Chapter Six

"Basic Rule" Voting: Impact of Campaigns on Party- and Approval-Based Voting

Shanto Iyengar
John R. Petrocik

American politics has a “fifth estate” of campaign managers and political consultants who are believed to be able to design campaign strategies and tactics that persuade voters to support their candidate. This conventional wisdom makes their services almost essential for many campaigns, and the credibility of a candidate’s effort often is judged by the reputation and win-loss record (and sometimes they are equivalent) of the consultants working for the campaign. The use of consultants is so widespread that it is not difficult to find jurisdictions where political operatives (albeit minor ones) are plying their trade near the bottom of the ballot in races for school boards, municipal judgeships, and county commissions. The sine qua non of their prominence is a prior belief that campaigns shape the outcome of elections. How much consultants contribute to the efficacy of a campaign is a subject of debate and not one that we will attempt to resolve. This chapter addresses the efficacy of campaigns themselves.

There is evidence of campaign effects. “Attack” campaigning, canvassing, voter contact, party organization work, campaign spending, media coverage, candidate appearances, television advertising, and the activities of political consultants have been studied for their effects on turnout, can-


2. For studies that do address this question, see Herrnson (2000) and Medvic (2000).
candidate images, fundraising, and election outcomes. This work has not, however, produced anything near a consensus that campaigns are as important as one would expect given the money and attention lavished on them.

There is a strong correlation between the vote and structural variables (a term used here as a shorthand for national economic conditions, incumbent approval, domestic and foreign tranquility, the honesty and integrity of officials, and standing predispositions, such as party identification). This correlation has persuaded many political scientists (few of whom, it must be admitted, have any experience in campaigns) that election outcomes are shaped by factors largely immune to campaign strategies and the maneuvering of candidates. Some findings—for example, that a president's pre-campaign popularity accounts for more than two-thirds of the variance of the vote of the incumbent party—are especially severe blows to the notion that campaigns move the vote. It is not surprising, therefore, that forecasting models based on structural indicators have been used extensively to predict election results and that none has incorporated campaign specific strategies, tactics, or events. Their predictive success has shaped a dominant theory of retrospective voting that allows very little room for candidate maneuvering because the structural variables that candidates cannot manipulate are in place before a campaign begins. In this theory, elections are referenda on the leadership of the incumbent president: voters pass judgment on the incumbent's overall record, but particularly on the economic performance of the current administration. Many general reviews and applications of these forecasting models have been done. Corroborating individual-level studies have only reinforced the notion that campaigns have limited and maybe insignificant net effects.


5. The theory of retrospective voting dates to at least V. O. Key's classic treatise The Responsible Voter (Key 1966), but also see Fiorina (1981).


Explaining Weak Campaign Effects

Researchers have proposed a variety of theories to explain why campaign effects may be so limited. One of the most prominent is the theory of offsetting effects, which accepts that campaigns can influence voters but that they almost always have a minimal net impact because the competitors neutralize each other because of a relative parity of resources, including both funding and know-how.

A second set of explanations for minimal campaign effects asserts that their seeming irrelevance is actually illusory. This account focuses on methodological considerations, particularly the limitations of survey research. The founding fathers of campaign research (Paul Lazarsfeld and Bernard Berelson and their successors at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research) pioneered the use of sample surveys on the premise that survey respondents' self-reports are reliable and accurate and that the standard test of a campaign effect—the scale of differences in vote choice between respondents who self-report high or low levels of exposure to the campaign—accurately tests campaign effects.

If self-reports are not accurate, then the absence of observable campaign effects can be attributed to measurement error. In most ways and at most times self-reports seem trustworthy, but there is good reason to believe that reports of campaign exposure are seriously erroneous, because the frailties of human memory create considerable slippage between what respondents say they saw or heard and what actually transpired. The avail-

9. For a review of this literature, see Iyengar (1996).
10. See Markus (1988); Gelman and King (1993). One would expect that these conditions are satisfied for presidential campaigns, but not for most other campaigns.
11. The NES interview schedule, for instance, typically includes an extensive battery of questions concerning media exposure (frequency of television news viewing).
able evidence indicates that self-reported and actual exposure are only weakly correlated.12

Adding even further to the measurement error is the fact that self-reported exposure to campaign messages often is related to political attitudes, including candidate preference, because those who choose to tune in to the campaign may differ systematically (in ways that matter to their vote choice) from those who do not. Respondents who recalled seeing a campaign advertisement in the 1992 National Election Study (NES) survey, for instance, were more likely to intend to vote than those who did not.13 Was it exposure to advertising that prompted turnout, or was the greater interest in campaigns among likely voters responsible for their higher level of recall? Most survey-based analyses of campaigns cannot disentangle the reciprocal effects of self-reported exposure and partisan attitudes.

Finally, a failure to observe campaign effects may reflect the short time frame during which most NES surveys (the most widely used survey data in academic circles) are collected. NES fieldwork begins around September 1—the traditional kickoff date for presidential campaigning. Fifty years ago the election might have been shaped significantly during the sixty or so days between September 1 and the election, but the modern system of “permanent” campaigns and months of highly visible campaigning before election day has created an environment in which most voters arrive at their choice of presidential candidate well before September 1. The small changes that occur after that date, even if they tip the balance, may be too small for surveys to detect.

Each of these hypotheses about the apparently limited effect of campaigns—offsetting effects, inadequate measurement of campaign exposure, and the time frame of the observations—is consistent with the observed facts. Our purpose in this chapter is not to choose among them, but to suggest that the “mystery of the irrelevant campaign” may be more apparent than real. The fact that partisanship and the popularity of the incumbent president are powerful determinants of voter choice is not inconsistent with the view that campaigns also influence these choices. Rather than treating structural and campaign-based accounts of elections as mutually exclusive, we see them as complementary.

