The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently

Scholars and journalists frequently worry about typical Americans’ seeming ignorance of politics. Many blame the news media, which, they argue, fails to provide voters with the information they need to function as competent democratic citizens. “Exhibit A” in this critique is frequently the proliferation of so-called “soft news,” which, unlike implicitly higher-quality, public affairs oriented “hard news,” is geared primarily, and more overtly, toward entertainment. Many people, however, are not very interested in politics. Such news is therefore unlikely to appeal to these individuals, or to influence their voting behavior. We argue that the “quality” of news depends upon the extent to which it enables citizens to determine, as efficiently as possible, which candidate best matches their own preferences. We further argue that in this regard, and for politically inattentive citizens, soft news is more efficient than traditional, hard news. Drawing on research from cognitive psychology on the use of heuristic cues in human reasoning, we derive a series of hypotheses, which we test using data from the 2000 National Election Study. We find that politically inattentive individuals who consumed daytime talk shows – a highly popular soft news format -- were more likely than their non-talk-show-consuming, inattentive counterparts to vote for the candidate who best represented their self-described preferences. Our findings suggest the need to rethink conventional definitions of news quality, as well as the effectiveness of the media in facilitating voting “competence” among democratic citizens.

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Introduction: Political Information and Democracy

Democratic theorists have long argued that a prerequisite for representative democracy is for citizens to vote in their own, subjectively determined, interests (Banfield 1961, Dahl 1961). To do so, of course, they must have sufficient information to determine which candidates will best represent their interests. But since in democracies it is markets rather than statesmen which govern the provision of information, the “proper” role of the press in helping citizens fulfill their civic duties remains open to debate (Norris 2000, Schudson 1998, Zaller 1999 and 2003, Bennett and Entman 2000). This is particularly the case when it comes to political campaigns, voting behavior, and the primary link between them — news coverage. While many claim the media have an obligation to inform citizens fully and thus enable them to figure out which candidate most closely matches their own preferences (e.g., Bennett 1997, Patterson, 2000), however they themselves define them, others counter that news content is -- and must be -- determined by the vicissitudes of the media marketplace (Baum 2003; Hamilton 2003; Norris 2000; Zaller 1999, 2003).¹

For many in the former camp, the current state of political news, and thus of citizens’ political knowledge – as well as, by extension, their competence as democratic citizens -- is bleak (Patterson 1994, 2000; L. Bennett 2003, S. Bennett n.d.). But others (e.g., Popkin 1993, Schudson 1998, Graber 2003, Zaller 2003) counter that a press that provides limited quantities of political information is not necessarily dysfunctional. Advocates of this latter perspective argue that prevalent standards for a properly informed citizenry are out of step with breakthroughs in

¹Due to the inherently subjective weighting that different voters attach to different considerations in weighing candidates, a voter’s preferences over values or public policies may (arguably) diverge from her “objective” – and hence exogenously determined -- self-interests. However, for our purposes, a voter’s inherently subjective personal preferences are essentially equivalent to her self-defined and subjectively determined interests. In other words, we argue that a voter’s individual determination of her own self-interest, while arguably conceptually prior to, is observationally indistinguishable from, her personal preferences. Consequently, for convenience, we employ these terms interchangeably throughout the paper.
cognitive science concerning how people process information in order to make decisions, such as voting. For our purposes, a key implication of this research is that citizens do not need complete information to make reasoned voting decisions. Rather, by employing information shortcuts, or heuristic cues, they may act as competent democratic citizens -- at least with respect to voting -- even if the political information they consume is imperfect, and even if they consume only small quantities of it (Popkin 1994, Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

For advocates of the former perspective, Exhibit A in their indictment of the contemporary news media and their role in the political process is the proliferation of soft news (Patterson 2000, 2003, Bennett 2003). Patterson (2000) for instance, argues in essence that quality news is hard news -- that is, coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life. “Information about these events,” he asserts, “is presumably important to citizens’ ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs” (2000:3).

In contrast, soft news is characterized by the absence of a public policy component, sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes and emphasis on dramatic subject matter (Patterson 2000, Baum 2003). Or, as Zaller (2003: 129) states, “soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining.” In short, the predominant scholarly critique of the contemporary news media -- with respect to their role as the primary intermediary between politics and politicians, on the one hand, and voters, on the other -- is that they offer too little hard news and too much soft news, thereby depriving citizens of the information they need to make informed vote choices.

Zaller (2003: 111), however, seeks to move this debate in a less normative direction. He argues: "the question of news quality is whether news provides a sufficiently rich and engaging ration of political information to make democracy work" (emphasis added). We agree. Yet, this begs the central questions motivating the present study: How do we know how much information is sufficient? And can citizens extract sufficient information from soft news to make reasoned vote choices and thus to make democracy work?
As the preceding definitions of soft and hard news suggests, most prior research (e.g., Patterson 2000, 2003; Bennett 2003, and others) has assessed the political value of news – implicitly or explicitly equated with normative notions of news “quality” – solely in terms of its content. That is, scholars have focused on the supply of political information, rather than attending to the nature of citizens’ demands, or what it is that citizens do with the news they consume.

This emphasis on the supply-side, however, conflicts with predominant theories of political participation, which trace the decision to vote to utility maximization. This latter perspective is best exemplified by Downs (1957), who wrote that “[T]he cost of information is... different for different men. [A]ny concept of democracy based on an electorate of equally well informed citizens... presupposes that citizens behave irrationally” (219, 236). Given that rational individuals employ heuristic cues to compensate for incomplete information, citizens with different information needs will vary in what they require to successfully fulfill their civic duties. One of the most fundamental such duties is (arguably) voting for the candidate whose economic, social and/or public policy preferences most closely match a voter’s own – self-defined and subjectively determined – preferences (henceforth “voting consistently”).

Of course, in deciding which candidate better matches their personal preferences, different voters prioritize different things. Some define their interests primarily in terms of their personal economic wellbeing; others prioritize candidates’ social values or policy positions. Regardless, unless voting is to be truly random – in which case democracy would have little meaning -- every voter must assess, in some manner, which candidate best matches her own

\[\text{In this sense, one’s assessment of his or her self-interest may be, for some voters, in effect, an information shortcut. While research has shown that many voters lack sufficient political knowledge to understand the relationships between the policies candidates propose and the effects of those policies on the society at large (Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1964, Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996), they do understand their own circumstances and values. In effect, these relatively uninformed citizens can simply extrapolate from their personal circumstances and values to the state of the nation.}\]
preferences, on whatever dimension(s) is (are) most salient to her. In this sense, voting consistently merely implies voting for the candidate that really does most closely match one’s preferences, however one defines them.

But how can we assess citizens’ capacity to vote consistently while recognizing that rational individuals expose themselves to different kinds and levels of political information? We propose an interactive framework for assessing whether citizens can learn what they need to know even if they prefer soft news. But rather than focusing exclusively on the content of political news, we investigate how, in making their voting decisions, different kinds of news consumers use different kinds of news.³ Whereas some may need The New York Times to determine which candidate they “ought” to favor, others may do just as well (or better) with Oprah.

To assess our revised conception of news quality and its implications, we develop and test a series of hypotheses concerning the effects on different types of consumers (low vs. high political awareness) of exposure to different types of news (soft vs. hard). In particular, we investigate the effects of exposure to entertainment-oriented, daytime talk shows – a quintessential, and highly popular, soft news format (Baum 2003, 2005) – on consumers’ propensity to vote consistently. We argue that for some consumers – primarily those that are not particularly politically aware – exposure to campaign coverage via daytime talk shows, (e.g., The Oprah Winfrey Show or Live with Regis and Kelly), is at least as useful in helping them vote consistently – and perhaps more so – as consuming traditional news media campaign coverage. This is because, to a far greater extent than traditional news outlets, such shows make information -- including political information -- highly accessible to their predominantly apolitical, entertainment-seeking audiences (Baum 2003, 2005). Thus, in Downsian terms, such information

³ We recognize that news serves purposes other than provision of information about public affairs, and that the extent to which it facilitates consistent voting is only one of any number of potential criteria by which one might judge its quality. Yet voting is arguably the most fundamental civic duty of democratic citizens, and, in our view, information provision is among the most important functions of the news.
is relatively cheap to consume.

