

# The Mass Media and the Public's Assessments of Presidential Candidates, 1952–2000

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*Media critics blame contemporary news for increasing levels of apathy and ignorance among the electorate. We agree that the amount of policy-oriented information in news coverage of presidential campaigns has declined and the level of news consumption has fallen. Yet, based on 50 years of data on media content and public attitudes, we find that over this period of time Americans have just as much to say about the major-party presidential candidates, what they have to say is more policy oriented, the association of vote choice with policy considerations has strengthened while the association with character considerations has weakened, and factual knowledge about the presidential candidates' issue positions has not declined. We assess the role of education, party polarization, and paid advertising in explaining trends in Americans' political knowledge and engagement. We show that the public's steady level of information and increased focus on policy in presidential politics reflects the high level of policy content in paid ads, which have compensated for the shift of news coverage toward candidate character, scandal, and the horse race.*

*"The common view is that the American public turns off, knows little, cares less, and stays home [on election day]. . ."*

—Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle?*

One of the most common generalizations about American politics is that today's voters are less informed and less engaged than voters in prior generations. This perceived decline in political engagement echoes a decline in both exposure to news and the quality of political news. Newspaper readership has been waning steadily for decades, the network news shows have lost a third of their viewers, and the content of campaign coverage in these news outlets has shifted away from policy to scandals, gaffes, and the horse race. It is no wonder, then, that Americans are viewed as less equipped to make electoral decisions today than they were 50 years ago.

In this paper we argue that the perceived deterioration in the political information environment is real, but the apparent decline in the public's ability to make substantively informed voting decisions is not. Americans are as interested in and informed about the candidates' policy positions in presidential elections as

they were in the 1950s, 60s, or 70s. Indeed, the importance of policy stances (in comparison to personal qualities) has increased over time. What explains this apparent disjuncture between the deteriorating news environment and voters' continued ability to bring policy considerations to bear in presidential voting? The answer, we argue, is paid political advertising. While news may be more sensational and less substantive than in the past, campaign advertising has become more substantive in content and has grown tremendously in reach, frequency, and sophistication.

In the following pages we document the trends in news coverage of presidential campaigns over the past 50 years. We then contrast changes in the news environment with trends in the public's knowledge of the presidential candidates and propensity to focus on policy considerations when talking about the candidates and forming a vote choice. We introduce a new data set, the Presidential Election Discourse Dataset (PEDD), which combines the coding of media content with survey based measures of public discourse about the presidential candidates between 1952 and 2000. Using these and related data, we show that the public's continued ability to use policy considerations in

forming presidential votes reflects neither increases in education over these decades nor a growth in the ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties or candidates. Rather, we argue, the growth of policy-oriented paid advertising best explains the public's increased focus on policy in presidential elections.

## The Changing News Environment

Americans' news consumption has declined dramatically over the past 50 years. Newspaper circulation per capita has fallen about 40% since the 1950s (Norris 2000; U. S. Bureau of the Census 2002, 700); the nightly network news shows have lost about a third of their viewers since 1970 (Rutenberg and Schiesel 2002); and although hard data on local television news viewership are not available, self-reports from national surveys suggest a decline of about 25% since the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup>

To some extent these declines represent Americans' shifting sources of news: from print to television, from network and local television news to cable news, and from television and print to the Internet. But increases in consumption of new news sources makes up only a fraction of the decline in consumption of older news media, especially in the 1952–2000 period we study. The growth in cable news viewership, for example, is quite recent and still rather modest. CNN was established in 1980 and was not joined by MSNBC and Fox News until 1996. The five current cable news networks combined attract only a fraction of the network news audience. In 2000, prime-time viewership for all cable news combined was about 3.5 million Americans, compared with about 32 million for the combined network evening news shows (journalism.org 2005).

The Internet is an even more recent news source. As late as 1996, only 22% of Americans had Internet access at home, and only 9% said they ever accessed news sites on the Internet.<sup>2</sup> By 2000, 33% of Americans claimed to go online for news at least once a week with about half this number (15%) claiming to access news

daily on the Internet (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2000). To the extent that the Internet has emerged as an alternative to traditional news sources, we would not expect to see much of an impact on presidential elections before 2000.

Declines in Americans' news consumption have been accompanied by changes in the overall quality of news coverage of politics and presidential campaigns. While "news quality" undoubtedly means different things to different people, we use the term to refer to political coverage which is more substantive and policy-oriented and less sensational, and to news in general which is focused on matters of social and political significance (Patterson 1991, 1994, 2000; Zaller 1999). Patterson (1994) finds, for example, that policy content on *The New York Times* front page coverage of presidential elections fell from 50% in 1960 to only 15% in 1990. Similarly, Zaller (1999) shows that the percent of network television news devoted to government and foreign affairs stories declined dramatically between 1981 and 1997 and that the quality of news delivered on television news magazines also declined during the same time period.

These declining trends in news consumption and quality suggest that we might expect a similar decline in voters' abilities to discuss substantive policy material and to use policy considerations when making their vote decisions. A large body of literature on priming and agenda setting show the power of the media to shape the way Americans think about politics and form political judgments (Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Miller and Krosnick 2000). It would be surprising, therefore, if the decline in consumption of policy-oriented news did not lead to a decrease in voters' use of policy relevant information at the polls. But a systematic assessment of the linkage between measures of news quality and voters' evaluations of candidates has not been done. In order to do so, we need better data on news coverage of presidential candidates during campaigns. We also need comprehensive measures of candidate communications during campaigns so that the direct effects of news can be isolated from the effects of candidate driven communications. The Presidential Election Discourse Dataset (PEDD) contains both sets of data and we bring it to bear on these questions.

## Data

To assess the relationship between the media environment and public discourse about the presidential candidates we introduce the Presidential Election

<sup>1</sup>In a December 1984 MORI Research survey, 56% of respondents said they "happened to watch a local news program on television yesterday" compared with 42% of respondents to a 2002 survey by the Pew Research Center. Survey data obtained from the Roper Center's iPoll Databank on September 30, 2005 (question identifiers: USMORI.NWS84G.RD04 and USPSRA.060902.R35B).

<sup>2</sup>*U.S. News and World Report* "Attitudes Towards Change Survey" August 10–18, 1996. National adult sample, n = 1002; Center for Media and Public Affairs "Attitudes about the News Media Survey" November 8–30, 1996, national adult sample, n = 3004.

Discourse Dataset (PEDD), which contains content analyses of presidential advertisements, speeches, and news coverage of presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2000.<sup>3</sup> The primary source data for PEDD come from the Annenberg School of Communication and the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, which produced a CD-ROM in June of 2000 with the transcripts of speeches, television ads, and debates of the 12 U.S. general election campaigns from 1952 to 1996. The collection on the Archive CD-ROM begins on September 1 of each general election and ends on the eve of Election Day or Election Day itself if there were speeches. Speeches and advertisements in this collection exhaust the universe of speeches delivered and ads aired during these 50 years of campaigns across the nation (Jamieson 2005; Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr 2000, 50). If ads were made, but never aired, they are not included.<sup>4</sup> PEDD contains codes for all the ads candidates aired, but none of the ads made on their behalf by interest groups or parties.<sup>5</sup> It does not contain codes for ads made in Spanish. For the 2000 election, we draw on a CD-ROM compiled by the Stanford University Political Communications Lab and Stanford Mediaworks that includes candidate advertisements along with every public speech given by Bush and Gore delivered between June 1 and October 7. They supplemented the CD-ROM by posting a web page that contained the campaign content from October 8 through Election Day.

