Campaign Reform:  
Insights and Evidence

This report presents the views of fourteen scholars in the fields of electoral politics, voting behavior, and political communication about what is wrong with the American campaign process and how to fix it. We write both as scholars and as citizens. As citizens, we share many of the same concerns and aspirations voiced by other participants in the current public debate about campaign reform. Like the vast majority of our fellow citizens, we wish contemporary political campaigns were more informative, more engaging, and more edifying.

At the same time, we believe that our scholarly expertise gives us both a distinctive perspective and a distinctive responsibility. Rather than simply reporting our wishes or prejudices, we aim to build our analysis upon current scholarly understanding of campaigns and elections. In some cases, that scholarly understanding leads us to endorse familiar conclusions in the broader public debate on campaign reform. In other cases, it leads us to revise or even reject conventional assumptions about the nature of contemporary political campaigns or the likely impact of proposed reforms. In still other cases, the scholarly evidence is much less clear—or much less directly relevant to the concrete, practical questions we wish to address; in those cases, we have attempted to provide an honest reading of the available evidence and its implications, pushing our arguments and conclusions as far as the evidence seems to warrant, but no farther.

Despite the diversity of our political views, intellectual perspectives, and professional experiences, we find ourselves in substantial agreement with respect to both diagnoses and prescriptions. We believe that the American electoral process works better than its critics and much of the public seem to recognize. At the same time, we view the manifest dissatisfaction of millions of citizens with contemporary campaign practices as a serious problem for our representative democracy, especially insofar as it may reduce their willingness to participate in the electoral process. Thus, we aim to address both the real failings and the perceived failings of contemporary political campaigns. We are convinced that relatively modest changes in the incentives and behavior of campaigners, journalists, and ordinary citizens could produce appreciable improvements in campaign practice, a better informed and more engaged electorate, and a healthier political system.
Campaigns and the Electoral Process

Whereas many observers seem to imagine that voters wake up on Election Day and mark their ballots for the candidate with the most charisma, the smartest pollster, or the slickest ads, academic research suggests that election outcomes are primarily determined by more substantial factors. In presidential elections—where candidates are invariably well-known, almost always able campaigners, and usually quite conventional representatives of their parties’ traditional platforms and interests—voters are powerfully guided by long-standing partisan loyalties, and election outcomes depend mostly upon national economic and political conditions. As one recent summary statement put it, “the public stays focused on a bottom line consisting of peace, prosperity, and moderation.” If vote intentions change significantly during the course of a presidential campaign, they are likely to change in ways that reinforce rather than override these basic structural forces.

At the national level, congressional election outcomes, too, are largely the result of such basic political factors as long-term partisan realignments, erosion in the sitting president’s supporting coalition in midterm election years, national economic conditions, and shifts in the ability of incumbents to insulate themselves from these and other national trends. In many congressional districts (and in many state and local races), incumbents’ pre-existing advantages with respect to experience, accomplishments, and name recognition are strongly reinforced by the inability of their challengers to attract the attention and money they need to run credible campaigns; but once a credible campaign has been mounted by each side, the election outcome seldom hinges on campaign tactics or technologies.

Of course, to argue that political campaigns seldom determine the outcomes of elections is not to suggest that they are insignificant. For one thing, imbalances in the quantity or quality of campaign effort are sometimes decisive, especially in close contests. And even when they are not, the balance resulting from equally vigorous and effective campaign efforts on both sides should not be mistaken for ineffectiveness. In that sense, campaigns certainly do matter.

What is more important, for our purposes, is that campaigns matter in a variety of ways that transcend the immediate efforts of the campaigners themselves to maximize their vote shares. Campaigns provide prospective voters with the information necessary to recognize and interpret the state of the country and the candidates’ backgrounds and records—and the motivation necessary to act on that information. They also stimulate democratic deliberation and communication between citizens and their political leaders—and create a record of public commitment and popular legitimation which significantly influences the behavior of winning candidates after they take office. It seems obvious that these functions will be better served by campaigns that are substantive, truthful, and engaging than by campaigns that are vacuous, misleading, and dull.

Even more broadly, campaigns and elections represent the primary contact most ordinary citizens have with the democratic process. Thus, informative, engaging campaigns may play an important role in generating and replenishing interest in and support for the political system more generally. For example, one scholarly study of the social
impact of campaigns measured small but significant increases in social trust during the 1996 election season, especially among well-informed citizens and those contacted by one or both political parties during the course of the campaign. Trust in government and political efficacy also increased between the pre- and post-election readings. The authors concluded that improvements in the campaign process, including better candidates and more energetic efforts at partisan mobilization, could lead to “higher levels of political efficacy, more trust in government, and greater social solidarity.”

The flip side of these potential benefits is that vacuous, distasteful campaigns may contribute to a gradual depletion of interest in and support for the political system more generally. Thus, it is troubling to note that campaigns and the electoral process are currently held in such low public regard. Prospective voters say they are dissatisfied with the candidates offered by the two major parties, and many claim they would prefer a multi-party system, or no parties at all. The proportion of citizens who say elections make the government responsive to their concerns has declined sharply over the past three decades. So has the proportion who bother to turn out to vote.

Our response to these troubling trends is to propose reforms of the campaign process that we believe would elevate the prevailing level of campaign discourse, provide more and better information to prospective voters, and make it easier and more rewarding for citizens to participate in the electoral process. We offer our proposals with some hope that they might increase, ever so slightly, the probability that the best candidate will win. But we offer them also with some hope that better political campaigns might produce a healthier public regard for the American democratic process.

Informative, engaging campaigns may play an important role in generating and replenishing interest in and support for the political system more generally.
Campaign Participants and Their Goals

Our proposals for reform are directed toward the behavior of three distinct sets of actors in the electoral process: candidates and their staffs and supporters; political journalists, editors, and executives in the print and electronic media; and the broad American public. We believe that campaigners, the media, and the public all bear significant responsibility for the current state of political campaigns, and that successful campaign reform will require changes in the behavior of all three groups. At the same time, we recognize the practical limitations of pious exhortation as a force for change. Thus, our aim is to propose reforms that respect the motivations and incentives that seem to animate the current behavior of each of these actors—or that seem capable of altering existing motivations and incentives in potentially constructive ways.

The primary goal of candidates for political office is and, we believe, always will be to get themselves elected. However much they may be motivated by important political principles—and we do not doubt that most candidates are motivated by political principles as well as by personal aims—they can do little to further their political principles or their personal aims unless they win access to the levers of political power. Thus, while we see nothing wrong with reminding candidates of their responsibilities to the democratic process, we do not expect such reminders to produce significant changes in their behavior, unless the candidates themselves are convinced that those changes are consistent with their own political interests.

In some cases, we argue that candidates have been mistaken about the nature of the electoral imperatives they face. For example, we can find no rational basis for the conviction of many candidates and campaign consultants that vitriolic attack ads are necessary—or even especially effective—for getting elected. Indeed, we believe that the importance of campaign spending more generally is often greatly exaggerated, and that politicians with a realistic understanding of the role of money among the constellation of factors influencing election outcomes would simply not bother to pursue it with quite the dogged zeal that has offended so many critics of the contemporary political process.

In other cases, we propose changes in regulations or institutions that we believe will produce new, more powerful incentives for candidates to behave responsibly. For example, “ad watches” by journalists and independent observers may encourage candidates to forego misleading advertising by increasing the potential political cost of attempting to deceive the public.

The goals of journalists, editors, and media executives reflect a more complicated mix of economic, political, and professional concerns. Close observation of reporters and editors in their day-to-day working lives suggests that they are animated primarily by professional norms of “newsworthiness”—and by the rewards bestowed upon those whose work is recognized by their peers as good journalism, including prestigious assignments, prominent bylines, and Pulitzer Prizes. The incentives of editors and producers presumably reflect a greater admixture of economic considerations along with journalistic considerations, while publishers and media executives feel even more responsibility to pursue profits along with professional prestige.
Given these goals, the news media should be expected to embrace proposed reforms that promise to enhance—or at least not to diminish—their professional standing and profitability. Here, even more than with candidates, realistic reformers must suggest positive incentives for change, since almost all serious efforts to compel good behavior by the media are likely to be stymied by the legal and cultural protections of the free press enshrined in the First Amendment. Thus, our focus will be on potential changes in media behavior that seem likely to benefit the democratic process while doing little or no damage to the profitability of media enterprises—and that seem broadly consistent with existing journalistic norms.

Fortunately, while journalists’ views about the nature of good journalism are elaborately developed and strongly held, they are not entirely impervious to revision or reinterpretation. Thus, we hold out some hope of persuading the reporters, editors, and producers who cover political campaigns to reconsider certain aspects of their current practice. For example, the corrosive cynicism of much press coverage of the electoral process serves no important journalistic purpose; neither does the excessive focus of much press coverage on tracking polls, campaign organizations and tactics, and other day-to-day campaign trivia. Political reporters could succeed better, even by the light of their own professed journalistic values, by simply reorienting their coverage to focus more on what one of them once sagely referred to as “the real campaign.”

Individual citizens are, we assume, also animated by a variety of goals—most of which have nothing to do with politics. Would-be campaign reformers sometimes seem to assume that citizens are naturally civic-minded and eager to consume political information which politicians and the mass media somehow fail to supply. We can discern little evidence in support of this view. Instead, we assume that most citizens most of the time are rather uninterested in politics, and that politicians and the mass media must and do adapt their behavior accordingly.

One important implication of this assumption is that reformers’ recommendations, too, should be adapted to the way citizens actually gather and use political information. For example, despite the futility of their civic attention, many citizens have well-developed attitudes toward specific public figures, political parties, and social groups, and these attitudes can help them navigate the complexities of the political world—but only if that world is appropriately structured to make intelligible the connections between preexisting attitudes and new information. Thus, we recommend that campaign-related communications should be required to include clear identification of their sponsors, so that citizens can use the credibility of the sponsor as a cue in evaluating the credibility of the message. As Samuel Popkin put it, “If voters look for information about candidates under streetlights, then that is where candidates must campaign, and the only way to improve elections is to add streetlights. Reforms can only make sense if they are consistent with the gut rationality of voters.”

This is not to suggest that citizens cannot be led to take a greater interest in the democratic process, or to pay more attention to campaign discourse. Indeed, many of our recommendations are intended to have precisely those effects. Nevertheless, the starting point of our analysis is a realistic conception of the place of politics in contemporary American life, and our criticisms and proposals for change reflect that conception.