We test our hypotheses through a statistical analysis of voting behavior in the 2000 presidential election, employing the 2000 American National Election Study (NES). We conclude by considering the implications of our findings for the study of political communication, voting behavior, and for democratic theory.

**Soft News and Voting Behavior**

Virtually all media outlets that present at least some information about public affairs offer a mix of “soft” and “hard” news content, and most have, over time, offered ever-larger quantities of the former. Yet some clearly offer more than others. Elsewhere, Baum (2002, 2003) refers to those media outlets that focus primarily on such material – including entertainment and tabloid news shows, network newsmagazines, and daytime and late night talk shows -- as the soft news media. These outlets differ in many respects. Yet, in contrast to the quintessentially traditional, hard news outlets -- such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, and the evening newscasts of the “big three” broadcast networks -- they all focus primarily on soft news themes like crime or celebrity gossip, and they all tend to cover similar types of political issues in similar manners (Baum 2002, 2003). Their audiences also tend to have comparatively little education or interest in politics (Baum 2003, Hamilton 2003).

For a combination of instrumental and conceptual reasons which we discuss below, we focus on one prominent type of soft news outlet: daytime talk shows. While not “news” shows in the traditional sense, a vast majority of the content of these programs clearly satisfies Zaller’s definition of soft news. That is, most of the information they present is explicitly intended to be “either personally useful or merely entertaining” (Zaller 2003: 129).

To be sure, some potential voters share political scientists’ taste in journalism and choose to consume hard news, out of intrinsic interest in politics or public affairs. But do others – particularly those with little interest in or knowledge about politics per se and who do not enjoy traditional hard news – manage to extract quality information from different media outlets, like daytime talk shows, that maximizes their utility as consumers? We argue that, at least for these
latter individuals, the answer is yes.

To understand why politically unaware Americans are able to find “quality” in this seemingly unlikeliest of places, it is important to consider the implications of the fact that different individuals place different values on political news. In expected utility parlance, for individuals who neither understand nor care about politics, consuming political news can be costly – in terms of the effort required to comprehend the information, as well as the lost opportunities of spending one’s time on more appealing endeavors – while offering little in the way of expected benefits (e.g., entertainment). All else equal, such individuals are therefore relatively unlikely to consume much hard news. And if they are exposed to any traditional news outlets – either inadvertently or by design – they are unlikely to pay attention to or understand the relatively more complex information presented in that context (Baum 2002, Hamilton 2003, Hamill and Lodge 1986). Before such individuals will attend to political information, the expected benefits must outweigh the expected costs. This, in turn, is only likely if such information can be rendered virtually costless to consume.

Why would an individual who is uninterested in and does not understand politics pay attention to political news? Baum (2002, 2003) argues that the soft news media can, under some circumstances, render political information cost effective to consume for even apolitical individuals. He develops an incidental byproduct model of information consumption in order to demonstrate that if substantive political information can be presented in an entertaining context, it can be piggybacked (that is, attached) to information intended purely for entertainment purposes, and, hence, consumed along with the entertainment-oriented information at effectively no extra cost. An apolitical individual may therefore be willing to consume even “low-benefit” political information, as the cost of doing so becomes essentially nil. Since the soft news media – including daytime talk shows – are in the business of making information highly accessible and entertaining, they are ideally suited for piggybacking. The net effect is that low-awareness individuals who typically ignore most political news, and who do not consume traditional news media, are less likely to ignore such information if it is presented in a soft news context.
At the same time, voting consistently is clearly not of overwhelming importance to an individual who does not care about politics. All else equal, if such an individual chooses to vote, she will presumably prefer to vote for the candidate who best matches her personal preferences. Yet, by definition, doing so is not among her top priorities. Hence, she will be willing to accept a greater risk of error than an individual who cares deeply about her vote choice and its implications. This suggests that for soft news to be considered “high quality” for politically inattentive individuals – at least by our definition – it need not lead to a perfect match of vote choice to personal preferences. Rather, it must simply increase the probability of voting consistently to a degree acceptable to a given individual such that the expected benefit of the improvement in voting consistency outweighs the expected cost of gaining that improvement. In the aggregate, this is likely to be manifested in an overall increase in the propensity of politically unaware soft news consumers to vote consistently relative to their counterparts who consume no soft news.

One might reasonably counter that information-intensive hard news is better suited for enhancing the probability of voting consistently. And all else equal, this is indeed most likely true. After all, just as adding more observations to a data set tends to reduce the standard error in a regression analysis, gathering more information will presumably reduce, to at least some extent, the likelihood of inadvertently voting for the wrong candidate. All else, however, is not equal. For most highly politically aware individuals, consuming hard news is intrinsically worth the time and effort. As noted above, these individuals are likely to care a great deal about voting consistently, and so will be willing to expend a fair amount of effort to do so. Due to their relatively more information-intensive coverage of politics, in turn, for highly politically aware individuals, consuming hard news media is more efficient – as a source of political information – than attending to soft news outlets (like daytime talk shows). More importantly, for many of these individuals, hard news is also most likely more intrinsically entertaining, regardless of whether or not, or how much, it enhances their probability of voting consistently. In fact, because highly politically aware individuals already possess a substantial amount of political knowledge
(Zaller 1992), exposure to campaign coverage via either the soft or hard news media is likely to have relatively modest effects on their already-high probability of voting consistently. However, to the extent doing so has any effect at all on such individuals, it seems likely to raise their probability of voting consistently. After all, they possess a sufficient knowledge base with which to comprehend hard news and integrate it into their overall candidate evaluations. Our first two hypotheses follow.

\[ H_1: \text{Among highly politically aware individuals, consuming soft news will have little, if any, effect on the propensity to vote consistently.} \]

\[ H_2: \text{Among highly politically aware individuals, consuming hard news will increase the propensity to vote consistently.} \]

In contrast, low-awareness individuals are much less likely to be willing to expend significant time and energy to enhance their probability of voting consistently. And since these individuals do not find hard news enjoyable to consume for its own sake, they will typically avoid it. This implies that the real choice for these individuals is frequently not whether to consume hard or soft news, but rather whether to consume soft news or no news. Given the latter choice, we argue that low-awareness individuals are better off consuming soft news than no news at all. After all, research (Baum 2003 and 2005, Young 2003) has shown that soft news outlets – including daytime talk shows -- do cover presidential politics. And they do so in ways explicitly intended to make such information highly accessible (that is, easy to understand) and entertaining for their relatively apolitical audiences. However, despite their “soft” approach to political interviews, such interviews do include discussions of public policy issues, albeit far less so than campaign coverage by traditional news outlets.

For instance, Baum (2005) conducts a content analysis investigation of all interviews with presidential candidates during the 2000 campaign that appeared on daytime and late-night entertainment-oriented talk shows (henceforth “E-talk shows”) – including those hosted by Oprah Winfrey, Rosie O’Donnell, Queen Latifah, Regis Philbin, Jay Leno, and David Letterman – Sunday morning political interview shows (e.g., Meet the Press, This Week), and national newscasts.
(ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, CNBC, and CNN), as well as a random sample of 60 national news campaign reports, excluding candidate interviews, from ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN. He reports that E-talk show candidate interviews featured a non-trivial amount of discussion of campaign-related policy issues, even as “hard” news interviews and campaign reports contained substantially more policy content—roughly 2.5 times more on a per minute basis.4

Specifically, during the 2000 presidential campaign, four daytime E-talk shows (The Oprah Winfrey Show, the Rosie O’Donnell Show, Live with Regis and Kelly, and The Queen Latifah Show) featured interviews with one or both major party candidates. These interviews, which averaged about 27 minutes in duration, included, on average, approximately 27 mentions of campaign-related public policy issues. Consequently, a typical daytime E-talk show interview with a presidential candidate included slightly more than one mention of a campaign-related policy issue per minute.5 The corresponding averages for candidate interviews on traditional news programs, and for national news campaign reports, were about 2.5 and 2.6 mentions per minute, respectively.