12. Examples are provided in Price and Zaller (1993). In the experiments conducted by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), for example, more than 50 percent of the participants who were exposed to a campaign advertisement were unable, a mere thirty minutes later, to recall having seen the advertisement.

In this view, voters are guided by their party affiliation and their assessments of the performance of the incumbent exactly because exposure to the campaign serves to make these factors even more tightly bound up with candidate preferences. We suggest that, “Campaigns matter because they tend to produce congruence between fundamental political conditions and predispositions, on the one hand, and vote intentions, on the other.”14

Campaigns as Activation

The analysis reported here provides evidence that campaigns shape the vote by activating underlying predispositions and perceptions. Considerable evidence from both the pre- and post-television eras suggests that presidential campaigns strengthen existing predispositions. The most basic predisposition, of course, is party identification, and exposure to the campaign tends to harden partisan loyalties, making it less likely that partisans will defect. This is not a new argument. The idea and evidence for it go back to the earliest voting studies, and contemporary survey studies provide considerable evidence that activation occurs as voters converge on the predictable choice, usually the candidate of the party preferred by the voter.

During the 1940 campaign Lazarsfeld and his collaborators found that many undecided voters converged on the “right” candidate: the one whose party was most closely associated with the voter’s interests (measured indirectly through socioeconomic status, religion, and place of residence).15 Later work repeatedly found this effect. Finkel examined changes in voting preference over the course of the 1980 campaign and showed that candidate preferences were remarkably stable and that when attitudes did change they invariably fit a pattern of partisan reinforcement or activation.16 Gelman and King argued that information, one of the most important by-products of political campaigns, enables voters to choose according to their preferences.17 As predicted by this “enlightenment” logic, Gelman and King found that voters assigned greater weight to “fundamental vari-

15. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944).
ables” as the campaign progressed. A similar pattern emerged in Holbrook’s study of presidential campaigns, which found that candidates whose initial level of support lagged behind its predicted level (based on baseline variables such as partisanship, the incumbent’s popularity, and the state of the economy) changed the most during the election cycle. The campaign impact, then, was most notable for candidates who entered the race as “underachievers” with an initial level of support lagging their predicted level of support. The campaign effect primed the relevance of the fundamental variables of partisanship, incumbent popularity, and the state of the economy, producing a better fit between fundamental variables and voter choice.

Petrocik’s analysis of the 1980 election yielded similar results: candidate preferences increasingly coincided with the issues and problems about which voters were concerned. A related analysis of the 1988 election showed that George Bush’s persistent emphasis on the peace and prosperity of the Reagan years caused voters’ evaluations of the state of the country to become increasingly correlated with their vote intention—a shift that moved Bush from a deficit in May to a lead by the middle of the summer. A study of the 1991 Pennsylvania Senate election showed a similar result.

A final piece of evidence concerning partisan activation derives from a series of experiments administered by Ansolabehere and Iyengar. In these tightly controlled studies, the experimental manipulation (typically exposure to a single campaign advertisement) significantly boosted the sponsoring candidate’s level of support. More to the point, this effect was concentrated among voters who shared the partisanship of the sponsor. Thus the principal effect of campaign advertising was to strengthen party-line voting.

Not all the individual-level survey evidence supports the hypothesis of partisan reinforcement. Examining all NES surveys since 1980, Bartels compiled evidence that amounted to “a resounding disconfirmation of the partisan activation hypothesis, at least as it applies to the autumn campaign in recent presidential election years.” Using the date on which respondents were interviewed as a proxy for exposure to the campaign (respondents interviewed in early September were treated as less exposed than those surveyed in late October), Bartels found that neither the impact of party identification on vote choice nor the level of party identification itself was strengthened among respondents interviewed nearer election day.

Basic Rule Voting as a Campaign Effect

This analysis focuses on how campaigns activate two fundamental political predispositions: partisanship and assessments of the job performance of the incumbent president. In any given election, we expect voters’ choices to follow directly from their party affiliation; Democrats will vote Democratic, and Republicans will vote Republican. When the partisan cue is absent—for example, the voter is nonpartisan—voters turn to their evaluations of presidential performance: those who believe the president has done well vote for him (or the party’s nominee), while those who rate the incumbent president’s performance negatively vote for the challenger. Further, we expect these retrospective performance judgments to underlie the vote choices of defecting partisans.

Together, partisanship and the performance of the incumbent combine to produce the following basic rule for voters: vote party affiliation and defect according to the logic of incumbent approval, which is to say that you should vote for the other party’s candidate only if you disapprove of the job performance of your party’s incumbent or approve of the job performance of the other party’s incumbent. Independents should vote according to their evaluation of the incumbent’s job performance.

Using both experimental and survey-based indicators of exposure to the campaign, this analysis shows that campaigns boost the number of voters who choose according to the party/incumbent approval calculus of the basic rule. It shows that the structuring effects of presidential cam-
Campaigns on vote choice are especially pronounced among young voters and weak partisans who lack the necessary commitments to engage in rule-based voting without the activation provided by campaigns. In concluding, we note that the controversy over structural versus campaign-oriented accounts of elections is artificial: party affiliation and assessments of presidential performance affect voter behavior because of the campaign.

**A Research Design to Test Campaign Effects**

Using experimental and national survey data from the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns (and survey data for some earlier races), we show that the basic voting rule provides a close approximation to observed voter behavior. More important, the data demonstrate that exposure to the campaign significantly increases the number of voters who choose consistent with the basic rule. The structural components of electoral choice are activated by exposure to the presidential campaign. Partisanship and voters’ evaluations of presidential performance together account for the great majority of votes cast in recent presidential elections. Given the impact of incumbent approval on vote choice and the fact that performance is such a perennial campaign message, the campaign activation hypothesis leads us to expect a significant interaction between exposure to the campaign and evaluations of the incumbent president’s job performance. Surprisingly, we know of no previous study that has examined this interaction directly, although Bartels’s recent analysis of the effects of presidential campaigns on the weight that voters assign to their beliefs about the state of the economy provides a close approximation.

