HOW VOTERS CONSTRUCT IMAGES OF POLITICAL CANDIDATES:
The Role of Political Advertising and Televised News

by

Montague Kern and Marion Just

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John F. Kennedy School of Government

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The voting literature has belittled the impact of campaigns on electoral outcomes, focusing instead on the greater contribution of partisan alignment [Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948] and retrospective judgments of governmental performance [Fiorina, 1981] as key predictors of the vote. But some recent evidence [Hershey, in Pomper, 1989; Pfau and Kensky, 1990] and much popular press are devoted to the power of campaigns to sway the electorate. If there is agreement between these two schools of thought it centers on the impact of the campaign on marginal voters and on the role of the campaign in influencing candidate evaluations and highlighting resonant issues.

The extent to which public discourse during a campaign centers on issues favoring one candidate as opposed to another is considered a good predictor of recent election outcomes. A case in point is the success of the 1988 Bush presidential campaign in directing discourse to patriotism (the Pledge of Allegiance) and crime (prison furloughs, Willie Horton). The best kind of candidate issue, as illustrated by the 1988 campaign, is one that not only casts the sponsor in a good light ("Bush is tough on crime") but at the same time casts the opponent in a bad light ("Dukakis is soft on crime"). Emphasizing agenda variables over partisan predisposition or economic preordination, points to the active role of voters in campaign communication. Issues are only important in the campaign agenda when they resonate with voters and shape their assessments of the candidate.

This research was designed to investigate the role of news and advertising in stimulating discourse about campaign issues and in the formation of candidate images. The vehicle for the study is a series of focus groups exposed to news and advertising broadcast during the 1990 Senate race in North Carolina.

This analysis of issue resonance and candidate image formation utilizes concepts drawn from schema theories of learning and memory, which increasingly have been tested experimentally [Crocker, Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Crockett, 1988; Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Graber, 1988; Reeves, Chaffee and Tims, 1982; Wicks, 1986 and 1990; Wicks and Drew, 1991]. A schema is a "cognitive structure that represents organized knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus" which enables individuals to integrate new bits of information [Fiske and Taylor, 1984, p. 139]. So, for example, individuals who know that Jesse Helms is a Republican and Harvey Gantt is a Democrat, can employ party schemas in constructing mental images of the two candidates. They will expect the candidates to hold typical partisan views, and they will revise their candidate schemas as they receive new information which confirms or contradicts the images or the candidates they have provisionally constructed from party identification.

Our purpose here is not so much to show how schema aid in information acquisition, as to show the dynamics of schema construction. This should prove a useful enterprise from a theoretical standpoint, as schema theory is often criticized for taking the schemas as given and offering no explanation for their origin [Kuklinski et al, 1991; Wicks, in press]. In this exercise we take two groups of individuals who are essentially unfamiliar with the 1990 North Carolina Senate race and show them news and political advertising from the climatic weeks of the campaign. We observe how individuals employ their values, beliefs, prior information and experiences (i.e. schemas) in elaborating new mini-schemas for Jesse Helms and Harvey Gantt.

Methods

The focus group methodology itself is relatively new, and presents a number of analytic problems [Lewin, 1947; Merton, Fiske, and Kendall, 1956; Krueger, 1988; Lederman, 1990a and b; Delli Carpini and Williams 1990 and 1991]. The standard size of a focus group (eight to ten people) is too small even for the kinds of validity tests used in experimental research. In addition, focus groups are not in any sense random samples. The participants are generally recruited to meet target criteria (in our case, middle and working class Democrats). The culturally and economically homogeneous groups that we constructed for this study participated comfortably and relatively equally in the discussions. The aim of our analysis was to explore not only individual processes but the social construction of meaning. Therefore, we

looked at the group discourse as the object of study and analyzed the patterns of expression over time. We note in the reports of other focus group researchers [Delli Carpini and Williams, 1991] that individual participants often do not hold consistent positions over time. Researchers generally blame the norms of civility and the pressures for consensual outcomes in small groups [Janis, 1982] for some of the variation. We have dealt with the problem of pressure to conform in two ways. First, we have asked each individual to record a response prior to the discussion in order to anchor opinions in the minds of the individuals and provide a crosspressure for consistency between the discourse and the written opinion. We expect our participants to be more likely to "stick to their guns" because they had committed themselves in writing. Second, our analysis focuses on the trends of discourse, especially shifts in the consensual view as represented by lines of discourse or mean responses. This emphasis allows us to observe the social construction of meaning which is a major advantage of the focus group method.

The participants were exposed to televised ads and news coverage in the sequence in which they were presented during the last stages of the general election campaign between incumbent Senator Jesse Helms and challenger Harvey Gantt. Because we wished to examine the formation of candidate images, the participants were drawn from outside the state of North Carolina. We expected these "naive" voters to be more open to persuasive messages by and about the candidates than would have been possible in North Carolina itself.

As is typical in the construction of focus groups, the participants were chosen to be ethnically and socio-economically homogeneous in order to make them as comfortable as possible in expressing their views to a roomful of strangers. The target population was white middle-class weak Democrats and independents in Southern New Jersey.[1] Our choice of target population was based on our need to find a group relatively unfamiliar with the North Carolina campaign and coincidentally to test the appeal of Helms' anti-affirmative action message to swing voters outside the South.[2] To further enhance the flow of conversation we conducted separate discussions with men and women. Evidence of the discussions which resulted supports our view that homogeneity on these various dimensions allowed for frank disclosure of views on such highly charged issues as race, homosexuality and

politics. Here we detail the analysis of the men's group in order to illustrate the development of particular schema. The women's group expressed similar sentiments and came to essentially similar conclusions, but emphasized themes somewhat differently from the men. In subsequent studies, we analyze the gender divergences in political discourse.

