

Constructing the Campaign
Brief Comments on Methods of Research

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Studying Campaign Discourse: A Multimethod Approach

This project integrates the analysis of the voter's media environment with the considerations the voter brings to bear in the decision process. The aim of this study is to understand how voters make decisions and construct candidate images by studying candidate and media discourse in the voters' media environment. Therefore, our study involves multiple research methods for assessing what people know and believe, as well as careful monitoring of the citizens' information sources.

We concentrated our research in four diverse communities: Los Angeles, California; Boston, Massachusetts; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Moorhead, Minnesota (next to Fargo, North Dakota). These communities represent media markets ranging from very small (Moorhead) to very large (Los Angeles), a range of ethnic and racial representation, different educational and income levels, as well as each major geographic region in the United States: the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West.

Many election studies focus either on the campaign media environment *or* on the examination of the voter's decision process. For example, research on media coverage of the campaign utilizes some form of content analysis and the results are generalized to the public response (Robinson and Sheehan, 1983). Studies of public opinion, on the other hand, often rely on national samples which make it virtually impossible to correlate a voter's actual media experience with the vote choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960; Key, 1964). Rather than relying on just one technique for studying citizens, which would be problematic, we address the question of how voters construct the meaning of the campaign with a variety of methods, including: national election surveys, local public opinion polls taken around the time of the state primaries and the

general election, focus group responses to a variety of campaign media, and a panel of in-depth interviews conducted during the election year with potential voters in each of the four media markets. The range of approaches helps us to overcome the limitations of particular methodologies.

Each of these techniques has particular strengths. Surveys are strong on the crucial aspect of generalizability. Because they are based on random samples, it is possible within certain margins of error, to infer results to the broader population. Since it is possible to ask a large number of questions, responses may be explored along a number of dimensions. Surveys, though, run the risk of creating opinions, because, with the exception of open-ended items, questions are asked in structured formats. This limits the responses people can give and prevents them from answering in their own language.

The strength of depth interviews lies in the researcher's ability to explore the ways different people think about issues. Since individuals can express concerns in their own words, the responses are more natural than in the case of surveys. These types of interviews also provide fuller responses because people can talk at length. Interviewers have the opportunity to delve deeply into thought processes through the use of follow-up questions. It is difficult, however, to know how far to generalize the results beyond the specific individuals interviewed in the study. No group of one or two dozen can be representative of the population at large.

To take account of the increasing complexity of the media environment, we undertook a parallel content analysis of network and local television news, newspapers, candidate advertisements, and talk show interviews with candidates – which emerged as an important media format during the 1992 campaign. Four national television networks

were monitored: The nightly news programs of ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN. The most highly-rated early evening local news program(s) were taped off-air in the four localities. Monitoring began on February 1, 1992 and continued daily through November 8, 1992. Newspapers were sampled every third day in the same period in each of the four communities in our study, and included The Los Angeles Times, The Boston Globe, The Boston Herald, The Winston-Salem Journal, and the Fargo Forum.

In order to capture the candidate discourse, we analyzed all of the candidates' advertisements, convention speeches and a random sample of thirty-five candidate interviews on national talk shows. Campaign advertising, which is under the control of candidates rather than news professionals, is an important source of candidate messages. Advertising is designed to grab attention and to persuade the audience to construct favorable images of the sponsor and unfavorable images of the opponents. Previous research has shown that the repetition of messages, exciting visuals, and dramatic music make advertising information more likely to be remembered than news (Patterson and McClure, 1976).

Candidate advertisements were obtained through on-air taping in each site as well as through ad tapes made by commercial vendors, such as Aristotle Industries. In the primary period, we obtained local ad buy data for Boston, covering all of the candidates who participated in the new Hampshire or Massachusetts primaries. (The other communities, which had later primaries, experienced much less advertising activity). In the general election, we compiled local ad buy data in each media market, for Bush, Clinton and Perot from July 1 to November 2, 1992. As a result, we can track which ads were aired in which communities throughout the campaign. Our analysis illustrates how

candidates construct advertising messages in an effort to create particular impressions of themselves, how the media cover candidate advertisements, and how news, talk shows and advertisements play into citizens' considerations of the candidates and their electoral decisions.