chapter 12

Elections in the Digital Era

Digital came of age in the 2008 campaigns, then data analytics in 2012.[1] In 2016, the campaigns invested heavily in digital communication strategies and analytic staffing, continuing to innovate and further developing the precision of their analytics. Advances in digital message testing and data gathering paid off, especially for the Trump campaign. However, 2016 was not solely about digital analytics. A major lesson from the campaign is that there is still much to learn about how politics and personality interact with the logics of digital *and* traditional forms of media to moderate the effectiveness of campaign messages. In this chapter we will discuss the main features of modern campaigns and how they've evolved from campaigns of the past.

Starting in 1952, television became the main battlefield for presidential contests. In the time since, campaigns have been making strategic decisions about how to craft and where to place political advertisements and candidate appearances to give their candidates the best chance of winning. Campaigns must decide which likely voters to target and how to target them. The expansion of news and entertainment choices that characterizes the current media landscape has implications for these decisions. Campaigns can pinpoint voter groups based on the demographics of the people tuning in to various niche programs or networks. Additionally, recent advances in technology and data gathering and analysis allow campaigns to microtarget voters by matching individual-level voter characteristics with media and Internet behaviors.

In the wake of recent election cycles, modern presidential campaigns realize the importance of data analytics. Analytics teams are now permanent and central fixtures in the hierarchy of major election campaigns. The Clinton and Trump campaigns of 2016 were no exception; each reflected the importance of digital investment. Analytics teams are responsible for using large datasets to predict the individual-level behavior of millions of Americans to aid in campaign message testing and microtargeting and to run predictive election models state by state throughout the campaign.

In the general election race of 2016, both major party campaigns invested heavily in digital strategies but employed different tactics. According to Donald Trump's digital director, Brad Parscale, a key reason for the Trump victory was the nearly $90 million the campaign invested in digital advertising.

Though Hillary Clinton's campaign generated more content across all the popular social media platforms, it continued to invest heavily in televised political ads, spending more than $200 million in the later stages of the campaign. Trump's campaign spent less than $100 million on televised ads during the same time, and instead invested heavily in digital ads. The advantage of investing in digital ads is the enormous message-testing capabilities digital platforms provide,[2] while also providing the same, if not better, allowances for microtargeting. The analytics people working on the Trump campaign regularly tested 40,000, 50,000, and even up to 175,000 ad variants on Facebook. They A/B tested differences in overall format, in the effectiveness of video versus stills, presence or absence of subtitles, and so on. The more versions they tested, the more likely it was that ads would be presented to Facebook users because Facebook wants to use ads that generate the most engagement.[3]

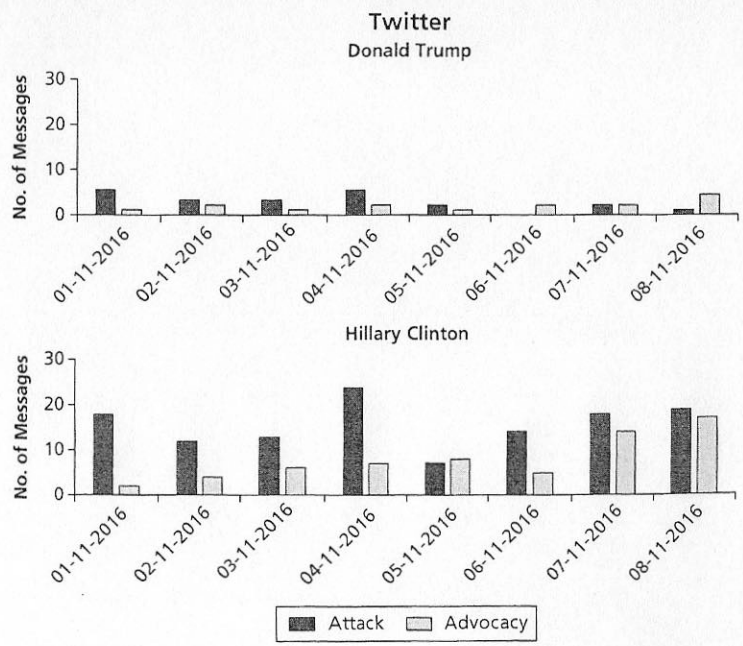
Clinton's campaign actually generated more content on social media platforms than Trump's, as Figure 12-1 suggests. The Clinton team also invested in digital advertising, spending approximately $30 million in the final weeks of the campaign (about one-third of what Trump spent).[4] Even though a common news media narrative in 2016 was how Clinton's ad spending vastly outweighed Trump's, in digital advertising the lopsidedness was reversed. The vast uptick in use of social media for news and politics this cycle coupled with the message-testing capabilities of digital advertising meant digital ad investment was apparently money well spent.

Spending was not the only critical difference for the ultimate successes of the 2016 campaigns' digital tactics. The politics of the times and fundamental differences between the candidates' public personas and the particular attributes of Facebook and Twitter meant that the candidates' messages were perceived and received differently by both the public and the press. Simply put, even though the Clinton campaign generated more social media content relative to the Trump campaign,[5] its efforts were not as effective, at least on Facebook and Twitter. Unfortunately for Clinton, the interaction between the political context and the peculiarities of certain social media platforms did not serve her well. First, Clinton was running in a race that privileged political outsiders, insurgents, and authenticity. Public esteem for politics-as-usual and political institutions was at historic lows. The voting public craved authenticity. Though Clinton's long time in public service helped her tout experience, she was part of the political establishment and struggled to overcome the public's perception that she was a prototypical strategic politician. As a candidate, she struggled to convey authenticity to voters. Second, Twitter and Facebook also privilege authenticity. These platforms are social and personal, and campaign messages must be crafted with the particular characteristics of the various platforms in mind. Users are conditioned to more personalized views—effective messaging on these platforms often requires candidates to "personalize" by showing different sides of themselves and their issue positions than the smooth polish historically required for televised political ads.[6] Even as Clinton's digital messaging team crafted loads of content,

rapid-response messages, and well-crafted attacks and issue positions, they seem to have ultimately lacked the personalization, authenticity, and audience appeal to attract and maintain the attention of the public and the press.

Based on coverage by the mainstream press, one would never expect that Clinton's campaign generated more social media content than Trump's. Whether by accident or strategic genius, the most effective element of Trump's Twitter communication was all the free media attention his tweets earned for the campaign. Even though the size of Trump's Twitter following was purportedly inflated by "bots," the initial impression of his growing traction and the reactionary and controversial nature of his tweets was enough to attract and sustain the attention of the media, which only served to grow his actual public following.[7] The postelection public discussions of many political strategists, journalists, and social scientists suggests the importance of social media platforms as part of future candidates' earned media strategies.[8]

FIGURE 12-1 **Twitter Messages from the Final Week of the 2016 Campaign**



Source: "Illuminating 2016: Helping Journalists Cover Social media in the Presidential Campaign," http://illuminating.ischool.syr.edu/#/platforms/1,2/dates/2016-11-01,2016-11-08/candidates/10,5/types/8&9,5&6. Syracuse University School of Information Studies. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Despite its innovations, even the 2016 campaign was guided by the familiar principles that candidates must communicate with their bases as well as attract new voters who have weak—or no—ties to the opposition party or who are likely to stay away from the polls. The digital media environment provides a range of new, inexpensive channels that candidates can use to distribute messages of their choice to audiences around the clock, around the country, and around the world. The target audiences, as before, are potential voters, who are a bit easier to pinpoint because of platform diversity and sophisticated digital analytics. In their messages, essentially, was old wine in new bottles, much of it branded more heavily than before by the candidates rather than the thinning ranks of professional journalists. The digital media did not crowd out the familiar old-timers; the old-timers fueled the reach and meaning of digital platforms in ways that will continue to shape the strategic practices of campaigns. Therefore, this chapter addresses a key question: What was the collective influence of all media platforms on various aspects of nationwide elections?

THE CONSEQUENCES OF MEDIA-DOMINATED POLITICS

The availability of television in nearly every home, the pervasiveness of public opinion polling, and access to the Internet, where election-related websites abound, guarantee the news media will play a major role in presidential elections. What exactly does that role entail? We will consider three main facets: the power of journalists to influence the selection of candidates, the requirement for candidates to "televise well," and the explosive growth and diversification of made-for-media campaigns.

Media as Kingmakers

Before television, voters had little chance to assess the candidates on their own. The political parties controlled nominations, and voters made their choices based largely on party labels. Party affiliation remains important at the state and local levels, where media information about candidates is scant, particularly on television. The exceptions are nonpartisan local elections, when candidates run without party designation and endorsement, or primary elections, in which candidates of the same party compete against each other. In the television age, journalists became the chief influence in the selection of candidates and the key issues of the campaign. Television brought candidates, especially presidential contenders, directly into the nation's living rooms, giving voters information for making choices based on the media's menu. Candidates, like actors, depend for their success as much on the roles into which they are cast as on their acting ability. In the television age, media people did most of the casting for presidential hopefuls, whose performance was then judged according to the assigned role.

News media exhibited this clout as the 2016 primary election approached. During this crucial "pre-primary" season, the news media gave substantial

amounts of free airtime and mostly positive coverage to candidate Trump, despite little funding and (at the time) little political following. The earned media attention from mainstream outlets is largely credited with building his momentum leading up to and during the early primaries.[9] Only later did the press work more aggressively to investigate his credibility as a candidate.

Casting occurs early in the primaries when newspeople, on the basis of as yet slender evidence, predict winners and losers to narrow the field of eligibles who must be covered. Concentrating on the front-runners in public opinion polls makes newspeople's tasks more manageable, but it often forces trailing candidates out of the race prematurely. In the 2016 contest, primary candidate and former governor of Florida Jeb Bush was an example of how poll slippage can affect candidates' fortunes. Though he enjoyed a strong standing in the polls in early 2015, once that began to slip his press coverage got increasingly negative. This reflects the typical press framing of candidates who are losing ground in the polls. The story of why they are losing ground dominates the coverage, which results in an unflattering portrayal.[10]

Early, highly speculative calculations become self-fulfilling prophecies because designated winners attract supporters whereas losers are abandoned. For example, as Donald Trump continued to rise in the polls, he benefited from the "gaining ground" frame, which typically leads to more coverage overall, and coverage that is relatively favorable. Up through the end of 2015, Trump earned close to twice the coverage of Jeb Bush, and more than twice the coverage of other leading contenders like Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz. Coverage imbalances throughout the primary season can seriously handicap campaigns, which then remain in the shadows.[11]

Candidates who exceed expectations in garnering votes are declared winners; candidates who fall short are losers.[12] When journalist Pat Buchanan finished sixteen points behind George H. W. Bush in the 1992 New Hampshire Republican presidential primary, the media declared Buchanan the winner because he had exceeded their expectations. They did the same for Bill Clinton, who had trailed former Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas in the 1992 Democratic primary in New Hampshire. The candidacy of Republican senator Bob Dole during the 1996 primaries was prematurely declared dead when he finished behind his competitors in a few early contests.

