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A Study of Presidential Campaign Event Effects from 1952 to 1992

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A persistent argument in political science is that presidential campaign events do not have strong effects because most people (1) are uninformed about issues and candidates, (2) tend to vote based on cues from reliable (partisan) sources about the state of the economy and condition of the country, and (3) face balanced information environments. This study argues that presidential campaign events are multifaceted and their effects are occasionally substantial. The analysis shows that certain campaign events reach voters and have significant and relatively durable effects, while other events have either negligible or transitory effects. The implication is that many previous studies have misspecified the independent variable (by lumping campaign events together), as well as the dependent variable (by considering only the immediate impact).

In recent years, renewed interest in studying presidential campaigns has produced disagreement over their impact. On one hand, many studies support the argument that campaigns are only indirectly relevant to presidential election outcomes (Bartels 1992; Finkel 1993; Markus 1988). On the other hand, some analyses have produced evidence that campaigns are extremely important to electing a president (Forsythe et al. 1992; Holbrook 1996; Popkin 1991). In particular, campaign events, which are among the most interesting manifestations of presidential electioneering, have become the focus of much controversy. Scholars studying campaign events differ not only on their influence, but also on the proper level of analysis (individual or aggregate level) and the most appropriate research design (experimental versus survey response).

While there is intense debate on campaign effects, there is also consensus as to the importance of understanding the processes by which voters come to support one presidential candidate over another. Implicit in the argument that campaign effects are epiphenomenal is the strong possibility that the issues and themes raised in presidential elections serve only to activate voters' (exogenously determined) latent preferences (Bartels 1992; Gelman and King 1993; Markus 1988). This possibility, in turn, almost certainly reduces the likelihood that campaigns facilitate a competition of ideas and policies. It also scrambles the notion

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of presidential promise keeping, with presidents typically being held accountable for performance and not for pursuing policies mandated by the previous election. In short, the challenge to the significance of campaigning not only departs from the popular perception of American democracy, it stands much of it on its head.

This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the influence of presidential campaign events. It defines and distinguishes campaign events by drawing on observations from politics and political psychology, then offers tests of both immediate and durable campaign effects in presidential elections from 1952 to 1992. This reconceptualization of independent and dependent variables (campaign events and voters' preferences) provides insight into broader questions of how voters decide and whether campaigns matter.

Presidential Campaign Effects

The conventional wisdom has it that campaigns produce "minimal effects" in presidential elections.[1] In their seminal study of presidential campaign effects in the 1940s, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues estimated the overall influence of the campaign to have been between five and eight percentage points (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944, 87). In a survey of more recent elections, Bartels (1992) goes even lower, suggesting that presidential campaigning is worth, on average, only two points. Both Markus (1988) and Finkel (1993) offer similar estimates using individual-level data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). Although minor changes in voters' preferences could alter the outcome of a close race, presidential campaigns do not seem to move electorates by more than a few points.

There are a couple of reasons this is thought to be so. The first is that people are generally uninvolved in politics, making them very unlikely to seek out political information and somewhat unlikely to be moved by information to which they are exposed. While much of the groundbreaking research supporting this perspective was done prior to 1965 (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Erskine 1962, 1963a, 1963b, 1963c; Kreisberg 1949; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Metzner 1949; Patchen 1964; Withey 1964), recent studies continue to show that American voters lack even basic knowledge about politics and government (Bennett 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1990; Luskin 1990).[2] Instead of assessing policy proposals and the candidates' merits, voters appear to rely on predictable shortcuts (or "cues") to make their vote choice (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982).

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[1] The minimal effects argument surrounding campaign influence is distinct from a similar argument about media effects. Unlike the media effects debate, challenges to the minimal effects conception of campaigns have yet to prove direct (persuasive) effects, although strong evidence has been produced for indirect (agenda-setting) effects. See Petrocik 1996 for an interesting analysis of the reasoning behind candidates' attempts to influence voters' agendas and how these played out in the 1980 presidential election campaign.

[2] This view has, of course, been challenged. The most influential counterargument comes from Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976), who contend that although voter information and sophistication is low, it does fluctuate with the context and intensity of the political debate.

A second tenet holds that opposing presidential campaigns, facing similar financial and strategic conditions, produce balanced informational environments (Bartels 1992; Gelman and King 1993; Zaller 1992). This allows exogenous factors such as the condition of the economy (Fair 1978; Kiewiet 1983; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992; Rosenstone 1983; Tufte 1978), general retrospective considerations (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966), and party identification (Campbell et al. 1960; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976) to be determinative. In a particularly trenchant analysis, Gelman and King (1993) argue that presidential campaigns thus serve to "enlighten preferences" of voters and are the means by which presidential election outcomes come to reflect "objective" economic and political conditions.

The challenge to the conventional wisdom contends that nowadays, if not earlier, campaign information and events *do* affect voters and influence elections. As Holbrook (1996) points out, a number of changes in the American electorate make this plausible. First, there is the long-term decline of partisanship in the United States (Campbell et al. 1960; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Wattenberg 1986, 1991). Since partisans tend to discount information from the opposing party (Zaller 1992), more independents indicate a greater receptivity to campaign information. Second, presidential elections have seen an increasing proportion of late deciders (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1990, 52; Flanigan and Zingale 1987, 167). This also suggests more voters are open to campaign information. Third, candidate preferences of voters have been increasingly volatile in recent elections (Allsop and Weisberg 1988; Crespi 1988; Gelman and King 1993). Again, this implies a growing proportion of voters are susceptible to campaign information. Fourth and finally, a variety of studies show that voters are influenced by campaign-related factors such as candidate personality judgments, media coverage, and television advertising (Frankovic 1981; Hershey 1989; Iyengar and Ansolabehere 1996; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Markus and Converse 1979; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Patterson 1980, 1993).

This "not-so-minimal effects" perspective is also buttressed by new evidence on the impact of presidential campaign events. For example, a growing body of research demonstrates the influence of presidential debates (Geer 1988; Holbrook 1996; Lanoue 1991; Shelley and Hwang 1991) and national party nominating conventions (Campbell, Cherry, and Wink 1992; Holbrook 1996) on voters' evaluations of the candidates. Similarly, a strong case has been made that scandals and corruption affect voters' candidate preferences (Lin and Fackler 1995; Meier and Holbrook 1992). In one of the most interesting analyses, Holbrook (1994) finds that conventions, debates, and other campaign events have had a nontrivial impact on the candidates' standing in presidential election opinion polls. He even suggests that the effects of events in election campaigns from 1984 to 1992 were almost as powerful as consumer sentiment and presidential popularity.

Sources of Confusion over Campaign Effects

There are at least three reasons for the confusion with respect to campaign effects generally and event effects in particular. First, there is little consensus as to what constitutes an "effect." For example, changes in voters' candidate preferences attributed to campaigning may balance out in the aggregate. Or they may change the poll margin, but not the relative positions of the candidates in the race. Some consider these changes important; others do not. More importantly, few studies consider the *durability* of campaign-induced changes in voters' preferences. This last fact suggests we have misspecified the dependent variable.

A second reason for confusion is that we often speak of campaign effects without specifying what constitutes campaigning. There is no existing study that gauges the totality of campaigning, and it would probably be impossible to do so. Some studies, however, are either clearer or more expansive in their conception of campaigning, and these frequently find effects (see Holbrook 1994, 1996). From this study's perspective, it is not obvious why one should treat campaigning or campaign events as a unitary entity. Surely not all events are the same, and yet analyses of events rarely distinguish among them in any theoretically meaningful way. All of this suggests that the key independent variable, like the dependent variable, has been misspecified.

A third reason for confusion is that different studies use different approaches to measure effects. Experimental research, which can isolate particular campaign stimuli, tends to show effects (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996). Survey research is much less likely to do so because (1) voters have imperfect recall when asked about their exposure to campaign advertising and events and (2) it is difficult to control for contextual factors that often mitigate poll movement (Bartels 1992; Finkel 1993).

This study engages the broad question of campaign effects by tackling these issues of model specification and research design. It proceeds in four sections. The first section defines campaign events and uses lessons from politics and theories from political psychology to develop a typology that facilitates a more detailed analysis of event impact. The second section describes the data and methodology used to measure the impact of campaign events. Section three presents the results of the analysis, while the final section presents further analyses and discusses the implications of this research for the study of campaigns.

Respecifying Campaign Events

It is first of all necessary to define a presidential campaign event. A "campaign event" is an occurrence that conveys distinct political information about the presidential candidates to the electorate. In particular, information that *distinguishes* between the candidates is an important component of an event. For example, debates, conventions, policy speeches, and even gaffes qualify as events, while foreign wars, natural disasters outside the United States, and local and statewide politics typically do not.[3] The most important consequence of this definition is that campaign events are primarily understood by the information they convey rather than by the form of the conveyance. This is not to say that the form of conveyance does not matter; it certainly distinguishes events from one another and influences our expectations of their impact. Rather, this study's understanding of campaign events *focuses* on the information being communicated, so that events are connected to individual-level psychological processes in a theoretically edifying manner. In addition, this definition includes both events focusing on substantive political information and events conveying information whose political relevance is neither obvious nor substantive. Furthermore, for present purposes, campaign events encompass planned as well as unplanned (or reactive) occurrences.

The definition, however, does more than expand the conception of campaign events. It also excludes a considerable portion of activity by positing that a campaign event must have the potential to reach the typical voter. It states that an occurrence need be conveyed to the *electorate* (undoubtedly via the media) to count as a campaign event. The myriad of campaign activities behind the scenes, as well as events not receiving media exposure, are not considered campaign events for the purposes of this analysis.

