

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE ISSUE AMBIGUITY IN THE PRIMARY AND  
GENERAL ELECTION

by

JUSTIN DEAN FAZZARI

(Under the Direction of Paul-Henri Gurian)

ABSTRACT

The theory of candidate ambiguity predicts that presidential candidates are strategically unambiguous and once they advance to the general election they utilize an ambiguous message strategy. This strategy during the primaries and general election is aimed at distinguishing themselves from the other candidates. Candidates' general election strategy incorporates more ambiguity in their issue positions in order to appeal to a larger portion of the electorate. The purpose of this study is to test the theory of ambiguity that candidates' use less ambiguous issue positions during the primaries and more ambiguous positions in the general election. The 1980 National Election Study is used to examine whether respondents receive more ambiguous messages in the general election and less ambiguous messages in the primary campaign. The results from the 1980 election do not provide support for the hypothesis. This may be due to the election that was chosen for analysis. Further research on elections with less well known candidates may reflect the existence of ambiguity in general election campaigns.

INDEX WORDS: Ambiguity, Uncertainty, Issues, Qualities, Issue Positions, Character Qualities, Campaign Strategy, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, 1980 Presidential Primary, 1980 Presidential Election

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JUSTIN DEAN FAZZARI

B.S., King's College, 1999

M.S., King's College, 2000

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2003

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JUSTIN DEAN FAZZARI

Major Professor: Paul-Henri Gurian

Committee: Brad E. Lockerbie  
Audrey A. Haynes

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2003

## DEDICATION

I would like to thank my parents, James and Janice Fazzari, for providing me with the support that was needed to research and write this thesis. It has been a wonderful two years at the University of Georgia. I will forever be a bulldog fan. I am glad you were able to visit and experience Athens, Georgia with me. The next move will bring me much closer to home. Hopefully it will be as fulfilling an experience as I have had completing the requirements for this degree.

I would also like to thank Edna McCarthy for the letters every week. They really keep me informed about life at home. I never miss the details on any event that has to do with the family. Finally, this thesis could not have been accomplished without generosity of my brother Jordan, who let me borrow his laptop computer to write this paper. It is much appreciated. Thank you everyone!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Paul-Henry Gurian for his help, encouragement and direction with writing this thesis.

I would also like to thank Meredith Caird for her excellent work proofreading and commenting on the many drafts of this paper. Her suggestions enabled me to craft a much richer, thorough and interesting thesis than I ever thought possible. Thank you!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The goal of a presidential campaign is winning the election. There are many strategies for achieving this goal. Research on candidates' strategies in presidential primaries and general elections has left many unanswered questions about what strategies are employed in different parts of the campaign. This paper focuses on one potential candidate strategy, issue ambiguity. Politicians are often reluctant to take clear issue stances during election campaigns. Certain types of candidates campaign by making broad appeals with limited detail and ambiguous statements to the electorate (Campbell 1983, Page 1976). Candidates tell the electorate what they want to accomplish but not the methods they plan to use to accomplish these goals. For example, candidates may say they want to fight terrorism and increase homeland security. The candidates state their objective but provide no information about how they will accomplish this task. Ambiguous issue positions are more effective and useful for less well known candidates. This type of candidate can use ambiguous issue positions to deal with polarizing issues in which taking a specific position would be controversial and alienate potential voters.

This paper seeks to examine the issue of ambiguity in the context of the 1980 presidential primary and general election. The specific objective is to test whether presidential candidates portray different levels of issue ambiguity in the primary and general election. The level of candidate issue ambiguity will be examined by measuring respondents' perceptions of candidates' issue positions. The National Election Study's

1980 primary and general election survey will be used to examine whether presidential candidates are less ambiguous about their issue positions in the primary and more ambiguous in the general election. The analysis will look for ambiguity by comparing respondents' perceptions of Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter's issue positions and character qualities. The 1980 election will be a difficult election to find evidence of ambiguous messages being sent out by the candidates because both candidates were well known. However, Ronald Reagan, a well known conservative, was able to make his messages appeal to moderates and Democrats alike. If evidence is found for ambiguity, one explanation for this appeal might be his use of ambiguous issue messages. If no evidence is found, then a different strategy may have enabled him to appeal to such a diverse group of voters.

This study uses an aggregate approach with descriptive statistics instead of an individual approach, which would include regression analysis. The aggregate and individual level approaches are both acceptable methods. Both approaches can be used to examine the 1980 NES data used in this paper. Each method has the potential to provide results from the data to support or refute the hypothesis. This paper is not attempting to use all the methods available. The most appropriate method was chosen to use as the analytical device for the data. There are certain advantages in using the aggregate method and certain advantages to the individual approach. The advantage of the aggregate approach is that the hypothesis can be tested in two distinct ways.

First, the amount of knowledge that people have about candidates' issue positions in the primary and general election can be tested and reported as a percentage. The percentages will specifically show what level of knowledge respondents have about each

candidates' issue positions. There are four issue questions asked in the primary and general election. For example, if respondents know three out of the possible four candidate issue positions in the primary, they would have a knowledge percentage of 75%. When their issue knowledge is tested in the general election and they know two out of four issue positions, their knowledge percentage would be 50%. This allows a comparison to be made of the change in knowledge levels from the primary to the general election. Comparing the primary and general election knowledge percentages indicates if knowledge levels increased, decreased or stayed the same over the two time periods. This exact process is used to measure knowledge of candidate qualities. Qualities are used as a baseline comparison for issue knowledge. The theory is that candidates will become more ambiguous about their issue positions in the general election but consistently send out specific messages about their qualities. Support for the hypothesis will be established if the increase in knowledge of issue positions lags behind the increase in knowledge of quality traits.

By specifically observing the percentage changes one can tell how high the knowledge are at each period, for each candidate. This helps the interpretation when there are two well known candidates being examined. In this paper since there is an incumbent and a well known challenger, there is not much change in knowledge levels from the primary to the general election. The aggregate approach allows this high initial level of knowledge to be seen. This explains why there is not much change in knowledge from the primary and general election and why ambiguity is not found. It would be much more difficult to make this observation using the individual level approach.

Second, the level of respondents' agreement about candidates' issue positions can be compared from the primary to the general election by measuring the standard deviation of the respondents' answers. The four questions about issue positions are coded to indicate the level of agreement about issue positions in each period. In the primary there is a certain level of agreement about candidates issue positions. When respondents are asked candidates' issue positions in the general election there may be a change in the level of agreement about candidates' issue positions. An increase in the standard deviation indicates less agreement about candidates issue positions, while a decrease indicates an increase in agreement about candidates issue positions. According to the theory, there should be an increase in the standard deviation of respondents' answers because the use of ambiguity will cause people to become more unsure about candidates positions.

The individual level approach can also show the change in knowledge levels and agreement. The drawback is that the regression approach does not allow one to observe the percentage change in knowledge levels. Interpreting b-scores can be more difficult and more importantly it can make it harder to explain why there was so little change in the model. In the regression model, the dependent variable is the level of knowledge in each time period. The dependent variable is the actual time period. There is a variable for the primary and general election time periods. The b-score for the time period indicates if that time period is statistically significant compared to the level of knowledge in that time period. The test is to compare the b-score from the primary and the general election. The higher b-score indicates a higher level of knowledge in that period. For example, if the b-score for the primary is 1.02 and the b-score for the general election is

0.5, then respondents' knowledge of candidates issue positions is higher in the primary. The regression approaches major strength is that many factors can be controlled. The drawback is that the b-score indicates which time period people have higher levels of knowledge but it does not enable one to examine how high the knowledge levels are, in terms of how many questions people answered. Examining the b-score individually gives little information. The b-scores must be compared for the two periods to give any indication about the level of respondents' knowledge.

The main advantage of the individual analysis is that more factors can be controlled. However, by separating the respondents into levels of media exposure the aggregate method provides results that can be interpreted more meaningfully under the 1980 presidential election circumstances. High media exposure means the respondents are consistently receiving information during the primary and general election campaigns. A consistent level of exposure is one of the most important factors when observing the change of information levels from the primary to the general election. Each method provides advantages but the aggregate method is the appropriate method to gain the most useful outputs and results.

An aggregate method is used because it allows a parsimonious interpretation of the change in candidate ambiguity from the primary to the general election. This method is advantageous because it permits the hypothesis to be tested in two distinct ways. The first test examines the actual percentage change in the number of issue positions that respondents can name for each candidate. The second test measures the respondents' level of agreement about candidates' issue positions. The use of these two tests provides the potential to find more convincing and conclusive evidence to support the hypothesis.

The aggregate approach is used because the hypothesis is investigating changes in candidate behavior from the primary to the general election from the perspective of the electorate. The aggregate method chosen allows an overall examination of what the respondents know and their level of agreement about the candidates' issue positions and personal qualities. The aggregate approach allows comparisons to be made between the changes in respondents' perception of candidates' issue positions and qualities in the primary and general election.

The regression approach does not provide easily discernable results that show the changes from the primary to general election of respondents' knowledge of candidate issue positions and qualities. It also does not allow a straightforward comparison between the issues and qualities. In the regression model issue knowledge is the dependent variable in one model and candidate qualities is the dependent variable in another model. Then a dummy variable representing a period in time, either the primary or the general election is the main independent variable. The model tests whether the general election time period has a statistically significant larger b-score in the issue model or the quality model, compared to the results in the primary. This model shows whether issues or qualities have a higher level of significance and in which period.

Unlike the aggregate model, it is difficult to examine the change in voter knowledge from the primary to the general election. In the aggregate model the change can be quantified as a percent change and measured for significance. The regression model shows the significance of the b-score. It is difficult to interpret what level of change in knowledge the b-score represents compared to examining the percentage change in the aggregate model.

This paper is divided into ten chapters. The introduction describes the ambiguity issue being addressed and why it should be examined. Chapter two reviews the prominent scholarly literature about ambiguity. The third section discusses the importance of candidates' issue positions and quality traits in presidential primaries and general elections. Chapter four lays out the research question, hypothesis and research design. The fifth section describes three important concepts when using survey data to find support for candidate ambiguity. This section explains how learning occurs during the election campaign, how voters can become uncertain about campaign issues and how the television medium informs people about presidential campaigns. The sixth chapter describes in detail why the 1980 election was chosen for analysis. The seventh section gives the measurement descriptions and explanations. Chapter eight lists the expectations and results of the data analysis. The ninth chapter is a discussion of the results. The conclusion in chapter ten discusses the findings and offers ideas about how further research can build on the findings of this paper.

Enelow and Hinich (1981) label the strategy of ambiguity as candidate-induced uncertainty, which they define as “uncertainty induced in the minds of voters.” Voters can cope with ambiguous messages from candidates by inferring or using educated guesses to identify any positions that are unclear about (Conover and Feldman 1989). If voters are unable to comprehend candidates' campaign messages, they may misidentify candidates' positions (Dalager 1996). This may be an intentional strategy in order to appeal to a larger portion of the electorate. If candidates fail to relay their issue positions, then it is difficult for the electorate to vote based on the issues.<sup>1</sup> Candidates may want

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<sup>1</sup> In a related subject Bartels (1996) says that the electorate's uncertainty about candidate's issue positions is very important and deserves more direct and sustained attention than it has so far received.

people to vote based on quality traits because qualities can be much less controversial than issue positions. For example, when Page and Brody (1972) examined the Vietnam War issue, they found it did not influence presidential voting in 1968. This was due to Nixon and Humphrey's intentional avoidance of discussion about the war during their campaigns. When the candidates did mention the Vietnam War, they were deliberately vague about their positions (Alvarez 1998).

An examination of the characteristics of the primary and general election from 1964 to 1984 reveal stark differences between the two types of campaigns. One of the main differences is that candidates are more specific about their issue positions in the primary than in the general election (Wayne 1984). Carter used this strategy in 1976 when he announced in a speech that, if elected, he would issue a blanket pardon to Vietnam draft dodgers. Barry Goldwater also used this strategy in 1964 to emphasize his conservative stance by criticizing the war on poverty as "phony." He also suggested in Tennessee the possibility of privatizing the Tennessee Valley Authority (Wayne 1984).

In the general election phase of the campaign both Barry Goldwater and Jimmy Carter began sending out more general messages to appeal to the general electorate. After Goldwater won the Republican nomination, he focused on broadening his electoral support by becoming more general (Wayne 1984). His strategy was designed to appeal to liberal Republican, conservative Democrats and independents. Goldwater's campaign message was based on his, "hopes, goals and programs for America's future (Wayne 1984)." Late in the campaign Goldwater realized he was going to lose the election. At this point, he made a strategic decision to stop using an ambiguous message strategy. He

narrowed his message and spent the rest of the campaign trying to persuade the public to accept and adopt his very conservative ideology and policy positions (Wayne 1984).

In the 1976 general election Carter called for a fair tax system, welfare reform and openness in government. He expressed these positions very generally, in a way that almost anyone could agree with them. Carter offered hope for the future saying, “there is fear that our best years are behind us, but I say to you that our nation’s best is still ahead.” Carter avoided talking about specific issues and campaigned on “general goals” (Page 1978).

During the primary campaign, candidates must campaign to a small, single party constituency. In the general election, they must campaign to the entire electorate, composed of mainly Republican and Democratic voters, as well as a small percentage of independent and minor party voters. Candidates need to take into account each different group’s issue preferences when planning their primary and general election strategy.

The primary election can be viewed as splitting the general electorate into two groups with different ideologies and issue preferences. Ideology is has not been found to be related to vote choice in most primaries (Norrander 1986 and Marshall 1981). Norrander’s study of the 1980 primaries shows that ideology was not related to vote choice in the Democratic Primary. Ideology was related to vote choice in the 1980 Republican Primary, but only in the early primaries. Later in the primary season ideology was not related to vote choice (Norrander 1986). Candidates in each primary campaign take issue positions that appeal to enough voters in their party to win the party nomination. One way candidates can gain support and distinguish themselves from the often crowded; multicandidate primary is to specify their positions on issues. Candidates

can use other means like experience or military service to distinguish themselves but this paper focuses on how candidates use ambiguity when sending out messages about their issue positions.

