

**Do Campaign Communications Matter for Civic Engagement?
American Elections from Eisenhower to G.W. Bush**

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**Revised chapter for Do Political Campaigns Matter?
David Farrell and Rudiger Schmitt-Beck (eds).
Routledge 2001**

Total Words: 7852 +5 Figures

Revised version: 2/16/2004 8:12 PM

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Who killed civic engagement? During the last decade multiple voices on both sides of the Atlantic have blamed campaign communications for fuelling public cynicism. In particular, *political actor* accounts claim that links between politicians and voters have been weakened by the adoption of professional marketing techniques, including the mélange of spin, packaging and pollsters. In contrast, *media actor* accounts hold journalistic practices in campaign coverage liable for growing public disengagement from civic affairs, and this thesis has developed into something of an unquestioned orthodoxy in the popular literature. The arguments are hardly new, but are these claims correct? Previous work by the author has argued that the process of campaign communications by politicians and journalists has not contributed towards civic disengagement (Norris 2000). This chapter, based on analysis of long-term trends in political communications in American election campaigns from the Eisenhower era in 1952 until the Bush-Gore contest in 2000, confirms that the indictment remains unproven. The chapter draws upon fifty years of National Election Surveys. Many popular commentators suggest that the American public was exceptionally disenchanted by the 2000 presidential election but, in contrast, this chapter demonstrates that, (i) contrary to popular opinion, the electorate did not display exceptional levels of disaffection in the 2000 campaign, in fact according to the standard indicators, American faith and confidence in government has been progressively restored in successive elections from 1994-2000; (ii) overall levels of political activism, interest in elections and public affairs, and attention to the news media display trendless fluctuations in successive American campaigns during the last twenty years, not a steady secular decline; and lastly that (iii) at individual-level, channels of campaign communications directly initiated by politicians and indirectly mediated by journalists are positively associated with levels of civic engagement.

To develop this argument, Part I briefly summarizes the theoretical framework including conceptual models of how the process of political communications in election campaigns has been transformed over the years and theories about how these developments may have fuelled public cynicism. Part II examines whether there has been a long-term

decline in civic engagement in the United States, as many claim, monitoring trends in party canvassing, campaign activism, political interest, trust in government, and attention to the news media, drawing from the series of surveys in the American National Election Studies. Part III examines the impact of attention to the campaign on public engagement, with models conducted at individual-level. The conclusion outlines the theory of ‘a virtuous circle’ to explain the pattern we find. Rather than mistakenly criticizing the process of campaign communications, the study concludes that we need to understand and confront more deep-rooted flaws in American democracy.

The Theoretical Framework

At the most general level, campaigns can best be understood as *organized efforts to inform, persuade, and mobilize*. Using a simple model, campaigns include four distinct elements: the messages that the campaign organization is seeking to communicate, the channels of communication employed by these organizations, the impact of these messages on their targeted audience, and the feedback loop from the audience back to the organization. Some messages are conveyed *directly* from politicians to voters, such as through door-to-door canvassing, advertising, and Internet websites, but most are communicated *indirectly* via the prism of the news media. This process occurs within a broader social and political environment. Effective campaigns also include a dynamic feedback loop as campaign organizations learn about their targeted audience and adapt their goals and strategies accordingly. Indeed the most dramatic effect of campaigns may be evident at elite rather than mass levels, for example if electoral defeat leads towards parties adopting new policies and leaders. Understood in this way, campaigns essentially involve the interaction of political *organizations*, the *news media* as prime intermediary, and the *electorate*. Studying these phenomena systematically is difficult because effective research designs require analysis of dynamic linkages among all three levels and often data is only available at one, namely post-election cross-sectional surveys of the electorate.

Although we commonly think of elections as the prime arena for political campaigns in fact these come in a variety shapes and forms, such as AIDS prevention and anti-smoking campaigns by public health authorities, environmental recycling campaigns by environmentalists, and attempts to win hearts and minds in the debate between transnational advocacy groups and anti-globalization movements and government and business proponents of free trade in the ‘battle for Seattle’ or Quebec. Campaigns can be regarded as ‘political’ when the primary objective of the organization is to influence the process of governance, whether those in authority or public opinion and behavior. As other chapters in this volume discuss, the primary impact of this process may be *informational*, if campaigns raise public awareness and knowledge about an issue like the dangers of smoking, or problems of the ozone layer. Or the effect of a campaign may be *persuasion* in terms of reinforcing or changing public attitudes and values, such as levels of support for the major parties or the popularity of leaders. Or campaigns may have an effect upon *mobilization*, - the focus of this study – typified by behavior such as voting turnout and party volunteer work. Many accounts emphasize how the process of campaign communications has been transformed during the twentieth century, but nevertheless the impact of these changes upon the *contents* of the messages has not been well established, still less the *impact* of the process upon mobilizing or demobilizing the general public.