While this helps identify campaign events, we still need to apply this definition to construct a conceptual framework that distinguishes among different events. If we understand campaign events as occurrences conveying information to the electorate, it makes sense to discriminate among these events by the subject matter of the information and its potential to move voters, as well as by the form of conveyance. In other words, campaign speeches should be considered distinct from debates because they look different *and* because they convey different kinds of information in a different manner.

This study identifies four inclusive (though nonexhaustive) categories of presidential campaign events: *messages, party activities, mistakes,* and *outside occurrences*. These four categories, as well as eleven additional subcategories, are arrived at by two processes: (1) an inductive examination of distinctions noted in the strategic planning memoranda of the Bush and Clinton campaigns from 1992, and (2) an inductive examination of the conveyance and content differences of dozens of events from the 1992 presidential campaign. Initially, the four-category typology was employed exclusively, but the eleven-subcategory typology is featured in subsequent analyses to highlight important event differences while maintaining some of the parsimony of the initial classification schema. The specifics of the categories and the rationale behind the typology

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[3] As is discussed later, some outside occurrences can be considered campaign events, especially if they are connected to the election by the candidates or if the incumbent has some flexibility in the timing of events. In addition, it is worth observing that if the substance of an outside event becomes a campaign issue, this would be captured by other aspects of the typology.

TABLE 1

A Typology of Major Presidential Campaign Events

Events	Definitions	Examples
Messages		
Prospective	Statement on which policies a candidate will pursue if elected	George McGovern's 1972 promise to raise taxes
Retrospective	Statement on the country's condition under the incumbent	Ronald Reagan asks, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" during 1980 campaign
Valence	Statement on the values and symbols embraced by a candidate	George Bush says "Pledge of Allegiance" at a flag factory in 1988
Character/Attack	Statement exalting one's personality or purpose while criticizing an opponent's accomplishments	Walter Mondale suggests a vote for Ronald Reagan is a vote for war in 1984
Party Activities		
National convention	Quadrennial party nominating conventions	1992 Democratic Convention in New York City
Presidential debate	Formal, televised debates between presidential candidates	1960 John Kennedy–Richard Nixon debates
VP debate	Formal, televised debates between vice presidential candidates	1988 Dan Quayle–Lloyd Bentsen debate
Party unity	Candidate seeks public support of a faction of the party	Jimmy Carter gains support of Ted Kennedy after 1980 nomination struggle
Mistakes		
Scandal	Accusation of impropriety	Richard Nixon's "slush fund" in 1952
Blunder	Ill-advised or inappropriate statement by a candidate	Jimmy Carter's "lust in my heart" statement in 1976 *Playboy* interview
Outside Occurrence		
Outside event	National or international event	Cessation of bombing raids in Vietnam by Lyndon Johnson in 1968

(including the unique psychological processes thought to correspond to each subcategory) are presented in table 1 and expanded upon below.

Messages

For some, the most powerful image of contemporary presidential campaigning is a candidate giving a speech to a local audience, with the media recording quotes to be replayed on evening newscasts and written up in local papers. Several specific event types occur within this broad category. *Prospective* messages state the candidate's policy position with the hope of inducing voters to make a favorable comparison with the opposition (Campbell et al. 1960; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976). *Retrospective* messages ask votes to reward or punish the incumbent (or his party) for good or bad times (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). *Valence* messages invoke consensual values, such as patriotism, God, peace, or prosperity (Salmore and Salmore 1992; Stoker 1990). Finally, *character attack* messages are used to exalt the candidate's integrity, character, or veracity or to question the opposition's (Salmore and Salmore 1992; Stoker 1990). Individually, these message types have been well documented elsewhere and do not constitute an innovation on the part of this study. Collectively, however, this combination covers most of the messages occurring in actual presidential campaigns while maintaining important practical and conceptual differences with respect to the form and logic of those messages.

Recent studies from political psychology can be used to establish expectations about how these and other events affect the electorate. Let us assume that voters retrieve (or access) information from their memories when voting on election day or when asked to respond to a survey question about their presidential preference. Let us also assume that certain kinds of information are more easily retrieved than other kinds. From studies of media effects, we know that information that is widely and repeatedly disseminated to the public stands a good chance of being absorbed (and retrieved later), whereas information not disseminated to voters can be neither absorbed nor retrieved (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). We also know that the news media exercise discretion in what they cover and how they cover it, thus "filtering" the information conveyed by campaign events (Fallows 1996; Jamieson 1992; Kerbel 1995; Lichter and Noyes 1995; Patterson 1993). It therefore stands to reason that presidential campaign events that reach a large portion of voters while still retaining a more or less one-sided spin should have the largest effects.[4]

Less obvious factors also affect the chance that information will be retrieved by voters. Carmines and Stimson (1989) point out that information on "easy" issues (like patriotism) is much more likely to affect voters than information on "hard" issues (like the budget deficit). This is similar to the argument of Enelow and Hinich (1984) about the power of valence and candidate-affect issue dimensions. Similarly, Ansolabehere (1988) observes that negative political information is more striking and memorable than positive information (see also

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[4] This is an application of the memory-based theory of information processing (for a full elaboration, see Iyengar 1991 or Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). The implications of this study for alternative information processing models are discussed in the final section. I should also point out that this study does not attempt to isolate the independent effects of media coverage of events. Instead, these effects are allowed to contribute to the overall effect of a campaign event.

Born 1990; Fiorina and Shepsle 1990; Iyengar and Ansolabehere 1996; Lau 1982, 1985). Finally, there is evidence that "character" information is more salient than information about a candidate's policy competence (Stoker 1990). This perspective on "character" information is also frequently articulated by political and media consultants. For example, Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater believed that Dukakis's emphasis on competence in the 1988 campaign was at odds with how voters selected a president (Germond and Witcover 1989). More recently, Clinton consultants Dick Morris and Robert Squier contended that "ethics" and "values" would determine the 1996 presidential election (Woodward 1996, 113–14, 237). Although these psychological tendencies undoubtedly vary with the political context and the characteristics of individual voters (e.g., education, political sophistication, etc.), they *do* suggest that valence, negative, and character cues are more likely to affect the candidate preferences of the aggregate electorate than substantive, positive, and competence ones.

The four categories of messages receive varying degrees of exposure and are typically conveyed through the news media. As a rule, one would not expect them to produce large effects. This study expects prospective messages to have the smallest impact, since they usually convey positive and substantive information. Conversely, the other three types of messages should cause somewhat larger (but still small) changes in voters' preferences. Both valence and retrospective messages, for example, fit Carmines and Stimson's definition of "easy" issue information, while attack messages, by definition, invoke negative information and should therefore be more memorable and more easily retrieved.

Party Activities

Party activities encompass a variety of presidential campaigning, with the most obvious example being the *national convention*. Although conventions typically run four days and encompass innumerable speeches and messages, they are treated here as singular events. Furthermore, they should have the largest effects of any of the event types under consideration. They are typically covered by all of the major news media for four consecutive nights. Even though network news coverage has diminished in recent years, few political events warrant as much concentrated coverage. Outside of the persuasiveness of the speeches and the power of the visuals, the main limit on the influence of conventions is the news media's editorial and interpretive discretion.

Events to enhance *party unity* are also common in campaigns, involving appearances or activities designed to mobilize partisans behind the party's candidate (Greenberg 1995; White 1961). They include endorsements from high-ranking partisans or vanquished primary opponents, as well as appeals to disgruntled factions of the party. These events generate relatively little publicity and should therefore produce only modest changes in voters' preferences.

In addition to conventions and party unity activities, *debates* are classified as party activities. This decision was made for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, although debates sometimes focus on many issues and can even be nonadversarial, they are essentially partisan encounters that allow candidates to restate issue and priority differences. The primary goal in any debate is fundamentally conservative: hold on to your party's base by not making mistakes and hope your opponent gives you an opening (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1993; Goldman et al. 1994). While candidates who are behind in the polls have incentives to make dramatic appeals to independent voters, a review of recent debates shows that they rarely do so, preferring instead to appear "presidential" and focus on core party issues. Vice presidential candidates are much more likely to use debates to aggressively court independent and leaning partisan voters, but these events constitute a small portion of the total number of debates. As a practical matter, debates could command a separate category, with vice presidential and presidential debates comprising sub-categories. Because parsimony is a goal of the macrogroupings, however, and since the independent effect of debates will be calculated anyway, there is little reason to isolate them at this stage of the study.

Debate effects should be significant, but less substantial than convention effects. While debates are watched by as many or more people than watch the conventions, their limits are greater. Not only do participants have their opponents to deal with, but media interpretations are critical for determining success (Holbrook 1996; Lemert et al. 1991).

Mistakes

Presidential campaigns see two types of mistakes: *scandals* and *blunders*. Scandals occur when allegations of wrongdoing are raised and reported in the mainstream media.[5] These allegations may be directed at the candidate, his political associates, his friends, or his family. While the chances of allegations being reported by the media are enhanced when concrete evidence exists, allegations need not be true for a scandal to occur (Lin and Fackler 1995; Meier and Holbrook 1992). Blunders (also called "gaffes" or "foul-ups") occur when a candidate or a representative of the campaign says something offensive, erroneous, or simply ill-received (Germond and Witcover 1989, 1993; Polsby and Wildavsky 1991). As even a casual observer of politics might have guessed, content analyses of media coverage show that blunders have drawn a disproportionate share of the coverage in recent presidential elections (Patterson 1980, 1993).

