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Does Campaign Length Matter? Testing for Cross-National Effects

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Our findings suggest that there are systematic differences in the ways that voters use the real values of economic variables when casting a vote depending on how long they have had to learn about the true state of the economy. It is possible that in campaigns of sufficient length voters may have more time to be exposed to competing campaign messages and to learn about the true state of the economy and the true policy positions of candidates. We tested this assertion on 113 elections in thirteen democracies. The test results in a confirmation of the hypothesis. In longer campaigns, voters rely more heavily on the true values of economic conditions to inform their evaluations of parties in power. In shorter campaigns, these effects are mostly absent. Campaign length seems to matter for voter learning.

What little we know about the importance of campaigns in terms of persuading voters we have mainly learned from pundits and professionals.[1] Time and again, they advance the argument that campaigns are an integral part of deciding election outcomes. Political scientists, however, have not always agreed. In early scientific studies of campaigns and elections scholars resolved that immutable social and psychological forces moved voters.[2] Due to this, researchers concluded campaigns were of marginal importance. With impressive regularity scholars of the 1940s and 1950s demonstrated that campaigns had

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[1] Theodore White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1961); Jack W. Germond, *Blue Smoke and Mirrors: How Reagan Won and Carter Lost the Election of 1980* (New York: Warner Books, 1981); Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Wake Us When It's Over: Presidential Politics of 1984* (New York: Warner Books, 1985); Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency, 1988* (New York: Warner Books, 1989); Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Mad as Hell: Revolt at the Ballot Box, 1992* (New York: Warner Books, 1993).

[2] Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Paul N. Lazarsfeld, B.R. Berelson and Helen Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

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only minimal effects on voting behaviour. The solidity of these findings led American politics scholars to turn their investigations to other political phenomena. The study of campaign effects slowed to a halt.

After nearly forty years of disregard, political scientists are once again investigating campaign effects with new enthusiasm.[3] Moreover, two national surveys are being planned specifically to uncover the effects of campaigns.[4] While most of this research focuses on American presidential campaigns, some scholars have turned their inquiry to other national elections.[5] Relatively few, however, have investigated cross-national effects from campaigns – even though this type of examination provides an important resource in uncovering campaign effects: variance in the types of campaigns.[6] To test how different

[3] Charles H Franklin, 'Measurement and the Dynamics of Party Identification', *Political Behavior*, 14 (1992), 297–309; Thomas M. Holbrook, 'Campaigns, National Conditions, and US Presidential Elections', *American Journal of Political Science*, 38 (1994), 25–46; Thomas M. Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter*? (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996); Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Attack Ads Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon and Nicholas Valentino, 'Does Attack Advertising Demobilize the Electorate?' *American Political Science Review*, 88 (1994), 829–38, p. 829; Larry M. Bartels, 'Messages Received: The Political Impact of Media Exposure', *American Political Science Review*, 87 (1993), 267–85, p. 267; Larry M. Bartels, 'Benchmarks for Reform,' in Larry M. Bartels and Lynn Vavreck, eds, *Campaign Reform: Insights and Evidence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000 forthcoming); Bruce Buchanan, *Renewing Presidential Politics* (New York: Little, 1996); Steven E. Finkel, 'Re-examining the "Minimal Effects" Model in Recent Presidential Campaigns', *Journal of Politics*, 55 (1993), 1–21; Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer, 'Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect of Attack Advertising', *American Journal of Political Science*, 42 (1998), 573–95; Marion R. Just, Ann N. Crigler, Dean E. Alger, Timothy Cook and Montague Kern, *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates, and the Media in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Lynn Vavreck, 'More than Minimal Effects: Differences between Clarifying and Insurgent Presidential Campaigns in Strategy and Effect' (doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, 1997); Andrew Gelman and Gary King, 'Why Are American Presidential Election Campaign Polls So Variable When Votes Are So Predictable?' *British Journal of Political Science*, 23 (1993), 409–51; Daron Shaw, 'The Impact of News Media Favorability and Campaign Events: Re-Examining Challenges to Minimal Effects in Presidential Campaigns', in Bartels and Vavreck, eds, *Campaign Reforms: Insights and Evidence*.

[4] The National Election Study 1998 Pilot Study was specifically designed to target the effects of campaigns and the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania is similarly planning a large national survey for the presidential election in the year 2000 with specific regard to campaign effects.

[5] Richard Johnston, André Blais, Henry E. Brady and Jean Crete, *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992); D. M. Farrell, 'Campaign Strategies', in Michael Gallagher and Michael Laver, eds, *How Ireland Voted, 1992* (Dublin: Folens, 1993); Gilberto Tinacci Mannelli and Enrico Cheli, *L'immagine del potere: Comportmaneti, atteggiamenti e strategie d'immagine dei leader politici italiani* (Milano: Franco Angeli Libri, 1986); N. J. O'Shaughnessy, *The Phenomenon of Political Marketing* (Houndmills, Hants: Macmillan, 1990); Edgar Wangan, *Polit-Marketing: Das Marketing-Management der Polischen Parteien* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlad, 1983).

[6] David Butler and Austin Ranney, *Electioneering: A Comparative Study of Continuity and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); D. M. Farrell and Martin Wortmann, 'Party Strategies in the Electoral Market: Political Marketing in West Germany, Britain, and Ireland', *European Journal of Political Research*, 15 (1987), 297–318; Shaun Bowler and David M. Farrell, *Conclusion: The Contemporary Election Campaign* (New York: St Martin's, 1992).

