THE SPINNING MESSAGE: HOW NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE AND VOTER PERSUASION SHAPE CAMPAIGN AGENDAS

DISSERTATION

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By

Corwin D. Smidt, M.A.

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The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Paul A. Beck, Adviser
Professor Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier
Professor Kathleen M. McGraw

Approved by

Adviser

Political Science Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

A prominent avenue of the political campaign’s influence on voters is through the nature of its issue content. Political science research has shown that the issues discussed by the candidates and the news media are more likely to become voter priorities, have a greater influence on voting behavior, and also shape what issues candidates address after they are elected. As such, scholars now argue campaigns are less a debate over issues than a fight over what issues to debate. However, despite their prominent influence, theoretical attempts to explain how campaign agendas develop are few, and those that do exist lack firm empirical support.

I seek to clarify how campaign agendas develop by examining how the agendas of candidates, the news media, and voters interact during campaigns. I offer a new perspective of campaign agenda formation that focuses on two attributes of these interactions. First, I suggest that the news media’s greater credibility and pervasiveness give them a greater ability to influence voter agendas. Additionally, I argue that news media issue coverage, combined with persuasive candidate rhetoric, can also shape voter evaluations on such issues, especially among swing voters.

I consequently argue that candidate needs to persuade voters are an under-emphasized component of campaign strategy and that an agenda-setting strategy also has costly consequences for candidate efforts at persuasion. Instead of agenda-setting, candidates form their agendas in response to the news media’s issue attention in order to
shape news coverage and prevent harmful persuasive environments. By making their case on those issues featured within news media coverage, candidates attempt to win over swing voters on such highly salient issues.

I test the theory in three parts of this dissertation. I provide the first known test of reciprocal agenda dynamics and show how the national news media drove candidates and the voters to focus on a select group of issues during the 2000 presidential campaign. I then demonstrate that Bush and Gore’s rhetorical responses to the news media’s agenda were influential in shaping voter opinions. Finally, I expand the analysis to Senate campaigns of 2000 and 2004 and demonstrate how candidates increasingly focus on issues as they gain coverage within the news media. Both of the theory’s expectations are supported, as the news media show a prominent influence on candidate and voter agendas.

On the whole, this persuasion-based theory of campaign agenda formation provides a new and much needed perspective on how the goals and abilities of the news media and candidates interact to create the rhetorical dynamics we observe within political campaigns. The theory applies the known moderators of agenda setting and persuasion within the political behavior literature to derive a better understanding of the influence, incentives, and behavior of candidates and the news media.
To Melissa, my wife, who has been a constant source of inspiration and joy in my life and to my parents, Corwin and Marilyn, who have always been proud and supportive of me no matter what.
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VITA

September 21, 1979 .................. Born, Grand Rapids, MI

2002 .................................... B.A., Political Science, Calvin College

2002-2003 ............................. University Fellow, The Ohio State University

2003-2005 ............................. Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant, The Ohio State University

2005 .................................... M.A., Political Science

2005-2006 ............................. Graduate Instructor, The Ohio State University

2006-2007 ............................. University Fellow, The Ohio State University

2007-present ........................ Graduate Research Assistant, The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Political Science
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CHAPTER 1

PERSPECTIVES ON CAMPAIGN AGENDAS AND AGENDA SETTING

Where do campaign agendas come from? We tend to observe candidates, the news media, and voters talking about the same issues, but why is that? Answering these questions is important because campaign agendas, the group of issues that are discussed by candidates and the news media, have powerful influences on electoral outcomes and governmental outputs. The news media and candidates’ attention to issues increases the weight of those issue considerations when voters formulate a candidate preference (e.g., Carsey 2000). A campaign’s issue content also contributes to voter impressions of candidate character traits (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). These influences make campaign agendas powerful determinants of voter behavior and election outcomes.

Campaign agendas influence the nature of representation within democracies as well. Victorious candidates not only claim their election represents a popular mandate for the policies their campaign promoted, but they often succeed in addressing such issues once in office. Elected officials show more attention to those issues discussed by themselves and their opponent during the campaign in the hopes of preventing future electoral vulnerabilities (Sulkin 2005). Therefore, by understanding what factors
determine the issue content of campaigns, one not only gains an understanding of how candidates win elections, but one also gains a better understanding of what issues the government will address.

Despite their clear importance, it remains unclear how campaign agendas develop. As this chapter will detail, most theoretical and empirical examinations have either solely focused on the efforts of candidates or the news media in determining voter campaign agendas. Within these efforts, however, little attention has been paid to how candidate and media agendas interact with each other. For example, do the media simply reflect the issue agendas of each candidate? If not, what consequence does the media’s agenda have for candidate behavior? It is these sorts of questions that political science is currently unable to answer. This lack of clarity is especially apparent among questions regarding candidate agenda formation since current theory and evidence seemingly conflict. Although evidence suggests candidates can shape a campaign’s agenda and prime issue considerations, thereby making these considerations more influential than others, empirical examinations of candidate agendas have found candidates do not formulate their agendas with issues that would be beneficial for priming.

In what follows I seek to provide a new perspective on campaign agendas. In particular, I stress that the news media are the main determinant of changes in voter and candidate agendas. They have a greater influence on the public because of their greater credibility and pervasiveness. Secondly, I argue that candidate desires to persuade voters is an under-emphasized component of campaign strategy and that an agenda-setting strategy has negative consequences for candidate efforts at persuasion. If a candidate were to ignore the news media’s agenda, then they fail to make their
case on issues important to voters. Consequently, if a candidate ignores the media’s agenda, then the other candidate might stand to significantly improve his or her performance on a collection of very salient and consequential issues, especially among swing voters. This need to provide their own persuasive rhetoric and combat harmful persuasive rhetoric on salient issues forces candidates to discuss the news media’s agenda.

I begin this chapter, and demonstrate this point, by first reviewing the current state of research on campaign agenda formation and its effects. This review will highlight a number of questions that remain unanswered within the literature. In response to these discrepancies within the literature, I will present my perspective of campaign agenda formation, one that I believe clarifies these unanswered questions. The following chapters proceed to test this theory by providing the first known test of reciprocal campaign agenda dynamics. These results show that the news media shape both candidate and voter agendas. In contrast, changes in candidate issue attention show a consistent influence in shaping news media issue coverage and voter issue opinions. In combination, the following will outline why candidate desires to provide persuasive rhetoric shape the formation of their agendas.

**Current Research on Campaign Agendas: Theory and Evidence**

Campaign agendas are perhaps one of the more influential campaign-level factors determining electoral outcomes. Empirical research has shown that both candidate and news media attention towards issues shape voter agendas and voter proclivities to rely on certain issue opinions when making a voting decision, processes often referred
to as agenda setting and priming. Considering campaign agendas and issue priorities have a strong influence of voter behavior, knowing where agendas come from thus emerges as an important question to answer.

**Agenda-Setting Incentives and Theories of Candidate Issue Attention**

The predominant focus of scholarly efforts when answering this question has been on the role of political candidates and how candidate incentives to emphasize favorable issues might shape campaign agendas and voter behavior. It is often noted that candidates show little propensity to place their own issue positions near that of the median voter’s (e.g., Burden 2004). Scholars also find voter opinions are mostly unmoved by campaign messages and persuasion (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). This makes candidates appear either as inept or unwilling to improve their electoral chances based on issue positions. The evidence that candidates are successful at determining voter agendas stands in stark contrast. Therefore, candidate rhetorical behavior is often theorized as being motivated by what I will refer to as *agenda-setting* incentives.

Within candidate-based perspectives of agenda formation campaigns are commonly viewed not as a debate over issues but as a fight to define what issues to debate. As Budge (1993, 4) puts it, campaigns are “mostly about salience, not confrontation.” A long line of research has suggested that candidate agendas are best understood as a product of candidate efforts to win elections by emphasizing issues favorable to a candidate’s chances. The generalized format of this reasoning is prevalent in various forms and across many years, within theories like expanding the scope of conflict (Schattschneider 1960), heresthetics (Riker 1983; Carsey 2000), saliency
theory (Budge and Farlie 1983), issue ownership (Petrocik 1996), or issue priming
(Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Druckman, Jacobs and Ostermeier 2001).

Probably the most current or popular form of this argument is Petrocik’s issue
ownership theory (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen 2003). The theory
suggests voters have crystalized attitudes across issues concerning the comparative
ability of each major party to deliver their desired outcomes. For example, voters
consistently view Democrats as better able to improve social welfare conditions while
they view Republicans as better at reducing crime or improving national security.
Petrocik argues parties and candidates are more likely to win when their “owned”
issues are the focus of voters and the campaign. Candidates, to the extent they can
influence voter agendas, are expected to emphasize their party’s owned issues and “not
attempt to change opinions on issues” (Petrocik 1996, 831). Likewise, each candidate
does not benefit by discussing or emphasizing issues the other party owns, a prediction
generally referred to as issue divergence; one candidate dominates attention toward
each issue and each candidate discusses a different set of issues.

Although developing out of a different theoretical structure, similar expectations
of issue emphasis and issue divergence are developed within William Riker’s heres-
thetic explanation of political issue dynamics (Riker 1983; Riker 1990; McLean 2002).
In reaction to theorems demonstrating a lack of voting equilibrium within multiple
dimensions, Riker argues political outcomes are best understood as a product of
strategic attempts to influence the salient issue dimension of a vote decision. To sup-
port his claims, Riker (1986) selects multiple examples from political history where
skilled politicians improve their political standing by changing the issue dimension
upon which they were evaluated. He coined such actions heresthetics, representing
what he viewed as the art of political manipulation, and similarly pointed out the incentives for issue divergence within his “issue dominance” principle.

Partly in response to Riker’s arguments, various formal models of candidate-voter interactions demonstrate the issue dominance or issue divergence tendency of candidate behavior in one form or another (Carsey 2000; Simon 2002). Additional models of candidate strategy also examine the effects of candidates emphasizing other favorable considerations. For instance, Sellers (1998) does so within the context of candidate experience and character evaluations instead of issue dimensions. Johnston et al. (1992) propose that parties succeed when highlighting favorable issues within the voters’ minds but also argue the rhetoric surrounding such attempts is an important factor determining their success.

As is evident, the specifics within each of these works often differ, but their emphasis is equally focused on how candidates have the incentives and abilities to determine the salience of certain issues within the campaign and voter decisions. Likewise, notable campaign practitioners have also argued that agenda-setting strategies are viable and successful in practice.

For instance, in his book *Behind the Oval Office* Dick Morris (1997) describes the use and success of such an approach during the time of Bill Clinton’s presidency leading up to the 1996 campaign. Morris likens the task of selecting issues to sailing a boat, where selecting a favorable issue for a candidate to advertise is similar to tacking one’s sail correctly against an opposing wind. Politicians may find a world of opinion against them on many issues, but a candidate can slowly improve his or her base of political support by emphasizing key issues which the public favors. Roger Ailes, media strategist for George H.W. Bush in 1988, summarized his perspective of
their strategy by saying “as long as the argument was on issues that were good for us – crime, national defense, and what have you – that if we controlled the agenda and stayed on our issues, by the end we would do all right” (quoted in Runkel 1989, 221). Campaign managers tend to exaggerate their degree of influence on the public. However, the overall volume of work suggests candidates not only desire to influence campaign agendas, but they also view it as a viable and successful strategy.

**Weak Empirical Support**

In reflection of this vast literature and descriptive evidence, it is surprising that most of the empirical evidence has failed to support these expectations. Despite strong theoretical expectations and the supporting beliefs among practitioners, examinations of candidate agendas find a lack of issue divergence both within congressional and presidential campaigns. This would suggest that candidates are emphasizing some issues that hurt their electoral chances.

Opposing candidates often discuss the same issues and show less divergence than one would expect based on these aforementioned theories (Sigelman and Buell 2004; Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006). Sides (2006) and Kaplan, Park and Ridout (2006) test explicitly whether candidates campaign or diverge on their party’s “owned” issues. While the results provide some support, issue ownership variables generally show little explanatory power when predicting candidate agendas. Both articles find candidates tend to “ride the wave” instead, whereby candidates focus on those issues the public already considers important.

These findings are odd considering there is no clear theoretical reasoning as to why candidates should deviate from an agenda-setting strategy. If candidates cannot persuade voters, then there exists no benefit for a candidate to emphasize and discuss
an issue on which the other candidates is more favorably perceived by voters. Yet this is what we find them doing.

One possible explanation offered by Aldrich and Griffin (2003) focuses on Independent voters and “unowned” issues. The authors suggest that the priorities of Independent voters are not owned by either party and that candidates might emphasize those issues in hopes of winning this crucial voting block. While unique, their perspective suggests that issue divergence should occur on those issues that are owned by either party, an expectation not supported by empirical tests. Clearly, something else is driving candidate issue appeals.

**The Forces Shaping News Media Agendas**

One possible factor which might explain this unexpected pattern in candidate behavior is the influence of the news media. However, scholarly examinations of the news media’s coverage of campaign issues are not as cohesive or as numerous as examinations of candidate agendas. This hole in the literature is odd considering the importance of the news media within campaigns and their ability to disrupt candidate strategies.

Since candidates do not communicate and interact directly with most voters, the media have an ability to select what candidate issue appeals are communicated to voters. Secondly, the media also have the ability to proactively emphasize issues candidates might ignore. While for a time politics and campaigns in the nineteenth century were characterized by party presses, which easily communicated the arguments and appeals of candidates to the voters, the media have since separated themselves from their reliance on parties. The news media are now mostly independent of purely
political motives. They are important political institution with distinct norms and incentives that are not always responsive to politicians (e.g., Cook 1998; Schudson 2002). This means that it is important to understand what incentives shape the news media’s issue selection or emphasis as well as their responsiveness to candidate behavior.

News media incentives and norms are complex. They operate in a variety of fashions and are not as straightforward as candidate goals. Some incentives guiding the news media’s issue coverage operate in the candidates’ favor. Since presidential candidates have an obvious connection to the election they are considered newsworthy and journalists, as conveyors of news, have an obligation to cover what the candidates are saying (Fishman 1980). The news media’s framework for deciding what is news is well known, and candidates can increase the newsworthiness of their actions by fitting their statements to such conventions. For instance, candidates often make conflict-oriented statements or craft visually engaging images that journalists find difficult to ignore (Graber 2002; Flowers, Haynes and Crespin 2003). Candidates are also well aware of the organizational demands within the media. Since it is their job, journalists face internal pressures to report something and often do so according to set routines and deadlines. This is to the candidates’ advantage because they can make their issue agendas easy to cover by providing statements and actions according to the deadlines and needs of reporters (Clarke and Evans 1983; Bennett 2003; Flowers, Haynes and Crespin 2003). As a result, a general view of news reporting is that when politicians talk, the media often reports (Sigal 1973; Bennett 2003).

However, other norms and incentives within the news media suggest candidate agendas are not completely reflected within news media coverage. In fact, many scholars suggest a candidate-driven model of campaign news is inaccurate (e.g., Graber
Journalists desire independence and neutrality and attempt to counter what they perceive as attempts by politicians to influence what issues they cover (Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Semetko et al. 1991). Furthermore, newspeople are mostly driven to cover issues they believe are relevant to their consumers. As noted media scholar Doris Graber (2002, 252-53) states:

“Coverage does not follow the campaign model of reporting. In this model—the utopia of campaign managers—the rhythm of the campaign as produced by the candidates and their staffs determines what is covered. Reporters dutifully take their cues from the candidates. Press coverage instead conforms to an incentive model. Whenever exciting stories provide an incentive for coverage, they are published in a rhythm dictated by the needs of the media and the tastes of their audiences.” . . . “The needs and tastes of the candidates may be ignored unless they manage to generate the kinds of stories and pictures that journalists find irresistible.”

Accordingly, the news media’s coverage of issues should primarily be viewed as a product of the characteristics of the story surrounding the issue and whether it fits a mold such that it is considered “newsworthy.”

What then dictates whether an issue can be considered newsworthy? Individuals are mainly attracted to stories about familiar subject matters, issues that are not complex, subject matters involving conflict, and issues that have some proximal importance to them. Consequently, newspeople focus on the informational needs of their customer by covering stories their audience will care about and ignoring issues that may be intrinsically important but yet are too complex and not of enough immediate personal relevance to the reader or viewer (Graber 2002, 256). Indeed, many scholars suggest the news media are more likely to focus on topics their readers find personally salient and less likely to express viewpoints of small minorities absent any credible elite leadership (Zaller 1999; Bennett 2003).
As just noted, politicians might attempt to craft their own agendas according to these practices in hopes of gaining better media coverage. However, journalists and editors are skilled political observers and are well aware of when they perceive as threats to their neutrality. What then develops is an interesting struggle between the desires and attempts of politicians to influence the news media’s issue agendas by catering to the incentives and desires of the media (Semetko et al. 1991; Patterson 1993; Zaller 1999) and the news media’s resulting aversion to serving political interests (Broder 1989; Kurtz 1998).

The Known Effects of Campaign Agendas

To understand the relative contribution of candidates and the media in shaping campaign agendas, it is important to also review the state of the empirical literature on agenda-setting effects. As will be shown, while much work has been done on the agenda-setting and priming, little work has directly addressed the relative influence candidates and the media have on voter agendas.

The initial research on campaign agenda setting mostly focused on the news media’s influence. While many had noted the possibility before, McCombs and Shaw (1972) provided the first clear evidence of the agenda-setting effect, where individuals ascribe greater personal importance to those issues the news media cover during the campaign. Their analysis of North Carolinians during the 1968 presidential campaign showed that they rated with greater importance those issues that also received coverage from newspaper and television news. Since then a number of panel, experimental, and time series studies have verified a causal relationship between the amount of coverage the news media give towards an issue and individual ratings of an

Further research on news media agenda setting has also shown what factors condition news media influence. MacKuen (1984) found that individuals with greater exposure to information – measured by education, political interest, and motivation – were more likely to respond to mass media agendas. However, MacKuen found limited support for the idea that such individuals also exhibit greater resistance to changing issue agendas. Scholars likewise argue that media agenda setting is dependent on the source’s credibility given by individuals (Wanta and Hu 1994; Dearing and Rogers 1996). McCombs (2004, 37) describes how the openness or independent nature of a news organization determines public responsiveness by citing evidence that individuals in Taiwan do not respond to state-owned television as much as privately owned newspapers. Miller and Krosnick’s (2000) experimental evidence also showed that greater individual trust in the news media increased one’s propensity to exhibit agenda-setting effects.

While mass public agendas are of large interest to studies of policy agenda formation (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993), their greater relevance to campaign effects is based on their association with priming and vote choice. Priming is loosely defined within political science as the phenomenon whereby the greater attention paid to an issue, either by a candidate or the news media, “the more people incorporate what they know about it into their political evaluation” (Kinder 2003, 364). Priming effects have been shown to occur from both the news media’s and the candidate’s focus on campaign issues.
The experimental evidence suggests that candidates appear more successful at priming elements of voter evaluations than they are at changing those evaluations (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002; Simon 2002). Their priming influence may be contingent upon whether voter characteristics – such as partisanship, ethnicity, and gender – resonate with the candidate’s issue focus (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002). There also exist strong cross-sectional associations between those issues candidates discuss and those issues voters weigh more when forming their candidate evaluations (Carsey 2000; Kahn and Kenney 2001; Abbe et al. 2003; Schaffner 2005). Similarly, the news media’s coverage of certain issues is strongly associated with the issue basis of public evaluations through priming, both within campaigns and other contexts (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Stoker 1993; Hetherington 1996).

As a whole, the abundance of evidence suggests candidates and the news media have an ability to determine voter agendas and influence how voters evaluate candidates. However, none of the studies estimate the relative influence of candidate and media actions. These studies also point to campaign agendas as a consequential factor in determining electoral outcomes; many people might prefer a different candidate depending on the issues they consider to be important. This is not to suggest that campaign agendas are simply an arbitrary product of candidate or media selection. The media and candidates certainly respond to and reflect external conditions which also set voter priorities. For instance, the news media and candidates showed greater attention to the issue of national security after September 11 and largely ignored the issue beforehand. But these reactions further increased the relevance and prominence
of national security beyond what it would have been absent their attention. Consequently, to the extent voter agendas are malleable within campaigns, candidate and media agendas appear to be important determinants of their content.

**Agenda Setting and the Mechanisms of Priming**

A prime route of a campaign agenda’s influence is through priming and, as with the agenda-setting literature, a large body of research has investigated the mechanisms behind candidate and the mass media priming effects. This literature has clarified why these effects occur but also contains some unresolved questions. These results are important because, as will be soon demonstrated, knowing what mediates and moderates priming effects will help clarify the relative influence of the news media and candidates in shaping voter behavior. It is for this reason that I believe it beneficial to also review what factors drive priming effects.

Similar to the moderators of agenda setting, Krosnick and Brannon (1993) argue priming effects are partially moderated by people’s attention to information as well as their ability to update their evaluations. The authors support this perspective by finding priming effects to be stronger among the more knowledgeable and specifically among the knowledgeable who were less exposed and attentive to political news. An extension to this perspective is developed within Miller and Krosnick’s (2000) study of the connection between priming and agenda setting. In line with evidence that credibility is an important moderator, the authors find priming and agenda-setting effects to be more prevalent among those individuals who were more knowledgeable and more trusting in the media. Furthermore, individuals who were more trusting in the media and more knowledgeable showed a significant relationship between their rating of an issue’s national importance and their use of their issue evaluations when
rating political leaders. The authors argue the effects represent how agenda setting is a mediating factor of priming, where individual proclivities to respond to the media's issue content are a result of the source's credibility and an individual's ability to integrate new pieces of information.

It is not surprising that agenda setting is thought to be a mediating factor of priming. A literature has existed for over thirty years demonstrating that issue importance ratings are an important predictor of what opinions influence someone's vote. RePass (1971) found that the public shows a heightened proclivity for issue voting based on those issues individuals consider to be important. Likewise, Krosnick (1988) used a collection of NES surveys to show that the influence of policy attitudes is dependent on the personal importance of such attitudes. People are also more likely to perceive differences between candidates on issues that are important to them. These results make clear that voter issue priorities have big consequences for voting.

Research has also investigated alternative mechanisms of priming. In particular, some scholars argue issue agendas might exhibit a priming influence by reducing voter uncertainty. Voters dislike uncertainty, and they often base their vote choice on those considerations that are more certain (Bartels 1986; Alvarez 1997). When candidates and the media discuss an issue voters are more certain where the candidates stand on that issue, and they consequently give greater weight to such considerations.

Franklin (1991) makes a strong case that elections influence voter behavior by clarifying voter perceptions of candidate issue positions. Franklin finds that it is not the simple presence of an election but the type of campaign, determined by candidate behavior, that is a greater determinant of voter clarity. Alvarez and Franklin
(1994) also find that voter certainty is correlated with their clarity of candidate perceptions and their proclivity to use such information about political figures when forming evaluations. News media coverage of campaigns is also believed to reduce voter uncertainty. Using a collection of NES surveys, Alvarez (1997) shows that individuals exhibit greater certainty within those elections where media coverage was more focused on issues and less focused on the horserace aspect of the campaign.

It is unclear how issue certainty and issue importance relate to one another. The two literatures have in many ways developed independently of one another. Political science scholars have failed to provide evidence as to the relationships between issue importance, certainty, and other indicators of attitude strength like accessibility or greater thought (e.g., Petty and Krosnick 1995). Indeed, the campaign’s ability to stress a select group of issues could operate within many of these mechanisms.

Few works have deciphered which of these mechanisms is more prevalent. Peterson (2004) provides evidence that issue certainty is a more likely mediator of priming effects than an issue attitude’s accessibility. Miller and Krosnick (2000) test for and find no evidence that attitude accessibility is a mediator of priming, but they do find support for attitude importance. These two works suggest accessibility is an unlikely mediator of priming but fail to sort out the relative contribution of issue certainty compared to issue importance.

Work within social psychology has further examined the relationship between thought, importance, and certainty, although their concept of certainty differs from political science (Petty, Haugtvedt and Smith 1995; Boninger et al. 1995). For example, Holbrook et al. (2005) find individuals were better able to remember statements made on policy issues that they had already rated as more important. The findings indicate that an issue’s perceived importance motivated additional elaboration or thought about that issue. They conclude by arguing that people do not use their volume of knowledge to infer how important an attitude is, but that instead attitude importance produces greater thought and knowledge accumulation, which then possibly leads to certainty.
It is important to know whether priming effects are mediated by knowledge, certainty, or importance. However, for the case of this research question, expectations may not be that different if the primary mechanism is attitude importance or attitude certainty. The current evidence strongly favors a belief that agenda setting and attitude importance are mediators of priming. This perspective indicates that exposure and credibility are two crucial determinants of agenda-setting effects.

However, these results do not rule out that attitude certainty might be an additional route of influence that enhances this relationship. For instance, source credibility, which was already mentioned as an important moderator of agenda setting, is also a determinant of individual proclivities to make certain inferences from information sources (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Consequently, trust in a message source emerges as an important moderator of priming effects for both importance and certainty. Therefore, in what follows, I mostly refer to attitude and issue importance as the mechanism of priming effects, but I do so while also recognizing the role certainty might play.

**Clarifying the Confounded**

Reflecting on the goals and incentives of the media and candidates, how is the empirical evidence to be evaluated? Do candidates or the media have a greater ability to determine campaign agendas?

Theoretically it is unclear. Theories of candidate strategy do not explain why candidates would want to deviate from their owned issues and respond to the media, yet we find candidates not following issue ownership expectations. Beliefs about news media incentives give some explanation as to why they should be reflective of
candidate agendas, but scholars seem adamant in suggesting journalists try to combat candidate influence. Furthermore, neither of these areas of research indicate whether candidates or the news media have a greater agenda-setting influence on the public.

The ability of the news media to set voter agendas and prime issue considerations is commonly accepted; the experimental evidence is very clear on this. But the observed size and importance of this effect within political campaigns may be overestimated. The media are likely to cover those issues given attention by candidates. Furthermore, candidates, party organizations, and other social communicators might be similarly highlighting those issues found within the media’s agenda through other forms of communication. These alternative means of candidate communication with voters may be embellishing the observed strength of association. This is problematic since none of the studies that document media agenda-setting influences provide separate controls for candidate or party influence.

Secondly, beyond biases, there are also concerns as to how much of a discretionary influence the media have in selecting their agenda (Tichenor 1982; Semetko et al. 1991; Dalton et al. 1998). That is, what proportion of the media’s issue focus is a product of candidate actions and how much results from the media’s independent norms, economic constraints, and structural incentives? If candidates mostly control the issue coverage of the media, then the powerful effects of the news media’s agenda are ultimately produced by the candidates. Likewise, if the structural biases of the press sufficiently modify a candidate’s issue focus, then these agendas differ and it becomes important to understand how their agendas relate to one another.

As with news media estimates, the observed effects of candidate agenda-setting and priming suffer from numerous confounding factors. If, as described, candidates
respond to public priorities then estimates of candidate priming effects are positively biased. But this is not to suggest candidates have no ability to influence voters. Experimental evidence shows that candidate advertisements have a priming influence. There are also numerous studies implementing other strong research designs that show robust associations.

Among others, Carsey (2000) finds a strong relationship between the issues discussed by candidates in a campaign and the issues voters weigh more when evaluating the candidates. These results are not driven by an inability to control for initial opinion levels as Carsey demonstrates voter opinions changed after candidates turned their attention toward such issues. In another oft-cited study, Johnston et al. (1992) use a collection of daily polls over the course of the 1988 Canadian parliamentary election to provide additional evidence. They find that candidates were able to influence electoral outcomes by focusing voter minds on the issue of free trade, although this finding relied on using media reports of candidate actions.

These studies are informative, but they still lack a means of separating out candidate and party influences from that of the news media’s. Furthermore, as with the media, it is not at all clear how great are the discretionary abilities of candidates to shape voter issue priorities. It is unclear how reactive candidate agendas are to the issue focus of the media. Candidates may show the potential to heighten the salience of an issue, but how is one to be sure they exercised this influence on issues they desired to emphasize?

These questions are often debated by top journalists and campaign strategists, where each side views the other as more influential (Runkel 1989). Unfortunately, empirical tests of these questions are lacking. This is partly because past studies
often have no external indicator of a candidate’s agenda absent the media’s influence. Many studies simply claim that the issues candidates talked about were also the issues advantageous to them. This tactic is especially problematic within studies that use media reports of candidate rhetoric to make such claims. The issue ownership perspective at least gives some exogenous definition and measure of what issues candidates should seek to emphasize, but empirical examinations based on issue ownership indicators have not performed well.

There is some scattered evidence that candidate agendas influence news media agendas. Roberts and McCombs (1994) analyze the relationship between the 1990 Texas gubernatorial advertisements aired in Travis County, Texas, and local newspaper and television coverage. They estimate a cross-lagged correlation model, where issue agendas during the first half of the fall campaign are correlated with issue agendas during the last half of the fall campaign. They find that news media coverage during the last half is significantly correlated with the early attention levels of candidate advertisements. Boyle (2001) performs a similar two-period analysis among major newspapers, network news, and candidate advertisers within 1996 presidential election. He finds that Dole’s first-half issue attention, but not Clinton’s, significantly relates to second-half news media agendas.

While admirable for their focus, both studies suffer from poor samples and poor model specification. Roberts and McCombs (1994) only look at one market’s local television and newspaper coverage within a gubernatorial election and rely on partial

\[^{2}\] A noted exception is Kahn and Kenney (2001) who utilize a survey of campaign managers within a sample of Senate elections, yet still fail to control for media influences on voters. Likewise, Herrnson and Patterson (2000) use a post-election survey asking candidates what issues were a priority to test for candidate influence. While not based on media coverage, these after-the-fact recollections are likely tainted by media influence.
correlations while only controlling for the previous half’s news agenda. Boyle (2001) computes candidate agendas based on the number of advertisements made by candidates, not their frequency aired. He also finds that Clinton’s advertisements had a significant negative influence on media coverage. Furthermore, both studies look at attention levels across, and not within, issues. Thus, the observed associations might be products of the fact both the media and candidates are driven to pay attention to an issue by some external factor.

In contrast, other empirical examinations find important differences between candidate and news media agendas and suggest the news media act independently of politician influence. Edwards and Wood (1999) examine the relationship between the agendas of the President, Congress, and the news media and find that the news media drive both congressional and presidential agendas. Flowers, Haynes and Crespin (2003) examine the success of presidential primary candidates’ rhetorical strategies in generating news media coverage of their campaigns. They find some rhetorical strategies influence news media coverage, but they also find media coverage is often unreactive to many candidate attempts. Norris et al. (1999) examine the relationship between party and media agendas during a British parliamentary campaign and argue the media and candidates roughly followed different agendas.

Only few studies have explicitly attempted to examine differences in candidate and media campaign agendas (Semetko et al. 1991; Just et al. 1996; Dalton et al. 1998; Ridout and Mellen 2007; Hayes 2008). From these studies, it has become apparent that candidates and the media pursue somewhat different agendas. Semetko et al. (1991) compare press and party campaign issue agendas within both Britain and the United States. While media and candidate agendas show some noted similarities, the authors
also find that, relative to Britain, the American press plays a much more active roll in selectively emphasizing or ignoring some aspects of each candidate’s agenda. In one noticeable example, the authors show how Mondale focused a great deal of his speeches on social welfare issues yet the media’s coverage of the issue was minimal. Dalton et al. (1998) perform a similar analysis by differentiating between candidate- and media-generated agendas. They suggest campaign agendas are best viewed as neither media nor candidate dominated, instead a “transactions” view of campaign agendas is most accurate, where the interactions between voters, candidates, and the media combine to produce campaign agendas.

A perspective of candidates forming their agendas in reaction to voter agendas correlates with other research as well. Jacobs and Shapiro (1994) find Kennedy’s rhetoric during the 1960 campaign was responsive to public priorities as measured by his private polls. Kennedy would significantly increase his attention toward an issue during a debate that was recently rated as important by individuals in his polls. Druckman, Jacobs and Ostermeier (2001) provide further support by demonstrating Richard Nixon’s 1972 campaign would increasingly emphasize those policy positions that were measured as having strong public support. Both studies argue candidates selected these issues to prime because they also projected favorable character traits.

Findings of the media’s influence on candidates are especially problematic for many of the studies of candidate priming. Most analyses generally ignore or deny any differences in candidate and media agendas. Some argue explicitly that the press are reliant on politicians for reporting and thus media agendas are mostly reflective of the arguments and appeals of the candidates (Simon 2002). Other studies are less explicit and distinguish between media-initiated and candidate-initiated stories, yet
these efforts still rely on examining media reports of candidate speeches to measure the actions and behavior of candidates (Sigelman and Buell 2004; Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen 2003). Given the media face incentives to selectively report issues according to their own structural biases, these studies thus inaccurately claim to be testing theories of candidate behavior.

In conclusion, it seems there has been a consistent failure within the past research to use independent measures of candidate and media agendas, estimate their reactivity to one another, and then estimate the effects of both variables on voters while controlling for the other’s agenda. The resulting understanding of campaign agenda development is incomplete since theoretical and empirical evidence makes clear that in order to understand the nature of campaign agendas one needs to simultaneously parse out the behavior and actions of candidates, the media, and voters. However, the past campaign research mostly fails to examine the empirical consequences of the interactions among these three actors.

There is only one extensive study which examines the issue focus of candidates, the news media, and voters over the course of the campaign (Just et al. 1996). In *Crosstalk*, Just et al. examine campaign dynamics within the locales of Boston, Los Angeles, Fargo, and Winston-Salem. Their explanation for how campaign agendas develop is broad. They simply argue that campaign agendas are constructed over

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3For a similar argument see Kaplan, Park and Ridout (2006).

4This is less the case for questions of campaign effects outside of campaign agendas specifically. For example, Box-Steffensmeier, Darmofal and Farrell (2005) use a similar approach as proposed in this paper to examine how media favorability, candidate spending, and voters’ expected vote interact across the 2000 presidential campaign.

5While Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004) devote some attention to these three actors and their agendas the authors’ focus is mainly on the general dynamics of the campaigns and no specific theory or question of issue dynamics is discussed.
time through a campaign discourse that reflects the combined interests of candidates, voters, and the media. For instance, the authors find that some issues voters considered important at the onset of the campaign became prominent issues during the campaign while others, like homelessness, were not discussed by candidates. Candidate decisions to discuss only certain issues consequently raised voter concerns for these issues, while their interest in other issues declined. Likewise, the media were argued to be able to raise the prominence of some campaign issues within voter minds such that candidates increasingly discussed those issue as well.

The constructivist view of Just et al. lacks clear predictions as to when candidates and the media can and cannot influence public issue agendas or what issues candidates and the media will select. Their results are nonetheless important since they demonstrate that candidate, news media, and voter agendas possess some sort of interactive dynamic. The dynamic interaction process might also help explain the lack of empirical support for models of candidate strategy based on agenda-setting incentives. As shown, these findings suggest candidates are either not rationally driven by electoral goals or that their issue attention is driven by factors beyond agenda-setting incentives. Indeed, Kaplan, Park and Ridout (2006) find voter and media issue attention variables influence the degree of candidate issue convergence within congressional campaigns. They, however, lack a unified explanation as to why these relationships occur.

**The Need for a New Perspective**

The theoretical and empirical literature presents a number of unresolved questions. Candidates and the media have an ability to influence voter agendas, but the size and
consistency of this influence within actual campaigns is unknown due to numerous possible confounds. Likewise, examinations of candidate agendas find candidates fail to focus on the issues one might expect if they were able to determine voter priorities. It is not clear why this behavior exists as no firm understanding has developed regarding the relationship between candidate and news media agendas. Clearly, in order to explain current empirical puzzles, a new perspective is needed that resolves how the agendas of voters, candidates, and the news media respond to one another.

I seek to address these theoretical and empirical inconsistencies within this dissertation. I do so by taking the assumptions of candidate agenda-setting models and modifying them to accurately reflect the mechanisms of campaign information environments. This involves utilizing detailed insights from the public opinion and voting behavior literature in order to help clarify voter responses to campaign information. Although this method of examining aspects of political behavior and their influence on elements of candidate behavior is not complex, there is a notable deficit of it in the current political science literature (McGraw 2002). Furthermore, those theories that do exist are often too simplistic and fail to recognize the multi-faceted consequences of information environments and candidate rhetorical strategies.

I also offer a perspective on campaign rhetoric that often holds appealing substantive consequences for our understanding of collective decisions. Scholars who focus on priming and agenda-setting strategies often criticize the meaning of electoral choices. They argue that political mandates and populist choices hold no meaning since they are mostly an artifact of elite strategies to win election (Riker 1982); we base our decisions on issues chosen at the candidates’ favor. Others suggest that agenda-setting
incentives drive candidates away from discussing similar issues. This leads to campaigns being bereft of the level of deliberation or political debates that many view as necessary for a healthy democracy (Simon 2002).

I differ with these conclusions by arguing political agendas are not an artifact of candidate strategies to win elections. Instead, campaign agendas reflect a set of issues determined by factors outside of their political control. Furthermore, candidates often need to discuss the same issues such that deliberation on political issues does occur. As a whole, the perspective suggests that election outcomes can represent the product of a spirited debate on issues chosen by factors exogenous to candidate influence. Ironically, this perspective comes about by allowing candidates and the media to have an influence on voters that goes beyond setting voter agendas.

**Agenda-Setting Influences, Persuasion, and Campaign Agenda Formation**

My contribution in understanding campaign agenda development and agenda-setting strategy starts by examining two important considerations from the political behavior literature. First, by recognizing the known moderators of agenda-setting effects, one can decipher the relative influence of the candidates and the media. From this examination, I suggest that the news media have a much greater influence than candidates on voters. Since the news media are more pervasive and are perceived as more credible by people, the news media have a greater ability to determine voter agendas.

Additionally, I consider the consequences agenda-setting strategies have for voter issue evaluations and opinions. This exploration indicates that if campaigns have persuasive influences and shape voter issue evaluations and opinions, then this may
also have an important implications for candidate agenda formation. Intense news media coverage and persuasive candidate rhetoric has the ability to change voter evaluations (Zaller 1992; Johnston et al. 1992). This need or desire for candidates to persuade voters, and combat their opponent’s persuasive efforts, is especially prevalent among the highly sought after swing voters, individuals who are highly influenced by campaign information and have no predisposition to favor either candidate.

As a result, candidates often face greater incentives to engage in efforts of persuasion or spin, and they direct their rhetoric toward those issues the media are discussing. Within close campaigns, candidates cannot ignore a salient issue, otherwise they may lose voters on that issue. This means they end up discussing the same issues, those issues featured within news media coverage, because they need to combat and engage the other’s rhetoric on issues of great public salience. By doing so, candidates create two-way message environments of equal force, where voter opinions are less likely to change.