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[5] By "mainstream," I am referring to network television broadcasts (ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC) and metropolitan newspapers (e.g., *New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune,* and *Los Angeles Times*). Cable access television shows and newspapers like the *Globe* or *National Enquirer* are clearly outside the mainstream, although stories originating with them may be picked up by the mainstream media.

Given the memorability of negative information and the increasing tendency of the media to report on scandals and blunders, these events can be expected to have a significant influence on candidate evaluations. Less certainly, scandals ought to be more influential than blunders since the former convey information about character while the latter often convey information about policy competence.

Outside Occurrences

Outside occurrences are ostensibly nonpartisan events that happen during the presidential campaign—wars, confrontations, incidents, treaties, tragedies, and disasters (natural and otherwise)—and offer information about the differences between candidates. As suggested earlier, even during an election year most nonpartisan events are excluded from this category because they are silent with respect to the relative professional competencies, personal merits, agenda priorities, and issue positions of the candidates. Some of these events, however, do become relevant for the presidential election campaign and warrant inclusion in this analysis (as discussed in the next section, inclusion is ultimately based on what the campaigns themselves had to say about occurrences and their importance for the election). No attempt is made to rate the relevance of these occurrences, though, so while the Vietnam War would seem far more relevant for presidential election politics than, say, the Suez crisis, this study would treat them similarly.

Outside occurrences are expected to have an inconsistent influence on voters' preferences. While they often receive substantial news media coverage, they are not controlled by candidates and therefore tend to yield ambiguous information for the purposes of the election; they can hurt, help, or have no effect on a candidate's standing. In the aggregate, one therefore expects the net effect of these events to be minimal.

Measuring Campaign Effects

Data

Data availability limits the study's time frame. Prior to the 1950s, there are no consistent and reliable measures of voters' candidate preferences during the presidential campaign. This rules out presidential elections before 1952. Beginning in 1952, however, there are data on both campaign activities (the independent variables) and voters' preferences (the most obvious dependent variable). The present study therefore encompasses the presidential elections from 1952 through 1992—11 in all. Again, because data on voters' preferences are scarce prior to September of an election year, the focus is on the general election campaign (September 1 through election day), although some pre–Labor Day events (such as national conventions) are included in the analysis.

The first step in measuring the impact of campaign activity is to identify a universe of events. While not exhaustive, the list culled for this study is inclusive—which is appropriate given its broad understanding of campaign events. It attempts to identify all of the events that people *presume* to have been important in presidential campaigns. Toward this end, the list initially relies on the yearly chronology of political events provided by the Gallup Poll. This chronology covers all of the obvious occurrences from past presidential campaigns and provides a credible starting point.

The list should also include those events that *could* have been significant but were less immediately obvious. Campaign narratives and political biographies are used to identify these additional events. At least two and usually three narratives or biographies are employed for each election campaign, and events are added if they are mentioned by more than one source. This provisional event list is then cross-referenced with the *New York Times*. Events not mentioned in the *Times* are dropped because (presumably) they did not receive the media exposure necessary to move voters. Events that occurred over an extended time frame (i.e., more than four days) and events with ambiguous occurrence dates are also excluded due to the practical difficulties involved with estimating their impact.

Because this list is drawn from post hoc accounts of presidential campaigns, one might wonder if the selection of events is endogenous and merely measures the impact of events that were selected because they made an impact. This is not the case. Presidential campaign events are noted by the Gallup Poll or the *New York Times* because they, along with other news media and political elites, *think* these events are important. In most instances, however, there is no empirical evidence that voters were affected by these events. Indeed, some events make the list despite widespread evidence they did not have an impact. For example, George Bush's speech unveiling his "Agenda for American Renewal" makes the list for 1992 even though it was widely judged ineffective.[6]

This is not to suggest that identification and classification concerns do not exist. One problem with identification is that television advertisements are notably absent from the list. The reality, however, is that while television ads commanded a large portion of the campaign budgets, few stood out as distinct campaign events. Moreover, the few ads that stood out did so because of subsequent news media coverage (e.g., Johnson's "Daisy" ad, Bush's "Willie Horton" ad). Even these ads failed to make the list, however, due to the ambiguity of accurately dating either their airing or subsequent media coverage.

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[6] The goal here is to develop a list that encompasses the major events of these campaigns. The main concerns for the selection process are that (1) the study misses, by virtue of its coding rules, major events that had no effects *or* (2) the study misses the real explanatory variable, which is media coverage. On the first concern, almost no events that received any attention from the campaigns or the media are excluded from the analysis. Moreover, many events considered marginal at the time (but that nonetheless received attention) *are* included in the analysis. The second concern is legitimate; events that do not receive media coverage probably do not affect many voters. Still, as stated in note 4, the notion underlying this analysis is that the media act as an intermediary in the general election campaign, typically responding to candidate events. In this sense, they are less an explanatory than a conditioning variable, whose effect can be acknowledged but not directly measured here.

A second concern is with the sorting of events into the typology categories, which is not always straightforward. On the one hand, conventions, debates, scandals, and (for the most part) outside occurrences correspond to distinct categories. Candidates' blunders, on the other hand, are more difficult to classify because they occasionally involve policy statements or campaign messages. For example, in late August of 1980 Ronald Reagan made the statement that the United States was in a "depression." This was considered a blunder by many, coming on the heels of other gaffes Reagan committed during the early fall of 1980 (Boller 1985). Others saw it as a declaration that Reagan was serious about unemployment and willing to take drastic measures to turn the economy around. Similarly, messages sometimes have multiple facets, and it is occasionally difficult to place an event in one category while ignoring its other aspects.

One option is to use multiple classifications. This is not a particularly attractive option here, though, since a main goal is to specify the distinct effects of given event types. Instead, this study allows the words of the actual participants—i.e., memos, reports, press releases, and quotations—to determine how events are to be classified. Biographies, campaign narratives, documents from presidential libraries, and the personal papers of candidates and campaign personnel were combed to determine how insiders viewed events *as they occurred,* thus reducing both the post hoc and guesswork quality of classification. The resultant classifications are less post hoc in that the character of an event is judged by conceptions registered prior to (or coincident with) their occurrence. Reagan's own advisers saw his "depression" statement as a mistake, for example, so this study codes it as such. Similarly, Dukakis's riding in an M-1 tank is coded as a mistake not because it hurt him in the polls, which would be post hoc and circular reasoning, but because both campaigns considered the photo-op a mistake well before it became part of campaign lore. (Bush campaign strategists, in fact, decided the image was so devastating that they incorporated it into their own television ads.) This classification method reduces guesswork as well, by making internal documentation the focus of analysis rather than relying on a loose collection of clues provided by news media coverage and a review of the political context. Just to be certain, a sampling of events (25 in all) was double-coded by different researchers, who were provided with the same documentation but were not aware of the others' scores. The zero-order correlation between the coders' scores (where a match was coded 1 and all else was coded 0) was a reassuring 0.8.

According to the Gallup Poll, there were 129 campaign events in presidential elections from 1952 to 1992. An additional 15 events were added, yielding 144 events overall. Sample events are listed in Table 1, and the full list will be provided upon request. Table 2 displays the frequency of presidential campaign events from 1952 to 1992, providing overall and partisan totals. Out of 144 events, 87 directly involved Republican candidates, while 94 directly involved Democratic candidates. This partisan balance alleviates concerns that the list

TABLE 2

Frequency of Major Presidential Campaign Events, 1952–1992

Events	Total	Republican Activity	Democratic Activity
Messages			
Prospective	20 (14%)	10 (12%)	10 (11%)
Retrospective	8 (6%)	3 (3%)	5 (5%)
Valence	10 (6%)	5 (5%)	5 (5%)
Attack	13 (9%)	4 (5%)	9 (10%)
Party Activities			
National convention	22 (15%)	11 (13%)	11 (12%)
Presidential debate	16 (11%)	16 (19%)	16 (17%)
VP debate	4 (3%)	4 (5%)	4 (4%)
Party unity	8 (6%)	3 (3%)	5 (5%)
Mistakes			
Scandal	13 (9%)	6 (7%)	7 (7%)
Blunder	13 (9%)	8 (9%)	5 (5%)
Outside Occurrences			
Outside event	17 (12%)	17 (20%)	17 (18%)
TOTAL	144	87	94

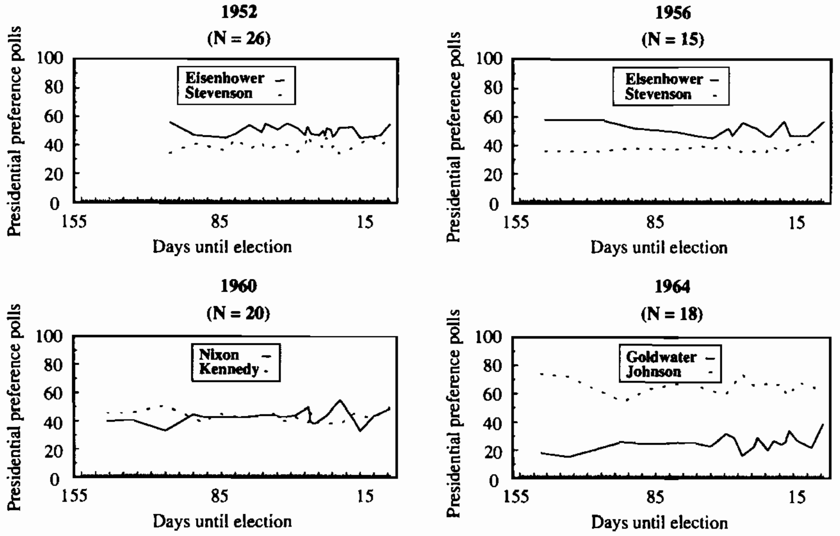
NOTES: Case frequencies for the parties' candidates are calculated by the number of events directly involving the particular party's presidential candidate. Debates and outside events often involve both parties' candidates and are thus counted for each party. The 1980 presidential debate between Ronald Reagan and John Anderson, which Jimmy Carter chose not to attend, is counted for both parties as a presidential debate. Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

would be slanted toward one party's activities. Perhaps more importantly, the distribution of events suggests the event categories capture the variance of activity in actual campaigns.

