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Article in *Annual Review of Political Science* · May 2015

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# How Do Campaigns Matter?

Gary C. Jacobson

Department of Political Science, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, California 92093;  
email: gjacobson@ucsd.edu

Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 2015. 18:1.1–1.17

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at  
[polisci.annualreviews.org](http://polisci.annualreviews.org)

This article's doi:  
10.1146/annurev-polisci-072012-113556

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## Keywords

elections, voting, participation, campaign spending

## Abstract

A review of the evidence leaves no doubt election campaigns do matter in a variety of important ways. The serious questions concern when, where, why, how, for what, and for whom they matter. This essay reviews a selection of high-quality studies that address these questions, focusing on several distinct lines of research that have been particularly productive in recent years: on the effects of events and advertising in presidential elections; on the effects of campaign spending in elections for down-ballot offices; on the effects of mobilization campaigns on voting turnout; on campaign influences on the vote choice (with special attention to the effects of negative campaigns); and on the nature of persuadable voters. It also offers some suggestions of areas where additional research should be productive.

1.1

## INTRODUCTION

Candidates, parties, individuals, and nonparty organizations spent more than \$8 billion on federal election campaigns during the 2011–2012 cycle; with state and local campaigns costing an additional \$2.8 billion, total recorded spending on the 2012 campaigns approached \$11 billion (Federal Election Commission 2013, National Institute on Money in State Politics 2014). The countless hours donated by campaign volunteers and other extensive campaign activities not covered by reporting requirements also confirm that, in addition to presumably astute political elites and their wealthy allies, millions of ordinary Americans do not doubt that campaigns matter. They are right: Several generations of empirical research confirm that campaigns do in fact matter—at least some of the time. The “minimal effects” thesis that initially inspired much of this research has not survived it. The question is not whether campaigns matter, but where, when, for what, and for whom they matter. In this essay, I review how these questions have been addressed and, to some extent, answered by political and other social scientists in recent years. My discussion is confined to election campaigns in the United States, necessarily leaving aside the extensive and vibrant body of research on elections elsewhere for lack of both space and adequate familiarity with this literature.

## STUDYING CAMPAIGN EFFECTS

As essential components of democratic politics, election campaigns attract attention from scholars across the social sciences as well as from journalists, memoirists, and historians. The data and methods employed to study political campaigns and their consequences are remarkably eclectic. Approaches include narrative case studies of particular campaigns, systematic analyses of sets of cases, analyses of observational data on campaign activities (including advertising, spending, field operations, and candidate appearances) and their aggregate effects, survey research (including single- and multiple-wave surveys, rolling cross-sectional surveys, and panel studies using diverse strategies for drawing and interrogating samples of citizens), laboratory and field experiments, and large-scale data mining of social media sources. As they become available, new data sources and techniques are quickly exploited and applied to the study of campaigns, which are themselves venues for continuing innovation. The study of election campaigns and their effects is anything but static.

Investigations of campaign effects have been as eclectic in their theoretical underpinnings as in their research strategies. Campaigns aim to influence the behavior of individual citizens, persuading those who might do otherwise to show up at the polls and to make the “right” choice. The study of campaign effects is thus the study of when, how, and why campaign messages influence or fail to affect individual behavior. Although many studies of campaign effects are necessarily agnostic about just how campaign activities ultimately register at the individual level (all studies based on aggregate data, for example), explicit or implicit notions of how information provided by campaigns influences knowledge, perceptions, opinions, and behavior underlie all of them. These ideas have been drawn from economics, psychology (social, personality, and cognitive), and communications as well as political science. They are generally applied to predict and account for results rather than serving as the focus of hypothesis testing, although research on campaigns has made some contributions to the development of these fields.

Questions about where, when, how, for what, and for whom campaigns matter have thus been addressed with a wide variety of data and methods and from a diverse set of theoretical perspectives; the combinations and permutations have produced an extraordinarily rich and varied literature, far too large to evaluate comprehensively in this article. I focus on a selection of studies that



address the most important controversies, present the most compelling substantive findings, offer the most original insights, or employ the most innovative and promising methods.

## WHEN, WHERE, AND WHY DO CAMPAIGNS MATTER?

### Presidential Campaigns

The suspicion that campaigns might actually not matter arose primarily from findings reported in research on presidential elections. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues' classic early studies of voting behavior (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, Berelson et al. 1954) concluded that presidential campaigns had little effect on voting decisions, which were determined by real experiences between elections and by enduring loyalties to parties and other social groups. A later line of research showed that presidential election outcomes could be predicted with considerable accuracy by so-called fundamentals such as the state of the economy, distribution of partisans in the electorate, and ideological locations of the candidates before the campaigns had even taken place (e.g., Tufte 1978, Rosenstone 1983, Lewis-Beck & Rice 1992, Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2014). Indeed, models based on such fundamental conditions could predict results more accurately than polls taken during the campaigns (Gelman & King 1993). Such findings directly challenged the relevance of the strategies, events, debates, speeches, ads, and gaffes that transfix news reporters during presidential contests and are later parsed by scholars seeking explanations for the outcomes of specific elections. If only the fundamentals matter, campaigns do not.

