The Great Divide: Campaign Media in the American Mind

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As a scholar of media and politics, I am frequently asked to participate in media commentary during election years. Although I wholeheartedly believe in the importance of academic outreach to the larger world, I suspect that this is my least favorite part of my job. It is in this context that I am most often told…strongly, unequivocally, and unanimously… that I am wrong. The multitude of observations involving media and politics about which I am wrong is both wide and deep. They converge around my relative naiveté in understanding the sheer power of the monster. When I take part in a radio call-in program or appear on an election-night television broadcast, then I, too, become part of the monster, wielding its incredible power while simultaneously

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First, I provide a sketch of how academic thinking on this topic has evolved since the early twentieth century. Second, I explain in greater detail the origins of public beliefs in omnipotent media. I also respond to the counterarguments that are frequently offered up to prove that academics are simply too out of touch with the real world to understand what is actually going on. Finally, I explore the reasons that this gap in understanding has only widened in recent years.

For American citizens, it often seems self-evident that, as the old adage goes, political candidates are sold like soap: they are simply advertised directly to the public.[1] In reality, there are fewer similarities than one might expect between the selling of packaged goods and the winning of votes for candidates. Because of these dissimilarities, public assessments of the importance of paid and unpaid media in campaigns may be off by miles rather than inches. Candidates are much more dif½cult to sell than soap, particularly when they run for high-level of½ces that attract the most press attention and the strongest

ence on political opinions and on vote choice in particular. Sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University initiated this work, using a series of panel surveys of single communities in the United States. These studies, later known collectively as the Columbia Studies,[6] suggested that most citizens knew for whom they would vote long before the general election campaign; and in interview after interview, they stuck to that preference. In the original Erie County, Ohio, study of the 1940 election, only 8 percent ever changed their minds between May and the November election. Those few who did change their prefer-

immunity in the television audience. Perhaps the symbols and postures used in political advertising are such patently ridiculous attempts at manipulation that they appear more ridiculous than reliable. Whatever the precise reasons, television viewers effectively protect themselves from manipulation by staged imagery.[13]

to be, and the more facial hair they will expect him to have.[18]

Media•s ubiquity leads people to infer that media must be powerful, if only because its presence dominates all aspects of life and reaches all kinds of people. Although political media flood the airwaves only during election years, Americans think about the sheer number of people reached by these political messages and assume high levels of persuasion from the high visibility of media. Further, many of these messages are obviously designed to be persuasive, so it seems self-evident that they must move opinions.

Americans believe in the political power of television in particular. The 1987 U.S. News & World Report cover heralded r •Television•s Blinding Power.Ž This •telemythology,Ž as it has since been dubbed by academics, consists of •a set of widely circulated stories about the dangerous powers of television.Ž[19] There is a strong belief among Washington elites •that the general public can be mesmerized by television images. . . . The power of television is perhaps more ½rmly an article of faith in Washington than anywhere else in the country.Ž[20]

In addition to the tremendous reach and visibility of television, most Americans are well aware of the mass persuasion industry and of political consultants and political advertising in particular. Given the received wisdom that politicians are sold just like soap, why shouldn•t the public infer that political ads, like product advertisements, typically persuade people to •purchaseŽ the product? This simple analogy often fails because the political context includes several important differences. First, although there is brand loyalty when one buys soap, it is nothing like the long-term brand loyalty inspired by political parties, which tends to remain stable throughout adulthood. Given that most Americans vote consistent with their preexisting party identi½cation, these persuasive communications are up against fairly powerful adversaries.

Moreover, the product marketplace includes dozens of choices for soap. For this reason, one brand rarely campaigns against another by throwing mud at a speci½c target. If Dove badmouths Irish Spring, consumers can easily turn to Dial instead of Dove, so negativity is not an ef½cient approach to boosting sales. Further, as noted above, it is easier to observe effects from product advertising because Dial and Dove seldom launch their advertising campaigns at exactly the same time. When

Citizens logically infer that all this activity must somehow make a difference.

To push this argument further, why wouldn•t political media consultants eventually go out of business if they were ineffective at producing the results their candidates desire? The rise of highly professionalized political campaigns is known worldwide as the •AmericanizationŽ of campaigns: •Theusa is universally acknowledged as the leader in campaign in-

from place to place and election to election. If what they do is not as effective as has been assumed, they may not want to know about it because that would wreak havoc on their business models: •Few involved in management of campaigns have an interest in developing a clear sense of what works.Ž[28]

In a few isolated cases, consultants have collaborated with academics to run scienti½c ½eld experiments in order to test, for example, which techniques have the greatest effect in increasing turnout.[29] But for the most part, consultants are uninterested in empirically validated best practices and prefer to stick with folk wisdom. Tracking polls, which show overtime trends in a candidate•s standings, are about as close as they come to gathering evidence that allows them to ascertain whether one approach works better than another. But in an uncontrolled campaign environment in which everyone receives the •treatment,Ž there are typically so many potential interpretations of what caused any observed change that strong causal inference is impossible.

Often, the knowledge gained can only bene½t those campaigns that follow the one invested in the research. As one campaign operative complained, •Finding out the day after the election that Treatment A was the best is of limited value to an organization like ours. We•re actually trying to win the -.0008 T.1(o)48 actu-,

Ironically, America leads the world in spending huge amounts of money on something that only possibly accomplishes what it sets out to do. If campaign media does persuade voters, it does so

The mass public, on the other hand, looks at some of the programming on offer today and ½nds it to be heavily biased toward one candidate or the other…more so than in the past. As a result, the public sees the potential for persuasive influence from media as greater than ever before. Without taking into account the likely audiences for these programs, the content itself seems far more hard-hitting and potentially persuasive than the news programs of the past, which at least attempted to achieve balance and neutrality.

Further, through a bizarre trend dubbed media narcissism,

similar outcries about the increasingly high costs of elections. The underlying reason that people are upset about the amount spent on campaigns is that they believe money buys television airtime, which, in turn, buys votes. When television time does buy votes, it does so highly inef½ciently. Thus, my own complaint is somewhat different: the problem with the high costs of campaigns is that such huge amounts of money are spent unproductively and inef½ciently when they could be spent in ways that more directly affect Americans. Despite the rise of narrowcasting, television is still among the least ef½cient means of persuasion, dollar for dollar. But the high costs of television and its perceived necessity mean that political leaders feel they must spend more and more of their time raising money rather than governing.

For a variety of reasons, media influence is indeed a dif½cult topic to study outside the laboratory. But regardless of the extent to which media actually influence election outcomes, we are not, as a political culture, well served by these extreme beliefs in media power. My problem with this common approach to covering campaigns runs deeper than the usual gripe, which is that coverage of strategy and tactics displaces more serious coverage of the campaign. The real problem stems from our culture•s underlying attitude toward political persuasion more generally.

I was struck by this underlying assump-

and Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Election (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

7 For a review of the Columbia Studies• ½ndings with respect to media influence, see Steven H. Chaffee and John L. Hockheimer, •The Beginnings of Political Communication Research in the United States: Origins of the •Limited Effects• Model,Ž in The Media Revolution in America and Western Europe

Media coverage has too much influence on who Americans vote forŽ; Con½dence in Leadership Survey, September 2007. Data are provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

49 This ½gure is based on responses to the following question: •Please tell me whether you think the news media today have more, less or about the same influence as they did 40 or 50 years ago [on] [w]ho becomes PresidentŽ; Roper Starch Worldwide, January 27…30, 2000. Data are provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.