Given, in turn, the aforementioned relatively greater complexity (compared to soft news outlets) of the information presented by the hard news media, we further argue that even if the choice is between soft or hard news, low-awareness individuals are still better off consuming soft news. After all, even if a low-awareness individual is exposed to hard news campaign coverage, she is less likely than her more politically aware counterparts to comprehend it. Consequently,

4 The data are based on double-coding of all transcripts by two coders working independently, with a kappa inter-coder reliability score of .93.

5 Late-night E-talk show (e.g., Leno and Letterman) interviews with candidates – which we do not explicitly investigate in our statistical investigations in this paper, as they are not included in the 2000 NES survey -- were somewhat shorter than daytime talk show interviews, averaging about 17 minutes in duration. They also contained somewhat less policy content: about .56 policy issue mentions per minute. Hence, a typical candidate interview contained approximately 9.5 mentions of campaign-related policy issues.
consuming political information via soft news should, we argue, enhance low-awareness individuals’ propensity to vote consistently to a greater extent than consuming no news at all, or consuming hard news alone. This discussion suggests four additional hypotheses.

H3: Politically unaware individuals who consume soft news will be more likely to vote consistently than their counterparts who do not consume soft news.

H4: The consistent-vote-enhancing effect on high-awareness individuals associated with consuming hard news will be smaller than that associated with consuming soft news among low-awareness individuals.

H5: Among politically unaware individuals, consuming hard news will have a weaker effect than consuming soft news on the propensity to vote consistently.

H6: Among politically unaware individuals, consuming hard news will have little, if any, influence on the relationship between soft news consumption and voting correctly.

But how do politically inattentive soft news consumers compare to attentive campaign-watchers who consume large volumes of hard news? Just like news junkies who maximize their journalism-consuming utility with hard news, we contend that soft news consumers maximize their own utility with more entertaining journalism. But is the payoff from one kind of news comparable to that from the other, in terms of how consumers make use of their preferred news products? While we do not contend that paying attention to soft news allows low awareness individuals to “catch up” to their highly aware counterparts, voting consistently does not require that they do so. After all, in U.S. presidential elections, the vote choice is, for most people, dichotomous. Consequently, for individuals who hold relatively weak preferences regarding the two major party candidates – a disproportionate number of whom are among the less politically aware members of the public – even a relatively small increase in information about the candidates may lead to a switch from an inconsistent to a consistent vote. We therefore contend that low awareness soft news consumers are likely to be able to approximate highly aware hard news consumers in their probabilities of voting consistently. Our final hypothesis is thus:

H7: The propensity of politically unaware soft news consumers to vote consistently will
be comparable to that of their more politically aware counterparts who consume hard news.

Data and Methodology

Voting Consistently

To test our hypotheses, it is first necessary to develop a reasonably valid measure of consistency between a voter’s preferences and her vote. With such a measure in hand, we can compare how different types of voters perform against this ideal, as a consequence, at least in part, of the different types of news they consume.

This, of course, begs the question of how one would objectively determine whether or not a voter has, in fact, voted consistently. After all, to at least some extent, a voter’s political preferences are subjectively determined. Voters weigh issues differently. Some voters prioritize their perceptions of candidates’ personal ethics or values, while others care more about their policy positions. And different voters care more or less about different policies. While we do not claim that it is possible to calculate perfectly which candidate best matches a given voter’s preferences, we believe it is possible to develop a useful approximation. For this purpose, following Lau and Redlawsk (1997), we rely on a semi-objective, experimentally derived measure of voting “correctly.” (We have replaced the term “correctly” with “consistently,” which we believe carries fewer normative implications.) Lau and Redlawsk experimentally tested a measure of “correct” voting based on the congruence of each voter’s chosen candidate with her own stated issue preferences, weighted by the intensity of those preferences. They found that their measure outperformed – that is, the subjects were more likely to vote “correctly” than – those same voters in a mock election where they were constrained to select limited amounts of campaign information.

Lau and Redlawsk then tested their “correct vote” concept against empirical data, employing all NES surveys between 1972 and 1988. For these latter tests, they developed an algorithm that measured respondents’ issue preferences and their self-reported “closeness” to a series of social groups, where the respondent’s closeness to a given group was statistically significantly related to their probability of voting for one or the other candidate. Their algorithm
also incorporated respondents’ perceptions concerning where the major party candidates stood on the issues, as well as respondent and candidate ideologies and party identification, and respondent approval or disapproval of the incumbent president. Finally, their algorithm employs the “directional” method (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989) in order to take into account the intensity (i.e., magnitude) and valence of the differences between the candidates’ “true” issue positions – as determined by the model – and the issue positions of the respondent. Table 1 summarizes the factors included in the “correct vote” algorithm. (For a detailed discussion of how the algorithm is calculated, see Lau and Redlawsk [1997: 596-597].)

The Lau and Redlawsk algorithm produces a summary statistic for each major party candidate, where a positive value indicates that voting for a given candidate is “correct” for a given respondent. The statistics for the two candidates are then combined into a single summary indicator, where a negative value represents a predicted “correct” vote for one candidate, and a positive value represents a predicted “correct” vote for the other candidate. We compared the predictions derived from this summary indicator against respondents’ actual self-declared vote choice. Based on this comparison, we created a dichotomous dependent variable, called “Consistent Vote,” scored 1 whenever the predicted vote and the actual vote cohered, and 0 otherwise. For instance, if the model predicted a vote for Gore and the respondent indicated that they had voted for Gore, that respondent was credited with having made a “consistent” vote. The same held true for Bush. Non-voters and respondents who reported voting for an independent or third party candidate were excluded, as the algorithm makes no predictions in this regard.6

We apply Lau and Redlawsk’s model to 2000 NES. We replicate their algorithm, with three exceptions, one fairly significant and the others quite minor. The significant exception

6 Theoretically, a respondent could receive a score of zero, in which case the algorithm would make no prediction for that respondent. However, no respondents received a summary score of zero. Hence, we are able to make a prediction for every respondent who reported having voted for Gore or Bush.
concerns the calculation of the candidates’ “true” issue positions. To estimate the candidates’ actual issue positions, Lau and Redlawsk rely on the opinions of NES respondents whose political knowledge -- based on a battery of factual knowledge questions -- exceed the overall mean in the survey. For two reasons, we elected to employ alternative means calculating the candidates’ actual policy positions. First, because our models interact media consumption with respondents’ political awareness, employing factual knowledge as a basis to determine where the candidates stood on the issues would produce a fundamental endogeneity problem. In other words, highly politically aware individuals would, by definition, tend to vote more correctly according to the algorithm. After all, in the Lau and Redlawsk formulation, their opinions form much of the basis for determining what constitutes a correct vote. Second, we believe that defining as “experts” all respondents who exceed the overall survey mean is too lenient a definition of “expert,” particularly given that the mean respondent answered only about 1/3 of the political knowledge questions correctly.

Consequently, we employed two alternative measures of the candidates’ “true” policy positions. First, we surveyed a group of actual “experts.” We sent an email request to about 80 political scientists with particular expertise in American politics, asking them to rate the candidates on the identical issue scales as those employed by the NES survey. We received a total of 40 replies. We employed the mean ratings of these 40 issue experts as our first estimate of the candidates’ “true” issue positions.