Media coverage and public opinion polls tend to move in tandem in the early months of a campaign. Candidates who receive ample media coverage tend to perform well in the polls. Good poll ratings then bring more media coverage. Once the caucus and primary season has started in the spring of the presidential election year, the outcomes of these contests become more important predictors of media attention. One other pattern is common, though not universal. The substance of stories tends to be favorable for trailing candidates in the race and unfavorable for front-runners. During the 2004 primaries, for example, Howard Dean's favorable ratings plunged while he was the Democratic front-runner, only to soar again when he became the underdog.[13] Recent primary seasons have

exhibited this trend; opposing candidates often employ an attack-the-front-runner strategy—media coverage and the polls follow suit. For example, shortly after Mitt Romney officially announced his bid for the presidency, it was clear why the presumed front-runner had waited so long to announce. His opponents attacked him from all angles; the media reported these attacks and also noted they were reflective of his standing as front-runner.[14] When Hillary Clinton entered the Democratic primary race as a healthy favorite to win the nomination in 2016, the other Democratic candidates' debate performances clearly reflected an attack-the-front-runner strategy.[15]

The media's role as kingmaker—or killer of the dreams of would-be kings—is often played over a long span of time. Image making for presidential elections now begins on a massive scale more than a year before the first primary. The "pre-pre-campaign," on a more limited scale, begins shortly after the previous election (if not before it, in some respects, especially as vice presidential candidates are considered), with newspaper and magazine stories about potential presidential candidates. Senators and governors who have received favorable publicity over many years may gradually come to be thought of as likely presidential nominees. Losers in the previous campaign who were bruised but not badly beaten remain on the "possibilities" list.

Media coverage can be shaped to destroy candidacies. This happened to two Democratic presidential candidates in 1988. Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware was forced out of the campaign by widely publicized charges that his speeches contained plagiarized quotations from other political leaders. Twenty years later, the stain had faded enough to permit Barack Obama to make him vice president. Media attention to this choice was negligible. The second media casualty in 1988 was Senator Gary Hart of Colorado, who withdrew after charges of philandering—he had dared reporters to follow and scrutinize him when questioned about adultery, and they did so. Recurrent media references to the Chappaquiddick incident, which linked Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) to the drowning of a young woman on his staff, also kept his supporters from drafting him as a presidential contender. However, adverse publicity can be overcome. In the 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton was accused of adultery and draft dodging, charges that caused his poll ratings and positive media appraisals to plummet. Despite the bad publicity, Clinton managed to win major primaries and the presidency, earning the title "Comeback Kid." In 2016, Donald Trump's candidacy exhibited resilience in the face of bad publicity, surviving public outcry over controversial statements about Mexican immigrants, allegations of questionable business dealings, a publicly released recording of sexually lewd remarks about women, and allegations of sexual assault from women who stepped forward during the campaign. Though the ongoing stream of scandals and gaffes sometimes produced dips and drops in Trump's poll standings, his popularity remained high and he ultimately won the nomination and the presidency.[16]

Television images can be important in making a candidate electable or unelectable. For instance, the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960, the

Reagan-Mondale debates of 1984, and the Bush-Gore debates of 2000 helped to counter the public's impressions that John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush were unsuited for the presidency.[17] Kennedy was able to demonstrate that he was capable of coping with the presidency despite his youth and relative inexperience, and Reagan in 1984 conveyed the impression that he remained mentally fit for a second term. Bush's performance in the second debate counteracted charges that he lacked sufficient intellect and debating skills to become an effective president.[18]

When the media chose policy issues during crucial phases of the campaign, they sharply diminished the chances of presidents Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush to win second terms, and they ravaged John McCain's presidential aspirations. In Carter's case, just before the 1980 presidential election, the country—and the media—commemorated the anniversary of a major foreign policy failure: Carter's inability to win the release of U.S. hostages in Iran. Disapproval of Bush in the 1992 election was directed mainly at his highly publicized failure to solve major domestic economy problems during the last year of his term. In McCain's case, reminders about his support of the Iraq War and his admission that he knew little about economics reinforced voters' beliefs that it was time for a change to a Democratic administration.

Media-operated public opinion polls are yet another weapon in the arsenal for kingmaking. The major television networks, in collaboration with such newspapers as the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* and *USA Today,* all conduct popularity ratings and issue polls throughout presidential elections. The results are publicized extensively and then become benchmarks for voters, telling them who the winners and losers are and what issues are crucial to the campaign. Depending on the nature and format of the questions the pollsters ask and the political context in which the story becomes embedded, the responses spell fortune or misfortune for the candidates. Polls may determine which candidates enter the fray and which keep out. In the 1992 presidential campaign, major Democratic politicians shunned the race because they believed that President George H. W. Bush's high approval ratings in national polls following the Persian Gulf War doomed their candidacies. That provided an opening for a little-known governor from Arkansas named Bill Clinton to propel himself into a two-term presidency.

Television-Age Recruits

Another important consequence of audiovisual campaigning is the change it has wrought in the types of candidates likely to be politically successful. Because broadcasts can bring the images of candidates for office directly into the homes of millions of voters, a candidate's ability to look impressive and perform well before the cameras has become crucial. People who are not telegenic have been eliminated from the pool of available recruits. Abraham Lincoln's rugged face probably would not have passed muster in the television age. President Truman's "Give 'em hell, Harry," homespun style would have backfired had it been presented on the nation's television screens rather than to small gatherings. The image of Franklin D. Roosevelt in a wheelchair could have spelled damaging weakness. Roosevelt, in fact, was keenly aware of the likely harmful effects of a picture of him in a wheelchair and never allowed photographs to be taken while he was being lifted to the speaker's rostrum.

Actors and other celebrities who are adept at performing before the public now have a much better chance than ever before to be recruited for political office. Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who were seasoned actors; John Edwards and Barack Obama, powerful orators; Al Franken, a comedian; and Donald Trump, former star of the NBC reality hit "The Apprentice" are examples of television-age recruits, whose chances for public office would have been much slighter in an earlier era. As columnist Marquis Child put it, candidates no longer "run" for office; they "pose" for office.[19]

In fact, good pictures can counterbalance the effects of unfavorable verbal comments. When CBS reporter Leslie Stahl verbally attacked President Reagan for posturing as a man of peace and compassion during the 1984 presidential campaign, a Reagan assistant promptly thanked her for showing four-and-a-half minutes of great pictures of the president. He was not in the least concerned about Stahl's scathing remarks. The pictures had shown the president

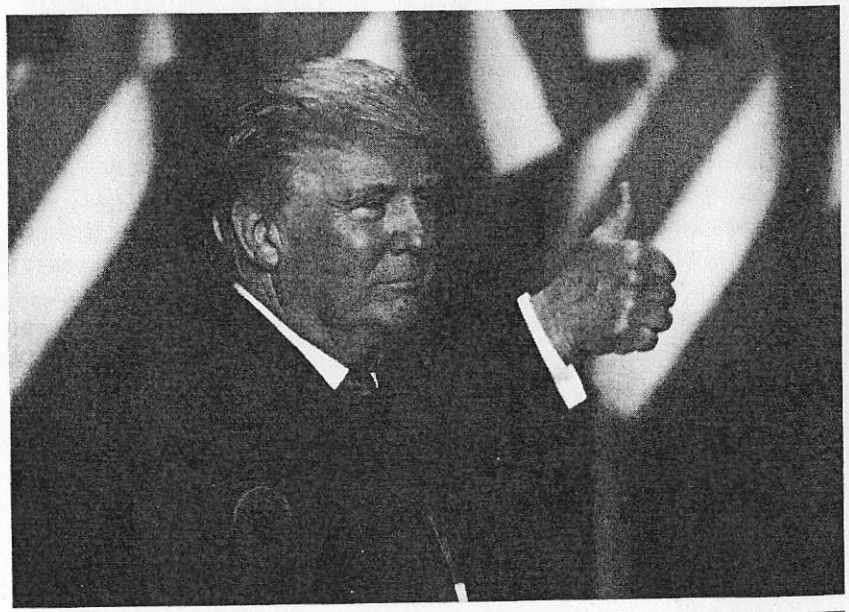
> basking in a sea of flag-waving supporters . . . sharing concerns with farmers in a field, picnicking with Mid-Americans, pumping iron . . . getting the Olympic torch from a runner . . . greeting senior citizens at their housing project, honoring veterans who landed on Normandy, honoring youths just back from Grenada, countering a heckler . . . wooing black inner-city kids.[20]

During the 2004 campaign, an emotional ad showing President George W. Bush hugging a fifteen-year-old orphan in Lebanon, Ohio, was credited with driving home the crucial message that Bush cared about people and would protect them. The ad showed an obviously grieving president cradling the youngster, whose mother had died in the 2001 World Trade Center attack. Young Ashley Faulkner's voice could be heard saying, "He's the most powerful man in the world, and all he wants to do is make sure I'm safe, that I'm OK."[21]

Media advisers have become year-round members of presidential and gubernatorial staffs. These experts coach candidates about proper dress and demeanor for various occasions, create commercials for the candidates, and handle general news coverage of the campaign. Presidential contenders spend roughly two-thirds of their budgets on television. In 2012 the presidential candidates, political parties, and independent groups spent more than $1 billion on television ads for the presidential race. Over 900,000 ads were aired and appeared in fewer markets than in 2008. Though there were more ads, fewer Americans were subject to the intense and negative ad campaign. Though the Obama campaign outspent the Romney campaign on television

ads, this was more than made up for by GOP outside group spending. However, the Obama campaign still managed to dominate the air wars in most media markets because the campaign funded its own advertising, qualifying its ads for the lowest rates in local markets. Ads funded by outside groups are subject to whatever the going ad buy rate is per market. In short, Obama ad spending went further because ads that benefited Romney were so heavily funded by outside groups.[22]

In 2016, the Clinton campaign outraised and outspent the Trump campaign, even when taking into account the more than $55 million Trump invested in his own campaign and the millions he raised from small contributions from individual donors. Clinton's campaign invested far more in television advertising than Trump's, but his campaign concentrated investments in digital advertising. Both candidates relied heavily on social media platforms as ways to communicate directly with potential supporters.[23] In election campaigns, funding disparities usually are a grave handicap for the financial underdog, whose messages are drowned out by the opposition. The 2016 election year was anomalous given that Hillary Clinton lost the election after she outraised Donald Trump, in part due to a notable shift in funding from outside groups on the Democratic side, which was a reversal from the previous cycle. Conventional notions about what candidate funding dictates may keep shifting as the implications from the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision continue to unfold.[24] Given the high cost of advertising and of gaining news exposure, a candidate's personal wealth or ability to raise money remains



Source: Alex Wong/Getty Images.

an important consideration, even when federal funding is available and e-mail and social networks provide cheap, candidate-controlled access to potential voters. The political consequences in recruitment and in postelection commitments that spring from such financial considerations are huge. And donors are more partisan.

