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Priming Past the Primary: Mass Media, Issue Salience and Candidate Evaluation in a Race Governor

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Abstract: Past research indicates that voters have begun to rely less on party affiliations and more on candidates' images and positions on issues in making voting decisions. Through using the mass media, voters can learn about issues and candidates, and form images of the candidates.

Our study concerns the effects of mass mediated election news, and of political advertising, on voters' choice of candidates. In particular, we examined the roles of media agenda-setting and priming, and of negative

political advertising, in the development of voter's evaluations of candidates. An important trend in agenda-setting research is to look beyond issue saliences as dependent variables to determine what relationships issue saliences have with other phenomena, such as public opinion and voting choice. Research into "priming" indicates that the issues and other aspects of political life (*e.g.*, a candidate's character) that become salient in an election are used by voters to evaluate candidates for public office, and therefore indirectly affect voting behavior.

An analysis of a sample survey of eligible voters in the 1990 race for Wisconsin governor found that attention to news accounts of the election is associated with higher levels of salience given some issues in that election. In line with the "priming" model, issue salience had some, although modest, relationship to evaluation of the candidates. Political commercials, including negative ads, appeared to affect candidate evaluations more directly, while news media appeared to work through issue salience to affect evaluations of candidates. Some evidence was found of a "boomerang" effect of negative advertising in this campaign.

Identification with political parties had only a small direct relationship to voting intention. Instead, this identification appears to work along with the direct and indirect effects of communication variables to influence candidate evaluation, which then appears to affect voting choice.

1. Introduction

Voters have begun to rely less on party affiliations and more on the candidates' images and positions on issues in making voting decisions.¹ Through using the mass media, voters can learn about issues and candidates, and form images of the candidates. Our study concerns the ways that voters derive evaluations of candidates directly or indirectly from the mass media, especially from news and political commercials. We expect that these evaluations may have a stronger relationship with vote choice than will party identification.

We have chosen to analyze the 1990 election race for governor of Wisconsin, since lower-level races such as this provide a fertile context for examining differences in voter behavior.² This race also featured the use of "negative" campaign commercials by both candidates.

1.1 News Media: Agenda-Setting and Priming

Agenda-Setting. For the past two decades, various researchers have examined the "agenda-setting" role of the press, usually in the

context of politics and public affairs. The agenda-setting model proposes that the more the news media stress certain issues, the more the public comes to see those issues as "salient" or important, as worth thinking about.³

Considerable research, involving various issues, media, and audiences, has found agenda-setting effects to be quite robust.⁴ However, the process does not work on all people at all times. Various contingent conditions, antecedent and intervening variables have been found that modify agenda-setting effects on the public.^{4, 5, 6}

In his review, Weaver notes that agenda-setting effects seem to be more powerful in the earlier phases of an election, when the framework of the election is being formed. News media may be less effective in setting agendas, he says, when audiences are also engaged in a lot of discussion about politics, or when the issues are "obtrusive," that is, issues that people can identify for themselves through personal experience (such as taxes or unemployment) independent of media treatment of those issues.⁶ While some research has found evidence for this mitigating influence of obtrusiveness, other research has found that personal experience may not modify media effects on issue salience⁷, and other studies indicate that personal experience may actually sensitize people to important issues such that agenda-setting effects may be stronger when issues are more obtrusive.^{8, 9}

An important factor to consider when assessing studies of agenda-setting is the level of analysis being used in the study. Most agenda-setting research investigates macro-level or societal-level effects of media issue coverage. Typically, content analysis of news media stress of various issues is compared to poll data indicating the number of citizens highly concerned about these issues. Commonly, media ranking of the importance of the issues is compared overall to the public's ranking of the importance of the issues. Relatively few studies of agenda-setting have been conducted at the individual-level, which would allow for closer examination of the relationship of an individual's perception of the importance of an issue to his or her exposure to news media stress of that issue. As a preface to their

individual-level study of agenda-setting, Lasorsa and Wanta⁹ noted that:

"According to our model, an individual who is exposed and attends to news media coverage learns the relative importance attributed by the media to political issues. Therefore, we argue, one's susceptibility to media agenda-setting should depend upon one's level of exposure and attention to mediated information: the less news media exposure and attention, the less likely is agenda-setting to occur" (p. 805).

While their study found correspondence between media and personal agendas among those who attend more to the media content, agenda-setting studies conducted at the individual-level of analysis have not revealed consistent agenda-setting effects⁽¹⁾, and more agenda-setting research is needed at the individual level.¹⁰ Individual-level analyses also allow the researcher to explore the relationship of perceived Issue salience with other psychological variables, such as affect toward a candidate.