Despite the manifest limitations of the public’s civic virtue, tens of millions of ordinary citizens do participate in the electoral process in a variety of ways, and for a variety of reasons. Many have internalized a sense of civic duty, and will be motivated to engage

While we see nothing wrong with reminding candidates of their responsibilities to the democratic process, we do not expect such reminders to produce significant changes in their behavior, unless the candidates themselves are convinced that those changes are consistent with their own political interests.
in campaign activities (ranging from information-seeking to propagandizing to turning out at the polls) to the extent that those activities are encompassed in their understanding of what it means to be a “good citizen.” Many also view campaigns and elections as entertainment, and they will be motivated to engage in campaign activities to the extent that those activities are interesting and fun. Finally, many citizens see the electoral arena as a forum for pursuing substantive political interests by electing “their” candidate or candidates; for these citizens, campaign activities will be attractive insofar as they seem likely to increase the likelihood that the “right” candidates will actually be elected.

The public can affect the incentives of other actors—the mass media and the candidates—by responding to their behavior in positive or negative ways. For example, citizens in their role as consumers might choose to patronize media outlets that provide detailed, truthful, and politically balanced news coverage—either because they find that sort of coverage interesting and entertaining, or because they want to be well-informed when they go to the polls. On the other hand, citizens in their role as voters might punish candidates who engage in illegitimate campaign tactics, if they recognize those tactics and feel moved to discourage them.

In short, candidates want to win elections, journalists want to exercise their craft, media executives want to earn profits, citizens want to be informed and entertained and see the “right” candidate win. It is worth noting that elevating the democratic process doesn’t appear anywhere on this list of the primary goals of campaign participants. That is not to suggest that candidates, the media, or ordinary citizens are indifferent to the condition of American democracy. Most candidates, journalists, and citizens no doubt attach great value to our democratic system, and would make heroic sacrifices, if necessary, to preserve it. The problem is that heroic individual sacrifices are seldom necessary. Instead, the reality is that most of us most of the time can make only imperceptible contributions to the collective maintenance of a healthy democratic system. Given that fact, intellectually honest (and politically realistic) would-be reformers must suit their strategies to their circumstances, offering a variety of relatively modest, distinctly unheroic proposals that, taken together, might produce a perceptible improvement in the quality of our electoral process. That is the aim of this report.
Campaign Advertising

Paid advertisements, especially on television, make up the bulk of political discourse in many contemporary election campaigns. Campaign reformers and ordinary citizens sometimes bemoan that fact, regretting the brevity, tone, and apparent vacuousness of campaign ads. While we recognize the limitations of spot ads as a mode of campaign discourse, we also recognize that ads convey a good deal of substantive political information in simple, sometimes powerful terms—especially to citizens who are relatively uninterested in politics and insulated from other modes of political communication.13 Broadly speaking, academic research suggests that television ads have gotten a bum rap in the debate about campaign reform.

Critics of modern political advertising are especially critical of the "negativity" of many campaign ads. This complaint has become increasingly common in recent years, as campaigners have become increasingly inclined to "go negative."14 However, academic research suggests that campaigners and critics alike have been seriously confused about what is at stake in the "negativity" of political advertising.

We believe that the focus of critics on the "negativity" of campaign advertising is largely misplaced, reflecting and perpetuating a general conflation of the important distinction between ads that are characterized as "negative" because they are contentious and argumentative, challenging claims about the records, characters and platforms of opponents, and ads that are characterized as "negative" because they are nasty, inaccurate, or unfair. Indeed, we believe with Kathleen Jamieson and her colleagues that labeling ads as "positive" or "negative" is more confusing than illuminating, and that journalists and scholars alike would do well to jettison that distinction in favor of a more straightforward categorization of ads as "advocacy" (focusing on the candidate's own qualifications), "attack" (focusing on the opponent's failings), or "contrast" (containing explicit comparisons between the candidate's own qualities, record, or proposals and the opponent's).15

Ads that attack political opponents can be high-minded or low-down, blunt or subtle, repulsive or engaging, fair or unfair. And ads that trumpet a candidate's own character, record, or platform can be just as deceptive and illegitimate as those that attack opponents. As Jamieson and her colleagues put it, "Most reporters and many scholars mistakenly assume that 'attack' is both 'negative' and 'dirty'. Conflating these terms obscures the important distinction between legitimate and illegitimate attack and minimizes the likelihood that the deceptions found in supposedly 'positive' discourse will be probed."16

For their part, campaigners have often seemed to assume that they must "attack each other because that is the best way to maximize their own support."17 However, a significant body of academic research casts serious doubt upon this conventional wisdom. A recent essay by Richard Lau and Lee Sigelman provided a comprehensive review of the relevant scholarly findings.18 Lau and Sigelman analyzed the results of over 40 different studies comparing the effects of what we refer to here as "attack" and "advocacy" ads, including some studies based on survey data and others based on laboratory experiments. Only 15 of the 51 relevant findings from these studies supported the notion that attack ads are more effective than comparable advocacy ads. Twenty-four others produced the opposite conclusion, while 12 showed no clear differences in effectiveness between attack ads and advocacy ads.19 Thus, taking the scholarly evidence as a whole, there is simply no support for the seemingly widespread and confi-
We believe that the focus of critics on the “negativity” of campaign advertising is largely misplaced. 

Should they give it up? The evidence on this point is a good deal less clear. There is little doubt that citizens dislike negative advertising, and some reason to fear that it has deleterious social consequences. However, several careful independent content analyses have shown that attack ads actually contain more issue information than advocacy ads, that they are more likely to offer evidence in support of the claims they put forward, and that they are less likely to be misleading. Thus, it is by no means clear that reducing “negativity” would make campaigns more substantive, as many critics assume.

In our view, attack ads may be quite legitimate, if they draw attention to genuine, politically relevant weaknesses in an opposing candidate’s performance or platform. On the other hand, distortions, exaggerations, and outright lies are never legitimate campaign tactics, whether they focus on a candidate’s own supposed strengths or on an opponent’s supposed flaws. Thus, campaign reformers should be interested in deterring or neutralizing the impact of misleading ads, regardless of whether those ads are “positive” or “negative” in tone. And journalists and reformers should not add unnecessarily to public cynicism by simplistically equating conflict and contention with “negativity” and “dirty politics.”

Candidates, in the business of trying to win elections, may often be tempted to skirt the bounds of truthfulness. By one count, about half of the advertisements in the 1996 presidential campaign contained at least one misleading statement. We believe that the most effective way to reduce the prevalence of misleading advertising is to increase the perceived cost to sponsoring candidates or groups of distortions, exaggerations, and outright lies in campaign ads. That is the aim of “ad watches”—systematic efforts by journalists to monitor and report on the truthfulness of campaign advertising.

“Ad watches” can have two distinct sorts of positive effects. First, and most obviously, prospective voters may attend to press scrutiny of campaign ads and be led to discount misleading claims that they would otherwise have accepted as true. Less obviously, but probably more importantly, ad watches may deter campaigners from sponsoring misleading ads in the first place. If ad watchers are credible and their standards are clear, campaigners may well try to avoid being publicly rebuked for sponsoring “misleading” or “unfair” ads. Thus, even if prospective voters are seldom attentive or responsive enough to be inoculated against specific misleading claims, ad watches may be valuable because they restrain campaigners, inducing them to curb, verify, and condition their claims in anticipation of potentially embarrassing press scrutiny.

There is considerable controversy in the academic literature regarding the actual impact of ad watches on viewers, with some studies reporting positive effects, some reporting negative effects, and some reporting mixed results. This area should be a high priority for further scholarly research. In the meantime, however, it seems likely to us that careful, clearly presented ad watches can mitigate the impact of misleading campaign discourse, especially by deterring campaigners from airing misleading or
unfair ads. For that reason, we urge journalists to continue their use of ad watches in national, state, and local campaigns.

Of course, authoritative ad watches cannot be done on the cheap; public accusations of deception should be made with great care, and careful research and reporting on the factual accuracy of ads requires a significant investment of time and expertise. Serious ad watching is especially difficult for small newspapers and broadcast outlets attempting to cover important national, state, and local races with modest reporting staffs. While we recognize this obstacle, we believe that the importance of the task warrants some redirection of journalistic resources away from more traditional political coverage. Some organizational ingenuity may also make it possible for media outlets to use their limited resources more efficiently—for example, by pooling or syndicating ad watches on a nationwide or statewide basis.

We also believe that there is room in the political process for increased scrutiny of candidates' ads and other campaign discourse by independent experts and non-partisan groups, either in conjunction with journalists (for example, as quoted sources in "ad watch" stories) or in their own right (either as watchdogs in predefined issue areas or in response to specific instances of misleading advertising). Obviously, such independent scrutiny will be newsworthy in proportion to the credibility of the source, with non-partisan experts deserving more attention from the press and the public than generalists and partisans, other things being equal. While it is important for journalists to exercise good news judgment in granting media access to outside "experts," we believe that independent ad watches are a significant untapped resource for hard-pressed news outlets, and for the political process more generally.

In recommending the continued use of ad watches, we urge practitioners to guard against two potentially important pitfalls. First, sustained media attention may inadvertently amplify the impact of misleading campaign ads. Kathleen Jamieson and others have argued that this sort of "boomerang" effect is especially likely when the actual content of an ad is reproduced without being appropriately "contextualized." Jamieson has suggested a "visual grammar" for televised ad watches utilizing a variety of audio and visual cues (for example, showing the ad playing on a visible television set rather than full-screen, and interrupting the audio and visual tracks to insert the analyst's observations) to impose a critical distance between the audience and the ad.\(^5\)\(^9\) Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyenger have gone even further, urging journalists to refrain completely from showing actual ads in the course of their ad watches.\(^3\)\(^0\) We endorse the use of these precautions in order to minimize the risk of inadvertently amplifying the impact of misleading ads.

Second, there is a very real danger that a relentless focus by the press on inaccuracies in campaign ads will simply reinforce the cynical belief of many citizens that campaigns are "all lies" and politicians are not to be trusted. The most important way to mitigate this danger is for ad watchers to provide an appropriate sense of perspective — distinguishing, for example, between illegitimate, unfair ads and those that are merely critical of an opponent's platform or record, and between significant distortions on one hand and trivial exaggerations and technical inaccuracies on the other.

Another way for journalists to minimize the danger that ad watches will simply generate increasing political cynicism among readers and viewers is to move beyond simple fact-checking box scores to provide broader evaluations and interpretations of ads as the centerpiece of political discourse in many modern campaigns. Too often, when ad
watches do go beyond evaluating the veracity of specific claims on a point-by-point basis, they do so by providing what amount to miniature movie reviews or strategic critiques. What we have in mind is a more substantive focus. What is the candidate promising, and to whom? How might he or she fulfill that promise? With what impact on the lives of prospective voters? By asking questions like these, journalists could use ad watches as springboards for broader, more engaging coverage of what is at stake in political campaigns.