The dependent variable is defined by survey responses to the so-called "trial heat" question: *If the election were held tomorrow, who would you vote for?* National surveys of registered voters are used to generate daily estimates of the margin between the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. The date of a poll is determined by the midpoint of the period in which the poll was in the field. For example, a poll conducted September 10–12 would be dated September 11. When there are multiple trial heats from a single date, the average is used. For dates without surveys, an estimate is calculated by using a generalized least squares (GLS) procedure modeling the trend from the most immediate prior and anterior data. These daily estimates of the margin are then used to measure changes in voters' preferences caused by campaign events. Figures 1A–1C plot the estimates of voters' preferences for each of the

FIGURE 1A

Tracking Presidential Preferences, 1952–1964



Notes: Presidential preference data encompass national polls of registered voters. Public poll results prior to 1984 come from the Roper Center and the ICPSR. After 1984, tracking poll data come from the Wirthlin Group (1984), KRC Hotline (1988), and Battleground '92 (1992). Private polls come from the presidential libraries of Dwight Eisenhower (1952, 1956), Richard Nixon (1960, 1968, 1972), Lyndon Johnson (1964), and Gerald Ford (1976), and from the personal papers of Robert Teeter and Richard Wirthlin.

11 presidential elections, showing the variance in the margin (the dependent variable), as well as the number of data points for each campaign.

The data are drawn from public polls conducted by firms like Gallup and Harris, stand-alone waves of the American National Election Studies, and private polls conducted by the campaigns. The private polls, which greatly enhance the acuity and stability of the estimates of candidate standing, were acquired from the Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford Presidential Libraries and from the personal papers of pollsters Robert Teeter and Richard Wirthlin.[7] As with the events, a complete listing of the polls utilized for this study will be provided upon request.

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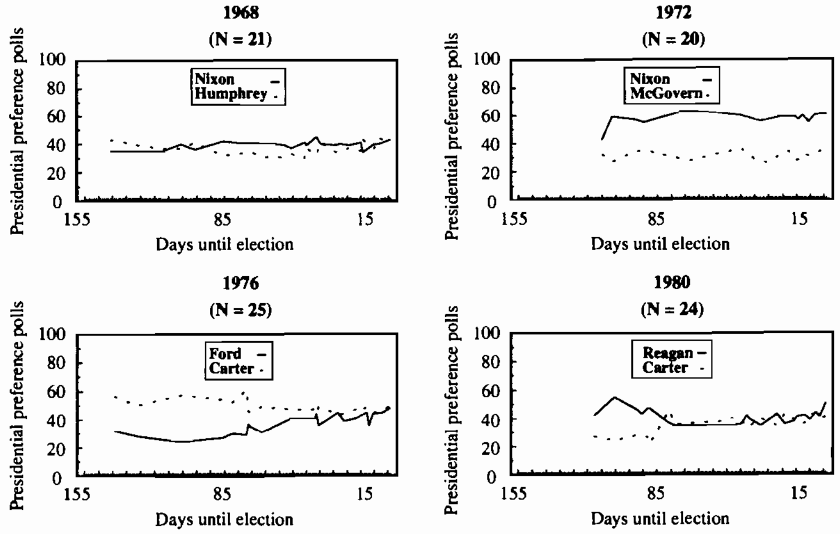
[7] I thank Dwight Strandberg of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Susan Naulty of the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, and Helmi Raaska of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library for their assistance in locating survey results. In addition, I wish to thank the principals of Market Opinion Research, Market Strategies, Inc., The Wirthlin Group, and those associated with both the Robert Teeter and the Richard Wirthlin papers for allowing access to campaign polls from the period 1972–92.

FIGURE 1B

Tracking Presidential Preferences, 1968–1980



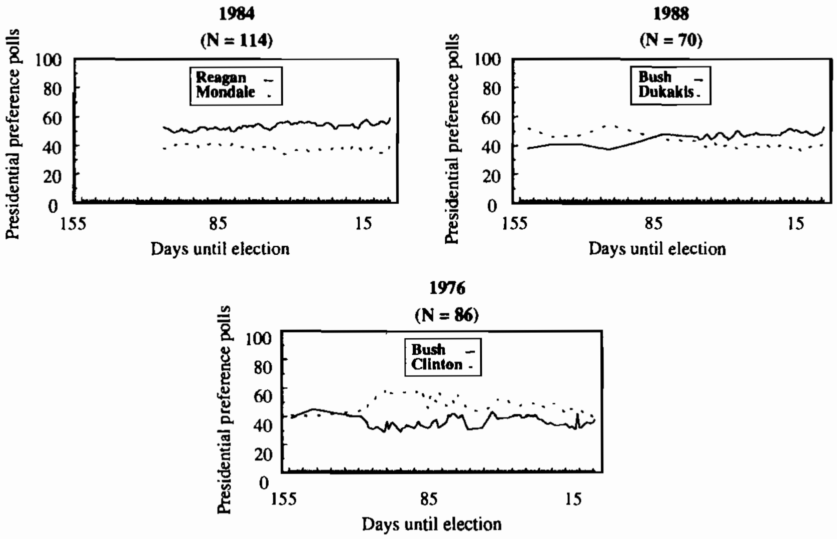
Notes: Presidential preference data encompass national polls of registered voters. Public poll results prior to 1984 come from the Roper Center and the ICPSR. After 1984, tracking poll data come from the Wirthlin Group (1984), KRC Hotline (1988), and Battleground '92 (1992). Private polls come from the presidential libraries of Dwight Eisenhower (1952, 1956), Richard Nixon (1960, 1968, 1972), Lyndon Johnson (1964), and Gerald Ford (1976), and from the personal papers of Robert Teeter and Richard Wirthlin.

There are three concerns about relying on these data. The first is that trial heats are not the vote, forcing the study to use a measure that is somewhat distant from the behavior of interest. This is, however, common practice in political science (see, for example, Holbrook 1996). Furthermore, Gelman and King (1993) provide empirical verification of the underlying assumption that these trial heats measure (and converge with) vote intention.

The second concern is the necessity of interpolation to generate estimates of the margin for days with no national polls. From 1952 through 1980, the average number of polls is 21, including pre- and post-convention surveys, and the average number of days for which estimates of the margin must be interpolated is approximately 40. These estimates may, of course, obscure movement in preferences. It is important to note, however, that this makes the discovery of campaign effects *less* likely. Only if trend data consistently exaggerated or suppressed changes in voters' candidate preferences, or if they biased the estimated effects of some events but not others, would this strategy of interpolation be

FIGURE 1C

Tracking Presidential Preferences, 1984–1992



Notes: Presidential preference data encompass national polls of registered voters. Public poll results prior to 1984 come from the Roper Center and the ICPSR. After 1984, tracking poll data come from the Wirthlin Group (1984), KRC Hotline (1988), and Battleground '92 (1992). Private polls come from the presidential libraries of Dwight Eisenhower (1952, 1956), Richard Nixon (1960, 1968, 1972), Lyndon Johnson (1964), and Gerald Ford (1976), and from the personal papers of Robert Teeter and Richard Wirthlin.

inappropriate. It is difficult to see how this is the case. At any rate, by 1972 there are few dates without polls, and by 1984 there are none.

A third concern is survey error. The dependent variable is the trial heat margin, rather than support for the Democratic or Republican candidates, because this diminishes the importance of undecided voters whose numbers are influenced by question format and sampling techniques.[8] As a difference measure, however, the margin has a standard error roughly two or three times that of either candidate's support.[9]

This study proceeds by granting survey error as an important concern. There is reason to believe, however, that (1) the existence of error doesn't much affect the likelihood that campaign effects will emerge and (2) error may be overstated by traditional statistical frameworks. On the first point, survey error could be mistaken for genuine movement in voters' candidate preferences in response to a particular event, but it could just as easily *mask* such movement. In a study of more than 100 events, it is likely that the effect of *random* error on the estimates of event impact would be close to zero. The second point supports this argument, as empirical estimates of errors associated with polling estimates of the margin indicate they are quite small. For example, we can estimate survey error by examining changes in the margin on days *without* campaign events. Figure 2 demonstrates that the average absolute movement in the margin (one to three days after the eventless date in question) is 1.8 points. When one allows the movement's direction to be either negative and positive, the average movement is 0. Thus, judging impact by the statistical significance of changes in the margin is not likely to bias the results in favor of finding campaign effects. These arguments are supported by the findings of Gelman and King (1993), which demonstrate survey errors are an inadequate explanation for oscillation of opinion measures.

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[8] The problem described above is often referred to as "house effects." For example, some polls treat soft/leaning supporters as "undecided," while others do not. This study uses soft/leaning supporters in estimating the margin and attempts to exclude polls diverging from this practice, but a rigorous purge is impossible because methodological explanations are often limited.