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campaign activities might influence voting, or if campaigns influence voting at all, variation in activities and types of campaigns is needed. Cross-national elections provide this necessary variance.

In this article, we use pooled cross-sectional data to explore some of the differing patterns of campaigning in thirteen countries and 113 elections. Specifically, we highlight the differences between campaigns in terms of their length and the relationship of this variable on voters' use of fundamental economic information during elections.

THE PUZZLE

Even though the study of campaigns has recently come to the forefront of work on voting behaviour, results of current research do not consistently contradict findings from the original campaign studies of the 1940s. Consider Finkel's finding that even though people do change their attitudes during campaigns, the changes are consistent with pre-existing proclivities and are rarely large enough to matter.[7] Holbrook's conclusions are similar – campaign events do influence public opinion, but these changes are either cancelled out through competition or too small in magnitude to overpower the effects from national economic conditions or presidential popularity.[8] It seems that even though campaigns are costly and they predominantly set out to increase information to voters, the effects are not as striking as the candidates and consultants believe. How can we reconcile this bifurcation between political science and political reality?

Andrew Gelman and Gary King take a first step at negotiating this puzzle by answering the question: why are American presidential election outcomes so predictable when campaign polls are so variable?[9] A striking illustration of this phenomenon is the 1988 US presidential election in which George Bush was the predicted winner and yet, in July, Michael Dukakis was leading Bush in trial heat polls by 19 points. The compelling question here is what happened between July and November that made voters change their minds about these candidates? And why did forecasting models predict the Bush victory even before July?

Gelman and King draw on the forecasting literature from American politics to make predictions about which candidate is likely to win an election. Scholars engaged in forecasting have been able to predict accurately the party split in American presidential elections months before the campaigns begin.[10] Gelman and King compare these predictions to the trial-heat polls throughout the

[7] Finkel, 'Re-examining the "Minimal Effects' Model" '.

[8] Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?*

[9] Gelman and King, 'Why are American Presidential Election Campaign Polls so Variable When Votes are So Predictable?'

[10] Ray C. Fair, 'The Effect of Economic Events on Votes for President', *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 60 (1978), 322–5; Alan Abramowitz, 'An Improved Model for Predicting Presidential Election Outcomes', *Political Science*, 21 (1988) 843–7; James E. Campbell, 'Trial-Heat Forecasts of the Presidential Vote', *American Politics Quarterly*, 18 (1990), 25–69; Michael Lewis-Beck and Tom Rice, *Forecasting Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1992); Steven Rosenstone, *Forecasting Presidential Elections* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983).

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election cycle and note that while the election result matches the forecast, the polls in the middle vary substantially.

This result is puzzling because it may indicate that while voters seem to be making choices on election day based on information that is available much earlier, they apparently are not using this information in answering trial-heat polls prior to election day. If voters were using this information, Gelman and King argue that there would be no fluctuation in trial-heat polls during the last months of the election. An immediate and intuitive response to this conundrum is that survey responses and voting choices are not generated by the same sort of decision-making process; that is, voters do not answer surveys about voting intentions as if they were really making a vote decision. Gelman and King, however, reject this hypothesis and several other reasonable explanations for the puzzle, based on data from American presidential elections since 1952. Instead of making dubious guesses about what kinds of psychological processes voters use when answering questions or voting, Gelman and King suggest a simple alternative: campaign activities increase the amount of information that voters have available to them about the types of things that are important and the candidates' positions on these things. In this way, campaigns do two things – they help voters make sense of the agenda and they reduce voter uncertainty about candidate positions or real conditions of important variables.

Changes in survey responses over the campaign are attributed not to differences in the ways that voters answer questions, but rather to changes in the information that voters have available at different points in the campaign. While all the information that voters will eventually use to make their vote decision is available months before the election, it only reaches voters over the course of a campaign via the competing messages that different candidates send. In short, campaigns serve to educate voters about important variables and the weights to attach to each of these variables.

This explanation for the variance of trial-heat polls, which Gelman and King call the 'enlightenment' hypothesis, is consistent with their data. But since it was fashioned explicitly to explain this phenomenon within their dataset this consistency does not strictly confirm the hypothesis and, of course, cannot provide a refutation of it. In this article, we suggest a number of possible cross-national implications of Gelman and King's 'enlightenment' hypothesis. The evaluation of these implications will bear on the empirical veracity of the hypothesis. We subject one of these implications to a test using cross-national data from thirteen democracies and 113 elections between 1960 and 1990.

THE ARGUMENT

Gelman and King's analysis is based on the idea that voters make electoral choices based on a set of 'fundamental variables' that include such things as the candidates' true policy positions, the true state of the economy, and the incumbency status of candidates. While the values of some of these variables will be known to voters before the campaign (incumbency status), others may

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not (candidate positions or true state of the economy). Additionally, voters may not know how to combine this information to make a vote choice; that is, they may not know how much weight to give each consideration. The assignment of weights to campaign issues is akin to agenda setting. Candidates try to instruct voters as to which issues are most important in formulating a vote decision. This is one important thing that happens during the campaign period.