The focus groups were structured as quasi-simulations. By way of introducing the simulation and stimulating interaction in this group around political topics, in the initial phase (Phase 1) the participants were asked to respond to the general question "is the country off on the right track or the wrong track?" Race emerged as the most important issue. The participants were then asked to imagine that they were voters in the election between Helms and Gantt, and to use the information in the video segments in making up their minds how to vote. Subsequent discussion segments in Phases Two through Seven followed exposure to a brief selection of news and advertising and the neutrally framed question "what's going on here for you?" Transcripts of the group discussions were analyzed line-by-line for their topics, and cognitive and affective elements. As is common in ethnographic analysis, many lines were multiply coded. Quantitative indicators convey only relative emphasis in the discourse, and are used to compare across phases of the discussion or across groups.

The video segments represent two-to-three day periods of news coverage and new candidate advertising, drawn from the final ten days of the Helms-Gantt contest, when opinion shifted away from Gantt and towards Helms. We were interested in seeing whether the structure of news and advertising exposure could help us to understand how opinions shift, and how candidate images are reshaped in response to new information. Points of opinion change were primarily assessed from the group discussion. However, analysis of the discourse was aided by a parallel analysis of written, scaled evaluations of the candidates which the participants provided immediately after exposure to each video segment.

Our coding of the discourse arises from a constructionist approach to communication, which holds that individuals construct meaning from media messages based on their own attitudes, values and affects [Gamson, 1988; Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992; Crigler, forthcoming]. We assumed that our participants would assess media messages through the prism

of their own information, understanding and judgments. In charting the discourse we specifically acknowledged when remarks arose in response to the media stimuli and when they were grounded in information or values of the participants. Following the constructionist tradition, our analysis takes account not only of opinions, but also of the critical interpretation of information, behavior, issues and events. The group discussions analyzed here illustrate that individuals can learn politically-relevant information from even brief media exposures and that they interpret that information in the light of their own constructions of political reality.

Advertising and News Stimulus Materials

It should be noted that this study, in examining spot ads in their news environment, builds on a research tradition designed to replicate the pattern of candidate presentation actually found on the airwaves [Patterson and McClure, 1976; Kern, 1989]. Most studies of voter response to candidates concentrate either on ads or news. The purpose of this research is to understand how voters make choices as they build candidate images based on a range of information choices. The focus group was offered information in discrete phases, on the theory that the temporal order of messages and their relationship is important in the image formation process.

The news stories and most of the ads are taken from broadcasts in Winston Salem and Greensboro in North Carolina's three-city Triad (Winston Salem, Greensboro and High Point) from the final ten days of the 1990 Gantt-Helms Senate race. This race was notable for the fact that a moderate black Democratic candidate, Harvey Gantt, the former mayor of Charlotte, challenged conservative Republican incumbent Jesse Helms, and ran even with him (with ten percent of the voters undecided) up until the last ten days of the election. Gantt's strategy involved running on "middle class" issues, such as education and health and values, such as self-help. He did not raise the issue of affirmative action, or try to protect himself against attacks in this area. In the final ten days, Helms engaged in a series of sharp attacks on Gantt including the famous "Wringing Hands" ("Crumpled Paper") commercial, which portrayed a rejected white job applicant, and which attacked affirmative action for minorities.

Helms won the election with 53 percent of the vote to 47 percent for Gantt.

The stimulus material was taken from this final ten-day period, which began as Helms came back from Washington beginning a tour of the state's media markets, and stepped up his advertising attack. In order to introduce the candidates to the New Jersey audience the initial video exposure included two of each candidate's positive ads taken from an earlier period in the campaign. These early ads gave the participants in the simulation an opportunity to see the initial self-presentations of the candidates. Otherwise the ads and news used as stimuli were presented in the sequence in which they were broadcast during the final ten days of the race. (See Fig. 1) While the order of exposure faithfully followed the campaign, some news stories have been omitted, and ads that were aired repeatedly in the campaign were shown only once in the focus group exposures.

Replicating the pattern of ads and news which reached the voters in the North Carolina Triad meant that Helms' "Wringing Hands" ad (the ad that gained national attention for raising the affirmative action issue in a racially-charged contest) was not shown in the focus group until the end of the race. The ad actually first aired in North Carolina only on the Thursday before the Tuesday election, after most of the other messages on our tape were broadcast. We made a point of including the network news story ("Mudslinging") about campaign advertising which aired during this period, because we hypothesize that it might have framed subsequent exposure to ads and may have been used by voters in the process of constructing their images of politicians who air political ads. The remaining news stories are drawn from local news, which is the primary source of information about Senate campaigns available to viewers. (It is rare for local races to make it on network news, except as part of national "trend" stories such as "Mudslinging.")

The local news stories in the last 10 days of the Helms-Gantt race all deal with strategy and the "horserace." There was a significant "spin" on the news which in this case favored the incumbent, Jesse Helms. The incumbent-orientation represents the norm for local campaign coverage [Goldenberg and Traugott, 1984; Robinson in Graber, 1984; Kern, 1989]. In the case under consideration local news not only followed the incumbent, but amplified his message. No news stories were developed on journalist reportorial initiative either concerning the issues in the election, or the serious charges which Helms raised against Gantt during this period. In particular, there was no analysis of