As such, I propose candidate issue attention is often developed less with the intention of shaping voter agendas and primarily with the intention of shaping or informing voter evaluations among those issues prioritized by the media and, thus, the voters. The news media’s relative dominance in setting voter agendas coupled with its ability to broadcast persuasive messages translates into candidates formulating their agendas in response to the news media’s issue agenda; they need to discuss and persuade voters on the media’s agenda. This persuasion-based theory of campaign agenda formation provides a new and much needed perspective on how the goals and abilities of the news media and candidates interact to create the rhetorical dynamics we observe within political campaigns. The theory applies known moderators of agenda-setting
and persuasion within the political behavior literature to derive a better understanding of the influence, incentives, and behavior of candidates and the news media.

Outline of Dissertation

In the next chapter I give a detailed description of the proposed persuasion-based perspective of campaign agenda development. Within this description I highlight two key empirical predictions. First, that the news media are a more powerful influence on voter agendas than are candidates. And second, that candidates, motivated by the need to prevent negative persuasive environments, are often forced to discuss the same issues as are featured within the news media’s coverage. I then outline and motivate the plan of research for testing and evaluating the theory.

I proceed to test my two hypotheses in Chapter 3. I first analyze the nature of voter agendas during the 2000 presidential campaign and outline how agenda-setting incentives do not appear to drive candidate behavior. I then pursue a dynamic perspective of campaign agenda development by analyzing and categorizing movements in voter agendas. This categorization highlights a select group of issue priorities that changed in response to the campaign. I test for what caused such movements by providing the first known examination of reciprocal campaign agenda dynamics. These tests show that the news media mostly moved both voter and the candidate agendas such that both increasingly focused on those issues as campaign priorities.

I dig deeper into the 2000 presidential campaign in Chapter 4 to evaluate the validity behind what I argue are the mechanisms behind the news media’s influence. Specifically, I make a strong case for why persuasion is an important consideration for candidates by highlighting the essential role swing voters play in winning an
election. I then go on to show how candidates benefit from discussing those issues found within the news media by examining how their behavior changed the shape of news media coverage for the issue of Social Security. Another analysis will show that candidate issue advertisements have powerful persuasive benefits for candidates, especially among swing voters.

Chapter 5 takes the analysis beyond the 2000 presidential campaign by examining state agendas and Senate campaigns. It first examines the differences between national and state-level campaigns and clarifies the driving force of campaign agendas at the state level. The analysis shows the theory to be very applicable to other campaign contexts. State agendas are shown to be highly nationalized with little response to state campaigns. Furthermore, Senate candidate agendas increasingly reflect the news media’s issue content as news media coverage of the campaign increases. Further tests validate these results by showing Senate candidates have little influence on local newspaper coverage.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by summarizing the results of the dissertation. It outlines the theory’s implications for our understanding of the campaign behavior and influence of candidates, the news media, and voters. It then ends by discussing its applications and insights for future research.
Why might candidates have an ability to influence voter agendas yet fail to use this ability in the expected manner? Why might candidates appear reactive to the agendas of the media or voters?

I seek to answer these questions by re-examining two components of the campaign communication process. First, I seek to clarify the relative abilities of candidates and the media to determine voter agendas. I present a reasoning as to why the news media have a greater influence on the public’s agenda than candidates. This reasoning is based on examining what factors are known to shape agenda-setting and priming effects among individuals. Second, I reevaluate the argument that candidate rhetorical strategies are completely driven by agenda-setting incentives. I argue that persuasion is an under-emphasized component of campaign strategy and that an agenda-setting strategy has costly persuasive consequences for candidates. If a candidate was to ignore a prominent issue, then the other candidate could significantly improve his or her performance on that issue. Likewise, candidates may benefit by trying to persuade voters to support them on key election issues. Consequently, by recognizing the persuasive effects of campaigns, it becomes reasonable to suggest candidates create their
agendas in response to the news media’s issue attention in order to prevent negative persuasive consequences.

In combination, the proposed reasoning suggests that candidates are often not driven by agenda-setting incentives when formulating their issue attention. Instead, I argue persuasion-based incentives often drive candidate rhetoric to be reactive to the agendas of the news media and, consequently, the public.

**News Media Advantages in Pervasiveness and Credibility**

A possible explanation for why candidates fail to focus on their owned issues is that they lack a strong agenda-setting influence and do not benefit from pursuing such a strategy. But is this characterization correct? The clearest way to decipher the relative influence of candidates and the media is by looking at the known modifiers of agenda-setting and priming.

As already discussed, the extant literature on agenda-setting and priming effects has stressed a person’s level of exposure, evaluation of source credibility, and level of political awareness are three important determinants. Of these three, the news media possess advantages in their levels of exposure and credibility. This advantage translates into an expectation that they should have a greater agenda-setting and priming influence.

**Hypothesis 1:** Voter agendas are more responsive to and reflective of the news media’s issue attention than that of the candidates.

Exposure is certainly a factor that increases agenda-setting and priming effects (MacKuen 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990); you have to be exposed to a message
in order to respond to it. People have little incentive to be informed about politics (Downs 1957), and it has become commonplace to argue the public has low levels of political information (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). These attributes of voters have important consequences for the relative size of candidate and media priming and agenda-setting effects. This makes news media agendas more influential since the news media are more prevalent within people’s lives.

It is not controversial to suggest the news media are a more prevalent information source than candidates for individuals. Selling information to the public is the media’s business after all. The media’s coverage of a variety of news – ranging from business, sports, and cultural news – means people seek them out as a primary source when desiring information. If individuals happen to come across political information within their news, then they might engage with it. It is less common for people to seek or come across information direct from the candidates.

The news media also have greater abilities than candidates to provide cues to a voter about an issue’s importance. For instance, the media send cues about the importance of an issue by placing a story toward the beginning or end of a paper or newscast. This also makes exposure to the news media’s messages more effective.

If people are more likely to get their political information from the media and have greater exposure to the media’s agenda, then they are more likely to shape their own agendas in response. At first blush, this argument might seem to go against findings that higher individual-levels of exposure lessen priming effects (Krosnick and Brannon 1993). But individual-level measures of exposure to political information are highly correlated with an individual’s previous exposure level and overall level of
political sophistication. It is the sophistication aspect of exposure that is argued to mitigate priming effects (Krosnick and Brannon 1993). Likewise, since the political sophistication of the public is constant within a campaign, sophistication does not contribute toward an understanding of the relative effects of candidates or the media. Instead, what matters is the news media’s greater level of pervasiveness since it gives media messages a greater probability of reaching individuals who are usually less attentive to politics. These less informed people are exactly the group of individuals who are more susceptible to priming (Zaller 1992; Krosnick and Brannon 1993).

Beyond exposure, credibility is another important characteristic that modifies agenda-setting and priming effects, and here people should also be more reactive to the media. People have long perceived the media as an information source with greater credibility than politicians. While their ratings have dropped, surveys show the public still rates the news media as more trustworthy than politicians, and these ratings remain especially high for network news and media sources with less prominent editorial points of view (The Pew Research Center For The People And The Press June 26, 2005).

People likely give the news media greater credibility because they do not see the media possessing as strong of political motivations as candidates. A party or politician’s attention toward an issue is always perceived within the context of it serving some sort of political goal. The political, let alone economic, benefits of a particular agenda are not as apparent for many mass news organizations. Furthermore, many large news organizations profess to norms of neutrality, and this contributes to voters finding such information as more trustworthy. These elements suggest the news media’s attention toward an issue gives greater legitimacy to its political importance.
Credibility also might modify candidate abilities to shape and use the news media’s agenda for their own benefit. If the public perceives the media as only reporting on an issue because a candidate talked about it that day, then the media’s attention may not send as credible of a signal. As such, candidates might not be able to harness the media’s influence unless they somehow spur the media to focus on an issue independently, because of an intriguing or newsworthy substantive component.

With its greater levels of credibility, people are more likely to utilize the new media’s issue focus as a basis for their evaluations (Miller and Krosnick 2000). Likewise, as an outside actor, the news media’s ability to directly state what issues are important should send a credible and persuasive cue to voters (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). By recognizing the news media’s greater levels of credibility and their greater levels of pervasiveness it seems reasonable to expect that voter agendas are more responsive to the news media’s agenda.

Consequences for Candidate Strategy

If the news media have a greater capability to influence voter agendas, then what consequence does this have for candidate behavior? Within agenda-setting models of candidate behavior (e.g., Simon 2002) the answer is simple: it would have no consequence. Candidates may have less to gain by focusing on owned or advantageous issues, but this should not change what issues are beneficial for agenda setting. Consequently, the expectation remains that candidates should devote their attention only to those issues possessing agenda-setting benefits.

Although not directly related, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) found candidate advertisements showed no additional priming effect when people were exposed to news media stories on the same issue. Hayes (2008), however, finds significantly larger agenda-setting effects when people are exposed to news stories and candidate speeches than just candidate speeches. Neither looks at the effect of news stories portrayed as candidate-driven as opposed to independently initiated.
The news media’s influence reduces candidate abilities to determine voter agendas. The news media emphasize issues independent of candidate actions by proactively seeking out candidate statements or positions on those issues. They can also be critical of a candidate for ignoring an issue and claim it to be a weakness. Candidate agenda-setting abilities face additional limitations since voter priorities are stabilized by their own self interest, values, and other external conditions (Boninger et al. 1995). Therefore, the extent to which voters respond to the candidate’s agenda is conditional on the content and strength of the news media’s agenda and the mitigating strength of these other individual-level determinants.

However, all these limiting and insulating conditions only contribute toward a candidate’s rate of return when pursuing an agenda-setting strategy. Candidates will get less bang for the buck, and they will have to devote more time, money, and effort if they want to change voter priorities into issues that favor their campaigns. Nevertheless, these factors do not change what issues are the most beneficial for their campaigns and what issues candidates will discuss.

A potential qualification is that the news media’s influence might attract a greater candidate interest in shaping news media agendas. However, it is unclear whether such a strategy is viable for candidates. First, if candidates are able to influence media agendas, then it is unlikely that it is through their public rhetoric and advertisements. Press secretaries and communication directors often send out numerous press releases, hold conference calls with the media, or issue talking points on questions they think journalists should ask about the other candidate. Candidates may also appeal to journalistic norms and incentives by adding newsworthy components to such actions.

As was the case for political sophistication, these individual-level constraints equally limit news media effects as well. The basic point is that candidates have a tough row to hoe.
(Flowers, Haynes and Crespin 2003). These efforts might be successful, but they are ultimately reliant on the decisions of journalists and editors or the attributes of the issue. Candidates cannot simply choose which of their favored issues make it on the media’s agenda. Furthermore, they have no ability to prevent unfavorable issue coverage. It also may be the case that candidate quotes or soundbites are not sufficient enough to produce agenda-setting effects via the media. Candidate issue references within soundbites might be a less credible cue to voters unless the media show some independent interest in an issue or document its level of priority among voters.

The extent to which the news media form their agendas in reaction to candidates is ultimately an empirical question. I have sought to make the simple point that candidates face no guarantee that journalists completely, or even partially, replicate their agendas. Indeed, scholars depict journalists as striving for independence and having a desire to reject candidate attempts to take advantage of them (Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Semetko et al. 1991). These depictions make it seem unlikely that the news media replicate candidate agendas.

What then are candidates to do? Since their own efforts at setting voter agendas possess relatively little influence and there exist no guarantees of media compliance, it seems reasonable to suggest other incentives might drive candidates away from focusing on their owned issues. This is, after all, the current indication of empirical evidence. But why do we find candidates discussing non-advantageous or unowned issues in reaction to news media or voter priorities? Here it seems to better understand candidate agenda formation one also has to recognize the negative persuasive consequences of agenda-setting behavior.
Persuasion as a Candidate Motivator

In comparison to their relative inability to determine voter agendas, it is possible that candidates possess a greater desire and ability to determine how they are evaluated on issues. Candidate issue rhetoric and actions, or inactions, hold a meaningful persuasive component; they can change voter opinions. This aspect of candidate rhetoric may trump agenda-setting incentives and drive candidates to form their agendas in reaction to the news media.

To suggest persuasion is a motivator within candidate behavior goes against most of the conventional wisdom within the social sciences. It has long been claimed that mass persuasion, to the extent it exists, mostly shows minimal effects (Klapper 1960). Researchers have also found that campaigns are largely ineffectual in shifting voter opinion (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944; Markus 1982; Finkel 1993). Only Bartels (1993) and Zaller (1996) provide prominent arguments that persuasion occurs often within American politics, although their arguments center on claims of poor measurement.

Kinder (2003) reviews the more recent literature and concludes “not much persuasion, mostly reinforcement and activation.” Likewise, given the minimal amount of persuasion and the extensive evidence of priming and agenda-setting, he also offers the judgement (365) that “campaigns are not so much debates over a common set of issues as they are struggles to define what the election is about. So campaigns are today, and so, it seems they have been.” Scholars appear to be settled on the idea that, since there is little evidence of persuasion, campaigning is directed mostly at priming and agenda-setting and not at persuasion.
I would argue these types of conclusions are misleading, if not inaccurate. By overemphasizing the fight over priorities, and a candidate’s role in that fight, scholars have potentially under-emphasized the role persuasion might play within campaigns and a candidate’s strategy.

Why Persuasion is a Factor Within Campaigns

The case for why campaign persuasion is a motivator can be made by reviewing what factors are considered to limit persuasion effects at the mass level. Kinder (2003) provides a nice framework for such an analysis. His review of the literature categorizes three components of political behavior and the communication environment which he argues produce a lack of persuasion: indifference, resistance, and neutralization.

People’s indifference to politics means they often never hear persuasive messages. Political indifference is pervasive since there is little incentive for individuals to pay attention to political information (Downs 1957). But indifference is not just a lack of attention, it is also endemic of people’s lack of knowledge and experience with political information. These conditions contribute to a lack of individual skill in navigating political information (Luskin 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Therefore, while indifference limits persuasion by limiting exposure to persuasive messages, when people are exposed to such messages their indifference also limits their ability to resist being persuaded (Zaller 1992).

This is exactly the sort of condition that occurs within campaigns. Many people with little experience navigating political information become engaged as the election progresses and as they need to make their voting decision. Candidate and party advertisements are also at their peak during the campaign and reach people who
may not usually encounter political information. While such increases in exposure for those who are indifferent may not be extreme, the point is that campaigns, more so than other political communication environments, are more likely to reach those who are indifferent.

Political indifference and sophistication are not the only factors which aid people in resisting persuasive messages. Another important attribute contributing toward resistance is an individual’s core values or identifications. Partisan identifiers hold a partisan lens (Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 2002) such that they react to political information in a manner that supports their predispositions. This is not only true of partisans but for individuals with strong opinions who might be considered motivated reasoners (Kunda 1990). These individuals are motivated to reason against oppositional arguments (Lord, Ross and Lepper 1979), and they appear highly resistant to persuasive messages (Zaller 1992).

Importantly, these same attributes known to foster resistance to persuasion also point toward a sizable proportion of the population who do not hold biasing predispositions and who are less resistant to persuasive messages. As campaigns might activate latent predispositions, the proportion of the public who lack biasing predispositions may be smaller. Nonetheless, the percentage of the public who claim to be independent with no partisan leanings consistently ranges around 10 percent. These nonpartisans and nonideologues are lower in political sophistication and do not categorize political information on a partisan or ideological basis (e.g., Lodge and Hamill 1986), factors which contribute to their open reception of all types of information.
Furthermore, and perhaps what is most consequential of all, is that this group of voters also has little inclination to favor either candidate. Unlike partisans who favor their party’s candidate at a high rate, Independents have no such inclination and are actively courted by both candidates since they are relatively open to supporting either one. With their lower tendencies to resist persuasive message, the behavior and opinions of this valuable “middle” of the electorate emerge as a strong consideration for candidates wanting to win elections.

These first two factors highlight a distinct, but potentially consequential, group of voters susceptible to campaign persuasion: non-partisan voters who are usually inattentive to political information. The final and third limiting factor Kinder describes, neutralization, does not change this characterization. This is because neutralization is not a limiting behavioral attribute of voters but it is an attribute of campaigns. Indeed, the fact that campaigns exhibit neutralization actually bolsters suggestions that persuasion is a factor within campaigns. Campaigns neutralize opinions by providing opposing persuasive messages of equal strength. Zaller (1992) argues these two-way message environments produce limited persuasion since neutralization comes from voters grabbing on to those messages that reverberate with their predispositions or holding a balanced set of considerations. However, if campaigns are neutralizing environments, then is this an indication that candidates are motivated to engage in persuasive rhetoric during campaigns? Or, to put it more concretely, why do these opposing persuasive messages exist?

Neutralization should not exist from an agenda-setting perspective; candidates should not attempt to provide persuasive messages (Petrocik 1996). But it is clear candidates and parties perceive some need to do so. In fact, it is odd that in describing
this third element Kinder fails to recognize that neutralization suggests politicians see
a motivation and ability to neutralize an opponent’s message. Of course, candidates
experience greater persuasive gains among their own partisans given the ability of
partisans to resist oppositional messages and accept within-party messages. However,
I would argue that candidates view persuasion as something beyond simply preaching
to the choir. Candidates likely recognize that persuasion is a factor within campaigns
that has the potential to drive the behavior of many of those lesser informed and
nonpartisan voters.

A Connection to Swing Voters

The factors thought to inhibit mass persuasion also point to a select group of voters
who are prone to being persuaded within intense campaign environments. This focus
on nonpartisans who lack biasing predispositions is partially connected to political
science’s recent interest and efforts in analyzing swing voters. Although political
science research has not clearly supported this perspective, journalistic descriptions
of campaign strategies often characterize these voters as central to candidate efforts.
These descriptions are not completely off base. That is, swing voters are central to
the fall campaign because they are so prone to respond to campaign information.
This translates into candidates having to monitor and court these essentially neutral
voters with much greater efforts.

A connection to swing voters is a somewhat treacherous path since rigorous defini-
tions and measurements of swing voters are lacking. Indeed, a recent book edited by
William G. Mayer, The Swing Voter in American Politics (2008b), provides a number
of perspectives regarding the issues of measuring and identifying their influence. One
problem is the lack of past scholarly attention. As Mayer (2008a) points out, few works beyond Kelley’s (1983) *Interpreting Elections* chapter on marginal voters devote any effort to operationalize the concept. Besides Key (1966), many foundational studies of voting behavior do not reference the idea of swing voters at all. Secondly, and perhaps in relation, there is fundamental problem in defining and measuring. For instance, Mayer defines a swing voter as “a voter who could go either way: a voter who is not so solidly committed to one candidate or the other as to make all efforts at persuasion futile” (2008a, 2).

While the connection between persuasion and swing voters is apparent in this definition, it has two problems. First, it is difficult to identify such a group. If one is a swing voter, then there is no guarantee that such a person changes his or her vote, only the belief that there existed the potential. This is a notably odd counterfactual to identify since it is also unclear what “all efforts at persuasion” are. Secondly, if one classifies all voters who faced the possibility of changing their candidate preference during an election as swing voters, then it is unclear whether such a classification is meaningful let alone possible. Since human behavior is not deterministic it seems invalid at the outset of a campaign to suggest there exists no possibility at all that some person’s candidate preference could change. This classification gives less theoretical clarity to the concept of swing voter, and it appears somewhat post-hoc.

In response to these observations I define swing voters as those individuals who lack a clear political attachment to either candidate based on general political orientations. In short, swing voters are those individuals who do not favor a candidate or party in their interaction and reception of political information. The benefit of such
a definition is that it makes one’s classification as a swing voter exogenous to the campaign. This definition of swing voters includes those individuals who are more likely to change their preference for a candidate, but it excludes partisans who might vote against their party’s candidate. It also includes voters who may stick with a candidate based on reasons specific to the two candidates running. In other words, I do not view swing voters as an all-inclusive group, where only swing voters change their candidate preference during the campaign. Instead, swing voters are a subset of voters who are not predisposed to a party, who do not hold biasing predispositions, and, thus, who are highly likely to be responsive to campaign communication.

**Agenda-Setting Behavior, News Media Coverage, and the Desire to Persuade**

Compared to the host of competing factors determining voter priorities, I would argue candidates often have a greater need and ability to shape voter evaluations within issues, especially among swing voters and especially within competitive campaigns. Campaigns, with the intensity and volatility of their media coverage, produce an environment that is favorable for persuasion. For swing voters and others with limited skill in interacting with political information, their increased levels of attention and exposure to political information increase their inclination to change their opinions on issues. Consequently, the potential for persuasive tides within the news media becomes both enticing and threatening to candidates since these tides move swing voter opinions and votes.

It seems that candidates are more likely driven to engage in and combat persuasive rhetoric during competitive elections since the contrasting agenda-setting benefits are likely small. This changes expectations of a candidate’s rhetorical strategy. No
longer is it best to avoid a non-favorable issue, instead candidates need to engage the opposition on every prominent issue in order to win over swing voters and neutralize the opponent’s rhetoric.

This reflects the perspective of some political folk wisdom. As Chris Matthews (1999, 116) outlines, the rule for candidates is to “leave no shot unanswered.” By not answering an opponent’s claim the public will believe that “it must be true” (125). Accordingly, candidate communication strategies exhibit an intention to shape voter opinions and combat potentially harmful information environments, regardless of the issue domain. This leads to what Kinder describes as neutralization, candidates creating two-way message environments in which each candidate limits the other’s persuasive gain.

However, candidates may not need to engage their opposition across all issues. In contrast, it is those issues within the news media’s agenda that are of strategic importance. These are the issues that are more likely to be salient for swing voters and issues about which swing voters are becoming informed. With the campaign’s high volume of information and the news media’s greater pervasiveness, low and mid-aware individuals are more likely exposed to news media messages. These are also the individuals who are less likely to resist persuasive messages contained within such coverage. Therefore, the electoral consequences of the news media’s persuasive content increase as a campaign gains in profile within the news media. Not only are candidate abilities to determine voter agendas reduced, but the benefit or need to shape news media coverage and what voters think on those issues increases. This persuasion-based view of campaign agenda formation is summarized by the following:

**Hypothesis 2:** The greater the news media’s attention to the campaign, the greater its agenda-setting influence, and the greater relative benefits
candidates face by discussing those issues prioritized within the news media.

The proposition is not that campaigns are rife with persuasion. Intense media scrutiny and voter awareness within the campaign arena are best viewed as creating the large potential for persuasion, especially among swing voters. As such, what I term campaign persuasion is not so much voters actually being persuaded, but it is candidates trying to persuade voters. They see the benefits of talking about the news media’s agenda since their rhetoric may shape voter opinions. They also see the costs of ignoring an issue, since this increases an opponent’s chances of winning over opinions on that issue. Therefore, while agenda-setting incentives direct candidates to focus explicitly on owned issues, they also hold negative persuasive effects for candidates. In contrast, I argue the news media direct candidates toward a similar group of issues to debate. They want to discuss similar issues in the hopes of winning over swing voters and neutralizing their opponent’s arguments.

In support of the proposed expectation, empirical examinations of campaign agendas tend to find greater issue convergence in those campaigns that are more competitive (Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006), where competitiveness is known to be highly correlated with increased media attention (Kahn and Kenney 1999). These findings could reflect candidate abilities to provide persuasive messages both within and outside the news media. While the news media have greater freedom to choose what issues to emphasize within campaign coverage, journalistic norms for balanced coverage constrain reporters to report each candidate’s perspective. These norms have little influence if only one candidate is discussing an issue since there is no opposing viewpoint to report. Media coverage of an issue would amplify, and predominately
favor, the lone candidate discussing the issue within an agenda-setting or issue divergence strategy. In contrast, by discussing those issues prioritized by the media candidates provide countervailing arguments and frames that the news media are obligated to cover and provide to voters, thereby limiting the opposing candidate’s potential gains.

Even if news media coverage of a particular issue favors a candidate, the opposition candidate’s direct communication to voters can limit these effects. Supporters who might be holding initially favorable attitudes toward a candidate are more likely to accept supportive messages and to resist opposing messages (Holbrook et al. 2001). As such, countervailing messages need not be as prominent or intense for them to have persuasive benefits. Likewise, to the extent direct communication by candidates can also persuade voters, candidates are best served persuading voters among those issues that are of highest priority since these issues have the greatest influence on one’s vote (RePass 1971).

While agenda-setting theories have often been the prime focus of campaign effects studies, other studies suggest parties and candidates effectively engage in combative persuasive rhetoric. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) have famously argued that politicians do not pander or follow opinion as much as they try to craft persuasive messages that move the public to support their original positions. Their examination of the fight over Bill Clinton’s health care plan and the Republican’s Contract with America showed how both Republicans and Democrats used polling and focus groups to develop effective talking points to convince the public of their positions.
Past studies of campaigns have also advocated a focus on the persuasion aspects of agenda formation. Johnston et al. (1993) argue that while agenda-setting incentives influence candidate and party behavior, such behavior is dependent on the rhetorical abilities of the parties to shape voter evaluations. In support of their claims, their analysis of the Canadian national election documents how voters reassessed their opinions on free-trade policy over the course of the campaign (Johnston et al. 1992). Likewise, Mendelberg (2001) found that Dukakis was only successful in limiting Bush’s Willie Horton advertisement strategy once they made explicit arguments against Bush’s tactic of manipulating racial attitudes.

This is not to say all fall campaign efforts are based on convincing swing voters. Other elements are geared at motivating and mobilizing voters. However, get out the vote efforts are often concentrated with local organizations using mail, phone, or personal contact (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Gerber and Green 2000). It is unclear whether these mobilization efforts influence a candidate’s rhetorical strategy during the fall campaign. Candidates might be able to boost turnout among supporters by emphasizing a base-mobilizing issue, especially within micro-targeted communications (e.g., Hillygus and Monson 2007). But a candidate’s public rhetoric will want to ignore these issues if they turn off swing voters. For instance, George W. Bush clearly benefitted from the same-sex marriage ballot proposals in 2004, but he did not embrace the issue in his mass-based communication efforts.

In summary, candidates often receive greater benefits from molding voter evaluations on those issues the media are prioritizing than from attempting to set voter agendas. This is especially true within elections garnering prominent media coverage. Candidate agendas seek to provide beneficial persuasive arguments and minimize
the occurrence of negative information environments, either by providing their own spin within news media reports or by providing unfiltered messages like television advertisements. These agendas will converge on issues prioritized by the news media since these issues are likely to be voter priorities and such evaluations are more consequential and more vulnerable to opposition influence, particularly among swing voters.

Testing the Theory

Two concrete predictions develop from the proposed perspective. A number of additional mechanisms regarding persuasion and swing voter behavior also need to be verified. Both hypotheses require tests of the association between the agendas of candidates, the news media, and voters. To evaluate these two hypotheses, as well as the supplemental arguments, it is essential to observe independent measures of the issue agendas of candidates, the news media, and the voters. It is partly the inability of past research to use independent measures of candidate and news media agendas that has left a number of unanswered questions within the agenda-setting literature. These problems will be avoided in this dissertation.

With increasing technology and data availability, independent measures of all three factors exist starting with the 2000 presidential election. The two most intriguing are the Wisconsin Advertising Project and National Annenberg Election Study, which provide valuable brand new perspectives on campaign activities and voter reactions. Importantly, each of these data sets provide a precise longitudinal component allowing researchers to examine dynamic associations, an essential component for this dissertation’s interest. I combine these measures with existing records of news media
coverage to develop a thorough examination of their relationship with one another as the campaign progresses.

Candidate Agendas

Starting in the year 2000, the Wisconsin Advertising Data Set (WiscADS) has recorded the date, time, sponsor, media market, estimated cost, and issue theme(s) of all federal and state-wide political advertisements aired for the year leading up to even election years (Goldstein, Franz and Ridout 2002; Goldstein and Rivlin 2007). For the year 2000 the data set includes all advertisements aired during the year within the top 75 media markets, covering approximately 80 percent of the nation’s population. For the following election years, the number of media markets and the days observed preceding the election were expanded to provide an even greater view of campaign activities.

Candidate advertisements offer a unique perspective on candidate agendas since they are a pure product of the candidates’ campaigns. Past research has successfully advocated their use as valuable indicator of candidate agendas for a number of reasons (Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006). Television advertisements cost money to produce and broadcast; they do not simply reflect “cheap talk.” Advertisements clearly indicate what issues candidates think they need to address and emphasize to voters since they are one of their most effective means of direct communication, especially with swing voters. Second, advertisements have a noticeable constraint on time, limiting the number of issues that may be mentioned. This lack of constraint is problematic when examining the issue focus of other forms of candidate communications. Finally,
the data also gauge the frequency with which each advertisement was aired and thus provide a clearer picture of the issue focus of each candidate.

Other data sources do not offer any of these advantages. Candidate speeches on the campaign trail are usually based on a set routine that does not often change overtime and usually contains a large list of issues since candidates have a less time constraints. They are also not systematically sampled in an accurate manner. In addition, as already argued, media incentives produce reports that have a selective issue emphasis, and they are not completely representative of the candidate’s actual agenda. Likewise, candidate debate agendas are determined by the news media and are not viable as a measure of candidate choice. Candidate advertisements that are observed within WiscADS, while only one indicator of the various methods of candidate communication, avoid many of the problems of measuring other source of candidate agendas.

There remain some problems in using campaign advertisements as a primary measure of candidate agendas. Each of these I will have to accommodate within my analysis. First, given their high costs, campaign advertisements are only consistently aired during the later portions of the campaign. This limits the ability to analyze the dynamic relationships with other forces until the fall portions of the campaign. Second, WiscADS’s measure of issue content is not completely indicative of issue salience. WiscADS only codes what issues were mentioned within the advertisement and does not indicate the relative salience or order of the issue mentions within an advertisement. Nevertheless, the expansive and valuable insight provided by WiscADS far outweighs these minor problems.
A Note on Case Selection

The availability of the advertising data is limited to recent campaigns. This puts limitations on what campaigns can be tested, and it is probably best to discuss the possible biases that are associated with those campaigns at the outset. The WiscADS allow an examination of presidential, senatorial, house, and gubernatorial campaigns. This dissertation examines the first two to test the relationship between the agendas of the candidates, the news media, and voters.

The next two chapters test the two main hypotheses and the mechanisms that are believed to be driving the expected behavior within a presidential election context. A presidential election is important to examine for a couple reasons. First, many of the previously mentioned examinations of issue ownership and questions of persuasion were performed within presidential elections and corresponding surveys. By examining the same type of election I will be better able to address these past findings. Additionally, for reasons I will also note below, the presidential election is important because it is of large interest to the national media, an institution with higher levels of credibility and exposure. If credibility and exposure are two factors that partially drive candidates away from pursuing agenda-setting behavior, then presidential campaigns offer a favorable context to evaluate the perspective’s validity.

In the following chapters I primarily implement and examine the 2000 presidential advertisement data since this is the only election with the needed data available. The 2004 presidential advertisement data are, as of now, still unavailable. The selection of the 2000 campaign potentially distorts the generalizability of the results. The nature of campaigning might differ depending on whether there is an incumbent candidate running. This is especially true within congressional elections, although
presidential elections differ since vice presidents, like George H.W. Bush and Al Gore, attach themselves to the current administration. Nevertheless, since neither Gore nor Bush had a presidential record, voters might have been more susceptible to formulating their candidate evaluations based on the campaign’s content. This might have heightened persuasion incentives compared to an election like 2004 where evaluations of Bush might have showed greater crystallization. This means the 2000 election offers a favorable case for persuasive influences. If persuasion incentives operate within campaigns, as I propose, then they should be evident within the 2000 campaign.

The chapter following the analyses of the 2000 presidential campaign recognizes these special attributes of the 2000 presidential campaign and attempts to assess the perspective’s relevance to other campaign contexts. To do so I will examine a sample of approximately 40 Senate elections for how candidate agendas and local news media content interact. I take the advertising data from the Senate elections of 2000 and 2004 and match the dynamics of advertisements aired within a local media market with the dynamics in coverage among prominent local newspapers. The examination of Senate elections across two election years offers impressive leverage through the variability in campaign intensity, newspaper exposure and credibility, candidate resources, and advertisement frequency.

**News Media Agendas**

Since I expect news media coverage drives the issue focus of campaigns, data containing the date and content of news reports is needed for empirical analysis. I will be relying on two such sources: various databases of newspaper articles and television news transcripts (e.g., LexisNexis, Factiva, and Newsbank) and the Vanderbilt TV
News Archive. Together these resources provide extensive material from which I can develop measures of news media content.

For the 2000 presidential election, I examine network television news, especially evening news coverage, as my primary indicator of national news media agendas. This choice was made for a couple of key reasons. First, network television news is national in scope and does not target a particular locale. Beyond *USA Today*, newspapers are much more prone to have geographical biases, especially in the nature of their issue focus. Newspapers like the *New York Times* might influence candidates and the coverage found in network news shows, however this mechanism suggests their influence on national voting dynamics is indirect and dependent on the response of the national news. Furthermore, voters might perceive newspapers as ideologically biased in the direction of their editorial endorsements, regardless of whether they are or not.\(^8\)

Relative to all other news media sources, network evening news coverage, with its direct outreach to a mass audience, has developed a prevalent norm and public perception of neutrality in reporting. Not surprisingly, network news is currently rated as the most trusted and credible news media source while attitudes to other news media resources have shown greater decline (*The Pew Research Center For The People And The Press* June 26, 2005). Another advantage of network television is their evening news format as it provides a much clearer metric for measuring news media agendas. Since each evening news show is set to a half-hour there is a constant source of constraint in their content. While the proportion of 30 minutes devoted to the campaign might vary, the constraint on time means increased coverage is at the

\(^8\)There is conflicting evidence regarding whether editorial perspectives are connected to reporting biases (e.g., Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt 1998; Kahn and Kenney 2002).
cost of non-campaign news. The time-length constraint forces network news shows to focus on the relevant campaign issues for the day. Contrast this format with newspapers whose overall content varies in size depending on the day of the week. Such day dependencies create artifacts in their daily agenda series, where Sunday editions hold a greater propensity to mention a wide variety of issues.

I use both the LexisNexis database of evening news transcripts and the Vanderbilt TV News Archive to develop measures of network news agendas. This combination of resources enables one to accurately characterize news broadcasts and their agendas. The Vanderbilt Archive provides information regarding the order, general nature, and time length of stories within the evening television news shows of ABC, CBS, and NBC. The Vanderbilt Archive, however, does not provide actual transcripts of what was said within each news story, only an abstract. As a result, I took transcripts from LexisNexis to code the issue content of each story.

I kept a record of what political issues were mentioned within each news story using the WiscADS coding scheme. I calculated news media issue attention by taking the length of campaign news segments discussing an issue and then dividing it by the total length of campaign news segments for all three networks that day. For example, if there were three network news stories aired on the campaign one day and two of these were 90 seconds long and did not mention Social Security while the third story was 120 seconds long and did mention Social Security, then news attention to Social Security equals 40 percent (120/300). I also distinguish between campaign stories and non-campaign stories, which allows me to formulate an issue’s overall salience as well as an issue’s salience within campaign coverage.
LexisNexis also provides transcripts of numerous other television news broadcasts. At times I supplement my characterizations and measures of news media content by quoting from these network shows, like NBC’s *Today* or ABC’s *Good Morning America*. Likewise, newspaper descriptions and characterizations of campaign events will be referenced at times to further develop the nature of the news media’s content and candidate communication strategies. For the chapter that examines Senate elections I change my focus to look at local newspaper content. Since Senate elections are at the state-level it makes sense to look at local newspapers. The specific format of and nature of issue agenda coding for this analysis will be described in that chapter.

**Voter Attitudes**

Finally, it is also important to have longitudinal data on the nature of voter agendas as most examinations of campaign agenda-setting effects advocate its necessity (Weaver et al. 1981). To accommodate this need I use the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Study or NAES (Romer et al. 2006). The 2000 NAES rolling cross section study conducted a national daily phone survey with samples ranging from 100-300 voters that started around December 1999. The 2004 survey continued this format but had a larger time window, starting in October 2003, and also contained larger daily samples. These surveys offer an unprecedented opportunity to evaluate national campaign effects.

Voter agendas were captured with the standard agenda-setting item that asks respondents what they thought the most important problem facing America was that day. Although this item is an imperfect measure of issue salience (Wlezien 2004), the potential for confounding factors is most likely constant during the campaign. The
measure also does not directly capture the priming influence of the news media or candidates, but, in line with Miller and Krosnick (2000), it does represent a known mediating factor of priming. When coding these open-ended responses coding categories were developed to be similar to those used within WiscADS and news media coverage.

Beyond having a longitudinal measure of voter agendas, a number of additional variables measuring the electorate’s issue opinions, candidate evaluations, general orientations, and attention toward the campaign are also needed to test many of the secondary arguments. For the most part these variables are found throughout the NAES surveys and, thus, allow an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms driving campaign agenda dynamics. In some cases items are not measured until the fall of the campaign and limit the period of analyses. Furthermore, for those instances when the NAES data are not complete, I supplement the analysis of voter agendas and behavior by looking at the 2000 National Election Study (NES) and the NES cumulative file. This combination of resources provides extensive description of voter attributes and their connection to agendas and behavior.

A notable problem when using national polling data is that presidential campaigns essentially take place within a select group of competitive states. National poll estimates would bias results in favor of finding minimal candidate agenda-setting effects since candidate actions are mostly directed at these battleground states. At times survey respondents were limited to those respondents living in battleground states to lessen this potential bias. Battleground states were coded based on Shaw’s (2006, 64) recording of each campaign’s target states for the year 2000. If a state was not
considered a base state by either campaign, then it was coded as under competition and part of the battleground sample.[9]

For the analyses of Senate campaigns, there is no comparable collection of longitudinal surveys within each state and year. However, the extensive window and sample size of the NAES does provide researchers an ability to make inferences about local-level agenda change. As others have done, one simply combines the daily samples from across the initial months to get a large enough sample of respondents within each state. Likewise, one combines samples from the period around the election to compare and evaluate agendas and their potential for change. I use simulation methods to essentially post-stratify state estimates and account for the lack of state-level sampling (e.g., Park, Gelman and Bafumi 2004). This provides an inexact but unbiased method for state agenda observation.

A Focus on Dynamics

Any theory and investigation of agenda setting is essentially dynamic. Scholars have argued that mass public agendas do not represent a cumulative summary of the previous year’s news focus. Instead, their agendas are perceived to have a limited capacity (McCombs and Zhu 1995) with a critical threshold of information exposure needed to push an issue on the agenda (Neuman 1990). Consequently, as one issue rises in coverage other issues fall off the public’s agenda. If a sufficient level of news coverage does not exist, then an issue’s priority drops off considerably, even if it was just recently a prominent issue.

[9] The sampling frame of the NAES was at the national level and poses potential biases in the sample of the battleground state voters. While this difference in sampling may create inaccurate levels in each issue’s importance among battleground state voters, this still does not complicate this paper’s analysis of the series daily change since the bias, if any, is likely constant across days.
Another reason I prefer a dynamic focus is because of the possibility of news media agenda cycles. Since the news constantly search for new and engaging content, news coverage of the campaign usually focuses on an issue or story for only a couple of days and then veers its attention to another subject soon after. These agenda movements might be particularly severe within the intense fall campaign. Therefore, to gain an understanding of the causes and effects of the news media’s agenda, it seems necessary to analyze news coverage on a daily basis.

