

# Messages that Mobilize? Issue Publics and the Content of Campaign Advertising

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*Does the issue content of campaign appeals mobilize particular subsets of voters? We examine whether issue content interacts with the interests and agendas of “issue publics,” focusing on the relationship between campaign messages and the turnout of senior citizens, veterans, and parents. Our analysis matches Current Population Survey respondents to media markets and then to relevant campaign advertising data in the 1998, 2000, and 2002 elections. We find that issue-specific campaign messages are not associated with higher turnout among senior citizens or veterans and are associated with only a small increase in turnout among parents. Our results suggest that campaign effects vary in their magnitude and importance for the mobilization of issue publics.*

The evolution of electoral campaigns in the United States is often described as a transition from party machines to “candidate-centered” politics. The tools and techniques of these two eras differ considerably, but the practitioners of candidate-centered politics have increasingly relied on mobilization—the bread-and-butter of machine politics—to achieve electoral success. Today campaign strategists can use sophisticated databases of voter information to contact, register, and mobilize specific subgroups of the voting-age population (Bai 2004; Gertner 2004; Leighley and Matsubayashi 2005). Journalists and commentators who cover campaigns acknowledge this strategy whenever they refer to such stylized groups of voters as “soccer moms” and “NASCAR dads.” Such accounts assume that candidates can successfully mobilize groups by highlighting the issues that groups care about. But do such appeals work? How easy is it to draw specific groups to the polls? We examine whether campaign messages mobilize particular groups of voters, focusing on three combinations of groups and messages: senior citizens and messages about Social Security and Medicare; veterans and messages about veterans; and parents of minor children and messages about education and child-care.

The relationship between campaign messages and electoral participation is important for two reasons. First, this relationship speaks to whether campaigns affect voters’ behavior. If the effect we uncover is small or nonexistent, then a commonplace portrayal of campaigns—in which candidates craft targeted appeals that bestir segments of the electorate—needs to be qualified. Second, this relationship speaks to broader questions about democratic responsiveness in the American political system. Galvanizing participation among subsets of the population may exacerbate existing inequalities in political power by giving leaders yet another incentive to focus on politically active groups, or it may ameliorate these inequalities by mobilizing previously quiescent groups. Alternatively, if there is little relationship between what campaigns say and what voters do, then campaigns may not have a systematic impact on the exercise of political voice.

## Theoretical and Empirical Links between Campaign Messages and Mobilization

Studies of voter turnout and political participation suggest that mobilization matters over and above the

large role played by education, civic skills, and electoral laws (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). There is an aggregate relationship between campaign activity, such as spending, and the level of turnout (e.g., Cox and Munger 1989; Jackson 1997; Patterson and Caldeira 1983). Furthermore, voters who report contact from the campaign are more likely to vote (Kramer 1970; Leighley 2001; cf. Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992). The field experiments of Green and Gerber (2004) suggest that face-to-face contact increases the likelihood of turnout. In sum, competitive and expensive campaigns stimulate turnout, and certain modes of campaign contact mobilize individual voters.

To date, campaign appeals have been studied mainly for their tone, in an effort to determine if negative advertisements “demobilize” voters (inter alia, Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Jackson and Carsey 2006; Lau and Pomper 2004). This literature suggests no clear relationship between tone and turnout. Tone is an important component of campaign appeals, but candidates also choose the content of these appeals, emphasizing particular issues and downplaying others, in their attempts to gain an electoral advantage—the strategy of “heresthetics” (Riker 1983). Less is known about the relationship between the content of campaign appeals and voter turnout. Gerber and Green (2000) examine various nonpartisan appeals—civic duty, the closeness of the election, and neighborhood solidarity—and do not find any significant differences among them. But no studies to date have focused on the issue content of campaign appeals.

Campaign appeals may mobilize specific groups when they speak to the particular interests and agendas of individual voters. That is, voters might be more susceptible to campaign messages when those messages focus on the issues personally important to them. Converse’s (1964) notion of “issue publics” describes a citizenry differentiated by political agendas (see also Hutchings 2003; Krosnick 1990). Because most people lack the inclination and resources to follow politics closely, many will be attentive only to issues that involve their own personal interests or the interests of groups with which they identify, and/or for which their deeply held values are particularly relevant. This portrayal of opinion dovetails nicely with the conventional wisdom that politicians can appeal to various groups by responding to those groups’ unique interests and concerns (whether symbolically or substantively).

With regard to the groups that we investigate here, this connection between issue content and political

participation has been examined only for senior citizens.<sup>1</sup> Campbell’s (2003) study of Social Security and political activism among seniors finds that seniors constitute an “issue public” that is especially attentive to news stories dealing with Social Security. Most strikingly, the political participation of seniors has increased sharply when Social Security and Medicare benefits were threatened in some way. Their spirited defense of entitlement programs suggests that seniors may perceive that more is at stake and vote in larger numbers when campaigns focus on these programs.