After the primaries have concluded only two candidates emerge as the party nominees. Norrander (1986) finds a change in their messaging strategies. Candidates' strategy in the general campaign is to expand their electoral appeal and gain the support of the entire party and then begin campaigning to people outside the party. Candidates begin a new campaign. They start by sending out positive messages to the electorate about who they are. They accomplish this by exposing their background, character traits and experience.

The general election can be viewed as combining voters' issue preferences and ideologies from both parties, plus a small percentage of independents' issue preferences and ideologies. The issue positions candidates take to appeal to the majority of voters in each primary election will not necessarily appeal to enough voters to win the general election. Candidates must broaden their message during the general election and appeal to voters outside their party.

The two median voter points established in the primary converge into one median voter point in the general election. The task for the two candidates in the general election is to move away from the two median voter points they positioned themselves at in the primary, and shift toward the one median voter position of the general electorate (Downs 1957). Candidates can accomplish this broader appeal by moving away from using issue specific messages in the primary and conveying ambiguous issue positions in the general election. This will enable candidates to appeal to the larger general electorate. This

paper seeks to find evidence to test the hypothesis that candidates are less ambiguous about their issue positions in the primary and more ambiguous in the general election.

Issue positions and character qualities are both components in a campaign strategy but they are used in different ways. Candidates increase the amount of ambiguity they use when conveying issue positions from the primary to the general election. They do not change the message about character qualities from the primary to the general election. Emphasis on positive quality traits remains constant.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW OF AMBIGUITY

The vagueness of candidates' issue positions can be underscored by pointing out how they deviate from an ideally clear stance. A clear position states the issue, all possible differing positions and what position the specific candidate advocates. Candidates almost always fall short of this test (Page 1978). Politicians use a politically ambiguous strategy because it is in their rational self-interest. Through ambiguity, politicians can avoid offending constituents who hold conflicting opinions and thus maximize support.

Two main theories deal with issue ambiguity. Kenneth Shepsle (1972) offers the first theory of campaign ambiguity, which is derived from the work of Downs (1957, ch 7-8). According to Shepsle's theory, ambiguity is a result of candidates' intentional strategy, when faced with a risk acceptant electorate. A second theory is offered by Benjamin Page (1976). He theorizes that candidates use a strategy called the emphasis theory of ambiguity. This theory states that candidates are ambiguous simply because they have limited resources to develop and communicate their positions effectively to the public. Candidates have limitations on their time, finances and exposure to voters, making ambiguity desirable and profitable (Campbell 1980).

Shepsle (1972) explains that an ambiguous strategy is developed in response to the inability to derive a "best" position on the issues. He suggests that candidates who have the opportunity to take a position on an issue should not. Instead, they should offer

a variety of possibilities to the voters. The advantage of offering an ambiguous strategy is to appeal to a large percentage of the electorate. Downs (1957) and Shepsle (1972) explain that candidates choose whether or not to use an ambiguous strategy based on how much voter support they think it will gain. Downs (1957) states that two party systems will encourage both parties to, “becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity.” Shepsle (1972) shows a link between risk acceptant voters and incentives for the challenger in a two-candidate race to adopt an ambiguous policy position. Downs (1957) and Shepsle (1972) imply that candidates can adopt issue positions and make this position clear to voters if they needed to, but the candidates do not favor this. The candidates prefer to keep their positions ambiguous because this will gain them the most electoral support.

Applying the Downsian model to the nomination process has one problem. In the Downsian model the winner is elected and in the primary, the winner is selected as the party nominee. The nominee must then engage in a second campaign. Therefore, primary candidates should be concerned about how their issue positions in the primary are positioned to reach the median voters in the general election. In Downs’s model, a candidate in the primary should adopt a platform that is moderate inside their party, even though this platform might not be moderate enough for the general election. Taking a more moderate position relative to the general electorate might cause defeat in the party primary. Therefore, candidates in the general election do not run in the exact policy center but to the right or left of the median voter to maintain support from their party.

A candidate’s most obvious goal is winning the election. The Downsian model assumes that people who are running for office are rational actors that are goal oriented. The candidate will choose actions to attain these goals or select appropriate means to

attain desired ends (Aldrich 1980). Aldrich posits that candidates have other goals such as policy goals. However, as Downs (1957) points out, “we assume that [the candidates] act solely in order to attain the income, prestige and power which comes from being in office. Thus politicians never seek office as a means of carrying out particular policies; their goal is to reap the rewards of holding office. They treat policies as a means to the attainment of their private ends, which they can reach only by being elected.”

Candidates have a set of ideal positions based on their views on the issues. *Ceteris paribus*, they will advocate these ideal points. However, in the dynamic political environment, candidates must examine their policy positions in terms of how they will help achieve the nomination and promotion of ideal positions. This requires some tradeoffs because campaign strategies containing only ideal policy positions may be poor strategies for winning the nomination or election. The exact tradeoff depends on the difference between the candidates’ ideal policy positions and the policy positions that will gain the most voter support.

Candidates must also consider what their opponents’ policy positions are in comparison. Are these positions liberal, moderate or conservative? Each candidate’s main objective is to win the election, but each candidate has policy preferences. Therefore, candidates must decide how to mold their policy preferences into a winning platform, taking into account the electorate’s ideal positions and opponents’ strategies (Aldrich 1980).

Page’s (1976) theory argues that candidates can manipulate the salience of issues in the campaign by talking about some issues and not about others. Page’s major conclusion is that, “emphasis theory predicts that candidates place all their emphasis on

consensus issues and say nothing about issues of conflict (Aldrich 1980).” Page’s theory reasons that when candidates create their platform they rarely change their ideal points. Instead they try to change the emphasis of the campaign by affecting the relative salience or importance of the issues. One should then be able to trace the general themes of each candidate and observe the variations in emphasis as the primary progresses (Aldrich 1980). Candidates utilize the emphasis approach by stressing the issues that appeal to the electorate rather than changing their own positions or trying to change the electorate’s positions.

Candidates raise the salience of certain issues to influence the electorate into making their vote choice based on those emphasized issues. Candidates are forced to make difficult decisions about which issues to emphasize and which issues to neglect. Concentrating on certain issues helps candidates develop an identity with voters. Avoiding other issues decreases the chance the electorate will identify the candidate with that issue (Aldrich 1980).

The 1976 campaign provides an excellent example. Reagan proposed a major reform plan for welfare decentralization, saving the federal government \$90 billion by transferring welfare to the state level. The program caused much controversy and the plan was seen as poor politics. Reagan did not change his position. Instead he stopped talking about the proposal (Aldrich 1980).

The emphasis theory gives direction to candidates when dealing with two common campaign situations. First, candidates should not emphasize issues in which their competitors are known to have similar positions. If there is not a distinct policy difference, candidates gain little advantage from campaigning on that issue. An

exception to this argument is that a candidate can speak first and frequently about an issue and thus make it ‘his’ issue despite the fact that his challenger has a similar position. Second, some issues take time to resonate with the public and others catch on immediately. This requires candidates to develop different issue strategies to address situations in which issues resonate immediately and situations in which issues take a while to appeal to voters (Aldrich 1980).

A central finding of Downs, Shepsle and Page is that candidates control the level of voter uncertainty about their issue positions. This implies that candidates can adopt a specific position and transmit it to the electorate if they want to (Enelow and Hinich 1981). Downs (1957) and Shepsle (1972) say that candidates make a choice to use ambiguity to gain electoral support. Page (1976) acknowledges this intentional choice but the reason candidates choose to be ambiguous is because they have limited resources to try to appeal to the electorate.

#### Deriving and Testing a Hypothesis from Existing Theory

Previous studies focus on candidates and their strategies. This paper assumes that candidates do use ambiguous strategies. This is an important starting point but an aspect that is just as important is how the strategy affects voters. Downs, Shepsle and Page all have sound theories about candidates’ ambiguous strategies but they do not take the research to the next level. They do not then focus on voters and test what effect these ambiguous strategies have on the electorate. If an effect of ambiguity on the electorate is found it will further validate the existence candidate ambiguity. One complication is that candidates may use different levels of ambiguity in the primary and general election due to different circumstances. Therefore, the research question posed here is, are candidates

less ambiguous in the primary and more ambiguous in the general election? The research design to address this question will allow the data to indicate if ambiguous strategies exist and how strong the effect of ambiguity is on the public in two time periods. It is not known if ambiguous strategies are effective enough to change the knowledge levels of voters and influence their level of uncertainty.

This paper tests the effect that ambiguous strategies have on the electorate in two different types of contests, the primary and general election. I hypothesize that in the primary candidates take less ambiguous issue stances and in the general election they take more ambiguous issue positions. This paper tests the hypothesis by examining voters' knowledge of candidates' issue positions and quality traits. If the ambiguity strategy is effective then people's responses should reflect different levels of uncertainty in the primary and general election. This paper sets a baseline of issue knowledge in the primary. Then knowledge levels are measured during the general election. Three results will provide support for the effect of the ambiguous strategy. First, support will be provided if there is a decrease in issue knowledge from the primary to the general election. Second, some support will be gained if the increase in knowledge about issue positions lags behind the increase in knowledge of quality traits. Third, if people have a lower level of agreement about candidates' issue positions in the general election than in the primary, it will give subtle support for ambiguity by showing an increase in voter uncertainty.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ISSUES AND QUALITIES

#### The Significance of Issues

There is a debate among scholars about the importance of issues in elections. A substantial amount of research reports significant effects of candidate issue positions on the electorate's vote choice (Aldrich, Sullivan, Borgida 1989; Carmines and Stimson 1980; Pomper 1972; Repass 1971). According to Dalager (1996), candidates and voters mention issues as an important aspect of the electoral process. He explains that candidates running for office often cite "the issues" as the best way to differentiate themselves from their opponents. Candidates also cite a determination to implement these issue positions as the reason for seeking office. Voters often say candidates' issue positions are the determining factor in deciding their vote choice during an election (Dalager 1996).

Brams (1978) argues, "although most of the research that has been conducted [about the primacy of issues] applies to the general election, it would seem even more applicable to primaries, in which party affiliation is not usually a factor. Since the vote in presidential elections is generally determined by issues, candidates and partisanship, the vote in primaries, the argument goes, should be explained by issues and candidates. This logic leads some scholars to think that issue can be expected to strongly influence the outcomes of the primaries (Geer, 1988)." Aldrich and Alvarez's 1994 study focuses on issues and primary voters. The authors state that it is generally accepted that vote choice

in presidential general elections is based on evaluations of candidates, issues and parties. However, in presidential primaries the determinants of vote choice are less clear. There is no consensus about which factors influence vote choice in primary elections or their relative weights (Aldrich and Alvarez 1994).

Aldrich et al. propose that political issues are an important influence in presidential primaries. Their examination of the 1988 Super Tuesday primaries shows that issues matter in primaries because primary campaigns are able to reach the intended voters with information about their candidate's issue positions. They are able to focus a specific message to a specific group of people. This is possible because as the number of candidates that participate in the primary increases, the number of votes needed to win decreases. If a candidate needs fewer votes to win, then the message can be more narrowly focused toward specific groups of voters. Geer (1988) reports that issues are especially important in primaries because they are intraparty affairs. Partisanship is not a factor in primaries because it can not provide clues to people about candidates' issue positions like it can in the general election.

Gopioian (1982) also finds issue emphasis by candidates in the primary campaign. The problem in primaries is that candidates often have the same basic ideologies. Candidates need to differentiate themselves and they can accomplish this by emphasizing the issues that set them apart from their competitors. He says that in 1976 Reagan decided to emphasize foreign policy issues when competing against Ford in the primary. Rational candidates will have a greater incentive to stress their issue positions when issue conflict is less evident to the electorate. Gopioian states that issue conflict is usually less evident in the primary than in the general election and therefore, candidates stress their

issue positions more in the primary. However, once there is a party nominee there is less need to be specific about issue positions. This is because the candidates' basic issue positions and ideologies are usually so different in the general election. Finally, Gopoiian reports that Reagan's issue positions as well as his ideology were very different from all of the Democratic candidates in the primary.

In the Democratic Party there should be less emphasis on issue positions. This is because the Democratic electorate is much more ideologically divided than the Republican electorate. Therefore, it should be expected that issues would be emphasized much more in the Republican primaries than in the Democratic primaries (Gopoiian 1982). Carter's strategy in the 1976 supports this statement. In the primary Carter emphasized his qualities of trust and integrity and used ambiguity in his issue positions to extend his "reach" along the ideological spectrum. Carter's two pronged strategy of ambiguity helped him project a "multiplicity of images, to be perceived differently by different people," and to "please or at least be inoffensive to the broadest possible spectrum of listeners (Gopoiian 1982). Carter's ability to appeal to a wide cross section of the party's ideological spectrum caused him to be referred to as, "the candidate of a thousand impressions: a liberal, a moderate, a moderate liberal, a conservative moderate (Gopoiian 1982)."

If the 1976 election were examined using the same methodology as in this paper, the results should have shown that respondents were more knowledgeable about Reagan's issue positions in the primary compared to Carter's issue positions. This is based on Gopoiian's findings that Reagan needed to specify the differences between his

positions and Ford's positions because their ideologies were seen as similar. Carter did not need to differentiate as much because his ideology was distinct from his competitors.

The problem with applying this rationale to the 1980 election is that Carter was the incumbent president. The strategy Carter used in 1976 worked for him as a non-incumbent in the Democratic Primary but it was much harder to be ambiguous as an incumbent in the 1980 Democratic Primary, because his positions were known. Gopoiian's study does not apply to Reagan in 1980 either. Reagan did not challenge candidates with similar ideologies. In 1980, Reagan was seen as the conservative candidate, George Bush was seen as the moderate and John Anderson was seen as the liberal.<sup>2</sup>

Gopoiian's study is important because it shows that under certain circumstances issue positions are important and emphasized by candidates in the primaries. This does not mean that issues are not important in the 1980 primary. The situation in 1980 is just different. Candidates in Reagan's position as a well known candidate do not need to stress their issue positions as much as lesser known candidates in the Republican primary. Incumbents in the Democratic Party may still emphasize issues less in the primary than Republicans but it is much harder for a well known candidate to accomplish this.