It is important to note that agenda-setting theories of candidate behavior, like issue ownership, actually suggest one should find no change in candidate agendas as the campaign progresses. Candidate agendas should be static. Candidates have a selection of owned issues on which they can campaign, and they should only mention those issues within their advertisements. However, if news media agendas fluctuate, as they are often found to do, then the proposition of this dissertation is that candidate agendas should change with it. This creates a nice contrast in the expected movements of candidate issue attention across the campaign.

High frequency longitudinal data also offer an ability to sort out endogenous relationships in a way not available to less frequent or cross-sectional analysis. With observations at the day level, one is able to gain clear inferences regarding the ordering of issue attention movements. These orderings clarify which actors react towards the agenda shifts of others. Vector Autoregression techniques provide an agnostic framework to assess whether each actor’s movements influence the future movements of other actors. As such, the precision of measurement and volume of data within the 2000 presidential campaign offer an unprecedented ability to examine the dynamic relationships of campaign agendas. In contrast, the Senate campaign examination
does not have as precise a data to sort out causal relationships, but it does provide
enough variation in campaign contexts to offer a different perspective on campaign
agenda formation.

**Outline of Testing**

Having described the motivation, expectations, and means for testing this dis-
sertation, I now proceed to evaluate the determinants and mechanisms of candidate
agenda formation in three steps. The next chapter tests my two hypotheses regarding
agenda formation by examining the content and determinants of candidate, media,
and voter agendas. This is followed by a chapter testing the proposed mechanisms
driving agenda dynamics. Here I seek to establish whether there are any persuasion
benefits to candidates focusing on the media’s agenda. Finally, having distinguished
and established the causal relationships within presidential agenda dynamics, Chap-
ter 5 tests the theory more broadly by examining whether persuasion motivations
appear to direct candidate behavior within different electoral contexts as well.
“He who determines what politics is about runs the country;”
E.E. Schattschneider (1960, 68)

Beyond it being one of the occasional contests without an incumbent seeking re-election, the 2000 presidential election is often considered to be an outlier. Not since the 1876 election, when an electoral commission appointed by Congress awarded Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency, had this country seen such a contentious result. Vice President Al Gore was the projected winner by political science forecasts and the one historical patterns favored. In light of George W. Bush’s performance and ultimate victory, a good deal of post-hoc analysis has since attempted to explain Gore’s loss.

While some scholars argue Gore’s perceived lackluster performance was a product of forecasting models using the wrong indicators (Bartels and Zaller 2001), other prominent scholars argue the campaign’s content and Gore’s actions contributed toward the final outcome (e.g., Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2003). Regardless of these debates, it is uncontroversial to argue campaign strategy and events had an important influence on the 2000 election. The election was undeniably close and at certain
times, Bush in the early summer and Gore in September, each candidate had a clear, although small, advantage in the polls. Since the election was so close and possessed clear tides, many factors or events have been attributed as contributing to the final outcome (e.g., Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson 2004).

Even with this intense scholarly scrutiny, an underemphasized aspect of the 2000 campaign was the unique nature of its issue agenda arena. Not only was the 2000 election competitive but, from the perspective of the 2004 campaign, so too was the issue agenda. Both Bush and Gore had an opportunity to campaign on a diverse set of issues. External conditions in 2000 did not constrain the public or politicians to focus on any particular issue. No clear issue dominated public concerns entering the campaign, and many issues were discussed during the primaries and general election campaign. Both candidates had a perceivable opportunity during this election to make the campaign about issues that would be beneficial to their chances.

Despite this apparent opportunity, the following investigation suggests that the presidential campaign managed to coalesce around issues ranked at or near the top of the news media’s and, consequently, the public’s agenda. As expected, both Bush and Gore developed issue agendas in what appears to be a desire to shape voter evaluations within issues and not a desire to shape voter agendas. Both Bush and Gore showed a demonstrable and consistent reaction to changes in the news media’s agenda as the general election campaign progressed. These changes in candidate issue agendas showed little to no influence on the corresponding issue priorities of the news media and voters. Despite the unique opportunity the 2000 campaign held for Bush and Gore to place an issue at the top of voter agendas, the evidence still suggests
that candidates campaigned on those issues that the news media were covering and
the public determined to be priorities.

This chapter will proceed by detailing the 2000 campaign’s issue agenda in steps. First, I test what relationship voter issue priorities and evaluations entering the general election campaign had with candidate agenda composition for the beginning portions of the campaign. In line with past studies, the results give little support for agenda-setting expectations and act as motivation for pursuing a different perspective on campaign agenda formation. From there I will take a dynamic perspective and examine a series of questions step-by-step. How did the public’s agenda change over the course of the campaign? What factors explain this change? Did the media or the candidates mostly appear to shape the public’s agenda? And finally, what drove the dynamics in candidate and media agendas?

**Setting the Stage: Initial Voter and Candidate Issue Priorities**

In order to evaluate how presidential campaign agendas develop one first has to have an understanding of public issue priorities before the campaign. What issues were at the top of the public’s list entering the 2000 campaign and which candidate did voters appear to prefer depending on one’s priorities? Here the intent is to evaluate the relationship between the candidates’ initial attention levels toward campaign issues, each issue’s priority level among the public, and how the public evaluated the candidates within each issue.

If agenda-setting motivations determine candidate agendas, then we should expect each candidate to focus on those issues among which they are already preferred by
voters. If, however, candidates formulate their agendas mostly with the intent of shaping voter evaluations within issues, as I contend, then candidates should mostly attend to those issues the public already views as a priority since these evaluations have greater consequences for electoral outcomes.

**Voter Priorities and Evaluations During the Primaries**

Voter agendas entering the campaign are undoubtedly already influenced by the news media and politicians. Every week politicians and the news media engage each other and highlight particular issues. Voters do not exist in a vacuum and the nature of their issue priorities is partially determined by politicians and the news media, no matter when they are observed. Although analysis in this chapter of the final stages of the 2000 campaign will further investigate the direction of such influences, for now I will simply observe the content of voter agendas as they were through the end of the primary season without a concern as to why they were that way. The purpose of such an exercise is to get an understanding of the type of playing field both George W. Bush and Al Gore were facing once their attentions turned solely toward the general election. These were the state of public priorities and evaluations both candidates had to face as they started their general election campaigns.

Table 3.1 presents the proportion of respondents mentioning a particular issue as the nation’s most important problem from the start of the NAES (December 14, 1999) until the day Bush and Gore’s main primary competitors, John McCain and Bill Bradley, withdrew from the primary campaign (March 9, 2000). The second column of the table presents the proportion of respondents who rated that issue as the

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10The day before their withdrawal Bush and Gore had commanding victories across the Super Tuesday primary states. The next week, on March 14, Bush and Gore both clinched their nominations after winning primaries in six additional states.
most important who also stated that they favored Gore over Bush. These comparative preference measures serve as indicators of what issues were to each candidate’s advantage to emphasize. They are not party-based measures, but capture agenda-setting incentives specific to the candidate.\footnote{Candidate-specific measures of issue ownership are not the same as party based measures of issue ownership. However, research that has used both have finds no specific differences (e.g., Sides 2006).}

It is important to note that these measures are not exactly voter ratings of each candidate along each specific issue dimension. The NAES does not contain comparable items for each issue across the campaign. This leaves the breakdown in candidate preference by each issue as the best available approach. Past research has demonstrated a strong relationship between one’s overall preferred candidate and the preferred candidate on the individual’s most important issue (RePass 1971; Krosnick 1988). In Appendix A, I offer further support of this decision as well as an investigation into any possible bias in these measures. Based on this strong association, an analysis of overall candidate preference appears to be the best indicator as to how each candidate were perceived along each issue dimension. For each issue a binomial probability test was estimated to see whether the sampled proportions significantly differed from an expected population proportion of fifty percent. A significant difference from fifty percent indicates Gore or Bush was most likely a preferred candidate among respondents who viewed that issue as important.

Let me begin with a brief description about the type of concerns each category represents. A coding of the NAES open-ended survey question was implemented to most closely resemble the issue coding in the 2000 WiscADS.\footnote{Details of the specific coding procedures and decisions implemented in the 2000 NAES most important problem questions are found in Appendix A} This produced many issue codes that represent distinct and straightforward political issues, such as...
education, crime, or Social Security, which are often discussed within the political arena. However, there were also some clear concerns that are rarely discussed as concrete political issues within campaigns. The most noticeable of these types of concerns include a high proportion of individuals mentioning the decline of religion, morality, or family values in American life.

Turning to Table 3.1, one might notice the diversity of issues respondents frequently mentioned as an important problem. As it does throughout the campaign period, education stands as the most important problem. This is followed by social welfare issues, law-and-order concerns, and family values issues that all rank within the top ten. Interestingly, economic and fiscal concerns were much lower on the list. Although the combination of economic concerns includes about ten percent of the public, they were by no means a strong priority. Abortion stands out as another issue often referred to as having an integral role within American politics yet showing remarkably low salience, ranking even lower than urban sprawl.

A couple of clear issue sets emerge in which each candidate appears to perform comparatively better. These results mostly show each candidate to have an advantage among issues owned by their party (Sides 2006). As with most Republicans, George W. Bush performed extremely well among respondents rating abortion, the Democratic Party and its candidates, or the decline of morals as the most important problem. Bush appeared to hold a lesser advantage on most economic issues like the

As one often finds during the primary season and head-to-head polling questions, the non-incumbent party candidate usually performs better since little is known about the candidate. This was true also for Bush who posted a 53.5 to 46.5 percent advantage for the entire sample. This also explains why we find George W. Bush showing a slight advantage for many issues with insignificant differences. Also note this question excludes undecided respondents who made up about seven percent of the sample at this time.

13As one often finds during the primary season and head-to-head polling questions, the non-incumbent party candidate usually performs better since little is known about the candidate. This was true also for Bush who posted a 53.5 to 46.5 percent advantage for the entire sample. This also explains why we find George W. Bush showing a slight advantage for many issues with insignificant differences. Also note this question excludes undecided respondents who made up about seven percent of the sample at this time.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>% saying MIP</th>
<th>% Preferring Gore</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>9.34</td>
<td>56.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline of Morals</td>
<td>8.99</td>
<td>21.97*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>45.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>52.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>51.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>59.82*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty, Homelessness</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>63.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth, Family Breakdown</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>44.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics, Money &amp; Corruption</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>47.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>40.57*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>40.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages, Income Disparity</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>43.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism, Tolerance</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>49.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relations, Unrest</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>33.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character of Society</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>56.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government, Size of</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>25.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Control</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>56.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget, Deficit</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>46.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>38.78*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs, Unemployment</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>54.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment, Pollution</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>49.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Security, Military</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>40.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats, Gore, Clinton</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>8.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas Prices, Energy</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>66.67*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription Drugs, Medicare</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>67.31*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>40.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overpopulation, Sprawl</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>51.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights, Legal System</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>40.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion, Life Issues</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>2.86*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Culture, Television</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Research, Disease</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>47.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporations, Capitalism</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>52.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans, G.W. Bush</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc. Issue</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>41.82*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates sample proportion significantly differs from $\pi = .5$ ($p \leq .05$). n = 6,295.

Table 3.1: Voters’ Most Important Problems During the Primary Season
Candidate Issue Priorities During Early Portions of General Campaign

How then did candidates formulate their early agendas? If agenda-setting motivations best explain candidate issue agendas, then each candidate should only focus on those issues identified in Table 3.1 as to their advantage. Bush and Gore should focus on these issues in hopes of further raising their salience. In contrast, the persuasion-based explanation of campaign agendas suggests a different type of motivation might structure candidate agendas. Since candidates have relatively little influence on voter or media agendas throughout the campaign then candidate agendas should mostly reflect media agendas and, consequently, the current state of voter priorities. In this framework, candidates are primarily concerned about improving voter evaluations on those issue dimensions that are expected to be salient during the election.

To first investigate this question, the balance of advertising issue attention for each candidate is presented in Table 3.2 during the time period in between the end of the primary campaign and the beginning of each candidate’s party convention. The advertisements included for analysis are those advertisements coded as directed towards the presidential race and financed by either the candidates or their political
The issues are ordered top-to-bottom by the amount of references across the two campaigns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Bush-RNC (n=20,857)</th>
<th>Gore-DNC (n=29,334)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>58.58%</td>
<td>16.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security</td>
<td>58.41%</td>
<td>0.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Issues</td>
<td>40.77%</td>
<td>4.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>31.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cand. Character/Record</td>
<td>1.01%</td>
<td>28.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Reform/Corruption</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>25.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>24.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>18.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>12.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rx Drugs, Medicare</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
<td>11.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Values</td>
<td>15.36%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget Surplus/Debt</td>
<td>15.36%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense/Nat. Security</td>
<td>0.75%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>0.09%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Column entries reflect percent of candidate and party advertisements referencing issue.

Table 3.2: Top Issues in Candidate and Party Presidential Advertisements (Post-Primary to Pre-Convention)

In some support of heresthetic arguments, Gore and Bush show little convergence in their issue attention levels. Except for education, attention toward an issue was mostly dominated by one candidate. George W. Bush appeared to mainly focus on

\[14\] See Shaw (2006) and West (2005) for more on the similarity of candidate and party advertisements. During this time Gore had no advertisements financed by his own campaign but still showed a large advertisement number advantage when one includes those financed by the Democratic party. It appears the Democrats were pursuing an early advertising strategy that supposedly worked for Clinton in 1996. For more on this strategy see Morris (1997) and in relation to the 2000 campaign see Matthew Dowd’s comments in Jamieson and Waldman (2001, 20).
three issues during his spring and summer campaign. Education, Social Security, and youth issues were clearly at the forefront of his campaign with some additional attention given to moral values and budgetary issues and a brief discussion of national security, jobs, and civil rights. On the other hand, Gore campaigned on a broader and more diverse set of issues within his spring and summer advertisements. While Gore’s top issue was health care, many other issues were not far behind. He showed interest in emphasizing his own record, the state of the political system, the environment, taxes, education, crime, and prescription drugs, with youth issues and Social Security showing a scant level of focus.

Did each candidate focus on issues that would have been beneficial for agenda setting? This expectation appears to be supported among issues like Social Security, health care, moral value issues, prescription drugs, and, although not clearly reflected in Table 3.1, the environment. However, there are a number of issues for each candidate, like international relations for Bush and poverty for Gore, where the candidate was clearly preferred by voters yet the candidate did not mention the issue in advertisements. Of the thirteen issues measured to possess a significant advantage for one candidate only four get attention from that candidate.

Contrast this with how much candidate agendas reflected preexisting voter priorities. The top issue priority for the public, education, also topped candidate attention. Although education was an issue on which voters originally appeared to prefer Gore, it appears Bush was the candidate contributing mostly to its level of attention. For other issues there is also evidence of campaign agendas reflecting preexisting public priorities. Of the top ten issues in Table 3.1 with corresponding codes in the WiscADS,

15Youth issues are a combination of the WiscADS codes for focusing on child care or other child-related issues.
seven are given attention by at least one candidate. However, there also appear to be some inconsistencies in the influence of the public’s priorities. For instance, the second highest most important problem, moral values, does not show an equivalent level of priority among the candidates as only Bush gave it a little attention.

To better understand if agenda-setting incentives influenced each candidate’s issue attention, I regress the percentages in Table 3.2 on each issue’s priority rating and a candidate issue standing variable. Many issues on the public agenda were not discussed by the candidates, and this produced an extensive number of observations at zero (69 percent). Consequently, I estimated a set of censored regression, or Tobit models, and I present the results in Table 3.3. Each observation is an issue-candidate dyad with two competing explanatory variables, the candidate’s rating on that issue as well as the percentage of the public rating that issue as an important problem.

So, for instance, there are two observations for the issue of education where the two dependent variables record the percentage of Bush and Gore advertisements mentioning education. For both observations, the Most Important Problem variable is set equal to Education’s importance rating in the first column of Table 3.1. A candidate’s issue advantage rating or evaluation within in an issue was modeled using one of two measures. The Issue Standing variable uses the candidate preference percentage from the second column of Table 3.1. The second measure, Significant Advantage, is a dummy variable that is equal to one if a candidate’s issue advantage in Table 3.1 was significant. These measures are meant to capture whether agenda-setting incentives influenced Gore and Bush’s agenda formation.

16Two of the top ten issue categories displayed in Table 3.1, violence and miscellaneous issues, have no corresponding category in the WiscADS data and thus cannot be analyzed.

17These issues were not shown in Table 3.2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1 Coefficient</th>
<th>Model 2 Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most Important Problem</td>
<td>4.32* (1.76)</td>
<td>4.68* (1.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Advantage</td>
<td>11.62 (10.86)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Standing</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>−29.46* (9.33)</td>
<td>−42.85* (20.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\sigma)</td>
<td>27.10 (5.08)</td>
<td>27.36 (5.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-likelihood</td>
<td>−102.85</td>
<td>−103.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent Variable: Percent of each candidate’s advertisements referencing issue. Censored regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses (* indicates \(p \leq 0.05\)).

Table 3.3: Explaining Candidate Issue Attention during Early Phases of the General Election Campaign

As is clear from Table 3.3, regardless of how one operationalizes a candidate’s issue advantage or ownership, candidate issue attention has a significant relationship with an issue’s priority level with the public. Agenda-setting incentives are less likely to be influential. Both measures of candidate issue ratings hold positive coefficient estimates, but neither of these estimates are significant. In contrast, persuasion-based motivations of candidate agenda formation show a consistent influence. After translating the estimates in Model 2 into observed variable predictions (Greene 2003, 766), we find that when candidate standing is at 50 percent and an issue’s importance rating is at two, a percentage point increase in importance rating creates an estimated
1.1 percentage increase in observed candidate attention. These results suggest a significant, but not overly powerful, association.

This analysis serves to demonstrate how agenda-setting incentives do not have a strong influence on candidate agendas. These results could partially be driven by an inability to control for other issue-specific factors. Most notably, issue importance indicators do not capture media coverage and all persuasive influences. I also estimated a number of different models that account for unobserved dependence across the pairs of observations for each issue. These include estimating a random issue-specific error term or using a clustering technique to allow for correlated errors for each issue. These estimates do not offer any substantively different conclusions and continue to show issue advantage or ownership levels do not determine candidate agendas.

**Inferences and Motivations**

These conclusions fall in line with the conclusions of other recent studies of the nature and sources of campaign agenda composition (Sides 2006; Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004). Also, to the extent voter priorities represent persuasive influences, they are supportive of candidates seeking to change voter evaluations. While significant, the substantive size of the relationship between candidate attention and the public’s issue importance was quite small and falls far from completely explaining candidate issue attention. Consequently, the overall inability to accurately model the content in candidate issue attention provides a greater motivation to pursue a different approach when attempting to explain campaign agenda formation and this is what the rest of this chapter will pursue. In the following analysis I will examine the dynamic, persuasion-based explanation of candidate issue
attention offered by this dissertation as well as a fuller view of campaign agenda development. Indeed, further exploration will hopefully demonstrate how a static analysis, such as that above, for the later portions of the campaign is inappropriate as it masks over important relationships not captured within aggregate summary statistics.

**Pursuing a Dynamic Perspective of Campaign Agendas**

So far the analysis of campaign agendas has been sequential but static. The previous sort of analysis is also limited by some strong assumptions of exogeneity. It is possible the public’s prioritization of issues like education may have been influenced by candidate actions during the primaries or even earlier political actions. Although I cannot go back and examine whether politicians influenced the public’s agenda in 1999, I can evaluate whether such a relationship is exhibited within the year 2000 by fully exploring how candidate, media, and voter agendas interact.

I examine campaign agenda dynamics by first detailing the degree of flexibility in public priorities and what best explains these changes. These results suggest public priorities often changed in reaction to external and non-political events, and they show campaigns as having only a partial role in changing the public’s agenda in 2000.

Despite this degree of stability in priorities, a core group of issue priorities still emerges as exhibiting strong connections to the campaign. Among these campaign issues, I proceed to evaluate whether candidates or the news media are responsible for the observed dynamics in public priorities. The goal of this analysis is simple. Both the news media and the candidates mentioned these campaign issues frequently. Gore and Bush’s attention to these issues could either be a result of them attempting to
increase each issue’s priority level among the media and voters or because they need to shape voter evaluations within those issues made prominent by the news media. By examining if candidates are best envisioned as driving or reacting to an issue’s prominence, I will distinguish among these competing explanations and test the two hypotheses.

How Did the Public’s Agenda Change?

A strong contention of this dissertation is that taking into account the timing or dynamics of campaign issue attention allows one to better understand how certain issues become important on election day. An assumption of this argument is that voter agendas change across the campaign and exhibit some sort of systematic dynamic behavior. To test the extent to which public issue priorities changed, I implement a simple time series test to distinguish whether a series is best described as changing over time or a white-noise series with consistent mean and variance. For the entire time period leading up to the election in which the NAES is running (December 14, 1999 - November 6, 2000) a Bayesian state space model was estimated where the observed issue importance rating was modeled as a product of sampling error, day-specific effects, and the underlying true issue importance rating. The number of individuals who rate issue $y$ as important on day $t$ is specified as following a binomial distribution:

$$y_t \sim \text{Bin}(x_t, n_t)$$

where $n_t$ is the total number of individuals who responded to the most important problem item in the NAES that day. To account for day-specific phone survey effects, $x_t$ is modeled as a function $\pi_t$, the true importance rating of the issue, and dummy
variables that control for any possible day-specific effects, $d_t$, as $x_t = \pi_t + d_t$. I then estimate whether the issue’s underlying daily importance rating, $\pi_t$, shows any systematic dependence overtime by estimating the following transition model:

$$\pi_t = \alpha + \beta \cdot \pi_{t-1} + \epsilon_t, \text{ where } \epsilon_t \sim \text{Norm}(0, \sigma^2)$$

Relatively diffuse priors are set for a white-noise series where the mean of $\beta$ is expected to be zero and the mean of $\alpha$ is expected to be equal to the average daily importance rating. If the true priority rating of an issue changes in a systematic fashion over time, then the model will reject the white-noise prior and the posterior estimate of $\beta$ will exclude zero with a high probability.

Two separate samples were analyzed for agenda dynamics. The entire national sample’s issue priority rating was estimated along with the aggregate series of survey respondents residing in battleground states. The second sample allows one to account for the possibility of more targeted campaign effects. The battleground state sample was defined based on the actual campaign strategies of the candidates, as recorded by Shaw (2006, 64). If both candidates did not consider a state to be a “base” state for either campaign then they were coded as being a battleground state. This includes basically all states in which candidates visited and aired general election advertisements.

The results from these tests are presented in Table 3.4. Excluding the miscellaneous category, only thirteen out of the thirty-four cohesive issue categories listed in Table 3.1 are estimated to have non-constant priority levels (about 40 percent). Most of these issues show significant dynamics in both the battleground and national

---

18 Greater details of these estimation procedures are presented within Appendix B.
19 For more details see Shaw (2006).
What issue priorities changed?

Crime
Education
Gas Prices, Energy
Gun Control
Health Care
International Relations, Unrest
Misc. Issue
National Security, Military (National only)
Politics, Money & Corruption
Poverty, Homelessness
Prescription Drugs, Medicare
Social Security
Violence
Youth, Family Breakdown (National only)

Issues listed were estimated to have an autoregressive term $\beta$ greater than zero (95% BCI).

Table 3.4: Changes in the Public’s Issue Priorities over the Campaign

sample series. Only concerns over national security and the youth showed different dynamic behavior. Examination of these different samples suggests these two differing results are most likely due to the lower power of the test within the smaller battleground sample.

Beyond these two issues, crime, education, gas prices, gun control, health care, international relations, politics, poverty, prescription drugs, Social Security, and violence were the only other issues that showed significant changes in their priority level over the course of the year. Combining issue categories into broader groupings produced similar inferences; public priorities changed mostly among law-and-order, social welfare, and foreign affairs issues (international relations and national security),
but showed no changes among economic priorities. The mentioning of miscellaneous issues as the most important problem also showed a significant decline, from about six to three percent, as the campaign developed. This result might be taken as evidence of political campaigns creating greater consensus within the public’s agenda.

A number of points deserve mentioning. Despite its typically prominent role within voter behavior, economic issues show no change in their priorities. I believe this is not typical of all elections but mostly reflective of the preceding decade’s economic boom making such concerns less prominent. To some extent economic concerns are less malleable because people have relatively greater knowledge of the issue’s personal relevance. However, studies have found the public’s economic concerns to be reflective of campaign content in other elections (Hetherington 1996). Indeed, issues like education and health care show that the public was more interested in using the country’s economic well-being to improve its educational and health care systems.

There are two other important points to be made here. First, Table 3.4 provides an estimate of the extent to which the public priorities changed during the year. While it is yet to be assessed whether these changes were actually produced by the campaign, these results demonstrate the public reassessed their priorities among a partial, yet noticeable, collection of issues. The public’s agenda in 2000 was not completely erratic, as many issues showed a consistent level of priority, but it was certainly malleable. Additionally, the changes that did occur were among many of the public’s more salient issues, such as health care, education, and crime.

Law-and-order concerns grouped crime, violence, gun control, and drugs. Social welfare included health care, poverty, welfare, prescription drugs, and social security. A variety of groupings were estimated among economic concerns. One combined responses mentioning unemployment, cost of living, or the economy; another combined these responses with concerns about taxes and the federal budget as well. Neither these or additional series found priority levels changing among economic issues.

20Law-and-order concerns grouped crime, violence, gun control, and drugs. Social welfare included health care, poverty, welfare, prescription drugs, and social security. A variety of groupings were estimated among economic concerns. One combined responses mentioning unemployment, cost of living, or the economy; another combined these responses with concerns about taxes and the federal budget as well. Neither these or additional series found priority levels changing among economic issues.
Since public priorities change, political actors face both opportunities and uncertainty in formulating their campaign agendas. Candidates may be able to contribute towards these changes and, thus, formulate campaign strategies in the hopes of changing voters’ agendas. In contrast, change also means candidates cannot expect the prominent issues during the spring of an election year to maintain their priority levels in November. External conditions and events drive the public to reassess their priorities. Therefore, candidates who cannot control or predict these fluctuations may need to be prepared and flexible enough to address a whole host of issues within their campaign.

A second result that emerges from Table 3.4 is the apparent nationalization of voter agenda dynamics. Both the battleground and national samples showed movements among similar issues. Further analysis of these estimates indicates that the national and battleground series mostly exhibit the same pattern of dynamics within each issue as well. For instance, compare the estimated dynamics of prescription drugs as an important problem in Figure 3.1. The two estimates are not exactly similar. Due to the smaller sample size, the battleground estimates have larger standard errors. The battleground state estimate also shows slightly greater deviation from the long run mean, with a larger dip in March and a higher peak in October. Yet the general pattern of movement in the two series is similar. Generally, comparisons, such as in Figure 3.1, are not exact but fail to find any dramatically different patterns of issue importance dynamics among battleground or national aggregates.

In reaction to its greater swings, one could perhaps argue voters in battleground states mostly drive changes in the general public’s campaign agenda. However, when comparing non-battleground and battleground state movements one fails to find consistent differences in dynamic behavior; only one issue series that is estimated as changing among battleground states is estimated as constant among non-battleground states.
Figure 3.1: Comparing Dynamic Movements in Prescription Drugs
What Explains this Change? News Events, Systematic Cycles, and Campaign Issues

These tests for dynamics indicate voter priorities changed for select group of issues during the year. But were these changes in public priorities connected to the campaign? This next section attempts to detail which of these issues show the greatest association with the campaign. The belief is that by clarifying what issues are most associated with the campaign, one can then concentrate tests for the relative influence of candidates and the news media among those issues. This will provide a better and more representative evaluation of their relative influence on campaign agendas.

Of course, distinguishing what caused priority changes is a difficult question to answer since the campaign is a relatively constant presence throughout the year. To the extent the campaign distracts the public’s attention away from other issues, one may argue campaigns change the priority of many issues unrelated to the campaign. I still would argue these declines are not “campaign effects.” Political incentives and news media interest in the campaign certainly determine campaign agendas, but I would point out these interests do not discriminate as to what other issues will lose their priority as a result.

These qualifications in mind, I classify changing issue priorities as generally belonging into one of three categories of dynamic movement: being driven either by news media cycles, non-media cyclical factors, or the campaign itself. Table 3.5 gives the breakdown as to what issue belongs in each category. Each categorization is described and justified below.

By my categorization, campaigns do not dominate changes in voter agendas but they exhibit a sizable influence. At most, five of the fourteen issue movements show
### Table 3.5: Classifying Public Issue Priority Dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Movement:</th>
<th>News Event Driven</th>
<th>Cyclical</th>
<th>Campaign Driven</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gun Control</td>
<td></td>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relations, Unrest</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gas Prices, Energy</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Security, Military</td>
<td></td>
<td>Poverty, Homelessness</td>
<td>Prescription Drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth, Family Breakdown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Political System</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A clear association with the campaign. For one of these issues, money and corruption in politics, the connection with the campaign is, to put it mildly, an adverse reaction to campaign activities and news media coverage. The following section describes each category, the issues included, and the nature of dynamics within each set to provide a better understanding of their classification.

**News Events**

A number of issue movements are strongly associated with specific events that grab and dominate the news media’s attention for a distinct period of time. Of course, the event which draws the news media’s attention is certainly a partial determinant of the issue’s prominence among the public. But, as will be shown, once the media’s attention to the broader issue diminished, the issue’s public priority rating returned to a rather flat and steady state.

For instance, examine Figure 3.2, which displays the importance rating of guns and gun control within NAES along with the number of evening news media stories.
each day that mentioned the issue. The salience of guns and gun control issues showed two distinct peaks, each in relation to a particular media event; before and after these events the public’s rating of gun control as an important issue is flat and steady at a little under 2 percent.

The first of these two media events was the shooting and death of one first grader by another at a school in Flint, Michigan. This, along with a couple of other violent shootings that quickly followed, generated a considerable amount of news media coverage of guns and the gun control issue. Whether it was human nature to try to integrate shocking events into a broader understanding of why they occurred or it was the news media trying to earn cheap ratings points by focusing on low-cost policy stories, the issue of gun control quickly jumped into the political arena and the news media’s focus. In fact, media coverage of the issue peaked two weeks after the shooting as President Clinton and other politicians used the window of media coverage to promote policies mandating federal gun licenses and handgun safety locks.

Interestingly enough, Clinton had already made prominent gun control proposals the January before and promoted them within his State of the Union address. Even with a considerable amount of political effort during this time, Clinton’s proposals only managed to generate a couple of news stories within the evening news. Compare this small news coverage spike in January with the news media’s attention level after the Flint school shooting. Clinton’s return to the issue on March 7 received substantial media coverage for the next week and peaked on March 15 when eight separate

\[22\] To capture the discrete events and their accompanying shocks a dual regime volatility model was estimated for this graph. This model allowed underlying opinion to often exhibit small changes but also allowed the series to experiencing a large shock about ten percent of the time.
Figure 3.2: Public Concern over Guns/Gun Control by Evening News Coverage.
network evening news stories discussed the issue of gun control and the verbal wars between Clinton and the National Rifle Association.

Despite this politically generated peak in news media coverage, public concerns over gun control showed no accompanying increase and started to decline instead. For about a week and a half after the shooting, gun control as the most important problem stays at about a constant four percent, but then starts to decay at a steady rate. Clearly, Clinton’s ability to place the issue of gun control on the media and public’s agenda was conditional and not large. He was only able to generate consistent media coverage after the Flint school shooting raised public concerns over the issue. Furthermore, this success in gaining media coverage had little benefits in terms increasing or even maintaining the issue’s salience among the mass public.

Contrast the inability of President Clinton to maintain public concern over an issue with that of a rather well-timed citizen activist group. It was in August of 1999 when New York publicist Donna Dees-Thomases saw national news stories of a shooting incident at a Jewish community center in California that wounded three children. Her response was to organize and attempt a Million Mom March. The march was scheduled on Mother’s Day and set in Washington D.C. for the purpose of advocating further gun control measures. The date could not have been scheduled any better. The movement’s profile within the news media greatly increased in the wake of the school shooting and other violent events, like another shooting at the Washington D.C. Zoo in late April. News media coverage grew to the point that on Mother’s Day weekend the event was the lead story for all three network news

23James, George. “Mothers Hope They’re One in a Million.” The New York Times October 31, 1999; 14NJ.8
shows. In reaction to the event and its coverage, public ratings of gun control as an important problem returned to their March levels.

As a whole, the priority dynamics of gun control suggest the public’s response to increased news coverage might be conditional on the nature or the source of the events contained within news media reports. In this case, news media coverage that was generated by politicians show a much weaker connection to increased public concerns compared to those generated by a civic movement or a horrific and tragic event. This pattern suggests that even if politicians are able to gain news media coverage the agenda-setting influence of such coverage may not be as great.\footnote{In contrast, some experimental evidence finds news media coverage has greater influence when political actors are included Hayes (2008). However, the extent to which subjects perceived political actors as the cause of the media story or simply a part of the story is not discussed.}

Following this string of gun-related events, some prognosticators proclaimed that gun control would be a big issue in the fall campaign. This was not the case. Gun control, although discussed, ended up drawing little attention from both news media coverage and candidate advertisements. Along with gun control, public concerns over the youth and violence that had also peaked in the spring likewise dropped off towards the summer.

It is unclear as to what caused this drop in attention towards guns and violence by the media and the public. One possible reason is that school had ended for the summer and school shootings, which the news media had given prominent attention, were unlikely to occur. Another possibility is simply that the public got sick of the issue, many had seen enough and it was no longer good for ratings.\footnote{It was not long after the Million Mom March that the National School Safety Center came out with a report finding that violence and shootings at schools had consistently declined since the mid-nineties. After this finding was released and reported the network evening news rarely reported on cases of violence or youth violence for the rest of the campaign.}
Dynamics in priorities for the issues of national security and international relations, although not shown, also exhibit an association with news media coverage. A primary event driving this relationship was the USS Cole bombing on October 12. Given the seriousness of the event and the methodical pattern of government actions, news coverage was persistent and increased public concerns up until election day. Concerns over international relations also exhibited significant spikes in attention for many other dates. Most prominent among these occur on the dates surrounding the events of Elian Gonzalez’s deportation to Cuba. These events showed little persistence, as their priority levels quickly declined after media coverage of the events ceased.

Non-Media Cycles

In contrast to news media events driving public concerns, priority dynamics for three issues show a strong connection to factors external to the news media’s attention. Two of these issue concerns, crime and gas prices, exhibit a strong relationship between external empirical measures. For the third issue, poverty and homelessness, the apparent dynamics in public concern show a noticeable association with changing weather conditions, as concern over the homeless peak during the holidays and winter months. The news media certainly play a mediating role within these dynamics and thereby strengthen public reactions. However, unlike the gun issue above, the events or conditions contributing toward the news media’s focus are much more common, quantifiable, and have a direct connection to a respondent’s everyday life.

The nature of this type of association is most apparent for the issue of gas prices. Figure 3.3 charts public concerns over energy and gas prices with weekly changes in the average price of regular gasoline across the United States. The scale for gas
prices as most important problem is presented on the left and the scale for actual gas prices is presented on the right. Weekly gas price figures are based on the U.S. Government’s Energy Information Administration’s weekly national survey of regular octane gas prices.

As one can see, there exists a continually strong association between public concerns over gas prices and the actual price experienced at the pump. The relationship is only obscured in late September, when Clinton made the controversial move of releasing the government’s Strategic Petroleum Reserve to combat rising prices. Clinton’s move increased petroleum supply and briefly lowered gas prices. It also
brought about considerable political and media coverage to the issue for the next couple of days, since Al Gore publicly requested that Clinton make such a move the previous day. The Republicans and news media paid considerable attention to the issue in return, and this spike in attention most likely creates the noticeably sharp spike during September. Soon after, however, falling prices, the campaign, and the USS Cole bombing appears to have quickly diverted public concerns away from the issue.

Although not shown, similar relationships are also apparent for changing concerns over crime and poverty. Crime’s rating as a most important problem peaks during July and August, the two months having the highest national crime rate according to FBI statistics. The local news media may make one more aware of these events, but such reports are dependent on these criminal events occurring. Homelessness and poverty peak during the holidays and winter months and drop off and stay flat for the rest of the year.

Campaign Issues

Beyond the 2000 campaign steadily convincing individuals that our political system was an important problem, the campaign shows a connection to changes in four issues. Public concerns over the issues of education, health care, Social Security, and Medicare coverage of prescription drugs show a clear attachment to the progress of the campaign and distinct campaign events. Figure 3.4 presents the overtime filtered

\footnote{It is reasonable to argue Clinton’s move disrupted this relationship afterwards and lowered concerns over gas prices beyond the price level. However, this action had negative consequences in the form of sustained negative media coverage about playing politics with national security. In fact, Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004) claim this negative coverage contributed to a one to two point percentage drop in Gore support and claim it was one of the major contributors to Gore’s eventual loss.}
estimates of national concerns over these five issues along with the national survey’s sample size to help gauge the uncertainty for each estimate.

A couple of clear inferences emerge from the presented dynamics. First, except for concerns over the political system, the public’s rating for each issue does not steadily increase, but it jumps up and down during campaign periods. Compare the public’s rating of our political system as an important problem with the movements in the other four issues. Changing concerns over politics highlights what a cumulative campaign effect would look like. Concerns remain mostly flat throughout the year and then increase as conventions begin and the campaign gains in intensity. In contrast, changing concerns over education and health care increase during the primary campaign months of late January and February. These concerns drop during the summer, only to increase again when the conventions begin. Noticeable swings in these issue priorities continue for dates past the conventions. Likewise, Social Security and Medicare/prescription drug coverage concerns moved the most during the latter portions of the campaign. Each issue’s priority level increases over the year but also contains noticeable up-and-down movements within these trends. These movements suggest the 2000 campaign’s influence on issue priorities was not a steady cumulative process but more indicative of issue priorities competing against each other within the campaign.

To further establish why these dynamics are best classified as associated with the campaign, Table 3.6 and Table 3.7 display the level of candidate and media attention to each issue during the fall portion of the campaign. Candidate attention is measured as the percent of television advertisements mentioning an issue. These issues are ordered by the overall volume of advertisements mentioning an issue to
Figure 3.4: Campaign Issue Dynamics
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Bush-RNC (n=97,101)</th>
<th>Gore-DNC (n=71,011)</th>
<th>Total Focus (n=168,112)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>50.06</td>
<td>20.37%</td>
<td>37.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>29.04</td>
<td>47.04</td>
<td>36.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security</td>
<td>36.38</td>
<td>22.59</td>
<td>30.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>17.43</td>
<td>36.83</td>
<td>25.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cand. Character/Record</td>
<td>27.06</td>
<td>19.08</td>
<td>23.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget Surplus/Debt</td>
<td>24.29</td>
<td>20.39</td>
<td>22.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription Drugs, Medicare</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>15.35</td>
<td>13.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Issues</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>7.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>14.01</td>
<td>6.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Spending</td>
<td>10.29</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>6.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Wage</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>12.36</td>
<td>5.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>12.24</td>
<td>5.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>11.02</td>
<td>4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Reform/Corruption</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Values</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.6: Top Issues in Candidate Advertisements (August 21 - November 6)

better rank their prominence. Media coverage is equal to the percentage of campaign broadcast time that referenced an issue.