Our central hypothesis is that the turnout of seniors, veterans, and parents will be greater when campaigns focus on issues salient to them. For seniors, we posit that those issues concern entitlement programs, namely Social Security and Medicare. For veterans, those issues involve veterans themselves. Campaign discussions of veterans’ interests often revolve around government benefits for veterans, such as health care.<sup>2</sup> For parents of children under the age of 18, we posit that issues related to education and childcare will be particularly important, since these children will almost always be enrolled in schools and will often need childcare. To be sure, members of these three groups are not the only people interested in entitlement programs, veterans’ benefits, and education. But government programs for seniors and veterans, as well as education and childcare, have more direct consequences for the welfare of these respective groups than for others, which arguably makes them the most likely “issue publics” on theoretical grounds.

These three issue publics also provide interesting variation in our two main phenomena of interest: the level of electoral participation and the salience of the issue in the campaign. In turn, this variation generates some possible corollaries to our central hypothesis. First, seniors and veterans are known to be more participatory; parents, however, are not much different

<sup>1</sup>Mettler (2002) argues that the G.I. Bill helped increase the political participation of World War II veterans, while Teigen (2006) finds that particular cohorts of veterans are more likely than nonveterans to turn out. Neither focuses on the mobilizing impact of campaign messages. Despite important work on how parenthood affects participation (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001), there has been no examination of the mobilization of parents, although one study of survey cooperation finds that new parents were more likely to participate in surveys when those surveys concerned issues related to children and parents (Groves, Presser, and Dipko 2004).

<sup>2</sup>Veterans might also have a particular interest in and devotion to the armed services, leading them to be more responsive to campaign advertising about national defense. We also conducted our analysis using a measure that combined advertising about veterans and defense. These auxiliary analyses confirm the (null) findings we present below.

than the rest of the public in terms of their participation (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Thus, we might expect parents to be more susceptible to mobilization efforts, since habitual voters are less common among parents than among seniors and veterans.

Second, entitlement programs and education were highly salient in the 1998, 2000, and 2002 campaigns and appeared in a large proportion of campaign advertising. By contrast, veterans' issues appeared only infrequently. We can envision two contrasting hypotheses. One is that less salient issues will prove less successful in mobilizing issue publics, as these issues are drowned out by the flood of campaign messages about highly salient issues. However, the opposite may also be true: amidst many messages about highly salient issues like education, messages about less salient issues, such as veterans, may prove novel and distinctive, attracting the attention of the relevant issue public and stimulating its participation.

## Data

To examine the relationship between campaign messages and mobilization, we leverage variation across races in salient issues and in the turnout of our three issue publics. We use general election campaign advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project (WAP) to measure campaign messages.<sup>3</sup> These data are available for 1998, 2000, and 2002 and encompass all advertisements aired in the top 75 (1998 and 2000) or the top 100 (2002) media markets. These markets contain upwards of 80% of the American population. The WAP data thus encompass a large number of campaigns and also provide detailed measures of campaign content. To be sure, citizens can be exposed to campaign communication through other media, including newspapers, television news, radio, and direct mail. These various forms of campaigning often

coincide (Huber and Arceneaux 2007), making the messages in television advertising a reasonable proxy for messages in other media and, thus, for the overall campaign agenda and how intensely that agenda is communicated to voters.

There is substantial heterogeneity across media markets in the volume and content of campaign advertising. To study the effects of an electoral context such as media markets, one needs adequate samples of the contextual unit and of voters within these units (Stoker and Bowers 2002). Large samples of individuals are also necessary to provide sufficient statistical power to identify the effects of communication on individuals (Zaller 2002). Standard election surveys like the American National Election Studies (ANES) are lacking on both counts. A more appropriate dataset is Current Population Survey's November Voter Supplement, which has approximately 90,000–105,000 respondents each year and includes measures of whether respondents reported voting, their age, veteran status, and (in 2000 and 2002) whether they have children under the age of 18.<sup>4</sup> Because most respondents can then be located in a media market based on the state, metropolitan statistical area (MSA), or county in which they live, they can be linked to the campaign advertisements aired in their particular market.

Two caveats should be noted. First, we cannot identify a media market for two sets of respondents: those who do not have any MSA or county identification and those who live in a small media market that does not fall into the WAP data. Table A-1 summarizes the proportion of cases in each category. Although only about two-thirds of the 1998–2002 CPS samples can be matched to the advertising data in their media market, the resulting sample sizes are still very large compared to other surveys.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, all 75 media markets in the 1998–2000 WAP data are represented, as are 98 of the 100 markets in the 2002 WAP data. The CPS also provides larger numbers of respondents within each media market than do surveys such as the ANES. For example, in 1998, the mean number of CPS respondents in each market was 749, with a median of 454.

<sup>3</sup>The 1998 advertising data come from the Brennan Centre for Justice at New York University School of Law, which used data obtained from the Campaign Media Analysis Group in Washington, D.C. Ken Goldstein deserves particular thanks for providing access to copies of the 1998 advertisements. The 2000 data are based on work supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts under a grant to the Brennan Centre and a subsequent subcontract to the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The 2002 data were obtained from a project of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, under Professor Kenneth Goldstein and Joel Rivlin of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and include media-tracking data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group. The Wisconsin Advertising Project was sponsored by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brennan Centre, the Campaign Media Analysis Group, the Wisconsin Advertising Project, Professor Goldstein, Joel Rivlin or The Pew Charitable Trusts.