Media Campaigning Strategies

Twenty-first-century election campaigns are structured to garner the most favorable media exposure, reaching the largest number of prospective supporters, with the greatest degree of candidate control over the message. Candidates concentrate on photo opportunities, talk show appearances, or trips to interesting events and locations. Even when candidates meet voters personally at rallies, parades, or shopping centers, they generally time and orchestrate the events to attract favorable media coverage.

The New Venues. Appearances on entertainment shows, once considered "unpresidential," have become routine. Maverick candidate Ross Perot started the pattern during the 1992 presidential race by announcing his presidential aspirations on CNN's *Larry King Live* call-in television show. Other candidates flocked to the talk show trek, preferring the light banter and respectful questions of callers to the pointed inquisition in interviews by the national press. By 2000 it seemed almost obligatory for presidential contenders to appear on talk shows hosted by major television personalities. John McCain first announced his entry into the 2008 presidential contest on David Letterman's show. Such appearances make strategic sense; voters under age thirty frequently claim that late-night talk shows and comedy programs like *Saturday Night Live* are their major sources of campaign information (see Box 12-1 for more on this trend).[25]

Candidates' escape from the highly critical national press to friendlier environments also takes the form of interviews on political satire shows. Even network morning news shows now devote entire hours to conversations with the candidates and accept telephoned questions from viewers during the show. All in all, the trend seems to be toward candidates having more direct contact with voters and increased control over campaign messages, all at the expense of campaign coverage control by the major media.

The 2008 campaign saw the debut of social websites as major outlets for candidates' messages, and this trend continued through the 2016 election.[26] Now, many messages first aired on television or news websites are rebroadcast on social media venues and capture as many or more viewers there than when they aired originally. The reach on these platforms is vast. For example, more than 13 million people viewed NBC's posting of the first Clinton-Trump debate on YouTube. Of course, more than 23 million viewed *SNL*'s spoof on the debate.[27]

Candidate-sponsored websites are another addition to the venues; they have evolved substantially since they were first used by campaigns in 1996. Most campaign websites show videos about the candidates' issue positions and other topics, allowing the candidates to present their cases at length in their own

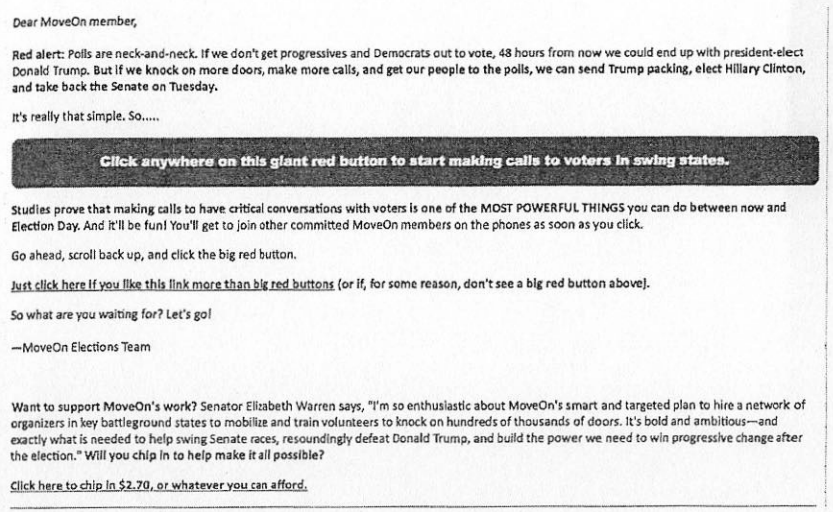
words and with carefully chosen pictures. Campaign websites are now also interactive; many contain links allowing visitors to register to vote, to donate money to the campaign or volunteer to work for it, and to check campaign sites in their states. There may be special interest pages for groups such as senior citizens, veterans, college students, or young children. Many websites provide e-mail or chat connections that enable candidates and their surrogates to stay in regular contact with website visitors. E-mail lists have been exceedingly useful as a get-out-the-vote device during the final days of the campaign. Presidential campaigns collect millions of e-mail addresses; they also use social media platforms to target direct messages to would-be voters and contributors.[28]

Though digital and social media allow new levels of interactivity between candidates and voters, campaigns engage in strategies of what Jennifer Stromer-Galley refers to as "controlled interactivity." Campaigns utilize the interactive affordances of digital and social media only insofar as they help the strategic aims of the campaigns.[29] Primarily, campaigns seek to use digital communication technologies in ways that enlist the help of their supporters through the use of their own social networks. Meanwhile, campaigns collect data on which messages are most effective at doing so and for which type of supporter.

For the average voter, the consequences of the availability of these fine-tuned and more candidate-centered approaches to campaigning are not entirely clear. Unquestionably, more people than ever before have been exposed to them since 2008. The blogosphere and online news sites also continue to expand their reach. Compared with the 2000 presidential election, use of the Internet as a mainstay of election information has more than quadrupled (Table 12-1). Still, television remains the chief source of election news, although fewer people tuned in to cable, network, and local news television sources for election news in 2016 compared with earlier cycles. Among cable channels, the political orientation arcs from conservative Fox News to liberal MSNBC, with CNN in the middle. It is unclear how such choices affect election outcomes, as people tend to choose news venues in tune with their existing political orientations.

Although the Web remains a secondary source of campaign information for the general public, and although the 2016 presidential candidates budgeted vast sums of money for over-the-air television, the digital communication environment was tremendously helpful. It became a major source of money from millions of citizens who responded to website appeals.[30] The Web also served as a virtual pied piper for all candidates, luring thousands of supporters to the campaigns. Web appeals enlisted them in e-mail recruiting efforts and mobilized them to go to the polls and bring their friends and neighbors along. That feat would have been impossible to achieve through direct mail or phone calls.

The Web also served as a rallying tool for political activists and political action committees who would have found it difficult to be heard otherwise. MoveOn.org, for example, used its website and e-mail blitzes to raise millions of dollars and mobilize more than 2 million liberals to the cause of removing Republicans from office. Large civic organizations such as MoveOn also retain the digital staff and expertise to continually develop their messaging strategies.[31]



Dear MoveOn member,

Red alert: Polls are neck-and-neck. If we don't get progressives and Democrats out to vote, 48 hours from now we could end up with president-elect Donald Trump. But if we knock on more doors, make more calls, and get our people to the polls, we can send Trump packing, elect Hillary Clinton, and take back the Senate on Tuesday.

It's really that simple. So.....

Click anywhere on this giant red button to start making calls to voters in swing states.

Studies prove that making calls to have critical conversations with voters is one of the MOST POWERFUL THINGS you can do between now and Election Day. And it'll be fun! You'll get to join other committed MoveOn members on the phones as soon as you click.

Go ahead, scroll back up, and click the big red button.

Just click here if you like this link more than big red buttons (or if, for some reason, don't see a big red button above).

So what are you waiting for? Let's go!

—MoveOn Elections Team

Want to support MoveOn's work? Senator Elizabeth Warren says, "I'm so enthusiastic about MoveOn's smart and targeted plan to hire a network of organizers in key battleground states to mobilize and train volunteers to knock on hundreds of thousands of doors. It's bold and ambitious—and exactly what is needed to help swing Senate races, resoundingly defeat Donald Trump, and build the power we need to win progressive change after the election." Will you chip in to help make it all possible?

Click here to chip in $2.70, or whatever you can afford.

Mobilization e-mail from MoveOn.org from the final days of 2016.

Source: MoveOn.org.

These digital fundraising and mobilization efforts can exert a crucial impact on election outcomes, especially in close elections. In 2016, websites remained a central point of new media campaign activity and e-mails were still a heavily utilized campaign tool. The traditional media picked up many of the messages circulated by activists on the Web and in e-mails, giving their sometimes extreme views a huge national audience. In addition, hundreds of websites, including blogs, provided a rich menu of information to voters who wanted to explore election issues in depth. E-mails by the millions sent by personal friends and celebrities, often stimulated by website appeals, may well be the most potent electioneering weapon of the twenty-first century.

Both old and new campaign media venues are important for the microtargeting practices described at the beginning of this chapter. In the 2016 election cycle, $1 billion was spent on digital ads, an 8 percent increase since 2012. Yet these figures pale in comparison to the estimated $6 billion political candidates spent on television advertising in 2016.[32] The effectiveness of both types of ads was enhanced by the use of data on individual voters, which has become a key part of narrowly targeting digital ads, television ads, and personalized appeals sent via e-mail, text, and social media.[33] Table 12-1 shows the platforms people relied on most for campaign news in the last few cycles. Digital forms continue to grow, while television remains the most widely used. A Pew study in 2016 asked respondents how many sources they typically use; almost half of respondents reported getting news from five or more sources. Among those citing digital platforms as most relied on, 48 percent relied on news websites and apps; 44 percent relied most on social networking sites; 23 percent reported issue-based apps, sites, and e-mails; and 20 percent reported using candidate or campaign group websites, apps, or e-mails.[34]

TABLE 12-1 Voters' Main Sources of Campaign News, 2000–2016 (percentage)

News Source	*2000*	*2004*	*2008*	*2012*	*2016*
Television	70	76	72	67	78
Cable	36	42	46	42	54
Network	22	33	24	19	49
Local	21	12	13	11	57
Newspapers	39	46	29	27	36
Radio	15	22	21	20	44
Internet/digital	11	21	33	47	65
Magazines	4	6	3	3	–

Source: Pew Research Center, "Low Marks for the 2012 Election," http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/15/low-marks-for-the-2012-election/. Figures for 2012 based on combined surveys of 1,206 voters conducted November 8–11, 2012; Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, Elisa Shearer, and Amy Mitchell, "The 2016 Presidential Campaign: A News Event That's Hard to Miss," February 4, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/02/04/the-2016-presidential-campaign-a-news-event-thats-hard-to-miss/.

Note: Figures add up to more than 100 percent because multiple answers were allowed. Respondents were not asked about magazines in 2016 in the Pew study.

