wanted, at least in one case, a longer allotment of time than a program wished to make. Such a bargaining posture does nothing to undermine the point that program officials, rather than Perot himself, took the initiative; in fact, it strengthens it, since it shows Perot acting from a position of strength.

When asked why they wanted to have Perot on their shows, two producers and a press officer for a third show said the same thing: That Perot was making news. Said one, "Our sense was that he was a growing phenomenon and we were very aggressive in going after him...we sensed movement and we wanted to be on top of it." Another said, "We're after whoever the key people are, who people are interested in..."

When two were reminded that Perot was not yet a serious presidential contender at the point at which their shows booked him, and that no poll had yet attempted to measure his public support, one said she wasn't sure why exactly the first booking was made. The other, however, had some more specific recollections. This producer said that she had seen Perot's appearance on the King show and had seen him on other interview shows at

⁵ This and other references to Holman are from an interview with Zaller, May 6, 1994.

⁶ This and other quotations from television show officials are from telephone interviews conducted by Zaller in May, 1994.

other times, and so knew that Perot always made a good interview subject. Her account ended there, thus implying that when a good interview subject appears to make fresh news, it is sufficient reason to invite him for another appearance on the show.

Holman, Perot's press secretary, independently suggested exactly this dynamic. Perot had made many interview show appearances over the years and had personal relationships with many of the producers who booked the major shows, Holman said. Once they saw that he was running for president, she offered, they naturally wanted to interview him again. "And once he goes on one show, ratings go through the roof, others see that... I think it's all a matter of ratings."

Ratings did tend to be higher when Perot appeared on an interview show. The average rating for NBC's *Today* show at the point in 1992 when Perot appeared was 3.8, where every point represents 921,000 households. However when Perot appeared on a two-hour viewer call-in on *Today* on June 11, the show's rating was 6.0, the highest it had been since the Gulf War.⁷

However, all three of the program representatives specifically denied that concern about ratings played any explicit part in the decision to book Perot, and two took offense at the suggestion that ratings had been a factor. One suggested that it had been naive even to raise the question, thus chiding her interviewer (Zaller) for doing so. Consistent with this objection, this person went on to attribute "Pollyanna-ish" motivations of "idealism" to herself. "We're interested in serving our viewers" by "putting on the best news show we can."

Only one of the three — the producer who had the specific recollection about how Perot had first been booked onto the show — admitted even indirect concern about ratings. "We saw someone who needed to be covered," she said. "We're always thinking of ratings in the back of our minds, but this was not a great rating coup." The two who had denied any concern about ratings both knew, when asked, what ratings of their show were; the third, who went the furthest in admitting concern about ratings, did not know her show's audience size. "I honestly don't know," she said. "It's in the millions though."

Thus, denying the importance of ratings in their decisions to book Perot, network officials invoked news values to justify what their show did or didn't do. Consistent with this invocation, two of the three also emphasized that their programs had, in the best tradition of journalism, asked tough questions of Perot. "Our show was not a cakewalk," one said, which was one reason, she also pointed out, that it was hard to get Perot to return. The hard questions did not, she admitted, necessarily come during Perot's first appearance, but they did come. Echoing the boom-and-bust logic by which more conventional reporters operate, one producer said, "The public would think we were mad dogs if we had attacked him in the first interview," this person also said, "but as the campaign went on and he still had not answered a lot of questions, we pointed that out."

⁷ *New York Times*, June 16, "On Talk Show Circuit, It's Perot vs. Clinton," by Walter Goodman, p. C18.

Tough questioning, in fact, became a trademark of Perot's later appearances on the morning news programs, eventually leading him to complain that *Today* show host Katie Couric was among the female reporters trying to prove their "manhood" by their interrogation of him.⁸ Far more likely, Couric was asserting her values as a journalist.

Thus, the morning news shows at some point ceased to provide Perot with opportunities to reach the public in a largely unmediated fashion, and although we have no data on this point, it appears likely that, as this occurred, Perot's effectiveness as a mass communicator became far lower than we estimated it to be for his appearances in late March and early April.

But if news values were frequently and, we believe, sincerely invoked by executives to explain why Perot was invited onto programs and how he was treated, they were a somewhat different set of news values than those described earlier in connection with the conventional political press. The most notable difference was frequent invocation of a value something like 'what the public is interested in' or 'the biggest story going,' which are close functional equivalents of concern about ratings. There was, on the other hand, scarcely any explicit concern about Perot's long-term political viability, which, as noted earlier, is the principal determinant of the amount of coverage the conventional press allocates to presidential candidates.

We may thus summarize the apparent dynamics of institutional mediation of the earliest phase of the Perot campaign: From Perot's history of lively appearances on interview programs, producers knew that Perot would make a good guest on their program. This, rather than any groundswell of public enthusiasm that could yet be visible to them, was apparently why producers took the initiative in trying to get Perot on their shows when they learned he was running for president. He was the kind of news these shows excel at covering: Lively, stimulating personalities, whether or not they have great public importance.

This account, however, goes only a little way toward explaining how Perot became a mass phenomenon. Perot's performances on daytime television in late March were apparently very effective in the sense that they converted a high proportion of those viewing them, but not extremely important once audience sizes are taken into account. Our estimate is that all of Perot's unmediated TV appearances added only about 2.5 percentage points to Perot's standing in the late March and early April polls — an effect, moreover, that wholly disappeared within about a month as other influences apparently swamped it. So the main story of the Perot bandwagon must still lie elsewhere, with the conventional political press.

Perot and the conventional press.

⁸ This incident occurred in late September as Perot was about to re-enter the presidential race. See "Assail Perot Over 'Manhood' Quip," by Fred Bruning, *Newsday*, October 1, 1992, p. 19. Perot latter said press reports of his remark had distorted what he said.

Although the behavior of the conventional press is sometimes difficult to explain, it seems in the case of Perot to have run to standard form. By his "better than expected" showing in the March polls, his charismatic performance on interview shows, his declared willingness to finance his own campaign, the speed with which his volunteers began qualifying him for state ballots, and his fit with the press' conception that an outsider could do well in 1992, Perot met all of the traditional criteria of political viability.

The normal response of the press to newly viable candidates is, as we have seen, to allot extensive and largely favorable coverage on them, and this, as we show in the next section, is exactly what the press did. Hence there is little about the press' decision to cover Perot that requires special explanation: It did what it normally does. Let us nonetheless briefly review the most important of the standard indicators of Perot's political viability.

It is hard to know exactly how seriously reporters took Perot's showing in the March polls. Rosenstiel, a journalist, wrote of polls in general that "most reporters claimed they thought polls unreliable" (p. 104). But he also reports numerous instances in which they relied heavily on them, sometimes on the grounds that they weren't sure which ones to distrust (p. 328-31). And Rosenstiel himself cited the March polls as evidence of a subterranean movement of support of Perot.

If reporters did doubt that Perot's support in the polls was real, they could look to another, more tangible indicator of Perot's mass appeal, namely, the impressive roster of major television shows that wanted him as a guest, including the Donahue show, which is mainly an entertainment program. Invitations to Perot to appear on these shows were sober-minded decisions based in significant part on Perot's ability to appeal to a mass audience, so the fact that he kept getting invitations could be taken as a useful barometer of the public's response to him. Reporters could, moreover, view the shows for themselves and judge whether, in Witcover's idiom, "the guy is a bomb" or not.

Thus, whatever the interview and call-in show appearances directly contributed to Perot's strength in the polls, they were probably more important indirectly for their demonstration effect on the mainstream press, which could see from them that Perot was a political talent with the potential to take off.

Perot also possessed two other attributes that the conventional press normally looks for in deciding whether to pay serious attention to a presidential candidate. He commanded a solid political organization, made up in great part by volunteers whose attraction to Perot could only strengthen the impression of Perot's raw political charisma; and, as a billionaire with a history of free spending of his own money on political causes, he had unquestioned financial viability.

A final point is that Perot's outsider candidacy fit well with the press' preconceptions of the kind of candidate likely to prosper in 1992. The central idea in these preconceptions was that, in the refrain of Pat Buchanan's insurgent campaign for the Republican campaign (and Jack Gargan's newspaper ads), voters were "mad as hell and not going to take it any more." Numerous press reports, based in some cases on polls

and in others on "person-on-the-street" interviews,⁹ had echoed the theme that 1992 was the year of the angry voter, so that once Perot's candidacy attained some initial viability, its potential for further growth — and for illustrating something reporters already believed to be true — must have seemed great.

It is inherently impossible when dealing with any discrete event — whether an apple falling to the ground from the pull of gravity, or the decision of reporters to cover Perot — to give a definitive general explanation for the event by referring only to the event itself. Rather, one must establish the general preconditions for the particular event and then show that those preconditions were met. That is what we have attempted to do here. Readers can no doubt imagine other factors that might have led the press to take Perot's candidacy seriously, but after Perot had managed to demonstrate mass appeal, command of a political organization, a good fit between his candidacy and a pre-existing scenario for a successful candidacy, and financial strength he had met all of the standard criteria for coverage as a serious candidate except one: He had no easy way of gaining access to the November ballot because he had not entered either party's primary. But Perot was vividly aware of this impediment from the start — his announcement of availability on the King show was conditioned on the ability of volunteers to qualify him for the ballot in all 50 states — and once he demonstrated the organizational muscle needed to solve the problem, which he rapidly did, the press began to cover him.

One of the earliest stories on Perot by a major media organization, "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio, is especially clear in explaining why Perot, though apparently a long shot to win, merited serious attention:

Robert Scott: Exit polls in the primaries show that voters are tired of politics as usual and they are yearning for a new candidate to get in the race, and that may explain why the prospect of Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot running for president has excited millions of voters across the country, and worried leaders of both the Democratic and Republican parties. A Los Angeles Times poll released today indicated that Perot would get 21 percent in a three-way match-up with President Bush and Bill Clinton. Perot says he'll run if supporters can get him on the ballot in all 50 states, a process that's now under way. NPR's Phylis Crockett reports.

Phylis Crockett: The idea may sound unlikely, a man who has never even run for elective office becoming president. But given voter dissatisfaction, the time may be ripe for someone who's never been a politician. The Ross Perot for president movement started when he appeared on Larry King Live, prompting calls from viewers around the country urging him to run. He said he would, if supporters got him on the ballot in all 50 states. More than one million callers have flooded the lines at his Dallas headquarters....¹⁰

⁹ See Germond and Witcover (1993) for an extensive statement of this thesis.

¹⁰ March 31, 1992.

The story then cuts to the phone bank at Perot headquarters, where one of Perot's volunteers can be heard telling a caller, "Yes we are getting a lot of calls. I'm told yesterday at one time that we had 30,000 holding that didn't get through. So if you don't mind let me tell you to have a good day and let me answer another line..."¹¹

Some members of the press apparently felt that no candidate, however potentially viable, should be regarded as a serious candidate for the nation's top job unless he or she had prior experience in public office (Rosenstiel, 1993, p. 173). This doubt may have reflected uncertainty about what appropriate standards of coverage ought to be for a candidate of Perot's background, since no one like him had previously emerged as a serious candidate for president. But enough reporters were willing to adhere strictly to a criterion of political viability to launch the Perot bandwagon. As their stories about Perot led to greater mass support, more reporters felt they had to pay attention to him until, within a few weeks of the first polls, even the most skeptical reporters had to agree that Perot's candidacy was a force to be reckoned with.

The timing and nature of Perot's coverage.

By our account so far, there is little mystery left in Perot's take-off phase. TV producers recognized in Perot a lively guest and promptly invited him to appear; conventional reporters recognized Perot's political charisma and other attributes of viability and, with some but not a great deal of hesitation, began covering him as they did other potentially viable presidential contenders.

The attention the political press gave to Perot was, as we shall show in this section, is the type of attention it normally gives to candidates it suddenly begins to take seriously. Coverage began with mostly positive notice of the exciting new force in American politics, and then turned to searching investigations of the candidate's character and issue positions. The public, for its part, responded as it normally responds to press coverage, moving toward more support for Perot when coverage was favorable, and then away when the press turned sour.

To show this, we have developed indicators of press coverage of Perot and two other candidates to whom he may be plausibly compared, namely, Jimmy Carter and Gary Hart. Both resembled Perot in that they emerged suddenly and unexpectedly as serious candidates for the presidency, thereby challenging the press first to explain their success and then to investigate their qualifications for high office.

We emphasize that, in making these comparisons, we do not claim that the candidacies of Carter and Hart are typical of all other presidential candidates. They are, as we show below, not typical of candidates who enter the primary process already well-known, such as incumbent presidents or Walter Mondale in 1984, nor are they typical

¹¹ The NPR story aired a week after the Donahue show, which, in generating 257,000 calls within 24 hours, must have overloaded switchboards for part of the time. One can thus accept the woman's remark as truthful without also believing that the Perot campaign typically lost 30,000 a day from people being put on hold.

of the vast majority of presidential contenders who never achieve even a modicum of political success. They are, however, typical – indeed, classic – cases of political outsiders who manage to beat the odds by emerging during the nomination process as unexpectedly viable contenders. Our purpose in comparing Perot to them is to discover the extent to which the political system dealt with Perot differently than it has dealt with similarly situated candidates in the past.

Our assessments of news coverage were based on stories appearing in three types of media, as follows:

New York Times. On the basis of story abstracts in the *Index to the Times*, news references to each candidate were rated as positive or negative. A typical example of an *Index* summary of a news story is as follows:

Ross Perot, acknowledging his rising popularity in some recent opinion polls and other signs of potential political strength, mounts his sharpest criticism to date of Pres Bush and Republican Party; accuses Bush of ignoring nation's deepening debt troubles, propping up Pres. Saddam Hussein in years before Persian Gulf war, and not acting to halt savings and loan crisis while overseeing deregulation of industry as Vice Pres; declares 'Nobody takes responsibility for anything in Washington,' interview with David Frost; photo. (M), Ap 24, A, 20:1.

In coding this story abstract, the material between semi-colons was taken as the basic unit of analysis — that is, the story element. All three story elements in this abstract were coded as positive for Perot, since all depicted him as an active, assertive candidate. The reference to a photo was not coded. About 20 percent of all references were too cryptic to be coded and so were omitted from the analysis, as in the following case:

Comment on Presidential candidates' appearances on talk shows, such as Gov Bill Clinton's appearance on Arsenio Hall show, and Ross Perot's launching his campaign on Larry King Live shows (M), Je 5, A, 15:5.

In 1984 and 1992, all stories in the *Times Index* under the rubric of presidential campaign were coded; in 1976, when campaign stories appeared under three different rubrics, the story was coded under its first appearance only.¹²

Time and Newsweek magazines. Each paragraph referring to a candidate was coded as favorable, unfavorable, or neutral with respect to that candidate, with almost all paragraphs assigned one of the two evaluative codes.

In about five percent of cases, paragraphs contained material that was both distinctly positive and distinctly negative. In these cases, the paragraph was counted separately as

¹² The measure just described differs from that used in Figure 1 of Part I, which was based on story counts only. We have switched to the new measure because it captures more of the information in the abstracts.

a positive and as a negative reference — that is, a +1 on the positive news count and a +1 on the negative news count.

Network Television News. Network television news on ABC, CBS, and NBC was coded on the basis of news abstracts published by the *Vanderbilt Television News Archive*. Because the abstracts are often quite spare and terse, about half of all story content could not be classified as positive or negative and was therefore omitted from the analysis. The omitted material may have had an actual slant, but its direction was not evident from the abstract. If the uncodable material carried a slant that was different from that of the codable material, the presence of so much uncodable material would introduce a bias into our results; however, there is no reason to believe that this would be the case.

The most difficult part of the task of coding the TV abstracts was deciding how much time each part of the story took up. The general rule was to divide each story into relatively distinct story elements, and to assume that each part received an equal amount of time. Although there was a large amount of guesswork in making these divisions, it was a constant problem across all story types and so probably would not tend to bias the results one way or the other.

The following example illustrates the procedure that was followed. All punctuation is original, but the division of the abstract into discrete story elements, as indicated by numbered line breaks, reflects coding decisions:

1. (Studio: Garrick Utley) The candidacy of Ross Perot featured; President Bush's attack on Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton this week recalled.
2. On Today, PEROT - comments.
3. Perot's ad on the American economy shown; economic solutions in his book United We Stand outlined on screen.
4. Perot spokesman Orson SWINDLE - says the people wanted to see Perot's ad show again.
5. New, shorter Perot ad shown.

The first element, which seems to be the anchor's introduction to a story on Perot, was considered uncodable. The remaining four elements, which appear to present generally pro-Perot material without any suggestion of criticism, were coded positive for Perot. According to the Vanderbilt abstracts, the whole segment ran 140 seconds; since four of the five segments were rated positive, 80 percent of story — a total of 112 seconds — was rated as positive coverage of Perot.

All of the content coding in this paper was done by Hunt.¹³ For *Newsweek* magazine, however, both Zaller and Hunt independently coded 14 weeks of stories. The two sets of codings, aggregated into two-week intervals and scored as the net of positive and negative paragraphs, correlated at the level of 0.96. Agreement would have been higher except

¹³ Hunt was a senior political science major at UCLA at the time of doing this research.

that one of us was somewhat more diligent in seeking out codable material in back sections of the magazine.

This reliability estimate, however, is much too high, even for *Newsweek*, which was a relatively straightforward medium to code. The intent in coding each medium was not to capture the content of that particular medium, but to use each medium as an independent indicator of overall communication flow. The relevant test of reliability, therefore, is the degree of covariance in the content of the three media. Evidence on this point is presented in Table 1. As can be seen, correlations among the indicators are in the range of .50 to .81, with a median of about .70. When the scales are standardized and combined into six separate indices — a positive coverage index and a negative coverage index for each of three candidates — the alpha scale reliabilities range from .74 to .93, with a median of .87 (data not shown). These estimates indicate a quite acceptable level of reliability.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 provides a rough preliminary look at our findings. This figure shows the relation between coverage of Perot in the *New York Times* and support for Perot in major opinion polls, as reported in *The Public Perspective*.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The most salient feature of these data is that Perot's rise from about 20 percent in a three-way race in late March to a peak of 37 percent in early June was accompanied by a steady increase in the volume of positive reporting in the *Times*, and that his subsequent decline to 15 percent in mid-July was accompanied by a decline in the number of positive stories and a rise in the number of negative ones. Perot's coverage was initially heavily positive, but became steadily more negative, reaching its peak level of negativity at the point at which the Texan began to slide in the polls. Clearly, Perot's rise to the political heights and subsequent steep decline track well with the directional thrust of his coverage in this media source.

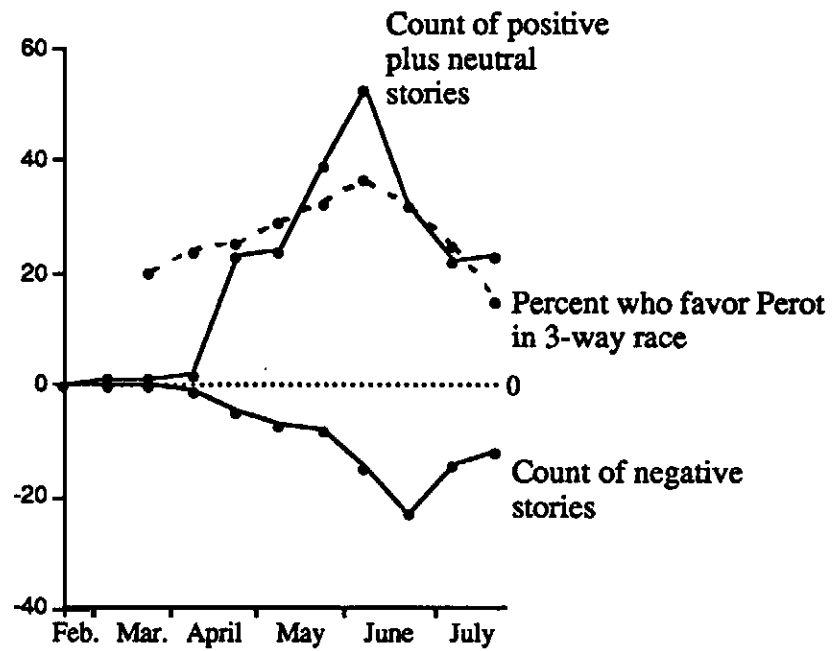
The obvious question about these data is whether they are representative of other media. The answer, as we shall see in a moment, is a qualified yes. The trend of Perot's coverage in the *New York Times* corresponds more closely with the rise and fall of Perot in the polls than the coverage of Perot in other media, but the trend is generally the same elsewhere. Let us look first at other newspapers. We have not coded the positivity and negativity of coverage of Perot in other newspapers, but we have drawn upon the NEXIS information service to measure the overall volume of press reports on Perot. That information, based on 30 major American newspapers, is presented in Figure 2, along with comparison data from the Clinton campaign. (We make the comparison to Clinton rather than Bush because Bush, as president, was mentioned in many stories that had nothing to do with the campaign, whereas nearly all of Clinton's mentions were campaign-related.) The basic datum in this figure is the number stories that mention a candidate. Some of the mentions denote major stories about the given candidate, but others are from stories devoted mainly to another candidate. Hence these data are intended only to convey information about relative amounts of coverage over time. As

Table 1. Average inter-scale correlations for measures of media content.

	Carter	Hart	Perot
Three indicators of positive coverage	.50	.79	.66
Three indicators of negative coverage	.65	.75	.81
Number of 2-week time clusters	11	11	9

Note: Cell entry is the average correlation among the measures of content in the *New York Times*, the two news magazines, and the three network TV news programs. All measures were aggregated to two-week time periods.

Figure 3.1. *Support for Perot and coverage in the New York Times*



can be seen, the number of stories mentioning Perot rose from essentially zero in early March, to half a story per day per newspaper in late March, to 1.5 stories a day in late April, to about 3.5 stories a day in late May and June. By comparison, the average number of stories mentioning Clinton throughout this period was about 3 per day per newspaper.

3.2
INSERT FIGURE ~~1~~ ABOUT HERE

One may draw two conclusions from these data. The first is that the *New York Times* was by no means the only newspaper in the country that took a serious interest in Perot, nor was it especially early or late to do so. A comparison with Figure 1 reveals that the volume of Perot coverage in other major newspapers follows essentially the same time-path as in the *Times*, rising from near zero in early March to a peak in June.¹⁴ The second is that Perot was able, at the peak of his campaign, to draw about as much coverage as a conventional party candidate routinely gets – which is to say, an amount sufficient to attract and maintain significant public support in a national political campaign.

We are now ready to examine a broader range of data. Trends in these indicators over the course of each candidate's campaign are shown in Figure 3. Each of the rows refers to a different candidate, and each column to a different medium. Thus, for example, the panel that appears at the intersection of the second row and the second column — that is, at the dead center of Figure 3 — depicts the media content scores of Gary Hart (second row) in the *New York Times* (second column). To smooth out idiosyncratic differences across media, Figure 4 consolidates the several media indices into a single view of media coverage of each candidate. In the calculations on which the composite measures are based,¹⁵ Figure 4 omits the last three periods of data for Carter and Hart, on the grounds that, in the final phase of the campaign, media scores were driven more by campaign events than by the logic of boom-and-bust.¹⁶

INSERT FIGURES 3.3 AND 3.4 ABOUT HERE

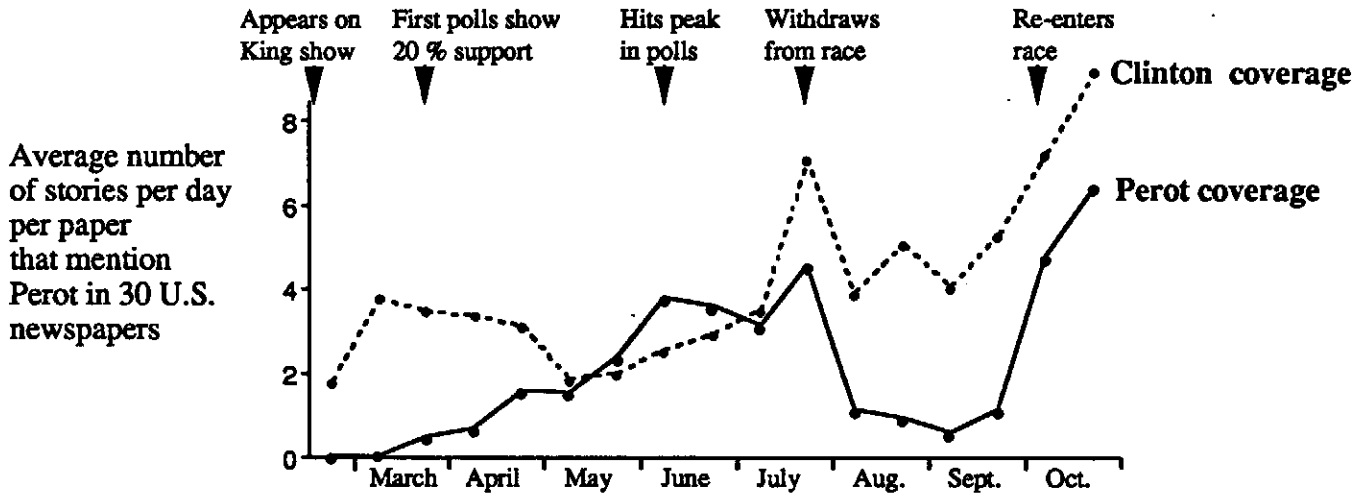
The clearest pattern in these data is that peaks and valleys in the various indices tend to occur in synchronization across media, as indicated by the reliability statistics described earlier. In each case, moreover, the first big peak in positive coverage precedes the first big peak in negative coverage — which is the essence of the boom-and-bust phenomenon. The tendency is clearer, as would be expected, when the data have

¹⁴ The only real difference, though probably not an important one, is that the peak level of Perot coverage in the *Times* was higher – about six stories per day devoted in significant degree to Perot in the *Times*, compared to a peak of about four stories per day at least mentioning Perot in other major papers. This difference is probably largely due to the fact that the *Times* carries more stories of all kinds than most other daily newspapers.

¹⁵ Each index was standardized by dividing by the size of the candidate's total news allotment in the given medium, that is, the sum of positive and negative scores for each medium and candidate; the three standardized indices were then averaged.

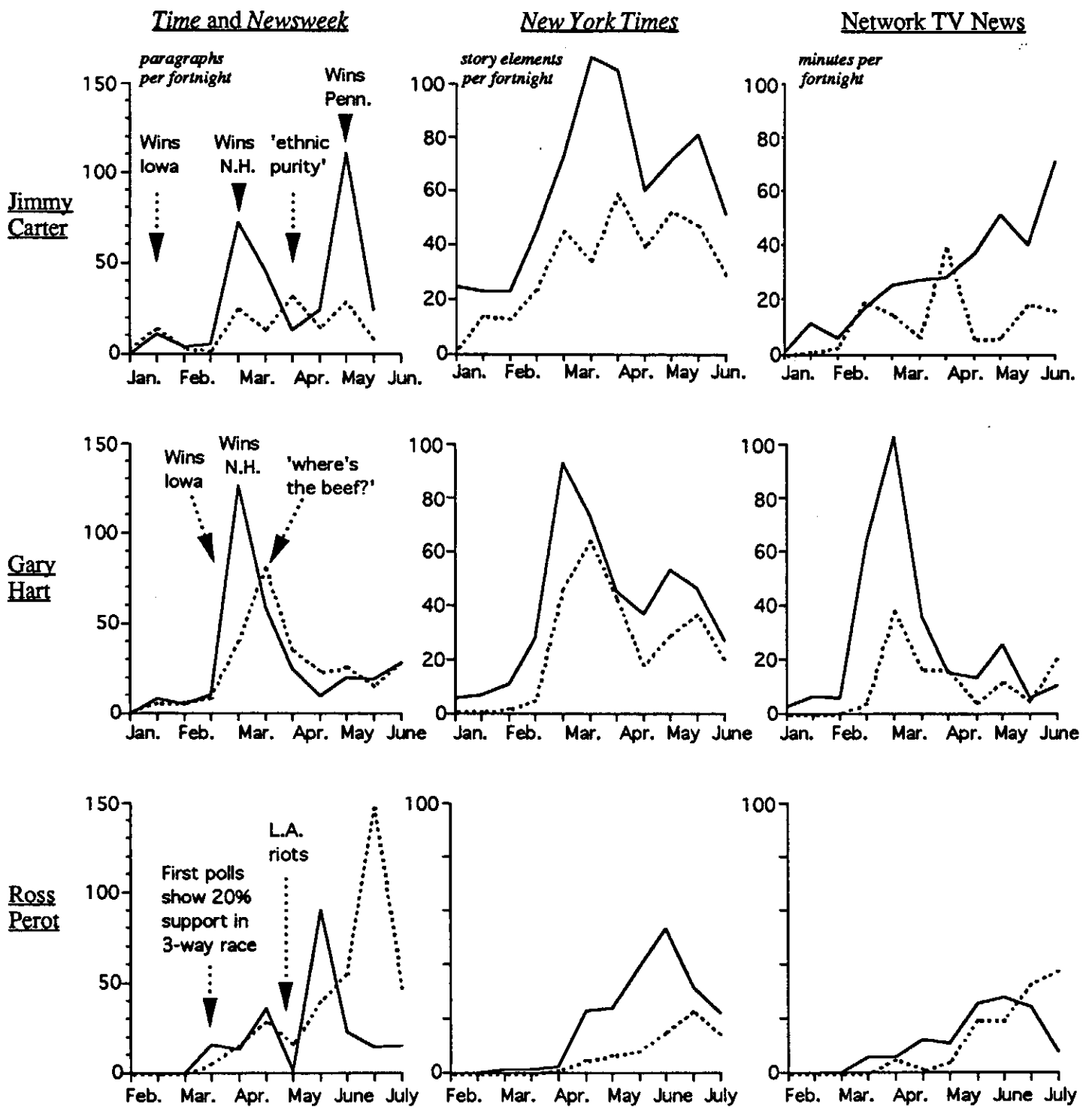
¹⁶ Carter and Hart each experienced surges on the basis of late-season primary victories that had nothing to do with the logic of boom-and-bust.