News and Advertising Stimuli

Phase 2	The candidates define themselves with a positive ad from earlier in the campaign, and each other and an attack ad.	
	Helms:	"Tiananmen Square" (positive character ad)
	Gantt:	"SAT Scores Worst" (issue-based attack ad)
	Helms:	"Gays/Special Interests" (emotional attack ad)
	Gantt:	"Bio (Self-Made Man)" (positive character ad)
Phase 3	Network News:	ABC, "Mudslinging"
	Gantt:	"Missed Vote" (issue-based attack ad)
	Local News:	WXII, Helms stumping, from Reidsville
Phase 4	Helms:	"Dr. Ellis Paige" (talking head, attack ad)
	Gantt:	"Helms Record" (issue-based attack ad)
	Local News:	WFMY, Helms stumping with Republican Senators
Phase 5	Helms:	"TV Deal/Racial" (character and issue attack ad)
	Local News:	WXII, Gantt and Helms stumping
	Gantt:	"Don't Be Taken in by the Smears" (talking head response ad)
Phase 6	Helms:	"Education —Link with Quotas" (talking head attack ad)
	Gantt:	"SAT Worst in the Nation" (new version, issue-based attack)

Figure 1

Gantt's alleged misuse of an FCC affirmative action program while he was mayor of Charlotte.[3] Instead, major news themes replicated campaign themes, especially those which Helms raised in his ads. In this, they cooperated in a "media blitz" campaign strategy which involves developing a coordinated message for use in political ads and news soundbites. New information was developed and presented around such simplified, single themes (on the negative side, link with special interests and misuse of office, on the positive side, "he stands up for principle" and represents the voters in office) [Kern, 1989; Kern in Spitzer, 1993].

Participants in our focus group simulation were initially favorable to Gantt. But they did not find confirmation of their first construction of Gantt in subsequent ads or news stories. Just like real voters they had to make continual choices, using their own values and experiences to select information to assist them in constructing images of the candidate.

Discourse Analysis

Analysis of the discourse of the focus group was used to facilitate an understanding of the individual frames through which participants evaluate candidates, and to assess the extent to which various messages stimulated discussion. In examining the discourse we considered whether messages of one candidate have a greater impact than those of another, and whether some messages reassert themselves in the course of group discussion with a sleeper effect, as individuals crystallize their images of candidates on the basis of new information coming from the media and from other members of the group.

The discourse was read by several coders who noted two major components of the discussion — discourse introduced by participants and discourse stimulated by media exposure.

Discourse Introduced by Participants The first category to emerge was discourse introduced by participants, without reference to information contained in the news and political advertising. Participant-generated discourse was further categorized according to the following operational definitions:

Values: Overarching valued concepts, or norms, i.e. standards of behavior against which individual behavior is judged.

Preferences: Expressions of favor or opposition, particularly in relation to issues.

Beliefs: What people think about the world; included are "for" and "against" statements which apply values to real world problems.

Affect: Statements carrying emotional valence around such general concepts as trust, caring, hopefulness, fear, anxiety, distrust and powerlessness.

Experience: Discourse arising from the life experience of the voter.

Information: A voter's own prior information about the topics under discussion enters the discourse, or information needs are expressed.

Discourse introduced by participants without reference to information contained in the news and ads represented 340 lines or 57.6 percent of the 590 lines of discourse. Its most prominent element was on the affective side: distrust of politicians (29 lines). In other areas, tolerance for African-Americans (24 lines) was also important, along with negative attitudes toward racial quotas (24 lines) negative experience with quotas (18 lines) and the need for further information to evaluate campaign messages (32 lines). Prejudice against gays was a significant, if less vocal, submotif (8 lines).

Discourse Evaluating Candidates (Mini-Schema)
The candidate response component comprised a significant portion of the total discourse, 42.3 percent. This discourse through which candidates were evaluated, positively or negatively, in response to media stimuli, fell into a number of categories which were found to be related:

Character
• Like and dislike statements about character in general, often referring to *personal qualities* of empathy and caring.
• References to candidate's *records* and *accomplishments*.
• Remarks about ties to special interests.
• Statements about the candidate's credibility.
Campaign
• References to candidate's negative *campaigning*. Remarks that the candidate uses *negative advertising*.

Issue Positions
• Statements favoring or disfavoring the candidate's stands on the *issues*.

This analysis enables us to understand the multiple elements of a candidate image (or mini-schema) as expressed in voter discourse while impressions of a candidate are being formed. It is clear, character is the most significant category of mini-schema, representing 32.2 percent of the total discourse. Campaign-related candidate schema, including "uses negative advertising," ranked a distant second, at 5.5 percent. Issue based candidate evaluations lagged even farther behind, at 3.8 percent of the total discourse. The main issue mentioned was education, which was raised in the advertising messages.

Elements of character schema relate to such areas as candidate credibility, the ability to represent everyone, and the negative side of the representation coin, association with "special interests." The results indicate that independence, or lack thereof, from what are taken to be "special interests" has become an important part of voter schema, through which information which comes from the media and through intergroup dialogue is evaluated in the construction of candidate images. Overall, three-fourths of the character-related schema were negative (150 lines of negative to 46 lines of positive discourse).

This research finds that the way candidates campaign, including their use of negative advertising, is also used by voters in constructing candidate images. Interestingly, however, it is much less significant than the character-related aspect of schema. An opposing aspect, failure to
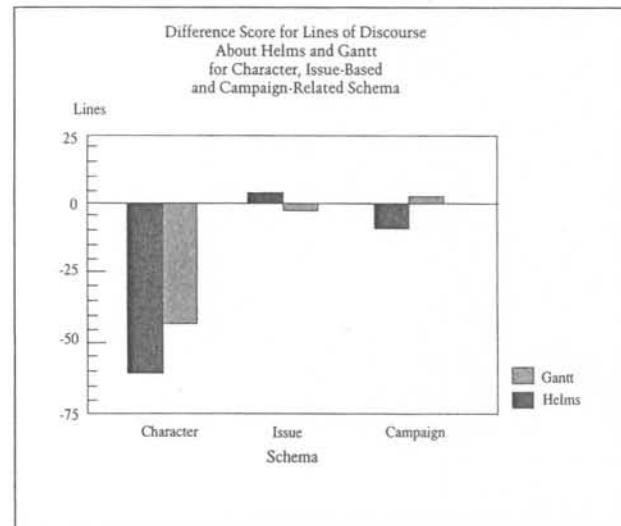

Figure 2

respond to attack, coexists as a frame through which candidate images are constructed. Overall, as Figure 2 illustrates, negative character schema predominated within the discourse.