The period of the campaign is also needed so that voters can be exposed to a large sample of campaign messages from which they can accurately estimate the true positions of candidates on important issues and the true state of the economy. When voters answer trial-heat polls in the months before the election, they may go through the same process they use to make a vote choice, but many are unable to employ accurate estimates of the true values of fundamental variables. Consequently, the early aggregate poll results reflect more individual idiosyncrasies of information than the later poll results, or even the election result. An increase in campaign information helps voters to reduce their uncertainty about assessments of candidate positions and economic conditions. This reduction in uncertainty that occurs over the course of the campaign turns noisy estimates of campaign variables into clearer ones.[11]

Gelman and King's whole argument comes down to the assertion that voters make more accurate estimates of the true values of the fundamental variables and their appropriate weights on election day than they do before election day. The reason for this is that campaigns actually convey information to voters which, though sometimes biased, does eventually separate fact from fiction and give the voter a true picture of the values and weights of the fundamental variables. According to Gelman and King, the function of the campaign is to inform voters about the fundamental variables and their appropriate weights.[12]

As we mentioned earlier, the solution to this puzzle was constructed to be consistent with observations of the data on American elections. Obviously, then, these data cannot provide any evidence for or against the veracity of this hypothesis. In order to evaluate the usefulness of this theory in general, we need to subject its main conclusions to other data or evaluate other implications of the theory not initially considered by Gelman and King. In the next section we attempt to provide some implications of the model for elections that occur in contexts very different from American presidential elections. These implications are consistent with the theoretical story underlying Gelman and King's explanation of the puzzle. The arguments made here suggest that there should be systematic differences in the degree to which true values of the fundamental variables are regular determinants of vote choice for campaigns and govern-

[11] Bartels, 'Messages Received'; Vavreck, 'More than Minimal Effects'; R. Michael Alvarez, *Information and Elections* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); R. Michael Alvarez and Charles Franklin, 'Uncertainty and Political Perceptions', *Journal of Politics*, 56 (1994), 671–88.

[12] Empirically, this suggests that as the campaign continues, more voters will make 'enlightened' decisions at the polls. Consequently, the amount of 'signal' in the aggregate estimate of the relationship between fundamental variables and the vote (or poll) should increase as the campaign proceeds.

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ments that are different from one another. Confirmation of these cross-national implications will boost confidence in Gelman and King's explanation for this puzzle in American presidential elections.

CROSS-NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE GELMAN–KING HYPOTHESIS

Gelman and King claim that elections are *informative* in a particular way – that is, they convey information about the values of 'fundamental' variables to voters. Because the relevant fundamental variables affecting a given election have some time lag, political scientists can predict elections based on true values of these variables well before the election, and voters can learn about them during the campaign and use them to make their vote choice. Two of the main dimensions upon which voters become informed during the campaign are the economy and policy positions of candidates.

Not all election campaigns, however, are created equal. Some campaigns may fail to be informative about the true state of the economy or the positions of the candidates. In Gelman and King's argument it is the competitive nature of the campaign that ensures that biased information cannot systematically misinform the electorate. Without true competition in a campaign the truth may be successfully hidden and electoral outcomes may not reflect the true values of the fundamental variables at all. In this case, election outcomes would become unpredictable and the puzzle would go away. In American presidential elections (but not congressional elections) Gelman and King assert that the conditions which ensure a competitive (and, therefore, informative) campaign are met.

The two conditions for competitiveness are symmetry and pervasiveness. The idea of symmetry is simply that the resources available to different candidates (or parties) in a campaign must be roughly equal. Without symmetry, resource-rich candidates can dominate the information that is conveyed to voters and so might be able to mislead them systematically about the true values and weights for fundamental variables that are unfavourable to them. Of course, campaigns must also be able to reach the bulk of the electorate with their campaign messages. This is pervasiveness. In the age of mass enfranchisement, this probably means campaigns must be able to access the mass media either directly (advertisements) or indirectly (news coverage).

Obviously, the American presidential campaigns meet these criteria for competitiveness. In addition, the 113 cross-national elections considered in this study also meet these two criteria. These elections, then, are cases in which voter 'enlightenment' should occur.[13] These criteria for educating voters, however,

[13] Many of the countries we study have actual legislation to ensure fairness in campaigns with respect to finances, media access, or both. Regardless of legal requirements and limitations, however, all the countries have party systems in which two or more parties, all possessing extensive resources, compete in the elections – thus ensuring symmetry. One possible exception to this is the case of Austria during the years of the 'Grand Coalition' between the OVP and the SPO. These two parties controlled an overwhelming majority of the resources expended on election campaigns and were both in government (with only the small FPO as an opposition). The problem with this situation is that

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ignore another implication of the Gelman and King argument that the authors have not explicitly explored. That is, that educating voters, as the authors believe the campaign does, should take time. 'Enlightenment' is quite explicitly conceived of as a process in which competing messages must cancel each other out and in which the voter must collect sufficient information to make unbiased estimates of the fundamental variables. Without sufficient time for this kind of process, voters will be hard pressed to correct distortions in their initial assessments which may be based on a very limited amount of information and only a few campaign messages.[14] We conclude from this argument that 'enlightenment' should be less successful in very short election campaigns than it is in campaigns of sufficient length (with the American case being an example of a sufficiently long campaign). Consequently, the systematic effects of the fundamental variables of vote choice should be less apparent in elections following short campaigns.

THE CONCEPT OF CAMPAIGN LENGTH AND ITS MEASUREMENT

While all democracies provide a maximum period between elections (the constitutional inter-election period, or CIEP), most allow the prime minister to request the head of state to dissolve the legislature at any time during the administration. Of the 113 elections used in this article, forty-nine resulted from an early dissolution of the legislature (see Table 1).[15] Sweden is the only country in the sample in which early dissolution of the legislature is constitutionally prohibited.

