Much of what we know about the candidate evaluation process is due to the existence of the National Election Study. For instance, we can thank the NES for showing us that most citizens know relatively little about seemingly important political phenomena and rely on cues such as partisanship when choosing candidates. Such a finding, while important, leaves fundamental questions about the quality of candidate evaluations unresolved. Foremost among these is: *"Do citizens who appear to have little information about politics necessarily cast votes out of ignorance or do they systematically find ways to adapt to the complexity that politics brings?"* In other words, we do not know the conditions under which information short-cuts help voters emulate the candidate evaluations and voting behaviors they would have exhibited if better informed. Were we to know more about these conditions, we could better evaluate the quality of candidate evaluations, the effects of political campaigns and the efficacy of our representative democracy.

I believe that the NES and Political Science are now well positioned to achieve a deeper, theoretically-rich and empirically-verifiable understanding of the pre-election relationship between citizens and candidates. Therefore, I propose a different, and relatively unified, way of thinking about political decision making. This way of thinking provides a basis for new questions that are well suited for resolving debates about the quality of candidate evaluations.

The way of thinking I propose is based directly on my own previous and ongoing research, which itself is heavily influenced by research in several related fields.[1] In this research, I use traditional exit polls, computer-assisted telephone interview technology; laboratory experiments, and deductive formal models of political communication to identify conditions under which voters can overcome the difficulties that candidate evaluation often presents.

I have found that a voter's ability to emulate the candidate evaluations and voting behavior that she would have exhibited if better informed depends on the existence and extent of several "conditions for learning." Each condition is a deductively valid conclusion from the premises stated above and an observable characteristic of either the information provider or the environment in which the voter receives information. If any of these conditions is present, then a voter can use these cues to improve the quality of her candidate evaluations. By contrast, if all of the conditions are absent, then even the presence of many information providers will be insufficient to either teach the voter anything that will aid in her evaluations or activate an emotional response.

The first condition for learning is the presence of observable and costly actions by an informed person. The logic underlying this condition closely follows the old adage, "actions speak louder than words." When someone takes a costly action (i.e. exerts effort), they reveal something to others about how much a particular outcome is worth to them.

The second condition for learning is the existence of a cost associated with making particular

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[1]My current work integrates basic insights from the cognitive revolution (Churchland and Sejnowski 1991; Holland et al. 1986; Lakoff 1986; Newell 1992; North 1993, 1994; Crick 1994), social psychology and public opinion (McGuire 1969, 1985; Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991), empirical studies of political cue taking (Feldman and Conover 1983; Kuklinski, Metlay and May 1981; Brady and Sniderman 1985; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Popkin 1991) and theoretical discussions about the strategic use of words (Crawford and Sobel 1982, Habermas 1983; Banks 1991).

statements. One example of this type of cost is a penalty for lying. The penalty for lying can be thought of as the potential loss in a valued reputation for honesty. While such a penalty does not render lying impossible, the fact that lying is taxed affects both information providers' incentives and the inferences that voters can draw from their statements.

The third condition for learning is a similarity of preferences over outcomes. Basically, if outcomes that are good for one person are also good for another, and if bad outcomes for one are also bad for the other, then neither will have an incentive to mislead the other. Hence, when the information provider prefers the same outcomes as the voter he is more likely to reveal what he knows, and the voter should assign greater weight to the probability that the information provider's claim is true.

The fourth condition for learning is the possibility of verification. Under certain conditions, the presence of a verifier – a person who can make a statement about the veracity of the information provider's statement – allows voters to learn from the information provider even if none of the previous three conditions for learning are present. For instance, the presence of a verifier who is known to have preferences over outcomes that are adversarial to those of the information provider, and for whom certain combinations of the first three conditions for learning applies, can induce the information provider to make statements that are ultimately more informative to voters.