In effect, we are arguing that good news coverage of campaign ads should be of a piece with good news coverage of campaign discourse more generally. Journalists should not hesitate to point out when the claims contained in television ads are false or unfair—but they should apply the same standard equally to direct mail appeals, speeches, debates, interviews, and other forms of campaign discourse. Of course, good journalists do scrutinize speeches and debates for accuracy and fairness—but they seldom do so with the force and clarity that distinguish the best examples of the ad watch genre.

On the other hand, no self-respecting news outlet would limit its coverage of a speech or debate to pointing out false or unfair claims. Then why should coverage of advertisements begin and end with fact checking? Our view is that it shouldn't. Instead, ad watches should be one element in a broader effort to report on ads as campaign discourse. By inventing new ways to present such coverage, journalists could significantly improve the quality of the information citizens take into account in casting their votes, while minimizing the danger of exacerbating public cynicism by focusing only on the most questionable or controversial examples of campaign advertising.

Careful, clearly presented ad watches can mitigate the impact of misleading campaign discourse, especially by deterring campaigners from airing misleading or unfair ads.
Media Coverage

The press serves an indispensable and constitutionally protected role in American politics and society. In political campaigns, print and broadcast news outlets are the primary institutions aspiring to present disinterested information to a mass audience about the candidates, their biographies and dispositions, their records and plans, and the accuracy and implications of their statements in speeches, ads, and debates. Reporters, columnists, and editorial writers help readers make sense of political information by providing analysis and interpretation of the strategies and motives of political actors. The press also performs an important watchdog role in the political process, uncovering and disseminating information about the powerful that would otherwise be unavailable to ordinary citizens. Because these activities are crucial to the functioning of democracy in a country that is large and diverse, in which most citizens have many competing demands on their time, it is vitally important that they be performed diligently and well. Often, they are.

Indeed, one important byproduct of the dazzling reach and diversity of the contemporary mass media is that citizens probably have more and better access to political information than at any previous time in American history. C-SPAN provides extensive unmediated coverage of campaign events; *National Journal*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and other specialized print and electronic publications offer sophisticated news and analysis, as do "The NewsHour" on PBS and national editions of *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*; anyone with access to the Internet can retrieve an almost unimaginable wealth of information from news outlets, government agencies, campaign organizations, and civic groups. For competent consumers interested in learning about politics and public affairs, this is the best of times.

Unfortunately, times are much less good for citizens who happen to be unwired, uncabled, unsubscribed, or simply unmotivated to seek out political information. Media organizations are not in the business of fostering democracy, and the commercial and professional constraints of the business they are in sometimes seem to leave them unwilling or unable to provide political news in a form suited to engaging and informing ordinary citizens.

The most dramatic manifestation of this mismatch between organizational goals and civic ideals is the current state of local television news programs. With newspaper readership and audiences for traditional network news programs both declining markedly, many citizens now get the bulk of their news from local television; but intense competition for ratings has squeezed more and more of the serious news content out of local news programs, leaving public affairs as a minor item between crimes, fires, sports, and weather—and political campaigns all but invisible. Even newspapers and network news programs, keen on surviving their own competitive pressures, have increasingly come to view political news as an unaffordable luxury. Thus, for example, the 1996 presidential campaign received much less network news coverage than previous presidential campaigns, because producers, reporters, and network executives decided that it was too "boring" to boost their ratings.32

Hence, our first and most obvious recommendation for media coverage of political campaigns is that the media should cover political campaigns. Elections are important democratic events, and they deserve significant attention from the mainstream media as well as more specialized media, whether or not they seem likely to boost ratings or circulation.
Having said that, we see two main problems with the campaign coverage the media do provide. First, journalists insert themselves too aggressively between candidates and citizens, prosecuting a professional agenda that is, in some respects, distinctly different from the agendas of these primary actors in the electoral process. Second, and relatedly, journalists focus too much on hoopla, the “horse race,” campaign tactics, and the ephemera of day-to-day campaigning, and too little on political substance.

These failings of contemporary campaign coverage are rooted in the professional values and competitive pressures of contemporary journalism. Nevertheless, we believe that they are subject to significant alteration, with little or no harm either to journalistic values or to the economic self-interest of the news industry. On one hand, we doubt that readers and viewers are as enamored of conventional campaign coverage as journalists and news executives seem to suppose; indeed, much of it is coverage that only a journalist could love. On the other hand, we are confident that the news media can find new models of campaign coverage that better reconcile their professional values with the broader needs of the political system.

For one thing, contemporary patterns of campaign news coverage are of fairly recent vintage. As recently as 1960, campaign coverage was a good deal more substantive, with more focus on policy issues and on the candidates’ speeches, platforms, and records. However, the dazzling success of Theodore White’s inside accounts of “The Making of the President,” the rise of television news as a potent social force, and changes in the broader American political culture all contributed to the evolution of a new style of campaign journalism—more independent, more interpretive, and more focused on the mechanics of the campaign process.

The most systematic documentation of these shifts has been provided by Thomas Patterson, who analyzed various aspects of media coverage in presidential campaigns from 1960 through 1992. Patterson’s data trace a substantial decline over this period in purely descriptive election coverage, with a corresponding rise in interpretive news stories. They also indicate that the tone of campaign stories has increasingly been set by journalists themselves, rather than by candidates or other partisan news sources.

One unfortunate byproduct of the movement of journalists to center stage is that the tone of campaign coverage has become increasingly cynical. We respect the aspirations of reporters and media commentators to be (and be seen as) sophisticated interpreters of the political process rather than common carriers of campaign news, and “watchdogs” rather than “lap dogs.” However, we believe that too many reporters and commentators have gone beyond skepticism—a healthy journalistic value—to adopt stances of corrosive political cynicism. Campaigns and policy debates are portrayed purely as contests of political self-interest, with little or no room for any broader public purpose, even as a byproduct of political competition. In the words of one recovering veteran of the campaign press corps, “Television pundits have become our most powerful explainers of political life, and their deepest message to the masses is that if they wish to be in the know, they too should watch the circus from above, with a smirk and a swagger.”

Another byproduct of the growing centrality of journalists in their own campaign coverage is that policy issues have receded from view, while hoopla, controversy, and campaign tactics have become much more prominent. For example, front-page stories in the New York Times were twice as likely to frame the election in terms of a “game schema” in 1992 as in 1960, while policy frames declined from more than 50 percent...
of all campaign stories to less than 20 percent over this period. At the same time, the issue coverage that does still appear has focused less on enduring policy problems and more on short-term campaign controversies. As Patterson put it, "For reporters, controversy is the real issue of campaign politics."\(^{37}\)

It is not difficult to understand why journalists are attracted to controversy—it has both news value and dramatic value. Stories about Dan Quayle's quarrel with Murphy Brown, a fictional television character, are both easier to produce and more likely to attract public attention than stories about Quayle's positions on proposed legislation affecting the family as a social unit. The problem for journalists is to use campaign controversies as springboards for reporting on the real substance of politics and political careers, rather than treating them as self-contained episodes, entertaining but essentially trivial.\(^{38}\) In the case of Murphy Brown, some journalists solved that problem very successfully, while others were much less successful in transcending the superficial attention-getting aspects of Quayle's speech and the subsequent controversy.

Verbal gaffes and internal campaign squabbles may also provide attention-getting hooks, but will usually be of little genuine importance in their own right. Journalists should use them as starting points for more general descriptions and assessments of the candidates’ platforms and management styles.

By the same token, “horse race” coverage can and should be informative as well as entertaining. We have no desire to rid campaign reporting of attention to strategy, tactics, or polls. But attention to these aspects of the campaign should not displace attention to substantive issues, and substantive issues should not be framed primarily in strategic terms. There is some value simply in telling people which candidate is ahead, especially in multi-candidate races where strategic voting is often required to concentrate support on candidates who are both attractive and electable. Moreover, sophisticated “horse race” coverage can help prospective voters figure out which side they should be on by reporting the composition of the competing candidates’ supporting coalitions, and can highlight connections between the campaign and the broader political process by reporting on why patterns of candidate support (or are not) shifting over time. This sort of coverage requires more than superficial reporting of tracking polls and campaign “spin”; but it need be no less entertaining as a result.

Nothing in these suggestions seems to us to conflict with journalists’ professional values, rightly understood. Nor do we see any reason to believe that more substantive campaign coverage would be less popular or less profitable than the news media’s current fare. Of course, dull rehashes of mind-numbing position papers will do nothing to attract audiences or inform citizens. But intelligent, professional coverage of real politics needn’t be like that. The “American Agenda” segments on ABC’s “World News Tonight” program offer one useful model of engaging issue coverage within the confines of a conventional news format. “The Choice ’96,” a two-hour dual biography of candidates Clinton and Dole that aired during the 1996 campaign as part of PBS’s “Frontline” series, provides an even more impressive model of political journalism that is both substantive and engaging. By juxtaposing important episodes from both men’s lives and careers, “The Choice ’96” provided a superb demonstration of the political relevance of candidates’ “character,” a topic on which conventional journalists have mostly taken their cues from supermarket tabloids; it would have brought professional distinction (and, we suspect, very respectable ratings) to any network news division.\(^{39}\)
The problem for journalists is to use campaign controversies as springboards for reporting on the real substance of politics and political careers, rather than treating them as self-contained episodes, entertaining but essentially trivial.

We believe that much of the tedium of conventional campaign coverage reflects the tedium of the situation in which media outlets place their reporters. Many television outlets and major newspapers assign one reporter to each candidate's campaign; these beat reporters travel with "their" candidate, hear him give more or less similar speeches in different locales every day, and gradually learn to see the entire campaign from the perspective of that candidate, his campaign staff, and their fellow reporters. Given these peculiar working conditions, it is hardly surprising that reporters come to attach exaggerated significance to relatively minor campaign events such as verbal gaffes, staff shakeups, and shifting opinion polls.40

What is most lacking in this sort of campaign coverage is a sense of perspective—a recognition of the big issues behind the day-to-day events. In order to better develop and convey that sense of perspective, reporters should spend less time traveling with candidates and more time covering other aspects of the campaign, including policy issues, the candidates' records, the roles of parties and interest groups, the flow of campaign money, and the views of ordinary voters. Wire service reports and satellite feeds can provide most of what there is to know about events on the campaign trail, freeing most reporters to spend most of their time on more substantial matters. Reporters with expertise in economics, religion, law enforcement, legislative politics, and many other fields can contribute as much or more than those who have slogged for years through the snows of New Hampshire and the back rooms of local party caucuses.

When reporters do travel with the candidates, their assignments should be rotated frequently. Fresh reporters can bring fresh insights to routine campaign coverage, avoiding the jaded, know-it-all tone that infects too much political news. There is simply not enough scope for candidate-specific expertise to outweigh the disadvantages of "pack journalism" on the campaign beat.

