

Campaigns, National Conditions, and U.S. Presidential Elections*

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One unresolved debate in election studies concerns the relative importance of political campaigns and the national political and economic climate in determining election outcomes. In this paper, a model of candidate support that incorporates campaign variables and national conditions is developed and tested using trial heat data from the 1984, 1988, and 1992 presidential elections. The results of the analysis indicate that, while both sets of variables have a significant impact on public opinion, national conditions have a greater impact on determining election outcomes than do campaign events.

He lacked a Lee Atwater.

—An anonymous Bush aide on why he lost the election

Its the economy, stupid!

—A poster at Clinton campaign headquarters

Every four years the U.S. public goes through the ritual of a presidential election campaign. For all of the drama and attention afforded these campaigns, little is known about the dynamics of public opinion during a campaign season. For instance, while popular interpretations of elections often focus on the importance of specific events during the campaign, it is unclear to what degree campaign events actually influence candidate support. Given that a number of forecasting models in political science provide extremely accurate statistical explanations of presidential elections (Abramowitz 1988; Campbell 1992; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992; Rosenstone 1983, 1985)¹ based primarily on prevailing national political and economic conditions, one might conclude that campaigns have little impact on election outcomes—that election outcomes are the product of national conditions. This is not, however, necessarily the logical conclusion. Consider the research on congressional elections in which there are also a number of models that accurately predict party electoral fortunes

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¹For a critique of the state of election forecasting in political science see Greene (1993).

(Abramowitz and Segal 1986; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1984; Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986). These models are also based largely on national political and economic conditions. However, we know that campaign-specific factors, such as candidate quality and campaign spending are important determinants of individual congressional election outcomes (Jacobson 1992).

This, then, poses an interesting question. Given the apparent determinative impact of the national political and economic environment on presidential election outcomes, does the campaign matter? Somewhat surprisingly, questions concerning the relative impact of national conditions and campaign events in presidential elections have not been subjected to much rigorous analysis. In this article, a systematic analysis of the question is provided by developing a dynamic model of candidate support in presidential elections—a model that specifies the effects of campaign variables and national conditions—and then applying the model to the elections of 1984, 1988, and 1992.

Should We Expect the Campaign to Make a Difference?

One well-known characteristic of the electorate is that most voters decide for whom they will vote relatively early in the campaign season. From 1952 to 1988, on average, 64% of the electorate have made their vote choice by the end of the party conventions (Asher 1992, 288). Although this implies that the campaign is clearly irrelevant for almost two-thirds of the electorate, it also suggests that one-third of the electorate could be influenced by the campaign. Nevertheless, most research to date does not support strong campaign effects. This conclusion is not based so much on analyses of campaign effects—few scholars have addressed this issue head on—as it is on general studies of voting behavior and elections outcomes. Most studies support the “minimal effects” school of thought (Finkel 1993).

Perhaps the strongest evidence against campaign effects can be found in the aggregate models of election outcomes. As mentioned above, forecasting models are able to predict presidential election outcomes with data on the state of the economy and presidential popularity. According to these models, elections can be considered as referenda on the performance of the incumbent administration. The referendum model had been used earlier in nonforecasting aggregate analyses (Kramer 1971; Tufte 1978), again with a great deal of statistical success. Although the referendum models do not rule out influence from the campaign, they do imply that campaigns have relatively little impact on election outcomes.

Individual-level studies do not provide much more support for strong campaign effects. Early studies of voting behavior suggested that vote

choice was primarily driven by a long-term attachment or predisposition to support one of the parties because of social background characteristics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) or party identification (Campbell et al. 1960). Although more contemporary research argues for the importance of other factors, such as issues and candidate evaluations, partisanship is still viewed as one of the more important influences on vote choice (Niemi and Weisberg 1993). The view of vote choice as essentially a function of long-term attitudes or predispositions also suggests a minimal influence from the campaign.

Individual-level voting studies also tend to support the referendum model. According to Fiorina (1981), both partisanship and voting behavior are strongly influenced by retrospective evaluations of the performance of the incumbent administration. Much of the research that followed Fiorina focused primarily on retrospective evaluations of economic issues (Markus 1988; Kinder, Adams, and Gronke 1989). While the evidence from these studies is somewhat mixed, one clear finding emerges: assessments of the state of the national economy and presidential performance are very closely tied to vote choice.

One interesting, yet infrequently cited, contribution to this literature is Kiewiet and Rivers's (1985) analysis of popular support for Reagan. Kiewiet and Rivers analyze support for Reagan during the 1984 campaign and find that changes in the unemployment rate were strongly tied to changes in support for Reagan (measured with trial heat polls) during the campaign.

As a group, then, this research strongly supports the same conclusion implied by the aggregate models: voting behavior and elections are largely a function of assessments of the performance of the incumbent administration. Although the referendum model does not leave much room for influence from the campaign, Markus does point out that the campaign may be "a very important vehicle for heightening voter awareness of prevailing economic conditions and the electoral relevance thereof" (1988, 152). This is similar to Gelman and King's (1993) point that the primary function of campaigns is to provide information to voters.

Perhaps the only study to directly address the impact of the campaign is Finkel's (1993) recent assessment of the "minimal effects" thesis. Finkel analyzes changes in public opinion during the campaign season, using panel data from the 1980 election. Finkel's primary findings are that attitudes formed before the campaign begins are very important determinants of vote choice at the end of the election and that changes in attitudes during the campaign, while having a significant impact, are not very important determinants of vote choice. Finkel (1993, 19) con-

cludes that for attitude changes during the campaign to have a nonminimal effect, they would have to be much larger in magnitude and much more lopsided than we have experienced in recent elections.

The arguments against strong campaign effects are perhaps best summarized by postmortems of 1984 election. Analyzing the 1984 election, Frankovic concludes that "in the long run, the major events of the fall campaign . . . mattered little in determining the outcome. This election, like most involving incumbents, was a referendum on the incumbent's performance, particularly the incumbent's economic performance" (1985, 47). This sentiment is echoed in Rosenstone's analysis: "the important determinants of the outcome of the 1984 presidential election were in place long before most people heard of Geraldine Ferraro, long before the candidates squared off in front of television cameras, and long before Americans met the bear in the woods (if there was a bear)" (1985, 25).

