

Priming and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns

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IN EVERY ELECTION CYCLE, the major parties and their presidential candidates spend vast sums of money and prodigious amounts of energy on the campaign for the White House. Thousands of journalists, campaign operatives, pollsters, and media consultants derive their livings from this yearlong spectacle. Every day, interested citizens can read and watch detailed accounts and analyses of the candidates' strategies, speeches, and issue stands. As soon as the election is over, star reporters and star campaigners race to produce best-selling inside accounts of the decisions and events that led to victory or defeat.

But is it all sound and fury, signifying nothing?

After more than half a century of academic election studies, the surprising reality is that political scientists still understand relatively little about how presidential campaigns affect the vote. Even more surprisingly, much of what they do understand seems to provide good grounds for doubting that campaigns significantly affect the vote at all, at least in the most straightforward sense of determining who wins and who loses. Finkel's (1993, 14) analysis of survey data suggests that "for all the presidential elections in the 1980s, the outcomes were essentially predictable from the electorate's spring or early summer dispositions." Moreover, statistical forecasts based upon historical relationships between presidential election outcomes and economic and political "fundamentals" measured before the fall campaign have even begun to match actual election outcomes about as well as opinion polls conducted just before Election Day (Rosenstone 1983; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992; and many others). If, as Gel-

man and King (1993, 412) assert, summarizing this evidence, "the outcome of recent elections can be predicted within a few percentage points in the popular vote, based on events that have occurred before Labor Day," we are left to wonder how the millions of dollars and hours expended by candidates, campaign workers, and political journalists in the two months *after* Labor Day could possibly be well spent.

One obvious answer is that even highly effective campaign efforts on both sides may cancel each other out, leaving the election result essentially similar to what it would have been if neither side campaigned at all. This sort of stalemate seems especially plausible in presidential general election campaigns, since both major parties typically draw from roughly similar pools of candidates, spend roughly similar amounts of money, and adopt roughly similar campaign strategies. As I have put it elsewhere,

In a world where most campaigners make reasonably effective use of reasonably similar resources and technologies most of the time, much of their effort will necessarily be without visible impact, simply because every campaigner's efforts are balanced against more or less equally effective efforts to produce the opposite effect. (Bartels 1992, 267)

Such countervailing effects are clearly an important part of the story. But they do nothing to account for the fact that campaigns sometimes do produce substantial shifts in the relative standings of the competing candidates, at least as measured in presidential trial heats in commercial opinion polls. Journalists and campaigners point to these substantial shifts to support their assertions that campaign strategies and campaign events are often significant and sometimes decisive.

At least in retrospect, the judgments underlying such assertions seem to reflect a good deal of consensus regarding the important turning points of each campaign season. But if these day-to-day campaign events really cause substantial shifts in vote intentions, we are left with the question of how eventual election outcomes could be so predictable in advance. To turn Gelman and King's (1993) apt question on its head, how are election outcomes so predictable when campaign polls are so variable?

A partial resolution of this apparent paradox may be provided by the notion that campaigns matter *because* they tend to produce congruence between fundamental political conditions and predispositions on the one

hand and vote intentions on the other. This supposition is supported by survey-based findings on political activation (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Bartels 1988; Finkel 1993) and by aggregate-level analysis of poll results and election outcomes (Bartels 1992; Gelman and King 1993; Holbrook 1996). Most strikingly, Holbrook (1996) has observed that the net effects of campaign events in the 1984, 1988, and 1992 presidential elections were strongly correlated with the discrepancy between early poll results and the "expected" election outcome based upon a typical political science model including presidential popularity, party tenure, and economic conditions. In 1984, when the relative standing of the candidates in June already corresponded closely with the expected election outcome based upon these fundamental factors, campaign events had little net impact; perhaps not coincidentally, one prominent journalistic account of the 1984 campaign (Germond and Witcover 1985) was titled *Wake Us When It's Over*. In 1988, when George H. W. Bush began the summer well below his expected level of support, he gained substantial ground during the campaign. In 1992, when Bush began the summer well above his expected level of support, he lost substantial ground during the campaign. In effect, each campaign seems to have produced predictable changes (or stability) in candidate standings, more or less regardless of the specific strategies adopted by the competing candidates and their political skill in implementing those strategies.

This view admits the possibility of significant campaign effects that do not simply cancel each other out; but it is a far cry from the view of most journalists and campaigners that campaign strategies and day-to-day campaign events—and by extension the political skills of the candidates and campaigners who produce those strategies and events—have a substantial independent impact on presidential election outcomes. For example, if almost any Clinton television ad would have been effective in the political circumstances prevailing in 1992 and almost any Bush television ad would have been ineffective, as Holbrook's (1996) analysis implies and as Rosenstiel's (1993, chap. 10) account suggests, then the political circumstances would seem to be more important than the specific content or impact of the ads (or speeches or debates or editorials) themselves. Thus, this view is closer to representing an elaboration of the statistical modelers' perspective than a genuine reconciliation of the statistical and journalistic accounts of election outcomes.

The difficulty of evaluating the statistical and journalistic accounts

is exacerbated by the fact that they are based upon very different sorts of evidence. Aggregate-level data of the sort employed in political science forecasting models seem useful for discerning patterns across campaigns, but much less useful for distinguishing the impact of campaign activities and events from other idiosyncratic factors and background noise within a given campaign season, or for specifying how the impact of campaign activities and events is conditioned by the political context of a particular election year. Impressionistic evidence of the sort offered by journalists and campaigners seems useful for generating hypotheses connecting specific campaign activities and events to eventual election outcomes but unlikely to be of much help in evaluating or generalizing from more or less plausible post hoc explanations of specific observed election outcomes. Neither sort of evidence by itself seems sufficient to shed clear light on the nature or magnitude of campaign effects.

Survey data gathered during presidential campaigns may provide a useful basis for resolving some of the persistent disparity between the (possibly exaggerated) generality of aggregate statistical analyses and the (possibly exaggerated) specificity of journalistic accounts. On the one hand, they can systematically reflect factors that aggregate statistical analyses must treat as random noise, such as campaign-related changes in specific aspects of the candidates' images. On the other hand, they can provide a fairly detailed picture of the nature and magnitude of significant shifts in vote intentions—and thus a check on the plausibility of impressionistic accounts of how those shifts were produced.

Unfortunately, most survey-based analyses of how campaigns matter—from the classic Columbia studies of the 1940 and 1948 elections (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) to the more recent studies of Patterson and McClure (1976), Markus (1982), Bartels (1993), Finkel (1993), and Just et al. (1996)—focus on single presidential campaigns.¹ Studies of campaigns in other electoral systems (e.g., Johnston et al. 1992, Finkel and Schrott 1995) are similarly limited. Given inevitable differences in survey design, measurement, and data analysis among these various studies, we know relatively little about the consistency or variability of campaign effects across campaigns and relatively little about how the circumstances and events of particular campaigns either reflect or transcend the more fundamental political factors emphasized in aggregate-level statistical analyses.

My goal here is to provide a more general analysis of how campaigns

matter, based on evidence from parallel surveys conducted in the midst of the six most recent U.S. presidential election campaigns. By examining these six campaigns both individually and collectively, I aim to evaluate and elaborate hypotheses drawn from statistical analyses of aggregate voting patterns on the one hand and journalistic accounts of specific presidential campaigns on the other.

Potential Campaign Effects

The question of how campaigns matter is obviously too broad to be exhaustively addressed in a single essay. In order to keep things manageable—and in keeping with the limitations imposed by the availability of data—I adopt a variety of more or less arbitrary limits on the scope of my analysis.

First, my analysis consists of a systematic search for two specific types of potential campaign effects, *priming* and *persuasion*. I use the term *priming* to refer to any systematic change in the weights attached to prospective voters' attitudes and perceptions in the formulation of vote intentions over the course of the campaign. *Persuasion*, in the sense adopted here, refers to any systematic change in the mean values of electorally relevant attitudes and perceptions over the course of the campaign.

Second, I focus only on presidential campaigns and only in the two months between Labor Day in early September and Election Day in early November. These restrictions allow me to tap the wealth of data about prospective voters' political attitudes and evaluations provided by the comprehensive preelection surveys conducted as part of the American National Election Studies (NES). The NES surveys employ much more representative samples than commercial polls conducted for the candidates or the news media, and they measure a much richer variety of potentially relevant political attitudes and perceptions in consistent form throughout each two-month campaign.