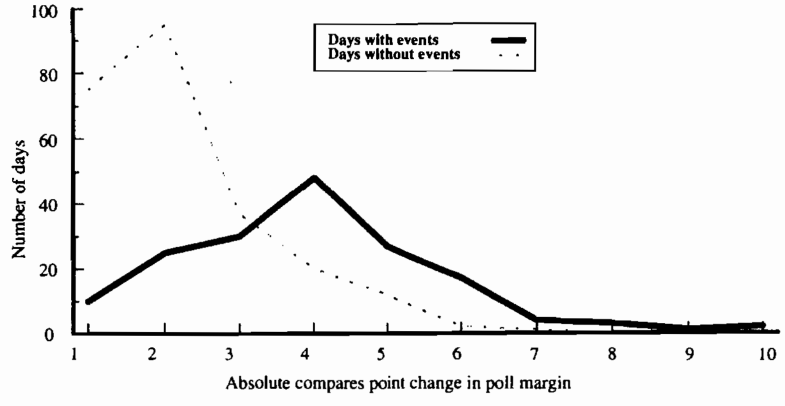
[9] This standard error is diminished considerably, however, when multiple poll estimates are available for a given date. A technical explanation is available upon request.

Design and Methodology

This study seeks to measure both the immediate and the relatively durable impacts of campaign events on voters' preferences. The "immediate" impact of

FIGURE 2

Campaign Effects versus Random Noise, 1952–1992



Notes: The graph above compares movement in the presidential preference poll margin on days without campaign events to days with campaign events. Days with campaign events typically produce an absolute change of about four points, while days without events produce an absolute change of about two points (which we can attribute to survey error).

campaign events is defined as the difference between the trial heat margin on the day before the event and the trial heat margin 1–3 days afterward. "Relatively durable" is defined as a significant change in the trial ballot margin lasting until the next campaign event. To test the relative durability of effects, two additional anterior data points are also considered, at 4–6 days and 7–10 days after the event. The anterior data points encompass 3 days to smooth the estimate and, in the case of the first such point, to account for information lags.

These decisions involve trade-offs. For example, it would be nice to have 10 daily observations of campaign effects, but the 3-day pooled estimates of the margin are more stable than the daily ones would be. Similarly, the 10-day time frame is itself a matter of practicality. One wants to extend the time frame as much as possible to test the durability of effects. Beyond 10 days, however, additional events begin to accumulate, making the isolation of effects difficult. As matters stand, only 13% of events (19 of 144) occur within the initial 3-day time frame of other events, while 44% (64 of 144) occur within 7 days.[10]

The data are thus pooled time series, with 10 days of reaction serving as the time series and the events serving as the cross-sections. Because there are multiple data points within the time series, one can model the shape of the trial heat margin for the 10 days after an event and test hypotheses about campaign effects. Borrowing from Carmines and Stimson (1989), this study considers four models of campaign effects:[11]

- *minimal effects*—Campaign events do not disturb the trial heat margin between the presidential candidates. Neither immediate nor relatively durable effects are expected.
- *spike effects*—Campaign events produce an abrupt but transient change in the trial heat margin between the presidential candidates. The distribution of preferences is briefly destabilized but reverts to the pre–event equilibrium.
- *step effects*—Campaign events produce an abrupt but durable change in the margin between the presidential candidates. In contrast to a spike effect, the change is permanent and a new equilibrium is established.

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[10] As others have observed, deciding exactly where one event ends and another begins is ultimately subjective. This study assumes changes in the margin coinciding with campaign events were caused by those events, and NOT by delayed reactions to some prior event. In particular, the study controls for the immediate impact of subsequent campaign events when modeling the long-term movement produced by an earlier event. Because the time between campaign events decreased from 1976 to 1992, this problem will undoubtedly be even more important for future analyses.

[11] This framework differs from Carmines and Stimson's in three major ways. First, there is a narrower time frame. Carmines and Stimson examine data from the 1940s to the 1970s, while the effect modeled here is confined to 11-day intervals. Second, Carmines and Stimson are solely concerned with long-term trends, whereas short-term effects are of utmost importance in the present study. To insure that long-term trends were not producing short-term changes in the margin, short-term effects were recalculated while controlling for long-term changes in the margin. The results are almost identical to the initial results and are excluded for simplicity's sake. Third, the minimal effects model is original to this analysis.

- *wave effects*—Campaign events produce a gradual change in the margin between the presidential candidates. The effect accumulates over several days, establishing a new equilibrium.

Each model is a variation of the first-order transfer function:

$$Y_t = [\omega_0 /(1 - \delta_1 B)]I_t + N_t$$[12]

where

Y_t = the change in the margin between major-party presidential candidates from 1 day before a campaign event to 7–10 days afterward;

ω_0 = zero-order initial impact parameter, equivalent to the change in the margin from 1 day before the event to 1–3 days afterward;

δ_1 = a first-order growth–decay rate parameter, equivalent to the change in the margin from 4–10 days after the event;

B = a back-shift operator representing the lag in the effect under study, equivalent to $BX_t = X_{t-1}$, where X is the day of interest and ranges from 0 to 10;

I_t = an input series of 0s and 1s—0 if before the campaign event and 1 if after; and

N_t = a noise model accounting for residual time dependence in the series.[13]

Figure 3 displays the support dynamic anticipated by each of the models. The accuracy of the respective models can be judged by examining the parameters ω_0 and δ_1. In estimating the initial impact of campaign events, the parameter ω_0 can be positive or negative.[14] A significant ω_0 indicates that campaign events had substantial immediate effects, while an insignificant ω_0 indicates little or no

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[12] Unlike static models, first-order equations assume a one-unit (1–3 days) lag in effects produced by campaign events. Thus, first-order equations improve on static models if the dependent variable is resistant to immediate change because "observation of cumulative cause with cumulative effect will find a causal connection if it is there, but with very little likelihood of identifying correct functional form or direction" (Carmines and Stimson 1989, appendix). The assumption of a first-order process here is predicated on autocorrelation and partial autocorrelation functions evident in plots of the residuals.

[13] B suppresses the impact of δ_1 as one moves closer to the event's occurrence. The formal expression of the noise term is:

$$N_t = (1 - \varnothing B^2)a_t$$

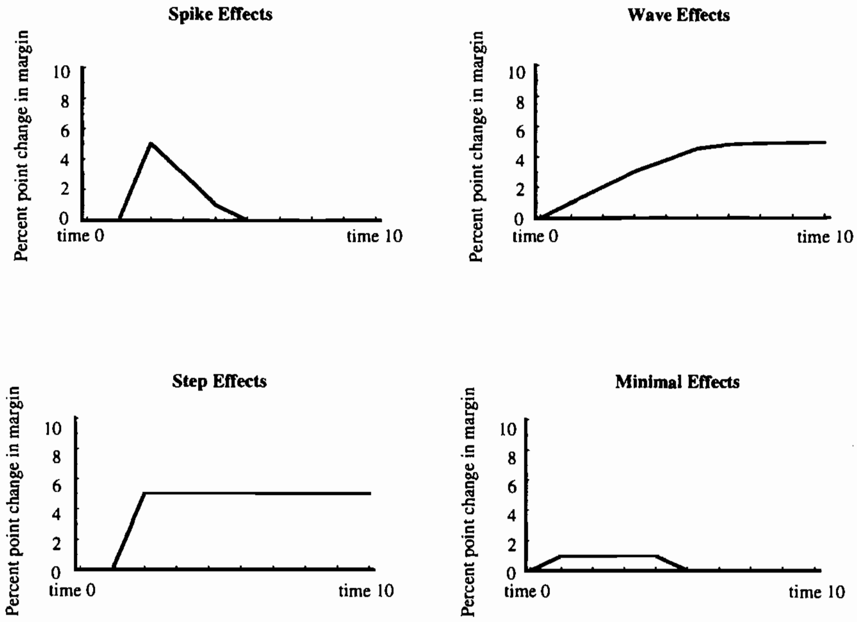
where $\varnothing$ is a moving average of change in the trial heat margin and a_t is random variation (see Carmines and Stimson 1989, appendix).

To be consistent with the Box-Jenkins framework, I model noise so that later causal analyses will not be confounded by this source of extraneous variance. The moving average process is suggested by my more general observations of movement in the trial ballot results over election campaigns.

[14] When estimating the model for all events, the magnitude of ω_0 is gauged according to the expected direction of the event's effect, with a positive parameter indicating predictable movement and a negative parameter indicating movement in the opposite direction. For example, a large negative effect induced by a scandal and a large positive effect induced by a convention would both result in a significant and positive ω_0.

FIGURE 3

Models of Campaign Effects across Time



impact. In estimating the relative durability of changes produced by campaign events, the parameter δ_1 can also be positive (indicating growth) or negative (indicating decay). A negative and significant δ_1 shows the impact of events is temporary (a spike effect), a positive and significant δ_1 shows the impact increases over time (a wave effect), and an insignificant δ_1 shows the impact is relatively durable (step effect).[15]

The equation is estimated for all campaign events, and is then reestimated excluding national conventions. This distinction recognizes the potential influence of conventions on the dataset due to their frequency and (substantial) impact. All told, there are 144 presidential campaign events in the inclusive analysis and 122 in the exclusive analysis.

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[15] I choose this methodological approach over generalized least squares (GLS) models of time-series data because it provides a stronger and more interpretable test of durability. Admittedly, one *can* test for durability in the GLS framework by lagging the independent variable. Furthermore, a GLS framework would allow for the introduction of control variables. My time frame, however, is such that controls are not nearly as important as they would be for an analysis that went beyond 10 days. A second concern is that GLS uses errors to "weigh" models. More specifically, diagnostic tests associated with GLS are much more ambiguous than is typically acknowledged. A Durbin-Watson statistic close to zero, for example, could be serial autocorrelation or it could be the result of parameter nonconstancy, regime shifts, functional form misspecification, or a host of other things. Therefore, when one subtracts out the "rho" in the correction one may be adding further "bias" to the empirical model. While not directly remedying many of these problems, neither does the present approach rely on strict assumptions as does GLS.