Campaign Effects

In spite of the evidence in support of the national effects approach to presidential elections, there is still some reason to expect campaigns to play an important role in determining election outcomes. First, referring to a point made earlier, if two-thirds of the electorate decide for whom to vote early in the campaign, this leaves a significant portion of the electorate to be influenced by factors such as the conduct of the campaign. It should be noted, however, that many of the people who decide late in the campaign vote the way they would be expected to vote, based on their background characteristics (Finkel 1993).

Second, some evidence suggests that there is considerable change in public opinion during the campaign season and that this change may be responsive to campaign events. Allsop and Weisberg (1988) and Weisberg and Allsop (1990) have documented considerable variation in partisanship during the 1984 campaign. Their analyses suggest that partisanship—usually thought of as a long-term attitude—is susceptible to change in response to the influence of campaign events. Gelman and King (1993) also illustrate significant fluctuation in public opinion during the campaign and suggest that major campaign events provide information to voters, many of whom will then change their opinions.

Third, the decline of partisanship (Wattenberg 1990) and the increase in candidate-centered politics (Wattenberg 1991) would seem to present more opportunities for campaigns to capture votes through packaging and presenting their candidates. Salmore and Salmore argue that as campaigns replace parties as sources of information, campaigns become more important determinants of election outcomes (1989, 9).

Finally, the impact of the media and the campaign efforts to exploit

the media are cited as significant influences on public opinion. One cynical point of view holds that campaign consultants have the ability to easily manipulate candidate image and public opinion toward candidates (Hellinger and Judd 1991). Jamieson points to the 1988 election as clear evidence that campaign messages have an impact on election outcomes. According to Jamieson, "there can be little doubt that the messages of the Bush ads swayed perceptions of Dukakis" (1992, 484). Echoing the theme that campaign uses of the media have an impact on public opinion, Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar (1993) point out that aggregate models do not account for shifts in public opinion during a campaign. Based on the patterns of opinion change during campaigns, Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar conclude that "fluctuations in polls show distinct patterns that can be linked to the pattern of campaign communication" (1993, 162). Gelman and King (1993) similarly conclude that the media play an important role in conveying information from the campaign.

These two opposing perspectives on elections present interesting possibilities. Clearly, national conditions are key determinants of election outcomes. On the other hand, it seems unwise, in the age of media saturation, high-tech campaign wizardry, and the decline of parties, to dismiss the impact of campaigns on public opinion. In the next section, I develop a model that allows for the incorporation of both schools of thought into a single explanation.

A Model of Candidate Support

The model to be tested here is a model of aggregate candidate support in the electorate during the campaign season. The logic of the model is quite straightforward. First, there is considerable movement in public opinion during the campaign season. It is assumed that much of this movement can be explained by both campaign events and changes in aggregate national conditions during the campaign season. Second, just as there is movement in public opinion during the campaign, there are also significant differences in party support across election years. These differences in support across campaigns are thought to be influenced primarily by differences in national conditions across campaigns.

In sum, then, the model suggests the following. The general level of support for candidates during a campaign season is primarily a function of national conditions. In other words, national conditions determine the context of the campaign, or what the candidates have to work with.²

²Aldrich (1993, 54-55) suggests that national conditions not only determine the context of the campaign but also limit the number of feasible strategies and the potential effectiveness of different campaign strategies.

Given this context, fluctuations in candidate support over the course of the campaign should be primarily in response to campaign events. It is important to understand that national conditions are likely to exhibit much more variation across elections than during any single election campaign. While there may be some variation in national conditions during an election year, the national environment will generally favor one party over the other throughout the campaign. Therefore, because of restricted variance in the national variables during a single campaign season, we may see changes in national conditions during an election year that do not seem to correlate with changes in candidate support.

Operational Model

The model will be tested using data from the 1984, 1988, and 1992 presidential elections. The dependent variable in this model is the Republican candidate's percentage point advantage over the Democratic candidate (Republican percent minus Democratic percent) in daily trial heat polls conducted from early June through early November. For 1984 the data are all taken from one source (Goldman and Fuller 1985); for both 1988 and 1992, the data had to be gathered from several different polling organizations. The process of gathering these data consisted of averaging the results of trial heat polls from different polling organization for every day that such results were available (see Appendix A for a detailed explanation of how these data were gathered). This data set yields 148 daily observations for 1984, 149 for 1988, and 150 for 1992.

One point that needs to be addressed is that these data are not the same as actual election outcomes. However, on any given day, these data do represent an estimate of how the election would turn out if it were held that day. As a check on the accuracy of the dependent variable, Table 1 provides the results of the last day of polling in each year along with the actual election results. According to these results, the polls provide a fairly accurate representation of the actual election outcomes. The

Table 1. Accuracy of Last Day Polling Results

Variable	1984	1988	1992
Last-day poll advantage	+20.0	+10.5	-5.0
Actual outcome	+18.2	+7.8	-5.6
Difference	+1.8	+2.7	-0.6

Note: Entries are the net Republican percentage point advantage over the Democratic candidate.

largest error occurs in 1988, where the polls overestimated Bush's margin of victory by 2.7 percentage points. The smallest error occurred in 1992 where the polls underestimated Clinton's margin of victory by less than one percentage point. Overall, the average absolute error on the last day of polling is just 1.7 percentage points. Given that the estimates in Table 1 illustrate a close relationship between the last-day polling results and the actual election outcome, any model that generates an accurate estimate for the last-day polling result is also generating a close prediction for the actual election outcome.

Independent Variables

The independent variables can be divided into two categories: those representing campaign events and those representing national conditions. With the exception of 1992, which required a control for the presence of Ross Perot's candidacy, all variables are measured in the same fashion in each election year.