Many fear that common developments in election campaigns have undermined their role as mobilizing processes. The last decade has seen growing concern in the United States about civic disengagement fuelling a half-empty ballot box. The common view is that, faced with the spectacle of American elections, the public turns off, knows little, cares less and stays home (Nye et al 1997; Ladd and Bowman 1998; Putnam 2000). Similar fears are widespread in many other democracies (Pharr and Putnam 2000). The growth of critical citizens is open to many explanations that have been explored elsewhere (Norris1999), linking public confidence with levels of government performance and value change in the political culture. One of the most popular accounts blames the

process of political communications for public disengagement, especially the changing role of politicians and journalists within election campaigns. The idea that typical practices in campaign communications have fostered and generated civic malaise originated in the political science literature in the 1960s, developed in a series of scholarly articles in the post-Watergate 1970s, and rippled out to become the conventional wisdom today. The chorus of critics is loudest in the United States but similar echoes are common in Western Europe. There is nothing particularly novel about these arguments but their widespread popular acceptance means that the evidence for these claims deserves careful examination. Two main schools of thought can be identified in the literature. Political actor accounts emphasize the decline of traditional face-to-face campaigns, eroding direct voter-politician linkages, and the rise of ‘spin’ and strategic news management by politicians, reducing public trust in parties and confidence in governments. Journalist actor accounts stress the shift within the news media towards covering political scandal rather than serious debate, policy strategy rather than substance, and conflict rather than consensus. These developments can be regarded as complementary, with the shift towards strategic news management by government prompting a journalistic reaction, or as two autonomous changes.

Campaign demobilization?

In theorizing about these developments, campaigns can be understood to have evolved through three primary stages. *Pre-modern* campaigns are understood to display three characteristics: the campaign organization is based upon direct and active forms of interpersonal communications between candidates and citizens at local level, with short-term, ad-hoc planning by the party leadership. In the news media the partisan press acts as core intermediary between parties and the public. And the electorate is anchored by strong party loyalties. During this era, which predominated in Western democracies with mass-branch party organizations at least until the rise of television in the 1950s, local parties selected the candidates, rang the doorbells, posted the pamphlets, targeted the wards, planned the resources, and generally provided all the machinery linking voters and

candidates. For citizens the experience is essentially *locally-active*, meaning that most campaigning is concentrated within communities, conducted through more demanding activities like rallies, doorstep canvassing and party meetings.

Modern campaigns are defined as those with a party organization coordinated more closely at central level by political leaders, advised by external professional consultants like opinion pollsters. In the news media, national television becomes the principle forum of campaign events, a more distant experience for most voters, supplementing other media. And the electorate becomes increasingly decoupled from party and group loyalties. Politicians and professional advisors conduct polls, design advertisements, schedule the theme de jour, leadership tours, news conferences and photo opportunities, handle the press, and battle to dominate the nightly television news. For citizens, the typical experience of the election becomes more *centrally-passive*, in the sense that the main focus of the campaign is located within national television studios, not local meetings, so that the experience becomes more distant.

Lastly *post-modern campaigns* are understood as those where the coterie of professional consultants on advertising, public opinion, marketing and strategic news management become more co-equal actors with politicians, assuming an increasingly influential role within government in a 'permanent' campaign, as well as coordinating local activity more tightly at the grassroots. The news media fragments into a more complex and incoherent environment of multiple channels, outlets, and levels. And the electorate becomes more dealigned in their party choices. The election may represent a return to some of the forms of engagement found in the pre-modern stage, as the new channels of communication allow greater interactivity between voters and politicians. Post-modern types of communication can be conceptualized to fall somewhere between the locally-active dimension of traditional campaigns and the centrally-passive experience characteristic of television-dominated elections. Case studies suggest that political campaigns in many nations have been transformed by the widespread adoption of political marketing techniques, although countries have not simply imported American

practices wholesale. According to the 'shopping' model, politicians adopt whatever techniques seem well suited to their particular environment, supplementing but not discarding older forms of electioneering (Plassner et al. 1999).

The extent and pace of these developments can be expected to vary from one context to another. Rather than claiming that all campaigns are inevitably moving into the post-modern category, contests can continue to be arrayed from the pre-modern to the post-modern, due to the influence of a range of intermediary conditions such as the electoral system, campaign regulations, and organizational resources. Even within the US, where these developments have perhaps gone furthest, all forms of campaigning remain evident, from the face-to-face, yard-sign, retail politics of primaries in New Hampshire to the capital-intensive, poll and ad-driven campaign in California. A series of case studies have documented the deployment of new campaign techniques in many established and new democracies around the world (Swanson and Mancini 1996; Butler and Ranney 1992; Bowler and Farrell 1992; Gunther and Mughan 2000). The move towards strategic communications represents part of the 'professionalization' of campaigning, giving a greater role to technical experts in public relations, news management, advertising, speech writing, and market research.

The rise of modern and post-modern campaigns has been widely blamed for encouraging cynicism. The most common concern is that the techniques of 'spin', selling and persuasion may have undermined the credibility of parties and political leaders (Jones 1995; Rosenbaum 1997). If everything in politics is designed for popular appeal then it may become harder to trust the messages or messenger (Franklin 1994; Pfetsch 1996; Siune 1998). Many believe that this process has reduced the importance of traditional activities such as local party meetings, door-to-door canvassing and direct voter-politician contact. The use of 'negative' or attack advertising by parties and candidates has also raised anxieties that this practice may demobilize the electorate (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995).