The earlier stages of presidential election campaigns, in which the candidates are less well known, may well produce more significant campaign effects (Bartels 1988), but they are less susceptible to systematic comparative analysis because relevant survey data are less plentiful and less uniform. Campaigns for elections to state and local offices may likewise produce more significant campaign effects, but here, too, high-quality survey data are in short supply.²

Third, I focus on presidential campaigns since 1980 because the range of relevant questions repeated in consistent form in NES surveys before 1980 is considerably less rich. Using questions asked consistently in several different years facilitates systematic comparisons across campaigns and also makes it possible to pool the data from several years in a single analysis. My temporal restriction has the additional virtue of minimizing heterogeneity in the political context of presidential elections, since I have argued elsewhere (Bartels 1998) that presidential elections in the 1960s and 1970s were less partisan and more volatile than at any other time in the last century but that elections since 1980 have seen a return to more typical historical patterns.

My analysis is based upon data from 6,926 respondents in the 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 NES surveys who reported in a postelection interview that they voted for a major-party candidate for president. Nonvoters and those who voted for Ross Perot, John Anderson, Ralph Nader, or other minor candidates are omitted to simplify the analysis and to facilitate comparison across campaigns. However, some of the 6,926 respondents who did eventually vote for a Republican or Democratic candidate were undecided, intended not to vote, or intended to vote for a minor candidate at the time of their preelection interview. Grouping these various intentions into a single intermediate category produces an ordinal dependent variable with three possible values: +1 for respondents who intended to vote for the incumbent party candidate; 0 for respondents who were undecided, intended not to vote, or intended to vote for a minor candidate; and -1 for respondents who intended to vote for the major-party challenger.

Fourth, I focus on changes in the mean values and in the electoral significance of four specific sets of potential explanatory factors: partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions. Together, these factors reflect the most important elements in most political scientists' models of voting behavior. Partisanship is measured by the familiar NES seven-point party identification scale. Issue preferences are measured by respondent self-placements on general ideology and three more specific issues: abortion, aid to minorities, and defense spending.³ Candidate images are measured by relative evaluations of the competing candidates as "inspiring," "knowledgeable," and "moral."⁴ Economic perceptions are measured by respondents' assessments of whether the national economy got better, got worse, or stayed about the same in the preceding year. A more detailed description of the data is contained in the appendix.

Fifth, I focus on changes in political attitudes and vote intentions that appear to be sustained over the course of an entire fall campaign. It seems quite likely that campaign events produce a substantial number of real but ephemeral changes in vote intentions (Shaw 1993; Holbrook 1994). In some sense all of these “bumps and wiggles” represent campaign effects; but since our real interest is presumably in voting behavior and election outcomes rather than in fluctuations in poll standings, it behooves us to identify changes that actually get reflected in the voting booth. The fact that NES has routinely reinterviewed respondents after the election to ascertain whether and how they voted makes it possible to limit an analysis of preelection vote intentions to respondents who actually reported voting in the postelection interview and to examine the consistency of preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports.

I focus on changes over the course of the fall campaign that can be captured, at least to a first approximation, by linear trend terms. Of course, there is no good reason to believe that all sustained campaign-related changes will be precisely linear. But neither is there any obvious theoretical reason to prefer some more complicated specification; and the available data are not sufficiently plentiful to warrant much confidence in any nonlinearities that they may reveal.

Thus, for present purposes, campaigns will be considered to matter to the extent that they produce linear changes over the two months between Labor Day and Election Day either in the mean values of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, or economic perceptions or in the weights attached to those attitudes and perceptions by prospective voters. For my analysis of persuasion, this formulation implies regression models with issue preferences, candidate images, and the like as dependent variables and the date of each respondent’s preelection interview as an explanatory variable. For my analysis of priming, it implies comparing regression models with preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports as dependent variables and simple interactions between the date of each respondent’s preelection interview and other relevant explanatory variables.

Priming

One familiar and theoretically plausible story about how campaigns matter is that they remind prospective voters of the electoral relevance of pre-

existing political attitudes and perceptions. Systematic increases in the weights voters attach to particular political considerations as a result of campaign activities and arguments would be an example of what social psychologists refer to as priming. Apparent priming effects have been identified in a variety of political settings using both experimental data (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Mendelberg 2001, chap. 7) and survey data (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, chap. 12; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Johnston et al. 1992, chap. 8; Mendelberg 2001, chap. 6). In presidential campaign settings, Petrocik (1996) and Vavreck (1997) have argued that candidates consciously strive to prime specific issues that, for historical or structural reasons, favor their cause. More generally, Gelman and King (1993) suggest campaign priming of political and economic "fundamentals" as one possible source of increasing congruence between trial heats and eventual election outcomes.

Most analyses of campaign priming have employed longitudinal survey data to measure the apparent weight attached to specific considerations in determining vote intentions at various points in the campaign. To the extent that any particular consideration is "primed" by the campaign, its impact on vote intentions should increase over time. Thus, in a previous version of the analysis reported here I compared regression coefficients representing the effects of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions on preelection vote intentions as measured at the beginning of each fall campaign (on Labor Day) and at the end of the campaign (on Election Day), interpreting increases in those regression coefficients as evidence of priming.

Lenz (2004) has pointed out that this analytic strategy relies too uncritically on the notion that specific political attitudes and perceptions are causes rather than consequences of vote intentions. If, instead, prospective voters gradually adjust their views about issues, candidates, or national conditions to conform with their vote intentions, the cross-sectional correlation between specific considerations and vote intentions may increase over the course of the campaign for reasons having nothing to do with priming. Prospective voters may be persuaded by the arguments of their favorite candidate to change their specific views (or gradually come to learn which specific views are consistent with their vote intentions); or they may simply feel increasing psychological pressure to rationalize their vote choice as Election Day approaches. The resulting patterns of opinion adjustment may reflect the relative *salience* of different considerations in the

campaign, but they shed no real light on the relative *importance* of different considerations in the evolution of vote intentions.

Lenz's (2004) reanalyses of a variety of well-known priming studies suggest that much of what previous analysts have interpreted as priming probably reflects opinion adjustment or rationalization. His evidence is most convincing in cases where panel data make it possible to disentangle the reciprocal effects of specific opinions on broad evaluations such as vote intentions or vote choices and of those broad evaluations on specific opinions. For example, being able to sort out the reciprocal effects of issue preferences and vote intentions over the course of a campaign would make it possible to tell whether an increasing correlation between issue preferences and vote intentions was attributable to issue priming or to issue opinion adjustment.

In the case of my analysis here, crucial leverage is provided by the fact that NES surveys in presidential years routinely include postelection reinterviews with more than 90 percent of the preelection respondents. Thus, it is possible not only to compare the apparent effects of issue preferences on vote intentions at various points in the campaign but also to compare the apparent effects of issue preferences at various points in the campaign on vote intentions and postelection vote reports. To the extent that issue preferences are "primed" by the campaign, the same issue preferences measured well before Election Day should have a larger effect on postelection vote reports than on preelection vote intentions. Conversely, processes of issue learning or rationalization would have no effect on pre-campaign measures of issue preferences and thus no impact on the relationship between these early issue preferences and postelection vote reports.

This reasoning suggests that the crucial comparisons for the purpose of detecting campaign priming are between the estimated effects of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions as measured in the NES preelection surveys on vote intentions and on postelection vote reports. However, any differences between these estimated effects should diminish systematically over the course of the fall campaign, disappearing for respondents interviewed just before Election Day (since for those respondents the ingredients of vote intentions and actual vote choices should be virtually identical).⁵ Thus, it is necessary to build interactions into the models from which the effects are estimated to reflect the point in the campaign at which each respondent was interviewed.

The effects of campaign time could, of course, be represented in a

variety of more or less complicated ways. Given my interest here in sustained changes over the course of each fall campaign, I employ a simple interaction between each explanatory variable and the date of each respondent's preelection interview. With the date-of-interview variable rescaled to run from 0 on Labor Day to 1 on Election Day, the main effects of the various explanatory variables in this interactive model reflect the estimated impacts of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions on the vote intentions and actual votes of respondents interviewed at the beginning of the campaign, while the interaction terms capture changes in the weights attached to specific electoral considerations over the course of the campaign.⁶

The parameter estimates reported in the first row of table 1 represent the main effects of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions from this sort of interactive model of vote intentions; thus, they represent the effects of these explanatory variables on the vote intentions of NES respondents interviewed at the beginning of each fall campaign. The parameter estimates are from an ordered probit analysis with vote intentions categorized as pro-incumbent (+1), other or undecided (0), and pro-challenger (-1). In addition to these main effects, the probit model included interactions between each explanatory variable and the dates of respondents' preelection interviews as well as election-specific intercepts and interactions between these election-specific intercepts and the dates of respondents' preelection interviews. The full set of parameter estimates appears in table A3 in the appendix.