#### The Insignificance of Issues: The 1980 Example

There are some studies that find that issues are not very important to the electorate. (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954; Campbell et al 1960; Converse 1962, 1964; Keeter and Zukin 1983; Smith 1989). Norrander (1986) suggests that issues are not important in elections because the electorate uses candidates' qualities as the main determinant in their vote choice. Norrander (1986) explains that this may occur because

people are unaware of candidates' issue positions due to candidates, "downplaying issues while stressing personal qualities." In her study of the 1980 election she uses candidate quality questions to determine whether people cited qualities or electability as the main determinant of their vote. Norrander looks at four correlates of vote choice: issues, ideology, candidate qualities and electability. Candidate qualities are found to have the most frequent and consistent relationship with vote choice. Issues have a much weaker correlation with candidate preferences.

Norrander (1986) cites content analysis that finds Carter stressed his experience, strength and honesty, while Reagan highlighted his experience. Reagan was especially successful at portraying his positive qualities to voters through the presidential debates. The debates also "appeared to have little effect in transmitting knowledge about his issue positions. If anything, they clouded the public's perceptions of his stands (Frankovic 1981)."

#### The Prominence of Character Qualities in Elections

Candidates place importance on both their character qualities and their opponents' qualities because it is believed that qualities are the most important consideration for people when voting (Geer 1988). There are two reasons offered for the importance of character qualities. First, primaries involve a large number of candidates and people rely on information that is not costly since they must decide between such a large number of candidates. The second reason is that voters may encounter difficulty distinguishing the differences between candidates' issue positions (Geer 1988).

Richard Nixon complained of John Kennedy's ability to garner votes based on style over substance (Funk 1997). Gerald Ford mentioned Carter's ability to charm

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<sup>2</sup> This was before Anderson dropped out of the Republican Primary and decided to run as an independent.

voters despite a relatively shallow political background. In 1976 Carter and Ford stressed the importance of restoring trust and confidence in the government and having an honest president (Marshall 1981). In the 1980 Republican Primary George Bush stressed his integrity and experience in government by saying that if he were elected he would be “a president we won’t have to train.” In the Democratic Primary Carter’s message focused on his trustworthiness and record as a peacemaker. Edward Kennedy campaigned on his legislative skills and leadership (Marshall 1981). Once Carter became president his image changed and he lamented about voters’ affection for the “Great Communicator,” rather than the incumbent president (Funk 1997). These campaign messages provide examples about the importance of candidate qualities in presidential campaigns. These qualities influence voters’ decisions about candidates’ qualifications to hold office (Kinder 1986; Fiorina 1981; Page 1978; Popkin 1991).

Campaigns try to create positive quality images of candidates. The campaign accomplishes this by maximizing attention on candidate attributes that favor the candidate and minimizing attention to qualities that favor other candidates. The ability to manipulate the image of qualities is limited by the believability of what is being portrayed (Funk 1999 and Marshall 1981).

The American electorate values certain traits in presidential candidates (Marshall 1981). These characteristics often reflect the public’s expectation for its leaders and the model for an ideal president. The president is expected to be skillful, knowledgeable, and competent. He should understand and have solutions to complex problems. The president also needs to be able to empathize with the public and embody their most redeeming qualities. These include being inspirational, honest, reasonable and a rational

person. Candidates try to project the qualities that are consistent with public expectations. The importance of certain traits varies over time so candidates need to be aware of which qualities are currently salient. Candidates who lack these salient qualities will be seen as unfit to hold office or at the very least need to repair their image problem (Wayne 1984).

Candidates will focus on qualities instead of issues if they believe that this strategy gives them an advantage in the campaign. Enelow and Hinich (1981) point to Carter's use of this strategy in 1976. The authors say that, "the voters' lack of familiarity with Carter, compounded by the personal focus of his campaign, made it extremely difficult for them (voters) to decide where he was located on the predictive dimensions of the campaign."

## CHAPTER 4

### THE RESEARCH DESIGN

#### Research Question

Due to differing circumstances in primary and general elections, the research question is, are candidates are less ambiguous about their issue positions in the primary and more ambiguous about issues in the general election?

The theory of ambiguity is tested indirectly. The model assumes that candidates use ambiguous strategies. The model tests voters' knowledge levels of candidates' issue positions. If the ambiguity theory is correct, voters become informed and can perceive changes in candidates' positions during the primaries. During the general election people become more uncertain about candidates' issue positions because candidates use much more ambiguity when informing the public about their issue positions. The reality may be that the differences between the candidates in the general election are so obvious due to party and the electorate's projections that ambiguity may not be apparent or effective. The candidates may send out ambiguous messages in the general election but the electorate may have so many other cues to inform them that ambiguity can not be observed through voter surveys.

#### Hypothesis

I hypothesize that candidates are perceived to be less ambiguous about issues in the primary election but more ambiguous about issues in the general election.

Candidates want voters to learn about their issue positions in the primary and then in the general election, accept a more ambiguous message about their issue positions. The process of learning may inhibit candidates from convincing the electorate that they support more ambiguous issue positions. Learning may not enable candidates to send out messages that appeal to a larger portion of voters because voters know the candidates' positions from the primary campaign.

The paper accepts Downs (1957) and Shepsle's (1972) theory that candidates intentionally make their issue positions ambiguous in the general election. The effect should be that voters know more issue positions and are in more agreement about candidates' issue positions in the primary. When the general election occurs, some voters may be less sure about candidates' issue positions and be in less agreement due to candidates' issue ambiguity. Candidates want this to occur because if their positions are not as well known, they will be able to attract a larger number of voters with a more general message. What candidates do not want to happen is for people to learn the specific issue positions they took during the primary. This does not enable candidates to expand their appeal in the general election by taking ambiguous positions.

When the primary begins respondents learn candidates' issue positions. Even after the primary ends, people still remember what positions the candidates espoused. People do not forget all the information they learned just because they cast their primary vote. When the general election begins candidates shift their emphasis from a specific message to a more general message. The voters remember what they learned about candidates' issue positions in the primary and continue to learn about candidates' issue positions in the general election. The voters hear the more ambiguous message in the

general election but some voters may still revert back to the information they acquired in the primary.

### Research Design

This model tests whether candidates are perceived to change their level of ambiguity about issue positions from the primary to the general election. This is tested by measuring people's perception of candidate issue positions and comparing it to their perception of candidate qualities. Candidates are not expected to shift their message about qualities from specific to ambiguous. Support for the hypothesis will be gained if the electorate perceives candidates issue messages as ambiguous relative to the message about their character qualities.

The best respondents to examine are those who have a high level of exposure to the campaign messages in the primary and general election. The most comprehensive measure of respondents' exposure to the campaign would measure their exposure to television, newspapers, radio and news magazines. The NES 1980 did not question respondents about their exposure level to all four mediums. Television use is the only medium that the survey questioned respondents about their amount of exposure and how much attention they pay in both the primary and general election. Examining this high exposure group will give the best opportunity to observe changes in the candidates' messages from the primary to the general election. Respondents that have low levels of exposure in the primary and general election are less likely to have the opportunity to receive adequate exposure to the campaign messages in both time periods. People that do not receive adequate exposure are not as likely to absorb and reflect ambiguous campaign messages when surveyed.

If the respondents were not grouped according to their exposure levels then they could have different views of candidates' positions and this would not necessarily be seen as ambiguity. The use of the high exposure group allows the use of the primary as a baseline of comparison for the results in the general election. Under these circumstances the level of knowledge for the primary is known. If changes in knowledge are observed during the general election, when media exposure is similar for the entire group across both periods, then there must be a cause of the change. This paper then argues that under these specific circumstances the cause of the change is candidate ambiguity.

Learning during the campaign should cause an increase in knowledge about issue positions and character qualities. Due to the learning process, evidence for candidate ambiguity can be illustrated by respondents' knowledge of issue positions lagging behind their knowledge of character qualities. If this lagging of knowledge about issue positions is found, then the use of ambiguous messages in the general election will be determined to be a contributing factor. This conclusion can be made because there is a high level of confidence that the high exposure group had a consistent baseline of exposure in both periods. The same conclusion can not be reached for the other groups because it is not known if they were exposed to the messages in both periods. There is not a baseline of consistent exposure for the other groups.

The model uses descriptive statistics based on panel survey data to examine the electorate's perception of candidate ambiguity in the primary and general election.<sup>3</sup>

Tables 1-3 lay out the model in some detail. Two specific tests will be performed to measure ambiguity. The first test measures the proportion of candidate issue positions

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<sup>3</sup>When the communication process between the electorate and the candidate is observed, the electorate should be the best judge of what messages are ambiguous and which are not (Campbell 1983).

the respondents report to know and whether the change is statistically significant. The difference of means test examines the mean change in respondents' answers about candidates' issue positions and character qualities during the two phases of the campaign. Character qualities, the baseline comparison for issue positions, will be examined in a similar fashion.

The second test measures the standard deviation of respondents' answers to the questions about Carter and Reagan's issue positions and qualities in both periods. Standard deviation tests are often used to find statistical significance. In this model the standard deviation test is used to measure respondents' level of agreement about candidates' issue positions in the primary and in the general election. This test is appropriate because the respondents being examined have a high exposure to both the primary and general election campaigns. The high-high group will have some level of agreement about the candidates' issue positions in the primary. This will be used as a baseline and compared to the level of agreement in the general election. Since it is known that the level of exposure remained constant it is reasonable to say that any change in the level of agreement was caused by a change in the messages received during the general election. If there is more agreement about candidates' issue positions in the general election then it can be stated that the respondents learn as the campaign progresses. However, if there is more disagreement about the candidates' issue positions then one explanation is that the candidates' become more ambiguous about their issue positions.

This study uses an aggregate approach with descriptive statistics analysis. The aggregate approach is used because the hypothesis is investigating the perception of

changes in candidate behavior from the primary to the general election from the perspective of the electorate. The aggregate method chosen allows an overall examination of what the respondents know and their level of agreement about the candidates' issue positions and personal qualities. The aggregate approach allows comparisons to be made between the changes in respondents' perception of candidates' issue positions and qualities in the primary and general election.

There has been much research on the theoretical aspects of ambiguity (Enelow and Hinich 1981; Page 1976, 1978; Shepsle 1972). However, ambiguity has been used sparsely in empirical models until very recently. There are two approaches to measuring candidates' issue ambiguity in campaigns. The first involves aggregate analysis measuring the variation in voter perception of issue positions and measuring the amount of issue positions the electorate is able to name for each candidate (Alvarez 1998). This is the method used in this paper. This model is an appropriate method to use in this research. Campbell fully develops this aggregate approach as a way to infer voter uncertainty from observations of the fluctuations across all voters in their placements of the candidates on each issue. He says that, "the principle variable in this analysis—the ambiguity of candidate's issue positions—is estimated as the standard deviation of the public's perception of the candidate's position (1983)." Critics of this approach charge that the variation is due to partisan biases and measurement error. Campbell sees this as a small drawback to the overall model design (1983). This approach can also be justified based on simplicity and ease of measurement, since the information about respondents' view of candidate positions and qualities is available in the NES and it is on similar scales (Alvarez 1998).

Table 1 Description of Hypothesis and Tests

Candidates Use an Ambiguous Strategy in Presidential Campaigns	
I hypothesize that candidates are less ambiguous about their issue positions in the primary and more ambiguous about their issue positions during the general election.	
Methods Used to Test the Hypothesis	
Test #1 Percentage Change Test	Tests the Change in the Level of Respondents' Knowledge about Issue Positions.
Expectation #1	Lower Issue Knowledge in the General Election than in the Primary.
Expectation #2	Issue Knowledge Increases at a Slower Rate than Qualities.
Test #2 Standard Deviation Test	Tests the Level of Agreement about Candidates' Issue Positions.
Expectation #1	Less Agreement about Candidates' Issue Positions in the General Election than in the Primary.

Table 2 Candidates' Strategies

Time Periods in the Analysis	Primary Campaign	General Campaign
Candidates' Strategies		
Issue Positions	Less Ambiguity about Positions	More Ambiguity about Positions
Quality Traits	Specific Messages about Qualities	Specific Messages about Qualities
Focus of the Message	People in the Candidate's Party	The Entire Electorate
Respondents Most Likely to Receive these Messages	People with High Media Exposure	People with High Media Exposure

Table 3 Variable Description

	Primary Campaign	General Campaign
Dependent Variable	Level of Candidate Ambiguity	Level of Candidate Ambiguity
Dependent Variable Measured by	Voters' Knowledge of Issue Positions	Voters' Knowledge of Issue Positions
Main Independent Variable	Primary Campaign Time Period	General Election Time Period
*Voters knowledge varies depending on the time period		
Independent Variable	Voter's Knowledge of Quality Traits	Voters' Knowledge of Quality Traits

## CHAPTER 5

### LEARNING, UNCERTAINTY AND THE TELEVISION MEDIUM

Issues and qualities are important because they inform people about candidates' positions and character. Candidates are not able to perfectly inform the public, which leads to voter uncertainty about the candidates. The process by which people learn about candidates is complicated and different for different types of people. As people receive information about candidates different people process the information in distinct ways. Some people rely on the early knowledge, some rely on more recent information and some become uncertain. This leads to different evaluations of candidates issue positions and character qualities. The following section examines how people process information and come to conclusions based on the information they receive. In the context of issue ambiguity it is important to understand this learning process because it helps explain why different people that receive the same information about candidates come to different conclusions. It is also beneficial to examine what medium transmits campaign information. Television is used in this study to measure people's exposure to information. This medium is an accessible tool for almost all people. It is a sufficient measure of people's exposure to candidates' messages in the primary and general election.

