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DO THE MEDIA CHOOSE THE PRESIDENT?

October 1, 1987

Seminar Notes

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

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The topic of this seminar was a timely one given the recent events of the presidential campaign. Both Henry Brady and Robert Turner alluded to recent critical media coverage of candidates such as Joseph Biden and Gary Hart who were forced to drop out of the presidential race because of some "improper" behavior of the candidate which was highlighted in the media. Brady's major concern is with how the media's coverage of one event can keep a candidate in the race or knock him out, and thereby affect the presidential primary system. In reaction to this, Bob Turner noted the term "bubble reputation" from the Ages of Man as being particularly relevant to a discussion of the 1988 presidential campaign in which a reputation can be burst in a moment. The question was raised both by Brady and Turner whether this trend of "the media eliminating the candidates" would continue for the current presidential race especially in light of the yet unresolved Dukakis/Sasso incident.

As background to discussion of these issues, Henry Brady provided an overview of his research addressing the presidential primary system. For the past two years he has been working on a book on the subject. Brady believes "the media don't choose the candidates, they just eliminate them." He did however acknowledge that the outcome of the race may be the same as the media choosing the president.

Brady's stylized view of the presidential primary system is illustrated in Figure 1. Brady characterized the primary system as "a time of extraordinary learning for the media and then the public." The model focuses on three aspects:

- o issues: what we think should really motivate voters,
- o knowledge: amount of knowledge people have about the candidates, and
- o viability: information about who is ahead and who is behind ("the horse race").

Given this schematic, he noted that "the less an individual knows about a candidate, the less likely they are to vote for that candidate." Brady discussed the integral role of the media in educating the public.

Brady's research has made use of two sets of data to explore how the public learns about candidates: (1.) a weekly survey of Americans spanning 1/15/84 conducted as part of the NSF-funded National Election Study focusing on questions of knowledge, viability, issues, preferences and (2.) UPI (United Press International) data covering 1/1/84 to 7/31/84 regarding all stories on primaries and candidates.

He noted the highlights of his UPI findings: 29% of UPI coverage was based on facts, 65.9% on attributed views, and only 5.1% on unattributed views. The Election Studies data revealed some interesting information about voters, e.g. voters know a lot about the "viability" of candidates (who is ahead and who is behind) and "electability," a fair amount about "candidate issues" and very little about "policy issues." Brady finds this last bit of information particularly significant since people often cannot answer to the question "where does a candidate stand," while being able to answer the question "who is ahead and who is behind."

Keeping these issues in mind, Brady went on to discuss the details of the 1984 presidential campaign focusing on the lead candidates: John Glenn, Jesse Jackson, Walter Mondale and Gary Hart. He described the public's learning process in becoming informed about candidates like Gary Hart around the time of the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. The most volatile finding in his data was people's estimates of who's ahead and who is behind. According to Brady "people have changing perceptions of this issue from week to week."

Brady was concerned with how people's images of the candidates varied from week to week during the 1984 presidential primary process. As Figure 2 reveals, the stability of image for each of the candidates varied, e.g. Reagan and Mondale had stable images which they hung on to for the whole primary season, while Glenn's image was not so stable because people had less knowledge about him from the start. Brady's real concern with these findings is "how fair a contest can this primary process be until people know as much about the lesser candidates as the ones they know a great deal about?" According to his data it took 20 weeks for people to know as much about Hart as Mondale in the campaign. Nevertheless, throughout this time period many people voted for Hart.

On the other hand, Turner believes it was not just expectations that explained the media's increased coverage of Hart after the Iowa primary, but the fact that Hart was new. He addresses the issue that the media may have been wrong in focusing its attention on Mondale and Glenn, but all the media did was follow expectations (Mondale thought the opposition was Glenn and therefore so did the media). Turner voiced concern that "the media should be more independent," but given a situation in which a candidate's organization is thoroughly researching a situation it is hard to ignore their data. This was the situation in 1984 since Mondale's staff was gathering a lot of information about Glenn. In Turner's opinion, the media will hopefully learn from this experience and give more balanced coverage in the future.