Figure 3.2. *Volume of media coverage in relation to key events in Perot campaign.*



Source: NEXIS information service.

Figure A. Patterns of press coverage for three outsider candidates.

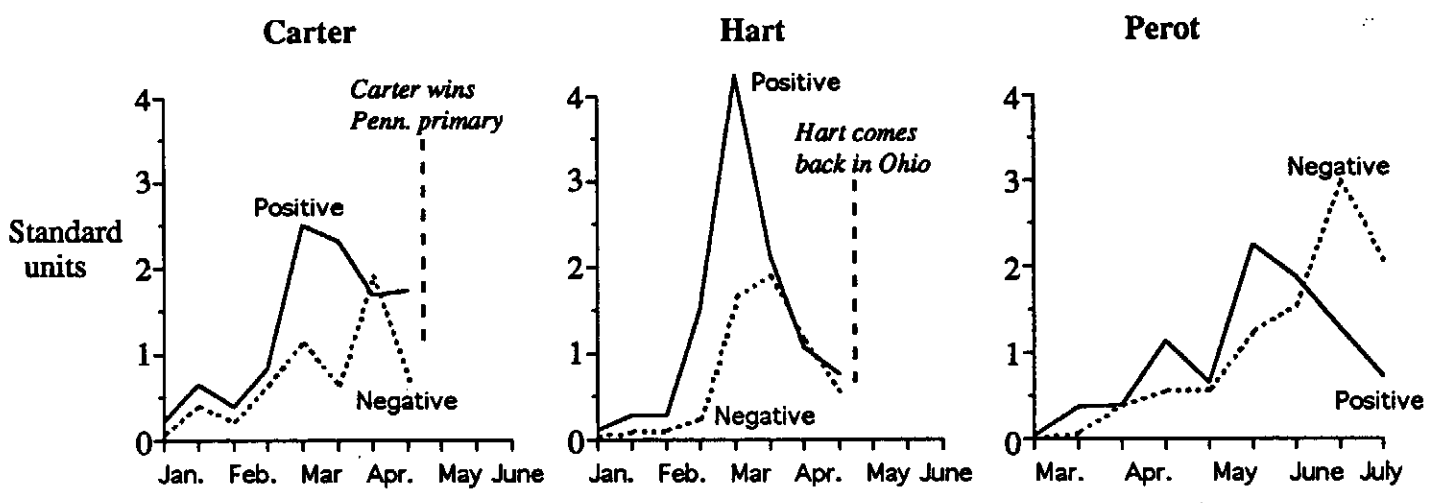


LEGEND

Positive coverage —————
 Negative coverage ·········

3.4

Figure 1. Standardized media coverage scores for Carter, Hart, and Perot



been consolidated and aggregated in Figure 4, and clearer for Hart and Perot than for Carter, but evidence of boom-and-bust is present in all cases.

There are some apparently idiosyncratic factors in the data. One obvious one involves television coverage of Carter, which turned massively positive at the tail end of his campaign, when other media were scaling back their coverage. Another, less pronounced exception involves coverage of Perot in early May, when the Los Angeles riots consumed virtually the entire national news hole in the news magazines for two issues in a row, but did not so monopolize other media. Neither exception, however, seems to carry any importance for our argument.

Another notable idiosyncrasy involves difference in their temporal dynamics of the three campaigns. Press coverage of Carter and Hart was set off by a particular event - success in the New Hampshire primary - of a type that reporters were both logistically and psychologically prepared to attend to. There was no comparable event for the Perot candidacy.¹⁷ The closest thing was probably the release of polls suggesting that Perot might be a force in a three-way race. But still, there was no tradition of press attention to such polls and, more importantly, no assemblage of reporters waiting at Perot's campaign headquarters to process the story. Indeed, the logistics of covering the Perot campaign remained a "special problem" for the press throughout the spring, as Rosenstiel relates:

The billionaire's campaign did not exist in a physical sense. It existed in the air, on television, on radio... There were no rallies, no platform, little or no record. Reporters assigned to Perot covered him by sitting in their hotel rooms in Dallas, calling the Perot petition office and asking on which radio shows Ross was appearing, and then arranging to listen to the interview. Perot might be anywhere. The reporter would be in his or her hotel... (p. 176)

Owing to these factors, press coverage of Perot developed slowly rather than overnight. It took reporters some time to figure out whether to cover Perot as a serious candidate for the presidency, and then after that how to cover a candidate who declined to rent a press plane and hop-scotch around the country from one pseudo campaign event to another. Yet eventually reporters did solve these problems, and did so in ways that had no obvious effects on the overall content of their coverage.

The one perhaps significant oddity in these data is that the bust phase of Perot's cycle was, both absolutely and relatively, more pronounced than that of the other candidates. That is, both the sheer amount of Perot's negative coverage, and the amount of it relative to his positive coverage, was greater than for Carter or Hart. This tendency is very clear in the more popular media, television and the news magazines, and non-existent in the *New York Times*, but still present overall.

¹⁷ Larry King, referring to Perot's announcement on his show, has said that "I was his New Hampshire" (*Washington Post*, May 5, A6). This analogy, however, is dubious. The outcome of the New Hampshire sets off an immediate, intense press barrage, which, as we have seen, did not occur in the case of Perot's announcement.

This raises the possibility that the press treated Perot differently than it has treated other presidential hopefuls in his situation, whether because Perot was inept at dealing with the press, or perhaps just because reporters disliked him. Before accepting this conclusion, however, we want to look more carefully at the reasons for Perot's negative coverage.

Why so much bad press for Perot?

In an effort to resolve this issue, we looked more carefully at the nature of negative coverage that Carter, Hart and Perot received. We began by identifying three broad types of negative coverage:

- Negative horse-race coverage, that is, coverage indicating that a candidate was losing political support, had too little of it, or faced serious and possibly insurmountable impediments ahead.
- Partisan attacks by interested parties, especially political opponents.
- Press-initiated criticism of a candidate's character, issue positions, or truthfulness.

We found it straightforward to apply this coding scheme to the newsmagazine stories and the *New York Times* story abstracts, but the bulk of our analysis will rely on the magazine stories because they were more openly interpretive and hence easier to code. It was not feasible to code the TV news abstracts which were, as indicated, quite sketchy. As previously, all content coding was done by Hunt. We do not have any data on the reliability of his coding, but there is no reason to believe that it was below the standard described earlier.

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

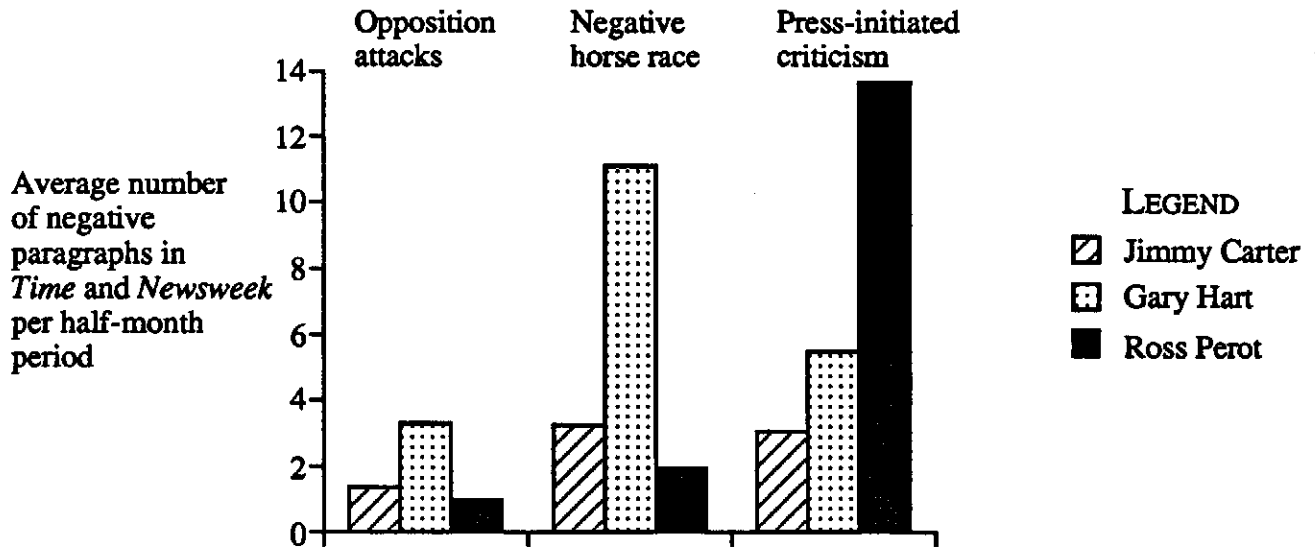
The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 5. As can be seen, Hart is distinctive for the very high amounts of negative horserace coverage he got. The reason for this distinctiveness, however, seems innocuous: Alone among these three presidential aspirants, Hart was actually defeated and knocked out of the race. Hence it was natural that he should get the largest amount of coverage indicating that his horserace prospects were poor.

Perot remains distinctive for the unusual amounts of press-initiated criticism he got — an average of about 14 paragraphs a week in the two magazines, which was more than three times the rate of press-initiated criticism of the other two candidates.

A striking aspect of these data is that partisan attacks by opponents are, in all three cases, the *least* common form of negative coverage in the news magazines. This is not, we assume, because contending candidates are shy about attacking one another, but because the news magazines feel the attacks of opponents on one another are less newsworthy than either their own criticisms of the candidates or their own analyses of horse race dynamics.

The news magazines are probably not fully representative of all other media in this regard. Hagen's analysis of the 1984 Democratic primaries, which was based on the United Press International news service, stressed other candidates as the primary

Figure 5. Sources of negative coverage of Carter, Hart, and Perot



source of negative coverage. Consistent with Hagen, our rough analysis of the sources of negative coverage of Gary Hart in the *New York Times* in 1984 found that the largest fraction of Hart's negative coverage (46 percent) in that medium came from Walter Mondale, compared to just 18 percent from press-initiated criticism. On the other hand, most of Carter's negative coverage (55 percent) in the *Times* in 1976 was of the horse race variety — an oddity, since Carter did win the nomination — and most of Perot's negative coverage (61 percent) in the *Times* in 1992 was classified as press-initiated.¹⁸

Our best guess is that the news magazines and the UPI wire represent polar opposites with respect to press-initiated criticism: UPI is most concerned with capturing day-to-day events and initiates little criticism on its own, while the news magazines are most concerned with interpretation and feel free to raise whatever criticism they wish. Most journalistic outlets probably fall in between, with most newspapers more like UPI and network TV quite similar to the news magazines.

In any case, Figure 5 confirms the impression that Perot got uniquely negative press coverage — but without explaining why he did so. Hence, we broadened our analysis still further in an effort to explain his poor coverage. In particular, we examined press-initiated criticism of all major, non-incumbent contenders in presidential primaries since 1976. We excluded only sitting presidents (on the grounds that different rules of press coverage may apply to them) and candidates who never achieved sufficient political stature to merit close scrutiny. Altogether, we examined a total of 19 cases, beginning with Henry Jackson, Jimmy Carter, Jerry Brown, and Ronald Reagan in 1976 and ending with Ross Perot in 1992.

Our analysis focused on the periods in which the press considered each candidate to be a serious contender. These periods ranged from four weeks (for Jesse Jackson in 1988 and Paul Tsongas in 1992) to a maximum of 26 weeks (for Ted Kennedy and Ronald Reagan in 1980). These time periods were reasonably easy to determine, since the media take it as part of their duty to report which candidates are viable and which are not. In most cases, our analysis began either at the point of a major primary victory or, for early front-runners, the start of the primary season in January. The major exceptions were Ted Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, whose coverage began late in 1979 when their campaigns got under way. The endpoints of our analysis were either the point at which a candidate suffered a fatal defeat in a primary and hence dropped out of the top tier of candidates, or alternatively, the point at which a frontrunning candidate knocked his last serious rival out of the race, thereby ending it. In the case of John Anderson, we began analysis when he declared his independent candidacy in May and ended it nine weeks later when he began to slide in the polls, thereby forfeiting further serious attention from the press. The exact time periods for each candidate are given in Appendix A. As in Figure 5, we focused on coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek*, on the

¹⁸ The figures for the *Times* are based on March coverage of Carter and Hart and June coverage of Perot. We include them, despite reservations about their quality, only to provide context for our fuller analysis of the news magazine data.

grounds that our coding of coverage in the newsmagazines would be most reliable. Again, coding was done by Hunt and without benefit of reliability estimates.

To reiterate, what we mean by "press-initiated" criticism is criticism that originates with reporters rather than in campaign events or partisan attacks. Here are two typical examples, one centering on a candidate's personal qualifications for office and the other on issue positions: To make clear what we mean by press-initiated criticism, we give two typical examples, one centering on a candidate's personal qualifications for office and the other on issue positions:

- Commenting on one of Reagan's misstatements in 1980, *Time* wrote that "Worse perhaps than the verbal gaffe is Reagan's relentlessly simple-minded discussion of complex problems." The implication was that Reagan was, in a general way, lacking in the mental acuity needed to be president.

- Regarding two policy ideas of Edward Kennedy in 1980, *Time* wrote that both "would require the creation of unwieldy and expensive bureaucracies in which Government decrees would replace the efficiencies of the market. ...Surveys show that the majority of people want to fight inflation by cutting Government spending."⁷

The distribution of press-initiated criticism across the 19 presidential candidates is displayed in Figure 6. As can be seen, Perot stands out even in this larger group for the unusual amount of negative coverage he got. The next most-criticized candidate is Paul Tsongas, who was criticized at an average rate of 11.25 paragraphs per week compared to 15.4 for Perot.¹⁹ (Note that the data in Figure 6 refer to weekly rates of negative coverage, so the time a candidate was in the race does not directly affect results.) Meanwhile, some candidates escaped almost unscathed, with two, in particular, standing out for having received sweetheart coverage: Henry "Scoop" Jackson in 1976 and John Anderson in 1980. The former averaged less than a paragraph a week of criticism, while the latter received about two paragraphs a week.

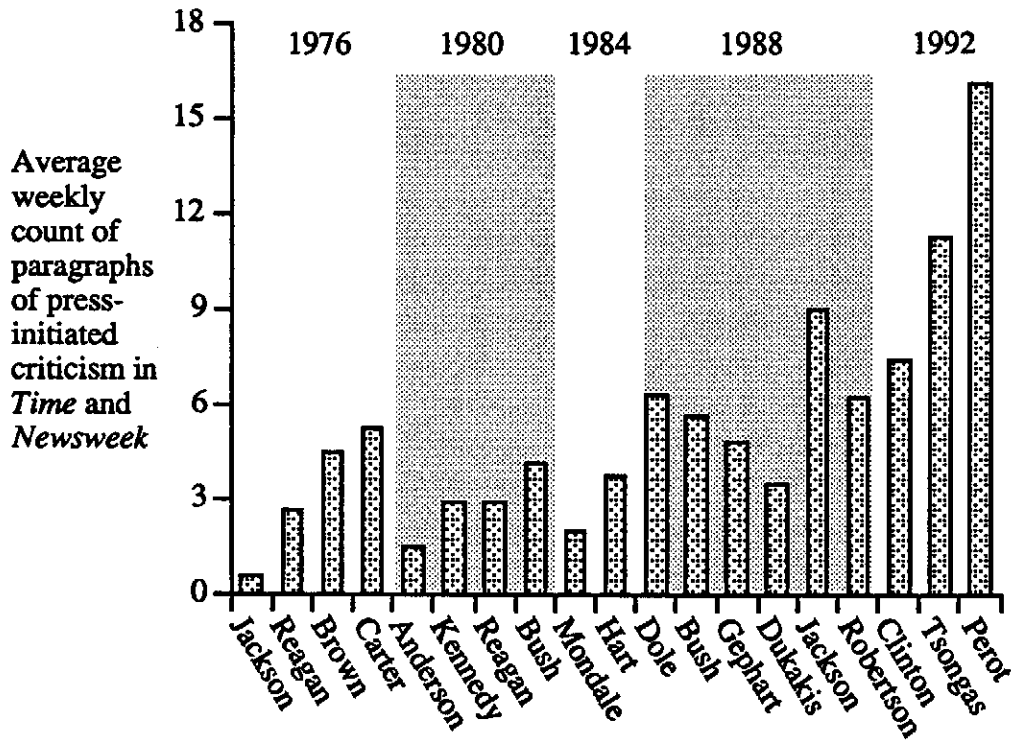
INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

These data contain two suggestions about why Perot was criticized as heavily as he was. One factor that clearly helps explain negative coverage is the year of the election: Candidates running in more recent elections have had to endure far more press-initiated criticism than candidates running in 1976 or 1980 (see also Patterson, 1993). Coverage was most negative in 1992, the year described by the press as the year of the "Angry Voter" and also an apparently angry press.

Figure 6 suggests that the prior political experience of candidates also affects coverage. To see how, note that the figure orders candidates within each election year by descending levels of political experience, where experience is measured by the number

¹⁹ This is slightly higher than the rate reported in Figure 5, which was 14. In coding the data for Figure 6, paragraphs were coded for predominant type of negative coverage — press-initiated, candidate generated, or horse race. Thus a paragraph might contain some press-initiated criticism but be counted under another rubric. For Figure 6, however, any paragraph containing any press-initiated criticism was counted, leading to the slightly higher estimate of 15.4.

Figure 6. *Distribution of press-initiated criticism by candidate, 1976-1992*



of prior state or federal elections the candidate has won plus the number of elections years in which the candidate has competed, whether successfully or not, for president or vice-president. Thus, for example, the first candidate listed in 1976 is Henry Jackson, who won a total of 10 elections to the House and Senate, and the last listed in 1976 is Jimmy Carter, whose only prior electoral success in state or national politics was election as governor of Georgia. Figure 6 shows that, in most election years, the less experienced candidates attracted larger amounts of press-initiated criticism.

We used a simple regression analysis to test the statistical robustness of these apparent effects. As can be seen in the first column of Table 2, both factors — year of the election and a politician's prior political experience — importantly affect the incidence of press-initiated criticism.²⁰ These simple results go a fair way toward explaining why Perot, who lacked political experience and ran in a year in which the press was especially critical, received as much negative coverage as he did.

We can, however, push our argument a step further. Another factor often cited as a determinant of press-initiated criticism is the candidate's political viability: The better a presidential aspirant is doing, the harder the press looks at the candidate. In the present analysis, we have limited our attention to candidates who were doing well. Nonetheless, there are some differences in viability among them, which we have tried to capture by means of a variable that awards candidates two points for winning a party nomination, one point for remaining competitive throughout the primary season, and no points for weaker showings — except Perot, whom we awarded the status of party nominee.

To our surprise, inserting this measure of political viability variable into the regression model had little effect on the results. As shown in the second column of Table 2, the coefficient for viability is small, statistically marginal, and incorrectly signed. Yet upon further exploration of the data — that is, data grubbing — we found evidence of a strong and apparently robust viability effect. When, as shown in column 3 of Table 2, an interaction term for viability \times experience is added to the model, its coefficient is highly statistically significant ($t=4.6$, $p=.001$, two tailed) and the viability variable also takes on a coefficient that is correctly signed and highly statistically significant ($t=3.05$, $t=.01$, two-tailed). The standardized betas for these effects (not shown in Table 2) are .68 and .47, respectively, thus indicating that the effects are quite large.

INSERT TABLE ^{3,2} ABOUT HERE

Although we did not initially anticipate it, this pattern of effects is not implausible. Both inexperience and viability induce tougher coverage, but inexperience makes most difference when it is combined with a good chance of winning.

To test the robustness of these results, we re-estimated the full model in roughly split halves of our data — cases up to and including 1984, and cases after 1984.

²⁰ We use an x-squared term for time because it fits the data far better than a simple linear term. In fact, an x-cubed term produces slightly better results than a squared term, but for reasons of substantively plausibility, we prefer the former.

Table 3.2. *Coefficients for models of press-initiated criticism*

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Year squared (1976 = 0 ... 1992 = 4)	0.47 (.08)	0.48 (.08)	0.49 (.05)	0.02 (.32)	0.64 (.17)	0.44 (.06)
Political experience (range 0-10)	-0.43 (.15)	-0.46 (.16)	-0.27 (.11)	-0.40 (.09)	-0.17 (.19)	-.29 (.11)
Political viability (range 0-2)	-	-0.48 (.51)	1.84 (.60)	0.51 (.55)	2.14 (.99)	0.85 (.92)
Viability X experience (range 0-20)	-	-	-0.69 (.15)	-0.25 (.15)	-0.79 (.23)	-0.44 (.22)
Intercept	4.08	4.06	3.63	4.82	1.47	4.02
Adjusted r-square	.72	.72	.88	.78	.84	.79
N	19	19	19	10	9	18

Note: Models I and II omit the variables indicated; Model III contains all variables and all cases; Models IV and V contain cases up to 1984 and after 1984, respectively; model VI contains all cases except that of Perot. In Model IV, year is not squared.

Because this left us with four variables, including an interaction, and only ten or nine cases per test, there was little hope of obtaining coefficients that were statistically significant. But as can be seen in the fourth and fifth columns of Table 2, the pattern of substantive effects obtained in the dataset as a whole is quite similar in each of its two halves. The only notable change involves the year variable, which has scarcely any effect over the period from 1976 to 1984. Thus, essentially all of the increase in the intensity of press scrutiny occurred in 1988 and 1992.²¹

Perot, as indicated, has extreme scores on all of the variables in this model: Zero experience, the viability of a party nominee, and running in 1992. It is therefore unsurprising that removing his individual case from the dataset weakens the overall results, as shown in the final column of Table 2. Yet because the pattern of results is similar whether or not Perot is included in the analysis, there is no reason to believe that inclusion of his case biases the outcome of the analysis.

Perhaps the best indication of how well these results explain press-initiated criticism of Perot is that if we apply the coefficients from the estimate that omits Perot's case (i.e., model 6 in Table 2) to Perot's scores on the three independent variables, we generate a postdiction that Perot would get 12.76 paragraphs of press-initiated criticism per week. This is more negative coverage than any other candidate actually got, and about 83 percent of the amount Perot got. If, further, we generate a \hat{y} estimate of Perot's support from a model that includes his case, we predict that he will get about 15.14 paragraphs of press criticism per week, or 98 percent of what he got.

These findings show that there was little if anything unusual in Perot's bad press. His coverage was highly negative, but not more negative than could have been predicted in light of his political inexperience, his high viability, and the year in which he ran.

But although these results continue to vindicate our claim that press coverage of Perot represents a case of "politics as usual," they do not fully explain the dynamics of the situation. In particular, they leave open the interesting question: Does the strong effect of prior electoral experience reveal something about the way inexperienced candidates deal with the media once it begins to scrutinize them? Or does it instead reveal how the press behaves toward inexperienced candidates, regardless of how well or badly the candidate performs?

The answer is not obvious. It is easy to believe that neophyte candidates lack the media savvy of more experienced players. But it is also easy to believe that the reporters are especially tough on neophytes because they believe it is their job to be. The regression results cannot, by themselves, answer this question. They show only that relationships exist between inexperience and negative coverage, not why the relationships exist.

²¹ From Patterson (1993), we know that negative coverage of general election candidates has been increasing since the 1960s; in view of this, we prefer to retain our x-squared specification over the entire time period rather than use dummy terms to pick up the changes that occurred in 1988 and 1992.

In the particular case of Perot, however, there is a good bit of qualitative evidence that the candidate brought much of the negative coverage on himself. An example is Perot's denial, in response to press inquiries, that his former company had prohibited employees from wearing facial hair. Since the company not only had a written policy prohibiting facial hair, but had lost a lawsuit with a disgruntled employee over it, it was fairly straightforward for the press to dig out and cite information that called Perot's truthfulness into question. Another example is Perot's denial, in response to press inquiries, that he had been importantly involved in negotiations for a public airport project adjoining his property in Texas, even though local officials were willing to say on camera that he had been involved.

What is notable here is not that the press put the spotlight on a candidate's blatant untruths, but that a serious candidate for the presidency gave the press an opening to do so — and continued to do so over and over in what Caesar and Busch have described as a string of "unforced errors" (1993, p. 104).

Perot sometimes seemed not even to care what reporters wrote about him. When, for example, a reporter from the *New York Times* sought to question him about a controversial matter, Perot brushed him off, saying "it doesn't matter" if newspapers printed damaging material about him, and "I think you could print any story you want on the front page [of the *New York Times*]... and there is no reaction. It just blows away."²²

But it was not only print reporters who got this treatment. Here is Rosenstiel's account of the first time ABC News reporter Morton Dean sought to cover Perot. The story centered on a rally at which Perot had said it was "too dangerous" for his wife to appear. After the rally,

Dean introduced himself. Most politicians Dean had ever met would have been happy to see a network correspondent. Many would have acted as if they knew him, even if they didn't. Perot just glared at him...

Dean imagined it was a tactic so he decided to stare back.

"Was your wife threatened?" the correspondent said. "Were you threatened?"

Perot tilted his chin. His look darkened. "You know better than to ask a question like that," Perot said. "You know what is going on out there."

Then the [candidate] turned in disgust and walked away....

"I had been called a dummy and an asshole before," Dean would recount, "but never the first time I met them."

Most encounters Dean had with Perot were as angry." (p. 177-178)

Whatever exactly led Perot to make the remark about his wife and then curtly refuse to discuss it with a network correspondent, his behavior was not that of an experienced political operator. As columnist Molly Ivins wrote of Perot, "Watching someone without

²² Cited in Rosenstiel (1993, p, 187).

political skills run for president sure as hell increased my respect for political skills."²³

The press, for its part, was determined to take a hard look at Perot's character and qualifications for office. The following excerpt from a *Washington Post* story written shortly before Perot took over the lead in the presidential race is indicative of the press' attitude:

"I was at a party with Sam Donaldson," [Larry] King recalled. "Sam says, 'Once I get Perot, I'll destroy him' ...

ABC's Donaldson said he would never suggest *seriously* that he could destroy Perot, but he added: "It's kind of hard to lay a glove on him. It's like Ronald Reagan in 1981 [emphasis added]."²⁴

It was not just Donaldson who worried that Perot had gotten too far too easily. As we have seen, intensified press scrutiny of boomlet candidates is a regular feature of American politics. Most likely, therefore, Perot's bad press was the result of an interaction between the candidate's own inexperience with the national media and the press' commitment to subjecting newly viable candidates to extraordinarily tough scrutiny.