The parameter estimates reported in the second row of table 1 are from a parallel probit analysis of postelection vote reports, categorized as pro-incumbent (+1) or pro-challenger (-1). As in the first row of the

TABLE 1. Campaign Priming of Labor Day Attitudes, 1980–2000

	Incumbent Partisanship	Issue Preferences	Candidate Images	Economic Perceptions
Effect on preelection vote intentions	1.164 (.057)	.527 (.120)	2.536 (.159)	.250 (.076)
Effect on postelection vote reports	1.364 (.073)	1.088 (.159)	3.188 (.223)	.292 (.097)
Difference	.200 (.093)	.561 (.200)	.652 (.274)	.042 (.123)
Change (%)	+17	+107	+26	+17

Note: Parameter estimates from probit analyses of preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports reproduced from the first and third columns, respectively, of table A3. Standard errors in parentheses.

table, these main effects represent the impacts of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions as measured on Labor Day at the beginning of the fall campaign. As with the parameter estimates for vote intentions in the first row of the table, election-specific intercepts and interactions between all of these variables and the date of each respondent's preelection interview are not shown in table 1 but are reported in table A3.

The third row of table 1 shows the difference between the estimated Labor Day effect of each variable on postelection vote reports and preelection vote intentions. These differences measure the extent to which Labor Day attitudes and perceptions were primed by the subsequent campaign. All of these estimated priming effects are positive, as one would expect if campaigns serve to highlight the electoral relevance of the corresponding political attitudes and perceptions. Moreover, three of the four estimates—for partisanship, issue preferences, and candidate images—are statistically significant by conventional standards. Thus, there is clear evidence of campaign priming in these results. However, three of the four priming effects are small by any reasonable substantive standard, implying increases on the order of 20 to 25 percent in the weights attached to the corresponding attitudes and perceptions over the course of recent fall campaigns. Only the estimate for issue preferences suggests a substantial priming effect, with early issue preferences getting more than twice as much weight in the formulation of eventual vote choices as in the formulation of Labor Day vote intentions.

The parameter estimates in table 1 are based upon a pooled analysis of survey data from all six recent campaigns. Table 2 reports the corresponding estimates of priming for each campaign separately. Each entry in table 2 corresponds to a difference between the estimated effects of a given explanatory variable, measured as of Labor Day, on preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports, respectively. Thus, the entries are equivalent to the corresponding entry in the "Difference" row of table 1, but for a single campaign. The complete statistical results on which these entries are based appear in tables A4 through A9 in the appendix.

Most of the campaign-specific estimates of priming presented in table 2 are too imprecise to be very informative. Indeed, only two of the twenty-four estimates in the table differ sufficiently from the corresponding pooled estimates in table 1 to be worthy of real note. The first of these is the estimate for issue preferences in 1988, which accounts for more than

half of the total priming of issue preferences evident in table 1. Setting aside this anomalous case—in which the estimated impact of Labor Day issue preferences on vote intentions was actually slightly *negative*—reduces the apparent magnitude of issue priming from more than 100 percent to a bit less than 40 percent.⁷

The other striking deviation in table 2 from the typical patterns of priming reported in table 1 is the estimate for economic perceptions in 2000, which suggests that the economy actually became a substantially *less* important electoral consideration over the course of the 2000 campaign. By comparison, the estimated economic priming effects in three of the five other election years in table 2 are large and positive. None of these estimates is close to being statistically significant by conventional standards. Nevertheless, omitting the 2000 election from the pooled analysis in table 1 would leave substantial evidence of economic priming in the remaining five election years, with an increase of almost 90 percent in the average weight attached to economic perceptions between Labor Day vote intentions and postelection vote reports.⁸

The latter estimate, omitting the anomalous 2000 data, is consistent with aggregate-level evidence suggesting that “prosperity gives the incumbent party a significant ‘ace in the hole’” during general election campaigns, over and above the advantage reflected in Gallup trial heats conducted just before the party conventions (Bartels 1992, 264–65).⁹ Thus, the 2000 elec-

TABLE 2. Campaign Priming of Labor Day Attitudes by Election Year

	Incumbent Partisanship	Issue Preferences	Candidate Images	Economic Perceptions
1980	.095 (.271)	.639 (.547)	.310 (.705)	.333 (.380)
1984	.308 (.223)	-.095 (.472)	.889 (.688)	.027 (.274)
1988	.157 (.210)	1.504 (.431)	1.090 (.843)	.225 (.323)
1992	.316 (.210)	.145 (.441)	.093 (.620)	-.046 (.295)
1996	-.195 (.282)	.955 (.662)	1.479 (.815)	.347 (.407)
2000	.453 (.233)	-.115 (.538)	.910 (.590)	-.407 (.251)

Note: Entries are differences between the estimated effects of Labor Day attitudes on postelection vote reports and preelection vote intentions in each election year, calculated from probit parameter estimates in tables A4 through A9. Standard errors in parentheses.

tion appears to be a striking exception to a general pattern of substantial priming of economic perceptions between Labor Day and Election Day. However, this striking case of nonpriming appears to have had rather modest electoral consequences: if economic perceptions had had the same impact on vote choices in 2000 that they had in the five previous presidential elections, Al Gore's share of the popular vote would have been less than 1 percentage point greater than it actually was.¹⁰ Thus, it does not seem likely that Gore's failure to emphasize economic prosperity on the campaign trail can account for the fact that his vote share fell so far below most political scientists' forecasts based on historical patterns of retrospective economic voting (Campbell 2001; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2002).

This calculation illustrates the more general point that the electoral consequences of the priming effects reported in table 2 depend crucially on the partisan balance of the attitudes and perceptions being primed. Economic perceptions at the beginning of the 2000 campaign were positive on balance but only modestly so (with an average value of $+0.158$ on a scale running from -1 to $+1$); thus, increasing the weight of those perceptions would have increased Gore's vote only modestly. By comparison, economic perceptions in 1980 were much more strongly negative (with an average value of $.625$); thus, the fact that those perceptions were significantly primed by the fall campaign was much more damaging to incumbent Jimmy Carter, costing him more than 3 percent of the popular vote.

Table 3 presents estimates of the electoral impact of priming for each explanatory variable in table 2 in each election year. These estimates were computed by comparing the simulated probability of a pro-incumbent vote for each major-party voter in the NES sample using the weights relating Labor Day attitudes to postelection vote reports (from tables A4

TABLE 3. Electoral Impact of Campaign Priming by Election Year (in percentages)

	Incumbent Partisanship	Issue Preferences	Candidate Images	Economic Perceptions
1980	+0.51	-1.44	+0.24	-3.29
1984	-1.30	+0.11	+0.65	+0.01
1988	-0.16	+0.77	-0.58	-0.33
1992	-0.13	+0.03	+0.12	+0.33
1996	+0.11	-0.81	-2.22	+0.59
2000	+0.10	+0.05	+0.57	-0.73
Average (absolute values)	0.38	0.54	0.73	0.88

Note: Entries are simulated changes in incumbent vote shares attributable to the estimated election-specific priming effects reported in table 2.

through A9 in the appendix) with the probability computed by replacing one of the "primed" weights with the corresponding "unprimed" weight relating Labor Day attitudes to Labor Day vote intentions. (In both cases, I adjust the attitudes and perceptions on which the simulated probabilities are based to remove the effects of post-Labor Day shifts in average values reported in tables 4 through 6.) Thus, the reported value of -3.29 percent for economic perceptions in 1980 in the first row of table 3 represents the estimated decline in Carter's vote share attributable to the priming of economic perceptions over the course of the fall campaign, by comparison with how he would have fared if the weight voters attached to economic perceptions had remained unchanged from Labor Day to Election Day.