News Demobilization?

Another related perspective commonly blames journalists rather than politicians. Kurt and Gladys Lang (1966) were the first to connect the rise of network news with broader feelings of disenchantment with American politics in the sixties. The Langs proved an isolated voice at the time, in large part because the consensus in political communications stressed the minimal effects of the mass media on public opinion. The idea gained currency in the mid-1970s since it seemed to provide a plausible reason for growing public alienation in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate era. Michael Robinson (1976) first popularized the term 'videomalaise' to describe the link between reliance upon American television journalism and feelings of political cynicism, social mistrust, and lack of political efficacy. Greater exposure to television news, he argued, with its high 'negativism', conflictual frames, and anti-institutional themes, generated political disaffection, frustration, cynicism, self-doubt and malaise. During the 1990s the trickle of complaints about the news media became a popular deluge. For Thomas Patterson (1993) the press, in its role as election gatekeeper, has become a 'miscast' institution, out of order in the political system. Cappella and Jamieson (1996) found that strategic news frames of politics activate cynicism about public policy. Dautrich and Hartley (1998) conclude that the news media 'fail American voters'. James Fallows (1996) argues that down-market trends have produced the relentless pursuit of the sensational, superficial, and populist, at the expense of serious coverage of public affairs.

Eleswhere similar voices can be heard. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) believe that a 'crisis of civic communication' has afflicted Western Europe. Achille and Bueno (1994) fear that growing competition from commercial channels has undermined the quality and diversity of public service television. Dahlgren (1995) argues that the displacement of public service television by commercial channels has impoverished the public sphere. Schulz (1997) warns that the decline of public service broadcasting and the rise of commercial channels in Germany, the latter emphasizing the more sensational and negative aspects of political news, may have increased public cynicism. Kaase (2000)

fears that these developments may produce audiences segmented according to the amount of political information to which they are exposed, possibly reinforcing a 'knowledge gap'. There is widespread concern that increased competition for readers has increased the pressure on traditional standards of news in the print sector, leading to 'tabloidization' or 'infotainment'. While hardly a new practice, many believe that today routine and daily front-page news about government scandals appears greater than in previous decades - whether sleaze in Britain, Tagentopoli in Italy, or l'affaire Lewinsky in America (Lull and Hinerman 1997). This coverage is believed to corrode the forms of trust underpinning social relations and political authority). Many hope that the Internet can escape these problems, but others fear that new media may simply reinforce political cynicism (Owen and Davis 1998; Murdock and Golding 1989; Hill and Hughes 1998).

Of course there are counterclaims in the literature and the number of skeptics questioning the evidence for media malaise has been growing in recent years. The most recent examination of the American evidence, by Bennett et al. (1999), found that trust in politics and trust in the news media went hand-in-hand, with no evidence that use of the news media was related to political cynicism. Kenneth Newton (1997, 1999) showed that reading a broadsheet newspaper in Britain, and watching a lot of television news, was positively associated with political knowledge, interest, and understanding of politics. Christina Holtz-Bacha (1990) demonstrated similar patterns in Germany, while Curtice, Schmitt-Beck and Schrott (1998) reported similarly positive findings in a five-nation study from elections in the early 1990s. Until recently, however, counterclaims have usually been published in scattered scholarly journals and thereby drowned out by the Greek chorus of popular lament for the state of modern campaign communications. In work elsewhere (Norris 2000) I have argued that the media malaise thesis remains flawed on multiple grounds.

Since the argument is based on historical shifts in the nature of campaign communications, then at diffuse level there should be evidence from longitudinal indicators of public opinion. If modern campaigns have weakened direct voter-party

linkages, then there should be evidence of lower levels of *electoral canvassing*. And there should be a steady erosion in conventional *political participation*, measured by traditional activities such as involvement in political discussion, attending party meetings, working for a party, contacting elected representatives, and donating money to a candidate during the election. If negative and strategic news has turned people off, then the public should be *less attentive to the news media*. There should be a long-term decline in *public interest* in government, civic affairs, and political campaigns. And standard measures of *political trust* should show a steady and significant fall. On the other hand, if indicators of American civic engagement display a pattern of stability or trendless fluctuations over time, rather than a steady fall, then this throws doubt on the core thesis.

Trends in American Civic Engagement

Party canvassing

First, to consider the evidence for these claims, this study can examine long-term trends in reported party-voter contact and levels of participation in American campaigns, drawing upon National Election Studies since 1952. If American parties have progressively abandoned traditional campaign techniques, exemplified by grassroots meetings and local get-out-the-vote drives, then we might expect to see lower levels of canvassing over the years. Figure 1 shows the proportion of Americans who said that someone from the political parties had called them by phone or someone had come round to talk to them about the campaign during successive elections. The results according to the NES figures show that party-initiated contact activity surged from 1956 to 1972, despite coinciding with the era when television took off rapidly in American households as a popular medium, and therefore when political ads gradually reached a wide audience. It is true that trends suggest a subsequent decline in contact activity from 1972 to 1990, but this was followed by a major recovery in successive elections. The level of contact activity generated in the 2000 campaign was the highest ever recorded in the series, with almost one third of all Americans talking about the election with parties. The

major parties have been broadly balanced in their contact activities over the years, with the Democrats marginally more energetic in many years although the GOP have outpaced them occasionally in the early 1960s and again in the mid-1990s. Moreover this underestimates the total amount of contact activity since about one in ten Americans regularly reports being called to talk about the election by someone not from the major parties, and this proportion has also increased in recent years. The form of contacting may now be conducted more by telephone than by the traditional face-to-face meeting, but what this trend suggests is that in recent decades American parties and candidates have been invested greater energies in the attempt to mobilize individual voters through calling them directly, not less.

