

Local News and Perceptions of the Rhetoric of Political Advertising

Barbara Allen

Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota

Daniel P. Stevens

University of Exeter, Cornwall

Gregory Marfleet

Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota

John Sullivan

University of Minnesota at Minneapolis

Dean Alger

Independent Scholar

American Politics Research
Volume 35 Number 4
July 2007 506-540
© 2007 Sage Publications
10.1177/1532673X06298717
<http://apr.sagepub.com>
hosted at
<http://online.sagepub.com>

As viewer numbers of national news have declined, local news has grown in importance as a source of political information. Yet prominent research into its effects concludes that its impact on political attitudes and behavior is minor. We theorize and demonstrate that the influence of local news may be indirect and subtle but nevertheless important. Using multiple methods, we show a clear relationship between perceptions of campaign rhetoric and watching local news, even when controlling for individual-level characteristics; this response, in turn, has an indirect effect on turnout. We explain this finding as a combination of the "mean social world" presented by local news, the nature of political coverage, and the perception of local news stations as simply another player in the campaign. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our results for the role of local news in politics and what might be done to make its contribution more positive.

Keywords: *elections; local news; national news; political advertising; campaign rhetoric*

Authors' Note: We would like to thank the students at Carleton College who were largely responsible for the focus group research discussed; Alissa McElhone for her research assistance; Justin Whitely Holmes, who was integral to the development of the survey; and Benjamin Bishin, Laurel Elder, Eric Lawrence, and Travis Ridout for helpful comments and advice.

During the past few years, scholars have noted that Americans are turning away from national television network news as a source of political information. This trend has elevated the importance of local news, with many local stations increasing the number of local news programs they air; it is not unusual for stations to air 2 hours of local news every weekday evening in three or more separate newscasts. Thus, according to Graber (2001), "Local news has become the biggest game in town" (p. 330). Indeed, now that "the cumulative audience for evening local news easily surpasses the cumulative audience for national news" (Iyengar, 1998, p. 1), local news has become the dominant source of information for a plurality of Americans. In the 2004 elections, according to a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2004) survey, local news remained the media source through which, more than any other, Americans said they regularly learned something about candidates and the campaign. In short, as Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) suggest, "Local news is America's principal window on the world" (p. 560).

Using multiple methods, we examine the relationship between watching (or not watching) local news and perceptions of election campaign rhetoric. We show that even when accounting for salient individual-level characteristics such as age, sex, race, political knowledge, and trust in government, frequent viewers of local news exhibit lower levels of tolerance for the kind of arguments that are standard fare in the modern political campaign. We also indicate that a lower tolerance for this type of campaign communication may be associated with lower turnout. We examine what it is about local news that undergirds these relationships.

Local News and Campaigns

Much is known about the general effects of media coverage and the implications for local news. For example, the vast literature on agenda setting (e.g., Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) shows that the subjects of stories and the intensity with which the media focus on them not only reflects newsmakers' priorities but also cues citizens regarding the relative importance of events competing for "newsworthiness." The tendency to focus on politics as a battle of strategies rather than a debate about ideas (Iyengar, 1991; Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993)—"conflict" and "horse race" framing—has been associated with declining feelings of interest and efficacy on the part of voters. The framing of a news item or issue as a single "episode" or event contrasts to presentations that place an event or issue in the context of broader themes or more complete, and often abstract, notions of causation. The

consequence of such episodic framing, according to Iyengar (1991), is that viewers are less likely to attribute responsibility for current circumstances to public officials. The tone in which stories are presented is another extremely powerful influence on the way in which citizens think about a campaign (Hetherington, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Robinson, 1976). And the "shrinking sound bite" on newscasts, some argue, is symptomatic of a growing unwillingness to let candidates speak in their own voices, which is also evidenced by a propensity to ignore their words completely, presenting, instead, an encapsulation of what they said or editorializing about them (Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993). Citizens often object to this unwanted insertion of a reporter between themselves and the candidate (McGill, Szanto, & Johnston, 1997), suggesting a distinction between a necessary degree of contextualizing, excessive interpretation, and editorial control.

Data on local news coverage of politics suggest that many characteristics of these trends (and potential influences on viewers' perceptions) appear simultaneously in election news coverage. For example, a study of local news coverage of the 2000 campaigns on Minnesota's network affiliates (Stevens, Alger, Allen, & Sullivan, 2006) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison NewsLab's extensive surveys of local news in multiple markets and for several stations in 2002 and 2004 (for 2002, see Franklin, Fowler, Goldstein, & Stevens, 2003) show that local news stations provide little coverage of campaigns. The coverage that is offered tends to be more horse race than issue oriented. Even where issues are the focus of a story, Stevens et al. (2006) demonstrate, the information provided is frequently superficial or even misleading and episodic rather than thematic. Election news stories are more often presented with a negative than a positive frame. Little time is given to hearing candidates in their own words; sound bites are frequently less than 5 seconds long and rarely exceed 10 seconds. Finally, Stevens et al. indicate a "follow the leader" phenomenon, in which stations tend to respond to and follow changes in coverage by the most popular station, limiting the variation in coverage within a market for those who might seek a more substantive approach.

It is possible to infer effects of local news coverage from such characteristics. However, inferring effects on voters' perceptions and responses to campaign communications in this way is vulnerable to the objection that campaigns involve complex information flows and spillover from one medium to another that may affect the ultimate impact of local news. Most prominently, individuals are exposed to vast amounts of information via paid political advertising, much of it occurring within local news broadcasts. When Franklin et al. (2003) examined the simultaneous effects of exposure

to local news and political advertising on either knowledge and perceptions of campaigns or on turnout and vote choice, they found very little effect of local news, echoing the conclusions drawn by Patterson and McClure (1976).

We extend the examination of local news effects, looking at several facets of the voter's perceptions of candidates and campaigns. We explore the impact of local news coverage on the voter's tolerance for political rhetoric, specifically the rhetoric of negative political advertising. We suggest that it is not merely that local news coverage of politics is sparse or, when it does occur, that election coverage offers little detail. Nor do we deny that viewers might learn from the softer, more personal coverage (Popkin, 2006) toward which local broadcasters often turn. Instead, we ask if local television news might present a particular view of the social and political world that breeds cynicism and disaffection from the give and take of electoral politics. We also theorize that local news media are seen as "players" in the campaign game, as opposed to analysts or observers, and speculate that to the extent broadcast journalists are believed to inhabit this role, viewers may increasingly reject the claims made by all sides in a campaign.

Local News and Negative Political Rhetoric

What aspects of local news might provide a perceptual screen that affects individuals' tolerance for negative political rhetoric? First, we might expect local news to make individuals more tolerant of negative political rhetoric. Despite findings that highlight the paucity and superficiality of its coverage of campaigns, local news broadcasts do provide some information about issues and where the candidates stand on them, especially for national and statewide races. They also provide "adwatches" in which candidates' advertising is analyzed for the truth of its claims. Armed with knowledge of what is at stake in a campaign and helped by local television news media to cut through exaggerated and misleading candidate rhetoric, perhaps viewers of local news are more tolerant of negative political rhetoric. Second, more political advertising is aired during local news than during any other kind of programming. Current wisdom says that negative political advertising arouses and engages voters (e.g., Geer, 2006). Through the effects of exposure to more negative advertising, which may heighten interest in the campaign and lead to perceptions of higher stakes in the outcome, viewers of local news may also become more tolerant of harsh political rhetoric. They may be more likely to accept that a candidate's behavior in private life—or the ideas and actions of a candidate's family members—the candidate's

military record, and other constructions of a candidate's character are, like issue positions and voting records, fair game for an opponent's critique.

There are, however, reasons to expect that more frequent viewers of local news would be more likely to see such criticism as unacceptable. Recent research on electoral campaign communications, for example, suggests that the effects of negative advertising may be more complex than previously supposed; partisans and independents may differ in their assessments and response to advertising claims that they deem unfair and, as a result, differ in their proclivities to vote for any candidate (Alger, Allen, Stevens, & Sullivan, 2005). In addition, the literatures in political communication and political psychology suggest at least three possible reasons why simply watching local news—including news that does not concern elections or other political processes—may result in a greater tendency for individuals to reject negative political rhetoric: a) a “mean world” effect, b) a content-based effect derived from the way campaign stories are framed by local news, and c) an alternative advertising exposure effect linking exposure to political advertising to individual levels of acceptance (or rejection) of negative political rhetoric.¹

The mean world account draws on the penchant for local news to focus on murder and other violent crimes against persons, disasters, and scandal. Such stories often lead the news, framing any news stories about politics that follow. By emphasizing crime, disaster, and scandal, news accounts elevate the viewers' sense of danger and vulnerability, often leading to erroneous conclusions about the level and character of criminal activity, threats from nature and disease, and the dishonesty of authorities. Such stories not only provide an informational basis for thinking about government, officials, policy, and law but also influence viewers' affective responses to political subjects. Research suggests that this exaggerated litany of threats and violence fosters a mean worldview among its audience, resulting in withdrawal and disengagement from social life (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981). This disengagement may also extend to distaste for political exchange.