As it happens, the priming of economic perceptions in 1980 appears to have been a good deal more consequential than any other instance of priming in the past six presidential elections. Indeed, only one of the twenty-three other estimates in table 3 is even half as large, reflecting a substantial increase in the electoral salience of Bill Clinton's low ratings for "morality" over the course of the 1996 campaign. Fewer than half of the remaining estimates are larger (in absolute value) than one-third of a percentage point. The average effects for partisanship, issue preferences, and candidate images across all six campaigns are on the order of half a percentage point, while the average effect for economic perceptions is less than one percentage point. Moreover, it is not uncommon for positive and negative priming effects to appear for different dimensions of evaluation in the same election, making their net electoral impact a good deal smaller than the sum of these average effects might suggest.

In short, while presidential campaigns do appear to succeed in priming the crucial electoral considerations emphasized in academic analyses of voting behavior, the magnitude of that priming is often modest. Moreover, given the relatively even partisan balance of opinion with respect to most of these crucial electoral considerations in most election years, the impact of priming on election outcomes is even more often modest. Occasionally, campaign events do seem to prime an electoral consideration where one party or the other enjoys a marked advantage in the distribution of opinion in the electorate. However, only two such instances are evident in the past six presidential campaigns: priming of economic perceptions probably cost incumbent Jimmy Carter about 3.3 percent of the vote in 1980, while priming of candidate images probably cost incumbent Bill Clinton about 2.2 percentage points in 1996. (Of course, Clinton

won anyway, and Carter would have lost anyway.) For the most part, campaign priming seems to be a matter of academic interest to political psychologists, not a major factor in determining the outcome of presidential elections.

Partisan Activation

Perhaps the most famous single instance of an apparently consequential presidential campaign was one of the first campaigns subjected to detailed scholarly study: the 1948 campaign analyzed by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee in *Voting*. In 1948, they wrote,

the psychologically most interesting (and, at the same time, the politically most relevant) phenomenon was the last-minute return of many voters to an earlier disposition. These were persons who had voted for Roosevelt in 1944 and often had many demographic characteristics or past political allegiances which would predispose them to a Democratic vote. In June, 1948, however, they expressed little confidence in Truman and intended to vote for Dewey. Yet just before election day they changed in their intentions. Their final Democratic vote was thus the reactivation of a previous tendency. (1954, 291–92)

Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's findings on the "reactivation" of standing partisan loyalties fit nicely with the emphasis of Campbell et al. (1960) and other subsequent analysts on party identification as a psychological filter shaping prospective voters' reactions to more immediate political events. Although the Michigan surveys were never used to examine directly the role of political campaigns in this process, they seem to support the inference that partisan activation is a central element in campaigns and a primary source of campaign effects.

There are at least three different ways in which partisan activation could be manifested in the survey data analyzed here. First, and most directly, the impact of party identification on vote intentions could increase over the course of the campaign; in that case, partisan activation would be an instance of the more general phenomenon of priming considered in the previous section of this essay. As I have already indicated, the parameter estimate capturing this direct effect of partisan activation (in the first

column of table 1) is quite small, implying that the impact of party identification on vote intentions probably increased by less than 20 percent over the two months of recent fall campaigns. Given the relatively even balance of partisan attachments in the electorate in recent years, it should not be surprising that priming of this magnitude has had only a very modest impact on election outcomes; indeed, only one of the six election-specific estimates of the electoral impact of partisan priming in table 3 exceeds about half a percentage point in magnitude. At least in this most direct sense, partisan activation does not appear to be a significant element of the fall campaign.

Alternatively, partisan activation might involve polarization of prospective voters into increasingly distinct partisan camps over the course of the campaign. Even if a given degree of partisan attachment had essentially similar effects throughout the campaign season, prospective voters' partisan attachments might themselves be strengthened by the campaign process, producing stronger partisan effects from the same coefficients. As it happens, there is no evidence in the data for this form of partisan activation either: the strength of partisan attachment (measured by the absolute value of the incumbent party identification variable) actually declined slightly between Labor Day and Election Day.¹¹

Finally, the evaluations of candidates, issues, and economic conditions included as additional explanatory variables in table 1 could, over the course of the campaign, come increasingly to reflect more basic partisan dispositions. However, there is little or no evidence for this sort of partisan activation in the past six presidential campaigns. The estimated impact of party identification on economic perceptions increased by less than 7 percent between Labor Day and Election Day, while the estimated impact of party identification on issue preferences and candidate images declined by 2 percent and 5 percent, respectively.¹² These results are even less supportive of the hypothesis of partisan activation than the result for the direct effect reported in table 1.

Taken together, these three sets of results provide remarkably little evidence of partisan activation in recent general election campaigns. Obviously, this is not to suggest that partisan predispositions are politically insignificant. On the contrary, party identification has both very strong direct effects on vote choices and very strong indirect effects by virtue of shaping prospective voters' attitudes about the candidates, the issues, and the economy. The surprising point is that these effects are about as strong on Labor Day as they are on Election Day. Thus, while there is a good deal

of evidence (e.g., from Conover and Feldman 1989; Bartels 1993, 2002; Finkel 1993) suggesting that partisan loyalties play a significant role in shaping developing perceptions of presidential candidates, this process appears from the present analysis to be essentially complete by the time the fall campaign is under way.

Persuasion

By *persuasion* I refer to any systematic change in prospective voters' electorally relevant attitudes and perceptions. Here, I treat any sustained change over the course of the fall campaign in average evaluations of the candidates' characters, the issues, or the state of the national economy as evidence of persuasion. I do not propose to address the question of who is doing this persuading or how. Moreover, I shall not explore a variety of potentially interesting changes in the distributions of attitudes and perceptions that leave the average values unchanged, nor shall I consider changes in the subjective uncertainty of prospective voters' attitudes and perceptions (Bartels 1986; Franklin 1991; Alvarez and Franklin 1994; Vavreck 1997).

Evidence of persuasion in the sense proposed here appears in table 4 (for issue preferences), table 5 (for candidate images), and table 6 (for economic perceptions). In each case, the table presents average values for

TABLE 4. Campaign Season Changes in Issue Preferences

	Labor Day	Election Day	Difference	Impact (%)
1980	-.1607 (.0171)	-.1320 (.0171)	.0286 (.0294)	-0.06
1984	-.0371 (.0163)	-.0152 (.0185)	.0219 (.0302)	+0.18
1988	.0383 (.0160)	-.0216 (.0194)	-.0599 (.0307)	-1.35
1992	-.0027 (.0164)	-.0911 (.0169)	-.0884 (.0284)	-0.83
1996	-.0719 (.0165)	-.0247 (.0183)	.0472 (.0300)	+0.57
2000	-.0547 (.0150)	.0301 (.0174)	.0849 (.0272)	+1.00
Average (absolute values)	.0609	.0524	.0552	0.66
Incumbent Partisanship	.1698 (.0089)	.1663 (.0099)	-.0035 (.0162)	—

Note: Regression analysis of Issue Preferences index for major-party voters only. Labor Day and Election Day coefficients are based on preelection interview dates assuming linear trends through each fall campaign. Standard errors in parentheses. Standard error of regression = .296, $R^2 = .18$, $N = 6,926$ (1980–2000).

the beginning and end of each fall campaign, derived from a regression model with indicator variables for each election year and interactions between the indicator variables and the date of each respondent's preelection interview. (Each regression model also includes partisanship and an interaction between partisanship and the date of each respondent's preelection interview to capture potential partisan activation.) In each case, the table also reports differences between the Labor Day and Election Day average values, as well as the estimated impact of these differences on each election outcome.

Of the eighteen possible instances of persuasion in tables 4, 5, and 6 (one for each of the six election years in each of the three tables), only three appear to have had electoral effects in excess of 2 percentage points. All three of those were instances of changing candidate images. In 1988, challenger Michael Dukakis's image eroded substantially while George Bush's improved, increasing Bush's vote share by an estimated 3.7 percentage points. In 1984, on the other hand, challenger Walter Mondale's image improved while incumbent Ronald Reagan's became less favorable, reducing Reagan's vote share by about 2.3 percentage points. Finally, in 1980 Reagan's image improved over the course of the fall campaign, reducing Jimmy Carter's vote share by about 2.2 percentage points.