[Figure 1 about here]

Campaign activism

Figure 2 presents the trends in campaign activism in US presidential elections. The pattern shows trendless fluctuations from 1952 to 2000 in many of the items, rather than a clear secular decline. The sharpest fall is in the proportion of Americans wearing a button or displaying a bumper sticker, both minor activities that have become unfashionable. Since the 1960s there has also been a modest long-term decline in activism within parties, although the proportion of party workers today is similar to the situation in the 1950s. The proportions of Americans engaged in other types of campaigning remains fairly stable, such as those contributing money or going to a political meeting. Today the Internet provides new channels of communication, such as the use of candidate websites for fund-raising and email for networking, discussion groups for chat and electronic payments for donations (Norris 2001a), but the figures suggest that older forms of campaigning continue with new technologies supplementing rather than replacing older channels

[Figure 2 about here].

Attention to Campaign News

As discussed earlier, many believe that the public has been turned off from the campaign by strategic and negative coverage in the news media. These fears have been fuelled by broader trends as many Americans leave network TV evening news for cable channels like MSNBC and CNN, as well as alternative news sources available via the Internet. The secular erosion in overall network news viewership recorded by Nielsen figures persists in non-election as well as election years, as Americans find access to cable news more convenient for their working schedules (Norris 2001b). Newspaper circulation figures, which have long been weak in comparison with similar postindustrial societies, have also been steadily falling in the United States. Yet when asked how much attention they pay to news about the campaign for President, the trends in Figure 3 from the 1960 to 2000 show a picture of trendless fluctuations. The main change occurred earlier, in the 1950s as television came into the living room, displacing the role of radio news that had been popular in the interwar years. Once widely available, TV news shows a fairly stable plateau over successive elections, with two temporary dips in 1984 and again in 1996. Use of newspapers shows a slightly more pronounced decline since the early 1980s but it also remains unclear whether this has now stabilized or whether it will fall further.

[Figure 3 about here]

Political Interest

If traditional forms of campaign activism have not fallen, what about general interest in election campaigns, as well as in government and public affairs? If election coverage became more negative in the 1960s and early 1970s, then plausibly people could switch off from politics. Figure 4 shows long-term trends in these indicators, in Presidential and mid-term elections. The results show that interest in the campaign was slightly stronger in successive elections from 1952 to 1976, and then fell to a lower level from 1978 to 2000

(with the exception of the 1992 election where attention rose again). The pattern is far from uniform, for example interest in the 1956 campaign proved similar to that in 1996. Variations over time could plausibly be produced by many factors, including the closeness of the race, whether an incumbent president was standing for reelection, competition from third party candidates, the salience of the political issues, and so on (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The decline of political interest indicates a period-specific shift, but this change seems to have occurred between 1976 and 1978. In addition, the decline in political interest could be attributed to many things beyond changes in campaigning, for example the heightened generational and racial tensions in American politics could have increased political interest during the 1960s, producing a fall thereafter.

[Figure 4 about here]

Trends in attention to government and public affairs, rather than campaigns, present a similar picture. The proportion of Americans who follow government and public affairs either ‘most’ or ‘some’ of the time in the 1990s is similar to the situation in the early 1960s. The main exceptions to the overall trend concerns heightened attention in the 1964, 1972, 1974 and 1976 elections. As many have observed, the events of these years stimulated political awareness – from conflict over civil rights and urban riots, to anti-Vietnam demonstrations, political assassinations, the rise of second-wave feminism, generational culture wars, and the aftermath of Watergate. From 1976 to 2000 attention returned to the ‘normal’ level evident in the early 1960s. There is no linear decline in interest in American politics. The 1992 Bush v. Clinton v. Perot election, for example, registered the 5th highest level of interest in the entire series. The common assumption that Americans have become increasingly bored with government and turned off from public affairs in recent years, and that this can be attributed to increasingly negative, trivial or strategic coverage in the news media, or to changes in party campaigning, receives no support from this evidence.

Political Trust

Yet the effects of a more cynical culture in journalism should be evident more directly in indicators of political trust in American government and politicians. After all, much of the concern about growing alienation has been generated by the long-term slide in the standard NES indicators of civic malaise. The key question here is whether the timing of the decline in political trust mirrors the events that are believed to have transformed the news culture.