None of this is to suggest that the news media should ignore what candidates have to say in their own behalf. Major news is sometimes made on the campaign trail, and when it is, it should be covered accordingly. But that has not been happening even with airplanes full of reporters following the candidates from speech to speech. For example, the average length of presidential candidates' "sound bites" on network television news programs shrunk from 42 seconds in 1968 to less than 10 seconds in 1988 and 1992, and the total speaking time allotted to each of the major candidates in 1992 by each network's evening news program amounted to only about 20 minutes between Labor Day and Election Day.41

The air time that used to be devoted to presenting the candidates in their own words is now primarily filled by the journalists themselves. As Patterson noted,

for every minute that the candidates spoke on the evening news in 1988 and 1992, the journalists who were covering them talked 6 minutes. . . . Election news in the 1960s gave candidates the opportunity to present themselves on their own terms to the voters. Today, journalists do most of the candidates' talking for them.42

Doing "the candidates' talking for them" may appeal to journalists' sense of professional self-importance, but there is no evidence to suggest that viewers or readers ei-
ther need or want their political news to be presented in such a heavily digested form. Indeed, careful comparisons of what candidates actually say and what journalists report suggest that the reporting is in some respects distinctly less edifying than the candidates’ own campaign discourse. For example, media coverage of what candidates say is dominated much more by attacks on their opponents than are the candidates’ own words—and with much less in the way of supporting arguments or evidence.43 Given propensities like these, it should, perhaps, not be surprising that journalists are one of the few professional groups currently ranked lower in public esteem than politicians!

One other, quite prosaic change in the behavior of journalists might contribute greatly to citizens’ comprehension of the campaign: repetition. Too often, crucial information about the candidates’ backgrounds, records, and proposals is presented once and then relegated to the void of “old news.” Journalists should recognize that news need not be new in order to be worth reporting. They should compete with each other not only in providing scoops, but also in providing clever, insightful reiterations of crucial background information.

This sort of repetition may strike reporters, editors, and producers as boring and pointless. But what is old news to the political experts who cover campaigns may not be old news even to fairly conscientious readers and viewers. For example, at the height of the 1992 presidential campaign, 36 percent of regular newspaper readers (and an even larger fraction of television news viewers) did not know which of the two major political parties was more conservative, 29 percent did not know which party controlled the House of Representatives, 39 percent did not know which of the major presidential candidates favored more government spending and services, and 35 percent did not know which of the major presidential candidates took a more permissive position on abortion.44 No doubt, these fundamental bits of political information were presented in passing by most major newspapers during the course of the campaign season. However, because they were less often reiterated than taken for granted, they failed to penetrate the consciousness of millions of ordinary citizens.

The mismatch in information and interests between journalists and their audiences is especially striking in press coverage of presidential campaign debates, which attract millions of viewers who are only casually interested in politics and, for the most part, inattentive to other campaign events. Research suggests that these debates are a significant learning experience for interested and uninterested citizens alike.45 However, the most prominent theme in the news media’s debate coverage—absent some dramatic controversy or verbal gaffe—is often that the candidates “said little that was new.” Of course, they said much that was new to significant portions of the debate audience—but little that was new to the political reporters and commentators who had spent months following every twist and turn of the campaign.

Like other professional groups (including professors), journalists are often more intent on impressing their professional peers than serving their actual clientele. American democracy would function better if they could overcome this tendency. They might begin by recognizing that the majority of Americans who are not, like them, politics junkies will often require repeated exposure to important information in order to take it in. Here, too, regular rotation of reporters on the campaign beat could facilitate better reporting.
Focus groups in which journalists watched ordinary citizens react to their news reports could also help them recognize more clearly the interests and needs of their mass audience. For example, journalists who justify their emphasis on the “horse race” by arguing that readers and viewers demand it might well find that impression quite mistaken.46 Having resisted audience research as a dangerous tool of profit-minded owners, journalists have missed the opportunity to adapt it as a tool for bridging the empathy gap that manifestly separates them from their readers and viewers.

By writing for their actual audiences, rather than for their professional colleagues or for an idealized audience of political junkies, journalists could do a great deal to help ordinary citizens make sense of the electoral process. Along the way, they might improve their circulation and ratings—especially if they can succeed in conveying real substance with clarity and style. Would that be an abandonment of journalistic values?
Candidate Debates

Public debates among competing political candidates have deep roots in American political culture—one need only think of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 or the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960. More recently, debates have become a regular feature of presidential campaigns since 1976, and an increasingly common feature of state and local campaigns as well. We believe that debates can and should be an important source of information in every political campaign.

Campaign debates have two key virtues: they tend to attract larger and more diverse audiences than most other campaign events, and they can provide those audiences with an unusual opportunity to observe the candidates thinking and speaking on their feet, without the protective cocoon of speech writers, briefers, and handlers so ubiquitous in modern political campaigns. We believe it is important for debates to be structured in ways that enhance these two virtues, providing as many prospective voters as possible with as much fresh insight as possible into the strengths and weaknesses of the competing candidates.

The most common obstacle to informative campaign debates is the desire of candidates to minimize their exposure to political risks. Unscripted interaction in a very public setting can lead to political disaster if a candidate is caught short on facts, if his mind wanders, if she loses her cool. Not surprisingly, many candidates—and especially front runners and incumbents—prefer to play it safe, avoiding debates entirely or insisting on bland, predictable debate formats that leave as little as possible to chance. In either case, the result is a missed opportunity for prospective voters.

We recommend that debate organizers attempt, as much as possible, to encourage sustained discussion, direct interaction, and spontaneity. It is possible to imagine a wide variety of informative debate formats, and there is no reason to believe that any one format will suit every candidate—much less every citizen. Experimentation with alternative formats should be encouraged for at least three reasons: to learn more about their practical advantages and disadvantages, to tap a variety of strengths (and weaknesses) of the competing candidates in a more or less even-handed way, and to stimulate public interest in the debates by providing an element of novelty and unpredictability. For example, a combination of traditional moderated debates, “town meetings” of the sort introduced in the 1992 presidential campaign, and free-wheeling direct conversations between the candidates might provide an attractive mix of formats within any single race.

How might such debates be organized, despite the natural reluctance of the candidates? One way to increase the probability that informative debates will, in fact, occur is to seek clear commitments to debate from the candidates in the earliest stages of the campaign, before their precise tactical interests are clear; among other things, early agreement can eliminate the distracting “debate about whether there will be debates” which too often absorbs so much news time and space. Another useful mechanism for facilitating effective debates is to lodge significant authority over debate arrangements in a neutral commission or other independent body.

At the presidential level, a bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates was created in 1987 to provide a coherent administrative apparatus for presidential and vice-presidential debates, replacing a more informal system in which competing debate sponsors were sometimes treated as pawns in the candidates’ maneuvers for political advantage.
The public legitimacy of the Commission's deliberations has been significantly hampered by a widespread perception that it has been dominated by the interests of the established major parties, rather than providing fair representation for individuals and views from all parts of the political spectrum. Thus, we recommend that the existing Commission be significantly revamped or even replaced by a new, more independent debate organizing body capable not only of maintaining the cooperation of both major parties, but also of representing the interests of the broader public.

Perhaps the most consequential decision that must be made by any debate sponsor is which candidates should be invited to participate. Here, we see a powerful tension between the competing values of inclusiveness and coherence. On one hand, providing access to minor-party and independent candidates may stimulate interest in the campaign and inject new issues and ideas into the debate. That is all to the good. On the other hand, participation by minor candidates may reduce and fragment the time and attention available to the major candidates, diluting their best opportunity to convey their perspectives and proposals to the electorate. The dangers on this side of the balance have been vividly demonstrated in early presidential primary season debates, which sometimes include half-a-dozen or more candidates; the resulting scramble for attention has tended to produce dueling sound bites and mock dramas better suited to professional wrestling than to political discourse. Thus, it seems clear to us that simply providing equal access to every legally qualified candidate will often not be an attractive option for debate organizers.

In some cases, the competing values of inclusiveness and coherence may be nicely satisfied by organizing a separate public debate for minor-party and independent candidates, giving them access to the public and potential influence on the campaign agenda without intruding on the main face-off between the major-party contenders. We urge debate sponsors and the media to explore the possibility of presenting a single, high-profile, open debate in the early stages of each campaign period, followed by a series of debates limited to the major candidates.

At the same time, we recognize that a third-party or independent candidate may occasionally be a sufficiently popular and serious contender to warrant treatment as a "major" candidate by debate organizers. Given the difficulty and importance of this sort of judgment call, it is especially important that decisions to include or exclude specific candidates be made in accordance with clear and reasonable criteria. At the presidential level, the Commission on Presidential Debates has developed an elaborate set of criteria for debate participation, with ballot access, evidence of national organization, poll standings, and judgements by journalists, political professionals, and political scientists all factored into an assessment of whether any given independent candidate has a "realistic" chance of being elected. While these criteria are certainly not unreasonable, we believe they should be further streamlined to emphasize objective indicators rather than subjective judgments.

Of course, even a prestigious, independent sponsor may have difficulty getting candidates to agree on a satisfactory debate schedule and format. In some cases, legal compulsion may be appropriate. In particular, we believe that participation in public debates should be an explicit condition for receiving public campaign funding, as it already is in New Jersey and some other states. At the presidential level, where most
candidates take public matching funds during the primary season and full public funding during the general election campaign, they should be required by law to participate in public debates organized by the Commission on Presidential Debates or its successor, with the commission exercising full control over the timing and format of those debates. If and when public funding is extended to congressional candidates, they should be similarly bound.

Even in the absence of compelling legal authority, informal pressure may go a long way toward encouraging candidates to participate in genuine and effective public debates. The press can and should draw public attention to any efforts by candidates to duck debates or manipulate debate formats. Political opponents and independent citizens can and should do likewise. The potential effectiveness of such efforts is symbolized by the career of "Chicken George," a heckler in a chicken costume whose persistent public ridicule helped soften the intransigent stance of an incumbent president in debate negotiations in the fall of 1992.

As with ad watches, free air time, and campaign funds, the potential value of meaningful candidate debates is especially great in congressional, statewide, and local campaigns, where alternative sources of information about the candidates, their records, and their proposals are likely to be in especially short supply. Simply by providing prospective voters with an opportunity to see the competing candidates side by side, a televised debate may help to transform a one-sided race dominated by incumbency or party affiliation into a two-sided race in which prospective voters recognize real, flesh-and-blood alternatives. Thus, television stations, newspapers, and civic groups should strive to ensure that debates occur in every campaign at every electoral level, and that as many prospective voters as possible have opportunities to see and hear those debates. In addition to broadcasting and rebroadcasting the debates in accessible time slots, the news media should enhance their status as important public events by publicizing, previewing, and recapping them.