Campaign Events

Several variables are used to measure the impact of the campaign on candidate support: conventions, debates, momentum, and an events tally. These variables measure the occurrence of different types of events that are hypothesized to influence support for candidates. The campaign variables are not, however, intended to capture the effects of different types of campaign strategies: they can only suggest whether candidate support is affected by different types of campaign events. While the issue of which type of campaign strategy generates the most support is extremely interesting, it cannot be directly addressed with the type of data used here.

Conventions. Probably the most prominent events in the course of a presidential campaign are the party nominating conventions. The conventions afford the parties the opportunity to present their candidates and issue positions to the U.S. public in a highly controlled format during a time when little else of consequence is being covered by the news media. Beyond nominating their candidates, one of the goals of the parties is to leave the convention with a significant "bump" in public opinion polls. Campbell, Cherry, and Wink's (1992) analysis of convention bumps from 1964 to 1988 found that conventions generally do provide an increase in candidate support that lasts well into the rest of the campaign.

To capture the effect of the nominating conventions, a dummy variable is created for each of the party conventions, scored zero for all days before the nominating convention and one after the first day of the

convention. Since the dependent variable is net support for the Republican candidate, it is expected that the Democratic convention dummy variable will have a negative coefficient and that the Republican convention dummy variable will have a positive coefficient.

Campbell, Cherry, and Wink (1992) model a decay component to the convention bump. This is not done here for a number of reasons. First, public support for candidates does not naturally decay simply due to the passage of time. Instead, when support declines or increases, it is in response to the occurrence of events or changes in the political environment. These types of influences are included in the current model. Second, when the decay variables are added to the model, they introduce extremely high levels of collinearity (the tolerances for the decay variables ranges from .02 to .004). Finally, there is not much evidence of significant postconvention decay in the elections analyzed here. When included in the model, the coefficients for the decay variables are in the wrong direction for four out of the six conventions.

Debates. Presidential debates are other major media events that provide the candidates an opportunity to present their case directly to the people. Debates, like conventions, are high visibility events. Unlike conventions, however, it is not clear from previous research that candidates can significantly better their position in the polls as a result of the debates. While debates frequently leave the voters with lasting memories, such as Ronald Reagan asking voters if they were better off than they were four years ago, or Michael Dukakis's seeming inability to show emotion when asked how he would react if his wife were raped and murdered, their effect on the electorate is unclear. Geer's (1988) analysis of the 1976 and 1984 debates suggests that they had a sizable, though probably not determinative impact on voting behavior. Shelley and Hwang's (1991) study of the 1988 election indicates that Bush gained about six percentage points as a result of the second debate but gained nothing from the first debate. Lanoue's (1991) analysis of the second debate in 1988, however, indicates that the debate had little lasting impact on vote choice.

In this analysis, the influence of the debates is measured with dummy variables scored zero for all observations through the day of the debate and one for all days after the debate. Unlike the convention dummy variables, there is no a priori expectation about the direction of the debate coefficient, only that public opinion will change in response to the debates.

Events. Besides the structured events of the campaign, such as the debates and the conventions, other types of events may influence candidate support in a campaign. These events may be staged to grab atten-

tion—such as announcements of vice-presidential candidates or scheduled campaign stunts and photo opportunities; or they may be events that “happen” to campaigns—such as staff shake-ups, accusations about one of the candidates, or a major campaign blunder. Likewise, events outside the campaign—such as a foreign policy actions or a scandal involving an administration official—may have an impact on candidate support. Controlling for the effects of these events is very important, especially because they can occur throughout the campaign season. It is not practical, however, to add dummy variables for each time one of these events occurs, primarily because of problems with collinearity and because such dummy variables would render only event-specific findings. Instead, a cumulative events tally variable is created that measures the change in events over time. To create this variable events are given a score of +1 or -1, depending on whether they are expected to have a positive or a negative impact on support for the Republican candidate. The events are then summed across the days of the campaign. Consider the following example. If on 10 June, the events variable is +2 and if three negative events occur over the next 15 days, the events variable would equal -1 on 25 June. Presumably, this drop in the value of the events tally would be associated with a decline in support for the Republican candidate.

Since events are always occurring, the biggest problem in creating this variable is deciding which events to include. Two different criteria were used to select events: (1) the events had to be such that they attracted considerable media attention and (2) the events had to be such that their impact would clearly favor one party over the other. In other words, the direction of the effect of the event had to be unambiguous. Unfortunately, the act of looking back at events and then deciding which ones are relevant is inevitably ad hoc to some degree. The two selection criteria listed above should help to alleviate this problem to some degree. The list of events included in this analysis, as well as the sources used, can be found in Appendix B.

Momentum. One rather elusive influence on candidate success is momentum. Momentum effects occur when increases (decreases) in a candidate's standings in the polls generate even more (less) support for the candidate. Not much is known about the sources and effects of momentum in general election campaigns. Much of the research that does exist on momentum in general elections is based on small-sample studies and has produced mixed findings (Traugott 1992). Most of what we know about momentum is based on research on presidential primary elections (Bartels 1988). In primary elections, momentum translates into viability,

which translates into increased media exposure and increased fundraising ability. Although general elections are a completely different ball game, it is expected that similar, though perhaps not as pronounced, momentum effects are a factor in general elections. Patterson (1989), for example, found that the amount of favorable media coverage of Bush and Dukakis was positively related to their relative standing in the polls during the general election campaign.

In this analysis, the effects of momentum are captured by a variable that measures the change in Republican support over a relatively short period of time. Specifically, for every day in the analysis, the difference between the Republican polling margin on the previous day and the Republican margin five days earlier is used to measure short-term change in candidate support. If this number is positive, indicating a Republican gain in support, it should translate into even more support for the Republican candidate. If the change is negative, it should generate a further decline in Republican support. An important point to understand is that momentum does not occur in a vacuum. Certain events or changes in the political climate occur that have an effect on the standing of the candidates in the polls; momentum then exacerbates these effects.

Perot. One final campaign variable to be controlled is the presence of the Perot candidacy in 1992. To control for the possibility that the Perot candidacy clearly benefited one of the major party candidates more than the other, two dummy variables are added to the model: one for the period before Perot announced that he would not be a candidate and one for the period after Perot announced that he would enter the race.