#### How Voters Process Candidate Information

Information processing is an active process in which people organize and make sense of the continuous stream of information they receive. They organize this

information into knowledge structures. The knowledge structure consists of many pieces of information about a subject such as pieces of information about a candidate (Lodge and McGraw 1991). Information-Memory processes are important because people are exposed to information about candidates over an extended period of time. Some of the information must be stored and retrieved from long-term memory when an evaluation or vote decision is made (Lodge, McGraw and Stroh 1989).

There are two distinct information-processing models that can be used to explain how people learn, retain and evaluate candidates: the memory-based model and the on-line or impression driven model. Memory based processing involves retrieving and integrating specific information about a candidate from prior memory. During the impression driven process, evaluation of candidates' positions or qualities occurs on-line as new, relevant information is acquired. In this process people make judgements about candidates based on current information. People store the judgement in their long-term memory but they do not store the actual facts used in creating the judgement. If people gather information in order to make an evaluation, they use the impression process. If people have no goal when they receive information, they use the memory drive process (McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh 1990).

It may seem reasonable to think that people who need to make an evaluation would recall information from their memory to help in an evaluation. Lodge et al. explains that the research in this area has shown no relationship between an evaluation and specific information stored in the memory (1989). This memory-based evaluation is too complex and time consuming for people. The impression driven model is more convincing for evaluations because it does not tax people's ability to recall specific

details. The impression model works like a “counter” that integrates new information into a “running tally” of a person’s current impression. When people need to make an evaluation they retrieve the “counter” from memory and update their summary information and store the new updates “counter,” while forgetting the specific information they received (Lodge, McGraw and Stroh 1989).

When people are surveyed and asked to make an evaluation of candidates’ issue positions and quality traits they use the on-line method. People access their running tally and give their evaluations. In this paper respondents are questioned during the primary and general election. People form impressions during the primary and access this information to make their primary evaluation. During the months leading up to the general election people receive more information. They take the new information and update their evaluations of the candidates.

Candidates send out ambiguous messages when they are specific in the primary and ambiguous in the general election. These ambiguous messages can be effective because as people receive new information they use on-line processing and constantly update their evaluations but do not retain specific information in their long-term memory. If candidates send out enough ambiguous messages, people will begin to remember their ambiguous positions even though they were informed of the candidates’ specific positions in the primary. People will remember a candidate had a specific position in the primary but since they do not recall the details of the position they can be more easily swayed by ambiguous messages. People do not lose information during the campaign. The information people remember evolves as the campaign progresses. As people update their “counter” with ambiguous messages they become more unsure about the candidates’

positions. People do not become confused. They knew the candidates' positions in the past but the updated information they are receiving contradicts the past information and this makes them more unsure.

Voters are learning more information as the campaign progresses but they are receiving ambiguous issue positions messages and specific quality trait messages. Since they are learning specific information about candidates' qualities and ambiguous information about issue positions, their knowledge of issue and qualities will not increase at the same rate. Their knowledge of qualities will increase at a faster rate than their knowledge of issue positions.

#### The Role of Learning and Voter Uncertainty

Learning is an evolutionary process; by its very nature knowledge can not remain stagnant. McKelvy and Page (1990) discuss people starting out with different background information and then through publicly available information add on to the original knowledge. They use the publicly learned knowledge to augment their prior private knowledge. Therefore, people rely on their private information until they are subjected to public information and then they gradually shift to rely on the public information as it reinforces the original information. If it conflicts with the original information they must expend effort to decide what information to use and accept.

As people learn more information about a subject, their perspective and knowledge about that subject changes. If there were only two periods in time for people to learn new information about a subject, they would receive information in the first period and process that information with any prior knowledge about the subject.<sup>4</sup> If they were asked questions about the subject, the people would base their answers on the

information they currently knew. In the second period, they would receive additional information about the subject and incorporate that information with what was previously learned. The information in the second period would influence their prior knowledge. This second period information could reinforce and clarify what was learned in period one. It could also make the information learned in period one unclear or confusing.<sup>5</sup> This two period learning scenario occurs in the NES 1980 panel study. People learn about the candidates in the primary and learn more information about the candidates as the general election progresses.

There are three possible outcomes that can occur after knowledge is gained during the general election. The information in the general election can concur with the information learned in the primary. Under this circumstance when respondents are questioned they would give the same answers in both periods. There should be a high level of agreement about the answers. Second, the information in the general election does not reinforce what was learned in primary and the people decide if what they learned in the primary was the correct information. The level of agreement should be lower than in the first situation. Finally, the information learned in the primary and general election do not agree. People are unsure about which information is correct. This result should have the lowest level of agreement. In this situation it is possible for some people to understand an issue less in the general election than they did in the primary. The argument is not that people lose knowledge. The argument is that when people learn additional information about an issue, it affects what is already known.

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<sup>4</sup> McKelvy and Page (1990)

<sup>5</sup> Kessel (1984) provides a similar discussion of the learning process, how information is received through different periods and is absorbed to create a more expansive knowledge structure.

When people receive more information about a subject they must process it. They must expend more effort to understand the different kinds of information they receive.

Knowledge about candidates increases as the campaign progresses (Kessel 1984). Generally, the electorate learns information about candidates in the primary and in the general election they learn more information.<sup>6</sup> This learning process may hinder candidates' abilities to send ambiguous messages to the electorate. However, the information that candidates give to the electorate about their issue positions in the primary and general election may not be the same. The effect of candidates changing their message should be most apparent to a certain portion of the electorate. The people affected are those who are exposed to a high level of the campaign messages and pay attention to the changing information.

The electorate can respond in two ways if candidates' messages about their issue positions are less ambiguous in the primary and more ambiguous in the general election. First, people can believe the issue positions they learned in the primary campaign are the candidates' real issue positions and disregard the ambiguous messages in the general election. Second, people can hear the ambiguous general election message, compare it to the primary campaign message and become unsure about the candidates' actual issue positions. The hypothesis is based on the theory that people become unsure about the candidates' issue positions because of the ambiguous messages.

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<sup>6</sup> Kessel (1984) says that the group of citizens that have increases in their levels of knowledge tend to be those whose spend time to pay attention at regular intervals during the entire campaign.

The level of candidate issue ambiguity that is observed from the model depends on how people react and process the messages they receive from candidates.<sup>7</sup> The results of the forthcoming data analysis will only confirm the hypothesis if respondents react to the ambiguous messages by becoming unsure about the candidates issue positions, despite being informed in the primary. If respondents react to the ambiguous issue position messages by relying on what they learned about the candidates' issue positions in the primary, the hypothesis will not be confirmed.

#### Television as an Information Medium

The medium used affects people ability to learn. It is important to analyze people who are exposed to a medium that will inform them relatively easily. This is defined as a medium that people do not have to expend a high amount of effort to gain information. Through this type of medium people will be most likely to receive candidates' messages. Television news has these qualities and as a result, is influential in nomination and general election campaigns. The 1960 election marked a turning point for television as a major influence on people's perception of presidential candidates. Television stands out from other forms of media because candidates use television as their primary medium for sending out information about their candidacy (Dover 1994).

Kessel (1984) reports that Doris Graber concurs with this assessment. Graber says that people can 'turn to television for a simpler, clearer, and more encouraging image of the electoral scene (Kessel 1984).' Graber's 1976 and 1980 studies show that people can become informed by watching the television news. Her results indicate that

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<sup>7</sup> Bartels (1986) says that the utility of the ambiguous strategy depends on people's different perceptions because the audience of the campaign is not a single homogenous group. Therefore, the ambiguous strategy can work because the messages have a different effect on all people.

the majority, 60%, of television election coverage focuses on campaign issues (Kessel 1984).

Television effects elections by enhancing the personal characteristics of candidates. News organizations personalize events by illustrating them through the actions and words of individuals. By doing this they direct attention to the key people involved rather than the overall context of the issue being reported. Television depicts candidates more as solitary actors seeking office than as aspiring leaders of a governmental institution. Candidates reinforce these images and positions through their advertising to targeted constituencies. The combination of television news coverage and candidate advertising has turned modern elections into candidate-centered campaigns. In this context candidates seek office as individuals and voters rely more upon candidates' positions and characteristics than upon partisanship when making decisions (Dover 1994).

Rahn et al. (1994) state that different types of voters may be affected differently by the structure of the information presented. Two types of information can be presented, one is person-centered and the other is dimension-centered communication. These two structures affect the processing strategies by increasing the motivation and ability to process the information.

Debate forums exemplify dimension-centered formats. Their conflictual nature may attract voters' attention but it can also make it hard to process the information if it is unfamiliar to the person. Rahn et al. found that when information was presented in this debate style people processed and recalled less information than they did from viewing a political commercial or a news broadcast.

Person-centered structures, like viewing the television news, are less involving than the debate medium. They require less effort and personal ability to process the information. Rahn et al. (1994) found that people recalled more information from news broadcasts than from debates. They explained that people were more motivated to pay attention to the news format and the information transmitted could be more easily understood. The type of medium used to study people's knowledge of issues in this paper is the television news. This medium is the best source of information for people to become motivated to understand and recall the information presented because the format is less complex and easier to understand than debate style exposure (Rahn et al. 1994).

## CHAPTER 6

### CHOOSING AN ELECTION

The examination of the 1980 presidential election has one major advantage and one major drawback. The structure of the 1980 National Election Study is very well suited for the proposed research design and data analysis. However, the characteristics of the candidates in the 1980 presidential race are not optimal for providing evidence to support the hypothesis.<sup>8</sup>

The optimal data set to examine the perceived change in candidates' use of issue ambiguity from the primary to the general election is a panel study in which the same people are asked questions about candidates' issue positions during the primary and again during the general election. The 1980 National Election Study contains this type of panel data. The 1980 NES provides a panel study in which the same respondents were asked the same questions in four time periods of the campaign. Respondents were first asked questions during the primary season in February, after the primaries in June, after the nominating conventions in September and finally after the election in November. The panel waves in February and September were chosen for analysis.<sup>9</sup> These two waves occur during the primary and general election campaign and therefore, provide the best

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<sup>8</sup> Geer (1989) says that the problem with examining primaries is the lack of good available data.

<sup>9</sup> Geer (1989) uses the 1980 NES study and explains that the problem with using this primary data is that in the February wave voters have had little opportunity to learn about the candidates. By June, people have had months to become informed but the actual primaries have already occurred. Geer acknowledges this drawback but explains that there is no better data source for examining people and their knowledge of candidates during the primaries.

time period to measure the electorate's perception of candidate ambiguity during the primary and general election.<sup>10</sup>

All respondents were interviewed before the first primary, which was in New Hampshire on February 26, 1980, which is in the preprimary period. This does not provide an optimal opportunity for the participants to learn about the candidates because the heaviest news coverage, candidate spending and campaigning occurs in the weeks before a state's primary. Ideally, the best time period to survey respondents is when the primaries are actually occurring and before any candidate captures momentum and becomes the front runner. This situation has the best opportunity to occur during the month of March. The time period used was the best alternative offered by the NES. Despite the fact the surveys occurred before the primaries began, the respondents in the high exposure group are people that watch television often and pay attention. This high exposure group is more likely to be informed about the primary candidates. These people are interested in the campaign and information is available for them to become informed about the candidates competing in the primary.

Geer (1989) acknowledges that the timing of interviews may bias an examination of voter knowledge because people may remain uninformed until primaries occur in their state. If voters are less informed at the time they are interviewed and more informed when their state's primary actually occurs, the results may be biased against finding evidence to support the hypothesis. However, an attempt to remedy this bias is made by analyzing the highest media exposure group from the primary interviews. This group

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<sup>10</sup> These are the two best time periods but news coverage is more dispersed among the numerous candidates in the primary than the general election. The general election usually contains only two candidates and the primaries normally have multiple candidates so people should naturally be more informed about candidates in the general election than in the primary (Geer 1989).

should have adequate exposure because there is available news coverage of the candidates, their platforms, positions and qualities months before any of the primaries actually begin. Therefore, this high exposure group has the best opportunity to learn the candidates' issue positions. The opportunity to learn the candidates' issue positions seems questionable for the groups with lower exposure levels. Their level of exposure does not appear to be sufficient when this survey is conducted.

The January time period is also a better measure of knowledge during the primaries than the survey wave conducted in June. In 1980 Reagan was determined to be the Republican nominee fairly early in the primary season. As soon as candidates lock up their nomination they begin campaigning to the general electorate. By the June survey, Reagan's general election campaign was underway for at least a month or more and he was exposing his general election messages to the electorate. Although Kennedy was still campaigning for the Democratic nomination in June, Carter had received enough primary votes for the nomination. Therefore in June, Carter had to begin focusing his messages toward the general electorate, despite the continuing challenge from Kennedy. People's responses reflect the information they receive up to the interview time. Their answers not only include information they learn during the primary but their answers are tainted by information they gain in the general election campaign since it was underway in June.

Respondents also more accurately reflect candidates' primary messages during January because they are gathering information in preparation to make their vote decision in the primary, which occurs within about two months. The June survey is conducted after people vote in the primary. At this point, the candidates are positioning themselves

for the general election and people are gathering information in preparation for the general election. It is possible respondents may not be paying as much attention because the general election does not occur for five months.

When examining the presidential elections from 1980 until 2000; the 1980, 1984 and 1996 elections have well known candidates. This creates the most difficult circumstances to find results to support the hypothesis that candidates are less ambiguous in the primary and more ambiguous in the general election. When candidates are incumbents or well known, even a small effect would indicate that stronger more positive results should be expected under different situations. These would be elections with candidates that have low name recognition and are not incumbents.

The 1980 primary National Election Study included four candidates from the Republican Party: Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, John Connally and James Baker. The 1980 primary NES study included three candidates from the Democratic primary: Jimmy Carter, Ted Kennedy and Jerry Brown. The two candidates examined are the nominees from both major parties.