<sup>3</sup>Because our focus in this paper is on media content as an influence on public knowledge and perceptions, we do not include the content of candidates' speeches in our analyses.

<sup>4</sup>The total number of ads analyzed here differs from West (2005) because he coded only "prominent" (specifically, ads discussed in Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr 2000, or covered in the news). Additionally, the ad archive at the University of Oklahoma is incomplete for some years, while in others it includes ads that were made but never aired.

<sup>5</sup>We do not attempt to weight the advertising data to reflect the frequency with which each ad was shown or the estimated viewership of each showing. Prior (2001) found significant differences between weighted and unweighted advertisements for Bob Dole in 1996 (although not for Bill Clinton). However, his unweighted data reflect ads produced nationally while his weighted data reflect ads aired in a single media market. It is impossible to know, therefore, how much the discrepancy he found in Dole ads is due to weighting and how much is due to the difference between the Dole campaign's national advertising and its advertising in Columbus, OH. On the other hand, Geer (1998, 2006) and Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr (2000) find that weighting their national advertising data by estimates of ad exposure did not significantly alter their results. Although we would prefer to use weighted estimates of ad exposure, if only to confirm that weighting has little effect on our measures of advertising content, such data are simply unavailable for most of the elections in our data set.

Newspaper campaign coverage data is from *New York Times* stories that reported on the campaign's events and rhetoric in the complete A section of the paper. Stories about the horse race, opinion pieces, and editorials are not included. The *New York Times* was chosen as the source for campaign news coverage data for three reasons. First, it has maintained a consistent position as the country's most prominent newspaper for the five decades under study. Second, the presidential campaigns have always received extensive coverage in the *New York Times*. Finally, the *Times* serves as an agenda-setting source for other news organizations (Bartels 1996; Gans 1979; Wilhoit and Weaver 1991).

The data sources described above provided a total 940 advertisements and 956 news articles from the 13 presidential campaigns examined. The unit of analysis for the media content variables in PEDD follows the work of Geer (1998, 2006), who codes each appeal a candidate makes. Thus, one ad may have many different appeals. Over 100 different codes were used in building PEDD, but the ones we rely on in this paper indicate the amount of policy versus character oriented content in the various sources of campaign information.<sup>6</sup>

As a source of historical data on news coverage of presidential elections, newspapers have the advantage of being available over the entire time period of interest. Transcripts or tapes of network news shows, in contrast, are generally not available prior to 1968. But in recent decades, more Americans get their news from television than from newspapers. To assess whether our measures of news coverage based on the *New York Times* are representative of campaign coverage on television, we coded the proportion of policy content on network TV newscasts for three elections with high, low, and average levels of policy content (as indicated by the newspaper coding). Of the three elections, 1980 had the highest percentage of policy content in both

<sup>6</sup>To assess the reliability of these data, a party-stratified random subsample of 50 advertisements (220 appeals) and 50 news stories (311 appeals) were coded by two unique coders. Each ad or story was coded using detailed codes in four major areas: economy, domestic policy, foreign policy, and character/traits. The inter-coder agreement among these four outcomes was 88% for the ads and 87.7% for news articles. Cohen's Kappa is a conservative test for intercoder reliability that accounts for agreement by chance (see Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002 for complete discussion of interrater reliability procedures and measures). In both cases, the null hypothesis of independence can be rejected with confidence (Cohen's Kappa = .72,  $Z = 9.0$  for ads; and Kappa = .82,  $Z = 9.5$  for news). For a more complete discussion of the content analyses, coding of campaign discourse, and reliability checks used in constituting PEDD, see Vavreck (2007).

newspaper and television coverage (86% and 85%, respectively), 1992 had the lowest (52% and 62%), and 2000 fell in between (66% and 73%).<sup>7</sup> Based on these comparisons, we feel confident that whatever qualities of campaign coverage do differentiate network news and the *New York Times* the patterns of policy content across elections (our primary focus in the analyses below) are likely to be quite similar.

The media content coding described above reflect the nature of the campaign environment that voters encounter. In addition, PEDD contains measures that reflect the way ordinary Americans talk about the presidential candidates. In particular, we use the National Election Study's (NES) open-ended candidate like/dislike questions, recoded to reflect the number of policy-based and character-based considerations offered as reasons to vote for or against each of the presidential candidates.

In each election since 1952, the NES has asked a nationally representative sample of survey respondents the following set of questions about each of the major party (and sometimes the minor party) candidates:

Now I'd like to ask you about the good and bad points of the major candidates for President. Is there anything in particular about [insert candidate's name] that might make you want to vote for him? What is that? Anything else?

Is there anything in particular about [insert candidate's name] that might make you want to vote against him? What is that? Anything else?

Interviewers coded up to five reasons for voting for and against each candidate for a total of up to 20 reasons for the two major party candidates.<sup>8</sup> These open-ended questions have the distinct advantage of allowing respondents to convey whatever voting considerations they may hold. Closed ended questions, in contrast, restrict respondents to a set of predetermined considerations that the survey writers have identified in advance. The flexibility of the open-ended questions is especially important in tracing changes in the bases of presidential voting over time, since survey writers are likely to do a better job some

years than others in anticipating the considerations that will be uppermost in Americans' minds.<sup>9</sup>

The candidate likes/dislikes questions are coded by the NES into hundreds of different substantive categories which we recoded into three groups reflecting considerations based on the candidates' policy positions, their character, and a residual "other" category which includes reasons like "he's a good Republican" or "I don't like his running mate" (the NES codes falling into each of our three categories are listed in the online appendix at <http://journalofpolitics.org/articles.html>). We view character and policy considerations as distinct but potentially related domains of judgment (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). For example, voters who view a candidate as compassionate may also perceive the candidate to support antipoverty policies and vice versa. Nevertheless, the relative weight of these types of considerations reflects alternative bases of candidate perceptions and vote choice—alternatives which, as we show below, vary from election to election reflecting changes in media content.<sup>10</sup>

The combination of data on campaign driven content in advertisements, news coverage of campaigns, and voters' evaluations of candidates makes PEDD a unique and powerful data set for testing whether the decline in consumption and quality of news has led to a similar decline in voters' abilities to bring policy relevant information to bear on their political choices.