Our contention, thus, is that anyone in Perot's objective position — that is, high on political viability, low on political experience, and running in 1992 — would have gotten the same tough treatment Perot got. An alternative argument, however, might be that Perot got the treatment he did because of his stridently anti-establishment views, especially his attacks on the press. Perot could not forego such attacks without fatally undermining his appeal with the public, and he could not prevent the press from retaliating against him for making them, so he had no real choice but to write off the press.

This counter-hypothesis cannot be definitively tested, but it is nonetheless useful to evaluate it in light of George Wallace's experience as an independent candidate for president in 1968.

As the Governor of Alabama, Wallace had brazenly proclaimed "segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," and had personally stood in a school house door to block integration of his state's schools. During the 1968 campaign he had threatened to run over any "long-haired college students" who tried to block his limousine, and he routinely included reporters among the "pointy-headed" people "who are going to get some of those liberal smiles knocked off their faces" when he became president (Chester, Hodgson, and Page, 1969:281).

But as a candidate running for president without benefit of a built-in party following, Wallace knew he needed the conventional press to get his message out to the

²³ Cited in Caesar and Busch, 1993, p. 113.

²⁴ "Press Faces Enigma Candidate," Howard Kurtz, *Washington Post*, May 5, 1992, p. A5.

public, and as a professional politician he knew how to deal with reporters. Thus, according to a recent political biography of Wallace,

... an atmosphere of grudging respect developed between Wallace and the entourage of reporters following his campaign. When he chided the press during campaign speeches, he would pause, gesture to the press table below the podium, and add, "course, now, I don't mean to include these fellas who been traveling with me. They're all good fellas."

.... Wallace worked hard to win the reporters' friendship. Aboard the press plane, a reporter need only plop down next to the candidate to ask a question or two... Wallace would usually rest between appearances; but if he was not asleep, he would make himself available in his hotel room to any journalist who wanted to see him. As one reporter put it, "The best source is Wallace himself...."

But if those following the campaign began to see a gentler, kinder Wallace, nothing had changed in his aggressive attacks on the federal establishment, or in his capacity to galvanize his supporters with rousing, confrontational oratory, as in this speech ... "we're going to take some of these students by the hair of the head and see if we can't get 'em under a good federal jail.... I'm sick and tired of some professors, and some preachers, and some judges, and some newspapers having more say about my everyday life... than I have to say about it myself" (Leshner, 1994, p. 419-20).

Compared with Wallace's veiled appeals to racism, Perot's calls for political reform in Washington and a balanced budget were tame stuff. Wallace's direct attacks on the press in general (as against the particular reporters with whom he dealt) were also more strident. Yet Wallace, a professional politician, managed to achieve a fair degree of accommodation with the press. We conclude from this that it was not so much Perot's views, but his lack of skill in dealing with reporters, that was responsible for the bad feeling that developed between him and many members of the press corps. As a neophyte candidate for the presidency, Perot was bound to be criticized by the press, but if he had been more politically skilled, the criticism probably wouldn't have been as critical as it was.

Having now, we believe, explained why Perot's coverage in the conventional press was initially positive but later became extremely negative, we turn to a more detailed examination of the impact of this coverage on public opinion.

Appendix A

Time Periods Used for Study of Press-initiated Negative Coverage

Note that all news magazines are advanced dated. Consider a week that runs from Monday, January 1 to Sunday January 7. On Monday, January 8, a magazine will come out carrying a date of January 14 and covering events from Sunday, December 31 to Saturday, January 6. The dates below refer to nominal (i.e., cover) dates of the magazines. When, however, actual date is relevant to our analysis, (e.g., Figure 1), we use the date the magazine first appears on the newsstand as its date.

1976

Jerry Brown. May 31 - June 21.

Jimmy Carter. February 2 - to June 21.

Henry "Scoop" Jackson. March 15 to May 10.

Ronald Reagan. January 5 to June 21.

1980

John Anderson. May 5 to June 30.

George Bush. February 4 to March 31.

Edward Kennedy. November 5 to May 5.

Ronald Reagan. November 26 to March 31.

1984

Gary Hart. March 12 to June 18.

Walter Mondale. January 2 to June 18.

1988

George Bush January 4 to March 28.

Robert Dole. February 22 to March 28.

Michael Dukakis. February 29 to May 2.

Richard Gephardt. February 22 to March 2.

Jesse Jackson. April 11 to March 2.

Pat Robertson. February 22 to March 28.

1992

Bill Clinton. January 6 to April 20.

Ross Perot. March 30 to July 20.

Paul Tsongas. March 2 to March 30.

Chapter Four

Effects of Press Coverage on Public Opinion

At the end of June 1992, as press-initiated criticism of Perot was reaching its peak, *Time* magazine noted what it called an emerging "natural law" of American politics:

Once a candidate is anointed as front runner, he inevitably triggers enough intense scrutiny from the press, opponents, and voters to slow down his surge. The impending effect is greatest on candidates about whom the public and press know little, since revelations can easily shatter their tenuous popularity.¹

It is clear, as the article observes and as we saw in Chapter 3, that political success engenders "intense scrutiny" by the press. It is interesting that reporters have become sufficiently self-conscious of their role in the process to describe it in terms of natural law. At least in *Time* and *Newsweek*, however, there was relatively modest evidence that success engenders more intense scrutiny by opponents², and it is difficult to imagine what intense scrutiny by the public would consist of.

What does happen is that public opinion moves in tandem with press coverage. The reason, as we shall maintain in this chapter, is that the public opinion is influenced by press coverage, moving to support candidates that get good press and to become disillusioned with those who do not.

It would be surprising if this were not the case. Ordinary citizens have neither the incentives nor the resources to scrutinize candidates for presidential office. Most are busy people, juggling jobs, family commitments and recreational pursuits. If they glance at stories about the presidential nomination in the morning newspaper, or stay alert when the TV news turns to presidential politics, they are doing pretty well. Most, however, do not manage to keep up with what the media lays out for them, and scarcely anyone — especially in the spring phase of the presidential election process — devotes independent effort to examining the records and promises of candidates.³

¹ "The other side of Perot," June 29, p. 39.

² See, however, Hagen's (1991) analysis of candidate coverage in the Associated Press in 1984. See also our discussion in the previous chapter.

³ Retired persons may be an exception. Sometimes well-educated and often with time on their hands, they can pay as much attention to politics as they wish. Unemployed

The aim of this chapter, then, is to examine the relationship between press coverage of candidates and public support for those candidates. On the assumption that press coverage leads public opinion rather than vice-versa, we shall document what turns out to be a very strong and stable relationship between the two. Among other things, we will show that the public, taken as a whole, was about as responsive to positive and negative coverage of Perot as it had been to comparable coverage of Carter and Hart in previous elections. In an effort to trace the path of media influence more definitively, we shall further show that the individuals most responsive to media coverage — both positive and negative — are those who are most attentive to public affairs in general. Media influence, as we shall therefore argue, tends to influence individuals in proportion to the amount of communication they receive from the media.

Public Support for Boom-and-Bust Candidates

A staple feature of the presidential election process are presidential straw polls. The key question typically asks, "suppose the election were held today, for whom would you vote."⁴ A list of candidates then follows.

There is an obvious element of unreality to such questions. In many cases, the election is not being held anytime soon, and sometimes the candidates who will compete in it have not even been determined at the time the polls are conducted. More importantly, many people do not begin to focus on who they will support until shortly before election day. If asked their preference before they have made up their minds, they will typically go ahead and answer the question, but the answers they give may be little more than throw-aways.

One might expect this to be especially true in the first half of the presidential selection process. The election is months away, and much of the time, the field of candidates is in flux. What candidates stand for, what their character is, and even whether they will survive until November is uncertain. A voter might be attracted by this candidate's smile or momentarily put off by that one's personality quirk, but such things are not likely to be key ingredients of a final vote decision. What one picks up in voter surveys in this period, therefore, is likely to be a more-or-less top-of-the-head response to whatever information is most salient in the news — and therefore in people's minds — at the moment of the survey.

persons, who are often poorly educated, tend not to devote their free time to politics (fn).

⁴ ABC News-*Washington Post* survey.

While there is some truth to all this, it does not follow that straw polls have no meaning. For one thing, straw poll results taken close to elections predict election outcomes extremely well, usually within a percent or so of the actual result. To be sure, what people tell pollsters the weekend before the election is probably more carefully considered than what they say six months before the election, but the difference should not be exaggerated. Preferences stated six months before election day would no doubt predict the election outcome if, for some reason, people had to vote at that time. And preferences measured shortly before election day remain susceptible to influence and change, as we shall see in Chapter 5.

For many candidates, Perot foremost among them, the ability to do well in straw polls is a key determinant of whether and how the press will cover a candidate, and this coverage, as it continues over time, may gradually contribute to a deeper and more firmly grounded public appraisal of the candidates. Even poll results that are here today and gone tomorrow — not an uncommon occurrence in the early phase of presidential campaigns — indicate something about what the public will resonate to if given the chance.

In sum, straw polls are not infallible indicators of how distant events will come out, but there is no reason to doubt their capacity to illuminate the current state of public thinking about candidates and the factors that affect it.

With these considerations in mind, let us turn to data on public support for Carter, Hart, and Perot, the boom-and-bust candidates whose coverage we analyzed in most detail in the last chapter. Afterwards, we shall make some observations about other varieties of candidates.

In order to conduct this analysis, we gathered aggregate opinion data on over-time trends in public support. In the case of Carter, who ran before the era of saturation political polling began, usable trend data is scarce. The best we have been able to find is a set of nine *New York Times*-CBS News polls released between January 4 and May 24, with polls typically done shortly after a major event and each asking Democrats their preference among the principal Democratic candidates.⁵ In the case of Hart, we used data from the National Election Studies 1984 rolling cross section survey. This study interviewed a continuous stream of citizens throughout the election season. In order to articulate survey results with our media content analysis, we aggregated the preferences of Democrats in this study by regular half-month time intervals from the first of January to mid-June. For Perot, we used the average of all published polls that carried

⁵ These data were retrieved from NEXIS.

three-way presidential preference questions, grouping by half-month periods from the second half of March to the first half of July.⁶ We also have one poll result from the second half of July and before Perot dropped out of the race. Note that the base for calculation of Carter's and Hart's support was all Democrats, but that for Perot it was all potential voters.

We have, then, 9 observations of support for Carter, 11 for Hart, and 9 for Perot. To explain these data, we expressed each media content index as a cumulative score up to the time of the corresponding survey observation. In so doing, we assume that overall levels of public support for a candidate are likely to depend on the cumulative balance of positive and negative information received up to the point of evaluating the candidate. To test this assumption, we performed OLS regression, a statistical technique for measuring the strength of relationship between variables.

The results of these regressions are presented in Table 4.1. Taken as a group, they demonstrate a high degree of association between media coverage and public support for candidates. The adjusted r-squares in the nine models — three types of media X three candidates — range from .60 to .91, with a median of .71. Each of the 9 adjusted r-squares is greater than zero with a confidence level of .01 or greater.

INSERT TABLE 4.1 HERE

A close look at the coefficients in the individual models yields a somewhat fuzzier picture. Of the 18 coefficients — we have a coefficient for positive media and a coefficient for negative media in each of the nine models — 13 achieve statistical significance at the level of .05, one-tailed. But five do not, and in two cases do not come close. The results are sharpest for Perot, where all six coefficients are statistically significant, and fuzziest for Carter, where only three of six make that cutoff.

The only really weak results are concentrated in one place, the model of the effect of television coverage on support for Carter. Neither media index has an individually significant effect, and one has the wrong sign. These results, however, are probably due to the fact that, as we saw earlier, Carter's heavily positive TV coverage was not representative of coverage in other media.

The best estimate of media impact would be one that took simultaneous account of the positive and negative information in all three media. Given the small number of data points and the high degree of collinearity among the different measures, it is not feasible simply to enter each index as an independent regressor. Hence we again resorted to a

⁶ The principal source of these data was the polls section of *The American Enterprise* magazine, supplemented by a search of NEXIS.

Table 4.1. *Coefficients for unstandardized models of media effects*

	Carter	Hart	Perot
Positive television news (cumulative minutes)	.0008 (.0012)	.0026 (.001)	.0035 (.0004)
Negative television news	.0017 (.0024)	-.0035 (.003)	-.0032 (.0004)
Intercept	.09	-.04	.20
Adjusted r-square	.71	.70	.92
Positive <i>New York Times</i> (cumulative abstracted story elements)	.0018 (.004)	.0053 (.0024)	.0025 (.0005)
Negative news magazine	-.002 (.008)	-.0074 (.004)	-.0031 (.0007)
Intercept	.09	-.05	.23
Adjusted r-square	.71	.60	.80
Positive news magazine (cumulative paragraphs)	.0025 (.0006)	.0085 (.002)	.0025 (.0007)
Negative news magazine	-.0028 (.001)	-.0073 (.002)	-.0011 (.0004)
Intercept	.07	0	.21
Adjusted r-square	.91	.85	.68
N	8	11	8

composite measure. More specifically, we converted each set of media scores to a cumulative sum, standardized it, and averaged it with its counterparts, thereby producing one overall measure of positive coverage and one overall measure of negative coverage for each candidate. In light of the lavish positivity of Carter's TV coverage, we logged the positive TV index before standardizing it, and to keep results comparable across cases, we did so for all three cases. In estimating the effect of these composite indicators, we switched to a logit model, a functional form that accommodates the floor levels of support that existed for Carter and especially Hart at the start of their campaigns.

The results obtained from the consolidated media indices are shown numerically in Table 4.2 and visually in Figure 4.1. There is not much to see in Table 4.2 except that all coefficients are now significant and that the r-squares are uniformly high, thus indicating that the media content variables do a consistently good job of explaining the candidate support data.

Figure 4.1 shows just how good the job is. As can be seen, actual and predicted levels of support are in quite close agreement in each case. Indeed, in light of the fact that we do not take any direct account of media coverage of opposing candidates, the level of agreement between predicted and actual support seems remarkable.

INSERT TABLE 4.2 AND FIGURE 4.1 ABOUT HERE

If it appears from Figure 4.1 that media content is better able to explain public support for Carter and Perot than for Hart, the appearance is misleading. Each estimate of support for Perot is based on the aggregation of several polls involving about a 1,000 individuals each; each estimate of Carter support is based on a single poll of several hundred individuals; but each estimate of Hart's support is based on the number of Democrats interviewed in each two-week period by NES, which is about 50 individuals. Hence the results for Hart are probably just noisier rather than substantively weaker.

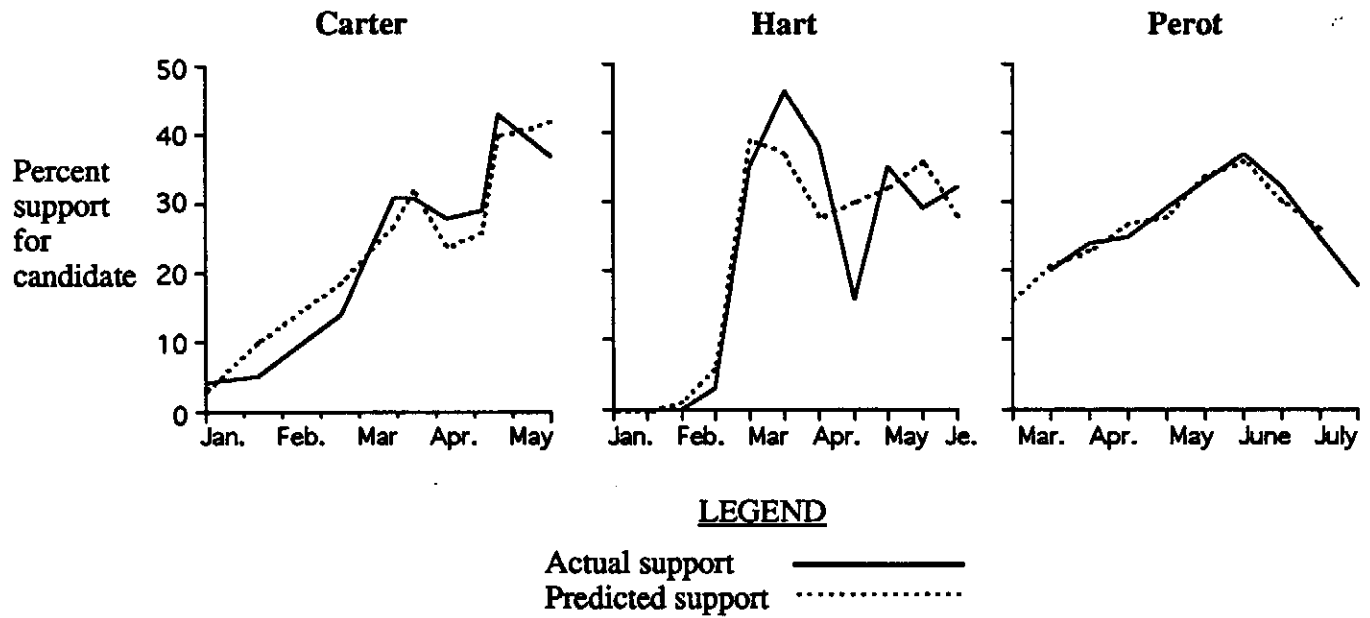
Close examination of the coefficients in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 suggests that, despite generally good fits for each candidate, the dynamics of media support may differ across candidates. It appears, for example, that public support for Carter was mainly a function of the coverage he got in news magazines, while support for Perot was mainly a function of TV coverage. However, this appearance, too, is probably misleading. Which media indices attract larger coefficients in a particular case is probably more a matter of chance fluctuation in small datasets than anything of substantive importance.

To demonstrate the essential similarity of media effects across the three candidates, we generated a "postdiction" of support for Perot by applying the *coefficients* from the

Table 4.2. *Coefficients for standardized models of media effects*

	Carter	Hart	Perot
Standardized positive media	0.89 (.23)	2.22 (1.07)	0.26 (.03)
Standardized negative media	-0.40 (.17)	-1.41 (.66)	-0.17 (.03)
Intercept	-1.32	-2.42	-1.03
Adjusted r-square	.92	.85	.93
N	9	11	8

Figure 4.1. Actual and predicted support for Carter, Hart, and Perot



Note: Predicted support based on coefficients in Table 4.2.

Carter and Hart models in Table 4.1 to Perot's *media content scores* and his baseline level of support.⁷

As can be seen in Figure 4.2, our postdiction of support for Perot tracks well with his actual support. What this indicates is that, story by story and across all three media, the public responded to the flow of positive and negative media coverage of Perot in roughly the same way that it had earlier responded to coverage of Carter and Hart, which was by believing much of it.

INSERT FIGURE 4.2 ABOUT HERE

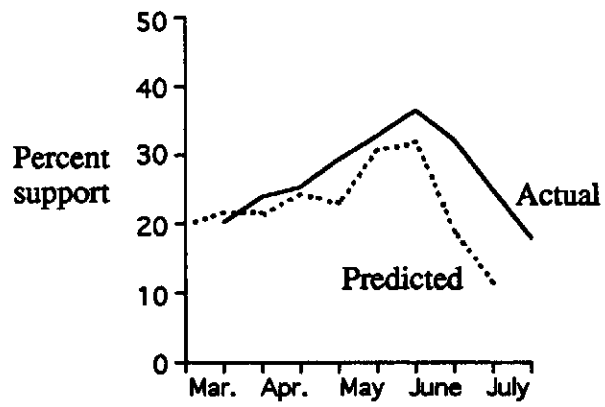
A close examination of Figure 4.2 suggests that the coefficients from the Carter and Hart models may understate the public's response to coverage of Perot during his take-off phase, but overstate the public's response to coverage of Perot during his period of decline. This suggests that the public may have been more responsive to good news about Perot and less responsive to bad news about him than it had been to news about Carter and Hart. We are, however, reluctant to accept this implication. The statistical imprecision of our estimates, the crude simplicity of our modeling, and our failure to take account of the effects of communication about opponents all induce us to be wary of attaching overly precise interpretations to our results. The most appropriate interpretation of Figure 4.2, we feel, is one that emphasizes the gross similarities across the Carter, Hart and Perot races rather than fine and possibly non-existent differences.

Individual differences in susceptibility to media influence

We have now seen that public opinion, taken as a whole, responded to the ebb and flow of press coverage of Perot, and that it responded to roughly the same degree as to coverage of past boom-and-bust candidates. Some citizens, however, were far more responsive to Perot's coverage than others. Those who routinely devote substantial attention to public affairs were highly responsive, moving to support Perot in April and May when coverage of the billionaire Texan was positive and deserting him in June when coverage turned sour. By contrast, citizens who devote little attention to public affairs

⁷ More specifically, we applied the six sets of coefficients (a set for Carter and for Hart on each of three media indices in Table 4.1) to Perot's raw scores on the same media indices, thereby creating \hat{y} estimates. The intercepts in these estimates were all set at 20.3 percent, which is the average of the three national polls conducted in the second half of March. What Figure 4.2 shows is the average of these six \hat{y} estimates. The estimates are based on raw rather than standardized media scores.

Figure 4.2 *Actual and postdicted support for Perot*



Note: Predicted support based on coefficients in Table 4.1.

were less responsive to press coverage of Perot — no doubt because most of it failed to reach them.

Thus, the story of individual differences in susceptibility to support for Perot is, in large part, a story of who paid most attention to the news and what they encountered when they did. Our aim in recounting this story, as we shall now do, is two-fold: First, to strengthen our general argument concerning the dependence of Perot's support on the coverage he received from the conventional mass media, and second, to set the stage for understanding the more complex, three-candidate campaign that was to occur in the fall.

Why news reception matters.

In the 1990 NES survey, 13 percent of the public could not recognize Dan Quayle as vice-president of the U.S. Inability to pass this elementary test of political knowledge is, by itself, unimportant. But it serves as a marker for the existence of a sizable group of people whose habitual attentiveness to public affairs — and to the conventional news media, which are the major source of information about public affairs — must be close to nil. Such people would be unlikely to find out about a third party candidate like Perot unless news coverage of him were extremely heavy, and perhaps not even then.

But in the same survey, 5 percent of Americans could identify William Rehnquist as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and 10 percent could identify Tom Foley as Speaker of the House of Representatives.⁸ Again, the particular test items are unimportant. What matters is that there is a group of people that pays sufficient attention to politics to acquire information about the country's leading political figures. Such people are likely to be among the first to receive news reports of third party candidates like Ross Perot.

To be sure, receiving news about Perot's presidential campaign is not the same thing as being persuaded to support Perot. Yet, reception of news about a candidate is surely a prerequisite for support, and if only the best informed people got the early news about Perot, who more than they would have been expected to support him?

This type of argument is often invoked to explain a major finding in communication research: As a first approximation, media influence often tends to be proportional to the amount of news people receive from it, such that those who absorb the most information are the most influenced. The implicit model, as Norris (1994) critically points out, is about as simple as it could possibly be: stimulus-and-response.

⁸ These data are from the 1990 National Election Study.

In view of how much press criticism Perot got, and the unorthodoxy of his campaign, it might seem doubtful that this rule would hold for him. Yet at the start of the campaign, his coverage was mainly positive, and the issues he stressed — balancing the budget even if it meant higher taxes, and campaign finance reform — had been constant refrains of the mainstream press. Perot, thus, opened his campaign by occupying some of the higher ground in American politics. In this early phase of the campaign, it does not seem far-fetched that a high proportion of those who received news of his campaign might have been induced to support it.

In order to test this hypothesis, we need to be able to measure people's habitual levels of news reception. As already suggested, a person's score on a multi-item test of political awareness makes the best measure of news reception. People who score highest on such tests are not only the most likely to acquire new information from the media, but are also most likely to adjust their political attitudes in light of new information (Price and Zaller, 1992; Zaller, 1994). Unfortunately, the surveys available to us to analyze support for Perot carried few tests of political awareness. We therefore cobbled together the best measure we could, one that relies most heavily on education but also contains two knowledge items and a measure of opinionation (i.e., willingness to offer opinions on a range of issues, which also indicates attentiveness to political news). Details of these measures are given in the Appendix to this chapter.

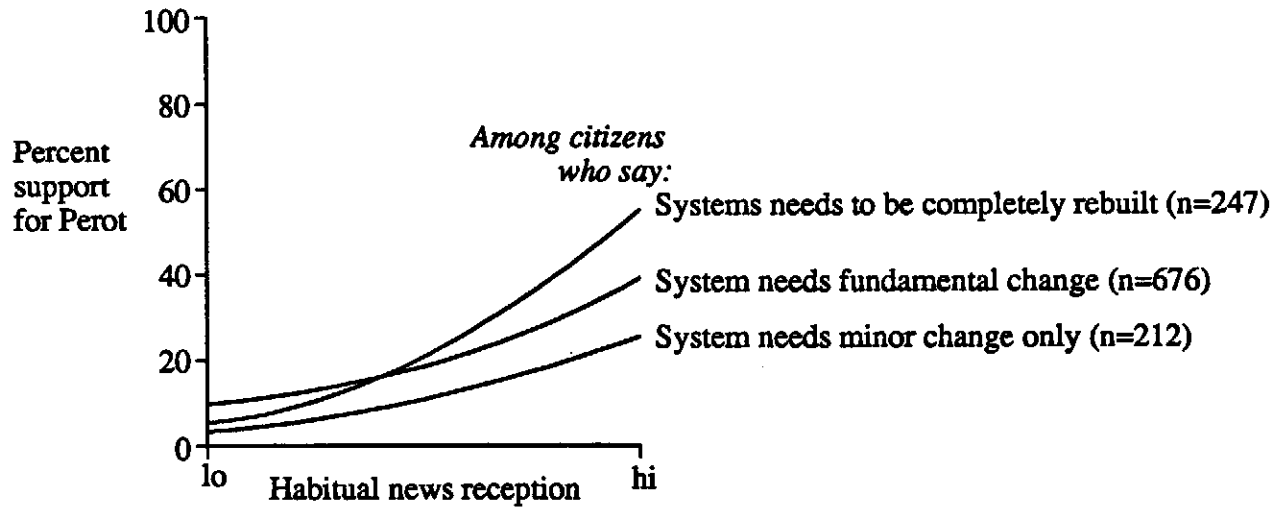
Figure 4.3, then, shows the effect of habitual news reception — as measured by education, awareness, and opinionation — on support for Perot in a late April survey. Since Perot's appeal was greatest among the politically disaffected, we show the effect of news reception for citizens who differ in their level of disaffection, where disaffection has been measured by answers to the following item:

Which of the following three statements comes closest to expressing your overall view of the system of government and politics in the United States:

- On the whole, the political system works pretty well and only minor changes are necessary.
- There are some good things in our political system, but fundamental changes are needed, or
- Our political system has so much wrong with it that we need to completely rebuild it.

INSERT FIGURE 4.3 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4.3. *Effect of habitual news reception on support for Perot*



Source: *New York Times*-CBS News poll, April 20-23. Measure of habitual news reception is described in Appendix A.

As can be seen, the effect of habitual news reception on support for Perot is large.⁹ It is also mediated, as would be expected, by political disaffection: The effect of news reception on support for Perot is largest among citizens who believe the political system is so out of sorts that it needs to be completely rebuilt, and smallest among voters who think the system "works pretty well." This indicates that at any given level of news reception, some people were, as would be expected, more open to influence by Perot's message than others.

Yet despite differences in susceptibility, the effect of habitual news reception on support for Perot is substantial in all segments of the electorate and quite large overall. This is the main message conveyed by Figure 4.3. If everyone were in the lowest reception group, support for Perot would have been about 7 percent. Yet, overall support was much higher, about 26 percent. We attribute the difference between 7 percent and 26 percent to the fact that news reception is higher in the population as a whole than it is in the lowest reception group.

Before accepting this attribution, however, we need to consider an obvious objection: How can we be sure that what we are calling the effects of "news reception" are really that? Perhaps they are something else, such as the effects of education.