Priming. An important trend in agenda-setting research is to look beyond Issue saliences as dependent variables to determine what relationships, if any, Issue saliences and have with other phenomena such as public opinion and the evaluations voters make of political candidates.^{4, 6} Research into "priming" indicates that the Issues and other aspects of political life (*e.g.*, a candidate's character) that become salient in an election are used by voters to evaluate candidates for public office.¹¹

Most research indicates that people actively process media products.¹² They usually adopt cognitive strategies to deal with the flood of information from the mass media¹³ and to cope with the complexities of political issues which otherwise would overwhelm the capabilities of human short-term and long-term memory.¹¹

Voters for example, simplify their election decisions by strategic use of "schemata"-cognitive structures in long-term memory that aid information processing by determining the relevance, storage, and use of information.¹³ Garramone, Steele, and Pinkleton found that voters rely more on schemata related to candidate images when it is difficult

to distinguish among various candidates, such as during the beginning of election campaigns. However, as candidates drop from the race and there are fewer perspectives on the issues, voters begin to rely more on Issue-related schemata to discriminate among candidates.¹⁴

The extent that voters consider one issue or another as relevant to their evaluation of a candidate is affected by priming, a mental process that simplifies complex cognitive patterns and decisions. Tversky and Kahneman note that people do not necessarily make judgments based on some logical ordering of information, but instead may employ heuristic shortcuts, such as applying foremost the information that is most available or accessible in memory. They found that cuing certain information beforehand makes it more available for later recall and therefore more likely to be used in forming evaluations.¹⁵ Such priming can affect the evaluations of political candidates and officials.^{16,17} The mass media, through agenda-setting, can prime certain issues by stressing them, thus altering the weights people give issues when they evaluate candidates, which in turn can affect the outcome of elections.⁴ In their study of television, Iyengar and Kinder found that:

"When primed by television news stories that focus on national defense, people judge the president largely by how well he has provided, as they see it, for the nation's defense; when primed by stories about inflation, people evaluate the president on how he has managed, in their view, to keep prices down, and so on (pp. 114-115).

Their results indicate that priming works in regard to judgment of a politician's character as well as in regard to his or her performance in office.¹¹

Our analysis will look for the relationship of individuals' attention to news media accounts of the election to the salience they ascribe to some select issues stressed in the election, but we will concentrate on examining the relationship of those perceived issue saliences to individuals' evaluations of the candidates, especially in the context of party preference and other possible influences. Since interpersonal communication can have priming effects in other contexts,¹⁸ it is

important to account for its influence. We will also be sensitive to the effects of political commercials on evaluations of candidates.

1.2 Political Commercials and Candidate Evaluations

Politicians are relying more on advertising to disseminate campaign information.¹⁹ Most of these political ads are meant to rally support for the sponsoring candidate. An increasing percentage of these ads, however, seem to make negative or disparaging statements about competitors.

Negative Advertising. Negative advertising, according to Merritt, "identifies the opponent and explicitly refers to either the general image or the specific policies with the goal of creating 'negative affect.'"²⁰ In our study, we are amending this definition to include the use of "implicit comparisons" that politicians have begun to borrow from product advertising.

Negative ads are also essentially "comparative ads," since they provide audiences with the opportunity to make a comparison between two or more choices. Comparative advertising usually involves a more established, well-known product (politically, the incumbent) and a less established or even unknown ("Brand X") product (the challenger). In either application, this strategy risks giving the competition free exposure for its name and attributes, and possibly creates confusion. Since such ads raise issues as a means of comparing candidates, they may have agenda-setting and priming effects as well. Yi, for example, found priming effects for print ads in relation to products.²¹

Research into this "negative" political advertising has found that voter reactions range from an increase in attention to, and recall of, advertising claims²² to reactions such as skepticism and lack of credence in the message's sponsor.²³ In an experiment, Kaid and Boydston found significantly lower evaluations of a targeted candidate after exposure to either newspaper or television ads using negative strategies.²⁴ Studies have also found some evidence that negative appeals can backfire or "boomerang."^{22,23,25,26} Garramone found in a 1982 Congressional election that 40% reported being more negative toward the sponsor of the negative ad, while only 15%

became more negative toward the target candidate.²³ Faber, Tims, and Schmitt found that negative appeals polarize voters. In their survey of a 1988 Congressional election, voters already leaning toward a particular candidate strengthened their choice after exposure to negative ads. Independents, however, were more likely to vote for the target than for the sponsor of an attack ad.²⁶