On the other hand, if only the fundamentals matter, Al Gore would now be putting the finishing touches on his presidential library. The idea that the fundamentals are both crucial to and insufficient for explaining presidential election outcomes has inspired several major investigations that, from different approaches, have converged on something of a consensus. Gelman & King (1993) proposed that campaigns are necessary for the fundamentals to be realized: they "enlighten" otherwise uninformed voters about the fundamentals (how the economy is doing, where their partisan identities and group interests lie), which thus become increasingly predictive of preferences as the campaign progresses. Erikson & Wlezien (2012) have explored this idea most fully, analyzing 1,971 pre-election polls taken in campaigns from 1952 through 2008 to examine how vote intentions evolve over the campaign season. They conclude that the fundamentals establish an equilibrium distribution of vote intentions that campaign events—particularly the party conventions and presidential debates—may disturb but whose impact is generally fleeting; insofar as "shocks" disturb this equilibrium, they are likely to matter only if they occur close to the election and so do not have time to decay. Some more subtle campaign effects persist, however, becoming in a sense part of the fundamentals (by, for example, locating the candidates more accurately in ideological space).

The idea that campaigns help—and may even be necessary—to make the fundamentals apply is also a core finding of several other major studies. Kenski et al. (2010), reporting results from the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) for 2008, emphasize this point. In addition to showing that "[c]ommunications did its job in linking the candidates to the conditions that political science considers important in voting decisions" (Kenski et al. 2010, p. 7), they also find that responses to specific campaign messages add substantially to explaining the variance in voting decisions (responses to the fundamentals and demography accounted for about 80% of the variance; with responses to campaign messages added to the model, this increased to 94%). The NAES, which also conducted studies in 2000 and 2004, interviews rolling cross sections of citizens over the year leading up to the election, reinterviewing a subset after the election to produce a panel component. These telephone surveys provide very large numbers of cases (more than



100,000 for 2000 and 2004; 57,000 in 2008) and offer a unique perspective on the dynamics of voter responses to campaigns (Johnston et al. 2004; Romer et al. 2006; for technical information on the studies, see Romer et al. 2004). These landmark studies have produced abundant evidence that voters respond in systematic and intelligible ways to specific campaign events. The datasets they have produced remain a primary resource for studying presidential campaigns and elections.

Vavreck (2009) addresses the issue from another angle. Her analysis focuses on one fundamental, the state of the economy, arguing that it is determinative—except when the candidate it favors fails to exploit his advantage and the other candidate, against the odds, manages to change the subject. Examining presidential elections from 1952 through 2008, she reports that in 11 of 15 cases, the candidate favored by economic conditions won by conducting what she calls “clarifying” campaigns that kept the economy front and center. “The economy matters because the candidate who benefits from it talks about it a lot during the campaign and this makes voters more aware of the condition and this candidate’s relationship to it” (Vavreck 2009, p. 158). What she calls “insurgent” campaigns—those of candidates who want to frame the decision as being about something other than the economy—face an uphill battle. They do occasionally succeed: Kennedy with fear of the United States falling behind the Soviet Union, Nixon in 1968 with crime and race, Carter in 1976 with honesty and outsider status, Bush in 2000 with an attractive domestic agenda and Clinton fatigue. However, in all but one of these four cases (Ford in 1976), the candidate favored by the economy failed to take full advantage of it; hence no Gore presidential library. It is worth noting that three of these cases involved open seats, raising the possibility that credit for a good economy is personal but not necessarily partisan. Sides & Vavreck’s (2013) unique real-time analysis of the 2012 presidential election (published in segments online as the campaign season progressed), based on 45,000 respondents interviewed three times, also finds that the campaigns served to highlight the fundamentals—in this case, the economy and partisanship—which became more potent in shaping the intended vote over time. The economy, though less than robust, had grown sufficiently for Obama to mount a successful “clarifying” campaign that, along with the unusually high levels of party-line voting, produced his victory.

In Vavreck’s analysis then, campaigns—and campaign strategies—do matter; the economy is usually decisive, but only because advantaged candidates are usually shrewd enough to make it the center of their campaigns. Popkin (2012) also undertakes a systematic analysis of postwar presidential campaigns, including primaries, to argue that what presidential candidates do and say makes a crucial difference. Like Vavreck, he finds the losers at least as instructive as the winners: in addition to Gore, his examples include Thomas Dewey in 1948 and Hillary Clinton and Rudolph Giuliani in 2008. Generalizing from an extensive review of postwar campaigns, Popkin concludes that a winning campaign requires the creation of an attractive public identity (involving the candidate’s family as well as the candidate), developing a vision for the future, and fielding and leading a competent, flexible campaign organization able to respond effectively to the inevitable surprises of the campaign season. The prominent losers failed most conspicuously on this third necessity. But the first two also remind us that campaigns enlighten citizens not only about the economy and its connection to the candidates, but also about their issue positions, qualifications, competence, and character, a point also made in all of the other studies mentioned so far.