Table 7 provides more detailed evidence about the nature of these

TABLE 5. Campaign Season Changes in Candidate Images

	Labor Day	Election Day	Difference	Impact
1980	-0.148 (.0150)	-.0460 (.0150)	-.0311 (.0257)	-2.18%
1984	.0970 (.0143)	.0509 (.0162)	-.0461 (.0264)	-2.26%
1988	-.0180 (.0140)	.0522 (.0170)	.0702 (.0270)	+3.71%
1992	.0913 (.0144)	.0538 (.0148)	-.0376 (.0249)	-1.62%
1996	-.1073 (.0144)	-.0830 (.0161)	.0243 (.0263)	+1.16%
2000	.0511 (.0131)	.0239 (.0153)	-.0272 (.0239)	-1.01%
Average (absolute values)	.0632	.0516	.0394	1.99%
Incumbent Partisanship	.2755 (.0078)	.2606 (.0087)	-.0149 (.0142)	—

Note: Regression analysis of Candidate Images index for major-party voters only. Labor Day and Election Day coefficients are based on preelection interview dates assuming linear trends through each fall campaign. Standard errors in parentheses. Standard error of regression = .259; $R^2 = .38$; $N = 6,926$ (1980–2000).

and other changes in candidate images in recent fall campaigns. The entries in the table represent changes over the course of each campaign in each of the specific character assessments that make up the candidate image scale employed in my analysis. Many of these changes are rather imprecisely estimated, but a handful are large enough to be both statistically

TABLE 6. Campaign Season Changes in Economic Perceptions

	Labor Day	Election Day	Difference	Impact (%)
1980	-.6250 (.0260)	-.6447 (.0260)	-.0197 (.0447)	-0.29
1984	.1049 (.0249)	.1929 (.0282)	.0880 (.0459)	+0.91
1988	-.0731 (.0244)	-.0538 (.0295)	.0193 (.0469)	+0.14
1992	-.5069 (.0250)	-.4885 (.0257)	.0184 (.0432)	+0.15
1996	.1581 (.0251)	.1737 (.0279)	.0156 (.0457)	+0.17
2000	.1580 (.0228)	.0802 (.0265)	-.0779 (.0415)	-0.26
Average (absolute values)	.2710	.2723	.0398	0.32
Incumbent Partisanship	.1970 (.0136)	.2102 (.0151)	.0132 (.0246)	—

Note: Regression analysis of Economic Perceptions index for major-party voters only. Labor Day and Election Day coefficients are based on preelection interview dates assuming linear trends through each fall campaign. Standard errors in parentheses. Standard error of regression = .451; $R^2 = .41$; $N = 6,926$ (1980–2000).

TABLE 7. Changes in Specific Candidate Images by Election Year

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Incumbent inspiring	.0228 (.0610)	-.0411 (.0504)	.0803 (.0483)	.0172 (.0446)	.0580 (.0553)	—
Incumbent knowledgeable	.0460 (.0573)	-.0635 (.0505)	.0629 (.0418)	.0171 (.0378)	.0675 (.0478)	-.0062 (.0429)
Incumbent moral	-.0177 (.0608)	.0109 (.0438)	-.0357 (.0474)	-.0353 (.0423)	.0003 (.0502)	-.1519 (.0489)
Challenger inspiring	.0890 (.0642)	.0956 (.0458)	-.1814 (.0475)	.0474 (.0423)	-.0342 (.0533)	—
Challenger knowledgeable	.0991 (.0618)	.0654 (.0396)	-.0963 (.0405)	.1113 (.0371)	-.0020 (.0420)	-.0192 (.0468)
Challenger moral	.0363 (.0535)	.0240 (.0392)	-.0078 (.0418)	.0077 (.0410)	-.0075 (.0469)	-.0169 (.0444)

Note: Entries are differences between Election Day and Labor Day values for each component of the Candidate Images index derived from separate regression analyses of candidate images in each campaign, assuming linear trends through the fall campaign. Coefficients for partisanship and interaction between partisanship and date of interview not shown. Standard errors in parentheses.

and substantively significant. In 1988, it is clear that prospective voters' assessments of Dukakis as "knowledgeable" and (especially) "inspiring" eroded substantially over the course of the fall campaign. In 2000, assessments of Al Gore as "moral" declined equally precipitously. In 1992, challenger Bill Clinton was increasingly viewed as "knowledgeable" over the course of the campaign, as was challenger Reagan in 1980.

Allowing for some canceling out of electoral effects for countervailing shifts in specific candidate images, the average net impact of changing candidate images in the past six general election campaigns amounted to about 2 percentage points. The corresponding effects of changes in issue preferences were even smaller, averaging about two-thirds of a percentage point, while the effects of changes in economic perceptions averaged about one-third of a percentage point. Of course, these shifts, too, sometimes had countervailing effects on election outcomes. In 2000, for example, Al Gore appears to have lost 1 percent of the vote due to erosion in prospective voters' assessments of his character but gained 1 percent of the vote due to a leftward shift in issue preferences over the course of the fall campaign. Taking such countervailing shifts in different dimensions of evaluation into account, the average net impact of persuasion in the past six presidential campaigns appears to have been about 1.8 percentage points.

While persuasion effects of this magnitude are clearly large enough to be electorally significant under the right circumstances, they are also clearly small enough to be roughly consistent with aggregate-level evidence that "the outcomes of recent elections can be predicted within a few percentage points in the popular vote, based on events that have occurred before Labor Day" (Gelman and King 1993, 412). Allowing for some exaggeration in the apparent fit of aggregate-level forecasting models (Beck 1994; Bartels 1997) and some additional persuasion effects associated with specific issues and character assessments beyond those included in my analysis, the survey-based and aggregate-level evidence seem to be in reassuring agreement regarding the likely magnitude of campaign effects in recent presidential elections.

Campaign Effects and Conventional Wisdom

The pattern of scattered persuasion effects documented in tables 4 through 7 suggests three general observations regarding the role of persuasion in recent presidential campaigns.

First, these effects do not seem susceptible to any straightforward explanation in terms of the nature of the explanatory factors at work, the identities of the candidates, or the political circumstances of each campaign. Thus, while systematic comparative analysis may highlight the desirability of a general theory of campaign persuasion, it does not seem at first glance to present promising raw material for such a theory. The road from journalism to science in this field may turn out to be winding and strewn with potholes.

Second, there is in any case little evidence here to support the general view of journalists and campaigners that effective or ineffective advertising campaigns, speeches, debate performances, and the like are the most important elements of contemporary electoral politics. Even if the persuasion effects estimated in tables 4 through 7 were clearly attributable to campaign events in the way journalists and campaigners seem to suppose, they would not be large enough to justify the great weight given to campaign events in conventional journalistic accounts of presidential elections. The campaigners' herculean efforts to shape and reshape the competing candidates' personal images seem to have moved election outcomes by about 2 percentage points in a typical election year, while persuasion effects with respect to issues and economic perceptions are on the order of half a percentage point. Effects of this magnitude may obviously be decisive in a close election—but they certainly are not routinely decisive. And while they are large enough and potentially important enough to warrant scientific investigation, they are probably small enough to be reliably identified only with a great deal of high-quality data and painstaking analysis.¹³

Third, and perhaps even more disconcertingly, there seems to be only modest correspondence between the specific campaign effects documented here and conventional accounts of recent presidential campaigns offered after the fact by journalists and campaigners. Both kinds of evidence are hard enough to interpret and evaluate in their own right—the statistical results because they involve a good deal of imprecision and display little in the way of intelligible pattern, the journalistic accounts because they are unsystematic and post hoc and clearly seem to exaggerate the overall importance of day-to-day campaign events. Convergence between these two disparate sources of evidence would go a long way toward mitigating the limitations of each considered in isolation, but the lack of convergence evident here further muddles the picture by highlighting uncertainties in the very raw material from which political scientists might begin to theorize productively about how campaigns matter.

Only one of the six campaigns considered here produced an estimated persuasion effect that seems clearly consistent with the conventional wisdom of journalists and campaigners. That was in 1988, when the most consequential opinion changes in any of the four election years—the striking decline in Dukakis’s image as “inspiring” and “knowledgeable” and the less striking improvement in Bush’s image on the same dimensions, reported in table 7—produced an apparent vote shift of 3.7 percentage points over the two months of the fall campaign. This shift seems plausibly attributable to the events emphasized in journalistic accounts of the 1988 campaign, including Bush’s Willie Horton and Boston Harbor attack ads and visits to flag factories and Dukakis’s hapless tank ride and lackluster debate performance. Moreover, it was almost large enough to have decided the outcome of the election, since Bush’s winning margin amounted to only 7.9 percentage points.