Expectations of negative content-based effects suggest that it is not so much that local news portrays the world as a mean place in which to live (nor that such newscasts devote too much time to these topics, slighting politics) but that it is the way news reports cover politics that affects viewers. One possibility is that as the Stevens et al. (2006) study of local news in Minnesota illustrates, the framing of campaign rhetoric is frequently that of a tiresome game of back and forth for which there is no “truth,” nothing is fair, and relevance is questionable. As an example, Stevens et al. detail coverage about a controversial campaign leaflet in a Minnesota congressional race between

male candidates, Bill Luther and John Kline, where the anchor concluded by saying, “The ‘he said, she said’ will finally end election day when *all* is said and done” (p. 75). The irony goes beyond the misplaced gender rhetoric of the battle “between the sexes.” Such commentary, often appearing (as in this case) as a “reality check” or similar feature story intended to “go behind the soundbites” in local broadcast news campaign coverage, may only exacerbate the effect of gamesmanship by suggesting that both candidates are loose with the truth or that a quick check shows there simply is no truth or reality as such. A second example of a content-based explanation notes not only the tendency of local media to depict politics as a game but also to portray local journalists or media organizations, along with campaigns, as active players in the game. These players decide what to report and what to emphasize, often employing simplistic frames of combat and similar clichés as a “hook” in the service of higher ratings rather than in an effort to enlighten.

A related content-based effect holds that the concentration on sensationalism, horse race, and conflict, along with the tendency to use episodic rather than thematic frames, simply adds to the negative aspects of campaigns, resulting in an audience that is cynical, frustrated, weary, uninformed, and ultimately intolerant of the rhetoric typical of campaigns and increasingly disengaged from the election.

A third hypothesis linking increased viewing of local TV news with less tolerance of some campaign rhetoric suggests that because viewers of local news are exposed to a large number of political ads, the ads, rather than the news, influence voters' opinions about what types of criticisms of an opponent are fair or out of bounds (i.e., the opposite of current wisdom). They simply grow weary of this kind of exchange.

Research Design

In our research, we focus on a particular category of campaign rhetoric: political advertising. After initial claims that negative political advertising depressed individuals via diminished perceptions of political efficacy (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), recent findings suggest that negative ads (despite their tone) may inform and otherwise benefit voters (Geer, 2006).² One explanation of these results is that citizens draw careful distinctions between legitimate and unfair criticisms of a candidate's record, issue positions, or character. Unfair or illegitimate criticism remains off-putting, but much of the content of negative advertising is seen as necessary and informative (Freedman & Lawton, 2000; Jamieson, 2000; Kahn & Kenney,

2004). At least part of the scholarly disagreement about voters' responses to "negative" ads may be definitional—ads that contrast candidates' positions or records accurately, even if they criticize an opponent harshly, may be informative and memorable. Jamieson and colleagues found that "most survey participants distinguish[ed] between one-sided attack ads and two-sided contrast ads," finding the latter "contrast ads substantially more responsible" (Jamieson, 2000, p. 74) and useful. In a similar manner, a distinguished task force of academics claimed in 1998 that

the focus on the "negativity" of campaign advertising is largely misplaced, reflecting and perpetuating a general conflation of the important distinction between ads that are characterized as "negative" because they are contentious and argumentative . . . and ads that are characterized as "negative" because they are nasty, inaccurate, or unfair. (Bartels, 1998, p. 17)

If negative advertising motivates individuals to participate and boosts turnout, such speculation implies, it is because citizens accept the cut and thrust of campaigns and can distinguish legitimate criticism from an unfair attack.

We examine the influence of local news on such baseline levels of negative advertising that voters—partisans and independents alike—will abide. As in other research, we find that citizens' appraisal of a campaign ad is strongly colored by whether they share the partisanship of the sponsor (Alger et al., 2005). However, the tone and content of local news provide another "lens" through which voters view politics and political advertising. In contrast to other studies that find little or no influence of local news, we demonstrate that local television news also establishes a context in which voters understand and evaluate election campaigns, advertising claims, and the fairness of political ads.

We use multiple methods, first, to ascertain the effects of local news on perceptions of campaign advertising and, second, to explore the validity of the explanations we offer. To examine the local news effects, we repeated a telephone survey we first conducted in 2002 in which we asked respondents their perceptions of what is fair in advertising, as well as how often they typically watch local news.³ We surveyed a random national sample of 510 American citizens, aged 18 and older. In addition, we recontacted as many of the 705 respondents from the 2002 survey as we were able to, completing 210 surveys, which composed a panel study portion of the data. There were very slight demographic differences between the panel and our original sample: The subset of 210 was somewhat more White and Democratic. We pooled them with

the sample of 510 to give us a total sample of 720. The sample of 720 we obtained was similar to the national population in terms of marital status and race, while slightly underrepresenting men, the less educated, and younger individuals; overall, however, we achieved a nationally representative sample on the characteristics that allow comparison with the 2000 census. We also compared partisanship in our sample to one of the best random large sample surveys of individuals from the 2004 election, the American National Election Survey (2004). We saw only minor differences.

The survey instrument consisted of two main sections. Initially, we gauged respondents' thoughts and feelings about political advertising based on their level of agreement with a set of statements we had first used in 2002 and employed an open-ended question format to learn, in the respondents' own words, what makes a political ad positive and what makes a political ad negative. Our purpose was to gauge broader perceptions and attitudes toward campaign ads.

In the second part of our survey, we looked in detail at perceptions of fairness in advertising. We replicated the approach of Freedman and Lawton (2000), and our own in the 2002 survey, examining respondents' perceptions of the fairness of a candidate's criticisms of an opponent in campaign ads. We asked questions on eight topics, randomly ordered (see appendix for question wording), looking for variation in perceptions of fairness when the claim concerned an opponent's issue positions, matters of character, military record, scandals involving the other member of the ticket, and other candidate constructs. In the next stage of questioning, our survey followed the abstract series of questions about fairness with some specific examples of these same criticisms of the opponent made by the presidential candidates and their supporters during the 2004 election. The order in which these were asked was also randomized. We did not inform respondents that they were specific examples of the same charges whose fairness they had previously been asked to assess. This is an important check on the robustness of effects. Our past research shows that the influence of variables in the abstract, particularly of partisanship, is by no means carried over to criticism that is directed at a specific candidate.

While the survey was in the field, we also conducted a series of seven 2-hour focus groups in the Twin Cities metro area of Minnesota between October 21 and 27. The group protocols ranged from news coverage of the elections to perceptions of political advertising. We showed examples of local news horse race and issue coverage of the presidential campaign and of a reality check. We were particularly interested in analyzing perceptions of campaign coverage by local news broadcasts and how focus group participants defined fairness in political advertising.

Analysis

We begin by analyzing the results of our survey. First, to understand more about the audience for local news, we look at various influences that may affect the frequency with which our respondents watched local news. Using a series of logit models, we then assess the relationship between the number of days a respondent said she or he typically watched local news each week and the individual's tolerance of criticism in political advertising. The dependent variable is whether a type of criticism, first illustrated in the abstract and then leveled specifically against an actual candidate, was perceived as fair. If local news lowers the threshold for criticism, then the sign of the coefficient for local news will be negative.

We also control for several additional variables suggested by other researchers who have found important influences on political attitudes and behavior and on media habits. First, we control for partisanship by including dummy variables for Republicans and Independents. We expect that partisanship will be especially influential in perceptions of the fairness of specific criticisms of the presidential candidates in 2004: Democrats will see criticism of John Kerry as unfair and Republicans will see criticism of George W. Bush as unfair (Alger et al., 2005). We also control for the independent effects of approval of George W. Bush as president, with the expectation that those who approve will be more likely to view criticism of him as unfair and criticism of John Kerry as fair.

Second, we use data from our survey to account for the impact of general attitudes toward political advertising; some citizens may simply have a distaste (or liking) for negative political rhetoric that drives their perceptions of fairness and perhaps also drives them toward the political coverage characteristic of local news. From respondents' extent of agreement with a series of statements regarding thoughts and feelings about political advertising, we include indexes of positive thoughts and feelings and negative thoughts and feelings about political advertising (see appendix). We also add two dummy variables based on answers to an open-ended question about how respondents define negative advertising. About half of our sample spontaneously defined negative advertising as mudslinging aimed at a candidate's character, whereas roughly 10% mentioned criticizing an opponent. Respondents who characterize negative advertising in this way may be more likely to regard some of the examples of criticism in our survey as unfair.

Third, we examine indicators of "views of government" because beyond attacking specific candidates, the undercurrent of much negative advertising is cynicism about government (Ansolahehere & Iyengar, 1995). Therefore,

citizens who view government positively may also perceive the kinds of charges that are the common currency of negative political advertising to be most unfair. Our indicators of views of government are perceptions of external efficacy and trust in the federal government.

