

Conclusion

To summarize, ads are one of the major ways in which citizens learn about the candidates. From advertisements, voters develop perceptions about personal qualities, values, electability, and issue positions. Not only are these perceptions important for the candidates, they affect the vote. Citizens often support those candidates they like, with whom they share values and who they feel are electable.

Ads do not operate autonomously. People bring prior beliefs such as party attachments, ideological stances, and life experiences relating to their age, gender, education, and race. For this reason, candidates undertake detailed research on voter opinions. Campaign commercials must dovetail with a person's background and political orientation for an ad to be effective. If a spot does not resonate with people, it will not inform viewers in the manner desired by candidates.

Notes

1. Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure, *The Unseeing Eye* (New York: Putnam's, 1976).
2. Ronald Mulder, "The Effects of Televised Political Ads in the 1975 Chicago Mayoral Election," *Journalism Quarterly* 56 (1979): 25-36; Charles Atkin, Lawrence Bowen, Oguz Nayman, and Kenneth Sheinkopf, "Quality versus Quantity in Televised Political Ads," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 37 (1973): 209-224.
3. Kathleen Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates, *The Spot* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984); L. Patrick Devlin, "Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 1988," *American Behavioral Scientist* 32 (1989): 389-414.
4. Larry Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Edie Goldenberg and Michael Traugott, *Campaigning for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1984), 85-91.
5. See Stanley Kelley Jr. and Thad Mirer, "The Simple Act of Voting," *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 572-591.
6. Quoted in Patterson and McClure, *The Unseeing Eye*, 130.
7. On hearing this story at a post-election campaign seminar, John Anderson quipped that Dole's fourteen seconds consisted of a news report about his car breaking down in New Hampshire. Both stories are taken from Jonathan Moore, ed., *Campaign for President: 1980 in Retrospect* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1981), 129-130.
8. Interview with Elizabeth Kolbert, July 20, 1992.
9. "How He Won," *Newsweek*, November/December 1992 (special issue), 40.
10. Marion Just, Ann Crigler, Dean Alger, Timothy Cook, Montague Kern, and Darrell M. West, *Cross Talk* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
11. For question wording, see Darrell M. West, *Air Wars*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997), chap. 6, note 21.
12. *Ibid.*, note 21.
13. Marion Just, Ann Crigler, Dean Alger, Timothy Cook, Montague Kern, and Darrell M. West, *Cross Talk* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.)

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THE MISCAST INSTITUTION

Thomas E. Patterson

Editor's Note

There is much "out of order" in presidential election campaigns. The mass media are miscast into filling the political role that political parties ought to play. The norms of journalism and the commercial goals of the press are at odds with the political values that should guide election campaigns in democracies. The candidates are miscast into serving a public relations function designed to snare, rather than enlighten, voters. This forces these candidates to make and keep politically disastrous promises. The voters are equally miscast. They cannot fill the void of political savvy left by ill-functioning parties. Their voting choices, therefore, lack sound political grounding. The news media are neither inclined nor equipped to supply them with the type of information they need to vote intelligently.

This study, drawn from his book *Out of Order*, was written while Thomas E. Patterson was a professor of political science at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. The book received the American Political Science Association's Graber Award as the best book of the decade in political communication. The American Association for Public Opinion Research named an earlier Patterson book, *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Politics*, published in 1976 with Robert McClure, one of the fifty most influential books about public opinion in the past half century. Patterson has also published two acclaimed American government texts.

The United States is the only democracy that organizes its national election campaign around the news media. Even if the media did not want the responsibility for organizing the campaign, it is theirs by virtue of an election

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system built upon entrepreneurial candidacies, floating voters, freewheeling interest groups, and weak political parties.

It is an unworkable arrangement: the press is not equipped to give order and direction to a presidential campaign. And when we expect it to do so, we set ourselves up for yet another turbulent election.

The campaign is chaotic largely because the press is not a political institution and has no capacity for organizing the election in a coherent manner. . . .