Granting that presidential campaigns matter, what specific campaign activities and events actually influence citizens’ behavior? The consensus in the literature is that at least one set of regular campaign events, the national conventions, usually have a measurable effect that is relatively resistant to decay (Campbell et al. 1992; Holbrook 1994, 1996; Shaw 1999a; Erikson & Wlezien 2012; Kenski et al. 2010; Sides & Vavreck 2013). These are of course the venues where candidates



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and parties make their maximum effort to exploit whatever fundamentals favor their side or to reframe the choice to discount adverse conditions. They also attract broad public attention and so are prime occasions for so-called enlightenment. The impact of another set of customary events, the presidential and vice-presidential debates, is less certain. Shaw (1999a) finds presidential debates to have significant and durable effects, especially if they involve blunders; other researchers have found little in the way of sustained effects, including none from the legendary 1960 Nixon–Kennedy debates (Erikson & Wlezien 2012), although ephemeral movements in the polls do often follow lopsided debate performances, as with the first debate between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012 (Sides & Vavreck 2013).

Beyond these set-piece events, all presidential campaigns engage extensively in advertising and use every available medium for reaching potential voters. The biggest investment is usually in television advertising, which campaign professionals clearly believe is crucial. Examining data on statewide television advertising by both candidates in the 1988–1996 presidential contests, Shaw (1999b) concludes that an advantage in advertising coverage did translate into a significant aggregate advantage in the statewide vote, although any observed imbalance was far too small to be decisive in any of these elections. Johnston et al. (2004), analyzing the NAES data, conclude that advertising was decisive in 2000; George W. Bush outspent Al Gore during the campaign’s final week in the battleground states, where he gained support while losing it elsewhere. Using the same data, Huber & Arceneaux (2007, p. 974) executed a clever natural experiment by examining voters living in nonbattleground states but in media markets shared with battleground states and find that the campaigns had “substantial persuasive effects.” Examining county-level data on TV ads and voting results in 2004 and 2008, Franz & Ridout (2010, p. 321) also find significant persuasive effects, particularly in 2008, but note that “the estimated impact of advertising was never huge.” Kenski et al. (2010), having matched aggregate data on radio and broadcast and cable TV advertising coverage to the zip codes of their respondents, find that the balance of ads had an immediate if modest positive effect on support for the advantaged candidate; ads on all three media have significant effects, but when combined, the effect of radio ads dominates.

The evidence that campaign ads do sometimes affect voters’ preferences in presidential races is compelling. The remaining questions concern how large and durable these effects are. Hill et al. (2013), again using the NAES data for 2000, agree with Huber & Arceneaux (2007) that the effects are fairly large but also find them to be, like the effects of campaign events, ephemeral. Sides & Vavreck (2013) find that in 2012, the candidates benefited if they had a net advantage in ad volume in a given media market, but that benefit was very short lived, disappearing after one or two days; neither candidate developed a sustained advantage from advertising as their efforts largely neutralized each other. An experimental study of advertising in the 2006 Texas gubernatorial campaign also found that televised ads had a notable but brief effect on voters’ preferences (Gerber et al. 2011). The rapid decay of advertising effects implies that ads are most effective close to the election (Shaw 1999b). The obvious strategic implication is that campaigns should concentrate their advertising just before voters go to the polls—an increasingly complicated matter now that so many people cast their votes before the official election day.

The dominance of fundamentals (once they are brought to the attention of voters during campaigns) and the rapid decay of the impact of ads or other “shocks” to the equilibrium implies that other events’ effects are also ephemeral. Although they attract much media attention during campaigns, events such as Romney’s denigration of the “47%” or Obama’s response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012 are likely to prove consequential only when they occur just before election day, if at all. The professionals running the campaigns evidently thought that these two events were of major consequence (Jamieson 2013a), but they seem to have had little actual effect on voters (Sides & Vavreck 2013).





## Non-Presidential Campaigns: The Crucial Role of Money

Presidential campaigns are unique in a variety of ways: intensive media coverage, lavish and relatively balanced campaign resources, and comparatively high levels of voter interest and attention. Virtually no one goes to the polls without some knowledge and opinions of the candidates; for example, more than 96% of voters in the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) could locate both Obama and Romney on the liberal–conservative scale, and virtually all of them offered “feeling thermometer” ratings of both candidates. This cannot be said of many other elections; some contests for US senator, governor, and mayor also inspire saturation media coverage and campaign advertising on both sides, but most do not. In circumstances where voters begin with little or no knowledge of one or both of the contestants, or where the cue of a party label is unavailable, the potential for the information provided by campaigns to influence citizens’ choice is obviously enhanced. In particular, where one candidate begins the campaign more familiar to voters than the opponent—as is typical when an incumbent office holder is challenged for reelection—the opponent’s campaign is likely to matter a great deal.