As is shown in Tables 3.6 and 3.7 the four policy issues with changing public priorities also received extensive attention from both the media and the candidates. The one big exception to this pattern is the attention both candidates and the media devoted towards the issue of taxes. The issue was frequently discussed by the candidates and the media, but it showed no significant changes in its priority level. Two
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Times Referenced</th>
<th>Total Duration (in seconds)</th>
<th>% of Coverage (Time)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Politics (Polls, Money)</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>46140</td>
<td>66.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gore-Clinton Behavior, Character</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>18000</td>
<td>26.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>13810</td>
<td>19.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>13760</td>
<td>19.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription Drugs, Medicare</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>13080</td>
<td>18.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.W. Bush Behavior, Character</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>12200</td>
<td>17.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12180</td>
<td>17.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7660</td>
<td>11.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7460</td>
<td>10.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Effectiveness</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7030</td>
<td>10.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Budget</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6650</td>
<td>9.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment, Pollution</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>7.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Security, Military</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4150</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Relations, Unrest</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3910</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Campaign in General</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>69,150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.7: Top Issues in Evening News Campaign Coverage (August 21 - November 6)

other lesser exceptions are the economy and the federal budget, issues that also received prominent attention from candidates or the media yet failed to register changes with the public.

Attention toward each candidate’s character and record was also prominent within news media coverage and candidate advertisements. Gore’s strained relationship with Clinton, his tendency for making embellished statements, and his ill-perceived actions became the second most prominent component of the media’s campaign coverage. As a non-policy issue, this level of attention has no clear connection within the most important problem item measuring issue salience and cannot be analyzed. Clearly
though, besides taxes, it appears the four issues that changed in priority were issues associated with the priorities of both candidates and the media. However, at this point, it is unclear whether candidates or the news media were most responsible for the observed priority dynamics.

A second interesting result from Figure 3.4 is the noticeable connection between changing public concerns over education and health care and the respective conventions of the Republicans and Democrats. Each party’s attention to an issue during the convention was associated with a spike in public priorities. Both conventions touched on many issues, but education and health care represent the primary issue of the respective conventions (as well as each candidate’s fall advertisements). The first day of the Republican convention was devoted to education, and it was highlighted by Colin Powell’s speech stressing the no child left behind ideals. Education was also the policy issue mentioned most by Bush in his acceptance speech, serving as a prime example of “compassionate conservatism.” Likewise, Gore’s speech proposing universal health care for children, a patient’s bill of rights, and his vow to fight the health care industry made health care the most evocative issue within media coverage of his speech.

The ability of party conventions to influence the mass public agenda is almost entirely dependent on the news media covering these conventions. These convention bumps thus seem to counter the previous gun control example, where politician-generated news exhibited a smaller or non-existent influence on public attitudes. However, further examination of these convention bumps help enlighten the why each convention had an influence.
Table 3.8: Percent of Party Identifiers Rating Education as Most Important Problem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Party Identification</th>
<th>Overall (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Independents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last 5 days before Rep.</td>
<td>10.77</td>
<td>8.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First 5 days after</td>
<td>15.94</td>
<td>11.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. Convention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>5.17*</td>
<td>3.22*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* - indicates difference in proportion significant (p ≤ .05, one-tailed test).
Table 3.9: Percent of Party Identifiers Rating Health Care as Most Important Problem

Consequently, the convention’s ability to present a mostly unfiltered presentation of a candidate and party’s agenda means they have clear implications for voter issue priorities. These events might be most influential among partisans and further campaign events can lessen this influence, but, in the case of 2000, both party conventions exhibited permanent consequences for voter agendas on election day.

**Remaining Puzzles**

Generalizing across these types of issue dynamics, it appears the public’s agenda showed some flexibility within a campaign year. Public priorities in 2000 were not completely malleable, as a little more than half of issues mentioned as an important problem had a constant level of priority throughout the year. Yet election day priorities are not easily predictable either, since other issues exhibited significant gains and losses. A majority of these changes are best attributed to non-campaign factors and media coverage regarding external events. These unpredictable and uncontrollable events demonstrate the degree of competition candidates, let alone the campaigns,
have when trying to raise an issue’s prominence. This makes a good deal of sense since voter issue priorities are a product of many personal and external factors that compete with the appeals of politicians. If candidates want to determine voter agendas, then they must face a multitude of competitors and noticeable uncertainty regarding how external factors and events might change before November.

Despite this competition, a group of four policy issues show a strong association with the campaign. These issue priorities fluctuated in accordance with the campaign but not in a simple cumulative manner. Given the campaign’s connection to changing issue priorities, what still needs to be answered is what caused these campaign issue priorities to fluctuate. Do these changes represent movements candidates are creating or responding to? Although changes in the public agenda show some connection to campaign events the power of politicians to influence and use the news media is not fully clear.

The Importance of Agenda Dynamics

I believe that campaign dynamics play an important role in understanding voter agendas on election day. An issue’s prominence is not simply reflective of a cumulation of events that occurred over the campaign, but it is best attributed to a specific pattern of events such that the order of events is consequential. For instance, an analysis that aggregated over the year 2000 would find media coverage and public concerns for gun control to be higher than in the previous year. However, these spikes occurred in the spring and their effects on the public’s agenda were long gone by November.
Summarizing data across a campaign ignores the fact that media coverage and candidate actions show clear cycles in their attention to issues, and that the public has a short memory in remembering past cycles. Since these cycles exhibit limited persistence among the public, those issues receiving their attention later in the campaign will have greater consequences for voter agendas. By knowing who and what causes these cycles to occur at a specific time, one can gain a clearer picture as to what determines voter agendas on election day.

The importance of agenda dynamics can also be demonstrated by examining candidate agenda dynamics during the fall campaign. As detailed in the theoretical chapter, many current theories of campaign agenda formation are static. These theories argue candidate agenda-setting incentives mostly dictate what issues candidates address. For each of these theories, candidates face constant incentives for candidates to campaign on a certain set of issues. Candidate issue attention is exogenous to the opposition’s behavior and, consequently, should be constant throughout the campaign.

But are candidate agendas static? Figures 3.5 and 3.6 show the observed daily proportion of candidate advertisements referencing the more prominent campaign issues. The displayed series are not moving averages or filtered estimates since the data come from a population of the top seventy-five media markets. As is apparent from these graphs, candidate advertisements show noticeable systematic movements in their issue content. Daily issue attention levels of the candidates do not emulate white-noise processes with constant levels of attention. Instead, candidate attention to an issue appears to be dependent on time. Some issues that were the number one
Figure 3.5: Bush-RNC Advertisement Volume and Issue Focus
priority of a candidate during the first half of the fall campaign received little to no attention during the second half.\textsuperscript{27}

Static theories of candidate agenda formation cannot explain these large shifts in a campaign’s attention toward issues. However, these systematic daily movements are also important to note since they bias summary statistics. An interesting example of the importance of dynamics is found with the issue of whether and how prescription drug coverage should be available through Medicare. As shown in Table 3.6, the issue’s prominence was low on the campaign’s summary agenda. It received less attention than candidate personal characteristics and the federal budget. However, this masks the fact that during early portions of the fall campaign the issue was one of the two more prominent policy issues.

As shown Figure 3.7, prescription drugs was the top campaign issue for both candidates during a three week stretch that ran from late August to the middle of September. On the second week after the Democratic convention George W. Bush made his newly announced prescription drug plan the number one issue within his advertisements. Prescription drugs soon became the major issue for Gore too, as he aired counter-attacks through the first days of September. Gore’s attention to the issue only sustained itself for a week, but Bush gave his prescription drug plan top priority for a three-week span.

\textsuperscript{27}These graphs cannot show the level of variance across states in advertising issue content. While there is some significant variance across states in issue content these differences are roughly constant across the campaign and neither shapes the observed dynamics nor distort dynamic relationships. For instance, candidates did not change their attention level to Social Security because they shifted all their advertisements to Florida. Instead, candidates showed an equal increase in attention to Social Security across the states. It was just that they focused more on the issue initially in Florida compared to other states.
Figure 3.6: Gore-DNC Advertisement Volume and Issue Focus
Figure 3.7: Candidate and News Media Focus on Prescription Drugs

Despite the fact prescription drugs was a top issue for a good three weeks, the issue’s prominence in aggregate summaries is not as apparent. This is because the issue received its prominent placement during the early portion of the fall campaign and over the Labor Day weekend when advertisement volume was much lower for both candidates. Statistics that average advertisements within the entire campaign, as opposed to averaging within and across days, are not an accurate indicator of an issue’s prominence on any given day of the campaign. This can be also observed within Figures 3.5 and 3.6 which demonstrate the changes in advertisement issue attention for the four campaign issues and taxes.
The dynamics in candidate attention are clear as well as the imbalance of advertisement volume across the campaign. This pattern explains how an issue like Social Security came to dominate the candidate’s overall attention much more than the news media’s. Although television’s daily coverage of the campaign increases as election day approaches, these changes are not near the gains in advertisement volume. Bush and Gore’s advertisement volume in the final weeks are double to triple the volume of the first couple of weeks. The late surge in attention towards Social Security (Figure 3.8) by both the candidates and the media made it the third most prominent issue in candidate advertisements. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the mass public’s agenda changed as a result. Concerns over prescription drugs, which at a brief point in September equalled those over Social Security, dropped, while concerns over Social Security increased over the final month (Figure 3.4).

The correlation between the time of an issue’s prominence within the campaign and public priorities on election day demonstrates how voter issue priorities are partially a product of when an issue gained attention and not just how much attention it received from the media and candidates. This perspective is often lost on current descriptions of campaign effects.

For instance, a prominent analysis of the 2000 campaign has argued that the battle over Social Security was one of, if not the, primary factor contributing to the final outcome (Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson 2004). What these authors do not make clear is why this issue was decisive compared to others. One can find similar candidate battles throughout the campaign over the issues of prescription drugs, taxes, health care and education. It was not that Social Security was the most important issue for voters and thus was saved for last. What made Social Security come to the forefront
at the end of the campaign such that it was given such a huge focus and became so
decisive? For a better understanding of the degree of an issue’s importance within an
election it seems necessary to examine how and why changes in issue attention occur
over time.

The similarity between candidate and media agendas, and their association with
changing public priorities, indicates that answering this question boils down to know-
ing what caused what. I would argue the news media move candidates to talk about
an issue. Media coverage of an issue is potentially persuasive and has a greater
agenda-setting influence on the public. As a result, candidates have to focus on those
issues the media cover in hopes of improving media coverage and voter evaluations on those issues.

Figure 3.9: Candidate and News Media Focus on Health Care

In support of this expectation, direct comparisons of candidate and news media attention toward issues highlight their strong temporal association with each other. For instance, Figure 3.9 displays the attention both candidates and the news media gave towards health care. Although candidate agendas do not march lockstep with one another or the news media, the series are clearly connected.
What Drove Agenda Dynamics?

To test dynamic influences in candidate, news media, and mass public agendas a vector autoregression (VAR) approach is most appropriate (Sims 1980; Freeman, Williams and Lin 1989). Within a VAR model, one specifies the current value of an observed series as function of past values of the same series as well as past values of different series. This is done for both candidates’ advertisement attention, the news media, and the public opinion issue series and then estimated simultaneously through a seemingly unrelated regression to allow for contemporaneous influences.

A couple of problematic features of this data motivate a slightly different approach. First, using polling data with sample sizes of about 120 each day produces extensive sampling error in the observed public opinion series. This makes the series very noisy and potentially lessens one’s ability to estimate systematic relationships. Additionally, with only 78 days of observations, the small sample of campaign days is problematic within VARs if a high number of lags are included as regressors. Finally, a larger concern is the extensive censoring at zero within candidate and news media measures. For instance, data on the daily attention level toward the issue of Social Security have 62 percent of the news media’s attention and 21 percent of Gore’s attention observed at zero. Since a VAR is akin to OLS regression, a failure to account for censoring would produce inconsistent estimates.

To address these concerns I estimate a Bayesian Vector Autoregression similar to that advocated by Brandt and Freeman (2006), however modified to take into account the censored nature of the news and candidate series and the sampling aspect of the voter agenda series. Bayesian priors help address degrees of freedom issues by specifying more recent lags as more likely to be influential. Furthermore, by directly
sampling a parameter’s posterior distribution, Bayesian analysis alleviates traditional
cconcerns over stationarity and provides richer assessments of model uncertainty in
forecast analysis.\textsuperscript{28}

The joint latent series for the news media, Bush, Gore, and the filtered voter
agenda series at time \( t \) is specified as a product of a multivariate normal distribution
(to account for contemporaneous error correlations):

\[
\text{News}_t^*, \text{Bush}_t^*, \text{Gore}_t^*, \text{MIP}_t^* \sim \phi_4(\mu_{1t}, \mu_{2t}, \mu_{3t}, \mu_{4t}, \Omega)
\]

For the candidates and media, each latent series is specified as observed when greater
than zero and missing when less than or equal to zero, for example:

\[
\text{News}_t = \text{News}_t^* \text{ if } \text{News}_t^* > 0 \text{ and } \text{News}_t = 0 \text{ if } \text{News}_t^* \leq 0
\]

For each series \( i \) the expected latent value, \( \mu_{it} \), is made to be a function of past values
of the filtered MIP series and each observed candidate and news media series up to
lag-length \( p \), as well as a constant. Or, more formally:

\[
\mu_{it} = c_i + \sum_{p=1}^{p} \alpha_{1p} \text{News}_{t-p} + \sum_{p=1}^{p} \alpha_{2p} \text{Bush}_{t-p} + \sum_{p=1}^{p} \alpha_{3p} \text{Gore}_{t-p} + \sum_{p=1}^{p} \alpha_{4p} \text{MIP}_{t-p}^*
\]

Observed values of the news media and candidate series are included as regressors
instead of latent values because I seek to model the influence of their observed behavior. In the case of voter agendas, the latent series is included as a regressor since
such estimates are never censored and since candidates and the media are exposed to
different polling data than that found within the NAES.

Tests for dynamic interactions were estimated for the previously identified four
campaign issues as well as the issue of taxes. Since education, health care, Social

\textsuperscript{28}Classical standard error estimates are invalid if a series is integrated and not stationary
(Hamilton 1994). Bayesian techniques which estimate a parameter’s variance by drawing multiple simulations avoid this problem.
Security, and prescription drugs were already shown to exhibit significant movements it is important to test and identify what drove these movements among the public. In contrast, the issue of taxes was included for analysis because it serves as important control and avoids selection on the dependent variable. There was a large amount of candidate and media attention to the issue but this did not produce measurable changes among the public. The issue’s prominence, however, enables dynamic analysis and provides an important contrast as to whether all issues prominent among the media and candidates move up the public’s list of priorities.

To place candidate and media influence on more comparable grounds, only dynamics within the previously identified battleground states were tested. This leads to a smaller sample size within the survey and less powerful tests but avoids potential biases. Since candidate advertisements, visits, and efforts are only directed toward these states, an examination of the national sample offers the possibility of biased inferences when deciphering the relative influences of the candidates and the media.

An additional issue within this analysis is that I measure each series with a proportion instead of a volume series. Volume is an attractive measure because we would expect a higher volume of news coverage or advertisements to have a greater chance of reaching voters and influencing their agendas. However, proportions were ultimately implemented for a couple of key reasons. First, series based on the volume of issue attention fail in any way to take into account the relative attention level towards each issue. For instance, if the absolute number of advertisements goes up for Social Security but the relative volume goes down, then individuals are probably less likely to respond. A proportional measure accounts for this. Volume series are also problematic since the overall volume of advertisements trends up. This makes
each volume series suffer from upward trending. Detrending each series to reduce this shared variance is only an imperfect procedure.

The direction of possible causal relationships is clarified using Orthogonalized Impulse Response Functions, or IRFs (Hamilton 1994). These were generated based on the entire posterior sample of the parameter simulations of each series. Each IRF combines the parameter values from across the four equations and then derives the system-wide interaction they have with each other for each day into the future. As such, IRFs demonstrate the consequences a past movement in one series is estimated to have on future values for the entire system. The benefits of focusing on IRF results over individual parameter estimates include an ability to quickly decipher significant indirect influences as well as the persistence of such influence. For instance, an IRF analysis is able to demonstrate whether candidate agendas significantly influence voter agendas directly as well as indirectly through the news media.

For each of the five issue series, a BVAR(3) model was estimated in WinBUGS with regressors of the first through third day lags. Further details of the estimation procedures, including the specific hyperparameters used for estimation, are presented in Appendix B. IRF results based on the censored BVAR(3) estimates for each issue are presented within the Appendix B in Figures B.1 - B.5.

Results

I have argued that the news media are much more pervasive and are considered more credible by individuals such that the media should have a greater ability to shape voter agendas. Table 3.10 assesses this proposition by examining what factors are estimated as significantly moving future public opinion. The overall results are
Impulse is: Issue Bush Gore News

Education + ++
Health Care +
Prescription Drugs +
Social Security ++ ++
Taxes

++/+ indicates positive change in issue’s importance with greater than 95%/90% certainty.

<table>
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<th>Issue</th>
<th>Bush</th>
<th>Gore</th>
<th>News</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
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<td>Social Security</td>
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Table 3.10: Who moved the public’s agenda?

supportive as the news media are estimated as having a strong and consistent influence. Looking down the last column, for four out of the five issues, increases in the news media’s observed issue attention are estimated to have brought about significant future increases in the battleground states importance rating. For the issue of taxes (Figure B.5) the estimates suggest a positive relationship but with less of a certain departure from zero. Overall, these estimates support the argument that the news media play a prominent, if not powerful, role in shaping voter agendas.

In comparison, candidate advertisement influences on battleground state agendas are much less prominent. Out of the ten estimated relationships, only two are estimated as approaching noticeable significance levels. Supporting the arguments of Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004), Al Gore appeared to be successful in convincing voters that Social Security was an important issue. Likewise, Bush’s attention towards education is estimated to have been successful at convincing individuals that
education was an important problem. Although both candidates arguably wanted the campaign to focus on these issues, this power was neither absolute nor exactly discretionary. For both these issues, the media also showed ability to shape public priorities. Furthermore, as will be examined shortly, the observed candidate attention levels to these issues were partially a product of increases in news media coverage.

It is difficult to gauge the relative influence of news media and candidate influences. First, there is the issue of comparing apples with oranges. Does a percentage change in candidate advertisement attention equal a percentage change in the news media’s attention? Secondly, since such estimates depend on the specific day forecasted, relative influences change depending on the day. Take the issue of Social Security as an example (Figure B.4), where a candidate and the media are both estimated to have an influence on the public. For the first day afterwards, a unit percentage change in Gore’s advertisements has three times the expected influence on the public than that of the news media. However, by the second day a unit percentage change in media coverage is expected to be 1.6 times more influential than Gore’s attention. These types of comparisons suggest that, in terms of the size of influence, there are instances when changes in candidate issue focus exceed the influence of equal changes by the news media. However, the news media’s influence is much more consistent and shows greater persistence across all issues. These results offer powerful support for the persuasion-based theory of campaign agenda formation.

Having seen that people rate their issue priorities mostly in reflection of changing media coverage, do candidates respond to the news media’s agenda as well? Table 3.11 summarizes what factors influence dynamics in candidate agendas over the course of the campaign. Out of the ten estimated relationships, changes in news media issue
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<td>Gore MIP News</td>
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<td>Social Security</td>
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<td>Taxes</td>
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+++/++ indicates positive change in issue’s importance with greater than 95%/90% certainty.
−−/− indicates negative response with greater than 95%/90% certainty.

Table 3.11: Who influenced candidate agendas?

attention are estimated to have produced significant differences in the behavior of the candidates seven times. Noticeably, these effects are concentrated among those issues in which the public was also most responsive to news media coverage. For the issues of health care and Social Security we see the strongest and most consistent news media effect, as candidates show persistent significant increased attention well into the future. The estimates for prescription drugs are also consistently positive, but they contain a higher degree of uncertainty. However, candidate responses are not always positive. In the case of education, both candidates show a consistent negative reaction to increased news media coverage.

Note that among three of the four identified campaign issues (Social Security, Health Care, and Prescription Drugs) the news media are estimated as not only
increasing public concerns, but also candidate attention. This result gives strong indication of the news media mostly dictating when an issue gains prominence within a campaign. When the news media cover an issue they raise its priority level among the public, and candidates change their issue attention as well in hopes of shaping news media coverage and shaping voter opinions on those issues.

The only qualification to this pattern is the issue of education where news coverage decreased candidate attention. A potential explanation for this result is that the news media increasingly focused on the issue of education at the same time health care gained in attention. Faced with increased news media coverage of two issues, candidates apparently placed greater efforts into the health care front. Since such dependence across issues is not explicitly modeled, it is difficult to assess whether this explanation is valid. Regardless, the overall nature of candidate behavior strongly supports the expectation that news media issue attention shapes voter agendas and, as a result, those issues candidates discuss.

Although not specifically expected, candidates also seem to be fairly reactive to the opposing candidates’ issue focus as well. On two of the five issues, Bush is estimated to have increased his attention to an issue in reaction to Gore’s attention as well. In contrast, for two issues Gore seems to have lessened attention to an issue once Bush increased his attention to them. These relationships suggest a potentially interesting dynamic among the two. Particular to this election, it appears that Gore was on the policy offensive while Bush was on the defensive. When addressing issues like taxes and Social Security, Gore’s advertisements were much more critical of Bush’s proposals. The Bush campaign had to respond with advertisement rebuttals that defended either their proposed tax cuts or privatized accounts. Once Bush aired a
response within an issue, Gore apparently changed his focus in hopes of landing a policy punch on another issue.  

A possible explanation of this type of behavior is that persuasive efforts and influences are neither equal nor constant within a campaign. Candidates use focus groups and polling to test and develop new messages over the course of the campaign and may use new messages if they resonate with voters. Candidates could then revisit an issue if they perceive a rhetorical advantage. Once a campaign puts out a refined message an opponent has to either formulate a reactive message that combats such an influence or strengthen one’s focus on the issue to match the increased efforts of the opposition candidate.

Another result apparent from Table 3.11 is that, when controlling for news media and candidate influences, changes in the public’s issue priorities do not directly shape the issue focus of the candidate or the news media. These estimates paint an overall picture of candidates who do not directly “ride the wave” of public opinion. Instead, and in line with my arguments, candidates preemptively act on increased public concerns. They react to changes in news media coverage not only to influence news media coverage, but also because they know media coverage will increase an issue’s salience and those issue opinions will be more important in the future.

Finally, Table 3.12 shows that changes in candidate issue attention do not appear to have a consistent or strong influence on news media coverage. Neither changes in Gore’s attention nor public importance levels are estimated to have an influence.

This is not to say Bush was on the defensive for other portions of the campaign. In contrast, Bush and the RNC were repeatedly on the character offensive by airing advertisements questioning Gore’s honesty. In fact, one could argue Gore’s attacks on Bush’s policies were an attempt to deviate attention away from candidate personalities. Further examinations of this element within the 2000 campaign will be examined in the next chapter.
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<td>Taxes</td>
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+++/- indicates positive change in issue’s importance with greater than 95%/90% certainty.
---/- indicates negative response with greater than 95%/90% certainty.

Table 3.12: Who moved the news media’s agenda?

on future news media issue coverage. For only one issue, taxes, is increased Bush attention estimated as lowering the future attention of news media coverage. It is unclear whether such a result is evidence of Bush being successful at modifying news media coverage. Considering news media coverage had a close to positive significant influence on the issue’s importance rating Bush would have conceivably desired the opposite effect.

The lack of a clear beneficial relationship between candidate issue focus and future news media coverage suggests candidates have limited to no influence on news media coverage. In general, since candidate agendas appear to have little influence on news media focus, their issue focus within the 2000 campaign was a reaction to news, and consequently voter, attention to prominent electoral issues. These findings support a persuasion-based explanation of campaign agenda formation. The results from the
BVAR analysis show the news media were the prime determinants of when an issue became a priority for the voters and the candidates. Candidates showed some success in increasing public concerns, but this power was not absolute. Candidate actions also seemed to be largely reactive to the attention of the media. In contrast, the news media’s issue attention was largely independent of candidate influence.

As such, the story in the 2000 campaign is one of the media directing the voter attentions toward issues which the candidates then discuss. The media may not have created and determined these issues independently, as their reporting is often dependent on atypical events and plot lines, but these decisions appear to have been mostly exogenous to the actions of candidates.

An important qualifier to this story is the issue of taxes. In this case, the public did not appear to react to the changing attention levels of the candidates or the media. Why might this have happened? One simple explanation is that not all issues discussed within campaigns resonate with voters. An additional consideration is that the taxes debate was framed differently. Since most everyone desires less taxes the question up for debate was whether tax rates were too high. In other words, the campaign debate was mostly framed in terms of whether tax rates were or were not a problem and for whom. This meant the campaign was a debate about its priority. This might explain why the IRF analysis found an increase in Gore’s advertisements lowered the issue’s public priority. Likewise, news media coverage may not have had an influence because it was balanced in discussing whether or not current tax rates were problematic. Clearly, the lack of candidate and voter reactions to the news media’s prominent coverage of taxes suggests different rhetorical battles were at play.
What Explains the Media’s Agenda? Dynamics vs. Central Tendencies

The results in the previous section help bring us to a next step in determining why certain issues become prominent during the campaign. One need only examine Figure 3.8 above to see how media coverage of Social Security was essentially silent for the first half of the fall, only to spike up in October and drive candidates to focus on the issue again. This increased level of attention propelled both the candidates and the public to increasingly focus on the issue. In contrast, news media coverage of prescription drug issues peaked in the early portion of the campaign and was not as prominent because the media changed its focus soon afterwards. Clearly, when an issue gains its attention from the media is an important component of how salient the issue will be for voters on election day.

At this point, it is important to be clear that voters and the candidates still have some ability to shape news media agendas, that is its central tendency, but they have little influence on their dynamics. When a candidate makes an issue a priority of his or her campaign, the news media will have some obligation to report on it. Likewise, by withholding statements and proposals on certain issues, candidates have some ability to control when an issue might gain prominence. However, the results suggest that, beyond this ability to shape their initial coverage, candidates have little ability to control how much the media will talk about an issue and for how long.

For instance, when Bush finally came out with a specific prescription drug plan in late August he attracted a lot of news media coverage in the following weeks, coverage that compared the Gore and Bush plan side-by-side. In this case, Bush obviously had an ability to release his plan at any time he desired, but Bush could not control how many news stories would be aired afterwards or what would be said. Likewise,
voter priorities have an influence on the central tendency of the news media’s agenda; higher priorities are more likely to receive news media coverage because those issues are more likely to attract an audience. However, newspeople during the campaign will often deviate from these tendencies when they sense an issue or topic deserving the media’s scrutiny and the public’s attention.

In this vein, it is only partially correct to attribute an issue’s prominence within the campaign as purely product of media coverage. As was just shown, the BVAR results suggest changes or dynamics in candidate and voter agendas have no influence on changes or dynamics in media agendas, whereas the media show a consistent influence on them. As I have argued, this relationship is important because campaign agenda dynamics play a central role in determining voter priorities on election day. But this does not mean news media agendas are completely exogenous or unexplainable noise. They still have some incentives that drive them to focus on some issues more than others. These forces may not direct day-to-day dynamics, but they may shape the media’s overall tendency to focus on some issues more than others.

What are these factors that shape the news media’s overall tendency to cover an issue in the presidential election? As already suggested, the news media are probably best envisioned as driven to serve consumer interests. The news media mostly seek to serve their readers and viewers by covering stories about issues that are of importance to their readers. We can test this expectation by regressing news media coverage in the fall campaign on the public’s issue priorities for the month prior to the fall. While this relationship is somewhat endogenous, it has already been shown that over half issue priorities were constant and what percentage change did occur before the fall was not extreme.
Table 3.13: Explaining Media Issue Attention

Table 3.13 presents two regression results that attempt to explain news media agendas. In the first model, media attention is estimated solely as a function of the public’s rating of the issue’s importance. In this case, public priorities have an insignificant but positive relationship. This relationship increases in size and significance when one also controls for federal issues, those policy issues mostly under the responsibility of the national government. Not surprisingly, those issues involving the federal government were much more likely to be mentioned within news media coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign. In contrast, non-federal issues with zero rating of public importance are essentially estimated to receive no television attention. For each additional percentage point increase in public concerns, the media is expected to devote one percent more of their coverage broadcast time to an issue.

These issues were coded as federal issues: the budget, government spending, immigration, international relations, military, Medicare/prescription drugs, Social Security, and taxes.
So, in the case of the 2000 campaign, Table 3.13 presents some evidence that initial public priorities shaped the media’s tendency to focus on some issues more than others. However, this relationship is neither very consistent nor substantively large. This suggests the media is somewhat guided into covering issues the public already shows some interest in. But in a manner that is fairly weak, where the media show a tendency to sharply deviate away from these forces.

Conclusions

This chapter has taken a detailed look at how the mass public’s issue agenda developed over the 2000 campaign. The results are fairly clear and supportive of expectations that candidates do not formulate their agendas based on agenda-setting incentives. Numerous examinations demonstrated the relatively minor role candidates play in shaping the public’s agenda and the fact that agenda-setting incentives often failed to explain a candidate’s attention toward an issue.

Bush and Gore’s initial agendas showed a strong connection to voters’ initial issue priorities, which represented persuasion-based incentives, instead of a candidate’s standing within an issue, which represented agenda-setting incentives. To the extent public issue priorities changed, most major changes occurred in reaction to events that were not easily controlled or expected by candidates. Within many of these changes, the news media were shown to play a mediating, if not determinative, role as well. Voter agendas were associated with the issue focus of the candidates, but tests show this relationship develops from the news media influencing both voter and candidate agendas. All of these results support beliefs that the news media have a pervasive influence on campaign agenda formation.
This is not to say candidates and politicians had absolutely no influence on the 2000 campaign’s agenda. In a couple of instances candidates and parties exhibited some success in raising an issue’s salience, but this influence was never powerful nor without competition. Both party conventions showed an ability to increase an issue’s prominence, especially among respective partisans. In the case of two issues, candidate advertisements also showed an ability to increase an issue’s priority level. However, these agenda-setting results did not involve issues strongly connected to agenda-setting incentives, nor were these influences ever without competition from the media coverage as well. Instead, in support of the second hypothesis, candidates appeared to want to focus on those issues that were already priorities among the public and, as the 2000 campaign progressed, the changing issue focus of the media and the opposition.

In this regard, another general conclusion of the chapter is that campaign dynamics are an important component in explaining an issue’s overall prominence within a campaign. Public issue priorities react to intriguing events, but they often fade away to an equilibrium level soon after. Candidate attention and public concerns over prescription drugs peaked in early September but dropped as the news media turned to other issues. In contrast, the issue of Social Security gained media coverage much later in the campaign, and it was thus much more prominent on election day. It is reasonable to suggest that if the order of news media coverage patterns were reversed, then these two issues would have played much different roles within the campaign.

Finally, I should reemphasize that, despite the pervasiveness of media influence, the news media does not completely determine campaign agendas. First, over half of the issues coded within the NAES showed constant levels throughout the year.
For other issues, like taxes, the public also did not respond to prominent level of media coverage. Still, those issues that did manage to move up the agenda showed the strongest connection to changing media coverage. In total, the evidence paints campaign agendas as not completely determined by the news media, but, to the extent public agendas are malleable, such changes are highly dependent on media coverage dynamics.

In conclusion, this detailed analysis of campaign agendas supported both of my hypotheses. Dynamics in candidate issue attention showed little success and did not appear to be driven with the intent to shape voter agendas. This leads to an interesting question, if candidates were not successful at influencing the public’s agenda, then did their changes in issue attention have other effects? The next chapter will examine this question by evaluating whether candidate issue attention was able to shape voter evaluations within those issues.
CHAPTER 4

WHY CANDIDATES CONVERGE

“There may be 90 million people watching, but 90 percent of them have already made up their mind, but the voters that matter most are the ones who know the least, so take the time to spell out your plans.”

George Stephanopoulos characterizing candidate strategy before the first debate. *ABC World News Tonight* October 3, 2000

The previous chapter provided a number of results indicating that Bush and Gore advertisements, and the issues they discussed, did not determine voter agendas nor did they reflect an agenda-setting strategy. Neither Bush nor Gore emphasized his party’s “owned” issues. Instead, both candidates exhibited a tendency to focus on those issues that were also being discussed by the media. Observing candidates modifying their agendas in reaction to the media is inconsistent with popular beliefs that candidates seek to win elections by shaping campaign agendas.

In contrast, the proposed persuasion-based model of campaign agenda formation can explain such movements. The efforts of candidates to talk about a certain issue may not be an attempt to raise the issue’s public priority, but to shape how a candidate is perceived within that issue, especially among swing voters. To the extent they are malleable, public priorities are mostly changed by the news media and other external factors. Candidates then may find their campaign efforts are best spent
working within, and not against, such movements. The previous chapter supported this explanation by showing Bush and Gore were clearly addressing the issues the media were discussing and the electorate considered to be priorities. But to what benefit? Answering this question is the goal of this chapter as it will try to provide evidence of why candidates can and need to shape voter opinions on issue.

In what follows, I will advocate that the goal of a candidate’s campaign rhetoric within competitive campaigns is to provide decisive information to swing voters. To do so, I will present two important bodies of evidence. First, I show why persuading voters, and specifically persuading swing voters, plays an essential role within a candidate’s fall campaign strategy. This analysis highlights why swing voters are an important element of fall campaign strategy, how swing voters possess low levels of campaign information and engagement, and, consequently, how their opinions are highly responsive to the campaign. Secondly, I also show how candidates might benefit from engaging on issues by presenting evidence that media coverage and voter issue opinions significantly respond to a candidate’s rhetoric and issue attention. This provides a reasoning as to why candidates converge on issues and provide two-way message environments. In combination, the following offers a detailed investigation as to why the desire to shape voter opinions is consequential for candidate strategy. They often cannot ignore issues the media and other candidates discuss.

**Persuasion and the Important Role of Swing Voters**

While I have attempted to advocate why voter issue opinions and the desire to shape them would influence candidate behavior, some still might question whether candidates are concerned about influencing voter issue opinions. Many scholars view a
voter’s choice as mostly a function one’s partisanship, socio-economic characteristics, and retrospective evaluations. Candidates should be equally concerned about managing and shaping these factors as well. Indeed, past works on campaigns and candidate strategy have often argued campaigns and candidates mostly work to strengthen these relationships as the campaign progresses. But is this characterization accurate? Do candidates and campaigns exhibit the intent or ability to shore up their base or are they more likely to try to convince swing voters?

The following section investigates these questions. What emerges from the analysis is the observation that voters showed remarkable consistency in how they formulated their choice for president during the 2000 campaign. Influences commonly referred to as fundamental forces – like partisanship, socio-economic characteristics, and retrospective evaluations – show a constant level of association with candidate coalitions. This created an interesting dynamic between voters who had a strong connection with one candidate on one extreme and those swing voters who lacked a strong underlying connection to either candidate at the other.

**The Consistent Influence of Core Vote Determinants**

Many scholars (e.g., Gelman and King 1993; Iyengar and Petrocik 2000) argue campaigns “enlighten” or “reactivate” voters by strengthening the influence of factors often considered exogenous to the campaign, like partisanship and presidential approval. This argument is similar to an agenda-setting or priming argument for general orientations. The campaign’s tendency to emphasize basic elements of the vote strengthens their influence as the campaign progresses and makes them the prominent determinants we often observe within vote choice models. Noticeably, this perspective
of campaign effects would also paint the need for candidates to persuade voters as secondary to the task of emphasizing important forces like partisan loyalties.

However, while often referenced, tests of these arguments are infrequent. Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) argue they found campaigns reactivating latent predispositions such that voters increasingly align their preferred candidate with their underlying predispositions. Gelman and King (1993) use a collection of trial heat polls to look at the correlation between a variety of voter characteristics and their vote choice as the campaign progresses and argue campaigns strengthen their influence. Hillygus and Jackman (2003) examine individuals before and after the 2000 party conventions and debates to see what factors changed one’s candidate preference. They find that conventions and debates have a significant ability to draw in partisans who were previously undecided. Beyond this return to the fold, independents also show a proclivity to support the party based on their positive or negative evaluations of the incumbent president. In other words, party conventions and debates show an ability to recruit individuals who were predisposed to that party’s candidate but not yet convinced.

These works provide evidence that campaigns can draw in predisposed voters. But further examinations question whether this is a prevalent enough mechanism to drive candidate behavior and rhetoric, especially during the fall campaign. Evidence for this point can be made by looking at opinion dynamics within the NAES sample of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. I also categorize Independents who report leaning toward a party as identifying with the respective party. This choice reflects both scholarly opinion regarding how best to categorize their behavior (Keith et al. 1992) and the fact these leaning Independents strongly favor the party’s
Figure 4.1: State-Space Estimate of Candidate Support by Party Identification

candidate. I then estimated a state-space model, similar to those implemented in the previous chapter, to derive a smooth estimate of the underlying proportion of partisans supporting each candidate.\footnote{I use the same transition model as described in the previous chapter. However, given the larger group size and percentages I used the normal approximation of the binomial, where the standard sampling error in the measurement equation is equal to $p_{it}(1 - p_{it})/n_{it}$.}

Figure 4.1 shows the results of the state-space model estimation. Look at the proportion of respondents within each group who report preferring Gore over Bush from July 5 to November 6.\footnote{Small samples prior to July 5 makes it difficult to estimate dynamics within the small pure Independent group.} Republicans and Republican-leaners and Democrats
and Democrat-leaners were supporting their respective candidate throughout this period at a rate of 80 to 85 and 85 to 90 percent, an extreme rate. The dynamics support the arguments of Hillygus and Jackman (2003) in that Republicans and Democrats increased their level of support for their candidate after each of their respective conventions. However, there are some notable qualifications to this influence. The evidence for partisan recruitment during the debates is inconclusive since each group’s level of support cannot exclude a flat line from the 95 percent confidence interval. The influence of conventions on partisans is also marginal at best, showing a maximum 4 percent change among Democrats.

