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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Cognitive Engagement in Presidential Politics: What Americans Learn about
Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Challengers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

by

Matthew A. Childers

Committee in Charge:

Professor Samuel L. Popkin, Chair
Professor Gary C. Jacobson
Professor Craig R. McKenzie
Professor Michael Schudson
Professor Langche Zeng

2012

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Mick and Jody Childers. They supported me throughout college and graduate school and always encouraged me to follow the career path that I found most fulfilling. Whether it was the week in Washington, D.C. during high school or deciding on whether we could make it financially possible for me to attend the University of Chicago for college, my parents always saw it as a matter of how and not if.

They may not feel that they can always relate to what I am doing, but my parents gave me a better education than they ever realized. My parents allowed me to make my own mistakes and always taught me that every decision I made had real consequences. During the few times my head got bigger than it should have, they and my grandmother were there to remind me where I came from and I have never forgotten since. They gave me a core of working class values and ethics that have guided me throughout my life and I will continue to rely on them until I die.

I owe everything I have and will ever achieve to them for their love, their support, and their guidance.

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I owe many, many thanks to Gary Jacobson for all of his substantive feedback and practical advice throughout my tenure at UCSD. He was always happy to comment on my ideas, even the ones that required another additional serious brainstorming. Gary always gave me a thorough and practical response to every draft of every paper and always knew what approach would be well received among scholars and what would not.

Samuel Popkin closely oversaw my dissertation research and I will forever be in debt to him for all of his support. Thanks to Sam's dedication, this dissertation is substantially better than it would have been without him. He patiently read every draft of every chapter here and pushed me to clarify my thoughts and my writing. I am not aware of many other advisors who spend as much time on their students' work as he does.

Sam went above and beyond what most advisors do for their students throughout this process. I never had to worry about having an income each summer when summer TAs were scarce and in high demand. More importantly, he provided a lot of personal support during a number of difficult times while I was working on this dissertation. Unfortunately, my parents traded hospital visits on more than a few occasions throughout the past few years. Being 2000 miles away from home on a student's budget kept me from hopping on a plane when I wanted to be there and consequently it was often difficult to focus on my research. Sam was ever patient and gave me the time and space I needed to get a handle on things.

I also owe a special debt of gratitude to my friends at UCSD for all of their camaraderie and support. When life gets stressful, sometimes the best comfort comes from those who are struggling to get through it with you and especially when they can always keep you laughing. James Long, Danielle Jung, and Mike Binder never hesitated to laugh at me or with me (depending on the circumstance) but were always there no matter what. Poker nights with

Mike, Danielle, Sam Seljan, Ellen Moule, Saul Cunow, Kate Van Emrick, and our awesome host Ryan Cox were always memorable and allowed me a few hours to forget about research.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Cognitive Engagement in Presidential Politics: What Americans Learn about Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Challengers

by

Matthew A. Childers

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Samuel L. Popkin, Chair

Many scholars and media pundits alike bemoan Americans' political ignorance. Facing stiff competition for their viewers from cable television in the 1980s, the broadcast news networks increased their coverage of softer news topics. Consequently, some claim that the public is less politically engaged today than they were in the days of when the network news focused on public affairs.

Using cognitive measures of how Americans evaluate presidential candidates, I show that they are more engaged today than before the rise of cable television. The public has more reasons for supporting and opposing presidents when they run for reelection than they did four years before. They also learn more about a president's policies than his character. Perhaps more importantly, the public is learning as much about presidents and their policies in the cable era than in the years when broadcast news focused primarily on public affairs.

The cable era is not creating a class of political dropouts. Politically uninterested Americans are more likely to abandon the network news when they get access to cable. They are actually learning more about presidents and their policies in the cable era than in the days when the average household had fewer television channels.

Even though the public is more engaged about presidents today than in the past, they typically are not aware of vice presidents when it is their turn to run for president compared to incumbents and challengers. Consequently, Americans tend to evaluate VPs more in terms of their character than their policies, whereas incumbents are evaluated for their record. This evidence supports previous research that implies vice presidents do not get credit for the current administration's record.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On the *Daily Show* on June 11, 2008, Rick Shenkman argued that the American public is as much to blame for the nation's problems as the incompetent politicians they sent to Washington, D.C. He was on the show to promote his book (2008) and told Stewart that our inattentiveness to politics is why we were mired in two unpopular wars. The public supports unpopular policies like the war in Iraq because they do not keep themselves informed about major issues. Hence, 70% of the public thought Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks when he was not. "If we're gonna really have a democracy, the American people have to take responsibility for the messes that are happening." (The Daily Show with Jon Stewart 2008)

With another election season in full swing, it is common for the media to bemoan the electorate's ignorance. During George W. Bush's tenure, some journalists blamed Americans for their ignorance and supporting a war based on false premises. In the current cycle, amidst the 2011 congressional gridlock journalists blamed citizens for electing politicians who refuse to work together during a time when our government must tackle big problems.

On CNN's *The Situation Room* in April 2011, Jack Cafferty asked viewers to chime in on whether they thought citizens should have to pass the same test that immigrants do to become citizens. He was

referencing a March 2011 *Newsweek* survey that gave 1000 Americans the U.S. Naturalization test. The exam has questions about American history, government institutions, and other textbook civics questions. 38% of the sample failed by the government's standards. 73% could not say why the U.S. was in the Cold War, 44% could not define the Bill of Rights, and 6% could not correctly identify the date for Independence Day (Romano 2011).

Cafferty complained that Americans have no clue about what their government is really doing. They do not learn about the issues and consequently support bad policies. People think the government spends much more than it does on foreign aid and public broadcasting and support cutting them. However, they want to preserve entitlement programs that are pushing the government further and further into debt (CNN 2011).

Stories like these are just a sample of the many we see questioning Americans' political engagement and they raise serious doubts about whether Americans learn about their elected leaders and the issues. In this dissertation, I investigate how much Americans are engaged in presidential politics. How much do people learn about sitting presidents between elections? Do they learn about presidents' policies? Or, do they learn more about the president's character? If they do learn about presidents' policies, do they associate the vice president with what the president has done?

Many political knowledge studies paint a dreary picture and suggest that Americans do not learn very much. They support journalists' arguments

that voters are apathetic and know very little about government and its policies. If they are correct, people may not pick up very much about what goes on between campaigns.

1.1 The Disengaged American Public?

Survey research establishes that Americans do not know many facts about government and elected officials. Conducting the most exhaustive analysis of Americans' knowledge of government institutions and political leaders, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) conclude that only a small fraction of the public is reasonably well informed about politics. In a 2007 Pew survey asking Americans factual questions about government institutions, leaders, and current events, only 10% correctly answered 20 of the 23 questions and only 50% correctly answered 12 (Kohut, Morin, and Keeter 2007). Converse (1964) examined responses to the National Election Studies (NES) open-ended questions about candidates and parties to find that most people did not consistently articulate liberal or conservative answers and concluded that an overwhelming majority of Americans are politically ignorant.

To measure political knowledge using factual questions is to assume that memorizing facts measures cognitive political engagement. Zaller defines political awareness as, "the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics *and* understands what he or she has encountered." (1992, 21) Thus measuring someone's factual knowledge is the best way to measure how

much he or she has absorbed and understood about politics (1992, 335). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) argue that such knowledge is critical for citizens to be able to take advantage of opportunities for civic engagement and to make choices compatible with their political preferences.

Using these standards, one must conclude that Americans do not learn about their leaders or their policies. Zaller (1992) argues that many people pay such little attention to what is going on that they do not critically evaluate the political information they encounter in the news or elsewhere. Thus, they tend to accept whatever they hear.

1.2 Citizens Learn More than We Give them Credit For

Our factual knowledge measures hold citizens to unreasonably high standards. Schudson cautions us that we should not expect Americans to be civics experts because our federal system is the world's most complex system of government with elections at many different levels and at many different times (Schudson 2000). Jurisdictions often overlap between federal and state agencies and people may find it difficult to know who is responsible. "Ask the next political science Ph.D. you meet to explain what government agencies at what level-federal, state, county, or city-take responsibility for the homeless. Or whom he or she voted for in the last election for municipal judge. The answers might make Jay Leno's victims seem less ridiculous." (Schudson 2000, 18)

To conclude that someone is not learning about politics because they do not know details about public offices or the legislative process underestimates how much people actually learn. It also ignores the way people process information and that they know more than they can articulate at a specific point in time. The average American may only care about and develop expertise in one or two issue areas.

As Downs (1957) argued long ago, it is rational for most people to remain politically ignorant. The conscious part of our brains, our short-term memory, has a limited capacity (Hastie 1986). We cannot focus on many things at once and have to prioritize among the many things demanding our attention.

Most people use heuristics and make reasoned choices anyway. They can infer a lot about what a candidate might stand for from knowing the candidate's party ID, career background, or which other politicians or groups have endorsed them (Lupia 1994; Popkin 1994). Most of the time people can use shortcuts and vote the way they would have if they had more information (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). However, reliance on heuristics does not mean that people do not learn a lot about politics.

We process more information than we remember and can articulate to someone else. Our attitude towards a candidate or on an issue is a weighted average of previous impressions. When we get new information on a candidate, for example, we judge it against our current impression, update

our attitude, and forget most of the details (Lodge and Stroh 1993; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). This explains why we may enjoy a book or a movie but have difficulty articulating why in great detail (Schwarz and Bohner 2001).

People can also know a lot about one or two issues and still be considered ignorant of many others. In the same article he labeled most of the electorate as politically ignorant, Converse (Converse 1964) acknowledged that people can be grouped into issue publics: groups of people who care about an issue very much and pay attention to current events related to it. Gershkoff (2006) finds that 85% of Americans care about at least one issue.¹ However, 22% of the population only care about one, 23% care about two, and 40% care about three or more. She also shows that people in an issue public are more knowledgeable about facts and details about that issue than about matters surrounding others.

Cognitive research establishes that people learn about politics without memorizing all of the details. Presidential campaigns understand this and craft their messages and advertising accordingly. They provide the electorate with cues in advertising, debates, and speeches that help citizens learn about candidates and their policies.

¹ She codes the NES open-ended questions about the candidates and parties, as well as responses to the most important problem into issue categories. Gershkoff considers one to be in an issue public if they mention that issue at least once in their answers.

1.3 Presidential Campaigns Engage the Electorate

Campaigns play a significant role in informing citizens about candidates and their policies. Since most people do not keep a close watch on government, campaigns work to clarify the differences between opposing candidates. They pack ads with symbols to connect issues to candidates and to emphasize the consequences of what a vote for them will do versus a vote for the opposition (Popkin 1994).

The more campaigns focus on an issue the electorate becomes less likely to misperceive it. In their study of the 1940 presidential campaign, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and Mcphee demonstrate that as their exposure to campaign communications on issues increased, citizens of Elmira, NY were much more likely to accurately comprehend the presidential candidates' platforms (1954, 228-229). In the 2008 election, more people in the battleground states learned about the presidential candidates' issue positions over the campaign compared to people in the rest of the country (Jackman and Vavreck 2009).

Campaign intensity stimulates the electorate to become more aware of candidates and their policies. In the 2000 election, as voters' exposure to campaign advertising increased, they articulated more reasons for liking and disliking Gore and Bush (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004). Wolak (2006) shows similar results from pooling advertising and NES data together

from the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections. Exposure to advertising also can lead citizens to be more aware of the candidates' policies. Again, in the 2000 election, as the number of ads in a television market increased, voters had more considerations of the presidential candidates' policies (Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen 2007).

If campaigns "go negative," the public becomes much more likely to be engaged in the election. During experiments where subjects watched campaign advertising, those who watched ads that had tense background music were more interested in learning more about the ads' subjects than subjects who watched the same ad with uplifting music (Brader 2005). When candidates are uncivil in attacking their opponents, citizens show more interest in the campaign than when candidates make positive appeals (Brooks and Geer 2007). Tracking a Virginia residents' exposure to advertising during the state's 1997 gubernatorial campaign in a panel study, Freedman and Goldstein (1999) show that the number of negative ads positively affected turnout.

1.4 What Do Americans Learn Between Campaigns?

While these studies establish that citizens learn about presidential candidates during campaigns, it is less clear what people learn between them. I investigate this puzzle by investigating the patterns in what people learn

about presidents and vice presidents. By examining Americans' engagement in presidential politics, we have a reasonable measure for what Americans learn about public affairs between election years.

The president is the focal point of national politics. His chief roles as commander-in-chief, diplomat-in-chief, and chief executive make him the most prominent member of our government. When Americans attribute responsibility for national conditions they are more likely to place credit or blame squarely on the White House. It is easier to determine the president's role in national policies than one of the 535 members of Congress or anyone in the massive federal bureaucracy.

In this dissertation, I study the patterns of what people learn about incumbent presidents, vice presidents, and challengers. How much do people learn about sitting presidents? What do they learn while he is in office? How much and what do they learn about vice presidents? Are people more familiar with vice presidents and their policies in successor elections? Or, are they equally as familiar with challengers? Do people evaluate vice presidents like they evaluate incumbents or more like challengers?

National television news programs are Americans' primary sources for political information, but the news has changed over time. In the 1950s and 1960s, the network evening news focused on covering public affairs, current events, and political leaders. Today a much greater percentage of its content is dedicated to stories about the personal side of war and economic recession,

consumer products, and celebrities. We are exposed to stories about a president's personal failings (or a candidate's) to a much greater extent in recent years than fifty years ago.

The changes in news content may have noticeable effects on what people are learning over time. I thus compare learning across presidents and across vice presidents' candidacies (as their party's presidential nominee). Do people learn more or less about recent presidents than they did about Eisenhower or Nixon? Has the content of what people learn changed over time? Are Americans getting more or less policy content today than they did when Eisenhower was president?

I measure the changes in Americans' engagement between campaigns primarily using data from the NES open-ended likes and dislikes about presidential candidates. These data are cognitive measures that give us insight into what political information Americans absorb about presidents and their vice presidents. As will be explained in the coming chapters and in Appendix A, they are preferable to factual knowledge questions for a number of reasons.

1.5 Chapters 2-4

The next chapter examines what people learn about presidents between elections and how this varies over time. How much more familiar are people with the president when he runs for reelection compared to four years

earlier? Do they learn more about his policies or his character? Do they learn less over time as the network news has gone from hard to softer news? Over time are Americans learning more or less about presidents' policies? Or, do they learn more about character over time? The theories about political knowledge, changes in media, and attribution suggest different possibilities with respect to how much and what Americans learn about presidents.

I compare learning across seven presidents who ran for reelection in the NES time series from 1952-2004: Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush. Learning is measured using changes in Americans' considerations of a president from his first election to his reelection.

Chapter 3 extends the study conducted in Chapter 2 to examine whether the learning we observe over time is more skewed to people who are interested in politics. The network news faced pressure to change their content from the rise of cable television in the 1980s. Prior (2007) argues that many Americans who preferred entertainment abandoned the news when they first received access to cable television. Consequently, they were less politically informed after leaving the news than they were before.

Americans who quit watching the network news over time were much less likely to be politically interested (Prior 2007). So, I examine whether politically uninterested Americans are learning less about presidents overall during the cable era compared to the years before. I also measure whether

they are learning less about policies and more about character over the same period. Finally, I investigate whether the gap in awareness of the president between interested and uninterested Americans grows larger over time.

In *Chapter 4* I turn my focus on what Americans know about vice presidents versus incumbents and challengers. Do VPs get credit for what the president has accomplished when they finally run for president?

Retrospective voting theory posits that people evaluate parties, that their assessment of an incumbent president will determine their support of their successor. However, vice presidents face many hurdles in connecting with voters and may not have a leg up on challengers going into the succession election. If this is so, we may observe significant differences in peoples' awareness of successors and incumbents.

I investigate Americans' awareness of vice presidents and their policies compared to incumbents. The public is likely to know less about a vice president's policies, but it is an open question as to whether the differences are great or negligible. Do VPs resemble incumbents or are they unfamiliar to the electorate? If the latter is true, people may evaluate them differently than incumbents and retrospective evaluations vary across *candidates* within a party, not just across parties.

1.6 Academic Contributions

This dissertation contributes to the literature on how much Americans are engaged in politics. It shows us what Americans learn about presidents and vice presidents between campaigns. By understanding what people pick up about presidents between campaigns, it can give us insight what people will focus on during an incumbent's reelection.

In the following chapters, I test claims about the effects changes in news have had on peoples' political engagement. If most people actually learn about more about a president's policies than this character, it refutes claims that softer news is dumbing us down. If they learn more about character, it lends credence to some scholars' and media pundits' claims about a decline in civic engagement.

My research here is also part of the growing community of scholars who are using cognitive measures to study what people learn about politics instead of factual questions. Most studies employ batteries of factual knowledge questions and they only indirectly measure what people think about in order to make reasoned choices. The NES likes and dislikes provide scholars with the closest measures of what issues people used to evaluate candidates and parties. They also provide a consistent measure over the whole NES time series since 1952.

The chapter on vice presidents is one of the few studies that attempts to measure peoples' awareness of vice presidents and their policies. Since Gore's loss in 2000, a growing number of scholars have shown that peoples' evaluations of the president are much weaker determinants of their votes in successor elections compared to those with incumbents. However, the literature is unclear about what people know about vice presidents and how people evaluate them.

Chapter 2: Learning About Presidents in the Cable Era

Campaigns affect what we know and the way people evaluate presidential candidates. When candidates communicate on issues, voters are less likely to misperceive their positions (Popkin 1994). As campaigns move from the primaries to the general election, more people learn enough to place the candidates on issue scales (Jackman and Vavreck 2009; Vavreck 2009). Also, as people are exposed to more advertising, they state more reasons for liking and disliking candidates (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Wolak 2006). This leaves unanswered what happens between campaigns, what people learn about presidents while they are in office.

Multiple threads in the literature suggest that most people will not learn very much presidents or their policies. Only a small minority of Americans shows an appreciable level of factual knowledge of politicians and government institutions (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Kohut, Morin, and Keeter 2007). Converse (2000) argues that this signifies that most Americans do not know about issues and other important matters the need to make reasoned choices.

Over time, the electorate may also be learning less about presidents and their policies and more about their character because of changes in news content and the media industry. The national television news programs have increased the number of “softer” news stories since the 1960s (Hamilton 2004).