The evidence for this conclusion derives primarily from the study of how campaign spending affects election results. The initial research focus was on congressional elections, enabled by the advent of reliable spending data beginning with the 1972 elections. The ensuing literature (summarized by Squire 1995 and Jacobson 2013) leaves no room to doubt that campaign spending matters. The central controversy has been the extent to which the effects of spending differ for incumbents and challengers. Jacobson (1978, 1980) provided evidence based on ordinary least squares (OLS) models that they did differ: Other things equal, the more House and Senate challengers spent, the better they did at the polls; the more incumbents spent on their campaigns, the worse they did. This was not because campaigning cost them votes; once the challenger’s spending was taken into account, the incumbent’s spending made no apparent difference. The conclusion that incumbents’ campaigns were ineffective, implying that they would do just as well without spending anything, is obviously implausible. The problem is that campaign spending is endogenous: Challengers expected to do well raise more money, as do incumbents who face more serious electoral threats. Because spending by challengers is greater when their prospects are better, OLS analyses exaggerate its effects; because incumbents raise and spend less money when their prospects are better, these analyses underestimate the effects of their expenditures. What is unclear is by how much.

The problem, characterized variously as simultaneity bias (mutual causation of money and expected votes) or missing-variable bias (unobserved determinants of both spending and outcomes), has been addressed in a variety of ways with rather disparate findings. At one extreme, results simply replicate the initial finding that challenger spending matters and incumbent spending does not (e.g., Jacobson 1985, 1990, 2013; Abramowitz 1988; Ansolabehere & Gerber 1994). Other studies, also using aggregate data, report that marginal returns on spending are greater for challengers than for incumbents but to a lesser extent than OLS analyses would suggest (Bartels 1991, Goidel & Gross 1994, Kenney & McBurnett 1994), and still others argue that spending by both incumbents and challengers has about the same effect or that incumbent spending is actually more potent (Green & Krasno 1988, 1990; Erikson & Palfrey 1998; Goldstein & Freedman 2000). One study, based on analysis pairs of House candidates competing for a second time, concluded that no one’s spending makes any difference (Levitt 1994), although the sample and the findings are far too atypical to deserve much weight.

Despite these conflicting results, the reasons for expecting marginal returns on campaign spending—that is, marginal returns on campaigning—to be greater for challengers than for incumbents are compelling. Incumbents usually begin the campaign season with a large advantage in



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familiarity which, if retained, guarantees comfortable reelection. Most are also sufficiently attentive to constituents to begin the campaign period with a cushion of public regard as well. Voters are very unlikely to turn them out without a good reason and an acceptable replacement, and it is usually up to the challenger's campaign to inform them of both the reason and the alternative (Jacobson 2006a). Diminishing returns apply to campaigning, so the marginal returns on campaign activities are smaller for incumbents (coming on top of past campaigns and extensive efforts to cultivate constituents) than for challengers (and other nonincumbents) who have not previously engaged voters at this level. This does not, however, imply that incumbents' campaigns are inconsequential. An incumbent who failed to respond to a vigorous challenge would allow the opponent to set the agenda and frame the choice—particularly dangerous when adverse political or personal circumstances require the incumbent to counter with a new message (Jacobson 2006a, pp. 205–6). Incumbents know this and so have always denied researchers the natural experiment in which a low-spending incumbent faces a high-spending challenger. We know that low-spending challengers virtually never win, no matter what the incumbent spends; and high-spending challengers sometimes win, no matter what the incumbent spends (Jacobson 2013). But because incumbents always spend large sums against high-spending challengers, the high-spending challenger/low-spending incumbent treatment is never observed, and causal ambiguity thus seems unavoidable in analyses relying on aggregate spending data and election results.

Still, a variety of other evidence supports the conclusion that campaign spending has greater marginal effect for challengers than for incumbents. Spending by House challengers narrows the incumbent's advantage in campaign contacts, familiarity, and evaluations, whereas incumbents' spending has no effect on these variables (Jacobson 2013). Panel studies of change in voters' responses to candidates over time show that greater spending benefits challengers significantly more than it does incumbents by generating positive evaluations and higher levels of support (Jacobson 1990, 2006a, 2006b; Kahn & Kenney 1999). Studies of campaign spending effects in a variety of other electoral contexts usually but not invariably find that spending by challengers has the greater impact. This result appears in studies of elections for state legislature (Giles & Pritchard 1985, Donnay & Ramsden 1995, Gierzynski & Breaux 1996), mayor (Holbrook & Weinschenk 2014), city council (Krebs 1998), state high courts (Bonneau 2007, Bonneau & Cann 2011), and, in primaries, for governor (Bardwell 2003). The exception is general-election contests for governor, where the evidence suggests that spending effects do not differ systematically according to incumbency status (Leal 2006, Brown & Jacobson 2008). Some experimental work also speaks to this issue by examining the effects of specific types of advertising on candidate support. Gerber (2004) persuaded five campaigns (for mayor in Connecticut, for the state legislature in New Jersey and Connecticut, and for the US House in Connecticut in both the primary and general elections) to allow the use of their mailing lists to conduct experiments with randomized direct mail. In every case, the mailings increased support for the challenger but not the incumbent. Panagopoulos & Green (2008) treated half of a matched sample of 49 cities with mayoral elections involving incumbents in 2005 with nonpartisan radio ads encouraging people to vote; incumbents in the treated cities did substantially worse.