The news is a highly refracted version of reality. . . . The press's restless search for the riveting story works against its intention to provide the voters with a reliable picture of the campaign. It is a formidable job to present society's problems in ways that voters can understand and act upon. The news media cannot do the job consistently well. Walter Lippmann put it plainly when he said that a press-based politics "is not workable. And when you consider the nature of news, it is not even thinkable."¹ . . .

* * *

The press's role in presidential elections is in large part the result of a void that was created when America's political parties surrendered their control over the nominating process. Through 1968, nominations were determined by the parties' elected and organizational leaders. Primary elections were held in several states, but they were not decisive. A candidate could demonstrate through the primaries that he had a chance of winning the fall election, as John Kennedy, the nation's first Catholic president, did with his primary victories in Protestant West Virginia and Wisconsin in 1960.

Nevertheless, real power rested with the party leadership rather than the primary electorate. . . . The nominating system changed fundamentally after the bitter presidential campaign of 1968. . . .

. . . [I]n the Democratic party [it] changed from a mixed system of one-third primary states and two-thirds convention states, controlled by party elites, to a reformed system in which nearly three-fourths of the delegates to the national convention were chosen by the voters in primary elections. Many Democratic state legislatures passed primary-election laws, thereby binding Republicans to the change as well.² Serious contenders for nomination would now have to appeal directly to the voters. . . .

Jimmy Carter's efforts in the year preceding his 1976 presidential nomination exemplified the new reality. Instead of making the traditional rounds among party leaders, Carter traveled about the country meeting with journalists. When the *New York Times's* R. W. Apple wrote a front-page story about Carter's bright prospects one Sunday in October 1975, his outlook indeed brightened. Other journalists followed with their Carter stories and

helped to propel the long-shot Georgian to his party's nomination. Carter would not have won under the old rules.

Of course, the news media's influence in presidential selection had not been inconsequential in earlier times, and in a few instances it had even been crucial. Wendell Willkie was an obscure businessman until the publisher Henry Luce decided that he would make a good president. Luce used his magazines *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* to give Willkie the prominence necessary to win the Republican nomination in 1940. . . .

Nevertheless, the media's role today in helping to establish the election agenda is different from what it was in the past. Once upon a time, the press occasionally played an important part in the nomination of presidential candidates. Now its function is always a key one. The news media do not entirely determine who will win the nomination, but no candidate can succeed without the press. The road to nomination now runs through the newsrooms.

Reform Democrats did not take the character of the news media into account when they changed the presidential election process in the early 1970s. Their goal was admirable enough. The system required a change that would give the voters' preferences more weight in the nominating process. But the reformers disregarded the desirability of also creating a process that was deliberative and would allow for the reflective choice of a nominee. In their determination to abolish the old system, they gave almost no thought to the dynamics of the new one. . . .

The modern campaign requires the press to play a constructive role. When the parties established a nominating process that is essentially a free-for-all between self-generated candidacies, the task of bringing the candidates and voters together in a common effort was superimposed on a media system that was built for other purposes. The press was no longer asked only to keep an eye out for wrongdoing and to provide a conduit for candidates to convey their messages to the voters. It was also expected to guide the voters' decisions. It was obliged to inspect the candidates' platforms, judge their fitness for the nation's highest office, and determine their electability—functions the parties had performed in the past. In addition, the press had to carry out these tasks in a way that would enable the voters to exercise *their* discretion effectively in the choice of nominees.

The columnist Russell Baker hinted at these new responsibilities when he described the press as the "Great Mentioner." The nominating campaign of a candidate who is largely ignored by the media is almost certainly futile, while the campaign of one who receives close attention gets an important boost. In this sense, the press performs the party's traditional role of screening potential nominees for the presidency—deciding which ones are worthy of serious consideration by the electorate and which ones can be dismissed as also-rans. The press also helps to establish the significance of the primaries

and caucuses, deciding which ones are critical and how well the candidates must perform in them to be taken seriously.