Finally, and most importantly, it is clear campaigns do not continually build support within partisan groups. Instead of a consistent positive slope, the trends are rather flat for most of the campaign with peaks and troughs coming at or soon after each party’s convention. Democrats especially show flat levels of support before and after their convention bump, and they are not estimated to possess dynamic behavior as a group. With support levels consistently within the 85 to 90 point range, it is apparent that partisanship had a consistently strong influence and that there was little more support for candidates to gain from these groups. In contrast, pure Independents show greater movements both during the conventions and afterwards. The scale of the graph makes the Independent movement seem incremental, but the estimated variance is six and ten times as large as that of the Democratic and Republican series. Indeed, Independents move over the widest range of 45 to 52 during the fall campaign.

This is especially true when one considers that measurement error primarily bias extreme levels of support toward 50 percent.
Consistently flat relationships can also be found among a multitude of other factors as well. Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004, 55) also look at differences among other basic determinants of the vote within the 2000 campaign and fail to find changes in the relationship between these factors and candidate support as the fall campaign progressed. They examine groups by race, religion, class, gender, and other factors. Only within the ideological identification item do they claim to find the fall campaign strengthening its relationship with candidate support. As a result, Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004, 63) conclude, “preexisting gaps did not widen at all” during the 2000 campaign.

The only other possible area where one finds the possibility of a strengthening or enlightening effect is within economic evaluations. I calculated differences in candidate support levels by a respondent’s evaluation of the federal government’s performance in managing the economy using similar methods as I used in Figure 4.1. Figure 4.2 plots the estimated daily difference in Gore support between those with positive evaluations of the federal government and those with neutral or negative evaluations of the government’s performance. Individuals with positive evaluations were more likely to support Gore by a rate of over 30 percent. This rate is not consistent and does show a tendency to increase during the campaign, thus providing evidence

34Unfortunately, the 2000 (and 2004) NAES has some confounded measures of retrospective economic evaluations. The primary sociotropic item specifically asks individuals to rate the overall condition of the nation’s economy “today.” This is obviously different than a retrospective item tapping a change in economic performance, such as the NES item requesting economic evaluation “over the past year.” In addition, the traditional NES item does not ask how “good” the economy is, but whether it “has gotten better,” an item tapping relative performance. As a result, the Annenberg item suffers by not giving respondents a reference point for evaluation and by reflecting a respondent’s attention to the stock market and other current economic news, which is higher among strong partisans of both parties, and not a reflection of retrospective evaluations.

Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004) apparently fail to recognize this problem and instead devote a whole chapter to the very small relationship between this item, partisanship, and support for Gore. The meat of their conclusions does not hold if one uses the NES survey (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2003) or, as I do, if one uses the NAES item that better taps retrospective evaluations.
Difference in support calculated by taking the posterior mean estimate of the difference in Gore’s support among individuals who give a positive evaluation of the government’s performance from his support level among those who rate the government as having made the economy no different or worse. 95 percent BCIs indicated with vertically-shaded lines.

Figure 4.2: Difference in Candidate Support by Evaluations of the Government’s Performance in Handling the Economy

of the campaign’s ability to make economic considerations of greater relevance. However, once again, the convention appears to serve as the trigger strengthening the relationship between economic evaluations and candidate support. Soon after the conventions the dynamics are less clear. The debates also show a small effect in widening differences but the increased effect is neither consistent nor large enough to exclude a flat post-convention rate.
As one final step, I also estimated a pooled logit model, from December 1999 to November 2000, where gender, race, partisanship, and retrospective evaluations are interacted with a smoothed, non-parametric function of a day counter variable. The model tests for whether each factor showed any changing influence on one’s candidate support as the campaign progressed. The smoothing function modification allows campaign effects to operate in manners beyond a simple linear interaction. The results of this model are not presented, but the estimates failed to reject the null hypothesis that voters relied on partisanship, economic evaluations, presidential evaluations, or demographic characteristics with equal weight throughout the campaign.

In conclusion, it seems the distribution of candidate preference was remarkably stable among a multitude of fundamental factors. To the extent the balance of these divisions changed these changes showed the clearest connection with party conventions. These findings indicate that only a portion of the 2000 campaign worked to strengthen alliances or “enlighten” voters, and only for a small number of factors. In other words, the candidates faced a fairly stable playing field within the campaign and held a core group of supporters within each of their camps. Partisan and social voting blocks already exhibited their typical alliances by July and showed little tendency to change their level of support. One cannot rule out that candidates and parties worked to maintain this stability, but it seems more likely that the observed stability is a fairly unbiased reflection of voter behavioral tendencies.

What does this mean for candidates? Here exists a broader case of the situation outlined by my theoretical arguments on agenda formation. Beyond issue priorities, it also seems voters apply their other considerations in a manner mostly exogenous to the fall campaign and candidate actions. Candidate support levels for partisans were
large and stable and could not easily be widened to draw in additional supporters. This was the case among socio-demographic and retrospective considerations as well. Candidates could clearly rely upon a stable base of voters. Individuals who identified themselves as Republicans or Democrats were highly likely to vote for their party’s candidate and did not show deviations from such proclivities.

As I argued before, it seems these results highlight persuasion as an important component of campaign strategy. First, campaigns appear relatively unable to change the influence of fundamental factors and the distribution of many of these factors. Many voters are highly predisposed to favor one candidate based on their partisanship and other socio-demographic characteristics. Their potential for motivated reasoning and use of a partisan lens means campaigning and campaign media coverage are highly unlikely to change their attitudes, let alone their level of candidate support. Indeed, this is why many scholars argue campaign persuasion is ineffectual or not a major component of candidate strategy (e.g., Simon 2002).

An additional insight from these results, and what many scholars typically ignore, is that there also exists a small but stable group of voters who lack a firm predisposition to support either candidate. These individuals either have cross-cutting attributes and cleavages or possess mostly neutral evaluations that do not favor either candidate. Indeed, this group shows an equal split in their propensity to support either Bush or Gore. Since they lack a firm predisposition for either candidate it would seem campaign information has a greater potential to not only change their attitudes and beliefs, but also to contribute heavily toward their candidate preference. Even if campaign information has a small influence it may be enough to tip the balance in favor of one candidate over the other. But is there any evidence that swing voters
react to the campaign differently than core supporters? It is to this point that I now turn.

**Focusing on Swing Voters**

I follow the definition and motivation outlined in the theoretical chapter, and I classify swing voters within the 2000 NAES as respondents who identify as pure Independents and who do not claim to be very conservative or very liberal. Beyond the theoretical clarity of focusing on general orientations, this measure also avoids the problems of measures advocated by others. Such studies use candidate evaluations items and create a difference score of likes and dislikes or thermometer evaluations and then identify individuals with approximately equal ratings of both candidates as swing voters (Kelley 1983; Mayer 2008a). These measures, however, are not a strength of candidate preference but are a direction of candidate preference. As a consequence, these measures become a derivation of one’s current candidate evaluation and not an indication of one’s underlying propensity to swing toward either candidate.

For instance, using Mayer’s (2008a) classification based on thermometer score differences, only 25 percent of 2000 NES survey respondents who classify as swing voters within the pre-election survey retain that classification within the post-election survey, with 40 percent holding in the reverse. In contrast, respondents who identified themselves as Independents, a measure with far greater reliability, show equal or greater proclivities to behave as swing voters; they were more likely than Mayer’s swing voters to change their candidate preference and equally likely to be undecided.

Figure 4.3 displays estimates from 1972-2004 NES surveys to give an idea what size of a group the measure classifies as swing voters. Each percentage represents the

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35The NES did not ask for ideological self-placement prior to 1972.
Entries reflect percentage of individuals who reported voting in that year’s presidential election and were calculated using the NES post-survey weighting variable.

Figure 4.3: Swing Voters as Proportion of Electorate, 1972-2004

proportion of swing voters and partisan supporters among those who report having voted in that election. Respondents who were predisposed to support either the Democrats or Republicans, a group I like to call stalwarts, were roughly of even size following the southern realignment of the 1970s. Swing voters are estimated to contain as much as 10 percent of the electorate. However, these numbers have declined from their high point in 1976. The NES suggests 7 percent of the electorate were swing voters in 2000.
Table 4.1: Time of Presidential Vote Decision by Type of Voter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Decision</th>
<th>All Pres. Elections</th>
<th>2000 Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swing</td>
<td>Stalwarts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Convention</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Last 2 Weeks</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All entries are percentages calculated using the NES post-survey weighting variable.

The percentages are somewhat small, but they show swing voters are highly coveted by candidates. Neither party has large enough group of stalwarts to comprise a majority on their own. This is especially true for most recent elections, as Republican and Democrat stalwarts are of relatively equal size. When faced with these conditions, candidates need to win over swing voters to win the election.

As I argued in the theoretical chapter, providing persuasive rhetoric is a strong motivator within a candidate’s strategy because swing voters are a primary target of fall campaign communications and since they are very susceptible to campaign persuasion, especially within the mass media. This observation is based on the belief that swing voters are less attentive to politics, less informed about the campaign, and less in touch with campaign information. Furthermore, swing voters are less likely to hold political identifications and attachments which enable them to resist political information that goes against their current beliefs. These factors combine to make swing voters highly coveted by campaigns and highly susceptible to campaign information effects.
A straightforward way to demonstrate why swing voters are more reactive to the fall campaign is to simply show when they report having arrived at their final voting preference (Table 4.1). When averaging over each NES survey of presidential elections from 1972-2004, a little more than one third of stalwart voters report having made their vote decision after the two party conventions. An average of only 18 percent of voters report deciding within the final two weeks of the campaign. Compare these percentages to swing voters. Averaging from 1972 to 2004, one finds these rates approximately double, as 64 percent of swing voters report having decided after the conventions and 38 percent within the last two weeks. Of particular relevance to this dissertation are the results from the 2000 NES. In 2000, when no incumbent was running, 80 percent of swing voters report having come to their decision after the conventions of each party and 54 percent report having done so within the last two weeks.

Furthermore, the behavior of these late-deciding swing voters is much less predictable than their stalwart counterparts. Republican and Democratic stalwarts who report having decided after the conventions still show support levels for their party’s candidate at levels of 80 percent, a support rate less than early deciders but still fairly cohesive. Although these voters came to their decision during the fall campaign, it is clear candidates had little chance to convince stalwarts from the other party. Meanwhile, swing voters show a roughly equal split in supporting Bush or Gore. Not only are swing voters more likely to wait until the fall campaign to reach their final voting decision, but they are clearly mixed in their candidate support.
Information Levels of Swing Voters

Beyond the late timing of their vote decision, it is also clear swing voters have lower levels of political sophistication, know less about the candidates, and pay less attention to the campaign. To examine general political sophistication, I compared the two groups within the 2000 NES on a six-point political knowledge score based on the factual identification items of political figures. Swing voters showed significantly lower scores than stalwart voters, averaging about a half-point worse score (2.4 vs 3.0 average). Indeed, about 40 percent of swing voters scored within the bottom quintile of political knowledge of all NES voters; only 17 percent got more than half the items correct compared to 33 percent of stalwarts.

The NAES study offers an even clearer picture regarding the differences between swing voters and stalwart respondents. In terms of knowledge about the current campaign, I calculated a candidate-knowledge score from nine issue position identification items. Out of a zero-to-nine scale, swing voters showed significantly lower scores throughout the campaign. For the three weeks preceding the Republican convention, swing voters scored an average of 3.8 out of 9 while stalwarts scored an average of 4.7. Both groups gained in their knowledge as the campaign progressed, however these gains were relatively equal for each group. For the final three weeks of the campaign swing voters scored 4.5 compared to 5.4 among stalwarts, a gain of

36I only look at NES respondents who reported voting within the NES, these differences widen to one point when compares all swing and stalwart respondents.

37Four of these items asked the respondent to identify the position of Bush and Gore among Health Care, Education, Social Security, and Abortion, resulting in eight items total. The fifth item asked respondents to identify the candidate who is favors a bigger tax cut.

38For consistency and clarity I refer to respondents as voters within the NAES although they were interviewed before the election and it is unknown whether they actually voted.
Summary of respondent’s reported engagement across campaign information sources.

Figure 4.4: State-Space Estimate of Engagement with Campaign Information

.7 for both groups (both difference of means significant, $p \leq .05$ two-tailed test). All voters learned over the campaign and in a manner where all voters improved equally. These similarities in campaign information gains but differences in levels are, perhaps, partly related to each group’s reported attention or engagement level with campaign information (Figure 4.4). I created a summary measure of a respondent’s reported level of attention to campaign news sources. Here a score of 1 indicates respondents paid a “great deal” of attention to presidential campaign news across all of their information sources, while a score of 0 indicates the respondent paid “no attention at all” to presidential campaign news in their news sources. As shown in
both swing voters and stalwarts show an increased level of engagement with political news as the campaign progressed. Stalwarts show greater levels of attention to campaign information than swing voters. As was the case with campaign information, gains in attention are also highly correlated, although the estimated difference in attention between the two groups grew from .06 to .10 by the end of the campaign. These results also correlate with findings from both the 2000 NES and NAES where swing voters report significantly lower levels of interest in the campaign.

In combination, swing voters are less likely to have made their final vote decision by the end of the campaign and are more evenly split in their candidate support compared to late-deciding stalwarts. They also have lower levels of political information, know less about the candidates, and show lower levels of engagement and interest with the presidential campaign. For the most part, these differences appeared constant. The campaign’s progression caused gains for all voters and did not strengthen or lessen differences between these two groups. Swing voters do not follow the campaign as closely and may not be as skilled navigators of campaign information as their stalwart counterparts. However, the results also showed that swing voters learned from and became increasingly engaged with the campaign as it progressed. In other words, swing voters were encountering and responding to campaign information, but the level of interaction did not eliminate their differences with the stalwart supporters of either party.

**Swing Voter Attitudes: Initial Neutrality and Increasing Polarity**

The results above demonstrate that swing voters are, on average, less engaged with the campaign and have lower levels of political sophistication. This fact alone provides a basis for the argument that they are more likely to form their evaluations
in reflection of the campaign’s dominant persuasive messages. But there are other characteristics of swing voters that further increase their susceptibility to respond to persuasive message environments. First, by conceptualizing swing voters as individuals with neutral general political orientations, they are less skilled or willing to resist oppositional messages by nature. Their absence of a partisan lens or ideological schema makes swing voters less likely to resist or selectively perceive the political information to which they are exposed.

In addition to their lack of extreme general orientations, swing voters are also less likely to hold other types of extreme attitudes that would make them resist persuasive information. The 2000 NAES allows one to examine the typical neutrality with which swing voters approach the campaign. When comparing swing voters within the NAES with stalwarts of both parties, swing voters hold far more neutral attitudes entering the campaign. Table 4.2 presents the 25th, 50th (median), and 75th percentile from three important attitudinal predictors of vote choice for the three weeks before the Republican convention. The first row examines each group’s thermometer rating of President Clinton. The second row summarizes each group’s beliefs of how close each candidate’s issue position is to their own among four key issues. A score of -8 indicates the respondent saw Bush closer to him or her on all 4 issues while 8 indicates the respondent believed Gore was closer, 0 represents a respondent who did not perceive either candidate as closer. Likewise, the third row holds a character evaluation index that combines an individual’s evaluations of how adequately the terms “caring,” “knowledgeable,” and “honest” describe each candidates on a four-point scale ranging from “extremely well” to “not well.”

39 These are the issues of abortion, health care, gun control, and Social Security.
Table 4.2 shows that swing voters average neutral ratings within all three measures and are centralized in these neutral evaluations. About one-half of swing voters hold opinions within one point of a completely neutral rating for the issue and character evaluations. Compare this to partisan stalwarts, who hold a biased median and a greater range. Likewise, swing voter ratings of Clinton, while neutral on average, show a slightly larger dispersion but are not close to the extremity among Republican and Democratic stalwarts.

Another view of swing voters’ cohesive neutrality entering the campaign is found by examining the difference between a respondent’s thermometer score rating of Bush and Gore. The score ranges from -100, for completely favors Bush, to 100, for completely favors Gore, and provides a good summary of respondent attitudes towards both candidates. Figure 4.5 plots the distribution for three two-week spans (before

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>25th, 50th, 75th percentile</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rep. Stalwarts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Thermometer (0/100)</td>
<td>0,10,50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projected Issue Position (-8/+8)</td>
<td>-3,-1,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Evaluations (-9/+9)</td>
<td>-4,-2,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calculated from NAES over dates July 9 - July 29, 2000.
the convention, early September, and the last two weeks) by each group of voters using a Box and Whiskers plot. The plot makes clear that swing voters were hardly a polarized group when entering the campaign; most of them lacked a strong predisposition to support either candidate. Swing voters have an average score of -2 for the first two-week span, and over one-half of the scores are within the range of -15 to 10. Compare this to stalwarts of the Republicans and Democrats. They approach the conventions with means of -40 and 24, respectively, and with over 75 percent of each group holding net favorable scores for the candidate of their respective party.

As the campaign progressed, stalwarts showed a closer connection to their party’s candidate. Democrats felt better about Gore relative to Bush, and Republicans show the same tendency with Bush. But a more important change is that swing voters exhibit increasing polarity in their comparative candidate ratings. By the last two weeks swing voters still show an average neutral rating, but now fifty percent of respondents show scores ranging in between -35 and 20; the standard deviation of scores changes from 35 to 48.

Both Table 4.2 and Figure 4.5 show that swing voters were cohesively neutral entering the 2000 campaign. It appears that the 2000 campaign was then able to take this neutral group of individuals having no clear candidate preference and then provide them with information that transformed them into having a clearer candidate preference. Nationally, this information was not favorable for one candidate or the other, but it seemed to contain diverse elements which had equalizing directional effects among swing voters.

When combining these attributes into popular arguments of opinion formation (e.g., Zaller 1992), it is clear that swing voters are a key group of voters who are
Box and Whiskers plots where center line represents median value for group, box ends indicate the lower and upper quartile range, and whisker ends indicate the maximum value observed that is not an outlier.

Figure 4.5: Distribution in Feeling Thermometer Difference Score by Time of Campaign
highly likely to be responsive to campaign information and be swayed by information environments they encounter. Swing voters hold few anchoring values, lack partisan or ideological biases when receiving information, and are unlikely to hold a strong predisposition or preference for either candidate. These neutral attitudes make them susceptible to campaign information determining their opinions on key issues, candidate evaluations, and vote choice. In support of this belief it was shown that swing voters respond to the campaign with increasing polarity in their summary candidate evaluations. Swing voters’ lack of attentiveness to politics means that a persuasive message’s pervasiveness is an important determinant of its influence (Zaller 1992). Those messages that get a large amount of advertisement and news media coverage are more likely to reach such voters and change their opinions.

These unique characteristics and tendencies of swing voters might also explain why campaign activities are at their highest and most frenetic levels the closer one approaches the date of the election. This pattern seems odd at first considering about two-thirds of voters have already arrived at their choice by the time the conventions are over. Yet one finds most advertisements and public campaign activities occur during the final months of the campaign when only a small group of voters remain uncertain of their choice. If most voters have made up their mind before the fall campaign, then why would candidates devote an extensive amount of attention to the final weeks of the campaign? One possible explanation is that candidates need to make even greater efforts at reaching out to these relatively detached swing voters. Like the George Stephanopoulos quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, as Election Day approaches those voters who are undecided are less and less informed. By airing more advertisements and visiting battleground state, candidates guarantee
their messages get on the news and reach those individuals who have yet to pick a candidate and who are relatively susceptible to persuasion but also inattentive.

The Benefits of Issue Convergence

The previous section built a case for why the potential for persuasion, and specifically the persuasion of swing voters, is an important component of the fall campaign. Since they are more likely to be undecided, swing voters are highly sought after by candidates. They are also uninformed and show greater responsiveness to campaign information. As the persuasion-based model of campaign agenda formation argues, in order to shape swing voter opinions on salient issues candidates follow the news media’s agenda in order to advocate their policy positions. By providing supportive messages of their issue positions, candidates can improve their own position on these important issues and negate what persuasive gains might have been made by their opponent.

The previous chapters demonstrated candidates responded to news media coverage, but is there evidence that these rhetorical responses make a difference within news coverage and voter issue evaluations? Is there any benefit to issue convergence and focusing on the media’s agenda? These questions will now be investigated. First, I take an in-depth examination of the candidate rhetoric and news media coverage of Social Security during the primary and general elections. This analysis demonstrates that both candidates’ attention toward Social Security was often in reaction to the news media’s characterization of the current issue debate. After this analysis, a more rigorous test will examine the relationship between news media coverage and candidate issue attention and voter evaluations. This effort will evaluate whether
campaign information environments had effects on voter issue opinions by combining contextual measures of television news and candidate advertisements with survey data. The results will demonstrate that there are sizable benefits to candidates who discuss the same issues, especially with swing voters.

**News Media Coverage, Candidate Behavior, and Voter Response: An Examination of Social Security**

To clarify the relationship between candidate issue focus, rhetoric, and national news coverage the following will examine the campaign debate over the issue of Social Security. The debate over Social Security was of high prominence during the campaign. Indeed, Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004) devote an entire chapter to the issue and argue it played a major role within the 2000 campaign. The issue dominated the news media’s campaign coverage for the last two weeks of the campaign and, as they claim, almost brought Gore victory.

What follows is not an attempt to reject these authors’ interpretation. In fact, much of their analysis supports an interpretation that candidates respond to news media issue coverage and opposition rhetoric. But there remain some discrepancies and questions within their analysis that can be answered by the persuasion-based model. One obvious question is why did Bush devote such a high level of attention toward an issue that issue ownership expectations suggest he should have ignored. Were there any benefits to his strategy? Second, are the authors correct to view Gore, and not the media, as having driven the issue’s placement on the agenda? Specifically, they claim that by “October Gore placed Social Security back on the campaign’s agenda” after having sharpened his rhetoric and arguments during the

They do comment that the “first exchanges” of the debate occurred through the free media.
first debate. This claim is re-evaluated by examining Gore and Bush’s rhetoric and the nature of the news media’s messages throughout the campaign.

To understand the greater context of the Social Security debate in 2000 it is important to recognize the ideas and rhetoric surrounding Social Security were around much earlier, when the economic boom started to bolster federal government budgets. As the surpluses were first projected, the majority Republican Congress quickly realized it had a nice sum of cash to dispense back to voters. It was then that the idea of the Social Security “lockbox” was developed as a rhetorical convention by Bill Clinton. Starting with the 1998 State of the Union address, Clinton advocated saving Social Security first by reserving budget surpluses to pay down the debt, thereby improving its future solvency. The argument effectively combated Republican ideas for devoting the surplus to alternative goals, like cutting taxes, by connecting it to the third rail of American politics. Indeed, at that time, government surpluses were primarily projected as coming from Social Security payroll taxes, but by 1999 the booming economy led to projected government surpluses from revenues outside Social Security and Medicare funds. This made Republicans and Democrats more than willing to strike a compromise of sorts, where Social Security surpluses were put in a trust fund reserved for paying down the debt, while additional surpluses were made available to reduce taxes and fund new projects.  

At the same time, in the face of a skyrocketing stock market, numerous Republican politicians advocated investing funds from the Social Security surplus in the stock market to gain higher returns over government bonds. Senator Phil Gramm was perhaps the foremost proponent of such a plan. These plans focused on giving

individuals private investment accounts funded by Social Security payroll taxes. The policy had huge political appeal since the market’s potential for greater investment returns would increase Social Security’s future solvency without increasing tax rates or changing benefits or age requirements. By early 1999 President Bill Clinton essentially coopted the idea, except he proposed that the government directly invest such funds instead of providing private accounts for investments. The Clinton plan was more redistributive in its focus, giving greater returns to those who contributed relatively less in payroll taxes. The Clinton plan also caused great concern since the government, and most likely the executive branch, would then be directing possibly 4 to 5 percent of the market’s traded value. Regardless of the consequences of these policies, it is clear that the ideas and rhetoric of privatizing Social Security and establishing Social Security trust funds and lockboxes had existed well before the 2000 campaign.

The Primary and the Early Campaign

Move now to the 2000 Republican primary. Many Republican presidential candidates, including George W. Bush and John McCain, support the idea of establishing private Social Security accounts, although none give specifics or emphasize the plan as a top issue. Instead, greater differences emerge over the issue of tax cuts. George W. Bush proposes over $400 billion in tax cuts, while his Republican opponent McCain proposes a little over $200 billion.

In trying to convince voters that Bush’s plan cut too much from the federal budget, McCain took a cue from President Clinton. McCain connected Bush’s larger tax

cut proposal into a vulnerability on the Social Security issue, despite that Bush’s economic plan supported continuing the trust fund (a funding amount of $2 trillion). In early January, McCain criticized Bush’s proposal of using the surplus’s “every penny for tax cuts,” and argued Bush was “forgetting we have promises to keep” on Social Security. Indeed, reporters characterized McCain’s rhetorical strategy of connecting the tax cuts issue to Social Security as having “touched a nerve in the Bush campaign.” Linda Douglass even commented on ABC, with a foretelling characterization, that Bush was confident he could win the primary based on his tax cut proposal, but that his advisers remained worried “that McCain may be creating a road map for Democrats to attack Bush if he becomes the nominee months from now in the general election.”

McCain’s criticisms were a prominent component of early advertisements and were also quickly covered by the media. Figure 4.6 shows the proportion of Bush and McCain advertisements and number of evening news campaign stories mentioning Social Security. Reporters tended to focus on McCain’s criticism of no additional funding for Social Security within their news stories and failed to emphasize that Bush’s plan included a continuation of the trust fund. The dominant media message was clear: Bush did not take care of Social Security. This type of coverage peaked in reaction to two debates in early January, where Bush and McCain squabbled over whether he was helping Social Security. For instance, on January 15 both ABC and CBS played parts of John McCain’s debate statement that Bush’s plan had “not one penny for Social Security” without correction in their evening news segments. Only NBC aired Bush’s debate response that “That’s not true.”... “I have $2 trillion set

Figure 4.6: Bush and McCain Social Security Advertisements and News Media Coverage of Social Security (Jan 1 - Mar 7)

Regardless of whether the news media was being accurate in their characterization of the debate, it was clear that McCain’s claims were the dominant messages within these stories.

How did the Bush campaign respond to this state of affairs? Bush had to address McCain advertisements and the media’s lack of specificity regarding his trust fund support. He had to tell voters he was doing something about Social Security. Bush did so by increasingly airing Social Security advertisements as the news media’s coverage of Social Security grew. After two weeks of sustained news media coverage

and McCain advertisements on the issue, the proportion of Bush Social Security advertisements went up to 60 percent. These initial advertisements clarified he would “protect” Social Security for current recipients by reserving the trust fund amount. They then got combative later, by late January accusing McCain of false attacks.

Likewise, Bush and his campaign team emphasized his trust fund support within their media appearances. Karl Rove began emphasizing Bush’s support on the morning show circuit, stating Bush’s plan saved $2 trillion on Good Morning America.\footnote{January 19, 2000.} He also appeared on the CBS’s The Early Show and noted McCain stated Bush’s plan “did not save a single dime for Social Security in his plan when in reality Governor Bush sets aside $2 trillion, that’s 20 trillion dimes, for Social Security in his economic plan.”\footnote{February 8, 2000.}

McCain hammered on with his rhetoric, but with skillful adjustment, arguing Bush’s surplus plan had “no new money in it for Social Security,” and “no money for paying down the debt.”\footnote{ABC Good Morning America February 11, 2007; emphasis added.} The media’s coverage of the issue was soon superseded by the primary’s other events, but Bush continued to address misconceptions of his support for Social Security within almost half of his advertisements. Before Super Tuesday, McCain reemphasized his most potent attack in a last gasp effort. It inevitably failed to win over Republican primary voters as Bush won. However, by March, Gore was already training his aim on Bush by coopting McCain’s rhetoric, arguing: “He does not put one penny into Medicare. He doesn’t put one penny into
Social Security. He doesn’t put one penny into paying down the debt.”

An almost exact replica of McCain’s earlier statements that Bush’s proposal “has not one penny for paying down the debt, not one penny for Social Security outside of the Social Security Trust Fund, the $2 trillion that’s already there, and not one penny for Medicare.”

The extent to which Social Security was a voter priority and had been covered by the news media during the primaries gave a strong hint to the Bush campaign that they needed to have firmer footing on the issue. Elderly voters, who were very concerned about Social Security, had voted Republican in 1998 when they were turned off by Clinton’s Lewinsky affair. Bush needed to retain those voters in order to win in the general election, especially in Florida. This would not happen if the news media continued broadcasting arguments that Bush did not have a plan for Social Security beyond the trust fund that was already in place. As Bush media advisor Mark McKinnon noted (Jamieson and Waldman 2001, 146), the Bush campaign recognized Social Security, health care, and education would be priorities for voters and the “strategy was to stay close on those issues. Those were issues that Bob Dole had been wiped out on by 20 or more points.” It was especially clear to the Bush campaign that they had to have some sort of plan and position on how to improve Social Security beyond the trust fund, especially given their large tax cut proposal.

The Bush campaign responded by promoting the policy of privatized Social Security. Privatization’s promise of greater investment returns and guaranteed money for younger workers mitigated other needs for changing benefits or increasing trust

Posterior mean state-space model estimates with 95 percent BCIs indicated by vertically-shaded lines.

Figure 4.7: Support for Social Security Investment in Stock Market

fund contributions. The plan became an effective rhetorical response to claims of doing nothing on the issue, and they fit in with his tax cut rhetoric that it was the people’s money and they should have it. The Bush campaign staked out privatization as a part of their platform early in the general election campaign. On May 15, Bush made a major speech, covered by all three networks, in which he fully embraced the privatized stock market account idea.

By stressing stock market investment Bush was preemptively addressing the main weakness of his primary campaign. Indeed, he did so by advocating an idea that Bill Clinton had supported just a year earlier. This would make it hard for Gore to credibly
criticize it as terrible, especially since many people supported it. As Figure 4.7 shows, near the time of Bush’s May speech, a majority of all voters supported the broad policy idea of stock market investment.

In combination, the story of the 2000 primary makes clear why Bush took on and discussed Social Security, an issue supposedly owned by Democrats. McCain’s rhetoric that Bush’s tax cuts ignored Social Security’s problems was effective in garnering media coverage and resonating with voters. They also gave Gore a road map on how to attack Bush, and Gore started down such a path already in March. Consequently, and even as the Bush campaign officials admitted, Bush had to discuss Social Security in the hopes of convincing voters that he would do something about the issue and keeping his evaluations on the issue even with Gore’s. A need to combat expectations of negative persuasive coverage was clearly driving Bush’s attention to the issue.

**September and the First Debate**

In contrast to Bush, Gore’s policy proposal did not advocate stock market investment and simply expanded money for the trust fund. Both policy proposals were not new or innovative. Bush’s speech in May lacked details; he merely claimed his privatization program would reflect elements of previous bills proposed by Gramm and others. These bills were not universally accepted as sound policy but, having been vetted and analyzed by government accounting agencies, were shown to have the potential to help the problem. On the other side, Gore’s policy proposal was not innovative since it simply prolonged Social Security’s solvency, but it did nothing to address inevitable future problems. This presented Gore with a difficult rhetorical task during the campaign. He could not accuse Bush of failing to address the bigger
Social Security problem since his own proposal did not. Instead, Gore had to go down the difficult road of convincing voters that they were wrong and that investing in the stock market was not as good of an idea as it sounds.

Gore’s first attempt at doing so was to cast doubts on how Bush would implement his plan. Right after the Democratic convention, Gore began publicly asking “where does the money come from” to invest in private accounts if Bush still planned on keeping current benefit levels.\footnote{ABC World News Tonight August 21, 2000.} A couple weeks later, on September 6, Gore was on ABC’s Good Morning America saying:

“Our opponents want to divert one out of every six dollars that is now going into the Social Security trust fund off into stock market investments, and that leaves a gap of $1 trillion over the next 10 years that has—that would have to be made up from somewhere else, otherwise you’d have to cut Social Security checks. And they will not give any specifics of how they want to make up that trillion dollars.”

The evening news regularly gave coverage to Social Security through mid-September (Figure 4.8), despite the fact Gore was not discussing the issue in his advertisements. Of the eight news stories six of these stories focused on Gore statements, like those above, criticizing Bush for a lack of specifics. The media showed a consistent acknowledgement of the issue and they were also predominately touching on Gore’s arguments and rhetoric. Bush’s rhetoric in response stressed the idea that both his tax cut and Social Security plans were based on giving the people more control of their money. In light of the media’s focus on Gore’s message, Bush also continued to discuss Social Security in over a third of his advertisements for as long as the media discussed the issue.
Figure 4.8: Candidate Attention and News Media Coverage of Social Security

Perhaps this relationship persisted because Gore was consistently ahead in the polls through September. A series of missteps by the Bush campaign, what his campaign referred to as “Black September” (Jamieson and Waldman 2001), had resulted in a number of lost news cycles for Bush on other issues. Bush was saved by Gore’s own missteps however, as his made-up statements about his mother’s prescription drug cost and the controversy over the release of the nation’s petroleum reserve hurt Gore’s lead (Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson 2004). Entering October, and now tied with Bush in the polls, Gore found that he had been losing serious ground on the issue of Social Security and Medicare. Swing voters had not lowered their level of support
Posterior mean state-space model estimates with 95 percent BCIs indicated by vertically-shaded lines.

Figure 4.9: Volatile Swing Voter Opinions on Social Security

for investment (Figure 4.7) and had actually improved their rating of Bush on Social Security (Figure 4.9). Bush’s advertisements and rhetoric, coupled with Gore’s soft rhetoric on the issue, had convinced swing voters to improve their evaluation of Bush on the two issues.

It is at this point that Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson (2004) argue Gore decided to place Social Security back on the agenda by attacking Bush during the first debate on October 3. However, it is clear that their argument is a very simplified story of the complicated message environment that followed the debate. Even when ignoring the previous chapter’s result, a step-by-step examination of the events suggests the
news media were, in fact, not responding to but simply waiting for the debates to talk about Social Security. All the evening news shows mentioned they expected Social Security to be a top issue during the first debate. NBC even ran a segment on the day of the debate regarding the budget surplus and Social Security.\(^{52}\) ABC aired statements by Bush the day before indicating his expectations as well. Referring to Social Security privatization, Bush said: “in the debate, you will hear him say, ‘Oh, we can’t do that.’ You know why? Because he trusts government and I trust people.”\(^{53}\)

The media and Bush’s expectations were supported as Gore and Bush devoted a large amount of time to the issue. But, in contrast to their description, Gore did not shoot the issue back on the agenda nor did he hit Bush hard on the issue during the first debate. The issue certainly was discussed by the media following the debate, but it was not in the way Gore desired. On television, reporters either declared that “Bush scored big on Social Security”\(^{54}\) or called it a draw, saying: “on whether a portion of Social Security should be privatized, neither pulled any punches.”\(^{55}\)

Evidence from news media focus groups suggests Bush won on the issue, and this was partly because Gore’s rhetoric concerning establishing a lockbox was a failure. One focus group member for USA Today thought Gore “went overboard with repeating things like ‘I’ll put Social Security in a lockbox.’ I took that as condescension.”\(^{56}\) Tom Shales of the Washington Post wrote that “Gore said so many times that Social

\(^{52}\)NBC Nightly News October 3, 2000.

\(^{53}\)ABC World News Tonight October 2, 2000.

\(^{54}\)ABC Good Morning America October 4, 2000.

\(^{55}\)CBS The Early Show October 4, 2000.

\(^{56}\)Hampson, Rick. “Out of 11 in focus group, Bush loses one to Gore; still, Democrat was rated both good, bad” USA Today, Oct 4, 2000; p. 6A.
Security funds should be put into a ‘lockbox’ that some viewers may have felt Al Gore should be put in a lockbox.”\(^{57}\) On MSNBC, focus group expert Frank Luntz claimed Bush won the debate within his focus group in St. Louis. Bush did so not on character, but on the issues. In particular, Luntz noted that Bush scored highly “when he offered details on allowing the young to invest some of their Social Security money.”\(^{58}\) Clearly, Gore had either not gotten his message through the media or his message was not working. If anything, Bush’s simple rhetorical argument won the opening salvos on which candidate would be better on Social Security.

**Gore’s Response**

Social Security was on the news media’s agenda after the first debate, but not in the way Gore had desired and not because of Gore’s criticism. If anything, it appeared that Bush was winning the rhetorical battle within the free media. Gore had to respond quickly by changing his rhetoric, and he did. By October 6, the day after the vice-presidential debate, the Gore campaign started a new rhetorical tactic. No longer did Gore emphasize his “lockbox” plan. Gore went negative instead, campaigning on the threat that Bush’s privatization plan would bankrupt Social Security in “a single generation.”\(^{59}\) His press team also circulated a study by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities suggesting Bush’s plan would shorten Social Security’s solvency by 14 years. On the same day, Gore’s campaign started airing advertisements that stressed

\(^{57}\) “Round 1: Candidates With Their Hats, but Not Their Hearts, in the Ring” Oct 4, 2000; p. C1.


Gore’s commitment to Social Security. These totaled 9 percent of his advertisements on October 6, and jumped up to over 40 percent on October 7.

It is unclear whether these advertisements were in reaction to the negative debate coverage. These advertisements did not contain Gore’s harsher bankruptcy rhetoric and were not as critical of Bush’s Social Security plan as they were of his tax plan. Nevertheless, Bush rebutted within the evening news of October 7 with what had worked for him in the past saying: “we better let you take some of your own money—it’s your choice—and put it in the private markets.”\textsuperscript{60} A couple days later, most likely because of increased campaign news coverage, Bush returned to Social Security as an issue in his advertisements as well.

At this point, the best indication is that Gore’s rhetoric was not yet sharp enough to improve his standing. As shown in Figure\textsuperscript{4.7} after the first debate swing voters were as approving of stock market investment as throughout September. Gore also dropped his advertisements on Social Security soon after. News media coverage at this time was not directly questioning Bush’s plan. It was not until the second debate when this trend started to change.

On October 10, the \textit{Wall Street Journal} published a comprehensive article on the problems of privatization plans.\textsuperscript{61} Within it, the article disclosed that a dirty little secret the Bush campaign never mentioned was that, while all previous plans by Senator Phil Gramm and the like were evaluated as helpful to the system, it was not because of the stock market’s greater rate of return. Instead, most of these proposals either contained “deep cuts in promised benefits” or “a multitrillion-dollar

\textsuperscript{60}CBS \textit{Evening News} October 7, 2000.

infusion of new revenue” which, combined with stock market returns, were evaluated as helpful to the system. Bush would not publicly support either of these plans, thus his nebulous plan was taking money out of the system without putting money back in or cutting benefits. Gore benefitted at once, the news media started examining Bush’s plan with renewed scrutiny. This was first stalled by the USS Cole bombing, which deviated all news coverage away from the campaign, but by the third debate their interest returned. Increasingly, the news media started airing greater questions about how Bush planned on covering gaps in funding.