Experiments and Surveys

The complementary advantages and disadvantages of experimentation and surveys provide compelling evidence for the validity of our results. Surveys can easily generalize to populations, but they are in a weak position to assess exposure to the campaign. Experiments, in contrast, can calibrate exposure precisely, but the generalizability of their results may be indeterminate. This analysis first tests the activation hypothesis experimentally, manipulating voters’ level of exposure to the 1992 and 1996 campaigns, and then corroborates those results with survey data comparing the vote choices of respondents who were interviewed during the early and late stages of the campaign.

Experiments have liabilities. In many cases the subjects are “captive” (college students) who are not representative. More important for this study is that experiments usually occur in sterile laboratory-like environments. No experiment can reproduce the cacophony and confusion of election campaigns, particularly as they are experienced by people who lead busy lives in which political stimuli are only a small fraction of their daily experiences. But we took steps to enhance both the generalizability and realism of the campaign experiments.

**The Campaign Experiments**

The experiments contrast voters living in the Greater Los Angeles area who watched no television advertisement or news report about the presidential campaign with those who watched one or two campaign messages. Random assignment assured that participants were equivalent in all respects except “exposure” to the campaigns. Any observed difference between the experimental and control groups thus can be attributed to exposure.

The generalizability of our results was boosted by using a subject pool that was reasonably representative of the local (Southern California) voting-age population. Unlike the usual social science experiment, our participants were people from many walks of life and included adults of all ages, employed and unemployed, whites, African Americans, and Hispan-

---

28. Bartels (1997a). This also was one of the results reported by Markus (1988). Bartels’s examination of NES surveys since 1980 found that exposure to the presidential campaign more than doubled the impact of beliefs about the state of the economy on vote choice (see Bartels 1997a, pp. 11-12). Over the course of the campaign, voters who believed the economy had improved (who, presumably, also approved of the president’s performance), became even more likely to vote for the incumbent.
Table 6-1. Profile of Experimental Participants, 1992 and 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median age (years)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race or ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The realism of the design was strengthened by administering the experiments during actual campaigns. Our experiments all took place between August and early November, the period of the general election campaign. The messages included in our experiments were, in the great majority of conditions, actual campaign advertisements. In addition to advertisements, some participants viewed “ad watch” reports in which a particular presidential candidate was scrutinized.

The experiments also attempted to heighten the mundane realism of the real-world experience of exposure to campaign advertising. The aura of the experimental laboratory was diminished by designing the viewing environment to resemble, as closely as possible, the normal conditions in which a person views television. Comfortable couches and chairs were arranged in front of a television set, with houseplants and wall hangings placed around the room. Respondents were offered coffee, cookies, and soft drinks to enjoy during the viewing sessions. In most cases, family members or friends took part in the experiment at the same time, so that respondents did not find themselves sitting next to a stranger while viewing the videotape.

The sites selected for each experiment were virtually identical in layout and decor. Each site consisted of a two-room office suite located in or near a retail shopping area. One of the rooms was used for viewing the tapes, and the other was used for filling out questionnaires. The 1992 experiments were conducted at two sites. The first was located near Westwood, a predominantly liberal and Democratic neighborhood located just south of the University of California, Los Angeles, campus. The other was located in Costa Mesa, a small city in more conservative Orange County. In 1996 the design included three sites. One was in a popular shopping mall in Westwood. The second was in a small shopping area in Moorpark, a northern suburb of Los Angeles. The third site was located in Manhattan Beach, a coastal city south of Los Angeles. This variety of locations helped to diversify the subject pool.

The Design of the Experiments

We used two different experimental designs. The first (administered during the 1992 campaign) embedded the campaign message (either an advertisement or an ad watch report) into a fifteen-minute recording of a recent local newscast. Because candidates advertise heavily during local news programs, the appearance of the experimental campaign advertisement in the local newscast was inconspicuous. All other news stories and product advertisements were screened so that they were not relevant to the campaign, and these same filler stories and ads were used in combination with each political advertisement. Within this “newscast” design, participants were exposed to either one or two campaign advertisements from the presidential candidates. However, in no case did participants watch more than one spot from a particular candidate.

The majority (five) of the advertising conditions in the 1992 experiments featured messages dealing with the state of the economy. Bill Clinton attacked George Bush’s record on the economy, promoted his own economic plan, and described the “Arkansas miracle.” For his part, Bush described his economic goals for a second term (lower taxes, more open

---

30. Although participants were free to converse with each other during the viewing sessions, they completed their responses to the questionnaires individually, often in separate rooms.

---

29. In 1992 one of the advertising conditions featured a Bill Clinton ad dealing with issues of women’s rights. We created this ad using footage from the Hill-Thomas hearings and from other Clinton ads.
export markets, a lower deficit) and attacked Clinton as a “tax and spend liberal.” A sixth condition emphasized Clinton’s support for women’s rights (featuring the Anita Hill—Clarence Thomas hearings and Clinton’s pro-choice stance). Finally, we used a pair of advertisements concerning the “character” issue—the Clinton advertisement “Journey” and a Bush spot emphasizing the importance of trust and integrity.

Three of the conditions during the 1992 study featured ad watch reports. In the first, CNN (Cable News Network) reporter Brooks Jackson critiqued the “Arkansas miracle” advertisement describing Clinton’s accomplishments while governor. A second report focused on the Clinton advertisement (“In His Own Words”) attacking Bush’s performance on the economy. Finally, we used a third report (also by Jackson) dealing with the accuracy of a Bush advertisement attacking Clinton for raising taxes while governor of Arkansas.