Their ratings were cut in half over the next twenty years as cable television proliferated across American markets (Prior 2007).

In this chapter, I seek to answer the following questions.

How much do people's evaluations of an incumbent president differ from their evaluations four years earlier when he was a challenger?

Do people learn more about his policies or his personality and character?

How is the cable era different? Has the rise of soft news changed the balance between policy and character in peoples' considerations of the president? Are they more or less policy-skewed in recent elections compared to those decades ago?

Since 1952 the NES has asked Americans to give their reasons for supporting or opposing seven presidents from their initial and reelection campaigns. With these data, I show that citizens learn about presidents and their policies during a term. People absorb more about the administration's policies than the chief executive's character. Despite the fact that the national news changed its content and its audience shrank during cable's rise, people are learning more about policies today than they were during the Eisenhower administration.

2.1 Political Learning, Engagement, and Changes in Media

Political science provides conflicting expectations about how much and what most people learn about presidents between campaigns. Studies assessing political knowledge suggest that people do not learn a whole lot. Nor, do they learn about the issues. Studies of changes in the news media suggest that people may be learning less about policies over time. However, some research on cognitive engagement implies that Americans may be learning more about policies now than they were decades ago.

It is clear that Americans are largely ignorant about their politicians and how government works. Somin summarizes the literature well by asserting that most people have a weak grasp on policy, are unfamiliar with the basic structure and functions of government, and cannot accurately assign credit and blame for what politicians actually do (1998). Consequently, Americans may not be learning enough about public affairs to make reasoned choices at the ballot box (Converse 1964; Converse 2000; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Zaller concludes that most Americans do not pay enough attention to public affairs to critically evaluate what they get from the news (Zaller 1992).

The evolution of the television news from its traditional focus on public affairs coverage to softer content may be causing people to learn even less about issues than they had in the past. Television news, Americans' primary news source since the late 1960s (Kohut, Morin, and Keeter 2007; Mayer

1993), has gradually shifted to consumer-oriented and softer news content with fewer “hard news” stories since the late 1960s (Hamilton 2004). In the days of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, news anchors “offered relatively unbiased accounts of information that their respective news organizations believed the public needed to know.” (Koppel 2010)

A driving force behind the changing content of network news has been the competition for audiences between news programs and competing entertainment available at the same time on cable television. Since cable television began to grow in the 1970s, the number of available television channels per media market has increased from 7 in 1970 to over 117 in 2009 (Figure 2.1) (Media Dynamics 2009). Around the same time, ratings for the television news suffered a long and steady decline as many Americans quit watching it (Figure 2.2). Significant numbers of Americans also quit watching the State of the Union Address, the president’s major opportunity to inform Americans about his agenda in the coming year (Baum and Kernell 1999).

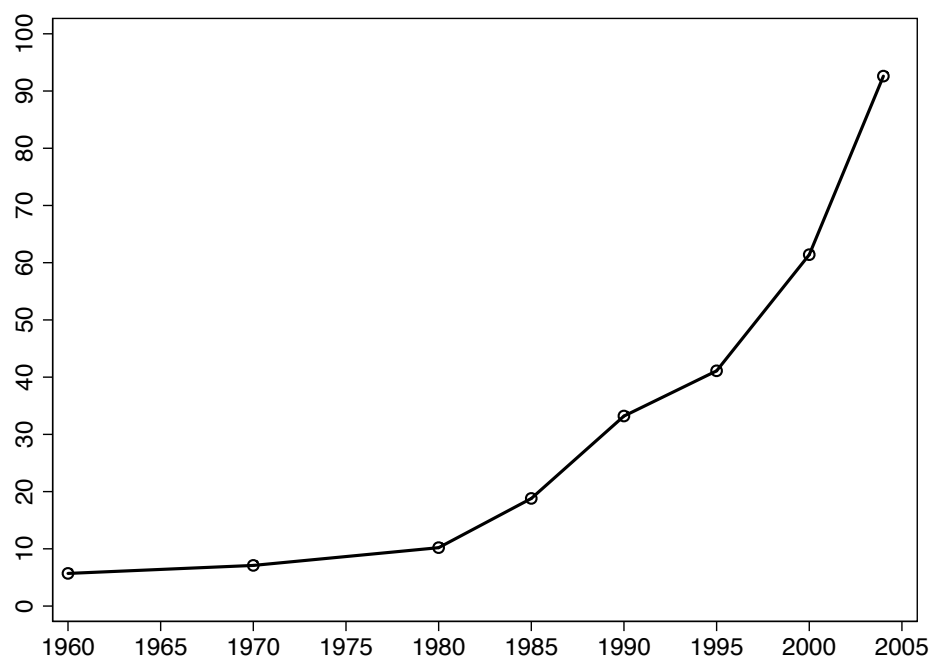


Figure 2.1: Average Number of Channels Available to U.S. Households

Source: 1960-1980 data are from TV Dimensions 2009 (2009) and 1985-2004 are from (Nielsen.com 2007).

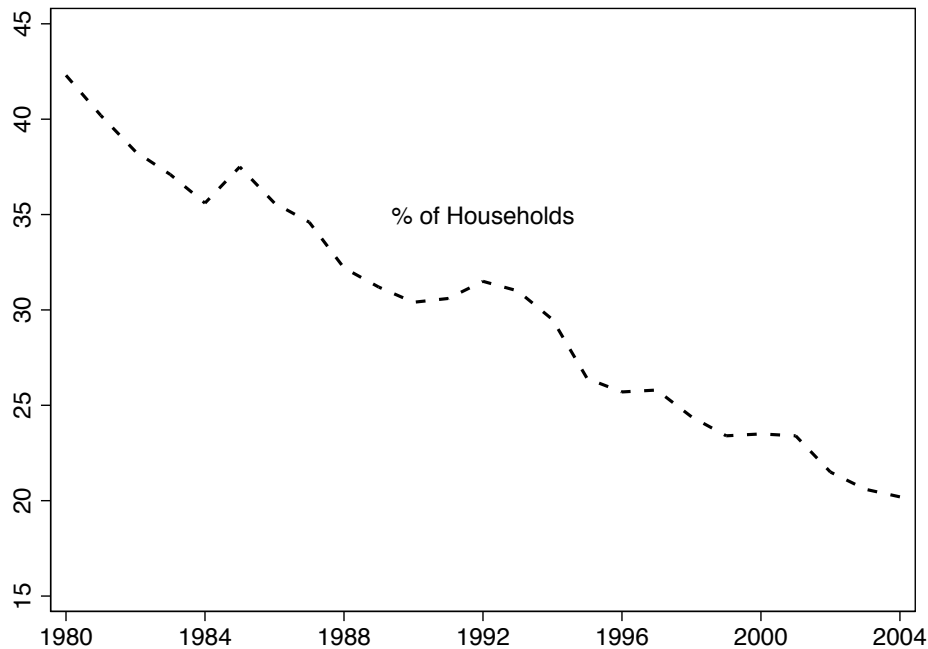


Figure 2.2: Decline in Ratings for the Network Evening News

Note: Combined ratings for ABC, CBS, and NBC national evening news. Source: (Guskin, Rosenstiel, and Moore 2011).

Networks began to pursue softer programs in the late 1960s, but their ratings fell drastically after 1980, giving them major incentives to change their content (Hamilton 2004). They wanted to increase their number of younger viewers (especially young women) because they could charge a premium for advertising time. The big three networks ran more stories that focused on consumer products and the human-interest angles of economic downturns and wars.² In 1980, roughly two-thirds of network news stories were about public policy, but by 2000 only half of their stories covered policy (Patterson

² After 1984, the FCC dropped their public service requirement for license renewal and that allowed the networks to dedicate more of their stories to issues without a clear public policy component.

2000). As networks were including fewer stories related to public policy, the stories they were including had a higher proportion of negative stories about presidential candidates.

Patterson argued that less political news stories and a more negative tone to the remaining stories together lowered interest in and attentiveness to politics. *If correct, a consequence of his argument linking the quantity — and tone — of hard news with the level of interest, is that people will be less aware of issues and more concerned with personalities instead.* Even if he has overstated the effects of the changes in content on peoples' political interest, people who continued to follow the news may have learned less about policies because they were getting less political content.

The “mass exodus” from the network news may also have caused Americans to be less politically knowledgeable over time. Prior (2007) concluded that people who chose to avoid the news when cable television entered the scene became less informed about politics. In a survey experiment over a two-year period, subjects were randomly assigned to two conditions. The treatment group was given a WebTV with cable television and the control group was given WebTV with only the broadcast networks and PBS. Subjects in the treatment group were less politically informed a year after the experiment began.

2.2 Is Softer News Positive for Engagement?

Patterson and Prior's theories are ones about the network news being agenda setters and both predict that citizens will have less issue awareness over time. They assume that the network news is Americans' only information source and if people are getting less issue content they will be less familiar with politicians' policies. From Patterson we should assume that people are picking up more about character over time because the news has more about politicians' personal lives today than in the past. Prior's work predicts the same outcome but contends that it is because more people are watching entertainment over time instead of the news.

Maybe today's news engages today's news audience as well or better than the "golden age" content engaged viewers then. The scholars arguing that people are less politically knowledgeable and more focused on candidate character explain the change in one of two ways. Either they are watching softer, more personalistic network news or ignoring the news entirely for entertainment. Maybe the current audience is learning as much or more from softer, personalistic news despite the diminished appeal of the network shows to academic critics.

Some people cannot follow the traditional network news format without difficulty, particularly for complex topics such as Wall Street bailouts, Fannie Mae or aid to Pakistan. In the traditional format, as Graber points out, many

stories do not provide contextual information necessary to clarify a story's meaning or relevance (Graber 2001). For example, journalists often refer to congressional legislation by their names like Dodd-Frank without giving additional information that can help viewers understand the story. If the journalist also briefly explains that Dodd-Frank was supposed to prevent faulty investment practices, people may be able to comprehend the story more easily.

There are ways people might learn more in today's media environment than in the "golden age." Consumer-oriented news stories and issue coverage with a human-interest angle conceivably might pique politically uninterested Americans' interest. Advertisers are more interested in reaching younger audiences and single mothers (Hamilton 2004), so in a competitive environment the news is aimed at these groups, not at the median voter. Viewers in these groups may be exposed to "hard news" stories they that they would not have otherwise seen when the news was primarily focused on news "you should use."

It is also possible that many people did not learn as much from the "straight news" format held in high esteem as from some of today's alternatives. A person fluent in Spanish but limited in English would most likely learn more about politics from *Telemundo's* news than from PBS's *Newshour*. Is it not also possible that some people might learn more from formats with a less complex vocabulary and less intricate analyses?

Individuals can have more difficulty learning from a political debate than from listening to candidates give a speech one after another (Rahn, Aldrich, and Borgida 1994).

Soft news programs, in fact, do inform their typical viewers. They feature the human-interest angle of salient issues like war and terrorism and supply connections sometimes missing on other programs. Baum (2003) shows that people who watch soft news programs about foreign policy crises become more attentive to them. Furthermore, politically uninterested Americans are much more likely to rally around the president in wartime than political junkies.

Presidential candidates have adapted to the changing media environment and have appeared on “infotainment” shows like *Oprah* and *The Tonight Show* to connect with casually interested Americans. These shows provide an extended and informal format that allows candidates to talk at greater length than allowed by standard campaign coverage (Baum 2005). Candidates’ appearances on these shows increased their support among initially opposed partisans.

Scandalous news may actually help people learn about issues, not keep them from doing so. Miller (2010) conducted experiments where subjects read news articles about hypothetical candidates and their issue positions over a number of days. Those in the treatment group read one article revealing that one of the candidates had an extra-marital affair. Control

group subjects only read stories about the candidates' policy positions. Days after reading the last article, subjects answered an online questionnaire where they were asked to recall the candidates' issue positions. Those who read about the scandal remembered more about the candidates' platforms than subjects who did not.

Cynics who argue that changing media adversely effects Americans' political engagement ignore the possibility that people care about some issues more than others. We do not pay attention to issues that we do not care about, but do pay attention to news about issues that matter to us. Most of the electorate cares about at least one political issue and they are much more knowledgeable about matters relating to what they care about than others (Gershkoff 2006).

2.3 Attribution Theory and Political Context

The cynics also discount the relevance of political context and our likelihood of using it to learn about elected officials' behavior. We may still make inferences about a president's policies despite getting less coverage of him on the national news. If we pay enough attention to what he does, we may still absorb enough information about him to make attributions about his policies instead of his personality.

Fenno once predicted that citizens will become more likely to assess a candidate's political character the more they observed them on the campaign

trail. He said, "...it seems likely that repeated campaign interaction between politicians and constituents increases the likelihood that judgments about political character will gain in importance." (Fenno 1996, 326) If we think of a president's political character in terms of their "conduct judged in the specific context of political roles, institutions, issues, and responsibilities," (Galston 2001, 223) judgments about their political character are actually judgments about their policies.

Fenno's hypothesis is supported when citizens pay attention to what politicians are doing. When we evaluate another person's actions, we try to determine whether their behavior is caused by the person's traits or their situation (Gilbert 2002). In doing so, we too often tend to blame their character *when their behavior can be entirely explained by the situation they were in* (Ross and Anderson 1982). This bias is known by two names: the *fundamental attribution error* (FAO) and more recently the *correspondence bias* (Gilbert and Malone 1995).³

The nature of the attribution process makes people easily prone to make character inferences when the available contextual information would lead us to make a situational attribution. Gilbert and Malone (1995) posit that we first try to understand what we just witnessed, make quick judgments about what we expected the actor to do in that kind of situation, and then make an

³ For thorough, yet concise synthesis of research on the fundamental attribution error, see Gilbert and Malone (1995).

inference about why they behaved like they did. Our intuitive process automatically makes a dispositional inference about the actor, but we update that inference through the deliberative process (akin to what Kahneman (2003) and others call the dual-processes of reasoning). During the deliberative process, observers consider whether the actor's behavior conformed to what they expected the actor to do.⁴ If the actor did what was expected of them, observers attribute their behavior to the situation. If not, they consider it a flaw and conclude the actor's behavior was caused by their dispositions.

Work on dual-processing models has shown that if people face competing demands for their attention, they are unable to update their intuitive judgments (Kahneman 2003; Kahneman and Frederick 2002). However, Gilbert (2002) demonstrated that cognitively busy people pick up situational cues and can correct their initial inferences at a later time when they have fewer demands for their attention. Thus, people must be willing and able to devote cognitive effort to evaluating the actor's behavior at some point in order avoid making a biased inference.

Our expectations for what another person should do in a given context depend on how familiar we are with their past behavior across different situations. We absorb information on how the other person has acted in similar situations as well as how others have behaved in the same situation

⁴ See Kahneman's (2003) discussion of dual-processing models of reasoning and judgmental biases.

(Ross and Nisbett 1991). As observers, if we are not familiar with the actor, we tend to rely on the latter, but often our beliefs about what others would do is really about how we would have behaved ourselves (false consensus bias) (Jones and Nisbett 1972).

As we accumulate knowledge of an actor's behavior over different situations, we become better at being able to differentiate their actions across different incidents. For example, my friend disliked the new trendy beer bar in the neighborhood after we tried it recently. Others thought he was moody since he is a professed beer fan and this bar offered a wide variety of ales, but they had not been to many bars with him before. On the other hand, I have and know that he prefers to go to pubs that offer wide selections of hoppy beers. This particular bar did not. I concluded that he disliked this particular bar because of their tap list and not because he was having a bad day. My prior interactions with him allowed me to form more realistic expectations for his reaction than our other friends and were more likely to infer his behavior was situational and not dispositional (this is consistent with Kelley's (1973) "covariation principle.")

The president is the most prominent figure in government and most people will get a lot of exposure to him over four years. If they deliberate on his actions at some point, the average American should have more considerations of him when he runs for reelection than the previous one. Burden and Hillygus (2009, Table 1) show that in presidential reelection years,

Americans articulate more reasons for supporting and opposing incumbents than challengers. They do not track the changes in peoples' total considerations of a president from the year he is first election to the year he runs for reelection.

They do show that some people learn enough about the president between elections to form a general impression of him. They measure this by showing the population's decline in uncertainty over the president between his first election and reelection. Uncertainty is defined as the percentage of the electorate who does not rate the president on a feeling thermometer scale or rate him as neutral (50 out of 100). For every president who ran for reelection since Eisenhower, this rate declines significantly over four years (Burden and Hillygus 2009, Figure 1)

Even if people do pay attention and form an impression or develop more considerations, it remains an open question as to whether people are learning about his policies or his character over that timespan.

If people are not devoting their attention to assessing the president's performance, they are likely to make as many (and possibly more) character-based attributions of the president during his reelection campaign relative to their assessments four years prior. Someone who had the news on while cooking dinner would have been less likely to conclude that Obama dropped the public option because members of his own party opposed it and more likely to conclude that he is not trustworthy (for not delivering on a campaign

promise). If that same person was not distracted, they may have caught the details and more likely to conclude that he had no choice but to take the public option off of the table.

We may also find that, despite some claims that most Americans are not civically or politically engaged, that people indeed are paying enough attention to the president to be able to recognize the different contexts he faces in office and make policy inferences instead of character ones. Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen (2007) provide some supporting evidence when they show that the average American had twice more policy considerations of *both* presidential candidates than they did in 1952. People also had fewer character considerations of the candidates over time.

2.4 Questions

As has been discussed, the literature provides conflicting expectations for what people are learning about the president while he's in office and whether it is changing over time. In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1) Does the population learn about the president over a term of office?
- 2) Do Americans learn more about the president's policies over a term or more about his character?
- 3) From the 1950s through now, does the balance between policies and character in Americans' judgments become more or less skewed towards policy?

2.5 Data

I examine how much and what people learn about incumbent presidents by studying their evaluations of seven presidents who ran for reelection since 1952: Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush. Learning is measured using responses to the NES open-ended “likes” and “dislikes” questions about the presidential candidates. In every presidential election year survey since 1952, the NES asks respondents to offer reasons that may make them want to vote for or against each one.⁵ With the exception of 1972, interviewers record up to five responses to each question.⁶

The NES likes and dislikes measure peoples’ cognitive responses to being prompted to think about why may support and why they may oppose presidential candidates. Cognitive responses are products of “information-processing and –structuring activity and thus consist of responses such as recognition, associations, elaborations, ideas, and images.” (Cacioppo,

⁵ For example: “Is there anything in particular about [DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE] that might make you want to vote for him? What was that? Anything else [that you liked about this candidate]?” See the codebook entries for vcf0475, vcf0476a, vcf0481, vcf0482a, vcf0487, vcf0488a, vcf0493, and vcf0494a in the ANES cumulative data file codebook for more information (Sapiro 2007).