Campaign spending has also been found to add votes in open congressional districts (Jacobson 1978, 1985, 2013), in legislative primaries (Breaux & Gierzynski 1991), and for ballot initiatives (Hadwiger 1990, de Figueiredo et al. 2011). And to come full circle, Bartels (2008) finds that campaign spending differentials have also affected presidential election results; other things equal, the candidate who spends more money wins more votes. In short, campaign spending has been found to matter for at least some candidates in almost every electoral context where its effects on results have been examined, and because spending is arguably the best summary measure of campaign effort, these results leave no doubt that campaigns do matter. But how much they matter





depends on the electoral context: more when cues such as party identification or prior information about candidates and issues are scarce; less in contexts where free information is abundant, partisan cues are available, and the candidates are already familiar to voters.

The most intriguing current question in the study of campaign spending effects is the extent to which the huge influx of independent spending by political parties, wealthy individuals, and nonparty committees unleashed by recent Supreme Court decisions has affected congressional (and other) election outcomes. Total independent spending from all sources in all House and Senate races grew nearly fivefold from 2004 to 2012, from \$150 million to \$715 million (Jacobson 2014). Journalists' reviews (e.g., Eggen & Farnam 2012) and some initial statistical analyses (Farrar-Myers et al. 2013, Hsu 2014) suggest that so far the net effects of these efforts range from very modest to nonexistent, mainly because outside money usually augments campaigns in which the candidates are already spending lavishly (hence diminishing returns apply) and because dueling independent campaigns tend to offset one another. But these conclusions are far from definitive for general congressional elections, and the consequences of independent campaigns at other levels and in primaries have yet to be investigated systematically.

## HOW AND FOR WHAT DO CAMPAIGNS MATTER?

### Turnout

Campaigns matter insofar as they influence citizens' electoral choices. They are aimed at persuading people to vote—or sometimes not to vote—and, if they do, to vote for a particular candidate. These decisions may be taken simultaneously but are conceptually distinct. Full-scale campaigns invest heavily in identifying and mobilizing prospective voters for their side; nonpartisan organizations that view electoral participation as essential to a healthy democracy also promote turnout. How effective are these efforts? Inspired by the seminal work of Gerber & Green (1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001), experimental studies of the effectiveness of various mobilization tactics now number in the hundreds. One reason such studies have become so popular is that the effects of campaigns on turnout are particularly suited to rigorous field experiments, allowing unobtrusive randomized interventions in the context of actual elections and with highly accurate data from official records on the dependent variable, voting participation (Green et al. 2012). A recent meta-analysis of the findings from an exhaustive collection of these studies provides a comprehensive summary of what has been learned from them so far (Green et al. 2012). The most effective tactics are personal: Door-to-door canvassing increases turnout by an average of about 2.5 percentage points; volunteer phone calls raise it by about 1.9 points, compared to 1.0 points for calls from commercial phone banks; automated phone messages are ineffective. Direct mail has a small (average, 0.16 percentage points) but nonetheless statistically significant effect. An experiment with text messaging reported large effects (4.1 points in Dale & Strauss 2009; see also Malhotra et al. 2011), but Green et al. (2012, p. 8) regard this as an “intriguing anomaly” for now.

There is little evidence from these studies that the specific messages matter much; for example, messages to potential voters emphasizing the closeness of the election, the civic duty of voting, or the need to vote to encourage elected officials to be attentive to their neighborhood were of equal effectiveness (Gerber & Green 2000a). There is one important exception, however: Experiments suggest that interventions ratcheting up social pressure by reminding people of their voting histories and those of their neighbors or by mentioning that their participation or lack thereof would be a matter of public record or scholarly investigation are unusually effective. “When social norms are asserted forcefully, the effects tend to be quite large, and even prerecorded phone calls conveying social pressure messages significantly increase turnout” (Green et al. 2012,



p. 10). Still, threatening to publicly expose voting slackers is unlikely to be adopted as a tactic on any significant scale by either partisan or nonpartisan mobilization campaigns.

Taken together, these results confirm that the traditional mobilization campaigns using volunteers door-to-door or on the phone do in fact pay off. So, evidently, does the practice of first identifying people who plan to vote and then calling a second time to remind them to do so (Green et al. 2012). There is also evidence of a spillover effect; canvassing one person in a household increases the turnout of that person's housemates, with an effect about 60% as large as that for the person canvassed (Nickerson 2008).

A rather different experiment on spillover effects has been reported by Bond et al. (2012). They treated about 60 million of a sample of 61 million Facebook users during the 2010 congressional elections with messages encouraging them to vote, information about where to vote, an "I voted" clickable button, a counter indicating how many other Facebook users had already reported voting, and a display of pictures of their Facebook friends who had voted. Another 611,444 were given the same treatment but without seeing any friends' faces, and a third group received no message. The turnout among those who received the social message was 0.39 percentage points higher than in either of the other groups, with all of this difference accounted for by the presence of close friends among those pictured as voters. The effect is not large in percentage terms, to be sure, but with the huge number of cases it is statistically significant ( $p = 0.02$ ), and the authors estimate that it produced an additional 282,000 validated votes nationwide (Bond et al. 2012).