The fourth group of control variables captures individual differences in political expertise. We use both political knowledge and frequency of newspaper readership as independent indicators—readers of newspapers tend to be more informed (Chang & Krosnick, 2003), but the correlation between the two indicators in our survey is only .19. We hypothesize that political expertise fosters greater tolerance of negative advertising, meaning that individuals who are knowledgeable or regularly read a newspaper should generally be more likely to see criticism as fair (Kahn & Kenney, 1999). The fifth category of control variables encompasses key psychological and demographic individual differences affecting media use, political behavior, or perception: generation, sex, and race (Miller & Shanks, 1996).⁴

Finally, it is possible that if there are media effects, they are more general than we suggest, particularly if national news coverage of campaigns shares many of the characteristics of local news coverage. It is therefore important that we also control for the possibility that national news has the same effects as local news. We do so by including a variable for the number of times a week an individual typically watches national news.

We began by examining the influences of these variables on how often a respondent typically watched local news (a scale ranging from *not at all* to *every day*; i.e., 7 days a week, rescaled from 0 to 1—see appendix). For purposes of comparison, we also examined how the same variables influence the frequency of watching national news. We describe the results here (they are available from the authors on request). The analysis shows that people who watch more local news are more likely to watch more national news. They also are more likely to read a newspaper and be less politically knowledgeable, older, and female and slightly less likely to be White. There are no partisan differences in viewing habits or differences rooted in attitudes toward advertising or views of government. Viewers of national news share many of these characteristics—they are older and also more likely to read a newspaper. However, there are two interesting differences with local news: There is no relationship between viewing national news and political knowledge, and Republican identifiers are slightly more likely than others to watch national news. We will need to bear these differences in mind if we find differences in the impact of local and national news.⁵

We now move to perceptions of the fairness of criticisms of candidates in the abstract and of George W. Bush and John Kerry from the 2004 presidential

election. The aggregate results show that there was considerable variation across issues and from criticisms of "a candidate" in the abstract versus specific criticisms on the same topics by the presidential candidates in 2004.⁶ Respondents were generally more tolerant of criticism of a candidate's record or qualifications for office than of personal matters. We also see, however, large aggregate shifts in perceptions of fairness of criticizing a candidate for his or her military record, in which many more respondents thought the specific criticisms of Bush's entry and service in the national guard were fair than thought this would be a fair criticism in the abstract. In a similar manner, for criticizing members of a presidential candidate's ticket, many more respondents felt that the specific criticism of Vice President Dick Cheney's record at Halliburton was fair than thought, in the abstract, that such a thing is generally fair.

Table 1 presents the full results of models for two of the abstract and specific criticisms of the presidential candidates in 2004, allowing us to see the general patterns of influences at the individual level. Our approach here is to first hold constant the six groups of control variables described above. The fact that some of the control variables are also associated with watching local news makes our estimates conservative in two respects. First, multicollinearity between variables inflates their standard errors while leaving the estimated effects unbiased, meaning we are less likely to see statistically significant effects of local news. Second, by accounting for the extent to which individual characteristics associated with watching local news also influence perceptions of fairness, we can be more certain that any additional impact of local news is genuine and not simply an artifact of the attributes of its viewers.

The first column of results in Table 2 presents the coefficients for the remaining dependent variables for local news only. The control variables in the models from which these coefficients are derived are identical to those listed in Table 1 (full tables are available from the authors on request). All variables are coded from 0 to 1 to facilitate interpretation.⁷

Table 1 shows that political knowledge is consistently associated with an increased likelihood of perceiving criticism of all kinds as fair: of candidates in the abstract, of George W. Bush, and of John Kerry. This finding would seem to be the effect of politically knowledgeable individuals' greater engagement with politics also making them view criticisms of candidates as an entirely legitimate feature of campaigns. The flip side is that the less politically knowledgeable, individuals who are also more likely to watch local news, are not as tolerant of criticism of candidates.

Table 1 also shows that partisanship plays the anticipated role in perceptions. Democrats are more tolerant of criticism of Bush, whereas Republicans,

(text continues on p. 521)

Table 1
Logit Models of Perceptions of Fairness of Criticisms of Candidates

| Variable | Talking One Way and Voting Another | | | Voting Record | | |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| | Abstract | George W. Bush | John Kerry | Abstract | George W. Bush | John Kerry |
| Media use | | | | | | |
| Local news viewership | -.90 (.33)*** | -.57 (.34)* | -.47 (.32) | -.82 (.33)*** | -.37 (.35) | -.59 (.34)* |
| National news viewership | -.18 (.36) | -.05 (.36) | .46 (.35) | -.10 (.36) | -.44 (.38) | .19 (.36) |
| Partisanship | | | | | | |
| Republican | .61 (.27)** | -1.46 (.26)*** | .71 (.27)*** | .45 (.27)* | -.85 (.27)*** | 1.32 (.27)*** |
| Independent | .41 (.35) | -.23 (.37) | 1.37 (.39)*** | .04 (.35) | .38 (.41) | .53 (.35) |
| Approve of Bush | .85 (.31)*** | -2.53 (.33)*** | 2.22 (.33)*** | .73 (.32)** | -3.82 (.37)*** | 2.49 (.33)*** |
| Attitudes toward advertising | | | | | | |
| Negative thoughts and feelings about advertising | -.84 (.55) | -.44 (.63) | -.78 (.58) | -.86 (.56) | .29 (.65) | .80 (.62) |
| Positive thoughts and feelings about advertising | .44 (.39) | .15 (.44) | .46 (.41) | .11 (.40) | -.15 (.46) | -.07 (.43) |
| Negative advertising is criticism of an opponent | -.11 (.31) | .29 (.35) | .25 (.33) | -.03 (.32) | -.30 (.36) | -.06 (.34) |
| Negative advertising is mudslinging character | -.19 (.19) | -.25 (.21) | -.25 (.19) | -.10 (.19) | -.52 (.22)** | -.05 (.21) |
| Views of government | | | | | | |
| External efficacy | -.23 (.29) | -.19 (.32) | -.31 (.31) | .42 (.30) | -.07 (.34) | -.10 (.32) |
| Trust in government | .67 (.54) | .02 (.58) | -.41 (.55) | .17 (.54) | .89 (.61) | .51 (.58) |
| Political expertise | | | | | | |
| Political knowledge | 1.97 (.42)*** | .36 (.45) | .72 (.44)* | 2.06 (.42)*** | 1.71 (.49)*** | .22 (.46) |
| Newspaper readership | .38 (.27) | .12 (.29) | -.57 (.28)** | .31 (.27) | -.13 (.30) | -.73 (.29)** |

(continued)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

| Variable | Dependent Variable: Criticism for . . . | | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------|------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| | Talking One Way and Voting Another | | | Voting Record | | |
| | Abstract | George W. Bush | John Kerry | Abstract | George W. Bush | John Kerry |
| Demographics | | | | | | |
| Female | -.11 (.20) | .06 (.22) | -.06 (.20) | -.71 (.20)*** | .01 (.23) | -.19 (.21) |
| White | .09 (.27) | .48 (.33) | .09 (.28) | -.02 (.27) | .13 (.35) | -.14 (.30) |
| Married | .33 (.20)* | .02 (.23) | .14 (.20) | .18 (.20) | .22 (.24) | .08 (.21) |
| Generation | | | | | | |
| New Deal | -1.29 (.42)*** | -.10 (.49) | -.65 (.45) | -.67 (.42) | .28 (.51) | -1.09 (.49)** |
| Cold war | -.63 (.28)** | -.24 (.31) | -.35 (.29) | .01 (.29) | -.59 (.33)* | -.44 (.31) |
| Early boomer | -.48 (.29)* | -.00 (.31) | .36 (.30) | .23 (.29) | .01 (.33) | -.12 (.31) |
| Late boomer | -.21 (.28) | .45 (.29) | .14 (.27) | .14 (.27) | .07 (.30) | .21 (.28) |
| Constant | -.25 (.65) | 2.46 (.72)*** | -.32 (.67) | .08 (.65) | 1.77 (.73)** | -1.26 (.72)* |
| Pseudo R ² | .14 | .32 | .24 | .14 | .38 | .33 |
| Probability > χ^2 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 |
| N | 665 | 662 | 651 | 669 | 667 | 668 |