BOX 12-1 Political Humor in Campaigns

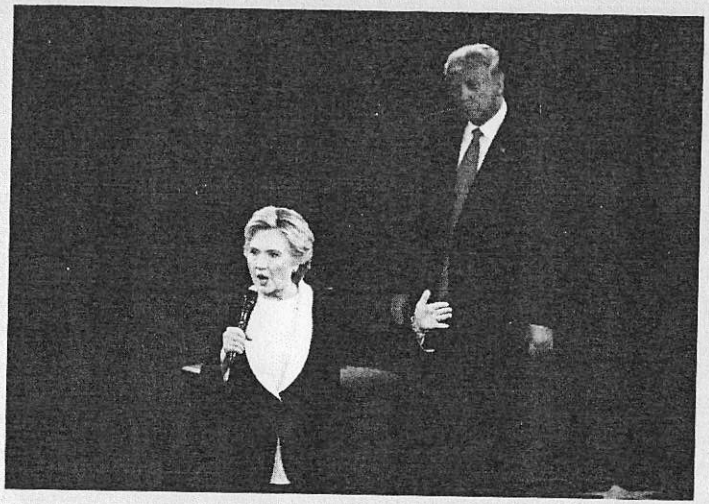
Humor has always been a potent political tool in society, from ancient times onward. In the Middle Ages, rulers employed court jesters to talk freely and frankly about flawed policies and politicians, at a time when it was a capital crime to mock the high and mighty. The inexcusable could be excused if, by definition, it was merely a "jest."

In modern times, truths told in jest, or satirized, and jokes about political leaders still are powerful weapons in political contests. They leap across the barriers of political correctness and chisel their message into human minds. Satire attracts huge audiences, especially among the best-informed segments of the public, who know enough about the political scene to understand the full meaning of veiled messages.

The 2016 presidential election was yet another exhibition of the popularity and power of political humor. Humorous messages took many forms, ranging from political cartoons in newspapers and on the Web to newspaper comic strips and televised satirical animated shows such as *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*. Comedic news programs such as John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, *Saturday Night Live*, and the satirical newspaper *The Onion* are household names. Their barbs circulated widely in 2016. The late-night talk shows, including *The Late Late Show* with James Corden, *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* added to the feast of political jokes. They made fun of the candidates' performance and skills, and occasionally their policies. Only people familiar with ongoing news developments could relish the humor, but judging from their viewership, this constituted many millions of people.

As is common during elections, a large number of jokes during the 2016 campaign referred to personal traits and the performances of the candidates. For example, Hillary Clinton's longtime political ambition and practiced performances were a common source of humor. Donald Trump endured many barbs about his overall manner, his bluntness, and his dealings with women. The various scandals each candidate was involved in also provided plenty of material.

Both candidates endured quite a bit of grief from the late-night shows after their debate performances. Though Clinton was widely perceived as the net winner across their debate contests, both candidates' performances provided fodder for late-night comedy. From reenactments of Trump looming directly behind Clinton as she answered a question during a town hall debate to replicating Clinton's giddy shimmy in response to an off-putting remark by Trump, comedy writers' rooms had plenty to work with. Throughout the 2016 campaign season, *SNL*'s Kate McKinnon and frequent *SNL* guest host and *30 Rock* star Alec Baldwin delighted audiences with their depictions of the two major party candidates.



Days after Donald Trump loomed directly behind Hillary Clinton during the town hall presidential debate, *Saturday Night Live* cast member Kate McKinnon and guest star Alec Baldwin parodied the moment: an example of the show's running commentary on the election.

Source: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg via Getty Images.

Such jokes may seem pretty tame, but repeated over and over again, they become part of the candidate's image that voters internalize and carry to the voting booth. No wonder *Newsweek* featured *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart on its cover shortly before the 2004 presidential election, calling him one of the most powerful media figures in that contest. In the same year, Stewart's parody of an American government textbook, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, placed fifteenth on the *New York Times* list of best-selling books.

Attracting Coverage. Candidates maximize their chances of receiving attention by planning their schedules around events that are known to attract reporters. They spend disproportionate amounts of time during the primary season campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire, where media coverage of the earliest contests is usually heavy. In a typical presidential campaign, coverage of Iowa's caucuses and New Hampshire's primary election dwarfed television news coverage of later primaries by a ratio of more than four to one.[35] To keep a favorable image of candidates in front of the public, campaign managers arrange newsworthy events to familiarize potential voters with their candidates' best aspects. Managers show candidates dressed informally, mixing with enthusiastic crowds of average people and looking relaxed, happy, and confident. If vigor has to be demonstrated, the candidate performs expertly in some popular sport. Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, for example, was shown duck hunting, but an aide carried the dead ducks lest animal lovers take offense. During the 2016 pre-primary season, 34 percent of Donald Trump's coverage focused on activities and events he performed and attended.[36]

Incumbents have a distinct advantage over challengers. Although they may attract about the same number of campaign stories, incumbents receive additional attention through coverage of their official duties. Incumbents may also be able to dictate the time and place of media encounters. When a president schedules a meeting for reporters in the White House Rose Garden, ample coverage is certain. Once promising challengers have attained wide recognition as front-runners, newspeople compete for their attention as well. These candidates' power to grant or withhold attention can be translated into influence over the quality and quantity of coverage.

Media judge the newsworthiness of campaign stories by general news criteria. Therefore, they pay little attention to minor candidates and newcomers whose chances for success are small. Lack of coverage, in turn, makes it extremely difficult for unknowns to become well known and increase their chances of winning elections. This is one of many examples of unintentional media bias that redounds to the benefit of established politicians.

Journalistic norms about newsworthiness and the need for candidates to attract coverage can also create perverse incentives. Negative campaign ads are increasingly frequent in presidential races; this trend extended through 2016 and now extends to negative messaging in digital media.[37] Political scientist John Geer argues that the news media are partially to blame for this because of the way journalists cover campaigns. Conflict and negativity are deemed newsworthy by journalists and for that reason they cover negative political ads extensively. Given the need for candidates to attract advantageous coverage, campaign strategists have noticed that one way to get news coverage is to produce and air the kinds of ads that will attract news media. If an ad is picked up by the news, it can work as free advertising for the campaign and allows the sponsor of the ad to dictate the narrative around the campaign. Following the most recent campaign cycles, we now know this extends to messages sent over social media. Mainstream journalists frequently cover candidate posts, especially if they are negative. This is just another way candidates and campaigns try to manipulate journalistic norms to attract coverage for their campaigns.[38]

Source: President Donald J. Trump/Twitter.

MEDIA CONTENT

What kinds of news media coverage have recent elections received? Did the media sufficiently cover the issues likely to require the new president's attention? Did they supply adequate criteria to enable voters to decide which policy options would best suit their priorities and which candidate would be most likely to govern successfully? Following some general comments about the media mix, we will address these questions and assess the adequacy of the information supply for making sound voting choices.

Although the link between the media and election outcomes has been studied more thoroughly than other links between media and politics, many unanswered questions remain because the dynamics of the process are always in flux. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the media's role varies substantially, depending on the influence of such factors as incumbency, the candidates' personalities and histories, and major national crises such as wars or economic tsunamis. Obviously, the effects and effectiveness of the media will vary depending on the changing political scene, the type of coverage chosen by newspeople, and the fluctuating interests of voters.[39]

Unscrambling the Message Omelet

When Humpty-Dumpty, the egg, fell off the wall in the nursery rhyme, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put him together again. The many components of the media message omelet have had a similar fate. Campaign commercials, for instance, have become a major ingredient of contemporary campaigns and often give them a distinctive flavor. But it is well-nigh impossible to isolate their contribution because all of the ingredients—print and electronic news stories, editorials, talk show banter and punditry, Internet messages, advertisements, even political jokes and skits on entertainment shows—mix inextricably with one another and become transformed in the process. Ads

generate and influence news stories and news stories induce and influence ads, which in turn lead to other ads and news stories and editorials.[40]

That is why we discuss campaign information as a whole, usually without isolating the unique contributions of different media. Distinctions exist, of course. Studies show, for example, that cable television and brief video formats are superior to newspapers for conveying particular messages and that the content of advertising messages is often discounted because they are regarded as self-serving propaganda, even though they provide more information about policy issues than most campaign news stories—though this varies by the funding source or sponsorship of the advertisement.[41] A shortage of good data has prevented researchers from intensive analysis of the role that commercials play when they are carried by venues other than television. Therefore, we know far less about the impact of messages displayed on bumper stickers or billboards, printed in newspaper advertisements, disseminated through video, or banner ads on mobile devices. However, newer research utilizing field experiments in the campaign environment is making headway in explaining the impact of various types of political messages that are delivered in ways other than through television advertisements. For example, scholars are investigating the effects of campaign messages left on voicemail, radio advertisements, and direct mail campaigns.[42] Research on digital forms of campaign news and advertising is also emerging at a quick pace, and digital forms allow for message testing in ways that prior forms of media made more difficult.

For the many candidates the news media ignore, direct messages through television commercials, candidate websites, e-mail, and social media often provide a better chance to gain attention.[43] That includes the vast majority of also-rans for national office, who seem unelectable to the major media, as well as most candidates competing for local and even state offices. Locally, the impact of commercials and other forms of direct messaging can be decisive. Indeed, wisely spent advertising funds can buy elections, even for congressional candidates who receive news story coverage.[44] To quote political scientist Michael Robinson, commercials for congressional candidates "can work relative wonders," especially when they are not challenged by the other side. "A well-crafted, heavily financed, and uncontested ad campaign does influence congressional elections."[45] This fact raises the chilling specter that wealthy candidates may be able to buy major public offices by investing their fortunes in expensive advertising campaigns. That fear escalated with the entry of such multimillionaires as Ross Perot and Steve Forbes into the presidential sweepstakes. Perot bought large blocks of television time for infomercials—data-packed commercials—in the 1992 presidential campaign. Forbes used personal funds to finance an expensive advertising blitz in the 1996 Republican primaries. Speculations that New York's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, might run for president in 2008 raised fears that money might be the trump card for winning the presidency. Historically, superior funding has not guaranteed victory at least at the presidential level.