Which Media Stimulated Discourse? The response component was further analyzed to indicate which message stimulated discourse. The line-by-line analysis of the response discourse was coded for the specific origin of the information: national television news, local television news, ads and news stories, Helms' ads, Gantt's ads, and both candidates' ads. Figure 3 summarizes the findings in this area. It also indicates that voters far more frequently selected messages in advertising, as topics of discourse, than news. Two hundred and six, out of the total of 268 lines of discourse, are in the reaction to ads-only categories. Figure 3 also indicates that the Helms' ads were the most generative form of expression. Approximately half of all of the discourse coded in the media-stimulated category represented a reaction to one of his ads alone.

The Building of Candidate Images

This research allows us to understand the construction of a candidate image through time, albeit much foreshortened. Individuals actively participate in the process — their values, opinions, judgements, feelings, experiences and frames for evaluating candidates come into play alongside candidate messages. The interaction between the message, the audience evaluations of the messengers, and resonance with personal values and experience constitute the message received.

Our special concern is the early stages of the construction of an image of an unknown candidate, Harvey Gantt. His image evolves more than Helms, in this discussion, perhaps because the New Jersey voters in our focus group did not have an image or schema for Gantt at the outset of the discussion. They had to evaluate him exclusively on the basis of the video messages provided for the group. In the case of Helms, some voters had prior schema: expressed by one, for example, as "I don't like Jesse Helms." Distrust of Helms and his messages was stated

Lines of Discourse Containing Images of Candidates Which Draw on Ads and News

Phase	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	Percent
	Ads Only	Ads, Local, Nat'l News	Ads, Local News	Ads, Local News	Ads Only	Ads, Local News		
TV News								
National	0	11	0	0	0	0	11	
Local	0	14	4	0	0	0	18	
News Subtotal	0	25	4	0	0	0	29	10.6
Ads and News	0	3	12	11	0	8	34	12.5
Ads								
Helms	30	20	18	45	3	17	133	
Gantt	35	10	10	1	6	0	62	
Both	11	0	0	0	4	0	15	
Ads Subtotal	76	30	28	46	13	17	210	76.9
Total							273	100.0

Figure 3

from the beginning and continued throughout the discussion. Yet just as change occurred in the evolving image of the less well known candidate, it also occurred in relation to Helms' image. Helms was viewed more positively by participants at the end of the focus group than at the beginning.

The change in the evaluations of the candidates is illustrated in Figure 4. Over the whole period of the analysis, participants constructed an extremely positive image of Gantt in Phase Two, with 30 lines of positive evaluation and two of negative evaluation, to an evaluation of him in Phase Seven which involved 14 lines of negative evaluation, comparable to the negative evaluation of Helms. The nadir for Gantt was in Phase Five with 32 lines of negative discourse to Helms' six.

Significantly, the overall feeling thermometers taken for the two candidates point to the same results. As Figure 5 illustrates, they reflected the discourse, dropping from a high of 73 for Gantt at the outset to 61 at the end. Helms' overall rating was about 50 on the 100 point scale both at the beginning and at the end of the discourse.

After the initial positive evaluation of Harvey Gantt the discourse went through three main phases as participants brought their values, affects, issue preferences and experiences to bear on their construction of his image. Gantt's honeymoon stage in Phase Two is examined below, as an example of the discourse method of
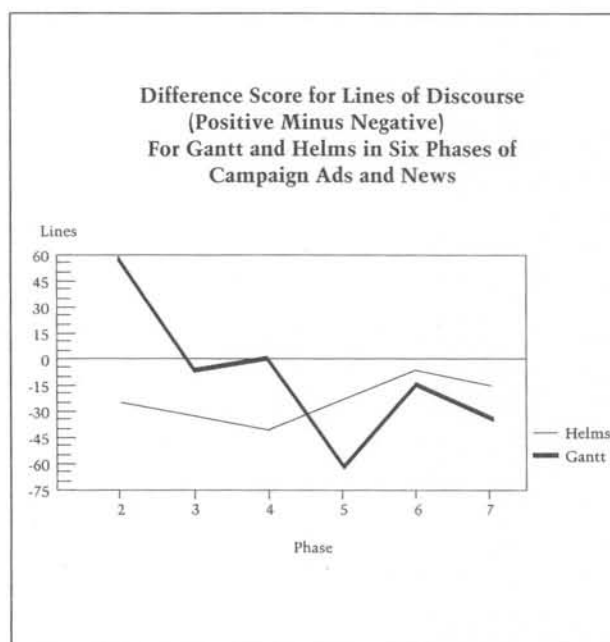

Figure 4

analyzing image construction. At this point (after the first sequence of ads which are analyzed in detail below) it was clear that voters liked Gantt because his messages resonated with their values of tolerance and individual initiative/self help. Gantt also had the advantage on the issue of education, which, however, was not an issue of cutting concern in the male focus group.

In contrast, Helms was evaluated with nine negative lines on character and two on negative advertising in Phase Two, as he had introduced an ad linking Gantt with homosexual special interests. Anti-incumbency sentiment was targeted in his direction both during this phase, and the next, as voters selected messages from the news stories which corroborated their view that he was an incumbent who had been there a mighty long time, and was probably, therefore, no longer representative of the people. Because Helms was depicted in the Phase Three news stories with older people, and most of the men were middle aged or younger, one participant said he did not think Helms represented younger people or the working class.