Note: All estimates are logit coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Table 2
The Effects of Local News on Perceptions of Advertising

| Criticizing . . . | Coefficient (Standard Error) | Maximum Effect on 0 to 1 Fairness Scale ^a | Percentage of the Sample That Would Switch From Fair to Unfair if Watching Local News Every Day Rather Than Never |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| An opponent on his or her voting record | -.82 (.33)** | .18 | 17 |
| George W. Bush on his voting record | -.37 (.35) | <i>ns</i> | <i>ns</i> |
| John Kerry on his voting record | -.59 (.34)* | .14 | 7 |
| An opponent for talking one way and voting another | -.90 (.33)*** | .16 | 22 |
| George W. Bush for talking one way and voting another | -.57 (.34)* | .09 | 9 |
| John Kerry for talking one way and voting another | -.47 (.32) | <i>ns</i> | <i>ns</i> |
| An opponent for taking campaign contributions from certain special interests | -.57 (.29)** | .12 | 14 |
| George W. Bush for taking campaign contributions from certain special interests | -1.06 (.32)*** | .18 | 36 |
| John Kerry for taking campaign contributions from certain special interests | -.69 (.30)** | .16 | 27 |
| An opponent's qualifications or capacity for office | -.49 (.28)* | .12 | 25 |
| John Kerry's qualifications or capacity for office | -.30 (.36) | <i>ns</i> | <i>ns</i> |
| An opponent for current personal troubles such as substance abuse | -.69 (.27)*** | .17 | 48 |

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

| Criticizing . . . | Coefficient (Standard Error) | Maximum Effect on 0 to 1 Fairness Scale ^a | Percentage of the Sample That Would Switch From Fair to Unfair if Watching Local News Every Day Rather Than Never |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Members of the opponent's ticket for scandals | -.61 (.27)** | .15 | 46 |
| Dick Cheney as a member of George W. Bush's ticket for scandals | -.70 (.32)** | .11 | 19 |
| John Edwards as a member of John Kerry's ticket for scandals | -.73 (.31)** | .16 | 13 |
| An opponent's military record | -.31 (.27) | <i>ns</i> | <i>ns</i> |
| George W. Bush's military record | -.65 (.31)** | .15 | 11 |
| An opponent for past personal troubles such as substance abuse | .14 (.30) | <i>ns</i> | <i>ns</i> |
| An opponent for the behavior of his or her family members | -.01 (.58) | <i>ns</i> | <i>ns</i> |

a. Change in probability for a hypothetical respondent at the mean of all the interval-level variables (see Table 1) and the mode of all categorical variables (a Democratic woman from the post-baby boom generation) if she watched local news on 0 days a week versus 7 days a week.
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

and those who approve of Bush's performance as president, are more tolerant of criticism of Kerry. There is also some echo of Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1995) finding that negativity, with its often antigovernment rhetoric, resonates more with Republicans than with Democrats. There is a sign that age may also be a factor. Although they are often nonsignificant, the direction of the coefficients for generation consistently imply that older generations are less likely to view the kinds of criticism of candidates expressed in advertising campaigns as fair. We find few or no effects of general attitudes toward political advertising or views of government.

The impact of watching local news is, however, consistent and robust in Table 1 and Table 2 even after controlling for the effects of political knowledge and age, both of which are associated with how often an individual views the local news. The more an individual typically watches local news, regardless of political knowledge or age, the less likely she or he is to perceive the rhetoric of campaign advertising as fair. This relationship holds true not only for the abstract examples of ad claims but also when the examples are specifically about George W. Bush and John Kerry. Moreover, we do not find the same to be true of national news audiences. The effect of local news is statistically significant at $p < .05$ for 10 of the 19 models (and at $p < .10$ for 2 additional models) and negative in every case, implying that there is a connection between watching local news and intolerance of campaign advertising rhetoric.⁸

We also examined some additional relationships to elucidate the nature of the local news effect.⁹ First, we added a variable measuring perception of media bias—whether the media treat both sides fairly—and its interaction with local news. We reasoned that if the effects of local news are caused by a more general disaffection with the media, then this measure would indicate that relationship. We found it had little impact, however: The effects of local news were robust, albeit with larger standard errors; the media bias variable had little influence; and the interaction with watching local news was statistically significant in only 3 of the 19 models. Second, we examined the interaction between trust in government, included as an independent variable in the models of Tables 1 and 2, and watching local news. Trust in government did not have a moderating effect in any of the abstract examples of criticisms but was statistically significant at $p < .05$ in 3 of the 10 examples of specific charges made in the course of the 2004 election and at $p < .10$ in 2 others. Although the results are not entirely consistent, there is some evidence that greater trust in government can dilute the effects of watching local news.

Table 2 provides some additional context in the second and third columns. The second column simulates the maximum effects of watching

local news on perceptions of fairness (a 0 to 1 scale) for a hypothetical respondent at the mean of all the interval-level variables and the mode of all categorical variables (a Democratic woman from the post-baby boom generation). It does so by contrasting the probability of considering a criticism to be fair if the respondent typically watched no local news as opposed to watching the local news every day of the week. These results show that controlling for a host of other factors, simply watching more local news often moves this respondent 12% to 18% on the scale toward unfairness. We ran a similar set of models including political knowledge, a variable that has consistently been shown to affect key political attitudes and behaviors (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), including perceptions of fairness. The effects of local news on perceptions of fairness are comparable to those of political knowledge and are in fact often larger than those of political knowledge when the criticisms are of specific candidates.

In the third column of Table 2, we place the substantive implications of the results in further perspective. We predict whether each respondent would deem a criticism fair or unfair based on the respondent's characteristics for the variables in Table 1 but imagine a world in which all our sample either watched no local news or watched local news every day (i.e., the value for local news is set at 0 or 1). The results show the proportion of the sample whose perceptions of the fairness of a criticism would cross the threshold from fair to unfair under this scenario, giving us an indication of the number of respondents who would potentially switch their judgment from fair to unfair purely as a result of watching more local news. The simulations indicate considerable potential changes (about 15% on the average) in perceptions.

Thus, there appears to be a clear relationship between perceptions of the legitimacy of campaign rhetoric in advertising and watching local news. Perceptions of fairness are not just about partisanship, political knowledge, or individual characteristics such as sex and race. We have demonstrated that in addition to such influences, watching local news has the potential to alter the perceptions of a substantial proportion of the electorate.

Our final question concerns the relationship between perceptions of the fairness of campaign rhetoric and political behavior. In Table 3, we present the results of three models with almost identical specifications to those of Tables 1 and 2.¹⁰ However, because the dependent variables are no longer categorical, the first two models are regressions and the third is an ordered probit. The first and second columns of coefficients show the effects of local news viewing on overall perceptions of the fairness of criticisms of George W. Bush and John Kerry. These dependent variables then become independent variables in the third column. Overall perceptions of fairness

Table 3
Local News, Perceptions of Fairness, and Turnout

| Variable | Fairness of Criticisms of Kerry | Fairness of Criticisms of Bush | Intended Turnout |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
| Media use | | | |
| Local news viewership | -.08 (.03)*** | -.06 (.03)** | .01 (.21) |
| National news viewership | .02 (.03) | .02 (.03) | -.08 (.22) |
| Partisanship | | | |
| Republican | .17 (.02)*** | -.12 (.02)*** | .81 (.55) |
| Independent | .09 (.03)*** | -.02 (.03) | .49 (.70) |
| Approve of Bush | .34 (.03)*** | -.40 (.02)*** | .01 (.25) |
| Attitudes toward advertising | | | |
| Negative thoughts and feelings about advertising | -.02 (.05) | .01 (.05) | -.22 (.39) |
| Positive thoughts and feelings about advertising | .04 (.03) | .05 (.03) | .25 (.28) |
| Negative advertising is criticism of an opponent | .01 (.03) | .00 (.03) | -.34 (.20)** |
| Negative advertising is mudslinging character | -.01 (.02) | -.00 (.02) | -.07 (.13) |
| Views of government | | | |
| External efficacy | -.05 (.03)* | -.04 (.02)* | -.06 (.21) |
| Trust in government | .01 (.05) | .01 (.04) | .19 (.37) |
| Political expertise | | | |
| Political knowledge | -.01 (.04) | .10 (.04)*** | 1.39 (.28)*** |
| Newspaper readership | -.06 (.02)*** | -.01 (.02) | .48 (.18)*** |
| Demographics | | | |
| Female | -.03 (.02)* | .00 (.02) | .09 (.14) |
| White | .00 (.03) | .02 (.02) | -.19 (.19) |
| Married | -.00 (.02) | .00 (.02) | .35 (.13)** |
| Generation | | | |
| New Deal | -.11 (.04)*** | -.03 (.04) | -.12 (.30) |
| Cold war | -.01 (.02) | -.05 (.02)** | -.08 (.20) |
| Early boomer | -.00 (.02) | -.00 (.02) | -.10 (.20) |
| Late boomer | .00 (.02) | .01 (.02) | -.13 (.18) |

(continued)

are based on the combination of perceptions of fairness of all the criticisms of George W. Bush and all the criticisms of John Kerry (recombined to a 0 to 1 scale in each case). We have seen such a robust effect of local news for the individual criticisms that it is unsurprising to see the same negative and statistically significant relationship for the combined measures. We also see partisan effects. In addition, Independents were more likely to see criticisms

