

Did the Media Matter?

Voter Learning in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election

The role media play in presidential elections has intrigued researchers since the ground-breaking studies by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues 65 years ago. The main interest of researchers has shifted from persuasion to cognitive effects, and the findings have varied over those years because of changing media use patterns, the introduction of new technology, campaign strategies, and a decline in the power of political parties and in political participation and interest by the public.

This paper reports findings from the latest in a series of statewide surveys we have conducted during the past five U.S. presidential campaigns beginning in 1988. The 2004 telephone survey was conducted by the Indiana University Center for Survey Research in Bloomington, Indiana. Trained interviewers called a random sample of voting-age adults between October 12 and October 24th. The telephone numbers were randomly generated using the Genesys list-assisted method, which allows unpublished numbers and new listings to be included in the survey. The sample size was 531 with a response rate of 50 percent after eliminating nonworking numbers, business and group quarters, respondents away during the survey period, and those physically or mentally unable to respond. The maximum sampling error for this survey is +/- 4.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

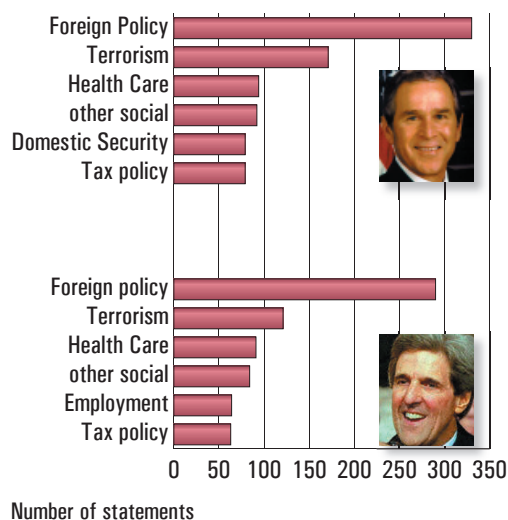
We tested the impact of the media campaign on three dependent variables-- knowledge about candidate stands on issues (based on a content analysis of news media coverage of the issues by **Media Tenor**), the likelihood of voting in the election, and interest in the presidential campaign.

Using hierarchical multiple regression, we entered control and predictor variables in separate stages. The first stage consisted of the demographic control variables of party identification, age, gender, education, income and whether respondents were employed. For the analysis of two dependent variables-- knowledge of the campaign issues and likelihood of voting--we entered campaign interest in the second stage. This provided a very conservative test for media effects because of the strong correlation between campaign interest and media use. In other words, we removed the variance predicted by campaign interest before looking for media effects. Third, we entered measures of traditional media consumption, including newspaper and television news exposure and attention to campaign news, radio campaign news attention, TV talk show campaign attention and campaign advertisement attention. Next we entered Internet news exposure and attention, and finally we entered debate exposure.

As might be expected, Democrats, males and more highly educated people were most knowledgeable about candidate issue positions. Interest in the campaign was also a strong predictor. The block of traditional media exposure and attention

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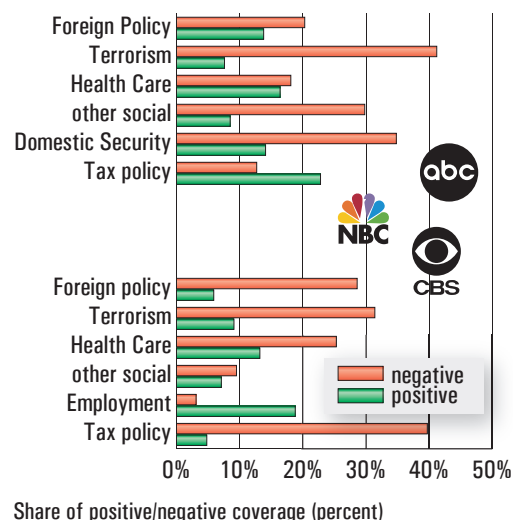
Most important topics on ABC, CBS and NBC evening news