<sup>4</sup>Another advantage of the CPS is that its measure of turnout is less susceptible to over-reporting than are similar measures in "political" surveys such as the ANES (Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003). This produces a more valid measure of our key dependent variable.

<sup>5</sup>The CPS respondents who could not be matched to advertising data are slightly less educated and wealthy than those who could be matched. However, the "unmatched" respondents were not consistently more or less likely to turn out than the matched respondents. Thus, we do not think that the unmatched respondents would evince more susceptibility to campaign messages, were we able to include them in the analysis.

Second, in merging the two datasets, some respondents will be (mis)matched with ads for races in which they cannot participate. These mismatches could arise when a media market is large enough to feature advertisements from multiple races, or when it overlaps state boundaries. If advertisements from an “irrelevant” race motivate people to vote—perhaps by reminding them of broader issues at stake—then our measures of advertising should derive from all advertisements that aired in each market. But if people simply tune out advertisements from irrelevant races then we should attempt to match respondents only to relevant races. Unfortunately, the CPS does not provide the information necessary to locate respondents in congressional districts, so multiple-race mismatches cannot be easily remedied. We can, however, deal with the multiple-state mismatches by constructing measures based only on advertising in respondents’ state of residence. We employ measures that do and do not attempt to correct for mismatches in the analysis that follows. Ultimately, the choice of measures has little consequence for the results.

In sum, this combination of data represents a powerful and largely unexploited means of examining campaign effects (Jackson and Carsey 2006). Although matching CPS respondents to media markets and then to relevant campaign advertisements is not always straightforward, the resulting dataset possesses many attractive features, including large numbers of respondents and markets and a reasonably reliable measure of electoral participation. Moreover, these data are especially well-suited to our research question because many subsets of the electorate, whose numbers would dwindle rapidly in standard election surveys, are well-represented in the CPS.

## Issue-Specific Advertising and the Turnout of Issue Publics

We determined whether each general election advertisement in the WAP data mentioned a specific issue (Social Security and/or Medicare; veterans; education and/or child-care).<sup>6</sup> We then summed the number of issue-specific ads that aired in each media market. As a first cut, we constructed scatterplots in which each data point is a media market, the x-axis is the number of

issue-specific ads in the market, and the y-axis is the level of turnout among the relevant issue public in the market.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 presents these scatterplots separately for 1998, 2000, and 2002. In each plot, the size of the data points is proportionate to the number of relevant individuals in the CPS sample from that media market (Korn and Graubard 1998). Lacking strong theory about the functional form of the relationship between ads and turnout, we include a lowess fit line to summarize this bivariate relationship (Cleveland 1979).<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1 confirms two of our earlier descriptive claims. First, seniors and veterans tend to be more participatory than parents. Second, there is much more advertising about entitlements and education than about veterans. For example, in some markets in 2000 and 2002, there were upwards of 8,000 total airings about these issues. By contrast, no market witnessed more than 800 airings about veterans in either 2000 or 2002.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1 also suggests that there is no consistent relationship between the volume of issue-specific advertising and the turnout of issue publics. Senior citizens in markets with more entitlement ads are more likely to vote, but this relationship is modest at best. In 1998, the relationship between turnout and the raw number of ads appears somewhat logarithmic: the turnout of seniors increases by about 7 percentage points as advertising increases from 0 to about 800 airings and levels off thereafter with a slight decline in the markets with the most advertisements. However, in 2000, the turnout of seniors is only weakly associated with the number of ads: thousands of additional ads appear to move turnout very little. In 2002, there is virtually no change in the turnout of seniors across markets that featured between 0 and 4,000 ads. In markets with more than 4,000 ads, turnout increases steeply, although these results are driven by only a handful of markets.