Table 3 (continued)

| Variable | Fairness of Criticisms of Kerry | Fairness of Criticisms of Bush | Intended Turnout |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Perceptions of fairness | | | |
| Fairness of criticisms of Bush | | | 1.07 (.43)** |
| Fairness of criticisms of Kerry | | | -.36 (.39) |
| Fairness of criticisms of Bush \times Republican | | | -1.87 (.61)*** |
| Fairness of criticisms of Kerry \times Republican | | | .70 (.59) |
| Fairness of criticisms of Kerry \times Republican | | | .70 (.59) |
| Fairness of criticisms of Bush \times Independent | | | -1.89 (.72)*** |
| Fairness of criticisms of Kerry \times Independent | | | -.01 (.77) |
| Constant | .44 (.06)*** | .78 (.05)*** | |
| Adjusted/Pseudo R^2 | .52 | .54 | .16 |
| Cutpoint 1 | | | .06 (.58) |
| Cutpoint 2 | | | .74 (.58) |
| N | 666 | 669 | 661 |

Note: Estimates in the first two columns are ordinary least squares coefficients; estimates in the third column are ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

of Kerry as fair than were Democrats but less likely than were Republicans; they are more likely to see criticisms of Bush as fair than Republicans but not more likely than Democrats.¹¹ In further models, we examined a possible moderating effect of watching local news on the influence of partisanship. None of the relationships was statistically significantly different from 0.

The third model examines the relationship between watching local news, perceptions of the fairness of criticism of candidates, and intended turnout. Our measure of intended turnout is constructed from questions about a respondent's reported likelihood to vote and whether the respondent named the candidate she or he would vote for. We coded respondents as most likely to vote if they said they would definitely vote and named the candidate they would vote for. Next on the scale were those who said they would probably vote or those who said they would definitely vote but were undecided or could not name the candidate. Last were those who said they probably or

definitely would not vote. Like other survey-based measures of turnout, our 3-point scale lacks variance (84% of our sample was in the top category)—by comparison, 79% of the 2004 American National Election Survey sample claimed to have voted. We include additional variables for the interaction between perceptions of fairness of criticisms of George W. Bush or John Kerry with partisanship. We have demonstrated elsewhere that turnout among partisans is stimulated by criticism of their candidate's opponent that they perceive to be fair; to the extent partisans see criticisms of their preferred candidate as fair, however, their turnout is depressed.

The results show that perceptions of the fairness of criticism are related to intended turnout, whereas local news viewing has no independent influence—its influence is therefore via its impact on perceptions of fairness. Although there is no direct effect of local news viewing on intended turnout, perceptions of the fairness of criticism aimed at George W. Bush, in particular, affected Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Wald tests of the differences in coefficients also show statistically significant differences in the impact of perceptions of fairness of criticism of Bush and Kerry for Democrats and Republicans. The more Democrats perceived criticisms of George W. Bush to be fair, the more likely they were to express an intention to vote. The opposite was true for Republicans and Independents: The more they thought criticisms of George W. Bush were fair, the less likely they were to think they would vote. The reverse is the case for Kerry, with the difference in the coefficients for perceptions of the fairness of criticism of Bush being statistically significant at $p < .01$ for Democrats and Republicans and not quite statistically significant at conventional levels for Independents. But the effects of criticism of Kerry are not by themselves statistically significantly different from 0 for Democrats, Republicans, or Independents.

As with the analysis in Table 2 (see Note 7), we also ran the turnout model with a simultaneous equation specification in which local news and perceptions of fairness of charges made against Bush and against Kerry (in two separate models) were endogenous. The results echo those shown in Table 3: Local news watching has a statistically significant, negative relationship with perceptions of the fairness of criticism against George W. Bush and John Kerry but no direct relation with turnout. Perceptions of the fairness of criticism against Bush has the same effect on Democrats, Independents, and Republicans as that of the analysis shown in Table 3, whereas these models also show, in contrast to those of Table 3, statistically significant effects of perceptions of fairness of criticism of John Kerry on the turnout of Democrats and Republicans.¹²

Our results in the model shown in Table 3 could be seen as normatively encouraging in one sense: Viewers of local news who are more likely to see criticisms of all candidates as unfair are, therefore, less likely to be demobilized by criticism of the candidate they support because they are unlikely to see it as fair. On the other hand, they are also less likely to be mobilized by criticism of the candidate they oppose for the same reason. Thus, viewers of local news are less responsive than other citizens to the rhetoric of campaigns. But that news is encouraging only if we believe that the critique of candidates' issue positions, voting records, past beliefs and behaviors, or other indicators of "character" are truly groundless and unfair.

What is driving the effects we see? It is clear that we can eliminate the explanations premised on a positive impact of watching local news on tolerance of campaign criticism. For negative effects, we offered three potentially complementary (and certainly not mutually exclusive) explanations. We can examine some of these potential effects with the survey data and draw on the focus group evidence to explain others. We begin with tests using the survey data.

The mean world explanation suggests that the way local news covers the social and political world leads its viewers to be withdrawn, disengaged, and, thus, intolerant of political exchange. If this were true, one would expect that the subset of our sample that was first interviewed in 2002 would have displayed a similar pattern of results in that survey, outside an election context, because it is not the election context and the coverage of campaigns by local news that is behind the effect but the general way in which it reports on the social world. Although we found few effects of local news viewing in our 2002 survey compared with the robust effects found in our 2004 survey conducted during the campaign, additional inquiry is revealing: For the panel subsample the effects of viewing the news on perceptions of fairness, indeed, do not vary with the election context. There were no statistically significant (at $p < .05$ in a two-tailed test) effects of local news viewing in 2002 (there were in 5 of 15 models, all negative, at $p < .20$). In 2004, there were three statistically significant effects at $p < .05$, and one more at $p < .10$, for 19 models. Thus, looking only at the panel subsample, we found that the responses of a given individual are likely to be similar at the two points in time. This finding also implies that the relationship between local news and perceptions of fairness is much more robust for the 510 respondents in the remainder of the 2004 sample (those pooled with the respondents in our panel). It is statistically significant at $p < .10$ in 13 of the 19 models. Although we find some evidence that the election context sharpens the impact of local news, it is not overwhelming. Moreover, the panel subsample supports our hypothesis that

the election context may have a weaker effect than the general tenor of the news. The evidence is inconclusive, but we cannot eliminate the mean world explanation.

The advertising explanation suggests that the effects of local news are an artifact of the concentration of political advertising in the commercial breaks of local news broadcasts. This hypothesis would be consistent with a finding from our 2002 and 2004 surveys: When asked to evaluate the fairness and legitimacy of campaign advertising claims outside an election context (the 2002 survey), viewers of local news were as likely as nonviewers to characterize a claim as fair, whereas in the midst of the 2004 election, increased viewing of local news coverage increased the propensity to view advertising claims as unfair. We tested the advertising explanation with several operationalizations for exposure to advertising: a dummy variable for respondents who lived in television markets that had experienced the most advertising, the total number of presidential ads in a respondent's television market, the log of the total number of presidential ads in a respondent's television market, and a 5-point scale for the intensity of advertising in a respondent's television market. If local news effects are an artifact of heavy exposure to advertising, we would expect that respondents who watched local news in markets with the most advertising would be less tolerant of the rhetoric of advertising than respondents in other markets. However, in these models, regardless of how we measured exposure to political advertising, the main effects of local news barely shifted, whereas the advertising variable and interaction term were almost never statistically significant. According to this test at least, the effects of local news that we see are not simply a consequence of heavy exposure to political advertising.

By contrast, we found evidence for the content-based explanations in our focus groups where discussions reflect the tendency both to view news media as another player in the "game" of the campaign and to respond negatively to superficial treatment of campaigns. The focus groups allowed us to examine an important aspect of perceptions of campaign advertising rhetoric: how individuals come to judge criticism as fair or unfair. The clearest view of fairness to emerge was of fairness-as-truth:

One of the stats you hear is that he [John Kerry] voted for tax increases 350 times and 3 million jobs were shipped overseas. I know a lot of the votes were counted multiple times. The 3 million jobs maybe was accurate when they reported it but the economy could have changed. They all use numbers to their advantage. . . . *To be fair, it's [got to be] accurate.* It just depends on where they're getting their facts.

I don't think it's fair because a lot of people believe what they read. They believe all these things. And you can't do that to people. You can't tell them something that's not true and then expect them to believe that, even when they know it's not true.

They're telling me that we don't have health insurance in this country because of trial lawyers. It's only one little piece of the entire puzzle. And they're trying to make me emotionally go there and I'm saying, "No. Your insurance rates are—I'm paying seven hundred and some dollars for my three children to be insured in insurance. Somebody's getting that money, so insurance companies have to be getting money too." And trial lawyers have to—I mean where is all this? There's no clear picture anywhere, there's no—show me the books; give it to me on paper.