One final set of tactics to manipulate turnout has not, for obvious reasons, been subject to published experimental or other systematic research: tactics aimed at deterring voting. In the final count, a vote subtracted from the other side is equal to a vote added to one's own. Unidentified, presumably Republican activists are routinely accused of trying to dampen turnout in minority neighborhoods where Republicans have little hope of winning votes. An example is the unsigned flyer that appeared in minority neighborhoods in Baltimore in 2002 reading, "URGENT NOTICE. Come out to vote on November sixth. Before you come to vote make sure you pay your parking tickets, motor vehicle tickets, overdue rent, and most important any warrants" (Tibit & Craig 2003). The election was actually on November 5. In 2010, Republican donors in Nevada openly sponsored a "Don't Vote" campaign urging Latino voters to stay home to punish Democrats for failing to deliver on immigration reform (Jacobson 2013). We have no evidence as to whether such campaigns are effective, and it is hard to imagine an ethical field experiment to find out. But clever researchers might be able to treat specific instances as natural experiments.

## The Vote Choice

Campaigns can get people to vote who would not otherwise do so. A large body of research indicates that campaigns can also influence the choices voters make once they do decide to vote by providing information and making connections. The most elementary piece of information is the candidate's existence and name, and if there is one thing campaigns can unambiguously accomplish, it is to raise voters' awareness of candidates (Jacobson 2006a, 2006b, 2013; Elms & Sniderman 2006; Fridkin & Kenney 2011). This by itself is an important effect because voters are reluctant to vote for unfamiliar candidates (Jacobson 2013), but some awareness of the candidate is also a precondition for other kinds of information to come into play. Information provided by campaigns has been found to affect vote choice in several linked ways. First, voters learn things about the candidates and issues that are relevant to their voting calculus (Popkin 1991, Bartels 1993, Johnston et al. 2004, Alvarez 1997; Vavreck 2009, Fridkin & Kenney 2011). Campaigns inform voters about candidates' qualifications, traits, issue positions, and competence as well as existence. They also raise awareness of politically relevant conditions, such as the state of



the economy, and national problems. More crucially, they build connections between information about candidates and issues and voters' existing attitudes and beliefs. This is commonly labeled priming, defined as reminding "prospective voters of the electoral relevance of existing attitudes and perceptions" (Bartels 2006, pp. 84–85), which changes "the weight voters attach to different considerations" (Hillygus 2010, p. 3; see also Bartels 2006).

The most common evidence of priming is the rising salience of partisan identities over the campaign period. Although Bartels (2006), analyzing the 1980–2000 ANES surveys, finds only a modest increase in the impact of party identification on the vote choice between Labor Day and the election, studies with longer time frames confirm that partisanship shapes preferences to an increasing extent over the course of the election year (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, Erikson & Wlezien 2012, Sides & Vavreck 2013). Presidential campaigns are, partly for this reason, polarizing events; for every president from Nixon through Obama, partisan differences in approval ratings have been widest during the quarter in which he sought reelection.<sup>1</sup> Campaigns have been found to raise the salience of a variety of other considerations, most prominently the state of the economy (Vavreck 2009, Sides & Vavreck 2013, Erikson & Wlezien 2012), but also ideology (Gelman & King 1993, Bartels 2006, Hillygus & Shields 2008), candidate images (Druckman 2004), and diverse policy issues (Druckman 2004, Kenski et al. 2010).

Of course, campaigns compete by offering different pieces of information and attempting to prime different considerations depending on how their designers want voters to think about the choices they face. There is little evidence that campaigns can alter voters' basic predispositions; rather, they work by inducing voters to frame the choice (that is, to answer the question, "What is this election about?") in a way that wins voters to their side (Hillygus & Shields 2008, Vavreck 2009). For example, Kenski et al. (2010) demonstrate that greater exposure to the 2008 Obama campaign's ads made voters more likely to accept the campaign's central theme that electing John McCain would be like electing George W. Bush for a third term—a belief that, other things equal, significantly increased the likelihood of voting for Obama. More generally, Popkin (1991) argues that campaign communications influence voters by informing them of the connections between their own lives and interests and the character of political leaders they choose, policies the government adopts, and how competently it governs. Campaign persuasion from this perspective is exactly like other forms of political persuasion: giving people good reasons of their own to do what you want them to do.

### Are Negative Campaigns More Effective?

What sorts of messages are most effective in moving voters? Campaign professionals evidently believe that negative messages attacking the opponent are more effective than positive ads about their own candidate or ads contrasting the two, which explains why nearly two-thirds of the ads broadcast in the 2012 presidential campaigns were purely negative attacks on the opposition (Fowler & Ridout 2013). A substantial body of research has now accumulated that casts serious doubt on the special efficacy of negative ads. The topic has attracted a sufficient number of studies to sustain meta-analyses (Lau et al. 1999, 2007). Lau et al. not only report the results of their meta-analyses but also provide short summaries of each of the 111 studies analyzed, making these two articles the first stop for anyone interested in exploring this literature. They find that negative ads are significantly more memorable and informative than other ads, albeit by a small margin,

<sup>1</sup>This observation is based on my analysis of all available Gallup Polls from this period; see Jacobson (2011) for evidence from administrations prior to Obama's.



but have no effect on political interest. They do reduce support for the target, but they also reduce support for the attacker by at least as much, and the net effect is statistically a wash. Thus “the research literature does not bear out the proposition that negative political campaigns ‘work’ in shifting votes toward those who wage them” (Lau et al. 2007, p. 1,183).