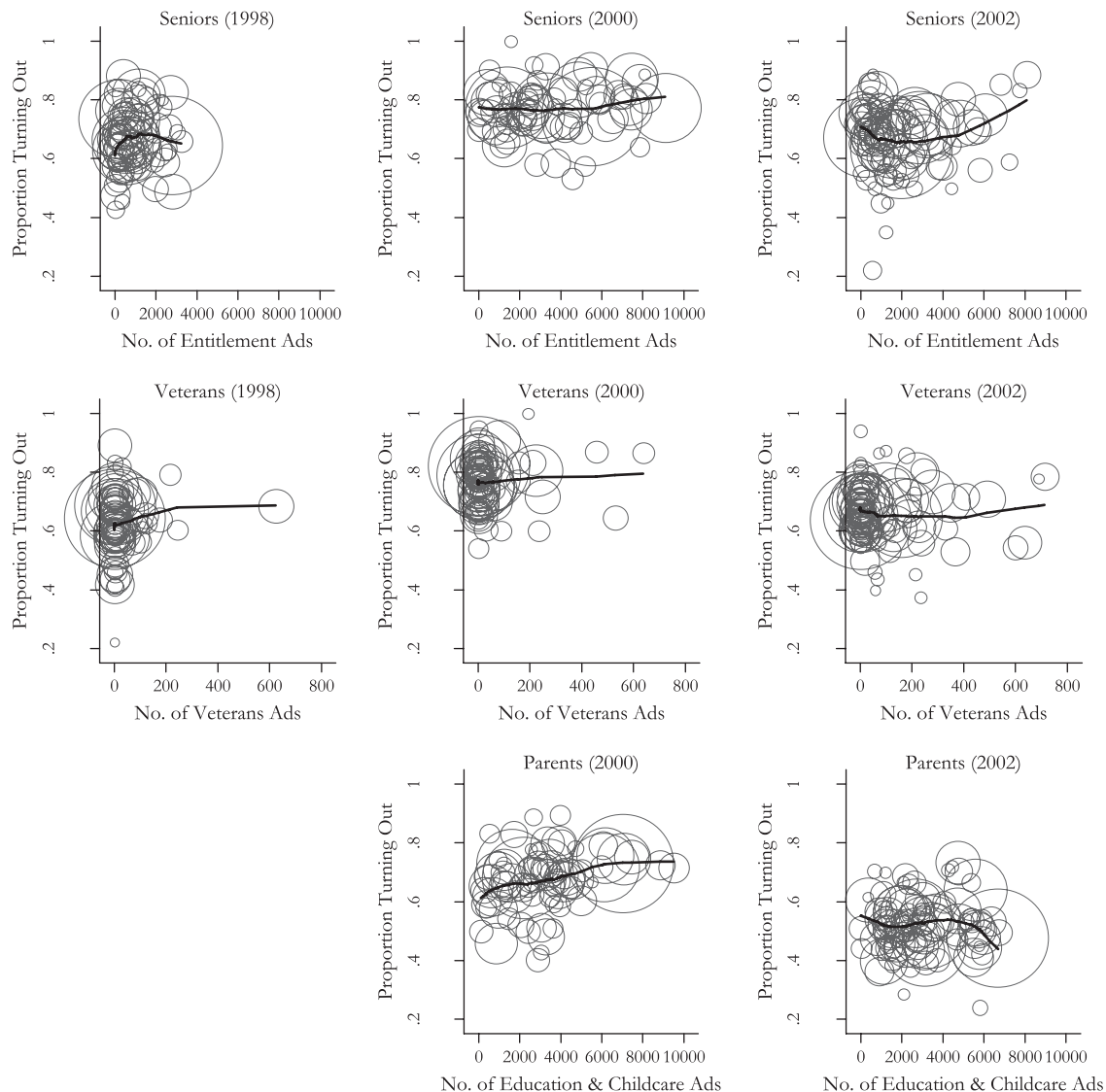
Turnout among veterans appears unaffected by the volume of veterans ads. In each year, there is higher turnout in the markets with a larger number of veterans ads, but the relationship is decidedly modest.

<sup>7</sup>We employ the measure of advertising that does not “correct” for multiple-state mismatches.

<sup>8</sup>In Figures 1 and 2, we employed the lowess estimator in Stata 9, with a bandwidth of 0.8.

<sup>9</sup>Three other features of these plots are worth noting. First, despite conventional portrayals of senior citizens as diligent voters, turnout was far from universal and differed considerably across markets. In other words, there is variation to be explained. Second, for every issue public, turnout was on average higher in 2000 than in 1998 or 2002, as expected in a presidential election year. Third, there were fewer entitlement ads in 1998, in part because of the glut of presidential advertising in 2000, in which entitlements figured prominently as a theme.

<sup>6</sup>We used the WAP coding, which records up to four issues for each advertisement and includes separate categories for Social Security, Medicare, veterans, education, and childcare. In 2002, we included ads that mentioned prescription drugs as “entitlement ads,” since they typically referred to adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare. In each election, we included ads about “other child-related issues” along with ads about education and childcare.

**FIGURE 1 Scatterplots of Turnout among Issue Publics, by Volume of Issue-Specific Ads**

The unit of analysis in this figure is the media market. Data points represent the proportion of a particular issue public that turned out in each market. Data points are in proportion to the size of the CPS sample in each media market. The fit lines are estimated using lowess. Sources: Current Population Survey and Wisconsin Advertising Project.

It may be that the number of veterans ads was not large enough to “penetrate” the public. Finally, there is mixed evidence for the mobilizing effect of education and childcare ads among parents. In 2000, there is a clear, mostly linear relationship in the hypothesized direction. From the minimum to maximum number of ads, the turnout of parents increases by about 12 points. However, in 2002, there is little relationship; if anything, the turnout of parents was lower in the markets with the most issue-specific advertising.

While suggestive, the scatterplots are limited for inferential purposes. The number of issue public

members in some markets is small, making the level of turnout a noisy measure. Moreover, advertisements might affect individuals who are not members of these issue publics. A second way to test our hypothesis is a “two-stage” strategy that is appropriate for multilevel data—here, voters nested within media markets—where the “clusters,” or number of voters, are quite large (Bowers and Drake 2005; Jusko and Shively 2005; Kedar 2005). In the first stage, we estimated a logit model of turnout within each market; the independent variables are education, income, gender, ethnicity, residential stability, a series of dummy variables for age, including one for those

aged 65 and over, and dummy variables for veterans and parents.<sup>10</sup> In the second stage, we constructed scatterplots with the number of issue-specific ads on the x-axis and the coefficient for the dummy variable for the relevant issue public on the y-axis. If issue-specific ads increase the turnout of issue publics then the magnitude of this coefficient should increase as the number of ads increases.