⁶ In the 1972 survey, interviewers recorded only three responses. The total number of considerations, as well as number of policy and character considerations for 1972 is adjusted to account for the fact that in this year the NES only recorded a maximum of three rather than five mentions for each of the candidates. Based on all of the other elections, the mean number of considerations of Republican candidates was 1.14 times the mean number using only the first three responses. I thus multiplied the considerations figures for them by 1.14 in 1972.

Harkins, and Petty 1981, 37) The likes and dislikes therefore offer us a window into the various things someone thought about as they evaluated a candidate.

I measure learning by comparing the difference in the average American's number of considerations about the president between his first election and his reelection campaign. Following Kam and Utych's (2011) lead, I argue that people who devote more cognitive effort to evaluating the president will offer more comments about him. Thus, if someone has more considerations of the president in his reelection campaign, this shows that they devoted cognitive effort to evaluating him since he was first elected (Cacioppo, Harkins, and Petty 1981). However, this is not enough to show how peoples' thinking evolves over time.

Peoples' levels of policy and character learning are calculated along the same lines. I compare the change in the number of one's policy and character considerations over a term. Specifically, this entails comparing the number of policy-related and character-related likes *and* dislikes in the president's reelection year to the number of responses in his previous election.

Policy considerations capture peoples' evaluations of his issue positions as well as their evaluations of specific aspects of his performance. I define a policy consideration as any response to the presidential candidate likes and dislikes questions related to foreign and domestic policies, how he manages government, his ideology, and finally his connections to major

population groups (i.e. seniors, African-Americans, or veterans, among others). Character responses include responses about his personality, traits, and leadership abilities.

Cognitive responses are preferable to factual knowledge questions for measuring what people learn about politics. Factual knowledge questions can show scholars what facts one may know, but they do not measure how someone has used them (Lupia 2006). What is more important is whether they know what the potential consequences are in major political issues and what political solutions are available (Graber 2010, 175). Cognitive measures give us insight into how someone has applied political information in forming choices and therefore come closer to measuring a citizen's political competence. For a more complete discussion of the relative utility of the NES open-ended measures, please see Appendix A.

2.6 Findings

People learn about presidents while they are governing. As Figure 2.3 shows, in six of the seven cases, people articulate more reasons for liking and disliking the president overall in his reelection year compared to the previous election. Their gains ranged from large to small across presidents.

The era of softer and more consumer-oriented news does not appear to be inhibiting Americans' abilities to learn about presidents. On average, people increased their comments about the president by .17 comments

between elections for the three presidents in office before 1980 whereas they averaged an increase of .54 considerations of presidents in the cable years (Reagan-George W. Bush). The population is learning three times as much about presidents in the years where their entertainment options are growing substantially compared to the days when they only had a few television channels.

The three administrations in which Americans had the greatest increases in the number of considerations of the president occurred as cable television penetrated major media markets. On average, people had .68 more of Reagan in his reelection year than his first election (a 29% increase). They had an average of .7 more considerations of George H.W. Bush in his reelection campaign than his previous one (31.5% increase) and .64 more considerations of his son in 2004 compared to 2000 (31.5% increase).

Nixon and Clinton had the smallest gains but each president experienced turbulent first terms. Nixon perpetuated the Vietnam War despite promising to end it in his 1968 campaign but he did have a number of foreign and domestic policy accomplishments during his first term. Nixon initiated the government's War on Drugs in 1971, reestablished relations with China in 1972, and created the EPA in 1970. Clinton's first term was engulfed in scandals like Whitewater, Vincent Foster's death, and stories about Clinton's extra-martial affairs while he was the governor of Arkansas. The following

figures will partially unpack Americans' reactions to the Nixon and Clinton presidencies.

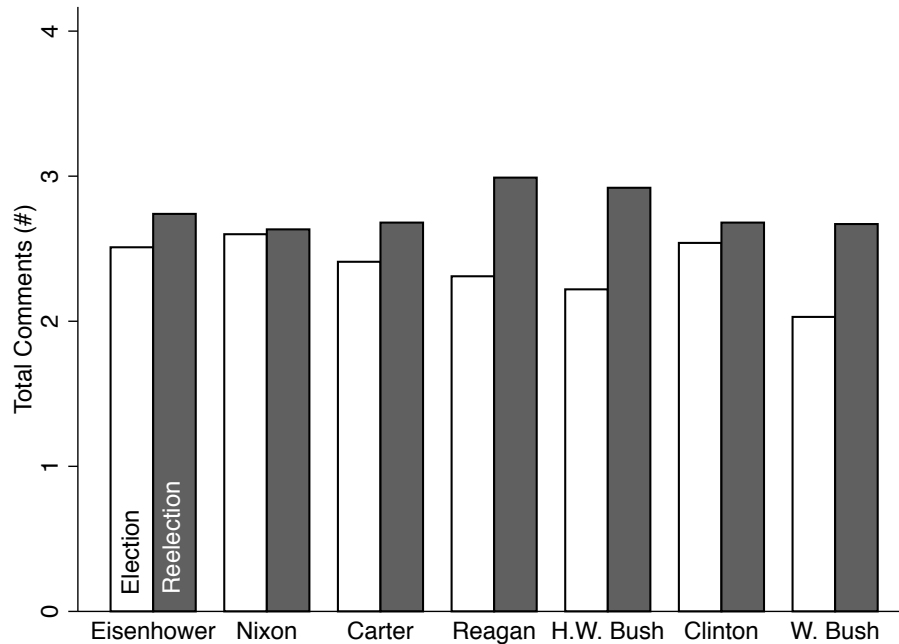


Figure 2.3: Changes in Americans' Awareness of the President Between Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File

Figures 2.4 and 2.5 show that people learn about the president's policies between elections and that they do not learn about his personality. For every administration studied here, people have more policy considerations four years after he was first elected to office. People are paying enough attention to his actions to make policy inferences.

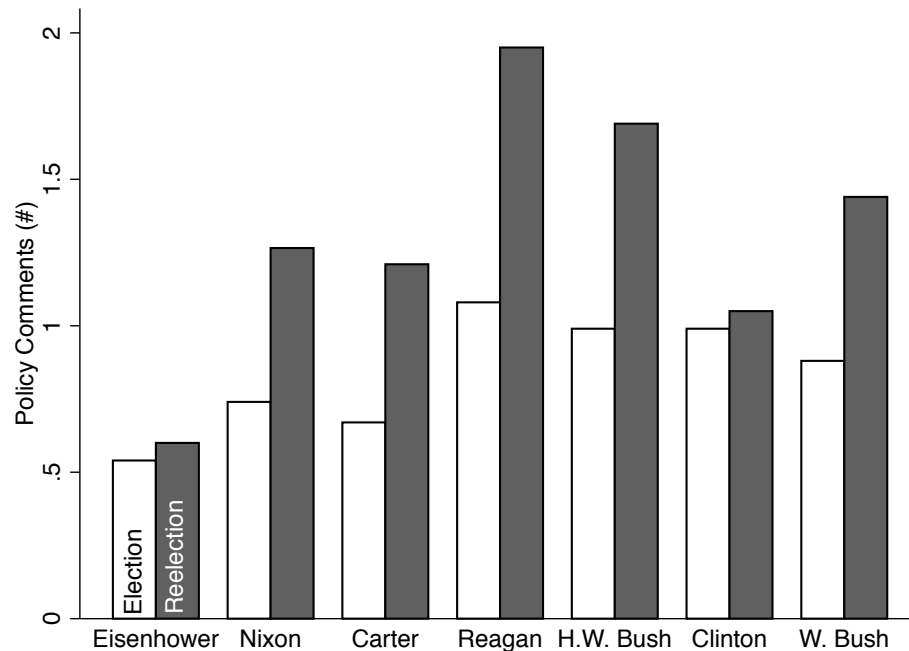


Figure 2.4: Changes in Americans' Awareness of the President's Policies Between Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File

The amount they learn about each president's policies varies across the seven studied. This suggests they are responsive to his performance and further shows that people are paying more attention to politics than they are given credit for. Figure 2.6 graphs the net change in policy and character considerations between elections for each president.

Americans learned the most about Carter and Reagan's policies compared to other administrations. People had .87 (80.6%) more things to say about President Reagan's policies in 1984 than they did when evaluating him in 1980. They had 80.6% more policy comments about Carter in 1980

compared to 1976. The eight years were defined by economic turmoil and recovery as well as foreign policy failure followed by success.

The late 1970s featured economic and foreign policy crises that shattered the nation's confidence in its government. The nation experienced double-digit inflation rates and a major energy shortage during Carter's administration. Americans were taken hostage during the Iranian revolution in November 1979 and were held through the duration of Carter's term. He was unable to negotiate their release before the 1980 election against Ronald Reagan.

Reagan's administration may be seen as righting the ship after Carter's term in some ways. Iran released the Iranian hostages on Reagan's inauguration day. He turned the economy around during his first term as unemployment peaked at 10.8% in 1982, but fell below 8% during his election year. He reduced income tax rates early in his first term and inflation rates fell well below their levels during Carter's administration.

Figures 2.4-2.6 shed some more light on what Americans learned about Nixon. Figure three showed that people had small gains in their total number of considerations of each president. Nixon had a productive first term and peoples' considerations of his policies reflect that. Americans' averaged an increase of approximately .5 more policy considerations between Nixon's campaigns. They decreased their focus on his character by the same magnitude.

Clinton's presidency is interesting in that people did not learn much about him at all between campaigns. We can see that they had small gains in their total number of reasons for why they liked and disliked him. However, we also see that they had small gains in what they learned about his policies and character.

The Clinton era signified the changes in the news from a strict focus on issues to more stories about human drama and the electorate's evaluations reflect that. By the time he took office, the public had heard a lot about Clintons' personal failures. News of Clinton's personal troubles continued to bubble up throughout his first term. Paula Jones's lawsuit and the Whitewater investigation spanned much of his first time. Thus, it may not be a surprise that people had little more to say about his character four years later.

His first term was also politically unproductive and explains why Americans had little more to say about his policies during his reelection campaign. Clinton stumbled out of the gate with Don't Ask, Don't Tell that prompted a public relations fight with the military. He failed to pass universal health care after struggling with congress for a year between September 1993 and August 1994. After the Republicans took Congress in 1995, Clinton and Speaker Newt Gingrich failed to agree on the 1996 budget and shut the government down twice in late 1995 and early 1996.

Changes in the news media and its environment are not distracting the electorate from the issues. During Eisenhower's presidency, Americans had

few alternatives to the news on TV, but people did not absorb much about his policies during his first term. On average, they only had .06 more (11% more) policy considerations of him in 1956 than when he first ran in 1952. Looking to George W. Bush's first term of office, they had an average of .56 more policy reasons for voting for or against the president than they did in 2000 (63.6% increase).

Since 1980, people are learning more in the era where people have more channels to choose from, more movies to watch and more ways NOT to see news if they choose not to. For the three presidents studied in the 1950s through the 1970s, Americans averaged an increase of .37 policy considerations over the president's first four years in office. Between 1980-2004, we see an average increase of .55 policy considerations over four administrations.

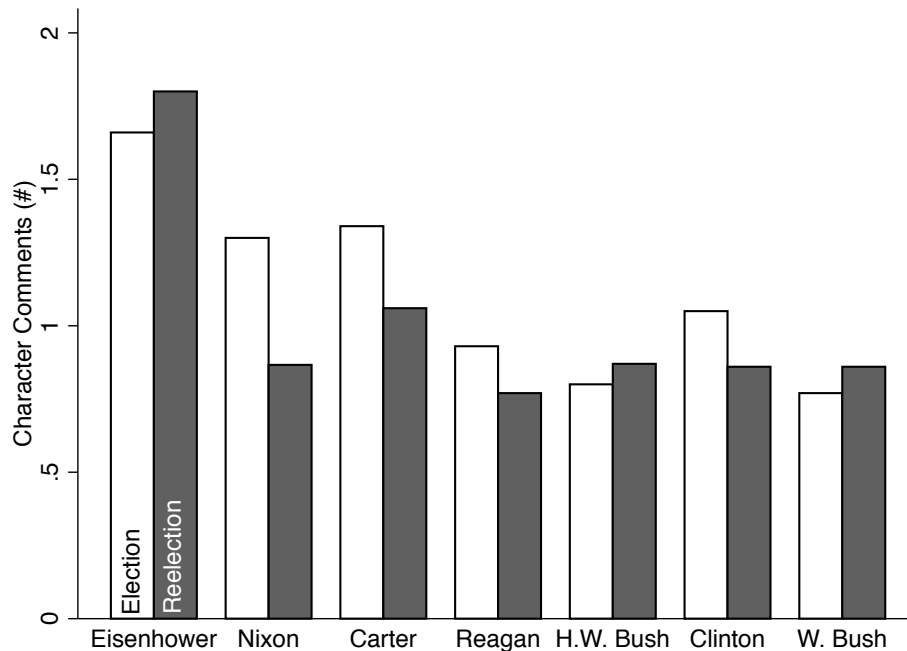


Figure 2.5: Changes in Americans' Awareness of the President's Character Between Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File

For the most part, people learn little about a president's character.

They have fewer character considerations in a reelection year than four years prior during Nixon's, Carter's, Reagan's, and Clinton's first terms. On the other hand, they had more to say about Eisenhower and George W. Bush's character four years after they were elected, but the gains were small.

Thus, people learn more about the president's policies than his character between campaigns. Figure 2.6 compares the net change in the number of peoples' policy and character considerations for each president studied. Except for Eisenhower, Americans' gains in policy considerations are greater than their gains in character.

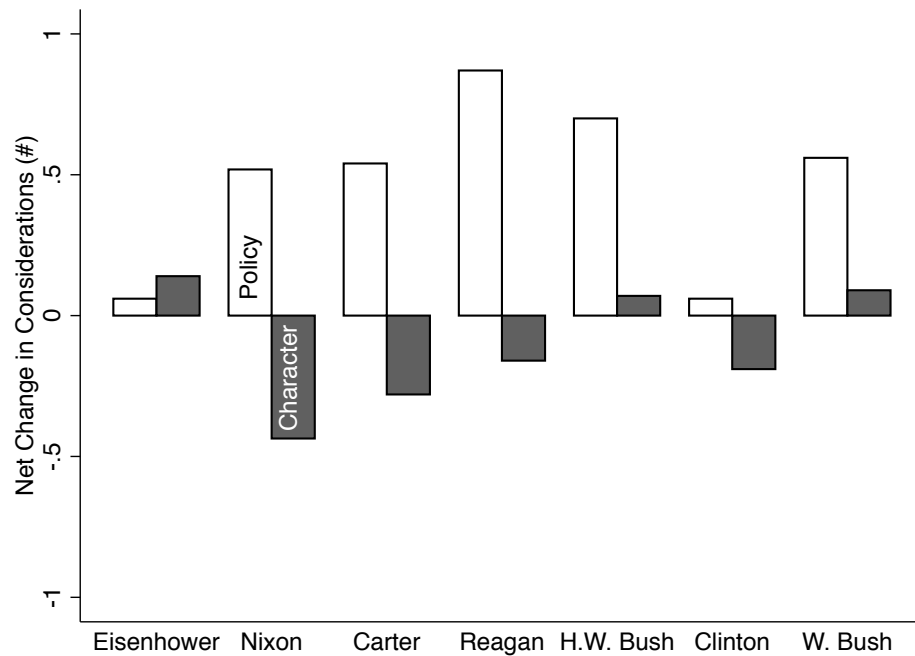


Figure 2.6: Learning About the President's Policies vs. His Character

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

2.7 Discussion

Scholars have bemoaned the fact that the network news has placed more emphasis on softer news over time and that fewer people are watching it. Despite all of the entertainment-filled “distractions” available to Americans today and the fact that fewer people are watching the television news over time, people are absorbing more policy content about the president in recent elections than they were when Eisenhower was in office. Americans on average learn much more about the him and his policies during the cable years than in the 1950s-1970s.

While this evidence is encouraging and contradicts some scholars' claims that people are less politically aware in recent years than in the golden age of television, some questions remain unanswered. It remains an open question as to whether the distribution of learning has changed in the cable era. People who would rather watch entertainment instead of the news are less politically interested than news viewers and may be learning less about politics in the cable era than they did before it (Prior 2007). The next chapter explores the differences between politically interested and uninterested citizens in how much they learn about the president and his policies over time. Do people with little political interest learn less over time? Are the gaps in awareness of the president and his policies between political junkies and less interested citizens greater in the cable era than in the broadcast television era?

Chapter 3: Political Interest and Learning About Presidents in the Cable Era

While on average, citizens learn about the president and his policies over four years, it remains possible that this is only among people who regularly follow public affairs. Most people rely on television for news and information about public affairs (Mayer 1993; The Pew Research Center for the People & Press 2011). People who abandoned the network news in the cable era are less interested in politics than those who stayed with it (Prior 2007). Thus, it is possible that uninterested Americans are learning less about the president's policies in the cable era than they were in the years before it. Consequently, the differences in policy awareness between interested and uninterested Americans may also be growing over time.

It is also possible that those who abandoned the network news may actually be getting their information from softer, more "infotainment-oriented" sources. People who only casually pay attention to political news stories may learn about issues from softer news programming because those programs provide more contextual information that those viewers need than harder news programming (Baum 2003). They may be more likely to absorb policy information about the president from these sources because they find those shows more interesting and personally relevant than the evening news.

In this chapter, I seek answers to the following questions. In particular, are politically uninterested citizens learning less about the president and his policies in recent years than they were before cable? Is the gap in policy awareness between politically interested and uninterested Americans growing over time?

The cable era is not dumbing down or dividing the electorate along lines of political engagement. Despite the presence of more alternatives to news programs during the cable era, casual political consumers are neither less aware of nor less engaged with policies than they were in the years before it. The difference in policy awareness between interested and uninterested Americans is not increasing over time and actually narrows during the cable years.