To be sure, we also encountered the sentiment that Americans do not expect campaigns to be fair. One of the assumptions revealed in these three quoted statements is the sense that truth exists somewhere: "It depends on where they are getting their facts," "show me the books," or most simply, it is wrong to lie and mislead "when they know it's not true." Our focus group participants suggested another implication to be taken from the tendency to understand "fairness" in terms of accuracy: Journalists should be able to "get the facts." If local news fails to clarify the picture or perhaps even muddies it, viewers may be more likely to throw up their hands and say that campaign rhetoric is generally unfair.

Guided by such insights taken from our focus groups, we returned to our survey data. If the local news effects are connected to frustration at not being presented with a full-enough picture to discern the accuracy of claims, we would expect that viewers of local news might be particularly responsive to more information. In an experiment embedded in our 2004 survey, we found evidence to support this conjecture. Half the sample was asked about the fairness of Republican allegations that John Kerry did not fully deserve his three Purple Hearts. Their responses showed the effect of watching the local news that we now expected: The more local news a respondent watched, the less likely she or he was to consider the charges fair. The other half of the sample was presented with the same allegations against Kerry but also received additional information stating that the facts had been checked by an independent organization and supported Kerry. The allegations were untrue. Under these circumstances, even controlling for partisan effects, more frequent viewers of local news were particularly likely to alter their opinion, and we no longer see an influence of local news. Thus, local news viewers are indeed particularly responsive to additional information that helps them to sort out the validity of a claim.

We saw further evidence that viewers of local news may be frustrated by coverage and for that reason become more likely to reject campaign rhetoric as unfair in other points raised in the focus groups, particularly the sense that the local news media are integral players in the game. According to this sentiment, news programming pushes the broadcaster's own angles and agenda, choosing stories from its conception of the station's interests rather than the public's need to know. Thus, we saw frequent comparisons to the *Daily Show*, as in this case:

Well, it's a kind of a news source. They just report on the same stuff, just funnier. You know, if you're going to hear a lot of bickering back and forth I'd rather have it funny. I mean you're going to hear it but you're not going to be appalled or just turned off by it.

Another comment about a campaign story is similarly illustrative: "It's like, I can't . . . it was like entertainment, I can't get anything out of it." Like McGill et al. (1997), we also heard participants complain about broadcasters' tendencies to interpret a candidate's words rather than allowing candidates to speak for themselves. In their judgment, such interpretive framing raised further obstacles to getting at the truth:

I want to hear the politicians speak, I want to get any background information that I need, I mean, do I know world economy? No, I don't. I don't have enough information on that to do my own analysis, but I don't want someone else to do the analysis for me. I want to hear the politicians speak, I want to get any background information that I need, and I want to make my own decision. And so, for them to not give me the words that they're saying, and then do their own analysis, I don't know what they're basing that on, so how can I trust that? I mean, it's someone else telling me what to think and whether they try to be neutral or not, it's always going to come out slanted one way, and I don't want that.

Even when shown local news presentations of data from polls, respondents often interpreted them through the lens of the local media as just another participant in the campaign:

It almost seems like they're taking the numbers from different places, on the last one it was 50 percent agree on the war on terror, and like 60 percent think we're bogged down in Iraq, and they . . . put them like next to each other but it's like you think they should go together, and that they're talking about the same issue, but they're not, so it's almost like they're trying to confuse you so you're getting the slant on whatever the station wants. One station says that

Kerry is ahead and he's going to win, but the other says that Bush is ahead, and even how they say that Bush led by three points earlier, and Bush led by nine points earlier and now he's leading by six, and it seems like they're getting numbers from different polls and using them for what they want.

These respondents are voicing frustrations with the format as well as the content of campaign coverage. They are not necessarily indicating a preference for more "hard news" as opposed to "soft news," which other researchers suggest individuals will often claim to want but in fact fail to choose when given the option (Popkin, 2006). Rather, responses such as these illustrations from our focus groups indicate that the presentation of potentially valuable information frustrates and confuses instead of clarifying issues. The cause, they suggest, is not an ideological media bias favoring either liberals or conservatives but a bias toward the interests of the broadcast stations.

Not even the adwatch or reality check was universally accepted. In principle, our focus group respondents agreed, the reality checks provided by local news stations could help them sort out the various claims of candidates for local offices, but again, depending on format, such analyses could also prove confusing and render the truth less certain:

It almost confuses the issue a little bit too because, they do these quick little one minute segments and they try to . . . you know . . . cover the whole issue, and it's going back and forth so much between, uh, what they say and, somebody comes around and says ok, this is where they're accurate, this is where they're not accurate. Then you have to decipher whether that person is giving his partisan view of it.

They kind of confuse me more . . . because it's too much information coming about. And I tend to block out . . . "ok I will get back to that later or something."

Such responses are in keeping with the mixed findings of other research into the effects of adwatches and reality checks (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1994).

Beyond seeing the media as another player, participants also spoke about the sensationalism and lack of depth and relevance in local news coverage of campaign politics, often occurring as broadcasters sought a hook to encourage viewers to tune in to their version of a story. Participants offered comments such as the following after viewing a story in which the anchors framed a campaign trail story with a local angle hook, explaining that President George W. Bush had made a whistle stop in a town that had once been the site of a bank robbery:

I'm so tired of the media getting stuck on these jags of like "he said this random thing." And, like, who cares, that's not what this is about. I mean granted you don't want to have a president that is going to have his foot in his mouth all the time or you know, is going to make an inappropriate comment or something like that. But what they were talking about [in this story]? They focused on a bank robbery, they focused on some little quip that he said, they didn't talk about, I mean he wasn't there to talk about jobs, about the economy, nothing—it was just bank robberies and, [deep sigh] I don't know.

I get the impression that these reporters want to have some type of controversial items going on, something to stir things up. They aren't necessarily reporting what's going on, they're trying to add to it and make it more newsworthy or more action-involved in the campaign.

The sum of these comments supports the idea that at least some of the local news effects we have seen may be content based. Citizens are bombarded with information during campaigns; they are often uncertain of its veracity and, therefore, of its legitimacy. The local news may simply exacerbate that uncertainty rather than lessen it. When presented with information that helps to sort the wheat from the chaff, however, viewers of local news seem to be particularly responsive.

As other studies show, local media devote little airtime to campaign politics. We also know that when local news does give time to election campaigns, it often lacks substance. What our study suggests, in addition to these pathologies, is that viewers may see local news media as other participants in the campaign game rather than enlightened and enlightening analysts or observers. Because local news coverage of campaigns adds to viewers' uncertainty, we see those who watch it most regularly rejecting as "unfair" the claims of all candidates.

The fact that we do not see the same effect of watching national news, given that it shares some of the characteristics of local news, also requires explanation. Consider the nature of differences in the content of national and local coverage of elections found in comparative studies of the 2004 election (Kaplan, Goldstein, & Hale, 2005a, 2005b). The two information sources differ in the time devoted to election news and in the type of coverage the election campaign received. Kaplan et al. (2005a) find, for example, that the networks "gave significantly more air time to the campaign than local stations did" (p. 9); from 25% to 31% of newscasts in the 29 days up to the election were devoted to election-related stories compared to 11% on local newscasts. In a telling finding that was perhaps illustrated and amplified by the frustration expressed in our focus groups, Kaplan et al. (2005b) also observe that despite

a very tight gubernatorial race in Washington, "The Seattle stations devoted 14 times more coverage to teasers and bumper music than they devoted to the gubernatorial race in their local news programs" (p. 11). Finally, with the exception of ABC, the ratio of issue-based to horse race stories was greater in national network coverage than in local news broadcasts. Such differences in content and style may contribute to the differences we observe, if viewers find that as these data suggest, national coverage of elections appears to be more substantive.

It may also be the case that viewers of national news have more faith in network broadcasts to provide them with helpful information. Despite complaints that national news increasingly seeks to entertain as well as inform, it is still forced to cover matters of government and international affairs. In addition, although news of international events may suggest a threatening world, that world may be more distant than the one depicted in local broadcasts that concentrate on violent crime and sensation or local vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks. We may also find differences in the content of national and local coverage when broadcasters turn to threats to personal (or collective) safety. Although instances of violent crime seem to lead local news broadcasts night after night, information about arrest and conviction rates or neighborhood watches and other effective citizen efforts do not. In contrast, national news coverage of security issues may employ a "threat-reassurance" frame in which the specter of vulnerabilities is raised and immediately assuaged by news of an official response or information that suggests the problem is less serious than the viewer has been led to believe (Allen, O'Loughlin, Jasperson, & Sullivan, 1994). A threat-reassurance frame is potentially less likely to produce a mean world outlook.