Motivated by the news media’s renewed interest, Gore also came at Bush with more extreme rhetoric. During the third debate, he directly connected Bush’s plan of private accounts for younger workers with his promise of funding current seniors’ benefits, saying “he’s promised seniors that their Social Security benefits will not be cut. And he’s promised the same trillion dollars to [young workers]. Which one of those promises will you keep and which will you break, governor?” On the same day, October 17, Gore started airing a new advertisement that directly cited the Wall Street Journal piece.

Announcer: What would George W. Bush’s plan do to Social Security? He’s promising to take a trillion dollars out of Social Security so younger workers can invest in private accounts. Sounds good. The problem is Bush has promised the same money to pay seniors their current benefits. The Wall Street Journal shows he can’t keep both promises. Which promise is he going to break? George W. Bush. His promises threaten Social Security.

The media started drawing sharper contrast on each candidate’s plan. These contained criticisms of Bush’s lack of specifics. For instance, on October 18, ABC aired a policy expert who said funding for Bush’s plan “has to come from either a decrease in other federal expenditures, a decrease in Social Security benefits, a
decrease in say, Medicare or Medicaid, or education or defense spending, or it has
to come from increased taxes."\footnote{62} What is interesting during this exchange, is that
all criticisms of Bush by the media included the qualifier that Gore’s plan was not
necessarily a better plan. All media reports simply made the point that Bush was
failing to tell the whole truth.

Gore was either not satisfied by the coverage or wanted to push Bush’s criticism
even further. Following the media’s increased coverage after the third debate, Gore
bumped his advertising attention rate to 50 percent during the penultimate week of
the campaign. He also sharpened his fear rhetoric in his advertisements and on the
stump. For example, Gore claimed that to adopt Bush’s plan would mean that “the
benefit checks for the people who receive Social Security benefits this year will have to
be cut.”\footnote{63} The media were not totally complacent to Gore’s attacks. They did allow
Gore’s statements to be aired, but they often framed these pieces with statements
like Lisa Myers’ “the truth is that both candidates are misleading voters.”\footnote{64}

Bush was no longer able to take the simple route of advocating the benefits of
letting people be in charge of their money. Gore was making strong threats in his
ads that were also getting played within the media’s coverage of the issue. These were effective threats to senior voters, and Florida was emerging as an
important state. Bush had to either defend his plan or at least cast doubts on Gore’s
accusations. Bush went all out in response, devoting over 60 percent of his advertise-
ments to the issue in the last week. The following advertisement highlights Bush’s
tactic of combating Gore’s rhetoric by casting doubt on Gore’s honesty.

\footnote{62}ABC \textit{World News Tonight} October 18, 2000.
\footnote{63}NBC \textit{Nightly News} October 25, 2000.
\footnote{64}NBC \textit{Nightly News} October 25, 2000.
ANNOUNCER: Remember when Al Gore said his mother-in-law’s prescription cost more than his dog’s? His own aide said the story was made up. Now Al Gore is bending the truth again. The press calls Gore’s Social Security attacks nonsense. Governor Bush sets aside 2.4 trillion to strengthen Social Security to pay all benefits.

AL GORE: There has never been a time in this campaign when I have said something that I know to be untrue. There’s never been a time when I’ve said something untrue.

ANNOUNCER: Really?

A Final Reevaluation

The preceding analysis challenges the argument of Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson that Gore put Social Security back on the agenda during the first debate. Gore’s attack in the first debate was ineffective and Gore was reportedly perceived as a loser on the issue according to the media and focus groups. In contrast, it was the media’s description and coverage after the first debate that forced Gore to implement a more threatening rhetoric. Furthermore, it was not until after the media themselves focused on Bush’s problems, before and after the third debate, that Gore responded with a renewed level of focus in his advertisements. Bush ultimately responded with his own advertising rebuttals to combat the criticisms within media reports and the persuasive arguments of Gore.

What effect did all these actions have on voters? It is clear that the renewed coverage of the media and Gore’s criticism of Bush’s plan had two main effects. First, swing voter preference regarding which candidate was better on Medicare and Social Security stopped trending toward Bush once October started (Figure 4.9). Second, starting after the second debate, swing voters also showed decreased levels of support for investing Social Security in the stock market (Figure 4.7). Gore’s attention and combative rhetoric on Social Security stopped Bush’s earlier successes among swing voters.
voters. However, Bush’s renewed attention to the issue and counter-attacks more than equaled Gore’s criticisms. Swing voters did not swing back the other way in favor of Gore; they stayed level. The only groups that moved were the stalwarts of both parties, who showed greater support for their candidate and their candidate’s position on the issue.

Combined with the results of the previous chapter, Bush and Gore’s attention to Social Security appears to have been instigated by the prevalence and content of the news media’s Social Security coverage. Throughout the campaign, both primary and general, candidate attention to Social Security was directed at inserting or combating persuasive rhetoric within news media messages. The analysis suggests that both Bush and Gore were successful at shaping swing voter opinion by inserting their persuasive messages within the information environment.

I admit that this interpretation is mostly descriptive and open to debate. In response, the next section will more rigorously test whether candidate issue attention has measurable persuasive benefits by estimating the effects of issue information environments on voter issue evaluations.

**Candidate Issue Attention and Voter Evaluations**

To more rigorously test the argument that candidates benefit by providing their own issue rhetoric, I seek to estimate the effect campaign information environments have upon the public’s issue evaluations. The 2000 NAES has two items that were consistently asked of respondents throughout the later stages of the campaign to allow such a test. The items asked respondents which candidate they thought would do

65 Another interpretation is that swing voters became split or polarized in this intense two-way message environment.
a better job on two issue areas, education and Social Security/Medicare.\textsuperscript{66} The two questions are useful since they do not ask voters to state a policy opinion regarding an issue – favoring school vouchers or privatizing social security – but measure a respondent’s summary evaluation within an issue or set of issues. Thus one can evaluate whether news media and candidate attention toward an issue changed voter evaluations within that issue.

To test for the persuasive influences of the campaign I regress each issue evaluation item on the cumulative number minutes of television news coverage mentioning the issue up to the day interviewed, the cumulative number of candidate advertisements mentioning the issue within the respondent’s media market up to the day interviewed, and an individual’s party identification.

I rely on the seven-point party identification scale, zero-centered at Independent, instead of the previous swing voter categorization. I made this choice mostly for computational clarity. Instead of the three category stalwart and swing voter measure, the more continuous seven-point measure gives a clearer estimate of the interactive effects of advertisement and news media coverage by taking into account categories of partisan strength. Since, according to my definition, all swing voters are Independents, this does not limit understanding of advertisement and news coverage influence on them. If anything, to the extent some Independents are ideological extremists, the estimated effect of campaign factors is less than their true influence.

This testing framework is unfortunately unable to address whether candidate reactions influence news media coverage but it does allow for a summary evaluation

\textsuperscript{66} The respective question wording went as follows: “Regardless of your choice for president, who do you think would do a better job of (improving education/strengthening Social Security and protecting Medicare).”
of the news media’s persuasive influence on voter evaluations as well as an estimate of what direct influence candidate issue advertisements had on issue evaluations. If Bush and Gore’s advertisements helped their issue evaluations, then it suggests issue advertisements are an effective means of mitigating negative persuasive environments. This would provide further evidence that a candidate’s issue attention is a product of its persuasive effects.

A few additional variables were included in light of minor specification issues. Candidate advertisement counts were transformed by the natural logarithm to account for decreasing marginal returns. To provide richer specification of the individual-level factors determining issue preferences, an individual’s age for the Social Security item and an individual’s level of education for the education item were included. Unlike attitudinal variables, these items are suitable for inclusion since they are constant over time and will not mask campaign influences. Finally, the daily percentage of individuals within the NAES who stated they would vote for Gore was also included. This overall polling measure controls for a persuasion-type effect (Page and Jones 1979), where an individual’s issue preference changes because they prefer the candidate for reasons beyond that issue. If Gore and Bush’s performance within education or Social Security/Medicare is a product of their overall performance and support level outside these issues, then this variable should capture this influence.

Unobserved dependencies within respondents’ media markets and its potential biases are also controlled for by including two components. First, an additional error term specific to each media market was estimated via a random effects logit. Also, the mean level of partisan identification and age or education at the media-market level

67Substantive conclusions remain the same when using a simple count variable.
was included in addition to the individual-level covariates. These variables control for the possibility candidate advertisements might be targeting media markets with more favorable viewers (i.e., Bush targeting media markets with more Republicans).68

Table 4.3 presents the random-effects logit model estimates which predicts an individual’s preference for Gore. For each issue evaluation, Model 1 estimates a straightforward relationship between the attention measures and candidate issue standing whereas Model 2 conditions the effect of the candidate and news media variables by one’s partisan identification. Not surprisingly, party identification and the other individual-level variables show a significant influence on one’s candidate preference. Democrats were more likely to support Gore and Republicans were more likely to support Bush. When controlling for party identification, individuals with higher levels of education were more likely to favor Gore on education and older individuals were more likely to favor Bush in regards to Social Security and Medicare. Changes in these items during the campaign also appeared to be structured by a candidate’s overall standing; an increase in Gore’s poll standings is estimated to improve his level of issue-specific support at a consistent marginal level of significance.

The more relevant findings are among the campaign information variables. In particular, changes in news media issue coverage and candidate attention levels to an issue show a significant influence on candidate issue evaluations across all issues and models. In regards to news media coverage, each additional minute of news media coverage on education or Social Security/Medicare is estimated to have been beneficial for Bush’s issue standing. Note, this result does not suggest news coverage of these issues was always helpful for Bush. Instead, increased news coverage of these

68For more on this issue and solution see pages 52-53 in Skrondal and Rabe-Hesketh (2004).
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<td>1.1815*</td>
<td>1.3348*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(.7146)</td>
<td>(.7124)</td>
<td>(.7097)</td>
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<td>.2788*</td>
<td>.2876**</td>
<td>.2864**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(.1456)</td>
<td>(.1445)</td>
<td>(.1380)</td>
<td>(.1378)</td>
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<td>Mean Education</td>
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<td>.7633**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(.2599)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Age</td>
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<td>−.0185</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.0008**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0002)</td>
<td>(.0002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush x PID</td>
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<td>−.0120</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0071)</td>
<td>(.0077)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gore x PID</td>
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<td>.0186**</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(.0088)</td>
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<td>−2.4453**</td>
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</table>

Coefficients are logit estimates with media market random effects. Standard errors are in parentheses. ** indicates \( p \leq .05 \), * indicates \( p \leq .10 \).

Table 4.3: The Persuasive Consequences of Campaign Agendas: Preferring Gore by Issue and Information Environment
issues significantly increased Bush’s standing when averaged across the campaign and the actual behavior of the candidates.

Conditioning this relationship by partisanship (Model 2) demonstrates that not all individuals reacted similarly to news media coverage and advertisements. Since the party identification variable is centered such that Independents equal zero, the inclusion of interaction variables makes the coefficient for television coverage represent the effect an additional minute of coverage had for pure Independents. For both issues, news coverage of the issue significantly helped Bush’s standing among Independents. However, for Independent who lean toward the Democrats the influence of television coverage becomes essentially zero for education. Furthermore, if one is a strong Democrat, then the net influence of news media coverage for both issues becomes positive, television coverage of the issue improved Gore’s standing with strong Democrats. Conversely, for Republicans, news media coverage increased their propensity to prefer Bush more so than Independents.

These results demonstrate campaigns create party polarization within issues; partisans appear to have latched on to supportive arguments within the media and resisted negative information that might have otherwise caused nonpartisans to change their evaluation. This makes each partisan group more supportive of their candidate as television coverage increased. The lack of additional variables regarding the content of news coverage unfortunately prohibits a more detailed analysis as to whether changes in candidate issue attention changed the effect of news media coverage. Nevertheless, the results give strong support to the argument that voter issue evaluations changed in response to how the news media cover an issue. This suggests that candidates may desire to shape the content of the news media’s issue content.
Turning attention to the effects of candidate advertisements, the results show that each additional advertisement mentioning education or Social Security and Medicare significantly improved that candidate’s rating within that issue. Clearly, candidate attention toward an issue shaped voter evaluations within that issue. Indeed, compared to the previous chapter, candidate issue attention appears to have had a more consistent influence in determining voter evaluations than in determining voter agendas. These results give strong evidence for persuasion-based incentives operating within campaign agenda formation.

The effect of advertisement volume conditional on partisanship (Model 2) demonstrates this relationship even further. The coefficient estimate for Gore advertisements shows they increased support probabilities among Independents. Furthermore, the positive and significant interaction term means that the gains from advertising were even greater among Democrats and less among Republicans. Likewise for Bush, increased advertisement volume in a media market significantly increased an Independent’s propensity to support Bush. Interestingly, the beneficial effects of Bush advertisements are estimated to be even greater among Democrats and Independents than among Republicans, as the interaction between partisanship and Bush advertisement volume is significantly negative for education. A negative interaction is also estimated for Social Security/Medicare, but it is not significant. One possible explanation of this results is that Republicans were already convinced Bush was better for them on these issues that advertisements had less of an influence. Nevertheless, these estimates suggest candidate issue evaluations always benefited from increased advertisement attention toward that issue, regardless of one’s level of partisanship.
Predicted probabilities across dates represent the estimated effect of changing news media and candidate attention. Each profile represents an individual with mean education level, at a time when candidate poll standing is at 50 percent, and in a media market that has no partisan bias and an average education level.

Figure 4.10: Probability of Preferring Gore on Education by Partisanship and Information Environment
To provide a better understanding of these estimates, Figure 4.10 presents an individual’s predicted probability of preferring Gore on the issue of education (using Model 2) when changing the information environment variables and holding all other variables constant. Each graph represents the predicted issue evaluation of either Strong Democrats, Independents, or Strong Republicans with an average level of age or education. Each line within the graphs corresponds to the predicted behavior of the partisan group within a hypothetical media market. Three hypothetical media market effects were estimated, one where Bush and Gore’s advertisements are either both at their maximum observed levels of issue attention and two where only one of the candidates has a maximum level of attention while the other at the minimum (zero). Changes across time reflect the effect increases in the news media’s education coverage and candidates’ education advertisements had on education evaluations.

The results in Figure 4.10 help demonstrate that opinions change by campaign information environments, and this responsiveness is largest for Independents. First, one can see that as the campaign progressed news media coverage generally hurt Gore’s standing with Independents and strong Republicans, but helped improve evaluations with strong Democrats. This suggests campaign news coverage may not have an equal influence across all groups. Furthermore, although significant, the size of these changes suggests the overall consequence of the new media’s education coverage was not immense, perceivably because it provided mixed messages. Within a media market receiving the maximum observed number of education advertisements from

69These calculations were performed by using a routine essentially similar to that advocated by King, Tomz and Wittenberg (2000), but modified so that the media market random effect was set at zero.
both candidates television coverage across the campaign decreased Gore’s probability of support by about 4.9 percent among Independents (p ≤ .05). Once again, it is important to recognize this estimated effect demonstrates the news media’s summary effect, but it does not capture what influence television coverage might have had if one of the candidates ignored the issue.

In contrast, the estimated influence of candidate advertisement attention highlight why advertisement content is important. Candidates benefit by talking about the same issues the other candidate and the news media are discussing. This can be observed by comparing the vertical distance between lines within each voter group. For instance, if Gore ignored education and Bush aired his maximum number of education advertisements within a media market, then the respective probabilities of strong Democrats, Independents, and strong Republicans preferring Gore on education at the end of the campaign are estimated at 75, 40, and 13 percent. By changing his advertisement level to his observed maximum (as found in Albuquerque) Gore increases his support to 86, 52, and 16 percent. Similarly, if Bush ignored education within a media market and Gore set attention at his maximum, Independents are estimated to prefer Gore at a rate of 64 percent. In this case, each candidate would risk losing 12 percent of Independents by not equaling an opponent’s level of issue attention (both differences significant - p ≤ .05), a 24 point swing overall. In contrast, strong Democrats’ probability of support moves only 9 percent from one environment to the other and are still highly likely to prefer Gore. Strong Republicans show a similar small move of only 4 percent. Although not shown, the results for the Social Security/Medicare model essentially replicate the substance and magnitude of these results for education.
Considering education ranked as the public’s most important problem within the NAES, these changes in support brought about by candidate advertisement levels demonstrate what a critical influence advertisement issue focus had during the 2000 election. Candidates certainly benefited by making their case and advocating their positions on issues that were salient for voters. Since candidates often equal each other’s level of attention these differences are hard to observe in practice. Nonetheless, these estimates demonstrate why presidential candidates need to focus on similar issues. If a candidate ignored a non-advantageous issue, then that candidate would stand to lose a lot of support from those voters who care about that issue, definitely a negative electoral consequence. These types of situations perhaps also outline why candidate attention toward issues might equally depend on the attention level of the opposition as that of the media. Candidates may not only need to provide persuasive messages within news media content, but they may also need rebut an opponent’s advertisement rhetoric as well.

Conclusion

Previous models of candidate strategy assume voter persuasion is infrequent, and they thus suggest candidates are more likely to base their strategies on priming or agenda-setting influences (e.g., Simon 2002). These works fail to acknowledge a couple points central to this chapter’s results. First, not all voters are targets of campaign activities. In particular, partisans show the greatest resistance to persuasion, and they are usually firmly decided on whom they are supporting before the campaign and are unlikely to change. In contrast, those voters who lack a clear candidate choice were shown to have important qualitative differences from stalwart supporters. Swing
voters have lower levels of political information and possess very moderate attitudes entering the campaign. These attitudes showed greater changes as the campaign progressed, as they were more likely to respond to campaign information and in ways that possibly determined who they would support.

I also argued that these attributes of swing voters make candidate efforts to provide persuasive rhetoric on popular issues central to their fall campaign strategy. Candidates see the need to make their case on prominent issues because they understand they would lose voters if they were to ignore the issue. For the case of Social Security, I showed that both candidates increased their attention toward the issue in response to the dominant messages within the news media’s coverage, for both the primary and general elections. Usually such attention corresponded with a change in the candidate’s rhetoric that sought to counter the dominant media message. I also showed that issue advertisements are effective means of shaping voter evaluations within each issue, and they can potentially counter the possibility of harmful information environments.

In combination with the previous chapter’s results, the desire to persuade voters clearly emerges as a motivating factor within candidate behavior. These results demonstrate that there are benefits for candidates who discuss and make their case on popular issues, regardless of whether it is owned or not. Since, in practice, candidates end up discussing the same issues and equalizing each other’s messages or advertisements, this might create no net persuasion in the aggregate. However, just because we do not observe much persuasion among voters, this does not mean that candidates are not receiving any benefit from discussing similar issues.
While these two chapters provide strong support for the belief that candidates discuss similar issues to improve voter evaluations among such issues, they are limited by the fact they only investigate one campaign. The next chapter addresses this deficiency by broadening the investigation to look at candidate and news media behavior within a large selection of Senate elections. As will be shown, persuasion considerations appear to be a strong determinant of candidate behavior in lower level elections as well.
CHAPTER 5

ISSUE AGENDAS WITHIN SENATE CAMPAIGNS

Presidential campaigns are prominent nationally, but they are not very similar to most other campaigns. Their high levels of media exposure and public attention make them a strong outlier compared to state or local elections. The 2000 presidential campaign also offered a unique instance where neither candidate was well known to the voters, this perhaps strengthened the need for candidates to shape voter evaluations.

These conditions are not as prevalent in other elections. News media coverage and voter attentions are often limited in lower-level campaigns, and this might change the nature of agenda development within these campaigns. If state and local elections are often away from the news media’s reporting, then candidates might have a greater ability to influence voter agendas and pursue an agenda-setting strategy. Secondly, incumbent candidates who have a longstanding relationship with voters may not be as threatened by negative information environments since voter evaluations of them are more crystalized and campaign information is less pervasive. Therefore, while the proposed persuasion-based explanation of campaign agendas showed strong explanatory power within a presidential campaign context, the applicability of the perspective to other contexts remains uncertain.
In response to this concern, I seek to demonstrate the theory’s applicability to other campaign contexts. This process will involve an examination of the agendas of the news media, candidates, and voters at the state level with a specific focus on U.S. Senate campaigns. To do so I first discuss a couple key considerations regarding agenda setting within lower-level campaigns. The discussion will outline a couple reasons as to why, despite what might be the weaker role of local news media, U.S. House and Senate candidates should have no greater agenda-setting abilities than presidential candidates. As a result, I hypothesize Senate and House candidates are as, if not more, responsive to news media coverage of campaigns and their agendas.

Three separate examinations will support this proposition. First, an examination and comparison of voter agendas for each state during 2000 and 2004 will show the lack of issue priority differences by states. The findings suggest state electorates are remarkably similar in their issue priorities for the nation, at least within presidential election years. The second finding comes from an examination of Senate campaigns during 2000 and 2004. It finds a clear association between campaign media coverage and rates of issue convergence within Senate campaigns. As predicted by the second hypothesis, when the media increase their coverage of the campaign candidates increasingly converge on and discuss a similar set of issues, namely those issues gaining prominent news media coverage. The final section certifies the causal direction of this influence by testing whether candidate spending and advertisements are able to direct the local media’s campaign coverage. This examination indicates candidate influence on local media is minimal and not a likely biasing factor.
The combination of these results outline why a focus on agenda setting or issue ownership frequently remains an unattractive strategy for candidates within lower-level campaigns. Candidates face competition from other federal campaigns as well as national and local news media. Voters also show little flexibility in their agendas across states. Consequently, as the news media’s coverage to the campaign grows so too do candidate proclivities to discuss issues in the media’s agenda. A final examination of candidate influence on the local media provides evidence that candidates have relatively little ability to shape local news media coverage. While I am not able to replicate the detailed analysis of the 2000 presidential campaign, evidence across a variety of campaign contexts is supportive of persuasion efforts shaping candidate agendas in U.S. Senate campaigns.

Considerations Within Other Campaign Contexts

Information environments for Senate, House, or other state-level campaigns exhibit two differences from presidential campaigns that are relevant to campaign agenda setting. First, is the lack of a congruent and cohesive news institution. Presidential elections are unique since many prominent news organizations market to national audiences. This is true for not only the television news networks but many periodicals like the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. More importantly, for local news organizations, the presidential race is relevant for the entire audience; regardless of one’s state or city one still has an interest in their vote for president. In short, the presidential campaign is good copy.

This is not as true for other federal office campaigns. The electorates of many House and Senate districts are served by fragments of various media markets. Many
individuals live in media markets and regions where the majority of market coverage is directed toward an audience in a different state or house district. Conversely, many news organizations market to individuals from a variety of states or congressional districts. This lack of congruence creates negative effects for both voters and the news media. Not only do these voters have less exposure to campaign information, but the news media have less of an incentive to report on such races since they only relate to a segment of their market.

Not surprisingly, political science research has shown that local news coverage of lower-level campaigns is inconsistent with noted disparities across media outlets (e.g., Clarke and Evans 1983; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Arnold 2004). Campaign coverage within local media is somewhat dichotomous: a few competitions judged to be close garner high levels of media coverage, but other contests generate little to none (Kahn and Kenney 1999). Media market congruence with congressional and state boundaries has also been found to be an important factor influencing voter interaction with the campaign, representative behavior, and campaign intensity (e.g., Campbell, Alford and Henry 1984; Stewart 1990; Levy and Squire 2000).

The local media are still an important factor in determining the nature of Senate and other campaigns (Westlye 1991; Fenno 1996; Kahn and Kenney 1999). However, they are less centralized and have less incentive to cover such campaigns. This means they may not act with as much authority and discretion as do the national media. Indeed, past studies have argued candidates and parties may have a greater ability to influence local news media coverage (Clarke and Evans 1983). This suggests local news media are not as prominent an influence on campaign agendas as are the national
media. Local media certainly reflect and amplify the national news media’s influence, but they may not act to independently sway voter priorities.

**Nationalization and Competition among Local Campaign Agendas**

However, just because local media may not be as independent or influential as the national media, this does not necessarily mean Senate or House candidates have greater abilities to set voter agendas. In particular, the second and larger difference between presidential and local campaigns is that local candidates also have to compete with a whole host of national-level and other state-level influences. These competing forces not only influence voters, but they influence the local media as well. Since Senate and House campaigns concern the federal government, these local elections tend to invoke the same set of issue priorities voters hold from their exposure to the national media or presidential campaigns.

The first great mitigator of candidate attempts to set localized agendas is the national media. I have already discussed and shown how the national media play a prominent role in determining the agendas of the mass public and presidential candidates. The influence and prominence of the national media is, importantly, not limited to the national evening news or national periodicals, although these certainly have a direct influence. The influence that is perhaps of greater prominence, however, is the national news media’s powerful influence on local news coverage.

Local newspapers are increasingly reliant upon wire services or national syndicates to provide them with their coverage of national issues as only a select few organizations are able to afford Washington bureaus. Editors can select from a group of stories from wire services to choose those topics that are more relevant to local readers, but they
are still reliant on those stories that national media cover. Not surprisingly, research has found that local newspapers are fairly reflective of and reactive to the issue agendas found within national or “inner-ring” news organizations (Crouse 1973; Shaw and Sparrow 1999). This makes the choices of national editors and journalists an important influence on the issue agendas of local newspapers (Gans 1979).

The second great mitigator of candidate influence is the competition they face from other campaigns. In theory, every five out of six times a House campaign is conducted, it does so within the context of another statewide campaign for federal office (deaths and other events make this rate even higher in practice). Likewise, Senate campaigns always occur among corresponding House elections and half of the time are conducted during presidential elections. This means that multiple candidates from multiple elections are trying to reach to voters and convince them what their priorities for the national government should be. In such contexts it is unlikely that candidates have a decisive independent ability to shape voters’ national policy priorities.

Beyond the mere presence of competition is the extent of competition among these different offices. Not only do local-level elections have other elections to compete against, but the level of competition is even with, if not skewed toward, presidential and gubernatorial elections. House and Senate candidates are unlikely to possess enough resources to overcome the communication efforts of all other campaigns. To get an understanding of the relative intensity of each election, Table 5.1 calculates

Shaw and Sparrow (1999) find that while the agendas are fairly similar local newspapers manage to influence the tone and favorability of such content, a finding in line with Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998).

Other competing factors are state initiatives, which have been found to highlight issues both up and down the ballot (Nicholson 2005).
<table>
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<th>Avg. Percent of Ads</th>
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<td></td>
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Table 5.1: Average Campaign Prevalence by Media Market

the average ratio of advertisements in the 2000 and 2002 Wisconsin Advertising Data by elected office.

The tabulations indicate no particular office dominates the television airwaves. The presidential election shows a higher prevalence of advertisements across the 75 media markets in 2000. Interestingly, in 2002 gubernatorial races seem the most dominant, no doubt because a large number occur during non-presidential election years. Some of the apparent equality in campaign advertisements somewhat masks the varying occurrence of elections by media market, but it appears to be a rare instance when one campaign dominates the air waves. Only 10 out of the 100 observed media markets in 2002 had advertisements only concerning one office. None of the 75 media markets in 2000 had advertisements aired for only one office. In those 61 markets with Senate elections presidential advertisements were still more prevalent, averaging 37 versus 33 and 27 percent for Senate and House campaigns, respectively. Clearly, the prevalence of multiple elections each year means no campaign occurs in a vacuum.
A potential qualification is that this external influence may not be as extreme within campaigns for state government offices. Prominent evidence exists that voters differentiate between the responsibilities of state and federal offices (Atkeson and Partin 1995). This appears to influence the nature of gubernatorial campaigns as well. For instance, Atkeson and Partin (2001) find “issue sorting” in campaigns for governor and U.S. senator wherein gubernatorial candidates discuss issues specific to their local responsibilities, while Senate candidates discuss issues specific to the federal branch, like international relations or Social Security. Therefore, voters may perceive contests for state office as distinct from federal issues and not associate the agendas of the presidential or congressional elections with their choice for governor.

Nevertheless, there appears little reason to expect that voters are more responsive to candidate agenda-setting attempts in House or Senate elections than in the presidential election context. The prevalence of the national media’s influence within individual lives and local media outlets makes it a powerful unifying factor across various electorates. Furthermore, lower-level elections are held at the same time as numerous other elections that equally compete for voters’ attentions and priorities.

**State Priorities: Do Voter Concerns Differ by State?**

The previous chapters have shown that the national media moved the public’s priorities over the campaign. What remains to be seen is how localized are state agendas and whether local campaigns are associated with any change in state voter agendas. Previous examinations of House and Senate elections have found campaign issues within House and Senate elections are an influential component within voting
decisions (Kahn and Kenney 1999; Abbe et al. 2003). Once again, such studies fail to sort out the direction of the causal relationship.

I seek to clarify this literature by first examining what, if any, differences in voter priorities exist by states. This will provide an understanding as to how nationalized are state agendas for federal offices. If voter priorities across states are roughly similar, then this would indicate states are very homogenous in their concerns over national issues. Evidence of state similarities thus support beliefs that national-level factors predominate in determining voter agendas (relative to other external influences). If agendas show greater variability, then it suggests national forces are not as determinative of a force, making local campaigns appear a more likely factor. I also test whether the presence of Senate campaign shows any propensity to reshape estimates of state agendas. The tests are broad, simply estimating whether Senate campaigns are significantly associated with any change in state agendas, but they provide an indication of their possible influence.

**Simulating State Agendas**

Large surveys at the state or district level are not as prevalent as national samples. This puts some notable constraints on one’s ability to test for localized agendas and campaign influences, especially estimates of the relative influence of candidates and the news media. To address this deficiency I follow and modify Park, Gelman and Bafumi (2004) by simulating the issue priorities of the residents for each of the lower 48 states during the fall of 2000 and 2004.

Instead of poststratification, which is difficult to justify given the national sampling frame, the procedure first estimates the probability of mentioning an issue as
an important problem based on respondents’ demographic characteristics and state and regional dummy variables. Then, based on that probability model, it simulates the priorities of the state’s electorate based on the state’s overall demographic characteristics coupled with the estimated state- and region-specific effects.

For each respondent $i$ mentioning issue $j$ as one’s most important problem ($mip$), the probability is defined follows:

$$ Pr(mip_i = j) = \frac{\phi_j}{\sum_{j=1}^{J} \phi_j} $$

Using a multinomial logit specification, the resulting model takes the following functional form:

$$ Pr(mip_i = j) = \frac{e^{u_{ij}}}{\sum_{j=1}^{J} e^{u_{ij}}} $$

where the vector $e^{u_{i1}}$ is set equal to zero for normalization purposes. For every other choice the linear index is calculated as:

$$ u_{ij} = \beta_j^0 + \beta_j^1 female_i + \beta_j^2 race_i + \beta_j^3 female \cdot race $$

$$ + \beta_j^{age(i)} + \beta_j^{edu(i)} + \beta_j^{age(i) \cdot edu(i)} + \beta_j^{region(i)} + \beta_j^{state(i)} $$

The first component is a combination of dummy variables for respondent sex, race, and its interaction. The second is a combination of dummy variables for age, education, and its interaction, where dummy variables are created for five categories of age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-64, 65+) and four categories of education (no high school degree, high school graduate, some college, college graduate) and the twenty interaction categories (including groups excluded for estimation purposes). Two additional dummy variables ($\beta_j^{state(i)}$ and $\beta_j^{region(i)}$) capture any unobserved state- and region-specific effects defined by the census’s regional classifications.
Computational limitations placed some constraints on model estimation. First, it was necessary to only include issue choices that were chosen at a frequent enough rate. Issues that were mentioned by less than approximately 2 percent of the national sample lead to lengthy and inefficient estimation for state-level effects. As a result, I estimated state priority levels for those issues which ranked as a top twelve priority nationally. All other issue mentions were included in a final “other” category. Also, unlike Park et. al., I had to use a non-Bayesian maximum-likelihood estimator of the model since the Bayesian simulation method was too computationally intensive. This meant estimating separate dummy variable parameters (fixed-effects) for states. This procedure is inconsistent among states with small numbers of observations; but the literature suggests the bias in the following models is minimal, however, considering there are over 50 observations per state (Katz 2001; Coupê 2004).

I estimated the model and then simulated state issue priorities using both the 2000 and 2004 NAES. To capture the greatest possible differences in state agendas I included all NAES respondents who were interviewed after Labor Day and before election day. This resulted in a sample sizes of 16,991 for the 2000 NAES and 19,590 observations in the 2004 NAES. To then simulate each state’s agenda I drew 1000 simulated values of $\beta$ from a multivariate normal distribution with means of the coefficient estimates, $\hat{\beta}$, and the estimated variance-covariance matrix. Each simulated coefficient vector was combined with each state’s demographic profile to calculate 1000 predicted probabilities for each choice and each state. These state profiles were calculated based on the 2000 census data.

I also combined similar issue categories, such as national security with foreign relations and violence with crime, to create more popular choices and broader indicators of state concerns.
Comparing State Agendas

To gain a handle on the validity of the estimates it is perhaps best to look at some of the state issue priority estimates and see if they show any face validity. Figure 5.1 shows the ranking of states according to their concern about education and other youth-related issues in the year 2000. This is one of the few issues that show large differences across states.

Indeed, with two models of 852 estimated parameters (12 x 71) it is hard to easily summarize the results.
Three states are given very high estimates for the prioritization of education: Utah, Nevada, and Arizona. This is not surprising since these states were growing at a rapid pace and had many parent-aged adults concerned about their kids education. In contrast, states with many elderly individuals, like West Virginia, Wyoming, and North Dakota, are estimated to hold much lower ratings. Despite these differences at the extremes, the estimates also show that 22 states out of 48 lie within 3 percent range in the middle, from Wisconsin to Louisiana, including the four largest states in population.

The results for education in 2000 show some sizable state-by-state variation. It was important to show these estimates for purposes of a validity check, however the extent of variation is not large for many other issues. To understand the nature of the results for each issue it is best to summarize each state’s difference from the priorities of the 2000 and 2004 NAES national estimates. A prominent summary measure of agenda similarity has recently been applied in analysis of candidate issue agendas (Sigelman and Buell 2004; Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006). The measure essentially sums up the absolute difference in percentages across issues as follows:

\[
\text{Agenda Similarity} = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{k} |mip_{sk} - mip_{Nk}|}{2}
\]

So for each issue \(k\), the agenda similarity score takes the absolute difference between the state \((mip_{sk})\) and national \((mip_{Nk})\) percentage, sums that up across all \(13\) issue categories, and then divides it by two and subtracts it from one. The resulting number can range anywhere between zero and one. If a state and nation’s priorities are completely different, then this leads to a summed difference of two and ultimately
results in an agenda similarity score of zero. A score of one indicates that there were no differences in percentage ratings between the state and the nation estimates.

Figures 5.2 and 5.3 show each state’s estimated issue similarity score with the national sample’s agenda for 2000 and 2004. A number of interesting results are observable. First, state similarity scores are consistently in the high range, averaging .84 and .86 in 2000 and 2004 respectively. This means the average absolute difference from national percentages is about 1 percent, a small average difference. These results would suggest that national forces are a prominent influence on state agendas as the differences across states are not huge.

Another interesting relationship is the surprising equal levels of agenda similarity between 2000 and 2004. The 2004 election was predominately focused on two or three issues, the Iraq war, terrorism, and the economy. In contrast, the 2000 election showed varied levels of concern over education, health care, Social Security, and a variety of other problems. One might then expect 2004 to show much greater issue similarity than in 2000, but this is not the case. It appears state-level differences were relatively equal for both years.

One final consideration is the pattern of small states that consistently show the lowest level of similarity with the national samples. Delaware, Wyoming, Vermont, Rhode Island, and North and South Dakota show the lowest scores each year. I believe this is a result of the few number of observations for these states. With approximately 50 individuals sampled for these states, estimates of state-specific effects for each issue are less efficient and appear to bias the results into finding a lack of similarity. If any, this pattern suggests that state agendas are even more similar to the national aggregate than the presented estimates.
Vertical line indicates average similarity across 48 states. Estimates based on mean, 2.5th, and 97.5th percentile values of 1000 simulated values.

Figure 5.2: State Agenda-Similarity Scores in 2000
Vertical line indicates average similarity across 48 states. Estimates based on mean, 2.5th, and 97.5th percentile values of 1000 simulated values.

Figure 5.3: State Agenda-Similarity Scores in 2004
Are Senate Campaigns Associated with Agenda Change?

Although states show substantial similarity in their agendas, campaigns still might be influential at the margins. This possibility can be examined by comparing states with and without Senate campaigns in both years. Senate campaigns are at the state level and, as opposed to gubernatorial campaigns, directly relate to public ratings of the nation’s major problems.

States with Senate campaigns in 2000 showed slightly greater convergence with national estimates; they had an average similarity score of .841 compared to .833 for states without Senate campaigns. The same relationship is observed in 2004 as states with Senate campaigns averaged .861 issue similarity score while states without campaigns average .848. So it appears state campaigns show no ability to change state agendas in a way that makes them different from the national average.

Another way to evaluate possible campaign influences is to test for whether they are associated with significant changes in state agendas across time. This change-over-time test does not pinpoint Senate campaigns as the cause of such changes, but it does estimate whether campaigns show the potential to create significant changes. To perform such a test I estimated the same type of model as described above but with a couple changes. First, I included those respondents interviewed before the fall to serve as a comparison group. I then added two sets of variables for each choice equation. The first was a single dummy variable equal to one for all respondents interviewed after Labor Day. The second set consisted of a group of campaign-specific dummy variables representing individual Senate campaigns. These were set equal to one for each respondent interviewed in a state holding a Senate campaign and on a date after Labor Day. The variables provide a test as to whether issue agendas within
such states exhibit agenda shifts that were distinct from changes the whole nation exhibited during the fall.\footnote{74}

The results of these tests suggest Senate campaigns are not associated with significant changes in state agenda’s across time. In 2000, the inclusion of the campaign dummy variables does not significantly increase model fit according to the Wald test ($p = .805, \chi^2_{390} = 365.88$). Likewise, in 2004 the coefficient estimates for the Senate campaign dummy variables are jointly insignificant ($p = .995, \chi^2_{371} = 326.85$). Of course, these tests do not deny that a single, intensely waged Senate campaign has the ability to reshape voter beliefs about national priorities, but it does suggest such an influence is either rare or, if consistent, is so small it is not measurable with the available data.

In combination, the examination of state agendas suggests state electorates are very similar in their national priorities. I would argue these similarities are a product of the national news media’s dominance in covering the federal government and shaping public evaluations of national priorities. It also appears that lower-level campaigns fail to create any measurable changes in this relationship. States with Senate campaigns show no less agenda similarity with national averages, and Senate campaigns showed no significant association with changes in state agendas across time. Voter concerns over the nation’s most important problem are fairly consistent at the state level, and they show little differences in response to state-level campaigns. These observations suggest an agenda-setting strategy for candidates in lower-level elections would be fairly ineffective.