In this article we refer to elections that are called by parties in power as 'unscheduled' elections. While we do not intend to imply by this language that these elections are completely unanticipated or necessarily occur very soon after they are announced (have short campaigns), we do claim that the campaign lengths for unscheduled elections and their opposite, scheduled elections, must be considered differently. The reason for this is that campaigns in cases of scheduled elections probably begin well before the day when the legislature is dissolved and the election date is actually announced. Near the end of the CIEP (say with only six months left) everyone knows that an election must occur soon, there is no reason for parties, candidates or voters not to begin the campaign whenever they want.[16] In these cases, then, it would be unwise to code the

(F'note continued)

the government parties may have been able to distort the messages the electorate received about the performance of the incumbent government and the economy systematically since there was no comparable opposition to counterbalance them. Since the Grand Coalition ended in 1966, only two of the Austrian elections in our data would be affected by this. In the analysis, we account for this.

[14] In relatively high-information, balanced campaigns, voters *gradually* improve their knowledge of the fundamental variables and generally have sufficient information by election day.

[15] 'Early' is defined as having occurred prior to six months before the end of the CIEP.

[16] In Italy there is a legal prohibition against campaigning prior to forty-five days before the election (seventy days previous to 1976). In these cases, even if everyone knew the election was to be soon, no one could begin campaigning before the date is set.

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TABLE 1 *Average Length of Unscheduled Campaigns, 1960–90*

Country	Total campaigns	Unscheduled campaigns	Mean length in days	Standard deviation	Min–Max
Sweden	9	0	0	0	0
Norway	8	0	0	0	0
Denmark	11	7	28.43	6.5	20–39
Belgium	10	7	43.14	8.38	34–55
Netherlands	8	2	102	14.14	92–112
Luxembourg	6	0	0	0	0
Italy	7	5	60	10.8	48–70
Germany	9	2	114	79.2	58–170
Austria	9	2	99	19.8	85–113
United Kingdom	7	5	21.8	7.98	10–31
Ireland	10	9	23.11	2.67	20–28
Canada	9	8	61.25	3.11	57–66
Australia	11	5	27.2	11.52	18–46
Total	113	42			

Notes: Data were coded by authors using primary sources. All scheduled elections are coded as having campaigns of six months.

campaign as beginning when the elections are announced (which is often only a short time before the election). However, when there is an unscheduled election, parties, candidates and voters do not know there is going to be an election until it is announced and so have no reason to begin campaign activities.[17] In these cases then, it is of particular interest when the election date (or the fact that there will be an impending election) becomes known, since this will define the campaign length.

Different events in different countries at different times have marked the day when the electorate becomes aware that an election is imminent. In countries following the Westminster model this is often the request by the prime minister for the head of state to dissolve parliament, while in others, the prime minister can call elections directly. The latter was the case, for example, when the Danish prime minister, Hr. Jens Otto Krag, asked, on 2 November 1966 for a brief recess during a policy debate in the Folketing and came back a few minutes later to announce new elections. The elections, which occurred exactly twenty days later, 'came as a complete surprise to the deputies'.[18]

In countries with a strong tradition (or even legal restrictions) against inter-election cabinet formations (the Netherlands in recent years), the termination or expected termination of a government will signal new elections. More often, however, when a cabinet falls before the end of the CIEP for a reason other than the calling of a new election, there is a search for a new cabinet that can take office without a new election. Indeed, the surprise in these cases comes when these formation attempts are unsuccessful and elections are called as a result.[19]

The practical coding of the length of election campaigns for this article, then, proceeded in two stages. First, an election was coded as either being an unscheduled election or a scheduled election, depending on whether it occurred more than six months before the end of the CIEP. If the election was scheduled, the campaign length was coded as six months. For unscheduled elections, news reports describing the circumstance of the election were read to determine exactly when the public was made aware that an election would be held. In Table 1 we present data on campaign lengths of unscheduled campaigns.

Finally, we have made no attempt to measure the length of the 'unofficial' campaigns that parties may begin months or years in advance of an election. The interpretation of the results presented below should consequently be restricted to the formal campaign, as defined above. In some important respects, however, this 'limitation' may be appropriate. In particular, Gelman and King's hypothesis is about the way campaigns affect individual perceptions of the

[17] We are not concerned here with the day-to-day proselytization of the electorate in which a party may engage and which probably occurs at all times. Rather when we talk about campaign activities we mean the intensive selling of the party message associated with the traditional notion of the campaign season.

[18] *Keesings Archives*, 1967, p. 21816.

[19] There are cases in which elections were called after several tries to form new cabinets, but this kind of total breakdown in the government formation process is fairly rare.

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economy and other fundamental variables. Yet, large literatures in both the rational choice and psychological schools of political behaviour have told us that voters may not, either rationally or for cognitive reasons, pay attention to the messages parties produce most of the time. Only when it becomes necessary to inform themselves due to an upcoming election is it worthwhile to pay attention. As discussed below, Gelman and King provide some evidence to suggest that this is true. Specifically, they show that about six months before an anticipated election voters begin to learn at an accelerated rate. Furthermore, they suggest that voters learn with marked increase with only six weeks to go in the campaign. This might suggest that even if parties begin to campaign years in advance of an election, they will be playing to an audience that is not really listening.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: DESIGN OF THE TEST

The puzzle which motivated Gelman and King's article was that while trial-heat polls are variable, American elections are quite predictable several months before the election. In other democracies, however, election results have been much more resistant to the prediction efforts of political scientists (but see Sanders).[20] This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that democracies outside the United States usually have multiple parties competing in elections and winning seats in the legislature. Further, it is often the case that no individual party commands a majority of legislative seats and so coalition cabinets are formed. This blurs the meaning of incumbency and may make predictions based on incumbent-based concepts (like economic voting) less useful.[21]

The fact that there are differences in the predictive power of the fundamental variables across countries is not fatal to an attempt to evaluate this hypothesis using cross-national data. As long as fundamental variables, like the state of the economy and candidate ideology, are thought to play some role in vote choice across different systems, then an evaluation of this hypothesis can be based on a test of whether the systematic influences of these variables are modified by the length of the campaign.