Neither does negative advertising generally reduce turnout. The idea that negative ads would turn voters off and keep them from the polls got strong initial support from Ansolabehere et al.’s (1994) estimate that negative campaigning produces a five-percentage-point drop-off in participation. This striking result inspired more than 50 additional research projects testing the demobilization hypothesis, which on the whole they did not support. Meta-analysis suggests that negative campaigns do not systematically suppress turnout and may even “have a slight mobilizing effect” (Lau et al. 2007). Negative campaigns do, however, have systematic effects on things other than participation and vote choice. Citizens exposed to them report modestly but consistently lower political efficacy and trust in government, and here, if anywhere, is where criticisms of negative campaigning seem warranted (Lau et al. 2007).

## FOR WHOM DO CAMPAIGNS MATTER?

Campaigns matter, but not for everyone. The impact of campaign messages necessarily varies according to the characteristics of individual voters. Many people participate without any encouragement; others abstain no matter how they are prodded. In partisan elections, most voters have made their decision when the candidates are slated, if not before, and are impervious to the information supplied by the campaigns. However, more than enough people remain whose behavior is not predetermined for campaigns to have measurable effects on aggregate participation and election outcomes. Who are these people?

It is firmly established that people with more money, education, and other resources are over-represented in electorates and that younger people and some ethnic minorities are underrepresented (Leighley & Nagler 2013). Experiments designed to measure the effects of mobilization campaigns are often based on the premise, explicit or implicit, that boosting turnout is normatively desirable because higher turnout produces a more representative electorate. Ironically, a recent meta-analysis of the results of 24 experiments reported in 11 papers suggests that interventions designed to increase turnout actually make the representation problem worse (Enos et al. 2013). Campaigns can mobilize both low-propensity voters [demographically skewed toward lower socioeconomic status (SES)] and high-propensity voters (with the opposite skew), but the latter are easier to contact and respond more readily, so the net effect of these interventions in most cases is to “exacerbate the disparities between voters and the voting-eligible population” (Enos et al. 2013, p. 14). Thus, routine campaign mobilization efforts may contribute to class bias in the electorate simply by using their scarce resources efficiently, going after the higher-SES citizens who are cheaper to reach and more apt to respond (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993).

Citizens also vary systematically in their susceptibility to persuasion by political campaigns. Researchers have proposed a variety of methods for determining who is subject to campaign influences and why. “Swing,” “floating,” or “persuadable” voters have been defined as those who change their preferences between elections (Shaw 2008), have less polarized opinions of the candidates and parties (Mayer 2008), are initially undecided or not firmly committed to a candidate (Dimock et al. 2008, Kenski et al. 2010), or are cross-pressured because they disagree with their party or its candidate on salient issues (Hillygus & Shields 2008). All of these criteria are designed to identify voters who might conceivably be induced to vote for either party’s candidate and hence are appropriate campaign targets. Remarkably, all of these definitions lead to estimates of a similar proportion of persuadable voters (at least in presidential elections), somewhere between 20% and



25%, although by definitions based on uncertain preferences early in the election season, that proportion falls below 10% by the end of the campaign period (Kenski et al. 2010).

These analyses also suggest that persuadable voters are a heterogeneous group. The idea that they are typically the least informed, least involved, and least partisan voters emerged from the classic voting studies (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, Berelson et al. 1954, Campbell et al. 1960) and has remained orthodox on both theoretical and empirical grounds (Mayer & Teixeira 2008). Voters without strong political views and limited political knowledge should be less resistant to campaign primes and messages and more influenced by the information they learn during the campaign, as indeed they are (Zaller 2004, Vavreck 2009). But Hillygus & Shields (2008) argue that even knowledgeable partisans may be persuadable if they hold opinions at odds with the policies espoused by their party or its candidates and are made aware of this fact. Analyzing data from a 2000 postelection survey of 2,831 respondents conducted by Knowledge Networks, Hillygus & Shields demonstrate that such cross-pressured partisans tend to defect at higher rates and that the effect is significantly greater if they live in battleground states or in states with many campaign visits by the opposing party's candidate. Defections are also significantly higher among those cross-pressured partisans reporting higher levels of awareness and attention to the campaign, indicating that campaign effects are not confined to the uninformed and relatively indifferent (Hillygus & Shields 2008, pp. 90–93). Their analysis confirms the potential utility of wedge issues—those that divide the rival party—for campaigns aspiring to attract votes across party lines.