Figure 2 presents these scatterplots.<sup>11</sup> In each plot, the coefficient estimate from a market is represented with a dot; the vertical line through the dot represents the 95% confidence interval around that estimate. The first row of scatterplots concerns seniors. As expected given the relationship between age and turnout, the coefficient estimates are positive and statistically greater than zero in the vast majority of markets. There is, however, no evidence that the effect of being a senior citizen is greater in markets with many entitlement advertisements. The lowest fit lines are essentially flat. The same pattern prevails in the plots for veterans and parents. The effect of being a parent or veteran is not statistically significant in most markets, and there is no evidence that the magnitude of the effect increases in markets with more issue-specific advertising.

Although Figures 1 and 2 provide little evidence for our central hypothesis, it is important to conduct a multivariate test for two reasons. First, we have not controlled for contextual factors that may be associated with advertising. For example, if there is more advertising in markets within states that have restrictive registration laws, then the lack of a relationship between advertising and turnout may be spurious. Second, the impact of issue-specific advertising may reflect a generic effect of advertising. Heavy advertising may stimulate turnout simply because it proxies the competitiveness of the race and the amount of electioneering. Thus, it is important to estimate the effect of issue-specific advertising over and above that of advertising generally.

To do so, we estimate models of turnout that include three sets of predictors. Each model contains the individual-level predictors used to create the scatterplots in Figure 2. Each model also contains

three state-level factors: dummy variables for whether the state featured a Senate race or a governor's race (both of which should stimulate turnout), and how many days before the election voters needed to register to be eligible to vote—coded from 0 for same-day registration (or no registration required) to 30. States with earlier deadlines should have lower turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Finally, each model includes the number of issue-specific ads and the number of all ads that aired in the respondent's media market.<sup>12</sup> The former tests our central hypothesis and the latter provides a crucial control. If issue-specific ads have significant effects over and above those of advertising generally, then we can be more confident that their issue content matters. To be sure, this is a tough test, since total advertising and issue-specific advertising are often highly correlated across media markets. Below we discuss the results of alternative specifications.

Our data thus have three levels. Individuals are nested both in markets and in states. However, unlike canonical multilevel data, media markets are not cleanly nested within states. We rely therefore on models of “cross-classified” data (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; chap. 12). Though most media market boundaries coincide with state boundaries, some do not. Another cross-classified dataset would involve students nested in both schools and neighborhoods. While most students may attend neighborhood schools, some will not. Below we present a hypothetical model, using Raudenbush and Bryk's (2002) notation, that assumes a single individual-level predictor that denotes an issue public ( $X_1$ ), a state-level predictor ( $Z_1$ ), and a market-level measure of issue-specific advertising ( $Z_2$ ):

$$Y_{ijk} = \pi_{0jk} + \pi_{1jk}X_1$$

$$\pi_{0jk} = \theta_0 + b_{00j} + c_{00k} + \gamma_{01}Z_1 + \gamma_{02}Z_2$$

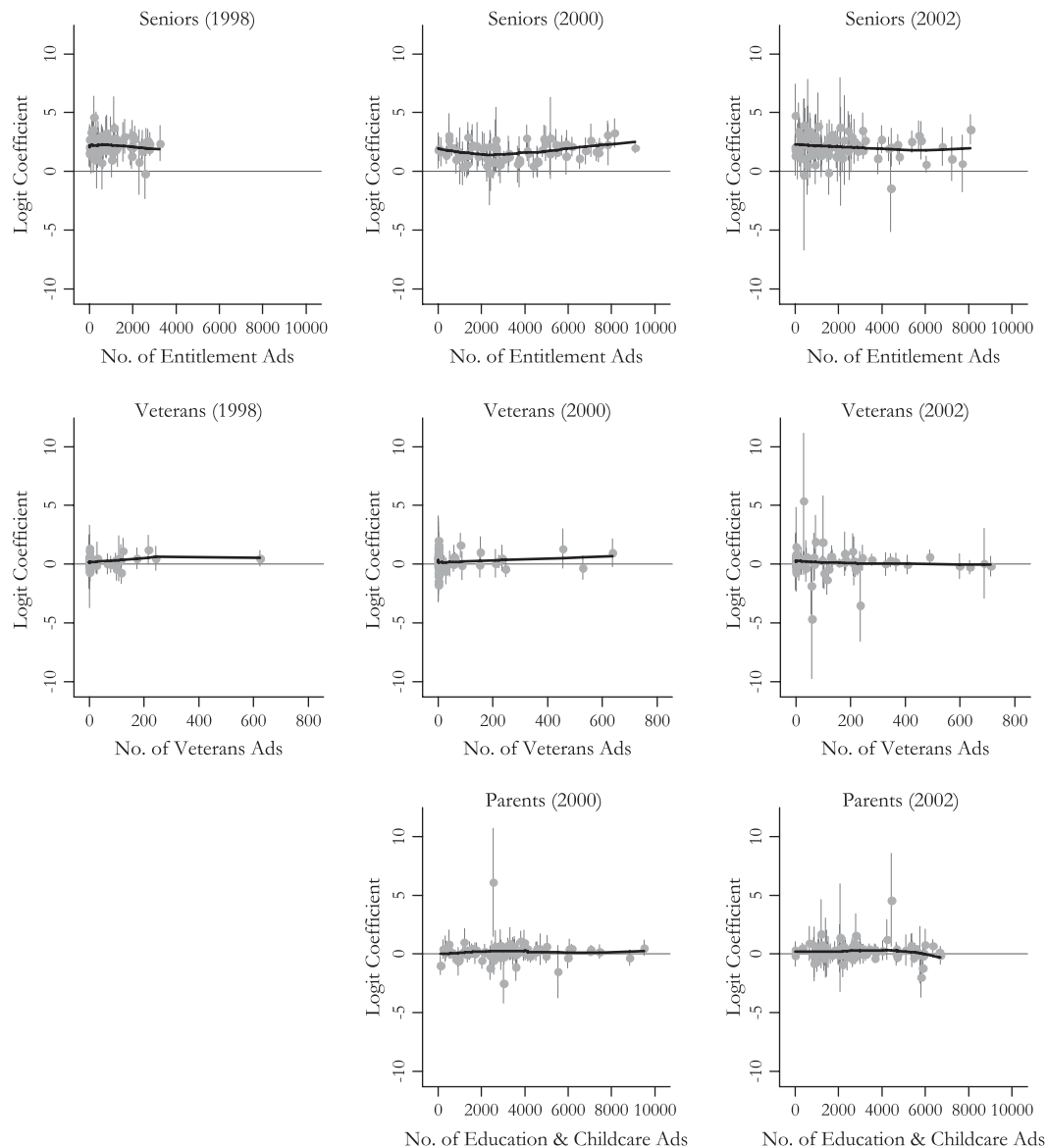
$$\pi_{1jk} = \theta_1 + \gamma_{11}Z_2$$