In the 1990 gubernatorial election we are studying, both candidates used the popular negative affect-laden appeals identified by Kern²⁷, such as anger and uncertainty, as well as some less frequent appeals such as guilt and fear. All of their ads fit the Merritt²⁰ definition of negative advertising, as amended. They also tend to rely on innuendo and on voter familiarity with the ongoing issues, charges and countercharges. (2)

1.3 Analysis Model

Based on this background and prior research, we generally expect that voter exposure to election issues stressed in the news media influences the voter's perception of the salience of these issues. Voters in turn use these perceived issue saliences to evaluate candidates, which in turn influences voting choice. Issue obtrusiveness could amplify or restrict media effects on issue salience. We would not expect news media effects to extend much beyond issue saliences, nor the effects of saliences to extend much beyond the evaluation of candidates.

Given their affective nature (*i.e.*, appeals to emotions), we would expect political commercials to be related to candidate evaluations more directly. It is possible that "negative" commercials, being comparative advertising, might raise issues useful for comparing candidates, and therefore affect issue saliences and priming. They may also "backfire" on the evaluation of the sponsor.

We generally expect that media influences would work only indirectly through issue saliences and candidate evaluations to affect vote choice, although these evaluations are expected to have stronger effects on vote choice than will party affiliations.

In our study, we will control for party identification, interest in the election, sex and age. We will also control for social status, since higher status (usually better educated) members of the public tend to have higher levels of formal knowledge related to public issues, and have more finely tuned information-processing skills.²⁸ We will also include in our analysis the effects of interpersonal communication about the election. Such discussions could affect media agenda-setting, if only by exposing people vicariously to issues experienced by others,⁴ and might also prime memory for certain issues that have been discussed.¹⁸

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Given this model, we will perform our analysis based on the following research questions (RQ) and hypotheses (H):

RQ1. What is the relationship of control variables and of communication variables to the salience that potential voters ascribe to the election issues, that is, how important these issues are to people in helping them decide for whom to vote in the 1990 race for governor?

Based on the agenda setting and priming models, we expect in particular that:

H1: Attention to news accounts of the election for governor will be positively related to the perceived salience of the issues.

Because past studies have found contradictory results in regard to issue obtrusiveness, we have no specific hypotheses regarding whether issue obtrusiveness will affect the results expected in H1. We will, however, be alert to differences in the coefficients from issue to issue that might be attributable to issue obtrusiveness. Similarly, we have no specific hypotheses regarding priming effects of negative commercials, but will be alert to any effects of these ads on issue saliences.

RQ2. What are the effects of control and communication variables on evaluations of the candidates?

We do not expect news media to have direct effects on candidate evaluations. However, given the nature of most political commercials to be affective rather than cognitive--that is, more likely to rally feeling than to provide knowledge--we expect that they will, as a set, influence positively the evaluations viewers make of the candidates they promote. We expect that:

H2a: There will be a positive relationship between paying attention to the set of commercials for the incumbent and the evaluation of the incumbent.

H2b: There will be a positive relationship between paying attention to the set of commercials for the challenger and the evaluation of the challenger.

We also propose that negative ads will diminish the evaluation of both the candidate being attacked and the candidate doing the attacking.

H2c: Recall of negative ads will be correlated negatively with the evaluation of the candidate being attacked.

H2d: Recall of negative ads will be correlated negatively with the evaluation of the candidate doing the attacking.

RQ3. Is the evaluation of candidates affected by issue salience?

Salient issues are expected to form a framework for evaluating political candidates. Therefore, we expect that:

H3a: will be relationships between issue saliences and evaluations of the candidates.

We also expect that exposure to election news media works through issue salience to affect candidate evaluation. Therefore:

H3b: The relationship of issue salience to candidate evaluation will be stronger than the relationship of news media exposure to candidate evaluation.

RQ4. *What are the effects of control and communication variables, issue salience and evaluation of candidates on likely vote choice?*

Since we expect that exposure to news works through issue salience to affect candidate evaluation, and that candidate evaluation then affects expected vote we propose:

H4a: The relationship of candidate evaluation to vote choice will be stronger than the relationship of Issue salience to vote choice.

Since candidate evaluations are expected to have stronger influence on vote choice than will party identification, we propose:

H4b: The relationship of candidate evaluation to vote choice will be stronger than the relationship of party affiliation to vote choice.