Strong evidence that campaigns actually do enlighten voters would come from an empirical demonstration that the precision with which the fundamental variables predict election outcomes varies systematically with the length of campaigns (with fundamental variables being less useful predictors in short campaigns).

[20] David Sanders, 'Government Popularity and the Next General Election', *Political Quarterly*, 62 (1991), 235–61.

[21] In parliamentary democracies the notion of the incumbent (and consequently the incumbent's vote share) is not always as straightforward as in the American case. In particular, most parliamentary democracies allow the party composition of the executive to change without the benefit of an intervening election. This means that there may be several parties or groups of parties that have been incumbents since the last election. It is common in cross-national electoral studies to get around this problem by simply considering the vote share of the incumbent party or parties that are in office at the time of the election.

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WHICH FUNDAMENTAL VARIABLES?

Scholars predicting American election results have had the benefit of a very rich data base from which to select variables for their models. Consequently, there has been some diversity in the set of variables that have been used successfully to predict presidential elections. Some models, for example, use presidential popularity, while others do not. Some use state ideology, and some include sets of election specific variables. One set of variables that is common to all forecasting models is a set of economic concerns such as unemployment, inflation or growth. These variables help to predict the success of the incumbent government because a good economic performance usually helps incumbents while a poor economic performance hurts incumbents.[22]

Because of the pervasiveness of economic indicators in the set of 'fundamental variables' and because many of the other sorts of variables used to predict American electoral outcomes are not available cross-nationally, this article focuses only on the economic component of the fundamental variables. That is, we try to determine if the influence of variables like inflation and unemployment on electoral performances of parties varies systematically with the length of the campaign.[23]

AN EMPIRICAL SPECIFICATION FOR THE MODEL OF ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE

In order to test whether the relationship between economic performance and electoral performance changes with campaign length, we need a model of electoral performance that is applicable cross-nationally. Fortunately, there is a growing literature in political science from which such a model can be drawn.

One such model is by Stevenson, which is based on earlier work by Powell and Whitten.[24] This model focuses on how the vote share of individual parties varies with economic performance. The model is particularly useful for our purposes because it accounts for a number of variables that seem to affect the strength of economic voting but which have not been used to test for this effect in country specific models. In particular, the model allows the vote share of incumbent parties that hold more responsibility for policy (measured as the number of seats held in the cabinet), to show greater vulnerability to economic

[22] V.O. Key Jr, *The Responsible Electorate* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

[23] All the models used take a retrospective view of economic voting and so include lagged measures of economic variables rather than future values or variables measuring expectations.

[24] G. Bingham Powell and Guy Whitten, 'Economic Voting: Taking Account of the Political Context', *American Journal of Political Science*, 37 (1993), 391–414; Randolph T. Stevenson, 'How Parties Compete: Electoral Performance and Cabinet Composition in Parliamentary Democracies' (doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, 1996).

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performance.[25] In addition to this 'clarity of responsibility' effect, Powell and Whitten, and also Stevenson, find that the effect of the economy on a party's vote share is different for parties from the left and from the right. The two studies do not agree, however, on exactly how this difference manifests itself. The difference between the studies derives from the two very different theoretical views about how voters evaluate the policy positions of parties.[26] These theoretical concerns, however, need not bother us here. For us, the message is simply that we should allow, in the specification of the model, for the direction and strength of economic voting to differ between parties of the left and right. Whether Powell and Whitten's or Stevenson's view of the direction of this difference is correct is an empirical issue about which we, at this point, shall remain agnostic (at least until we get to the data analysis).

To account for these nuances, the model of electoral performance used in the empirical analysis here shows the interaction between economic variables with measures of party ideology (a dummy variable for left or right) and policy responsibility (two dummy variables coding whether a party has most of the seats in the cabinet, some of the seats, or none). Only after these interactions are accounted for do we test the main hypothesis of this article, that the strength of economic effects on a party's vote share is also dependent on the length of the campaign.[27]

HOW TO TEST THE CAMPAIGN LENGTH HYPOTHESIS

There are at least two ways one might proceed in testing the campaign length hypothesis. One way is to show the interaction between the raw campaign length variable (coded in days) and the economic variables in the model.[28] The resulting sets of coefficients can then be combined to produce effects of economic variables and electoral performance, holding variables such as cabinet responsibility and left–right placement constant. We can also generate standard errors for these effects to test whether they are different from one another.[29] This

[25] This hypothesis was originally put forward by Powell and Whitten, who confirmed it in an analysis of aggregate vote change of incumbent parties. Stevenson's work on individual parties also confirms this effect.