\footnote{74}{With sample sizes of over 40,000 for both years these dummy variable tests are not unreasonable.}
Media Coverage and Candidate Issue Attention in Senate Elections

In support of my first hypothesis, state agendas failed to show significant changes in association with Senate campaigns. What does this mean for candidates? My second hypothesis argues that as the campaign’s profile within the news media grows, candidates should focus on the media’s agenda. The greater the news media coverage, the greater the likelihood news media coverage contains persuasive messages and arguments. Therefore, candidates will seek to discuss the issues prominently featured within the media in order to prevent costly persuasive environments.

Previous research has already shown that issue ownership and other agenda-setting incentives do not appear to determine candidate agendas (Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006). These works, however, have not examined the potential influence of the news media, although they do suggest the potential for this relationship. For example, Kaplan, Park and Ridout (2006) found candidates are more likely to discuss the same issues as campaigns become more competitive. Considering the close positive relationship between competitiveness and news media coverage, their result suggests a similar positive relationship might exist.

I will seek to add to this literature by directly testing the relationship between candidate and media agendas. Recognizing that previous research has extensively evaluated candidate agendas, I do not attempt to explain all the influences on candidate agendas but merely seek to evaluate and show that candidate agendas clearly reflect the need to combat persuasive environments. As local media coverage of the campaign grows, the greater need for candidates to persuade voters that they are
the right candidate on the media’s issues. Likewise, candidates face a greater risk of losing voters if they were to not talk about an issue the news media discuss.

**Measuring Media Coverage within Local Newspapers**

I measure news media attention based on rates of local newspaper coverage. Newspapers provide an excellent indicator of local news media coverage. It is easily available in high quality electronic formats and past studies indicate newspaper coverage provides a clearer and more timely reporting of campaign events (Westlye 1991). I collected newspaper articles using electronic newspaper databases such as LexisNexis. Starting with the 2000 and 2004 media markets experiencing a Senate election, I included media markets for analysis if I found a prominent newspaper’s content was available for coding. This led to 95 media market and Senate campaign dyads being included for analysis. These dyads represent media markets that contain a large amount of the corresponding state’s population, a prominent newspaper with accessible content, and elections possessing two major-party candidates. A list of each race and corresponding newspaper included within the analysis are presented in Tables A.4 and A.5.

I examined newspaper articles starting after Labor Day or the first day after the primary, whichever was later. If an article mentioned either of two major-party candidates it was downloaded from the database and manually coded. I read each of these articles to ensure accuracy, and I coded whether they referenced the forthcoming Senate election. If an article referenced either of the two candidates and the current campaign it was coded as a campaign article and ultimately included in the measure.

---

75 Louisiana’s non-primary general election was excluded due to its inclusion of two prominent Democratic candidates.
of news media coverage of the campaign as a whole. Each campaign article was also analyzed using a computer program to measure the newspaper’s issue coverage. The program used a set of issue-specific keywords to find sentences with possible issue references within an article. These sentences were then displayed, manually read, and ultimately coded for whether the article referenced the corresponding issue. The coding categories were very similar with the WiscADS codes for advertisements. I give further details regarding these measurement and coding decisions in Appendix A.

When analyzing across a selection of newspapers it is unclear how to appropriately quantify a variable representing media coverage. Attempts to measure the volume of coverage within days of the campaign often use such units as the number of paragraphs or lines referencing the election. A noticeable problem within these quantifications is that news story length and the number of news stories are often a function of news organization constraints instead of the actual salience of the campaign. Sunday papers have more space to fill and might have longer stories about the campaign buried in the inner regions. Smaller Monday editions have greater space constraints and might contain a shorter story that is on the first page. This produces complicated issues in quantification and information retrieval. Likewise, larger news organizations have greater space to fill within their papers, but they also have greater competition from additional issues and stories salient to the area.

To avoid these issues I theorize the quantity of interest as whether a newspaper covers the campaign for each day of the fall campaign. While summarizing newspaper coverage by day is a loss of information, modeling such additional information leads to complicated and complex issues regarding model choice and variable creation. Instead, the belief is that the daily event of campaign coverage is a more transferrable
measure across days of the week, different newspaper organizations, and different campaign contexts.

**Issue Similarity by Newspaper Campaign Coverage**

Since both candidates are expected to increasingly focus on the media’s agenda as the media’s coverage of the campaign grows, there should be greater agenda similarity in campaigns with intense media coverage. Using the advertising data and its issue codes one can calculate the extent of agenda similarity in candidate advertisements using the same formula as in the previous section by comparing the percent of advertisements that reference each issue. There are 34 Senate campaigns in 2000 and 2004 that are contained within observed media markets and have both candidates airing advertisements. For those campaigns with multiple media markets and observed newspapers, the state-level variables represent the average across media markets.

I use two different estimation techniques and measurements to account for media coverage’s influence. The first technique uses ordinary linear regression with a standardized measure of media attention. The standardized measure takes the percent of days with campaign articles and then divides it by the ratio of a newspaper’s circulation to the state population (in millions). When summarizing across newspapers within the same Senate race, it is important to make their rates of coverage comparable. Newspapers with larger circulations are more likely to have the resources and the available print space to publish campaign stories. However, it also seems apparent that some newspapers in cities that contain a large share of the state’s population cover the campaign more frequently since candidates campaign in the surrounding area frequently. Therefore, by dividing by the ratio of a newspaper’s circulation to
the state populations, one creates a comparable measure of the newspaper's measure of campaign coverage.

The second estimation technique recognizes that this first attempt at standardization is fairly inaccurate and, as will be shown, creates a heavy outlier in the *New York Times*. As a result, I seek to estimate the weight at which this factor should be used for standardization using an exponential weighting parameter that is estimated via nonlinear least squares. The model is specified as follows:

\[ E(Similarity) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Coverage}^{\gamma(Circ./Pop.)} \]

The inclusion of the exponential weighting coefficient \( \gamma \) allows for media coverage to have decreasing or increasing returns to scale depending on the newspaper's size.

Two models are estimated within both the OLS and NLS specification. The first model tests the straightforward relationship between media coverage and candidate agenda similarity. The second model controls for two additional campaign measures that have been shown to be strong predictors of agenda similarity. The first variable is the total amount of campaign spending per capita among both major party candidates. The second variable is the difference in spending per capita between the two candidates. If candidates have more money, then they can air more advertisements and discuss more issues creating a positive effect. However, if only one candidate is doing much of the talking, then this should lessen agenda similarity since that one candidate can talk about many more issues.

Figure 5.4 plots out the observed and predicted values from the two bivariate regressions. As shown in Table 5.2 both variables have significant and clear positive associations. The graphs make clear that, across both specifications, increased newspaper coverage is associated with increased agenda similarity among candidates.
Figure 5.4: Senate Candidate Issue Convergence by Media Coverage
Those campaigns showing the lowest level of agenda similarity also received little media coverage. In the OLS model specification one can also see that the Clinton-Lazio campaign of 2000 serves as a strong outlier in comparison to all other campaigns. This is partly driven by the large circulation numbers of the *New York Times* and the frequent levels of coverage the campaign got across all New York newspapers.

What is nice about the NLS specification is that it takes into account these extremes. The estimated scaling for the campaign coverage measure creates less extreme outliers. These NLS estimates also show improved fit and, perhaps more importantly, they provide appealing measures of intensive campaigns. Tight races, such as the Robb-Allen race in Virginia and the Grams-Dayton in Minnesota, are now at the higher levels of news media coverage, while previously they had a low rating. What is consistent across both graphs, though, is that as news media coverage of the campaigns increases so too do candidate agenda similarity scores, with a gain of roughly .4 as one goes from the minimum to the maximum.

How much are these results driven by extraneous factors? One might question whether campaign competition is exogenous to media coverage and drives candidates to debate on the same issues. The candidate spending measures provide nice controls for this possibility. Table 5.2 presents the estimation results from the four models. For both specifications the relationship between media coverage and issue convergence remains positive with less consistent significance. The OLS estimates show all three factors influence agenda similarity in the expected direction, although the size of the media’s influence somewhat weakens. The NLS results suggest candidate spending is not as powerful a factor as is media coverage. The difference in spending is still a negative influence on agenda similarity, but greater total spending by candidates
Table 5.2: Issue Similarity in Candidate Agendas by Media Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>OLS Estimates</th>
<th>NLS Estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Coverage (Std.)</td>
<td>3.348**</td>
<td>2.225*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.51)</td>
<td>(1.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Coverage</td>
<td>0.339**</td>
<td>0.262**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.129)</td>
<td>(.140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Spending (by Pop.)</td>
<td>0.040*</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.025)</td>
<td>(.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff. in Spending (by Pop.)</td>
<td>−0.084**</td>
<td>−0.072**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.034)</td>
<td>(.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exponential Weight</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.045)</td>
<td>(.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.346**</td>
<td>0.350**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.046)</td>
<td>(.061)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.288**</td>
<td>0.319**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.085)</td>
<td>(.096)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adj. $R^2$  

- OLS and NLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. ** - $p \leq .05$ one-tailed test, * - $p \leq .10$ one-tailed test

Table 5.2: Issue Similarity in Candidate Agendas by Media Coverage

does not show a significant relationship. Since the NLS framework is also found to have a better adjusted $R^2$ statistic and nice estimates of campaign intensity, I would argue the NLS results provide the best estimates and offer powerful evidence of the media’s influence on candidate issue attention.

**Media Influence on Senate Candidate Agendas**

These results indicate candidates discussed the same issues within campaigns receiving large amounts of media coverage, but they do not directly test whether candidates discussed the same issues newspapers were discussing. To do so, I combine the two major-party candidates’ advertisements and then tabulate the percent of advertisements referencing each of top 35 issues for 2000 and 2004. I exclude those Senate
races in which only one candidate, usually the incumbent, airs advertisements. These summaries give an issue attention rate among candidate advertisements for each observed media market.

I also code each campaign newspaper article for issue content and calculate the average number of days referencing each 35 issues for each newspaper. I averaged these two variables for each Senate race to get an average issue-attention rate for both candidates and local newspapers. This produces about 1400 observations of campaign-issue dyads, where approximately 35 issue observations exist for each observed Senate race.

Not surprisingly, across all issues and all campaigns, the average reference to a specific issue is frequently zero; 70 percent of all issues within campaigns are given absolutely no reference by candidate advertisements. For many others the rates are small, as 90 percent of issue dyads are referenced by less than 11 percent of candidate advertisements. This is because candidates usually concentrate on a select group of issues to campaign on during their campaign. The extensive number of observations at zero means that censored regression (Tobit) estimation is preferred. I also take into account any unobserved dependence across each issue for each year by using a random-effects panel data framework. The specification accounts for any extraneous national-level influences driving candidate attention towards an issue for each year.

The panel Tobit results in Table 5.3 show that, as expected, there is a significant positive association between rates of newspaper coverage of an issue and candidate references to that issue within their advertisements. The estimates also suggest that

76I take the percent of days (Labor Day - election day) referencing an issue instead the percent of campaign articles. I do so because percent of days takes into account the intensity of issue coverage within each campaign, not just the relative attention.
Variable Panel Tobit Estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Coverage</td>
<td>0.342*</td>
<td>0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.091*</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\hat{\sigma}_{issue}$</td>
<td>0.082*</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\hat{\sigma}_{dyad}$</td>
<td>0.124*</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\rho$</td>
<td>.306</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations 1467
Groups 67
Log-Likelihood -128.373

Panel Tobit model estimates with standard errors in parentheses. * - p ≤ .05 two-tailed test.

Table 5.3: Newspaper Influence on Candidate Agendas

candidate issue attentions show strong national associations within each year. The $\rho$ estimate of .306 suggests that roughly 31 percent of the variance in issue attention rates are explained by differences in issues each year. These extraneous national-level dependencies could easily be a product of national media or party influences.

The significant coefficient estimate represents news media influence on the unobserved or uncensored candidate attention rates and is not immediately interpretable. To get a better handle on the estimates Figure 5.5 shows the estimated influence of news media coverage as it ranges from its minimum, 0, to the maximum observed issue-attention rate of .7, representing 70 percent of days with an issue reference. The top line of the graph shows the estimated probability of either candidate mentioning an issue as news media coverage increases. The chance of an issue mention
grows from under 30 to over 80 percent as news coverage goes from its minimum to maximum. Considering that 70 percent of observations were at zero this is a very meaningful change. The bottom line also shows the expected rate of candidate issue references based on newspaper coverage. At the maximum level of news media issue coverage candidates are expected to mention that same issue in 17 percent of their advertisements, a value that may seem small but that is in the top 7th percentile of observed values.

In combination, these relationships make a strong case for the local news media having a strong influence on Senate candidate behavior. This influence may be
partly a result of the national media’s influence on local newspaper agendas. Regardless of the source of local agendas, it indicates threats of persuasion have a powerful influence on candidate agendas. Senate candidates show much greater issue convergence in those campaigns with high levels of news media coverage. This indicates agenda-setting incentives become much less influential as the news media provide more information about the election to the public. It also appears candidate advertisements are much more likely to talk about an issue if that issue gains prominence within the news media. These two associations are very supportive of persuasion-based incentives operating in candidate behavior. However, the last section clarifies whether candidates have any influence on the local media and tests if these observed relationships are biased.

**Are Senate Candidates Able to Influence Local Newspapers?**

A final and very important consideration when examining the relationship between candidates and the news media within Senate campaigns is the extent to which candidates influence local media coverage and agendas. This is a prominent concern since the previous literature concretely argues candidates have such an influence. Most prominently, Clarke and Evans (1983) and Simon (2002) argue the local media mostly replicate the actions and rhetoric of the candidates. While some recent studies have cast doubt on this perspective (Arnold 2004), there exists little reason to doubt candidates are successful in shaping local news media coverage of the campaign and their issue focus. The possibility of this relationship makes the type of analysis in Table 5.3 problematic and possibly confounded.
Consequently, I test these beliefs in two stages using the 95 newspaper advertising dyads. First, I analyze the extent of candidate influence on newspaper coverage of the campaign in general. I do so by examining what influence candidate spending and advertisements have on local newspaper coverage of the campaign. Although not obvious, this examination is related to campaign agenda development since it sheds light on what drives media coverage to the campaign as a whole. As I argue, if the local news media do not cover the campaign, then candidates face little need or desire to follow the media’s agenda. As such, an incumbent may not be able to influence local news media agendas, but he or she may be able to lessen the volume of campaign coverage and, thus, make the news media’s agenda less influential. If campaign spending and advertisements are successful in driving newspaper coverage to the campaign as a whole, then they are indirectly able to shape campaign agendas such that the results in Table 5.2 are a somewhat biased indicator of news media influence.\footnote{Although the candidate spending measures somewhat guard against this influence.}

After this analysis, I analyze whether candidate advertisements influence the issue coverage of local newspapers. Here I seek to decipher whether the association between candidate issue attention and news media issue coverage is a product of candidate influence on the news media. As will be shown, these two tests suggest candidates have a significant influence on rates of media coverage of the campaign and of specific issues, but this influence is small in substance relative to other factors.

**Analysis**

There are two major issues to address when analyzing a selection of newspaper coverage for each day of the campaign. First, exogenous to candidate influence,
newspaper coverage of an election is consistently a function of time; as the election approaches it becomes more salient and newspapers are more likely to cover the campaign. Since campaign advertisements and activities also increase as the election approaches this potentially confounds an analysis of candidate influence. To take into account duration dependence a Cox proportional hazards model was estimated (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). The Cox model was chosen over parametric options since the duration dependence of newspaper coverage is not easily captured with a parametric distribution.
Figure 5.6 presents the proportion of newspapers covering their corresponding Senate campaign for each day leading up until the election. Although not initially obvious, two patterns of coverage emerge from this graph. Newspaper coverage of the campaign increases as the election approaches and Sundays are more likely to experience campaign articles than any other day of the week. The Sunday before the election is the most popular day for campaign articles as nearly 90 percent of newspapers mention the campaign that day. Furthermore, all Sundays are more likely to experience coverage than any other day that week. This is observable by examining the equally-spaced small spikes in coverage that occur preceding the final Sunday. The Cox model estimates a separate baseline hazard rate depending on the day preceding the election such that this odd underlying pattern of newspaper coverage is adequately taken into account.\(^{78}\)

Finally, although some attributes of the campaign and newspapers will be explicitly modeled, there still exists a significant amount of dependence in daily observations from the same newspaper. Newspapers produce noticeable differences in their Senate campaign coverage for reasons beyond their economic constraints (Arnold 2004). Table 5.7 presents the overall distribution of news coverage to the campaign as well as a breakdown of this relationship by whether the election was for an open seat or not. As one can see, campaign coverage rates are somewhat bimodal with positive skew. A large number of incumbent campaigns garnered coverage centered around 25 percent of campaign days. In contrast, open races showed much higher levels of coverage. In fact, two newspapers covered their respective open campaign every day during the

\(^{78}\) A lesser form of time-dependence is the duration of time in between each campaign article. An additional between-article time counter showed this to be minor influence, where all substantive inferences remain.
period analyzed. Not surprisingly, both of these papers covered the Clinton-Lazio race of 2000.

Since some newspapers are exposed to more intense campaigns than others and are more likely to focus on political and campaign news than others, I model observations from the same newspaper as having a shared frailty term. Shared-frailty models are similar to random-effects multilevel models. All observations from the same newspaper are specified as having an additional time-constant component that increases or decreases their propensity to cover the campaign.
Specifically, the hazard rate \( h \) for observation \( i \), in newspaper \( j \) is modeled according to the following functional form:

\[
h_{ij}(|\beta'x_{ij}, \nu_j) = h_0(t)\nu_j \exp(\beta'x_{ij})
\]

where \( t \) represents the day until election and \( \nu \) follows a gamma distribution with mean one and variance \( \theta \). \( \beta'x_{ij} \) represents the summed contribution of modeled covariates, \( h_0(t) \) represents the baseline hazard rate for day \( t \) and \( \nu_j \) captures any time-constant differences in coverage rates across newspapers. If \( \theta \) does not significantly differ from zero, then all newspapers are estimated to possess equal underlying rates of coverage since \( \nu \) equals one for all newspapers. Given these modifications, the following analysis should adequately account for any unobserved dependencies driving campaign coverage.

Variables

I model the propensity for daily newspaper coverage as a function of three factors: journalist expectations, candidate actions, and newspaper constraints. Kahn and Kenney (1999) suggest that journalistic expectations play a large role in influencing news media coverage of a campaign. Journalist expectations about the forthcoming election are captured using two variables representing the attributes of the candidates and the state’s race as a whole. These two variables represent determinants of news coverage that are not easily manipulated by candidates.

The presence of a Quality Challenger should create greater uncertainty about the outcome of the election and increase election coverage. Specific to the case of

\[79\]

I also estimated another model that included state-specific fixed effects for those races with numerous media-markets within the sample. The results of this alternative model do not change any of the following inferences.
Senate elections, I coded quality challengers as a dichotomous variable representing those candidates who have previously held an elected statewide or federal position. A second variable measures electoral conditions based on the state’s partisan balance; closely divided states should be more likely to garner media coverage. I measure this influence using the state’s *Normal Vote*, which was measured using the incumbent party’s margin of advantage from the two-party vote, in the previous presidential election. For example, if the incumbent party got 40 percent of the two-party vote the normal vote for that race would be coded at negative 10 percent. Given the susceptibility of Senate elections to skewed results depending on the year and quality of competition, previous presidential election margins were chosen.

I include two time-changing covariates to capture the possible influence of candidate actions on newspaper coverage. I first include measures of the challenger and incumbent party’s *Daily Advertisements* count within each media market. The appropriate variable form to capture advertisement influence is somewhat unclear. Do candidate advertisements have a cumulative influence on journalists or are their influence much more temporary? Depending on one’s priors one could choose a cumulative count of advertisements, a weekly count, or some other combination. Cumulative counts were considered problematic in the sense that advertisements in April should not show a continual influence on journalist expectations. In addition, cumulative counts add additional trending and collinearity into variables that make it difficult to estimate their influence. Instead, a simple lag variable, representing the media market’s advertisement count in the previous day, was chosen for implementation.

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80 Early election polls, while definitely influential, were avoided as a measure of expectations since they are confounded by challenger quality and campaign finance levels.

81 Other types of measures, such as week or three-day lags, were also tried but showed no different substantive conclusions.
Table 5.4: Advertisement Volume in 2000 and 2004

Table 5.4 presents a summary of daily advertisement frequency by those media markets included in the analysis.

The second set of variables representing candidate influence are *Daily Spending* measures of the incumbent and challenging party candidates. Using the quarterly, pre-primary, pre-election, and post-election FEC reports, one can calculate the amount of money each candidate spent over specific time periods. Each candidate’s spending over these periods is divided by the number of days to get a daily average, and it is then standardized by dividing each average by the state’s population (in 10 millions) to make these levels across states more comparable.

Candidates may share the same avenue of influence on the media, but challengers and incumbents likely shape media coverage in different ways. Challengers are known by fewer voters and face lower expectations than incumbents. Their campaigns should seek to change this condition by increasing their profile among voters and among the media. An active challenger campaign signals a degree of viability and makes their candidacy more newsworthy or intriguing. This is especially likely since increased media coverage is generally perceived to be beneficial to challengers (Westlye 1991). In contrast, incumbent activities most likely decrease news media coverage. Their
spending and activities should further improve expectations about their chances of winning, making the outcome seem more certain and less newsworthy. Therefore, the expectation for both of these measures is that incumbent advertisements and spending should improve incumbent advantages in expectations and decrease news media coverage. Conversely, challenger advertisements and spending will draw voters in, make the race more salient, and thereby increase newspaper interest in the campaign.

As mentioned before, newspaper organizational constraints should also influence the frequency of campaign coverage. I include a newspaper Circulation measure, as previously coded by dividing it by the state population variable, to account for this factor. Newspapers with higher circulations, or with circulations that make up a great deal of the state’s population, are expected to cover their respective Senate campaigns much more frequently.\(^{82}\)

**Accounting for Omitted Variable Bias or Endogeneity**

Before proceeding to the results a brief discussion is needed regarding the possible issue of omitted variable bias or endogeneity. When specifying a random-effects model to account for unobserved dependence within each newspaper, one also assumes such differences are independent of model covariates. This is problematic since candidate advertisement and spending rates are often found to be higher in more competitive races, where competitive races are also associated with increased newspaper coverage. Likewise, if newspaper coverage rates drive candidate spending, then the current random effects specification is biased. Failure to adequately control for this potential for omitted variables or endogeneity leads to biased estimates.

\(^{82}\text{Modifications to this measure were made for newspapers that covered two campaigns. So, for example, the Washington Post’s circulation numbers were divided by two to account for the fact it faces relatively equal constraints to cover Virginia and Maryland races.}\)
A solution to this issue is the inclusion of additional variables that capture the media-market mean of variables that potentially confound estimates (Skrondal and Rabe-Hesketh 2004). The media-market mean variables capture those differences in coverage that are associated with across, and not within, campaign differences. In other words, the dyad mean variables are included to capture the across-campaign association between media coverage and advertising or spending levels. These aggregate associations are determined by two possible factors. One factor is the underlying or preexisting competitiveness of the election that is not a function of candidate or newspaper influence and the second being the likely reverse influence newspaper coverage has on candidate spending. For instance, incumbent spending may lessen newspaper coverage, but incumbents may spend and use this influence more in competitive campaigns that have high rates of newspaper coverage.

These differences in association by the level of analysis are accounted for when one includes both within and across campaign measures. By including both dyad-mean variables and their corresponding time-changing covariates that are mean centered, coefficient estimates for the time-changing covariates represent what influence a within-campaign change in a variable has on newspaper coverage rates. The media-market means of the same variable then capture how the association between the level of this variable and newspaper coverage across campaigns. This is important because it makes the time-changing covariate a clear estimate of what influence changing candidate behavior has on newspaper coverage, directly representing the discretionary influence of candidates. Specification tests indicated that excluding campaign-level means of the candidate spending variables lead to biased results, as a result their campaign-level means are included as additional controls.
Results

A Cox proportional hazards model was estimated with a shared-frailty term to take into account shared unobserved dependencies within each newspaper’s coverage. All estimations combine incumbents and incumbent party candidates and challengers and challenging party candidates. Coefficients, and not hazard ratios, are presented along with standard errors in parentheses. Within the Cox model, coefficient estimates represent the linear change in the log of the hazard ratios caused by a unit increase in the independent variable. This means negative coefficients represent less coverage of the campaign and positive estimates represent greater coverage of the campaign.

Table 5.5 presents the results from the estimated model of newspaper coverage of the entire campaign. This model tests the extent to which candidates shape agendas by limiting newspaper coverage of campaign. In general, the directional results fall in line with expectations. Increases in both incumbent party spending and incumbent advertisements are estimated to decrease the rate of newspapers covering the campaign. In contrast, challenger advertising and challenger spending are estimated to increase the propensity for newspaper coverage. However, the effects of spending and advertising are of mixed significance and substantive influence across challengers and incumbents. Based on the significance tests, incumbents successfully deter news media coverage through their spending while challengers show success in gaining news media coverage through their advertisements at marginal significance levels.

In terms of the spending relationships, it is important to notice how the campaign-level means enlighten the complex nature of the relationship between spending and newspaper coverage. The coefficient for the average level of incumbent and challenger spending is significantly higher in campaigns with a greater level of media coverage.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previous Day’s # of Inc. Ads</td>
<td>-.00139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Day’s # of Cha. Ads</td>
<td>.00213*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Inc. Spending (Centered)</td>
<td>-.00024**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.9x10⁻⁵)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Cha. Spending (Centered)</td>
<td>.00007</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(6.6x10⁻⁵)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality Challenger</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.1379)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation (Std.)</td>
<td>.00456**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal Vote</td>
<td>-.41202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.3952)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Daily Inc. Spending</td>
<td>.00017*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Daily Cha. Spending</td>
<td>.00058**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations 5484  
Groups 95  
\[\hat{\theta} = .2628** (.043)\]  
Partial Log-likelihood -9615.76

Coefficients are Cox proportional hazards estimates with a shared gamma frailty term. Standard errors in parentheses. Efron method used for ties. ** indicates p ≤ .05, * indicates p ≤ .10; one-tailed tests.

Table 5.5: The Determinants of Newspaper Campaign Coverage
But, when one looks at the variables capturing within-campaign effects, the influence of incumbent spending is one that actually decreases media coverage. These estimates show how incumbent spending actually deters newspapers from covering the campaign, but that incumbents use this influence more so in races with higher levels of media attention.

The difference in results between challenger and incumbent effects could come about for a couple reasons. First, it may be that challenger spending is also able to increase media coverage, but the FEC reports do not give enough leverage across time periods. Challengers spend money to raise more money and show fairly high levels of spending throughout the fall campaign. In contrast, incumbents have large war chests and have a greater ability to increase or decrease their spending levels depending on when the need arises. Since challenger spending across campaigns has such a strong significant positive association, it may be wiping out the ability to estimate the within-campaign relationship. A second reason why a differential relationship might occur is that incumbents might not view advertisements as their preferred tool in supporting their campaign. Advertisements draw coverage of a race and raise its profile. This might give incumbents the incentive to spend money on other means of voter communication efforts, such as targeted communications or get-out-the-vote drives, and only use advertisements to combat challengers in already close elections.

Although candidate actions influence local newspaper coverage, other attributes of the campaign show much stronger influences within rates of newspaper coverage. The presence of a quality challenger greatly increases the frequency of newspapers covering an election. A newspaper’s level of circulation also appears to have a strong
Baseline survivor function represents media market with a normal vote of zero, a non-quality challenger, median level of newspaper circulation, and mean levels of across campaign spending levels.

Figure 5.8: The Rate of Campaign Coverage by Campaign Profile

positive influence on the propensity for newspaper coverage. A more extreme state normal vote is associated with less frequent media coverage but at an insignificant level.

To get a handle on the relative influence of each covariate, Figure 5.8 presents the comparative survivor functions for three different campaign profiles. These survivor functions represent the probability that the duration of time before the first campaign
The article is published extends beyond some time $t$. The baseline survivor function represents a campaign with a normal vote of zero, a non-quality challenger, median level of newspaper circulation, and mean levels of advertisements and campaign spending. Within this context, there is a 50 percent chance of going the first 9 days without a newspaper publishing a campaign article.

In comparison, by holding these variables constant and making the campaign have a quality challenger one can see the rate of survival decreases as the curve shifts to the left. The simple presence of a quality challenger increases the rate of newspaper coverage of a Senate campaign by 84 percent each day. In the context of Figure 5.8's survivor function, a quality challenger means there is only a 29 percent chance of going the first 9 days without a newspaper writing a campaign story. Finally, by increasing newspaper circulation levels to their highest standardized value, as observed in the Providence Journal, the survivor rate reduces by almost as much. Moving circulation levels from their median level to their maximum increases the rate of newspaper campaign coverage by 73 percent. Combining these two influences, there is now a 50 percent chance that a newspaper will print a campaign newspaper article after the first three days of the fall campaign – a situation that is certainly more threatening for an incumbent.

In comparison to candidate and campaign attributes, candidate actions are estimated to have a less powerful influence. For instance, Blanche Lincoln’s 2004 Arkansas campaign showed one of the largest within-campaign increases in spending for an incumbent. Her October increase is estimated to have reduced the rate of newspaper coverage of her Senate campaign by a little over thirty percent. A sizable, but not dominating influence. Compare the influence of incumbent spending
with challenger advertisements. A challenger who increases one’s advertisement count within a media market from 0 to 75 (the maximum observed challenger average in 2004) is estimated to increase the chances of a newspaper article the next day by only 17 percent. This means challengers seeking to increase their news media profile might have to put up a sustained surge of advertisements if they hope to consistently increase their exposure. Given the high costs of this influence, it is questionable whether candidates might view the increased potential for newspaper coverage worth the cost of advertising needed to receive it.

**Issue Coverage**

Candidates may not have a powerful influence on rates of coverage, but candidates still may show considerable influence on the issue content of such coverage. It seems reasonable to expect newspaper coverage to somewhat reflect the priorities of candidates. However, newspapers also have the freedom to discuss and frame campaign stories using many issues, not just those candidates emphasize. They also are subject to a variety of market incentives and national news media influences that might guard against candidate success. I seek to test the relative influence of these factors in order to show that local newspaper agendas are largely nationalized because of the national focus of their readers and the influence of the national media.

I use measures of issue references coded from the same campaign news articles as analyzed in Table 5.5. To guard against including issues which had no relevance to the election at all (and thus were not at risk), only issues mentioned by over 5 percent of candidate advertisements were examined within news articles. The resulting format

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83 A possible alternative tactic is to code for all issues within a campaign and then estimate split-population duration model which does not assume that every issue will experience a newspaper reference (Box-Steinensmeier, Radcliffe and Bartels 2005)
of the data includes multiple observations within each day’s newspaper coverage, where each observation records information about the event of a newspaper’s issue reference.

Three modifications were made from the previous model to capture issue-specific influences. First, candidate advertisement numbers now represent the previous day’s number of issue-specific advertisements. If an advertisement made reference to an issue, then that advertisement is expected to influence local newspaper coverage of that issue. Specification tests indicated the need to also include the mean level of incumbent and challenger advertisements for each issue to control for any possible endogeneity bias, these variables will be shown to shed an important light on the relationship between candidate and media issue references.

Two final changes were implemented to measure the extent to which local newspapers appear to be driven by national-level factors. The first modification was to include a national Issue Importance variable for each issue. The variable represents the national percentage of NAES survey respondents who rate that issue as the most important problem during the month preceding Labor Day of each year. Furthermore, the second modification was the inclusion of an additional set of issue-specific dummy variables for each year of the campaign. These issue- and year-specific fixed effects capture any cross-campaign similarity in issue references that might occur because an issue is getting a large amount of coverage from the national media, party, or other candidates.

Table 5.6 presents the results from the model estimates. The number of campaigns observed drops by three since three media-markets had no policy issue references in
Table 5.6: The Determinants of Newspaper Issue Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>(.011)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.011)</td>
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<td>Issue Importance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.0317)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily Inc. Spending (Centered)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(3.2x10^{-5})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily Cha. Spending (Centered)</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(4.0x10^{-5})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality Challenger</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(.1592)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation (Std.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.0033)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Normal Vote</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(.5083)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Daily Inc. Spending</td>
<td>.00024*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Daily Cha. Spending</td>
<td>.00060**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Daily Inc. Issue Ad</td>
<td>.01086**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0027)</td>
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<td>Avg. Daily Cha. Issue Ad</td>
<td>.02098**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.0030)</td>
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</table>

Observations 39,126
Groups 92
\[\hat{\theta} = .3373** (0.053)\]
Partial Log-likelihood -28,694.432

Coefficients are Cox proportional hazards estimates with a shared gamma frailty term. Issue-specific fixed-effects estimates not displayed. Standard errors in parentheses. Efron method used for ties. ** indicates p ≤ .05, * indicates p ≤ .10; two-tailed tests.
their advertisements. Coefficient estimates for those variables that are not issue-specific nicely reflect the substantive conclusions of Table 5.5.

Looking at the top two coefficient estimates one finds that candidate advertisements show a significant positive influence on rates of newspaper issue references. An increase in either the challenger or incumbent’s number of daily advertisements referencing an issue brings about a significant increase in the probability of a newspaper discussing that same issue the next day. These two results suggest that both challenger and incumbent party advertisements have a robust influence upon newspaper issue coverage.

However, while consistent, the strength of this within-campaign influence is small. For example, when a challenging party candidate increases his or her reference to an issue by 18 advertisements over the average (the 95th percentile of within-issue increases) the newspaper is only 8.9 percent more likely to discuss the issue the next day. An incumbent party candidate who increases advertisements on an issue by 22 above the mean (the 95th percentile) increases the rate of newspaper issue coverage by only 6.9 percent above the baseline rate.

Compare these rates of candidate influence to the larger rates of association accounted for by the variables containing daily averages. Challengers who average 18 advertisements a day on an issue do so among newspapers that mention that issue at a 46 percent higher rate. Incumbents who average the same number of issue advertisements do so among newspapers that have a 22 percent higher rate. Both these results find that the influence of candidate advertisements on newspaper issue references is roughly one quarter the size of their campaign-level associations. While one
cannot verify that these daily average associations are entirely a product of a newspaper’s influence on candidate behavior, it does suggest that candidate advertisements are not the dominant force driving the association between newspaper and candidate agendas as examined in Table 5.3.

**The Larger Role of National Factors**

What is even more apparent is that these local factors on newspaper issue coverage are not as large as the estimated influence of national factors. An issue’s national importance rating has a significant and large positive influence on newspaper coverage rates. For instance, an issue with a 5 percent higher rating as a most important problem, as health care did compared to foreign policy issues in 2004, had a 77 percent higher rate of newspaper coverage. National concerns over terrorism (13.12 percent as most important problem) are estimated to bring about 4.5 times (or 350 percent greater) the rate of issue references compared to issue references for issues that received no mentions as the most important problem.

Furthermore, while not displayed, the issue-specific fixed effects equally suggest that newspaper issue coverage shows a large degree of cross-campaign dependence. Note that these shared issue dependencies across campaigns is beyond those associated with public priority ratings or candidate advertising factors. Regardless of what locale or state one is in, newspapers were placing similar levels of priority and focus on a select group of issues. For example, even after controlling for candidate advertisement levels and public issue priority ratings, newspapers covering Senate campaigns in 2000 had three times a greater rate of attention to the issue of prescription drugs than to the issue of crime. All newspapers in 2004 mentioned taxes at twice the rate of the issues of jobs or unemployment. Similar significant differences in coverage are observed
for many other issues as well. Clearly, strong extraneous factors beyond candidate actions and voter priorities combine to determine the profile of issues within the local newspapers. These extraneous factors might include national media coverage and the influence parties and other high-profile contests.

Coupled together the results in Table 5.6 suggest a similar story as in Table 5.5. A candidate’s campaign behavior plays a statistically significant but substantively small role in determining newspaper coverage. Changes in the issue focus of candidate advertising exhibit a positive influence on the rate of newspaper coverage of those issues. However, these rates of change were small considering the observed distribution of candidate issue advertisements and the reverse association. Furthermore, a number of extraneous and national-level factors showed the greatest influence on newspaper issue coverage. These strong external determinants of newspaper coverage rates indicate candidates have a relatively small influence on a newspaper’s issue content.

Conclusion

While unable to investigate and examine campaign agendas with the same detail and rigor, this broad exploration of state agendas and Senate campaigns supported many of the findings of the previous two chapters. In support of beliefs that voters exhibit mostly national agendas, the issue priorities of the mass public showed little variation and massive similarity across states in 2000 and 2004. Likewise, state priorities showed no significant change in response to Senate campaigns. As was suggested by the second hypothesis, Senate candidates were much more likely to discuss the same issues in campaigns with intensive media coverage. Candidates were also
much more likely to discuss those issues within their advertisements that were also prominently featured within the media. The final analysis suggested this association is somewhat confounded, candidates did show an ability to shape news media coverage, but estimates of this influence were relatively small compared to the reverse associations.

Beyond the robust influence of the news media across campaign contexts, the nationalization of state agendas shined as a prevalent factor throughout this chapter. The estimated priorities of each state were very similar nationally. This was expected based upon the prominent role of the national news media in determining local news media content, and this reasoning was also supported within the analysis of local newspaper coverage. Local newspapers were unified in their issue coverage for reasons beyond candidate advertisements and public priority ratings.

I believe this combination of results provides strong support for the proposed persuasion-based theory of campaign agenda formation. This was an examination of numerous campaigns which occur in a variety of competitive scenarios and information environments. However, the theory’s expectation of issue convergence and the media’s direction of candidate agendas makes clear that such behavior is conditional on the prominence of news media messages. Candidates are only expected to focus on the same issues if the news media are covering the campaign. Candidates should seek to prevent negative persuasive environments within such campaigns by providing their own rhetoric or spin on each prominent issue.

It is also important to not deny the evidence for candidate abilities to determine local newspaper rates of campaign and issue coverage. However, these influences apparently were not dominant. They instead reflect what could be considered a
reasonable amount of news media responsiveness to the actions of the candidates and substance of their rhetoric. Newspapers appear to note when candidates stress or mention a new issue, but these movements do not abruptly change a newspaper’s focus. Likewise, with all the research on campaign intensity and its ability to change voter behavior (Westlye 1991; Kahn and Kenney 1999), it appears candidates make some contribution to such changes. However, this level of candidate influence was not enough to claim candidates as the prime factors shaping campaign intensity.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Where do campaign issues come from? This question served as the initial motivation for this project. To some cynics the campaign’s tendency to promote a select group of issues seems an innocuous process; campaign issues are just pawns in a rhetorical beauty contest. On the contrary, research has clearly demonstrated that the contents of the political agenda have immensely important consequences for electoral and policy outputs. Agendas advantage some choices or candidates over others, and they set the stage for what substantive policy areas the government addresses in office. Therefore, knowing the origins of campaign issues is an immensely important task, both for our understanding of campaign strategy and behavior as well as our understanding of government policy outputs.