2. Method

To test our hypotheses, we constructed and pretested a questionnaire designed to measure our independent, dependent and control variables and then conducted our survey beginning two weeks prior to the November 1990 Wisconsin gubernatorial election. The campaign was mature by that time, allowing for issues to develop and for candidates to express their stands on the issues. While agenda-setting effects may be weaker this late in the campaign, priming effects may be stronger than during the earlier phases of the campaign.

2.1 Survey Design

A 10-12 minute telephone interview was conducted of a probability sample of eligible voters in the Milwaukee metropolitan area.³ Interviewers were advanced students who were trained and paid. Interviewing was completed in 10 days, during which time no major revelations emerged in regard to either candidate. The incumbent had a 2-1 lead in most polls conducted around the time of the start of our interviewing, and went on to reelection later. Add-a-

digit procedure was used to ensure that unlisted numbers were included in the sample. Respondents were assured of confidentiality.

Analysis of Response. The survey yielded 206 usable interviews, a response rate estimated at 45% of eligible respondents. To determine whether respondents differed from other eligibles who refused to be interviewed, we asked "refusers" if they would answer just a handful of questions. About 60% of them agreed. After they passed the screening questions, we asked them about age, income, education, sex, party preference, and strength of party affiliation. We found that refusers were lower in social status than respondents who agreed to answer the full questionnaire, and that those lower status persons who felt little affiliation with political parties were the least likely to answer the full set of questions. Therefore, our results are tilted somewhat toward higher status persons and those lower status persons with stronger party identification. These groups are likely to be more interested in the election, and therefore more likely to agree to be interviewed.⁽⁴⁾ Since priming effects have been found to be more pronounced among political novices than among those more expert in politics²⁹, it is possible that this sample bias may underestimate priming effects in our study, making our results conservative.

2.2 Measurement

Control Variables. Social status, sex, age, political preference, and interest in the election were used as control variables in the analysis. These variables could directly or indirectly affect media use, issue saliences, candidate evaluation, or vote choice in this election. Social status was calculated by summing standardized scores for education and income, after missing data in each had been replaced by the sample mean. Reliability (alpha) is .71.

Election Media Exposure Variables. Degree of attention to newspaper and television news about the election, the number of gubernatorial debates viewed, overall attention to commercials for the two candidates, and frequency of discussions about the election were also measured, via Likert-type scales, in the study.

To determine recall of negative commercials, respondents were given a set of descriptions of specific commercials, and asked whether they remember seeing each ad. In this form of partially aided recall, no clues are given regarding which candidate sponsored the ad, but a follow-up question asks whom the ad is for. Respondents were given a score of zero if they did not recall seeing the ad, a one if they did recall seeing the ad, and a two if they correctly identified the candidate who sponsored the ad.

To produce a baseline for memory, respondents were also asked whether they had seen another ad that showed hands reaching into a bag and grabbing money. Such an ad never was used in the campaign. Respondents were given a zero if they did not recall seeing this bogus ad, and a one if they did. Recall of the bogus ad is controlled in all analyses involving the real negative commercials.

Issue Salience. To determine how important various election issues were to respondents in helping them distinguish the candidates, they were told:

"We'd like to know how you feel about some specific issues. I'll name an issue, and you tell me how important each issue will be in determining how you might vote in the upcoming governor's election."

Responses were scored so that higher values represent greater issue salience. We decided to concentrate our analysis on two more obtrusive issues, environment and property taxes, and two less obtrusive issues, political campaign financing and candidate experience in office.⁽⁵⁾ Our analysis of newspaper coverage of the election indicated that all four of these issues received higher levels of coverage in the news in the context of the election (*i.e.*, associated with the candidates). Similarly, all four issues were included in the gubernatorial debates. Negative campaign commercials concerned raising property taxes, the propriety of campaign financing, and the character of the candidates.

Our approach to analysis differs from measures of correspondence between media and individual issue saliences⁹ by

selecting a few issues that are more salient in media election coverage and then measuring whether attention to media election coverage affects the audience member's perception of the importance of those issues. While our measurement does not indicate whether individuals' issue rankings match those of the media, it has the advantage of allowing us to follow-through in our study of priming by comparing more direct measures of individual issue salience to the evaluations audience members make of the candidates.

Candidate Evaluation. Respondents were asked to rate each candidate separately on seven semantic-differential scales.(6) Factor analysis of the set of scales revealed single, but separate, dimensions for the two candidates. The seven scales were summed for each candidate, and coded so that higher values represent more positive evaluations. Reliability (alpha) for the challenger's evaluation index is .90. For the incumbent's evaluation index, alpha is .89.