## Trends in Candidate Knowledge and the Bases of Vote Choice

In Figure 1 we display the trends in news quality and consumption. Since each of these indicators is based

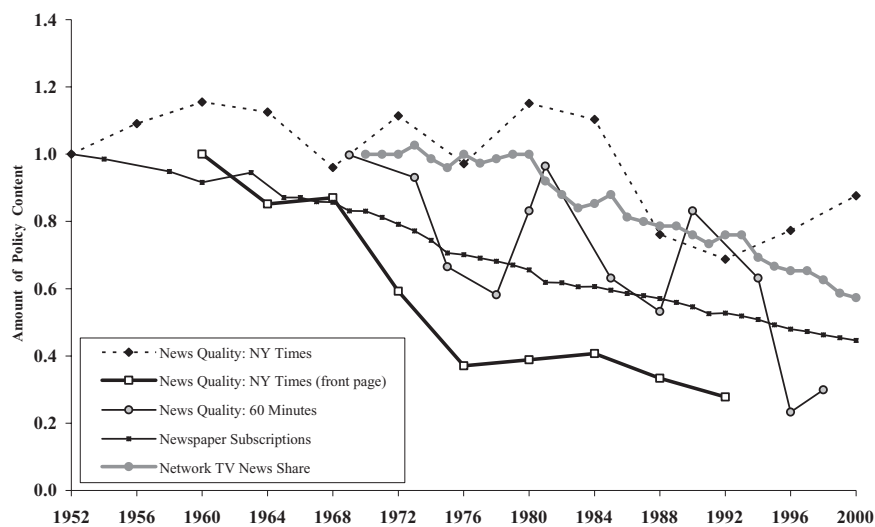
<sup>7</sup>These television data are based on Vanderbilt News Archives content of major network news broadcasts.

<sup>8</sup>The number of likes/dislikes for 1972 is adjusted to account for the fact that in this year only the NES recorded a maximum of three rather than five mentions for each of the candidate likes/dislikes questions. Based on the other 12 elections, the mean number of likes/dislikes using all five mentions was 1.134 times the mean number using only the first three mentions for each like/dislike question. Therefore, the observed and predicted number of likes/dislikes for 1972 is "inflated" by 1.134. Analogous adjustments are made separately for policy, character, and other likes/dislikes in all the analyses of these categories of responses.

<sup>9</sup>While concerns are sometimes expressed that these open-ended questions are overly sensitive to the momentary accessibility of one or another consideration in respondents' minds, Geer (1991) shows that respondents' comments do not indiscriminately reflect recently encountered information.

<sup>10</sup>The two indices we construct from the open-ended candidate likes/dislikes questions (total mentions and percent policy-related mentions) are related to both political interest and political knowledge. To gauge the relative strength of each of these relationships, we conducted factor and regression analyses using NES questions about interest in the election and frequency of following public affairs on the one hand, and an index of accuracy of relative placement of the presidential candidates on the 7-point scales. These analyses indicate that the total number of candidate likes/dislikes is related about equally strongly to the measures of political interest and political knowledge, while the percent policy-related likes/dislikes is related more strongly to knowledge than interest (see the online appendix to this article for details).

FIGURE 1 Trends in Campaign News Quality and Consumption, 1952–2000 (all measures rescaled to 1.0 for first year of available data)



Sources:

“**News Quality: NY Times**” indicates the prevalence of policy as a fraction of policy and character content in *New York Times* coverage of the presidential campaigns (PEDD data set)

“**News Quality: NY Times (front page)**” indicates the prevalence of policy as a fraction of policy and game schema as a dominant orientation of presidential campaign stories from the front page of the *New York Times* (Patterson 1994)

“**News Quality: 60 Minutes**” indicates the extent to which stories on CBS’s *60 Minutes* contain “information about matters of general political or social significance” (Zaller 1999, p. 2 and Figure 6)

“**Newspaper Subscriptions**” indicates the number of U.S. newspaper subscriptions per household (Television Bureau of Advertising 2004; U. S. Bureau of the Census 2003)

“**Network TV News Share**” indicates the combined market share for the NBC, ABC, and CBS weeknight evening news shows (Rutenberg and Schiesel 2002)

on a different metric, we rescale all measures to 1.0 for the first year of available data, making time trends easier to discern. As the declining lines in the figure make clear, both the consumption of news and the quality of news have deteriorated over the last 50 years. The steepest losses come from the quality of news on the front pages of the *New York Times* and on *60 Minutes*. The quality of campaign coverage in the entire first section of the *New York Times* shows a later and less marked shift in quality. It appears that substantive policy coverage first became less prominent in *New York Times*’ reporting, shifting from the front page to the inside pages, and then began to decline in the inside pages as well.

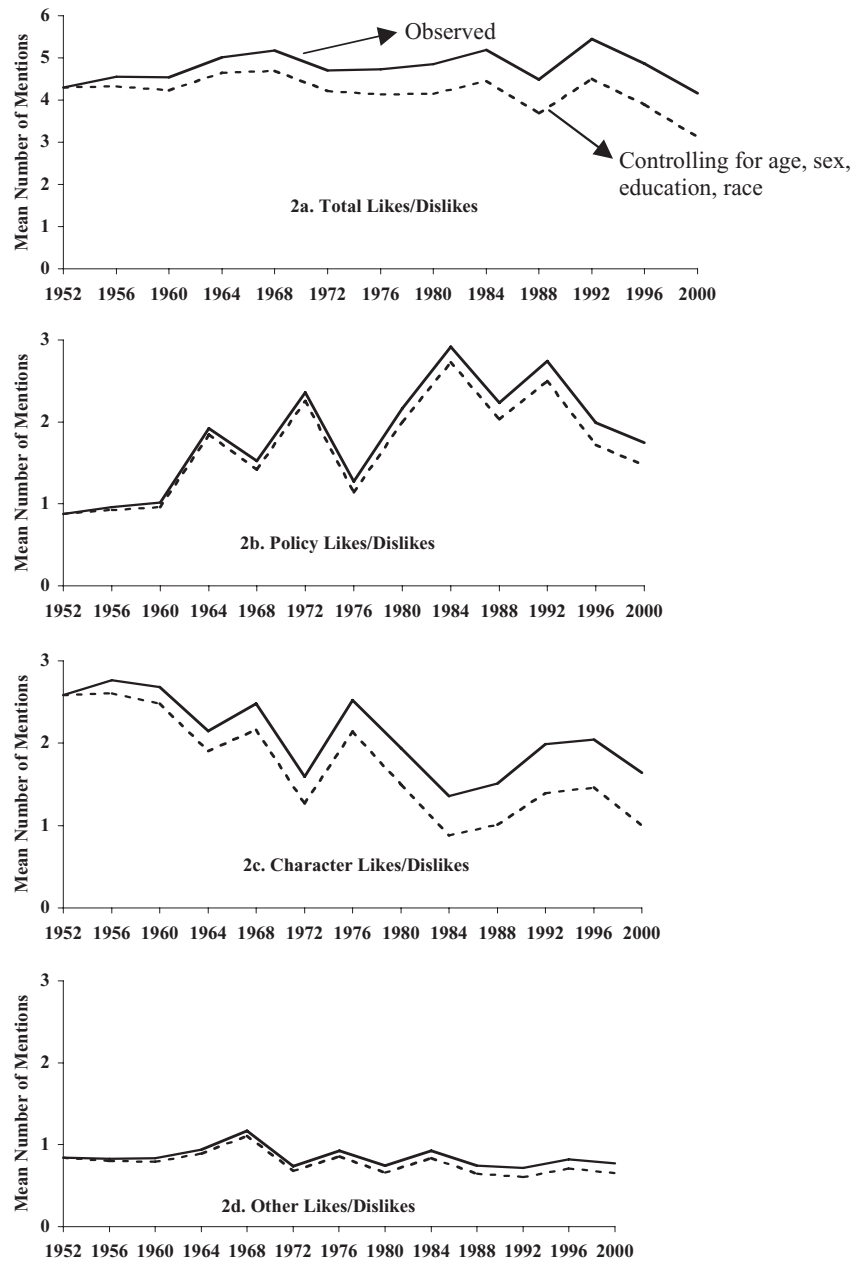
The projected consequences of these trends for electoral politics are clear. As Patterson writes, “In general, the nature of election news acts to diminish the public’s concern with the candidates’ programs and leadership. Although changes in the campaign have increased the voters’ need for information about the candidates’ politics, election news now contains proportionately less information of this kind” (1980, 176). As news consumption diminishes and coverage of candidates’ policy positions declines, we would