To allay this concern, we need to show that the relationship between support for Perot and news reception (as only measured by education, awareness, and opinionation) was not a static association, but changed with changes in the news content that people received. When coverage of Perot was largely favorable, as it was at the time of the April survey just analyzed, greater news reception should be associated with greater support for Perot. But as coverage of Perot became more critical, the association between news reception and support for Perot would be expected to change. How exactly opinion would be expected to change, and whether it conformed to expectation in the case of Perot, is the subject of the next section.

The effects of competing communication flows.

At several points in this book, we have analyzed the effects of mass communication by finding out whether the people most heavily exposed to coverage of Perot — whether in call-in programs on which Perot was discussed, interview shows on which he appeared, or the conventional news — differed in some attitudinally relevant way from those least

⁹ The plots in this figure are based on three separate logistic regressions (within each level of disaffection) in which support for Perot is the dependent variable, and news reception and news reception squared are the independent variables. The reason for the squared terms, which are non-significant, is to allow for possible non-linearities.

heavily exposed. The assumption in each case has been that the influence of mass communication is proportional to amount of communication received.

We have also noted, however, that the mass media often carry opposing communications — that is, some messages favoring one position and other messages taking the opposite view. In the case of Perot, one set of messages touted his colorful background and no-nonsense attitude toward reform, while another set of messages raised questions about his truthfulness and character. The people who were most attentive to the mass media would be likely to receive both the positive and negative messages, which, if the messages were roughly equally persuasive, might then cancel one another and leave attitudes unchanged.

The likelihood that opposing media messages may cancel one other raises a major complication in the effort to discern the effect of mass communication on public opinion. It is a complication that arises not only in the case of Perot, but in the vast majority of studies of mass communication. Further complicating it, the balance of positive and negative messages may change over time — from mostly favorable at one point, to mostly unfavorable at another, and so forth. The sheer volume of communication may also change.

The inability of media researchers to deal effectively with these complications is, as maintained elsewhere (Zaller, 1994), among the most important reasons that scholars have been able to document media effects that are as large as common intuition suggests they really are. We shall therefore need to take them on if we are to fully understand the impact of mass communication on Perot's rise and fall in the polls in spring 1992.

Doing so, however, will take considerable effort. It will require, first of all, laying out a model of how, in general, political communication diffuses through a mass polity like that of the United States. In order both to keep discussion of this model from becoming too abstract and to convince skeptics of the model's validity, it will be necessary to examine data from a few cases besides that of Perot. And finally, some simple math will be required to develop and devise tests for the model of communication effects. This math, we stress, really is very simple — nothing more difficult than addition, subtraction and one-dimensional graphs. But because some readers are put off by any math whatsoever, and because the math really is vital to the argument, the need for it adds a layer of complication to our argument.

Altogether, then, our effort to accommodate the effects of competing communication will require a considerable diversion from the Perot campaign itself. But, as in the analysis of press-initiated criticism in Chapter 3, it is not possible to have a

systematic understanding of how the political system operates in a particular case except by analyzing that case in the context of others. Moreover, the topic of the diversion — how, in general, competing communication in the mass media affects public opinion — is one of inherent interest and importance. We therefore ask our readers' patience and attention for the lengthy analysis that follows.

We begin by clarifying some key terms. First is the *intensity* of a particular message or communication. Intensity is used in its colloquial sense, referring to how "loud" or "strong" or "penetrating" a message is. Factors that affect intensity are how often the message is repeated, how widely, at what length, and at what level of prominence. Messages that run at the top of the evening news and with big newspaper headlines, thus, are high intensity messages. Other factors affecting intensity are vividness and intelligibility.¹⁰

The second key term is *habitual news reception*, which refers to a person's general, day-to-day tendency to absorb ideas and information from the news. As suggested earlier, citizens vary greatly in their habitual attentiveness to politics. Some pay close attention to the news and comprehend — that is, *receive* — the messages carried in the news. Such people rate high on habitual news reception. Others either pay little attention to the news, or else do pay attention but fail to take in the messages they encounter. Such people rate low on habitual news reception.

Habitual news reception may, in principle, be measured in many different ways: Self-reported level of media use, background level of political knowledge, or even education. In practice, however, self-reported level of media use makes a poor measure of habitual news reception — probably because many survey respondents exaggerate their level of media use.¹¹ What works best is a person's background level of political

¹⁰ The later factors are ones that involve the degree of fit between qualities of the message and qualities of the message receivers. For example, one quality that makes a message intelligible — thereby increasing its likelihood of being received independently of amount of repetition in the media — may be that it refers to a topic for which most audience members happen to possess a pre-existing schemata. For analytical purposes, however, we assume that the qualities that make for intelligibility are entirely properties of the messages themselves, since the degree to which messages possess these qualities depends on the skill of communicators.

¹¹ The level of exaggeration is not modest. For example, National Public Radio hired Arbitron to assess the size of its listening audience by means of diaries which a representative sample of adults were paid to fill out on a daily basis. These diary reports indicated that the percentage of persons who listen to NPR at least once a week is 6 percent, whereas 35 percent of respondents to a national survey claimed to do so. Moreover, while the survey respondents who claimed to be NPR listeners reported listening to NPR an average of four days a week, NPR's internal estimate is that most of its listeners tune in just 2 to 3 times a week. Thus, the NPR self-report measure

knowledge, as measured by information tests for which correct answers cannot be faked or exaggerated. People who are very knowledgeable about politics are people who, in most cases, absorb a large amount of news on a day-to-day basis. Education also works reasonably well as a measure of habitual news reception (Price and Zaller, 1993).

Message intensity and habitual news reception are related concepts, but they are by no means the same thing. Message intensity refers to *properties of particular messages*, like frequency of repetition of a message, while habitual news reception refers to the *habitual behavior of individuals* with respect to news in general. People who are very high on habitual news reception — e.g., news junkies — may pick up essentially everything in the news, whether it is a high or low intensity story. People who are low on habitual news reception may, despite their general inattentiveness, receive some news stories. Most likely, they will receive those having very high intensity, and few or none having low intensity.

Figure 4.4 illustrates these ideas by showing patterns of news reception for some actual news stories. The figure consists of three panels, each of which will be described separately. The panel on the left shows the percent of citizens at each level of habitual

Note to Math-Sensitive Readers

Some readers habitually skip over graphs and tables, trying to pick up their meaning from the text alone. That strategy will not work in this case. The graphs we use are more than supplements to understanding; they are the primary vehicles by which we present the argument. To skip the graphs is to skip the heart of the argument.

news reception (as measured by tests of background knowledge of politics) who learned about the crash of a DC-10 airliner in a cornfield at the time of a 1989 survey. This was an event that received extremely heavy coverage in the mass media, including dramatic videos of the crash itself that were shown repeatedly. It was, in short, a very high intensity story. As can be seen, higher levels of habitual news reception are associated with steadily higher chances of receiving this particular news message. About

appears to overstate the size of the NPR audience by a factor of about 10. In the same survey, a number of survey respondents who claimed to be readers of the Wall Street Journal said that they normally read it seven days a week, even though the newspaper is published only on weekdays. Such people score at the very top of measures of self-reported media use, thereby greatly undermining the ability of the measures to detect the effects of actual media use.

36 percent of the people at the lowest level of habitual news reception received the story, while essentially 100 percent of those at the highest level of habitual news reception did so. For a hypothetical "busy citizen" at a middling level of habitual news reception, the chance of picking up on the DC-10 story was 88 percent.

INSERT FIGURE 4.4 ABOUT HERE

The center panel of Figure 4.4 shows the percent who learned of the resignation of House Speaker Jim Wright, a story that also received extensive, though less visually arresting, coverage at the time of the same survey. It was, in short, a somewhat lower intensity story than that of the DC-10 crash. This graph shows that someone at the lowest level of habitual news reception had a roughly 5 percent chance of getting the story of the Wright resignation, while someone at the highest level of habitual news reception had a 95 percent chance. The same hypothetical "busy citizen" who had an 88 percent chance of getting news of the DC-10 crash has a 17 percent chance of getting news of the Wright resignation.

The DC-10 and Wright stories were relatively straightforward news stories involving no attempt at mass persuasion. We have used them only to illustrate how mass communication diffuses through a population in which citizens differ greatly in their attention to public affairs.

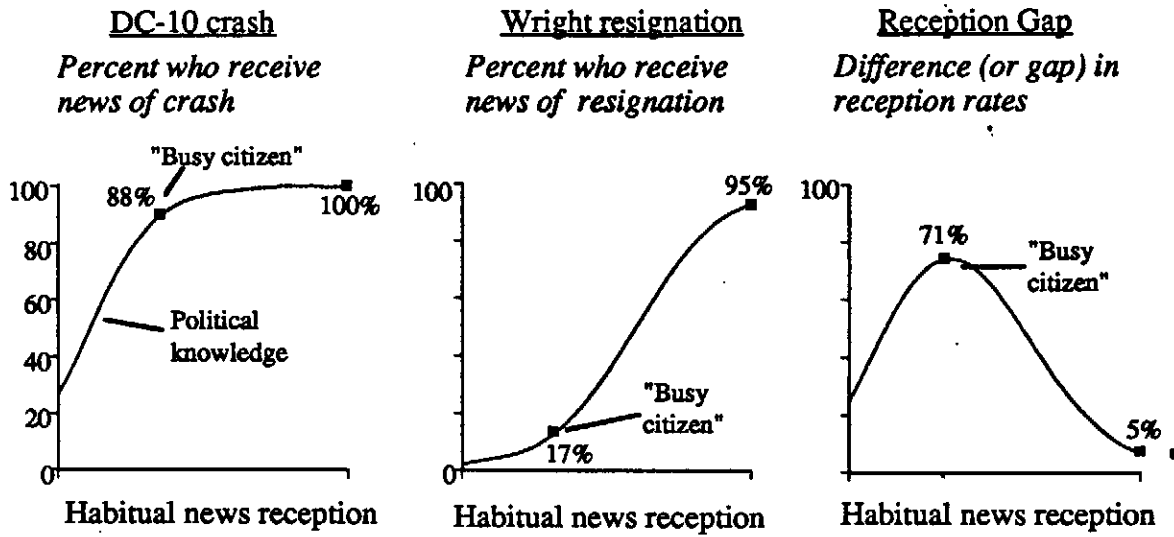
Imagine, however, that the messages in Figure 4.4 came from a presidential campaign. Imagine, in particular, that the high intensity message in the left-hand panel of Figure 4.4 were not about a DC-10 crash, but a persuasive message about Ross Perot, and that the message said "Ross Perot is a great guy; vote for him, for sure." And suppose that the less high intensity message in the middle panel were not about Jim Wright, but a persuasive message that said "Ross Perot is a rotten bum; don't even think about voting for him."

Suppose, finally, that each of the messages was, in its own way, highly persuasive. Hence any person who got only one of the messages would be persuaded by it, but anyone who got both would form a neutral opinion about Perot.

Given these suppositions and the particular patterns of message reception shown in Figure 4.4., what would be expected effect of mass communication on support for Perot (or anyone else who was the subject of such pro and con messages)?

Obviously, there would be a considerable tendency for the two messages to cancel out one another. Note, however, the tendency to cancel would depend on individuals' habitual levels of news reception. At the highest levels of habitual news reception, 100 percent of the people get the pro-Perot (i.e., DC-10) story, while 95 percent get the anti-Perot

Figure 4.4. *Patterns of news diffusion, as captured by three measures of habitual news reception.*



Note: Details of figure construction may be found in Zaller (1992).

Source: 1989 NES Pilot study

(Wright) message. With almost everyone getting both messages, the tendency to cancel would be almost total, and the net effect of the two messages on opinion would be close to zero.

But look now at the hypothetical Busy Citizen, a person who is only moderately attentive to politics. She has an 88 percent chance of getting the pro-Perot (DC-10) message, but only a 17 percent chance of getting the anti-Perot (Wright) message. Hence in this group, the two communications do not completely cancel. A large fraction of voters would get only the pro-Perot message, which could in turn generate a sizable surge in public support for Perot.

Finally, look at citizens at the rock-bottom lowest level of habitual news reception. They have a 36 percent chance of getting a pro-Perot message, and a 1 percent chance of getting an anti-Perot one. Here, most get no message at all, but if they do get a message, it will probably be pro-Perot message, and it will probably not be canceled by an anti-Perot one. Hence, some increase in support for Perot would be expected among citizens at the lowest level of habitual news reception.

Implicit in this discussion is the notion of a *reception gap*, which may be defined as "the difference in reception rates between two competing messages." At the highest level of habitual news reception, the reception gap in favor of the pro-Perot message would be 5 percent: 100 percent of the people get the pro-Perot message, 95 percent get the anti-Perot message, for a "reception gap" of 5 points in favor of the pro-Perot message.¹² For the Busy Citizen, the pro-Perot reception gap would be 71 percent ($88-17=71$), and for a person at the lowest level of news reception, it would be 35 percent.

Reception gaps, calculated in this way at each level of habitual news reception, are shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 4.4. It is essential, especially for math sensitive to readers, to be sure to study Figure 4.4 long enough to see exactly how subtraction of the two reception curves in the left and middle panels of Figure 4.4 generates the reception gap curve on the right.

As Figure 4.4 shows, the reception gap is largest for citizens falling in the middle ranges of habitual news reception. If, as the stimulus-response model of mass communication assumes, the effect of mass communication is proportional to amount of

¹² Technically sophisticated readers will notice that, given the argument we have made, it would be more appropriate to define the pro-Perot reception gap as "the probability of receiving a pro-Perot message times the probability or not receiving an anti-Perot one." However, pitching the argument in such terms would make it more difficult for many readers to grasp without otherwise affecting the substance of our argument.

communication received, we would expect a pattern of persuasion effects that generally follows the pattern of the "reception gap" curve shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 4.4.

How valid is this expectation? Do actual data on persuasion effects due to mass communication resemble the curvilinear "reception gaps" shown in Figure 4.4?

The answer is that, in a general way, they do. Yet all persuasion effects do not have exactly the same shape as in the right-hand panel of Figure 4.4 — nor should they. The effects that occur in a particular case depend on the intensities of the particular communication flows at work in that case. Hence what we should find in actual data on opinion change is not a series of curves that all exactly resemble the pattern in Figure 4.4, but curves that bear a family resemblance to Figure 4.4 and that vary in a predictable manner with variations in the intensities of the messages that produced them.

We are now ready to look at some actual data on the effects of political communication. The data come from campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives between 1958 and 1990. The reason for choosing such data is that House campaigns normally involve two opposing communication flows, one of which, that of the incumbent, is distinctly more intense than the other. This is because most incumbents spend more money on advertising and get more news coverage than do typical challengers (Jacobson, 1993).

Given a case in which (to revert to more generic language) pro-X communication is more intense than anti-X communication, we should expect to observe the same curvilinear pattern of opinion change depicted in the right-hand panel of Figure 4.4, above.

This, in fact, is what we do find. Figure 4.5 shows the incidence of voting for the incumbent by voters who belong to the opposition party — where voting for the opposition party is understood as an indicator of opinion change in response to a political campaign.¹³ As can be seen, opinion change in response to political campaigns conforms

¹³ The reason these curves take the form they do is the same as in the hypothetical case of pro- and anti-Perot messages: Voters in these House elections were exposed to two competing messages. One was a moderate-to-high intensity pro-incumbent message, and the other was a low-to moderate intensity pro-challenger message. At the highest levels of news reception, the competing messages tended to be mutually canceling, thus producing little attitude change. In the middle ranges of news reception, the incumbent message had a large advantage, thus producing large amounts of pro-incumbent attitude change. And at low levels of habitual news reception, a handful of voters got pro-

in each of a series of elections to the expected curvilinear pattern, a pattern in which voters in the middle ranges of habitual news reception are most susceptible to campaign influence. There is also some fairly obvious and regular variation across the different election years, namely, a tendency for middle-attentive voters to become more susceptible to campaign influence in later election years. This tendency is made dramatically clear in Figure 4.6, which superimposes the 1978 pattern of opinion change over the 1966 pattern. As can be seen, the increase in pro-incumbent voting is due almost wholly to voters falling in the middle ranges of habitual news reception.

INSERT FIGURES 4.5 AND 4.6 ABOUT HERE

The pattern of change across election years can be readily explained by the "reception gap" argument we have developed. The explanation goes as follows: Since the late 1950s, incumbents have been finding more ways to use modern technology — especially targeted mass mailings and televised political advertisements — to increase the intensity of their campaign communication, thereby reaching more and more middle-attentive voters (but still not voters in the least attentive segment of the public). At the same time, challengers have found it difficult to raise the money to keep up with incumbents, so that their capacity to reach middle-attentive voters has not increased much. As a result of these changes in message intensity, the reception gap in favor of pro-incumbent communication has grown over time, and has grown most dramatically among middle-attentive voters.¹⁴ This, in turn, has led to greater pro-incumbent voting among the middle-attentive.

These data point up the importance of careful attention to *changes* in the relative intensity of opposing communication flows. Before turning to data on Perot, we must develop this point a step further, and for this we again turn to hypothetical data, as shown in Figure 4.7.

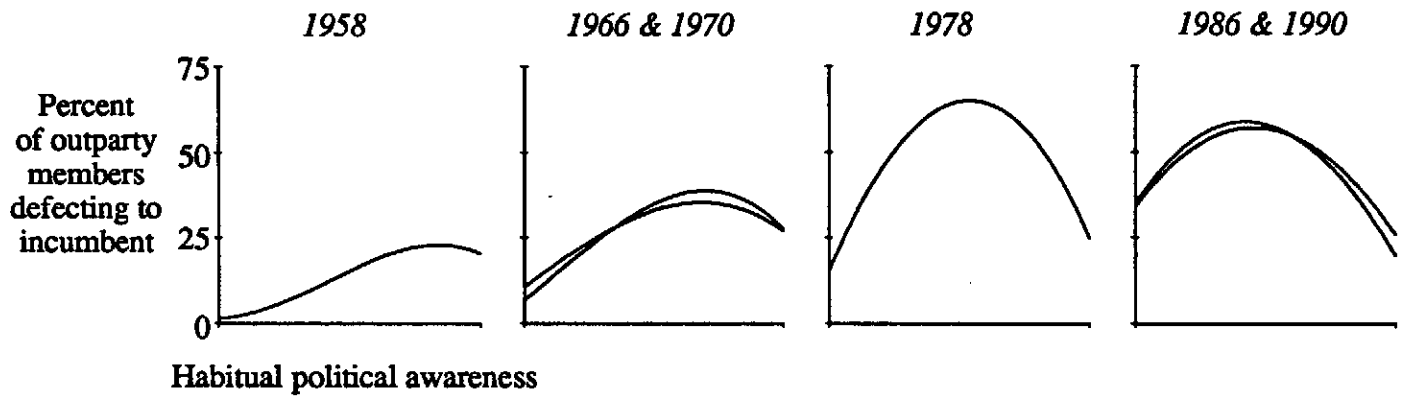
Figure 4.7 is, we confess, a bit daunting to look at, but any reader who has got this far can go one step more, since the math and logic are identical to what we have already worked through in Figure 4.4. The key to understanding the figure is to take it row by row, and to avoid looking at the whole figure until each separate row is fully understood in its own terms.

INSERT FIGURE 4.7 ABOUT HERE

incumbent communications and essentially none got pro-challenger communications, thus generating a small advantage to the incumbent.

¹⁴ Highly attentive voters still get both messages, inattentive voters still fail to get either.

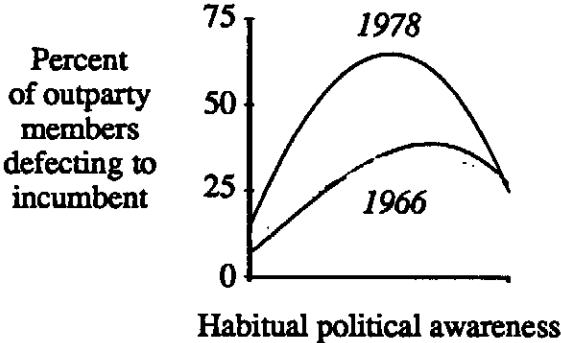
Figure 4.5. Patterns of outpartisan defection to House incumbents, 1958 to 1990



Note: Estimates are constructed from logit regressions in which the independent variables are political awareness and political awareness squared. Political awareness is measured as comparably as possible in each different survey and runs from about the 1st percentile to the 98th percentile in each panel; see Zaller, 1992 for details of analysis.

SOURCE: CPS and NES election studies

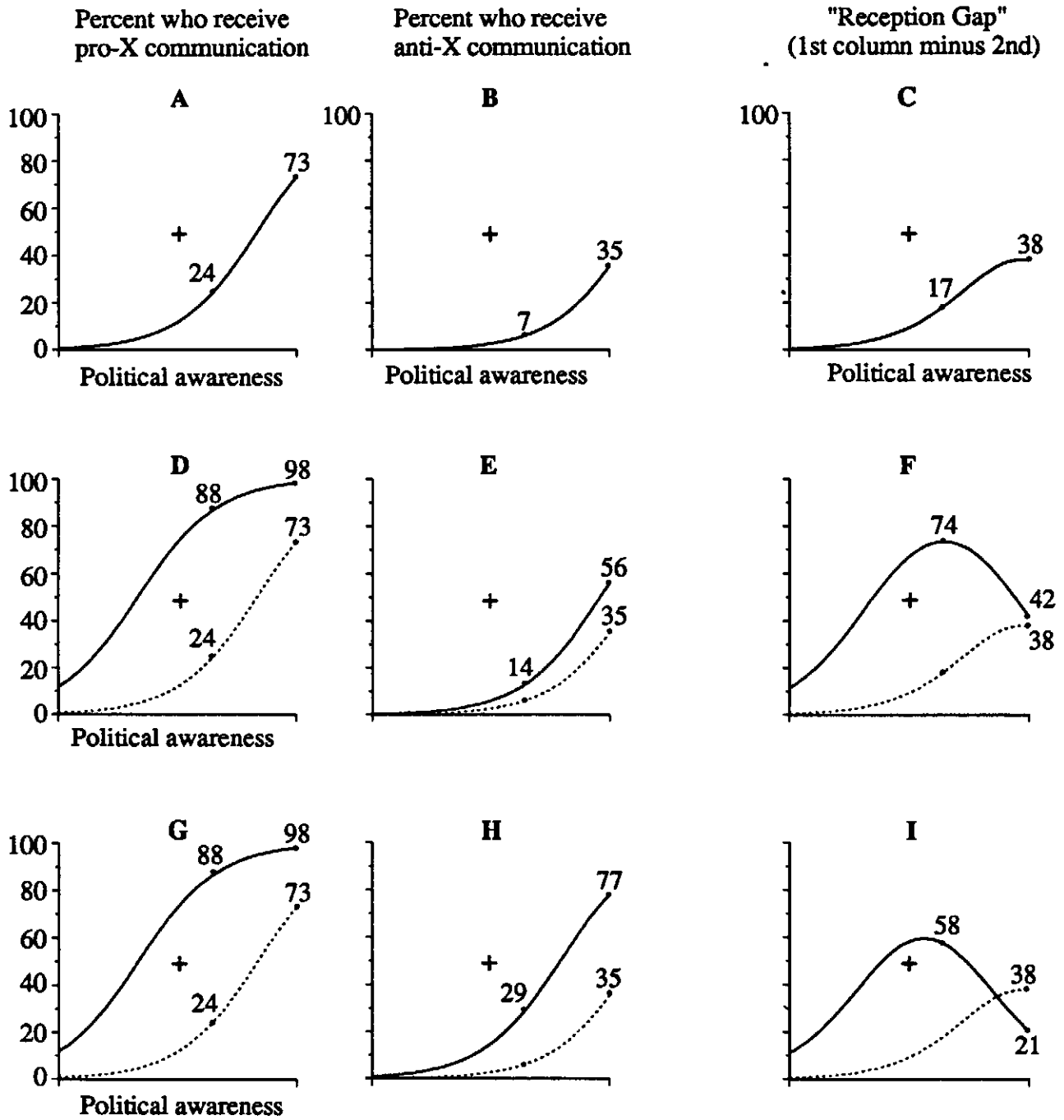
Figure 4.6. Patterns of outpartisan defection in 1966 and 1978



Note: Data are from Figure 4.6.

SOURCE: CPS and NES election studies

Figure 4.7. *Simulated patterns of news reception and influence*



Let us look, then, at the top row of three panels. These panels, taken together, depict a campaign in which there are two opposing messages, which we term a "Pro-X message" and an "Anti-X message." The graph on the upper left shows hypothetical patterns of reception of the "pro-X" message (e.g., "Perot is a great guy"). This graph indicates that 73 percent of people who score high on habitual media attentiveness receive "pro-X" communications, compared to 24 percent of moderately attentive people, and essentially zero percent of people who pay very little attention to public affairs.

Now look at the top middle graph, which depicts reception of "anti-X" communication (e.g., "Perot is a rotten bum"). The "anti-X" message is evidently less intense or "loud" than the pro-X message, since at each level of habitual attention to the media, people are less likely to receive anti-X messages than pro-X ones. For example, 73 percent of the most attentive received a pro-X communication, but only 35 percent of the most attentive received an anti-X communication.

The reception gap between the two messages is calculated, as earlier, by simple subtraction, and is shown in the top right panel. For example, the difference in reception rates among the most attentive citizens is 38 percent ($73-35=38$). Similarly, the reception gap among moderately attentive citizens is 17 percent ($24-7=17$).¹⁵

The point to notice is that, for these particular messages and in contrast to Figure 4.4, the reception gap is largest among those whose habitual level of news reception is greatest. Before discussing why, let us finish working through the figure.

Look, then, at the middle row of Figure 4.8. The solid line in the middle left panel indicates patterns of news reception for a pro-X message that is somewhat more intense than the pro-X message just above in the top row. (The dotted line in this figure shows the pattern from the top row, which we shall use as a baseline for highlighting differences between rows.) Thus, whereas 73 percent of the most attentive receive the hypothetical pro-X message just above in the top row, 98 percent of the most attentive receive the intensified pro-X message in the middle row. Similarly, the anti-X message in the second row has greater intensity than the anti-X message from the top row. (E.g., whereas 35 percent of the most attentive receive the anti-X message in the first row, 56 percent do so in the second row, which indicates a more intense anti-X message in the

¹⁵ The pattern of reception gaps in Figure 4.7 is substantially the same if the gap is calculated as probability of receiving the pro-X message times probability of not receiving the anti-X one. This calculation gives the percent of individuals who receive only the louder message, which is closer to our theoretical concerns than is the figure produced by subtraction. We use subtraction, however, because it makes exposition easier.

second row.) Finally, the middle right panel shows the reception gap for the two messages in the second row. This reception gap has been formed, as previously, by simple subtraction of the two reception curves on the left of it. (Referring to the figure, the reader can see that $98 - 56 = 42$; $88 - 14 = 74$.) Thus, one gets a quite different type of reception gap for these two messages — one in which moderately attentive people are most likely to receive only the louder message and hence are most likely to be influenced in a pro-X direction.

The bottom set of panels illustrates one other possibility. Here the intensity of the pro-X message has been kept exactly the same as in the middle row, but the anti-X message has been made more intense than in the second row. The baseline, shown by the dotted line, is again taken from the top row of the figure, and the reception gap has been formed, as in previous cases, by simply subtraction.

What is important in this final case is the comparison of reception gaps in the bottom right panel. Note that there is a sort of "cross-over effect," whereby the reception gap in favor of the pro-X message has become smaller among those scoring highest on habitual news reception, but larger among those scoring very low on habitual news reception. (We shall shortly see an example of this cross-over pattern.)

We come now to the heart of our argument, namely, the attempt to link the three rows of the Figure into a comprehensive story about the effects of mass communication.

In the top row of the panel, we have depicted a situation that is comparable to the initial phase of a presidential campaign in these respects: 1) there are two opposing messages, 2) the positive message is the louder of the two, and 3) neither message is sufficiently intense to reach people who fall in the middle or lower range of political attentiveness. Under these circumstances, the reception gap is centered among those at high levels of habitual news reception, since they are the only ones sufficiently attentive to receive the low intensity communication that comes at the very beginning of campaigns.

The second row shows what happens as the pace of communication quickens. The pro-X message begins to reach people who are only moderately attentive to politics, whose opinions then change in a pro-X direction. The anti-X message is also increasing in intensity, but can reach only as far as the highly attentive. Its effect is to neutralize the intensified pro-X message — but it can do this only for highly attentive persons, who are still the only type of person likely to receive the anti-X message.