A good example of how to conduct an effective state-level debate was provided by the 1998 California gubernatorial primary debate. The debate included all of the major Republican and Democratic candidates, it was broadcast and rebroadcast statewide in both English and Spanish, and it was previewed and recapped in print and broadcast news. The audience for its first airing exceeded the usual audience in its time slot. The questions asked by reporters focused on the substantive issues facing California, and the candidates responded to those questions with detailed answers. While we have no evidence demonstrating that the debate informed the citizens of California or stimulated them to vote in the primary, it cannot have hurt. And in an election year tagged by some observers as the year of the apathetic citizen, turnout in the California primaries was actually up.

Providing access to minor-party and independent candidates may stimulate interest in the campaign and inject new issues and ideas into the debate, but may also reduce and fragment the time and attention available to the major candidates, diluting their best opportunity to convey their perspectives and proposals to the electorate.
Free Air Time

One of the most salient and significant attempts to improve the quality of campaign discourse in the 1996 election cycle was the provision by several broadcasters of "free air time"—television spots offered to candidates without charge to speak directly to prospective voters. As former political journalist Paul Taylor, one of the main proponents of free air time, put it, "the candidates must talk into the camera the whole time. No surrogates. No journalists. No opponent. No unseen narrator. No tricky visuals. Just the candidate talking straight to the citizens—democracy's most sacred transaction."50

Taylor and his colleagues in The Free TV for Straight Talk Coalition convinced several broadcasters to provide free air time to presidential candidates on an experimental basis in 1996. For example, the Fox network provided the two major presidential candidates with ten back-to-back one-minute segments in prime time to address specific questions; CBS and NBC provided fewer but longer segments during regular news programs, including CBS Evening News, CBS This Morning, and Dateline; CNN, PBS, and UPN aired six two-and-a-half-minute statements by each candidate on topics of their own choosing on alternate evenings. While these diverse and rather fragmented provisions of free air time fell well short of the Coalition's ambitious goal—nightly two- to three-minute segments airing simultaneously on all broadcast channels—they represented a symbolically important precedent, and an opportunity to assess the potential impact of more extensive free time provisions in future election cycles.

An analysis by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that the actual content of free time presentations mostly satisfied the expectations of free time advocates. Candidates spent about 90 percent of their free time focusing on policy issues, they largely avoided presenting criticisms of their opponents without supporting evidence, and they used less inflammatory language than in their paid advertising. Moreover, available data provide no indication that broadcasters' ratings declined when they aired free time segments. Finally, while the free time experiment generated relatively little press attention or public notice, the 22 percent of registered voters who reported seeing at least one free time segment considered them slightly more informative than either debates or paid ads.51

Despite these positive aspects of the 1996 free time experiment, the reactions of campaigners and broadcasters were less than enthusiastic. For example, Dole media consultant Alex Castellanos called free time "fairly inconsequential. It was a distraction, it was insignificant." (Perhaps not surprisingly, Dole did not even bother to use some of his allotted free time.) Meanwhile, CBS news anchorman Dan Rather complained that the candidates "regurgitated sound bites they had been using since last summer. What we got was a lot of waffling and sidestepping. The free time just took up time that otherwise would have been given over to good journalism."

The lukewarm response of broadcast executives, campaigners, and journalists to the call for voluntary free air time has led some reformers to propose a more ambitious plan, in which radio and television stations would be required to provide free air time to political candidates as a condition for retaining their licenses to broadcast. In one version of this proposal, broadcasters would simply have to make a fixed amount of free time available to all qualified candidates for offices within their listening or viewing area.
Almost any public funding system would help level the playing field for challengers to current incumbents.

We agree that politicians spend too much time raising money—and that some are even discouraged from trying. The way to mitigate this problem is not to make fundraising ever more onerous.

The money chase . . . structures how elected officials allocate their time, where they travel, who they speak with, and how they deploy their legislative energies. White House documents released during the investigations of fundraising practices of the 1996 Clinton reelection campaign provide sobering documentation of the demands on the time of the President and Vice President (by most accounts willingly met) for fundraising. The impact of the money chase on Capitol Hill is even more striking. . . . Personal accounts of former members illustrate the myriad ways in which life in Congress is shaped by the constant quest for campaign funds.98

However, we believe that the way to mitigate this problem is not—as many citizens and even some reformers would have it—to make fundraising ever more onerous, by letting the value of maximum contributions erode with inflation and imposing additional restrictions on candidates and contributors. Instead, we advocate a combination of partial public funding, modest increases in basic contribution limits with subsequent indexing for inflation, and new efforts to plug the two most egregious loopholes in the current system of campaign finance: "soft money" and "issue advocacy."

"Soft money" is a category of funds raised by political parties outside the limitations imposed by federal election law; the intended purpose of "soft money" is to pay for general "party-building" activities and state and local campaigning. What began as a modest channel for legitimate organizational activities has mushroomed in recent years into a major loophole, with the two major parties together raising an estimated $263 million in soft money in 1996—about twelve times as much as they had raised only twelve years earlier. Much of that money went to finance the broadcasting of so-called "issue advocacy" ads which were clearly intended to benefit the parties' presidential and congressional candidates, but which did not fall under federal regulation because they did not "expressly advocate" the election or defeat of specific candidates.99

The main attraction of soft money from politicians' point of view—and the main complaint of most observers—is that it can be raised without regard to the contribution limits and disclosure requirements that apply to federally regulated campaign money. To politicians, an undocumented six- or seven-figure contribution from a single wealthy individual or corporation is, not surprisingly, a tempting alternative to long evenings spent speaking at chicken dinners or "dialing for dollars" in search of $1000 contributions. At the same time, one can hardly be surprised that such large, unregulated contributions inflame public cynicism about political corruption, whether or not they actually buy undue influence.

One possible solution to this problem—a solution incorporated in the legislation sponsored by Senators McCain and Feingold and Representatives Shays and Meehan in the 105th Congress—would be to ban soft money altogether by prohibiting national parties from financing any of their activities with unregulated funds, prohibiting candidates for federal office from raising unregulated funds for their parties, and prohibiting state parties from raising or spending unregulated funds in any way that would benefit candidates for federal office. We favor a somewhat less radical solution: imposing reasonable ceilings on soft money contributions and on total soft money expendi-
tures. These reforms would alleviate the most pressing concerns about undue influence and uncontrollable soft money "arms races," while retaining some incentive for parties to invest in activities not tied to specific federal candidates or campaigns.

An even more difficult problem for would-be reformers is to stem the flood of "issue advocacy" ads sponsored by dozens of groups outside the direct control of parties or candidates. These ads, too, escape regulation as long as they do not expressly advocate the election or defeat of specific candidates. Because they are not subject to disclosure requirements it is impossible to tell exactly how large a role they play in contemporary campaigns, but there is no doubt that they are significant. One study estimated that at least $135 to $150 million was spent on issue advocacy ads in 1996, and they have played an even more prominent role in some subsequent special election campaigns.

Despite the label, "issue advocacy" ads actually contain relatively little issue content, and despite their technical avoidance of "direct advocacy" they prominently feature candidates' names and images. Indeed, the main thing that distinguishes them from other campaign ads is their lack of accountability. Because they are not subject to federal disclosure requirements, it is often virtually impossible to attach responsibility for specific ads to the individuals or groups who produced them or paid for them.

While we have no desire to restrict the ability of individuals or groups to publicly express their political views, we do believe that disclosure requirements should apply to election-related communications whether they emanate from candidates, parties, or other individuals or groups. For ordinary citizens, a good deal of the information contained in any political message is conveyed by the identity of its sponsor. Is the sponsor credible or biased? A friend or a stranger? These are reasonable and important considerations in interpreting and assessing political communications—and even more important for purportedly "independent" issue advocacy than for candidate- and party-sponsored communications.

The problem here is that applying disclosure requirements to issue advocacy ads would require some relaxation of strictures on the regulation of political speech that does not constitute express advocacy under the courts' current interpretation. A broader definition of express advocacy as communication that "could only be interpreted by a reasonable person as containing advocacy of the election or defeat of one or more clearly identified candidate(s)" was proposed by the Federal Election Commission, but successfully challenged in federal court as too broad and vague to pass constitutional muster. A less vague but even broader approach would simply define as express advocacy any paid communication with the general public within a specified period (say, 30 days or 60 days) prior to an election if that communication used a candidate's name or likeness. While it is possible that such a definition would encompass some political communications that were genuinely unrelated to the upcoming election, we view this as a small price to pay for the significant increase in political accountability that would be provided by requiring effective disclosure of the sponsorship of all campaign-related communications.

The importance we attach to the principle of accountability also leads us to support proposals to require more timely and effective disclosure of political contributions and expenditures. Perhaps the simplest and most important of these would require political committees operating above some modest threshold of activity to file their reports electronically using specially designed software provided by election agencies. Mandatory electronic filing—and automated Internet posting of the resulting data by elec-
We do not consider full disclosure a panacea for all the ills of the current system of campaign finance. Nor do we believe that the benefits of fuller disclosure would manifest themselves automatically through diligent scrutiny by prospective voters of every candidate's list of contributors. Just as we expect ad watches to work in significant part through the deterrent effect of elite scrutiny, we expect financial disclosure to work best—and perhaps only—when the news media and political activists do most of the hard work of monitoring, disseminating, and interpreting information about the sources of campaign contributions and "independent" expenditures. This is not simply a matter of "following the money," although that is an important first step; it is also a matter of conveying the significance of particular patterns of contributions and expenditures. Are a candidate's big contributors local elites or out-of-state interests? What other candidates or causes have they supported in the past? What has an incumbent done (or not done) in Washington to warrant the support or opposition of the NRA, the NEA, the shipping industry, or local businesses? As with other aspects of the campaign, information about contributions and expenditures will be useful to prospective voters only insofar as it sheds light on broader political concerns about the candidates' records, character, and commitments.

Finally, since no regime of campaign finance regulation can be effective without successful implementation and oversight, we strongly favor a significant increase in the administrative capacity and resources of the Federal Election Commission. The FEC has an extremely difficult mission: to enforce a wide variety of laws and regulations governing the collection and expenditure of campaign funds by monitoring the complex financial transactions of more than a thousand separate campaign organizations (many of which are born, live, and die within a single two-year election cycle) and a vastly larger number of politically active organizations and individuals. The Commission's staff and budget are far from adequate to fulfill that mission. As a result, major violations are often identified months or years after they occur—far too late to influence the outcome of the election—and all but the most serious cases are, in the end, ignored for want of investigative attention. American citizens cannot realistically expect even the limited campaign finance regulations currently on the books to be taken seriously by candidates and contributors as long as the FEC remains what one observer has called "the orphaned oversight agency of big-money politics."
Information and Engagement

While news coverage, advertisements, and debates are pervasive aspects of modern electioneering, they are far from being the only important channels for campaign discourse. In America’s pluralist democracy, many other organizations—ranging from government agencies to interest groups to non-partisan civic associations—use election campaigns as occasions to inform and engage the citizenry. Their activities both reflect and further stimulate the development of a vibrant national political culture. We applaud those activities, and seek to expand upon the most effective of them.