The control condition in 1992 consisted of participants who watched a newscast with no campaign advertisements as well as participants who watched a newscast that included one or more ads from one of the U.S. Senate campaigns in California. As we will show, the initial results indicated that these two groups were similar in the degree to which participants supported candidates according to the basic rule. They thus were combined, and the design was reduced to conditions that featured a message from the presidential campaign and conditions that did not.

In 1996 we used a different design in which participants simply watched a videotaped collection of nine television advertisements, one of which was an advertisement from the 1996 presidential campaign. The experimental treatments corresponded to the actual advertisements being aired in Southern California by Clinton and Bob Dole. The particular advertisements used addressed illegal immigration, drug abuse, the budget deficit, crime, federal spending on social welfare programs, the state of the economy, taxes, and “character.”

In two other experimental conditions, participants watched a collection of three news stories, one of which was an ad watch dealing with either a Clinton or a Dole advertisement. The first covered the Dole ad on drug abuse among juveniles, and the second focused on Clinton’s advertisement “Wrong in the Past,” which attacked Senator Dole’s previous opposition to social security and other benefit programs.

Finally, the “no message” control group in 1996 consisted of participants who watched no political advertisement or news report at all and those participants who watched an advertisement either supporting or opposing Proposition 209—the California Civil Rights Initiative. The proportion of participants in these two sets of conditions who voted “structurally” was virtually identical and significantly different from the corresponding proportion in the “presidential campaign” conditions. As in the case of 1992, the design was reduced to two levels—participants who received a message from the presidential campaign and those who did not.

The Survey Data

Survey data were drawn from the 1980, 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections. The 1980 and 1988 data were used to corroborate patterns observed in 1992 and 1996. We began with the latter two elections because the experimental data were collected in 1992 and 1996.

In addition to the surveys carried out by the NES for 1992 and 1996, we included pre-campaign national surveys (administered in May 1992 and February 1996) carried out by organizations associated with the Bush and Dole campaigns, respectively. The questions concerning vote inten-

31. The California senatorial campaigns of 1992 featured two high-profile races: Barbara Boxer (Democrat) versus Bruce Herschensohn (Republican) in one and Dianne Feinstein (Democrat) versus John Seymour (Republican) in the other. The experimental advertisements featured in the Senate studies covered a variety of subjects including women’s rights (1992 was the “year of the woman”), crime and urban unrest, the depressed state of the California economy, and others. For a more detailed description of the studies and stimulus materials used in the 1992 Senate studies, see Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1999).

32. The ads appearing in the tape (in order) were sponsored by the following products or companies: Kentucky Fried Chicken, United Airlines, Advil, Nicorette, Yuban, Advantage Flea Control, AT&T, Jack-in-the-Box, and Ford.

33. In general, we synchronized our participants’ exposure to the 1996 ads with the candidates’ ad buys.

34. The two noncampaign stories on the tape concerned the illness of the pope and the efforts of a small college in Kentucky to provide students with employment opportunities.

35. Proposition 209, which was passed by the electorate, required state agencies to terminate preferential consideration based on race or gender.

36. The “voting” that is described in the experiments is actually a vote intention and not a reported vote. In our estimation the intention is functionally equivalent to a reported and observed vote since what the design tests is whether campaign exposure increases behavior or, in the case of the experiments, “intended behavior” that is consistent with the basic rule of candidate evaluation and support.

37. The non-NES data are standard telephone surveys that were stratified by region.
tion, presidential approval, party identification, and age were essentially identical in these studies. The survey data do not fully replicate the exposure manipulation in the experiments. We approximated the manipulation by stratifying respondents according to when they were interviewed, assuming that respondents interviewed nearer the election experienced more campaign activity than those interviewed early in the election season. For the 1992 campaign, we compared the rates of party voting and basic rule voting in May (before the campaign) with the corresponding rates for two periods during the fall campaign—September and October. The analysis of the 1996 campaign relied on a similar comparison: party and basic rule voting before the campaign (February) versus after the onset of the campaign.

Following the presentation of the parallel survey results for 1992 and 1996, we broadened the investigation to encompass the 1980 and 1988 campaigns (1984 was excluded because we had no national surveys covering a comparable time frame). All of the 1980 data were drawn from the more elaborate NES study of that year; separate surveys were administered in January, June, July, and the standard September-October sampling frame. Finally, the data for 1988 were drawn from surveys carried out for the Bush campaign (administered in May, July, and early September), from the 1988 NES September-October survey, and from a Republican-sponsored survey conducted during the week immediately after the election.

**Indicators**

Our indicator of candidate preference was the respondent’s vote intention. In the experiments we asked participants (following the playing of the videotape), “If the election were held today, how would you vote?” A similar question in the surveys assessed candidate preference at the time of the interview. Responses to this question were coded as a dichotomy with intended votes for the Democrat set equal to +1 and votes for the Republican set to 0. For the analysis of the 1992 and 1996 elections, we tested the activation hypothesis both with and without Ross Perot voters. Most of the analysis reported below excludes Perot voters. Perot supporters were included at one point to demonstrate that the net effect of excluding them is to depress the magnitude of the differences observed as a function of campaign exposure.

Professed party identification and a measure of incumbent job approval are the structural determinants of the vote. Of course, incumbent approval is contaminated by partisanship, making it difficult to disentangle party voting from approval voting. However, our operationalization of the basic voting rule forces party identification and approval of the incumbent to be mutually exclusive: job approval is relevant only for independents and partisan defectors. By definition, independents cannot assess the incumbent through a partisan lens. Similarly, a Democrat who disapproved of Clinton’s job performance in 1996 or a Republican who disapproved of Bush’s job performance in 1992 cannot be rationalizing partisanship because their assessment of the president is contrary to the partisan connection. The votes of partisan defectors, accordingly, can be attributed purely to the approval component of the basic voting rule.