Row three depicts a situation that is the same as in row two, with one difference: The anti-X message is more intense than the one in the second row. Hence it not only

neutralizes the effect of the pro-X message among the most highly attentive, it overcomes it and begins to reverse its effects. Thus, the tendency of the messages in row three will be to produce a pattern of cross-cutting opinion change: the most attentive will become less supportive of candidate X (relative to the dotted baseline from the top row), while middle-attentive persons, responding to the balance of communication that reaches them, will become more favorable toward candidate X.

These simulations fall well short of an exhaustive depiction of all possible message intensities and their resulting reception gaps. They do, however, provide a good overview of the kinds of communication effects that can be expected in a particular type of situation, namely one in which a political campaign gets under way with mostly positive but low-intensity messages, and then gradually picks up speed as both positive and negative messages gain in intensity.

The reason, of course, for our decision to focus precisely on this type of situation is that, in the period of rising support for Perot from April to June, both pro-Perot and anti-Perot communication were gaining in intensity (see Figure 3.4). Our simulation, in other words, has been designed to capture the effects of the communication flows similar to those Perot actually experienced.

This is not to say that the argument applies only to Perot. It applies to any candidate (or political movement) for which the intensities of both pro-X and anti-X messages are increasing from a baseline of less intense messages (see Zaller, 1994).

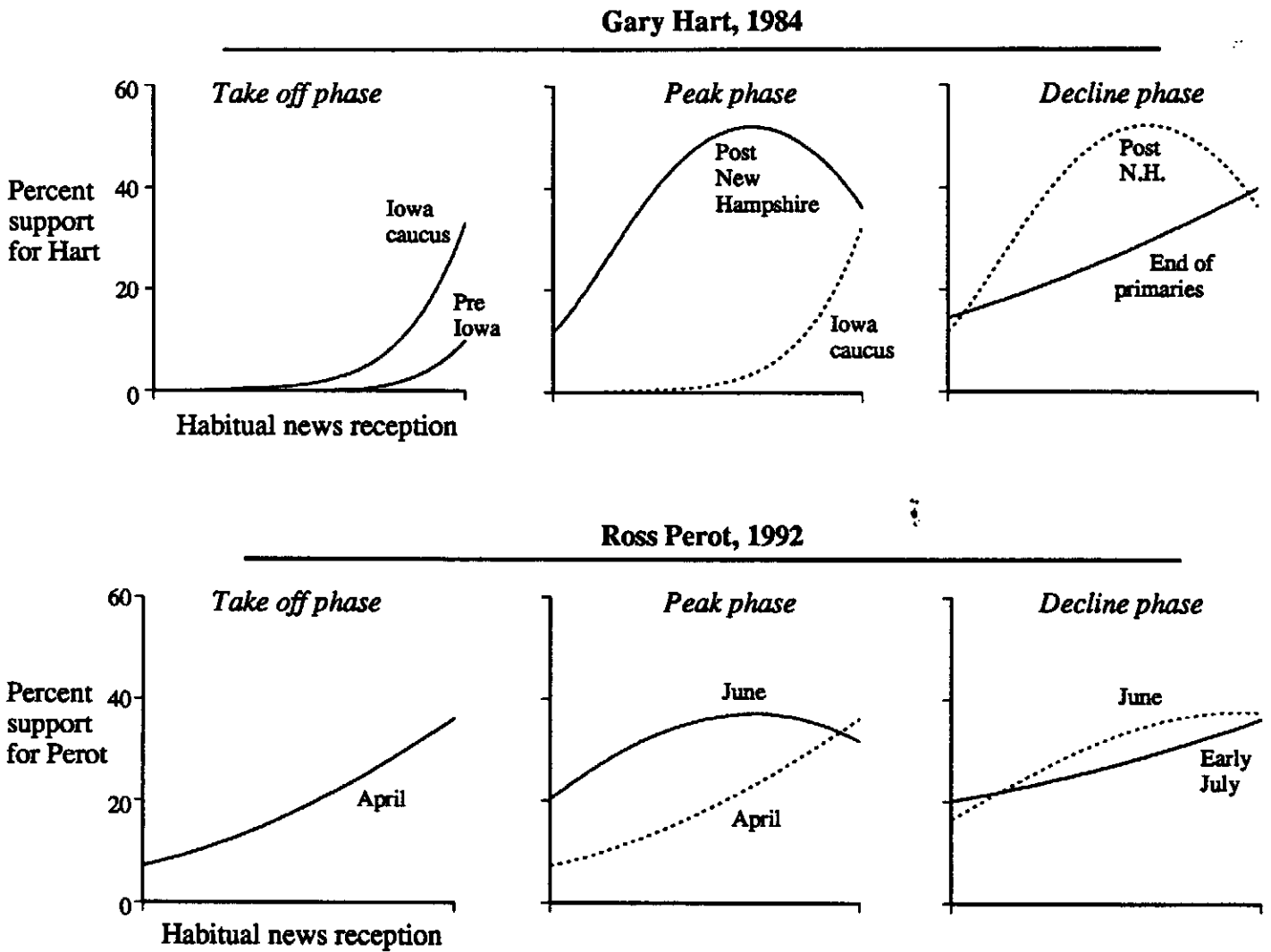
We are now ready to apply this argument to data on the evolution of public support for Perot. For the sake of comparison, we shall examine parallel data for another boom-and-bust candidate, Gary Hart. Having already taxed our readers with a long theoretical windup, we relegate all supporting technical details this analysis to Appendix A of this chapter. Appendix B provides a formal statement of the two-message communication model we have implicitly been using and additional evidence for the general validity of the model.

Figure 4.8, then, shows data on public support for Hart and Perot in three comparable phases in each candidate's campaign. We take each time period separately, as follows:

INSERT FIGURE 4.8 ABOUT HERE

1. The early takeoff phase (left panels in Figure 4.8). For Hart, the Figure shows data from two early phases of his campaign — before the Iowa caucus, when he got hardly any coverage at all, and the period surrounding the Iowa caucus, where a strong finish attracted the first glimmerings of serious media attention for Hart. For Perot, the left-

Figure 4.8. Dynamics of support for two "boom & bust" candidates, Hart and Perot.



Note: Estimates are based on logistic regressions employing two terms, reception and reception squared.

Sources: National Election Studies 1984 rolling cross section survey, CBS News-New York Times poll, and ABC News-Washington Post poll.

hand panel of Figure 4.8 shows support in April, as Perot's conventional press coverage was just beginning. Thus, as in the top row of the simulation, both candidates are getting a moderately intense flow of mostly positive coverage. For each candidate, the effect is the same as in the simulation: The citizens who are most habitually attentive to politics are most likely to support the emerging candidates, because they are the ones most likely to pick up what is still a relatively low-intensity communication flow.

2. The phase of peak support (middle panels in Figure 4.8). For Hart, the phase of peak support comes just after his surprise victory over Walter Mondale in the New Hampshire primary; for Perot, the phase of peak support is early June. Just as in the second and third rows of the simulation in Figure 4.7, both candidates were now getting larger amounts of both positive and negative coverage than they did in their take-off phases, but positive coverage remained more frequent than negative coverage (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). The intensified positive message is now able to reach moderately attentive voters, leading them to climb aboard the Hart and Perot bandwagons. Its effect shows up as a distinct bulge in support for Hart and Perot (relative to baseline support in the takeoff phase) among voters in the middle range of habitual news reception. Among the most attentive voters, the effect of heavier coverage is more subtle. In the case of Hart, the more intense positive message has been roughly offset by the more intense negative message. Hence, as in row two of the simulation, there is no net attitude change among the most attentive. In the case of Perot, the increased intensity of the positive message has been more than offset by the intensified negative message. Hence, as in row three of the simulation, the most attentive voters have become slightly less supportive of Perot. This is an example of what we termed a "cross-over effect" — that is, different voter blocks moving in opposite directions in response to the particular balance of messages that reaches them. The reason there is a cross-over effect for Perot but not for Hart is that, as we saw in Chapter 3, Perot's negative coverage was more frequent than Hart's, thereby enabling it not merely to neutralize but to reverse the effects of positive coverage.

The reason, incidentally, that communication effects appear somewhat sharper for Hart than for Perot is most likely that the questions available to measure news reception are much better in the Hart dataset, as described in the chapter Appendix.

3. The phase of declining support (right-hand panels in Figure 4.8). In response to a further increase in negative coverage and a decline in positive coverage, both candidates lost support among the public after their initial rise in the polls. We did not attempt in Figure 4.7 to simulate declining support in response to increasingly negative press

coverage, but easily could have. The argument would have been as follows: The more intense message is now the anti-X message (either anti-Hart or anti-Perot), while the less intense message is the pro-X one. Highly attentive persons receive both messages, which tend to cancel out and leave opinion unchanged. But middle attentive ones may receive only the louder, anti-X one, and hence tend to become less supportive of candidate X. Meanwhile, the least attentive voters rarely receive either message, and so tend to remain unchanged. Thus, the dynamics of decline are entirely similar to the dynamics of rise, as captured in the middle row of the simulation in Figure 4.8, except that now the process is running in reverse — that is, against both candidates, because the anti-candidate message has become the more intense of the two.

What these results show is that a simple model of the effects of competing communication, as embodied in the simulated data in Figure 4.7, can explain the most important qualitative features of changes in public support for two boom-and-bust candidates, Hart and Perot. The qualitative features explained by the model, as should be clear, are by no means intuitive or straightforward. Nor is the model itself idiosyncratic to this type of case, as suggested by the data from Congressional elections (see also, Zaller, 1992). The model thus serves its purpose of further demonstrating the close relationship between public support for Perot and the particular pro- and anti-Perot messages to which the public was exposed.

Our argument concerning the dependence of public opinion on media coverage would be stronger if the model of communication effects were formalized and subjected to statistical tests of goodness of fit to the data. In the case of Hart, these steps have been successfully taken and reported elsewhere (Zaller, 1994). In the case of Perot, the available data are too weak to justify such modeling. Nonetheless, the qualitative features of the Perot data are sufficiently close to the those expected by the general model of communication effects as to make it highly plausible that, in these respects as in others, the rise and fall of candidate Perot conforms to the general contours of politics as usual.

The effect of press coverage on support for other Candidates

Only the most hard-bitten skeptic could examine the evidence presented in the previous section without acknowledging the power of the mass media to shape public opinion. The effects documented are not merely "observable"; they are "very large," in

the down-to-earth sense that propelled previously little-known candidates to leadership in difficult political contests.

It is, however, a separate question how common such media effects are. We have, after all, examined only three cases. It is therefore fair to ask to what extent the results generalize to other cases.

Since we have not gathered data and done the laborious content on all 19 of the major presidential candidates since 1976, we cannot be certain. We do, however, have grounds for reasonable inference.

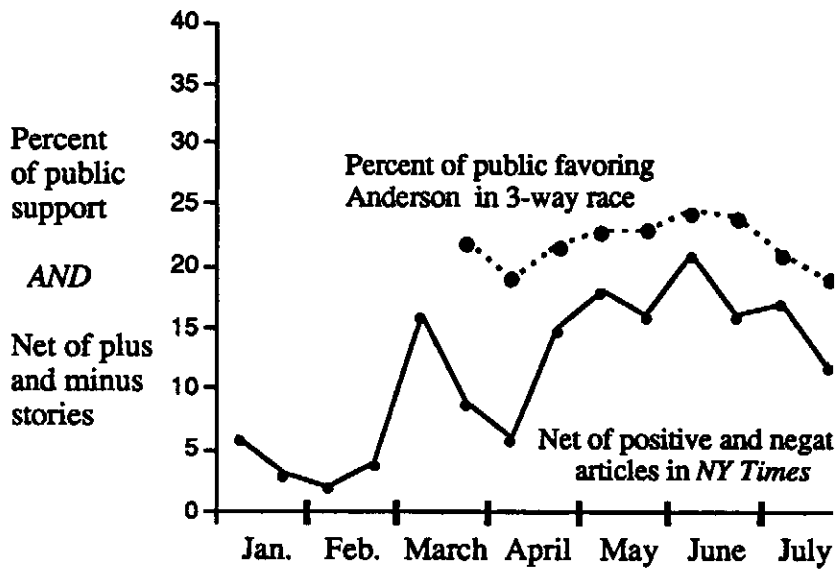
Let us consider what may seem a contrasting case of minimal media effects, that of John Anderson's unsuccessful run through the Republican primaries in 1980 and his effort to launch a third party candidacy. The chronology of Anderson's campaign is roughly as follows: After what reporters judged were surprisingly strong (but still second-place) showings in two early Republican primaries, Anderson became the fortuitous recipient of a brief, moderately intense shower of favorable media attention. Shortly afterward, a poll found Anderson drawing just over 20 percent of the presidential vote in a hypothetical three-way race with incumbent President Jimmy Carter and the leading Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan. This was about the same vote share Perot drew in his initial poll and probably reflecting about the same amount of crystallized opinion.

But, in contrast to Perot, Anderson never took off. As can be seen in Figure 4.9, his level of support remained essentially flat throughout the primary period. The proximate reason for the failure to take off can be found in the press that Anderson got. As also shown in Figure 4.9, his coverage took a nose-dive just after the possibility of a third party challenge began to be discussed, and, even after coverage improved, Anderson's press never became nearly as favorable as Perot's was. Again, the reason is easy to discover. As the primary season progressed, Anderson began to lose one primary contest after another, including contests in his home state of Illinois and in Wisconsin, where he had been expected to do better. The press, in reporting these losses and the lackluster campaign performance that led to them, fatally undermined whatever potential Anderson might have had to launch a boomlet. In May, Anderson announced that he would run as an independent candidate, but the press, although dutifully reporting on his activity and even subjecting his record to some scrutiny, never heaped on the positive coverage.

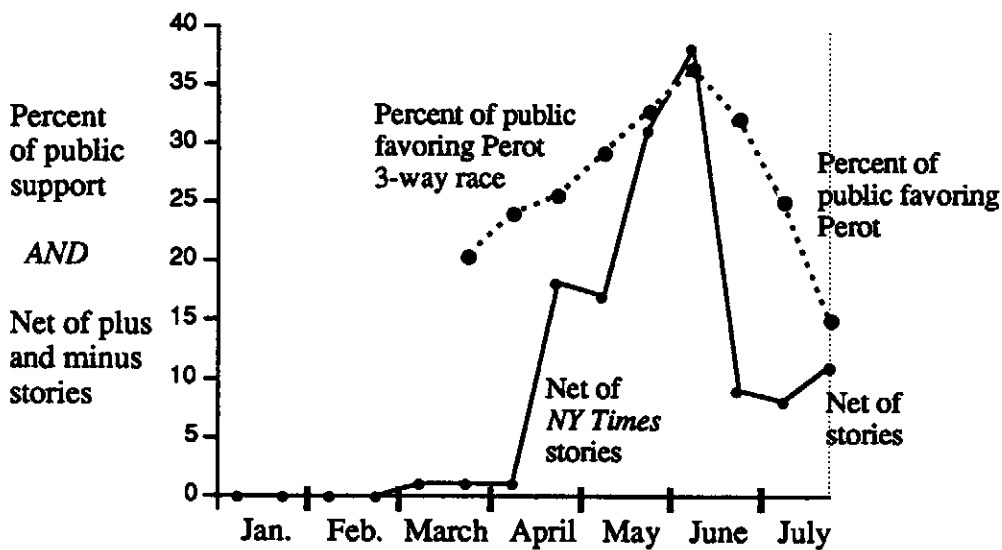
INSERT FIGURE 4.9 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4.9. *Media Coverage and Popular Support for Third Party Candidates in 1980 and 1992*

John Anderson, 1980



Ross Perot, 1992



Note: Media data are the net of all positive and negative stories – i.e., the sum of mainly positive stories minus the sum of mainly negative stories – in the *New York Times* in the given half-month period.

During this entire period, Reagan was competing effectively in the Republican primaries, dispatching a field of candidates that included, besides Anderson, such people as George Bush, John Connoly, and Robert Dole. President Carter, for his part, beat back a strong challenge by Senator Edward Kennedy. This naturally generated a fair amount of positive coverage for Reagan and Carter, especially in the phase of the race in which Anderson first broached the idea of running as an independent.

We conclude, therefore, that Anderson's failed takeoff represents no embarrassment to our thesis of "very large" media effects. The reason for an apparently minimal media effect is not that the media lavished positive coverage on Anderson and the public failed to respond. It is that the media never really boosted him — or at least never boosted him to the relative exclusion of opponents.

Anderson's case does, however, highlight two important qualifications of press power. One is that the informal rules that determine patterns of media coverage do not tell reporters that they can cover anyone they want and in any way they want. They are rules that, as we maintained in the last chapter, tell reporters that they must try to figure out who the public is interested in and rush to cover that candidate as quickly as possible. Thus, in the case of Perot, the press covered him after large percentages of the relatively small audiences for TV interview programs demonstrated, by their hundreds of thousands of phone calls, that Perot had appeal to them. The same thing happened to Anderson, except in reverse. After he was unable to compete well against Reagan, even in his home state of Illinois, reporters were unable to develop much enthusiasm for him.

Some fraction of what seems media power, thus, is simply reporters doing a good job of figuring out what voters will be interested in and feeding them massive quantities of it — and doing so, quite often, before many voters have figured out what they really care about. The press often seems powerful, in other words, because it is good at anticipating what the public will respond to.

This is not to say that Perot and other boomlet candidates would have risen in the polls even if the press had ignored them. At least in the case of Perot, our analysis in Chapter 2 indicates that his candidacy could not have taken off without the assistance of the conventional press. The argument is only that the candidates that reporters pick out for boomlet coverage are not a random selection of candidates, or the candidates that reporters happen to personally like. Rather, they are candidates chosen for the likelihood of their being able to capitalize on the coverage they will get.

Anticipating the preferences of the public is not, however, the whole story of media influence. Once a candidate becomes widely popular, the press commences with negative

coverage, and does so in the absence of any evidence whatsoever that the public either wants or appreciates having its champions tarnished by the press. The reason, as we have argued, is that the informal rules by which reporters operate tell them it is their job to scrutinize newly viable candidates for the presidency. Since, as we have seen, this negative coverage, though not demanded in any discernible way demanded by the public, nonetheless influences public opinion greatly, we are justified in considering it an autonomous exercise of media power.

Concluding Remarks

We began this chapter by noting the superficiality of the public's response to poll questions asking voters to "suppose the election were held tomorrow." Many people, we suggested, answer these questions on the basis of the information that happens to be at the top of their head at the moment of response. What they will actually do in the voting booth several months later is, for many of them, a different matter.

Little of the evidence presented in this chapter is likely to disabuse readers of this idea. The principal points of the chapter may be readily summarized:

- Public opinion toward presidential contenders is, at least in the spring phase of the campaign, highly sensitive to the ebb and flow of press coverage.
- The public, taken altogether, was about as responsive to positive and negative coverage of Perot as it had been to such coverage of Carter and Hart.
- Individual voters responded to press coverage of Perot, as well as to Hart, in rough proportion to the amount of it they received.

If there was any important aspect of the media-driven phase of Perot's spring campaign that was unique, we have failed to detect it. Both the forces that generated his boom-and-bust coverage in the press, and the mass response to that coverage as reflected in public opinion polls, continue to suggest that the rise and fall of candidate Perot was a case of media politics as usual.

It is possible to interpret this pattern of findings as evidence that the mass media possess truly awesome political power. If the media can make and unmake presidential candidates, manipulating public opinion toward them like so much soft clay, what can the media not accomplish?

As we have argued, however, such an interpretation is too strong. Reporters do not cover candidates until there is reason to believe that the public will respond favorably to that coverage, and they typically scale back coverage as quickly as it appears that the candidate is having difficulty. To a considerable extent, therefore, the "boom" coverage

that fueled the early candidacies of Carter, Hart and Perot was mainly the press giving the public heavy exposure to candidates the public was interested in or, in the opinion of reporters, likely to become interested in.

A more plausible case can be made that the criticism the press heaps on selected presidential candidates, and which is always extremely damaging to them, represents an exercise of press power. Yet even here, power is not wholly unbridled, since, as we have shown, the heaviest doses of press-initiated criticism are reserved for candidates who are newly viable and previously untested. And the fact that candidates with greater political experience are better able to handle press scrutiny suggests that the reporters are more intent on testing candidates than flexing their own muscles.

Appendix A

MEASURE CONSTRUCTION FOR FIGURES 4.3 AND 4.7

The three surveys that are used to examine the effect of exposure to the mass media on support for Perot have several noteworthy peculiarities. The first is that the earliest Perot data are from April, by which time Perot already had considerable support; this is a contrast with Hart, for which the earliest data come from the period prior to the launching of the boomlet.¹⁶ In addition, our final survey data on Perot come from a period in July when Perot's support was 29.6 percent — only a little lower than his peak level of support in June, and still much higher than it would be at the point he dropped out of the race in mid-July. Because we lack data from the very end of the Perot campaign, the amount of opinion change available for us to explain is artifactually low, and quite a bit lower than it is in the Hart case.

Further handicapping our analysis is the fact that none of the Perot datasets carried exactly the same items, and one asked the candidate support question only of registered voters. Again, there is a sharp contrast with the Hart data, which were derived from a single "rolling cross section" survey that ran for many months and carried numerous identical measures of news reception in each phase.

In order to compensate for differences among the Perot surveys, we have based our April-June comparisons and June-July comparisons on slightly different measures and sample universes, depending on what was available in adjacent surveys. Compounding these problems, however, was the fact that none of the surveys carried the items necessary to build a really good measure of habitual news reception. The net effect of these problems is a dataset in which opportunities for observing large media effects are substantially less than they were for the Hart case.

The items used for measuring news reception in the Hart dataset are the same as described in Zaller (1992), supplemented by years of formal education. The reliability of the scale is .8x. The four time periods used in the analysis of the Hart campaign are as follows: From the beginning of the survey in January until the week before the Iowa caucuses; from the week before until the week after Iowa, when the New Hampshire primary occurred; from the New Hampshire primary until the Friday following the

¹⁶ We have data from the March survey of the *Los Angeles Times*, but support for Perot is almost as high in the March survey as in the April survey, and the questions available to measure news reception are worse, which is why we are using the April data.

Super Tuesday primaries; from the Saturday after Super Tuesday, when Hart suffered his first defeat, until the week following the final set of primaries.¹⁷

In the April 20-23 *New York Times*-CBS News surveys and in the June 3-7 *Washington Post*-ABC News surveys, our measure of news reception was built from education, ability to assess the ideological inclinations of Bush and Clinton, willingness to rate a leading political figure, and willingness to offer opinions (rather than "don't know") on a selection of issues. Details of item selection are given in a footnote.¹⁸

The scales available for comparison of Perot support in June and July are decidedly weaker. Since our best survey from the period of declining support, that of the *Post* early July, contains no ideological rating items, these two items had to be omitted from the June scale. The reliabilities of these two scales are only .35 and .16.¹⁹

The alpha reliabilities of these scales do not look good: For the first pair, they are .56 for the *Times* scale and .44 for the *Post Scale*; for the second, they are .35 and .16. However these values are obviously misleading, since education, the principal component of all for scales, is highly reliable, and since the additional items, despite their low correlations with education, do add to its explanatory power. The reliabilities are reported only for the sake of convention.

Appendix B

A TWO-MESSAGE MODEL OF MASS COMMUNICATION

¹⁷ The inclusive dates are ...

¹⁸ From the *Times* survey, education is measured as a four-point scale, the ideological rating items are Q. 24 and Q. 27, the rating item involves Jerry Brown (Q. 6), and the opinionation items involve Q. 32a-38, 50-65, 80. From the *Post* survey, education is measured as a four-point scale (by collapsing a six-point scale to be comparable to the *Times* equivalent, the ideological rating items are Q. 26 and 27, the rating item involves Dan Quayle (Q. 20d), and the opinionation items are Q. 35a-d, 36-44, 908. Up to five "no opinion" responses were taken as indicators of lack of awareness.

The rating items in the *Post* survey asked whether a candidate was too liberal, too conservative, or just about right. These were converted to awareness tests as follows: Ratings of Bush as about right or too conservative, and of Clinton as about right or too liberal were accepted as correct, except from self-described strong liberals/conservatives, whose answers were also accepted as correct if they rated Clinton as too conservative or Bush as too liberal, as appropriate. In both surveys, the ideological awareness items were double-weighted.

¹⁹ In the July *Post* survey, education is measured on a six-point scale, the rating item involves Barbara Bush (Q. 14f), and the opinionation items (scaled as above) are Q32-34, 35a-i, 908. For comparison with this scale, the awareness scale from the June *Post* survey uses the a six-point education scale, and the Quayle and opinionation items described in the note above.

For modeling the effects of competing communication on the probability of defecting from one's own party to that of the incumbent, the following model from Zaller (1994) may be used:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Pr.}(\text{Defect} = 1) &= \text{Probability of being influenced by the incumbent campaign} \\
 &\quad \text{and not being influenced by the challenger campaign} \\
 &= \text{Pr.}(\text{Influence}_{\text{Inc.}}) \times [1 - \text{Pr.}(\text{Influence}_{\text{Chl.}})] \\
 &= (1 + \exp(-b_0 - b_1 * \text{Aware} - b_2 * \text{PID} - b_3 * \text{Intensity}_{\text{Inc.}}))^{-1} \\
 &\quad \times [1 - (1 + \exp(-b_1 - b_1 * \text{Aware} + b_2 * \text{PID} - b_3 * \text{Intensity}_{\text{Chl.}}))^{-1}]
 \end{aligned}$$

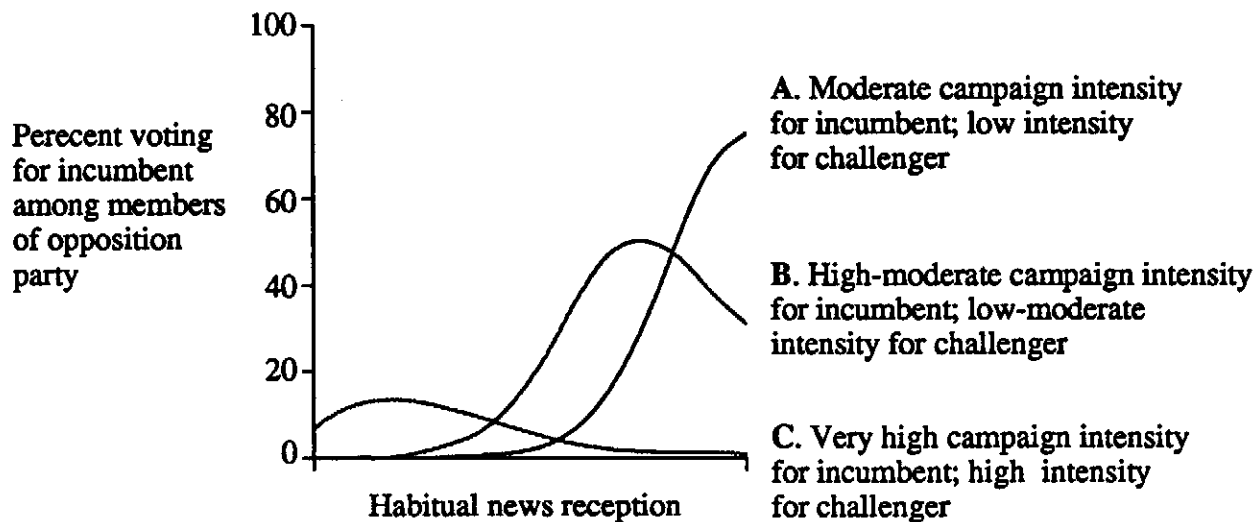
Where "intensity" is a measured variable capturing the frequency of communication in the incumbent and challenger campaigns.

An application of this model to data from the 1966 congressional elections is shown in Figure 4.10. Three types of races are shown: A very low key race in which the incumbent's campaign, though more intense than that of the challenger, is low intensity; a modally intense race, in which the campaigns of both candidates are more intense than in the baseline case; and a very high intensity race in which both races are still more intense.²⁰ Thus, the pattern of increasing campaign intensity in these races parallels the pattern of increasing campaign intensity in the take-off and peak phases of presidential campaigns, as depicted in Figures 4.7 and 4.8 in the text of the chapter. As can be seen, the pattern of campaign effects — as captured by the incidence of defection from one's own party to that of the incumbent — conforms to the general pattern in these same figures.