In this model,  $i$  indexes individuals,  $j$  indexes markets, and  $k$  indexes states. The model includes random main effects for both markets ( $b_{00j}$ ) and states ( $c_{00k}$ ), as well as a grand mean ( $\theta_0$ ). The key part of this model is the cross-level interaction between the effect ( $\pi_{1jk}$ ) of the individual-level predictor  $X_1$  and the measure of advertising  $Z_2$ . Our central hypothesis predicts a positive interaction, i.e., a value of  $\gamma_{11}$  that is significantly greater than 0. This signifies, for example, that the effect of being a senior citizen on

<sup>10</sup>Income, education, and residential stability are ordinal variables. Gender and ethnicity are dummy variables. Our ethnicity variable simply captures white versus nonwhite, since minority ethnic groups are barely present in the CPS samples in some media markets. The excluded category for age is those aged 25–34.

<sup>11</sup>In a few small markets, the logit models generated perfect predictions (i.e., all seniors voted) and thus exceedingly large coefficients and standard errors. We deleted these markets from Figure 2.

<sup>12</sup>In this case, we employ the “corrected” raw number of ads. The results are unchanged if we employ the “uncorrected” measure.

**FIGURE 2. Scatterplots of Logit Coefficients for Issue Publics, by Volume of Issue-Specific Ads**

Each dot on this graph represents the logit coefficient for a dummy variable for the relevant issue public, derived from separate models of turnout in each media market. The vertical lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals around these coefficient estimates. The fit lines are estimated using lowess. Sources: Current Population Survey and Wisconsin Advertising Project.

turnout is greater in markets with more advertising on entitlement programs. Because our dependent variable is dichotomous the model employs a logit link. The model was estimated via maximum likelihood in HLM 6.02.

Table 1 presents the results. There are three sets of models, one corresponding to each issue public, with separate models for each year. We present only the coefficients and standard errors for the key variables: measures of both total and issue-specific advertising, the relevant issue public dummy variable,

and the interaction among them.<sup>13</sup> The three models for seniors suggest little effect for entitlement advertising and for advertising generally. In fact, in only one case (2002) is the interaction between seniors and entitlement ads even of the hypothesized sign. For

<sup>13</sup>The full results are available from the authors upon request. The individual-level variables have their expected effects; turnout increases with education, income, and residential stability. Turnout also tends to be higher in states with less restrictive registration requirements. The presence of a senate or gubernatorial race does not have a consistent effect.

TABLE 1 Models of Turnout

	1998	2000	2002
<b>I. Seniors and entitlement ads</b>			
Senior citizen $\times$ entitlement ads	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)
Senior citizen $\times$ total ads	0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.009 (0.01)
Senior citizen	1.68* (0.06)	1.46* (0.08)	1.82* (0.06)
Total entitlement ads	0.03 (0.06)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.007 (0.02)
Total ads	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
<b>II. Veterans and veteran ads</b>			
Veteran $\times$ veteran ads	-.003 (0.01)	0.15 (0.13)	0.15 (0.09)
Veteran $\times$ total ads	-0.04 (0.15)	-0.001 (0.008)	-0.005 (0.009)
Veteran	0.26 (0.15)	0.17 (0.16)	0.09 (0.10)
Total veteran ads	0.17 (0.10)	-0.21* (0.09)	0.03 (0.07)
Total ads	0.02* (0.01)	-0.007 (0.005)	0.01 (0.007)
<b>III. Parents and education/ childcare ads</b>			
Parent $\times$ education/childcare ads	-	0.10* (0.04)	0.07* (0.03)
Parent $\times$ total ads	-	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)
Parent	-	0.21* (0.06)	0.20* (0.05)
Total education/childcare ads	-	-0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)
Total ads	-	0.01 (0.01)	0.002 (0.01)