expect to find Americans becoming less knowledgeable about candidates for office and more likely to think about competing candidates in terms of their character strengths and flaws rather than their policy positions.

As we show in the following pages, neither of these expectations is borne out. The ability of respondents to correctly place the candidates relative to each other on issue position scales has not declined, the total number of reasons Americans offer for favoring one or the other presidential candidate in response to the NES’s open-ended likes/dislikes questions has held steady, and the proportion of policy-based considerations in the NES’s likes/dislikes has trended upward over time (see also Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

In an effort to understand these trends in the public’s substantive engagement with presidential politics we consider three factors which have all grown considerably over the past 50 years: levels of formal education, ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties, and paid political advertising. After discussing each of these factors in turn, we combine them in a single analysis of Americans’ policy-based engagement with presidential elections.

FIGURE 2 Trends in Categories of Mentions in Likes/Dislikes



**Education.** Americans' levels of formal education increased dramatically between 1952 and 2000. The percentage of American adults who had completed high school rose from 39 to 84 over this period, while the percentage who were college graduates increased from 7 to 25 (U. S. Bureau of the Census 2003, 37). Americans might be consuming less news, and the news they consume might be of lower quality in its coverage of politics and public affairs, but perhaps Americans' higher level of formal education allows them to learn more from the information to which they are exposed.

To assess the impact of increased educational levels among the American public, we begin by regressing the total number of candidate likes/dislikes on respondents' education along with age, sex, race, and indicator variables for each election between 1952 and 2000. Using the coefficients from this equation, we hold constant the demographic variables at their 1952 levels to estimate the expected number of candidate likes/dislikes each year, net of changes in education, age, sex, and race (online appendix Table A5).

The solid line in Figure 2a shows the observed number of candidate likes/dislikes while the dashed

line shows the predicted number of likes/dislikes holding education, age, sex, and race constant at their 1952 values. Increases in education have served to boost somewhat the number of things Americans have to say about the presidential candidates.<sup>11</sup> But the predicted decline in the total number of candidate likes/dislikes net of education, age, race, and sex is quite modest through 1996, and the dip in 2000 was temporary (our analyses generally end in 2000 due to the limitations of our media data, but in 2004, NES respondents mentioned 4.9 candidate likes/dislikes, more than in either 1996 or 2000). Even if education had remained at its 1952 level, we would not have expected to find much of a decline in the total number of candidate likes/dislikes over the 13 elections we examine, and even less if we were to consider the 2004 election as well.

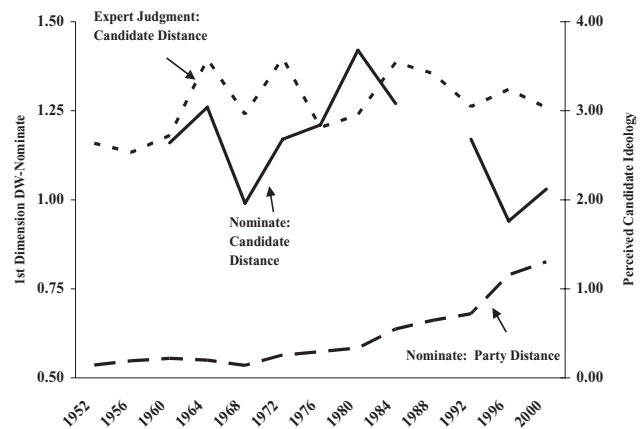
Increases in education might affect not only the number of things Americans have to say about the presidential candidates but also the kinds of considerations they offer as reasons to vote for or against one candidate or the other. Figures 2b–2d show observed and predicted number of policy, character, and other considerations (again holding constant education, age, sex, and race at their 1952 values).

Overall, the “other” category of comments constituted about 20% of responses and varied little from election to election (Figure 2d). In contrast, the policy and character remarks varied considerably across the years (Figures 2b and 2c). In relatively nonideological elections where the candidates were not clearly distinguished by their differing issues stances, such as Kennedy/Nixon in 1960 or Carter/Ford in 1976, the number of character comments is high and the number of policy comments is low. In more ideological elections like Nixon/McGovern in 1972 or Reagan/Mondale in 1984, the number of policy likes and dislikes is high and the number of character likes and dislikes is low.

More importantly, the overall trends in the kinds of things Americans have to say about the major party presidential candidates are opposite those we might have expected given the changes in news content. As Figures 2b and 2c show, the average number of policy-based reasons for liking or disliking the candidates has

<sup>11</sup>Additional analyses (not shown) reveal that almost all the difference between the observed and predicted number of likes/dislikes in Figure 2 are a consequence of controlling for education; holding constant age, sex, and race has virtually no impact. We also examined the interaction between education and year to assess the possibility that the impact of education on candidate likes/dislikes has changed over time. The interaction term was neither substantively nor statistically significant.

FIGURE 3 Party and Candidate Polarization



Notes: Figure shows the distance between Democratic and Republican Parties or candidates. DW-NOMINATE scores for parties are mean scores for the U.S. House of Representatives; DW-NOMINATE scores for presidential candidates are based on congressional votes for candidates who served in congress and on presidents' positions on congressional votes during their terms in office for winning candidates who did not serve in congress.

Sources: Expert judgments of candidate ideology are from Zaller (2004); DW-NOMINATE scores for the parties are from <http://www.voteview.com>; DW-NOMINATE scores for the presidents are from Nolan McCarty, personal communication.

increased over the years while the number of character-based reasons has decreased. These figures also show that the demographically adjusted decline in total number of likes/dislikes shown in Figure 3a is due primarily to the decline in character-based not policy-based considerations; even when we hold education (along with age, sex, and race) constant at its 1952 level, we see a substantial increase in the number of policy-based reasons Americans give for liking or disliking the presidential candidates.