Notably, the standard deviation on our experts’ assessments is far smaller than that for the estimates of NES “expert” respondents, as defined by Lau and Redlawsk: .64 for our experts, versus 1.02 for NES “expert” respondents (i.e., those whose factual political knowledge exceeded the survey mean). This suggests that our experts were in far greater agreement on the candidates’ issue positions than were the NES “expert” respondents.7

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7 The mean ideological score across our 40 experts was 4.75 on a 1-7 scale, where 7 represented “extremely liberal” and 1 represented “extremely conservative.” This compares to an average ideological score among NES “expert” respondents of 3.55. Hence, our experts were somewhat
For our second alternative means of assessing the candidates’ true issue positions, we relied on the judgments of fully informed researchers. Specifically, we asked five undergraduates and one graduate student to literally read everything the candidates said during the 2000 campaign. This was possible because all candidate speeches, advertisements, press releases, and other statements are available on a single CD-ROM, entitled “In their Own Words: Sourcebook for the 2000 Presidential Election.” After our researchers read all of the CD-ROM’s contents, we asked them to rate the candidates’ positions on each pertinent issue area.

Figure 1 summarizes the estimates of our American politics experts and student research assistants on each issue dimension included in the “correct vote” algorithm. Each candidate issue position question asked respondents to rate the candidates on a 1-5 or 1-7 scale, representing their position on a given issue. For instance, the item labeled “Services vs. Spending” was based on a question asking respondents whether, in their view, each candidate would like the government to provide fewer services in order to reduce spending, provide more services even if it meant an increase in spending, or keep spending at about the same level as in 2000. Respondents rated each candidate on a 1-5 scale, where 1 represented “reduce spending and services a great deal,” 3 represented “keep spending about the same,” and 5 represented “increase spending and services more liberal than Lau and Redlawsk’s NES “expert” respondents. It is possible that our liberal and conservative experts might fundamentally disagree on the candidates’ issue positions. If so, this difference might have important consequences for our estimates of the candidates’ “true” issue positions. In fact, among our experts, the overall difference -- across all of the issue dimensions we investigate -- between self-described liberals and conservatives was quite small, about seven percent. And the standard deviations are nearly identical. Moreover, if one limits the NES “experts” to those identifying themselves as liberals, the standard deviation remains virtually unchanged, at 1.0. This suggests that even after controlling for systematic ideological differences, our experts converged in their ratings far more than the NES “expert” respondents. This further suggests that our experts’ estimated issue positions are, in all likelihood, more reliable than those of the NES “expert” respondents, as defined by Lau and Redlawsk.
a great deal.” For consistency, all scales were normalized to a 1-7 interval. (See Appendix for the complete survey questionnaire.)

For most of the issues, the evaluations of our “fully informed” student researchers were quite similar to those of our experts, correlating at .87. For our students, the overall standard deviation across all issue dimensions was .65, again, far smaller than that of the NES “expert” respondents, and nearly identical to the aforementioned .64 for our experts in American politics. Despite significant differences between the ratings of the two groups on several issue dimensions, when we replicated our results using both methods of calculating the candidates’ true issue positions, the results were substantively indistinguishable. In fact, while the precise correct vote summary statistics produced by the two indicators differed slightly, there were no instances where switching from one to the other indicator produced a sufficient difference in the algorithm to change its prediction for a given respondent. Hence, for our statistical analyses below, we report only the results based on the estimates from our expert survey. (Results based on the latter estimates are available from the authors upon request.)

The second difference between the original Lau and Redlawsk (1997) algorithm and ours concerns approval of the incumbent president. Lau and Redlawsk added this factor to the estimate of the “correctness” of voting for Gore, but not for Bush. In our view, approving of the incumbent in a situation where his vice president is on the ballot is equally likely to influence the likelihood of voting for either candidate. Hence, we include this factor in our estimation of the “consistency” of voting for Bush.10

Finally, Lau and Redlawsk derived their final summary estimates of each respondent’s

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8 A t-test indicates that the differences between the two groups are statistically insignificant.

9 The mean ideological score across our six student research assistants was 4.83 on the identical 1-7 scale, where 7 represented “extremely liberal” and 1 represented “extremely conservative.”

10 In an email exchange, Richard Lau, a co-author of the “Correct Voting” algorithm, indicated that there was no compelling reason to avoid doing so.
“correct” vote in two different ways: (1) calculating the overall mean value across the various factors included in the summary estimate, and (2) calculating the total sum of all of the factors included in the summary estimate. These two methods correlate almost perfectly, at over .98. Lau and Redlawsk (1997) employ the first method. But, at the margins, we prefer the latter method, as it preserves the full ranges of variation in the original variables. Hence, we report results employing the latter method. Not surprisingly, however, the two methods produce comparable results.

**Independent Variables**

The 2000 NES includes a series of questions concerning media consumption habits, one of which asks respondents how often they watch daytime talk shows. For the present study, we employ daytime talk shows as an exemplar of the soft news media. Specifically, we investigate the implications of watching these programs, as well as traditional hard news shows (including national network news and newspapers), for respondents’ voting behavior. Our key causal variable is based on the following question: “How many times in the last week have you watched daytime television talk shows such as ‘Oprah Winfrey,’ ‘Rosie O’Donnell,’ or ‘Jerry Springer’?” Because relatively few respondents (9%) reported watching more than 3 such shows, we collapse this indicator into four categories, coded: 0=none, 1=one time, 2=two times, and 3=three or more times. Overall, 28% of respondents indicated that they had watched at least one daytime talk show during the prior week. (For the recoded scale, \( \mu = .61 \) and \( \sigma = 1.07 \).)

While this indicator does not explicitly measure exposure to *presidential politics* on daytime talk shows, we believe that, in addition to being the best – indeed, to our knowledge, the *only* – available indicator for testing our hypotheses in close proximity to a presidential election, it is also reasonably valid. There are two reasons for this. First, Baum (2005) reports that the major party presidential candidates made six appearances on major daytime talk shows during the 2000 general election campaign (as well as four appearances on late-night talk shows).\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) This pattern continued unabated in 2004. For instance, Democratic Candidate John Kerry and Republican candidate George W. Bush appeared on *Live with Regis and Kelly* and *Dr. Phil* (as well
Simply stated, the more an individual watched daytime talk shows during the fall of 2000, the more likely she was to have been watching when a presidential candidate made an appearance. Second, given that the NES question asks respondents about their talk show viewing in the week prior to the interview, and given that all but one of the candidates’ daytime talk show appearances took place during the pre-election wave – which began on September 5, 2000 – the relationship between watching daytime talk shows and encountering candidate interviews on such shows was far higher during this period than at any other time.

The control variables, in turn, fall into four categories, and include many of the most widely employed variables in the study of American voting behavior (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993: 273-275). These are: (1) demographics (age, education, gender, race, religiosity), (2) political attitudes (party ID, strength of partisanship, ideology, participation in the 2000 campaign, preference for divided government, intent to vote for opposition party candidate), (3) political disaffection (trust in government, external efficacy), and (4) media consumption (national network TV news, local TV news, newspapers, political talk radio, politics on the internet, cable access, TV campaign ads, morning TV news shows).\textsuperscript{12}

Following Baum (2005), we also create an indicator of respondents’ political awareness. Zaller (1992: 21) defines political awareness as “the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered.” In order to capture both parts of Zaller’s definition (attention and understanding), we create a scale derived from four elements, assessing (1) interest in government and public affairs, (2) attention to the 2000 election, (3) level

\textsuperscript{12} Price and Zaller (1993) find that survey respondents tend to overstate their media consumption, particularly for questions addressing relatively broad media categories. The questions employed herein ask respondents to recall their consumption of specific programs during the prior week, thereby mitigating this problem. Moreover, differences in the probabilities of holding an attitude, as media exposure varies, should not be affected by systematic over-reporting of the level of exposure.
of political information, as estimated by the interviewer, and (4) factual political knowledge, derived from a series of 10 questions. All four elements were normalized to a 0-1 interval and then added together to create a summary political awareness indicator. The resulting variable, which combines objective measures with respondents’ self-assessments, runs from 0 to 4 ($\mu=2.5$ and $\sigma=1.0$). To determine whether consuming talk shows and hard news media have differing effects on the attitudes of different types of respondents, we separately interact daytime talk show and traditional news consumption with political awareness. To estimate traditional news consumption, in turn, we create a scale based upon respondents’ self-declared frequency of watching national network TV newscasts and reading daily newspapers during the prior week. (See Appendix 1 for question wording and coding.)