National Conditions

Two variables are used to capture the effects of national conditions: consumer sentiment and presidential popularity. One characteristic that both of these variables share is that they have relatively little variation during the general election campaign but vary a great deal across election years. Therefore, the national conditions are expected to be more relevant in explaining the general level of support for parties across election years than explaining fluctuations in support during an election year.

Consumer sentiment. As described earlier, a strong link has been established between economic performance and presidential election outcomes. During times of economic prosperity, the incumbent party benefits at the polls; during times of economic downturn, the incumbent party suffers at the polls. It is expected that such a relationship will emerge in this analysis. Rather than relying on aggregate economic indicators, however, the Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS) is used to gauge per-

ceptions of the state of the economy among the mass public. The index is based on a monthly public opinion poll and is composed of six survey questions that tap into retrospective and prospective evaluations of the economy.³ High values of the ICS indicate a positive outlook on the economy. The ICS, or components of the ICS, have been linked to presidential support at both the individual level (Lewis-Beck 1988) and the aggregate level (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992). Because the Republican party held the White House during each of the elections analyzed here, it is expected that consumer sentiment is positively related to support for Republican presidential candidates.

Presidential popularity. Although economic evaluations are an important source of presidential support, there are a number of other criteria voters can use to evaluate the performance of a president, such as handling of foreign affairs, personal charisma, positions on specific issues, and the like. In this analysis, presidential popularity is used as a surrogate for public perceptions of noneconomic aspects of presidential performance, as well as any economic aspects not covered by the ICS.⁴ Because the Republican party held the White House in all three of the election years analyzed here, it is expected that popularity will be positively associated with the dependent variable.⁵

³Monthly data for the ICS were provided by the Survey Research Center, University of Michigan. The base (ICS = 100) for the ICS is February 1986. The index of consumer sentiment is created using responses to the following five survey questions. (1) "Would you say that you and your family are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?" (2) "Now, looking ahead—do you think that a year from now you and your family will be better off financially, worse off, or just about the same?" (3) "Now, turning to business conditions in the country as a whole—do you think that during the next 12 months, we'll have good times financially, bad times, or what?" (4) "Looking ahead, which would you say is more likely—that in the country as a whole, we'll have continuous good times during the next five years or so, or that we will have periods of widespread unemployment, or depression, or what?" (5) "About the big things people buy for their homes—I mean furniture, home furnishings, refrigerator, stove, television, and things like that. In general, do you think now is a good time or a bad time to buy such household items?"

⁴The measure of presidential popularity used here is the percentage of the public that approve of the way the president is handling his job. The approval data are taken from Gallup polls administered during the campaign. In most cases, there were a couple of different polls taken during a month. These figures were used for the days that the polls were taken. Approval ratings for days when no polls were taken were estimated by interpolating between the values of days when poll results were available. The approval data for 1984 and 1988 were taken from Edwards and Gallup (1990). The data for 1992 were provided by the Gallup organization.

⁵One might argue that presidential popularity should not be used as an independent variable because it is likely to be endogenous to many of the campaign variables. There is some correlation between campaign events and presidential popularity, though not enough

Analysis

Data for the dependent variable (Republican support in the polls) are presented in Figure 1. The dependent variable is displayed on the vertical axis, and days of each of the campaigns are displayed on the horizontal axis. Several important points are made by these data. First, there is significant fluctuation in public opinion from early June through early November. Across all three years, the average difference between the highest and lowest points of Republican support during the campaign is 27 percentage points. Second, in each of the years, there appear to be large swings in support in response to the party conventions and presidential debates, although the effects seem particularly pronounced following the party conventions. Finally, although there is fluctuation during the campaigns, the average level of support for the Republican candidate (represented by the solid horizontal line through the data in each year) differs significantly from year to year. The average daily Republican percentage point advantage was 15 in 1984, $-.61$ in 1988, and -9.48 in 1992. It is around these averages, hypothesized to be the product of national conditions, that fluctuations in public opinion, presumably caused by campaign events, occur during the election years.

The data in Figure 1 are not offered as conclusive evidence in support of the model. Rather, Figure 1 is only intended to illustrate the variation in candidate support and the manner in which some variables might affect that variation. A more rigorous test of the model is offered in Table 2 where the within year analysis of the model is presented.⁶ Several findings emerge from Table 2. First, the model does an adequate job of explaining statistical variation in candidate support, as revealed by the model R^2 statistics and the standard errors. Second, although the effects are somewhat inconsistent, the campaign variables generally had a significant impact on candidate support. The Republican conventions had a positive impact on support for the Republican candidate in each of the elections, with an especially large impact in 1988. With the exception of 1992, the Democratic conventions produced smaller swings in public opinion. The

justify excluding it from the model. The average within-year correlation between popularity and the campaign variables is .29 (absolute value). When all years are pooled, the average correlation between popularity and the events variables drops to .12.

⁶The estimates in Table 2 are generalized least squares (GLS) estimates. GLS is the preferred method because of the presence of a significant first-order autocorrelation process ($\rho = .51, .67, \text{ and } .53$ for 1984, 1988, 1992, respectively). The specific method used to estimate the coefficients is the Yule-Walker method, which is similar to the Cochrane-Orcutt transformation procedure, except that there is no loss of data due to lagging variables. Estimates very similar to those in Table 2 were also obtained using the Cochrane-Orcutt procedure.