INSERT FIGURE 4.10 ABOUT HERE

²⁰ Campaign intensity is measured by the aggregate levels of knowledge of the competing candidates among non-voters and voters of the incumbent's party, i.e., among persons other than those whose votes are being modeled. See Zaller 1994 for application to other data and a fuller explanation of modeling procedures.

Figure 4.10. *Patterns of campaign influence at three levels of overall campaign intensity in 1966 House election.*



Note: Details of estimate available upon request

Source: 1966 National Election Study

Chapter Five

The Fall Campaign: The Outsider vs. the System

Technically, 1912 was the last time in which Americans voted in large numbers for a presidential candidate who was neither a Democrat nor a Republican. That was the year that Theodore Roosevelt, running as head of the Bull Moose party, finished second to Woodrow Wilson, the Democrat. Roosevelt got 27 percent of the vote to Wilson's 41. The third place finisher in that race was William Howard Taft, the nominee of the Republican party and the incumbent president. He ended up with 23 percent of the vote.

There is much question, however, whether Roosevelt should be counted as a third party candidate. A lifelong Republican, he was elected vice-president on the Republican ticket in the election of 1900, took over the presidency after of the assassination William McKinley in 1901, and was then elected president in his own right as head of the Republican ticket in 1904. He could probably have been re-elected as a Republican in 1908, but, in deference to the tradition that presidents serve only two terms, he declined to run and designated Taft as his successor. Taft was duly nominated and elected, but his policies so angered Roosevelt that "Old Rough and Ready" challenged Taft for the nomination at the 1912 Republican convention. After losing a bitter fight to party regulars controlled by Taft, Roosevelt ran for president on a vehicle of his own creation, the Bull Moose Party.

We recount this history because it is routinely said that Perot was more successful in his race for president than any third party candidate since 1912. This seems an understatement of his success. In the eyes of millions of voters in the 1912 election, Roosevelt was the real Republican candidate. Thus, 1912 was not a year in which a powerful third party candidate challenged the traditional parties; it was a year in which two Republicans, one calling himself a Bull Moose, ran against one Democrat.

In truth, the last time a candidate who was "neither a Democrat nor a Republican" did as well as Perot was in the 1856 election, in which Millard Fillmore won 22 percent of the vote as head of the American Party, also known as the "Know Nothing" party.¹ Since,

¹ In 1860, the northern and southern wings of the Democratic party ran their own candidates, thus splintering the major party vote and, as in 1912, permitting the other major party, which was headed by Abraham Lincoln, to win with 43 percent of the vote.

however, the American party was the remnant of the recently disbanded Whig party, and since Fillmore had served as president under the Whig banner just four years earlier, it can be argued that his success as a third party candidate was, like Roosevelt's in 1912, more an expression of traditional party sentiment than an alien intrusion on the party system.²

Altogether, then, Perot ran the most successful third party campaign not having prior roots in the traditional two-party system. Not even the populist crusaders of the late 19th century did better than he did.

This achievement is notable enough in itself, but it is made more so by the fact that, having quit the race in July, Perot had to start his campaign from scratch when he re-entered the contest on October 1. This left him just over a month to reverse the effects of months of campaigning by his major party rivals and to convince a sizable fraction of the electorate that a vote for a third party candidate would not be wasted.

To judge from the experience of previous presidential campaigns, Perot's late-starting campaign had essentially no chance of success. Not only are American presidential elections always dominated by the Democratic and Republican parties, but election campaigns typically seem to make little or no difference in the outcome. Swings in public opinion of the kind that are common in the primaries are virtually unheard of, and changes in who is ahead in the polls are unusual except in close races. In most years — despite the millions of dollars in advertising and intense press coverage — the outcome of presidential elections can be reliably predicted before the campaign even begins.

Against this background, we pose the central question that of this chapter: What can Perot's unusual success, both in mounting an effective campaign and in challenging the tradition of two-party competition, tell us about the normal sources of stability in American presidential politics?

Theoretical Background

Stability of the Party System: Duverger's Law

The most common argument for the stability of the U.S. two-party system is probably Duverger's Law. The law asserts that, in first-past-the-post systems³ such as that of the United States, multi-party competition tends to settle down to just two parties. The reason is that, in any contest with three or more parties and widespread

² Fillmore was elected vice-president on the Whig ticket in 1848 and took over the presidency after death of President Zachary Taylor.

³ That is, systems in which the candidate or party with the largest number of votes wins, even if that number falls short of 50 percent.

information about the relative standing of the parties, voters will be reluctant to "waste" a vote on someone who is unlikely to win, and will therefore gravitate toward one of the top two candidates. (In a system in which parties that finish third, fourth or even twentieth in the election can nonetheless obtain proportional representation in parliament, Duverger's law makes no claim that competition will tend to devolve into two-party races.)

Duverger's Law fared poorly in the 1992 presidential elections, in the sense that it is unable to account for salient facts that fall within its domain. First, given that there was a point in the race at which Perot had the support of 37 percent of the public compared to 30 percent for Bush and 25 percent for Clinton, Perot was not the candidate who should, according to Duverger's Law, have been forced out of the race. Yet, just a month after leading in the polls, his support fell into the teens and he quit the race.

The second and more serious failure of Duverger's Law is Perot's come-from-behind drive in the fall election. If Perot had entered the fall campaign in a strong position and slipped gradually back to 19 percent of the vote, it would have vindicated the law, since its claim is that support for third party candidates tend to melt away as election day approaches. But the opposite occurred. When Perot re-entered the race on October 1, only about 5 percent of the public supported him. In stubborn defiance of Duverger's Law, Perot increased his public support to around 20 percent before making his charge of Republican sabotage of his daughter's wedding. The press pounced on this unsupported allegation, stalling Perot's forward momentum and actually causing him to lose public support (more on this below). At that point, Duverger's Law should have kicked in with a vengeance, leading to massive voter flight from Perot. Instead, Perot lost support only during the period in which his sensationalist charge was being played up in the media, and resumed an upward trajectory in the polls once the flap died down.

That a distantly third place candidate could make gains even in the closing days of a presidential campaign is a major affront to Duverger's Law. No doubt, fear of wasting one's vote is a powerful psychological motive, and no doubt it did hurt Perot in the fall election. But this motive was at best one among many forces at work in 1992, and seems to have been far from the most powerful.

So, although the 1992 election is only one case, it creates about as much trouble for Duverger's Law as any single case could. The problem is not that Perot got 19 percent of the vote; it is how he got it.

Stability of the Party System: Voter attachment to traditional parties

Another classical argument for the stability of the two-party system in the United States is the theory of party identification. Cast in its most impressive form by researchers from the University of Michigan (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960, 1966; Converse 1964, 1970, 1976), this theory asserts that voters develop psychological commitments to any party they have been supporting for a long period of time, thereby creating major barriers to entry for new parties.

The theory of party identification seems, at least at first glance, to have fared reasonably well in 1992. Perot enjoyed his greatest success in the spring, before the traditional parties nominated their candidates. Once the parties held their nominating conventions — which functioned, exactly as they are supposed in theory to do, to mobilize the party faithful — Perot was unable to succeed nearly so well.

Another salient political fact accords well with the theory of party identification. As is well-known, the average strength of party attachment among the American public has declined greatly in recent decades. For example, in 1964, only 20.8 percent of Americans described themselves as independent of the parties; in 1992, this figure had risen to 41.1 percent.⁴

In view of these figures, there is no obvious embarrassment to the theory of party identification in the fact that a third party candidate ran strongly in 1992. If anything, one might cite Perot's success, under current conditions of growing independence from the traditional parties, as support for the longstanding argument that party attachment functions, in periods in which it is stronger, to dampen the potential for third party success. In this vein, as Martin Wattenberg (1994) has commented, "Most important among the developments that made Ross Perot's meteoric rise possible is the decline of American political parties" (Chapter 10, ms. p. 1).

The "party decline" argument, if correct, can explain both Perot's surprising success in 1992 and the stability of the American party system in preceding decades. But the argument is by no means self-evidently true. First, although the public's attachment to parties has declined in recent decades, it has declined much more among non-voters than among voters. It may therefore be that, insofar as party attachment is concerned, voters are only slightly more susceptible to third party movements than they have been in the past. One must, in addition, bear in mind that the attachment of voters to the Democrat and Republican parties is not a very seriously test of party attachment

⁴ These figures refer to people who describe themselves as independents in the initial question on party attachments in the 1964 and 1992 NES surveys; in the later survey, the cross-section (rather than panel) sample is used as the basis of the estimate.

in most elections. The major party candidates are bound by historical and coalitional constraints that create, election after election, the same basic type of contest — one that pits a pro-government, anti-defense racial liberal against an anti-government, pro-defense racial conservative. Given such choices and no others, many voters are likely to be stable in their preferences whether or not they have an attachment to a party per se.⁵ And even if genuine attachment to the Democratic and Republican parties does exist, it may have far more capacity to constrain choice between these two parties than to constrain choice among a wider range of possibilities. Absent a candidate able to mount a serious third party campaign, it is hard to know how strong voter loyalties to existing parties actually are.

Minimal effects of political campaigns.

Perhaps the best indicator of the basic stability of general election contests is that academic analysts can, with knowledge of the state of the economy, the popularity of the incumbent president, and perhaps the incumbent party's record of success or failure in managing foreign affairs, usually do a good job of predicting the outcomes months in advance.⁶

This is not to say, of course, that general election campaigns hold no surprises at all. Some races are simply too close for anyone to call, even from polls taken on the weekend before election day. And some genuine instability does exist.

Yet post-war presidential elections rarely produce surprises as great as are produced in nearly every primary season. These surprises include Eugene McCarthy's strong showing against Lyndon Johnson in the 1968 New Hampshire primary, which led Johnson to quit the race; Muskie's collapse and McGovern's rise from obscurity in 1972; Carter's equally improbable rise from obscurity in 1976; Kennedy's collapse in the 1980 election; Mondale's rise, fall, and rise again in a series of heroic victories and defeats in 1984; and the survival, despite hugely damaging press revelations, of Bill Clinton in 1992. Only in 1988 did the primaries run as generally expected, but even so, they seem less predictable than that year's general election result.

⁵ Numerous efforts have been made to distinguish the independent effects of party and issue positions on vote choice and on each other, but the difficulties of identifying and specifying the statistical models used in these efforts make them suspect. Note, for example, the contrasting conclusions reached by Markus and Converse (1978) and Page and Jones (1978).

⁶ See Rosenstone (1980); Gelman and King (1993); and the series of papers in *The Political Methodologist*, volume 5, Spring-Summer 1994.

There are several apparent explanations for the greater stability of general election contests compared to primary elections. The most obvious is that traditional party attachments, irrelevant in the primary period, become important anchors of mass opinion in the general election campaign. Another is that the public, having already endured nearly a year of presidential politicking by the time of the fall campaign, has had ample opportunity to learn the strengths and weaknesses of the leading candidates. Any new information voters receive must therefore compete with a much larger mass of pre-existing information than is the case in the primaries, and this may make voters less susceptible to new information than they were earlier. And finally, the press appears to play a different and more constrained role in fall elections. With the field narrowed to two or perhaps three well-known contenders, reporters have no need to introduce and then scrutinize new candidates, and therefore no inducement to boom-and-bust coverage; rather, they content themselves with reporting the maneuvers of opposing campaign teams that are, in most years, roughly evenly matched. Thus, the flow of news tends to be more balanced than in the spring phase of the campaign.

The political system, in sum, seems animated by different forces in the fall. Party loyalty is stronger, reporters more constrained, and voters less easily swayed by new information.

These arguments are not as easy to evaluate as they might at first seem. To begin with, there are three explanations for why general election are so stable and only one occurrence — or actually, non-occurrence — to be explained. Absent more evidence, it is hard to know which explanation, if any, is actually important.

Solid evidence, moreover, is hard to come by. The difficulty of evaluating voter loyalties to the existing parties in the absence of a credible alternative has already been noted. In the same vein, there is the question of whether voters tend to be stable in general election campaigns because they get a great deal of new information but pay no attention, or because they get no new information at all. The tendency of contemporary campaigns to emphasize made-for-TV hoopla — colorful rallies, festive hand-shaking and baby-kissing rituals, carefully scripted visits to factory gates, and so forth — makes the latter a real possibility.

Most generally, the issue is whether campaigns are so predictable because elite behavior — the types of candidates that run, the strategies they follow, the way the press covers them — is so stable, or because the voters themselves are deeply inclined toward stability.

Here, then, is another point at which Perot's unusual campaign can shed valuable light on a question about how, in general, the political system operates. A non-party

candidate, he entered the fall campaign almost exactly at its mid-point, after the two-party contest had stabilized but with plenty of time left for things to change. He then proceeded to run a highly unorthodox campaign that was short on campaign hoopla and long on fresh information, most notably in the form of half-hour paid "infomercials" on television. If political analysts had wanted to design an experiment to test the effects of campaigns and party attachment on voter preferences, they would have been hard-pressed to improve on what Perot actually did.

A Close Look at Party Attachment

Although, as noted, the average strength of party attachments has declined in recent decades, it has by no means disappeared altogether. Indeed, some maintain that it is virtually as strong as it ever was (Keith et al., 1990; Miller, 1991). To see how this could be true, one needs to look carefully at how party attachment is measured. In each National Election Study since 1952, respondents are first asked:

Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what.

In follow-up questions, people who describe themselves as Democrats or Republicans are then asked whether they are "strong" or "not so strong" party members, while self-described independents are asked whether they are "closer to" one of the parties. The follow-up question for independents is especially important, since people who describe themselves as closer to one of the parties vote for that party almost as loyally as "not so strong" party identifiers.

In 1988, 90 percent of people who described themselves as either Republicans or closer to the Republican party voted for the Republican candidate, while 85 percent of such Democrats voted for the Democrat.⁷ These figures refer to 93 percent of the people who voted in the 1988 election, and so leave only a small pool of truly uncommitted voters to which an independent candidate can readily appeal.

These data, however, raise obvious questions. Most importantly, they implicitly assume that people vote for their party's candidate because of a prior commitment to that party. Yet this could be exactly backwards: Perhaps people describe themselves as committed Democrats (or Republicans) because of a prior commitment to the Democratic (or Republican) candidate.

⁷ These figures include so-called "leaning partisans." A natural suspicion is that party attachment represents no more than a rationalization for current vote intention, but the possibility that this occurs on a broad scale has been repeatedly refuted; see, however, footnote 21 for evidence that some endogeneity exists.

Many studies have been devoted to this question. In the strongest of them, voters are interviewed at multiple points in time, at least one of which is before the campaign begins. Thus, for example, Markus and Converse (1979) found that party attachment, as measured in surveys in 1972 and 1974, was a powerful predictor of vote choice in the 1976 election, when the same individual voters were re-interviewed. The most common conclusion from these studies is that most voters maintain a standing commitment to one of the political parties, and that — with relatively minor short-term adjustments in response to political events — pre-existing party commitments predominantly shape vote choice rather than vice versa.⁸

As we have noted, however, an unavoidable shortcoming of these studies has been that Democratic and Republican candidates for president differ from one another in roughly the same ways in each election. Across a series of issues, Democratic candidates for president tend to be more-or-less left-of-center, while Republican candidates tend to be more-or-less right-of-center.

The evidence on the election-to-election similarity of candidate offerings is quite clear. In its regular election studies, the NES has long asked voters to place the Democratic and Republican party nominees on 7-point scales, where one end is labeled "extremely liberal" and the other is labeled "extremely conservative." The results, for each pair of candidates from 1968 to 1992, are shown in Figure 5.1. As can be seen, Democratic candidates are not all identical to one another, but they are far more similar to one another than to any Republican. Likewise, Republican nominees are more like one another than any Democratic nominee. Similar data could be marshaled for placements of candidates on a host of partisan issues, from defense spending to racial liberalism to social welfare. [THIS FIGURE MISSING]

INSERT FIGURE 5.1 ABOUT HERE

Given this sort of stability in the choices voters are offered, it makes sense for voters to describe themselves as Democrats or Republicans and to vote loyally for their chosen party in one election after another — and to do so even if they have little attachment to parties per se.

So the question is: How well would party attachment hold up if voters were offered "a different kind of choice." Would self-described Democrats and Republicans continue to vote loyally for the candidate of their chosen party, or would they bolt to the new type of candidate?

⁸ Cite more studies.

This is a question that the Perot candidacy enables us to answer. In the analysis that follows, we shall rely most heavily on a National Election Study survey that interviewed the same people at four separate times, as follows:

- Following the 1990 Congressional election.
- A few months after the completion of the Gulf War, in early summer 1991.
- During the fall phase of the 1992 presidential campaign, that is, between September 1 and election day.
- Following the 1992 election.

The data from this study affords tremendous leverage for determining the extent to which voters' pre-existing attachments to parties either shaped, or were shaped by, Perot's third party candidacy.

To measure party attachment in these surveys, we created a four-point indicator of "strength of party attachment," running from "pure independent" to "independent but leaning toward a party" to "not so strong partisan" to "strong partisan." Table 5.1 shows the effect of this variable on support for Perot. As can be seen, the relationship between strength of party attachment and vote for Perot is strong — but, suspiciously, it is somewhat stronger when party has been measured during the 1992 campaign than when it has been measured two years earlier. What makes this suspicious is that it raises the possibility that party is, in part, a rationalization or perhaps mere description of a person's vote rather than a genuine cause of it.

INSERT TABLE 5.1 ABOUT HERE

Recall that party attachment in NES surveys is measured in a pre-election survey that runs from September 1 to the day before the election. If the reason that party is a stronger predictor of the vote when measured during the campaign is that people change their statement of party identification when they have decided who to vote for, we should find that the relationship between party attachment and vote Perot becomes stronger as election day gets closer.

Data bearing on this question are shown in Figure 5.2. In this figure, we used regression coefficients — more precisely, bivariate ML logit coefficients — to summarize the relationship between party attachment and vote. As can be seen, the relationship is stable over most of the campaign, but becomes dramatically stronger in the closing weeks of it. What seems to be happen is that as Perot's campaign picks up

Table 5.1 *The effect of party attachment on chance of voting for Perot*

	Pure Independent	"Closer to" a party	"Not so strong" partisan	"strong" partisan
Party strength as measured in 1990	30.4 (56)	25.4 (209)	22.3 (323)	9.5 (315)
Party strength as measured in 1992	39.2 (74)	24.1 (220)	24.7 (283)	6.2 (324)

Note: Cell entries show percent voting for Perot; numbers in parentheses are numbers of cases.

Tau b -.17 -.23
Gamma -.35 -.46

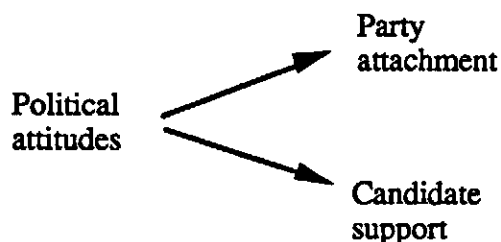
steam and as election day approaches, voters begin bringing their party attachments into line with their intended votes.⁹

INSERT FIGURE 5.2 ABOUT HERE

Thus, Figure 5.2 make two key points. The first is that party attachment is an important independent "cause" of vote Perot, in the sense that strength of party attachment, *measured long before Perot became a candidate for president*, was an important predictor of eventual support for Perot. The second is that the actual impact of party on vote can be importantly exaggerated if party is measured in close proximity to election day (as it is, for example, in typical commercial surveys and in the election day "exit polls" of voters leaving the polls). In view of the danger of such exaggeration, we shall in the analysis that follows rely exclusively on party attachment as measured prior to the emergence of Perot's candidacy to measure the effect of pre-existing party attachment on his support.

We shall have more to say about the impact of party on support for Perot in a moment. First, however, we shall broaden our analysis to take account of political attitudes that may also have affected support for Perot.

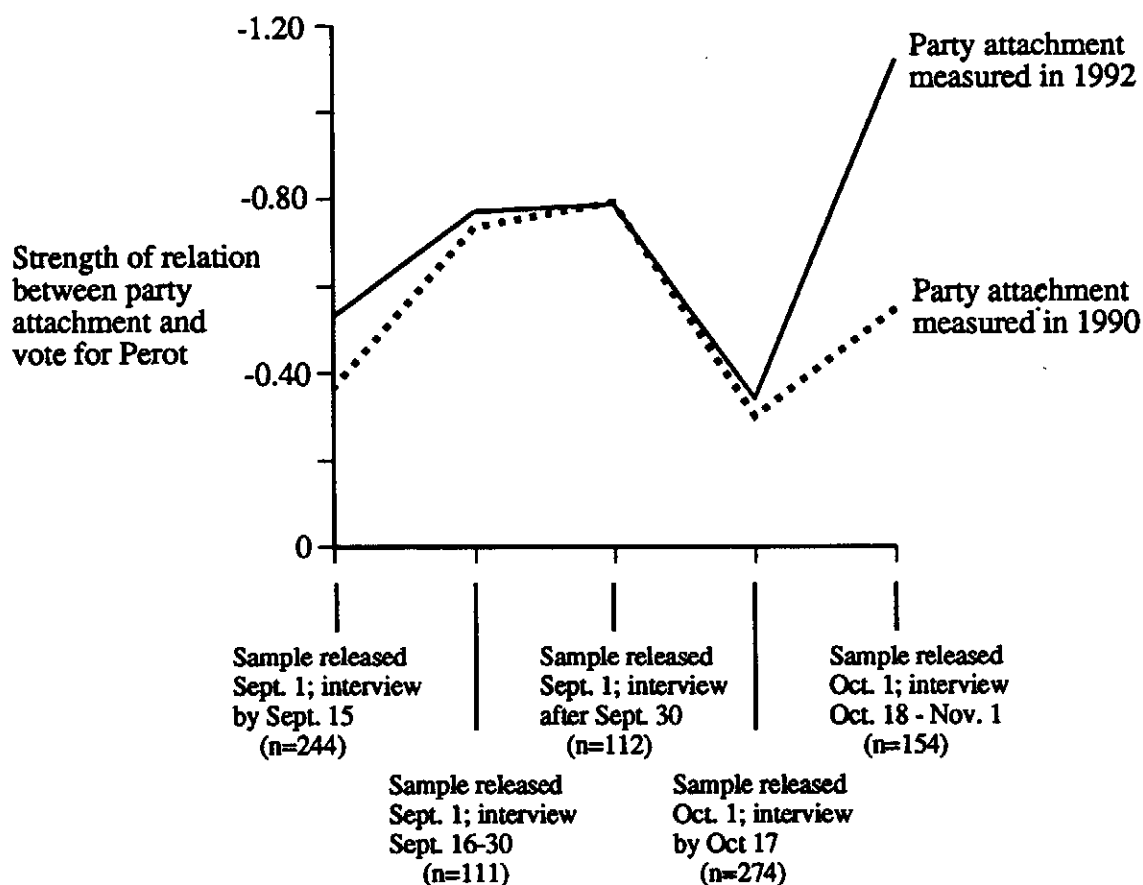
It is natural to think of political attitudes as the true independent variables in presidential politics — the "unmoved movers" that determine the response of voters to parties and candidates. Typical examples are attitudes toward taxes, welfare, defense, and the performance of Congress. Schematically, we may illustrate the idea that political attitudes cause voting behavior as follows



We have already seen, however, that more is going on. Voters have pre-existing attachments to parties, and these attachments seem to affect their choices of candidates. At the same time, candidate choice also affects party attachment. We may illustrate the

⁹ Despite its large magnitude, the increase in strength of party attachment in the last part of the campaign, as shown in Figure 5.2, achieves only marginal statistical significance ($t=1.59$). Moreover, if all respondents are included in the calculation for the second half of October, irrespective of when they were released for interview in September or October, the t-ratio falls to 1.0. Thus, by a conservative reading of the data, the apparent increase in the effect of party on vote could have occurred by chance alone about 15 times out of a 100.

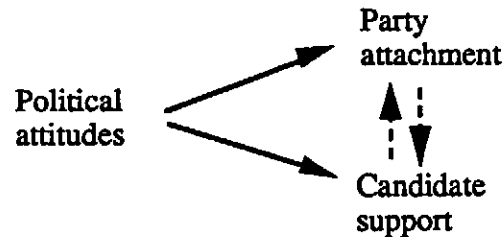
Figure 5.2. *Effect of 1990 and 1992 party attachment on support for Perot*



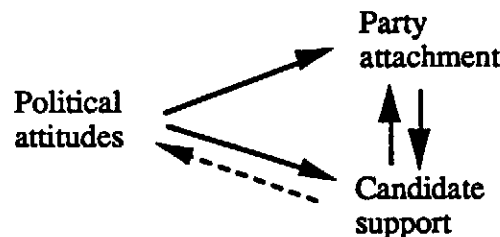
Note: Party attachment was measured on a scale running from 0 (pure independent) to 3 (strong partisan). Relationship of party to vote is measured by a bivariate logit coefficient.

Source: National Election Study 1990-1992 panel

mutual relationship between party attachment and candidate support by means of the dotted lines that have been added to the schematic diagram, as follows



We wish now to raise one other complication, namely, the possibility that political attitudes may not only "cause" candidate support, but may in turn be caused by it, as illustrated by the dotted line in this diagram:



In other words, political attitudes and candidate support may be "reciprocal causes" of one another, in the same way that party attachment and candidate support are reciprocal causes of one another. A large research literature in political science indicates that this form of reciprocal causation must be taken seriously (fn).

In light of this, we are reluctant to use measures of political attitudes in one survey to estimate support for Perot in that same survey. Doing so could lead to an exaggerated estimate of the actual impact of attitudes (as in the just examined case in which the actual impact of party was exaggerated when party was measured during the campaign period).

Accordingly, we returned to the multi-wave NES survey to look for questions capturing voter attitudes toward the issues on which Perot staked his candidacy. As might have been expected, there were more such questions in the 1992 waves of the study, since that study was designed with Perot particularly in mind. We restricted ourselves, however, to questions that were measured both during the 1992 campaign and prior to the campaign. Table 5.2 reports representative examples of what we found. As can be seen, political attitudes measured prior to the campaign do a weak job of predicting support for Perot, while the same attitudes measured in the campaign period show notably stronger relationships. This holds for belief that government is run for the benefit of a few big interests, disapproval of the way Congress does its job, and concern about the budget deficit, each of which was a prime theme of Perot's campaign.

(Unfortunately, the NES survey did not carry any of these items in its September-October 1992 wave; all of the "campaign measurements" are from the post-election survey, which was conducted in November-December 1992).

INSERT TABLE 5.2 ABOUT HERE

To test these results more rigorously, we turned to multiple regression analysis. The purpose of this technique, which is routinely used in the natural sciences as well as the social sciences, is to estimate the impact of each of a series of causal variables while simultaneously controlling for the effects of others.

We have estimated two multiple regression models — one in which the principal independent variables were measured in the 1990 NES survey, and the other in which these variables were measured in 1992. (The 1991 survey was missing some of the variables so no fully parallel study could be made with it.)

This results of this analysis, shown in Table 5.3, corroborate those reported so far, but provide some extremely useful specificity. Look first at the results for strength of party attachment. Party, as measured in 1990, has a strong impact on vote for Perot, and an even stronger impact when measured in 1992. The coefficient for the 1990 measurement shows the true independent impact of strength of party attachment; the 1992 estimate shows the impact of party as augmented by rationalization during the campaign. The rationalization effect here is smaller than it appeared in Figure 5.2, because here we are using interviews from the whole campaign rather than just the last two-and-a-half weeks of it. But even so, the amount by which the true effect of party on the vote is exaggerated is substantial.

INSERT TABLE 5.3 ABOUT HERE

How large, exactly, is the true impact of party attachment on support for Perot? To answer this question, we can use the regression results to simulate support for Perot under various scenarios. Suppose, first of all, that no voter had any attachment to a political party — that every voter, in other words, was a "pure independent."