Interestingly, however, the participants did not apply issues in their negative evaluation of Helms. One person stated: "I don't like him." But no one said, "I don't like his stand on the National Education Association or homosexuality." Voter schema about negative advertising, however, hurt Helms in Phase Two as in the next phase. In Phase Two the main focus was on
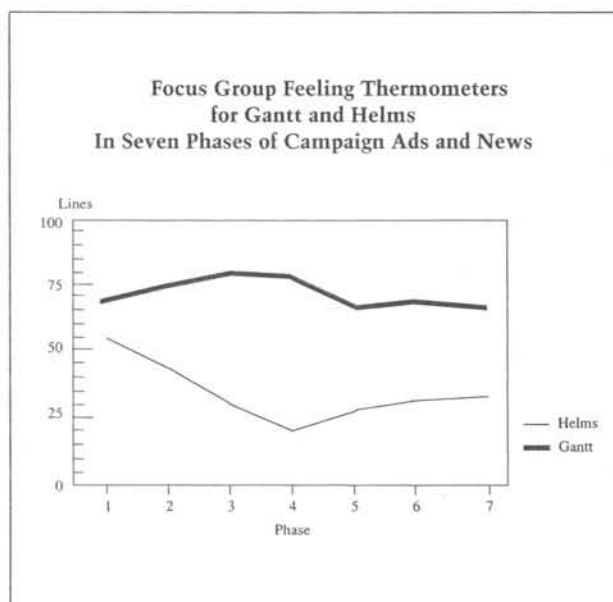

Figure 5

a local news story which amplified Helms' charge that Gantt was secretly airing negative ads on black radio stations, running a "Secret Campaign." Voters evaluated Helms negatively in Phases Two and Three for his attacks on Gantt.

The participants' frequently expressed value of tolerance, and their view that the candidate shared their values of individual initiative and self-help, contributed to their positive evaluation of Gantt. Anti-incumbency sentiment and distrust of politicians was targeted in Helms' direction, as was the case until Phase Six, when it was only Gantt who was evaluated negatively while Helms was evaluated neutrally. In the final phase the Gantt and Helms negative evaluations were equally high, but Helms had gained a clear convert, and few Gantt supporters remained.

The Construction of a Positive Image: Phase Two Examined

We examine Phase Two in some detail paying particular attention to coding categories, and the construction of positive imagery of Harvey Gantt, as it survives the process of group dynamics. The role of the moderator in facilitating discussion is also illustrated. Phase Two demonstrates that the types of ads which offer the greatest amount of useful information to the voter are those which involve emotional rhetoric, character-related information and issues which are self-explanatory or which relate to readily understood individual experiences [Kern, in Spitzer]. "In such ads issues are now personified through the use of visual and aural effects." Sound and visuals are blended, or "dovetailed" around a story of situation, exemplifying the values and issues expressed (Kern, 1989; p. 208-9).

In this phase, four political ads were introduced as stimuli. Two of them offered information which voters used in their construction of candidate images: a Helms negative emotional attack ad ("Gays/Special Interests") and a Gantt positive emotional biography ad ("Self-Made Man"). The other two ads were largely ignored.

Overall, the dynamics of Phase Two had short-range as well as long-range consequences. The short-range consequences are voter construction of a positive image of Gantt and a negative image of Helms. The long-range consequence, however, is that only *one* of the four ads was a "sleeper", generating discourse and contributing to the ongoing evolution of candidate imagery in subsequent phases. The "sleeper" was Helms' negative attack ad "Gays/Special Interests."

The Ads: Four ads are introduced during Phase Two of the campaign simulation. Two are positive ads which enable the candidate to make his best case: his character, issues and record are presented. The two included in this analysis are from early in the race, rather than during the final ten days. They were introduced in order to allow the New Jersey voters to see at least one aspect of the positive side of the candidates, which North Carolina voters had already seen. The first of these is a Helms ad in which he compares himself to a courageous Chinese protester who stood up alone in Tiananmen Square against a tank. The second ad is Harvey Gantt's positive emotional "Bio (Self-Made Man)" in which he dovetails the story of his life as a self-made man, with the values of individualism and hard work, and their implied policy consequences: no government waste or "handouts." He says the driving force behind his campaign is helping to build a nation in which all who strive and work hard can similarly achieve.[4]

The Gantt attack ad is largely informational. It focuses on a series of facts about the state: that its SAT scores rank 49th in the nation, that its children drop out of school, that there are 900 toxic waste sites, etc. Declarations are presented in text on the screen, for example, "For 18 years Jesse Helms has voted against Education." The ad concludes "North Carolina Can't Afford Another Six Years of the Jesse Helms Way: It's Time for a Change." The only character message is the record of Jesse Helms. There is no stylistic "dovetailing," or blending of visuals around a story or situation, exemplifying the values and issues expressed. For example, in a recital of toxic waste statistics there are no tales told about harm to real people. The same is true in relation to the dismal "facts" about education.

The Helms attack ad is of a different sort. In the academic literature all ads which attack an opponent are frequently defined as negative. There are, however, emotional negative ads which utilize harsh sounds and affect-laden symbols which connect the opponent with negatively perceived "others." Helms' "Gays/Fundraising" ad falls into this category. Homosexuals are the negatively perceived "other." The ad's message: Is Gantt indebted to special interest groups? Is he trustworthy?

Although the two ads are very different, both present Helms' and Gantt's issues with emotional rhetoric — such as the role of special interests in contemporary politics, or the need

for America to return to a self-help ethic. Together, these two ads are the subject of most of the discourse, as the voters in Phase Two construct their initial images of the candidates.