The results presented in Figures 2a–2d (and online appendix Table A5) suggest that education plays at best a minor role in accounting for trends in the kinds of reasons Americans offer for liking or disliking the presidential candidates. We further assess the impact of education in consort with a broader range of predictors below.

**Party polarization.** Americans' growing attention to policy considerations in presidential elections reflected in Figure 2b could reflect, at least in part, a growth in the ideological distinctiveness of the parties and candidates. The increased ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican congressional delegations over this period has been well documented and much discussed (e.g., Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Poole and Rosenthal 1991, 1997, 2001;

Snyder and Groseclose 2000, 2001). If the presidential candidates have also become more ideologically polarized over the past decades, or if Americans use party cues to form impressions of the policy stances of the candidates, the public may become more policy-oriented in assessing presidential candidates even while receiving less policy-relevant information from the news media.

Figure 3 shows three data series reflecting party and candidate polarization between 1952 and 2000. The dashed line toward the top of the Figure indicates politically knowledgeable observers' judgments of the ideological distance between the presidential candidates (Zaller 2004). For each election, a panel of experts (1952–68) or the most politically knowledgeable NES respondents (1972–2000) rated each presidential candidate on an ideological scale. Zaller (2004, 173–76) combined these ratings and converted them to a common 7-point metric. The ideological distance between the Republican and Democratic candidates based on these data is shown in Figure 3 and reveals no tendency toward ideological extremism over time.

One shortcoming of this approach for our purposes is that observers' judgments of the candidates are endogenous to the content of the campaign. Consequently, we cannot confidently interpret perceived candidate polarization as an influence on the public, independent of the characteristics of the campaign media environment. The candidates, of course, influence the campaign media content, but other characteristics of the media, like the shifting focus of news coverage or the prominence of paid advertising, also influence perceptions of the candidates.

The second measure of presidential candidate polarization in Figure 3, which consists of the difference in the first dimension DW-NOMINATE scores for the two candidates, does not suffer from this endogeneity problem. However, NOMINATE scores are based on congressional voting and are therefore only available for candidates who served in congress or who won the presidency (in which case scores are based on the presidents' stated positions on congressional votes during their terms in office). NOMINATE scores are consequently unavailable for three of the 13 elections we examine.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, assessments of presidential ideology based on positions a president takes while in office are hardly ideal for judging his ideological posture during the campaign.

Neither of these two measures of candidate polarization are especially well-suited to our needs, but as Figure 3 shows, there is no evidence of any increase in presidential candidate polarization in either measure. To the extent that we can judge based on existing evidence, then, it appears unlikely that changes in candidate polarization explain increases in the policy content of Americans' evaluations of presidential candidates.

In contrast to the measures of candidate polarization, party polarization increases steadily beginning in the early 1970s, rising about 50% between 1972 and 2000. Since public perceptions of the parties appears to respond to this increase in partisan polarization (Hetherington 2001), the increased ideological distance between the Democrats and the Republicans may have contributed to the growth of policy-based reasons for liking or disliking the presidential candidates evident in Figure 2b. Consequently, we include party polarization among our predictors of presidential evaluations in our analyses below.

**Paid advertising.** The final explanation we consider for the increased engagement of the public with the policy substance of presidential politics is the role of paid advertising in providing policy-relevant information to voters. In their study of the 1972 presidential election, Patterson and McClure (1976) argued that voters could learn more about the candidates' policy positions from paid advertising than they could from television news. More recent studies have confirmed the high level of policy content in paid advertising (Just, Crigler, and Buhr 1999; Vavreck 2001; West 2005), and in an impressive analysis combining information on individual NES respondents' television viewing habits with data on candidates' television advertising in the top 75 media markets from the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004) show that people exposed to more paid advertising during the 2000 election expressed more interest in the election, were more likely to vote, and had more things to say about the presidential candidates in response to the NES likes/dislikes questions (but see Huber and Arceneaux 2007 for an alternative analysis).

Presidential advertisements have always been fairly policy-oriented and appear to have become somewhat more policy-oriented over time (our ad and news content data are shown in the online appendix Table A6). In addition, the quantity of presidential campaign ads has grown. Expenditures for presidential television advertising increased sixfold between 1972 and 2000 (Television Bureau of Advertising

<sup>12</sup>In addition, NOMINATE scores for presidents who did not serve in congress are based on relatively few votes and therefore have large standard errors.



TABLE 1 Policy-Orientation of Presidential Candidates Likes and Dislikes, 1952–2000

	Model 1: Individual and Aggregate Level Data			Model 2: Aggregate Level Data, First Differences		
	Native Units	0-1 Range	Standardized Coefficients	Native Units	0-1 Range	Standardized Coefficients
Aggregate-level predictors						
Percent policy in ads	.58 (.17)	.24 (.07)	.20*	.60 (.13)	.39 (.09)	.79*
Percent policy in news	-.14 (.27)	-.05 (.09)	-.05	.27 (.19)	.11 (.08)	.23
Party Polarization	.16 (.30)	.05 (.09)	.05	-.96 (.62)	-.12 (.08)	-.24
Percent high school grads	–	–	–	2.42 (.97)	.18 (.07)	.38*
Median income	–	–	–	.01 (.03)	.02 (.08)	.03
Individual-level predictors						
Educational level	-.003 (.002)	-.01 (.01)	-.01	–	–	–
Family income	-.01 (.003)	-.05 (.01)	-.04*	–	–	–
Female	-.02 (.004)	.02 (.004)	-.04*	–	–	–
Black	.12 (.007)	.12 (.007)	.11*	–	–	–
Other race	.05 (.01)	.05 (.01)	.04*	–	–	–
Age 31–50	-.05 (.01)	-.05 (.01)	-.07*	–	–	–
Age 51–60	-.07 (.01)	-.07 (.01)	-.08*	–	–	–
Age 61–70	-.09 (.01)	-.09 (.01)	-.09*	–	–	–
Age over 70	-.13 (.01)	-.13 (.01)	-.12*	–	–	–
Intercept	.02 (.04)	.32 (.09)		-.07 (.12)	-.38 (.09)	
N	20,944	20,944	20,944	12	12	12
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.09	.09	.73	.73	.73

\* $p < .05$ .

Notes: The dependent variable in Model 1 is the percentage of candidate likes/dislikes in each election that are policy as opposed to character based; the dependent variable in Model 2 is the change in this percentage from the previous election; Party polarization is the difference between the Democratic and Republican Party mean DW-NOMINATE scores for the House of Representatives; Educational level is scored 1–4 for grade school or less, high school, some college, and college or advanced degree. Robust, clustered standard errors were estimated for all aggregate-level predictors.

2005), and while we were unable to find data on advertising expenditures for the early elections we studied, overall campaign spending tripled between 1960 and 1972 (Polsby and Wildavsky 2000). With the spread of VCRs (and more recently DVRs like TiVo) Americans may have become better at avoiding ads, but the increase in resources devoted to campaign advertising suggests that ads and the policy information they contain may help explain the growth of policy-based considerations in the public's evaluations of the presidential candidates.