**Statistical Results**

We now turn to the effects of consuming soft news – in this instance, entertainment-oriented daytime talk shows -- and traditional news media on individuals’ propensity to vote consistently. Table 2 presents the results from four logit analyses testing our seven hypotheses. Model 1 excludes all but two control variables – strength of preferences over the candidates and the political participation index – both of which are potentially critical factors influencing the probability of a consistent vote as well as of willingness to re-evaluate one’s vote choice based upon new information. This preliminary model is intended to determine whether any of the

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13 The alpha reliability score for the four items included in the summary scale is .70.

14 For the hard news consumption scale, which is normalized to a 0-7 interval, $\mu=3.37$ and $\sigma=2.24$. We tested our hard news index using a variety of media consumption indicators, including local and morning TV news. None performed as well as our specification.

15 While excluding the political participation control weakens the relationships somewhat, the only control variable that significantly affects the strength of the key relationships is strength of preferences over the candidates. This suggests that voters who feel strongly about a candidate have *some* good reason for doing so, and hence are unlikely to vote incorrectly, even if they are not particularly politically knowledgeable.
results reported below are artifacts of our multivariate model specification. In fact, the key
coefficients in the stripped-down model, though -- as one would expect -- not identical to the
fully specified models, are nonetheless similar in magnitude and significance. Hence, we can
proceed more confidently to the fully specified models.

[Table 2 here]

In Model 2, we add all control variables, except Party ID, which is also included in the
“correct vote” algorithm. Including it as a separate control would, in essence, double-count the
effects of party affiliation. Model 3 replicates Model 2, with the addition of Party ID as a separate
control variable. Despite the double-counting issue, we nonetheless add Party ID because it
repeatedly has been found to be the single most important determinant of vote choice. We prefer
to over-weight party, rather than under-weight it by treating it as simply one of many equally
weighted factors, as in the “correct vote” algorithm. Nevertheless, presumably because it is
included in the algorithm, including or excluding party ID as a separate control variable makes
virtually no difference for the reported results. This is apparent by comparing Models 2 and 3.
Consequently, given this variable’s centrality to the literature on voting behavior, the remaining
discussion focuses on the fully specified model, including Party ID as a control variable.

Turning to our tests, the third hypothesis predicts that politically unaware soft news
consumers will be more likely to vote consistently than their counterparts who do not consume soft
news. For ease of interpretation we employ a simulation technique developed by King et al. (2000)
to transform the key coefficients from Model 3 into probabilities, as well as to estimate the statistical
significance of the predicted effects. Figure 2 illustrates the results, separately presenting the effects
of variations in talk show consumption among respondents who do and do not consume hard news
(top graphic) and the effects of variations in hard news consumption among respondents who do
and do not consume soft news (bottom graphic), as respondents’ political awareness varies from
one standard deviation below, to one standard deviation above, the mean.16

[Figure 2 here]

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16 For all reported results, we vary political awareness in the identical manner.
The curves in the top graphic of Figure 2 offer strong support for Hypothesis 3. The thick lines in the figure denote statistically significant curves, while the thinner lines represent statistically insignificant relationships. Among low-awareness respondents who report consuming *no* hard news, as daytime talk show consumption increases from its minimum to maximum values, the probability of voting consistently increases by 13 percentage points, from .71 to .84 (p<.05). Moreover, as predicted by Hypothesis 6, variations in hard news consumption have virtually no effect on this relationship. The corresponding increase among low-awareness respondents who consume the *maximum* quantity of hard news is an identical 13 percentage points, from .72 to .85 (p<.05).

The top graphic in Figure 2 also offers clear support for Hypothesis 1, which predicts at most modest effects of consuming soft news among highly aware individuals. Among these latter respondents, a maximum increase in talk show consumption is associated with small and statistically insignificant declines of 5 (from .75 to .70) or 3 (.86 to .83) percentage points, respectively, depending on whether they consumed *no* hard news or the *maximum* quantity of hard news.

We turn next to Hypotheses 2, 4, and 5. Model 3 at Table 2 also tests these hypotheses. The bottom graphic in Figure 2 illustrates the results. Beginning with Hypothesis 5, among low-awareness respondents, regardless of their talk show consumption, variations in hard news consumption have virtually no effect whatsoever on the probability of voting consistently. Among non-talk show consumers, a maximum increase in hard news consumption is associated with a statistically insignificant increase of one percentage point (from .71 to .72) in the probability of voting consistently. The corresponding effect among maximum talk show consumers is also a statistically insignificant increase of one percentage point (from .84 to .85). Consistent with Hypothesis 5, these effects are far smaller than the corresponding effects associated with consuming soft news.

Our second and fourth hypotheses, in turn, predict that consuming hard news will increase the propensity of highly aware individuals to vote consistently, but that this effect will be
smaller than the corresponding effect of consuming soft news on low-awareness consumers. The two bolded curves shown in the bottom graphic of Figure 2 indicate that among highly aware respondents, a maximum increase in hard news consumption is associated with increases of 11 (from .75 to .86) or 12 (from .70 to .82) percentage points, respectively, among respondents who consume no or a maximum quantity of daytime talk shows. In both instances, these effects are significant at the .08 level.

Looking across the two graphics in Figure 2, we can see that, as also predicted by Hypothesis 4, the effects of consuming talk shows among low-awareness respondents are consistently stronger, albeit modestly so (by one or two percentage points), than the corresponding effects of consuming hard news among highly aware respondents. Taken together, these results are largely supportive of Hypotheses 2 and 4 – though more strongly so in the former case.

Our seventh hypothesis predicts that low-awareness soft news consumers will manage to approximate the propensity to vote consistently of their more highly aware counterparts who consume hard news. This is a particularly difficult test for our theory. After all, it is one thing to increase one’s probability of voting consistently. It is quite another to match that of political junkies, based solely on variations in consumption of entertainment-oriented daytime talk shows. Yet, the data support this hypothesis as well. Among low-awareness, maximum talk show consumers, the probability of voting consistently is either .84 or .85, depending on hard news consumption. The corresponding probabilities among highly politically aware respondents who consume maximum quantities of hard news are .86 or .82, depending on talk show consumption. Interestingly, among the latter individuals, consuming daytime talk shows appears to be associated with modest declines in the probability of voting consistently. Though these declines are small and statistically insignificant, they do raise the possibility that, for political junkies, soft news is more of a distraction than a useful source of political information.

Our final statistical investigation, shown in Model 4 of Table 2, offers an indirect test of the incidental byproduct model underlying our news quality model. This table includes an
interaction between exposure to campaign advertisements on television and political awareness in place of the interaction between daytime talk shows and political awareness. If, as the incidental byproduct model predicts, low-awareness respondents are indeed consuming political information in the soft news media largely via piggybacking, then no comparable effects should emerge between consuming TV campaign ads and the probability of voting consistently. After all, campaign ads are unambiguously political in nature – and readily recognizable as such – rather than being geared primarily toward entertainment. Hence, presumably, low-awareness individuals should tend either to avoid such ads altogether or ignore them if inadvertently encountered in the course of channel surfing. Though not directly predicted by the incidental byproduct model, TV ads also seem relatively unlikely to substantially influence highly aware individuals, who will typically not view partisan political messages as credible information unless the source is a fellow partisan (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, Miller and Krosnick 2000). In fact, our results support the model. No meaningful interaction arises between consumption of campaign advertisements on TV and the probability of voting consistently, regardless of respondents’ level of political awareness. Indeed, taken together, the results from our statistical investigations offer strong support for our theory, including our revised conception of news quality.