Both Brady and Turner noted the unique media coverage Jesse Jackson received. Brady believes that people had a very distinct image of Jackson from the start of the campaign because of all the media coverage he garnered, especially regarding his Middle East trip to negotiate the release of an American flyer. Brady questions whether the media covered a notable event in this case or just had nothing better to cover given a lull in the primary season. In Brady's opinion, the media treated Jackson like a "side show"--a way to fill-up newspaper and TV when no one else was doing something interesting--and maybe this was the correct thing to do. He acknowledged that there has been a growing trend of "playing to the media" evidenced by the rise of the media consultant. Turner noted that despite the events of the campaign "Jackson was bound to receive heavy coverage from the media because he was the first black candidate and this is news in itself."

Brady reviewed the coverage of the candidates in the 1984 race in respect to the votes the candidates actually received. He related the example of the Iowa primary in which Hart received 52% of UPI coverage apparently because he did unexpectedly well, while Mondale only received 33% of the coverage after winning the contest. Brady's concern is "whether we should have a process that inflates these random events." His feeling is how fair can a process be especially if it inflates events to such a point that a candidate actually has to drop out of the race.

Brady and Turner did voice differences about media behavior: Brady spoke of the "Herd Instinct" discussed in Timothy Crouse's book The Boys on the Bus. Brady feels the press has a tendency to operate under this instinct whereby reporters strive to come up with the "right" lead. In his opinion, it is this process that can lead to the inflated coverage of particular events. While Turner would agree that "there is a lot of collegiality when reporters are on the bus, the reporters strive for individuality." Turner believes there is a great deal of competition amongst reporters which results in fairly different leads.

In conclusion, Brady thinks we should "feel bad" about the current primary system and thinks it is no better than the old boss system. He criticizes the current primary process as being somewhat random in the sense that some candidates may be lucky enough to go through the process unscathed by the media. To remedy this situation, Brady does not recommend trying to change the ways of the media, but does suggest redesigning the nomination process. He would like to see the primary process less binding than it is today.

Addressing the old boss system as an alternative to today's primary system, Turner noted that "he is not sure that the old time convention where the pros were running things guaranteed to give us a savior everytime." He also voiced disappointment in the current

system especially in the way it appears to narrow the field very quickly. Turner does not think the solution to these concerns lies with controlling the media's coverage of the candidates (e.g. making sure each candidate receives equal media time, an equal balance of favorable and unfavorable coverage). He questions whether you would end-up with a "proper" result even if such a controlled system could be established.

In contrast to Brady's presentation, Turner believes people may actually be ahead of what the media are doing and are not so much led by what the media says. He cited the example of John Glenn who received a great deal of coverage (a lot of it positive) at the start of the 1984 race, only to have his coverage taper off as the press found the public losing interest in the candidate. While some have argued that this was a curious thing for the press to do, Turner feels the media's actions were appropriate given Glenn was not a good candidate.

In reflecting on the recent Dukakis and Biden incidents, Turner defended the press--"the press did not manufacture any of these issues." Although he believes the events may have been blown-up more than the events warrant, the issues have not been. He cited Dukakis' support for Massachusetts divestment from South African investments only to have Dukakis gain media attention for having "overlooked" his personal investments in this area. Turner believes it was Dukakis' obligation to have looked into this matter before the media brought it to his attention. In Turner's opinion, since Dukakis runs as a "holier than thou" candidate he should live by this standard. Lastly, on the Biden issue Turner believes the press was not to blame in bringing certain issues to light, e.g. his law school plagiarism, number of degrees, etc. leading to Biden's being hounded out of office since "the press did not manufacture these issues."

According to Turner "there is not (probably) one answer for restructuring the process or changing the process that will make a big difference." While Brady notes "he is not happy with this process that leads to bad results, but he is not sure how he would change the process." Peter Lemieux noted that because it seems like the media have a difficult time handling multiple candidate races they may be rushing to narrow the field down to two candidates. Lemieux believes this phenomenon should be addressed in making any changes to the current system.