Gantt's "Bio" offered themes which were congruent with New Jersey's middle class values as expressed by focus group participants: individual initiative, the work ethic and tolerance of blacks.

"Bio" stimulated positive discourse, with several participants contributing to the construction of a positive image for Gantt, based on information about his character, stands on an issue — education, which he not only favored, but which his life story as presented in the ad, exemplified — and record. Two voters, who expressed their own concern about education, also used "SAT Scores Worst" to help construct a positive image of Gantt. The positive image construction survived a challenge from one voter, Ken, who based it first on the value of "needing more information" and subsequently on the emotion, "distrust of politicians." It also survived a challenge from another voter, Ralph, who drew from his own experience with the unpopular Governor Florio of New Jersey and indicated that he had seen nothing from either candidate. The dialogue follows, along with an illustration of the coding process, and the group dynamic which evolved, including the role of the moderator.

Arnold: He [Gantt] is for people. He's got his *beliefs* (+IMAGE:GENERAL). He's doing a lot of things right. I already mentioned he's doing *education* (+IMAGE: ISSUE). [Coded as a response not only to "Bio" but to "SAT Scores Worst" as well, because education is mentioned.]

Moderator: You say he's for people. Why do you think he's for people?

Arnold: Well, the things that he's done, built schools, and, you know, had a business [+IMAGE: RECORD].

Ken: [disagreeing] How do you know he's doin' them? Did somebody [else] start them [the schools and business]? Is he *finishing* them? [INFORMATION LACKING]

Arnold: Well you can't tell from all this, but you can tell a lot more than the other guy [INFORMATION LACKING].

Moderator: One at a time, one at a time, folks.

Ken: I was just stating I can't tell that much from looking at the TV [INFORMATION SEEKING]. Politicians have not really been known to tell the truth in my lifetime. That I know of [AFFECT: DISTRUST OF POLITICIANS].

[Ken continues with further distrust of politicians, distrust of the news media, etc.]

Bob: [disagreeing, enters the discussion, taking it back to the original construction, adding his own interpretation to it] ... I mean, like he said, he started up, you know, from a poor black kid, you know and he's tryin' for education. [Coded as a response not only to "Bio" but to "SAT" as well because education is mentioned.] You know, at least what he said is "I want everybody to earn. I want them to earn what they work for. Not to give it out" [+IMAGE: CREDIBILITY].

Moderator: So you like that.

Bob: Well, that's what caught me there. At least he came out and said, I'm not gonna give it out to you [+IMAGE: GENERAL]. It doesn't necessarily mean, later on, down the road that he's going to do it. But at least he come out and said it. There's a statement, he made it on TV and everybody's gonna hold him accountable for it [+IMAGE: ISSUE].

Moderator: Let me go to Ralph and then let me go down there. Ralph, what are you thinking?

Ralph: You're asking people in New Jersey. This is [not] South Carolina. We're more metropolitan. We're more suspicious. We went through a campaign for governor in which we were veritably, we were deceived to no end....he hasn't shown me anything yet [OWN INFORMATION; AFFECT: DISTRUST OF POLITICIANS].

[The dialogue shifts to Tom, who ranks Gantt favorably on positive campaigning [+IMAGE: POSITIVE CAMPAIGN] and concludes that Helms' negative attack ad must "mean that he

can't attack him for what he's saying he did. So that puts some credibility on his advertising [+GANTT IMAGE: CREDIBILITY; -HELMS IMAGE: NEGATIVE ADS].

Thus the image survives several challenges until the topic turns to the subject of the nature of the negative advertising which Helms is using.

Tom expresses tolerance for gays who "should not be mistreated." Another participant disagrees, and interprets the information in Helms' ad in the terms described in the ad, as representing special interest group support for Gantt:

Ken: I don't know... the fact that if you have one single interest putting in that much money. What's this guy got to give back to these people? [-IMAGE: SPECIAL INTEREST, GAYS]

Gantt's positive image survives during this phase as he developed it in his advertising, as middle-class male voters construct a candidate image using their own values of tolerance and individual initiative to select related bits of information from the ads. The discourse is more about values than about issues, although education is mentioned. Self-help is frequently stated in terms of values. What emerges is the image of a "people"-oriented candidate whose life reflects the values which they care about. But Gantt has scored no points against Helms. And the Helms ad has sown a seed in a climate of distrust of politicians and a submotif of prejudice against gays, which is clearly expressed in the next segment of the campaign simulation, Phase Three, as the Gantt image is sullied with the special interest group connection. This seed germinates in later phases of the campaign.

The overall image of Helms, who launched the attack in Phase Two, is negative, and is expressed in the following remarks:

Ray: He's been in the Congress and the Senate for awhile, and is therefore less connected to "the people" [-IMAGE: SPECIAL INTERESTS].

[later]

Ray: He [also] blasted the gay community.... and if he's against this one specific group, he's probably against the middle class and he's probably against blue collar, and everything else [-IMAGE: NEGATIVE ADVERTISING].

Ralph: [disagreeing] Why not bring a negative to light? If it is negative. I mean "that's politics" [+IMAGE: NEGATIVE ADVERTISING].

Voters disagreed on the degree to which the use of negative advertising affected their candidate evaluations. Few of them "liked" Helms. But his message got through.