We cannot be certain that a mean world effect results from such distinctions in framing and content or that such an effect accounts for the differences we found between viewers of local and national news. Nevertheless, the differences between these two news audiences are striking and consistent under a variety of model specifications. These results suggest that such differences in content and sense of the world conveyed to viewers of local and national news are at least a part of the story.¹³

Discussion and Conclusion

The growth in importance of local news as a source of political information, as America's "window on the world," has led to a parallel interest among scholars. The first generation of research into campaign effects, including our

own, focuses on the characteristics of local news coverage of campaigns. The second generation of research will begin to examine the relationship between watching local news and political attitudes and behavior. Franklin et al. (2003) suggest that the effects are weak relative to those from advertising. We have extended the study of local news effects from the direct stimulus-response of its influence on levels of information, attitudes, and behavior to a subtler impact on perceptions of negative campaign rhetoric.

A great deal of prominent research in the field now suggests that the effects of negative political advertising are more substantial than that of other kinds of advertising and that they are mediated by perceptions of its fairness. In turn, perceptions of the fairness of negative political advertising are driven by individual characteristics such as partisanship and political expertise. Our research indicates that controlling for partisanship and political knowledge, local news media may also affect perceptions of fairness, with implications for turnout. After eliminating some possible explanations for the connection between perceptions of fairness and local news, we suggest that this result is a combination of a general mean world effect and specific aspects of the way the local news media are viewed—as players in the game of campaigns, "spinning" the news according to their own self-interested motivations—and a consequence of the way in which they cover politics. Local news leaves its viewers less certain of the validity of candidates' claims and, therefore, inclined to view all campaign advertising rhetoric as unfair. Thus, it seems that there are substantive indirect effects of local news on campaigns.

In a broader sense, our research suggests that the remedies for local news may be more complex than has sometimes been recommended; it is certain that our findings suggest concerns about the quality as much as the quantity of information news broadcasters may offer about candidates for election and their campaigns. Thus, it may not be as simple as insisting on a certain amount of coverage of politics in each broadcast or on more candidate-centered discourse, if the audience for local news continues to be skeptical of broadcast journalists' reasons for choosing particular stories to cover or of the nature of news coverage. Such doubts may only be exacerbated as viewers increasingly see local news media as among the players in the campaign.

In showing that "more" is not necessarily the answer, we turn to what our respondents say they want from local news: information about local election contests, clearly presented facts that will enable them to make decisions, and from the campaigns and those who cover them, more emphasis on what is to be done and less on the claims and counterclaims of campaign rhetoric. Do the sources of information available to citizens help them engage in addressing political concerns? Could an increase in the relative importance of

local news coverage reinvigorate the civic cultures of some locales? In the years since we conducted our first surveys, we note the increased use of Internet tie-ins providing additional information, occasionally including detailed accounts of sources and data supporting broadcast reports of campaign events and analyses such as truth tests. Such "news and links" may respond to viewers' desire for greater depth and particularly factual evidence in reporting political news. In the light of our findings, this trend, like much else about local news coverage and its effects on voting and other forms of democratic participation, needs serious study.

Appendix

Questions and Coding

Criticizing an Opponent for Taking Campaign Contributions From Certain Special Interests

According to the Democratic National Committee, drug companies, who have given over \$6.5 million to the Bush campaign and related organizations, will pocket 61% of spending for the new Medicare drug benefit as profits. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Bush?

According to the Republican National Committee, John Kerry has been the number one Senate recipient of special interest money over the last 15 years, and his agenda is driven by those special interests. They claim he has given preferential treatment to donors for government construction and insurance contracts, and given others prime appointments. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Kerry?

Criticizing an Opponent for His or Her Voting Record

George W. Bush has claimed that the war on Iraq has made the US and the world more secure, John Kerry argues that war and the poorly planned and executed effort to stabilize Iraq have inflamed the Middle-East, created tensions with our allies, distracted us from finding Osama Bin Laden, and made us less secure. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Bush?

The Bush Campaign charges that Kerry has an inconsistent record of support and opposition of the war in Iraq. They contend that he voted to authorize the war, but against properly funding our troops. Republicans claim that this indecisiveness sends the wrong message to our troops, our allies, and particularly, our enemies. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Kerry?

Criticizing an Opponent for Talking One Way and Voting Another

During his 2000 Nomination acceptance speech, President Bush said that the government should give the budget surplus back to the people. The Kerry Campaign argues that instead of giving the surplus back, the Bush administration twice gave huge and fiscally irresponsible tax cuts to the rich that, along with new spending programs created a 2.7 trillion dollar deficit. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Bush?

Kerry claims to be fiscally responsible. The Bush campaign charges that, rather than being fiscally responsible, Kerry has voted for the biggest tax increase in American history, while voting against President Bush's tax cuts, against the balanced budget amendment, and against major tax relief at least 29 times. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Kerry?

Criticizing an Opponent's Qualifications or Capacity for Office

The Bush Campaign charges that John Kerry is indecisive. They accuse him of "flip flopping" on a number of issues including the war in Iraq, middle class tax relief, and trade policy. The Bush campaign charges that these flip flops show that Kerry is indecisive, and creates a feeling of uncertainty and mistrust. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Kerry?

Criticizing an Opponent's Military Record

George W. Bush has said that he is proud of his service in the national guard during the Vietnam War, however, Democrats charge that George W. Bush used family connections to join the Texas Air National Guard to avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam. Bush lost his flight certification after failing to take his annual physical, and there is little evidence that he actually fulfilled his obligation. Democrats further charge that Bush has failed to provide satisfactory documentation and accounting for his time in the National Guard. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Bush?

Criticizing Members of the Opponent's Ticket for Scandals

According to Democratic sources, Halliburton, a large company, which Vice President Cheney was formerly CEO of, is currently under investigation for high level accounting fraud, misconduct in international business, and misleading its investors while

Cheney was CEO. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Cheney?

Republican sources charge that prior to his career in the senate, John Edwards drove up medical costs and deprived some communities of medical practices by winning frivolous and scientifically ungrounded lawsuits against doctors, hospitals, and clinics as a trial lawyer in North Carolina. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Edwards?

Coding

Very fair and *somewhat fair* were coded as 1; *somewhat unfair* and *very unfair* were coded as 0.

Thoughts and Feelings About Political Advertising: The Positive Thoughts and Feelings Scale was constructed from the extent of agreement with the statements that ads "Make me feel more certain of who I'll vote for," "Make me feel more like voting," "Help me to understand the choices," and "Address the issues I care about." The Negative Thoughts and Feelings Scale was constructed from the extent of agreement with the statements that ads "Distort the facts about candidates' policies," "Make me more cynical about campaigning," "Treat me like I'm stupid," "Make me angry," and "Make me argue with what they say." Responses were combined into indexes, with *strongly disagree* = 0, *somewhat disagree* = 1, *somewhat agree* = 2, and *strongly agree* = 3. Each index was then divided by the maximum possible score to create a 0 to 1 index.

Definitions of Negative and Positive Advertising: The responses that a negative ad is "mudslinging" or that a negative ad "criticizes an opponent" were operationalized as 0 to 1 dummy variables.

Perceptions of Fairness of Criticisms of George W. Bush/John Kerry: *Very fair* = 3, *somewhat fair* = 2, *somewhat unfair* = 1, and *very unfair* = 0. For the indexes, these were summed for the relevant charges and converted to a 0 to 1 scale.

External Efficacy: Public officials don't care much what people like me think: *Strongly disagree* = 1, *somewhat disagree* = .66, *somewhat agree* = .33, and *strongly agree* = 0.

Trust in Government: Trust in the federal government in Washington: *a lot* = 1, *some* = .66, *only a little* = .33, *not at all* = 0.

Political Knowledge: The number of correct answers was summed and divided by 5 (Job or political office now held by Dick Cheney; Responsibility to determine whether a law is constitutional; Majority required to override a presidential veto; Party with most members in the House of Representatives; Party more conservative at the national level).

Newspaper Readership: Days a week typically read a daily newspaper, divided by 7.

Local News Viewership: Days a week typically watch local TV news, divided by 7.

Party Identification: Generally speaking do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? The standard National Election Study follow-up questions were then asked to create two dummy variables. 1 = *Independent identifier*, 0 = *Republican or Democratic identifier*, 1 = *Republican identifier*, 0 = *Democratic or Independent identifier*.

Presidential Approval: *Strongly disapprove* = 0, *somewhat disapprove* = .33, *somewhat approve* = .66, and *strongly approve* = 1.

Gender: 1 = *female*, 0 = *male*.

Race: 1 = *White*, 0 = *non-White*.

Marital Status: 1 = *married and living with spouse*, 0 = *not married and living with spouse*.

Generation: New Deal (born before 1930), cold war (born 1930 to 1945), early baby boomers (born 1946 to 1954), late baby boomers (born 1955 to 1964), post-baby boomers (born after 1964).

Notes

1. To reiterate, and as we demonstrate herein, we recognize that an alternative is that the direction of causation is reversed—individuals who do, or do not, like the kinds of criticisms that are characteristic of the modern campaign watch local news—but we account for numerous salient attributes of such individuals and still find an additional impact of local news viewing.