Cell entries are estimated coefficients and standard errors from cross-classified hierarchical models. The dependent variable is coded 0 (did not vote) or 1 (voted). Senior citizen, veteran, and parent are dummy variables coded 0 or 1. All advertising variables are scaled in 1000s of airings. Each model also includes the individual- and state-level variables described in the text. \* $p < .05$ .

veterans, there is little evidence that issue-specific advertising affected turnout in 1998. In 2000 and 2002, the crucial interaction term is of the correct sign and, in 2002, it borders on statistical significance ( $p = .103$ ). Overall, these results suggest a weak relationship between issue-specific advertising and turnout among seniors or veterans.

In contrast, the results for parents provide some support for our central hypothesis. In both 2000 and 2002, there is a positive and statistically significant interaction effect: the probability of turnout among parents increases in markets with more advertising about education and childcare. The substantive effect of this interaction, however, is not large. To demonstrate, we focus on 2000 and compare the predicted probability of turnout among parents and nonparents in two markets with, respectively, low and high levels of advertising about education and childcare.<sup>14</sup> In 2000, these markets were Oklahoma City (322 ads about education and/or childcare) and Green Bay-Appleton (4,673 ads). Using the levels of total and issue-specific advertising in these two markets, and holding the other variables in the model constant, the

model predicts that parents would be 3.8 percentage points more likely to turn out than would nonparents in Oklahoma City (the “low” market) and 6.4 percentage points more likely to do so in Green Bay (the “high” market). This 2.6 percentage point increase is arguably a small effect given the substantial investment involved in airing more than 4,000 additional ads.<sup>15</sup>

What would this investment “buy” in terms of additional votes among parents? The average cost of airing a general election ad in Oklahoma City in 2000 was \$564, according to the WiscAds data. To increase the level of education and childcare advertising in Oklahoma City to that in Green Bay-Appleton—an increase of 4,351 airings—would therefore cost \$2.45 million. According to the 2000 Census, the estimated number of parents of school-age children in the

<sup>14</sup>We define low and high as the 10<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles. We set the other variables at their means or modal values.

<sup>15</sup>Alternative model specifications do not change our basic conclusions. If we include measures of issue-specific ads but not the measure of total ads—thereby mitigating collinearity—the effects of entitlement and veterans ads are not significantly associated with turnout among seniors and veterans, respectively. However, the effects of advertising on parents’ turnout are no longer statistically significant. Substituting logged measures of advertising does not change the results for seniors and veterans and, again, weakens the results for parents.



Oklahoma City media market is 334,689.<sup>16</sup> If the model's prediction is correct, increasing the number of education and childcare ads by 4,351 would increase the percentage of parents who voted by 2.6 points—that is, approximately 8,700 additional parents would have voted in this election. Dividing the cost of those additional ads by the number of newly mobilized parents yields a cost-per-vote of \$282. This is roughly 15 times the average cost-per-vote of door-to-door get-out-the-vote efforts (see Green and Gerber 2004, 39). Thus, the effects of advertising here are not only small but also costly to achieve in practice.

But perhaps the effect of message content is conditional on other attributes of the ads.<sup>17</sup> One such attribute is the ads' tone. Issue-specific ads may have a larger effect when they criticize the opposing candidate because negative information is more salient and better illuminates the potential costs and gains of electoral choices (Lau 1985). If legislative threats to programs like Social Security motivate seniors' participation (Campbell 2003), then advertising messages describing similar threats may do likewise. A second attribute is the party associated with the ad. Voters may find advertising messages more persuasive when they originate with the party thought to "own" the issue (Iyengar and Valentino 2000). In our analysis, Democratic advertising may prove more important for entitlements and education, because the Democratic Party is thought to own both issues (Petrocik 1996; Sides 2006). Ownership of veterans' issues is less clear. While the Democratic Party is often considered better able to handle social programs, the Republican Party is thought to be "stronger" on national defense.

An investigation of these two attributes reveals no consistent relationships across issues and across years. The impact of entitlement ads on turnout depends neither on their tone nor on their party

sponsorship. In 2002, Democratic ads were significantly associated with seniors' turnout, but this effect did not emerge in 1998 or 2000. Differentiating veterans ads by tone and party also had no consistent effect. In 2002, positive ads about veterans were significantly associated with veterans' turnout; in 2000, Republican ads had an effect that was nearly statistically significant. These effects, however, are not evident in other years. Differentiating ads about education and childcare also failed to reveal any systematic evidence that tone or sponsor matters. We also investigated the intersection of tone and sponsor (e.g., negative Republican ads, positive Democratic ads) but again found few effects.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

The idea motivating this paper is that campaign effects depend on both the campaign's content and the public's agenda. Because citizens vary in the issues they consider important, different groups within the electorate may respond differently to campaign messages. In particular, we hypothesized that citizens would become more motivated to vote when their concerns are addressed during the campaign. We captured variation in the public's political interests by incorporating the notion of issue publics and then disaggregated campaign messages to identify the policy content relevant to specific groups. Our case studies, however, generally failed to support our central hypothesis. In three election years, we found no consistent evidence that messages related to Social Security and Medicare were associated with higher turnout among seniors or that messages related to veterans were associated with higher turnout among veterans. We found only modest evidence that messages related to education and childcare were associated with higher turnout among parents of children under the age of 18. These results suggest that mobilization may be more prevalent when two conditions are met: first, the targeted group is less participatory