Table 2. Determinants of Candidate Preferences during Presidential Campaigns, 1984-92
(GLS Results)

Variable	1984	1988	1992
Constant	19.92	-43.21	-50.58**
Democratic convention	-2.12**	-2.84**	-16.69**
Republican convention	4.71**	11.76**	4.15**
First debate	-2.58**	.57	-.50
Second debate	3.63**	2.90**	-1.49
Third debate	—	—	3.30**
Early Perot	—	—	-.72
Late Perot	—	—	1.33
Events	.24	1.10**	1.07**
Momentum	.22**	.13*	.17**
Presidential popularity	.49	.14	.89**
Consumer sentiment	.08	.32	.29*
N	148	149	150
SE	1.75	1.86	2.32
R ²	.47	.70	.78

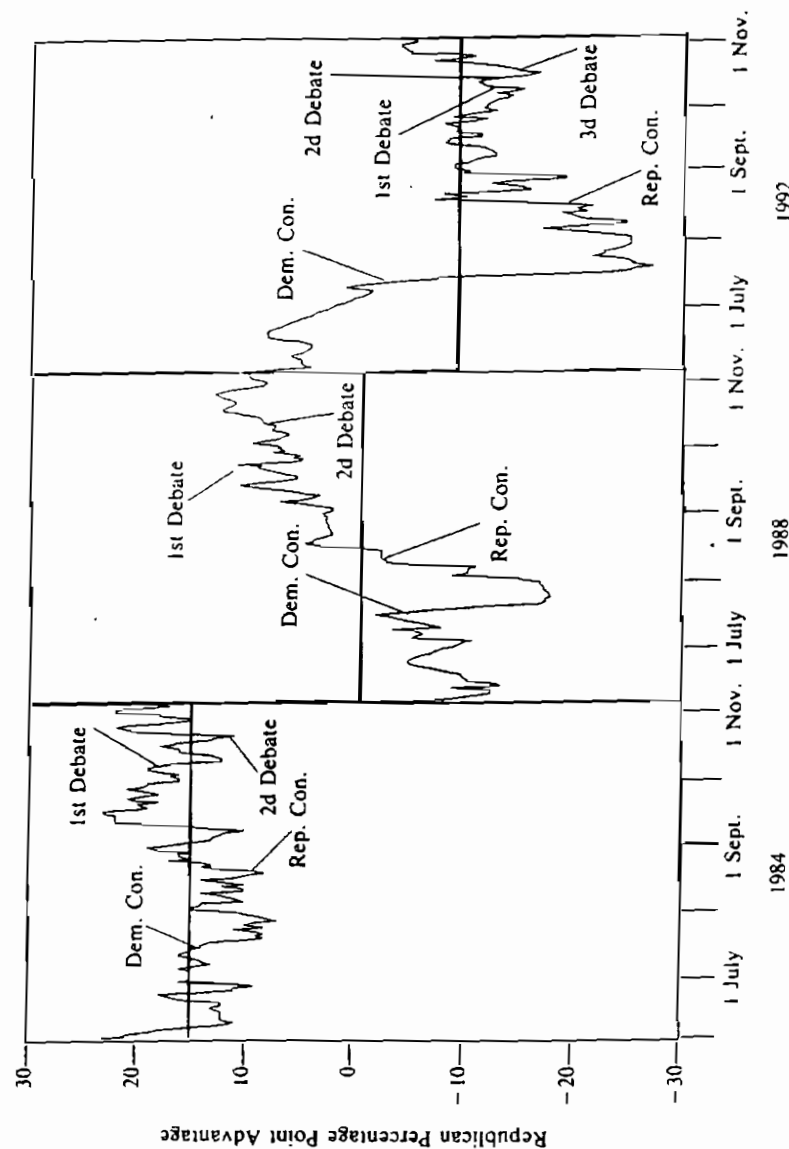
Note: Estimated using the Yule-Walker procedure. Estimates of first-order autocorrelation are .51, .67, and .53, for 1984, 1988, and 1992, respectively.

*significant < .10; **significant < .05.

1992 Democratic convention, however, had the greatest impact on candidate support.

In each of the election years, at least one of the televised presidential debates had a significant impact on candidate support. The first debate in 1984 cost Reagan about two percentage points of the vote. Recall that this was the debate in which Reagan appeared to be wandering and somewhat confused during his closing statement. The coefficient for the second debate (4.71), in which Reagan appeared to have recovered his poise and wit, suggests that Reagan more than gained back whatever he lost because of the first debate. In 1988 only the second debate had a significant impact, adding slightly under three percentage points to Bush's advantage. Recall that this was the debate in which Dukakis gave a rather emotionless response to a hypothetical question about whether he would favor the death penalty if someone were to rape and murder his wife. This was also the debate in which Bush was very much at ease with the panelists, often joking with them as they asked questions. In 1992 only the third debate had a significant impact on candidate support, again

Figure 1. Trial Heat Results, 1984-92



adding slightly over three percentage points to Bush's support. What probably distinguishes this debate from the others in 1992 is Bush's aggressiveness.

The events variable has a significant and positive effect on candidate support in 1988 and 1992. In both years, positive (negative) events generated slightly over a percentage point of additional (less) support for George Bush. To the extent that campaigns can control events, this effect could prove useful (or damaging, depending on your perspective), especially in close races.

Momentum has a fairly consistent impact in all three election years, although its effect is somewhat less pronounced in 1988. When a shift occurs in public opinion such that candidate support increases or decreases, momentum exacerbates the shift. For instance, if candidate support were to increase, due to some series of events, by five percentage points over a four-day period in 1984, momentum would generate an additional 1.1 percentage points ($.22 \times 5$) of support on the following day. What this means is that, once you factor in the effects of momentum, there is potential for the events in this model to generate much more impact than what is expected from the coefficients in Table 2.

The only other campaign variables are the two Perot dummy variables: one for the period before he declared he would not be a candidate and one for the period after he declared that he was a candidate. Neither of the Perot coefficients demonstrate a significant effect. What this means is that, in the presence of other control variables, neither candidate benefited from Perot's candidacy. This is not to suggest that Perot did not have an impact on the 1992 campaign. Rather, this suggests that in terms of relative candidate support, Perot's candidacy had no effect.

The results for the national variables are somewhat mixed. The coefficients for the national variables are not significant for either the 1984 or 1988 contests. In the analysis of the 1992 election, however, both presidential popularity and consumer sentiment are statistically significant and substantively important influences on candidate support. For every percentage point increase (decrease) in presidential popularity, support for Bush increased (decreased) .89 percentage points. For every unit increase (decrease) in consumer sentiment, support for Bush increased (decreased) .29 percentage points.