[26] Powell and Whitten's hypothesis is that leftist parties, since they draw their main support from working-class segments of society, will be punished more for unemployment than inflation and that bourgeois parties will be punished more for inflation than unemployment. In contrast, Stevenson sees leftist economic policy as essentially a luxury good that is 'purchased' by voters when they can afford it (during good economic times) and shunned when they cannot. Consequently, Stevenson predicts that leftists will lose votes during an economic downturn (whether measured by inflation or unemployment) and rightists will gain during a downturn.

[27] The model also includes a number of control variables. For a complete specification of the model, see Table 2. Measurement issues are discussed in associated footnotes.

[28] After any interaction with the dummy variables (mentioned previously) has been accounted for.

[29] The interpretation of interactions in linear models has received several treatments in the literature. For example, see Leona S. Aiken and Stephen G. West, *Multiple Regression: Testing and Interpreting Interactions* (London: Sage, 1991), p. 25. In some instances, scholars call these effects 'conditional' – the effect of x_1 conditioned on a value of x_2; and in other instances scholars refer to

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approach gives the unique effects of the economic variables for each campaign length. Examining confidence intervals constructed from the standard errors for a range of campaign lengths allows us to assess the degree to which the economic effects are different for various campaign lengths. Though we have completed such an analysis, in the discussion that follows we adopt a different strategy, which may be more appropriate as a test of the 'enlightenment' hypothesis. That is, rather than allowing continuous campaign lengths to interact with economic variables (and the other interaction terms) we dichotomise campaign lengths into two categories, short and long. The reasons for this are theoretical as well as practical.[30]

The enlightenment hypothesis does not suggest that campaign length should be linearly related to the size of the economic effects over the entire range of possible campaigns. Rather, it indicates that there is a minimum length of campaign time required to ensure competing campaign messages can effectively convey the values and importance of fundamental variables to voters. For example, one would not expect there to be any difference between the size of the economic effects in a campaign of a year and and a campaign of a year and a half; both campaign lengths are beyond the threshold of 'long enough' for voters to learn about true values of fundamental variables. Additionally, voters probably do not begin to pay attention to campaign information until the election gets reasonably close, as Gelman and King suggest. In this sense, it matters very little that the campaign has been going on for a year – it matters only that the campaign has been going on longer than the threshold.

Gelman and King provide no specific recommendation as to when a campaign is long enough to convey true values of fundamental variables adequately, but they do provide some evidence, which indicates that a campaign of about six weeks may be adequate. Specifically, Gelman and King show (in their Figures 7a–c) that voters pay little attention to campaigns earlier than 200 days prior to the election. Even then, the change in voter information is quite small until about six weeks before the election, at which point, voters seem to accelerate their learning markedly, rapidly gaining information about the fundamental variables and their associated weights. This suggests that only in campaigns shorter than six weeks should we expect campaign length to hamper voter learning about

(F'note continued)
the effects as 'simple slopes'. The terminology is unimportant. The formula for arriving at these effects, however, is straightforward, as follows: consider the model $y = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \beta_3 x_1 x_2 + \varepsilon$: To interpret the effects of x_1 on y, you would take: $\partial y/\partial x_1 = \beta_1 + \beta_3 x_2$. In a linear model the standard errors follow directly.

[30] The data on campaign lengths are radically bimodal. There are very few cases of campaign lengths between eight weeks and six months (recall that six months is the campaign length given to scheduled elections). A dichotomous coding scheme, which delineates short and long campaigns at the eight week mark, would lose little to a continuous measure at least for longer campaigns. Results of the continuous analysis are available from the authors. Point estimates are consistent with what is reported and discussed in subsequent sections of this article. Standard errors and confidence intervals differ mostly due to a lack of continual variance over the range of campaign lengths. This limits the efficiency of any continuous interactive estimation. A theoretical as well as empirical solution to this situation is offered forthwith.

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the true state of the economy. Any campaign longer than six weeks should allow voters to learn about the state of the economy, regardless of how much longer the campaign is than the six weeks threshold.

The estimation strategy we adopt is consistent with this theoretical argument made by Gelman and King. We shall dichotomize campaign length into 'long' and 'short' campaigns – where a short campaign is shorter than six weeks.[31] Other proximate thresholds (five, seven, and eight weeks) do not alter the results presented below.

ESTIMATION AND RESULTS

A detailed discussion of the econometric issues associated with estimating pooled, cross-national models of the electoral performance of parties may be found elsewhere.[32] In that work a similar dataset was used to show that Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimates produced by such models are robust to a number of possible criticisms. Some of these criticisms, such as the way that the dynamic properties of the data are handled, are mentioned in the footnotes here, but Stevenson's discussion should be consulted for a complete treatment of the issues.[33]

We present the estimated coefficients from the OLS regression of party vote change on a set of control variables and economic variables in interaction with measures of cabinet responsibility, party ideology and campaign length in Table 2. The large numbers of coefficients (generated by the three interaction terms on each economic variable), however, are not easily presented or interpreted in this format. Therefore, we provide Table 3 to aid understanding of the results. These entries are the economic effects or simple slopes and their appropriate standard errors. The information in Table 3 is not a new analysis of the data – these effects are computed from the results we presented in Table 2 and the covariance matrix of the Table 2 parameters.[34] In these tables we provide direct evidence relating to the central hypothesis of this article: do differences in campaign lengths

[31] The theory does suggest that within the group of short campaigns, a longer campaign should show economic variables having a greater effect. We could, then, use the continuous campaign lengths within the group of short campaigns to see if this is indeed the case. Unfortunately, since the division of the long and short campaigns divides the sample roughly in half, we simply do not have enough data to make very fine distinctions between the effects of campaign lengths that differ by only weeks or days. Consequently, this analysis produces insignificant results, although in some cases the differences just barely miss statistical significance at the alpha = 0.05 level.