<sup>16</sup>To arrive at this number, we downloaded Census Table P-15, which presents information about the number of families in each county with different combinations of family type (single vs. two-parent) and different age ranges of children. This information is calculated by the Census Bureau from their Summary File 3 and is available on the American FactFinder website (<http://factfinder.census.gov>). We focused only on those counties in the Oklahoma City market. The number of parents in this market is equal to the number of two-parent families with children under 18 (multiplied by 2), plus the number of single-parent families with children under 18. We have no way of knowing who among these parents are eligible to vote, but nevertheless this number should suffice for the purposes of illustration.

<sup>17</sup>We also differentiated senior citizens by their income level to see if less wealthy seniors, who depend more on Social Security and Medicare assistance, are especially responsive to entitlement ads. We found no evidence of this relationship.

<sup>18</sup>We also examined two alternative advertising measures. The first included only ads aired during the final two weeks of the campaign; these ads may have been more salient and more influential than earlier ads. The second included only ads that focused exclusively on the issues in question; these ads may have been more influential than ads that also discussed other issues. "Late" advertising mattered in only two of the eight models (seniors in 2002; veterans in 2000); "exclusive" advertising mattered in none. Finally, we also performed a difference-in-differences analysis, comparing the 1998 and 2002 midterm elections to see whether the change in senior citizens' or veterans' turnout within markets was associated with a change in the volume of issue-specific ads. We found no such effect.

(as are parents, relative to seniors and veterans), and, second, the volume of advertising is large (as was advertising about education and childcare, relative to advertising about veterans). But given the limited number of issues and groups under consideration here, these conclusions are tentative at best.

Our mostly null results have important lessons and implications for both the conventional wisdom and the scholarly literature on campaign effects. The conventional wisdom often portrays the electorate in terms of discrete groups that are defined in terms of generation, gender, ethnicity, occupation, or a quasi-sociological mash-up (e.g., “security moms”). These groups are presumed to have distinct sets of interests and to respond to messages centered on those interests, but our results provide a cautionary tale. Campaign messages targeted at specific subgroups of the electorate will not necessarily spur these individuals to participate.

The scholarly literature on campaign effects has produced clear evidence that campaigns can matter (inter alia, Johnston et al. 1992; Shaw 1999), but this does not suggest that campaigns always matter—a point that even campaign effects scholars are careful to note. The crucial task is to specify when, how, and for whom campaigns “matter.” Thus, null effects are as important as significant effects because both help establish the boundaries of what campaigns can accomplish. Understanding these boundaries helps build better theories about whether and how political communication affects the attitudes and behaviors of citizens. Such theories will likely entail disaggregating both the electorate and campaign messages, as we have done here.

This study also lays out a useful empirical strategy for investigating how subsets of the American electorate respond to specific campaign themes, a question that will become even more relevant if campaigns continue to engage in segmentation and microtargeting. The sheer size of the Current Population Survey samples, the breadth of the contextual units from which they are drawn, and the detailed information in the Wisconsin Advertising Project data constitute, in combination, a powerful research design for this question. Future research could examine whether the participation of other groups, such as racial and ethnic groups and the poor, depends in part on campaign messages. In addition to probing the boundaries of campaign effects, doing so will pinpoint the identities that are most salient to voters in the context of elections.

Finally, campaigns may have systematic consequences for the exercise of political voice. A defensible democratic ideal is that each citizen has equal standing in the eyes of elected leaders and policymakers. Systematic inequalities in political voice

(Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) demonstrate that American politics falls short of this ideal, but perhaps political institutions and processes can ameliorate these inequalities. Our results suggest that, at a minimum, campaign messages do not exacerbate existing inequalities. The participatory tendencies of senior citizens and veterans do not increase when campaigns focus on entitlements and veterans’ benefits, respectively. In fact, the mobilization of parents may imply that, under specific circumstances, campaign messages can have an equalizing effect.

**Appendix Table A-1. Valid and Missing Data in the 1998-2002 Current Population Studies**

	1998	2000	2002
Total sample size	90,400	88,884	105,682
Matched to advertising data	56,367 (62.4%)	55,467 (62.4%)	68,434 (64.7%)
Not matched to advertising data	19,806 (21.9%)	19,429 (21.9%)	25,040 (23.7%)
CPS lacks information on MSA			
Resides in untracked media market	14,227 (15.7%)	13,988 (15.7%)	12,208 (11.6%)

This table summarizes our success in matching CPS respondents to televised political advertisements that aired in their market. In each year, about two-thirds of respondents could be matched. Approximately one-fifth of the sample lacked a geographic identifier specific enough to identify their media market. Finally, in 1998 and 2000, about 16 percent of the sample resided in smaller media markets that are not part of the WAP data. Note that this figure declines to 12 percent in 2002, which stems from the inclusion of 25 additional markets in the WAP data.

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