Expected Vote. A series of questions was asked to determine the candidate for whom the respondent is likely to vote. The resulting scale is:

- 1 [The challenger] for sure.
- 2 [The challenger] but might change.
- 3 Unsure but leaning more toward [the challenger].
- 4 Unsure/Neither/Other.
- 5 Unsure but leaning more toward [the incumbent].
- 6 [The incumbent] but might change.
- 7 [The incumbent] for sure.

2.3 Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. Guided by the four research questions and related hypotheses, we used a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses to assess the influence of control and independent variables on a successive series of dependent variables: issue salience, candidate evaluation, and expected vote.

To regress each issue salience, the set of five control variables was entered as the first block. Since interpersonal communication about the election could affect issue saliences and other variables, it was entered as the second block. Attention to newspaper and television news about the elections, and viewing of the gubernatorial debates, were entered as the third block. General attention to commercials for the candidates (two variables) was the fourth block. The fifth block was "recall" of the bogus ad. The fourth block and, in particular, fifth block were considered controls for the sixth block, recall of the negative commercials for the two candidates.

In regressing evaluations of each candidate, the above blocks of variables were entered in the order noted, followed by a block of the four issue saliences to assess priming effects on evaluations. In regressing likely vote choice, the above blocks of variables were entered in the order noted, followed by a block of the two candidate evaluation variables. Comparisons of betas across dependent variables were conducted to assess the mitigating roles of each variable in the model.

To make optimum use of the sample size, missing data are replaced with the sample mean. Directional hypotheses are tested with one-tailed tests of statistical significance. Other relationships are tested by two-tailed tests of statistical significance.

3. Results

Even though we are using an influence-chain model, we are limited by the fact that our data are cross-sectional. All causal inferences from these data must be tempered by that fact.

3.1 Issue Salience

Our first research question concerned the relationship of control and communication variables to the salience of election issues, that is, how important these issues were to local voters in helping them decide for whom to vote in the 1990 race for governor.

Table 1 lists the four issues in order of their perceived importance in evaluating candidates in the election. Environment was rated as "very important" in this regard by 64.4% of those surveyed, property taxes by 59.9%, candidate experience by 39.9%, and campaign funding by 25.0%. (The margin of error, at the 95% level of confidence, is plus or minus 7%.)

The perceived importance of the environmental issue is not affected by any of the control variables. This result probably reflects concern for the environment cutting across the demographic and political groups identified as controls in this analysis. Older respondents, however, tend to be more concerned than younger ones about property taxes ($\beta = .21, p = .01$) and the candidates' experience ($\beta = .15, p = .05$) as election issues. Older respondents are more likely to be property owners, and therefore property taxes would be more salient to them. Perhaps older respondents also put more value on accumulated experience as a qualification for the position of governor, and other jobs as well. Those more interested in the campaign are also somewhat more likely to consider campaign funding as an important issue in deciding how they might vote in the election ($\beta = .17, p = .05$).

Based on the agenda-setting and priming models, we have proposed in H1 that attention to news accounts of the election for governor will be positively related to the perceived salience of the issues.

Hypothesis Test. The relationships between attention to news about the gubernatorial election and the salience of the four issues are shown in Table 1. Attention to news accounts of the gubernatorial election relates positively and significantly, albeit somewhat weakly, to issue salience in three of the eight comparisons. The perceived importance of the environment issue is not associated with attention to any of the media. Those who read election news in the newspaper tend to perceive the experience of the candidates as a somewhat more important issue than do those who do not ($\beta = .20, p = .05$). Viewing of television election news is associated with giving greater importance to the issues of property taxes ($\beta = .21, p = .05$) and campaign funding ($\beta = .16, p = .05$, one-tailed). Thus, some support is given

H1, at least in regard to the issues and news media noted above. The salience of the campaign funding issue is also associated with viewing of the gubernatorial debates ($\beta = .15$, $p = .05$). The negative commercials are not related to issue saliences.

The relationship of issue saliences to attention to election news accounts does not give clear evidence that issue obtrusiveness affects the relationship of this attention to the importance that respondents give to these issues in regard to the election.

Generally, it appears that attention to election news may be affecting the importance people give to some issues that could be used to discriminate candidates, although other communication media (in this case, debates) may have similar effects on issue salience. The relationships, however, at least as found in this study, are not very strong.

