
The Changed Information Environment of Presidential Campaigns

What information do citizens get from the mass media during presidential campaigns? This question has been studied in the past, yet is more important than ever. Since America's first competitive presidential election in 1796, the technology of mass media has been constantly changing. It has evolved from small partisan newspapers in the 1700s, to mass-circulation broadsheets in the 1800s, to radio and television in the 1900s. But mass media seem now to be more omnipresent than ever before, augmented over the last fifteen years by social media, transforming how news is created, disseminated, and consumed. This is the starting premise of the book that follows. Traditional and social media content is a central feature of modern election campaigns; indeed, for most citizens, election campaigns occur *entirely* through traditional and social media. It follows that accounting for both the nature of media content and the nature of media effects is central to understanding presidential election campaigns.

This book seeks to understand what information is produced, how that information gets to voters, and what information voters actually absorb in our new and complex information environment. In any national-level democratic election, there is a long list of issues and candidates that the media can focus on, and innumerable ways in which those issue and candidates can be presented. Most citizens' experiences of a presidential campaign are fundamentally affected by these journalistic decisions.

In 2016, in addition to many pressing national policy concerns that might have demanded attention regardless of the candidates, both major party nominees had unprecedented characteristics, and the fall campaign was particularly eventful. The Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, was the first woman ever nominated for president by a major American political party. She had a long history in national Democratic politics that included losing a hotly contested primary battle against Barack Obama when she ran for president in 2008. In the 2016 cycle, she faced an unexpected fight for the nomination from Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, an Independent who caucused with the Democrats. Donald Trump, in contrast, defeated a large number of other candidates and won the Republican nomination rather handily. He became his party's presumptive nominee well before Clinton did, and he was successful despite having no prior electoral experience and indeed little previous connection to the Republican Party. On Election Day, for the second time in the last five presidential elections, the Republican nominee won despite receiving fewer votes than the Democrat. What were the nature and content of the information environment—that is, the words conveyed by and recalled from mass and social media—in this historic election? This is one central concern in the chapters that follow.

Even as media content is increasingly available in digital format, examining media content is in some ways more challenging than it was in the past. Changes in media technology mean that people encounter information about a presidential campaign in many different ways. In addition to hearing directly from friends and family, reading writ-

ten publications in print or online, listening to news-oriented radio, or watching an increasing number of different network and cable television news programs, citizens encounter political news through various social media platforms. These platforms interact with more traditional forms of media and with interpersonal communication, amplifying certain messages more than others. Capturing this increasingly multivariate media environment is difficult, to say the least.

Thus another ongoing theme of this book is that advances in media technology call for new ways of measuring the information environment. Thankfully, corresponding developments in survey and content-analytic research techniques facilitate new approaches to measuring the information that reaches and is absorbed by the mass public. Put more succinctly, there is an increasingly complex system by which political information reaches voters, and an increasingly complex set of research methodologies to match. In this book, we rely on new ways of measuring information flow and reception during political campaigns, focusing on language and words, toward understanding the 2016 presidential election. We believe that some of the approaches outlined will be valuable for political communication scholars trying to understand the nature of campaign information in the context of a new and complex media environment.

The chapters that follow paint a detailed picture of one of the most notable political campaigns in the postwar era. Our work suggests that the pre-election period was characterized by particularly negative messaging, a shifting but largely uninfluential series of scandals for Donald Trump, and a single, stable, and influential scandal for Hillary Clinton. The impact of email-related news on Clinton's election prospects is readily apparent in our data. But the effects of that scandal were not, as some have suggested, only driven by late-campaign interventions from FBI Director James Comey. Our data make clear the *long-standing* salience of email, in news content but especially in the public mind. Even when there was other news about Hillary Clinton, the public thought about "her emails"—for months and months—indeed, starting before the election campaign was even underway. The end result was a close

enough election outcome that Donald Trump won the Electoral College vote. Considered narrowly, these findings highlight the importance of email scandals to the 2016 election outcome. Considered more broadly, our results highlight the importance of considering not just the content of the (increasingly diverse) media environment but also the ways in which that content circulates across media platforms, and over time, and “sticks” in the minds of prospective voters.

The Impact of Campaign-Period News

American presidential campaigns are unusually long by international standards. Candidates start to run for their party’s nomination sometimes two years in advance, and often the nominees are effectively decided well over six months before Election Day. In 2016, overall, approximately \$2.4 billion was spent on the presidential campaign by candidates, parties, and independent groups (Sultan 2017). But, of course, attention to the campaign does not come only, or even primarily, from electioneering. Most people never meet a candidate or attend a campaign event; they hear about the campaign at least as much through the news media as through campaign advertising; and overall, the publicity surrounding U.S. presidential campaigns is massive by any reasonable measure.