On the other hand, nothing in conventional accounts of the 1988 campaign explains the almost equally striking shift to the left in prospective voters’ issue positions during the course of the campaign (reported in table 4) or the remarkably strong priming of those issue preferences (reported in table 2). Indeed, these apparent campaign effects stand in marked contradiction to Germond and Witcover’s (1989) characterization of the 1988 campaign as “the trivial pursuit of the presidency.” Thus, even in 1988, the match between conventional wisdom and the specific campaign effects estimated here must be considered a good deal less than perfect.

For the other presidential campaigns considered here the match between conventional wisdom and my parameter estimates is even less obvious. For example, conventional accounts of the 1984 campaign suggest that “Reagan’s brand of emotional advertising” (Kern 1989), with its “Morning in America” theme, lulled the electorate into an essentially non-ideological endorsement of the status quo (Germond and Witcover 1985). While the statistical results presented here tend to confirm that the electorate’s assessment of economic conditions became more optimistic over the course of the 1984 campaign, the contribution of that change to Reagan’s landslide seems to have amounted to less than 1 percentage point. Meanwhile, despite Reagan’s much-touted acting skills and the purported genius of his image makers, he appears to have lost more than twice that many votes due to a significant erosion over the course of the campaign in his advantage over Mondale on the candidate image dimensions considered here.

In 1992, James Carville and his "War Room" colleagues earned fame and fortune for their apparent success in keeping the electorate's collective mind off Bill Clinton's perceived character flaws and on the long recession then just ending—as Carville's famous campaign headquarters sign reminded them, "It's the Economy, Stupid." However, the data analyzed here suggest that prospective voters' economic perceptions did not change significantly over the course of the 1992 campaign, that the impact of those perceptions on vote intentions was no greater in 1992 than in other recent campaigns, and that the 1992 campaign probably did less, not more, than most other recent campaigns to increase the electoral relevance of economic perceptions. Instead, the most significant effects of the 1992 campaign evident in the NES data are a noticeable shift to the left in prospective voters' issue preferences and a noticeable improvement in ratings of Clinton as "knowledgeable," neither of which corresponds in any obvious way to any prominent theme in journalistic accounts of the 1992 campaign.

What accounts for such striking mismatches between conventional accounts of recent campaign effects and the "reality" reflected in my parameter estimates? In part, of course, the mismatches are attributable to the limitations of my own analysis, which focuses on a small (albeit important) set of potential campaign effects and utilizes data from a single (albeit high-quality) survey in each of the six most recent presidential campaign seasons. Some of the specific apparent campaign effects (and noneffects) estimated here are no doubt due to small survey sample sizes and the limitations of the simple statistical models employed here. But I suspect that there is more to it than that.

Most of the important discrepancies I have noted between statistical results and conventional wisdom share a common characteristic: the conventional wisdom attempts to "explain" why the winning candidate won, whereas the statistical results are equally likely to "explain" why the winning candidate did not win by even more. Thus, in 1988, changing candidate images—which contributed to Bush's victory—received a great deal of attention from the press, whereas changing issue preferences—which cost Bush votes—received very little. Conversely, in 1984, increasing economic optimism—which contributed to Reagan's victory—captured the attention of campaign observers, whereas changing candidate images—which cost Reagan votes—did not.

Elsewhere I have complained that

much less is known in general about the impact of modern election campaigns on voters than one might gather from a superficial reading of the literature. Breathless accounts of brilliant campaign operatives manipulating the electorate are often based upon no better evidence than the claims of the operatives themselves. . . . When more substantial evidence is offered for the effectiveness of a particular campaign strategy, it is usually evidence of the simplest and least trustworthy sort: Campaign A did X and won. (Bartels 1992, 263)

It should not be surprising that political journalists are susceptible to the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Their primary aim is to construct a compelling narrative account of the election outcome, and their primary sources are often the winning campaign operatives whose enthusiastic (and self-interested) claims are most likely to give that account the flavor of a "just so" story. What is more surprising is that political scientists have done relatively little to improve upon journalists' accounts of how campaigns matter. Doing so will require much more systematic, comparative, and theoretically grounded analysis of campaign effects. The result will probably be less dramatic than the journalists' accounts but truer to the realities of contemporary electoral politics.

APPENDIX

This appendix provides a description of the data on which the statistical analyses described in the text are based, more detailed statistical results, and a comparison of the ingredients of vote intentions and postelection vote reports for respondents interviewed close to Election Day.

Data

The variables from the American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File utilized in my analysis are identified and described in table A1. The analysis includes 6,926 respondents in 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 who reported in the postelection survey that they voted for one or the other of the major-party candidates. Minor-party voters, nonvoters, and preelection respondents who were not reinterviewed after the election are excluded from the analysis. The 1992 and 1996 data are weighted to compensate for panel attrition using the "general weight" constructed by the NES staff (v009). In addition, all of the data are weighted to equalize the effective sample sizes for the six election years.

All of the variables are coded to range from -1 for extreme anti-incumbent responses through 0 for neutral responses to $+1$ for extreme pro-incumbent responses. Thus, the postelection "Incumbent Vote" variables is coded $+1$ for incumbent party voters and -1 for out-party voters; the pre-election "Incumbent Vote Intention" variable is coded $+1$ for those intending to vote for the incumbent party candidate, 0 for those intending not to vote or to vote for a minor-party candidate, and -1 for those intending to vote for the out-party candidate.

The "Issue Preferences" variable represents an unweighted averages of self-placements on four separate issue scales: liberal-conservative ideology, abortion, aid to minorities, and defense spending. Conservative positions on these issues are classified as anti-incumbent positions in 1980, 1996, and 2000 and as pro-incumbent positions in 1984, 1988, and 1992. The "Candidate Images" variable represents an unweighted average of the differences between incumbent and out-party candidate ratings on three separate character traits: "inspiring," "knowledgeable," and "moral."¹⁴ The mean values and standard deviations of the resulting variables are shown in the last two columns of table A1, and the separate mean values for each election year are shown in table A2.

Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports

The estimated effects of priming reported in the body of this essay are derived from a series of probit analyses relating vote intentions and postelec-

TABLE A1. Descriptive Statistics for National Election Study Survey Data

	NES Variable(s)	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation
Incumbent Vote (postelection)	v705	-1 to 1	.0212	.9998
Incumbent Vote Intention	v713	-1 to 1	.0507	.9397
Incumbent Partisanship	v301	-1 to 1	.0119	.7390
Issue Preferences	v803, v830, v838, v843	-1 to 1	-.0437	.3243
Candidate Images	v353, v354, v355, v365, v366, v367	-1 to 1	.0158	.3293
Economic Perceptions	v871	-1 to 1	-.1255	.5746

Note: Incumbent Partisanship is the seven-point NES party identification scale, with endpoints reversed in years with Democratic incumbents (1980, 1996, and 2000). Issue Preferences are an unweighted average of self-placements on four issue scales: liberal-conservative ideology, abortion, aid to minorities, and defense spending. (Conservative positions are classified as anti-incumbent in 1980, 1996, and 2000 and as proincumbent in 1984, 1988, and 1992.) Candidate Images are an unweighted average of the differences between incumbent and challenger ratings on three character traits: "inspiring," "knowledgeable," and "moral" (in 2000, "knowledgeable" and "moral" only). Economic Perceptions reflect whether "over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed the same or gotten worse," with "much better" = 1, "somewhat better" = .5, "stayed the same" = 0, "somewhat worse" = -.5, and "much worse" = -1. Data from American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File. Total $N = 6,926$ major-party voters, weighted to equalize election years (and, in 1992 and 1996, for panel attrition).

tion vote reports to prospective voters' partisanship, issue preferences, assessments of the candidates' images, and economic perceptions. Table A3 presents the results of probit analyses employing all 6,926 major-party voters in the six most recent presidential campaigns. The results are from two separate but parallel probit analyses, one of preelection vote intentions (classified as pro-incumbent or pro-challenger, with an intermediate category consisting of respondents who said they were undecided or intended