This is a difficult case and a dramatic effect of candidate ambiguity on the respondents' knowledge of issues should not be expected. The best situation for this analysis would be an election with no incumbent president. This scenario would provide the opportunity to compare two people that were only candidates and not also officeholders. The situation in 1980 was that both candidates were well known. Jimmy Carter was the incumbent president and had been observed for four years in the White House. This makes the analysis more difficult because Carter was in the role of president and candidate simultaneously. The main difference for Carter is that the position of

president gave him much more exposure to the American people throughout the campaign. This exposure was in the form of free media coverage that a knowledgeable politician will use to get reelected.<sup>11</sup>

Ronald Reagan was the former governor of California and a well-known conservative. Reagan talked about a set of principles and broad policies that were defined by his years in public life. The positions and policies he ascribed to were not much different than the ones he had been portraying since he became a conservative (Plotkin 1981).

It will be very difficult for either Carter or Reagan to change what people think about them, their issue positions or qualities. If there are positive results, it should be expected that the results would have greater significance in a more conducive election. Even if only weak effects are found, under these conditions further research should be warranted.

Carter and Reagan were the only major candidates in the race after the conventions and, therefore, analyzing other candidates who are no longer in the race would not provide any support or evidence for the hypothesis. For the purposes of this research, the beginning of the general election begins after the party conventions. Therefore, based on this time period no other people from the major parties would qualify as candidates running in the general election.

This analysis does not consider independent candidates running for president.

This paper analyzes the major party candidates because they matter. Anderson's

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<sup>11</sup> Bartels (1986) finds that uncertainty about Carter's positions did reflect this exposure. He showed that for every issue except Reagan's tax cut, people were more uncertain about Reagan's issue positions than Carter's. The difference was between 10 and 20 percent in five separate issue categories: aid to minorities, defense, spending, guaranteed jobs, and government spending and services. These are the issues that Carter

presence in the general election campaign did not fundamentally alter the other candidates' strategies or the ultimate outcome. Either the Republican or Democratic candidate will be elected president. The paper does not focus on candidates who do not have a legitimate chance of winning the general election.

The major independent candidate in the 1980 election was a Republican turned independent named John Anderson. Although Anderson did run in the general election he will not be studied here. The premises and theories discussed in this paper are testing the general pattern that describes the major party candidates. Independent candidates do not have the same characteristics as candidates with major party affiliation. Independent candidates have different motivations and they are not expected to act in the same way as major party candidates. Independent candidates try to attract attention and show they are a different alternative than the major party candidates. Independent candidates' emphasis is different because they want to be taken seriously. This is accomplished by being more specific about positions. This specificity carries through the primary and general election.

Another problem with including John Anderson in the analysis of the 1980 election is that he was not a pure independent candidate. Anderson started as a Republican and participated in the Republican Primaries. He then dropped out of the Republican race soon after the Illinois primary. He then changed his affiliation and became an independent candidate. It is hard to interpret the results of Anderson's messages since his messages changed focus during the primary season. Early in the primaries his messages were focused on Republican voters and then, while the primaries

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had taken action on and had a record about. Three issues that Carter did not take action on were more unclear to people: abortion, Reagan's tax cut and his ideology.

were still occurring, he became an independent. The focus of his messages was then the entire electorate, unlike the candidates still engaged in primary competition. He began his general election campaign not after the conventions like Reagan and Carter but during the Republican and Democratic primary season.

To verify this assumption about Anderson analysis was conducted to measure respondents' knowledge about Anderson in the primary and general election. The results show that no respondents had any knowledge of Anderson in the primary wave. In the general election wave there was a slight increase in knowledge about his issue positions and qualities. The baseline of knowledge in the primary of zero knowledge does not allow any meaningful analysis pertaining to the hypothesis and candidate ambiguity.

#### The Republican Primary

Ronald Reagan's strategy in the primary was to maintain the front-runner position he had established in earlier years. The other candidates were left to distinguish themselves as the major alternative to Reagan. The first primary was held in Iowa but Reagan did not campaign in the state. George Bush campaigned vigorously and won 33 percent of the vote to Reagan's 27 percent (Plotkin 1981). This primary gave Bush momentum in the race. Reagan reacted by intensely campaigning in New Hampshire, while Bush, Baker and Anderson were striving for the moderate vote. Reagan regained the front-runner position after this primary by winning about 50% of the vote. There were many withdrawals after this primary and the field narrowed to Reagan, Bush and Anderson. Reagan was able to solely court the conservative voters, while Bush and Anderson sparred over the moderate and liberal Republicans (Plotkin, 1981). Reagan then won four southern primaries before the Illinois primary on March 18<sup>th</sup>. This was the

home state of John Anderson and a loss would signal the end of Anderson's hopes for the nomination. Despite the crossover of Democrats, Reagan won the primary by a 4-3 margin. This marked the withdrawal of Anderson from the Republican primary and the beginning of his independent campaign. Bush continued winning states like Connecticut, Pennsylvania and Michigan, but his strength was mostly confined to the Northeast, a more liberal region. Reagan showed the ability to attract votes from traditional Democratic constituencies such as union members and Catholics. Voters unhappy with Carter were inclined to support Reagan in the primaries. Reagan also had an advantage because the states he won in the south and west were winner-take-all, while the states Bush won tended to have the proportional division of delegates. By the end of May, Bush withdrew from the race and left Reagan as the sole candidate from the Republican Party (Plotkin 1981).

#### The Democratic Primary

Jimmy Carter's strategy was based on his position as the incumbent president. He mainly emphasized his experience gained as president. The advantage of the incumbency allows the president to exploit this experience through daily news coverage and television time for important speeches or events. Carter's strategy was to stay in Washington during the campaign to remove any criticism of using the presidency for campaign purposes. This also helped Carter display his role as commander-in-chief during the Iran hostage situation. Finally, Carter declined television debates, which reduced his exposure to rivals (Plotkin 1981). Carter won just less than half of the vote in the New Hampshire primary. This primary and the Wisconsin primary led to the withdrawal of Jerry Brown, who won only a tenth of the vote and had little financial support. Kennedy focused on

the Illinois primary. This state contained Kennedy's constituency of urban voters, Catholics and minorities. Despite this focus Carter won the primary 2-1. After the contest the press indicated that Carter would be the eventual winner. In fact, the victory gave Carter a quarter of the votes needed for the nomination. One week later Carter defeated Kennedy in Wisconsin and Michigan. The states Kennedy did win were narrow victories and the delegates were often split with Carter. Kennedy could not appeal to the electorate outside the Northeast and California. Carter by contrast was dominant in the South as well as the Midwest and West. The president's popularity declined throughout the primary but he retained enough support to win the nomination (Plotkin 1981). When voters were polled Kennedy won when policy was stressed and Carter won when character was stressed. Despite this policy advantage Kennedy was not able to exploit the administration's record in his favor (Plotkin 1981).

#### The General Election

Ronald Reagan won 44 of 50 states, with 489 electoral votes out of the total 538. Reagan won a clear majority and gained 55.3 percent of the two party vote (Pomper 1981). The media portrayed the 1980 election as a contest between two individuals and not parties. Many voters who did identify with a party described themselves as having weak loyalty. When describing the reason for their votes, few voters mentioned party and many held a negative view of the both parties. Carter had a problem because his first campaign stressed him being an "outsider" and independent of the establishment. This did not help Carter when he was an incumbent and part of the establishment. He did not gain strong support from the traditional democratic base and gained almost no support from the Independents and Republicans. Reagan received strong support from his base

and managed to garner votes from many Democrats. Reagan gained about half of the Catholic and union vote and large portion of the Jewish vote (Plotkin 1981).

### General Election Issues and Strategies

#### The State of the Union

The basic campaign trend in 1980 showed that Carter was unpopular. He was the target of national discontent. There was a sense that America was bound to decisions made by Arab oil producers. America endured record high inflation and interest rates combined with rising unemployment and decreasing industrial strength. The real wages of American families in 1980 had fallen five percent below the level at the beginning of the Carter presidency. Carter was also plagued by the Iran hostage crisis. The hostages were held for over a year and the situation hurt his public image as an effective leader. The public faulted Carter because of his inability to seize control and implement solutions to these problems (Pomper, 1981, 76).

#### Issues in the 1980 Election

The 1980 general election campaign contained some major issues such as energy dependence, inflation, unemployment, foreign policy and social issues. Carter's position on energy was to call for the conservation of resources through more efficient uses of energy and the creation of environmentally secure sources of energy. Reagan called for more domestic production of oil and more nuclear power. He planned to accomplish this with as much private capital and marketplace investment as possible (Plotkin 1981).

President Carter's position on fixing the economy rested with a program of a tight budget, restrained monetary policy and private restraint by management and labor. His position was to use private and public means to improve the economy. He also proposed

a system of tax penalties and rewards as a way to control wages and prices. Ronald Reagan's position was to give economic markets the freedom to work. He rejected wage and price controls in favor of lower taxes, less spending and a balanced budget. This was a shift away from the public sector toward the private sector. Reagan's position to use the private sector differed from Carter's position, which proposed the use of both public and private sector solutions to stimulate the economy (Plotkin 1981). Carter's position on foreign policy and military issues was primarily a defense of what he had accomplished. He emphasized the signing of the SALT II treaty with the Soviet Union. He argued that his basic foreign policy had been successful with the Panama Canal treaty, the Camp David Accords and progress in developing Third World countries. Reagan offered a vision of a world that was hostile to American interests. His solution was to increase the military power to protect America. His more specific positions are more difficult to assess. His position on China was somewhat ambiguous. Reagan at first argued for the restoration of "official" relations with Taiwan, but later backed off that position under pressure from China. He was hawkish on the Middle East calling the PLO a terrorist organization and chided Carter for meeting with them. Reagan did not however, say what he would do beyond the Camp David Accords. Finally, Reagan called for closer relations with the European nations in NATO. Reagan claimed Carter had lost the confidence of the NATO allies but the criticisms that Reagan made seemed to attack Carter's image, not his positions.

#### Reagan's Strategies

Reagan embraced the traditional challenger strategy, emphasizing the failures of the Carter administration. The Reagan campaign focused on two slogans. The

Republican Party's national convention theme was "Together, A New Beginning," and the phrase, "For a Change" was used in Reagan's television advertisements (Pomper 1981). These slogans did not contain any specific information but only promised a change. In speeches, debates and on the campaign trail, Reagan asked the American people a series of questions to make them think about their current situation and potential to improve under his leadership. Reagan asked, "Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in the stores than it was four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment in the country than there was four years ago? Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel that our security is as safe, that we're as strong as we were four years ago (Pomper 1981)." The campaign tried to use these questions to emphasize Carter's deficiencies. He tried to portray Carter as an ineffective leader, incapable of implementing policies, using presidential power for political reasons and unable to deal with foreign policy crises (Wayne 1984).

Reagan offered a general conservative philosophy and a vague vision of better times. He emphasized his leadership, competence and decisive qualities (Pomper 1981). The issues Reagan did address included: dealing with inflation, increasing jobs, economic growth and a more responsible federal government (Wayne 1984). Wayne (1984) explains that one approach to discussing issues is to remain vague. This tactic is used to convey a plan of action without encumbering it with specific details. Despite his strong ideological stands, Reagan was able to campaign on a much more vague message than Carter because of his impressive communication skills (Pomper 1981).

### Carter's Strategies

Carter had three possible strategies: to praise accomplishments and promise future improvements (used by Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and Gerald Ford in 1976); to blame others for his failures (as Harry Truman did in 1948); or to try to change the public's focus to the weaknesses of the opponent (Pomper 1981). Carter chose to rely mainly on the last strategy. At the beginning of the primary Carter emphasized his accomplishments and his ability to represent the Democratic Party's ideals. As the campaign progressed, Carter began to attack Reagan and John Anderson. Carter's campaign portrayed Reagan as "simplistic" and unfit to be a leader. The negative thrust of Carter's campaign was designed to accentuate the ideological concerns about Reagan's issue positions and his negative personal qualities (Wayne 1984). The campaign sent a message that unemployment, inflation, the economy and foreign policy issues could get worse under Reagan.

Carter portrayed himself as hardworking, informed, a moderate about complex issues and knowledgeable about foreign affairs. These were all seen by Carter's advisors as the president's strengths and Reagan's weaknesses. Carter did not address future plans or make any speeches about policy issues (Pomper 1981).

## CHAPTER 7

### MEASUREMENT DESCRIPTION AND EXPLANATION

In this model ambiguity is measured by voters' perceptions rather than by candidate statements. Campbell (1983) lists three reasons why voters' perception of candidates' messages is a better measure than directly analyzing candidate speeches, debates or press releases. First, it is difficult to measure the ambiguity or specificity of candidate speeches, press releases or debates. Second, ambiguity may arise from candidates' actions and behavior. Voters listen to candidates but they also watch what they do. Finally, if candidates' messages are to be judged as ambiguous, this should be done by the audience the candidate is trying to reach. What may be ambiguous to a political observer may be clear to voters. Therefore, voters are the best judges of ambiguity (Campbell 1983).

The objective is to find the level of people's uncertainty about candidates' issue positions. Downs (1957) defines uncertainty as, "Any lack of sure knowledge..." Uncertainty can be described simply as not being sure about something or less than perfect information. Information is defined as data that reduces uncertainty. More specifically in this paper uncertainty is defined as respondents not knowing the answer to issue position and character quality questions. The uncertainty that people experience may be remedied by gathering certain non-conflicting information during an election campaign. Ambiguous messages can sometimes be perceived as containing conflicting information and thus make this task difficult for some people (Gant 1994).