[Figure 5 about here]

Figure 6 maps trends in the standard NES indicators of trust in government, from 1958 until 2000. The pattern confirms relatively high levels of trust from the 1958-1964, the sharp plunge from 1964 to 1974, the modest slide until 1980, then the revival under Reagan's first term in the early 1980s, the slide again from 1984 to 1994, then a distinct revival during Clinton's second term. While earlier observers saw only a linear decline, the most recent figures suggest a far clearer pattern of fluctuations. The key question for this study is how far these patterns can be related to the timing of any assumed changes in political campaigning. The pattern in the 1980s and 1990s, with the rise and fall and rise again in American political trust, strongly suggests that rather than a secular phenomena, driven by cultural or structural trends, this represents a more events-driven or performance-driven political explanation. If 'negative' campaign coverage increased in the early 1980s, as Patterson (1993) suggests, or if news of political scandals commonly became front-page headlines in the 1990s, this may be associated with the popularity of presidential candidates, but it is unrelated to broader trends in American political trust, which became more positive during these eras. Of course we cannot assume that there is any simple and direct link between attitudes towards the political system and the broader pattern of campaign coverage, since multiple factors can influence political trust. But at

the same time if the timing of trends in these indicators of civic engagement fails to match the timing of any hypothetical change in the campaign communications, even with lags, then we have failed to establish convincing evidence for these hypothetical effects at diffuse level.

The Impact of Exposure to Campaign Communications

So far we have examined diffuse patterns at aggregate level, but what is the evidence of the effects of exposure to campaign communications on civic engagement at individual level? Table 1 displays the results of a regression model analyzing the effects of attention to the campaign news media and party canvassing on campaign activism. The model controls for the standard factors commonly found to be associated with political participation, including demographic background (age, gender, income, education and race), and political attitudes (including political interest and strength of partisanship), as well as the year of the survey in the merged NES 1948-1998 dataset. The results in Table 1 confirm that attention to campaign communications in newspapers, radio news, and magazine news, as well as being canvassed by parties, are all significantly associated with greater campaign activism, even after controlling for social background and political attitudes. Attention to television news about the campaign is also positive but proves a statistically insignificant predictor of activism. Other variables point in the expected direction, with greater levels of political participation among men, older citizens, the well educated and the more affluent, as well as among stronger partisans and those who are politically interested. The year of the election proves insignificant, confirming the earlier observation that there has not been a secular slide in overall levels of campaign engagement. Moreover the indicator of party canvassing proved more strongly related to participation than any of the demographic variables.

[Table 1 about here]

Similar models are run using a single media attention scale with measures of campaign activism, external efficacy, trust in government and government responsiveness as

alternative indicators of civic engagement, with the summary results presented in Table 2. The models confirm that Americans who are most exposed to direct and indirect channels of campaign communications, because they pay attention to campaign news and they are canvassed by parties, prove consistently more *active*, *efficacious*, and *more positive about government responsiveness*. This relationship remains significant even after introducing a battery of controls in the multivariate regression models. There is a modest negative effect between exposure to the news and trust in government but this proves statistically insignificant despite the large sample size.

(Table 2 about here)

Moreover, far from a case of ‘American exceptionalism’, this pattern is found in the United States *and* in Western Europe (for full details see Norris 2000). The evidence strongly suggests that the public is not simply passively responding to political communications being presented to them, in a naive ‘stimulus-response’ model, instead they are critically and actively sifting, discarding and interpreting the available information. A more educated and literate public is capable of using the more complex range of news sources and party messages to find the information they need to make practical political choices. The survey evidence suggests that news exposure was not associated with civic disengagement in America.

Conclusions: A Virtuous Circle?

Why should we find a positive link between civic engagement and attention to campaign communications? There are three possible answers, which cannot be resolved with the available evidence here.

One interpretation is *selection effects*. In this explanation, those who are most predisposed to participate politically (for whatever reason) could well be more interested in keeping up with current affairs, so the direction of causation could be one-way, from *prior attitudes to attention to campaign communications*. This view is consistent with the ‘uses and gratification’ literature, which suggests that media habits reflect prior

predispositions in the audience: people who love football turn to the sports results, people who invest in Wall Street check the business pages, and people interested in politics read about government and public policy (Blumler and Katz 1974). But if we assume a purely one-way selection effect, this implies that despite repeatedly turning to campaigns messages, the public learns nothing whatever from the process, a proposition that seems inherently implausible.

Another answer could be *media effects*. In this explanation, the process of watching or reading about campaign messages (for whatever reason) can be expected to increase our interest in, and knowledge about, government and elections, thereby facilitating political participation. The more we watch or read, in this interpretation, the more we learn. News habits can be caused by many factors such as leisure patterns and broadcasting schedules: people may catch the news because it comes on after a popular sit-com, or because radio stations air headline news between music clips, or because the household subscribes to home delivery of a newspaper. In this view, the direction of causality would again be one-way, but in this case running *from prior news habits to our subsequent political attitudes*.

Both these views could logically make sense of the associations we establish. One or the other could be true. It is not possible for us, any more than for others, to resolve the direction of causality from cross-sectional polls of public opinion taken at one point in time. But it seems more plausible and convincing to assume a two way-interactive process or *a virtuous circle*. In the long-term through repeated exposure, like the socialization process in the family or workplace, there may well be a ‘virtuous circle’ where the news media and party campaigns serve to activate the active. Those most interested and knowledgeable pay most attention to campaigns communications. Learning more about the election (the policy stances of the candidates and parties, the record of the government, the severity of social and economic problems facing the nation) reduces the barriers to further electoral turnout and civic engagement. In this

interpretation, the ratchet of reinforcement thereby moves in a direction that is healthy for public participation.