Source: Media Tenor
10/01 - 10/31/2004

Basis: a total of 2,914/2,774 statements on Bush/Kerry on network evening news

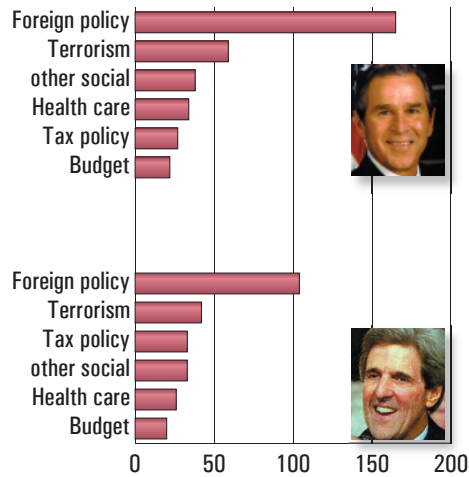
Rating of most important topics on ABC, CBS and NBC evening news



Source: Media Tenor
10/01 - 10/31/2004

Basis: a total of 2,914/2,774 statements on Bush/Kerry on network evening news

Most important topics on Time and Newsweek 10/01-10/31/04

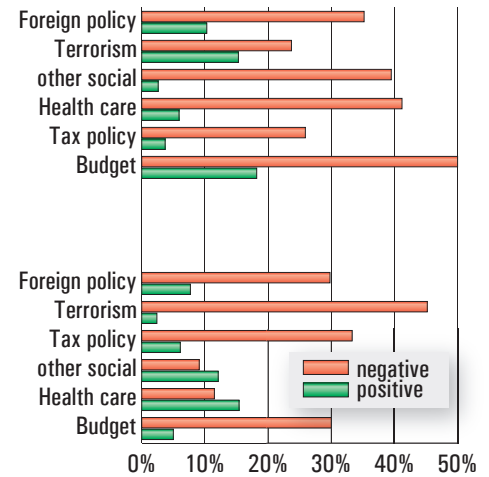


Bewertung per Saldo

Source: Media Tenor 10/01 - 10/31/2004

Basis: a total of 989/836 statements on Bush/Kerry on Time and Newsweek

Rating of most important topics on Time and Newsweek 10/01-10/31/04



Bewertung per Saldo

Source: Media Tenor 10/01 - 10/31/2004

Basis: a total of 989/836 statements on Bush/Kerry on Time and Newsweek

variables produced no significant results, but Internet news exposure and debate exposure were both significant predictors of knowledge of candidate issue stands.

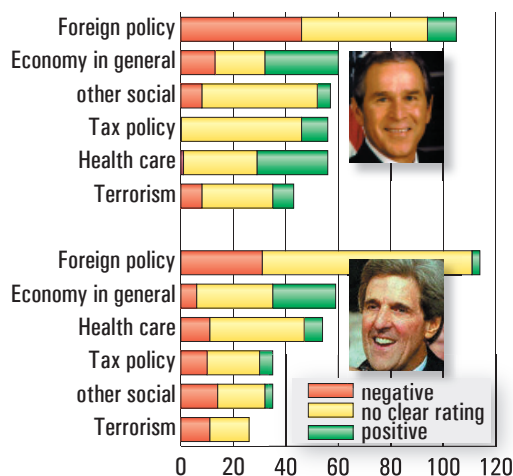
Identification with a major political party, higher education levels, being older and campaign interest were all predictors of likelihood of voting, but no media variables were significant. Media exposure and attention measures were more significant pre-

dictors of campaign interest, however, suggesting an indirect news media effect on knowledge of candidate issue positions through increasing interest in the campaign.

When campaign interest was used as a dependent variable, identification with either political party and being older were significant predictors, as well as attention to campaign news on the radio, attention to campaign news on television, attention to campaign news on the Internet and frequency of debate exposure.

Looking at trends in our campaign studies, we find an increase in Internet use compared to the 2000 election, and a significant relationship between frequency of Internet news exposure and campaign issue knowledge for the first time. We also find a significant correlation between attention to campaign information on the Internet and interest in the campaign for the first time. Frequency of traditional media use, including televised debates, registered declines in 1996 and 2000, but last year we found increased levels close to those recorded in the 1992 election. Interest in the campaign followed the same pattern, with declines in 1996 and 2000, but an increase to nearly the 1992 campaign level in 2004. Other details of the findings and trends since 1988 are discussed in the paper.

Coverage, rating of most important topics on Wall Street Journal U.S.



Number of statements (positive, unclear rating, negative)

Source: Media Tenor 10/01 - 10/31/2004

Basis: a total of 1,046/926 statements on Bush/Kerry in the Wall Street Journal

Basis:

Media: ABC, NBC CBS and Fox News; Time, Newsweek, Wall Street Journal U.S.

Time: 10/01 - 10/31/2004

Analysis: All statements on Bush/Kerry in this media