Figure 1
PRIMARIES, POLLS, AND MEDIA COVERAGE

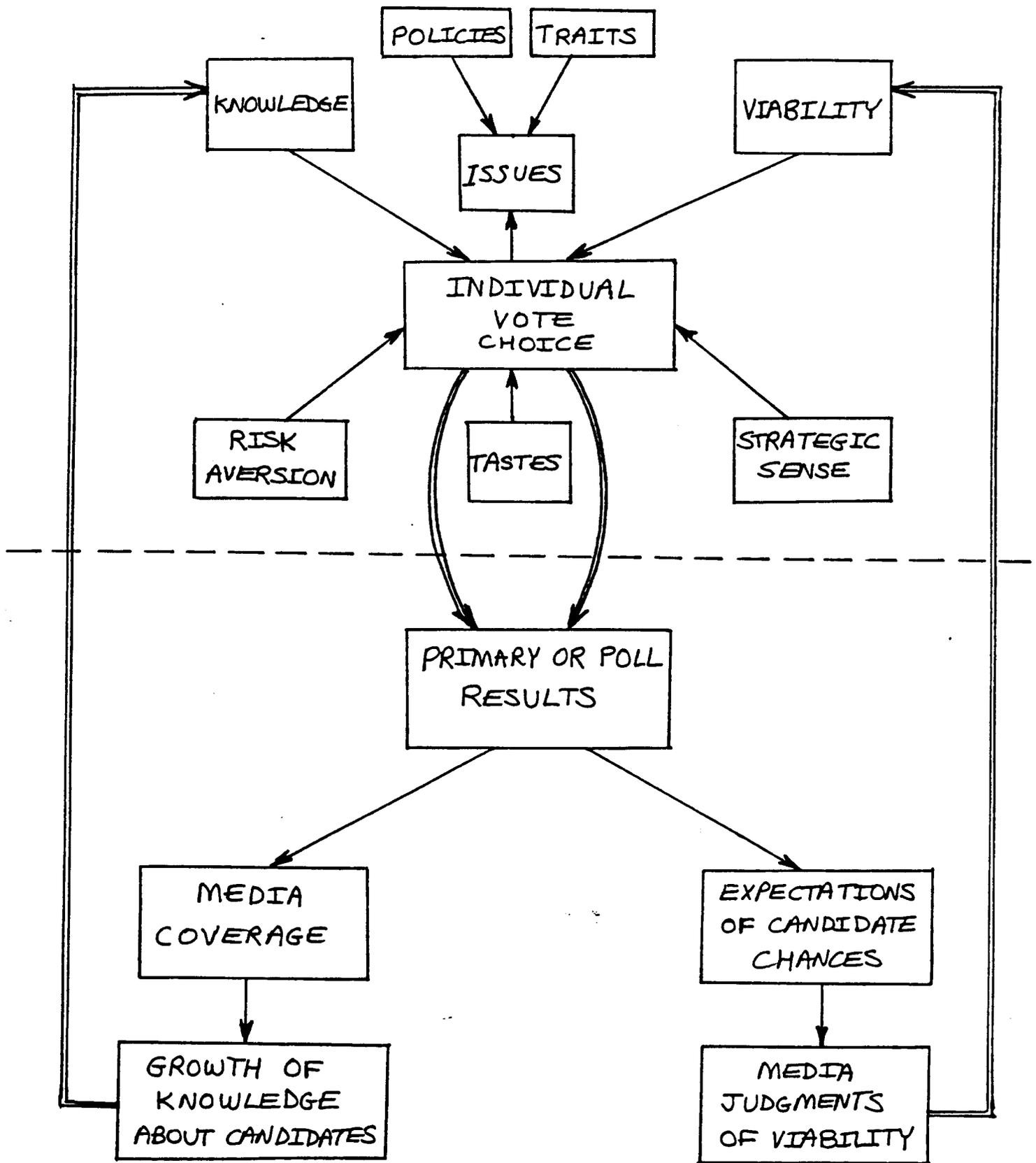


Figure 2
Stability of Candidate Images