A few states have long traditions of providing informative pamphlets to prospective voters. These voting guides are typically mailed to registered voters a few weeks before Election Day, and include information about candidates for public offices, initiatives, referenda, and policy issues. In some cases, the voting guide includes a facsimile of the actual ballot, allowing voters to familiarize themselves with the layout of the ballot before stepping into the voting booth. We believe these voting guides serve a very useful purpose, providing moderately conscientious voters with a great deal of relevant information in a very convenient form. We encourage all state and local governments to develop and disseminate voter pamphlets, using as models successful examples like those distributed by the California Secretary of State’s office.

Voting guides serve a very useful purpose, providing moderately conscientious voters with a great deal of relevant information in a very convenient form.

Voter guides produced by independent interest groups represent a more controversial source of campaign information. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the Christian Coalition Voting Guide, which differs from quasi-official voter pamphlets like California’s not only in being produced by a private organization, but also in being mailed to specific targeted voters rather than to the entire electorate. The Christian Coalition voting guide has been criticized for overstepping the boundary of non-partisanship—indeed, a lawsuit was filed against the group alleging that its activities should be treated as in-kind donations to, or independent expenditures on behalf of, the Republican Party.

While we see no reason to attempt to curtail the efforts of activist groups to inform and persuade perspective voters, it is obviously necessary for both practical and legal purposes to distinguish between non-partisan civic education on one hand and endorsements and propaganda on the other. From the ordinary citizen’s point of view, what is crucial here, as elsewhere, is that the source of the information be clearly identified, so that she can treat it with an appropriate degree of confidence or skepticism. Thus, we suggest that all campaign-related communications, regardless of the medium by which they are transmitted, be required to identify prominently the individual or organization sponsoring them. In the case of umbrella organizations (“Americans for a Better America”), the identifying information should include a clear identification of the individuals or organizations—be they corporations, trade associations, labor unions, or other membership groups—that are their primary sources of funding.

Recent technological developments have opened some exciting new avenues for campaign communication, making it possible for prospective voters to collect even more—and more personally relevant—information about political candidates and issues. In particular, the evolution of the Internet as a mass medium has facilitated the provision of much more and better-tailored information than could be disseminated even in the best of the traditional printed voter pamphlets. Given the current limitations of Internet access—particularly among older, poorer, and less-educated citizens—these electronic
communication channels cannot yet be thought of as satisfactory replacements for more traditional channels. Nevertheless, they deserve to be further developed and more widely utilized as supplementary channels of political communication, and as investments in the democratic technology of the 21st century.

The best-developed and most impressive of these innovative efforts is by Project Vote Smart, a non-profit, non-partisan group that gathers information on over 20,000 candidates and elected officials and provides that information to the public free of charge over the Internet and by telephone using a toll-free hotline. Project Vote Smart provides information on the biographies, voting records, campaign contributions, issue positions, and performance evaluations by interest groups of all federal office-holders, all governors, and some state legislators, as well as contact information for these public officials and information on the backgrounds and platforms of candidates for office. This information is gathered by full-time staff and student interns. The project is funded through foundation grants and individual contributions, and does not accept funding from corporations, interest groups, or organizations that lobby government at any level.

Project Vote Smart is a powerful and flexible information resource for citizens. For example, prospective voters can monitor the performance of specific elected officials, compare the positions of competing candidates on issues of particular interest, and look for endorsements by trusted interest groups. The project also publishes The Voter's Self-Defense Manual, which provides information on government offices and elected officials; The Vote Smart Web Yellow Pages, which guides voters through Internet pages focusing on politics and public affairs; and a Reporter's Source Book and a Reporter's Resource Guide to help journalists get information from elected officials and government employees.

Utilization of Project Vote Smart has been widespread. The web site gets approximately 10,000 candidate record requests per day during campaign seasons, while the telephone hotline gets several thousand calls. Hundreds of newspapers print candidate record reports from the project regularly, and many radio stations use information from Project Vote Smart in regular weekly political reports. The project has also distributed over one million copies of the Voter Self-Defense Manual and more than 5,000 copies of the reporter's resource books.62

Despite this strikingly successful record of accomplishment, we believe that Project Vote Smart has a great deal of still-unrealized potential. On one hand, connections with other sources of political information should be further developed in order to enhance the role of Project Vote Smart as an information clearinghouse. Internet providers, portals, and media sites should be encouraged to point to Project Vote Smart and other voter information sites (such as the Center for Responsive Politics) during election campaigns. Additional resources should be devoted to organizing information in ways that are likely to be useful to citizens and journalists evaluating campaign events in real time, for example, in the form of ad watches or debate watches. Even more importantly, the sheer existence and richness of this information resource should be more broadly publicized, with widespread advertising and other publicity efforts, especially during campaign seasons.

In addition to advocating innovative efforts to provide information to prospective voters, we support broader, long-term efforts to engage citizens in the electoral process. Since scholarly work on political socialization suggests that political identities

Technological developments have opened some exciting new avenues for campaign communication, making it possible for prospective voters to collect even more—and more personally relevant—information about political candidates and issues.
and roles are largely molded in childhood and adolescence, we believe that efforts aimed at children are especially promising. Renewed attention to early political socialization seems especially appropriate in light of the sharp declines in regime-supportive attitudes and behavior among those in the “post-New Deal” generation that reached voting age between 1968 and 1992. While the reasons for these declines are by no means simple or clear, there is at least a temporal coincidence, and perhaps a causal connection, between the troubling political disengagement of this “baby boom” generation and the shift following World War II in the content of civic education from an emphasis on “nation-building” to an emphasis on “critical thinking.” Thus, we have some reason to hope that a revitalization of political socialization might contribute to stemming or even reversing in the next generation the declines in electoral participation and attachment to the values of citizenship that have been the distinctive “contributions” of the baby boomers to American political culture.

Because elections are salient, participatory, and easy to understand, they provide a splendid occasion for teaching and encouraging young people to learn and care about the political process more generally, and thus to become competent and engaged democratic citizens. One project in particular has enormous reach in this endeavor—Kids Voting USA. This non-profit, non-partisan organization has branch offices in 40 states and activities in 6,000 schools across the United States, and reaches 5 million students ranging in age from kindergarten through high school. The program enables students to visit official polling sites on Election Day, accompanied by parents or guardians, and cast ballots similar in content to the official ballot. An associated curriculum, including family participation and community involvement, stresses the importance of being informed about election choices and the responsibilities of voting.

The Kids Voting USA curriculum includes exercises in gathering information, thinking critically, and making choices. Homework assignments involve using newspapers as information sources, and sometimes include activities or questions for family members. In-class discussions are sometimes led by community business, political, or civic leaders, and are supplemented by community events such as Kids Voting USA Rallies and assemblies. The general lesson of this curriculum is summed up by the Kids Voting USA slogan: “Voters Rule!”

The effects of this program have been documented by a variety of scholars, including Stephen Chaffee, Bruce Merrill, and Jack McLeod. Survey results of participants and non-participants in the Kids Voting USA program suggest that the program stimulates political learning and discussion among students and their parents, and increases parents’ rates of electoral participation by 5 to 10 percent. It also seems to reduce the socio-economic gap among students with respect to interest in public affairs and participation in political activities, and the gender gap with respect to social studies learning and performance in the classroom, as well as generating significant increases in newspaper readership among students participating in Kids Voting USA activities.

We urge the continuation and expansion of programs like Kids Voting USA. We especially encourage partnerships between such programs and the media. Newspapers should be strong supporters of programs like Kids Voting USA which, among other effects, socialize young people to become newspapers readers. In addition to participating in such programs through community activities (for example, by sending reporters and editors to speak in classrooms or at rallies or assemblies), media outlets should consider dedicating portions of their election coverage to attracting young readers and viewers, perhaps through explicit tie-ins with Kids Voting USA activities. Lest such tie-ins seem

---

Project Vote Smart provides information on the biographies, voting records, campaign contributions, issue positions, and performance evaluations by interest groups of all federal office-holders, all governors, and some state legislators, as well as contact information for these public officials and information on the backgrounds and platforms of candidates for office.
A revitalization of political socialization might contribute to stemming or even reversing in the next generation the declines in electoral participation and attachment to the values of citizenship that have been the distinctive "contributions" of the baby boomers to American political culture.

to demean serious political journalism, we note that elements of campaign coverage that make election news easier for young audiences to digest might well appeal to their elders as well, making both groups more engaged and better informed citizens—and, incidentally, more avid consumers of news both in and out of the campaign season.

The Kids Voting USA program stimulates political learning and discussion among students and their parents, and increases parents' rates of electoral participation.
Citizen Participation

Perhaps the most common—and most damning—indictments of contemporary American electoral politics is that so few citizens even bother to show up at the polls. While turnout rates among those who are actually eligible to vote are surprisingly difficult to ascertain, the standard calculations of turnout as a fraction of the voting-age population make it clear that non-voters now outnumber voters in most American elections. This fact, which puts the United States at the low end of electoral participation among contemporary democratic states, is not easy to accept in a nation that, more than any other, has defined itself by its arrangements for self-government.

Of course, the outcomes of elections would not necessarily change if all those eligible to vote actually did so, but this fact should not be overly comforting. The many habitual non-voters are by no means a random sample of the eligible electorate, but are disproportionately young, unschooled, and poor. Moreover, these troubling biases have been exacerbated in the past three decades, as declines in turnout have been noticeably concentrated among groups that were already less likely to participate in the electoral process. The difficulty of getting these citizens to the polls encourages parties and candidates to discount their interests. Thus, it is quite possible for non-voters to share the opinions of voters on the issues that happen to be put before the public, while other issues that would be of greater concern to non-voters are simply ignored by candidates for office.

The problem of class bias in turnout is complicated by the fact that those who are most in need of political mobilization often have least access to political information. The poor are a relatively unattractive audience for advertisers, and thus for the traditional commercial media. They are also especially unlikely to have access to cable television news, the Internet, and other potentially rich sources of specialized political information. In many cases, their strongest social ties are to churches, labor unions, neighborhoods, and ethnic groups. Thus, parties and civic groups aiming to engage these least involved citizens may have to rely on old-fashioned methods of personal contact. For example, one recent study of electoral mobilization among Latinos found that only direct contacts by Latino organizations had a significant impact on turnout.