In the following section, I review the literature's conflicting claims with respect to the rise of cable television and its effects on cognitive political engagement. I will then discuss my methods and data sources. Finally I will discuss the findings and offer ways to rethink how media may be affecting what we learn about politics.

3.1 Changes in Media, Political Interest, and Learning

Since network news ratings began to drop in 1980, scholars have debated about whether politically uninterested citizens are learning less about policies and that government is less responsive to their policy concerns.

Those who claim that the proliferation of cable television is a main factor, argue that it seduced many people away from the network evening news and towards lower brow entertainment (Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen 2007; Prior 2007). Others argue that soft news and infotainment programming actually help casual political observers learn about politics.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, television news ratings have declined substantially since cable television took off in 1980. In 2004, the combined ratings of the three major network news programs (20.2) were slightly less than half of what they were in 1980 (42.3, see figure 2.1) (Guskin, Rosenstiel, and Moore 2011). Only a fraction of this audience may have transitioned to cable news. In the second quarter of 2006, 15.9% of all households watched one of the three broadcast evening news shows while only 2.1% watched one of the evening news programs on the major cable news networks (Gorman 2010).⁷ By the first quarter of 2010, 16.2% of all households watched the broadcast news and but only 3.2% watched cable evening news.

The decline of news viewership and the rise of cable may be causing uninterested citizens be less informed about policies over time. These trends may also be exacerbating the gap in policy awareness between them and those who regularly follow public affairs. Prior (2007) argues that cable television's proliferation across the U.S. gave Americans greater choice and

⁷ Cable news networks include CNN, MSNBC, Fox, CNBC, and CNN's Headline News.

more opportunities to avoid the news if they chose to. Those who prefer entertainment to the news are also much more likely to have lower levels of political interest (Prior 2007, 42-43). In a survey experiment, he demonstrates that people who have access to cable and prefer entertainment to the news become less knowledgeable about politics over between the first and second periods. Thus, people who “abandon” the network news when they get access to cable watch less news and become less politically informed. This also causes the gap in knowledge between politically interested and uninterested citizens to grow.

Recent studies using cognitive measures of how Americans evaluate candidates show that the population may be more familiar with candidates’ policies in recent years than they were in the 1950s. The average American had twice as many policy considerations of the presidential candidates in 2000 as they did in 1952 (Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen 2007). Hayes (2009) shows a similar trend in terms of policy considerations as a percentage of all considerations. Both studies also show that people have focused less and less on character over time since Eisenhower’s administration.

Those studies paint a more optimistic picture of Americans’ familiarity with issues, but variation in population averages may mask important trends within groups. An increasing population average can reflect a growing divergence in policy awareness between people who regularly follow public affairs and those who do not. Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen (2007, 1173),

speculate that their evidence showing upward trends in the population's average policy considerations over time may reflect such a divergence. Higher averages over time may reflect the fact that the politically interested are learning more about policies over time and the less interested are not. Or, both groups may be learning more about policies but those who are relatively less interested in politics are learning much less than those who show greater interest.

3.2 Low-Interest Americans: Are they Learning More or Less Over Time?

- 1) Are Americans with low interest in politics learning less about the president and his policies in the cable era than they were in the years before it?
- 2) People who are regular consumers of government and public affairs will be more familiar with policies than those who are not, but is this difference increasing over time?

The literature reviewed in the previous section suggests multiple possibilities with respect to how much uninterested citizens may be learning about presidents and their policies. Uninterested citizens are less likely to read news about public affairs (Graber 2001) and abandoning the network news may have led them to be less informed about issues in the cable years than they were before it. Cable television providers have significantly

increased the number of available channels since 1980 and uninterested citizens may be learning less and less over this period. Consequently, the difference between theirs and interested citizens' policy awareness may be greater in the cable era than in the years before it.

On the other hand, uninterested citizens may be learning as much or more in the cable years as they were in the heyday of broadcast news. I reviewed research in the previous chapter suggesting that people may actually be learning as much or more about politics in the cable and Internet era than before. "Lowbrow" infotainment programming may do a better job at making political news accessible to the casual political consumer. Soft news programming may be engaging uninterested Americans in politics and not pushing them away (Baum 2003; Baum 2005).

People with little interest in politics may be learning about presidents and policies from the Internet. The Internet gives people more news sources that may fit their tastes than television (Graber 2001). People can get information about everything from public affairs to celebrity gossip and find a site that gives them the information in ways they find more interesting than conventional print and television sources. News and other information sites vary by partisanship, ideology, and by the ratio of hard to soft news content.

3.3 Methods

I measure learning by comparing changes in Americans' cognitive engagement in evaluating the president. Using responses to the open-ended "likes" and "dislikes" questions about the presidential candidates in the National Election Studies (NES) (Sapiro, Rosenstone, and Studies 2007), I measure learning about the president in general by comparing the average interested and uninterested American's total number of considerations of the president during his reelection year to their total considerations of him during the last election. Policy learning is measured similarly using responses about domestic and foreign affairs, government management, philosophy of government, ideology, and connections to constituency groups.⁸

Increases in peoples' considerations of the president over four years shows that they have thought about him. If one's total number of considerations increases from one election to the next, it shows that they have absorbed information about him and used it to form reasons for voting for or against him the next time around. On the other hand, if they have more policy considerations of him during his reelection year than they did during his previous election, it shows that they have made inferences about his policies

⁸ I opt not to use measures of peoples' factual knowledge of politics because conventional factual knowledge questions are suboptimal measures of whether people are learning what they need to know to be competent in the voting booth (Lupia 2006). For a more thorough discussion, please see Appendix A.

and have evaluated his performance in office.⁹ They have become more engaged with policies over four years.

I compare learning for six presidents who ran for reelection since the NES began using the likes and dislikes questions: Nixon, Carter, Reagan, H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush. My measure of political interest is based on how often the respondent reports following government and public affairs and this measure was not introduced until 1960. Interested Americans are defined as those who follow government and public affairs most or some of the time while the uninterested are defined as those who follow government and public affairs only now and then or hardly at all.

Some may object that comparing changes between interested and uninterested citizens may be confounded by the possibility that peoples' interest levels change over time. However, a person's level of political interest is actually quite stable. Using aggregate survey data and panel studies from several countries, Prior (2010) demonstrates that most people do not fluctuate in how much they follow politics from year-to-year or over the long-term.

3.4 Findings

The evidence presented in Chapter 2 is encouraging but raises the question of whether political junkies are doing all or most of the learning and the uninterested are not. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 provide a partial answer to that

⁹ See previous chapter on attribution theory for further elaboration.

concern. They show the changes in the size of the population who offer a policy or character consideration of the president over the four-year terms we have studied thus far.

There are substantial increases in the percentage of the population with *any* policy considerations of the president for five of the seven administrations in the sample. The two highest increases in the population with a policy consideration came under both Bush administrations. 24.5% more Americans evaluated the first President Bush on policy in 1992 than in 1988 and 22.2% more Americans offered a policy consideration of his son in 2004 than in 2000. Finally, more people evaluate the president for his policies in the days when people can choose which news they care to read or watch than they did during the years when network news organizations chose for them.

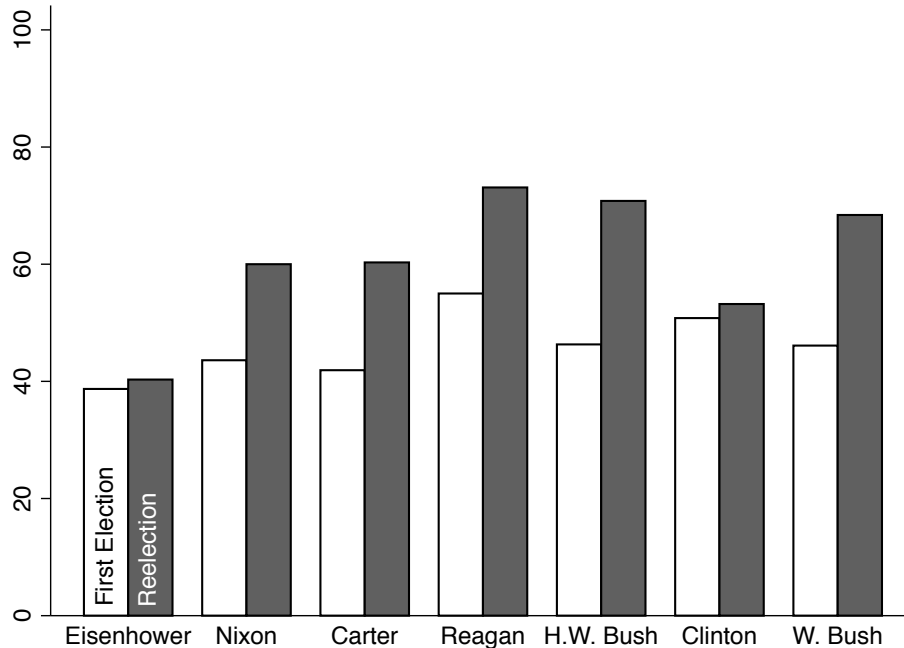


Figure 3.1: Percentage of Americans With a Consideration of the President's Policies

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

Fewer Americans have character-related comments in his reelection year than in the previous one for four of the seven presidents studied. There is a small increase in the percentage of the population with character considerations under Eisenhower as well as George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. For the remaining four presidents, we see a slight decrease in the size of the population who evaluate the president in terms of his character.

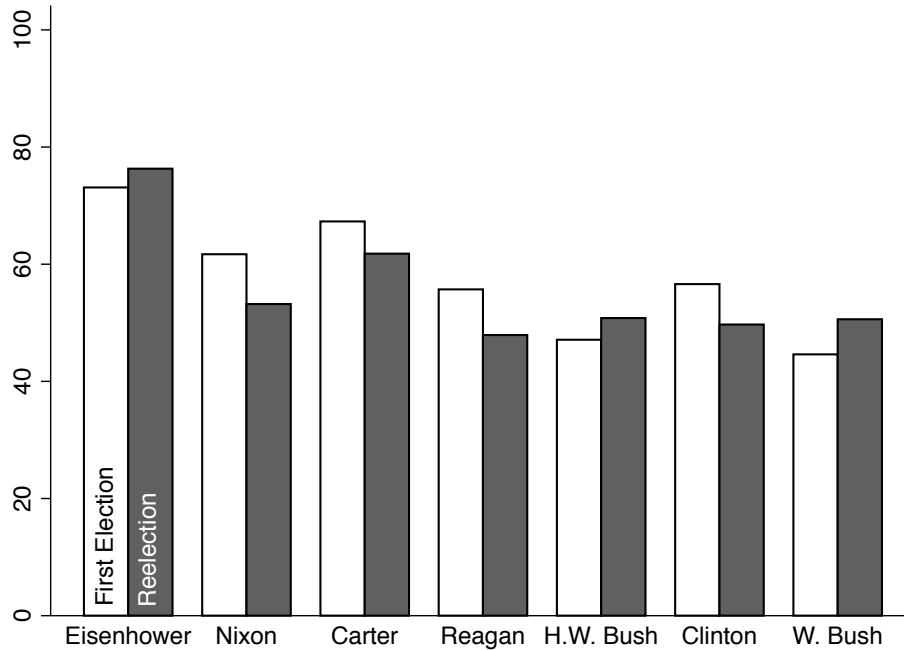


Figure 3.2: Percentage of Americans With a Consideration of the President's Character

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 display how many considerations Americans have of the president in the year he is first elected and during his reelection year. Each bar shows the average number of considerations among the politically interested (Figure 3.3) and the uninterested (Figure 3.4). Figure 3.5 graphs the changes in the awareness gap between both groups over each president's first term.

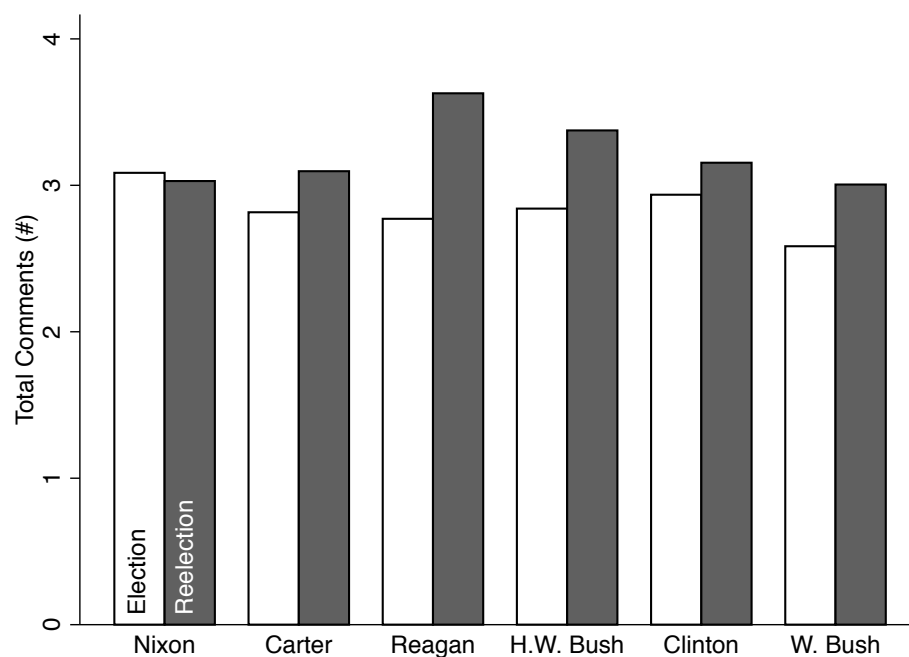


Figure 3.3: Change in Interested Americans' Awareness of the President Between Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative File

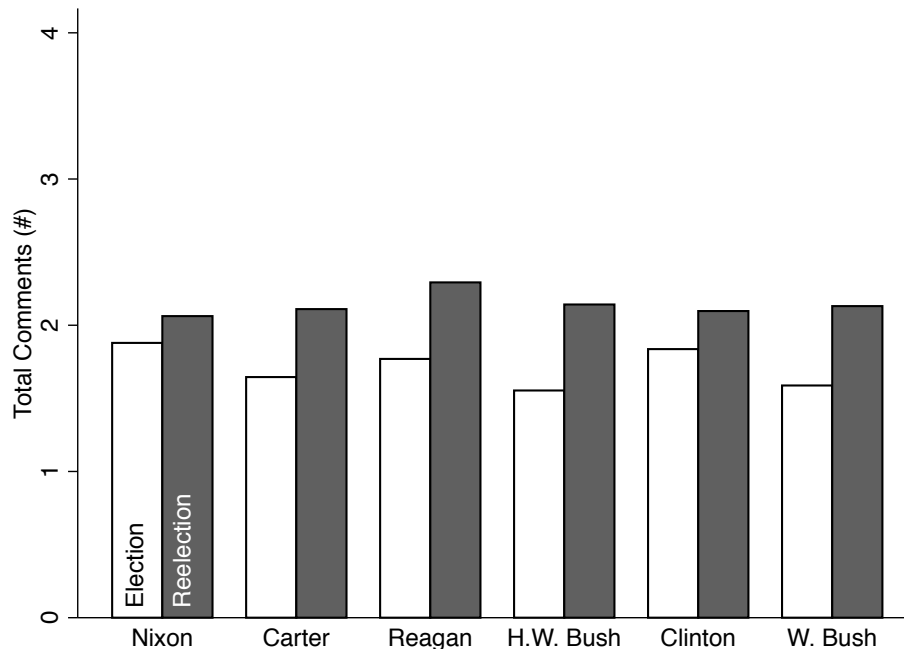


Figure 3.4: Change in Uninterested Americans' Awareness of the President Between Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative File

Uninterested Americans become more aware of the president while he is in office for every president studied here. They are also learning as much in recent years as they did in the 1960s and 1970s. The increase in how much uninterested citizens have to say about George W. Bush over his four years is roughly equal to what it was for Jimmy Carter and *greater* than the change during Nixon's first term. Despite the substantial growth in cable television after 1980, uninterested citizens are showing greater rates of learning about presidents during that period than when they had relatively few choices on television.

With the exception of the Reagan administration, uninterested citizens learn relatively more about the president than their more politically interested counterparts. Figure 3.5 graphs changes in the difference in how much interested and uninterested citizens have to say about the president from his first election to his reelection. This gap narrows under every president except for Ronald Reagan. During his administration, it increases by approximately 34% while is in office.

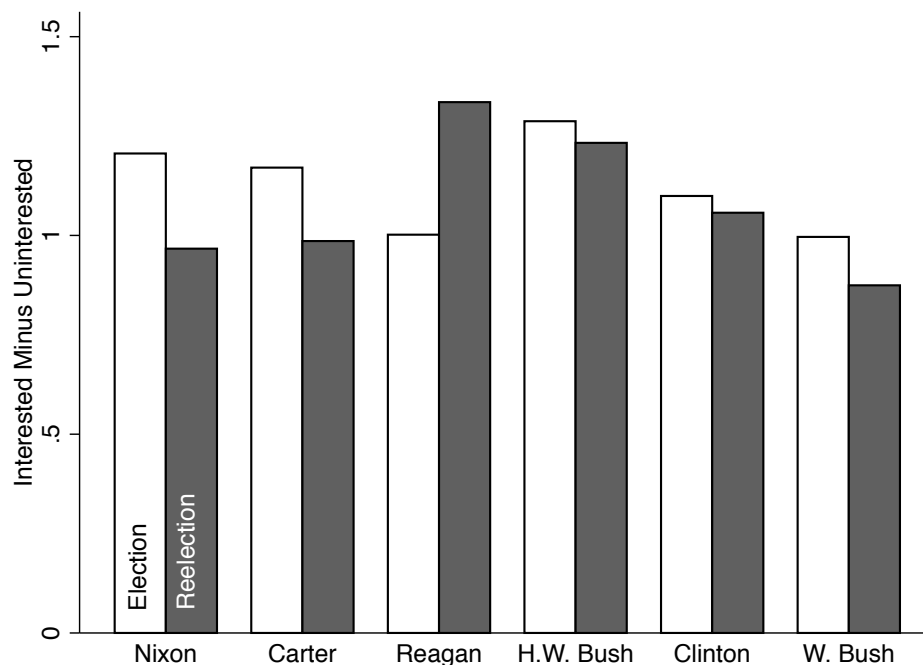


Figure 3.5: Change in the Gap in Americans' Familiarity With the President Between Elections

Note: Bars equal the difference in the total number of considerations between interested and uninterested Americans.