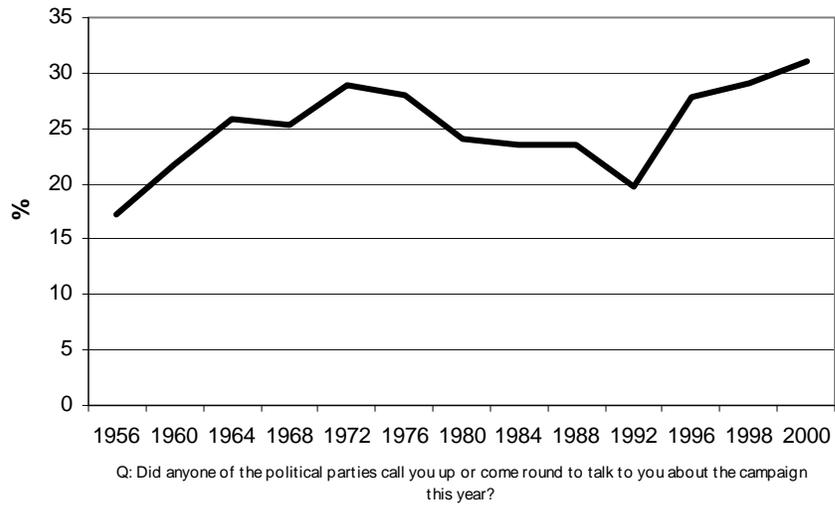
In contrast, the news media has far less power to reinforce the disengagement of the disengaged, because, given the easy availability of the multiple alternatives now available, and minimal political interest, when presented with campaign messages this group is habitually more likely to turn over, turn off, or surf to another web page. If the disengaged do catch the news, they are likely to pay little attention. And if they do pay attention, they are more likely to mistrust campaign information. Repeatedly tuning out political messages inoculates against their potential impact. This theory cannot be proved conclusively from the available cross-sectional survey evidence, any more than can alternative theories of blaming campaign communications for the ills of the body politic, but it does provide a plausible and coherent interpretation of the associations confirmed in this study.

Claims of media malaise are methodologically flawed so that they are at best unproven, to use the Scottish verdict, or at worse false. As a result too often we are ‘blaming the messenger’ for more deep-rooted ills of the body politic. This matters, not just because we need to understand the real causes of civic disengagement to advance our knowledge, but also because the correct diagnosis has serious implications for public policy choices. ‘Blaming the messenger’ can prove a deeply conservative strategy, blocking effective reforms, especially given a First Amendment tradition that idealizes protection of media mega-corporations from public regulation.

This study does not seek to claim in la-de-da fashion that all is for the best in the best of all possible political worlds. If not ‘broken’, there are many deep-rooted flaws embedded in the core institutions of representative democracy; we are not seeking to present a Panglossian view. The important point for this argument is that many failings have deep-seated structural causes, whether the flood of dollars drowning American campaigns, the bungling and incompetence evident in the Florida recount, or the lack of viable third

parties competing in US elections (for details see Norris 2001c). If we stopped blaming the news media's coverage of campaigns, and directed attention to the structural problems in ensuring free, fair and competitive democratic elections, perhaps effective remedies would be more forthcoming.

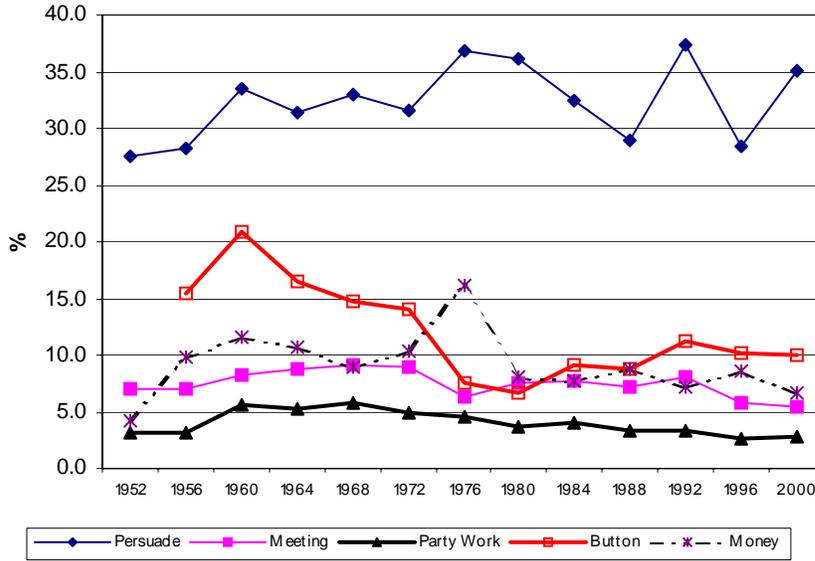
Figure 1: % Canvassed by the major parties, US 1956-2000



Note: Q: “As you know, the political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidate. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year?”