The press's responsibilities, however, go far beyond news decisions that allocate coverage among the contending contests and candidates. The de facto premise of today's nominating system is that the media will direct the voters toward a clear understanding of what is at stake in choosing one candidate rather than another. Whereas the general election acquires stability from the competition between the parties, the nominating stage is relatively undefined. It features self-starting candidates, all of whom clamor for public attention, each claiming to be the proper representative of his party's legacy and future. It is this confusing situation that the press is expected to clarify.³

A press-based system seems as if it ought to work. The public gets a nearly firsthand look at the candidates. The alternatives are out in the open for all to see. What could be better?

The belief that the press can substitute for political institutions is widespread. Many journalists, perhaps most of them, assume they can do it effectively.⁴ Scholars who study the media also accept the idea that the press can organize elections. Every four years, they suggest that the campaign could be made coherent if the media would only report it differently.⁵

However, the press merely appears to have the capacity to organize the voters' alternatives in a coherent way. The news creates a pseudocommunity: citizens feel that they are part of a functioning whole until they try to act upon their news-created awareness. . . . The press can raise the public's consciousness, but the news itself cannot organize public opinion in any meaningful way. . . .

The proper organization of electoral opinion requires an institution with certain characteristics. It must be capable of seeing the larger picture—of looking at the world as a whole and not in small pieces. It must have incentives that cause it to identify and organize those interests that are making demands for policy representation. And it must be accountable for its choices, so that the public can reward it when satisfied and force amendments when dissatisfied.⁶ The press has none of these characteristics. The media has its special strengths, but they do not include these strengths.

The press is a very different kind of organization from the political party, whose role it acquired. A party is driven by the steady force of its traditions and constituent interests. . . . The press, in contrast, is "a restless beacon."⁷ Its concern is the new, the unusual, and the sensational. Its agenda shifts abruptly when a new development breaks.⁸ The party has the incentive—the possibility of acquiring political power—to give order and voice to society's values. Its *raison d'être* is to articulate interests and to forge them into a winning coalition. The press has no such incentive and no such purpose. Its objective is the discovery and development of good stories.⁹ . . .

The press is also not politically accountable. The political party is made accountable by a formal mechanism—elections. The vote gives officeholders a reason to act in the majority's interest, and it offers citizens an opportunity to boot from office anyone they feel has failed them. Thousands of elected officials have lost their jobs this way. The public has no comparable hold on the press. Journalists are neither chosen by the people nor removable by them.irate citizens may stop watching a news program or buying a newspaper that angers them, but no major daily newspaper or television station has ever gone out of business as a result.

Other democracies have recognized the inappropriateness of press-based elections. Although national voting in all Western democracies is media-centered in the sense that candidates depend primarily on mass communication to reach the voters, no other democracy has a system in which the press fills the role traditionally played by the political party.¹⁰ Journalists in other democracies actively participate in the campaign process, but their efforts take place within an electoral structure built around political institutions. In the United States, however, national elections are referendums in which the candidates stand alone before the electorate and have no choice but to filter their appeals through the lens of the news media.

. . . [T]he presidential election system has become unpredictable. The nominating phase is especially volatile; with relatively small changes in luck, timing, or circumstance, several nominating races might have turned out differently. There is no purpose behind an electoral system in which the vote is impulsive and the outcome can hinge on random circumstance or minor issues. Stability and consistency are the characteristics of a properly functioning institution. Disorder is a sure sign of a defective system. Although pundits have explained the unpredictability of recent elections in terms of events and personalities peculiar to each campaign, the answer lies deeper—in the electoral system itself. It places responsibilities on its principals—the voters, the candidates, and the journalists—that they cannot meet or that magnify their shortcomings.