The candidacy of Donald Trump revived debates about billionaire candidates, at least in early stages of the campaign. Campaign finance data released by the Federal Election Commission in February 2017 show that, indeed, Trump self-financed nearly 23 percent of his campaign, in the amount of just over $56 million. Other accounts report he invested up to $66 million of his own funds. Yet Trump was able to raise approximately $280 million from small donors giving individual donations of $200 or less. Hillary Clinton outraised Trump, and she was advantaged by heavier contributions from super-PACs. Clinton spent more heavily on traditional campaign tactics such as television ads and get-out-the-vote efforts, while Trump relied heavily on earned media and invested heavily in digital advertising. Both candidates made heavy use of social media platforms to disseminate direct messages. That Clinton outraised Trump despite his ability to invest heavily in his own campaign may ease concerns about office buying.[46]

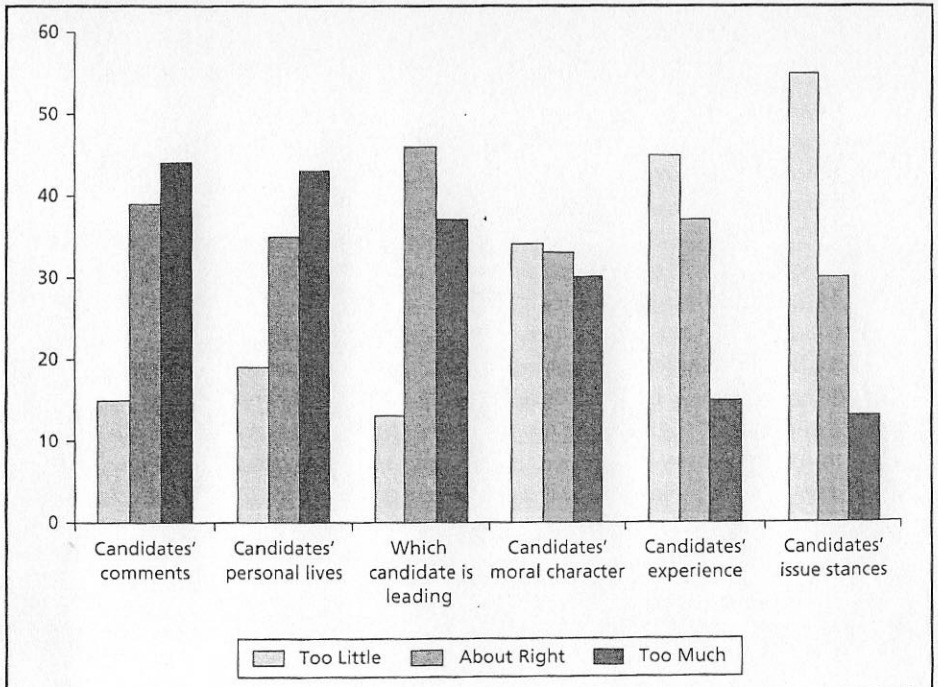
Patterns of Coverage

Any evaluation of how the media perform their tasks must also take into consideration the commercial pressures that journalists face. It is extremely difficult to mesh the public's preference for simple, dramatic stories with the need to present ample information for issue-based election choices. Information that may be crucial for voting decisions often is too complex and technical to appeal to much of the audience. Hence newspeople feel compelled to write breezy infotainment stories that stress the horse race and skim over policy details.[47]

Prominence of Election Stories. In a typical presidential election year, election stories constitute roughly 13 percent of all newspaper political coverage and 15 percent of television political news. That puts these stories on a par with foreign affairs news or coverage of crime. Election news receives average attention in terms of headline size, front-page or first-story placement, and inclusion of pictures, but stories are slightly longer than average. Although election stories are quite prominent when primaries, conventions, and significant debates are held, they have not historically dominated the news. Normally it is quite possible to read the daily paper without noticing election news and to come away from a telecast with the impression that election stories are just a minor part of the day's political developments. This has changed in recent cycles. Election news, which filled 10 percent of the cable news hole in 2007, jumped to 41 percent in 2012, far exceeding the second most covered news story of the year: the Florida shooting of teenager Trayvon Martin, which accounted for 7 percent of the cable news hole. By July 2016, even when the presidential election was still several months away, nearly 60 percent of respondents reported they were "exhausted" by the amount of election coverage. Earlier in the campaign 91 percent of Americans reported learning about the election from at least one type of news source in the prior week. Campaign coverage of the 2016 presidential contest took up a substantial portion of the news hole, and interest was relatively higher, despite reports of fatigue.[48] However, as reported in chapter 8, while presidential races receive significant attention from the news media, coverage of subnational races is scarce—even for competitive statewide elections for senate seats or the gubernatorial office.

Uniformity of Coverage Patterns. Patterns of presidential election coverage are remarkably uniform, regardless of a venue's partisan orientation. The major difference generally is the breadth of coverage, measured by the number and length of stories, and the favorable ratings of candidates and issues.[49] There are noteworthy coverage variations among media sectors, platforms, and business models. Compared to newspaper coverage, the usual one- or two-minute television story gives little chance for in-depth reporting and analysis. To conserve limited time, television newscasters create stereotypes of the candidates early in the campaign and then build their stories around these stereotypes by merely adding new details to the established image. Once established, stereotypes stubbornly resist change. There is a feeling that leopards never change their spots.[50] Issue positions and experience is also more common early in the campaign as candidates are still introducing themselves and their positions to the public. As the campaign proceeds, those stories become old news, and stories recounting the horse race—who is winning and who is losing—emerge as a dominant theme in coverage.[51] Figure 12-2 shows how audiences rank

FIGURE 12-2 **Assessments of Campaign News Topics Covered**



Source: Adapted from Jeffrey Gottfried, "Most Americans Already Feel Election Coverage Fatigue," July 14, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/14/most-americans-already-feel-election-coverage-fatigue/.

Note: Percentage of respondents saying there has been too much, too little, or the right amount of each campaign news focus. Pew survey conducted June 7–July 5, 2016. "No answer" is not shown.

these categories; the data show news outlets' reliance on the horse race is related to its popularity among audiences.

Content analysis studies during congressional, state, and local campaigns show similar patterns. The political portraits that various media paint of each candidate match well in basic outline and in most details. But the time and space allotted to various aspects and the tone of evaluations can vary significantly. Generally, election news patterns are quite stable in successive elections, and all venues cover the major happenings and offer similar categories of coverage such as issues, traits, experience, horse race, and strategy. But no longer does this necessarily mean that Americans receive similar types of information on which to base their political decisions. It depends on their media selections. Mainstream media that are not ideologically branded offer similar patterns in coverage. Partisan venues online and on cable sometimes choose different traits, issues, and events on which to focus. Similarity in coverage of election campaigns has benefits as well as drawbacks. The large degree of homogeneity introduced into the electoral process is an advantage in a heterogeneous country such as the United States, where it can be difficult to develop political consensus. But it also means uniform neglect of many topics and criteria for judging candidates. Shared ignorance mars shared knowledge. A uniform information base obviously has not produced uniform political views throughout the country. Differences in political evaluations must be attributed to varying framing and interpretations of the same facts and to the different outlooks that audiences bring to the news. As chapter 11 pointed out, the impact of news usually is perceiver determined rather than stimulus determined.

Of the factors that encourage uniform coverage, journalists' professional socialization appears to be the most important. Newspeople share a sense of what is newsworthy and how it should be presented. Reporters cover identical beats in a fashion that has become routine for election coverage. That means keeping score about who is winning and losing and reporting dramatic incidents and juicy personal gossip. It means avoiding dull facts as much as possible without totally ignoring essential, albeit unglamorous, information. However, content is becoming more diverse in certain areas as news content becomes more common across digital platforms. A 2012 report on YouTube by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism shows that news content on YouTube is more conversational and fluid with a significant amount of audience-contributed content. As media consumers continue to expand their news use across various types of digital media, patterns of uniformity in content are likely to continue to change, even for election news.[52]

Coverage does not strictly follow the campaign model of reporting. In that model—the utopia of campaign managers—the rhythm of the campaign, as produced by the candidates and their staffs, determines what news media cover. Reporters dutifully take their cues from the candidates. Some research shows a relationship between the strategic efforts of campaign and the flow of election news.[53] However, most press coverage has largely conformed to an incentive model. Whenever exciting stories provided an incentive for coverage, the media published them, in a rhythm dictated by their needs and the tastes of their audiences. The needs and tastes of the candidates are often ignored

Local Television News Ad Watch Story.

Source: KSHB Kansas City.

unless they manage to generate the kinds of stories and pictures that journalists find irresistible. In some ways, declining news resources and digital media have revived campaigns' ability to structure the media narrative of campaigns. Covering campaign communications is relatively cheap and easy, which makes campaign ads, e-mails, and social media posts ripe for providing the basis of a news article storyline. As a result, coverage of direct candidate communications now occupies a substantial portion of the campaign news hole.[54]

Though campaign coverage is not entirely dictated by the candidates, the campaign process and the strategic decisions of the candidates can shape coverage. For example, another reason polling gets covered so frequently is that newly released polling data are timely and newsworthy relative to biographical information and issue stances introduced early in the campaign. As a result, early in the campaign we see more campaign news stories focused on traits and issues associated with the candidate while polling coverage remains throughout the campaign cycle.[55] Patterns in coverage are also driven by the strategic decisions of the campaigns themselves. Candidates' ads are often issue- and trait-based early in the campaign to serve as an introduction to voters; news stories reflect this early in the cycle. Likewise, strategy-framed stories pick up along with horse race coverage as Election Day nears and get-out-the-vote efforts of the campaigns are underway. The increase in news coverage of political ads and campaigns' social media posts in recent years also contributes to coverage patterns being somewhat campaign driven.[56]

Substance of Coverage: Candidate Qualifications. The candidate qualifications that media highlight fall into two broad groups: those that are generally

important in judging a person's character and those specifically related to the tasks of the office. Included in the first group are personality traits (integrity, reliability, compassion), style characteristics (forthrightness, folksiness), and image characteristics (confidence, level-headedness). Professional qualifications at the presidential level include the capacity to develop and execute effective foreign and domestic policies, the ability to mobilize public support, and a flair for administration. The candidate's political philosophy is also a professional criterion. Presidential candidates over the years have most frequently been assessed in terms of their trustworthiness, strength of character, leadership capabilities, and compassion. Media have covered professional capacities—the very qualities that deserve the fullest discussion and analysis—only scantily and often vaguely even when an incumbent is running.[57]

The handful of professional qualifications that news stories mention from time to time include general appraisals of the capacity to handle foreign affairs, which has been deemed crucial in a global society, and the capacity to sustain an acceptable quality of life for all citizens by maintaining the economy on an even keel and by controlling crime and internal disorder. The same types of qualities reappear from election to election, but not necessarily in every candidate's profile. Disparate coverage then makes it very difficult for the electorate to compare and evaluate the candidates on important dimensions. Effective comparisons are also hindered by contradictions in remarks reported about the candidates. Bound by current codes of objective reporting and neutrality in electoral contests, the media rarely give guidance to the audience for judging conflicting claims. The exception is the trend toward fact-checking, which involves analyzing candidates' claims and reporting the extent to which they are true or false.[58]