Source: NES 1956-2000

Figure 2: Trends in Campaign Activism, US 1952-2000



Notes: NES 2000 version of questions:

Discuss: “We would like to find out about some of the things people do to help a party or a candidate win an election. During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates?”

Meeting: “Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate?”

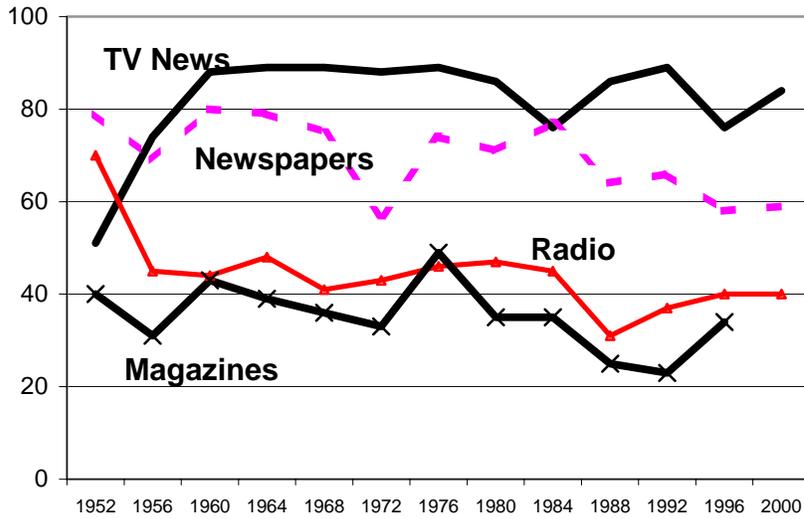
Party Work: “Did you do any (other) work for one of the parties or candidates?”

Money: During an election year people are often asked to make a contribution to support campaigns. Did you give money to an individual candidate running for public office?
 “Did you give money to a political party during this election year?”

Button: “Did you wear a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a sign in your window or in front of your house?”

Source: NES 1952-2000

Figure 3: Attention to the news media, US 1952-2000



Notes:

TV News: “Did you watch any programs about the campaigns on television?”

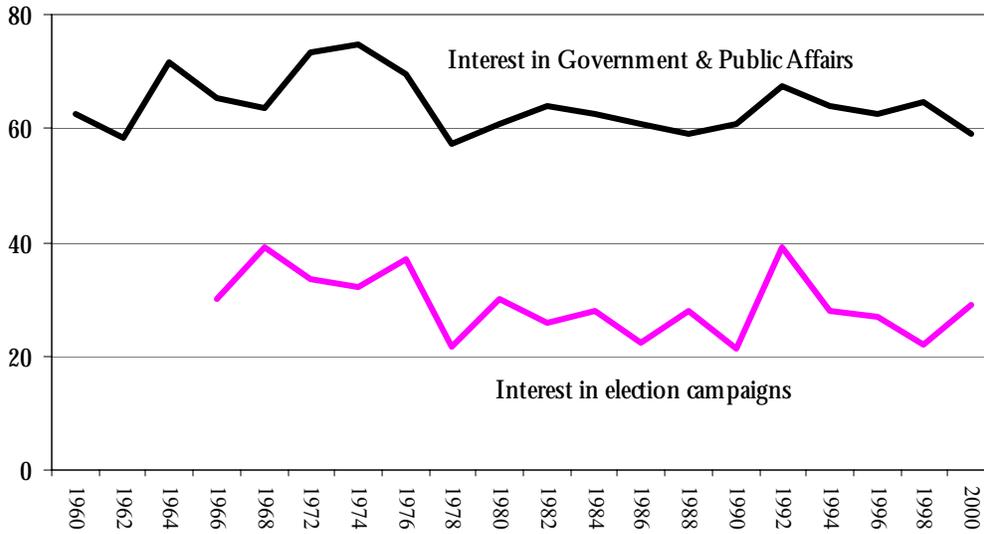
Radio: “How about radio – did you listen to any speeches or discussions about the campaign on the radio?”

Magazines: “Did you read about the campaign in any magazines?”

Newspapers: “Did you read about the campaign in any newspaper?”

Source: NES 1952-2000

Figure 4: Interest in Campaigns and in Government, US 1952-2000



Notes:

Interest in Campaigns: “Some people don’t pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you, would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns so far this year?”