In sum, we used a composite of partisanship and approval of the incumbent’s performance to classify voters who responded to structural factors. The responsiveness of the voter to structural influences was measured first in terms of simple party voting and second in terms of both partisanship and incumbent approval. Table 6-2 summarizes the measures. The party voting rule focuses exclusively on partisans and stipulates that they vote accordingly: Republicans for Bush in 1992 and Dole in 1996.
Table 6-2. Party and Basic Rule Voting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The party rule</td>
<td>Party identification is consistent with vote choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The basic rule</td>
<td>Party identification is consistent with vote choice, or defection is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consistent with incumbent job assessment, or independents' vote choice is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consistent with incumbent job assessment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and Democrats for Clinton. Defectors are treated as violating the party rule. The party rule makes no prediction, obviously, for independents.

Basic rule voting encompasses party voting for partisans and adds retrospective approval of the incumbent for independents and party defectors. Defectors and independents conform to structural influences if their vote choice corresponds to their assessment of the performance of the incumbent president. An independent or Republican who voted for Clinton in 1992, for example, is regarded as a basic rule voter if he or she disapproved of Bush’s performance as president.

Results

The key test of the campaign activation hypothesis is the amount of change that occurs in the rate of party and basic rule voting in 1992 and 1996 as a result of exposure to the presidential campaign. In the experiments, the proportion of party and basic rule voters should be greater among individuals exposed to a campaign advertisement or ad watch. In the surveys, where time of interview is a proxy for campaign exposure, the proportion of party and basic rule voters will increase over time.

We begin by examining the separate contributions of each structural factor—party identification and incumbent approval—to the vote choices of participants in the experiments. Table 6-3 presents, by year, the percentage of participants within each of the three levels of the experimental design (corresponding to the presidential, nonpresidential, and no-message conditions) whose vote intentions were classified accurately on the basis of their party identity and evaluations of the incumbent’s job performance.

In both years, participants who were exposed to the campaign ads registered the highest level of party-based voting, although the differences approached significance ($p < 0.11$) only in 1996. Approval-based voting also peaked in the presidential campaign conditions. Here, the differences were significant in 1992 ($p < 0.01$) and not in 1996.

From our perspective, the most important feature of table 6-3 is the behavior of the participants exposed to a nonpresidential campaign message; in all four comparisons, their presidential voting choices were either equally or less predictable than the choices made by the participants who saw no campaign message. This pattern suggests that exposure to a message from some other campaign is functionally equivalent to no message at all, at least in terms of the logic of campaign activation. We thus collapsed the no-message and nonpresidential message conditions in both years; the analyses that follow rely on this reduced form of the manipulation.

The full-fledged test of the campaign activation hypothesis presumes that candidate preference is a joint function of party affiliation and incumbent approval (the basic rule). Partisans vote for their party, and non-partisans vote according to how they evaluate the incumbent’s performance, as do defecting partisans. Figure 6-1 summarizes the experimental and survey evidence for 1992 and 1996.

The experiments produced significant activation of party voting in 1996 ($p < 0.05$) and measurable but statistically weaker increases in 1992.
the case of basic rule voting, the campaign activation effect was significant in 1992 (p < 0.05), but the utter predictability of participants' vote choices in 1996 from the basic rule precluded further activation—the share voting consistent with the basic rule remained fixed at 98 percent. Thus even among participants who were shielded from the presidential campaign, 1996 vote choice was fully accounted for by party and incumbent approval. Under these circumstances, exposure to the campaign had no impact in the experiments.

The September-October NES survey data are strikingly comparable to the level of basic rule voting that occurred after the subjects were exposed to the experimental manipulation and parallel the experiments quite closely at significant points. First, there is substantial similarity (perhaps fortuitous) in the actual proportions of basic rule voters in the experiments and the surveys. In May 1992 approximately 70 percent of the two-party vote division for president was purely partisan (the exact result obtained in the experiment). When we count nonpartisans and defectors who voted according to their evaluations of Bush's performance, the percentage of "correct" votes increased to 86 percent. The pattern was similar in 1996. In February of that year, 64 percent of the sample intended to vote consistent with their partisanship and 74 percent with the basic rule, despite the fact that it was so early in the election year that respondents were unsure about the likely Republican nominee.

Second, the effect of the campaigns is apparent, despite the high level of pre-campaign candidate preference in both years. Even though most of the increase in party and basic rule voting occurred between the pre-campaign observation and September, party voting was activated further during September and October 1992 (p < 0.10). In the case of 1996, however, neither party nor basic rule voting increased after September. Thus, according to both the experimental and survey data, post-September campaign activation occurred only in 1992.

Third, the experimental and survey data also converge on the result that virtually all the activation in structure-based voting occurred in partisan voting. The retrospective, incumbent-approval component of the basic rule was constant from May to November in 1992 and from February to November in 1996. In the 1992 experiments, most of the exposure-induced increase in basic rule voting was an increase in party voting. For the 1992 surveys, all of the increase in basic rule voting occurred because of heightened consistency between party identification and vote intention. There was a net decrease in basic rule voting between May and October.
Table 6-4. Components of Basic Rule Voting in 1992 and 1996 Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Approval</th>
<th>Totala</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Equals the proportion of the sample casting a vote consistent with the component or rule.

(see table 6-4). In 1996 campaign-induced increases in party voting similarly overwhelmed approval voting. The performance evaluations contributed not at all to the activation effect in the 1996 experiments; they also added nothing to the predictability of the overall vote between the February and November surveys.