After the "Honeymoon" — Media and the Construction of a Negative Image

Following the "honeymoon" in Phase Two a negative image of Harvey Gantt began in Phase Three, when the sleeper effect of Helms', as opposed to Gantt's, commercials became apparent. Although they denounced Helms for his "Gays/Special Interests" ad in Phase Two, the participants transferred their reservoir of distrust for politicians from Helms to Gantt in Phase Three. They selected themes from the "Gays/Special Interests" ad, amplified in news stories, as the main topic for discourse. The amplification of the Helms ad occurred in this period not only in the network news story ("Mudslinging") which ran visuals of the "Gays/Special Interests" ad, but in a local news story which repeated a Helms charge that Gantt was running a "secret" campaign. In the process of selecting information from the media campaign to talk about in the group discussion, participants drew on prior distrust of politicians, as well as prejudice against gays. A question emerged of whether Gantt was gay, and why he had gone to San Francisco to raise money. Both points came to be generalized around the idea that Gantt was linked to special interests. This possibility was amplified in news stories containing Helms' charges to this effect, which provided confirmation for voter discomfort.

In Phase Four, Gantt attempted to regain control of the agenda, with a return to an issue ad focusing on Helms' poor record in regard to the children of the state. This ran along with Helms' response ad, "Dr. Ellis Paige." The Helms ad focused the education issue around voter distrust of government and politicians. Helms argues he had voted against the federal education bills as charged by Gantt in order to reduce the federal role in education. This assertion brought into play generalized distrust of government and politicians. Here is Tom, a key Gantt supporter:

     Well, I'm starting to be a little confused at this point. You know,

Helms is now attacking Gantt and what I have in my mind is what he said about the education issue. You know, the fact that money's being wasted. Being controlled by the Federal Government rather than...

Moderator: You think that could be true.

Tom: Yeah, it's creating a question in my mind. So at this point I'd have to look into the issue further...

In Phase Five, with seeds of doubt sown on education, Gantt's key issue, and concern about whether Gantt did in fact represent the values of individual initiative and self-help, Helms introduced a new message in his two "Television Station Deal" ads, accompanied by amplifying news stories. The TV station deal ads charged that Harvey Gantt, as mayor of Charlotte, used an affirmative action program for personal gain. At this point, the reservoir of distrust voters have for politicians was targeted at Gantt and anti-Gantt sentiment overwhelmed the discourse. Opposition to quotas as an issue emerged, as did much discourse relating to personal experience with quotas. Helms had introduced his racial advertising message in a fashion which connected with voter character-based schema for evaluating candidates. He had also introduced it to a group which was deeply concerned about race issues. During Phase One in response to a question concerning whether the country was on the right or the wrong track, virtually all the participants had selected the latter response and many identified race as the issue that was the most significant. Five times as many lines of discourse (75) were devoted to race as to the next most salient issue, drugs (15). Other issues, including taxes and government waste, did not even come close. Subthemes in this dialogue about race concerned need for tolerance (29), interracial marriage and dating (19). (See Figure 1) The upshot for Harvey Gantt in Phase Five was not that voters said they were going out to vote for Jesse Helms. Instead, they said, "apathy has set in."

In Phase Six the sleeper effect of the "Dr. Ellis Paige" commercial was apparent. This ad dovetails opposition to a federal role in education, because of federal support for quotas, with the visage of a kindly university professor speaking directly to the camera, bathed in a halo of light. Two stimuli were introduced in a further dialogue on the social issues: a Gantt ad in which he attempts to redirect the campaign agenda back to the Helms voting record on social issues,

particularly education ("SAT Worst in the Nation") and a Helms talking head ad in which he reaffirms the message of the "Dr. Ellis Paige" ad, explaining that he opposes a federal role in the area of education, because he opposes quotas. The group rejected this second record-based Gantt advertising message ("SAT Worst in Nation") and wondered about the *context* of the bills which Helms voted against. One participant said, "what exactly was the context? There's all these add-ons all the time. There's always, things are grouped together." Others agreed. With "Dr. Ellis Paige" the Helms campaign again produced an ad which, like "Gays/Special Interests" and the "TV Station Deal" ads, was a sleeper or one which comes back into the dialogue, and offers information to which voters return in their ongoing evaluation of candidate messages.

In Phase Seven the "Wringing Hands" commercial was introduced. In it the quota issue is brought away from the workplace (of television station deals) into the home of the individual viewer. A pair of white hands holds a job rejection slip, because a job was unfairly given to "a minority." At this point high levels of negative discourse are targeted at both Gantt and Helms, as voters sum up their overall negative evaluation of the candidates. Gantt's negative evaluations include a link with special interests, Helms' include a lack of credibility. The voters' overall conclusion reaffirms their earlier statement: apathy has set in.

The focus group also illustrated the frustration of voters with campaigning and with the content of campaign messages. The participants reiterated their doubts about the veracity of charges and the need to "check out" TV news and advertising information with other sources, specifically newspapers. They complained continually that charges went unanswered and wished there were other fora in which the candidates would be forced to respond to one another (such as debates). From what we know of popular behavior, it is unlikely that dissatisfaction with campaign discourse actually leads to information-seeking behavior, but it suggests that frustration may be a factor in deepening the distrust of politicians, the media and election campaigns, and also contributes to the sense of voter confusion and powerlessness.

This discourse permitted us to make some tentative judgements about the relative weight accorded to different categories of evaluation as they relate to voter construction of candidate images. How significant is "ties to special

interests" or credibility, for example, in relation to a variable such as "uses negative advertising"? From this analysis, it is clear that although voters did not like the negative advertising, they use disinformation contained in the ads to evaluate the candidate against whom it was targeted.

The bottom line is that charges, such as, "ties to special interests" and "misuse of public office for personal gain" were important in voter schema. As individuals slowly constructed and reconstructed their image of Harvey Gantt they used information available, particularly negative ads, which were confirmed in news stories.

It is also important to recognize that voters have collateral sources of information. Even in this simulation, which was structured so that the participants would be naive about this specific campaign, the members of the group were able to bring to bear relevant information about the 1988 presidential campaign, local politicians and the cost of government programs. They used this information to validate or discount the messages conveyed by and about Helms and Gantt. The simulation, therefore, illustrates the active interpretation of new messages in the light of what is already known, which characterizes the electorate's participation in the campaign process.