On the Possibility of Selection Effects

Our talk show exposure indicator could, potentially, be capturing some internal characteristic(s) of viewers having little to do with their exposure to campaign information. For instance, compared to non-viewers, typical daytime talk show viewers tend to be less politically aware or engaged and to hold weaker preferences over political candidates. Yet this seems unlikely, as our multivariate models explicitly control for these and various other related factors.

Nevertheless, it remains possible that a disproportionate number of individuals who were interested in the election but undecided about the candidates, and who typically do not watch daytime talk shows, elected to tune in to one or two such shows specifically to help resolve their uncertainty. Such a pattern would call into question the appropriateness of the incidental byproduct model underlying our hypotheses. If this were the case, we would expect that during
weeks in which the candidates appeared on daytime talk shows, the audiences for such shows would be at least somewhat different than in periods in which the candidates made no appearances. In particular, one would expect that candidate-attracted audience members might be more politically aware and engaged – after all, they would have gone out of their way to find campaign information in a relatively improbable place – but less strongly committed to their party’s candidate.

Given that the daytime talk show question asks respondents to recall their viewing behavior during the week prior to their NES interview, it is possible to test this possibility directly. The maximum number of candidate appearances on daytime talk shows in any single week was two. Hence, respondents who reported watching more than two such shows during the prior week could not have done so exclusively to see presidential candidates. To determine whether candidate-seeking, occasional viewers differed materially from regular talk show viewers, we divided talk show viewers into four subgroups, based upon whether: (1) they reported watching 1 or 2 versus 3 or more daytime talk shows in the prior week, and (2) their interviews took place within seven days of a candidate appearance on a daytime talk show. For each subgroup, we calculated averages for political awareness, strength of partisanship, campaign participation, probability of having “strong” candidate preferences, and probability of caring about the election outcome. The results, shown in Table 3, indicate that there are no statistically significant differences for any of these five factors regardless of frequency of talk show viewing or timing of the interview.

[Table 3 here]

As a final test for selection effects (not shown), we replicated our models, substituting frequency of watching game shows (Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy) in place of talk show consumption. Like daytime talk shows, game shows are entertainment oriented. Yet they are virtually devoid of political content. If the internal characteristics of viewers who prefer entertainment-oriented media – net of the factors included in our models -- account for any of the patterns we report, then we might anticipate similar patterns associated with consuming both
game shows and talk shows. If, however, the reported relationships are attributable to the content of daytime talk shows, then game show consumption should not influence the propensity to vote consistently. In fact, regardless of their political awareness, game show viewers were not more likely than non-viewers to vote consistently. This further suggests that self-selection into daytime talk show audiences is not a primary factor influencing the reported relationships.

**Conclusion**

Citizens’ ability to vote consistently depends on the information they consume, but not in the manner that many scholars have assumed. In fact, our finding that some individuals’ abilities to derive civic-oriented “quality” from news they consumed for an entirely different end—entertainment—should give pause to those who decry the proliferation of soft news in the media marketplace. The apparent quality of these citizens’ vote choices, given their media consumption, also suggests untold resourcefulness among those—the less politically engaged segments of the public—that some have viewed as a drag on democracy.

Looking to the interaction of political behavior and news consumption, we render an understanding of quality which extends to hard or soft news, and thereby focuses our analysis on the conditions under which quality results from the interaction of citizens’ news consumption and their political decision-making. As much as possible, this takes the concept of determining news quality out of our own hands, and places it in the hands of citizens we understand to be rational.

Most scholars rely for their political information on hard-hitting journalists (and media institutions) without whom our civic lives would be impracticable. But the names Seymour Hersh and Nina Totenberg likely ring as hollow to low-awareness voters as do the names Dick Cheney and Dennis Hastert. Whatever the “design” of media, once we set aside our own normative biases regarding the kind of news citizens ought to consume, we discover that, at least with respect to voting, a majority of citizens are able to act in their own interests, even if their predilection is for Oprah Winfrey instead of Jim Lehrer. We thus found that among low-awareness respondents, exposure to daytime talk shows was associated with a substantial and statistically significant increase in the probability of voting consistently. For these same respondents, no such
relationship emerged in response to exposure to more traditional, hard news outlets. In contrast, as one might anticipate, highly politically aware respondents were largely unaffected by exposure to daytime talk shows. These individuals presumably do not need entertainment-oriented talk shows to help them figure out which candidate best represents their interests. Rather, time spent consuming such programming is in all likelihood a distraction for these individuals, who might otherwise spend their media consumption time attending to more information-intensive hard news outlets.

However, exposure to hard news did enhance the propensity of highly aware individuals to vote consistently. Presumably because they possess the necessary political knowledge to understand such information and place it into a broader context, these individuals were better able to make effective use of hard news than were their less-politically-aware counterparts.

Interestingly, we found that not only did low-awareness talk show consumers enhance their propensity to vote consistently, but they did so to such an extent that they effectively caught up – in this admittedly narrow sense – to their highly aware counterparts. In other words, low-awareness respondents who consumed the maximum quantity of daytime talk shows were about as likely to vote consistently as highly aware respondents who consumed the maximum quantity of hard news. Indeed, our findings suggest that there is a swath of the citizenry that acts effectively in the voting booth without consuming hard news, presumably because alternative information sources, such as the soft news media, provide them with sufficient political cues to vote successfully in their own interests.

Patterson (2003: 141) calls for a standard of news quality that “requires the non-elite press, and not just the elite press, to contribute to an informed public.” Our understanding of news quality serves this agenda. Indeed, we found that under particular conditions one of the least “elite” press outlets – daytime talk shows – does “do good” among the very voters who cause most worry for democratic theorists: the politically unaware.

A democratic theory which takes seriously the proposition that individuals act to maximize their utility, and which grants that citizens need not retain reams of information in
their heads in order to be good citizens (Zaller 2003) does not need to rely on expert prescriptions for news consumption. Rather, low-awareness voters’ ability to maximize their personal utility extends not only to their media-consumption choices but also, in the narrow case of soft news consumers, to their low-information vote choices.

This is particularly true given the relatively simple, dichotomous nature of American national elections. Relative to some democratic electoral institutions that ask voters to decide between literally dozens of candidates, the American two-party, plurality-rule electoral system greatly simplifies the work of typical voters. Most of the time, and for the vast majority of Americans, “voting consistently,” merely requires weighing two candidates against one another to determine who, at the margins, is likely to best represent their individual self-interests. Given that low-awareness voters tend to be among the least strongly wedded to their political attitudes and preferences (Zaller n.d.), they are most likely to be willing to alter their vote choice in response to new information, conditional on receiving such information (Zaller 1992, Baum 2005). The soft news media, in turn, including daytime talk shows, are ideally suited to capturing the attention of these relatively apolitical voters (Baum 2005). Consequently, even a relatively small amount of factually and contextually accurate information received via a soft news outlet is likely to enhance the ability of low-awareness voters to figure out which of the two major candidates best represents their interests. And even though soft news outlets tend to focus far more on candidates’ personalities than their policy positions, there is no reason to believe that the political information contained in these programs, however limited in scope or personality-oriented, is fundamentally inaccurate. This suggests that, in the context of U.S. elections, a little information may indeed go a long way, particularly for the least politically aware voters. This further suggests that when low-awareness Americans tune in to Oprah, Regis, Jon Stewart, or Jay Leno, democracy may well be strengthened, rather than weakened.

Appendix 1: Text of Survey of Presidential Candidate Issue Positions in 2000 Election

“I would like to request your assistance in a study of the effects of different forms of media exposure on knowledge of presidential candidates’ issue positions among different groups of
voters. Specifically, I am writing ask if you would fill out a brief survey regarding the positions of Al Gore and George W. Bush on a series of policy issues during the 2000 presidential election. The survey includes 10 issue-position questions in total (each one asked with respect to both Gore and Bush), plus one ideology self-assessment question. As you may recognize, these questions are taken from the 2000 NES. My goal is to use a panel of “experts” (including yourself) to help estimate, as accurately as I can, where the candidates actually stood on these issues. I realize that you may have updated some or all of your beliefs regarding Gore and Bush since 2000. All I ask is that, to the greatest extent possible, you attempt to base your answers on your best recollection of what you believed the candidates’ issue positions to be at the time of the 2000 election campaign.

