The Differential Impact of Mass Media on Political Learning During The 1996 Presidential Election

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INTRODUCTION

An informed public discourse is an essential cornerstone in the foundation of any democracy. In the United States, it is the mass media which are most responsible for providing the critical informational link between elites and the masses. Over the years, an enormous body of literature has developed in an attempt to evaluate the performance of the mass media in fulfilling their democratic objectives. Although it has advanced our understanding of media effects considerably, the existing literature suffers from important shortcomings which continue to impede scientific progress in this important field. The proposed study represents an attempt to address these shortcomings.

The following proposal is considered in four sections: First, a literature review will serve to clarify the state of the research on media effects as well as to identify deficiencies which continue to hinder its progress. Second, based on the examination of relevant literature, a general theory of media effects will be presented. Third, having established a theoretical foundation, several hypotheses will be submitted for testing. And finally, a brief description is offered outlining the methods designed to address the central question of this inquiry: the differential impact of media on political learning during the 1996 presidential election.

THE RESEARCH ON MEDIA EFFECTS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Evidence of Media Effects The study of media effects began ominously enough when Adolf Hitler rose to power providing support for a hypodermic effect—the notion that people are helpless to resist the persuasion of propaganda, that messages are literally injected into the mind where they are stored in the form of changes of feelings and attitudes (Trent and Friedenberg 1995). The hypodermic thesis gave way in the 1940s to the social influence model developed by researchers from Columbia University. Lazarsfeld, et al., (1954) uncovered evidence for a minimal effects model and found that very few people changed their mind in response to campaign propaganda. While the Columbia School emphasized sociological explanations, the University of Michigan Survey Research Center introduced in the 1950s the importance of cognitive and attitudinal explanations for voting decisions. Research conducted by the Michigan school emphasizes the influence of partisan identification in the votes of citizens.

An exhaustive consideration of the contemporary evidence of media effects lies well beyond the scope of the present study. The subject of interest here is the impact of media on political learning. For the purposes of this review, the relevant evidence suggesting media effects on political learning is considered for studies examining the impact of a single medium, and for comparative studies examining the differential impact of more than one medium.

Single Medium Studies Considerations of the influence of a single medium on political learning include studies of television news, televised political ads, radio ads, newspapers, and presidential debates. Investigations of television’s impact on political learning are plentiful, their conclusions diverse. Graber (1990) has found that television news stories militate against learning. Because television news stories are short, it is difficult for them to convey much information. In her study 33% of the stories included for analysis were covered in less than one minute. Political learning is further complicated by the simultaneous bombardment of the viewer...
with verbal information that is only partially redundant with pictorial information. Also, Graber (1996) has argued that producers of television news do not take full advantage of the medium's potential to provide citizens with the information they need to fulfill their civic functions.

Along similar lines, Robinson and Davis (1990) suggest television is a relatively ineffective means of acquiring new information. Their study reveals that most differences by amount of TV viewing are either insignificant or significant in the wrong direction, that is, those who view TV newscasts or who claim TV newscasts to be their main information source have lower comprehension scores. Based on samples of network evening news broadcasts from each presidential election from 1968-1988, Hallin (1992) implies that political learning is made more difficult by decline in the average length of sound bites from 43 to 9 seconds over the same period.

In contrast to these findings, the results of an experimental design conducted by Iyengar and Kinder (1982) have led them to conclude that television news has significant effects on issue salience. They state: television programs profoundly affect which problems viewers take seriously. This is especially true among the politically naive, who seem unable to challenge the pictures and narratives that appear on their TV sets. Their study also uncovers evidence of priming: problems prominently positioned in television broadcasts loom large in subjects' evaluations of presidential performance. In his description of the Allusion of intimacy, Keeter (1987) has demonstrated that, since the 1960s, candidate personal qualities have become more important for voters who depend on television, and less important for voters who rely on newspapers. As a final example of television's impact on learning, Capella and Jamieson (1996) have argued that the increasing use of strategy frames in television newscasts, rather than focusing on social problems and their solutions, has led to an increase in public cynicism in particular, and to a decline in the public trust of the media more generally.