### Analysis of Education, Party Polarization, Ads, and News

To assess the relative impact of education, party polarization, ad content, and news content on Americans' perceptions of the presidential candidates, we regress the percentage of policy-oriented reasons Americans offer for liking or disliking the presidential candidates

on these four predictors. In the first model in Table 1, our units of analysis are individual NES respondents and we combine individual-level NES data (on education, income, sex, race, and age) with aggregate-level measures of party polarization, and advertising and news content for each election.<sup>13</sup> Of the four predictors of interest, only the policy content in ads is significantly related to the policy-orientation of respondents' candidate evaluations. The coefficient for ad content as measured in its native "percentage of all ad appeals" indicates that each 10 percentage point increase in the policy content of presidential ads is associated with a 5.8 percentage point increase in the policy content of candidate likes/dislikes. Our alternative explanations—party polarization and respondents' education—are both related to candidates likes/dislikes at the zero order ( $r = .19$  and  $.05$ , respectively), but produce neither substantively nor statistically sig-

<sup>13</sup>To generate appropriate standard errors for our aggregate election-level data, we use Stata's robust standard errors with clustering routine.

nificant coefficients in the multiple regression model. The other individual-level predictors included in this model (income, sex, race, and age) are all related to the policy content of candidate likes/dislikes, but since these demographic characteristics change little over this time period their relationship with candidate evaluations reflects cross-sectional variation only and does not contribute to the temporal dynamics of the public's candidate evaluations.

The coefficients for the aggregate-level predictors in Model 1 reflect the associations between time series variables. Because the dependent variable and the predictors of interest all trend upward over time, their associations might reflect nothing more than this common upward trend.<sup>14</sup> In Model 2 we address this issue by taking the change from the previous election of both our dependent and independent variables. Using first differences precludes us from including the individual-level demographic predictors in Model 1, but also resolves the problem of spurious correlation due to the nonstationarity of the time-series variables.<sup>15</sup>

The aggregate time-series results in Model 2 confirm the association between advertising content and candidate likes/dislikes found in Model 1. As measured in native units, a 10 percentage point greater increase from the previous election in the policy content of presidential ads is associated with a 6.0 percentage point greater increase in the policy content of candidate evaluations. Also like Model 1, neither the policy content of news coverage nor party polarization are significantly associated with candidate evaluations. Finally, change in aggregate education as measured by the percentage of the adult population that had graduated high school is a significant predictor of change in presidential evaluations. Measured in native units, change in education appears to have a large impact on change in candidate likes/dislikes, but this is somewhat misleading since actual changes in educational level from election to election are quite small.<sup>16</sup> Both the standardized coefficients and the rescored (0 to 1) predictors show that the observed differences in educa-

tion have about half the impact of the observed differences in advertising content.<sup>17</sup>

## Geographical Variation in Presidential Advertising

The analyses reported in Table 1 show a strong association between the content of paid advertising and the kinds of reasons Americans offer for liking and disliking the major party presidential candidates—an association evident in our analyses of both the *level* of policy content in candidate likes/dislikes and the *change* in policy content from the previous election. As a final test of the influence of paid advertising on Americans' presidential candidate evaluations, we conduct a cross-sectional analysis of the 2000 presidential election, combining NES data on candidate likes/dislikes with the same CMAG data on the frequency of candidate television advertising used by Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004). Our coding of the content of presidential television ads from 2000 (in PEDD) found that 85% of the appeals in those ads were policy-based. Consequently, we expect that respondents living in media markets with more presidential advertising will have more policy-oriented things to say about the candidates. Given the strong policy focus of presidential advertising in the 2000 election, we expect the impact of television advertising on the number of character-based considerations to be negligible. For obvious reasons, we also expect the number of advertisements aired in a respondent's media market to be a stronger predictor for respondents interviewed closer to election day than for those interviewed weeks or months before the election (NES interviews were conducted during the two months leading up to the 2000 election).

The first column in Table 2 shows that the number of policy-oriented likes/dislikes is positively and significantly related to the number of television advertisement airings in respondents' media markets (controlling for respondents' age, sex, race, income, and education). Specifically, the expected number of policy-oriented likes/dislikes among respondents in the most heavily saturated market (scored 1 on the

<sup>14</sup>Dickey-Fuller tests for the aggregate time-series in model 2 only allow us to reject the null hypothesis of nonstationarity for ad content ( $p = .003$ );  $p$ -levels for candidate likes/dislikes, news content, party polarization, and percent high school graduates are .18, .51, .99, and .89, respectively.

<sup>15</sup>Dickey-Fuller tests of nonstationarity for first differences of candidate likes/dislikes, ad content, news content, party polarization, and percent high school graduates are .000, .000, .01, .11, and .06, respectively.

<sup>16</sup>The largest change is about six percentage points, compared with 41 percentage points for the policy content of presidential ads.

<sup>17</sup>As a further check on these findings we ran the analyses reported in model 1 of Table 1 separately by level of media consumption using the "attention to the campaign in the media" index from the NES cumulative file. This index combines respondents' reported attention to the campaign on television, in newspapers, on the radio, and in magazines. We divided respondents into low, medium, and high media groups and found no statistically significant differences for any of the coefficients in this model.

**TABLE 2** Number of Televised Presidential Campaign Advertisements in Respondent's Media Market as a Predictor of Policy- and Character-Oriented Candidate Likes/Dislikes, 2000

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Number of Policy Considerations	Number of Character Considerations	Number of Policy Considerations	Number of Character Considerations
# of Presidential Campaign Ads	.83 (.39)*	-.20 (.38)	1.65 (.61)*	.03 (.58)
Interview Date			.25 (.27)	-.27 (.26)
Interaction: Ads × Date			-1.71 (.97)	-.47 (.93)
Education	2.15 (.24)*	1.80 (.23)*	2.14 (.24)*	1.79 (.23)*
Age	.19 (.27)	1.17 (.26)*	.22 (.27)	1.25 (.26)*
Income	.59 (.45)	.65 (.43)	.57 (.45)	.58 (.44)
Female	-.09 (.12)	-.10 (.11)	-.08 (.12)	-.09 (.11)
Black	.16 (.19)	-.96 (.19)*	.16 (.19)	-.98 (.19)*
Hispanic	.14 (.21)	-.11 (.20)	.14 (.21)	-.13 (.20)
Live in battleground state	.29 (.17)	.05 (.16)	.31 (.17)	.06 (.16)
Constant	.34 (.20)	.49 (.19)*	.21 (.23)	.61 (.23)*

\* $p < .05$ .

Notes: Data from 2000 NES and Political Advertising in 2000 (CMAG) studies merged on the basis of respondents' congressional districts. Dependent variables are the number of policy- and character-oriented candidate likes and dislikes. Predictors are all rescaled to range from 0 to 1.  $N = 1245$ .

rescaled measure of advertising quantity) is .83 mentions higher than in the least saturated market (scored 0). In contrast, the number of character-oriented likes/dislikes is slightly, although nonsignificantly, lower among respondents exposed to more presidential advertising ( $b = -.20$ ).