2. Like Lau and Pomper (2000), we take negative advertising to mean "talking about the opponent—his or her programs, accomplishments, qualifications, associates, and so on—with the focus, usually, on the defects of these attributes" (p. 2).

3. Our 2002 survey was conducted 18 months after the 2000 election, whereas the 2004 survey took place at the height of the election—interviews were between October 7 and November 1. Interviews were conducted by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. Further details are available from the authors on request.

4. With our 2002 data, we tested a variety of plausible relationships between age and perceptions of fairness. Specifying the effect of age in years as linear in our models produced a mixture of results. Adding a quadratic term for age in years did not help. We theorized that perhaps we were capturing generational effects. With dummy variables for generations, the relationship became clearer. For consistency, we retain the same specification in this article with 2004 data. We reran the models in Tables 1 and 2 with age in years to check that our specification does not affect other relationships, especially between watching local news and perceptions of fairness. It does not: The effects are stable.

5. Because our dependent variables each had eight intervals, we felt comfortable with ordinary least squares regression models. We also looked at ordered probit models, however, to check that this decision did not affect the results. It did not.

6. Results are available from the authors on request.
7. We also examined alternative specifications using simultaneous equation models. We specified frequency of watching local news as an endogenous variable. We were particularly interested in knowledge and/or cynicism about politics, as reflected in low trust in government or low external efficacy, because they are potential influences on watching local news and also on perceptions of fairness. Perhaps they were driving the effects of local news we observed. We found that the direction and statistical significance of the relationships between local news and perceptions of fairness changed little and that although political knowledge is negatively associated with watching local news, and consistently positively associated with perceptions of fairness of criticisms, cynicism about politics is unrelated to local news viewing and has no systematic effects on perceptions of fairness. Results of the two-stage probit least squares models are available from the authors on request.
8. In contrast, the coefficient for national news is never statistically significant at $p < .05$ in these models and is statistically significant, and positive, at $p < .10$ for only one of them. We would expect to find one or two such relationships by chance. It is therefore difficult to draw any other conclusion than that watching national news does not affect perceptions of the rhetoric of advertising.
9. These results are available on request.
10. We keep the models similar more for purposes of comparison to Tables 1 and 2, and for simplicity, than because we have a priori expectations about all of the independent variables.
11. These claims are based on the coefficients displayed in Table 3 for the differences with Democrats and on Wald tests for the differences in coefficients for the claims about the differences between Republicans and Independents.
12. Results are available from the authors on request.
13. We also looked at the effects of combinations of relative frequency of watching local and national news. We reran all our models in two different ways: by creating a variable for the difference in the number of times a respondent typically watched local news compared to national news (the highest positive value being for respondents who watched local news every day and never watched national news) and, in a similar manner, by including a dummy variable for respondents who watched more local news than national news and an interaction term between this dummy variable and frequency of watching local news. In both cases, the impact of the frequency of watching local news remained robust. Of the new variables, we saw the strongest effects when we included the dummy variable and interaction, but even here the interaction was statistically significant in only 3 of the 19 models. Thus, the effect of watching local news appears independent of other media habits.

References

- Alger, D., Allen, B., Stevens, D., & Sullivan, J. (2005, January). *Principles, partisanship, and perceptions of political advertising*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Politics Group of the Political Studies Association, Canterbury, UK.
- Allen, B., O'Loughlin, P., Jaspersen, A., & Sullivan, J. (1994). The media and the Gulf War: Framing, priming, and the spiral of silence. *Polity*, 27, 255-284.
- American National Election Survey. (2004). *The 2004 National Election Study* [Data file]. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies. Available from <http://www.electionstudies.org>
- Ansolabehere, S., & Iyengar, S. (1995). *Going negative: How political advertisements shrink and polarize the electorate*. New York: Free Press.
- Bartels, L. (1998). *Campaign reform: Insights and evidence: A report of the task force on campaign reform*. Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.
- Cappella, J., & Jamieson, K. H. (1994). Broadcast adwatch effects: A field experiment. *Communication Research*, 21, 342-365.
- Chang, L., & Krosnick, J. (2003). Measuring the frequency of regular behaviors: Comparing the "typical week" to the "past week." *Sociological Methodology*, 33, 55-80.
- Dearing, J., & Rogers, E. (1996). *Agenda setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Delli Carpini, M., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Franklin, C., Fowler, E. F., Goldstein, K., & Stevens, D. (2003, August). *Political information flows and their effects in the 2002 elections*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia.
- Freedman, P., & Lawton, L. D. (2000, April). *Campaign advertising, perceived fairness, and voter turnout*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago.
- Geer, J. (2006). *In defense of negativity: Attack ads in presidential campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorelli, N. (1980). The mainstreaming of America: Violence profile No. 11. *Journal of Communication*, 30, 10-29.
- Gilliam, F., & Iyengar, S. (2000). Prime suspects: The influence of local television on the viewing public. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 560-573.
- Graber, D. (2001). *Mass media and American politics* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Hawkins, R., & Pingree, S. (1981). Uniform messages and habitual viewing: Unnecessary assumptions in social reality effects. *Human Communication Research*, 7, 291-301.
- Hetherington, M. (1996). The media's role in forming voters' national economic evaluations in 1992. *American Journal of Political Science*, 40, 372-395.
- Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, S. (1998, September). "Media effects": Paradigms for the analysis of local television news. Paper prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation planning meeting, Center for Communications and Community.
- Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. (1987). *News that matters: Television and American opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jamieson, K. H. (1992). *Dirty politics: Deception, distraction, and democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson, K. H. (2000). *Everything you think you know about politics . . . and why you're wrong*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kahn, K. F., & Kenney, P. (1999). Do negative campaigns mobilize or suppress turnout? Clarifying the relationship between negativity and participation. *American Political Science Review*, 93, 877-890.
- Kahn, K. F., & Kenney, P. (2004). *No holds barred: Negativity in U.S. Senate campaigns*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kaplan, M., Goldstein, K., & Hale, M. (2005a). *Spanish language TV coverage of the 2004*

- campaigns* (Report of the Lear Center Local News Archive). Los Angeles/Madison: University of Southern California Annenberg School, University of Wisconsin.
- Kaplan, M., Goldstein, K., & Hale, M. (2005b). *Local news coverage of the 2004 campaigns: An analysis of nightly broadcasts in 11 markets* (Report of the Lear Center Local News Archive). Los Angeles/Madison: University of Southern California Annenberg School, University of Wisconsin.
- Lau, R., & Pomper, G. (2000, August). *Accentuate the negative? Effectiveness of negative campaigning in U.S. Senate elections*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC.
- McGill, L., Szanto, A., & Johnston, M. (1997). The voters speak: Findings from the Media Studies Center's voters and media research project. In J. Mashek, L. McGill, & A. Clayton Powell III (Eds.), *Lethargy '96: How the media covered a listless campaign* (pp. 98-111). Arlington, VI: The Freedom Forum.
- Miller, W., & Shanks, J. M. (1996). *The new American voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Patterson, T. (1993). *Out of order*. New York: Knopf.
- Patterson, T., & McClure, R. (1976). *The unseen eye: The myth of television power in national politics*. New York: Putnam.
- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2004, January). *Cable and Internet loom large in fragmented political universe* [Press release]. Washington, DC: Author.
- Popkin, S. (2006). Changing media, changing politics. *Perspectives on Politics*, 4, 327-341.
- Robinson, M. (1976). Public affairs television and the growth of political malaise: The case of "The selling of the Pentagon." *American Political Science Review*, 70, 409-432.
- Stevens, D., Alger, D., Allen, B., & Sullivan, J. (2006). Local news coverage in a social capital capital: Election 2000 on Minnesota's local news stations. *Political Communication*, 23, 61-84.

Barbara Allen is a professor, former chair of the Department of Political Science, and former director of Women's Studies at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota. In addition to published works on Martin Luther King Jr. and the American civil rights movement, she has written about federalism and the political thought of Alexis de Tocqueville in her book *Harmonizing Earth With Heaven: Tocqueville on Covenant and the Democratic Revolution*.

Daniel P. Stevens is a senior lecturer at the University of Exeter in Cornwall. His primary research interests are in mass political behavior and media. He has published articles in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and *Political Research Quarterly*.

Gregory Marfleet is an assistant professor at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota. He is interested in how political beliefs shape elite and mass decision making, and he has published articles in *Political Psychology*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, and the *American Review of Politics*.

John Sullivan is a regents' professor and the Arleen Carlson Chair of Political Science at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis. His research interests include political psychology, political tolerance, and voting behavior. He has published articles in many mainstream psychology and political science journals.

Dean Alger is a media and public affairs consultant, writer, and adjunct professor. He is currently serving as a consultant to the Minnesota Secretary of State, among other projects. He is author of three books on media and politics subjects and coauthor of an award-winning election, media, and political behavior study. Political communication and public opinion are key research fields.