For each question, please mark an “x” next to the appropriate category."

(1) When it comes to politics, do you usually think of **you** as a liberal, a conservative, or a moderate? Please rate yourself along the following 7-category scale.

(2) What about **Al Gore and George W. Bush**? Did you think of them – circa 2000 – as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate/ middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative?

- _____1. Extremely conservative
- _____2. Conservative
- _____3. Slightly conservative
- _____4. Middle of the road/ moderate
- _____5. Slightly liberal
- _____6. Liberal
- _____7. Extremely liberal

(3) In 2000, did you think **Al Gore and George W. Bush** would have liked the government to provide fewer services in order to reduce spending, provide more services even if it meant an increase in spending, or keep spending at about the same level as it was in 2000? Do you think they would have liked to reduce/increase services and spending a great deal or reduce/increase services and spending only some? Or, are you unsure how the candidates felt on this issue?

- _____0. Unsure
- _____1. Reduce spending and services a great deal
- _____2. Reduce spending and services only some
- _____3. Stay same as now
- _____4. Increase spending & services only some
- _____5. Increase spending and services a great deal
(4) In 2000, did you think Al Gore and George W. Bush believed we should decrease defense spending, increase defense spending, that Government spending on defense was about the right amount, or are you unsure how the candidates felt on this issue? If you think they believed that defense spending needed to be increased or decreased, was it by a lot or a little?

___0. Unsure
___1. Decrease defense spending a lot
___2. Decrease defense spending a little
___3. About the right amount
___4. Increase defense spending a little
___5. Increase defense spending a lot

(5) In 2000, do you think Al Gore and George W. Bush felt government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living, that government should just let each person get ahead on their own, or somewhere in between? Do you think they felt strongly or not strongly that the government should see to jobs and a good standard of living or that the government should just let each person get ahead on their own? Or, are you unsure how the candidates felt on this issue?

___0. Unsure
___1. Strongly - government should see to jobs and standard of living
___2. Not strongly - government should see to jobs and standard of living
___3. Somewhere in between / depends on circumstances
___4. Not strongly - government leave people on own
___5. Strongly - government leave people on own

(6) In 2000, did you think Al Gore and George W. Bush felt that government should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks, that government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves, or somewhere in between? Did you think they felt the government should help blacks to a great extent or only to some extent? Alternatively, did you think they felt blacks should have to help themselves to a great extent or only to some extent? Or are you unsure how the candidates felt on this issue?

___0. Unsure
___1. Government help blacks to great extent
___2. Government help blacks to some extent
___3. Somewhere in between / depends on circumstances
4. Blacks should help themselves to some extent
5. Blacks should help themselves to a great extent

(7) In 2000, did you think Al Gore and George W. Bush thought it is important to protect the environment even if it costs some jobs, OR that protecting the environment is not as important as maintaining jobs and our standard of living, OR somewhere in between? Did they think protecting the environment was much more important (than maintaining jobs and standard of living) or only somewhat more important? Alternatively, did they think maintaining jobs and standard of living were much more important (than protecting the environment) or only somewhat more important? Or are you unsure of the candidates’ positions on this issue?

0. Unsure
1. Environment much more important
2. Environment somewhat more important
3. Somewhere in between/depends on circumstances
4. Jobs somewhat more important
5. Jobs much more important

(8) In 2000, did you think Al Gore and George W. Bush would have liked to make it more difficult for people to buy a gun, make it easier for people to buy a gun, or keep these rules about the same as they were at the time? Do you think they would have liked to have made it a lot easier/more difficult, or somewhat easier/more difficult? Or are you unsure of the candidates’ positions on this issue?

0. Unsure
1. A lot more difficult
2. Somewhat more difficult
3. Keep rules about the same
4. Somewhat easier
5. A lot easier

(9) In 2000, which opinion best agrees with the views of Al Gore and George W. Bush on the issue of abortion, or are you unsure of the candidates’ views on this issue?

0. Unsure
1. By law, abortion should never be permitted.
2. The law should only permit abortion in the case of rape, incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger.
3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need for
the abortion has been clearly established.

4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

9. Other. Please specify.

(10) In 2000, did you think Al Gore and George W. Bush felt that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government, OR that a woman’s place is in the home? Do you think they felt strongly or not strongly on this issue? Or are you unsure of the candidates’ positions on this issue?

0. Unsure

1. Strongly - women equal role

2. Not strongly - women equal role

3. Somewhere in between / depends on circumstances

4. Not strongly - place is in the home

5. Strongly - place is in the home

(11) In 2000, do you think Al Gore and George W. Bush believed we needed much tougher government regulations on business in order to protect the environment, OR that current regulations to protect the environment are already too much of a burden on business? Do you think they believed that we needed to toughen regulations to protect the environment a lot, or just somewhat? Alternatively, do you think they believed regulations to protect the environment were way too much of a burden on business or just somewhat of a burden? Or, are you unsure about the candidates’ positions on this issue?

0. Unsure

1. Toughen regulations a lot

2. Toughen regulations a little

3. Somewhere in between / depends on circumstances

4. Regulations somewhat of a burden

5. Regulations way too much burden

Appendix 2: Variable Definitions and Coding

Political Awareness: Scale constructed from four elements: (1) “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in
government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” (Coded: 0=hardly at all, 1=only now and then, 2=some of the time, 3=most of the time); (2) “Some people don’t pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns so far this year?” (Coded: 0=not much interested, 1=somewhat interested, 2=very much interested); (3) Interviewers’ estimate of respondents’ level of political information (Coded 1-5, with 5 representing maximum information); and (4) factual political knowledge scale derived from 10 questions. For the factual knowledge item, respondents were asked to identify the following political figures: Trent Lott, William Rehnquist, Tony Blair, and Janet Reno. They were also asked to identify the home states of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Al Gore and Joseph Lieberman, as well as which party controls the House and Senate. Respondents were given one point for each correct answer, resulting in a scale with a mean of 4.2 and a standard deviation of 2.6. Each of the four factors was normalized to a 0-1 interval, and then added together to form a single scale.

Ideology: Following Zaller (1991), we create a scale derived from two feeling thermometer questions, in which respondents were asked to rate their feelings toward liberals and conservatives on 100-point scales. We subtracted the conservative thermometer score from the liberal score, yielding a scale running from -100 to 100, where -100=strongest positive feelings toward conservatives and negative feelings toward liberals, 0= neutral or equivalent feelings toward both, and 100=strongest positive feelings toward liberals and negative feelings toward conservatives.

Strength of Candidate Preference: “Would you say that your preference for [Gore / Bush / Buchanan / Other] is strong or not strong?” Coded 0=not strong, don’t know, or “will not vote for president” and 1=strong.

Guidance from Religion: “Would you say your religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day living, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day life?” Coded: 0=religion not important, 1=some, 2=quite a bit, 3=a great deal.

Campaign Participation: Scale based on questions asking respondents if, during the 2000 campaign,
they did any of the following: (1) tried to influence someone else’s vote choice, (2) displayed a campaign button, sticker, or sign, (3) attended any political meetings or rallies, (4) worked in any way for one of the parties or candidates, or (5) contributed money to a party or candidate (based on the average across two separate questions). Each element was coded 0=no, .5=don’t know, and 1=yes. The five elements were added together and normalized to a 0-1 interval.

External Political Efficacy: Scale derived from the sum of two questions – (1) “Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with this statement….People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.” Coding: 0=agree, .5=don’t know, 1=disagree; and (2) “Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with this statement….I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think.” Coding: 0=agree, .5=don’t know, 1=disagree.