Why do such pronounced effects not occur during the 1984 and 1988 elections? Quite simply, presidential popularity and consumer sentiment did not exhibit much variation in these earlier elections. During the 1984 campaign, the range in presidential popularity was from 52% to 59%, and the range in the ICS was from 95.5 to 100.9. In 1988 presidential popularity ranged from 48% to 53%, and the ICS ranged from 93 to 97. In 1992

presidential popularity ranged from 29% to 40%, and the ICS ranged from 73 to 85. Since it is only in 1992 that the national variables exhibit much meaningful variation, it is only in 1992 that we should reasonably expect the national variables to have a significant impact.

Do the results in Table 2 mean that the national variables had no impact on the outcomes of the 1984 and 1988 elections? Certainly not. The model described earlier suggests that national conditions will be more important in determining the average level of the dependent variable throughout an election year than in influencing the ebb and flow of opinion during course of the campaign.

Pooled Analysis

To analyze the general effects of national and campaign related variables in elections from 1984 to 1992, the data from all three elections are pooled together into a single data set. Pooling the data in this manner poses a special set of statistical problems (Stimson 1985). For the present analysis, the primary problems are the possible existence of unique intercepts for each year and a significant autocorrelation process for each year. Two steps were taken to ameliorate these problems. First, a dummy variable is added to the analysis for the 1988 election (dummy variables for 1984 and 1992 were not statistically significant). Second, the data are analyzed using the Yule-Walker method described earlier, which corrects for first-order autocorrelation.⁷

The results of the pooled analysis are presented in Table 3. Aside from the exclusion of the Perot dummy variables (excluded due to lack of significance in the earlier analysis and their uniqueness to the 1992 election) and the inclusion of the 1988 dummy variable, all variables in Table 3 are the same as those presented in Table 2. Several interesting findings emerge from Table 3. First, the explanatory power of the model is quite strong. The R^2 statistic (.87) and the standard error (1.99) suggest a very close correspondence between the actual values of the dependent variable and the values estimated by the model. Second, most coefficients are quite similar to those found in Table 2. The effects of the debates are essentially the same as before, showing that the Republican candidates

⁷First-order autocorrelation for the pooled series is .60, which is very close to the average first-order autocorrelation of the three separate series (.53, .67, and .51). The Yule-Walker procedure was able to remove most of the autocorrelation in the data. The first-order autocorrelations for the separate years, after the Yule-Walker estimation procedure, are: .03, .21, and .20 for 1984, 1988, and 1992, respectively. For the pooled series, the first-order autocorrelation is .16, DW = 1.68 (the next four lags are .00, .13, .05, .14). According to Hanushek and Jackson (1977, 173), autocorrelations of .20 or less do not pose a significant problem. Lewis-Beck (1986, 234) suggests that the cutoff point is .30.

gained strength following the second debates of 1984 and 1988 and the third debate of 1992 and were slightly hurt by the first debate of 1984. Second, the convention coefficients stayed essentially the same. Again, the Republican convention of 1988 and the Democratic convention of 1992 stand out as the most important events in this analysis. The coefficient for the momentum variable is about equal its average value in the three equations in Table 2. The only campaign variable coefficient to exhibit much real difference from the earlier analysis is the events tally variable. Whereas the earlier analysis indicated that events had an impact only in the 1988 and 1992 campaigns, the coefficient in Table 3 suggests a more general effect.

The findings for the national variables are much different from those from the earlier analysis.⁸ According to Table 3, both presidential popularity and consumer sentiment are statistically significant and substantively important determinants of candidate support. While the coefficients for popularity (.51) and consumer sentiment (.20) may seem small, the potential effects of these variables can be quite large. Consider the difference between the average level of Bush's popularity during the 1992 campaign (36%) and the average level of Reagan's popularity during the 1984 campaign (55.2%). If we multiply the difference between these two values (19.2) by the coefficient for popularity (.51), the estimated differences in candidate support between these two years, due to differences in presidential popularity, is 9.79 percentage points, all else held equal. A similar comparison of the average level of the ICS for 1984 (97.7) and the average level of the ICS for 1992 (76.5), predicts a difference in candidate support of 4.24 percentage points, due to different levels of consumer confidence. Together, the difference in the national variables contribute 14.03 percentage points to the difference in Republican support between 1984 and 1992, all else held constant.

The behavior of the popularity and consumer sentiment coefficients is exactly as anticipated. In the within-year analysis, the national variables had a very limited impact on candidate support. Again, this is primarily the result of restricted variance in the national variables during a campaign series. However, in the pooled analysis in Table 3, where the model is explaining variance across and within campaign seasons, the

⁸The coefficient for the 1988 dummy variable cannot necessarily be interpreted as representing additional, unspecified national effects. While it is true that this coefficient represents an intercept shift for 1988, we cannot say for certain that this is due to differing national conditions. It is possible that the differences are attributable to differing, unspecified campaign tactics. As Stimson (1985) points out, such dummy variables are expressions of our ignorance and serve a purely statistical purpose.

Table 3. Pooled Model of the Determinants of Candidate Support during Presidential Campaigns, 1984-92 (GLS Results)

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>
Constant	-31.47	-5.74**
<i>Conventions:</i>		
Democratic, 1984	-2.05	-1.92*
Republican, 1984	4.58	4.60**
Democratic, 1988	-3.97	-3.66*
Republican, 1988	12.92	11.78**
Democratic, 1992	-17.24	-14.81**
Republican, 1992	5.21	4.96**
<i>Debates:</i>		
First, 1984	-2.32	-1.80*
Second, 1984	4.10	2.85**
First, 1988	1.11	.92
Second, 1988	3.37	2.62**
First, 1992	.01	.00
Second, 1992	-1.02	-.55
Third, 1992	3.58	2.08**
<i>Events</i>	.79	4.29**
Momentum	.17	4.55**
Presidential popularity	.51	4.96**
Consumer sentiment	.20	2.06**
1988	-20.31	-20.03**
$R^2 = .87.$		
SE = 1.99.		
N = 444.		

Note: The data have been corrected for first-order autocorrelation using the Yule-Walker procedure. The estimated value of first-order autocorrelation (prior to correction) is .60.