* * *

The voters' problem is one of overload. The presidential election system places extraordinary demands on voters, particularly during the nominating phase. These races often attract a large field of contenders, most of whom are newcomers to national politics. The voters are expected to grasp quickly what the candidates represent, but the task is daunting. . . . Nor can it be assumed that the campaign itself will inform the electorate. At the time of nomination, half or more of the party's rank-and-file voters had no clear idea of where Carter (1976), Mondale (1984), Bush and Dukakis (1988),

and Clinton (1992) stood on various issues.¹¹ . . . The Republicans' nomination of Ronald Reagan in 1980 is particularly revealing of the public's lack of information. . . . When asked to place Reagan on an ideological scale, 43 percent said they did not know where to place him, 10 percent said he was a liberal, and 6 percent identified him as a moderate.¹²

Nominating campaigns are imposing affairs. They are waged between entrepreneurial candidates whose support is derived from groups and elites joined together solely for that one election. Primary elections are not in the least bit like general elections, which offer a choice between a "Republican" and a "Democrat." If these labels mean less today than in the past, they still represent a voting guideline for many Americans. But a primary election presents to voters little more than a list of names.¹³ There is no established label associated with these names, no stable core of supporters, and typically the appeals that dominate one election are unlike those emphasized in others. . . . Voters are not stupid, but they have been saddled with an impossible task. The news media consistently overestimate the voters' knowledge of the candidates and the speed with which they acquire it. . . .

Voters would not necessarily be able to make the optimal choice even if they had perfect information. A poll of New Hampshire voters in 1976 reportedly showed that when each Democratic candidate was paired off successively with each of the others, Jimmy Carter came out near the bottom. . . . Yet he won the primary. New Hampshire's voters divided their support somewhat evenly among the other Democratic contenders, enabling the less favored choice, Carter, to finish first with 28 percent of the vote. The possibility that someone other than the consensual alternative will emerge victorious exists in every multicandidate primary.

There was a time when America's policymakers understood that the voters should not be assigned this type of election decision, even if they were able to make it. Citizens are not Aristotles who fill their time studying politics. People have full lives to lead: children to raise, jobs to perform, skills to acquire, leisure activities to pursue. People have little time for attending to politics in their daily lives, and their appetite for political information is weak. . . . How, then, can we expect primary-election voters to inform themselves about a half-dozen little-known contenders and line them up on the basis of policy and other factors in order to make an informed choice?

Of course, voters *will* choose. Each state has a primary or a caucus, and enough voters participate to make it look as though a reasoned choice has been made. In reality, the voters act on the basis of little information and without the means to select the optimal candidate in a crowded race.

The modern system of picking presidents also places burdens on the candidates that they should not be required to carry. Some of the demands are

grotesque. A U.S. presidential campaign requires nearly a two-year stint in the bowels of television studios, motel rooms, and fast-food restaurants. . . .

The system can make it difficult for a person who holds high office to run for nomination. In 1980, Howard Baker's duties as Senate minority leader kept him from campaigning effectively, and he was easily defeated. . . . The strongest candidate for nomination is often someone, like Carter in 1976 and Reagan in 1980, who is out of office. . . .

Advocates of the present system argue that the grueling campaign is an appropriate test of a candidate's ability to withstand the rigors of the presidency. This proposition is a dubious one. It is easy to imagine someone who would make a superb president but who hates a year-long campaign effort or would wilt under its demands. . . .

The current system makes it impossible for the public to choose its president from the full range of legitimate contenders. The demands of a present-day nominating campaign require candidates to decide far in advance of the presidential election day whether they will make the run. If they wait too long to get into the race, they will find their funding and organization to be hopelessly inadequate. Moreover, a candidate who wins the nomination but then loses the general election is likely to acquire a loser's image which may hinder any subsequent run for the presidency. As a consequence, any potential candidate is forced into a strategic decision long before the campaign formally begins. . . .

For those who run, the electoral system is a barrier to true leadership. Candidates are self-starters who organize their own campaigns. . . . As entrepreneurs, they look for support from wherever they can plausibly get it. In the past, the parties buffered the relationship between candidates and groups. Today, it is very difficult for candidates to ignore the demands of interest groups or to confine them to their proper place. Indeed, the modern candidate has every reason for tirelessly courting interest groups—nominating campaigns *are* factional politics. . . .