It is important to reiterate that in examining major campaign events, this analysis ignores the myriad of minor activities undertaken by a presidential campaign that have little impact on the public opinion polls. It also ignores longer-term activities whose effect cannot be measured with this framework. Still, the present design should produce conservative estimates of campaign effects because the definition of "effect" is narrow, acknowledging only whether events alter a candidate's position in the national polls. For instance, a campaign event might appear ineffectual even though it influenced many voters in a particular state. Furthermore, there is no attempt to capture other purposes that might be accomplished by specific campaign events, such as "long-run positioning" or "inoculation activities," because these activities are designed not to alter voters' preferences for one candidate over another but to change the *perceptions* voters have about the candidates.[16] Finally, the present study also ignores effects on turnout, except insofar as turnout influences vote choice.

Findings

Table 3 shows the immediate and relatively durable effects of campaign events from 1952 through 1992. Table 4 demonstrates the effectiveness of the different models in explaining changes caused by campaign events. Taken as a whole, presidential campaigning made an impact: the model's improvement over the moving average (MA) model is 3.54% and the small-sample chi-square statistic (Q) is a statistically significant 6.76. Excluding conventions, which had a particularly large impact, the model's improvement over the MA model is 3.10% and the Q is a statistically significant 6.20. In addition, events produced predictable movement in 92% of the cases in which a prediction could reasonably be made. As expected, however, a more detailed analysis of Tables 3 and 4 shows that effects varied substantially. Let us classify them as "minimal," "transitory," "substantial," or "outstanding," and discuss them in turn.[17]

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[16] "Long-run positioning" is when a candidate takes a position on an issue (often an unpopular position) with the hope of establishing a favorable impression in a more general political sense. For example, a candidate may take a pro-life stance on abortion (the less popular position, according to national surveys) in order to position herself as a "conservative" or as someone who is willing to take a "moral" stand regardless of what is politically convenient. "Inoculation" is making a statement or defining a position on an issue *before your opponent attacks you on it.* For example, a candidate who has voted to cut social security could run a television advertisement emphasizing his positive work for the elderly on other issues. This is a strategy to minimize damage.

[17] The moving average process is significant ($t = 2.14$) and reduces the amount of unexplained variance. The residual mean square drops from 7.14 for the series modeled with no parameters to 6.78 for the integrated moving average model. The latter value, "the predictive error when the series is modeled entirely as a function of its own history," provides "a base-line against which presumed causal explanations may be measured" (Carmines and Stimson 1989, 171).

TABLE 3

Parameter Estimates of Presidential Campaign Events' Durability

Events	Initial Impact Parameter (w_o)	Growth–Decay Rate Parameter (S_1)	Most Appropriate Model
Messages			
Prospective	0.2 (2.9)	0.2 (1.2)	minimal effects
Retrospective	−0.6 (2.9)	0.4 (1.6)	minimal effects
Valence	1.8 (1.7)	−0.7 (0.5)	spike effects
Attack	0.9 (2.7)	0.1 (2.7)	minimal effects
Party Activities			
National convention	7.4 (3.3)	1.5 (3.6)	step effects
Presidential debate	1.7 (1.2)	1.7 (1.7)	wave effects
VP debate	3.0 (2.6)	−1.6 (1.2)	spike effects
Party unity	4.2 (1.1)	−1.2 (0.9)	spike effects
Mistakes			
Scandal	−0.7 (3.6)	−0.5 (3.1)	step effects
Blunder	−6.2 (1.0)	−1.5 (0.9)	step effects
Outside Occurrences			
Outside events	0.3 (5.1)	−0.3 (1.6)	spike effects
ALL EVENTS	2.68 (2.39)	0.22 (1.96)	step effects
ALL EVENTS (excluding conventions)	1.80 (2.22)	−0.02 (1.65)	step effects

NOTES: The parameter estimates for "all events" control for the expected direction of changes. Messages, conventions, and party unity activities are expected to help a candidate, so favorable changes caused by those events are coded positively. Mistakes are expected to hurt a candidate, so unfavorable changes caused by those events are also coded positively. Although debates have typically helped Democratic and hurt Republican candidates, one cannot allow their contrary partisan effects to cancel out the overall estimate of debate effects. All debate effects are therefore coded positively to avoid the misleading interpretation that they were insignificant. Because there is no directional expectation for outside events, they are excluded from the "all events" calculation. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. For the growth–decay parameter, positive signs indicate the effect increased over time while a negative sign indicates it diminished.

Minimal Effects

Three of the four message types—prospective, retrospective, and attack messages—produced statistically insignificant changes in the margin (+0.2, −0.6, and +0.9 points, respectively). Only valence messages were statistically significant. Moreover, these effects did not grow over time, as indicated by the insignificant growth rate parameters. Since messages are often filtered by the media and tend not to be seen by many people, this is not surprising. Still,

TABLE 4

Modeling Presidential Campaign Events' Form

Events	Initial Impact Parameter (w_o)	Moving Average (Θ)	Residual Sum of Squares	Residual Mean Square	Improvement over Benchmark Residual Mean Square Error (6.78)	*Q* (df)
Messages						
Prospective	0.2 (2.9)	0.6	26.59	6.65	1.92%	5.01 (18)
Retrospective	−0.6 (2.9)	0.4	26.33	6.58	2.95%	4.96 (8)
Valence	1.8 (1.7)	0.4	26.04	6.51	3.98%	7.14 (7)
Attack	0.9 (2.7)	0.5	26.29	6.57	3.10%	5.65 (14)
Party Activities						
National convention	7.4 (3.3)	0.8	25.24	6.31	6.93%	12.34 (19)
Presidential debate	1.7 (1.2)	0.7	26.04	6.51	3.98%	8.25 (14)
VP debate	3.0 (2.6)	0.7	26.20	6.55	3.39%	6.00 (2)
Party unity	4.2 (1.1)	0.6	26.27	6.57	3.10%	5.97 (6)
Mistakes						
Scandal	−0.7 (3.6)	0.5	26.23	6.56	3.24%	5.20 (11)
Blunder	−6.2 (1.0)	0.7	25.99	6.50	4.13%	8.87 (12)
Outside Occurrences						
Outside events	0.3 (5.1)	0.5	26.58	6.65	1.92%	4.99 (15)
ALL EVENTS	2.68 (2.39)	0.6	26.16	6.54	3.54%	6.76 (155)
ALL EVENTS (excluding conventions)	1.80 (2.22)	0.6	26.26	6.57	3.10%	6.20 (133)

NOTES: The parameter estimates for "all events" control for the expected direction of changes. Messages, conventions, and party unity activities are expected to help a candidate, so favorable changes caused by those events are coded positively. Mistakes are expected to hurt a candidate, so unfavorable changes caused by those events are also coded positively. Although debates have typically helped Democratic and hurt Republican candidates, one cannot allow their contrary partisan effects to cancel out the overall estimate of debate effects. All debate effects are therefore coded positively to avoid the misleading interpretation that they were insignificant. Because there is no directional expectation for outside events, they are excluded from the "all events" calculation. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. "*Q*" is the Box-Ljung (1976) Q statistic for small samples, distributed as chi-square: $Q = (N)(N + 2)\Sigma\rho_i^2/(N - i)$. Degrees of freedom are presented in parentheses.

there are reasons to doubt that presidential campaign messages are ineffective. Perhaps the main reason is that many of the message events were attempts by losing candidates to shake things up. In 1992, for example, George Bush tried many message events, hoping for one that worked. Most obviously, he unveiled a "new" economic plan and repeatedly criticized Clinton's history of tax and fee increases in Arkansas. Predictably, many of these messages effected little change in the trial heat margin. By contrast, Bill Clinton stuck to his effective "putting people first" message, rendering subsequent messages unnecessary. To make a baseball analogy, changing pitchers is not necessarily proven to be ineffective because changes are positively associated with runs allowed. Managers *have* to remove floundering starting pitchers, so going through several relief pitchers is a *consequence* of initial failure and not a *cause* of subsequent failure.

Both scandals (−0.7 points) and outside events (+0.3 points) also failed to produce significant movement for either parties' presidential candidates, although not all of these events were inconsequential. For scandals, this finding is particularly interesting because these events tend to draw coverage and convey simple, negative information. Perhaps public cynicism has increased along with coverage so that these events simply reinforced the preexisting notion that politicians are untrustworthy. This explanation receives some support when one looks at the particularly dismal effects of scandals since 1972 (immediate impact parameter = −0.4). As for outside occurrences, their impact was occasionally significant, but as was suggested earlier, they could either help *or* hurt a candidate, leaving their net aggregate effect close to zero. For example, the Suez crisis helped Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, but the deaths of U.S. Marines in Lebanon hurt Ronald Reagan in 1984. These differences highlight the unpredictable character of many outside occurrences and lead this study to question the extent to which incumbent presidential candidates can manipulate such events to boost their chances for reelection.

Transitory Effects

Valence messages (+1.8 points) and vice presidential debates (+3.0 points) produced substantial but transitory effects, as demonstrated by the significance of their decay rate parameters (−0.7 and −1.6 points, respectively). Table 5, which distinguishes between Republican and Democratic events, shows the strong impact of Republican valence messages (+2.2 points). This effect was driven by events in the 1976 and 1984 campaigns; Gerald Ford's "Rose Garden" events and Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" appeals coincided with 3–4 point improvements in the trial heat margin. These messages did not effect lasting changes in voters' preferences, however, as the decay rate averaged −1.2 points across the three posterior time periods.