In a study of the impact of newspapers on learning, Mondak (1995) found that exposure to a major local newspaper did not enhance knowledge of national or international politics, but did contribute to self-perceived knowledge of campaigns. In his study, the strongest predictors of information acquisition were education and prior knowledge. In their comparison of positive and negative radio ads, Shapiro and Reiger (1992) have shown that negative ad arguments were remembered more than arguments from positive ads. However, in contrast to negative issue ads, negative image ads were seen as relatively unfair and resulted in a backlash against the sponsor. Finally, are the studies addressing the impact of presidential debates. Berquist and Golden (1981) provide anecdotal evidence in support of their thesis that the 1980 presidential debates were electronic media events in which a speaker's delivery, appearance, and overall manner as filtered through the television screen proved to be more important than substance. They additionally find that perceptions of the debates are shaped by media analysis which begins shortly following their conclusion. In a more systematic analysis, Zakahi, et al., (1993) have claimed that even among the most undecided voters, the debate had little effect on voting intention. Also, Pfau and Kang (1989) argue that the 1988 debates served only to reinforce preexisting attitudes. Lichtenstein (1982) reports, however, that 80% of the viewers of debates between local candidates learned about the candidates by viewing the debates, whereas only 55% percent made the same claim about presidential debates.

The findings uncovered by studies of television's impact on political learning are mixed at
best. It was remarked in one study that immediately following the introduction of a new medium into American culture, that medium is inevitably blamed for the rise of many of the problems plaguing society. This was the case with the introduction of radio and, as evident from the conclusions drawn by many media scholars, it certainly is the case with television.

**Comparative Media Studies** Although television has been shown by single medium studies to be a less than ideal source of political learning, a medium’s true value can only be evaluated in comparative studies which consider the impact of multiple media. Several such studies are considered. An early study conducted by Neuman (1976) found that the better educated strata are more attentive to stories in the print media, and over time this knowledge gap widens between themselves and the less attentive in terms of knowledge and understanding (122). Neumann argues that television plays the role of a knowledge-leveler because many people not reached by newspapers and magazines are exposed to television.

In line with these results, Price and Zaller (1993) provide additional evidence supporting the knowledge gap hypothesis. In their study of media usage, including TV, radio, and newspapers, they found that prior political knowledge is the strongest predictor of news recall. More or less regardless of self-reported levels of mass media use, someone who is generally well informed about politics will tend to be well informed about whatever the media cover... (157).

In a study comparing televised political ads and televised debates, Just, et al., (1990) found that political ads are less ambitious, but more successful in conveying candidate information... (121). Their evidence points away from the superiority of televised debates as a source of political learning. Television viewers can and do learn about candidates from political advertisements (131). While Just, et al., (1990) have shown that TV ads are superior to debates as a source of political learning, Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) have demonstrated that, when knowledge levels are controlled, television makes about as strong a contribution to knowledge gain as does the newspaper. In another study, Zhao and Chaffee (1995) report that TV news is superior to political ads. Based on interview data from six campaigns surveys of voters from 1984 to 1992, they conclude that television maintained its edge over political ads in 5 of the 6 campaign surveys, with the notable exception of the North Carolina Senate race between Helms and Gant in 1992. The effects of television news hold up even after controls for newspaper reading. It should be pointed out that the importance of television news in political learning detected by Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) and Zhao and Chaffee (1995) contradicts the conclusions reached in Patterson and McClure’s (1976) frequently cited study which suggest that voters learn from televised political ads, but not from television news. In contradiction to these findings are those of Robinson and Levy (1996). In their comparative study of newspapers, television news, radio news, magazines, and books, they have shown that television news is a weak predictor of information gain. In their view, the higher scores for television news viewers are principally a function of their demographic characteristics and use of other news media. For Robinson and Levy, despite their dwindling readership, newspapers remain America’s premier source of public affairs information.

DeFleur, et al., (1992) present a study comparing the recall resulting from presentations by newspapers, television, radio, and computer screens. Their results show that news stories read in newspapers or computer screens were recalled at a significantly higher level among the 240
subjects tested than the same stories presented to subjects in the broadcast media. Theirs represents one of the only systematic comparative studies conducted which examine the influence of computers on political learning.

Brians and Wattenberg (1996) present a comparison of how voters gain issue knowledge and salience from television ads, television news, and newspapers during campaigns. They find that citizens who recall political ads have the most accurate knowledge of candidate issue positions. And, in terms of salience, citizens who recall political ads are also more likely to use domestic and foreign issues to evaluate presidential candidates. Also, consumption of negative ads was associated with greater issue knowledge and use of issues late in the campaign.