TABLE A2. Survey Data Average Values by Election Year, 1980–2000

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Incumbent Vote (postelection)	-.1398	.1642	.0577	-.1700	.1632	.0536
Incumbent Vote Intention	-.0415	.1751	.0653	-.1583	.1920	.0732
Incumbent Partisanship	.1157	-.0438	-.0151	-.1245	.0763	.0634
Issue Preferences	-.1269	-.0345	.0096	-.0670	-.0372	-.0062
Candidate Images	.0007	.0641	.0087	.0396	-.0754	.0560
Economic Perceptions	-.6114	.1363	-.0678	-.5233	.1807	.1362
N	844	1,376	1,195	1,357	1,034	1,120

TABLE A3. Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports, 1980–2000 (N = 6,926)

	Preelection Vote Intentions		Postelection Vote Reports	
	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes
Incumbent Partisanship	1.164 (.057)	1.112 (.064)	1.364 (.073)	1.159 (.078)
Issue Preferences	.527 (.120)	.717 (.143)	1.088 (.159)	.945 (.178)
Candidate Images	2.536 (.159)	3.060 (.184)	3.188 (.223)	2.995 (.234)
Economic Perceptions	.250 (.076)	.539 (.086)	.292 (.097)	.538 (.106)
1980 Pro-Incumbent Bias	.021 (.098)	.066 (.104)	-.254 (.127)	-.190 (.129)
1984 Pro-Incumbent Bias	.267 (.089)	.351 (.103)	.335 (.112)	.338 (.123)
1988 Pro-Incumbent Bias	-.074 (.080)	.513 (.101)	.196 (.100)	.115 (.119)
1992 Pro-Incumbent Bias	-.207 (.096)	.079 (.104)	-.251 (.122)	.052 (.129)
1996 Pro-Incumbent Bias	.594 (.098)	.582 (.107)	.541 (.124)	.500 (.128)
2000 Pro-Incumbent Bias	-.048 (.080)	-.202 (.094)	-.134 (.100)	-.279 (.113)
Ordered probit thresholds	+/- .352		—	
Log-likelihood, pseudo-R ²	-3,510.4, .48		-1,828.4, .62	

not to vote or to vote for a minor-party candidate) and the other of post-election vote reports (classified as pro-incumbent or pro-challenger, with nonvoters and minor-party voters excluded from the analysis). The explanatory variables in each case consist of relevant attitudes and perceptions plus an indicator variable for each election year. To allow for the possibility of campaign-related changes in the weights attached to each of these variables, I estimated separate coefficients representing the weight attached to each variable on Labor Day and on Election Day.¹⁵

The parameter estimates presented in table A3 are the basis for my analysis of priming in table 1. The campaign-specific analyses of priming in tables 2 and 3 are based on the results of separate parallel probit analyses for each election year. Those results appear in tables A4 through A9.

Vote Intentions and Votes

The analysis of priming reported in the body of this essay is based upon a comparison of the preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports of respondents interviewed near the beginning of the fall campaign. But that comparison is only sensible if differences between vote intentions and postelection vote reports reflect the impact of the intervening campaign rather than peculiarities in one or the other of these dependent variables. The possibility of systematic discrepancies between vote intentions and postelection vote reports is not to be taken lightly, since there are potentially significant differences both in the social contexts of these two dis-

TABLE A4. Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports, 1980
(*N* = 844)

	Preelection Vote Intentions		Postelection Vote Reports	
	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes
Incumbent Partisanship	1.064 (.163)	.778 (.160)	1.159 (.216)	1.039 (.209)
Issue Preferences	.358 (.330)	-.119 (.358)	.997 (.436)	1.147 (.462)
Candidate Images	2.893 (.421)	3.696 (.487)	3.203 (.565)	2.988 (.604)
Economic Perceptions	.188 (.235)	.772 (.244)	.521 (.299)	.492 (.308)
Pro-Incumbent Bias	-.020 (.186)	.173 (.186)	-.069 (.236)	-.155 (.233)
Ordered probit thresholds	+/- .464		—	
Log-likelihood, pseudo-R ²	-505.7; .42		-263.3; .54	

tinct responses and in the response options. (More than 10 percent of the major-party voters in my analysis said in their preelection interview that they were undecided or would not vote for president or would vote for a minor-party candidate.)

Fortunately, any systematic discrepancies of this sort should be evident in a comparison of the vote intentions and postelection vote reports of respondents interviewed close to Election Day, since for those respondents there is little or no intervening campaign to produce genuine shifts

TABLE A5. Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports, 1984 (N = 1,376)

	Preelection Vote Intentions		Postelection Vote Reports	
	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes
Incumbent Partisanship	.932 (.139)	1.136 (.161)	1.240 (.174)	.967 (.187)
Issue Preferences	.854 (.291)	.515 (.349)	.759 (.372)	.603 (.412)
Candidate Images	2.661 (.399)	3.225 (.482)	3.550 (.560)	2.715 (.563)
Economic Perceptions	.320 (.172)	.669 (.213)	.347 (.213)	.898 (.250)
Pro-Incumbent Bias	.239 (.093)	.314 (.108)	.268 (.116)	.238 (.123)
Ordered probit thresholds	+/- .311		—	
Log-likelihood, pseudo-R ²	-681.5; .47		-382.8; .59	

TABLE A6. Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports, 1988 (N = 1,195)

	Preelection Vote Intentions		Postelection Vote Reports	
	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes
Incumbent Partisanship	1.078 (.133)	1.363 (.170)	1.235 (.163)	1.161 (.190)
Issue Preferences	-.150 (.251)	1.618 (.358)	1.354 (.350)	.940 (.432)
Candidate Images	2.748 (.491)	3.770 (.592)	3.838 (.685)	3.724 (.735)
Economic Perceptions	.033 (.201)	.486 (.237)	.258 (.253)	.343 (.278)
Pro-Incumbent Bias	-.082 (.083)	.569 (.113)	.194 (.101)	.075 (.122)
Ordered probit thresholds	+/- .306		—	
Log-likelihood, pseudo-R ²	-621.9; .46		-336.1; .59	

in the weights they attach to specific electoral considerations. Such a comparison is provided in table A10. The first row of the table presents the estimated effects of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions on the vote intentions of NES respondents interviewed near the end of each campaign, reproduced from the second column of table A3. The second row of the table presents the corresponding estimates for postelection vote reports, reproduced from the fourth column of table A3. The third row of the table presents the differences between

TABLE A7. Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports, 1992
(*N* = 1,357)

	Preelection Vote Intentions		Postelection Vote Reports	
	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes
Incumbent Partisanship	.981 (.129)	1.185 (.140)	1.297 (.166)	1.303 (.179)
Issue Preferences	1.258 (.270)	.591 (.303)	1.403 (.349)	.850 (.407)
Candidate Images	2.860 (.373)	2.701 (.396)	2.953 (.495)	3.324 (.546)
Economic Perceptions	.372 (.180)	.499 (.191)	.326 (.234)	.511 (.248)
Pro-Incumbent Bias	-.173 (.131)	.081 (.137)	-.217 (.166)	.023 (.176)
Ordered probit thresholds	+/- .385		—	
Log-likelihood, pseudo-R ²	-666.9; .49		-326.8; .65	

TABLE A8. Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports, 1996
(*N* = 1,034)

	Preelection Vote Intentions		Postelection Vote Reports	
	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes
Incumbent Partisanship	1.504 (.182)	1.028 (.199)	1.308 (.215)	1.140 (.225)
Issue Preferences	.474 (.388)	1.086 (.409)	1.429 (.536)	.998 (.503)
Candidate Images	1.771 (.432)	4.269 (.544)	3.250 (.691)	3.999 (.710)
Economic Perceptions	.223 (.251)	.942 (.292)	.570 (.321)	.542 (.353)
Pro-Incumbent Bias	.509 (.129)	.700 (.146)	.523 (.156)	.600 (.164)
Ordered probit thresholds	+/- .319		—	
Log-likelihood, pseudo-R ²	-388.9; .58		-208.1; .70	

the preelection and postelection estimates, while the fourth row presents these differences in percentage terms. The structure of table A10 is thus exactly parallel to the structure of table 1, but with the "Labor Day" parameter estimates from table A3 replaced by the corresponding "Election Day" parameter estimates.