Verbal news commentary about the political candidates tends to be negative, so voters' choices have seemed dismal in recent elections. The high praise that Barack Obama earned throughout his 2008 campaign was a notable exception. Overall, only 18 percent of newspaper coverage about him was negative, but that figure jumped to 28 percent in 2012. In the 2016 presidential election contest, the tone of overall news coverage for both candidates proved markedly negative. A study from the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy and Media Tenor reveals the ugly details. The tone of coverage Clinton received varied widely, ranging from negative to positive even at the earliest stages of the campaign. Trump's coverage was consistently more negative than positive during the general election, but had a run of positive coverage during the pre-primary and primary seasons. Tone of coverage depended heavily on the topic at hand. Both candidates endured controversies and scandals, earning negative coverage. The campaign was heavily covered through the lens of the horse race, which is positive for the candidate winning and usually negative for the candidate losing. For example, because Clinton was leading in the polls for most of the race, the tone of her horse race coverage was positive. Coverage of the debates was more positive for Clinton than Trump, but because the proportion of Clinton's scandal coverage began a slow but steady increase in late

September, her negative coverage grew to 37 percent in early November. Neither Trump's nor Clinton's positive coverage breached 50 percent for any outlet in the study. The negativity in 2016 reflects a broader trend: since 2004, presidential campaign coverage has grown increasingly negative.[59]

The typical downbeat mood of election coverage is epitomized by the lead paragraph in a *Time* magazine story at the end of the 1980 race between Reagan and Carter: "For more than a year, two flawed candidates have been floundering toward the final showdown, each unable to give any but his most unquestioning supporters much reason to vote for him except dislike of his opponent."[60] The negative characterizations, which are increasing and mar most presidential and subnational elections, are hardly fair to capable candidates, who often possess great personal strengths and skills that should be praised rather than debased. However, the level of journalistic negativity is variable across news media outlets and can also vary with candidate strategies and electoral contexts.[61]

Substance of Coverage: Issues and Events. Journalists' overriding consideration in reporting about particular issues, as in all political coverage, is newsworthiness rather than intrinsic importance. That is why happenings on the campaign trail, however trivial, receive extended coverage. Rather than exploring policy issues in depth, news stories emphasize rapidly paced, freshly breaking events. In fact, the amount of coverage for particular issues often seems to be in inverse proportion to their significance. For instance, during the 1992 primaries, one of every six campaign stories on the television networks referred to Governor Bill Clinton's personal life. Sexual foibles, reputed drug use during college days, slips of the tongue, and bad jokes all made headlines and were repeated endlessly on various entertainment programs. In the 2000 campaign, a story about George W. Bush's arrest on drunk driving charges twenty-four years earlier received more coverage during the last three days of the campaign than all foreign policy issues had received since Labor Day.[62] When Hillary Clinton choked up a tiny bit in responding to questions during the New Hampshire primary campaign in 2008, it became a major media focus, as did an out-of-wedlock pregnancy in candidate Sarah Palin's family that same year. The 2016 campaign was populated by gaffes and scandals provided by both candidates, which occupied much press attention and served both candidates with plenty of negative coverage.[63]

Three features stand out in coverage of issues and events. First and most significant, the media devote a large amount of attention to horse race aspects of campaigns. During 2016 the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy and Media Tenor tracked and examined all campaign stories from ten major news outlets from the pre-primary season through Election Day. According to the study, during the general election campaign, 42 percent of stories focused on horse race issues (see Figure 12-3).[64] That category encompasses stories about campaign strategies, polls, fundraising, and advertising. Only 10 percent of the coverage focused on policies, 4 percent covered personal matters, and 3 percent discussed the candidates' leadership experience. Because the candidates were involved in so many gaffes and scandals, coverage of controversies made up a whopping 17 percent of coverage. Although the horse race bias is an ongoing problem in campaign coverage, 2016 horse race content was up from 2012. The explosion of public opinion polling since 2004 explains the prevalence of horse race coverage, as polls are welcome grist for the 24/7 cable news mill and for political websites, which need a constant stream of newly minted stories.

All this enlarges a particular media syndrome that might be best described as the *media echo effect*. The expansion of polls and the media's fascination with seeing the race through their strategic lens create a pattern in which the media reinforce and magnify the phenomena they observe. The press covers what the candidate does that day. The polls measure the political impact of that behavior. The media then analyze whether the latest campaign performance is helping in the polls. That in turn influences the candidate's behavior. And winning in the polls begets winning coverage.[65]

There are also economic incentives for news organizations to cover polling and the horse race. Scholars and observers of campaigns have been saying for years that horse race coverage is dominant because of its audience appeal. In 2004, media scholar Shanto Iyengar and colleagues empirically investigated this question and found that campaign news audiences do in fact prefer horse race to issue stories; their study concludes that "the horse race sells." This means that, from the perspective of news organizations, horse race stories are doubly appealing—they are newsworthy and they are pleasing to audiences.[66] Table 12-2 provides a breakdown of horse race coverage and its relationship with tone toward the candidates in the 2016 election.

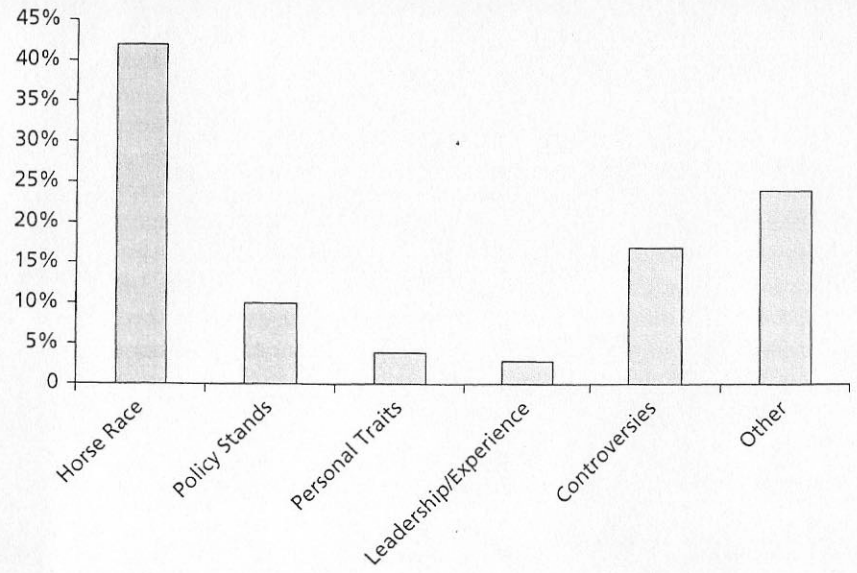
Second, information about issues is patchy because the candidates and their surrogates try to concentrate on issues that help their campaigns and to avoid issues likely to alienate any portion of the huge and diverse electorate from whom all are seeking support. Third, there is more issue coverage, albeit unsystematic, than scholars have acknowledged in the past. Audiences often overlook commentary about issues because it is embedded in many horse race stories and discussions of candidates' qualifications. For example, the claim that a candidate is compassionate may be linked to his or her concern about health care laws. When the design of content analyses focuses narrowly on recording only one issue per news story, multifaceted stories are forced into a single category and important facets become obscured.

In recent elections, some twenty-five issues, such as taxes, Social Security, or education, have usually surfaced intermittently in the press; for television the number hovers around twenty. Typically, only half of these receive extensive and intensive attention. Many important policy questions likely to arise during the forthcoming presidential term are entirely ignored. Although candidates like to talk about broad policy issues, such as war and peace or the health of the economy, newspeople prefer to concentrate on narrower, specific policy positions on which the candidates disagree.

As is the case for coverage of presidential qualifications, issues discussed in connection with individual candidates vary. Voters thus receive little aid from the media in appraising and comparing the candidates on the issues. Compared with print media, television news usually displays more uniform patterns of issue coverage for all the candidates and involves a more limited range of issues. Television stories are briefer, touch on fewer aspects of each issue, and contribute to the stereotypic images developed for particular candidates. Events are often fragmented and barren of context, but what is left is dramatized to appeal to the audience. No wonder most people turn to television for news about the candidates and their campaigns.

We should assess media coverage not only in terms of the numbers of stories devoted to various topics but also in terms of political impact. There are times when election politics is particularly volatile and a few stories may carry extraordinary weight. Rapid diffusion of these stories throughout the major media enhances their impact. Michael Robinson calls such featured events *medialities*—"events, developments, or situations to which the media have given importance by emphasizing, expanding, or featuring them in such a way that

FIGURE 12-3 **Campaign News Topics as a Percentage of Campaign News Hole**



Source: Adapted from Thomas E. Patterson, "News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters," December 7, 2016, https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/.

Notes: Data collected by Media Tenor. Other category includes stories about things like events, staffing, and logistics.

TABLE 12-2 **Tone of Coverage by Topic and Candidate (percentage)**

	Trump	*Clinton*
Horse race		
Positive	22%	62%
Negative	78%	38%
Controversies		
Positive	8%	9%
Negative	92%	91%
Policy stands		
Positive	15%	18%
Negative	85%	82%
Personal qualities		
Positive	18%	23%
Negative	82%	77%
Leadership/experience		
Positive	7%	39%
Negative	93%	61%

Source: Adapted from Thomas E. Patterson, "News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters," December 7, 2016, https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/.

Note: Date range for news stories is August 16–November 7, 2016.

their real significance has been modified, distorted, or obscured."[67] Medialities usually involve policy scandals, economic disasters, and personal foibles. Such key stories can have a far more profound impact on the campaign than thousands of routine stories and should be appraised accordingly. Examples during the 2016 election included the echo chamber coverage of Hillary Clinton's "basket of deplorables," and Donald Trump's "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And I assume some are good people," comments in reference to people coming to the United States from Mexico.[68]

Political and Structural Bias. Does election coverage give a fair and equal chance for all viewpoints to be expressed so that media audiences can make informed decisions? Are the perennial charges of bias that disappointed candidates level evidence that newspeople always show favoritism? Or are they merely reactions to coverage that did not advance those candidates' causes? In general, journalists try to balance coverage of all major candidates for the same office. They aim for rough parity in the number of stories about each candidate and in the balance of favorable and unfavorable stories.

Nevertheless, imbalances in coverage occur frequently, even if not systematically. When they do, it raises the question as to whether political or structural bias is involved. Political bias reflects ideological judgments, whereas structural bias reflects the circumstances of news production. Balanced reporting may be impossible when candidates' newsworthiness and willingness to talk to reporters vary or when their campaigns are linked to different issues. Structural bias, even though it lacks partisan motivation, nonetheless may profoundly affect people's perceptions about campaigns.[69]

Editorials, of course, are intrinsically biased because their primary purpose is to express opinions. As part of the editorial function, many news media endorse candidates. That has little impact at the presidential level but does seem to matter for lower-level offices, particularly in elections in which voters have little information for making their own decisions.[70] Influential papers, such as the *Los Angeles Times,* the *Washington Post,* and the small but influential *Union Leader,* of Manchester, New Hampshire, can be extraordinarily successful in promoting the election of candidates they have endorsed and in defeating unacceptable contenders. At the presidential level news coverage tends to be essentially evenhanded, regardless of the candidate endorsed. Below the presidential level, the media tend to give more coverage to their endorsed candidates than to those they have not endorsed.