It would not be very beneficial to examine all 1008 respondents in the survey.<sup>12</sup>

The issue that the research question seeks to examine requires the respondent to be exposed to the messages being sent out by the campaign. If respondents are not exposed to the campaign, then there is no reason to expect any change in their perception and knowledge of the candidates' issue positions. Therefore the data set needs to be broken down into several groups that represent different levels of exposure to the campaign messages. This can be accomplished by creating groups based on a variable that would indicate the level of the respondents' level of exposure to the campaign.

People receive campaign messages from many different mediums. The electorate can attend candidate speeches, watch television debates, read the paper, listen to the radio or watch television. One approach is to base this variable on television exposure. A majority of people follow presidential campaigns by watching television. In 1976 the network news covered 70 percent of the campaign issues (Patterson 1980). Television is the prime source of campaign information for 60 percent of the American people (Wayne 1984).<sup>13</sup> This wide exposure makes it reasonable to expect that people who watch more television news and pay more attention will have increased exposure to campaign messages. Since television viewing is a widely used medium for all forms of information, it should provide an adequate measurement of people's exposure to campaign messages. Dalager (1996) supports this view and reports that watching television has a significant effect on issue recall. His issue model shows that people, who

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<sup>12</sup> Once the respondents who did not answer the questions being examined were eliminated, the actual number of people included in this study is 767.

<sup>13</sup> Patterson (1980) says that unlike newspapers that are locally based and divide their coverage between local and national affairs, the networks are national organizations whose coverage is almost exclusively dedicated to national politics. The daily newspaper is received in about 70 percent of American households but 98 percent of the households have a television. Patterson believes that these numbers provide evidence

watch the television news, are better able to name and identify issues in campaigns (Dalager 1996).

Bartels (1986) finds that media tends to make people more certain about candidates' issue positions. They are more likely to answer questions about these issue positions when exposed to the media. It has also been found that television has a greater impact than newspapers in the primary. This is because television is a more intrusive medium than newspapers. If readers are not interested in the campaign they can skip over sections of the paper. Television viewers are captive to the election news stories that the networks decide to present. Television viewers are also subject to a higher proportion of election stories than newspaper readers during the primary. During the 1976 primary, the campaign was the subject of one in five stories on the evening news, but it was only one in eight stories in the newspapers. Television viewers were 15 percent more likely than readers to recall information about the campaign (Patterson 1980).

A television variable will be created to divide the 767 respondents into four groups according to their level of television exposure over the course of the primary and general election.<sup>14</sup> The television variable will be an interactive variable multiplying times per week television is watched by the amount of attention that is paid to television.<sup>15</sup> The interactive was created because both components of the variable are

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that television is the preeminent source for public information. Television appeals to the masses, while newspapers are read by a relatively smaller group.

<sup>14</sup> Bartels (1986) includes watching the television news in his voter uncertainty model as a major indicator of the level of people's exposure to campaign issues. Norrander (1986) explains that the news media and campaign commercials are the two sources for information about candidates. If people are exposed to news programs they also have a chance to be exposed to campaign commercials at the same time.

<sup>15</sup> The question stated, "How often do you watch the national network news on early evening TV?" The answers are (1) Every evening (2) 3 or 4 times a week (3) once or twice a week (4) less often (5) never watch the news on TV (6) Don't know (7) NA. The question stated, "When you watch the news on TV, do

important for people to receive campaign messages. The use of the interactive term allows the respondents to be grouped according to their overall exposure to the television news. If only one component were used it would not capture the full effect of exposure to the campaign messages. Kessel (1984) explains that there are two explanations for people becoming informed. The first is how much information exposure they have to the source and the second is how intensely they monitor the source for information. In this study an interactive variable is created to capture both aspects.

There are five possible answers including zero to the television question about times television is watched per week. There are four possible answers including zero to the question about the level of attention viewers pay to the television. The answers were recoded to give higher scores for more attention paid and time watching TV.<sup>16</sup> The interactive variable is coded from 0 to 12. This coding allows a campaign exposure score to be calculated based on television exposure during the primary season and general election. This allows the respondents to be ranked according to their exposure during the primary and the general election.

It is essential that people pay attention to the television while they are viewing in order to acquire information about the campaign. Inherent in this assumption is that television news programs cover and report campaign issues. Kessel (1984) reports that the media has avoided covering issues in many presidential races. The media coverage of

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you pay a great deal of attention to news about government and politics, do you pay some attention or don't you pay much attention to news about government and politics?" The answers are (1) Don't pay much attention (2) Pay some attention (3) Pay a great deal of attention (4) Don't know (5) NA.

<sup>16</sup> The variable time spent watching TV was coded as follows: (4) Every evening (3) 3 or 4 times a week (2) once or twice a week (1) less often (0) never watch the news on TV (0) Don't know (Eliminated) NA. The variable amount of attention paid to TV was coded as follows: (1) Don't pay much attention (2) Pay some attention (3) Pay a great deal of attention (0) Don't know (Eliminated) NA.

the 1980 election was an exception and the media provided extensive coverage of the issues during the general election campaign.

If respondents watch the news many nights a week but do not pay attention, they would not be receiving the campaign messages. If they watched television only a few nights a week but paid a lot of attention, the respondents would not obtain enough information about the campaign to perceive changes in candidates' level of ambiguity from the primary to general election. Only by watching the news several nights a week and paying attention while viewing will the respondents be affected by the different levels of ambiguity used by the candidates.

Respondents are placed in one of four categories based on the interactive television variable. This division of the data allows the hypothesis to be addressed using the appropriate respondents.<sup>17</sup> The groups are: (1) (High-High) High exposure during the primary and High exposure during the general election (2) (High-Low) High exposure during the primary and Low exposure during the general election (3) (Low-High) Low exposure during the primary and High exposure during the general election and (4) (Low-Low) Low exposure during the primary and Low exposure during the general election.<sup>18</sup>

The groups are scored identically for the primary and general election.<sup>19</sup> The people placed in the high groups are those who have a score from 8 to 12. The

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<sup>17</sup> Alvarez (1998) uses a method of disaggregation similar to the method used in this model.

<sup>18</sup> When the respondents were divided into groups, they were first divided according to their exposure in the primary. There were 391 people in the high group and 376 in the low group. The high group was then divided again according to exposure in the general election. Out of the 391 people in the high group 262 also had high exposure during the general election and 129 had low exposure during the general election. The low group was also divided according to exposure in the general election. There were 52 people who had high exposure during the general election and 324 people who had low exposure during the general election. Therefore, the high-high group had 262 cases, the high-low group had 129 cases, the low-high group had 52 cases and the low-low group had 324 cases.

<sup>19</sup> Only the respondents who answered the issue position and quality trait questions in both the primary and general election were included in the analysis.

respondents in the low group have scores from 0 to 7. The first step is needed to separate the respondents according to their scores in the primary. There are 391 people (50.9%) in the primary high group and 376 (49.1%) in the primary low group. Based on this grouping the respondents are put into high and low for the general election.

The high group from the primary is split into high and low for the general election and the result is that 262 (34.1%) of the respondents have high exposure in both the primary and general election (High-High). There are 129 (16.8%) of the primary high group that reduce their exposure in the general election and fit into the low general election exposure group (High-Low).

When the low group from the primary is then separated into high and low exposure for the general election, the results show that 52 (6.7%) of the people increased their exposure score enough in the general election to be placed in the high group (Low-High). There are 324 (42.2%) respondents that remain in the low exposure group in the general election (Low-Low). The low-high group may seem unusually small. It might be expected that people are not as interested and do not pay as much attention during the primary and then, during the general election, people become more interested and pay more attention to the campaign. The groupings presented here show just the opposite. The high-low group (129) is larger than the low-high group (52). When these results are looked at in the context of all four groupings, the results show that a majority of people stay in the same group for both periods. Of the people who had high exposure in the primary, 67% remained in the high exposure group during the general election. Of the people who had low exposure during the primary, 86% remained in the low exposure group during the general election. The pattern that emerges here is that the people who

are exposed to messages during the primary stay exposed during the general election and the people who are not exposed stay not exposed.

The groups that do not have high exposure in both periods are not used as a baseline for comparison in this model.<sup>20</sup> The constant level of exposure in both periods allows people's knowledge of candidates' issue positions and qualities in the primary to be the baseline. Respondents' knowledge in the general election is then compared to the knowledge levels in the primary. This will show if people's knowledge of issues and qualities changed. The argument in this paper is that the cause of the change is candidate ambiguity. The conclusion does assume ambiguity exists for the other groups. Candidates either use ambiguity or they do not. The reason the high-high group is used is because this group provides the best circumstances to observe candidate ambiguity. In this model the existence of candidate ambiguity will be found by surveying people who are exposed to all the campaign messages. This can be accomplished most effectively through the use of the high-high group. The construction of this model excludes low exposure groups but this does not mean that candidates do not use ambiguous messages in the general election. The low groups are just not in a position to receive the messages in a way that can be measured and observed.

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<sup>20</sup> To address any concerns over using only the high exposure group, analysis was conducted on the other three groups. The results for the H-L and L-H groups reflect similar results to what was found in the H-H group. The results for the L-L group provided some support for the percentage change test of Reagan and Carter. This group had the least exposure to the media and does not reflect the trends apparent in the other three groups because it has such different characteristics. Because of such limited media exposure this group should not be relied upon for making conclusions about the hypothesis. However, the Low-Low group does offer some potentially interesting possibilities because this group does have the same level of exposure in both periods. It is possible that this group may also be exposed to other information sources besides television. These respondents may read the paper or talk to people who are exposed to television information. Therefore, it is possible this group may provide useful information about the change in candidate messages from the primary to the general election.

Respondents in the Low-Low category are not used in the analysis. If people have very low exposure to the campaign during the primary and general election, it would not be expected that this group would perceive any change in candidate issue ambiguity or candidate qualities. Any change would not be explained by the hypothesis and supporting theory.

People in the High-Low group are also not considered in this analysis. This group received a high level of messages in the primary, which informs them initially. However, since they are informed at a low level during the general election, their perception of the candidates should not change much from the initial information they receive. If they receive low exposure during the general election their level of agreement about candidate issue positions should be about the same as in the primary. Any perceived changes in the respondents' answers would be random occurrences and not based on a high level of exposure like their answers were in the primary wave.

The participants in the Low-High group are not ideal for analysis. Based on the television variable, it is reasonable to assume that this group would have little knowledge about candidates' issue positions in the primary and then receive more information during the general election. Having this very low level of exposure to the messages in the primary makes it difficult to address the hypothesis. The hypothesis seeks to compare how candidates change the level of ambiguity they use from the primary to general election. This group does not provide respondents with adequate exposure in the primary, which makes any comparison with the general election difficult.

One group that has the same level of exposure in both periods is the high-high group.<sup>21</sup> This is the best group to examine because they are influenced by messages from the primary and the general election. Candidates also gear their messages toward people who pay attention to the campaign.<sup>22</sup> If the effect of candidate ambiguity is to be found, it will be discovered in the high-high group. This segment will have the exposure necessary to be affected by messages in the primary and general election. They will be subject to candidates' less ambiguous stances in the primary and by more ambiguous issue stances in the general election.

In this research design, it is important to examine the same respondents in both periods and to have these same respondents exposed to the same level of candidates' messages in both periods. Using the same respondents with the same level of exposure in the primary and general election is similar to a control variable. The similar level of high exposure over both periods is a very key component of this research in order to get a true measure of the difference in the level of ambiguity used by candidates in the primary and general election. It allows the examination of the very specific changes in respondents' knowledge and perception of candidates' issue positions.<sup>23</sup>

Examining the same respondents in both time periods is crucial for observing the effect of candidates changing their level of ambiguity from the primary to the general

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<sup>21</sup> It was important to choose a group that was seeking to become more informed and reduce their uncertainty. The high-high group is the most likely group to seek out information about the candidates issue positions and character qualities. Therefore, the effect of any ambiguous or specific messages should be seen in this group (Gant 1994). As Downs (1957) notes, "the rational citizen will prefer more information to less, *ceretis paribus*, since more information will usually lead to a higher degree of confidence in a decision (Gant 1994)." He is saying that the groups that are exposed to more information should be more confident about the knowledge they possess.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell (1983) says, "the ambiguity or clarity of a message is as much dependent on the listener as the speaker." When comparing the four groups, the people in the high-high group are most likely to be listening and receiving the candidates' messages.

election. When the same people are examined it can be seen how the campaign messages affect the same people in two time periods. The data set could be separated by comparing two groups composed of different people but with the same level of exposure. The comparison would compare all the people with high exposure in the primary to all the people with high exposure in the general election. This would only allow the results to show who was better informed, those people in the primary or those in the general election. It would not allow testing the theory that people who were informed at a certain high level in the primary actually were less certain of candidates' issue positions in the general election. This is a much better test because the existence of uncertainty can much more easily be attributed to candidate ambiguity.<sup>24</sup>

Examining the high-high group lets us say that the respondents' lower level of knowledge about candidates' issue positions in the general election is not due to people only learning the general election messages, which may or may not be ambiguous. The high-high group will know if candidates are ambiguous in the general election because they were exposed to the messages in the primary. If the primary messages are more specific and once people receive the general election message, they become unsure about

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<sup>23</sup> Kessel (1984) argues that the 1980 general election to a greater degree than any other modern election was determined by issues. The 1980 election contained a highest proportion of candidate emphasis on issue positions since 1972.

<sup>24</sup> The alternate model discussed above would place those people with high exposure in the primary into the same group regardless of their exposure in the general election. It also puts those with high exposure in the general election into the same group regardless of their exposure in the primary. This has several implications. First, there will not be the same people in both groups. This makes the effect of ambiguity less clear. When the same people are exposed to candidates' messages in the primary and in the general election, any change in the candidates' messages that effect the group can be observed. When two separate groups are examined the results show how the candidates' messages affected the one group in the primary and how the candidates' messages affected the separate group in the general election. There are two separate results. The problem is that any conclusion that attempts to connect the results is missing crucial information. For example, it may be observed that people in the primary high exposure group have a higher level of knowledge about candidates' issue positions in the primary than the people in the high general election group. The problem is that the prior exposure level of the general election group is not known.

the candidates' positions, then the candidates have effectively transmitted ambiguous issue positions. Using the high-high group is the more difficult segment to find results but it makes the interpretation of the results much clearer and precise. It makes it easier to cite ambiguity as the cause of respondents' uncertainty in the general election when people were more certain in the primary.