The comparisons presented in table A10 provide rather little evidence of systematic discrepancies between the bases of preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports. For respondents interviewed close enough to Election Day that we can discount the possibility of genuine, campaign-related shifts in the bases of choice from preelection to postelection, partisanship, candidate images, and economic perceptions all had

TABLE A9. Probit Analyses of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports, 2000 (N = 1,120)

	Preelection Vote Intentions		Postelection Vote Reports	
	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes	Labor Day Attitudes	Election Day Attitudes
Incumbent Partisanship	1.465 (.134)	1.309 (.151)	1.918 (.191)	1.416 (.193)
Issue Preferences	.573 (.329)	.678 (.411)	.458 (.426)	1.241 (.508)
Candidate Images	2.069 (.331)	2.159 (.370)	2.979 (.488)	1.945 (.486)
Economic Perceptions	.329 (.151)	.194 (.169)	-.078 (.201)	.410 (.209)
Pro-Incumbent Bias	-.053 (.090)	-.123 (.101)	-.083 (.115)	-.251 (.122)
Ordered probit thresholds	+/- .348		—	
Log-likelihood; pseudo-R ²	-559.1; .48		-274.2; .65	

TABLE A10. Determinants of Vote Intentions and Postelection Vote Reports for Election-Day Interviews

	Incumbent Partisanship	Issue Preferences	Candidate Images	Economic Perceptions
Effect on preelection vote intentions	1.112 (.064)	.717 (.143)	3.060 (.184)	.539 (.086)
Effect on postelection vote reports	1.159 (.078)	.945 (.178)	2.995 (.234)	.538 (.106)
Difference	.047 (.101)	.228 (.228)	-.066 (.298)	-.001 (.136)
Change (%)	+4	+32	-2	-0

Note: Parameter estimates from probit analyses of preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports reproduced from the second and fourth columns, respectively, of table A3. Standard errors in parentheses.

virtually identical effects on preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports. Issue preferences seem to have received about one-third more weight in postelection vote reports than in preelection vote intentions; but even this difference is much smaller than the corresponding difference in table 1 for respondents interviewed close to Labor Day, and it is far from being statistically significant by conventional standards. Thus, it does not seem imprudent to interpret the differences in the apparent bases of Labor Day vote intentions and postelection vote reports in tables 1 and 2 as reflecting genuine priming rather than some merely artifactual difference between vote intentions and actual votes.

NOTES

This essay is a significantly revised and updated version of a paper originally presented at the conference "Capturing Campaign Effects" in Vancouver in 1997 and subsequently presented in seminars at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Columbia University. I am grateful to participants on those occasions for helpful comments and especially to Stanley Kelley, Lynn Vavreck, and John Zaller for detailed reactions and advice. I also thank Gabriel Lenz, whose ongoing dissertation research has greatly clarified my thinking about priming. The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trusts provided generous financial support for the work reported here. The data were collected by the American National Election Studies project at the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, funded by the National Science Foundation, and made available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

1. A notable exception is Sanders's (1996) analysis of the 1984 and 1988 campaigns, which utilizes some of the same survey data I employ here but focuses on a different set of potential campaign effects.

2. The most ambitious systematic survey focusing on statewide elections, the NES 1988-90-92 Senate Study, only interviewed respondents after Election Day. Kahn and Kenney's (1999) comparative analysis of U.S. Senate campaigns made extensive use of the resulting data but obviously sheds little light on the phenomena of priming and persuasion as I have defined them here. All of the congressional election-related items in regular NES surveys conducted before 1996 were also carried only in postelection surveys.

3. I do not consider directly whether campaigning produced changes in respondents' perceptions of the candidates' issue stands but assume that the political significance of such changes would be reflected either in prospective voters' own issue preferences or in the weight they attached to those preferences in arriving at vote choices.

4. I make no use of more general candidate evaluations reflected in thermome-

ter ratings or open-ended "likes" and "dislikes," because these seem too proximate to vote intentions to add much to the analysis.

5. A test of whether they are, in fact, identical is reported in table A10 in the appendix. That table compares the parameter estimates relating preelection vote intentions and postelection vote reports, respectively, to partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions for respondents first interviewed at the end of each fall campaign. Only one of the estimated weights for postelection vote reports differs by more than a few percent from the corresponding weight for preelection vote intentions, and that difference is not statistically significant (with a *t*-statistic of 1.0).

6. In effect, each respondent's preelection vote intention and postelection vote report are modeled as weighted averages of "Labor Day" and "Election Day" effects, with the weights depending upon when the respondent was interviewed. So, for example, respondents interviewed in early October, halfway through the fall campaign, are assigned approximately half the Labor Day effect plus half the Election Day effect for each explanatory variable. Respondents interviewed in late September are assigned approximately three-quarters of the Labor Day effect plus one-quarter of the Election Day effect, while respondents interviewed in late October would be assigned approximately one-quarter of the Labor Day effect plus three-quarters of the Election Day effect and so on.

7. With the 1988 campaign excluded from the analysis, the parameter estimates for the effect of Labor Day issue preferences on Labor Day vote intentions and postelection vote reports are .714 (with a standard error of .138) and .994 (with a standard error of .179), respectively.

8. With the 2000 campaign excluded from the analysis, the parameter estimates for the effect of Labor Day economic perceptions on Labor Day vote intentions and postelection vote reports are .212 (with a standard error of .089) and .402 (with a standard error of .113), respectively.

9. The aggregate-level evidence comes from a regression of eventual incumbent vote margins in eleven presidential elections (1948–88) on preconvention polls and election-year income changes. Each 1 percent change in real income produced a corresponding change of 2.7 percentage points (with a standard error of 1.0 percentage points) in the incumbent party's vote margin on Election Day, over and above the incumbent's margin in the last preconvention Gallup poll. Adding relative campaign spending to the regression increased the estimated impact of income growth slightly, to 3.2 percentage points (with a standard error of .6).

10. The probit parameter estimate in table A9 representing the impact of Labor Day economic perceptions on postelection vote reports is $-.078$. The corresponding parameter estimate for the five previous elections is .402. Simulating the probability of a Gore vote for each major-party voter in the 2000 NES sample (with adjustments to remove the effects of post-Labor Day changes in average values of partisanship, issue preferences, candidate images, and economic perceptions) produces average probabilities of .5399 using the former value and .5484 using the latter value. Since the Democratic advantage in economic perceptions also declined substantially over the course of the fall campaign, the difference of .85 percentage points actually overstates how many votes Gore would have gained

on Election Day if economic perceptions had had the same effect in 2000 as in other recent election years.

11. This calculation is based on a regression analysis relating the strength of partisanship (measured by the absolute value of the -1 to $+1$ party identification variable) to the date of each respondent's preelection interview plus indicator variables for each election year. The average strength of partisanship declined from .674 on Labor Day to .663 on Election Day; the difference of $-.011$ has a standard error of .013. Similar regression analyses for each campaign separately produced differences of $-.050$ (with a standard error of .031) in 1996, $+.043$ (.036) in 1980, and $-.036$ (.030) in 2000.

12. These calculations are based on parameter estimates for incumbent partisanship and an interaction between partisanship and the date of each respondent's preelection interview in the regression analyses reported in tables 4, 5, and 6.

13. For an interesting analysis of the power of typical election surveys to detect campaign effects, see Zaller 2002. For a description (including data and codebooks) of a recent much larger than typical election survey, the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey, see Romer et al. 2004.

14. The "inspiring" questions were not included in the 2000 survey; thus, the "Candidate Images" variable for 2000 is constructed from the "knowledgeable" and "moral" ratings only.

15. The separate "Labor Day" and "Election Day" estimates are derived from interaction terms reflecting the date of each respondent's preelection interview. The NES surveys include a variable indicating how many days before the election each respondent was interviewed. I recoded that variable to create a date-of-interview variable ranging from 1 at the beginning of the fall campaign to 0 on Election Day. I then reversed the coding to create a second date-of-interview variable ranging from 0 at the beginning of the fall campaign to 1 on Election Day. The parameter estimates in the "Labor Day" columns of table A3 are based on interactions between the relevant explanatory variables and the first date-of-interview variable, while those in the "Election Day" columns are based on interactions between the relevant explanatory variables and the second date-of-interview variable. In effect, each respondent's vote intention and postelection vote report are represented as weighted averages of these "Labor Day" and "Election Day" parameter estimates, with the weights depending on when the respondent was interviewed. Conversely, the "Labor Day" and "Election Day" estimates for each explanatory variable are both based on the full set of survey respondents, but with early respondents weighted relatively heavily in the "Labor Day" estimate and less heavily in the "Election Day" estimate and late respondents weighted relatively heavily in the "Election Day" estimate and less heavily in the "Labor Day" estimate.

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