Of course, campaigns on both sides can and do play this game, and at least in presidential elections, the usual net result is a standoff. Campbell (2008) examines swing voters (defined by a combination of party identification and net likes and dislikes about the two parties) using ANES data from 1952–2004 and finds that in only one of the 14 elections—1960—did a swing-vote majority determine the winner. In other years, “the division of the swing vote either reinforced or merely muted the verdict of those who were settled in their votes early in the campaign” (Campbell 2008, p. 128). Most persuadable partisans end up voting for their party's candidate, with the small proportion of pure independents either splitting evenly or going with the decisive winner (Keith et al. 1992, Clymer & Winneg 2008, Sides & Vavreck 2013). Thus, the pursuit of swing voters is simply another way in which campaigns tend to incorporate and realize the fundamentals.

The proportion of persuadable voters is clearly larger in elections below the presidential level, as evident, for example, in the sizable incumbency advantage found in congressional and state elections (Ansolabehere & Snyder 2002, Jacobson 2013) and the greater volatility of election outcomes at these levels from one election to the next.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that voters have little prior knowledge of the candidates and remain reluctant to support people they know nothing about, the proportion open to influence by the new information supplied by campaigns will be greater.

The way in which campaigns influence the persuadable also varies among individuals. Theoretical accounts of how messages work propose two distinct cognitive paths: online processing and memory-based processing (Petty & Cacioppo 1985, Hastie & Park 1986). With online processing, individuals respond to new information by updating embedded attitudes, and the changes are durable. Revamping a running tally in this way requires “effortful processing” and thus some motivation to exert the effort (Petty & Cacioppo 1985; Lodge et al. 1989, 1995). With memory-based processing, expressed attitudes are constructed on the spot with little mental effort according to whatever information is in memory at the moment, with no expectation that any changes will

<sup>2</sup>For example, the standard deviation of the presidential vote swing across US House districts between 2004 and 2008 was 3.3 percentage points; for House candidates in the same districts, it was 6.0 points. For valid comparison, the analysis is confined to the 328 districts where major party candidates competed in both elections and where district boundaries remained unchanged between the elections.





be stored in memory. How campaign messages are processed depends, then, on how motivated and engaged individuals are in the election. The rapid decay of the effects of campaign messages and events suggests that memory-based processing predominates; it also suggests that most voters are not deeply engaged in presidential elections and, by this measure, even less so in elections for down-ballot offices (Hill et al. 2013). But some online processing is also evident in the way that campaigns cumulatively tighten the alignment between prior political attitudes and candidate preferences over the election season.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars have made remarkable strides over the past several decades in testing for the effects of diverse campaign activities on the behavior of voters and outcomes of elections. The scale of this enterprise is too great for exhaustive coverage in a review of this size. I have said nothing, for example, about the research on how news media coverage of campaigns affects voters, nor have I discussed any of the valuable systematic collections of campaign case studies that have appeared in recent years (e.g., Magleby & Patterson 2008, Magleby 2011). The insights provided by these projects are essential to a thorough understanding of how campaigns can matter, and they should not be ignored by anyone interested in the questions addressed here.

In the research I have been able to cover, several things stand out. First, the study of campaign effects has been enriched immeasurably by the creation, dissemination, and integration of new large datasets. The Wisconsin Advertising Project (begun in 1998 and continued through 2008; succeeded in 2010 by the Wesleyan Media Project), ad data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group, the NAES surveys, the Knowledge Networks surveys, YouGov's Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project, and data supplied by Facebook are only a few of the most prominent sources of a vast quantity of fresh data now available for examining campaign effects. Scholars have been able to integrate these collections, often adding their own variables, with fruitful results. The influx of new data is likely to continue, and plenty is still to be learned from what is already in hand, so work derived from projects of this kind should continue to flourish.

Second, research on several important questions has been sufficiently abundant to support meta-analyses that can effectively summarize what at first glance seem to be disparate and contradictory findings. As new studies are added to the mix, Bayesian updating allows the science to advance, clarifying what we do and do not know. A different but also productive kind of meta-analysis occurs when researchers use the aggregate results of hundreds or thousands of diverse surveys to measure campaign effects across time and space. No single survey or study can be other than suggestive, but when multiple sources and studies converge on a conclusion, we can have some confidence that it approximates reality.

Third, although both experimental and observational studies remain informative and essential, carefully designed field experiments offer the best prospect for nailing down basic causal relationships. Randomized treatments in real electoral settings provide both internal and external validity for estimates of campaign effects. To date, the great majority of published field experiments have focused on turnout, in part because studying actual campaign advertising experimentally requires the cooperation of people who run campaigns, and they have higher priorities than facilitating scientific research. Green et al. (2014) offer some ideas about how to overcome this and other more technical problems in conducting field experiments on media effects and are correct in designating this as an important direction for future research.

The question of when and how campaigns matter remains a moving target, for campaigners are continually trying new ways to reach and move voters. Our knowledge of the effects of microtargeting (Jamieson 2013b)—narrowly focused messages aimed at narrowly defined





subgroups—remains rudimentary, as does our understanding of campaigning via social media and of saturation advertising by outside groups. Scholars have only begun to consider how campaigns affect different ethnic groups (Abrajano 2010). And perhaps the ultimate question—how campaigns at every level matter for how we are governed—remains understudied and largely unanswered.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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