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File

Once again, cable television is not creating a digital divide in terms of how informed Americans are about presidents. However, the extent to which

uninterested citizens narrow the gap in awareness is lower during the cable years than during the heyday of network news. They show lesser gains in terms of how much they learn about incumbents after Reagan's administration than they did before it.

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 show that Americans are devoting more cognitive effort to evaluating the president while he is in office and are becoming more familiar with him. The next section will explore whether uninterested Americans are learning more or less about the president's policies in the cable era than in the years before it. It also examines whether the differences between politically interested and uninterested in their familiarity of the president's policies are greater over time or not.

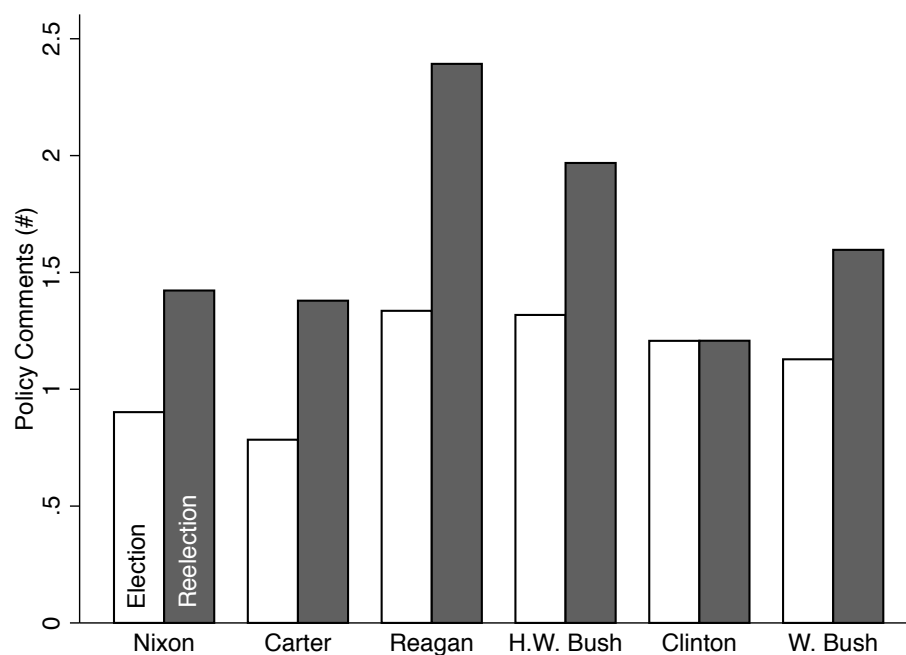


Figure 3.6: Change in Interested Americans' Awareness of the President's Policies Between Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

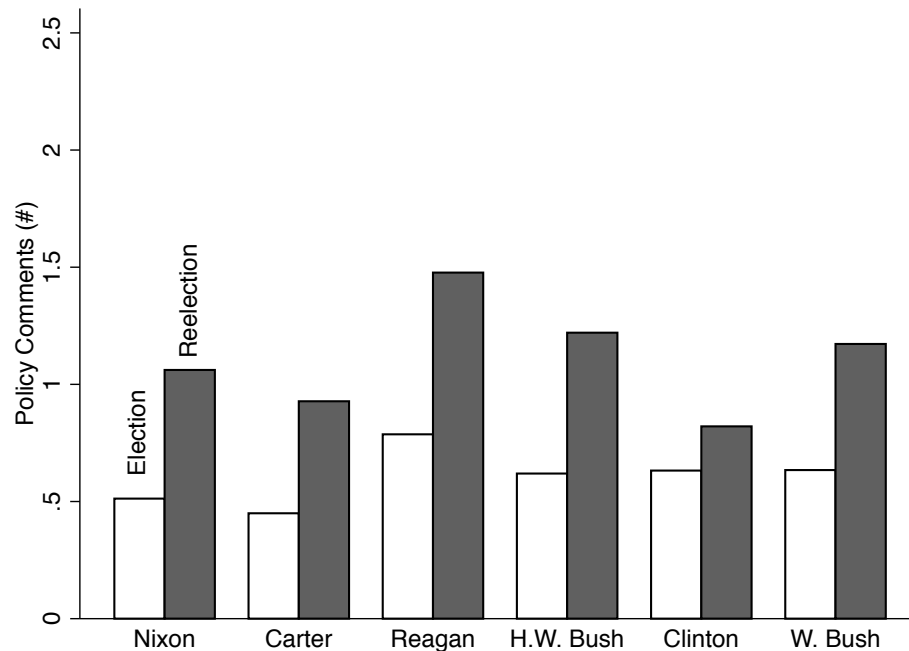


Figure 3.7: Change in Uninterested Americans' Awareness of the President's Policies Between Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File

Not only are uninterested Americans learning about the president in general, *but also more importantly they are learning about the president's policies.* They show appreciable increases in their number of considerations of the president's policies for every administration studied. As we saw in the previous chapter, the amount they learn varies across administrations and again that implies that Americans are also responsive to the president's performance. Uninterested people learned relatively less about Clinton's policies than any other president and this may reflect the fact that Clinton got off to a slow start during his first term.

The evidence does not support claims that cable television is seducing uninterested citizens away from the news and is making them less aware of the issues. Figure 3.7 shows that politically uninterested Americans are learning as much about the president's policies in in the 1980s and 1990s as they were in the 1960s and 1970s (with the obvious exception of the Clinton administration). They had an increase of .53 policy considerations of George W. Bush over his first term, while they had an increase of roughly .5 considerations during Nixon's first term. The two presidents where uninterested Americans learned the most about policies were Reagan (increase of .69 considerations) and George H.W. Bush (increase of .6). With the exception of Bill Clinton, casual political observers are learning more about policies during the era where cable television substantially increased Americans' alternatives to the news than they did when they only had a few channels to watch.

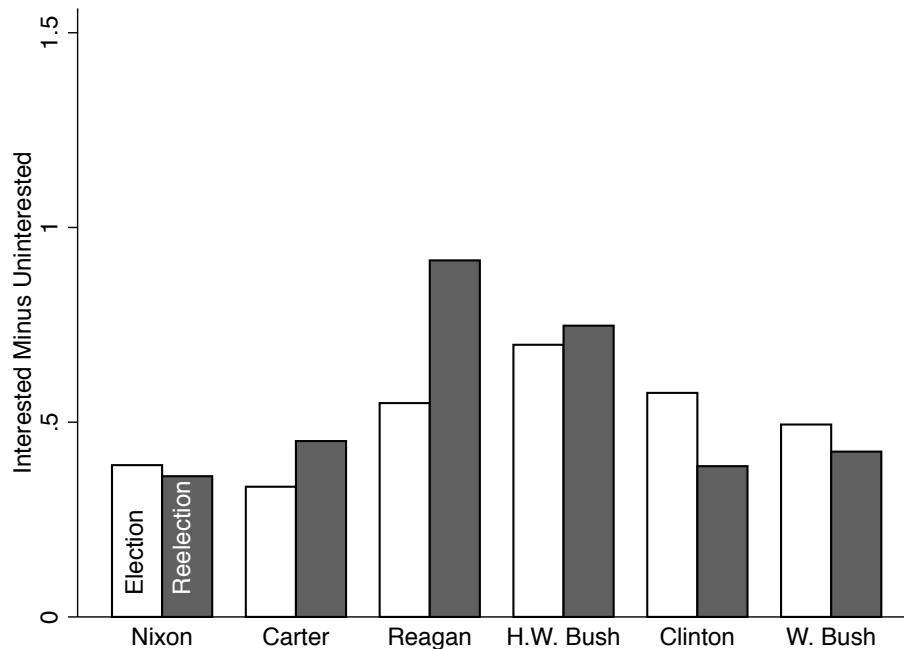


Figure 3.8: Change in the Gap in Policy Awareness Between Elections

Note: Bars equal the difference in the number of policy considerations between interested and uninterested Americans.

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

The rise of cable is not exacerbating the differences in how much interested and uninterested citizens are aware of the president's policies. In absolute terms, the gap in policy familiarity is slightly greater during the cable era than it was in the 1960s and 1970s (see Figure 3.8). However, cable is not driving a wedge between them. Interested Americans learned more than the uninterested about the president's policies during Carter's, Reagan's, George H.W. Bush's administrations. On the other hand, uninterested Americans learned more about policies than interested citizens during Nixon's, Clinton and George W. Bush's first terms.

3.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the notion that they have abandoned the news, uninterested Americans are learning as much about the president in recent years as they were in the heyday of broadcast television. They are also learning as much about his policies over a four-year term in the cable years as they were in the period before cable. The cable era may have led them away from the network news, but they are as engaged during this period as they were before.

Cable television has also *not* increased the gap in policy familiarity between interested and uninterested citizens. For three of the presidents studied (Carter, Reagan, and George H.W. Bush), interested citizens show greater levels of policy learning than their less attentive counterparts. However, uninterested citizens pick up more about policies than interested citizens during Nixon's, Clinton's, and George W. Bush's first terms.

This chapter and the previous one show that Americans are as engaged with policies now as they ever were despite the changes in the news media environment. The next chapter explores whether vice presidents benefit from what people are learning about presidents. When they run for president, do people associate vice presidents with what the administration has done? Are Americans very familiar with the vice president and his policies? Or, is he a new face like the typical challenger? Are VPs evaluated similarly to incumbents or are they evaluated like challengers?

Chapter 4: The Public's Awareness of Vice Presidents and Their Policies

Al Gore's underperformance in the national popular vote 2000 surprised most pundits and political scientists because he was running to succeed a popular incumbent who was presiding over the longest economic expansion in American history. They expected most of the electorate to vote for Gore because they credited Democrats for the great economy. All of the participants of a 2000 APSA meeting panel about presidential election forecasting models predicted a Gore victory and most did so by comfortable margins (Campbell 2001; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2003). Experts who predicted a solid Gore victory were thinking along the lines of retrospective voting theory, which predicts that citizens vote for the incumbent party's candidate when they approve of its performance and vote against them when they do not (Fiorina 1981; Key, Jr. 1966).

Retrospective voting theory may offer plausible explanations for an incumbent party's successes or failures when presidents run for reelection, but it is less successful explaining successor elections. Four vice presidents have run to succeed sitting presidents since Eisenhower's administration and three of them lost. Hubert Humphrey lost following LBJ, whose approval rating was below 50% most of his last two years in office. Two of the remaining three ran

to succeed popular presidents but only George Bush was able to win in 1988.

If the electorate goes in a different direction following a popular incumbent, it implies that *candidates matter just as importantly as parties* in peoples' assessments of national economic and political conditions.

Forecasting models were bullish on Gore in 2000 because retrospective voting theory is a theory of parties' electoral success and discounts the differences between candidates. They failed to account for the possibility that voters evaluate vice presidents differently from incumbents because they bring different things to the table than their predecessors. Incumbents have records *in that office* to run on while vice presidents only can offer campaign promises.

In this chapter I explore the differences in the public's awareness of incumbents and vice presidents and their policies, as well as how they evaluate them. Are Americans as familiar with VPs as they are with incumbents who are running for reelection? Or are they as unfamiliar to the electorate as challengers usually are? Does the public evaluate VPs like they evaluate incumbents or do they evaluate them like challengers?

From the citizens' perspective, vice presidents are much different than incumbents when they finally run for president. VPs and their policies are noticeably less familiar to the electorate than incumbents and are even as unfamiliar as some challengers. Incumbents are judged on their policies while VPs are evaluated on their character. Finally, one of the most interesting findings in this paper is that despite having served in the presidency before

they first ran for the office in a general election, Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) and Gerald Ford did not benefit from incumbency as much their peers who served full terms.

In the next section I will review literature on retrospective voting and its coverage on vice presidents' pursuits for the White House. I then review the evidence of Americans' awareness of in party candidates and their policies over time. Finally, I discuss the implications that Americans' evaluations of VPs have for the campaigns that vice presidents craft when it is their turn to run for the presidency.

4.1 Retrospective Evaluations of Incumbents and Vice Presidents

Theories of retrospective voting posit that elections are referenda on incumbents and their record. Setting out to refute then-recent arguments that the electorate is easily manipulated by political propaganda, V.O. Key famously quipped, "voters are not fools." (Key, Jr. 1966, 7) He argued that citizens are concerned about policies and government performance, but they base their votes on whether they approve of or oppose what the incumbent party has done over the past four years (Key, Jr. 1966, 149).

Downs's (1957) version of retrospective voting also concludes that the election comes down to how voters judge the incumbent's performance. He proposes that citizens vote for the party that brings them the most policy benefits. Parties fight for the middle to broaden their coalition as much as

possible. Since both parties present similar platforms, voters make their choices based the incumbent's performance.

In reality, the opposing campaigns offer alternative platforms with real differences, but incumbency is still the focal point of the campaigns. Voters know what life has been like under the incumbent party and can make inferences about the future by judging their performance over the last four or eight years (Fiorina 1981). The out party candidate cannot point to experience in that office and has to rely on attacking the incumbent's record. People will have more uncertainty when they judge how well a challenger fits their model of what makes a good president. "Thus public estimates of a challengers' competence must be based on how he or she talks, looks, and campaigns- criteria that are susceptible to more varied interpretation than the incumbent's actual job performance." (Popkin 1994, 66) People are then more likely to assess the incumbent's record because it is cognitively easier. "In effect, every election is a judgment passed upon the record of the incumbent party." (Downs 1957, 41)

Retrospective voting theory explains presidential reelection years reasonably well. Incumbents tend to get reelected when economies are strong and get voted out during recessions or if the country is mired in unpopular wars. When most of the public thinks the country is headed in the right direction, incumbents keep their jobs.

Retrospective voting theory, however, has difficulty explaining the variation in the incumbent party's electoral fortunes when the vice president is running to succeed the incumbent. For only two of the four succession elections since Eisenhower, the results are congruent with what we would expect given the incumbent's standing among the electorate. President Johnson's approval rating hovered below 50% for most of his final two years in office and Hubert Humphrey narrowly lost the nationwide popular vote. George Bush soundly defeated Michael Dukakis in 1988 as approximately 60% of Americans approved of Reagan's during his final year in office. However, Richard Nixon lost to JFK in 1960 when Eisenhower was very popular throughout his tenure. Al Gore lost a close election to George W. Bush even though Clinton also had a 60% approval rating and the United States was enjoying a long and robust economic expansion. A 50% success rate suggests that the theory is missing part of what voters consider about candidates from election to election.

The theory has had trouble explaining incumbent party failures in successor elections because it is a theory about parties and discounts the importance of candidates. Downs's model claims that people decide between the parties and not candidates (Downs 1957, 39-40). In discussing the nuances between Downs's theory (1957) and Key's (1966), Fiorina shows that the theory's central claim is that people compare parties and not candidates:

To highlight the differences between these two possible bases for retrospective voting, consider the example of Johnson's conduct of the war in Vietnam. To the Downsian retrospective voter, Johnson's actual conduct of the war is a guide to Humphrey's future conduct of the war. A vote against Humphrey is a vote based on policy disagreement; Nixon's war policy is preferred. Under the traditional view, a vote against Humphrey is a vote of no confidence; its policy implications are not defined, save that change is desired. (Fiorina 1981, 13)

Despite the differences between Downs and Key, what that passage makes explicit is that the theory does not differentiate between candidates within a party. The incumbent's policies are a cue for their vice president's policies. A positive evaluation for President Clinton is a positive evaluation for Vice President Gore. If a voter disapproves of President Johnson's policies, she also disapproves of Vice President Humphrey's.

Citizens, on the other hand, distinguish between parties and their leaders. People blame or credit the president for national conditions but this does not mean they also attribute the same level of responsibility to the incumbent party. Thus, one's support for the president will not necessarily translate into the same level of support for their vice president, as recent research has begun to explore.

4.2 Vice Presidents and Retrospective Voting

People's support for the president's performance does not translate into votes for their VP. When their second-in-command is running for president,

peoples' evaluations of the president's performance have a weaker impact on their choice than when incumbents are running. Testing alternative explanations for why Gore lost to Bush in 2000, Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2003) show that presidential approval affected Americans' decisions less in 1988 and 2000 than they did in every other election since 1972. Pooling together NES surveys from 1972-2004, Campbell, Dettrey, and Lin (2010) show that presidential approval mattered significantly less in elections with a vice president compared to incumbent reelection years. In offering reasons for supporting or opposing vice presidents, very few Americans make direct connections between them and the president. In 1960, 1968, 1988, and 2000 the percentage of Americans explicitly mentioning the president in either a positive or negative consideration of their VP's candidacy was never higher than 14% (Wattenberg 2003).

Scholars have found similar patterns using retrospective evaluations of the economy. Using aggregate elections data from 1872-2000, Norpoth (2002) shows that economic indicators did not significantly influence election results in successor elections while they did affect incumbents' vote shares in their reelection years. In NES surveys from 1956-2000, citizens' evaluations of how the economy has changed in the past year significantly affected their choice for president when incumbents were running (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). When choosing between a VP and his challenger, however, citizens' retrospective evaluations of the economy did not affect their choice.

4.3 Why Do Vice Presidents Not Benefit From The Incumbent's Record?

These studies show that voters' evaluations of the current administration's policies do not translate into the same level of support for VPs, but the literature has yet to unpack some of the reasons why. In the rest of this chapter, I hope to provide some insights by addressing the following questions.

- 1) Are people relatively unfamiliar with vice presidents and their policies compared to incumbents? People are likely to know less about VPs than they know about incumbents but it is an open question whether those differences are great or small.
- 2) Is the public as unaware of VPs as they are of challengers?
- 3) If the incumbent's record is not a strong factor in peoples' choices for president when their vice presidents are on the ballot, how do people evaluate them compared to incumbents?
- 4) Are VPs' policies a major focus in peoples' assessments of them or do people judge them on their personality?