I began this dissertation with a review of the varied literature on candidate agenda formation, voter agenda setting, and the myriad of relationships that have been proposed as driving campaign agendas. Despite the wide-ranging interest in agenda setting from the political behavior and the candidate strategy literatures, many of these theories and empirical examinations were shown to be divorced from one another and inadequate. Notably, the literature has failed to provide a theory of agenda
setting that deciphers what relative influences candidates and the media have on voter agendas and each other’s agenda.

Consequently, I have sought to reconcile the apparent conflict between theories based on candidate agenda-setting incentives and the lack of confirming evidence by clarifying who influences whom. This new perspective of campaign agenda formation made two key observations. First, candidates are not the only players within campaigns who are able to shape voter agendas. Instead, if one looks at the modifiers of agenda-setting effects, then it becomes clear that the news media’s greater pervasiveness and credibility give them a much greater influence among voters. Furthermore, if one recognizes the potential for voter persuasion, then it also becomes clear that agenda-setting incentives have costly persuasive consequences. I thus argued that the lack of an agenda-setting influence makes persuasion a predominant concern driving candidate behavior within those campaigns intensely covered by the news media. As a result, candidates frequently follow and focus on the news media’s issue agenda.

**Summary of Findings**

My hypotheses and arguments regarding the mechanisms of agenda formation were supported throughout a variety of issues, campaigns, and methods of analysis. What follows is a brief summary of the variety of tests that were undertaken.

**Who Drives Campaign Agendas?**

Chapter 3 tested the two hypotheses within the context of the 2000 presidential campaign. It first demonstrated how candidate agenda-setting incentives failed to explain the issue content of candidate advertisements. An analysis of the dynamics
of public priorities showed they moved among a select group of issues. Extraneous factors drove some of these changes in issue priorities, but others were connected to the campaign.

What followed was an analysis of what caused the issue priority movements within those issues that were connected to the campaign. To do so, I provide the first known test to simultaneously estimate the agenda-setting influences of candidates, the news media, and voters on each other. These tests supported both hypotheses of the proposed persuasion-based theory of campaign agenda formation. The news media showed relatively greater ability to change voter priorities. Furthermore, candidate agendas reacted to the issue coverage of the national news media. This reactivity and movement in candidate agendas, which I argue represents an attempt to persuade voters on prominent issues, was not expected, if not irrational, according to theories of candidate agenda-setting strategies.

**Swing Voters, Campaign Persuasion, and Candidate Response**

Chapter 4 was an in-depth examination of voter opinions and news media coverage during the 2000 presidential campaign. The specific goal was to demonstrate both the influence of persuasion within campaigns and that candidate responses to news media agendas were in fact efforts at winning over voters on those issues and limiting the opponent’s success at such efforts.

In regards to the first task, analysis indicated that the foundations of vote choice (partisanship, retrospective evaluations) showed a relatively constant influence on vote choice throughout the campaign. This indicated that each candidate held a core
group of stalwart supporters, but they also had to appeal to swing voters, who appeared to be the key players within the fall campaign. I then examined the attributes of swing voters and showed why they are so susceptible to campaign information. In contrast to stalwart supporters, swing voters were shown to be less informed, less likely to have made a vote choice entering the campaign, neutral in their predispositions, cohesively neutral in their initial evaluations of candidates, and more reactive to campaign information environments. All these conditions pointed to the persuasive content of fall campaign information environment being a strong influence on their vote choice.

As to the second task, the chapter took an extensive examination of whether candidates benefited by focusing on issues the media were discussing. This first involved an in-depth analysis of the issue of Social Security during the primary and general election campaigns. There was evidence in both instances that candidates focused on the issue in the hopes of mitigating the media’s dominant message. Bush first focused on Social Security during the primaries to combat the news media’s acceptance of John McCain’s arguments. Likewise, Bush put forth his privatization plan to counter rhetorical claims he had no plan for saving Social Security. These actions were so successful that Gore had to sharpen his rhetoric criticizing Bush during the fall campaign. By the end of the campaign both candidates focused intensely on the issue to negate the criticisms of the media and the opposition. The last test in the chapter estimated how much candidates had to gain and lose by focusing on key issues. The results clearly showed that news media content and issue advertisements swayed voter preferences within issues, and this influence was most decisive for swing voters.
Examining other Campaign Contexts

The last analytical chapter took to the task of evaluating the theory in other campaign contexts. The 2000 presidential election offers a detailed, and probably favorable, perspective from which to evaluate how candidates, the news media, and voters interact. The Senate chapter evaluated the theory’s applicability to many other types of campaigns. I first discussed how Senate and House candidates have no greater advantages than presidential candidates in determining voter agendas and, thus, should be responsive to the national news media’s agenda as replicated within local media. I examined state agendas and Senate campaigns of 2000 and 2004 to test these claims and provided three key bodies of supportive evidence.

First, in support of the belief that voter priorities for federal elections are nationalized, there were strong similarities between state agendas and national averages in both 2000 and 2004. Tests for whether there were any movements or changes in state priorities associated with Senate campaigns were decidedly unsupportive. These results suggest voter agendas showed little localized influences and, in support of the first hypothesis, that Senate candidates had little agenda-setting influence.

The second body of tests examined the second hypothesis. Two tests using local newspaper coverage of Senate campaigns strongly supported expectations that the news media agendas are very influential in shaping candidate agendas. Senate candidate advertisements increasingly discussed the same issues in those campaigns garnering high rates of news media coverage. Likewise, tests showed Senate candidate advertisements were significantly more likely to discuss issues in their advertisements that newspapers were also giving greater rates of coverage.
The final tests sought to ascertain whether such results were biased by candidate abilities to determine local news media content. Importantly, I found candidate advertisements and spending had significant influences on newspaper rates of coverage to the campaign and specific campaign issues. However, both of these influences were relatively small compared to the reverse associations and the influence of nationalized factors external to a candidate’s control. In combination, both tests showed that newspaper issue content was highly nationalized, for reasons beyond public priorities and candidate advertisements. These results paint the news media as a mostly exogenous force in shaping Senate campaign agendas.

**Implications of Findings**

What are the implications of these findings for our understanding of politics? Let me answer this question by discussing three separate points. I will proceed by first clarifying possible misperceptions of the news media’s influence. This will be followed with a discussion of how these findings relate to positive theories of voter behavior, candidate strategy, and theories of campaigns. After this discussion I will conclude with a brief comment on what possible insights this perspective holds for our normative understanding of campaigns and representation within American politics.

**Perspectives on the News Media**

Let me first clarify some possible misconceptions. Some people are understandably timorous in accepting evidence for a powerful and mostly exogenous news media determining campaign agendas. First, to be clear, just because the news media show a powerful ability to direct the attentions of the public and candidates toward a select
group of issues, this does not necessarily imply the news media “control” the political agenda. My tendency to describe the news media as an exogenous force is really only meant to describe the short term relationships observed during campaigns. To the extent campaign agendas move over the campaign, the news media appear to drive such changes.

While the news media are the dominant force driving changes and dynamics in campaign agendas, this does not mean they control or set the overall agenda. As I stated in Chapter 3, the news media are still responsive to incentives that direct their overall tendency to focus on some issues more than others. Indeed, the media’s dominance in shaping agenda dynamics is partly because newspeople anticipate what issues their readers will find interesting. I hope I provided enough evidence that the news media’s overall agenda is somewhat reflective of the public’s preexisting priorities and, thus, the customers they serve. These customer tastes certainly set the media’s overall tendencies to talk about certain issue (i.e., Tables 3.13 and 5.6), but these forces do not explain the abrupt swings in attention to particular issues that happen during campaigns. These news cycles are largely a function of journalists’ trained abilities to recognize newsworthy substance, issues for which they anticipate the public’s interest and care. As such, the media hold exogenous anticipations that are potentially wrong but are often foretelling of the public’s interest.

Furthermore, I also believe this reaction is partly a fault of popular conceptions of the news media. The news media are often described and conceptualized as some anthropomorphic being, a centralized and powerful institution. However, research within communications and economics makes clear that this is not the case. The news media are certainly a collective body, in that journalists are aware of the actions
and choices of their colleagues, but they do not march in lockstep with one another. It is best to conceptualize news media content as representing an aggregation of the opinions, norms, and market incentives of multiple news organizations, journalists, and editors.

I would in fact argue that the news media’s overall influence is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, individual news organizations cannot shape campaign agendas on their own. Communications research shows that state-owned and centrally operated news organizations hold less agenda-setting influence than their market-based counterparts (McCombs 2004). Likewise, people give much less credibility to news outlets that are believed to be driven by political incentives (The Pew Research Center For The People And The Press June 26, 2005). This is likely because the news media’s credibility is dependent on it following some sort of non-political objective. If people see that numerous news organizations, operating under a variety of market and political incentives, are equally focusing on an issue, then it sends a credible signal to the observer that such an issue is important. As such, the news media are powerful because they speak with multiple voices.

**Perspectives on Voter Behavior and Campaign Strategy**

Beyond our understanding of the news media’s influence on campaign agendas, this dissertation makes a number of valuable contributions to the public opinion and candidate strategy literature. For instance, the public opinion and voter behavior literatures often incorrectly assume that candidate choices and behavior occur in a vacuum. The simple observation that candidate rhetoric is associated with attitudinal
change has led many scholars to claim candidates willfully prime and frame issues in a manner beneficial to their political goals.

On the contrary, these sorts of simple associations are not enough to ascertain the practical extent of elite influence on the mass public. Such perspectives fail to acknowledge other information sources and the nature of information transferral processes within campaign environments (Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt 1998). Specific to this dissertation was a focus on the national news media and how their variety of influences brings about a profound change in a candidate’s rhetorical strategies. These insights were produced by analyzing candidate and news media influences on voter behavior in combination, as opposed to independently. This perspective was not only able to provide the first test clarifying what factors drive campaign agenda formation, but it was also able to explain why the news media’s issue coverage influences candidates to follow their agenda.

I believe this sort of perspective holds promise for future research efforts as well. One obvious extension is to the role of interest groups in campaigns. Interest groups can act as outside actors during campaigns, like the news media, but they also have issue-specific goals and political goals that make them different. Knowing how people and candidates might respond to interest group campaigning seems an important question to answer, especially given new campaign finance regulations.

Another extension would be into areas beyond the general election campaign. I am currently working on applying such a perspective within the context of the 2008 presidential primary. The project delineates the role of state and national media, candidates, and public opinion polls in producing primary momentum. This is a big improvement over efforts that simply examine what effect one factor has on the other.
It would also be interesting to examine whether the media and politicians exhibit a similar type of relationship agenda-setting relationship outside of a campaign context.

This perspective also makes the strong case for persuasion as a determining factor within campaign strategy and, potentially, voter behavior. The previous literature has often underemphasized the role of persuasion within politics. This is a point occasionally argued by prominent scholars (Bartels 1993; Zaller 1996; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), but such beliefs are rarely supported or pursued within empirical research. I argued persuasion might be found once one recognizes the vast heterogeneity in people’s interaction with politics. This resulted in the categorization and analysis of swing voters and their reaction to the campaign.

The substance of these results was very fruitful and indicate further use in other examinations. Future examinations of campaign effects would do well to recognize that not all voters are alike. Heterogeneity in behavioral reactions to the campaign could potentially explain why we often fail to find campaign effects. Likewise, heterogeneity in the composition of the electorate will also influence what strategies candidates follow. Persuasion or issue ownership motivations might be the more influential depending on the partisan composition of the electorate. For the case of the 2000 presidential election, swing voters were crucial to victory and highly sought after by candidates. However, if partisan composition is advantageous to one candidate, then that candidate may find an agenda-setting or issue-ownership strategy a more attractive route. In other instances, campaign mobilization might make an important contribution to the behavior of partisan stalwarts but not others. Negative advertising effects may have positive effects for turnout among some partisan voters but not among swing voters. This would mean its influence on turnout is dependent on the
composition of the electorate. I believe this approach of establishing the conditions under which campaign effects are and are not to be found is bound to strengthen our understanding of both political behavior and campaign effects.

Finally, beyond heterogeneity in voting behavior and campaign effects, I also examined the potential for heterogeneity in candidate strategies. The point was not to suggest that candidates have no agenda-setting abilities and incentives. Instead, I suggested and was able to show that these types of behaviors have unacknowledged costs in public opinion and voter behavior. This multi-faceted examination of when and where campaign strategies are beneficial might equally apply to other contexts of politician interaction with the media, like campaign mobilization strategies or games of setting expectations. While these suggestions may not be exact, I believe they demonstrate how the dissertation’s perspective potentially contributes to a variety of research questions.

**Perspectives on Representation**

Up to this point I have mostly refrained from discussing what these results have to say about the nature of representation in elections. I often avoid making broad claims about democracy based on a small selection of empirical tests, but at this point I find it worthwhile to make a couple observations.

First, the results in this dissertation suggest that campaign agendas often mean something. Scholars who have focused on candidate agenda-setting strategies often surmise that campaign agendas are mostly a by-product of candidate rhetorical strategies (e.g., Riker 1982). They argue that what we often term as political mandates
are really an artifact or construct of the politician, an agenda the candidate created based on what was optimal to his or her electoral chances.

However, I find the opposite. When a candidate talks about an issue, he or she often does so not of their own choosing. Campaign agendas instead come from the efforts of skilled political observers and their anticipation of and reaction to the public’s interests. The news media’s loud voice and strong relation with the public thus pushes candidates to play and win a campaign based on someone else’s agenda. While I was not able to exactly show how these news media agendas were created, I believe it is reasonable to claim they partially represent the public’s interest.

Secondly, this result also shows that public persuasion is an important condition for meaningful agendas and public deliberation. Some scholars have suggested that candidate abilities to prime issues and set voter agendas create disincentives for deliberation (Simon 2002). My findings here suggest otherwise. Since voters are susceptible to being persuaded, candidates often find much greater cause to discuss and debate each other on the same issues. While I do not seek to evaluate whether this deliberation is all that some claim it to be, I simply want to suggest that the public’s proclivity to be persuaded might have positive benefits for the conduct of democracy.

Of course, some might claim that persuasion also creates false representation. For instance, Jacobs and Shapiro claim such political tactics “simulate responsiveness by changing centrist opinion to support their positions” (2000, 44). But I would argue that, in a competitive context, such change is downright desirable and is nothing like “simulating” responsiveness. Campaigns give open-minded voters exposure to two different arguments of relatively equal strength. Public choices in such settings become informed and well-balanced. A similar point of view is found within the findings
and arguments of Dennis Chong and Jamie Druckman’s investigations of competitive framing. Indeed, I would argue political competition changes voter opinion into a more representative form, what some might term its latent and truer counterpart (Key 1961). If they change in a certain direction how is one to say it is not in a direction that people really wanted if they were fully informed.

Conclusion

Political behavior and campaign effects research is one of the older and more prominent literatures in political science, but it is also experiencing a breath of fresh air as data such as campaign advertisement and dynamic survey studies become improved and increasingly available. I hope I have partially lived up to the promise of these new research opportunities by providing a theoretically and methodologically compelling analysis of campaign agenda setting. This analysis offered groundbreaking tests of reciprocal agenda-setting effects, evidence of the role of campaign persuasion, and valid new insights into our understanding of both candidate, news media, and voter behavior. These insights also address and engage numerous questions that have been of central interest to the discipline.
Coding and Evaluation of Most Important Problem Measure

In line with past work examining voter agenda-setting effects (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 2000) voter agendas were captured with an item asking respondents what they thought the most important problem facing America was that day. When coding these open-ended responses, coding categories were made for any issue or concept that was mentioned by over a quarter of a percent within the entire sample. These were then classified in coding scheme that produced categories similar to those used within the Wisconsin Advertising Project data, but also including a number of broader categories such as “Decline of Morals” or “Breakdown of Family.” These broader categories could then be coupled with more specific issues if of interest but, for the purpose of this analysis, was restricted to those categories of clear reference to the issues coded within the other sources.

A minor issue within the NAES data involves the recording of individual responses. These were recorded as a string variable within the NAES data set but the recording of these responses was not consistent. Some interviewers typed what was essentially a verbatim record of what the respondent said. These records often include multiple
issues as the respondents often mentioned more than one issue. In contrast, other records within the survey include a single word to represent the respondent’s answer. As a result, a couple of decisions had to be made when classifying these responses. First, individual responses were often limited to the first issue mentioned since the question technically requested only one and since it is unclear whether further issue mentions being recorded were also a product of the interviewers’ tendencies. However, if the second issue recorded was a more specific instance of the broader issue first mentioned by the respondent, the more specific reference was considered a clarification and used for coding as well.

**Investigating Potential Bias in Most Important Problem Measure**

Although the issue evaluations within Table 3.1 mirror certain partisan stereotypes of the era such that the Republican candidate was preferred among those with economic and foreign affairs concerns, these results might still be surprising to some considering the track record of the incumbent administration. The Clinton administration oversaw a dramatic economic boom which, although the boom had past its peak, many still might expect to aid Gore’s ratings on the issue. However, this boom was during a period of divided government and, considering the what was perceived as a healthy state of the economy, those who still thought the economy was an important problem might be reflecting a unique class of economic concerns or even reflect partisan biases in evaluations of current conditions (Bartels 2002).

These results possibly mirror qualifications mentioned in the literature regarding the potential confounding relationship between an individual’s issue evaluation and issue priority within the most important problem question format (see Wlezien 2004).
Since the item asks for what one perceives as the most important problem in America those mentioning valence issues potentially exhibit unrepresentative bias towards having negative evaluations about the current state of such an issue. These negative evaluations might then also influence their ratings of the incumbent candidate on such an issue such that their preference for the two candidates are not an accurate indicator of every one else’s preference for the two candidates for that issue. Such concerns obviously need to be addressed before we use the candidate preference result as an accurate indicator of a candidate’s standing among the greater public for each issue.

Thankfully, for an issue like the economy a number of questions are available within the NAES during varying dates of the survey that allow one to investigate what the relationship is between one's economic evaluations and its most important problem rating. Here we seek to answer two questions in particular. First, does one's evaluation of the current state of an issue, like the economy, influence whether one rates it as an important problem? Second, do those who rate such an issue as an important problem then also rate the candidates differently on such an issue compared to other respondents? For instance, if one is more likely to rate the economy as in a bad state then is one also more likely to give Gore a poorer rating at handling the economy since he was part of the incumbent administration?

In regards to the first question, Table A.1 presents the results from two different logistic regressions. The first estimates a straightforward relationship as to whether increasing negative ratings of the economy made one more likely to rate it as an
important problem relative to all other issues. The second model estimates the same relationship but with the additional controls of one’s reported income level, a dummy variable as to whether one was unemployed or not, and one’s rating of one’s personal economic condition. Both economic evaluation measures are coded on a four-point scale (excellent, good, fair, and poor) such that increasing values mean a worse evaluation. Income is coded using an 9-point ordinal scale where increasing values indicate a higher household income level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1 Coefficient</th>
<th>Model 2 Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Economic Evaluations</td>
<td>0.331* (0.033)</td>
<td>0.356* (0.040)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Economic Evaluations</td>
<td>0.108* (0.045)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed?</td>
<td>−0.146 (0.237)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Level</td>
<td>0.089* (0.017)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>−4.089* (0.086)</td>
<td>−4.847* (0.176)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ n = 37,332 \quad \text{Log-likelihood} = -5603.614 \]

Source: NAES 2000 (April 4 - November 6, 2000). Logistic regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses (* indicates \( p \leq .05 \)). Dependent variable: Mentioning the Economy as Most Important Problem.

Table A.1: The Relationship Between Economic Evaluations and Rating the Economy as the Most Important Problem

The exact question wording for the independent variable is as follows: “How would you rate economic conditions in this country today? Would you say they are excellent, good, only fair or poor?”
As one can see, regardless as to whether one controls for other factors or not, as individual evaluations of the economy worsen the probability of that individual mentioning the economy as an important problem significantly increases. Based on Model 1 estimates, only 2.3% of individuals who rate the economy as excellent are likely to rate the economy as the most important problem compared to 5.9% of those who rate the economy as poor. Other significant individual-level factors include increasing income levels and worse ratings of one’s personal economic situation. Overall, both models support previous arguments in the literature that the most important problem item confounds an individual’s rating of an issue’s importance with an individual’s evaluation of its current condition. This is the result that motivates us to examine a potential partisan or candidate-evaluation bias among those who consider such an issue an important problem.

Even if individuals who consider the economy an important problem rate economic conditions as worse compared to others, we still might not find them representing a distinct partisan group or evaluating the candidates differently than others. Individuals who might perceive an issue as being in a worse state may simply possess different standards of evaluations than others. For instance, one might evaluate the economic conditions in 2000 as being poor, but still view them as relatively better than in 1992 when Clinton was elected. As such, individual tendencies to rate an issue as being in a lesser condition may reflect different standards of evaluation, not biased perceptions of its current condition or recent relative performance.

To examine whether those who mention an issue as being problematic evaluate the candidates on such an issue differently than others, Table A.2 compares individual evaluations of the candidates in terms of the economy by whether they viewed the
Who would do a better job of keeping the economy strong? | Economy not MIP | Economy MIP \\
--- | --- | --- \\
Bush | 43.06% | 39.76% \\
(6,203) | (196) \\
No Difference | 6.48% | 7.10% \\
(934) | (35) \\
Gore | 50.46% | 53.14% \\
(7,270) | (262) \\
Total | 100.00% | 100.00% \\
(14,407) | (493) \\
\chi^2 = 2.1650, p = .339 \\

Source: NAES 2000 (August 24 - November 6, 2000)

Table A.2: Differences in Evaluations of Candidates by Rating the Economy as Most Important Problem

economy as an important problem. As the Chi-Square test indicates, individuals who viewed the economy as an important problem showed no significant difference in their candidate evaluations. In fact, the sample results suggest individuals were slightly more likely to approve of Gore, the incumbent candidate, if one thought the economy was a problem. From this result, it appears that individuals who mention an issue as being a problem do not differ among others in their candidate evaluation for that issue. This suggests voter priorities are relatively absent direct partisan influences.

Finally, with these variables one can also verify the strong connection between respondents’ evaluation of the candidates for one’s most important problem and the

\[85\] Some might notice the overall result differs from the inference in Table 3.1 where Bush appeared to be the preferred candidate among economic issues. Note, however, that these results occur for much different time periods. As one can see in Table A.3, the issue evaluation result for this sample is accurately reflected in the overall candidate preference distribution.
candidate preference indicator used in Table 3.1. Once again, previous work has extensively shown that the more important an issue for an individual the stronger the relationship with one’s voting behavior (RePass 1971; Krosnick 1988) and here we seek to examine a quick replication of this relationship for the issue of the economy. Specifically, for those individuals who rated the economy as the most important problem how did their evaluation of the candidates on the economy relate to their overall candidate preference?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent’s Overall Candidate Preference</th>
<th>Better Job of Keeping the Economy Strong?</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>84.52%</td>
<td>54.55%</td>
<td>8.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(142)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>(21)</td>
<td>(175)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gore</td>
<td>15.48%</td>
<td>45.45%</td>
<td>91.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(213)</td>
<td>(249)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(168)</td>
<td>(22)</td>
<td>(234)</td>
<td>(424)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[\chi^2 = 231.9661, p = 0.00\]

Source: NAES 2000 (August 24 - November 6, 2000)

Table A.3: Candidate Preference by Candidate Ratings on the Economy for those rating the Economy as the Most Important Problem

As one can see, the results in Table A.3 show a very strong relationship between individual ratings of candidate abilities on the economy and one’s overall candidate preference. While 59 percent of those who thought the economy was the most important problem preferred Gore overall, this result shows dramatic changes if one has differing evaluations of the candidates on the economy. About 85 percent of these individuals who thought Bush would do a better job than Gore on the economy also
preferred Bush over Gore overall. The reverse relationship is even stronger as about 91 percent of the individuals who thought Gore would do better on the economy also showed an overall preference for Gore over Bush. Regardless of the causal direction of this relationship, it appears fairly clear that one’s preferred candidate for one’s most important issue and one’s overall candidate preference are very similar. It appears that we can be fairly confident in the candidate overall preference measure’s validity as an indicator the candidates’ relative standing or advantage for that issue.

**Collection and Coding of Local Newspaper Coverage**

As mentioned, using the newspaper databases available, newspapers with substantial levels of circulation were sought within each Senate campaign media market included within the advertising datasets. Newspapers were generally chosen based on what newspaper had the highest circulation level within the state add within the media market. The four exceptions of using within-state newspapers were the use of the *Washington Post*’s coverage of both the Maryland and Virginia races, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*’s coverage of the 2004 Illinois race, and Memphis’s *Commercial Appeal* coverage of the Mississippi race in 2000. These newspapers were deemed to have large enough readers within the corresponding state, and large enough advertisement activity, such that analysis was meaningful.

When a newspaper with the largest circulation within a media market was not available, a secondary newspaper was sought, conditional on that newspaper being of sufficient size and not being in the same city of the larger newspaper (to avoid papers with ideological appeal). This practice produced only one additional newspaper, the
Modesto Bee, while most other markets were then excluded for analysis. Once again, New Orleans was excluded from analysis due to Louisiana’s multiple-candidate field.

Tables A.4 and A.5 display all the newspapers included for analysis as well as the database used to access their content. For each newspaper, articles were included for analysis if they mentioned either of the two major-party candidates. Search terms for first and last name, popular variants of first and last names, and candidate titles were included. Candidate’s first and last name or title and last name were allowed to be separated by up to three additional words. Using this search terms, each article retrieved was then coded into an XML document using an automated Perl program.

After retrieval, each article was then read through by the author to identify any incorrect article retrievals and to code those articles explicitly referring to the relevant campaign. Articles from minor or non-final editions were deleted so content from only the final and primary distribution was included. Articles mentioning an individual with the same name as the candidate but who was not the candidate were deleted (i.e. Gene Kelly references in Texas). Secondly, a number of articles were also deleted since they did not represent a newspaper’s explicit choice to follow a candidate or campaign. These groups of articles were as follows: 1) letters to the editor were excluded: guest op-ed pieces were included if identified as such; 2) write to your Senator segments were excluded: those articles simply including a Senator’s local and Washington D.C. office address; 3) references to self-titled places or programs: all articles referencing buildings or programs were excluded (i.e. Robert Byrd High School) unless it was the announcement of the initiation of the building or program; and 4) articles referring to a candidate only in the photo captions were excluded. Although included within
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Media Market</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Database</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Feinstein-Campbell</td>
<td>Fresno</td>
<td>Fresno Bee</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>San Francisco Chronicle</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sacramento</td>
<td>Modesto Bee</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>San Diego Union Tribune</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td>Nelson-McCollum</td>
<td>Jacksonville</td>
<td>Florida Times-Union</td>
<td>DJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>Miami Herald</td>
<td>NB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tampa</td>
<td>St. Petersburg Times</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Palm Beach</td>
<td>Palm Beach Post</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA</td>
<td>Miller-Mattingly</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>Atlanta Journal Constitution</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN</td>
<td>Lugar-Johnson</td>
<td>Indianapolis</td>
<td>Indianapolis Star</td>
<td>NB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ME</td>
<td>Snowe-Lawrence</td>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>Portland Press Herald</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>Sarbanes-Rappaport</td>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<td>Boston</td>
<td>Boston Globe</td>
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<td>Detroit</td>
<td>Detroit Free Press</td>
<td>NB</td>
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<td>Grand Rapids</td>
<td>Grand Rapids Press</td>
<td>DJ</td>
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<td>Dayton-Grams</td>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>Minneapolis Star Tribune</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Lott-Brown</td>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>The Commercial Appeal</td>
<td>DJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>MO</td>
<td>Carnahan-Ashcroft</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<td>NE</td>
<td>Nelson-Stenberg</td>
<td>Omaha</td>
<td>Omaha World Herald</td>
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<td>Ensign-Bernstein</td>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>Las Vegas Review Journal</td>
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<td>Corzine-Franks</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Newark Star Ledger</td>
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<td>Bingaman-Redmond</td>
<td>Albuquerque</td>
<td>Albuquerque Journal</td>
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<td>Clinton-Lazio</td>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>Albany Times Union</td>
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<td>Buffalo News</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<td></td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>New York Times</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Syracuse</td>
<td>Post Standard</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<td>DeWine-Celeste</td>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>Cincinnati Enquirer</td>
<td>NB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>Plain Dealer</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>Columbus Dispatch</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dayton</td>
<td>Dayton Daily News</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Toledo</td>
<td>Toledo Blade</td>
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<td>Santorum-Klink</td>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Philadelphia Inquirer</td>
<td>NB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Harrisburg</td>
<td>Patriot News</td>
<td>DJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td>Chafee-Weygand</td>
<td>Providence</td>
<td>Providence Journal</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN</td>
<td>Frist-Clark</td>
<td>Knoxville</td>
<td>Knoxville News Sentinel</td>
<td>DJ</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>The Commercial Appeal</td>
<td>DJ</td>
</tr>
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<td>TX</td>
<td>Hutchison-Kelly</td>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>Austin American-Statesman</td>
<td>LN</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>Houston Chronicle</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>San Antonio Express News</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UT</td>
<td>Hatch-Howell</td>
<td>Salt Lake City</td>
<td>Salt Lake Tribune</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
<td>Allen-Robb</td>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>Richmond Times-Dispatch</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Norfolk</td>
<td>Virginian Pilot</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
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<td>Roanoke Times</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Cantwell-Gorton</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>Seattle Times</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spokane</td>
<td>Spokesman-Review</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV</td>
<td>Byrd-Gallaher</td>
<td>Charleston</td>
<td>Charleston Gazette</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI</td>
<td>Kohl-Gillespie</td>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DJ = Dow Jones (Factiva); LN = LexisNexis; NB = Newsbank

Table A.4: Newspapers included in 2000 Sample

250
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Media Market</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Database</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Shelby-Sowell</td>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>Birmingham News</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>Lincoln-Holt</td>
<td>Little Rock</td>
<td>Democrat-Gazette</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Boxer-Jones</td>
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DJ = Dow Jones (Factiva); LN = LexisNexis; NB = Newsbank

Table A.5: Newspapers included in 2004 Sample
the dataset, this paper’s analysis is limited to those articles explicitly referencing the Senate campaign.

As mentioned previously, to ensure accurate coding, issue content of an article was coded using a computer-aided human coding routine. Each article referring to the campaign was searched using a collection of search terms specific to the issue focus of the candidates’ advertisements. Each issue was given multiple search terms so as to cast a wide net. If a sentence matched any single search term for an issue then the sentence was displayed on a computer screen indicating to the author what issue was found and then asking for human coder approval. Upon reading each sentence, the author could then decide if the search term was used in the appropriate context and then input whether to mark that article as having discussed that issue.
APPENDIX B

METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS

Testing for Public Agenda Dynamics

As mentioned in Chapter 3 for each day \( t \) the number of individuals who mention an issue as important \( y_t \) within a survey with sample size \( n_t \) are specified as following a binomial distribution:

\[
y_t \sim Bin(x_t, n_t)
\]

\( x_t \) is then specified as representing the day-specific level of issue priority that is a combination of the underlying issue priority rating for that day \( \pi_t \) as well as systematic survey effect pertaining to the day of the week interviewed \( \delta_i \). This mode effect is modeled as a set of mutually exclusive dummy variables, \( j_{it} \), where, for example, \( j_{1t} \) equals one if one was interviewed on Monday such that \( \delta_1 \) captures any systematic differences common across Monday respondents. This results in the following:

\[
x_t = \pi_t + \sum_{i=1}^{7} \delta_i \ast j_{it}
\]

We then estimate whether the issue’s underlying daily importance rating, \( \pi_t \), shows any systematic dependence overtime by estimating the following transition model:

\[
\pi_t = \alpha + \beta \ast \pi_{t-1} + \epsilon_t, \text{ where } \epsilon_t \sim Norm(0, \sigma^2)
\]
A minor issue when estimating these sorts of models is the potential for a misspecified transition model. The underlying transition model may be best represented with a one and two-day lagged regressor instead of simply a one-day lag. Unfortunately, the complex identification restraints of the model essentially mandate the simpler functional form. Since there are two data-generating processes, a sampling process and a transition process, the underlying $\pi$ series is unobserved. Tests of more complex transition models suffer for extremely low power and high autocorrelation within parameter estimates. Given the goal here is to simply test for systematic time dependence and not the exact nature of this movement, the more efficient simple transition model was chosen for estimation.

To estimate the model using the Gibbs Sampler the following priors were set:

$$\alpha \sim Norm(p, 100), \text{ where } p_t = \frac{y_t}{n_t}$$

$$\beta \sim Norm(0, 100)$$

The underlying standard error for the transition model was constrained to be less than the standard deviation in the observed proportion series ($p_t$) with a flat prior within the viable range:

$$\sigma_\epsilon \sim Unif(0, s_p)$$

Day-specific survey effects were then specified as unlikely to be greater than two percent and, following Beck, Jackman and Rosenthal (2006), the average of the day-specific effects was set to zero such that each $\delta$ parameter represents the deviation from the overall mean.

$$\delta_i = \delta_i^* - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{7} \delta_i^*}{7}$$

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{7} \delta_i^*}{7} = 0$$
Finally, to initialize the estimation chain, semi-diffuse priors were set on the initial underlying value $\pi_0$ as follows:

$$\pi_0 \sim Norm(\bar{p}, 4\sigma^2)$$

Posterior estimates were generated after running 25,000 iterations from two chains. To avoid improper solutions and speed up estimation each $\pi$ was constrained to be greater than zero. For each chain, the first 5000 observations were discarded to allow for model convergence and then every 10th iteration was selected of the remaining 20,000 iterations to reduce autocorrelation within the MCMC samples. Summing over the two chains produced posterior estimates based on 4000 iterations.

Bayesian state space models within WinBUGS face the potential for poor mixing and posterior coverage by the Gibbs sampler. A strong indication of this problem is the high autocorrelation within the MCMC samples. However, in each case, convergence was quick, as indicated by the Gelman-Rubin statistic, and autocorrelation was not severe after taking only each 10th iteration for posterior estimates.

**BVAR Estimation Details**

Following Brandt and Freeman (2006), relatively diffuse Sims-Zha hyperparameter priors were set to represent prior beliefs of system dynamics. These priors are centered on each dependent variable series being an independent random walk. Estimates were based on the following hyperparameters: $\lambda_0 = .8$, $\lambda_1 = .5$, $\lambda_3 = 1$, $\lambda_4 = .5$, $\mu_5 = 0$, and $\mu_6 = 5$. These first two hyperparameters ($\lambda_0$ and $\lambda_1$) specify the random walk
prior as being very uncertain overall. The $\lambda_3$ parameter specifies the prior variance for each lag parameter decreases at a constant rate towards zero for each additional day. The $\lambda_4$ parameter specifies the tightness of the prior for the constant. The $\mu_5$ parameter specifies beliefs about each series being unit root, while $\mu_6$ describes one’s belief of how correlated or cointegrated the series were in the prior. Specifying $\mu_5$ greater than zero proved to place an inaccurate prior weight on persistence, especially within the news media and latent public opinion series.

A variety of procedures were used to select an appropriate lag length including model fit indices and classical lag length tests. Classical lag length tests for the uncensored model preferred a one or two day lag model. However, given the BVAR priors, a lag length of three was used since additional lags do not decrease model efficiency as drastically. Estimates using a greater or less number of lag lengths produce the same substantive conclusions.

Posterior estimates were based on 25,000 iterations for each of two MCMC chains. The first 5000 iterations were discarded as burn-in iterations and then each tenth iteration was included in the posterior sample to avoid possible autocorrelation in the Gibbs sampler and to make sure the Monte Carlo results represent a full sample of the posterior. This resulted in a combined posterior sample of 4000 parameter simulations which were then used for IRF analysis. Since these were estimated in WinBUGS, a prominent issue of these Bayesian state space models is the potential for poor mixing and posterior coverage of the Gibbs sampler. However, in each case, convergence was

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The specific WinBUGS code used for analysis was checked for accuracy by replicating results of an Sims-Zha BVAR model on uncensored data using Patrick Brandt’s MSBVAR package within R. The WinBUGS program estimates were essentially the same as they came within the Monte Carlo, or simulation, error rate.
quick as indicated by the Gelman-Rubin statistic and showed indications of adequate sampling of the posterior probabilities.

In order to identify each IRF, contemporaneous influences were structured with a Cholesky decomposition ordering represented by the column ordering in each figure. These orderings were chosen to reflect the nature of the observed data (polling data has no contemporaneous influence) and the direction of influence suggested by each issue’s parameter estimates. This meant specifying the news media as the “first mover” in each system, with Gore and Bush either second or third, and the public having no contemporaneous influence. Alternative orderings of the candidates do change results in certain cases, although these differences are not of clear substantive importance and fail to reflect the inferences from the lagged variable parameters.

For each IRF the effects of a standard error shock in each series is simulated for the next seven days across all series. The system-wide effect of a positive increase in each variable is presented down each column. Each shock represents a change in observed behavior, where the graphed responses show changes within the uncensored series. The dark line shows the day-to-day expected value of each series and the dashed lines represent the 90% Bayesian confidence intervals.

IRF Graphs
Figure B.1: Education IRF Results

Mean posterior impulse response functions for uncensored series displayed with 90% Bayesian Confidence Intervals. Each series shock is equal to one standard error in the uncensored series (News S.E. = .420, Bush S.E. = .081, Gore S.E. = .082, MIP S.E. = .009). Left-to-right column ordering reflects contemporaneous shock ordering.
Mean posterior Impulse Response Functions for uncensored series displayed with 90% Bayesian Confidence Intervals. Each series shock is equal to one standard error in the uncensored series (News S.E. = .490, Bush S.E. = .094, Gore S.E. = .100, MIP S.E. = .008). Left-to-right column ordering reflects contemporaneous shock ordering.

Figure B.2: Health Care IRF Results
Mean posterior Impulse Response Functions for uncensored series displayed with 90\% Bayesian Confidence Intervals. Each series shock is equal to one standard error in the uncensored series (News S.E. = .465, Bush S.E. = .110, Gore S.E. = .103, MIP S.E. = .004). Left-to-right column ordering reflects contemporaneous shock ordering.

Figure B.3: Prescription Drugs IRF Results
Mean posterior Impulse Response Functions for uncensored series displayed with 90% Bayesian Confidence Intervals. Each series shock is equal to one standard error in the uncensored series (News S.E. = .436, Bush S.E. = .097, Gore S.E. = .097, MIP S.E. = .004). Left-to-right column ordering reflects contemporaneous shock ordering.

Figure B.4: Social Security IRF Results
Mean posterior Impulse Response Functions for uncensored series displayed with 90% Bayesian Confidence Intervals. Each series shock is equal to one standard error in the uncensored series (News S.E. = .547, Bush S.E. = .184, Gore S.E. = .147, MIP S.E. = .004). Left-to-right column ordering reflects contemporaneous shock ordering.

Figure B.5: Taxes IRF Results
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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