

Date: 15 January 1996

To: NES Board

From: Larry M. Bartels

Re: Television news items on 1995 Pilot Study

The 1995 Pilot Study included a detailed battery of items measuring exposure to television news. This memo provides brief analyses of three aspects of that battery: a series of items measuring exposure to television news genres other than traditional network news programs, a context experiment involving the placement of our traditional network news exposure item, and two new measures of network-specific reception.

Exposure to Alternative News Sources. In addition to the traditional network news exposure item, all respondents were asked about general exposure to news programs and about specific exposure to a variety of other news sources: morning news programs ("Today," "Good Morning America"), local news programs ("Eyewitness News," "Action News"), entertainment news programs ("Hard Copy," "Entertainment Tonight"), and news magazine programs ("60 Minutes," "20/20"). All of these news formats attracted substantial audiences, with mean exposure levels (on a zero-to-one scale) ranging from .55 for network and local news to .35 for news magazines and .25 for morning and entertainment news programs. (The corresponding exposure level for talk radio programs was .13.) The pairwise correlations among specific formats ranged from .14 to .42, while the correlations between general news exposure and specific formats ranged from .26 to .51. An exploratory factor analysis produced one strong dimension with factor loadings of .71 for general news exposure, .63 for network news, news magazines, and local news, .43 for entertainment news, .37 for morning news, and .05 for talk radio. The summary factor is correlated with general news exposure at .80 and with network news exposure at .72. Unfortunately, it is hard to find evidence that any of these various forms of television news exposure have any substantial political effects. In regressions with Clinton, Dole, Perot, Powell, and Hillary thermometer ratings as dependent variables and lagged thermometer ratings, party identification, ideology, and talk radio exposure as control variables, virtually none of the various exposure measures produce any significant effects. The sole exception is for Powell, where the relevant t-ratios are 1.9 for the summary scale produced by the factor analysis, 1.8 for network exposure, 1.3 for news magazine exposure, and 1.2 for general news exposure.

Context Experiment. Half the Pilot Study respondents (Form A) were asked the standard network news exposure items at the very beginning of the study in an approximation of traditional NES practice; the other half (Form B) got the same questions much later in the study after a variety of other items tapping exposure to entertainment television, general news, and other specific news formats. Reported exposure was significantly higher for Form A (.58 versus .52, with a t-statistic on the difference of 1.8), which suggests that the Form B context may reduce overreporting of news exposure. The correlations with 1994 network news exposure were .43 for Form A and .37 for Form B, providing some more (albeit weak) evidence of context

sensitivity.

Network-Specific Reception. Half the Pilot Study respondents (Form A) were asked to rate four network anchors on a feeling thermometer; the other half (Form B) were asked which network each anchor works for. In Form A, from 67 to 72 percent of the respondents had opinions about each of the three main anchors (that is, recognized them and gave them a rating other than 50), while the corresponding percentage for Bernard Shaw was 38 percent. In Form B, from 32 to 48 percent of the respondents correctly matched each major anchor with his network, while 24 percent correctly matched Shaw with CNN. In bivariate correlations, a summary scale of Form A placements is more strongly correlated than a summary scale of Form B matches with network news exposure (.49 versus .21), general news exposure (.32 versus .23), and 1994 network exposure (.27 versus .16). In summary regressions, the Form A placement scale is strongly related to network news exposure (with a t-ratio of 8.7) and less strongly related to political information (with a t-ratio of 1.6); the Form B matching scale is strongly related to both political information (with a t-ratio of 6.5) and network news exposure (with a t-ratio of 3.7). In anchor-specific regressions, network-specific exposure has average t-ratios of 1.7 for Form A and 2.0 for Form B. Neither the Form A placement scale nor the Form B matching scale adds much to regression models for Clinton thermometer ratings, Dole thermometer ratings, scales measuring respondents' willingness to place Clinton and Dole on crime, welfare, and government jobs, or measures of "correct" placement of Clinton as pro-environmental regulation, Dole as anti-environmental regulation, Clinton as pro-black, or Dole as pro-business. The two exceptions: the scale of Form A anchor placements gets a t-ratio of 1.8 in the regression of candidate issue placements (versus 1.2 for network exposure), and the scale of Form B matches gets a t-ratio of 1.7 in the regression of "correct" Clinton environmental placements (versus 1.3 for network exposure).

Recommendations. While there are some significant demographic differences among the various news audiences (for example, older respondents are more likely to watch network news, news magazines, and morning shows and less likely to watch entertainment news programs; women are more likely to watch morning shows and entertainment news programs), there is little evidence here that specific news exposure has significant political consequences. Nor is it clear that a news exposure scale based upon a battery of specific exposure items will significantly outperform our traditional network news item (or, perhaps, a single more general news exposure item). Nor is it clear that the anchor-specific reception batteries add much above and beyond straightforward exposure measures (and, in the case of the anchor matching game, general political information). Any further investment in these areas in 1996 would, in my view, have to be based on a hope that the campaign setting will produce larger and more distinctive news exposure effects than the Pilot setting, and that the Pilot Study items will, in fact, allow us to capture those effects.