Much is written about the effect that the mass media have upon the presentation, and the outcome, of political campaigns. Frequently, critics charge that news reporting focuses on the superficial, personal characteristics of candidates and ignores the issues underlying elections. Observers of the process also target advertising, which they say
distorts positions and trivializes important issues. At the same time, it is suggested that
the predominance of polling by news outlets turns elections into popularity contests and
causes candidates to follow rather than lead voter opinion on contemporary issues. This
ERIC Digest looks at these and related questions about the relationship between the
political process and the media.

"PAID FOR BY THE COMMITTEE TO ELECT..."

Advertising, by its nature, takes positions. Commercials suggest that the advertiser's
product is better than a competitor's or is important to the viewer's well-being. Such a
claim may or may not be true, and the question is not always so easy for the reader,
viewer, or listener to evaluate. While the results of a bad choice about which brand of
soap to buy may be inconsequential, a wrong decision about whom to elect to a position
of public trust can have far-reaching consequences.
The ramifications of advertising in politics are not all negative. Advertisements can help
the public become aware of political candidates and issues and educate would-be
voters about what is at stake in campaigns. In fact, commercials can be more instructive
in that regard than debates (Just, 1990).

As is true of other types of human relationships, first impressions can be very important
as voters form their opinions about political candidates. A study of the 1976 U.S.
presidential race between Carter and Ford indicates that voters' initial reactions to
Carter's image shaped their later voting behavior. For Ford, initial reactions to issues
played a larger role (Oshagan, 1988).

Research on Australian elections suggests that candidates' use of the media can have a
strong impact upon those who make up their minds about candidates during the
campaign. Such voters are more likely to be swayed by political appeals than are
people who have decided whom to choose before a campaign starts. While partisan
voters use the media because they are interested in politics, undecided voters refer to
media sources for information about parties, candidates, and issues (Blood, 1991).

THE ROLE OF THE TELEVISION DEBATE IN
ELECTIONS

Many observers consider the 1960 debate between U.S. presidential candidates
Kennedy and Nixon to be a textbook example of television-age political campaigning. It
has often been asserted that differences in the two candidates' television personae
accounted in part for Kennedy's election victory. Some, however, dispute the
significance of the televised 1960 debates, suggesting that while visual cues
undoubtedly have the potential to influence voter perceptions, the nature and extent of
the influence remain a matter of speculation (Vancil and Pendell, 1987).
Debates involving candidates for the 1988 presidential nomination carry a similar
message. Results of a study of college students revealed the finding that the winner of the 1988 debate was predicted by perceptions of the candidate who projected the strongest personal image, the greatest credibility, the most logical arguments, and the strongest emotional appeals. Furthermore, voter preferences expressed after a first debate were strong predictors of eventual candidate choice (Keyton, 1989).

In some political campaigns, even the lack of debates can have significance. George Bush's successful 1988 presidential campaign employed debate avoidance, a reliance upon emotional appeals and ridicule, and a de-emphasis of issues. Both of the major U.S. political parties have used such strategies, considered to be departures from ethical behavior (Kelley, 1990).

INDIVIDUAL VOTER CHARACTERISTICS AND THE MEDIA

Men and women react differently to the media analysis that generally follows political debates. A study conducted at the University of Florida during the 1988 vice-presidential debates showed that females took less extreme views of candidates after viewing post-debate analysis. By contrast, such analysis had little effect on the extremity of views expressed by politically involved males (Engstrom, 1989).

During the 1988 presidential campaign, the "gender gap," a perception that men and women viewed the leading candidates differently, was much discussed. George Bush's campaign planners were able to battle the gap through the way in which the candidate was portrayed in advertising. One advertising approach was to represent Bush as a law-and-order "Equalizer," who shared women's concerns about street crime. Another technique was to underscore Bush's belief in traditional family values. Thirdly, the campaign used ads that underscored the candidate's ability to laugh at himself, as a way of showing his human side (Nelson, 1989).

Like gender, race plays a role in how people view social issues and even how people respond to questions about such issues. Various studies have indicated that a member of one race will answer questions from an interviewer of another race in such a way as to avoid alienating the interviewer. It can be argued that even when an interviewer and interviewee are of the same race, survey results should be scrutinized carefully when the interviewer's questions concern a candidate of a different race. What remains to be explored is whether race should be treated as an uncontrolled variable in political surveys involving at least one white and one black candidate. (Loge, 1989).

MEDIA COVERAGE AND CAMPAIGN AWARENESS

Whatever its positive or negative effects, exposure to the news media does influence
public awareness of elections. In a study of the 1988 Southern "Super Tuesday" regional primary, researchers found exposure to all media to be positively and significantly related to voter awareness of the campaign, as well as to voter perceptions of increased campaign activity and perceptions of increased Southern political prominence. Exposure to partisan political information was found to be significantly related only to perceptions of increased campaign activity (Walker, 1990).

Educators need more information about the role of television in elections, and particularly how television influences young voters. Among future voters, television appears to affect their political attitudes. A study examined the political views of 10- to 17-year olds and their parents before and after the 1988 election. While parents' attitudes seemed to be the greatest influence upon the political socialization of the younger children, television appeared to be the greatest influence upon the older ones (Sears and Weber, 1988).

The effect of media coverage of elections is visible on the local level as well. Newspaper stories and advertisements can raise public awareness of municipal and school board elections, to the extent that voter turnout increases as a result (Luttbeg, 1988). Interestingly, a study of Philadelphia voters suggests that media reliance (defined as identification of a particular medium as one's main source of campaign information) is unrelated to campaign knowledge and activity (Rosenberg and Elliot, 1989).

Between 1972 and 1988, there was an increasing tendency among the major news outlets to report on the content of the political advertisements themselves. By presenting segments of negative ads during newscasts, such news reports may have had the effect of promoting the candidates whose commercials were being discussed and legitimizing political advertising as a basis for political decision making (Garner, et al., 1990).

In the 1992 presidential primaries, the public perceived the campaign as a largely negative one, with candidates trading criticisms and allegations. As the campaign has unfolded, would-be voters have given low marks to the news media. An LA TIMES-MIRROR poll reported in the NY TIMES indicated that a majority felt that the press had "too much" influence on who became President. The same NY TIMES article cited a poll of Boston area residents, half of whom ranked news coverage of the 1992 race as "fair" or "poor." A somewhat more generous view of the news media emerged from a national survey by the Center for the People and the Press, in which 65% of respondents described the 1992 election coverage as "good" or "excellent." Still, a third of those surveyed called the reporting "fair" or "poor" (Kolbert, 1992).

REFERENCES


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