This book is premised on the idea that campaign-period media content can matter to election outcomes. In spite of the magnitude of U.S. campaigns, however, there are reasons to question this assumption. Political scientists have focused a lot of attention on how and when news coverage reaches voters. Many have concluded that the impact of news coverage is limited. Instead, they often say campaigns mostly reinforce citizens’ existing predispositions, making them more certain that they prefer the same type of candidates they had voted for in the past (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Klapper 1960; Kinder 2003; Bartels 2006). Other work finds that one can predict the presidential popular vote margin fairly reliably without knowing *anything* about the campaign coverage.

Just knowing the economic growth rate in the election year, whether the United States was engaged in an unpopular foreign war, and how many terms the current president's party had held the White House enables one to predict, if not the exact vote totals, at least which elections were landslides for one party or the other and which were close (e.g., Abramowitz 1988; Bartels and Zaller 2001; Hibbs 2000, 2007; Bartels 2008; Wlezien and Erikson 2012; for more on this, see chapter 2).

While many political scientists and communication scholars believe that media coverage during presidential campaigns has only minor effects on voting, many journalists and pundits believe the opposite: campaign messages matter a lot. We suspect that reality is somewhere in between. Indeed, even as there is work that makes accurate election predictions in the absence—and indeed largely before—any campaign-period media coverage, there is also work that finds small but significant media effects throughout election campaigns (Sides and Vavreck 2013). Some work suggests that small errors in long-term predictions may be accounted for by media content—that even as long-term macroeconomic factors matter, so too does media content, albeit at the margins (Belanger and Soroka 2012).

Other work demonstrates media effects in the context of election campaigns. Studies find that those who consume more news prefer different candidates than those who consume less, for instance, holding partisanship and other background characteristics constant (Bartels 1993; Hetherington 1996). Other work finds that, even if media content does not change people's vote choices, it changes their beliefs about which topics are salient (i.e., at the top of the head) and the issues people base their voting decision on, phenomena called “agenda setting” and “priming” (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Johnston et al. 1992; Iyengar and Simon 1994; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004; Ladd 2007; McCombs 2014).¹

The activation of predispositions, especially partisanship, appears to be stronger when people are exposed to media coverage that emphasizes partisan themes; and the influence of the economy on voting appears to be stronger when campaign media coverage primes economic

considerations and less when the economy gets less coverage (Bartels 2006; Vavreck 2009; Sides and Vavreck 2013). The agenda-setting and priming that happen during campaigns may thus augment the impact of predispositions and the economy on voting preferences. Put differently, it may be that in many cases the impact of campaign-period media is simply to engage the fundamentals (e.g., Campbell 2008; Gelman and King 1993; Erikson and Wlezien 2012), reminding voters about their predispositions and preferences in time for Election Day.

Who is most influenced by these media messages? Some people enjoy following politics and pay a lot of attention to political news, whereas others have little interest. While campaign interest among the American public varies greatly (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Prior 2018), for the portion interested in politics, there is almost unlimited coverage of the campaigns in the media environment. Indeed, the seemingly never-ending growth in media and entertainment choices over the past several decades has only exacerbated the differences in exposure to political communication between those who enjoy it and those who don't (Prior 2005, 2007). These long and heavily publicized presidential campaigns don't necessarily break through to the less politically engaged. Those who are addicted to political news consume most of it.

Since political engagement is strongly correlated with partisanship and ideological consistency, those who consume the most political messages are the least likely to be moved by those messages. Instead, persuasion usually occurs in the uncommon event that those with moderate levels of political engagement encounter political information, or the very rare event that those with low political engagement do (Zaller 1992).

The fact that middle- and low-engagement voters are the most susceptible to influence when they encounter political information also helps us understand why the topics given heavy attention in the media environment can be consequential. First, stories that are covered heavily and repeatedly over a long period of time are most likely to break through and actually get noticed even by people without strong pre-

existing political commitments. Second, it is easier to change preferences (and the intensity of preferences) by changing the subject than by directly telling people to vote for or against a candidate. Persuadable voters who don't follow the details of politics may be more likely to notice when one issue is getting heavy coverage, and thus think more about that issue in the voting booth.

In short, media effects needn't draw citizens away from their initial preferences; and effects should not be distributed evenly across all citizens. These facts have led to what we would characterize as a new consensus about the likely effects of media coverage in election campaigns. Media content *can* shift support for candidates, for some voters at least, either through the introduction of new information, or through the reinforcement and intensification of "fundamentals" and preexisting partisan preferences. In a close election like 2016, these effects can be of real consequence.