*significant < .10; **significant < .05.

national variables are significant and important determinants of candidate support.

The analysis thus far indicates that national conditions and, to some extent, campaign events play an important role in determining support for candidates in presidential elections. One question yet to be resolved is how important the two sets of variables are relative to each other. Table 4 presents estimates of the relative impact of the campaign variables and the national conditions variables. The first two lines in the table

Table 4. The Net Effects of the Independent Variables

Variable	1984	1988	1992
<i>Net Effects:</i>			
Campaign variables	.99	15.32	-12.0
National conditions	49.69	46.80	36.70
<i>Simulated outcomes:</i>			
Outcome under 1980 conditions	1.18	-4.80	-11.81
Difference between simulated and original estimates	-16.82	-15.19	-6.16

Note: The estimates in the net effects line are based on multiplying the coefficients in Table 3 times the values of the independent variables on the last day of polling and then summing the products. Estimates in the third row are based on simulating 1980 values of presidential popularity (32%) and consumer sentiment (76.7) for each of the three election years. The resulting numbers represent an estimate of the Republican vote advantage in each election year if national conditions were the same as in 1980. The numbers in the fourth row are calculated by subtracting the original estimated outcome from the simulated 1980 outcome.

summarize the aggregate impact of each of the two groups of variables on the last day of polling (the last-day polling results are used here as a proxy for the actual election outcomes). These results were obtained by multiplying the coefficients from the pooled analysis times the value of the independent variables on the last day of polling and summing the products. The resulting numbers tell us the net effect of the variables on candidate support for that day.⁹ According to these results, the national variables had a substantially greater impact in each of the election years than did the campaign variables. In 1984 there was almost no net effect from the campaign; in 1988 the campaign events favored the Republicans by about 15 percentage points; and in 1992 the campaign events favored the Democrats by about 12 percentage points. At no point do the campaign effects begin to rival the effects of national conditions.

Another way to illustrate the effects of national conditions is to simulate an alternative national environment for each of the three elections. In other words, one could ask how the elections would have turned out under different national conditions, while holding constant the magnitude of campaign effects. The third line of numbers in Table 4 contains estimates of how the three elections would have turned out if they had been

⁹The sum of these numbers, plus the constant and the value of the 1988 dummy variable, are approximately equal to the actual value of the dependent variable on the last day of polling.

held under the same national conditions that existed at the time of the 1980 election. The 1980 election is used as a comparison because of the relatively low values of both presidential popularity (32%) and consumer sentiment (index = 76.7) at the time of the election. According to these estimates, under 1980 conditions the 1984 election would have been too close to call; the Republicans would have lost the 1988 election; and they would have lost the 1992 election by a substantially wider margin than they actually did. These results are further illustrated in the fourth line of Table 4, which presents the difference between outcomes estimated with the actual levels of the national variables and outcomes estimated with the 1980 values of the national conditions. Here again it is shown that national conditions can account for wide swings in party support.

Conclusion

This analysis has sought to shed light on the issue of the relative impact of presidential campaigns and national conditions on presidential election outcomes. As a means of addressing this issue, the analysis has focused on how both sets of factors influence public opinion during and across campaign seasons. Reviewing the evidence, it appears that several different types of campaign events have an impact on public opinion. First, it is clear that the political conventions sway public opinion in favor of the party's candidate. Sometimes, the movement in opinion following the conventions is truly enormous. Second, the debates have potential to move public opinion, although the effects of debates are less consistent and generally of smaller magnitude than those of the conventions. Third, momentum was also found to have a significant influence on public opinion, although the impact of momentum is rather small. Finally, the events tally variable suggests that other types of events, both from the campaigns and outside the campaign, can have an impact on public opinion.

All of this is not to say, however, that campaigns determine election outcomes. In fact, it appears that national conditions are more important in determining the overall level of support for candidates, and therefore election outcomes, than are campaign-related events. Consistent with previous research, presidential popularity and the perceived state of the economy are strongly related to candidate support.

Again, this does not mean that the campaign is irrelevant. As spelled out above, the campaign clearly has an impact on public opinion. In fact, in both 1988 and 1992, the net effect of campaign events (see Table 4) was quite substantial. The important issue for this analysis, however, is how substantial these effects are compared to the effects of national conditions. Even given the impact of campaign events in 1988 and 1992, they had virtually no net impact in 1984. The 1984 election is a good

example of how individual events (especially conventions and debates) can have a significant effect on public opinion yet have no net effect because the events cancel each other. What this indicates is that the greatest potential for campaign events to exert maximum influence is found when the effects of events are clearly lopsided. In other words, if one party were to completely blow all campaign events, the net effect might be enough to be a determining factor in the election outcome (depending, of course, on the prevailing political and economic conditions).

In sum, then, both campaign events and national conditions are important influences on public opinion in election years. It should not be forgotten that both sets of factors contribute to the final election outcome. In most cases, however, it is perceptions of the economy and evaluations of the performance of the president—not how well a candidate delivers the acceptance speech or how snappy the sound bites are during the debates—that are most responsible for the final outcome.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF EVENTS DURING THE CAMPAIGN

1984

June 6	Mondale claims nomination (-)
June 12	Mondale announces beginning of V.P. search (-)
June 14	Reagan holds press conference (+)
June 21	Mondale interviews Tom Bradley for V.P. slot (-)
June 23	Mondale interviews Bentsen and Feinstein for V.P. slot (-)
June 26	Mondale and Hart meet to show unity (-)
July 12	Mondale announces V.P. choice (-)
July 14	Mondale tries to replace Mannat with Lance (+)
July 24	Reagan holds press conference (+)
August 9	AFL-CIO endorses Mondale (-)
August 11	Reagan jokes about bombing USSR (-)
August 12	Potential problems with Ferraro's taxes announced (+)
August 21	Ferraro discusses taxes at press conference (+)
August 25	Mondale meets with Democratic governors (-)
August 28	John Anderson endorses Mondale (-)
August 29	Mondale meets with Democratic mayors (-)
August 30	Teamsters endorse Reagan (+)
August 30	Ferraro produces tax records (+)
September 7	Meese nomination set aside (-)
September 11	Gromyko invited to United States (+)
September 12	House Ethics Committee announces it will investigate Ferraro's finances (+)
September 20	U.S. embassy in Beirut bombed (+)