The effects associated with vice presidential debates were also short-lived. Although the "winner" of the debate generated an average bump of +3.0 points for the ticket, this bump disappeared after approximately six days. Interestingly, Republican tickets have lost support after vice presidential debates, perhaps owing to their proclivity for contentious statements and gaffes. In 1976, Robert Dole's claim that World Wars I and II were "Democrat wars" cost the ticket 3.0

TABLE 5

Direction and Magnitude of Change Produced by Presidential Campaign Events

Events	Initial Impact Parameter (ω_0) for Republicans	Initial Impact Parameter (ω_0) for Democrats
Messages		
Prospective	+0.4 (2.50)	+0.1 (4.34)
Retrospective	−1.0 (2.61)	−0.3 (4.73)
Valence	+2.2 (1.48)	+0.6 (2.72)
Attack	+1.0 (3.35)	+0.9 (4.47)
Party Activities		
National convention	+7.8 (2.82)	+6.9 (3.95)
Presidential debate	−1.7 (1.20)	+1.7 (1.20)
VP debate	−3.0 (2.55)	+3.0 (2.55)
Party unity	+5.0 (0.00)	+3.5 (1.65)
Mistakes		
Scandal	−1.3 (3.07)	+0.2 (4.02)
Blunder	−5.0 (0.00)	−7.3 (2.06)
Outside Occurrences		
Outside event	+0.6 (4.57)	−0.1 (5.89)
AVERAGE MOVEMENT	1.75 (1.89)	2.28 (2.75)

NOTES: The initial impact parameter is the change in the margin 1–3 days after the event (compared to the margin the day before the event). Positive numbers represent favorable changes for the candidate associated with the event and negative numbers represent unfavorable changes. "Average movement" is calculated by summing changes produced by campaign events, while controlling for the *expected* direction of those changes, and dividing by the total number of events. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

points. Even more memorable was Dan Quayle's 1988 performance as Lloyd Bentsen's straight-man in the "you're no Jack Kennedy" skit. That Quayle held his own with Al Gore and James Stockdale in 1992 did not alter the overall negative effect.[18]

As expected, the spike pattern associated with each of these events is consistent with the manner in which they convey information. Valence messages and party unity activities convey "easy" information, but are usually not the centerpiece of presidential campaigns and do not often rate significant, repeated exposure. Vice presidential debates, conversely, receive enormous exposure. The information they convey, however, is *(a)* often "hard," *(b)* interpreted after the fact by the media, and *(c)* rarely repeated.

---

[18] The t-statistic for the Democratic vice presidential debate advantage is 2.35.

Substantial Effects

Presidential debates produced statistically significant changes in the margin (+1.7 points) that *increased* over time (+1.7-point growth rate parameter). These significant effects are not entirely unexpected given the tremendous visibility of presidential debates. The distinct wave pattern of the presidential debate effect demonstrates either that it took a few days for the debate to sink into the political mind-sets of voters, or that the media's post hoc interpretations of the debate had an independent influence on voters' preferences. This second possibility is consistent with survey and focus group evidence from 1992, provided by Market Strategies, Inc., that shows most undecided voters initially thought Ross Perot won each of the presidential debates. Media accounts of the debates were quite favorable to Bill Clinton, however (see Goldman et al. 1994), and polls conducted two or more days after the debates showed an increase in the proportion of voters who thought Clinton had won.

Less predictably, Table 5 demonstrates that these changes were most often favorable to Democratic candidates.[19] While this might confuse those of us whose lasting image of the 1988 presidential campaign is Michael Dukakis's analytic review of why he would not want the death penalty for someone who had raped and murdered his wife, Democratic success *is* consistent with even a cursory review of past debates. In 1960, Richard Nixon's standing in the polls declined after his first debate with John Kennedy. In 1976, Gerald Ford's contention that "Eastern Europe is not under Soviet domination" allowed Jimmy Carter to increase his lead by 4.0 points. In 1984, Ronald Reagan's rambling final statement during his first debate with Walter Mondale cost him 4.0 points. Only in Ronald Reagan's 1980 debates with Jimmy Carter did a Republican candidate gain in the polls.[20]

All presidential candidates lost a substantial amount of support when they committed a blunder (−6.2 points). While this effect did not grow over time—indeed, it faded at a rate of −1.5 points across each anterior time period—it remained significant over the 10-day time frame. This is consistent with the exposure and information associated with gaffes, which (as was pointed out earlier) tend to draw substantial, negative coverage from the news media.

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[19] The t-statistic for the Democratic presidential debate advantage is 2.83.

[20] In a general sense, it is important to observe that while Republican and Democratic presidential campaign events produced different effects, these differences may not reflect systemic differences between the parties' candidates. It seems improbable, for example, that Democratic candidates were inherently better at debating than Republicans. Many of these differences are random and would disappear if we had 100 elections in this study rather than 11. It *is* plausible, however, that *some* differences are systemic. In particular, the positive effect of Republicans' valence messages could have been caused by the focus on "traditional" and "family" values in the presidential elections of 1988 and 1992 (Germond and Witcover 1989, 1993). Most partisan differences, though, appear epiphenomenal.

Similarly, party unity activities effected positive change for candidates before their influence faded. The data indicate that party unity activities increased candidates' shares of the vote by an average of 4.2 points. This impact then decayed at a rate of −1.2 points across each anterior time period. Although party unity events still had a significant, positive impact overall, the diminution of their effect suggests they had a backlash. Perhaps appealing to a faction of the party caused greater support at the expense of alienating other elements of the electorate, eventually undoing the initial gains.

Outstanding Effects

National conventions were the most influential campaign events for both Republican and Democratic candidates. Their effects were almost always positive and large, averaging +7.4 points. In addition, there was little decay in the change effected by the conventions. In fact, the bounce from the convention tended to *increase* over the anterior time periods (the growth rate parameter was +1.5 points). This is expected given the information context and exposure of conventions. While substantive information is conveyed by most conventions, valence, negative, and "easy" issue information is also conveyed. Moreover, while the conventions are no longer watched by most Americans, even now they draw an hour of prime time coverage for four consecutive nights from all of the networks. Coupled with extensive secondary coverage by the news media, exposure to conventions continues to be widespread.

All told, Republican conventions were slightly more successful than their Democratic counterparts, producing a +7.8-point bounce compared to a +6.9-point bounce for the Democrats.[21] Furthermore, Republican convention effects were more predictable than those for Democratic conventions. The standard deviation for Democratic convention bounces was 3.9 points compared to 2.8 points for Republican conventions. This fits with an anecdotal review of Democratic conventions, which include the rancorous and controversial conventions of 1968 and 1972, as well as the more tranquil convention of 1992. Matalin, Carville, and Knobler (1994) argue that the heterogeneous nature of the Democratic presidential coalition makes smooth conventions unlikely. They also contend that the unlikely tranquility of the Democratic convention in 1992 produced glowing news media coverage and helps explain Clinton's huge bounce. Although this argument is plausible, it has not been empirically tested. On the other side of the partisan aisle, it is also interesting to note that the controversial 1992 GOP convention produced a significant but transitory spike effect.

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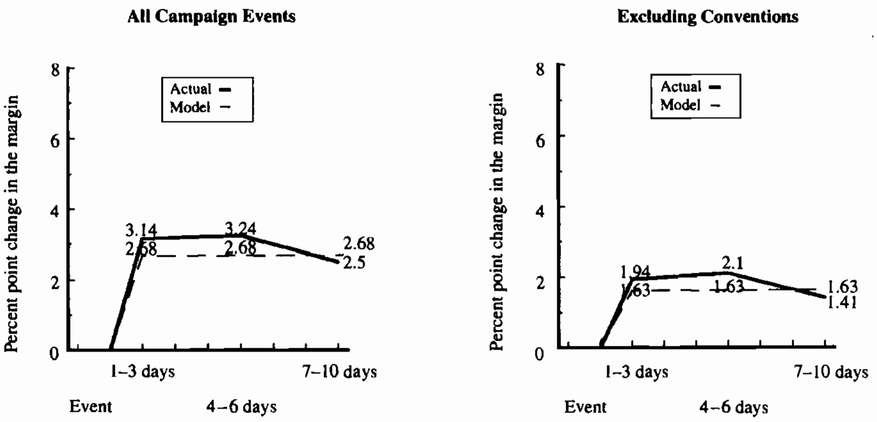
[21] The t-statistic for the Republican convention advantage was 0.26.

FIGURE 4

Campaign Effects across Time, 1952–1992
(The growth rate parameter S1 is omitted in the estimation of the model due to its relative statistical insignificance)



All Campaign Events

Excluding Conventions

From these data it is clear that while different campaign events had distinct effects on voters' candidate preferences, the overall pattern corresponds with the step effects model. Figure 4 demonstrates the estimation of effects compared with the actual data. Both the data and the model's estimation show the relatively durable impact associated with the step effects hypothesis and strongly suggest that campaign events have had a significant influence on voters in contemporary presidential elections.

Further Analysis and Findings

One thing this study has not done—something that Holbrook and Gelman and King (1993) do—is account for the possibility that the campaign effects estimated here are merely the proximate stimuli for preference changes that are a function of exogenous factors like national economic conditions or presidential approval. The hypothesis of interest is that positive and effective campaign events are most likely to be accomplished by a candidate whose support is well below that predicted by election forecasting models. Influential negative events, by the same token, are most likely to occur when a candidate's support exceeds that predicted by election forecasting models. The flip side of this hypothesis is that campaign events that produce minimal or transitory changes are most likely to be accomplished by a candidate whose support is consistent with that predicted by these models.