Contrary to the press's chronic complaint, the central problem of the modern campaign is not that presidential candidates make promises they do not intend to keep; instead, it is that candidates make scores of promises they ought not to make but must try to keep.¹⁴ Politicians with a reputation for breaking promises do not get very far. They attract votes by making commitments and fulfilling them. But it is the nature of the modern campaign to encourage them to overpromise. In this sense, the campaign brings them *too* close to the public they serve. . . .

Politics, like the marketplace, cannot function without ambition. The challenge, as the political scientist James Ceaser notes, is "to discover some way to create a degree of harmony between behavior that satisfies personal

ambition and behavior that promotes the public good."¹⁵ All of the nation's great presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt—were men of towering ambition, but their drive was directed toward constructive leadership.

The electoral reforms of the early 1970s have served to channel ambition in the wrong direction. Today's nominating system is a wide-open process that forces candidates into petty forms of politics. Without partisan differences to separate them, candidates for nomination must find other ways to distinguish themselves from competitors. They often rely on personality appeals of the ingratiating kind. . . .

An electoral system should strengthen the character of the office that it is designed to fill. The modern system of electing presidents undermines the presidential office.¹⁶ The writers of the Constitution believed that unrestrained politicking encouraged demagoguery and special-interest politics,¹⁷ and would degenerate eventually into majority tyranny. If we know now that the Framers were wrong in their belief in the inevitability of a tyrannical majority, we also know that they were right in their belief that an overemphasis on campaigning results in excessive appeals to self-interest and momentary passions.

More than in the candidates or the voters, the problem of the modern presidential campaign lies in the role assigned to the press. Its traditional role is that of a watchdog. In the campaign, this has meant that journalists have assumed responsibility for protecting the public against deceitful, corrupt, or incompetent candidates. The press still plays this watchdog role, and necessarily so. This vital function, however, is different from the role that was thrust on the press when the nominating system was opened wide in the early 1970s.

The new role conflicts with the old one. The critical stance of the watchdog is not to be confused with the constructive task of the coalition-builder. The new role requires the press to act in constructive ways to bring candidates and voters together.

The press has never fully come to grips with the contradictions between its newly acquired and traditional roles. New responsibilities have been imposed on top of older orientations. . . . If the media are capable of organizing presidential choice in a meaningful way, it would be despite the fact that the media were not designed for this purpose. . . . The public schools, for example, have been asked to compensate for the breakup of the traditional American family. The prospects for success are as hopeless as the task is thankless. The same is true of the press in its efforts to fill the role once played by the political party. . . . [T]he press is not a substitute for political institutions. A press-based electoral system is not a suitable basis for that most pivotal of all decisions, the choice of a president.

Notes

1. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1965), p. 229.
2. William Crotty and John S. Jackson III, *Presidential Primaries and Nominations* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1977), pp. 44–49.
3. Michael J. Robinson, "Television and American Politics: 1956–1976," in *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*, 3rd ed., ed. Morris Janowitz and Paul Hirsch (New York: Free Press, 1981), p. 109.
4. See "The Press and the Presidential Campaign, 1988" (Seminar proceedings of the American Press Institute, Reston, Va., December 6, 1988).
5. *Ibid.*
6. See Everett Carll Ladd, *American Political Parties* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 2.
7. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 229.
8. Richard Davis, *The Press and American Politics* (New York: Longman, 1992), pp. 21–27.
9. James David Barber, "Characters in the Campaign: The Literary Problem," in *Race for the Presidency*, ed. James David Barber (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 114–17.
10. Holli Semetko, Jay G. Blumler, Michael Gurevitch, and David H. Weaver, with Steve Barkin and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The Formation of Campaign Agendas* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), pp. 3, 4.
11. See, for example, Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election* (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 167, and Paul Taylor, *See How They Run* (New York: Knopf, 1990), pp. 202–03.
12. Scott Keeter and Cliff Zukin, *Uninformed Choice: The Failure of the New Presidential Nominating System* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 110, 136.
13. Austin Ranney, *Channels of Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 93.
14. Theodore Lowi, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 11.
15. James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 11.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.