One seldom-noticed cause of low turnout is the sheer number of elections in which Americans are expected to participate at the national, state, and local level, including primaries, general elections, and referenda. Whereas a typical democracy might have one round of national elections and one round of local elections in a four-year cycle, a conscientious voter in the United States makes half a dozen or more trips to the polls in four years, and casts dozens of separate votes. The result is to increase considerably the voter’s burdens of time and attention, dissipating a finite stock of civic energy. Thus, one careful analysis attributed a significant fraction of the turnout decline in presidential elections since 1960 to the fact that most states have moved their gubernatorial elections to midterm years, losing the potential spillover effects of citizen mobilization produced by competitive gubernatorial campaigns.

A second, even more important cause of low turnout in the United States, by comparison with most other democracies, is the fact that Americans must register to vote rather than simply turning up at the polling place on Election Day. In 1996, more than 50 million otherwise eligible citizens could not vote because they were not registered in advance of the election. Writing in 1980, Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone
In 1996, more than 50 million otherwise eligible citizens could not vote because they were not registered in advance of the election.

estimated that easing registration laws in a variety of ways—by eliminating closing dates, allowing registration outside of regular business hours, and the like—would increase national turnout by about nine percentage points.73

Some of this potential increase has since been realized, most notably with the passage in 1993 of the National Voter Registration Act, the so-called "Motor Voter" law. The Motor Voter law was intended to reduce bureaucratic obstacles to voting by requiring states to provide uniform registration services through drivers' license offices, public assistance and disability agencies, and mail-in registration. Early evidence suggests that the Motor Voter law did produce a significant increase in voter registration. From 1995 to 1996, the first full year of implementation, more than 20 million citizens were registered to vote or updated their voting addresses—a higher total than in any previous one-year period. Florida and Texas each registered a million new voters in 1995-1996; and new registrations in the 18 to 21 year-old category doubled.74

The main objections raised against registration reform in the debate leading up to the passage of the Motor Voter law were that it would encourage fraudulent voting and that it would bias election outcomes in favor of Democrats. However, experience with the system so far does not seem to sustain either of those objections. We know of no evidence suggesting that fraudulent voting has increased as a result of simplified registration. Nor is there any evidence of significant partisan bias. Of the 20 million voters who registered under the Motor Voter law in 1995-1996, about half (49 percent) registered as Democrats and about a third (34 percent) registered as Republicans; these proportions are quite consistent with the proportions of party identifiers in contemporaneous surveys of the entire adult population.75 In a state-by-state analysis, Democratic registrations dropped off slightly in most states using Motor Voter procedures, while Republican registration remained essentially constant.76

Of course, the main point of easing voter registration is to increase actual turnout on Election Day. Here, the impact of the Motor Voter law is less clear. Some skeptics have argued that the low level of overall turnout in the 1996 elections by comparison with 1992 implies that, in the end, the Motor Voter law had little or no real impact. However, that conclusion seems unwarranted in view of the wide variety of other factors that increase or decrease overall turnout in any given election year. Our view is that further experience, and more careful assessment, will be necessary to gauge the ultimate impact of recent registration reforms.

In the meantime—and in the absence of any convincing evidence of either increased fraud or significant partisan bias—we see every reason to press forward with efforts to make registration and voting as convenient and painless as possible. One avenue worthy of further consideration is a fully automatic registration system, which would presumably have even greater positive effects than those already achieved under the Motor Voter law. Any fully automatic registration system would have to overcome even more substantial concerns about potential fraud and abuse, as well as a variety of logistical hurdles. Nevertheless, we believe that the routine and apparently successful operation of automatic registration systems in many other democracies around the world suggests that the United States, too, should be able to provide automatic access to the ballot for every eligible citizen. Thus, we urge reformers and election officials to explore the logistics of a fully automatic registration system.

Another important way to make electoral participation easier is to give voters more control over when and how they cast their ballots. Some states have liberalized proce-
dures for casting absentee ballots, greatly reducing the difficulty of voting for citizens who are either too immobile to get to the polls (for example, due to illness or infirmity) or too mobile to get to the polls (for example, business travelers and vacationers). In six states, any eligible voter who wants to cast an absentee ballot may do so, producing what is in effect an optional vote-by-mail system; in Oregon all eligible voters in some elections have automatically received mail ballots. Seven other states allow early in-person voting up to three weeks before Election Day.

While these liberalized voting procedures deserve further study, evidence currently available suggests that they do increase turnout, especially when parties and candidates engage in focused mobilizing efforts. At the same time, early voting does not appear to produce significant partisan biases or negative effects on the quality of political deliberation. Thus, we view these developments as promising steps toward a less rigid, more inclusive democratic process, and urge states to experiment further with more flexible voting procedures.

One other procedural change that has frequently been suggested to increase turnout is to make Election Day an official holiday, as many other countries do. While we know of no solid evidence regarding the likely benefits or costs of such a proposal, we consider it sufficiently promising to warrant adoption by one or a few states on a trial basis. Aside from whatever direct effect it might have by making electoral participation more convenient for working people, an Election Day holiday would stand as a powerful symbolic recognition of the civic significance of voting.

The routine and apparently successful operation of automatic registration systems in many other democracies around the world suggests that the United States, too, should be able to provide automatic access to the ballot for every eligible citizen.
Combining the Pieces: The Compact Model

Our analysis and recommendations have focused in part upon the structural and legal environment in which American campaigns and elections are conducted, but even more upon the actual conduct of campaigners, the media, and the public. We have, we think, suggested a variety of small but important ways in which each of these major actors could better fulfill its role in the campaign process. While we have attempted to shape our recommendations to take account of their incentives and constraints, we recognize that some of those recommendations will only be practical to the extent that campaigners, the media, and the public are willing to subordinate their immediate self-interest for the sake of a broader social good—a more informative, engaging, and edifying campaign process.

One promising model of cooperative, voluntary reform is provided by the Minnesota Compact, proposed by journalist Tom Hamburger of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune in 1995. The Minnesota Compact was sponsored and widely publicized by a coalition of civic, business, media, and academic groups, and was endorsed by 283 candidates for state and local offices in the 1996 election. By setting out clearly the responsibilities of candidates, the news media, and citizens in the electoral process, and by inviting clear commitments to these norms in advance of the campaign, the compact facilitated the enforcement of good campaign behavior on all sides. By casting citizens as responsible partners in the electoral process, its sponsors aimed both to engage and empower them and to mobilize them as a corrective force on the behavior of politicians and the press. Polling data from the senatorial race between Paul Wellstone and Rudy Boschwitz suggest that voters rejected ads aired on Boschwitz’s behalf that they perceived as “unfair”; this apparent public backlash was consistent with the spirit of the compact, and may have been facilitated by extensive ad watching conducted by the media as part of their role under the compact. More generally, newspaper coverage of the race avoided an excessive focus on strategy and tactics and provided sustained coverage of issues.

The 1996 Senate race in Massachusetts was notable for two voluntary efforts to improve the quality of the campaign: a series of widely publicized candidate debates hosted by the news media; and an agreement by the two campaigns to limit spending, advertising, and the influence of outside money in the race. The compact in Massachusetts succeeded in all but eliminating outside issue advocacy advertising and independent expenditures. However, the spending agreement broke down in the final weeks of the campaign.

A similar effort was undertaken during the 1997 New Jersey gubernatorial race. A campaign forum sponsored by Rutgers University’s Eagleton Institute of Politics brought together campaigners, consultants, academics, and reporters to discuss a variety of efforts to elevate the level of campaign discourse: well-publicized debates; a focus by the news media on information about the candidates, issues, and accuracy in the campaign; and agreements by the candidates to take responsibility for ads by independent groups, appear and speak in ads mentioning their opponents, and avoid running ads distorting the voices or images of their opponents. The Republican and Democratic nominees agreed to participate in two broadcast debates, and to speak in “free time” on the New Jersey public broadcasting station; they also agreed to focus on the issues
and avoid personal attacks, and to submit their ads for review by researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center. A post-campaign analysis of ads and free time concluded that the campaign was “relatively free of the kinds of harshly ‘negative’ attacks and distortions that characterized the Senate race in that state the year before.”

Obviously, efforts of this sort will be only as successful as campaigners, the media, and the public are willing to make them. Nevertheless, we see some promise in the “compact model,” both as a practical mechanism for achieving voluntary cooperation among these various actors and as a potent symbol of their shared responsibility for improving the American campaign process.
About the Task Force

The Task Force on Campaign Reform was commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trusts to contribute the scholarly expertise of leading political scientists to the public debate on campaign reform.

The Task Force gathered periodically over a 15-month period in Chicago, Washington, and Princeton to deliberate about the state of the political process, the practical implications of academic research on campaigns and elections, and the likely consequences and prospects of proposed reforms of the campaign process. The present report reflects our shared understanding of how well contemporary political campaigns satisfy the needs of American democracy—and how they might do better.

The Task Force was aided in its work by the students in a Policy Workshop on Campaign Reform directed by Larry M. Bartels and Lynn Vavreck in the fall of 1997 in Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. The workshop was composed of eight Master's degree candidates in the Woodrow Wilson School: Wendy C. Berry, DeAngela J. Burns, Jennifer Kim, José Quiñones, Richard S. Sheres, Daniel S. Volchok, Christopher Walker, and Robert Witajewski. These students sampled the academic literature on campaigns and elections, met with scholars, politicians, journalists, and political activists, produced background papers addressing several key issues in the reform debate, and issued a collective report summarizing their own conclusions and proposals. We are grateful to them for their assistance, and salute their energy, intelligence, and idealism.

We are also grateful to the many scholars, campaigners, journalists, and political reformers who contributed to our efforts by sharing ideas or evidence, pointing out flaws in our arguments, or pushing us to consider new problems or proposed solutions. E. J. Dionne, Jr., of The Washington Post, Paul Taylor of the Alliance for Better Campaigns, and Amy Gutmann of Princeton University's Center for Human Values deserve special notes of thanks. Also at Princeton, Reggie Feiner Cohen, Patricia Trinity, Patricia Coen, and Dean Michael Rothschild of the Woodrow Wilson School provided invaluable logistical support.

Finally, we wish to record our heartfelt gratitude to The Pew Charitable Trusts—and especially to Paul C. Light, Director of the Trusts' Public Policy Program, and his staff—for the enthusiasm with which they initiated our work and the generosity with which they supported it. The Pew Charitable Trusts have recently sponsored a variety of innovative projects in the general area of campaign discourse and civic culture, ranging from direct political activism to data collection and evaluation projects to training seminars and outreach programs. We are pleased and proud to contribute to their important efforts.