3.2 Candidate Evaluations

Our second research question concerned the effects of control and communication variables on evaluations of the candidates. Party identification (Table 1) relates to candidate evaluations in ways that would be expected, with those who identify more with the Republicans having a more favorable impression of the Republican incumbent ($\beta = .26$, $p = .001$) and those who identify more with the Democrats having a more favorable evaluation of the Democratic challenger ($\beta = -.26$, $p = .001$). None of the other control variables relate to these evaluations.

Hypothesis Tests. Given the affective nature of political commercials, we expected in H2a that there will be a positive relationship between paying attention to the set of commercials for the incumbent and evaluation of the incumbent, and in H2b that there will be a positive relationship between paying attention to the set of commercials for the challenger and evaluation of the challenger. Table 1 indicates support for both H2a ($\beta = .24$, $p = .01$) and H2b ($\beta = .24$, $p = .01$).

We have also proposed that negative ads will lessen the image of both the candidate being attacked (H2c) and the candidate doing the attacking (H2d).

Table 1 indicates that recall of negative commercials is not associated with evaluations of the candidates being attacked. Therefore, there is no support for H2c in this analysis. It does appear, however, that the incumbent may have hurt himself more than he hurt the challenger with his negative commercials, since recall of those commercials is associated with a somewhat lower evaluation of the incumbent (beta=-.15, p=.05), although the relationship is not strong. Therefore, there is some support for H2d, at least in regard to the incumbent.

Only about 5% of respondents believed that they saw the bogus ad. This misperception, in addition, is not associated with any of the variables in Table 1. By comparison, 30-45% of the respondents saw at least one of the actual negative commercials. (Margin of error at the 95% confidence level is plus or minus 7%.)

Generally, among the media exposure variables, only commercials appear to be directly related to candidate evaluation. This pattern seems consistent with the affective nature of the evaluation variables and of the commercials. There appears to be some "boomerang" effect of negative political advertising, which might be due either to misunderstanding of the commercials (7) or to viewers lowering their evaluation of candidates who would use such advertising.

3.3 Salience and Evaluations

Based on the priming model, our third research question asks whether the evaluation of candidates is affected by issue salience. If so, then salient issues form a framework for evaluating political candidates. We expected in H3a that there would be relationships between issue saliences and candidate evaluations.

Hypothesis Tests. Table 1 shows four significant relationships between issue saliences and candidate evaluations across eight

comparisons. The salience of the environmental issue relates to more favorable evaluations of the challenger ($\beta = .19$, $p = .01$), who campaigned for a moratorium on metal-ore mining in the state and for a state-mandated freeze on toxic discharges into state waterways. The incumbent wanted no change in the laws regarding mining and favored less direct measures (alternative technologies, incentives and education) to deal with toxic discharges. The salience of the candidate experience issue is positively related to evaluation of the incumbent ($\beta = .14$, $p = .05$) and negatively related to evaluation of the challenger ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .05$), as might be expected. The issue of campaign financing, which was raised as an attack on the incumbent, is negatively related to his evaluation ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .05$). Thus, there is some limited support for H3a.

The salience of the property tax issue is associated with an intention to vote for the incumbent ($\beta = .17$, $p = .001$), who promised no new taxes while the challenger proposed a complicated tax revision package. In this case, issue salience is not related to our candidate evaluation measures, but appears to affect vote choice more directly. While these results run contrary to the direction of influence we expect from our model, it is also possible that our evaluation measures do not include dimensions that would capture the influence of this issue.

Since we expect that exposure to election news media works through issue salience to affect candidate evaluation, we have proposed in H3b that the relationship of issue salience to candidate evaluations will be stronger than the relationship of news media exposure to candidate evaluations. The relationships between the news media variables and candidate evaluations are near zero and non-significant (Table 1), whereas there are significant, albeit not strong, relationships between issue salience and candidate evaluation as noted. These results would give some support to H3b.

Given the fact that respondents rated the issues of environment and property taxes as relatively important in helping them decide for whom to vote, we might have expected the empirical relationship of these issue saliences to candidate evaluations to be much stronger than the relationship of campaign funding and candidate experience to

candidate evaluations. Such is not the case, however. Perhaps respondents simply responded according to the general salience they give these issues, and were not able to self-report the impact that these issues have on their evaluations. Sherman, Mackie, and Driscoll found that their subjects were "typically unaware of the impact that primed dimensions have on particular evaluations and thus [did] not report weighting them more heavily" (p. 415).¹⁷

Generally, these results indicate that, in line with the priming model, issue salience affects the judgments people make of candidates, at least in regard to some issues. News media influence appears to work through issue salience to affect evaluations, although political advertising, including negative advertising, appears to affect evaluations a bit more directly.