Calculations based on the coefficients in Table 5.3 indicate that, in this hypothetical scenario, Perot would have gotten 30.6 percent of the vote for president rather than the 19 percent he actually got.¹⁰ The difference, approximately 11.6 percentage points, represents one plausible estimate of the effect of voter attachment to parties in preventing an even larger vote for Perot.

¹⁰ This estimate was derived by using the coefficients in Table 5.3 to produce a y-hat estimate of support of Perot with strength of party attachment set to 0 for all persons.

Table 5.2. *The effect of government trust, as measured at three different time, on support for Perot*

How much of the time do you think you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?

	<u>Just about always</u>	<u>Most of the time</u>	<u>Only some of the time</u>
Question asked after 1990 election	14 (22)	18 (219)	19 (662)
Question asked in mid-1991	17 (24)	17 (398)	21 (481)
Question asked after 1992 election	4 (25)	14 (251)	22 (627)

Would you say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?

	<u>For all of the people</u>	<u>Few big interests</u>
Question asked after 1990 election	22 (196)	18 (669)
Question asked in mid-1991	19 (283)	20 (465)
Question asked after 1992 election	12 (161)	21 (699)

Note: Cell entries are percent supporting Perot in 1992 election; numbers in parentheses refer to case numbers.

Source: National Election Study 1990-91-92 panel.

Table 5.3 *Coefficients for model of support for Perot*

	Variables measured in 1990	Variables measured in 1992
Intercept	-0.37	-1.40
Strength of Party Attachment ^a (range 0-3, pure ind. to strong partisan)	-0.37 (.11)	-0.51 (.11)
Ideological centrist ^b (1=centrist, else=0)	0.18 (.23)	0.52 (.22)
Trust in government scale ^c (range 1-5)	-0.01 (.12)	0.36 (.14)
Worry about budget deficit ^d (range 0-1)	0.19 (.22)	0.38 (.21)
Disapprove job of congress ^e (range 1-5)	0.12 (.08)	0.11 (.09)
Race (white = 1, else=0)	1.88 (.62)	1.78 (.61)
Gender (male=1, else=0)	0.33 (.21)	0.36 (.21)
Age (logged, in years)	-1.73 (.62)	-1.97 (.63)
N of cases	903	901

Note: Dependent variable is vote for Perot (0-1). Standard errors for logit estimates shown in parentheses.

Source: National Election Study 1990-1992 panel survey.

^a Pure independent category includes all individuals not indicating some degree of attachment to Democratic or Republican party.

^b Respondent takes position of 4 of 7-point ideological self-description scale

^c In 1990, variables v504 to v507; in 1992, v6120 to v6123. Each item was coded to a five-point range, then summed and divided by 4. People who volunteered "never" in response to first item in series were coded to 5; respondents who said "don't know" or were otherwise missing were coded to the middle position.

^d Respondents who cited budget deficit or related problems in response to question about most important problem facing the country; codes used were 415, 418, 498. Responses from all three probes counted.

^e V165, v5950, original coding except that missing data coded to 3.

Another estimate may be developed by assuming that average levels of voter attachment were not zero, but were at the levels reported in 1964, the point at which the public's attachment to political parties was at its post-World War II peak. According to this estimate, Perot would have received about 17.4 percent of the vote, or about 1.5 points less than he actually got, if voters had been attached to parties as strongly in 1992 as they had been in 1964.¹¹

We shall have more to say about the effect of party on support for Perot in a moment, but first let us look at results in Table 5.3 for the three measures of political attitudes. A four-item index of trust in government, as measured in the 1990 survey, has no impact (or perhaps a tiny negative impact) on support for Perot, but a strong impact when measured in a November-December 1992 survey. Concern about the federal budget deficit as measured in 1990 has only a tiny impact on support for Perot, but a sizable impact when measured in a 1992 survey. Only the question on approval of the way Congress is doing its job has the same impact whether measured in 1990 or 1992, and its impact is relatively small and statistically marginal in both cases.

The conclusion implied from this pattern of results is that, although certain political attitudes were associated with support for Perot at the time of people's vote decisions, these attitudes were, in most cases, the effect of support for Perot rather than the cause of it. To judge from the 1990 data, the independent effect of these three political attitudes on support for Perot (rather than vice versa) was only about 3.3 percent of the vote. We arrived at this conclusion by using the data in Table 5.3 to calculate that if all voters approved the way Congress was doing its job and were moderately trustful of government (rather than being overwhelmingly disapproving and distrustful), and if no voter had any concern about the budget defect, Perot would have gotten 15.7 percent of the vote rather than 19 percent. Attitudes of distrust and alienation, thus, appear to have had relatively little on individual-level decision to vote for Perot.¹²

¹¹ On a scale running from 0 (pure independent) to 3 (strong partisan), the mean level of party attachment *among voters* in 1964 was 2.13; among voters in the 1992 NES survey (including panel and cross-section respondents), the mean was 1.90. Among panel members only, it was 1.99. The estimate of 17.4 percent was derived by using the coefficients in Table 5.3 to produce a \hat{y} estimate of support of Perot with strength of party attachment set to 2.13 for all persons.

¹² This estimate was derived by using the coefficients in Table 5.3 to produce a \hat{y} estimate of support of Perot with concern about the budget set to 0 for all persons, Congressional approval set to 2 (moderate approval) for all persons (on a scale with a range of 1 to 5 and a mean of 3.65 in 1990), and trust in government set to 2 (moderately trustful) for all persons (on a scale from 1 to 5 with a mean of 4.16 in 1990). Under these conditions, Perot's estimate vote falls from 19 percent to 15.7 percent.

In view of all that has been written about voter anger and the ascent of the independent voter, these results can only be described as startling. Before considering their implications, however, let us consider the key question: Are the results themselves credible?

Readers can largely answer this question for themselves by returning to the raw data. As shown earlier in Table 5.1, about 30 percent of pure independents voted for Perot, so the estimate of 30 percent support for Perot if all voters were pure independents, as derived from our regression analysis, is hardly a surprise. And as shown in Table 5.2, political attitudes, as measured prior to the onset of Perot's candidacy, have little overall power to predict support for Perot. The regression analysis merely confirms this point.

The one point that cannot be directly verified from the raw data is the estimate that if the public's attachment to parties in 1992 had been as great as it was in 1964, it would have cost Perot only about 2 percentage points. The reason the estimate is so small turns out, however, to be straightforward: As noted earlier, most of the decline in party attachment over the past three decades has been concentrated among non-voters, who have also become more numerous during this time. Among citizens who still vote in presidential elections, average levels of party attachment are not much lower than they were in 1964. Table 5.4 provides evidence on this point. (TABLE MISSING, but see note 11)

INSERT TABLE 5.4 ABOUT HERE

If, then, we accept these estimates as credible, what do we conclude from them?

Let us take first the estimate that political attitudes, as measured before Perot became a candidate, had limited capacity to predict subsequent support for him, but that these same attitudes, measured after he became a candidate, predict support for Perot fairly well.

First off, we should underscore the point "fairly well." Although it is possible to find political attitudes that predict support for Perot, it was more difficult to find such attitudes for Perot than for Bush or Clinton. Table 5.5 provides some illustrative predictor attitudes for Clinton, all of which were measured in 1990. As can be seen, each of several political attitudes predicts support for Clinton — who, like Perot, was still a political unknown in 1990 — better than any attitude in Table 5.2 can predict support for Perot. [Table missing]

INSERT TABLE 5.5 ABOUT HERE

Much of the reason for the greater predictability of Clinton's support is that, as the Democratic nominee, he inherited a political coalition with well-known and therefore

well-measured political attitudes. For nearly 50 years, pollsters have been perfecting the art of asking questions that will predict support for a Democratic nominee, and they have gotten pretty good at it. So in the case of an independent and unorthodox candidate like Perot, the predictor variables available in the 1990 NES survey were probably not as good as the ones available to predict support for Clinton.

But this is not the whole story. The questionnaire items on government trust and the power of special interests tap attitudes that were central to Perot's appeal, and these items work well enough once the Perot campaign got under way. The clear implication of this finding is that the attitudes associated with support for Perot did not fully crystallize until the candidate himself appeared on the scene and began to appeal to them. Perot's campaign, thus, did not merely tap into existing attitudes; it helped to create the attitudes to which the candidate then appealed.

Such "persuasion effects" are, as described earlier, a well-recognized and unsurprising feature of political campaigns. In the case of Perot, persuasion effects are perhaps especially unsurprising. Throughout his campaign, Perot articulated a vision of government dysfunction and how to deal with it, and did so in a way that was hard to distinguish from his political personality. Voters attracted to the latter were therefore persuaded to subscribe to the former as well. Thus formed, belief in Perot's vision of dysfunctional government was correlated with support for Perot without being, in most cases, an actual cause of that support.

Presumably this process ran in reverse as well: Some individuals, disliking Perot despite their initial distrust of government, became less distrustful of government, at least in their answers to survey questions about distrust of government.

We noted earlier that survey questions carried in the 1990 NES survey did a weaker job of explaining support for Perot than questions added to the 1992 survey for the specific purpose of measuring support for Perot. The 1990 NES questions also do a weaker job than some questions carried in commercial polls — questions that were written after Perot had become an active candidate and begun to articulate his particular brand of distrust of government. A clear implication of our analysis is that if, for some reason, these new questions had been carried in a 1990 survey, their explanatory power would be much less than it was in the campaign surveys in which they were actually carried. This, in turn, indicates that the vast majority of commercial polls exaggerate the impact of political attitudes on support for Perot, perhaps by a factor of two or more.

Let us now turn to the other major finding to emerge from the regression analysis in Table 5.3, namely, the estimate (based on 1990 measurement of party attachment) that

Perot would have gotten 30.6 percent of the vote if every voter were a pure independent. This estimate is at once too low and too high. It is too low in the sense that if campaign polls had shown Perot getting 30.6 percent of the vote, the press would have paid more attention to him, more voters would have known more about him (more on this below), and no one would have been worried that a vote for Perot was wasted because he had no chance to win. Thus, if Perot had been capable of getting 31 percent, it might have changed the dynamics of the race in a way that gave him a chance to win an even larger share of the vote.

Yet in another way, the estimate of 31 percent may be too high. Greater attention from the press might not have been an unmixed blessing for Perot. It would surely have brought more press criticism, and this criticism might have prevented Perot from increasing his vote share, or even driven his vote share below 31 percent. Recall, for example, that Perot's vote share in straw polls rose to as high 37 percent in May and June, whereupon the press' unleashed a stream of criticism that drove his support below 20 percent, whereupon Perot withdrew from the race. The same might have happened in the fall election campaign.

The general point here is that one cannot project election outcomes on the basis of mass attitudes alone. Partly this is because, as we have just seen, mass attitudes are more changeable than is usually recognized. But mostly it is because elite behavior is always taken with a view to how the public is behaving and is likely to behave in the future, so that if public support for Perot had been different, elite behavior toward Perot would have been different too. How exactly this would have played out is impossible to say. The only point we make here is that our estimate of 31 percent should not be taken too literally.

There is, however, one conclusion that one can plausibly reach from the estimate of 31 percent support: Namely, that the public's continuing attachment to political parties was a significant impediment to Perot's success. Despite all that has been written about the rise of the "independent voter," the evidence indicates that much more remains of voters' attachment to parties than has been lost in recent decades.

This conclusion will no doubt hearten certain contrarian political analysts who have been insisting for years that the public's declining attachment to political parties has been exaggerated (Keith et al, 1988; Miller, 1991). It is not, however, entirely clear that it should, since our findings cut two ways. If, as we have also shown, a Perot-type candidate could get close to 20 percent of the vote under 1964 levels of mass attachment to parties, then it has been possible, at least insofar as voter attachment to parties is concerned, for a third party candidate to do that well for a much longer time than anyone

has realized. Indeed, even higher levels of support for a third party candidate are apparently possible under 1964 levels of party attachment, since Perot's support in May and June reached 37 percent among survey respondents describing themselves as registered voters.¹³

The conclusion we draw from this set of facts is that the attachment of individual voters to parties, though important, has probably been overstated as a source of stability in general election campaigns and in the U.S. electoral system more generally. Much more important, we suspect, as sources of stability are the effects of parties at the level of elite politics — most notably, their capacity to recruit and monopolize talented candidates, and their capacity to convince the press to ignore candidates who do not have a party imprimatur.¹⁴

This is a conclusion that fits well with our earlier analysis of Perot's spring campaign, which stressed the importance of reporters' decision to cover Perot as a serious candidate for the president as the most important determinant of his rise from obscurity. As we shall see in the next section, it also fits well with other evidence from the fall campaign, which indicates that, in cases in which general election campaigns do serve up genuinely new information, voters show no particular hesitation in responding to it.

Press mediation of communication flow.

Ross Perot was not the only "third party" candidate in the 1992 election. In many states, the Peace and Freedom Party, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Libertarian party were also on the ballot. The conventional political press ignored most of these parties on the grounds that they had no chance of winning and hence were not newsworthy.

It is not clear that the press could have done otherwise, since the number of people prepared to consider themselves serious candidates for the presidency is undoubtedly quite large. Nor, we might add, is it clear that the press should have done otherwise, since it is not clear that democracy works better with three or six or twelve serious candidates for president than it does with just two.

¹³ The large majority of people registered to vote in presidential elections do vote (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980); however, there is a fair amount of exaggeration in voter self-descriptions of whether they are registered to vote or not.

¹⁴ In the historical past, parties were essential to communicate with the masses of ordinary voters; in the present, however, their role as information conduits is relatively limited and, in many parts of the country, non-existent.

But, in any case, the fact that the press made no effort to cover all the people running more-or-less seriously for president raises the question: How does the press decide which candidates to cover in general election campaigns and which to ignore. And among those it does cover, how does the press decide exactly how much attention to pay to each given candidate?

The first of these questions seems to have a reasonably clear answer: In recent times, the press has afforded significant general election coverage to candidates it covered (and vetted) in the spring phase of the presidential campaign; these have included, besides the Democratic and Republican nominees, three third party candidates — George Wallace in 1968, John Anderson in 1980, and Ross Perot. Candidates that it ignored in the spring it has always continued to ignore in the fall. These include candidates of long-established minor parties, such as the Peace and Freedom and Libertarian parties.

The next question is how much coverage a "serious" third party candidate would be expected to get. The best guess here comes from Michael Hagen's (1991) study of coverage in the 1984 Democratic nomination contest. Hagen found, as reported in Chapter 3, that the press tends to cover candidates in multi-candidate races in proportion to how well it expects them to do.

If that is the rule, it seems to have been skillfully applied to the case of Perot. Perot wound up getting 19 percent of the general election vote, an amount well above his average level of support in the polls over the whole period he was in the race. In the *New York Times* in the month of October, we counted 212 stories bearing on the election,¹⁵ of which 38, or 18 percent, were devoted to Perot. Counting the paragraphs devoted primarily to Perot in October issues of *Time* and *Newsweek*, we found that Perot's share was 18 percent. And our count indicates that he got 21 percent of all campaign coverage on the network TV news.¹⁶

These figures indicate a reversal of the bias in press coverage that had existed in the spring. In the six-week period from May 1 to June 15 — the period of Perot's peak

¹⁵ Stories that dealt in substantial part with more than one candidate were counted as stories about each.

¹⁶ From the count of newspaper stories that mentioned Perot in the NEXIS information service (see Figure 2 of Part I), we found that Perot was mentioned in 70 percent as many stories as Clinton. This does not imply that Perot got 70 percent as much total coverage as Clinton, since many stories mentioning Perot may have devoted substantially more attention to Clinton and vice-versa. But the number shows that Perot, although getting less coverage than a major party candidate, was by no means ignored by the nation's newspapers.

support in the polls – the *New York Times* carried 146 stories primarily about Perot and 95 primarily about Clinton. (Because of the difficulty of distinguishing government news from campaign news in this period, we do not have reliable data on campaign stories devoted to Bush.) In this same period, network TV news devoted 108 minutes to Perot and 67 to Clinton.¹⁷ It is worth emphasizing that Clinton had not stopped campaigning in this period; he had simply ceased to attract coverage because, in the lingo by which reporters explain such matters, his campaign was no longer making news.¹⁸

Perot, by contrast, was making news because he was a novel force in American politics at a time when the other candidates had secured their nominations. The political press had nothing more important or interesting to do than to cover him. In the fall, however, Perot was no longer novel, and he was competing in a contest that, with an incumbent president on the verge of defeat, was sufficiently exciting without him in the race. Reporters did not, in this situation, allocate coverage according to the logic of boom-and-bust; rather, they reverted to a simpler rule: Cover candidates in rough proportion to their viability.

In the last section, we noted that change in the level of mass attachment to political parties between 1964 and 1992 is little help in explaining Perot's emergence as a successful third party candidate in 1992. Fluctuations in press coverage are, however, another matter. The reason that Perot was able to shoot to the top of the polls in the spring was that he was getting large amounts of largely positive coverage at a time when his opponents were not. The reason he did not shoot to the top of the polls upon re-entering the race in October is that this pattern of media coverage was not repeated.

Perot's unmediated campaign.

Because rules of press coverage were different in the fall than they had been in the spring, Perot had essentially no chance to stage a dramatic fall rally by relying on coverage available to him (or any comparably situated candidate) in the conventional news media. If he was to win, he had to get his message out to the public by other means.

¹⁷ Bush got less campaign coverage than either Perot or Clinton in the *Times* in this six week period (55 stories) , but more TV coverage than either (176 minutes). In the case of TV, however, we were unable to separate campaign stories from White House-based coverage of government, so the latter figure is not indicative of the amount of campaign coverage Bush got on TV.

In the NEXIS sample in this period, there were 3,205 stories mentioning Perot, as against 2,690 that mentioned Clinton.

¹⁸ Kurtz, Washington Post, get exact quote.

Two vehicles were available — the presidential debates, and paid advertisements. We shall deal with each, beginning with the latter.

On ten separate evenings in the fall campaign, Perot ran lengthy advertisements on national television. Most ads were half an hour long, some were repeated on a later evening, and some ran on more than a single station per night. The first infomercial was, according to the Nielsen rating service, seen by 16 million people and competed well with a major league baseball playoff game. A later infomercial, described by Nelson as the second most widely seen in the series to date, was seen by 13 million. No other estimates are publicly available, but it does not seem unreasonable to guess that the average nightly audience across all 10 infomercials, including some at the end of the campaign that appeared on all networks, was 12 million.¹⁹

If we simply multiply 10 nights of infomercials times a guesstimated average audience size of 12 million per night, we get 120 million people — somewhat more than half of the voting age population of the country. This estimate, however, is much too high, since there must have been considerable viewer overlap. But an estimate of 50 million viewers, a little over 25 percent of the voting age population, does not seem outlandishly high.

By way of checking this estimate, we turned to the 1992 National Election Study, which asked respondents to its pre-election survey whether they remembered seeing any ads for presidential candidates. Those who said yes were asked what they remembered.²⁰ In the last three days of the campaign, 28 percent of voters were able to recall something about a Perot ad, compared to 30 percent for Bush ads and 23 percent for Clinton ones. Since neither Bush nor Clinton had run any infomercials, and since Perot ran many conventional 30 and 60-second spots that might have been among the ads recalled, these figures do not indicate an unusually high level of penetration by Perot's infomercials. Nor do they suggest that our initial estimate of 25 percent viewership of Perot's infomercials should be revised in an upward direction.

Whatever the exact viewership of Perot's infomercials, one would not expect it to be distributed randomly across the population. The novelty value of "infomercials" would, perhaps by itself, make them interesting to aficionados of politics, but, at the same time, any political message of such unusual length would be unlikely, whatever the gifts of the

¹⁹ The source for all this information is the NEXIS information service, which carried numerous press and newsletter announcements and evaluations of the ads.

²⁰ Up to five open-ended probes were made, and respondents who mentioned a Perot ad in response to any of the probes were counted as having seen such a Perot ad. The ad question was carried on the pre-election wave of the NES survey.

communicator, to have much appeal among the politically apathetic. Before such people could even find out what the message was, they would be likely to switch the television channel to something more interesting, which is to say, non-political. Figure 5.3 confirms this exception. As with virtually all mass political communication, Perot's ads (including infomercials as well as conventional spots) were seen far more often by people who were habitually attentive to public affairs than by those who were not.

INSERT FIGURE 5.3 ABOUT HERE

These data indicate that Perot's advertisements, though perhaps going some way toward making up his shortfall in conventional news coverage, are unlikely to have made it up completely. In a highly competitive election in which one's opponents have full access to a news system that reaches an estimated 100 million people every day, there is no substitute for having the same access for one's own campaign messages.

The presidential debates.

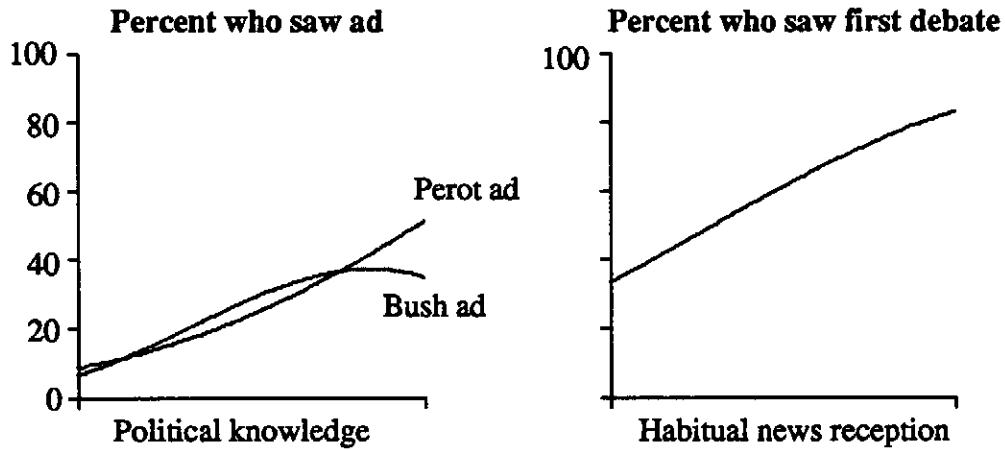
The three presidential debates gave Perot his largest audience and hence his best chance to overcome his disadvantage in the conventional media. The percent of registered voters claiming to have seen or heard these debates was 72 percent for the first, 76 percent for the second, and 79 percent for the third.²¹ Even allowing for overstatement — Nielsen rated the audience for the first debate at about 90 million — these are very high levels of exposure. Those most likely to see the debates were, of course, the same people who were most likely to have seen Perot's infomercials, as indicated in the right-hand panel of Figure 5.3.

Although Perot shared the debate platform with his two opponents, he seems to have been the best performer. National surveys conducted by the Bush-Quayle organization immediately after the debates found Perot the clear winner of two debates and the second-place finisher to Clinton in the third.²² These figures represent an extremely impressive showing for Perot, since the normal tendency is for partisans of a candidate to say their own candidate won (Krause, 1979) and Perot had by far the fewest pre-debate supporters. More tellingly, focus groups examining the attitudes of uncommitted voters found that Perot won all three debates by wide margins. In his *weakest* performance, in the second debate, Perot was chosen the winner by 43 percent of undecided voters in Bush-Quayle focus groups, with Clinton next at 29 percent. In his

²¹ These data are based on research by the Bush-Quayle organization, as cited in Shaw, in progress.

²² These data are from Shaw, in progress.

Figure 5.3. Reception of information in the fall campaign



Sources: 1992 National Election Study; *New York Times*-CBS News poll, October 11. Habitual news reception is measured on the left by information tests, and on the right by education plus self-reported attention to the campaign.

best performance, in the first debate, Perot won by 50 percent to Clinton's 16 percent and Bush's 13.

It is illuminating to contrast Perot's effective performances in the 1992 presidential debates with his notably ineffective performance in the debate with vice-president Al Gore the following year over the North American Free Trade Treat (NAFTA). We have not attempted to measure the number of times Bush and Clinton attacked Perot in the debates, but clearly it was not often. For the most part, the major party candidates treated Perot with restraint, each hoping, no doubt, that he could be the one to inherit the greater number of Perot's supporters in the event Perot knocked himself out.

This was in marked contrast with the NAFTA debate, in which Gore attacked Perot at every opportunity. As *Washington Post* columnist David Broder observed, "Gore delivered the kind of personal attack that Clinton and former president Bush had refused to make when they hooked up with Perot in the three presidential debates last fall. It was relentless..."²³ Perot, as he often did when attacked, became riled, thereby permitting Gore, despite his notoriously wooden speaking style, to emerge as the clear victor in opinion surveys conducted afterward.

The degree to which debaters attack one another may be said to determine the amount of mediation that has occurred. If the debaters largely ignore one another, in the manner of strangers holding "side by side press conferences," then each has an opportunity to deliver a relatively unmediated message. If, on the other hand, direct confrontation predominates, such that each debater is continuously responding to what the other has said, each side's message is mediated by the other's.

Conceived in this way, the contrast in the NAFTA and presidential debates recapitulates one of the main arguments of this book: Perot, though masterful when given free rein to control his message, was ineffectual in situations in which he had to share control of his message with others.

During the 1992 presidential debates, however, Perot remained relatively unmediated. His two opponents had obviously calculated, perhaps correctly, that the big winner from any attack on Perot would be the candidate who refrained from attacking, and hence neither attacked.

The effects of competing communication flows.

To review, we have now characterized the flow of campaign communication affecting Perot as follows:

²³ November 11, 1993, p. A23.

- A flow of conventional news that roughly reflected the relative viability of the contending candidates. As the third place candidate in the race, Perot suffered from this probably standard rule of general election coverage.

- A series of infomercials that reached perhaps a quarter of the electorate.
- Three presidential debates that reached more than half of the electorate.

Our aim in this section is to examine the responsiveness of the public to this coverage. First, however, we need to examine the directional thrust of conventional news coverage of the campaign.

For this analysis, we have used network television news coverage of the campaign, which is reputed to be the most influential source of campaign communication. Coding of this news was based on the same sources and procedures as described earlier in Chapter 3.

The flow of campaign news in the period in which Perot was in the race is shown in Figure 5.5. The figure shows the net of positive and negative coverage on network TV news for all three candidates for each day from October 1 to election day. Two features of these data stand out. One is that coverage is about as stable on a day-to-day basis as could be expected — except for very short-lived spikes associated with candidate gaffs. The biggest of these gaffs refers to Perot's charge that he dropped out of the race in July because Republicans had been planning to sabotage his daughter's wedding. The second and third biggest spikes refer to Bush's poor performance in the second debate and to his campaign's attempt to prove charges that Bill Clinton had behaved unpatriotically during his year as a student at Oxford and had perhaps even tried to renounce his citizenship. The other obvious feature of these data is the stable news advantage that Clinton maintains over Bush and Perot throughout the month.

Both of these features can be explained in terms of the general rules by which the press covers general election campaigns and the strategies by which candidates try to exploit them. For example, a large fraction of Bush's general news disadvantage was contributed by stories explaining why he was behind in the race and Clinton was ahead. Another large part of Bush's disadvantage can be explained by his need to try risky gambits (e.g., trying to prove Clinton had lied about visiting Moscow) while Clinton, riding a wave of dissatisfaction over the economy, had no need to take such risks.

For the moment, we can only speculate on these matters. However we are currently engaged in a content analysis of campaign coverage from 1976 to 1992, and it is our hope that this analysis will provide the basis for an empirically grounded explanation for the pattern of coverage apparent in Figure 5.54. Such an explanation is not essential

to the conclusions we reach in the book, but will enrich the book by enabling us to account for the directional thrust of Perot's coverage as well as the amount of it. In the meantime, we simply take Figure 5.4 as exogenous input into the analysis that follows.

INSERT FIGURE 5.4 ABOUT HERE

To examine the effects on public opinion of this flow of campaign information — news, debates, infomercials — we turn to data from an ABC News-*Washington Post* tracking poll. This poll interviewed about 500 self-described registered voters per day from October 6 through election eve. These data appear in Figure 5.5. Also shown in Figure 5.6 are the dates of Perot's infomercials, the presidential debates, and some other campaign events that might have been expected to affect public opinion.

INSERT FIGURE 5.5 ABOUT HERE

The two events that stand out in Figure 5.5 are Perot's performance in the first debate, which was followed by a roughly 4 percent increase in support, and press coverage of Perot's charge of Republican sabotage, which was followed by a roughly 4 percent decline in support for him.