September 24	Reagan addresses United Nations (+)
September 27	Mondale meets with Gromyko (-)
September 28	Reagan meets with Gromyko (+)
October 1	Labor Secretary Donovan indicted (-)
October 8	Wall Street Journal and NBC News both question whether Reagan is too old to be effective (-)

1988

June 7	Dukakis clinches nomination (-)
June 8	Dukakis endorsed by Simon, Gephardt, Babbitt, and Cuomo (-)
June 14	Pentagon scandal announced (-)
June 16	Gore endorses Dukakis (-)
June 10	Investigation of Jim Wright announced (+)
June 19-21	Reagan at economic summit (+)
July 3	U.S. shoots down Iranian airliner (+)
July 5	Meese announces he will resign (-)
July 12	Dukakis announces V.P. choice (-)
July 12	Thornburgh announced as Meese replacement (+)
July 18	Justice Department announces that Meese "probably violated the law" (-)
July 29	Dukakis denies he has suffered from clinical depression (+)
August 4	Dukakis holds rally in Philadelphia, MS. without mentioning slain civil rights workers (+)
August 6	James Baker resigns; leaves administration to join Bush campaign (+)
August 24	AFL-CIO endorses Dukakis (-)
August 26	Bush raises pledge of allegiance and prison furlough issues (+)
September 1	Bush visits Boston Harbor (+)
September 8	NEA endorses Dukakis (-)
September 11	Malek resigns from Bush campaign (-)
September 20	Bush visits flag factory (+)
September 22	Boston police union endorses Bush (+)
October 3	Bush's "Revolving Prison Door" ad begins (+)
October 13	Teamsters endorse Bush (+)
October 19	Bush's "Tank" ad begins (+)
October 24	Dukakis launches talk show blitz (-)

1992

June 3	Clinton appears on Arsenio Hall Show (-)
June 4	Bush holds news conference (+)
June 13	Clinton denounces Sister Souljah's lyrics (-)
June 15	Quayle "potato(e)" incident in New Jersey (-)
June 16	Weinberger indicted (-)
June 16-17	Bush and Yeltsin hold Washington, DC, summit (+)
June 19	Quayle blasts "Cultural Elite" (+)
June 21	Clinton releases economic plan (-)
July 6-8	Bush at Munich Economic Summit (+)
July 9	Clinton picks Gore as V.P. (-)
July 17-22	Clinton/Gore bus trip (-)
July 30	Advertisement placed in national papers calling for Quayle to step down from the ticket (-)

August 5-7	Second Clinton/Gore bus trip (-)
August 13	Baker resigns as secretary of state to become Bush's chief of staff (+)
August 25	Schultz's notes, suggesting that Bush knew about the arms for hostages deal, are made public (-)
August 26	"No-Fly" zone established in Iraq (+)
September 1	Bush addresses nation (Hurricane Andrew) (+)
September 4	Clinton says he knew about his uncle's role in helping him to avoid the draft (+)
September 10	Bush gives economic address in Detroit (+)
September 16	First debate canceled (-)
September 19	Crowe endorses Clinton (-)
September 21	Bush attacks Clinton's draft record as new information comes out (+)
September 29	Bush makes debate proposal (+)
October 7	NAFTA signed (+)
October 14	State Department admits error in passport probe (-)
October 30	Weinberger's notes are released (-)

Sources: *Facts on File, Campaign for President: The Managers Look at '84*, ed. Jonathan Moore (Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1986); *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at '88*, ed. David M. Runkel (Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1989); *The Quest for the Presidency: The 1988 Campaign*, ed. Peter Goldman et al. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); *The Quest for the Presidency: The 1984 Campaign*, ed. Peter Goldman et al. (New York: Bantam Books, 1985).

APPENDIX B: CALCULATING THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The dependent variable for each election year is based on trial heat poll results for the race between the major presidential candidates. For the 1984 election, the data were taken from Goldman et al. (1986, 454), who present daily tracking poll results provided by Richard Wirthlin, pollster for the Reagan campaign. The poll results are based on four-day tracking polls from 4 June through 4 October and two-day tracking polls from 5 October through 5 November. These data are somewhat unique compared to those used for the 1988 and 1992 analysis in that they are provided by a single polling organization and cover virtually every day from early June through election day.

Gathering the data for 1988 and 1992 required a bit more creativity. These opinion estimates were generated on the basis of poll results provided in *Public Opinion* (November–December 1988) and *Public Perspective* (July–August, September–October, and November–December 1992). Daily candidate support figures were calculated in the following manner. First, poll results for support for the Republican and Democratic candidates were recorded for each day from early June through the last polls taken before the election. To avoid incompatible poll results, only those polls that sampled registered voters were used in the analysis. Second, the poll results were averaged by day, yielding a single figure for Republican and Democratic candidate support for each day that polling results were available. The difference between the percentage supporting the Republican candidate and the percentage supporting the Democratic candidate (Republican % - Democratic %) was then calculated and used as the dependent variable. The data in Table A.1 illustrate how the dependent variable was calculated for 6–8 June, based on the results of a Gallup poll taken 6–8 June and a *Washington Post/ABC* News poll taken 6–7 June.

The days for which polling data are not available present a special problem. Rather than exclude these days from the analysis, poll values were estimated for these days by

Table A.1. Calculating the Dependent Variable

Poll	Gallup %	Washington Post/ABC %	Daily Mean %	Republican Advantage %
6 June:				
Bush	31	30	30.5	
Clinton	25	26	25.5	+ 5
7 June:				
Bush	31	30	30.5	
Clinton	25	26	25.5	+ 5
8 June:				
Bush	31	—	31	
Clinton	25	—	25	+ 6

interpolating between days with existing data. For example, if the polling data give a Republican advantage of six percentage points on one day, eight percentage points two days later, and no data are available for the middle day, an interpolated value of seven percentage points would be assigned to the middle day.

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