4.4 Why Vice Presidents Are Different from Incumbents

Vice presidents face a number of disadvantages running for president that provide us with reasons to expect the public to be relatively unaware of

them and their policies. The VP's constitutional roles are limited and for most of the country's history they have not been major players in the White House. VPs recently became more influential but most of what they do is not prominently covered in the media. They do not get much press coverage compared to the president and when they are in the spotlight they are speaking *on behalf of or in support of the president*. They have trouble establishing their own identity vis-à-vis the president not only because of their duties to the administration, but also because voters associate them with the administration's failures while not crediting them for the successes.

For most of the country's history, VPs did little more than fulfill their constitutional duties and this has led some to question the office's value beyond being first in the line of presidential succession. John Adams participated in George Washington's cabinet meetings but over the next two centuries most VPs had relatively little influence on the president's agenda with a couple of notable exceptions. Lincoln made his VP one of his advisers and Hoover called on his vice president to preside over cabinet meetings. Most other VPs were kept from influential positions in the White House and consequently the office has not been held in high esteem. Vice President Thomas Marshall (Wilson administration) mocked the office, saying: "Once there were two brothers. One ran away to sea; the other was elected vice president of the United States. And nothing was heard of either of them again." (Bendix 2004) John Adams also complained, "[m]y country has in its wisdom

contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived . . . I can do neither good nor evil.”

(Goldstein 2008, 374)

Walter Mondale secured more duties and more access to the president than any of his predecessors had done and the vice president has been a major player in every administration since. He was a close adviser to Carter on all parts of his agenda, had permission to attend any meeting on the president's daily schedule, and was the first to have an office in the West Wing (Pika 2010). Mondale's role is the basis of what many scholars consider the “modern vice presidency” and was used as a precedent for Bush, Gore, and Cheney to expand the office's authority beyond what Mondale had done (Goldstein 2008). Dick Cheney took the vice presidency to a new level when he assumed the office. Bush delegated to him the lead responsibility in a number of important policy areas and his authority within the administration was so expansive that some considered him to be Chief Executive Officer to President Bush's Chairman of the Board (Pika 2010).

Even though the vice president's role in the White House has grown in recent decades, most of their job is done out of the spotlight. The “modern VP” is a senior adviser to the president on major decisions but the press typically does not focus on that when analyzing the president's actions. Al Gore was considered the most successful vice president when he was in office and led a

major initiative to reduce government waste (Pika 2010). However President Clinton announced the project on the White House lawn with two forklifts stacked with huge piles of papers representing the list of federal regulations (U.S. Senate n.d.). After the 2000 election, Gore advisor Carter Eskew admitted that even though Gore was one of the most effective vice presidents in the nation's history, the public was unaware of his accomplishments. "They saw him as just a guy standing behind, not doing much." (Jamieson and Waldman 2001, 57-58)

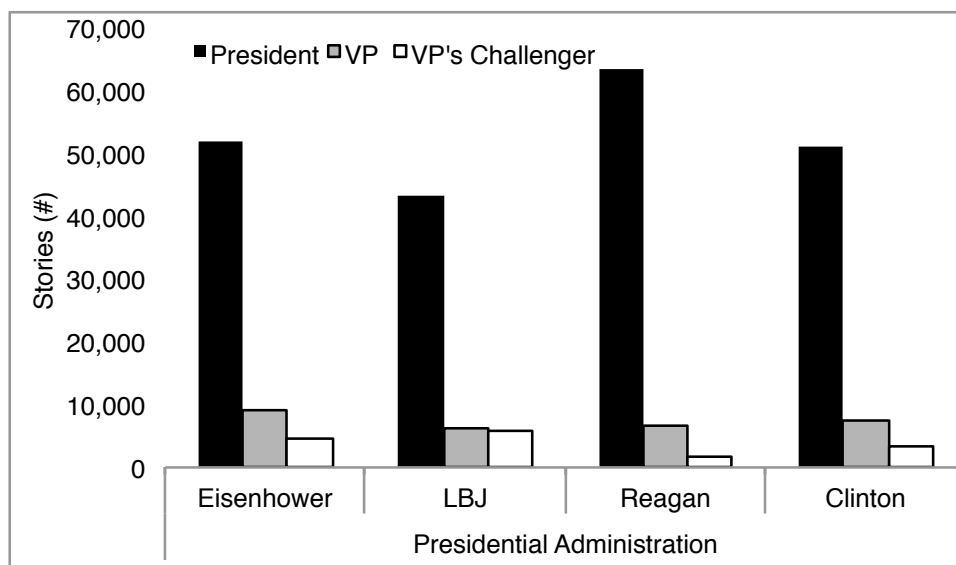


Figure 4.1: News Coverage of the President, Vice President, and the Vice President's Challenger During An Administration

Note: Bars equal the number of *New York Times* articles mentioning the president, vice president, or the vice president's challenger January 1 of the year the incumbent was inaugurated through Election Day of the year their vice president ran for the White House. For example, the black bar in the Eisenhower administration represents the number of articles about President Eisenhower from January 1, 1953-election day in 1960, the gray bar represents Vice President Richard Nixon, and the white bar represents Senator John F. Kennedy (Nixon's challenger in the 1960 election.) For the Johnson administration, the bar shows the number of articles about Johnson when he was vice president as well as those during his actual presidency. See Appendix C for the Boolean search terms I used. Source: www.nytimes.com.

Vice presidents get limited national press coverage and this can be seen above in Figure 4.1. As a proxy for national press coverage, I measure the number of articles mentioning the president, vice president, and the vice president's eventual challenger from January 1 of the year the incumbent was inaugurated through Election Day of the year their VP ran for the White House. Presidents get many times the coverage of their vice president or their VP's challenger during an administration. However, Nixon, George Bush, and Al Gore had at least double the amount of national exposure than their eventual challengers did during the same period.

Not only do VPs get limited national exposure before it is their turn as the in party's presidential nominee, they spend their time in the spotlight supporting the president's policies. Leading up to the 1960 Republican convention, Nelson Rockefeller was able to craft his own message and tour the country making appeals to party loyalists and independents. Vice President Nixon, on the other hand, had misgivings about some of Eisenhower's foreign policies but had to campaign supporting them. If he chose to go his own way, he risked losing Eisenhower's support in the fall (White 1961, 201). Even though he disagreed with Johnson on Vietnam and was losing support among those who opposed the war, Humphrey spent much of the 1968 campaign advocating a position on Vietnam that supported some aspects of Johnson's policy while staying silent on the rest. If he came out

completely against what Johnson was doing, he would risk losing support among the pro-war faction within the Democratic Party (White 1969).

Vice presidents have a muddled identity because they do not have a record to run on. They cannot credibly claim credit for the administration's successes but may be tied to some of its failures. Eisenhower offered Nixon the choice of any cabinet position he wanted in 1956 over vice president because he knew that Nixon would be able to claim more credit for the administration's policies from a cabinet member's perspective than he would from the vice-presidency (White 1961, 309). In 2000, Gore's staff tested alternative messages associating him with the Clinton economy but were unable to craft one that increased Gore's support among voters (Jamieson and Waldman 2001, 57, 89-90). He also lost support from people who disapproved of Clinton's personal failings (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2003), something strategists from both campaigns also confirmed after the campaign (Jamieson and Waldman 2001).

Given the obstacles that vice presidents face in connecting with the public, we should expect the public to be unaware of them and their policies and some anecdotal evidence from the campaigns themselves should only bolsters these expectations. Early on in the run up to the 1988 campaign, George H.W. Bush's staff faced unexpected hurdles in testing campaign messages from the fact that the public knew very little about him. The public had weak impressions both candidates. Summing up their findings from early

focus group sessions, Lee Atwater recalled that one person thought Bush was a congressman and nobody could name any of the other government positions he had previously held. Ailes said, “One guy sort of summed it up for me when he said, ‘You’d think the guy’d been there all those years and we’d know something more about him than this.’” (Germond and Witcover 1989, 158)

Gore’s campaign staff learned much of the same from their early research. Carter Eskew explained that the public did not have a good sense of who Al Gore was nor what he did as vice president (Jamieson and Waldman 2001, 57-58).

4.5 Evaluating Vice Presidents vs. Incumbents

Americans are likely to evaluate vice presidents differently than they evaluate incumbents because they have had less exposure to VPs than incumbents who have served a full term. As I discussed in Chapter 2, people are more likely to make dispositional inferences about others when they have had little prior exposure to them (Ross and Nisbett 1991). As one observes someone else’s behavior across a number of different situations, they become more likely to see how an actor’s behavior differs across multiple situations and they become more likely to attribute the actor’s behavior to the situation (Gilbert and Malone 1995; Ross and Anderson 1982).

Americans have had much more exposure to the president and more opportunities to scrutinize his behavior than the vice president’s. Thus, their

evaluations of VPs are likely to be more skewed towards character-based inferences than policy-based ones, when compared to their evaluations of incumbents. Compared to challengers, VPs' evaluations should be more policy-skewed since they may get some benefits from being in the administration. Vice presidents have had more exposure in the national spotlight than their challengers have and people may be more aware of their policies.

4.6 Vice Presidents Elevated to the Presidency: LBJ and Gerald Ford

Thus far I have referred to sitting vice presidents running to replace the incumbent, but the two VP's who took over the presidency mid-term may not have benefitted from their incumbency when they ran for reelection. LBJ served only one term before he ran for reelection and Ford served half of a term. Neither one had previously campaigned for the presidency as their party's nominee before they ran for reelection. Compared to other incumbents, Americans had significantly less exposure to them in office before their reelection campaigns began and fewer opportunities to learn about their policies and abilities to function in the office. *Thus for the purposes of this study, I will treat them as VPs for their reelection years.*

4.7 Data

As I have done in the previous chapters, I compare peoples' awareness of the presidential candidates and their policies using responses to the

National Election Studies (NES) open-ended questions about the candidates. For an explanation of how the likes and dislikes reflect the content of one's reasoning about politicians, please see Chapter 2 on learning about presidents. Appendix A goes further in showing how responses to the likes and dislikes questions are superior measures of voters' awareness of politics and candidates than other measures.

Specifically, I compare Americans' total number of considerations, as well as their number of policy and character considerations for incumbents, VPs, and challengers to show the variation in how informed the public may be about each. If, on average, the public has more considerations of incumbents than vice presidents, this suggests that people do not credit VPs for the incumbent administration's record. People view them differently than incumbents and therefore VPs may not be able to exploit the advantage of serving in the White House during their campaigns.

My time frame for this study is 1956-2004 because doing so allows me to use elections where there was either an incumbent running for reelection or a sitting vice president running to take his place. During this period there were 7 elections with incumbents running for reelection where the incumbent had served a full four year term, four elections with a sitting vice president running to succeed the incumbent, and two elections with an incumbent who succeeded his predecessor during their term (as I stated above, they will be treated as VPs for this study).

4.8 Findings

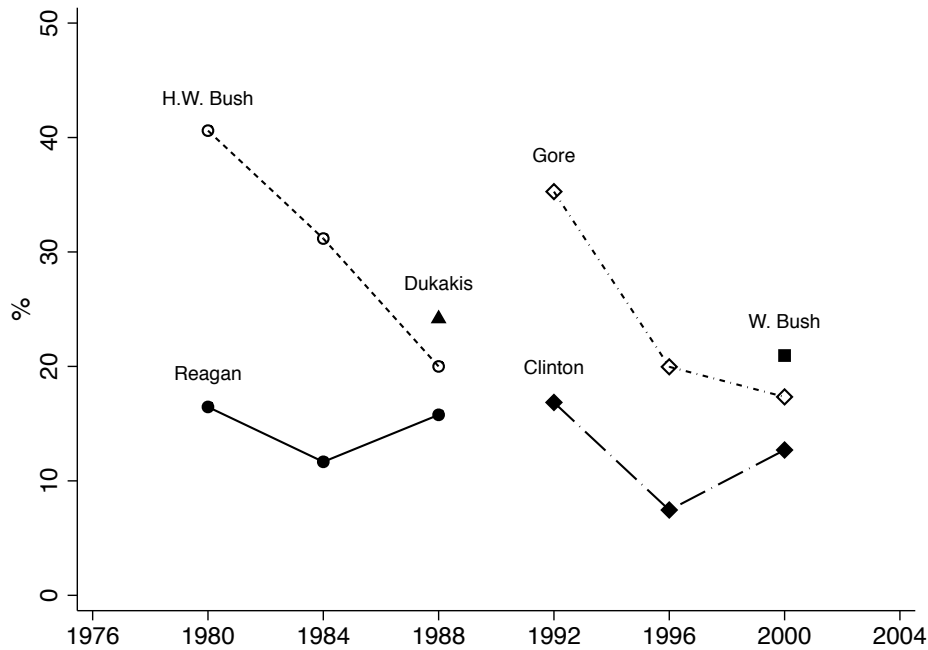


Figure 4.2: Changes in Uncertainty About the President and Vice President Between Elections

Note: Uncertainty measures the percentage of Americans who either rate the president (or VP or challenger) 50 out of 100 on a feeling thermometer scale or fail to rate them at all.

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File

Americans have weak impressions of vice presidents when it is their turn to run, as others have claimed. Campbell, Dettrey, and Yin (2010) argue that voters should have less definite impressions of vice presidents than incumbents because they are new candidates with different agendas. The evidence in Figure 4.2 shows that this is the case for at least two of them. It tracks the percentage of Americans who are uncertain about the president and the vice president over time using Burden and Hillygus's (2009) measure of

uncertainty. They define a person as being uncertain about a candidate if they cannot evaluate them, i.e. if the person either cannot rate the candidate on a feeling thermometer or rates them at 50 out of 100 (neither warm nor cold towards the candidate). It is no surprise that when they first run together, a substantial percentage more of the electorate fail to offer an evaluation of the vice presidential candidate than the presidential candidate. Over eight years (a reelection campaign four years later and then their run for the presidency), this percentage is cut in half.

However, when it is their turn, VPs are no more familiar to the electorate than the president was when he first ran! With the benefit of eight years in the White House, vice presidents can only catch up to their predecessors when they were the opposition candidates on the national stage for the first time. Slightly more Americans could not evaluate George H.W. Bush in 1988 than the percentage of the electorate who failed to evaluate Reagan in 1980. We see a similar situation with Al Gore in 2000.

Both VPs had a leg up on their challengers with the electorate when they ran for president but their advantage was unimpressive. 20% of Americans failed to evaluate Vice President Bush whereas 24% had the same problem with Governor Dukakis in 1988. In 2000, 17% of Americans did not evaluate Al Gore whereas 21% did not evaluate Governor Bush. The evidence here suggests that VPs are fresh faces to Americans when they run

for president and the remaining evidence to be presented shows much the same.

Using Americans' considerations of the candidates, we see more evidence that they are typically less familiar with vice presidents than they are with incumbent presidents. Figure 4.3 shows the average American's total number of considerations of in party candidates from 1956 to 2004. VPs vary in their familiarity to the electorate, but on average Americans had 17% more considerations of incumbents than VPs (2.76 considerations for incumbents vs. 2.36 for VPs). Four in party candidates were noticeably less familiar to Americans than other in party candidates and all four were either sitting VPs or a vice president who succeeded a president mid-term: Richard Nixon in 1960, Gerald Ford in 1976, George H.W. Bush in 1988, and Al Gore in 2000. Three were vice presidents and the fourth was President Gerald Ford. He was only in office for two years after taking over for Richard Nixon but was relatively less well known to the electorate than other incumbents. The other two, Humphrey and LBJ, on the other hand, were on par with other in party candidates in terms of the number of reasons Americans had for supporting or opposing them.

The contrast between vice presidents and incumbents becomes much clearer if we examine Americans' policy considerations of in party candidates. With the exception of Eisenhower, people were less aware of all VPs' policies than they were of incumbents (see Figure 4.4). The differences in how much

people know about incumbents' policies compared to their former running mates are substantial. Over time, they have 79% fewer policy considerations of VPs than they do of incumbents who served a full term (an average of 1.31 for incumbents and only .73 for vice presidents). *Americans are always less informed of VPs' policy positions than incumbents who served a full first term.* The one anomaly is Eisenhower in 1956 as Americans had less to say about his policies than other incumbents and even most VPs.