Table 5.6 provides a relatively full summary of the campaign effects shown in the Figure. Look first at the left-hand column in Table 5.6., which summarizes effects for the whole electorate. The most important of the effects is the net change in support for Perot following the eight nights on which it is possible to get a clean reading of the effect of an infomercial. That net effect is +8.5 percent, or an average of a little more than 1 percentage point per night of infomercials.²⁴ This estimate excludes the infomercial that coincided with press coverage of the sabotage charge, and the last infomercial of the campaign, for which no next-day poll is available. The infomercial effect, combined with the 4.2 percent net gain from the debates, amounts to a hefty boost from Perot's unmediated communication.

INSERT TABLE 5.6 ABOUT HERE

The effects of the infomercials, as large as they are, are even more impressive than they initially seem. Consider the first, which is associated with an increase in support for Perot of 1.6 percentage points. This difference is based on comparison of Perot's standing just before and just after the infomercial²⁵, and standing in isolation is not

²⁴ On some nights, Perot repeated an infomercial on more than one station or ran more than one infomercial. Taking account of such differences did not importantly affect the estimated effect, as explained in the Appendix to this chapter.

²⁵ The effect of this infomercial was probably not magnified by the favorable notice given it on network TV news, since the effects of the news would not have registered until the second day. The fact that there was a general effect of infomercials, as shown in

Figure 5.4. Trends in TV coverage in fall campaign

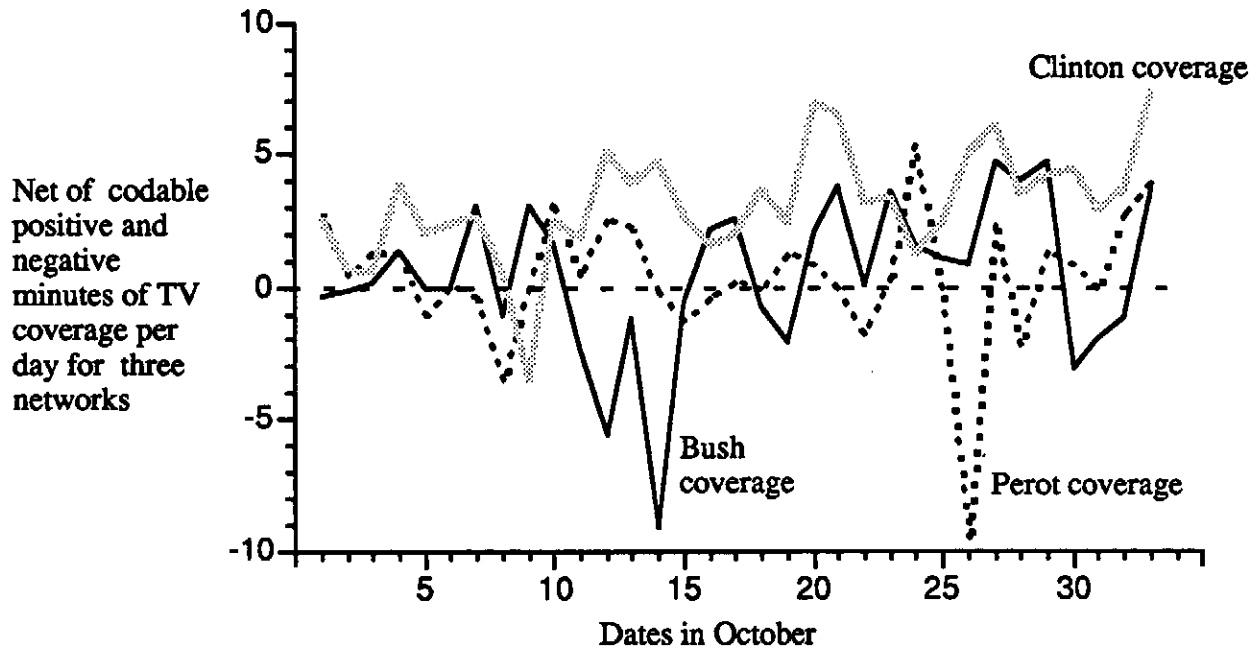
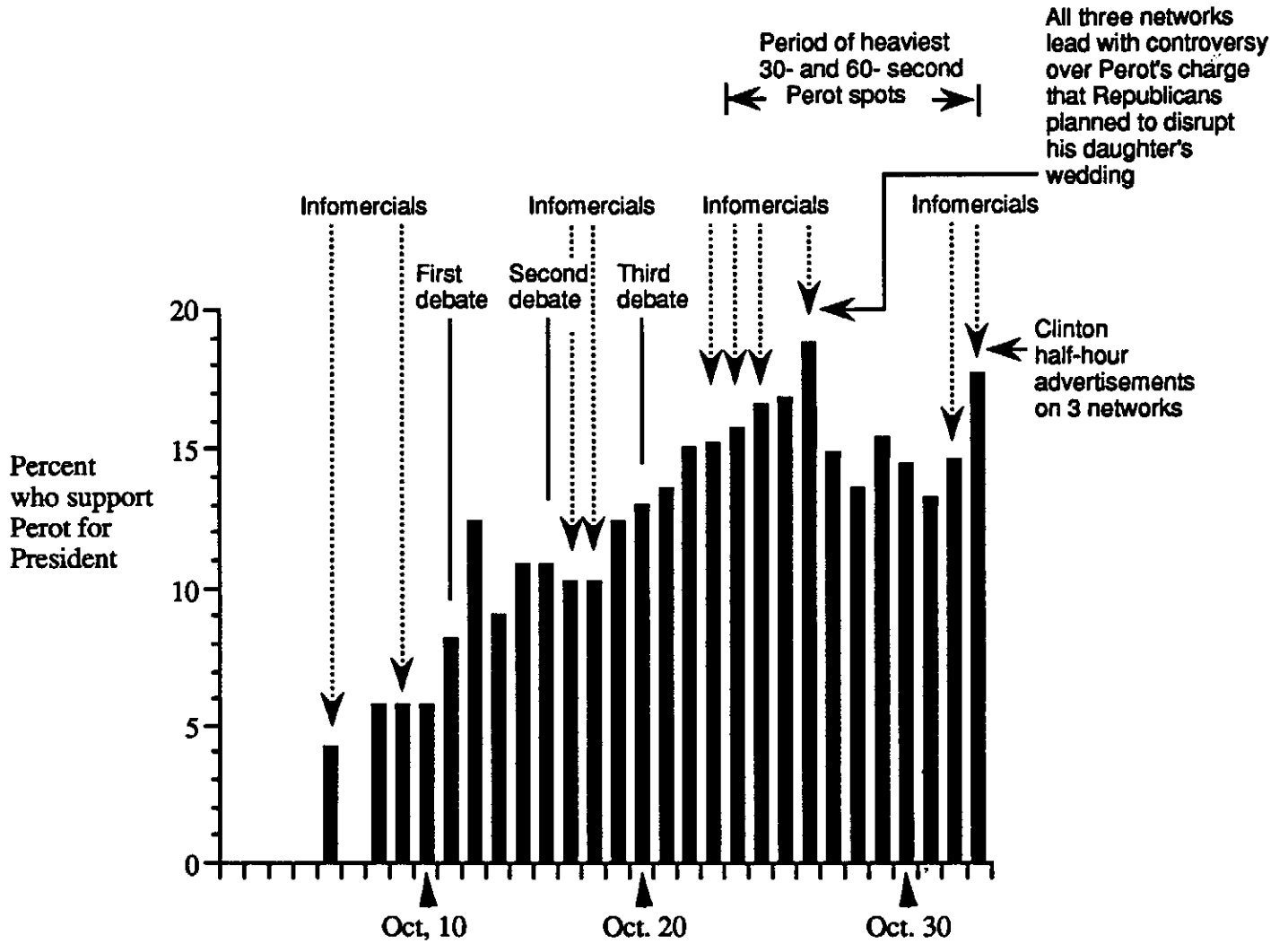


Figure 5.5. Time trend in support for Perot in relation to communication events



Source: ABC-Washington Post tracking polls.

Table 5.6. Effects of fall campaign events on support for Perot

	Full Sample	College Degree+	Hi. sch. + Some coll.	Less than High school
Net changes following infomercials ^a	+8.5%	+16.9	+5.2	-1.9
Net changes following three presidential debates	+4.2	+7.2	+3.5	0
Change following Perot charge of Republican sabotage	-3.8	-4.9	-3.3	-2.7
Total responsiveness: Sum of previous effects, regardless of direction	+16.5	+29	+11.9	-4.5
Net of previous effects	+8.9	+19.2	+5.3	-4.5
November 2 support minus October 6 support	+13	+16	+14	+6
Standard error of mean difference in previous row	1.9	3.4	2.6	4.4
Average number of cases per day	504	158	290	51

Note: Cell entries are changes in percent support for Perot over time periods indicated.

Source: ABC News-Washington Post tracking polls

^a Excludes infomercial that aired same days as media coverage of charge of Republican sabotage.

quite large enough to be confidently distinguishable from chance variation ($p=.11$, one-tailed²⁶). But in view of the larger pattern of effects of which it is a part and other analysis to be reported in a moment, we shall treat it as if it were statistically significant.

As noted earlier, Perot's first infomercial was seen by 16 million Americans. Assuming that the vast majority of these were voting age adults, this amounts to 8.4 percent of the potential electorate. Unfortunately, the poll data we have includes only people who describe themselves as registered voters, which, according to the survey results, is 77 percent of the voting age population, or about 146 million people. It is likely that the 16 million who saw the infomercials came very disproportionately from this 77 percent of the population. If, for the sake of concreteness, we assume that 14 of the 16 million did so, it follows that the proportion of the ABC News-*Washington Post* sample that saw the infomercials is 14/146, or 9.6 percent. Our estimate of the fraction of these 14 million people that would have had to convert to Perot in order to generate a 1.6 percentage point shift among all registered voters is 19.2 percent. (Derivation of this estimate is explained in a footnote.²⁷)

Since the people who saw this infomercial were probably not representative of all Americans, it cannot be assumed that it would have been equally effective if it had been viewed by the entire electorate rather than just 9.6 percent of it.²⁸ But whether it

Appendix C, gives us further reason to believe that news coverage of this particular ad could at most explain only a part of its effect.

²⁶ A mean difference of .016 in samples of 500 is closer to statistical significance than it "looks"; this is because estimates of population proportions are more reliable when the proportion is near 0, as it is here, than when it is above .20 or so, as it is in more typical preference polls.

²⁷ Estimation is complicated by the fact that some people viewing the infomercial would have been initial Perot supporters and hence unavailable to contribute to increased support for him. Moreover, Perot initial supporters would probably have been more likely to view the infomercials than non-supporters. We have taken these considerations into account as follows:

Perot's support prior to airing of the infomercial was 4.2 percent, or 6.1 million people in a population of 146 million self-described registered voters, as estimated by the ABC News-*Washington Post* poll. We assume that one third of the Perot supporters saw the debates (compared to a little under 10 percent among other registered voters). Subtracting one third of these 6.1 million from both the numerator and denominator of our earlier estimate of viewership (14/146), we find that 8.3 percent of self-described registered voters not already supporting Perot saw an infomercial. In order for this group to generate a bump of 1.6 percent in the polls, $1/8.3 \times 1.6$ must have converted, or 19.2 percent.

²⁸ The people who exposed themselves to Perot's infomercials were probably more favorably predisposed toward Perot than people who elected not to watch, and so more susceptible to persuasion. Viewers may also have been more undecided, though this

would be effective on a larger audience or not, the ad seems to have been effective on the audience that actually did see it, and as such, can be counted as an additional testament to Perot's powers as an unmediated communicator.

Since Perot's initial infomercial received favorable coverage in the conventional press, it is possible that our estimate of a 19.2 percent conversion rate confounds its actual effect with that of press coverage. We have two comments on this possibility. First, most of Perot's infomercials received little or no news coverage, and their average effect, adjusted for their smaller audience sizes, is roughly the same as the effect we have estimated for the first infomercial. Second, in a separate analysis reported as an Appendix to this chapter, we find that the effect of infomercials on support for Perot is unchanged by controlling for the effects of nightly TV news, including whatever part of the news referred to infomercials.

The effects of competing communication flows.

As we have emphasized throughout this essay, citizens vary in their attentiveness to political communication, with the result that the most attentive are often most likely to be influenced. Columns two, three, and four of Table 5.6 underscore this point by showing how Perot's gains and losses from campaign events were distributed across voters who varied by education, where educational is understood as a proxy for habitual propensity for news reception.

As can be seen, the most attentive voters are, in this instance as in others examined in this book, consistently the most responsive to campaign information, while the least attentive are least responsive. Note that this tendency holds for both pro-Perot and anti-Perot events.

Figure 5.7 relies on a series of graphs to cast the data on relative responsiveness to campaign information into a more revealing form. As can be seen in the lefthand panel, habitual attentiveness to public affairs, as measured by education, had no association with support for Perot at the start of the campaign. Yet after three debates and several rounds of infomercials to which the most politically attentive voters were most responsive, a positive relationship developed between attentiveness and support for Perot. This relationship held Perot's charge of Republican sabotage of his daughter's wedding, a charge that was the single most damaging news event of the final month of the

seems less clear, given the novelty value of the infomercials for people interested in politics. Yet on the other hand, they were also probably more politically sophisticated than the population as a whole and hence a tougher audience to persuade. How close these compensating biases come to offsetting one another is hard to say.

campaign (see Figure 5.5, above). As they had been throughout the campaign, the most attentive voters were most responsive to this new communication, turning away from Perot at greater rates than members of other education groups. In consequence, the relationship between habitual attentiveness and support for Perot switched from linear and positive to sharply non-monotonic as shown in the middle panel of Figure 5.7. But at the end of the campaign, the highly attentive responded once again to a Perot infomercial, thereby restoring a linear relationship between education and support for Perot, as shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 5.6. (A CBS News-*New York Times* tracking poll over the last days of the campaign confirms the striking pattern of change shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 5.6).

INSERT FIGURE 5.6 ABOUT HERE

Hence, going into the final day of the campaign, Perot was apparently running strongest among those who had been paying most attention to the campaign. That evening, Perot ran a last round of infomercials, but for the first time, Clinton responded in kind, airing half-hour shows on all three networks. The ABC News-*Washington Post* tracking poll was discontinued at that point, but according to the 1992 NES study, the relationship between habitual attentiveness to public affairs and actual vote for Perot on election day returned to the pattern of sharp non-monotonicity. This non-monotonic pattern holds both for education and for our preferred measure of attentiveness, level of political knowledge (see Figure 5.7). So it appears that, although the best educated were most likely to support Perot in two polls taken the day before the election, they were influenced by the final events of the campaign to abandon Perot, thereby leaving middle-educated persons most likely to vote for Perot.

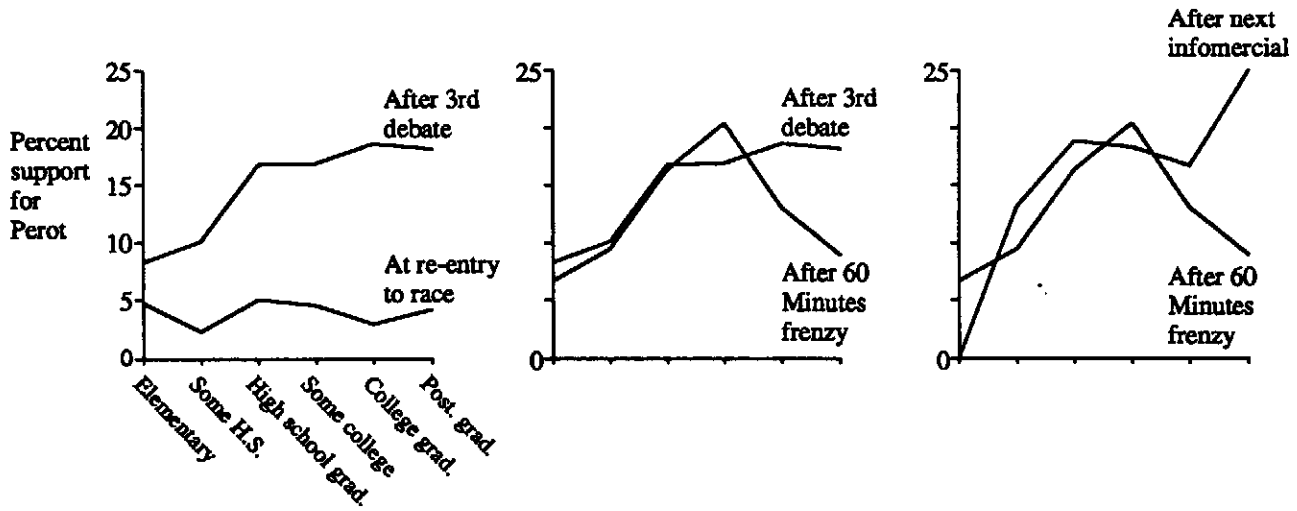
INSERT FIGURE 5.7 ABOUT HERE

Can this pattern of repeated flip-flops by the most politically attentive and presumably sophisticated members of the electorate be real? And if real, what does it reveal about public responsiveness to campaign communication?

From a literal reading of the data, the changes among the highly educated are almost certainly real. Not only at the end of the campaign but from the first days of it, the most educated were most responsive to campaign events. (For a further, more rigorous demonstration of this proposition, see the Appendix to this chapter.)

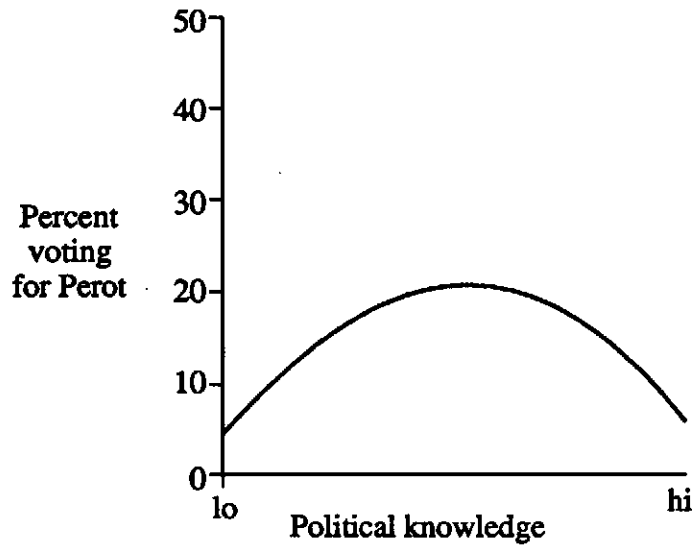
Nonetheless, to equate "responsiveness to events" with "daily flip-flops" is to be too literal. It is highly doubtful that the electorate contains many voters who made and changed actual vote decisions on a daily basis. Far more likely, the electorate contains many voters who, though unsure who they will support on election day, nonetheless

Figure 5.6. Education and responsiveness to Perot campaign events



Source: ABC News-Washington Post tracking polls.

Figure 5.7. *Political awareness and vote for Perot*



Note: Political awareness is measured by means of an 18-point test of political knowledge. Estimates in figure are based on a logit regression in which there were two independent variables, awareness and awareness squared.

Source: 1992 National Election Study

agree to answer survey questions about their current thinking. Their responses are then weighted more heavily in the direction of the most current information than their final vote decisions will be. Thus, without any individual changing a firm decision from one day to the next, the numbers of people expressing support for a particular candidate can fluctuate greatly in response to recent events. The situation is one in which there are many people who would have favored candidate X on day Y if they had been asked, but are instead asked on day Z, when they do not favor candidate X and have no idea that they would have favored him if they had been asked a day or two earlier.

Daily tracking polls openly invite such top-of-the-head responses from people who have not fully made up their minds. For example, the ABC News-*Washington Post* survey on which we have relied asks, "suppose the election were held today, for whom would you vote."²⁹ No doubt many people answer this question only because they know they will not be held to the answers they give.

What probably happened, then, is that many highly educated Perot sympathizers took into account a broader range of information on election day than they did when asked, on the day following an infomercial or debate, to "suppose the election were held today." This broader range of information no doubt included recollections from the barrage of media-initiated criticism of Perot's character in the spring — criticism that better educated persons were more heavily exposed to than anyone else and that, owing to superior cognitive abilities, they were probably better able to remember than others.

None of this is to say that responses to tracking polls, even by people who have not fully made up their minds, are meaningless, for two important reasons:

1. In every recent election, tracking polls have done a good or excellent job of predicting the final election outcome, especially polls taken near the end of the campaign (Gelman and King, 1993).
2. Tracking polls enable us to see clearly the effects of particular campaign events — events that, taken altogether, almost certainly do determine the final outcome (see also Shaw, in progress).

But notwithstanding their value, people's responses to tracking poll questions — mainly because they force people to make up their minds quickly and on the basis of the information that happens to be most readily accessible at the moment — should not be equated with final vote decisions, and day-by-day fluctuations should not be equated with flip-flops (see Zaller, 1992, p. 79-80).

²⁹ The poll contains a follow-up question that further prods the undecided to make a choice. However, we have made no use of this question in our analysis.

One other point about the responsiveness of the highly educated needs special emphasis. The point is that the *most educated voters were most responsive to campaign communication primarily because they were the only segment of the electorate actually exposed to many campaign messages*, especially Perot's infomercials and even the very heavy (but also short-duration) press coverage of Perot's charge of Republican sabotage. If the middle-educated and less-educated voters had been as heavily exposed, they would no doubt have been at least as responsive — and probably more so.

This returns us to one of the main points of this essay: Perot's unmediated campaign communication was highly effective in persuading those who saw it to support him. His problem, from the time the press "discovered" and began to tout him in the spring until the end of the campaign, was that the audience for unmediated communication in the United States is too small to sustain a successful presidential campaign. Lower level offices, including seats on local school boards as well perhaps as occasional seats in the U.S. Senate, can be won by communication that is controlled exclusively by the candidate himself or herself; the presidency cannot.

Conclusions

We began this chapter by asking what Perot's striking success as a truly outsider candidate for president can tell us about the normal of the normal stability in American presidential politics.

The conclusion we infer from the evidence presented in this chapter is, from the perspective of past research on presidential elections, a strong one: The main determinant of stability and change in the public's electoral preferences is the pattern of mass communication to which it is exposed. When the direction and balance of mass communication vacillate dramatically, as they regularly do in primary elections, the public's preferences are unstable. When the flow of mass communication concentrates on the two major party candidates and gives each approximately equal play, the public will reliably choose between the two. But when the press takes a third party candidate seriously, so will the public. And when the media convey new information to the public, whether about a major party candidate or a third party candidate, and whether in the nomination period or the general election, the public will respond.

The attachment of most voters to one of the existing parties constitutes an important source of resistance to mass communication, and hence an important source of stability in the political system. But "important" does not mean "insuperable." There is, and probably has long been, a great deal more "give" in the public's attachment to parties than has been generally assumed.

This point can be gleaned from the simplest data displays, as Table 5.6 makes clear. In June, at the peak of Perot's support in the polls, just over 25 percent of those describing themselves as "strong" party supporters supported Perot for president. Even in the fall election, support among people who had described themselves in 1990 as strong partisans was nearly 10 percent. Perot's support among "not so strong" partisans was, of course, still greater.

The conclusion to be drawn from these and much similar data is that, however potent a voter's habitual attachment to one of the traditional parties when the voter faces a choice between the two traditional parties, the capacity of party attachment to constrain choice among a wider range of possibilities is distinctly limited.

Our data suggest, moreover, that communication flow is a more important determinant of vote choice than party attachment. Our reasoning is as follows: The difference in support for Perot between an electorate with no voter attachment to parties and an electorate with the highest recorded levels of party attachment (those of 1964) is, as explained earlier, the difference between 31 percent support for Perot and 17 percent support, or 14 percentage points. The difference between a communication flow providing no support for Perot (that of late September, 1992) and one providing maximal support for Perot (that of May-June, 1992) is, as described earlier, the difference between 5 percent support for Perot and 37 percent, or 32 percentage points.

Obviously, the precision of these estimates is quite low. Yet they stem from a fairly straightforward analysis of the best available data. Perhaps the best way of summarizing them is to say that the mass communication to which voters are exposed — whether it refers to three candidates or just two, and the degree to which it is positive or negative — seems at least as important as voters' standing attachments to political parties in determining electoral choice, and possibly a lot more important.³⁰

More generally, we conclude that the primary sources of electoral stability, both within particular election campaigns and within the U.S. electoral system as a whole, reside at the level of elite politics more than at the level of mass politics. Hence we return in our final chapter to this subject.

³⁰ Note that both of these comparisons implicitly control for the effect of the other variable.

Appendix to Chapter 5

In order to more rigorously test the results reported in Table 5.6, we conducted a set of time series analyses. These are reported in Table 5.7. The dependent variable in each analysis is the change in support for Perot from the most recent poll.

INSERT TABLE 5.7 ABOUT HERE

In the first column of the table, we report a model that contains variables for each of the debates, for Perot's infomercials (a one has been assigned to the day following each infomercial, with all other days set to zero on this variable)³¹, and the net of Perot's TV news coverage, lagged by one day. Two variables in this regression are statistically significant on one-tailed tests: the first debate ($p=.02$) and the net of Perot's TV news coverage ($p=.04$). The p -value on the infomercials is .30.

In the second column, we add a 0-1 variable for the day following the heavy TV news coverage of Perot's charge of Republican sabotage. This variable has an effect that is statistically significant at the level of $p=.015$, while the net TV variable becomes incorrectly signed and statistically insignificant. In addition, the adjusted r -square on the analysis more than doubles, and the magnitude of the infomercial term nearly doubles.

In the third column, we eliminate the net TV variable, leaving everything else as is. This slightly *raises* the adjusted r -square without much affecting other estimated effects. The p -value for the infomercial variable is .14. The conclusion from this analysis is that media coverage of Perot's charges against the Republican was the only conventional media story that had an important net impact on the race, and that infomercials and the first debate also probably affected Perot's support.

The remaining columns of Table 5.7 report parallel time series analyses within three education groups. These results corroborate those reported in Table 5: The best educated were most responsive to campaign events, with some evidence of a smaller response among the middle-educated, and no evidence of any responsiveness among the least educated. (The significant Durbin-Watson statistic in the final column indicates that all day-to-day variation support among the least educated is due to chance fluctuation which regresses to the mean the next day.)

³¹ Information regarding the number and length of infomercials aired on a given night was available through NEXUS. However, taking into account such information did not importantly affect the estimate impact of the infomercials.

Table 5.7. Coefficients for time series analysis of effects of fall campaign events

	Total Sample	Total Sample	Total Sample	College Degree	Hi sch. degree	No HS degree
Infomercial on previous day (0-1)	.0039 (.007)	0.0075 (.007)	0.0073 (.007)	0.024 (.011)	0.000 (.01)	-0.005 (.023)
First presidential debate (0-1)	0.039 (.017)	0.039 (.016)	0.039 (.15)	0.09 (.025)	0.014 (.023)	0.024 (.051)
Second presidential debate (0-1)	-.006 (.018)	-.011 (.016)	-.09 (.015)	-0.01 (.025)	0.000 (.023)	-0.07 (.051)
Third presidential debate (0-1)	-.001 (.017)	.003 (.016)	.003 (.015)	-0.001 (.025)	0.001 (.023)	0.03 (.051)
Perot charges Reps. sabotage wedding	-	-0.060 (.025)	-.050 (.016)	-0.072 (.026)	-0.039 (.024)	-0.028 (.053)
Net of TV coverage (in codable minutes)	0.0023 (.0013)	-.00098 (.0017)	-	-	-	-
Intercept	.003	.004	.003	-.002	.006	.005
Adjusted r-square	.13	.29	.32	.40	-.07	-.09
SE of estimate	.017	.015	.015	.024	.022	.050
Durbin-Watson	2.34	2.43	2.48	2.16	2.29	3.17
N of data points	26	26	26	26	26	26
Average number of cases per datapoint	504	504	504	158	290	51

Note: Dependent variable is change in proportion supporting Perot from previous day; standard errors appear in parentheses.

Source: ABC News-Washington Post tracking polls