Questions about candidate issue positions are included in the model to examine candidate ambiguity. This allows analysis of the change in the electorate's perception of candidates' issue positions. From the primary to general election people in the high-high group are increasingly exposed to information about the candidates. This exposure should inform respondents about candidates' issue positions as the campaign progresses. There are four questions included in the issue analysis.<sup>25</sup> These questions ask respondents to give candidates' positions on the issues of inflation/unemployment,<sup>26</sup> defense,<sup>27</sup> government services<sup>28</sup> and Russian relations.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Only four questions were included in the analysis because the NES only asked respondents four issue questions in the waves analyzed. These were the only 4 issue questions asked in both waves. It would be beneficial if more issue questions were asked but all the available issue questions were utilized.

<sup>26</sup> The question stated, "Some people feel that the federal government should take action to reduce the inflation rate, even if it means that unemployment would go up a lot. Others feel the government should take action to reduce the rate of unemployment, even if it means that inflation would go up a lot." Where would you place the candidate? The answers are (1) Reduce inflation even if unemployment goes up a lot (7) Reduce unemployment even if inflation goes up a lot (8) Don't know (9) NA (0) All Else. For the standard deviation test (1) was coded as (7) and (7) was coded as (1).

<sup>27</sup> The question stated, "Some people believe we should spend much less money for defense. Suppose these people are at the end of the scale at point number 1. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 6. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2,3,4,5 or 6." Where would you place the candidate on this scale? The answers are (1) Greatly decrease defense spending (7) Greatly increase defense spending (8) Don't know (9) NA (0) All Else. The coding stayed the same for the standard deviation test.

<sup>28</sup> This question stated, "Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel it is important for the government to continue the services it now provides even if it means no reduction in spending." Where would you place the candidate? The answers are (1) Government should provide many fewer services; reduce spending a lot (7) Government should continue to provide services; no reduction in spending (8) Don't know (9) NA (0) All Else. For the standard deviation test (1) was coded as (7) and (7) was coded as (1). The attempt in coding these four issue questions was to code more conservative positions high (7) and code more liberal positions low (1).

Interpreting the results will be difficult if the model only examines the change in the ambiguity of candidates' issue positions from the primary to the general election. It would be difficult to justify a substantive level of significance under these conditions. The interpretation could be viewed as arbitrary and questionable. The introduction of candidate qualities into the model attempts to remedy this problem by creating a baseline of comparison for candidate issue positions. During the campaign candidates send out messages about their issue positions but they also want to inform voters about their character qualities.<sup>30</sup>

The discussion pertaining to respondents learning about candidates' issue positions throughout the campaign also applies to character qualities. The electorate learns about candidates' character qualities throughout the primary and general election. The learning curve increases as respondents receive more information about candidates. According to the hypothesis, when candidates are campaigning on issues, they are less ambiguous in the primary and more ambiguous in the general election in order to appeal to a larger portion of the electorate. Candidates attempt to change the perception of their issue positions from the primary to the general election. There should not be a change in the way candidates portray their character qualities. They should want to present their qualities in the most positive way possible in the primary and general election. For example, if a candidate wants to send the message that he has strong leadership qualities, this will be a consistent message throughout the campaign. Unlike the way candidates become ambiguous about their issue positions in the general election, candidates maintain

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<sup>29</sup> This question stated, "Some people feel it is important for us to try very hard to get along with Russia. Others feel it is a big mistake to try too hard to get along with Russia." Where would you place the candidate? The answers are (1) Important to try very hard to get along with Russia (7) Big mistake to try

the same message about their positive qualities in the primary and general election.

There is no ambiguity in the messages about candidate character qualities. Based on the same messages about character qualities sent out by the candidates in the primary and general election, it is expected that respondents' knowledge of candidate qualities will increase at a much faster rate than respondents' knowledge of candidate issue positions.

There are nine questions included for candidate quality analysis. These questions ask respondents to say whether the quality mentioned described the candidate.<sup>31</sup> The qualities include dishonest, weak, knowledgeable, power-hungry, inspiring, solve our economic problems, provide strong leadership, and develop good relations with other countries.

Two approaches are used to examine candidate ambiguity. The first, main approach looks at the number of issue positions and character qualities that respondents can name.<sup>32</sup> The other, secondary test analyzes the level of agreement between respondents about candidates' issue positions and character qualities. The questions are coded differently in test (1) and test (2).

If test (1) in the research design looks at how many issues respondents reported to know about in the primary and general election, it should be expected that respondents know more later in the campaign. This would reject the hypothesis. The problem is that the learning curve moves from low knowledge in the primary to higher knowledge in the general election due to campaign exposure. However, the ambiguity issue works in the

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too hard to get along with Russia (8) Don't know (9) NA (0) All Else. The coding stayed the same for the standard deviation test.

<sup>30</sup> See Gopoian (1982) and Aldrich and Alvarez (1994).

<sup>31</sup> The question stated, 'Please tell me whether the word or phrase that describes the candidate I name (1) Extremely well (2) Quite well (3) Not too well (4) Not well at all (8) Don't know (9) NA (0) All Else.

opposite direction. The ambiguity theory proposed in this paper predicts that high knowledge of issues in the primary and lower knowledge of candidate issue positions in the general election. To address this problem, the level of candidate issue ambiguity needs to be compared with another aspect that candidates try to expose to the electorate. This aspect is candidate qualities. Throughout the campaign from the primary to the general election, candidates strive to portray their leadership qualities, knowledge of issues, honesty, morality, problem solving ability and foreign affairs expertise. When comparing responses about candidate qualities to issue positions the difference of the means test will be performed. This test measures whether the changes in respondents' answers about candidate issue positions and qualities from the primary to the general election are statistically significant. If the changes are statistically significant, it will show that there is a high probability that the results are not random. There can then be a high level of confidence that the results are valid.

In test (1) the questions are coded 0 or 1. If the respondent gave an answer to the question it is coded as 1. If the respondent answered, don't know it is coded as 0.<sup>33</sup> All other answers are taken out of the analysis. This type of coding allows the issues to be summed up with a maximum score of 4 and minimum score of 0 for each wave. The qualities have a maximum score of 9 and minimum score of 0 for each wave. The scores from each respondent are added up and the mean was taken. This provides a mean score for candidates' issue positions and character qualities during the primary and another mean score for the general election. The mean score is then converted into a percentage,

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<sup>32</sup> Bartels (1986) explains that it should be assumed that when candidates are asked questions about candidates' issue positions they will provide an answer if they are sufficiently certain about the candidate's position. If they are not sufficiently certain they will say they do not know.

<sup>33</sup> Bartels (1986) verified this method of coding and examining survey data related to ambiguity measures.

which represents the composite percent of all questions answered by respondents. The percentage from the general election is then subtracted from the percentage in the primary. This shows if there is any change in the knowledge of candidate qualities and issue positions from the primary to the general election. The percentage change between issue and quality knowledge is then compared. It should be observed that respondents' knowledge of candidate qualities increases at a much faster rate than respondents' knowledge of candidate issue positions. A further step tests whether the results are statistically significant. This test is called the difference of means test. This test indicates whether the percentage change in respondents' knowledge of issue positions and candidate qualities is statistically significant.

Support for the hypothesis will be even stronger if respondents' knowledge of candidate qualities increases at a much faster rate than respondents' knowledge of candidate issue positions and the results are statistically significant. This is not a perfect comparison because people learn different information at different rates. It is also complicated because the media and candidates stress different aspects during the campaign. In this analysis issue positions need to be compared to another aspect of the campaign. If issue positions were examined without a comparison it would be difficult to state the meaning of any increase or change and say what level of change is substantial for conclusions to be reached.

There are more factors influencing respondents than what is measured by issue and quality knowledge. However, the use of qualities as a comparison gives more context to the changes in issue knowledge than analysis without qualities as a comparison. Generally, one may assume candidate qualities are easier to learn than issue

positions and expect quality knowledge to increase at a faster rate than issue knowledge. In the context of the primary and general election periods this expectation can not be assumed. If qualities are learned easier than issue positions then people should learn quality information early in the primary. Once the general election occurs people should have such a high knowledge of qualities from the primary that a large increase in knowledge is not possible. The learning about qualities in effect slows down because whatever can be learned about qualities has already been learned in the primary. Since issue positions are more difficult to learn, people should be able to increase their knowledge levels in both the primary and general election. The combination of these factors makes it reasonable to use qualities as a comparison for issue knowledge. Therefore, it is not clear the general assumption can be made that quality knowledge increases faster from the primary to the general election than issue knowledge.

In test (2), the standard deviation test, the standard deviation of respondents' answers in the primary and general election about candidate issue positions and candidate qualities is compared. The amount of agreement of the respondents about candidates' issue positions and qualities is examined. The expectation is that there will be more agreement about candidates' issue positions in the primary than the general election based on a larger amount of candidate ambiguity in the general election. An increase in agreement will be signaled by a decrease in the standard deviation. In general, people can have very different views about candidates' issue positions and the differences will not necessarily be due to ambiguity. In the context of this research design the group being analyzed is highly exposed to candidates messages. If candidates are specific about their issue positions then there should be a high amount of agreement about the

candidates issue positions. If candidates are ambiguous there should be less agreement than when candidates are specific. In the research design the primary is used as a baseline to measure the level of agreement about candidates issue positions. Then in the general election the standard deviation shows the change in the level of agreement. By using the primary as a baseline it does not matter how much agreement or disagreement there is about candidates issue positions. The key is to examine the change in agreement. People that radically disagree about candidates issue positions in the primary will probably radically disagree in the general election also. The change in the amount of agreement will indicate ambiguity. If there is more agreement in the general election compared to the primary then ambiguity is not present. If there is less agreement in the general election compared to the primary then it indicates ambiguity.

Just as in test (1) the learning curve is moving in the opposite direction. Taking into account that people learn as the campaign progresses, there may be more agreement about candidate issue positions in the general election than in the primary. To address this problem, the standard deviation of respondents' issue position responses will be compared to the standard deviation of their candidate quality responses. It is expected that there will be more agreement about candidate qualities than issue positions in the general election. This is because as the campaign progresses candidates expose their positive qualities to the electorate. The standard deviation of candidates' issue positions should decrease less than the standard deviation of candidate qualities. This means there is less agreement about candidate issue positions and this is due to candidates' use of ambiguous messages in the general election.

In test (2) the questions are coded in scale form. The issue responses that include answers 1-7 are coded the same as footnotes 23-28. All other answers are taken out of the analysis. The quality responses that include answers 1-4 are coded the same as in footnote 28. All other answers were taken out of the analysis. This allows examination of the standard deviation of the answers. The standard deviation is calculated for respondents' knowledge of candidate issue positions and qualities for the primary and general election. This is accomplished by taking the standard deviation for each issue and averaging the standard deviations of the four issues. The standard deviation is then taken for each of the nine character traits and averaged. This permits the comparison of the mean standard deviation for issues and qualities from the primary to the general election. The mean standard deviation from the general election is then subtracted from the mean standard deviation in the primary. This displays any change in agreement between the respondents over the course of the campaign. The standard deviation shows at what level respondents are not in agreement about candidate issue positions compared to the mean answer.

A larger decrease in the standard deviation signals more agreement between the respondents about the candidates' issue positions and character qualities. The hypothesis will be supported if the standard deviation decreases more for candidate qualities than for knowledge of candidate issue positions. This means that there is more agreement about candidates' qualities than about their issue positions. Due to the occurrence of learning during the campaign it is not expected that there will be less agreement among respondents about candidates' issue positions. However, based on candidate ambiguity

in their issue messages, learning about candidate issue positions should occur much slower than learning about candidate qualities.

## CHAPTER 8

### EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS

It is expected that support for the hypothesis using the 1980 election may be minimal. The circumstances of incumbency and a well-known challenger are expected to make finding the existence of ambiguity difficult. Under these conditions if even a small amount of evidence is found to support the hypothesis, it should be considered encouraging. The existence of statistical significance for the change in knowledge about issue positions and character qualities would provide convincing support for the hypothesis. However, under this arduous situation, if the results show that the knowledge levels are moving the correct direction; this should be accepted as support for the hypothesis.

It should also be expected that due to learning during the campaign, people will agree more about Carter and Reagan's issue positions and quality traits in the general election than in the primary. The learning that occurs during the campaign may have a larger impact in this test than in the percentage change test.

There are three expectations for Reagan and Carter in test (1), the percentage change test and two expectations in test (2), the standard deviation test. The results from the high-high group will be examined to see if the respondents perceive that candidates are less ambiguous in the primary and more ambiguous about issues in the general election. The results are shown for Reagan and Carter individually. This allows comparison between the results for an incumbent and a challenger.

### Test 1: The Percentage Change Test

First, there will be a higher level of knowledge about the candidates' issue positions in the general election than the primary. This will be shown by respondents answering a larger percentage of questions about Reagan and Carter's issue positions than character qualities in the general election than in the primary.

#### Reagan

Table 4 shows that people know more of Reagan's issue positions during the general election than during the primary. The increase is 11.82% and is statistically significant at the 0.10 level. It can be stated at a 95% confidence level that these results are not random. The percentage of respondents that could name the candidate's issue positions increased from 77.25% to 89.07%. This statistically significant increase can be attributed to respondents learning during the course of the campaign. If learning could be controlled, the expectation would be that due to candidates' more ambiguous messages in the general election, respondents would know less issue positions in the general election than in the primary. Learning can not be controlled, so it is expected that despite ambiguous messages people will have higher knowledge of candidate issue positions in the general election.