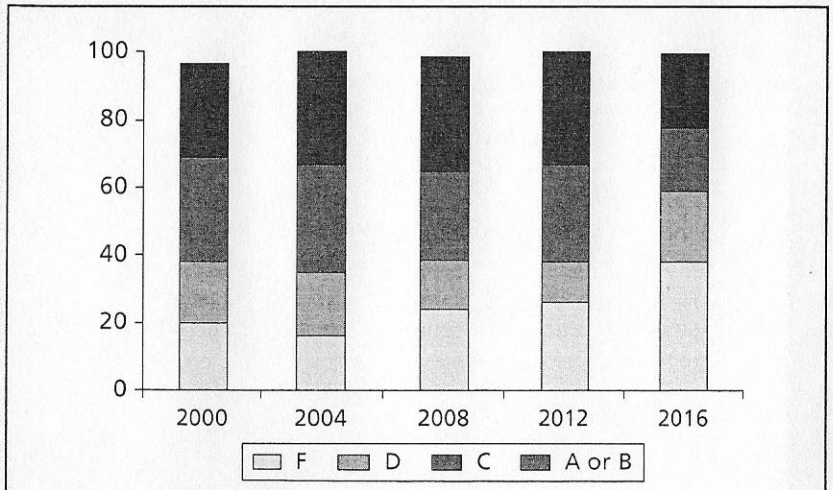
The effort to keep coverage balanced does not extend to third-party candidates. Anyone who runs for president who is not a Republican or Democrat is out of the mainstream of newsworthiness and is slighted or ignored by the news profession. Especially newsworthy third-party candidates, such as Robert La Follette of the Progressive Party in 1924, George Wallace of the American Independent Party in 1968, John Anderson of the National Unity Campaign in 1980, independent Ross Perot in 1992, and the Green Party's Ralph Nader in 2000, have been notable exceptions. Newsworthiness considerations also account for the sparse coverage of vice presidential candidates despite the importance of the office and the possibility that the vice president may have to replace a deceased incumbent. A total of 95 percent of the coverage in a typical presidential election goes to the presidential contenders and only 5 percent to their running mates. This disparity is also noteworthy because recent research illustrates that when vice presidential contenders are the subjects of more election coverage, they have a stronger impact on vote choice.[71] For lower-level races, coverage of candidates is determined by news media assessments of competitiveness, which, in turn, has an effect on competitiveness.

Adequacy of Coverage

How adequate is current election coverage? Do the media help voters make decisions according to commonly accepted democratic criteria? As discussed, the media do not make comparative appraisals of candidates and issues easy for voters. In presidential contests information is ample about the major, mainstream candidates and about day-to-day campaign events. It is sketchy and often confusing about the candidates' professional qualifications and about many important policy issues. Most primary contenders, candidates of minor parties, and vice presidential candidates are largely ignored. This is not surprising because the field of candidates usually is quite large, with several hundred individuals registering as formal candidates for the presidency. The prevalence of negative information about the candidates makes it seem that all of them are mediocre or even poor choices. This negative cast can be a major factor in many voters' decisions to stay home on Election Day. It also undermines the ability of newly elected officials to command support after the election, especially from members of the opposing party.

Voters gave election news record low marks for the 2016 cycle, as Figure 12-4 shows. There are more D and F grades than A, B, and C grades combined. Usually more voters think that Republican candidates, more than Democrats, are treated unfairly. In 2016, that trend continued in the sense that Clinton supporters graded the press more positively than did Trump supporters, 60 percent of whom give the press a failing grade. Nearly 60 percent of all voters gave the press a D or an F for its performance this cycle. A full 90 percent of voters felt there was more mudslinging in the 2016 campaign, and 73 percent said there was less issue coverage than usual.[72] This is striking compared to assessments in the 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential campaigns, where at least three out of four voters felt adequately informed. Many scholars

FIGURE 12-4 **Voters' Evaluations of Election News**



Source: Adapted from Pew Research Center, "Low Marks for Major Players in 2016 Election—Including the Winner: Voters' Evaluations of the Campaign," November 21, 2016, http://www.people-press.org/2016/11/21/voters-evaluations-of-the-campaign/.

and pundits would agree with the poor grades given for election news because citizens do not match the high standards of civic knowledge that democratic theory prescribes. The most serious deficiency in the news supply is inadequate analysis of policy issues, so voters do not learn about the key points at stake, the scope and nature of various trade-offs, and the impact of their votes on the resolution of major political problems. The patterns of coverage force voters to make choices based more on the candidates' campaigning skills than on their governing skills and policy preferences. These are valid criticisms if one accepts the premise that policy issues, rather than leadership characteristics, should drive voting choices.

If the public's chief role is to choose a good leader, along with a general sense of the directions this leader will take, then judgments about the adequacy of the information supply become far more positive. The proliferation of news venues in the Internet age allows average people easy access to a vast variety of information at diverse levels of depth and sophistication. Links on election websites are an especially rich source for facts and interpretations that facilitate in-depth analyses, whenever voters feel the need—which they rarely do.[73]

The mainstream media do fall short when it comes to supplying the needs of political elites in ready fashion. Opinion leaders would benefit from more complete coverage of the candidates' stands on major and minor issues, more point-by-point comparisons of candidates and policies, and more ample evaluations of the political significance of differences in candidates and their programs. Stories covering important topics that candidates neglect would be useful, as would more coverage of third-party candidates and vice presidential contenders. In the end, though, no news consumer need hunger for information in the Internet age. With a little effort, a global cornucopia of facts and opinions is readily available to anyone with access to a computer and the Internet, should they want news.

In presidential contests the deficiencies of media coverage are most noticeable during the primaries, when large slates of same-party candidates are competing in each. The media meet this challenge by giving uniformly skimpy treatment to all candidates except those designated as front-runners. It is not uncommon for two or three front-runners to attract 75 percent or more of the coverage, leaving a pack of trailing contenders with hardly any attention at all. As political scientist Thomas Patterson has noted, "Issue material is but a rivulet in the news flow during the primaries, and what is there is almost completely diluted by information about the race."[74] One problem is that in primaries candidates often agree on a larger number of issues, which means differences are stretched and highlighted, and coverage focuses on viability and likeability as opposed to issues. While the quality of coverage during the primaries may be thin, the quantity is substantial, although it is unequally distributed, so the races in well-covered states become disproportionately influential. By the middle of the primary season, interest in these contests dwindles. Coverage shrivels. It perks up slightly during the conventions and when the final campaign starts, following the Labor Day holiday in September.

Negativity of Coverage

News media have also received criticism in recent years for the negativity of election coverage. Though much negativity in campaign news comes from the campaigns themselves, campaign news negativity is also a product of journalists' norms and routines for deciding what is newsworthy. Negativity in presidential campaigns has been on a fairly consistent upswing since about the mid-1980s and with it the volume of negative campaign coverage.[75] Generally speaking, today there is more political news containing criticism of government, politicians, and their policies, and fewer news stories focusing on substantive issues. Audiences more frequently encounter a journalistic tone of cynicism and negativity in political news coverage. Today, political news often focuses on journalists' analysis, and much less of the coverage is about what the candidates are saying. Though journalistic commentators are generally neutral in the sense of being nonpartisan, they are usually broadly critical and negative in their comments.[76]

These trends in negativity are thought to have significant implications for political attitudes and behavior. Common conjecture and scholars alike argue that negative media coverage of politics has contributed to an overall decline in citizens' trust in government and participation in politics. Negative political news content has been linked to decreases in several forms of political participation, generally negative attitudes toward government, more distrust in government, cynicism, and negative evaluations of political institutions.[77]

TABLE 12-3 **Tone of Candidates' Campaign Coverage by Source (percentage)**

	Trump		*Clinton*	
	Positive	*Negative*	*Positive*	*Negative*
CBS	11%	89%	39%	61%
USA Today	12%	88%	30%	70%
Washington Post	13%	87%	23%	77%
Los Angeles Times	14%	86%	47%	53%
New York Times	14%	86%	39%	61%
NBC	17%	83%	37%	63%
ABC	19%	81%	37%	63%
CNN	19%	81%	33%	67%
Wall Street Journal	20%	80%	37%	61%
Fox	27%	73%	19%	81%

Source: Adapted from Thomas E. Patterson, "News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters," December 7, 2016, https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/.

What is driving the increase in negative news coverage of politics? Many suggest it can be explained by the economic structure of the media. The public as a news audience responds well to general negativity in political news coverage. Given that most news organizations' revenue is dependent on attracting audiences, if negativity appeals to audiences, it should appeal to market-driven news media. In 2016, both presidential candidates were covered more negatively than positively, and social media content was even more negative about the candidates.[78]

WHAT PEOPLE LEARN FROM CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

What do people learn from campaign coverage? The answer varies, of course, depending on their interest in the campaign, prior political knowledge, desire for certain information, and political sophistication. Good published research remains sparse, especially when it comes to the effects of advertising. Nonetheless several general trends emerge from national surveys, such as those conducted biannually by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, and from intensive interviews of smaller panels of voters.