These coefficients represent the predicted impact of paid advertising for the NES respondents taken as a whole. The full impact of advertising on candidate considerations is better estimated by taking into account the date of interview, since we are most interested in the impact of paid advertising at the time of the election, not weeks or months prior. Model 2 in Table 2 includes an interaction term for advertising level by day of interview (with day of interview rescaled to run from 0 for interviews conducted the day before the election to 1 for the earliest interviews which were conducted 63 days before the election). In this model, the coefficient for presidential campaign ads represents the predicted impact of advertising at election time, while the sum of this coefficient and the interaction term reveals the predicted impact of advertising approximately two months prior to the election.

As expected, the impact of advertising on respondents' presidential considerations is far stronger at election time than months before. For policy-oriented likes/dislikes, the predicted impact at election time of living in the most heavily saturated market compared with the least heavily saturated market is 1.65 men-

tions, while the impact for character-oriented mentions is essentially zero ( $b = .03$ ).

Adding the coefficient for the interaction term to the coefficient for presidential campaign ads also indicates that respondents living in high- and low-advertising markets were indistinguishable in the number of policy-oriented considerations they offered two months before the election ( $1.65 - 1.71 = -.06$ ). This is what we would expect if our advertising measure is indeed reflecting the impact of ads, and helps to rule out the alternative possibility that pre-existing differences across media markets account for the tendency of respondents in high-advertising markets to offer more policy-based reasons for voting for or against the major party candidates (this also comports with Gelman and King's (1993) finding that people begin to pay attention to campaigns as election day approaches).

Another alternative explanation for these findings is that respondents living in high- and low-advertising markets might differ not only in their exposure to ads, but also in their exposure to other kinds of campaign activity including news coverage and campaign outreach efforts. To address this concern, we followed Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004) and included an indicator of whether respondents lived in battleground states during the 2000 election (based on the Cook Political Report's classification) in all our analyses. As Table 2 shows, respondents living in battle-

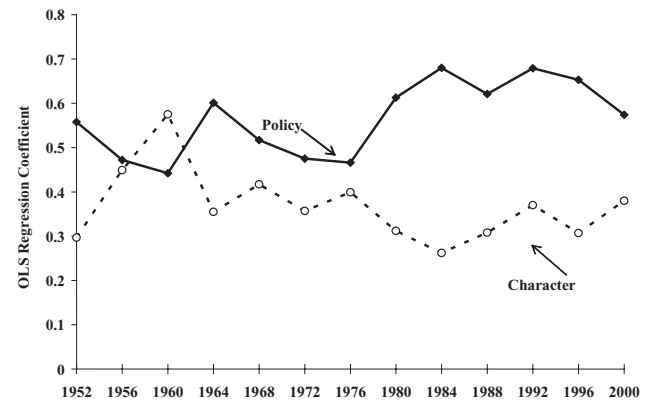
ground states do mention somewhat more policy-oriented likes/dislikes, but this effect is independent of the impact of the amount of advertising in each media market.<sup>18</sup> The cross-sectional analysis of advertising and public discourse thus confirms our findings from the longitudinal analysis of media content: the considerations Americans express about the presidential candidates reflect the content of paid advertising.

## Public Rhetoric vs. Presidential Vote Choice

What Americans have to say about the Republican and Democratic candidates for president is of interest in its own right, but these responses may represent mere rhetoric if they do not reflect the kinds of considerations voters rely on in choosing between the candidates. In *Interpreting Elections*, Kelley (1983) showed that the net balance of favorable and unfavorable responses to the NES likes/dislikes questions could be used to predict vote choice quite accurately (see also Geer 1998; Glass 1985; Keeter 1987; Kelley and Mirer 1974; for a dissenting opinion on the value of the open ended questions see Rahn, Krosnick, and Breuning 1994).

Here we take advantage of this approach to compare the relationship between candidate preference and the balance of favorable and unfavorable responses separately for policy- and character-based considerations. Specifically, for each respondent, we sum the policy-oriented reasons for liking the Democratic candidate and disliking the Republican candidate and divide by that respondent's total number of policy-oriented likes and dislikes to get the partisan balance of policy-based considerations (with the analogous calculation for character-based considerations). We then use these partisan advantage scores as predictors of candidate preference (along with controls for education, age, race, and sex). The results from these analyses are shown in Figure 4 (and the online appendix Table A7). Not only have the kinds of

FIGURE 4 Partisan Balance of Policy and Character Mentions as Predictors of the Two-Party Vote



Notes: Chart shows the OLS coefficients from 13 separate regressions (one for each election 1952–2000). The dependent variable is two-party reported vote scored 1 for the Democratic and 0 for the Republican candidate. The partisan balance of the policy likes/dislikes is the number of policy-oriented likes/dislikes favoring the Democratic candidate as a percentage of all policy-oriented likes/dislikes (and analogously for the character likes/dislikes). Controls include race, sex, age, and education. See the online appendix Table A7 for full regression results.

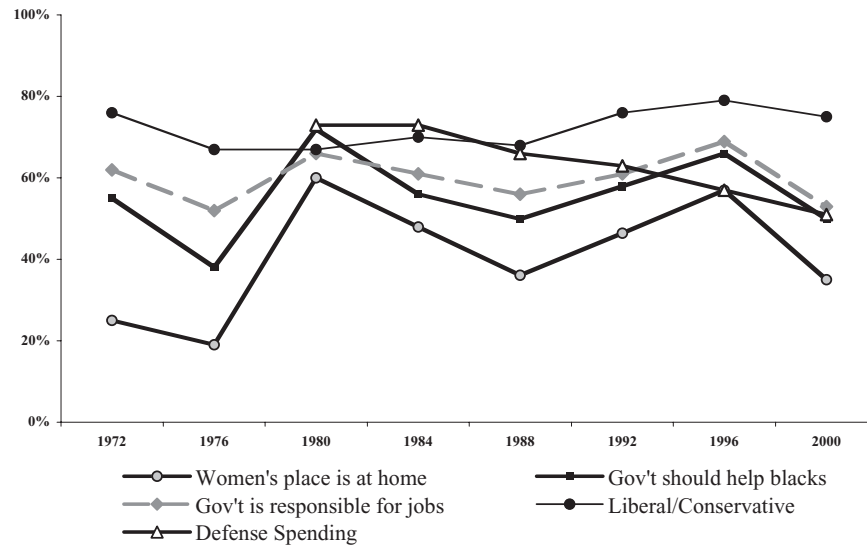
things Americans mention as reasons for liking and disliking the presidential candidates shifted away from character and toward policy over the years, but the connection between policy-based considerations and vote choice has strengthened, while the relationship between vote choice and character-based considerations has weakened.