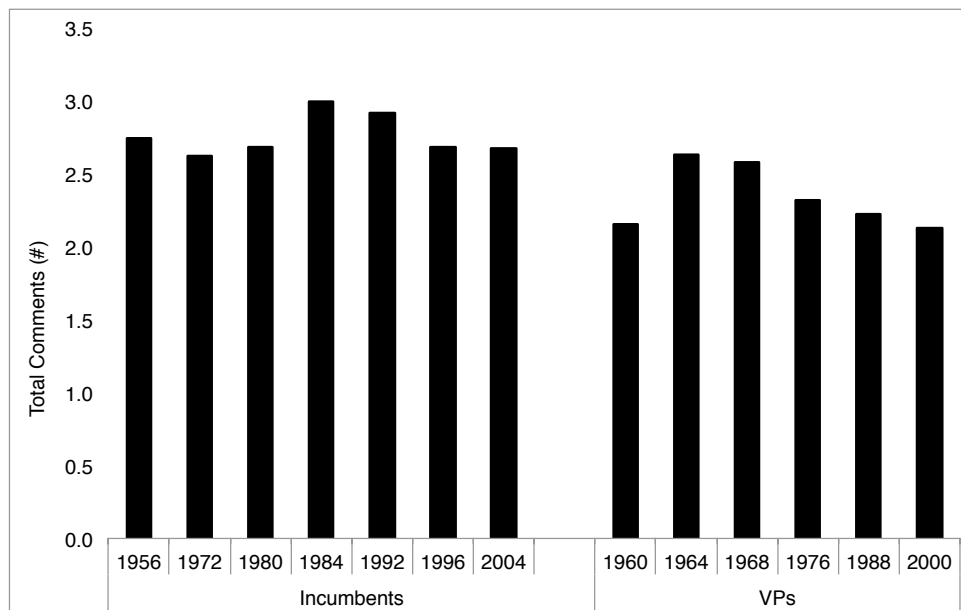


Figure 4.3: Americans' Familiarity With in Party Candidates

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

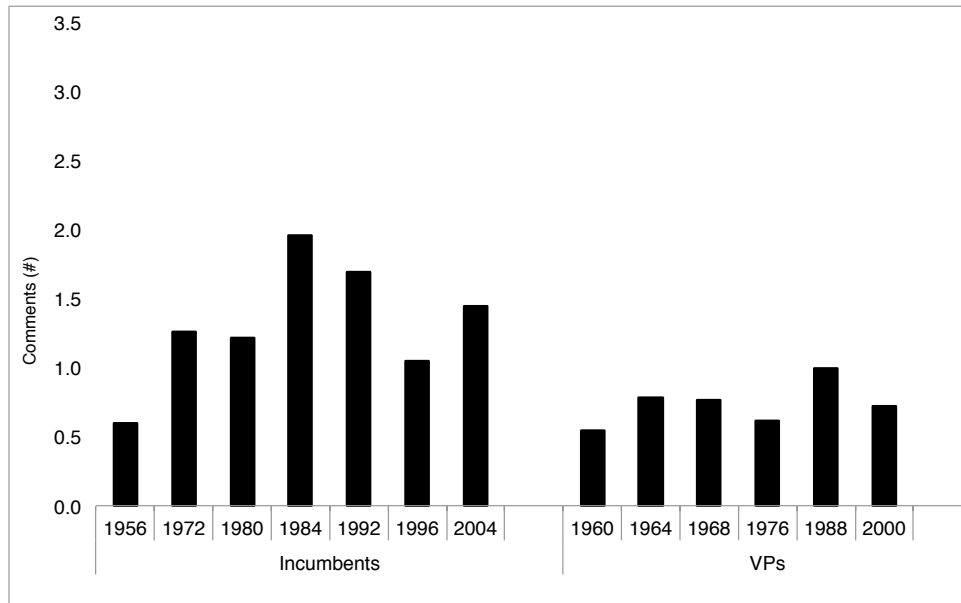


Figure 4.4: Americans' Familiarity With In Party Candidates' Policies

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

Despite VPs' growing importance within the White House policymaking structure since Carter's administration, they are not benefitting from that role when they later run for president. In Figure 4.3, people have fewer reasons for supporting VPs overall in recent elections than they did in the 1960s. With the exception of George H.W. Bush, they are about as familiar with vice president's policy positions today as they were in the 1960s. The average number of peoples' policy considerations of VPs shows a relatively flat trend compared to their familiarity with incumbents and hovers around .7. Even though VPs over the last three decades may have been more influential in the president's agenda than their predecessors, Americans are not giving them credit for their increased roles in the president's agenda.

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 shed more light on how much people know about vice presidents in relation to incumbents and the figures suggest that Americans do not credit them for the successes or failures of the current administration. If they did, their familiarity with VPs' policies would be higher than it is. As Campbell and his colleagues argued (Campbell, Dettrey, and Yin 2010), people have less definite impressions of succeeding in party nominees and cannot be sure of whether they will govern in the same way as the current president (Campbell, Dettrey, and Yin 2010).

4.9 Findings: Incumbents, Vice Presidents, and VPs' Challengers

Vice Presidents also do not benefit from being more familiar than challengers. Figure 4.5 compares Americans' total considerations of each candidate from 1956 to 2004 and as in Figures 4.3-4.4 it groups the elections by whether an incumbent is running for reelection or whether his party's next nominee is running to replace him. It is no surprise that people are more familiar with incumbents than challengers. Presidents have been in the national spotlight for the length of a term in addition to the campaign that got them elected. Plus, they have a record to run on. Challengers lack the same exposure. However, so do VPs and this is reflected in the bars on the right side of Figure 4.5. People have slightly more considerations of the out party candidate than vice presidents for four of those six elections.

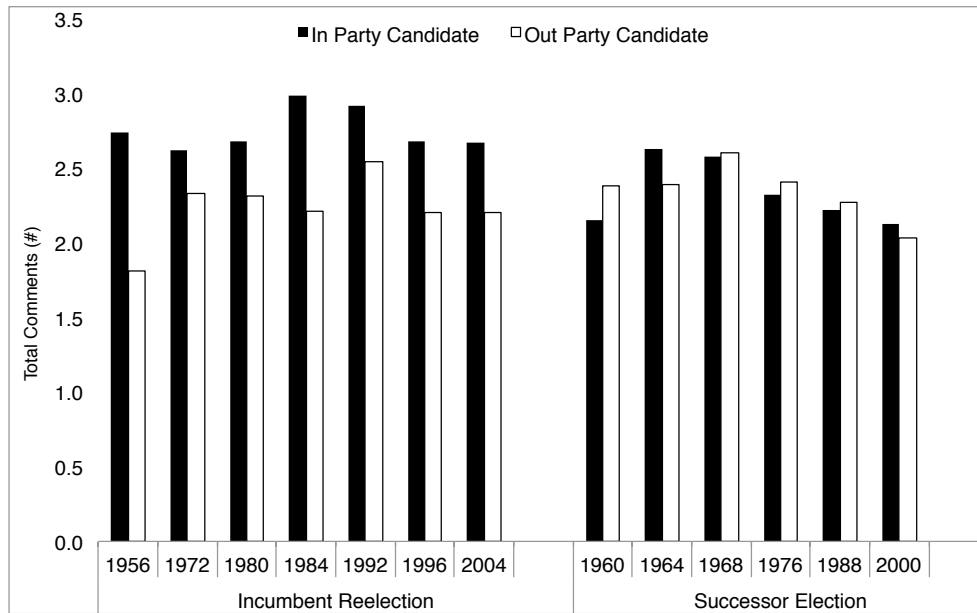


Figure 4.5: Americans' Familiarity With Both Candidates in Reelection and Successor Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

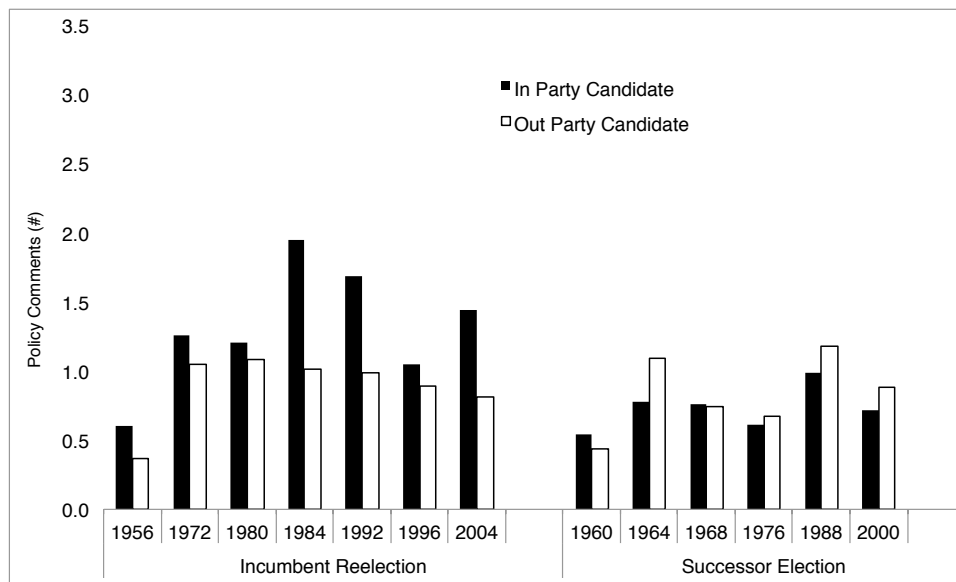


Figure 4.6: Familiarity With Both Candidates' Policies in Incumbent Reelections vs. Successor Elections

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

The contrast between incumbent elections and those for their successors are much starker when comparing Americans' familiarity with candidates' policies over time. When incumbents who have served for full terms are running for reelection, Americans are much more familiar with their policies than their challengers'. The data in Figure 4.6 compare the electorate's average number of policy considerations for each candidate over time similarly to the way Figures 4.3-4.5 have done so. Richard Nixon's policies were more familiar to the electorate than his opponent's in 1960. For four of the other elections with a vice president, Americans were actually more aware of the challenger's policies. People were relatively unfamiliar with every other VP in the study that includes three other vice presidents and two presidents running for reelection.

The fact that Americans are less familiar with vice presidents' policies than they are of the challenger's lends further credence to claims in the literature that VPs do not get credit or blame for the current administration's performance. Voters do not attribute much responsibility for the current administration's record to their vice presidents. When a VP succeeds a president during a term, as LBJ did in 1964 and Ford did in 1974, they also do not get much credit for what they actually do in office before the next election. The 1964 election was more about Barry Goldwater's platform than LBJ's. Gerald Ford was in office for two years before he faced Jimmy Carter and Americans had more to say about Carter's issue positions than Ford's. Three

of the four VPs who ran to succeed their predecessor made fewer connections with the electorate about their policies than their opponents did. Voters were more informed about Nixon's policies than Hubert Humphrey's in 1968, more informed about Dukakis's policies than Bush's in 1988, and were more informed about George W. Bush's platform than Al Gore's in 2000.

Incumbents are evaluated for their policies and not their character because they have a record that people can judge them for. Figure 4.7 compares Americans' number of policy considerations of in party candidates to their number of character considerations for them during each election from 1956 to 2004. Incumbents who have served a full term are evaluated more for their policies than their personal traits, again with Eisenhower being an exception in 1956. Nixon, Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush were all evaluated more on their policies than their personalities after their first four years.

VPs, on the other hand, are evaluated more for their character than their policies, despite having served in the current administration. Americans had noticeably fewer reasons for supporting or opposing them based on their policy positions than they had for their incumbents. The one vice president whose policies mattered more than his character was George H.W. Bush.

Even though they were running as sitting presidents, LBJ and Gerald Ford were evaluated just like most vice presidents who ran to succeed incumbents. Their character was much more salient to citizens than their

policies. Previous studies of vice presidents have not treated LBJ or Ford differently than other incumbent presidents, but the evidence in Figure 4.7 suggests that they should. Both LBJ and Ford ran for reelection having had much less time in the public eye as president than their fellow incumbents: no initial presidential campaign and less than a four year term to use as a signal of their competence to hold the office.

Both presidents received relatively little credit for their times in office despite having some important accomplishments. LBJ pushed the Civil Rights Act through Congress in 1964 amid a reelection campaign. Johnson may not have gotten credit for that in the voters' minds since he cited JFK's legacy as a rallying cry to pressure Congress to pass it. Gerald Ford was active in the Far East and continued Nixon's work on reducing nuclear weapons. He also was active in fighting inflation with his WIN campaign (Whip Inflation Now). They were active presidents for the duration of the terms for which they succeeded their predecessors, however Americans do not credit them for their accomplishments.

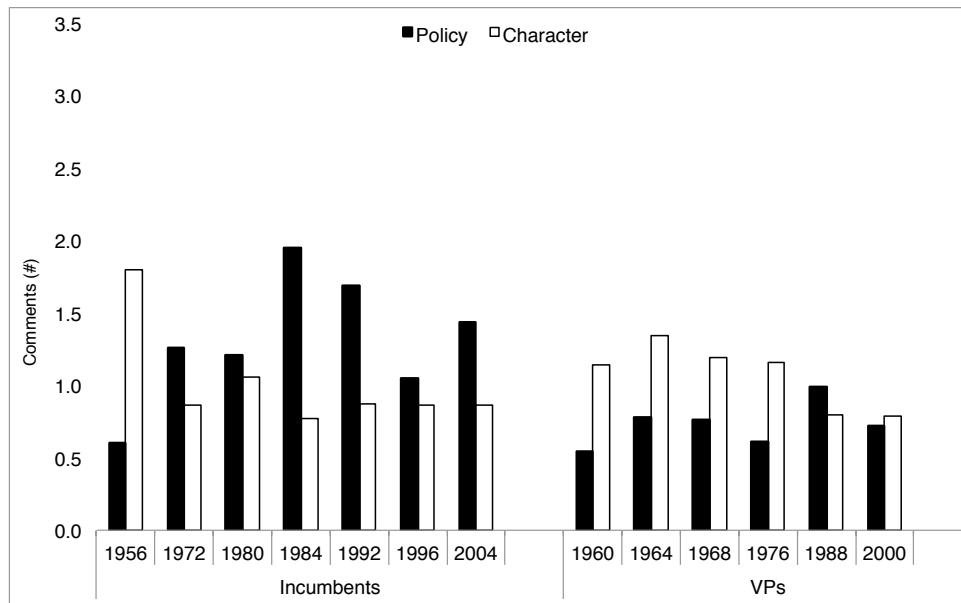


Figure 4.7: Evaluations of In Party Candidates

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

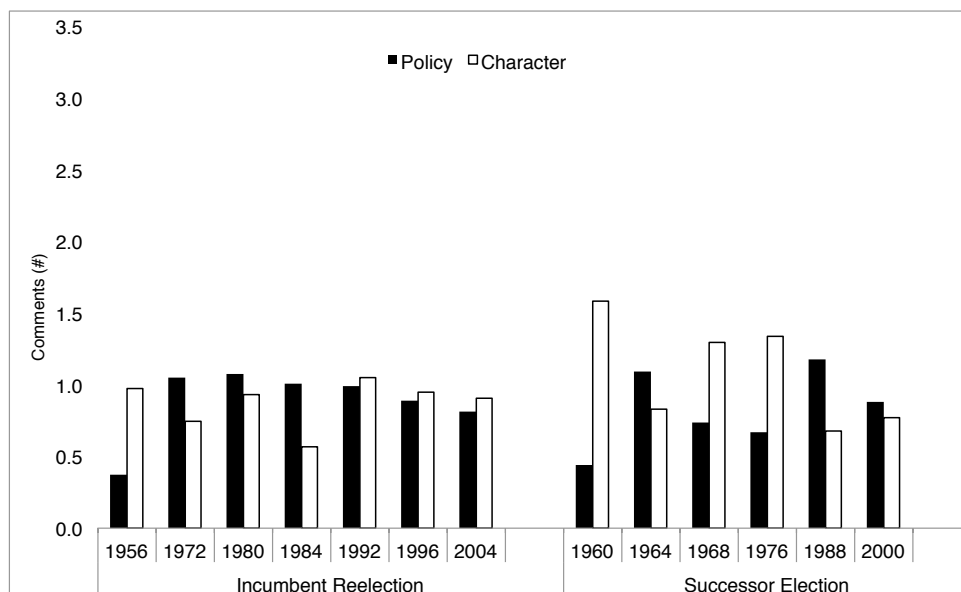


Figure 4.8: Americans' Evaluations of Challengers

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.

With respect to what Americans focus on in evaluating vice presidents, their judgments of VPs are much more similar to how they evaluate

challengers than incumbents. Figure 4.8 shows the average American's balance of policy- and character-related considerations of challengers over time. In just over half of the elections studied here, Americans focus more on a challenger's character than his policies. Challengers are relative newcomers to the national stage when they finally enter the general election phase of the presidential campaign and people over the years are more likely to make inferences about their character than their policies. Vice presidents are judged similarly, which again indicates that Americans have not had enough exposure to them and have not observed their behavior over enough unique circumstances to see the differences between their actions across the situations.

The trends in Figures 4.5-4.8 imply that VPs face the same obstacles that challengers do when they run for president. When a candidate first hits the national stage as their party's nominee, most of the electorate is not equipped with the knowledge of their political background and that is why incumbents may adopt Rose Garden strategies to project the image of competence. Voters have an easier time predicting the future under an incumbent because of what an incumbent has already done compared to assessing what kind of president a challenger might be (Popkin 1994). The evidence presented shows that vice presidents do not benefit from incumbency and their campaigns may be as much about convincing the public

of their competence as it is about their policies. Challengers usually have the same dilemma.

4.10 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter was an attempt to shed more light on how successor elections are different than incumbent reelection years. It explored the differences in our electorate's familiarity between incumbents and their vice presidents, as well as their policies. It also examined the differences in how those candidates are evaluated. It also compared VPs to challengers.

The evidence here suggests that vice presidents are not attributed responsibility for their administration's policies. People are less familiar with VPs and their policies than incumbents and are often less familiar to the electorate than challengers are. They focus more on an incumbent's policies than this character when he runs for reelection but Americans do the opposite when evaluating VPs. People focus on a vice president's character rather than his policy platform in elections where they are the in party's nominee. Vice presidents who were elevated to the presidency during their predecessor's term had the same difficulties other VPs had.

Retrospective voting theory hypothesizes that people evaluate parties in determining which candidate to vote for, but in future research we should acknowledge that candidates matter at least as much if not more than parties. Between the evidence shown in the studies of voters' choices in incumbent vs. successor elections (Campbell and Dettrey 2009; Campbell, Dettrey, and Yin

2010; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2003; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001) and what I have discussed above, it is clear that voters distinguish between a party's leaders as well as seeing the differences between the parties.

The evidence here also suggests that political scientists should do more to show how the news and other media inform the electorate about politicians *between* elections instead of how they are useful during campaigns. The fact that VPs' policies are noticeably less familiar to the public than incumbents' shows that media coverage of government activities between elections does as much if not more than campaigns in informing the electorate about issues. Vice presidents are not focal points in media coverage of national politics and the public does not get information about what they do for while serving the president.

Campaigns inform people about candidates, but they are unable to make up for the lack of exposure to vice presidents during a presidential administration. Presidential candidates spend tens to hundreds of millions of dollars during campaigns to reduce voters' costs of researching their issue positions and backgrounds, yet successor elections are low attribution years compared to reelection years. People are actually slightly less aware of VPs' policies than challengers.' A three to six month general election cycle is not enough for vice presidents to make up for years of news coverage of the president's performance that mostly ignores the vice president's contributions as a trusted advisor.

VPs may continue to face these obstacles in the future unless they secure more opportunities to convey their roles in policy but this is not likely. Negotiating more access to the president guarantees that a VP gets more opportunities to gain presidential experience, but it does not give them opportunities to connect with voters and earn credit for the administration's successes.

It is not difficult to imagine that if Dick Cheney ran for president in 2008, people may have been more aware of him and his issue positions than his other VPs. The media covered his involvement in the Bush Administration arguably more often and in greater detail than they had done under previous administrations (Pika 2010). Bush gave Cheney more responsibilities on hot button security issues like detainee interrogations, which allowed him to deflect some of the attention and ultimately some of the heat. Cheney's role out front is unlikely to be replicated very often unless a president faces similar difficult circumstances in the future.