Learning about Candidates and Issues

A serious obstacle to understanding media influence on elections is the dearth of analyses of media content. Only rarely have researchers examined the content of election news, including commercials, and the context of general news in which it is embedded. That makes it impossible to test what impact, if any, diverse messages have on viewers' perceptions. In general, researchers have also failed to ascertain media exposure accurately. They frequently assume that people have been exposed to all election stories in a particular news source without checking precisely which stories have come to the attention of which individuals and what the individuals learned.[79]

The foremost impression from interviews with voters is that they can recall very little specific campaign information. That does not necessarily mean that they have not learned anything. As discussed in chapter 11, when people are confronted with factual information, such as news about a particular presidential candidate, they assess how it fits into their established view of that candidate. If it is consonant, the information strengthens that view and the person's feelings about the candidate. If it is dissonant, the person is likely to reject it outright or note it as a reasonable exception to their established schema. The least likely result is a major revision of their established beliefs about the candidate. Once people have processed the news, they forget most of the details and store only their summary impression in memory. That approach is called *online processing*. When people are later quizzed about details, they are likely to recall only what was frequently repeated in recent news stories. Online processing thus creates the false impression that the average person has formed opinions about the candidate without having learned the appropriate facts.[80]

Voting Behavior

Do media-intensive campaigns change votes? The answer to this perennial question, so dear to the hearts of campaign managers, public relations experts, and social scientists, hinges on the interaction between audiences and messages. Crucial variables include the voters' receptivity to a message urging change, the potency of the message, the appropriateness of its form, and the setting in which it occurs. For most voters, the crucial attitudes that determine voting choices are already firmly in place at the start of the campaign, so their final vote is a foregone conclusion. Vote changes are most likely when voters pay fairly close attention to the media and are ambivalent in their attitudes toward the candidates. Campaign messages are most potent if they concern a major and unexpected event, such as a successful or disastrous foreign policy venture or corruption in high places, and when individuals find themselves in social settings where a change of attitude will not constitute deviant behavior. Campaign messages are also more potent when issues candidates emphasize are also reflected in campaign coverage. These circumstances are fairly rare, which explains why changes of voting intention are comparatively uncommon. Fears that televised campaigns can easily sway voters and amount to "electronic ballot box stuffing" are therefore unrealistic.[81]

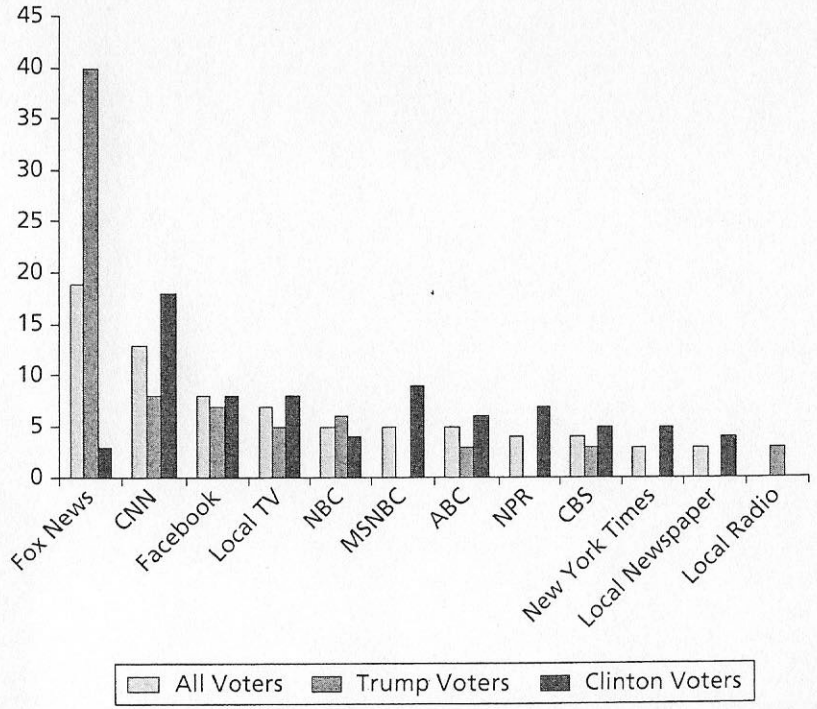
However, even small numbers of media-induced vote changes might be important. Tiny percentages of votes, often less than 1 percent, decide many elections at all levels. That was demonstrated dramatically in the 2000 presidential election, where vote totals in Florida were extremely close and their validity was questioned—yet the electoral votes of that state determined the victor. The media may also skew election outcomes when they can stimulate or depress voter turnout; a difference in turnout is more likely to occur than changes in voting choices. Do broadcasts that predict election results before voting has ended affect turnout? The answer remains moot despite several investigations of the problem. Current evidence indicates that the effects, if they do occur, have rarely changed election outcomes.[82]

Attempts to stop the media from projecting winners and losers while voting is still in progress have run afoul of First Amendment free speech guarantees. This may explain why the laws passed in more than half of the states to restrain exit polling are seldom enforced.[83] Congress has tried since 1986 to pass a Uniform Poll Closing Act. Although the measure has thus far failed to pass, prospects for ultimate success are good, especially after the presidential election of 2000, in which the issue of broadcasting election results while polling places remained open in parts of the United States became a huge political controversy. A smaller dispute arose in 2004 when media published exit polls that wrongly suggested a Kerry victory before the polls had closed. The concern

about the impact of exit polls and early forecasts may be overdrawn. Voters are bombarded throughout the election year with information likely to determine their vote and turnout. Why should the media be squeamish on the campaign payoff day?

The most important influence of the media on voters does not lie in changing votes once predispositions have been formed but in shaping and reinforcing predispositions and influencing the initial selection of candidates. When newspeople sketched out the image of Bill Clinton and held him up as a potential winner during the 1992 primaries, ignoring most of his rivals, they morphed the obscure governor of a small southern state into a viable candidate. Millions of voters would never have cast their ballots for the unknown Arkansas politician had not the media thrust him into the limelight

FIGURE 12-5 **Voters' Main Source for Election News by Candidate Supported**



Source: Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Amy Mitchell, "Trump, Clinton Voters Divided in Their Main Source for Election News," January 18, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/2017/01/18/trump-clinton-voters-divided-in-their-main-source-for-election-news/.

Note: No entry means less than 3 percent of respondents in that supporter category listed the outlet as their main source.

as a likely winner. In the 2016 cycle, surveyed voters revealed that they engaged in some partisan media selectivity, which may serve to reinforce political predispositions. Partisans on either side of the aisle made distinctly different media choices, as Figure 12-5 shows.

By focusing the voters' attention on selected individuals, their characteristics, and issue stands, the media also determine to a large extent the issues by which the public will gauge the competence of the candidates. Very early in the campaign, often long before formal campaigning starts, media interpretations of the significance of issues can shape the political and emotional context of the election. As Leon Sigal noted many years ago, the media "play less of an independent part in creating issues, sketching imagery, and coloring perceptions of the candidates than in getting attention for their candidacies. Newsmen do not write the score or play an instrument; they amplify the sounds of the music makers."[84]

SUMMARY

The media's role in recent campaigns has been powerful and pervasive. Campaigns have become battles for spreading favorable and unfavorable messages about candidates and issues through traditional and digital media venues. The main quest is for a place in the limelight and a "winner" image. Candidates expect that public recognition and support—or opposition—are likely to follow, particularly at the presidential level.

In this chapter we have scrutinized newspaper, television, and digital media election coverage, considering general coverage patterns, the substance and slant of coverage, and the manner of presentation. The evidence shows that the media have placed heavy emphasis on the candidates' personal qualifications for office and on the ups and downs of the race. They often mention policy issues but rarely explore them in depth. Mainstream media stories are chosen primarily for their newsworthiness; digital messages are more likely to caricature the contrasts between candidates' qualifications and policies, with one side as veritable angels and the other as Satan's disciples or dunces. Structural biases abound and have important political consequences, but outright political bias is uncommon.

Although the public claims, off and on, to be very interested in learning about the election, it absorbs only a small portion of the considerable amount of available information. Nonetheless, the bits of information that people absorb create sufficient political understanding to permit sound voting choices based primarily on whether the chosen candidate seems trustworthy and capable of leading the country. Although news stories rarely change people's minds, they can influence undecided voters. Along with media impact on turnout, shaping the views of even small numbers of voters can determine the outcome in close elections and change the course of political life.

Before television, research and conventional wisdom suggested that news media impact on elections was minimal because election stories persuaded few people to change their votes. Television and digital age research has cast

the net much wider to include the media's effects on all phases of the election campaign, from the recruitment and nomination stages to the strategies that produce the final outcome. In addition to studying the media's impact on the final choices of voters, social scientists now look at political learning during campaigns and at the information base that supports voting decisions. Television news stories and massive numbers of highly sophisticated commercials have changed the election game, especially at the presidential level. The affordances of digital communication technologies have made retail politicking possible again and have personalized appeals to individual voters. Personalization is taking place on a scale that was unimaginable before the Internet. One thing is certain: candidates and media remain inextricably intertwined. Those who aspire to elective office must play the media game by rules that continue to evolve.

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NOTES

1. See Sasha Issenberg, *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* (New York: Crown), for a description of early developments in modern campaign analytics and how they emerged. For an interesting perspective on the degree to which Obama's campaign tactics ultimately mattered, see John Sides's series of blog posts about election 2012 on http://themonkeycage.org/.
2. Dave Karpf, *Analytic Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
3. Issie Lapowsky, "Here's How Facebook Actually Won Trump the Presidency," *Wired,* November 15, 2016, https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-won-trump-election-not-just-fake-news/.
4. Ibid.
5. "Illuminating 2016: Helping Journalists Cover Social Media in the Presidential Campaign," http://illuminating.ischool.syr.edu/#/platforms/1,2/dates/2016-11-01,2016-11-08/candidates/10,5/types/8&9,5&6.
6. See Shannon C. McGregor, Regina G. Lawrence, and Arielle Cardona, "Personalization, Gender, and Social Media: Gubernatorial Candidates' Social Media Strategies," *Information, Communication, and Society* 20, no. 2, 2017): 264–283; Shannon C. McGregor, "Personalization, Social Media, and Voting: Effects of Candidate Self-Personalization on Vote Intention," *New Media & Society* (2017), 10.1177/1461444816686103; Gunn Enli, *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).
7. Jennifer Stromer-Galley, "Trumps Tweets and Other Tremendous Tales: What the Illuminating 2016 Project Reveals about Social Media in 2016" (plenary at the Texas A&M University conference on Making Sense of the 2016 Elections, 2017). Though Trump reportedly had more Facebook and Twitter followers than Clinton during the campaign, a large proportion were "bots," or fake accounts; see Rob Salkowitz, "Trump's 20 Million Twitter Followers Get Smaller under the Microscope," *Forbes,* January 17, 2017, http://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2017/01/17/trumps-20-million-twitter-followers-get-smaller-under-the-microscope/#6256e134675b; for data and figures comparing Trump and Clinton activity on Facebook and Twitter, see "Illuminating 2016."
8. Lapowsky, "Here's How Facebook Actually Won Trump the Presidency."
9. Thomas E. Patterson, "Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump's Rise, Sanders' Emergence, Clinton's Struggle," June 2016, https://shorensteincenter.org/pre-primary-news-coverage-2016-trump-clinton-sanders/.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Larry M. Bartels, "Expectations and Preferences in Presidential Nominating Campaigns," *American Political Science Review* 79 (September 1985): 804–815. The importance of the winner image is discussed in Henry E. Brady and Richard Johnston, "What's the Primary Message: Horse Race or Issue Journalism?" in *Media and Momentum: The New Hampshire Primary and Nomination Politics,* ed. Gary R. Orren and Nelson W. Polsby (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987).
13. "Campaign 2004: The Primaries," *Media Monitor* 18, no. 1 (2004): 3. The Pew Research Center has released several in-depth studies of press coverage of the 2008 primaries. For example, see