As social scientists, we especially commend the willingness of The Pew Charitable Trusts to fund careful evaluations of the impact of campaign reform efforts. Too often, well-meaning foundations scurry restlessly from one promising initiative to another, never pausing long enough to assess the actual impact of the activities they support. By contrast, The Pew Charitable Trusts have funded serious independent evaluations of their own projects and others in a variety of areas, including free air time, civic journalism, and deliberative opinion polls. Those evaluations have made an important contribution to our own efforts to assess the likely consequences of actual and proposed campaign reforms. They should stand as models to be emulated by any private or public funding agency that is more interested in positive results than in good intentions.
Task Force Members

Larry M. Bartels, chair of the Task Force, is Professor of Politics and Public Affairs and Stuart Professor of Communications and Public Affairs in the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. He is the author of *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice*, and currently chairs the Board of Overseers of the American National Election Studies.

Henry E. Brady is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy and Director of the UC Data Program at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the coauthor of *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election* and *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*.

Bruce Buchanan is Professor of Government at the University of Texas, Austin. He directed major studies of the media and the electorate in 1988, 1992, and 1996 for the Markle Foundation, and his books *Election a President* and *Renewing Presidential Politics* are based upon those studies.

Charles H. Franklin is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His articles on campaigns, voting behavior, and research methods have appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, and other leading scholarly journals.

John G. Geer, vice chair of the Task Force, is Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *From Tea Leaves to Opinion Polls: A Theory of Democratic Leadership and Nominating Presidents: An Evaluation of Voters and Primaries*, and editor of *Politicians and Party Politics*.

Shanto Iyengar is Professor of Communication and Political Science at Stanford University. His work on the media and political psychology includes *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate, Is Anyone Responsible?: How Television Frames Political Issues*, and *News That Matters*.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson is Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication and Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. She is a leading media commentator on political communication. Her scholarly works include *Spiral of Cynicism, Dirty Politics, Packaging the Presidency*, and *Presidential Debates*, among others.

Marion R. Just is Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College. She led major studies of political communication in the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns, and is coauthor of *CrossTalk: Citizens, Candidates, and the Media in a Presidential Campaign* and of *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning*.

Stanley Kelley, Jr., senior adviser to the Task Force, is Professor of Politics, Emeritus, at Princeton University. He has published numerous works on political parties and elections, including *Political Campaigning: Problems in Creating an Informed Electorate* and *Interpreting Elections*.

Thomas E. Mann is Director of Governmental Studies and the W. Averell Harriman Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is a leading commentator on Washington politics, and former executive director of the American Political Science Association. His books include *Unsafe At Any Margin: Interpreting Congressional Elections* and *Campaign Finance Reform: A Sourcebook*.

Samuel L. Popkin is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego. He has served as a consultant to the CBS News election unit and in the McGovern, Carter, and Clinton presidential campaigns. His books include *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* and *Candidates, Issues, and Strategies*.

Daron Shaw is Assistant Professor of Government at the University of Texas, Austin. He has worked in a variety of Republican campaigns, including the Bush presidential campaign in 1992, and has written on the effects of campaign events and political advertising.

Lynn Vavreck, executive director of the Task Force, is Assistant Professor of Government at Dartmouth College. She served on the Quayle campaign staff in 1992, and has written scholarly articles on campaign effects in the United States and elsewhere.

John R. Zaller is Professor of Political Science at UCLA. His scholarly works include *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, The American Ethos*, and numerous articles and book chapters on public opinion, attitude change, and media politics.
Endnotes


10 The legal responsibilities of broadcasters to serve the “public interest” under the Communications Act of 1934 present a limited but potentially important exception to this generalization, which we touch upon in our discussion below of proposals for “free air time.”


13 One pioneering study, Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure's The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), concluded from an analysis of survey data that campaign advertising had a "truly impressive" impact on voters' knowledge of the candidates' issue positions (page 116), and "contributed heavily to the political education of the individuals who were least attentive to newspapers" (page 125). A more recent study based on experimental data, Ansolabehere and Iyengar's Going Negative, found that "advertising on the issues informs voters about the candidates' positions and makes it more likely that voters will take their own preferences on the issues into account when choosing between the candidates" (pages 8-9), that "advertising reinforces or 'awakens' latent partisan predispositions" (page 10), and that "advertising works to level differences between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'" with respect to political information (page 9).

14 For example, one content analysis of presidential campaign spots found that the proportion of negative appeals increased from about 22 percent in 1960 to more than half in 1996. John G. Geer, "Campaigns, Party Competition, and Political Advertising," in Geer, ed., Politicians and Party Politics (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).


20 "Six of the nine studies found negative political ads being rated as less ethical, less fair, and otherwise less liked than positive political ads, while two studies came to the opposite conclusions and one uncovered no significant differences" (Lau and Sigelman, page 15).

21 "Of the 20 relevant findings, 10 report no significant differences and two associate positive outcomes with negative political ads (e.g., higher turnout), but eight report significant negative consequences... Concerns about these possible effects should be treated as genuine, but the jury is still out on them" (Lau and Sigelman, page 16-17).


23 For example, moral philosopher Michael Walzer has argued that there would be more substance in our political discourse if there were fewer attack ads ("Left Alone," The New Republic, March 24, 1997, page 27), and political activist Curtis Gans, director of the nonprofit Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, has advocated regulation of political advertising to reduce the prevalence of negativity (quoted by Eliza Newlin Carney in "Opting Out of Politics," National Journal, January 17, 1998, pages 106-111).

25 Compare, for example, the conclusions of Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar in “Can the Press Monitor Campaign Advertising?” (Press/Politics 1, 1996, pages 72-86) and Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella in “Setting the Record Straight: Do Ad Waches Help or Hurt?” (Press/Politics 2, 1997, pages 13-22).


30 Ansolabehere and Iyengar, Going Negative, page 142.

31 In an era of direct mail, narrowcast cable channels, and e-mail, it is increasingly important—as it was in the era before nationalized mass media—for journalists to monitor the content and consistency of candidates’ appeals to various distinct and potentially insulated segments of the electorate.


34 “From 1960 to 1992, the proportion of interpretive election reports on the front page of The New York Times increased tenfold, from 8 percent to 80 percent.” Patterson, Out of Order, page 81.

35 Patterson, Out of Order, pages 113-114.


37 Patterson, Out of Order, pages 73-74, 146-147, 137.


39 “The Choice ‘96” was one of four specific episodes cited by the jury that awarded “Frontline” the Gold Baton at the 1997 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards ceremony. The Center for New American Media won a Silver Baton for “Vote For Me,” an innovative PBS mini-series profiling local political candidates.

40 One of the first (and most colorful) portrayals of “pack journalism” on the campaign trail was Timothy Crouse’s The Boys on the Bus: Riding With the Campaign Press Corps (New York: Random House, 1973).

Patterson, *Out of Order*, pages 75, 77.


These percentages are based upon the 42 percent of the 1992 American National Election Study sample who indicated that they read a newspaper at least five times per week. They actually overstate somewhat the political knowledge of regular newspaper readers, since with only two possible answers to each question some respondents presumably arrived at the correct answer through sheer guesswork.


One academic study found that “horse race” news coverage stimulated noticeably less interest and discussion among focus group participants than either issue coverage (taken from ABC’s “American Agenda” series) or direct communication by candidates. Just, et al., *CrossTalk*, chapter 6.

In one interesting experiment, a team of scholars presented identical information about two hypothetical competing candidates using alternative formats. Some subjects saw a “candidate-centered” video in which each candidate was featured in a continuous seven- to eight-minute profile touching upon his personal background, policy positions, and political party membership. Others saw a “debate” in which the same footage was edited to produce alternating statements by the two candidates on their backgrounds, then on their policy positions, then on their political parties. Among politically sophisticated subjects, recalled information and candidate evaluations were more strongly correlated in the candidate-centered format than in the debate format (.49 versus .31), but the reverse was true for relatively unsophisticated subjects (.28 versus .69). Wendy M. Rahn, John H. Aldrich, and Eugene Borgida, “Individual and Contextual Variations in Political Candidate Appraisal,” *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994), pages 193-199.

The Commission on Presidential Debates has clearly been bipartisan rather than non-partisan in its operations. Indeed, the organization’s founding co-chairmen were Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr., and Paul G. Kirk, Jr., former chairmen of the Republican and Democratic National Committees, respectively.


This connection was quasi-officially asserted by Reed Hundt, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, in a March 1997 address on “Broadcasters and the Public Interest.” “The FCC,” Hundt pointed out, “is now writing the rules and preparing to grant the broadcast digital television licenses. We intend to make clear that these licenses will be issued subject to concrete and commensurate public interest obligations. Although we will grant these licenses in advance of defining specifically how these obligations will be carried out in the digital age, all broadcasters will take these licenses knowing that they will be subject to such obligations.” (“Free Air Time and Campaign Reform,” Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, March 1997, page 30.)
A notable exception to this generalization is the A. H. Belo Corporation, whose television stations in Dallas, Houston, Norfolk, Sacramento, Seattle, and Tulsa provided free air time for five-minute statements by 71 congressional and gubernatorial candidates in the two weeks leading up to the 1996 election.

Some public funding schemes would offer congressional candidates public money only if they agreed to limit or completely forego additional private fundraising. Since they could (as presidential candidates can) choose not to accept public funds, relying instead on private contributions raised in accordance with existing regulations, such a system would not violate the prohibition on mandatory spending limits imposed by the Supreme Court's *Buckley v. Valeo* ruling. The majority and minority positions presented in the report of our sister task force on Campaign Finance Reform provide a more detailed discussion of the pros and cons of spending limits. See Herbert E. Alexander, et al., "New Realities, New Thinking: Report of the Task Force on Campaign Finance Reform," Citizens' Research Foundation, University of Southern California, March 1997.

Princeton Survey Research Associates, "Money and Politics: A National Survey of the Public's Views on How Money Impacts our Political System," commissioned by the Center for Responsive Politics, Washington, DC, April-May 1997. By way of comparison, the same survey found twice as much strong support for minor and largely irrelevant reforms such as banning contributions from non-citizens (56 percent) and requiring congressional candidates to raise a certain proportion of campaign funds in their own states (50 percent).


The Supreme Court ruled in *Buckley v. Valeo* that federal campaign finance laws could only regulate communication that constituted "express advocacy" of the election or defeat of specific candidates. Subsequent court rulings have interpreted this stricture as ruling out regulation of political communication that does not include specific words such as "elect," "defeat," or "vote for," regardless of the intent or impact of that communication.

Deborah Beck, Paul Taylor, Jeffrey Stanger, and Douglas Rivlin, "Issue Advocacy During the 1996 Campaign: A Catalog," Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, September 1997. The estimate of total spending on issue advocacy ads in the preceding paragraph is from the same source.


Information about the Kids Voting USA program and studies of its effects are available from the organization's website, http://www.kidsvotingusa.org.