Finally, the survey data suggest that presidential campaigning seems to decide the election before September (supporting one of the explanations for why so little campaign effect is observed in September and October). Most of the vote in 1992 and 1996 was decided well before the onset of the fall campaign. The approval component, in particular, was invariant after September, although the party component also changed very little. The events that occurred during the first three quarters of the campaign year brought into line virtually all of the individuals who were to vote consistent with the basic voting rule. The fall campaign only reinforced the earlier result.

The Perot Vote

A distinctive characteristic of the 1992 and 1996 campaigns was the candidacy of Ross Perot. The presence of a strong third-party candidate may, at first glance, be expected to undermine the role of party voting. But in fact, the inclusion of Perot only serves to highlight the campaign's strong activation of partisan predispositions. Figure 6-2 documents the extent of partisan mobilization in the 1992 survey data with Perot voters included. Figure 6-2 differs from figure 6-1 by (1) counting an intention to vote for Perot as a violation of the party rule and (2) counting a vote for Ross Perot as consistent with the basic voting rule for defecting Republican identifiers and independents who disapproved of Bush's performance.

With Perot's vote counted, only about 54 percent of the sample had a voting intention that was consistent with their party identification in May. The remaining 46 percent represented independents (about 10 percent) and defectors, with most of the defectors expressing a preference for the insurgent Perot rather than the major-party alternative to their party's candidate. The retrospective dimension of the basic voting rule explained about half of the defection rate. Thus about 23 percent (100 - 77, see the last column of table 6-5) of the expressed vote intention in May 1992 was inconsistent with either the partisan or retrospective dimension of the basic voting rule. Between May and the start of the fall campaign in September, this figure fell to 10 percent (100 - 90). All of this change occurred because of an increase in the party voting component of the basic voting rule: party voting increased about 22 percent (from 54 to 76 percent). The impact of incumbent approval on the vote declined between May and September. While 23 percent of the respondents were voting for a candidate on exclusively retrospective grounds in May, by September only 14 percent were casting purely retrospective votes. Table 6-5 shows quite clearly that the campaign mobilized partisans. The incumbent approval
Table 6-5. Components of Basic Rule Voting in 1992 with Ross Perot Supporters Included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Approval</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Equals the proportion of the sample casting a vote consistent with the component or rule.

The two-part basic voting rule was in place well before the presidential campaign reached its maximum intensity. Retrospective voters made their decisions early; but the campaign, by activating partisanship, actually pulled a substantial 40 percent of May approval voters back to a party vote.

In summary, the experimental and survey data both reveal significant campaign activation in 1992 and 1996. Party and approval-based voting both increased as a result of exposure to the campaign. The activation effect was especially pronounced in the case of party voting, with or without counting Perot supporters. The presence of a third candidate provided more latitude for the campaign to activate partisanship, although party voting declined as the Perot campaign made inroads into Democratic and Republican ranks (figure 6-2).

Confirming the Pattern: 1980 and 1988

The experimental and survey data for the pair of Clinton elections match quite closely. But is this pair of elections atypical, and is the agreement between the surveys and the experiments fortuitous? To extend the generalizability of the results, we considered the 1980 and 1988 campaigns. Again, 1984 was excluded because we have no national survey covering a comparable time frame.

As shown in figure 6-3, the changes observed with the 1980 NES panel study and a series of surveys conducted during the 1988 presidential election year are virtually identical to those observed in the Clinton elections.

In January 1980, when many voters were undecided and neither party, but especially the Republican party, had a certain nominee, less than 50 percent of the public had a preference that was consistent with the party rule and only 60 percent expressed a preference that was consistent with the two-part basic voting rule. By mid-summer, at which time Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan had secured their nomination, the number of party voters increased to about 55 percent, and voters choosing by the basic rule increased to 64 percent. Those figures increased to about 66 and 91 percent, respectively, by September, where they remained through October.
Table 6-6. Components of Basic Rule Voting in 1980 and 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Approval</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported vote</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early September</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NES (September/October)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported vote</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Equals the proportion of the sample casting a vote consistent with the component or rule.

The pattern of results for 1988 was virtually identical. Michael Dukakis led Bush through the end of July. Just over 70 percent of the electorate had preferences that were consistent with the party rule, and 81 percent could be classified as basic rule voters. By mid-August, a combination of increased party and approval-based voting put Bush into a dead heat, where the contest remained through September (a result corroborated by the September NES interviews). By October, Bush had forged a six-point lead among voters who had decided whom they would support; party voting was just over 80 percent, and basic rule voting reached 93 percent. The vote intention remained at that margin through election day, when Bush defeated Dukakis with 53 percent of the vote, with a basic rule vote of 95 percent and a party vote of 83 percent.

The changes in the party and approval components of the basic voting rule in 1980 and 1988 were substantially similar in magnitude to those observed in 1992 and 1996 (table 6-6). That is, the activation effect of the campaign was larger for party voting than for approval-based voting. The total activation effect was especially strong in 1980, but three-quarters (forty-five points versus thirteen points) of the increase in basic rule voting between January and September-October were contributed by the mobilization of partisans. In 1988 the overall activation effects were much smaller—there was only a thirteen-point increase in basic rule voting (compared with 58 percent in 1980)—but, once again, partisan mobilization outweighed mobilization of retrospective voters by a ratio of better than five to one.

Two themes recur in these results. First, campaigns do activate structural variables, and this effect is unlikely to be observed during the fall because most of the change occurs before September. Sometimes the activation effect is very large (as it was in 1980); at other times it is negligible (as it was in 1996). The changes that do occur during the fall campaign may decide the election (as happened in 1980 and 1988), but the magnitude of the shift is sufficiently small to make its detection difficult.

Second, campaigns prime the partisan component of structural voting to a greater degree than evaluations of the incumbent's performance. If the performance evaluation captures the dynamic elements of the campaign on which the incumbent or challenger hopes to capitalize, it is clearly the smaller component of the vote and of whatever changes occur. It seems that the most retrospectively motivated voters make early and firm judgments about the performance of the incumbent, and the campaign produces very little further activation of approval judgments.