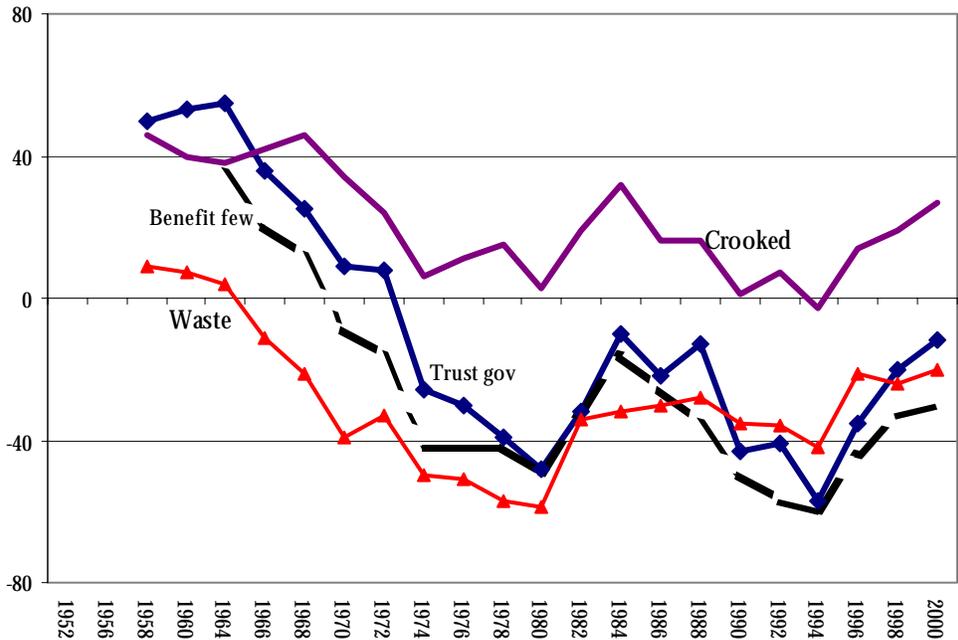
% ‘Very’ interested.

Interest in government and public affairs: “Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?”

% ‘Most/Some’ of the time.

Source: NES 1952-2000

Figure 5: Trends in Trust in Government, US 1958-2000



Notes:

Crooked: “Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are (1958-1972: a little) crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked (1958-1972: at all)?”

Benefit few: “Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?”

Waste: “Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?”

Trust government: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right -- just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?”

Source: NES 1952-2000

Table 1: Regression model predicting campaign activism, US 1948-1998

	B	(s.e.)	Beta	Sig.	Coding
YEAR	.0001	(.001)	.003	.802	Year of the election
DEMOGRAPHIC CONTROLS					
Gender	.0354	(.015)	.025	.018	Male (1)
Race	-.0180	(.026)	-.008	.485	White (1)
Age	-.0271	(.005)	-.065	.000	Years
Education	.0472	(.010)	.064	.000	4-categories
Household Income	.0157	(.007)	.026	.022	5-categories
ATTITUDINAL CONTROLS					
Political interest	.1240	(.006)	.256	.000	7-point scale
Strength of partisanship	.0109	(.004)	.033	.002	7-point scale
ATTENTION TO CAMPAIGN NEWS					
TV News	.0388	(.024)	.018	.108	See fn. Fig.3
Newspapers	.0409	(.018)	.027	.024	See fn. Fig.3
Radio news	.0757	(.015)	.054	.000	See fn. Fig.3
Magazine news	.1220	(.017)	.085	.000	See fn. Fig.3
Party contact	.2230	(.017)	.142	.000	Contacted (1)
Constant	.205				
Adjusted R2	.184				

Notes: The model predicts campaign activism based on ordinary least squared regression models with columns reporting the unstandardized (B) coefficients (with the standard errors in parenthesis), the standardized Beta coefficients, and significance. The model was tested for collinearity.

Campaign Activism: A 4-point scale measuring attending a political meeting, working for a candidate or party, displaying a campaign button, and talking to others about parties or candidates. This scale is available for all elections except for 1954, 1958, and 1966. For details see Figure 2. It should be noted that similar results were replicated using the longer 6-point scale of campaign activism.

Party contact: See Figure 1.

Source: NES 1948-1998 merged dataset.

Table 2: The relationship between media attention, party contact, and civic engagement, with controls, US 1952-1998

	Media Attention				Party Contact				R ²
	B	(s.e.)	Beta	Sig.	B	(s.e.)	Beta	Sig.	
Campaign activism	0.067	(.007)	.109	.000	.223	(.016)	.142	.000	.183
External efficacy	1.212	(.458)	.033	.008	2.813	(.983)	.030	.004	.149
Trust in government	-0.458	(.275)	-.021	.095	.178	(.589)	.003	.763	.090
Government responsiveness	1.504	(.323)	.060	.000	1.291	(.323)	.060	.000	.064

Note: For the design of the full model see Table 1. The results presented here show the effects of media exposure and party contact on selected indicators of civic engagement in multivariate ordinary least squares regression models which control for the year of the survey, the standard socio-demographic characteristics (gender, race, age, income, and education), and political attitudes commonly associated with civic engagement (the political interest scale and the strength of partisanship). The columns present the unstandardized regression (B) coefficients, the standard error (s.e.) in parenthesis, the standardized Beta coefficients, the significance of the association, and the adjusted R² for the whole model. All models were tested for collinearity.

Party contact: see fn Figure 1.

Campaign activism scale: see fn Figure 2.

Campaign news attention: This scale is based on attention to the campaign in TV news, newspaper, radio news, and magazines. See fn Figure 3.

Trust in government: see fn Figure 5.

External efficacy: 100-point scale “Public officials don't care much what people like me think” and “People like me don't have any say about what the government does.”

Government responsiveness: 100-pt scale “Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do -- a good deal, some, or not much?” and “How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think, a good deal, some or not much?”

Source: NES 1948-1998 merged dataset.

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