3.4 Expected Vote

Our fourth research question concerned the effects of control and communication variables, issue salience, and evaluation of the candidates on likely vote choice. Since we expect that issue salience affects voting intention only by working indirectly through candidate evaluation, we have proposed in H4a that the relationship of candidate evaluation to vote choice will be stronger than the relationship of issue salience to vote choice.

Hypothesis Tests. Table 1 shows that moderate relationships exist between candidate evaluation and vote choice, such that those who perceive the incumbent more favorably are more inclined to vote for him (beta=.32, p=.001) and those who perceive the challenger more favorably are more inclined to vote for him (beta=-.36, p=.001). In addition, these coefficients in general are stronger than the relationships of the salience variables to vote choice, supporting H4a.

We have also proposed in H4b that the evaluation measures will be more strongly related to vote choice than will party affiliation. It appears in Table 1 that the voter's evaluation of the candidate plays a bigger role in his or her vote decision than does party identification, which is still influential but less powerful (beta=.18, p=.001). Therefore, H4b is supported. Party identification still does have some

additional indirect influence on vote choice, however, by affecting to some extent (beta=.26 in absolute value, $p=.001$) the evaluations voters make of the candidates.

None of the election communication media had any direct relationship with vote intention. Most of their effects on voting intention seem to be indirect, via issue salience or the evaluations voters make of the candidates. Candidate evaluations appear to be more strongly related to vote choice than is party identification. These results are consistent with the assertion that the mass media have taken over many of the functions of political parties in informing voters and selecting candidates.³⁰

4. Conclusion

The relationships among variables that we found in our study in general supported most of our hypotheses, but were not strong in magnitude. These relationships may have been stronger if the election had been closer and if our sample had not been biased toward those who were apparently more interested in the election. In the latter case, they may have been less affected by media agendas than those less interested in the election. Measurement would have been improved if our salience measures had been more specific regarding a broad topic such as "environment," and if we had measures of individual experience with the issues. Nonetheless, our results have revealed some noteworthy patterns.

Generally, our results indicate that paying attention to news accounts of the election affects the importance given some issues, and that, in turn, the salience of some issues can affect voters' evaluations of candidates. Thus, there is some support for the priming model. The influence of issue obtrusiveness on agenda-setting and priming is inconclusive in our study.

Political commercials appear to be related to candidate evaluations more directly. Negative advertising can "boomerang" or backfire by lowering the evaluation of the attacking candidate. Viewers may see the attacking candidate as a bully, or may actually be confused about which candidate sponsored the ad.

Our results also tend to confirm that vote choice is affected more strongly by the evaluations people make of candidates than by political affiliation. These evaluations are somewhat affected by political affiliation, and to some extent by political advertising and, more indirectly, by the news content of the mass media.

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Notes

1. Lee Becker, as quoted by Weaver³¹.
2. For example, in his advertising, the challenger claimed the incumbent suppressed documents indicating that the incumbent received campaign money from special interest groups who would gain from the passage of legislation allowing dog racing in the state. In another commercial, sponsored by the incumbent, the silhouette of a private detective is shown. The detective is on the phone, reporting that he had been hired by the challenger to dig up some dirt on the incumbent. He said he could find nothing of the kind, and indicated that the challenger was foolish for attempting this. In yet another ad, the incumbent turns the "TLC" phrase on his opponent by saying that if the challenger is elected, the challenger will "Tax Like Crazy."
3. Possible respondents were screened according to three criteria, to determine if they qualified to be interviewed: 1) At least 18 years old and a resident of the state; 2) Registered voter in the state or intended to register; and 3) Aware of the gubernatorial election.
4. Among respondents in this survey, higher status persons were more likely to show interest in the campaign for governor. The response rate may have been improved had we not indicated in the introduction to the questionnaire that the survey concerned the upcoming election for Wisconsin governor.
5. Taxes have been considered an obtrusive issue in past agenda-setting research, although environment had been considered unobtrusive. Results appear to be mixed in regard to agenda-setting effects and environment.⁸ MacKuen and Coombs found weak agenda-setting

effects for environment, which brings into question either its unobtrusiveness as an issue or the idea of stronger agenda-setting effects for unobtrusive issues.³² We propose that, in a state such as Wisconsin, environment is an issue with which people have personal experience, if only due to recycling concerns and the growing association between environmental contamination from hazardous substances and risks to human health³³, and therefore should be considered obtrusive. Since most people will have little or no direct experience with candidate qualifications and with the campaign funding issue, these issues would be relatively unobtrusive.