Identifying when and which mass-mediated information matters is of course relatively complex. This book examines some possibilities by focusing on the information that was both disseminated in media and actually absorbed by the public (i.e., the content of traditional and social media), and the public's recollections of that content. Our data point to a storyline that sits somewhere between what we might call the *campaign-period-information* and *engaging-the-fundamentals* perspectives of media effects. On the one hand, it seems clear that campaign-period coverage of email scandals related to Hillary Clinton and the Democrats were highly salient for survey respondents. On the other hand, these email-related scandals were not "new" to the campaign—they were prominent before the campaign began, and their impact seems to have stemmed in part from their enduring salience, spurred on by campaign events. In short, "email" was a *pre-campaign* issue for Hillary Clinton, the election impact of which may have been augmented by campaign-period news coverage.

The Plan for This Book

This book examines how information flowed through various forms of media to the public in the 2016 presidential campaign. The chapters that follow reflect complementary but also somewhat different approaches to analyzing full-text news content, social media posts, and survey responses. These differences reflect the fact that we are eight coauthors, each of whom brings a slightly different approach to the study of campaign media. That said, each chapter aims to characterize which issues and candidates get covered or neglected during presidential campaigns, how the coverage of those issues and candidates differs in traditional media versus social media, and the relationship between the information in both of these venues and the information citizens actually report hearing about.

As already noted, the issues and candidates in this election were unusual in multiple ways, and the 2016 campaign was particularly eventful. It is difficult to interpret what we are seeing in the media content without some understanding of the candidates and the events of the campaign. Thus chapter 2 briefly provides some basic background on the candidates, the state of the country in 2016, and the events of the fall general election campaign. It gives special attention to explaining Hillary Clinton's email scandal, which persistently dominated much of the 2016 media environment. We think this chapter serves as a useful review of many of the details of the 2016 campaign that may now have been forgotten. The reader might also refer back to this chapter when reading later chapters for a refresher on an event to which the media system is reacting.

Chapter 3 introduces the main datasets we use in this book and provides a brief description of what the media, journalists, and the public were focused on throughout the campaign. Using topic models that analyze the words used in each of these datasets throughout the fall campaign, we consider when and how topics emerged from the background into focus and then faded.

Chapter 4 looks at media reaction to the first Republican primary

debate in the election season in August 2015. This was the national introduction to Donald Trump, how he would behave on the stage of national presidential politics, and how the media system would react to him. We find, very early on, patterns that would be echoed in the fall 2016 campaign information environment. Trump dominated news coverage of the debate. And, despite it rarely coming up from Republican candidates in this debate, people were nevertheless hearing about Clinton's email scandal during this time.

Chapter 5 examines the tone of coverage in the fall 2016 campaign. It finds that overall news coverage was more negative than in recent previous presidential campaigns, consistent with these candidates being the most personally unpopular nominees in polling history. We also find that the tone of media content became more negative when moving from newspaper coverage to Twitter content to personal recollections of what people had heard about the campaign.

Chapter 6 closely examines what people reported hearing about the candidates in the open-ended survey questions during the campaign. We find a persistent and large focus on Clinton's email scandal throughout the campaign. Interestingly, Republicans tended to recall hearing more about Hillary Clinton than Democrats did.

Chapter 7 examines major events of the fall 2016 campaign and how information about them got out to the public. We give special attention to examining how long coverage of events lasts in the media system and how long people report hearing about it. We find that what people reported hearing about during the campaign was largely not long-standing challenges facing the country but short-term campaign events generated by the candidates themselves. These candidate-generated stories temporarily displaced the Clinton email scandal in the public's thinking; but after a short period they faded, and the email story returned. This created a contrast between the information people received about Clinton and Trump. While topics in coverage of Trump were very inconsistent over the weeks of the campaign, Clinton coverage kept returning to the same narrative over and over. We also find that what the public reported hearing is not a mirror image of what

was covered in our media datasets—what the public reported hearing was both more responsive to recent events and more dominated by the email scandal.

Chapter 8 takes a careful look at fake news stories on social media. We find that there were a lot of fake news stories circulating on social media, but, in general, high-quality news tended to be shared more than low-quality news. However, Republican voters were more likely to remember information that was in fake news stories about Clinton than what was in traditional news coverage of Clinton.

Chapter 9 sums up the lessons we learned about the information the mass public encounters in a modern presidential campaign, and uses those lessons to think about future campaigns. We discuss the implications both for scholarship on campaign messaging in future elections and for media practitioners who will be covering elections in 2020 and beyond.

Many of the figures in this book have dynamic features built into them that can be viewed from the website Words That Matter Supplemental Files (<https://dx.doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/JS7FT>). For example, running a mouse over some of the charts that show a specific pattern of survey or Twitter responses will indicate key dates or activities in the campaign.