The analysis of each phase of the discourse, summarized in Figure 5, indicates that the broad outlines detailed above do not convey the intricate forward and backward movement, assessment and reassessment that characterizes candidate evaluation. Images of both candidates were revised over the course of the simulation, as voters selected information for attention according to their individual values, affects and preferences. This analysis also indicates both the greater immediate impact of the Helms' ads in stimulating discourse throughout the course of the campaign simulation, and their greater "sleeper" effect, as they came back into the dialogue at later phases in the simulation, after the media had moved on to other matters.

"Learning" occurred as voters selected message elements, according to their own cognitive and affective schema, and used information to construct images of the candidates.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the relatively new focus group method may be linked to a more traditional method, simulation, to produce a powerful new tool for analyzing campaign

discourse. The focus group not only demonstrated the development of candidate images but showed how those images were extended and revised in the light of new information. While the participants' individual responses written down on paper are evidence of the shifts in individual opinion in response to campaign stimuli, we were also able to take advantage of the focus group discourse to identify how the campaign messages operated in the group process.

Analysis of the focus group indicates that concern about race, which emerged early in the discussion, did not appear to decrease Gantt's initial support — he was actually favored by the New Jersey focus group at the outset of the simulation. But race concerns clearly were tapped by the Helms "TV Station Deal" ad, which called Gantt's character into question, but also raised the issue of minority set-asides and affirmative action.

The "TV Station Deal" example, however, is only one of the several messages resonating with significant shared values to produce an evaluation or reevaluation of the candidates. As we showed in the analysis in Phase Two, Gantt profited from the norm of self-help (the work ethic) and tolerance. His "Bio" ad made an important contribution to the image which emerged of Gantt as a man who had "pulled himself up by his bootstraps." This image of Gantt as a self-made man enhanced the credibility of his issue message on education. The reasoning was that a person who had made it up from poverty to become an architect, really understood the value of education. The Gantt "Bio" spot and the Helms "TV Station Deal" ads demonstrate how ads that powerfully affect candidate evaluations operate through their resonance with significant shared values.

Analysis of the discourse also reveals how one candidate can both disarm and discredit another by mobilizing widely shared beliefs. Helms was able to undermine Gantt's best issue, education, by using advertising to shift the focus to the role of the federal government in education. Here Helms drew on a generalized distrust of "big government" to neutralize Gantt's attack on his education record. This tactic was coupled with an even more powerful assault on Gantt's credibility as a fresh face in politics. Responding to a series of Helms' messages, the "Gay/Special Interests" ad, the "gets most of his money from gays" news soundbite, and most effectively in the "TV Station Deal" ad, the participants began to doubt Gantt's honesty and his ability to

represent them fairly. The result was that all of Gantt's initial support faded away and the campaign simulation ended in apathy and disgust with the electoral process.

These instances also demonstrate two important findings of our analysis which is that advertising messages were far more likely than campaign news to stimulate discussion, and second, that advertising dominated the discourse by activating widely shared affects and values. In general, references to news in the discourse about candidates concerned instances in which candidates reiterated campaign messages (e.g., Helms' soundbite repeating his charge that Gantt got "most of his money" from gays).

The focus group simulation provides evidence for the origin and dynamic revision of candidate "mini-schema" and provides a window on the way information is interpreted and utilized. Most messages appear to slide right past the audience, some messages are stored and may be activated later, and some are immediately inserted into candidate schema. We have seen that the more affectively laden messages embedded in advertising are more likely to figure in the construction of candidate schema, particularly as the messages link up with larger schema such as education or politicians.

One troubling aspect of our analysis of the news sample from this period of the Helms-Gantt campaign was that it showed a painful tendency to amplify Helms' messages at the expense of Gantt's. Helms was given a number of long, unchallenged opportunities to attack Gantt in the news, while Gantt was shown on the defensive, denying Helms' attacks. The television journalists made no independent corroborations of the charges, nor did they ask probing questions about the evidence that Helms offered for his attacks.

On an equally dismal note, the simulation demonstrates the wellsprings of distrust which negative advertising activates in candidate attacks, i.e., negative advertising is believable precisely because people believe that most politicians are not worthy of their trust. From the standpoint of democratic theory, the distaste for candidates and politicians, which results from negative campaigning is particularly troublesome. The problem is circular. Negative ads are believed because politicians are distrusted, and politicians are increasingly distrusted by people who believe negative ads. The most serious aspect of the problem is the tendency for people to want to withdraw altogether from the political process, or, as our simulation participants put it, "apathy just set in." It is not clear that a vibrant exchange of views on critical issues of policy which is essential to democratic debate can be maintained in the face of this level of public distrust.

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Endnotes

1. Middle class was defined in terms of $50,000 family income, and an education through the second year of college.

2. This same New Jersey target population was used by the Republican Party to test the "Furlough" ad in the 1988 presidential campaign.

3. For a complete analysis of the candidates' strategies, including their ads, and the news stories for this period, see Kern, 1993. For "ad watch" analyses of the ads in the general election campaign, see a series of articles by Seth Efron in the *Greensboro News and Record*, July 28-November 3, 1990.

4. The Gantt campaign made a deliberate decision not to run as a minority candidate. He defined his character and issues in general terms. The result was that he did not address issues relating to race early in the campaign. The Pfau and Kenski (1990) discussion of "inoculation" strategies implies that candidates should introduce difficult issues in order to neutralize later attacks.

For an analysis of subliminal aspects of Helms' racially tinged advertising campaign, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, plenary address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Atlanta, Georgia, October 31-November 3, 1992.