[32] Stevenson, *How Parties Compete*.

[33] One might be suspicious of the lagged dependent variable in the incumbent vote change model. The inclusion of this variable makes the OLS estimates biased but consistent, unless the errors in the equation are serially correlated – in which case the OLS estimates are not consistent. The Durbin–Watson test for first-order autocorrelation is not appropriate in the presence of a lagged dependent variable but other tests have been developed. In the present case, we are fortunate that these tests agree with the standard D–W test in indicating that there is no significant autocorrelation in the incumbent vote change model and hence the lagged dependent variable presents no significant estimation problems.

[34] The authors will gladly provide any interested readers with the covariance matrix and the Gauss program used to generate standard errors.

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TABLE 2 *Effects of Fundamental Variables on Electoral Performance*

Variable	Coefficient	*t*-statistic
Constant	0.013	0.079
Previous Vote Change	− 0.18	− 4.05
Previous Vote %	1.3	1.2
Previous Vote %*Incumbent	− 8.16	− 3.6
Previous Cabinet*Minority Incumbent	1.12	2.0
Party Split	− 5.70	− 4.0
Party Merged	2.24	1.7
Violent Conflict*Incumbent	− 1.2	− 1.1
Party has Incumbent Prime Minister	0.59	0.68
GDP Change	12.2	1.2
GDP Change*Long Campaign	− 13.3	− 1.0
Unemployment Change	0.39	1.0
Unemployment Change*Long Campaign	− 0.70	− 1.4
Unemployment Change*High Responsibility	− 1.92	− 1.0
Unemployment Change*Long Campaign*High Responsibility	− 0.33	− 0.2
Unemployment Change*High Responsibility*Rightist	3.99	1.9
Unemployment Change*High Responsibility*Rightist*Long Campaign	1.35	0.54
Unemployment Change*Low Responsibility	− 0.50	− 0.4
Unemployment Change*Long Campaign*Low Responsibility	− 1.70	− 0.7
Unemployment Change*Low Responsibility*Rightist*Long Campaign	2.59	0.52
Inflation Change	49.5	− 0.81
Inflation Change*Long Campaign	− 93.5	0.69
Inflation Change*High Responsibility	480.5	− 1.4
Inflation Change*Long Campaign*High Responsibility	− 1,079.0	− 0.5
Inflation Change*High Responsibility*Rightist	− 337.9	1.2
Inflation Change*High Responsibility*Rightist*Long Campaign	932.4	1.0
Inflation Change*Low Responsibility	279.2	− 1.4
Inflation Change*Low Responsibility*Rightist	− 597.2	0.7
Inflation Change*Low Responsibility*Rightist*Long Campaign	270.0	0.94

Notes: Dependent variable is vote for party. Cell entries are OLS coefficients and *t*-statistics. $N = 609$ Adj. $R = 0.14$ S.E.R. = 2.92

cause the strength of the economic effects on voting to vary? Some general findings from Table 2 will be addressed as they bear on how we present the results in Table 3.

We interpret the evidence from Table 2 as additional support for the Powell

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TABLE 3 *Effects of Economy on Vote for Parties with High Levels of Responsibility*

	Unemployment		Inflation	
	Short	Long	Short	Long
Rightist party	2.45†	2.78†	192.18*	− 47.95*
High-responsibility	(1.15)	(0.87)	(192.70)	(168.32)
Leftist party	− 1.53*	− 2.56*†	530.06*	− 642.44*†
High-responsibility	(1.83)	(0.88)	(692.11)	(289.69)

Notes: $N = 609$. Cell entries represent the effect of unemployment or inflation on party vote holding other variables constant (simple slope). These numbers are computed by combining the appropriate coefficients from Table 2. See fn. 29 for compilation formulae. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors of these slopes, which are calculated from the variances and covariances of the coefficients from Table 2.

*Indicates that the short-long campaign coefficients are statistically different from one another at a 0.05 level of significance. These cells also shaded.

†Indicates that the cell entry is statistically different from zero at a 0.05 level of significance.

and Whitten and Stevenson hypotheses that only parties with high levels of cabinet responsibility should experience any electoral effects from economic performance regardless of campaign length. These findings are also consistent with the work on party popularity by Andersen.[35] Given this, in Table 3 we do not report the effects of the economy on vote share for parties with low cabinet responsibility or for opposition parties (no responsibility), since the effects are insignificant regardless of campaign length.

Again, in Table 3 we present the effects of unemployment and inflation on vote for parties with high levels of cabinet responsibility. These numbers are the simple slopes computed from Table 2. Generally speaking, the results provide modest support for the hypothesis about campaign length. In particular, the tests for whether the parameters for long and short campaigns are different from one another are statistically significant for three of the four cases reported (only the case of unemployment effects on rightist parties is insignificantly different between long and short campaigns). Further, the pattern suggests support for the idea that economic effects are of greater magnitude in longer campaigns. More than just being different from each other (short v. long), three of the estimated effects for short campaigns are indistinguishable from zero by any reasonable standard (while only one of the coefficients for long campaigns

[35] Christopher Andersen, *Blaming the Government: Citizens and the Economy in Five European Democracies* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1995). Recall that the logic behind this result is that retrospective, incumbency-oriented voters will punish incumbents for poor economic performances. Without the ability to assign blame for economic policy or outcomes to specific parties (the low responsibility cases), however, voters are unable to act on this logic. A similar story applies to voters who are prospective and vote to insure a particular future policy, they simply concentrate their economic votes on parties that are likely to play a major role in the determination of policy (that is high responsibility cases).