## Factual Knowledge of Candidate Policy Positions

Thus far we have relied on the NES open-ended candidate like/dislike questions to gauge how Americans' thinking about the presidential candidates has changed over the years. While these questions can tell us something about the relative importance of policy and character-based considerations, they cannot tell us whether those considerations are accurate reflections of the candidates' characteristics and policy stands. It is possible, that is, that the growth in interest in the candidates' policy positions has been accompanied by a decline in the ability of Americans to correctly identify where the candidates stand on the central issues of each election. Perhaps changes in the electoral media environment (including the rise in campaign advertising discussed below) have served to obscure the candidates' policy positions rather than educate the public.

<sup>18</sup>In a related analysis based on merging the CMAG data with the National Annenberg Election Survey, Lipsitz (2004) shows that respondents in high-advertising media markets were better able to answer a series of factual questions about the candidates' policy stands than those exposed to less presidential advertising. This finding remained robust to controls for the competitiveness of the state's presidential race, the number of candidate visits to the state, respondents' reports of contact by the campaign, and a range of demographic characteristics. This broader array of controls gives us even greater confidence that differences across media markets reflect the impact of advertising and not some other, correlated, characteristics of the electoral environment.

FIGURE 5 Percent Correctly Placing the Democratic Candidate to the Left of the Republican



*Note:* Excludes respondents who did not place themselves on the corresponding 7-point scale; prior to 1996, these respondents were not asked to place the presidential candidates either. N's range from 617 (liberal/conservative for 2000) to 2539 (women's place for 1992). *Source:* 1972–2000 National Election Study. Indicates the percentage of respondents correctly placing the Democratic presidential candidate to the left of the Republican candidate out of all respondents who were asked to place the two candidates on these scales. Respondents who said “don't know” for one or both candidates were considered to have given an “incorrect” response for that issue dimension. Question wording in online appendix.

Because the prominent policy issues change from one election to the next, there is no perfect way to assess changes over time in Americans' ability to correctly identify the relevant policy stands of the presidential candidates. Moreover, the best available data on the public's perceptions of the candidates' issue positions only extend as far back as 1972. In every presidential election starting that year, the NES asked respondents to place each of the presidential candidates on a series of 7-point issue scales with one end representing a liberal position on that issue and the other end a conservative position. The rather general nature of the issue scales prohibits any definitive assessment of the “correct” placement for each of the candidates (see Figure 5 for question text). Nevertheless, it is clear that on all of the issues examined in every election since 1972, the Democratic candidate would be considered by knowledgeable observers to hold a more liberal position than the Republican candidate. Based on this criterion, Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents who correctly placed the Democratic candidate to the left of the Republican on the four issues asked about most frequently as well as the liberal/conservative ideology scale.

As we might expect, there is some variation from election to election depending on the issues which were prominent and the distinctiveness of the two candidates' positions. (The comparatively nonideo-

logical post-Watergate election of 1976 is notable for the unusual difficulty NES respondents had in identifying the relative placement of Carter and Ford on these issue scales.) But based on these data, it is difficult to discern any trend over time toward increased or decreased public knowledge of the candidates' issue positions. Defense spending shows a clear downward trend, but the other issues show modest upward trends in respondents' abilities to identify the relative positions of the two candidates. Although we have no perfect way to gauge the public's knowledge about the candidates' policy positions from election to election, the data we do have are inconsistent with the hypothesis that Americans' ability to accurately incorporate the candidates' policy stances into their electoral decision making has declined.

## Conclusion

As our own data and those of other scholars show, the amount of substantive, policy information in news coverage of presidential campaigns has declined and the number of Americans attending to the news has fallen. Yet we find no evidence of decline in the public's knowledge of the candidates' issue positions or in the raw number of reasons they offer for liking or disliking the candidates. Similarly, Americans are

more rather than less likely to cite policy reasons as the basis for favoring one or the other candidate and the relative impact of policy-based as opposed to character-based considerations on Americans' vote choice has increased rather than decreased over time.

In this paper we have focused on trends in Americans' knowledge and evaluations of presidential candidates for the public taken as a whole. These overall trends, however, may obscure important variation across subgroups of the public. Prior (2005, 2007), for example, shows that the expansion of media choice that accompanied the spread of cable television led Americans with a strong interest in politics to become more knowledgeable and those without much interest to become less knowledgeable (as the expanded options in entertainment television pulled them away from the news). A fuller accounting of the changes in Americans' political engagement will require attention to this and other subgroup differences. While we leave this project for future research, our expectations are that the expansion of media choice has indeed led to greater divergence in political engagement between more and less interested Americans, but that the growth of political advertising and the increased political content of entertainment television have acted as counterforces, helping to keep less politically interested Americans more informed about presidential elections than they would otherwise be. Existing cross-sectional analyses are consistent with these expectations: the positive association between political knowledge and exposure to both political advertising and to politically relevant entertainment television is strongest for those with the lowest preexisting levels of education and political information (Baum 2002, 2003; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004).

We view our findings about the growth of policy related considerations in presidential evaluations as part of a growing revisionist literature. In a popular and academic context strongly focused on perceived declines in political interest, civic engagement, and voter turnout, a few scholars are offering more optimistic assessments. McDonald and Popkin (2001) argue that reported drops in voter turnout since 1972 are an artifact of the growing percentage of adult Americans who are not eligible to vote; Norris (2000) argues that contrary to perceptions, the news media in Western Europe and the United States play a positive role in fostering political knowledge, trust, and participation; and Bartels (2000) concludes that judged on the basis of voter learning and knowledge, the quality of American presidential campaigns have not declined, and may even have improved over the past 30 to 50 years.

In this paper we document Americans' increased orientation toward policy in evaluating presidential candidates and forming voting preferences and show the link between this orientation and paid political advertising. In both longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses we find that Americans' evaluations of the presidential candidates are far more strongly linked to the content of political ads than to news coverage of the campaigns. We are not alone in suggesting that campaign ads, so frequently despised and disparaged, play a positive role in educating the electorate about the candidates' issue positions. Patterson and McClure (1976), Geer (2000, 2006), Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004), and West (2005) all make this argument based on a variety of data.<sup>19</sup>

If this revisionist position is correct, then the dramatic changes in the media environment that have occurred over the past decades have not brought with them the decline in substantive, policy-relevant information about candidates and elections that many perceive. This is not to say that Americans typically hold a wealth of knowledge about politics or a depth of concern; only that their levels of knowledge and concern compare favorably with the past. More importantly, perhaps, our analyses suggest why the perceived decline in substantive knowledge and policy orientation has not occurred. If we are correct, the decline in news quality and consumption and the growth of paid advertising has led to a shift in the sources of information that shape the public's perceptions of the presidential contenders. The vast sums that are currently spent on presidential campaign ads are, we believe, beneficial to a public that has other priorities than political self-education. Yet the demands that this level of fundraising places on presidential candidates not only discourages many otherwise able candidates from running, but may corrupt, or appear to corrupt, the policy process and produce political leaders beholden to campaign donors. Despite its benefits for the public, the current "system" of political education through paid campaign advertising raises a host of concerns about who will end up paying the price.

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<sup>19</sup>Our analyses reflect the content of candidate-sponsored ads. If the growing number of independent and party ads are less policy-oriented (or more misleading), then their educational benefits for the electorate will be smaller.

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