Finally, Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) provide a book length treatment of the construction of political meaning in Common Knowledge. Their findings cast doubt on those studies which assert newspapers are a superior source of political learning. They show that television has a slight edge over news magazines in terms of the amount of political learning, and a much larger edge over newspapers. Also, they demonstrate that TV is most suited to learning about issues that are more distant or abstract, such as South Africa or SDI. The attention-grabbing nature of television makes it easier to learn about low salience issues. Their findings also suggest that the differences we do find in comparing television and print media are more the result of the journalistic conventions for presentations of the news that have evolved in each medium than the physical modalities of communications by audio and moving images versus text.

This finding stands in stark contrast to Graber’s (1990) conclusion that recall of television news is enhanced by visuals. But Neuman et al., (1992) would respond, there is no significant difference in learning across the audiovisual, the audio-only, and print conditions when content is held constant. They argue that, because news magazines are as literacy based as newspapers, the reason for magazine superiority must lie in its style of presentation, rather than the modality of print. Finally, the authors provide evidence to suggest that the television-is-the-problem effect can be explained by the preference of people with lower cognitive skills to get their news from television. Their results show that three-quarters of the least cognitively skilled prefer broadcast news, while just over half of the most skilled prefer either newspapers or news magazines (significant at $p < .05$). Likewise, Brians and Wattenberg (1996) argue that by controlling for other variables associated with newspaper reading and campaign interest may dissipate the medium’s explanatory value.

**Shortcomings** Quite evident from the above review of the literature are several shortcomings. First, although the emphasis in this review has been on comparative studies, there are far more studies examining a single medium than comparative studies. For example, there is very little comparative research which has produced substantive findings on televised debates or radio influence on political learning. Only by simultaneously examining the impact of various media on political learning can we get an accurate indication of the value of a single medium in a given study. Many of the single medium studies have shown television to be wanting in terms of its value for facilitating political learning. But only in comparing television to other media in studies like those of Brians and Wattenberg (1996) and Neuman, et al., (1992) is it possible to get a more accurate picture of how a medium contributes to political learning.

Second, the literature on media effects on political learning is plagued by a host of
contradictory findings. Which findings should we believe: those which suggest television news is a more capable medium promoting political learning? Or, should we adopt the views of those studies which assert newspapers = superiority in fostering learning? What about those studies which demonstrate the superior influence of political ads on political learning? The absence of a clear answer to these questions points to a weakness in the media effects literature.

And third, as Bartels (1993) has argued, the lack of consistency in findings may be, at least in part, due to a lack of methodological rigor. Bartels, for example, has shown that accounting for measurement error produces strong media effects, especially for television news. Sources of measurement error, Bartels argues, has generally led to an underestimation of media effects. Also, several other methodological problems diminish the findings of media effects research: many have small sample sizes, many studies are conducted in one city, and most studies include different measures of political knowledge which are time-bound and cannot be used in future studies. As a result of these methodological issues, it is difficult to know which of the many contradictory findings reflect a more accurate represent of how media affect political learning.

A GENERAL THEORY OF MEDIA EFFECTS

The above review of the literature provides several suggestions for the development of a general theory of media effects. From this brief review, it is apparent that comparative studies are more convincing than single medium studies in the weight of the evidence they bring to bear in attempting to answer the crucial question: what is the differential impact of media on political learning during the 1996 presidential election? First, these studies, to an extent, suggest a more optimistic view of the capacity of television to encourage political learning than the single medium studies. Single medium studies of television = influence on political learning were mostly pessimistic but, when compared to the influence of other media in comparative studies, television is often shown to be an important influence on political learning. As Neuman, et al., (1992) have shown the capacity of television to promote learning is more a result of the journalistic conventions characteristic of the medium rather than any difference in modality.

Second, a few studies have found (Patterson and McClure 1976; Just, et al., 1990; Brians and Wattenberg 1996) that political ads have contributed to learning. As Just, et al., have argued, political ads are less ambitious, but more successful in conveying candidate information. And Brians and Wattenberg have concluded that political ads contribute to a well-informed electorate. In explaining this finding, it should be pointed out that it is in the interest of the political ad= sponsor to provide the clearest presentation of the most convincing evidence available supporting his or her candidacy.