Although this study's models are not readily amenable to the introduction of a control variable for the predictions of macroeconomic models, a simple and instructive test can be accomplished. Using popular vote predictions from the presidential election forecasting model of Lewis-Beck and Rice (1992), it is possible to estimate the deviation of the preevent margin from the margin predicted by exogenous factors. If we then define "significant deviation" as being more than five points from the predicted popular vote margin, this study's models can be reestimated for "high potential" events (where there is significant deviation from the predicted margin) and "low potential" events (where there is insignificant deviation from the predicted margin). If Gelman and King's hypothesis that campaigns serve to "enlighten preferences" is correct, we should expect that effects are greatest (i.e., largest and most durable) when a candidate is underachieving prior to a positive event or overachieving prior to a negative event.

Table 6 shows that effects are indeed larger and more durable for high potential events. It also shows, however, that campaign effects do exist even for low potential events. Moreover, the decay rate for low potential events, while significant, does not completely eradicate the change in voters' preferences. While some of the movement attributable to low potential events may be explained by unpredictable changes in "unenlightened preferences," it is likely that a significant portion of the movement was among enlightened voters.

In a separate analysis also presented in table 6, events were classified as occurring "early" (before October 20) or "late" (after October 20). Since deviations from forecasting models tend to diminish over the course of campaigns, it should not be surprising that "late" events were somewhat less likely to cause relatively durable changes in voters' preferences. This is contrary to Gelman and King's expectation that movement should be greater as one nears election day because more voters are paying attention. The difference is not large, however, and is mostly explained by the impact of conventions on the estimation of "early" effects.

In general, these findings are consistent with Holbrook's estimate of campaign effects while controlling for national conditions. They are also compatible with major parts of Gelman and King's work, since the "enlightened preferences" argument acknowledges that events convey information and that there cannot be a perfect convergence of preferences to a predicted outcome. At the same time, these findings suggest that events are not "merely" the means by which voters learn of exogenous conditions. The findings are thus consistent with impressionistic observations of presidential campaign events; we know that some events work while others do not, regardless of exogenous factors. For example, despite the precarious state of the national economy in 1992, Clinton could not stage any events that affected voters' preferences until the nominating convention (those who would argue that this was because voters were not paying attention ignore

TABLE 6

Event Effects Controlling for Deviation from Political Science Models and the Timing of the Event

Events Occurring When Election Forecasting Models' Predictions Are Consistent with Trial Ballot Margin (within +/− five points)		Events Occurring When Predictions Are Off (outside +/− five points)	
Initial Impact Parameter	Growth–Decay Rate Parameter	Initial Impact Parameter	Growth–Decay Rate Parameter
2.23 (3.75)	−0.71 (2.71)	2.89 (2.27)	+0.35 (1.84)
N = 50		N = 93	
Events Occurring Late in the Campaign (on or after October 20)		Events Occurring Early in the Campaign (before October 20)	
Initial Impact Parameter	Growth–Decay Rate Parameter	Initial Impact Parameter	Growth–Decay Rate Parameter
2.60 (2.58)	−0.17 (2.12)	2.70 (2.25)	+0.25 (1.90)
N = 25		N = 118	

NOTES: Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Estimates of deviation from election forecasting models are calculated by taking the predictions of the popular vote given by Lewis-Beck and Rice (1992), calculating the predicted final vote margin, and comparing this to the margin estimated for the day of a given event. Events occurring on days when the margin is outside the range predicted by election forecasting models are then separated from other events. The Lewis-Beck and Rice model takes into account macroeconomic conditions, presidential approval, and several other factors and is derived as follows: proportion of popular vote = (predicted proportion of electoral votes) + 160.5/4.27 (1992, chap. 3). The estimate for 1992 is calculated from figures provided by the authors in chapter 9.

Ross Perot's rise in the polls during this same period of time). It is important to observe, however, that even if events had little or no independent effect it would not mean that campaigns do not matter (as Gelman and King themselves point out) nor would it mean that campaign events cease to be interesting phenomena. If campaign events "merely" convey critical information to voters about exogenous conditions, we would still want to know what kinds of events are better at this conveyance and how this process varies within and across election campaigns.

Conclusion

This study began by identifying a debate about how campaigns affect elections. It suggested that differences in the literature may stem from misspecifications of both presidential campaigning and electoral effects. A new categorization of campaign events and expanded models of voters' preferences were offered, with empirical findings supporting this more complex view of campaign effects. In particular, different categories of campaign events were found to have produced different effects, with some causing significant and relatively durable changes in voters' preferences. Subsequent analyses then showed that campaign events continue to produce significant (though smaller) changes even when controlling for national conditions and the timing of events. These findings shed light on the disagreement in the literature; while campaigning *can* affect voters, influential campaign events may not be detected because (1) they are lumped in with events that do not matter and (2) the effects of different events may balance out.

These results are both similar and distinct from the most important recent work on presidential campaigns. The significance of particular events fits nicely with recent specialized studies. For example, the finding that debates and conventions are highly correlated with changes in voters' preferences is consistent with Holbrook's influential studies (1994, 1996). In addition, the conditioning effects of the economy and other exogenous factors suggested by the later analyses of this study corroborate the findings of Gelman and King (1993) and Holbrook (1994, 1996).

But there are differences as well. Most fundamentally, this study acknowledges the subtleties of campaigning and campaign effects pointed out by Holbrook and extends them. By distinguishing among different types of campaign events, we not only find that their effects are unique, but that this variance is typically predictable. More specifically, the significance of blunders and party unity activities is an original and striking bit of news, while the relative durability of debate, convention, blunder, and party unity effects (and the transitory effects associated with other events) is something that has not been documented previously.

These findings are also instructive with respect to how voters process information in campaigns. In particular, the decay of certain effects suggests that voters often use memory-based processing strategies when evaluating candidates. It is important to point out, however, that many events produce either minimal or durable effects, both of which are consistent with the on-line model (which predicts no decay because information conveyed by events is thought to be used by individuals to update instantaneously their evaluations of the candidates). Of course, such extrapolations are contentious because they are drawn from aggregate-level data. Thus, while insight into individual-level behavior can be inferred from aggregate-level findings, one should always be cautious about such inferences.

What do these findings tell us about whether campaigns matter? On one side of the ledger, the evidence suggests events *can* influence close elections by swaying the decisive votes. For instance, John Kennedy's debate performance, coupled with his strategically driven messages and appearances, probably doomed Richard Nixon in 1960 (White 1961). In addition, campaign events occurring just before election day can be decisive in a close race. This observation is consistent with studies that argue the 1980 and 1988 presidential elections were decided by campaign events undertaken in the last 10 days.[22] To borrow another sports analogy, elections can be like close basketball games in which the final possession decides the contest.

In lopsided races, events can tighten the race or reinforce the front-runner's lead, depending on the nature of the event, the prevailing economic and political conditions, and the particular distribution of preferences. For example, Clinton led Bush by 12 points in September 1992—about 10–17 points above the predictions of election forecasting models—and geared a substantial portion of his campaign toward minimizing the impact of Bush's events. It is plausible that his campaign could be judged "effective" because Bush "only" narrowed the gap to 5 points (a margin within the error range of many forecasting models) despite the host of scandals that hounded Clinton. Put another way, it is plausible that Clinton's campaign influenced the outcome by countering the Bush campaign's information with information of its own, thus blocking even more significant movement in voters' preferences. This possibility highlights an observation made earlier: While campaigns can be persuasive, they can also be important without favorably altering voters' preferences. More broadly, the point to be made is not simply that campaigns can cancel each other out (although that may occur in the aggregate); it is, rather, that the persuasive effects noted in this study are all the more striking given that they are an especially demanding standard by which to judge impact.

On the other side of the ledger, the finding that some events affect voters' preferences is not incompatible with the minimal effects perspective. Even setting aside the existence of many ineffective events, it is probable that some portion of effective events are the proximate stimuli through which more deterministic variables are set in motion. There is, however, reason to doubt the inevitability implicit in this argument. Some events work while others do not, even in situations where deterministic variables suggest a large pool of available voters. The expertise and quality with which an event is accomplished is therefore not irrelevant. Furthermore, while this expertise and quality may be equal when one aggregates a number of elections, the notion that Republican and Democratic campaigns are *inherently* equal in a *given* year is debatable.

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[22] Petrocik (1996) contends that Reagan's victory over Carter was accomplished by last-minute events that reinforced voters' preference for Reagan's issue agenda. Forsythe et al. (1992) make the case that Bush's victory in 1988 was wrought by campaign events occurring in the last 10 days of the campaign.

In a larger sense, those concerned about the quality of democratic reflection might be disturbed by the role that singular events, especially mistakes and conventions, have played in presidential election processes. Indeed, an argument can be made that these events convey images and not substantive issue information. But it is wrong to dismiss the legitimate contribution these events make to the general feeling voters have for a candidate. As Popkin (1991) suggests, in today's complicated world voters are suspicious of promises and rationally seek clues as to the character and competence of the candidates—mistakes and conventions can provide these clues. In addition, it *is* the case that more substantive events (such as the debates and some messages) have also had an influence on voters' preferences.

Of course, even if there were overwhelming evidence that electioneering is a waste of time, candidates would continue to campaign on the off chance that it may matter. This is especially the case at the presidential level, where the stakes are too high for a candidate to neglect any activity that may persuade voters, even if the activity is expensive and the probability it will be decisive is low. But there is reason to believe campaigning *can* be decisive because, simply put, *campaigning affects voters*. This fact should become even more clear if future analyses consider the variety of campaign activities and the different ways in which voters are affected by them.

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