Who Is Influenced?

Our final set of analyses focused on the differential role of campaigns for voters with little, some, or extensive past experience with party and basic rule voting. We focused on age (in the experiments) and strength of partisanship (in the surveys).

We anticipated that older voters—who have had repeated opportunities to vote and who have a more entrenched bond with their party—would find the campaign redundant; they “know” how to vote without prompting from the candidates. In psychological terms, they are chronic structure-bound voters. Conversely, we anticipated that relatively inexperienced voters, those with only one previous presidential campaign under their belt, would be the most in “need” of activation. Lacking the experience to fall back on structural factors as a matter of habit, these voters are brought into line by the campaign. In short, we expected a significant interaction between age and exposure to the experimental manipulation.
younger voters will register the greatest increase in structural voting as a result of exposure to the campaign.

The experimental results on exposure to the campaign, age, and party voting are arrayed in figure 6-4. In 1992 the effects of the campaign were much stronger among the young. Participants under the age of twenty-eight registered a twelve-point increase in party voting compared with an average increase of 3 percent for the two older groups. This divergence produced a significant interaction ($p < 0.05$) between exposure to the campaign and age. The results for basic rule voting were identical; exposure to the campaign had little impact on the votes of middle-age or older voters but produced a ten-point increase among the young. Once again, the age and exposure to the campaign condition proved significant ($p < 0.05$).

The pattern was less striking in 1996. Exposure to the campaign had the largest impact on party voting among the youngest group of participants. However, the age-related differential in the effects of exposure was insufficiently large to warrant a significant interaction effect. In the case of basic rule voting, all three age groups exhibited full conformity to the rule even among participants not exposed to the campaign, thus precluding any possible effects of exposure.

In the survey data, we can examine differences in party voting as a function of the strength of respondents' partisanship. Figure 6-5 plots the rate of party and basic rule voting for 1992 and 1996 by strength of identification (which was approximated in the experiments by age). The survey data do not corroborate the experimental results fully, although the pattern is consistent. In particular, the main theoretical result of the experimental data is strongly confirmed: party and basic rule voting changed more over the course of the election season among weak partisans and independents than they did among strong identifiers. Strong partisans exhibited very high rates of party voting regardless of the stage of the campaign. In 1992, 89 percent of the strong partisans interviewed in May intended to cast a party vote; in 1996 this figure was 88 percent as early as February. While party voting among strong partisans increased seven to

42. Independents, in addition to leaners and weak identifiers, are grouped as weak partisans in figures 6-5 and 6-6 and in table 6-6. This was done to maintain maximum comparability between these presentations and earlier tables and graphs. The absolute values for party and basic rule voting are reduced by this decision, but the slopes for the weak partisans are unchanged. The inclusion of independents has no effect on the relationship between exposure to the campaign and basic rule voting.
eight percentage points by September and October of the election year, the change was almost twice as large among weak partisans. The pattern was essentially identical for basic rule voting. In 1992 basic rule voting increased nine points among weak partisans ($p < 0.05$) compared with an insignificant three-point change among strong partisans. In 1996 basic rule voting increased twenty-one points among weak partisans and independents, but only eight points among strong partisans. Table 6-7 summarizes these changes.

The only real discrepancy between the experimental results and the survey data concerns the 1996 election. The experiments produced significant change in party voting overall in 1996, but the effect was not concentrated among the young. The survey data also revealed substantial changes over time in party voting, and the effects were enhanced among weak partisans. We can only speculate about the origins of this difference. The most likely reason is the different times at which the data were collected. The experiments were administered during August, September, and October, long after most Americans had reached their equilibrium presidential choice (as the survey data show). The effects of the campaign revealed in the survey data are based on a comparison of the electorate's vote intentions in February and September-October. In February, many Americans, but especially those who were not strongly partisan, were undecided or prepared to consider a vote that was inconsistent with the party rule. Between February and the fall of 1996 most of this inconsistency and indecision was resolved in favor of rule-based voting. The experiments, however, were conducted after this settling had rallied young and old participants alike firmly behind their party's nominee.
Partisan Differences in Activation in 1980 and 1988

The 1980 and 1988 elections allow us to replicate the pattern observed in 1992 and 1996. In general, as figure 6-6 shows, the pattern in these elections duplicates what was observed in 1992 and 1996. There is one striking difference: changes in party voting over the course of the 1980 campaign were as large among strong partisans as they were among weak partisans. The difference could reflect campaigning differences—the data do not span identical time periods, but the most likely cause is the large pro-Reagan surge that accompanied the certainty of his nomination. Republican defection to Carter was very high early in 1980, giving the president a substantial lead over his Republican challengers. In mid-1980 these Republican defectors surged into their partisan column, and the data reflect this shift.

This difference between the surveys notwithstanding, the similarity of the activation is striking. Weak partisans and independents registered substantially larger gains in party and basic rule voting. Overall, the survey results hold steady across elections. In each instance, exposure to the campaign proved most influential for weak partisans; as the campaign progresses, these voters “catch up” with their more committed counterparts. The experimental results suggest a similar pattern with age (at least in 1992): exposure to campaign advertising facilitates party or basic rule voting among the young.

Conclusions

Taken together, the experimental and survey evidence indicate that campaigns bring voters’ candidate preferences into alignment with their partisanship and evaluations of the incumbent’s performance. The most frequent manifestation of campaign activation is the shepherding of wayward or undecided partisans back into the fold. Weak partisans and others for whom electoral choice is a relatively novel undertaking are especially “protected.” In this respect, our results mirror the considerable body of research that points to the reinforcing (rather than converting) effects of campaigns and the special responsiveness (to campaign messages) of those who are less involved, demonstrating again that campaigns are most “needed by,” and have the largest effect on, political “have-nots.”