6. The attributes used to evaluate candidates were: capable-incapable, honest-dishonest, desirable-undesirable, good-bad, caring-uncaring, appealing-unappealing, negative-positive.
7. While the reason that the incumbent's ads had more impact on candidate evaluations is not clear, it is possible that their higher production quality may have contributed to their impact. An additional consideration is that negative ads may be confusing to some viewers. Since the ads mention the opposition candidate, some may misperceive the ad as being for that candidate. Since such ads often involve innuendo and responses to opposition ads, those who have not followed the campaign carefully, or who do not have firm knowledge of the relevant issues, may not understand the meanings of the messages. Recall of such televised messages, which are fleeting, may be especially susceptible to this type of interference. In their study of commercials and other televised messages, Jacoby, Hoyer, and Sheluga³⁴ discovered that:

" ... A large proportion of the American television viewing audience tends to miscomprehend communications broadcast over commercial television. The vast majority (95.6%) of the 2700 respondents in this investigation miscomprehended at least some portion of the 60 seconds worth of televised communications which they viewed Approximately 30% of the relevant informational content contained within each communication was miscomprehended" (p. 89).

In our study, viewers of any of the three negative ads were just as likely to misidentify whom the ads were "for" (or not know) as they were to identify the correct candidate. Lower status persons were more likely to misidentify which candidate sponsored the incumbent "Tax Like Crazy" ad ($r = .26, p = .05$) and the challenger "Documents" commercial ($r = .41, p = .01$), while higher status persons were more likely to name the correct candidate. Perhaps the better information-processing capabilities of the better-educated, coupled with greater background knowledge of public affairs issues,²⁸ helped

them understand these commercials in the limited time they ran on the air. More research should be conducted into these interference patterns, since they might account for some of the apparent "boomerang" effects of negative advertising.

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Table 1:
Issue Salience, Candidate Evaluation, and Voting Intent
by Control and Communication Variables

Multiple Regression Analyses (Betas)

Variable:	Issue Salience			Candidate Evaluation		Voting Intent [R=high]	
	Envi- ronment	Property Taxes	Candidate Experience	Campaign Funding	Republican Incumbent		Democratic Challenger
Control:							
Social Status	-.10	-.06	-.07	-.09	.08	-.05	.05
Sex	.06	-.08	.03	.01	.10	-.06	.02
Age	.06	.21b	.15a	.11	-.01	.08	-.08
Election Interest	.04	-.01	.09	.17a	.10	.02	.07
Party Preference (R=high)	.00	.13	.09	-.11	.26c	-.26c	.18c
Communication:							
Interpersonal	-.08	-.06	.02	-.02	.04	-.03	-.03
Mass Mediated:							
Election News:							
Newspapers	.10	-.06	.20a	.06	.00	-.01	.11
Television	.05	.21a	.01	.16a	-.05	.00	-.02
TV Debates	-.04	-.01	.05	.15a	.03	-.08	.02
Commercials For:							
Incumbent (R)	.11	.01	.08	-.04	.24b	-.11	.05
Challenger (D)	.11	.03	-.14	.13	-.13	.24b	-.03

Variable:	<u>Issue Salience</u>				<u>Candidate Evaluation</u>		Voting Intent [R=high]
	<u>Envi-ronment</u>	<u>Property Taxes</u>	<u>Candidate Experience</u>	<u>Campaign Funding</u>	<u>Republican Incumbent</u>	<u>Democratic Challenger</u>	
Negative Ads:							
<i>Bogus</i>	.02	-.03	-.03	.04	.09	.04	.04
<i>For Incumbent (R)</i>	.04	.12	.00	.01	<u>-.15a</u>	-.08	-.07
<i>For Challenger (D)</i>	.12	-.02	-.03	.00	-.02	-.02	-.02
Issue Salience:							
Environment					-.01	<u>.19b</u>	-.05
Property Taxes					<u>.08</u>	<u>-.09</u>	<u>.17c</u>
Candidate Experience					<u>.14a</u>	<u>-.14a</u>	-.04
Campaign Funding					<u>-.17a</u>	.10	-.10
Candidate Evaluation:							
Incumbent (R)							<u>.32c</u>
Challenger (D)							<u>-.36c</u>
Multiple R:	<u>.34a</u>	<u>.37a</u>	<u>.34a</u>	<u>.39b</u>	<u>.51c</u>	<u>.52c</u>	<u>.77c</u>

N=206 Significance Key: (a) .05 (b) .01 (c) .001
Underlined: Significant one-tailed only.