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is insignificantly different from zero). We believe these findings give some credence to the notion that voters learn from the competing messages that candidates send them during campaigns in much the way Gelman and King predicted they would.

Having presented these general results from Table 3, a closer look at the coefficients is warranted. The signs of the economic effects differ between left and right parties more in accordance with Stevenson's than with Powell and Whitten's hypotheses about the nature of economic voting in parliamentary democracies.[36] Specifically, the left seems to be hurt by a bad economy whether measured by inflation or unemployment, while the right seems actually to gain from higher unemployment, regardless of campaign length.[37] The effect of inflation on rightist, high responsibility incumbents is not statistically significant for either short or long campaigns. This could be due to the fact that inflation, in general, may be a difficult concept about which to learn. Studies in American politics have shown that voters learn easily about unemployment because news stories can show visual images of unemployed people waiting in long lines to cash unemployment checks. Inflation, however, does not lend itself to pithy stories or simple pictures. These factors may make inflation less apt to be primed in the minds of voters.[38]

Thus, while we still think the balance of the evidence favours support for our hypotheses, we do not want to overstate the case. For parties of the left, voters in long campaigns use real economic data on inflation and unemployment when making a vote decision, just as we expected; and in short campaigns these voters do not. For parties of the right, however, voters in short and long campaigns use unemployment as a factor in vote choice with relatively equal weight. And, even in long campaigns voters were unable to use information about inflation to evaluate rightist parties.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that there are systematic differences in the ways that voters are able to use the real values of economic variables when casting a vote depending on how long they have had to learn about the true state of the economy. Gelman and King motivated this analysis by suggesting that in longer campaigns, voters have more time to be exposed to competing campaign messages and to learn about the true state of the economy and the true policy positions of candidates. We tested one implication of their assertion on 113 elections in thirteen democracies – that voters in short campaigns would not be

[36] A traditional retrospective voting hypothesis that does not distinguish between left and right incumbents is also not supported – this theory would suggest both left and right incumbents should suffer from both inflation and unemployment.

[37] This positive effect of unemployment on the vote share of rightist parties is also reported by Powell and Whitten.

[38] Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 63–73.

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able to use the true values of their economic conditions as well as voters in long campaigns did. The test resulted in a confirmation of the hypothesis – subject to some limitations.

First, consistent with other work on comparative economic voting, economic effects were only found in cases in which the cabinet parties could clearly be identified as responsible for government policy.[39] Not in all elections, then, is there even the opportunity for campaigns to encourage economic voting. Secondly, while the statistical results from Tables 2 and 3 are generally supportive, they are not overwhelming.

Three of the four possible differences between long and short campaigns that we tested in Table 3 were statistically significant. And although the long and short campaign estimates for rightist inflation are statistically different from each other, neither is individually different from zero. That said, however, the balance of evidence seems to favour the idea that only in campaigns of sufficient length are voters able to learn about the true state of the economy and so, in aggregate, produce a systematically detectable economic vote.

These findings have several implications for political scientists hoping to study campaign effects. Primarily, we believe these data suggest that the minimal effects conclusion may be misleading due to its search only for the persuasion and conversion of voters. In this case, we have documented campaign effects that are not directly associated with either the persuasion or conversion of voters to or from parties. We do believe, however, that these results illustrate how campaigns may help to produce a more enlightened or more informed electorate, thereby contributing to a public good.

Secondly, voters may be learning during campaigns, but this learning will be difficult to observe unless data is gathered prior to the point at which people begin their enlightenment. In this analysis, that threshold was set at six weeks. Without the benefit of a panel design (or a graduated rolling cross-section) that begins to survey respondents well prior to six weeks before the election, it may be difficult to trace the effects of campaigns on individual voters.[40]

In terms of practical political implications, we conclude that voters will learn about true values of fundamental political variables if given enough competitive information and time. Thus, we suggest caution to campaign reformers who advocate shortening campaigns due to the disengagement or increased cynicism of the electorate. In this analysis, time is information – and length of the campaign helped voters to make use of important electoral information. Shorter campaigns may produce 'happier' voters, in the sense that they do not watch leaders attacking each other for so long; but shorter campaigns may also produce less 'enlightened' voters who don't know as much about the candidates and issues facing them.

One final difficulty associated with research on campaign effects is that when

[39] Powell and Whitten, 'Economic Voting: Taking Account of the Political Context', pp. 391–414.

[40] Perhaps this is the reason many scholars have difficulty documenting significant campaign effects using traditional election surveys, which usually begin to interview respondents six to eight weeks prior to election day.

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looking for these effects political scientists are faced with the task of not only gathering appropriate data, but of also knowing what constitutes 'proof' that an effect exists. For example, Holbrook concludes that shifts in public opinion from campaign events are not pronounced enough to overcome the effects from the state of the economy.[41] Few scholars doubt that the nation's economy is an important variable in an election year. What we have learned from this analysis, however, is that people may not know the state of the nation's economy or how important it is until the candidates begin to inform them of this information and how to use it. In the light of these findings, the importance of the nation's economy to voters on election day is a significant campaign variable. Thus, when political scientists conclude that the importance of the economy signifies that campaigns have minimal effects, they may be underestimating what the campaigns and the candidates have actually done.

[41] Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?*

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