To show how and when actual voters can use simple cues to successfully overcome the complexity of candidate evaluation, I have designed survey questions based on the conditions for learning just described. These questions not only demonstrate that voters can learn from simple cues, but also what it is about the cues that influences their evaluations and behavior. Survey questions that demonstrate these factors are sufficient to suggest a wide range of conditions under which voters can use seemingly small amounts of information to vote as they would have if they were better informed.

Consider an example of such questions from a survey whose time in the field is nearly completed as I write this memo. Respondents are asked the following questions:

1. Now I am going to ask you a couple of questions about no-fault auto insurance. How often would you say that you had thought about this issue before today – often, sometimes, rarely or never?

2. It's been reported that [SOURCE] [POSITION] no-fault auto insurance. What do you think? Is no-fault auto insurance a good idea or a bad idea?

3. Now I am going to ask you a couple of questions about [SOURCE]. On most political issues would you say you and [SOURCE] agree all of the time, most of the time, only some of the time, or never?

4. How much would you say [SOURCE] knows about what will happen if no-fault auto insurance is made available to all Americans – a lot, some, a little, or nothing at all?

Unbeknownst to the respondent, two independent random processes determined which version of the series she was asked. One of the random processes determined whether SOURCE=Jesse

Jackson (45% chance), SOURCE=Pat Buchanan (45% chance), or SOURCE=no source (10% chance). The other random process determined whether POSITION=supports (50% chance) or POSITION=opposes (50% chance).[2]

I use this series of questions, plus traditional feeling thermometers, to evaluate hypotheses about the effectiveness of low-information cues.[3] In addition to observing whether Jesse Jackson's endorsement is sufficient to influence a voter's opinion about an issue, these questions allow us to evaluate what it is about Jackson that lead the respondent to react in the way that she did. We will see also see why a Jackson or Buchanan endorsement affects different people differently (i.e. we will see what distinguishes people who follow Jackson's endorsement, from people whose responses are unaffected by it, from people who – once they hear Jackson's endorsement – go the other way.) My previous empirical and theoretical work suggests that these differences will be systematic, but not as trivial as one might initially expect. For instance, preliminary returns from the field suggest that hypotheses based on several widely-held beliefs about a cue's effectiveness will be rejected as will null hypotheses derived from contradictions of the conditions for learning described above.[4] Questions such as these help in our quest to understand the quality of candidate evaluations because they allow us to identify conditions under which seemingly simple pieces of information can have a large effect on a voters' beliefs.

I propose that the NES explore the possibility of adding similar questions to the next Pilot Study. To maximize the interest of such questions to Political Scientists, the sources about which respondents are asked should be the few political parties, elites and interest groups with large national followings (e.g. the Republican party, the Democratic party, current and former presidents, the Sierra Club, the NRA, Jesse Jackson, Rush Limbaugh). Using a format similar to that given above, the respondent is first informed of a group opinion, then the respondent is asked her own opinion followed by a series of questions about her relationship to the group.

The general purpose of such questions is to determine the conditions under which a group opinion affects respondent beliefs. In this sense, they can be used determine how cues like party ID and group endorsements affect candidate behaviors in a way that feeling thermometers cannot. Such questions can reveal the characteristics that distinguish a persuasive cue from an unpersuasive one. They can also provide the window to fundamental insights about why cues like party labels and elite endorsements have effects that differ systematically across respondents and across elections. By redirecting the focus of a small part of the survey in this way, the NES can provide the foundation for a new generation of stronger conclusions about the types of information that voters actually use in forming opinions about candidates and the subsequent quality of those opinions.

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[2] If SOURCE=no source, then no position is given and no questions about the source are asked. In addition, the sequence of the final two questions is determined by a third random process.

[3] Another variant of this experiment on the same survey asks voters about their opinion of the new issue "spending more money to build prisons" and presents respondents with the reported opinion of either Phil Donahue or Rush Limbaugh.

[4] In April 1994, this set of questions was asked of 109 respondents on a trial run of the survey. If the data from the current run matches that of the trial, I will be able to reject several meaningful null hypotheses about the conditions for learning, candidate evaluation and campaign effectiveness.