Third, other important dimensions of political learning include media impact on voters issue knowledge and issue salience. Issue knowledge refers to a voter= ability to correctly a candidate= issue position, and issue salience refers to those problems voters think are important. Iyengar and Kinder (1982)) have found television news to be an important contributor to issue salience, while Brians and Wattenberg (1996) and Just, et al., (1990) have shown that political ads promote increases in issue knowledge and issue salience.

Fourth, the results of Price and Zaller (1993) and Neuman, et al., (1992) compliment each other nicely. Neuman, et al., (1992) illustrate the tendency of those with lower cognitive skill to depend on television, thus underestimating the amount of learning without controlling for prior
knowledge. Conversely, Price and Zaller (1993) note the tendency of those with higher cognitive skill to depend on newspapers, thus overestimating the effect of newspapers on political learning without controlling for prior knowledge.

Finally, from a political science perspective, one of the more interesting developments associated with the communications revolution is the use of the computer and the World Wide Web to access news information provided by such news outlets as MSNBC and CNN. Because this technology is still relatively new, those with higher education, higher income, and higher levels of interest are more likely to (1) have free access to the medium, and (2) use the medium for this particular purpose.

To summarize the important findings to this point, the following general theory of media effects is offered. Under the appropriate circumstances, all media have the capacity to impact political learning. The explanation for media impact on political learning is more likely to be found in individual characteristics of voters than in the difference between various media. For example, those with greater political knowledge tend to rely on newspapers, while those with lower political knowledge tend to depend on television. Regardless of the medium, however, prior political knowledge is likely to be the most significant factor in determining whether a voter engages in political learning.

**THE PROPOSED STUDY**

*Research Question* The central question around which this inquiry is focused is the differential impact of mass media on political learning during the 1996 presidential election. The proposed study uses the 1996 ANES to examine the impact of television news, newspapers, political ads, news magazines, presidential debates, talk radio shows, and computers on political learning. Which medium or media are most conducive to political learning among voters?

*Variables* Political learning, the dependent variable, is measured across three different dimensions: recall, issue knowledge, and issue salience. Recall is determined from responses to questions in the 1996 ANES which measure respondents’ recall of media information. Issue knowledge refers to a respondent’s capacity to correctly identify candidates’ issue positions. Issue salience is measured by responses to the Most Important Question. The first independent variable, media usage, is derived from exposure and attention items. The second, prior knowledge, is measured according to the five-item scale developed and tested in Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993). It includes: party control of the House, veto override percent, party ideological location, judicial review, and identification of the vice president. Finally, because it is necessary to control for individual characteristics, various demographic variables are included. The variables selected for analysis will then be used to perform a regression analysis of the impact media have on political learning during the 1996 presidential election.

*Hypotheses* Following from the suggestions provided by a review of the literature and a general theory of media effects outlined above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: To test the findings of Price and Zaller (1993) and Mondak (1995), it is hypothesized that greater levels of political knowledge are associated with higher levels of political learning.

H2: Due to the differences in the medium of television resulting from the journalistic conventions mentioned in Neuman, et al., (1992), greater levels of television use are
expected to be associated with higher levels of political learning.

H3: As speculated in Neuman, et al., (1992), voters with lower levels of political knowledge are more likely to be associated with greater television use news rather than newspapers, thus underestimating this medium’s impact on political learning.

H4: As Price and Zaller (1993) have concluded, those with higher levels of political knowledge are more likely to be associated with greater newspaper use rather than greater television usage, thus overestimating the impact newspapers have on political learning.

H5: Because this medium is still relatively new and access is not uniformly distributed across the country, the effects of computer usage on increasing levels of political learning will be most evident among those with higher education and income levels (those more likely to have access to the medium) and those with higher levels of interest in the campaign (those more likely to use the medium for this purpose).

H6: From the results of Iyengar and Kinder (1982), is hypothesized that greater use of television news is associated with increased levels of issue salience.

H7: Based on the conclusions drawn by Brians and Wattenberg (1996) and Just, et al., (1990), it is hypothesized that greater use of political ads is associated with greater levels of issue knowledge.

The proposed study represents a starting point for an investigation into the role of mass media in contributing to political learning. More hypotheses might added, a different research design might be suggested, but the importance of the central research question remains: what impact did various media have on the political learning of voters during the 1996 presidential campaign? The performance of the mass media is as central to the functioning of our democratic system as the Presidency, the Congress, and the Courts. Ultimately, the vitality of our democracy depends on the ability of the mass media to link elites and citizens in an informed public discourse.
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