Although campaigns activate both elements of the basic rule—partisanship and evaluations of the incumbent’s performance—partisanship shows greater elasticity. We suspect that the prominence of the party com-
ponent stems from the preference of candidates and strategists for waging campaigns aimed at their partisan base. Holding one’s partisan base is the sine qua non of successful campaigning, and there is no better way to do this than to emphasize issues that represent the core programmatic commitments of the party.\textsuperscript{43} For Democrats, this requires an emphasis on social welfare issues (child care, education, social security), racial equality, the fair treatment of labor unions, and so on; for Republicans it requires an emphasis on excessive taxation, the need for smaller government and more individual initiative, military preparedness, and increased crime control. In this sense, the equilibrium outcome of campaigning is for Democrats and Republicans to emphasize “owned” issues.\textsuperscript{44} That is, campaign rhetoric is designed to remind voters of their policy stereotypes of the Republicans and Democrats.

The experimental studies provide us with considerable confidence that the logic of “ownership” mediates the activation of party affiliation. In 1996 we asked participants to rate the credibility of the “target” campaign ads, their responses showed that Democratic voters rated ads dealing with Democrat-owned issues (unemployment, civil rights, social welfare benefits) as most credible, while Republicans were especially impressed by ads dealing with crime, illegal immigration, and a balanced budget.\textsuperscript{45} In sum, activation of partisanship during campaigns follows inevitably from the incentives facing voters and candidates.

The evidence concerning campaign-induced partisan activation has clear normative implications. In recent years, there has been no end of hand wringing and condemnation of modern campaigns for their use of deceptive and nonsubstantive messages that manipulate voters by distracting them from the “real” issues of the day. Perhaps this conventional wisdom has underestimated the political savvy of the electorate; when voters are swayed, the effect is invariably toward the “correct” (for example, partisan or retrospective) direction. Most scholars agree that party voting is sensible and allows voters to overcome their low levels of information about specific policies and candidate positions. Even if some voters are misled, the cumulative effect of campaigns is to enable the large majority of voters to cast ballots that reflect their political predispositions rather than the momentary appeal of a political advertisement. More than 90 percent of those intending to vote behave consistently with their most reliable long-term predisposition—party identification—and with a relevant short-term cue that is based on the logic of political accountability.\textsuperscript{46} With so many voters casting “substantive” votes, the evidence suggests that campaigns are at least as likely to enlighten as to manipulate. The issue that is neither resolved nor even addressed by this finding is whether campaigns that activate long-term predispositions and depress the influence of short-term considerations are always desirable.

Finally, our evidence provides an explanation for the typical null result obtained by campaign researchers who rely on NES surveys. Virtually all of the shifting we observed in party and basic rule voting occurred before September. The primary campaign and the events that follow the emergence of a nominee seem sufficient to activate party and retrospective voting among the great majority of the electorate.\textsuperscript{47} The size of this majority, of course, depends on circumstance. In 1996 the “campaign” actually may have begun in 1994 with the election of the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives. The ensuing implementation of the Contract with America, repeated and prolonged policy impasses between Congress and President Clinton, the resulting shutdowns of the federal government, and the never-ending charges and countercharges over who did what to whom mobilized partisans very early in the run-up to the presidential contest. With repeated and continuous exposure to shrill partisan conflict, it is no surprise that by September, virtually everyone (98 percent in the experiments) was sufficiently informed about the candidates to engage in rule-based voting. In 1992, however, there were more “unknowns” surrounding the candidacy of Bill Clinton and the themes that defined the Bush and Clinton campaigns did not fall into place until after the nominating conventions. Since the onset of the campaign was relatively recent, both the experiments and fall surveys in 1992 revealed traces of post-September activation.

The bottom line, of course, is that the added value generated by any particular fall campaign is inversely related to the time voters have had before the fall to consider the candidates and the issues. The lesson for survey researchers in pursuit of campaign effects is that efforts to monitor public opinion must encompass more than the final stages of the campaign.

\textsuperscript{43} See Petrocik (1996); Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995).
\textsuperscript{44} See Simon (1998).
\textsuperscript{45} Iyengar and Valentino (forthcoming).
\textsuperscript{46} See Zaller (1998) for an argument that voters are responsible and not as swayed by political trivia as is generally believed.
\textsuperscript{47} The methodological implications of “long” campaigns are discussed in Bartels (1997b).
References


“BASIC RULE” VOTING

IN 1992, A “PRO-FAMILY” lobbying organization known as the Christian Action Network (CAN) became more and more upset about the liberal drift of social policy in the United States. Led by an activist named Martin Mawyer, the group decided to take action. Too long, it felt, conservatives had sat on the sidelines while the country went downhill. What troubled group members the most was the “gay rights” political agenda that had emerged in preceding decades. A variety of people were devoting themselves to an agenda that, in the eyes of Mawyer, included (1) job quotas for homosexuals, (2) special civil rights laws for homosexuals, and (3) the allowance of homosexuals in the U.S. armed forces. None of these constituted good policy, according to the advocacy organization.

Most galling, though, were the specific efforts that Governor Bill Clinton, then the Democratic candidate for president, was making to appeal to homosexuals and lesbians. Convinced that it was time to take a stand, CAN decided to inform the voting public about Clinton’s support for a gay rights agenda. The organization put together a fall television ad entitled “Clinton’s Vision for a Better America” that was broadcast at least 250 times in twenty-four major cities across the country right before the election. Along with direct mail letters, op-ed columns, and newspaper advertisements, this commercial condemned Clinton and his running mate Al Gore for supporting radical homosexual rights. Featuring images of the two Democratic candidates in sequence with pictures of young men wearing chains and leather marching in a Gay Pride parade, the ad con-