Strength of Partisanship: Scale estimating the extent of the respondent’s partisanship. Coding:
0=Apolitical, 1=Independent or Other, 2=Independent – lean Democrat or Independent – lean Republican, 3=Weak Democrat or Republican, and 4=Strong Democrat or Republican.

Trust in Government: Scale constructed from the sum of two questions: (1) “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” (Coding, 1=“never,” 2=“only some of the time,” 3=“most of the time,” 4=“just about always”); (2) “Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don’t waste very much of it?” (Coding 1=“waste a lot,” 2=“waste some,” 3= don’t waste very much”).

Intent to Vote for Opposition Candidate: Dummy variable coded 1 if respondents indicated that he or she intended to vote for the opposition-party candidate in the 2000 election. (Respondents who did not plan to vote were coded 0; those who ultimately did not vote were excluded from the overall analysis.)

Preference for Divided Government: Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent indicates “it is better when control [of Congress and the presidency] is split between the Democrats and Republicans.”

TV and Newspaper Consumption Variables: Number of days in past week respondent: (1) read a daily newspaper, (2) watched national network news on TV, (3) watched early or late evening
local TV news, (4) watched morning news shows on TV. (Note: morning news variable is coded as follows: 0=none, 1=1-2 times, 2=3-4 times, and 3=5+ times or “every day.”)

*Listen to Talk Radio*: “How often do you listen to...[political talk radio]?” Coded: 0=never, 1=only occasionally, 2=once or twice a week, 3=most days, 4=every day.

*Campaign on Internet*: Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent followed campaign news on the Internet.

*TV Campaign Advertisements*: Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent recalls “seeing any ads for political candidates on television” during fall 2000.

*Cable Access*: Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent subscribes to cable or satellite television.

**References**


Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.


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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Jobs vs. Environment Tradeoff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Environmental Regulations on Business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Gun Control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Equal Rights for Women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Following Lau and Redlawsk (1997), social groups are included for a given candidate only if respondents’ self-described “closeness” toward that group was significantly positively correlated with their reported vote (vis-à-vis a given candidate).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Consumption</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daytime TV Talk Shows</td>
<td>.364 (.202)^</td>
<td>.513 (.241)^</td>
<td>.495 (.241)^</td>
<td>.070 (.085)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard News*</td>
<td>-.124 (.107)</td>
<td>-.076 (.128)</td>
<td>-.066 (.130)</td>
<td>-.060 (.126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local TV News</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.036 (.202)^</td>
<td>-.037 (.202)^</td>
<td>-.039 (.202)^</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning News TV Shows</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.133 (.068)^</td>
<td>-.136 (.067)^</td>
<td>-.133 (.067)^</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Campaign Advertisements</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.348 (.232)</td>
<td>-.365 (.234)</td>
<td>-.209 (.646)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk Radio</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>.053 (.073)</td>
<td>.070 (.074)</td>
<td>.077 (.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable Access</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.363 (.216)^</td>
<td>-.374 (.216)^</td>
<td>-.380 (.216)^</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign News on Internet</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>.194 (.191)</td>
<td>.190 (.192)</td>
<td>.179 (.191)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES/Demographics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.041 (.039)</td>
<td>.047 (.039)</td>
<td>.045 (.038)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.015 (.028)</td>
<td>.012 (.029)</td>
<td>.013 (.028)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age^2</td>
<td>.000 (.000)</td>
<td>.000 (.000)</td>
<td>.000 (.000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.130 (.180)</td>
<td>-.114 (.182)</td>
<td>-.121 (.182)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-.446 (.347)</td>
<td>-.386 (.349)</td>
<td>-.395 (.348)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-.311 (.426)</td>
<td>-.442 (.434)</td>
<td>-.407 (.434)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance from Religion</td>
<td>-.019 (.074)</td>
<td>-.008 (.075)</td>
<td>-.015 (.074)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Knowledge &amp; Attitudes</th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Awareness</td>
<td>-.238 (.152)</td>
<td>.092 (.180)</td>
<td>.094 (.181)</td>
<td>.075 (.250)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to Vote for Opposition</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.686 (.365)^</td>
<td>-.658 (.384)^</td>
<td>-.603 (.387)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Candidate Preferences</td>
<td>.672 (.160)^***</td>
<td>.455 (.192)^*</td>
<td>.446 (.192)</td>
<td>.446 (.192)^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Partisanship</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>.300 (.093)^***</td>
<td>.281 (.093)^**</td>
<td>.273 (.093)^**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Participation</td>
<td>.212 (.447)</td>
<td>.239 (.484)</td>
<td>.235 (.482)</td>
<td>.229 (.483)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>.005 (.003)^*</td>
<td>.002 (.003)</td>
<td>.002 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.106 (.053)^*</td>
<td>-.106 (.053)^*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer Divided Government</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.387 (.203)^</td>
<td>-.401 (.205)^*</td>
<td>-.402 (.205)^*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Trust and Efficacy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External Political Efficacy</td>
<td>.207 (.223)</td>
<td>.229 (.223)</td>
<td>.221 (.222)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Government</td>
<td>-.269 (.100)^**</td>
<td>-.287 (.100)^**</td>
<td>-.284 (.100)^**</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction Terms</th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Awareness x Daytime TV Shows</td>
<td>-.127 (.073)^</td>
<td>-.165 (.084)^*</td>
<td>-.163 (.084)^*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Awareness x Hard News</td>
<td>.039 (.038)</td>
<td>.049 (.044)</td>
<td>.048 (.044)</td>
<td>.048 (.043)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Awareness x Watch</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-.059 (.235)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Campaign Advertisements</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.083 (.403)</td>
<td>1.346 (1.095)</td>
<td>1.694 (1.107)</td>
<td>1.811 (1.202)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 )</td>
<td>40.37***</td>
<td>78.19***</td>
<td>80.81***</td>
<td>78.84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R^2</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=1081</td>
<td>N=988</td>
<td>N=988</td>
<td>N=988</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a_p \leq .10, \ ^* p \leq .05, \ ^** p \leq .01, \ ^*** p \leq .001; \) Heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors in parentheses.

*National Network News + Daily Newspapers
TABLE 3. Average scores on five dimensions of political engagement/involvement for respondents interviewed within a week of a candidate appearance on a daytime talk show versus those interviewed in other periods, as frequency of talk show viewing varies (1-2 vs. 3+ shows in prior week)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Watched 1-2 talk shows; Interviewed in Week with Candidate Appearance</th>
<th>Watched 3+ talk shows; Interviewed in Week with Candidate Appearance</th>
<th>Watched 1-2 talk shows; Interviewed in Week without Candidate Appearances</th>
<th>Watched 3+ talk shows; Interviewed in Week without Candidate Appearances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Awareness*</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Candidate Preferencesb</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care Who Wins Electionc</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent of Campaign Participationd</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Partisanshipe</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a 0-4 scale (4=max)

b dichotomous (0-1) indicator (1=high)

c dichotomous (0-1) indicator (1=yes)

d 0-5 scale, normalized to 0-1 interval (1=max)

e 0-3 scale (3=max)
FIGURE 1:
Mean Ratings of Candidates' "True" Issue Positions by American Politics "Experts" and "Fully Informed" Student Research Assistants
FIGURE 2. Probability of Voting Consistently as Daytime Talk Show or Hard News Consumption and Political Awareness Vary

Daytime Talk Shows
(Bold curves are significant at $p \leq 0.05$)

Hard News
(Bold curves are significant at $p \leq 0.08$)

Probability of Consistent Vote vs. Number of Shows Watched in Prior Week

Probability of Consistent Vote vs. Number of Days Consumed in Prior Week

Legend:
- Low Awareness - No Hard News
- High Awareness - No Hard News
- Low Awareness - Max. Hard News
- High Awareness - Max. Hard News