Future research should go further in measuring the degree to which the media attributes responsibility for the administration's policies to VPs. Doing so may allow scholars to tease out why they are not more strongly linked to their administration when they run for president. It is likely that their coverage is less about them and their role in the administration than it is about the president and his message.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this dissertation I investigated peoples' cognitive engagement in presidential politics. My evidence shows that Americans more engaged than many scholars give them credit for. They connect issues to presidents and are absorbing more about issues over time since the 1950s.

Americans learn about presidents between campaigns but their gains vary across presidents. They picked up more about Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and his son more than the other presidents. They had the lowest net gains in total considerations of Nixon and Clinton. Clinton had a number of policy failures in his first term that may explain this. Nixon's low net gain is due to people having much more to say about his policies in his reelection and almost as much less to say about his character.

People also learn more about policies over a term than about the president's character. For most presidents, the difference is substantial as their gains in policies are more than twice any gains in character awareness. The public might be failing to learn basic political facts, but they are absorbing information about presidents' domestic and foreign policies, as well as how they manage the bureaucracy and work with Congress.

The rise of soft news has not dumbed down the public. In fact, Americans have more issue content in their presidential evaluations and less

character content in cable era than before it. Since 1980, Americans have gone from having access to 10 television channels to well over 100 today. They now have more opportunities to avoid the news than before. Yet, they learn more about presidents overall and more about their policies with during this period than before.

People may be disengaging themselves from the network news, but they are not disengaging from politics. Fewer people are watching the news over time, but they are still learning about presidents' policies. Chapter 3 showed that politically uninterested citizens are not learning less about presidents or their policies in the cable era than they were in the heyday of broadcast news. The growth of the number of people who have policy considerations of the presidents between elections is just as great during the cable era as it was in the days before.

Changes in the news environment are also not exacerbating the inequality in the public's awareness of presidents or their policies. The gap in Americans' awareness of the president between interested and uninterested Americans narrows for every president except for Reagan. Comparing the same patterns for Americans' policy awareness, the gap grows during Carter's, Reagan's and George H.W. Bush's first terms. However, uninterested Americans picked up relatively more policy content than interested Americans while Nixon, Clinton, and George W. Bush were in office.

People are becoming more engaged in what presidents are doing in the cable years than in the broadcast TV days, but they are not more familiar with vice presidents or their policies over time. People had as many reasons for why they liked and disliked Al Gore overall as they had about Richard Nixon in 1960. They had as many comments about Al Gore's policies as they had about L.B.J's in 1964 or Hubert Humphrey four years later.

Americans also do not associate VPs with the incumbent's record. When they are finally presidential nominees, Americans are as unfamiliar with them as they are with their challengers. Incumbents running for reelection are always better known than their challengers, but vice presidents are not. The public more often has more to say in evaluating a VP's opponent than they have about the vice president.

The evidence in Chapter 4 shows that this is especially so for vice president's policies. Americans have more policy comments about challengers than vice presidents with one exception. They were more aware of Nixon's policies than Kennedy's.

The public's unfamiliarity with VPs should not be surprising given their press coverage. The president garners the lion's share of coverage of the administration compared to the vice president. Anecdotally, vice presidents' news coverage features their role as presidential subordinates or spokespersons.

Citizens were also relatively less aware of the two presidents who were first elevated to the presidency without first being elected: LBJ and Ford. Americans knew more about their character during their battles for reelection than they did about their policies. LBJ accomplished the Voting Rights Act in 1964, but the whole time he stumped for it in homage to JFK's legacy. President Ford was active in his two years as president before 1976, but he had difficulty succeeding against a heavily Democratic congress.

5.1 Embracing The Evolution of News in Future Research

My findings support Baum's arguments that softer news is positive for political engagement, but political scientists have yet to comprehensively show how this applies across the spectrum of political issues. For example, as the networks increased the number of stories about health care over time, do Americans become more likely to evaluate presidential candidates' health care policies? Are people more likely to place candidates on an issue like health care as coverage of it increased over time?

Increased negativity in the news may be engaging the electorate and not turning them off to politics. People respond more to negative information than positive (Brader 2005; Geer 2006; Holbrook *et al.* 2001; Lau 1982). Stories that uncover government scandals or stories about a candidate's personal failures may catch peoples' attention and help them connect issues to politicians (Miller 2010).

Political scientists should examine whether negative news stories lead citizens to absorb more about a candidate's policies or not. Recent presidents have all had scandals within their administration garner intense news coverage. Has this led voters to recall more about those issues when evaluating presidents and presidential candidates? For example, did the Valerie Plame scandal in 2003-2004 lead the public to evaluate Bush on intelligence matters or how Bush was managing the federal government when he ran for reelection in 2004?

Champions of hard news also ignore the possibility that the more diverse and more social news environment engages people in ways that old formats did not. The modern media environment provides people with more alternative programming options to the news but it also provides an ever-expanding array of news sources and forums for political engagement that Americans did not have in the past. News organizations all over the world have their news stories online and they update them regularly. Many of them have also collaborated with social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to make it easy for people to share news stories with their friends and colleagues. Social networking websites provide forums for rapid-response political dialogue among friends and even strangers and were used to organize the mass protests in Egypt and Tunisia. Americans and the world were able to watch homemade videos of the protests on YouTube as they

were uploaded. There is much more room to explore the ways this new environment affects political engagement.

5.2 Incumbency vs. Succession and What It Means for Campaigns

David Axelrod, President Obama's chief campaign strategist, once claimed that character always matters more to voters than issues. After working for the Democratic National Committee in 2004, he explained that the Swift Vets attacks on Kerry's character were effective in halting all of his momentum after the Democratic convention because character is *always* more powerful than issues. "The first ad, with words such as *liar* or *dishonest*, hurt the character of Kerry. As one DNC ad creator stated, 'Character always trumps issues.'" (Devlin 2005, 293)

Axelrod is only partially correct if we consider the citizen's perspective. Policies can trump character as well. The relative salience of each to the average American depends on whom they are evaluating. Candidates thus face different obstacles depending on whether they are the incumbent, the challenger, or a sitting vice president running to succeed the president.

An incumbent's policies are more salient to the electorate than his character when he is running for reelection. This is not surprising given that citizens learn more about presidents' policies than their personality and other traits. Plus, it is easier for citizens to predict what policy benefits they may

derive from government under the incumbent than the challenger because they know what life has been like the past four years (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Popkin 1994).

Presidential reelection campaigns are always referenda on the incumbent and his performance. In good times, incumbents eagerly campaign on their administration's successes. However, they cannot avoid their failures when most of the electorate thinks the country is on the wrong track. Challengers can have difficulty connecting with the voters on their own policies because they are new to the scene, but they always blame the president for the administration's unsuccessful policies.

We can see some of this in the 2012 Republican primaries thus far with Mitt Romney. Before the January and February jobs reports showed real signs that the economy was beginning to pick up steam, he seemed to be the eventual nominee. He was the most electable Republican because he had success in the private sector and could contrast that with Obama's lackluster economy. Americans have since become more confident in the economy's future, Obama's approval rating is slowly rebounding, and Romney is struggling to craft a new message.

Axelrod was right in his analysis about anti-Kerry ads because character is more salient than policies to citizens evaluating challengers. Challengers cannot point to presidential-caliber experience to play up their competence. People thus can only judge them on how they perform on the

campaign trail (Popkin 1994). Thus, they are much more likely to attribute the challenger's actions to character because they have limited knowledge of the candidate's background.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, vice presidents also face many of the same burdens that challengers do and are evaluated similarly. Much of the literature suggested otherwise because vice presidents should be able to run on the incumbent's policies. At first thought, this probably makes sense. However, citizens are not highly aware of vice presidents' policies. Al Gore's strategists in 2000 could not craft any arguments about Gore's role in the economy that tested well in internal polls (Jamieson and Waldman 2001).

Thus, vice presidents enter successor elections as fresh faces and cannot take credit for their administration's successes. Their character is likely going to be more salient to citizens because they are practically as new to the electorate as a challenger is. They have to introduce themselves to the electorate while trying to avoid being blamed for their administration's failures.

More inquiry is necessary to understand why people are not familiar with vice presidents. We have yet to gain a thorough understanding of how the news covers vice presidents and how this affects peoples' familiarity with them over time. Why do vice presidents have trouble connecting with voters? Why does the electorate sometimes associate VPs with the administration's failures and fail to credit them for the administration's successes? Is this because challengers' campaigns are heavily focused on attacking the administration?

Appendix A: Cognitive Measures vs. Factual Knowledge Measures

Political scientists are trending towards using cognitive measures instead of factual knowledge questions to gauge the nature and levels of Americans' political engagement. A majority of surveys ask questions about civics, government institutions, public figures, and current events (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). These types of questions measure knowledge that is tangentially related to voting and miss a lot of what citizens actually know about politics.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) suggested a five-item index that represents typical knowledge question indices very well. They recommended a five-item index for a reasonable measure of political knowledge that correlates well with more comprehensive questions series. The five questions ask respondents which party controls the House, the percentage of votes each chamber of Congress needs to override a presidential veto, which party is more conservative than the other, which government branch has the power of judicial review, and who is the vice president (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 304-305).

These questions do not measure what people actually have learned about candidates or their policies. They assume that citizens need to know facts like those referenced above to make a reasonable inference about what

a presidential candidate might do on particular issues like health care reform (Lupia 2006). Knowing what congress needs to override a veto does not help someone decide if Obama or McCain will work towards a policy outcome that they prefer. A person may not remember such details but they may remember that candidate Obama opposed an individual mandate during the 2008 campaign and be justifiably skeptical that Obama would pursue it as president.

Campaigns and news coverage of government activities discuss public leaders and issues, not general facts about how government works. When candidates are on the stump, they are offering visions of what government should be doing for people in the future and not reinforcing basic facts about the structure of our government institutions. When news organizations cover the legislative process about a contentious issue where the president may be publicly battling with congressional leaders, the focus is not on which party is the majority in each chamber of Congress. The focus is on the president's and congressional leadership's opposing positions on what the legislation should include and what it should not.

Cognitive measures provide researchers with a better gauge of what people absorb from campaigns and government activities and how they use that to evaluate politicians. Cognitive responses are "the results of information-processing and –structuring activity and thus consist of responses such as recognition, associations, elaborations, ideas, and images." (Cacioppo, Harkins, and Petty 1981, 37) Thus, the content of the NES likes and dislikes

offer a window into the structures of our cognitive processes (Cacioppo, von Hippel, and Ernst 1997). An added perk of using open-ended questions is that they allow respondents to use their own frame of reference without imposing any structure on responses like closed-ended questions do (Miller 1990).

Peoples' responses are a product of what thoughts were most accessible in their minds at the time the question was asked. One of the four axioms of Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of survey response postulates that the more recently a political consideration has been activated in our minds, the more likely it will be accessible in response to a survey stimulus. He later argues that in response to a survey question, people "do not normally canvass their minds for all considerations relevant to the given issue; rather, they answer the question on the basis of whatever considerations are accessible 'at the top of the head.'" (Zaller 1992, 49)

We should not be quick to conclude that the likes and dislikes only reveal reactions to political information we have recently been exposed to. The accessibility of attitudes and considerations also reflects thoughts about what we care about and how often we have thought about them (Krosnick 1989). Our considerations about issues we care about are as accessible as our thoughts about political messages we have recently been exposed to either in the news or from campaigns (Popkin 1994).

Information processing models demonstrate that a consideration's accessibility is also a function of how well we have related it to political

concepts in our long-term memory. Lodge and Stroh (1993) argue that our knowledge of the world is structured in our long-term memory similarly to a computer file directory: we have abstract higher-level concepts like Republican or Democrat that are linked to more specific concepts like “Obama” and “president.” Within a cognitive node about President Obama or George W. Bush, we have links to affectively charged judgments about their attributes. These can include issue positions, character traits, or past behavior. When we evaluate new political information, we link it to our cognitive directories (i.e. Obama and Bush) and update our evaluation that that subject (Lodge and Stroh 1993). We are also likely to activate our considerations on related political concepts and bring them into our consciousness.

Psychologists caution us to be skeptical of peoples’ answers when we ask about the reasons they chose one option over another. Reviewing experimental evidence Nisbett and Wilson (1977) demonstrate that subjects were unaware of the underlying cognitive factors behind their preferences. When asked to explain their answers to questions during experiments or during surveys, people reconstruct the reasons behind their decision based on accessible thoughts and not the other information that factored into their decision (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Wilson 2002; Wilson and Bar-Anan 2008). For that reason, Lodge and Stroh (1993) caution political scientists to proceed with caution using the NES like and dislikes.

I do not claim that the open-ended responses are accurate reports of the factors that influenced someone's presidential choice. However, they reveal some of the aspects of the candidates' character traits, issue positions, and past actions that mattered to that person when they were evaluating each candidate. Even the most carefully constructed set of closed-ended questions is likely to miss some of the things people thought about.

The number of responses overall or in a subject area measures cognitive effort and not loquaciousness. A number of studies show that people offer more responses under high intensity conditions than under low intensity conditions (Cacioppo, Harkins, and Petty 1981). For example, people articulate more likes and dislikes of candidates where campaign intensity is high than people who live in low intensity states or districts (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Zaller 1992). Smith (1989) worries that NES respondents who were more talkative inherently offered more considerations than introverted respondents. However, Geer (1988) demonstrated that the number of one's responses is closely related to their level of political interest and not their verbosity.

A growing community of political scientists is using the NES likes and dislikes to measure Americans' cognitive political engagement. Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen (2007) code the responses into policy and character variables to show that as the policy content in presidential campaign advertising increased since the 1950s, Americans had more policy content in

their considerations of presidential candidates. Hayes (2009) shows that policy responses are a greater percentage of peoples' comments about both presidential candidates today than in the 1950s and character content is down. Kam (2006) demonstrates that campaign intensity has positive and significant effects on peoples' likelihood of having both positive and negative considerations of candidates. Holbrook et al. (2001) use the open-ended responses to demonstrate that peoples' initial favorable impressions of candidates are very influential but sustained negative attacks over a campaign are more potent than additional positive information about a candidate. Holbrook (2002) uses the open-ended responses to measure how much people know about presidential candidates in showing that debates can reduce the knowledge gap between those with higher and lower levels of education.

Appendix B: Policy and Character Consideration Codes

Policy and character considerations variables were created from responses to the open-ended likes and dislikes questions about the presidential candidates. The NES codes responses into hundreds of categories that I recoded into policy and character categories. The NES response codes may be found in the cumulative data file appendix under “1952-1968” and “1972-2004 Party-Candidate Master Codes.” I list the specific policy and character codes below.

NES Candidate Likes and Dislikes Variables vcf0475-vcf0498d

1952-1968:

Policy

Democratic Candidate Likes: 5401-5409, 5411-5420, 5431, 5440, 5442, 5446, 5448, 5450, 5455, 5456, 5460-5484, 5490-5492, 5500-5520, 5530-5533, 5537, 5541, 5550-5553, 5560, 5561, 5570-5586, 5590-5595, 5599, 5601-5699, 5701, 5799, 5870

Democratic Candidate Dislikes: 6401-6420, 6422-6430, 6440-6453, 6460-6485, 6490-6492, 6500-6520, 6530-6537, 6541, 6550-6553, 6560, 6561, 6570-6587, 6590-6595, 6601-6699, 6702-6799, 6871

GOP Candidate Likes: 7400-7416, 7431, 7439-7454, 7461-7484, 7491, 7492, 7500-7520, 7530-7537, 7541, 7550-7553, 7560, 7561, 7570-7586, 7590, 7595, 7599, 7601-7699, 7701-7799, 7870

GOP Candidate Dislikes: 8401-8430, 8440-8451, 8461-8485, 8490-8492, 8500-8520, 8530-8537, 8541, 8550-8553, 8560, 8561, 8570-8586, 8590-8595, 8599, 8601-8699, 8702-8799, 8870

Character

Democratic Candidate Likes: 5010-5391

Democratic Candidate Dislikes: 6010-6391

GOP Candidate Likes: 7010-7391

GOP Candidate Dislikes: 8010-8391

1972-2004

Codes are the same for both candidates from 1972-2004.

Policy: 531-534, 601-608, 615, 616, 619-627, 628-697, 801-838, 841-848, 870, 871, 897, 901-998, 1001-1015, 1019-1046, 1051-1070, 1080-1082, 1084-1088, 1101-1199, 1201-1297, 1300-1310

Character: 201-498

Appendix C: *New York Times* Archive Search Terms and NES Sample Size by Year

To compare national media exposure for a vice president and the vice president's challenger during a presidential administration compared to the incumbent, I searched the *New York Times* archives to count the number of stories mentioning each actor respectively. My Boolean search terms are listed below.

Boolean Search Terms for News Coverage of the President, Vice President, and the Vice President's Challenger Per Administration

Eisenhower Administration

Articles counted from January 1, 1953 through Election Day 1960

President Eisenhower: president and eisenhower

Vice President Nixon: "vice president" and Nixon

John F. Kennedy: senator and john and kennedy

Johnson Administration

Articles counted from January 1, 1961 through Election Day 1968. I counted LBJ's coverage as vice president in his total count.

President Johnson: "vice president" and Johnson, president and Johnson

Vice President Humphrey: senator and humphrey, "vice president" and humphrey

Richard Nixon: richard and nixon

Reagan Administration

Articles counted from January 1, 1981 through Election Day 1988

President Reagan: president and Reagan

Vice President Bush: “vice president” and bush

Michael Dukakis: governor and dukakis

Clinton Administration

Articles counted from January 1, 1993 through Election Day 2000

President Clinton: president and clinton

Vice President Gore: “vice president” and gore

George W. Bush: governor and george and bush

Number of Respondents Who Answered Likes and Dislikes Questions about the Presidential Candidates by Year

Year	N
1952	1799
1956	1762
1960	1164
1964	1571
1968	1557
1972	1372
1976	2248
1980	1570
1984	2257
1988	2040
1992	2485
1996	1714
2000	1807
2004	1212

Number of Respondents Who Answered Likes and Dislikes Questions about
the Presidential Candidates by Year and Level of Political Interest

Year	Interested	Uninterested
1968	857	488
1972	811	304
1976	1333	562
1980	831	525
1984	1208	715
1988	1044	717
1992	1522	718
1996	966	565
2000	908	635
2004	727	336

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