#### Carter

Table 5 shows that people know fewer of Carter's issue positions during the general election than during the primary. The 0.10% decrease suggests that people's knowledge about Carter's issue positions did not change in any meaningful way from the primary to the general election. While this change in issue knowledge is in the correct direction to provide support for the hypothesis, the change is too small and it is not

statistically significant. There is not a 95% confidence level that the decrease in knowledge about Carter's issue positions is not random. The percentage of respondents that could name Carter's issue positions decreased from 94.44% to 94.34%. It can not be stated that people learned issue positions in the primary and became more unsure about these positions in the general election. This case provides no support for the hypothesis. The expectation for Carter as the incumbent and the object of observation for four years is that respondents issue knowledge would increase. The evidence suggests that despite these circumstances people did not increase their knowledge of his issue positions as the campaign progressed. The lack of statistical significance does not allow any conclusions to be made about respondents issue knowledge and how this reflects Carter's issue messages and the use of ambiguity.

Second, respondents' will have more knowledge about qualities than about issue positions in both the primary and general election. This will be shown by a larger percentage of questions answered about qualities than issue positions.

#### Reagan

Respondents were able to answer a larger percentage of questions about Reagan's character qualities than about his issue positions. In the primary respondents answered 77.25% of the questions about issue positions compared to 88.35% of the questions based on qualities, for a difference of 11.10%. This shows that respondents know more about Reagan's qualities than his issue positions. This difference could be due to his emphasis on qualities in the primary. In the general election respondents were able to answer 89.07% of the questions about issue positions and 93.94% of the questions about qualities, for a difference of 4.87%. This also shows that respondents know more quality

characteristics than issue positions. This difference could also be due to candidates' emphasis on qualities and ambiguity about issue positions. There is a larger difference between the percentage of questions answered about qualities and issues in the primary compared to the general election. People gained knowledge about Reagan's issue positions faster than they gained knowledge about character qualities. This does not provide evidence to support the theory that candidates emphasize their character qualities more in the general election and do not emphasize their issue positions as strongly in the general election compared to the primary.

#### Carter

Respondents were able to answer a larger percentage of questions about Carter's character qualities than about his issue positions in the primary than the general election. In the primary respondents answered 94.44% of the questions about issue positions compared to 98.31% of the questions based on qualities, for a difference of 3.87%. This shows that respondents know more about Carter's qualities than his issue positions. This difference is so small that no conclusion can be reached about his emphasis on qualities and ambiguity about his issue positions. In the general election respondents were able to answer 94.34% of the questions about issue positions and 98.07% of the questions about qualities, for a difference of 3.73%. This also such a small difference that nothing can be said about respondents' knowledge of candidates' qualities and issue positions. This provides no evidence to support the theory that candidates are ambiguous about their issue positions and emphasize their character qualities in both the primary and general election.

Third, knowledge about candidates' issue positions will increase at a slower rate than their knowledge of candidate qualities. This will be done by comparing the percentage change in questions answered about issue positions and qualities from the primary to the general election. First, the changes in issue positions and qualities will be examined separately for statistical significance. Then the difference of the mean test to measure significance will be performed to compare the change in issue positions to the change in qualities.

### Reagan

The increase in respondent's knowledge of Reagan's issue positions increases at a statistically significant 11.82%, from 77.25% of the issue positions in the primary to 89.07% in the general election. During the primary 88.35% of the quality questions were answered compared to 93.94% in the general election, which is a statistically significant increase at the .001 level of 5.59%. This is the most dramatic change out of all the results. Unfortunately, the result is that at the 95% confidence level, people's knowledge of candidate issue positions went up at a statistically significant faster rate than quality knowledge. This is exactly the opposite result from what was expected according to the hypothesis. The may be due to people learning throughout the campaign. When the change in knowledge about issue positions 11.82% and qualities 5.59% are compared using the difference of the mean test, the results are statistically significant.

### Carter

The results show a decrease in the number of Carter's issue positions and qualities that respondents can name. There is a 0.10% not significant decrease in the percentage of issues that respondents could answer from the primary to the general election. There is a

0.24% decrease, which is not statistically significant, in the percentage of character qualities respondents could name from the primary to general election. This provides no support for the theory that Carter was ambiguous about his issue positions and was stressing his qualities during the general election. Due to the high level of initial knowledge about Carter's issue positions and qualities it may have been difficult for respondents to significantly increase their knowledge of issues or qualities.

When the changes in issue positions are compared to the change in qualities the results are not statistically significant. The difference of the means test shows that there is not a 95% confidence level that a slight change in the level of knowledge about issues and qualities is not random chance. The results are just as discouraging as in Reagan's case.

#### Test 2: The Standard Deviation Test

The first expectation in test (2) is that there will be less agreement about the candidates' issue positions in the general election than in the primary. This will be shown by an increase in the standard deviation of respondents' answers from the primary to the general election.

#### Reagan

The standard deviation of Reagan's issue positions should increase from the primary to the general election. This will signal that respondents have more disagreement about Reagan's issue positions. Table 5 demonstrates that there is more agreement about Reagan's positions during the general election than in the primary. The standard deviation of Reagan's issue positions in the primary is 1.60 and in the

general election it is 1.49. This is a decrease of .11. This does not provide support for the hypothesis.

### Carter

The standard deviation of Carter's issue positions should increase from the primary to the general election. This will signal that respondents have more disagreement about Carter's issue positions. This will be a harder feat when the candidate is in the position of incumbent. Table 7 demonstrates that there is more agreement about Carter's positions during the general election than in the primary. The standard deviation of Carter's issue positions in the primary is 1.55 and in the general election it is 1.40. This is a decrease of 0.16. This does not provide support for the hypothesis.

Secondly, from the primary to the general election there will be a greater increase in agreement about the candidates' character qualities than about their issue positions. This will be done by comparing the change in the standard deviations of the candidates' issue positions and qualities from the primary to the general election.

### Reagan

Table 6 does not show that there is a decrease in the standard deviation of Reagan's qualities. This means there is less agreement about his character qualities. The standard deviation of Reagan's qualities in the primary is 0.85 and in the general election it decreased to 0.87. The results show that the change in the standard deviation from the primary to the general election was an increase of 0.02 for qualities and a decrease of 0.11 for issue positions. There is not a greater increase in the level of agreement about

Reagan's qualities compared to his issue positions. This does not provide support for the hypothesis.

### Carter

Table 7 shows that there is a decrease in the standard deviation of Carter's qualities. The standard deviation of Carter's qualities in the primary is 0.89 and in the general election it decreased to 0.85. This creates a decrease of 0.04. This reflects no meaningful change in the amount of agreement about Carter's character qualities. The results of the change in standard deviation of issue positions and qualities from the primary to the general election show a decrease of 0.16 for issue positions and 0.04 for character qualities. This provides no support for the hypothesis. Support for the hypothesis would have shown the standard deviation decreasing more for qualities than for issue positions. There is not more agreement about Carter's character qualities than about his issue positions from the primary to general election.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The results for the H-L, L-H and L-L groups are listed after the H-H group.

Table 4 Percentage Change for Reagan

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Reagan	Issues	77.25%	89.07%	11.82%	0.012	
	Qualities	88.35%	93.94%	5.59%	0.000	
	% Change	11.10%	4.87%			0.001

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 5 Percentage Change for Carter

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Carter	Issues	94.44%	94.34%	(0.10%)	0.914	
	Qualities	98.31%	98.07%	(0.24%)	0.552	
	% Change	3.87%	3.73%			0.775

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The percentage difference between the percent of questions answered about issue compared to qualities.
2. The percentage of questions answered in the primary.
3. The percentage of questions answered in the general election.
4. The percentage change in the number of questions answered in the primary compared to the general election.

5. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions and character qualities from the primary to the general election.

6. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions compared to the change in the number of questions answered about character qualities from the primary to the general election.

Table 6 Standard Deviation Change for Reagan

Standard Deviations				
Table 3		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Reagan	Issues	1.60	1.49	(0.11)
	Qualities	0.85	0.87	0.02

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 7 Standard Deviation Change for Carter

Standard Deviations				
Table 4		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Carter	Issues	1.55	1.40	(0.16)
	Qualities	0.89	0.85	(0.04)

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The mean standard deviation for the primary.
2. The mean standard deviation in the general election.
3. The standard deviation change between the primary and the general election.

Results for the H-L, L-H and L-L Groups

High-Low Group

Table 8 H-L Percentage Change for Reagan

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Reagan	Issues	69.00%	83.00%	14.00%	0.006	
	Qualities	87.00%	89.00%	2.00%	0.046	
	% Change	18.00%	6.00%			0.011

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 9 H-L Percentage Change for Carter

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Carter	Issues	93.00%	93.00%	0.00%	0.689	
	Qualities	98.00%	95.00%	(3.00%)	0.000	
	% Change	5.00%	2.00%			0.021

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The percentage difference between the percent of questions answered about issue compared to qualities.
2. The percentage of questions answered in the primary.
3. The percentage of questions answered in the general election.

4. The percentage change in the number of questions answered in the primary compared to the general election.
5. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions and character qualities from the primary to the general election.
6. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions compared to the change in the number of questions answered about character qualities from the primary to the general election.

Table 10 H-L Standard Deviation Change for Reagan

Standard Deviations				
Table 3		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Reagan	Issues	1.59	1.40	(0.19)
	Qualities	1.75	1.84	0.09

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 11 H-L Standard Deviation Change for Carter

Standard Deviations				
Table 4		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Carter	Issues	1.53	1.34	(0.19)
	Qualities	1.71	1.75	0.04

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The mean standard deviation for the primary.

2. The mean standard deviation in the general election.
3. The standard deviation change between the primary and the general election.

Low-High Group

Table 12 L-H Percentage Change for Reagan

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Reagan	Issues	74.00%	91.00%	17.00%	0.026	
	Qualities	89.00%	96.00%	7.00%	0.000	
	% Change	15.00%	5.00%			0.084

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 13 L-H Percentage Change for Carter

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Carter	Issues	94.00%	98.00%	4.00%	0.164	
	Qualities	98.00%	99.00%	1.00%	0.458	
	% Change	4.00%	1.00%			0.119

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The percentage difference between the percent of questions answered about issue compared to qualities.
2. The percentage of questions answered in the primary.
3. The percentage of questions answered in the general election.
4. The percentage change in the number of questions answered in the primary compared to the general election.

5. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions and character qualities from the primary to the general election.

6. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions compared to the change in the number of questions answered about character qualities from the primary to the general election.

Table 14 L-H Standard Deviation Change for Reagan

Standard Deviations				
Table 3		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Reagan	Issues	1.56	1.54	(0.02)
	Qualities	0.72	0.94	0.22

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 15 L-H Standard Deviation Change for Carter

Standard Deviations				
Table 4		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Carter	Issues	1.36	1.42	0.06
	Qualities	0.77	0.84	0.07

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The mean standard deviation for the primary.
2. The mean standard deviation in the general election.
3. The standard deviation change between the primary and the general election.

Low-Low Group

Table 16 L-L Percentage Change for Reagan

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Reagan	Issues	67.00%	62.00%	(5.00%)	0.770	
	Qualities	86.00%	88.00%	2.00%	0.376	
	% Change	19.00%	26.00%			0.770

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 17 L-L Percentage Change for Carter

	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Primary	General	% Change	Sig.	Sig.
Carter	Issues	91.00%	91.00%	0.00%	0.387	
	Qualities	97.00%	95.00%	(2.00%)	0.000	
	% Change	6.00%	4.00%			0.003

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The percentage difference between the percent of questions answered about issue compared to qualities.
2. The percentage of questions answered in the primary.
3. The percentage of questions answered in the general election.
4. The percentage change in the number of questions answered in the primary compared to the general election.

5. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions and character qualities from the primary to the general election.

6. The statistical significance of the change in the number of questions answered about issue positions compared to the change in the number of questions answered about character qualities from the primary to the general election.

Table 18 L-L Standard Deviation Change for Reagan

Standard Deviations				
Table 3		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Reagan	Issues	1.53	1.32	(0.21)
	Qualities	0.73	0.76	0.03

\*The sample size is 262 people.

Table 19 L-L Standard Deviation Change for Carter

Standard Deviations				
Table 4		1	2	3
		Primary	General	Change
Carter	Issues	1.41	1.32	(0.09)
	Qualities	0.76	0.75	(0.01)

\*The sample size is 262 people.

1. The mean standard deviation for the primary.
2. The mean standard deviation in the general election.
3. The standard deviation change between the primary and the general election.

## CHAPTER 9

### DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

#### Discussion of the 1980 Presidential Election Results

The overall result of this research is that ambiguity is not observed and the hypothesis is not supported. None of the results provide evidence that candidates use less issue ambiguity in the primary and more issue ambiguity in the general election. The lack of supporting evidence is apparent in both the percentage change test and the standard deviation test.

#### Test 1

The results of the percentage change test do not suggest that people have more knowledge about candidate qualities than issue positions and respondents learn information about candidate issue positions at a slower rate than they do about candidate issue positions from the primary to the general election. The hypothesis focused on finding evidence that candidates are more ambiguous about their issue positions during the general election than in the primary. Character qualities were used in the model because the theory in this paper suggests that because candidates are ambiguous about their issue positions they need to emphasize another aspect and that is their character qualities. However, based on the model's outputs this statement is not supported

In the percentage change test learning did occur from the primary to the general election for Reagan's issue positions and character qualities. This was not encouraging because it was expected that if any ambiguity was found it would be observed from the challenger, Reagan. Respondents did not increase their knowledge about Carter's issue

positions or qualities despite his incumbency status. This may have been due to the high initial level of knowledge apparent in the primary. The interpretation is that people had a high level of knowledge about Carter's positions and traits in the primary and maintained this level of knowledge through the general election.<sup>35</sup>

Respondents knew more about Reagan and Carter's character qualities than about issue positions in both the primary and general election. This may provide subtle evidence that candidates are more ambiguous about their issue positions than character qualities. This is a minor finding and without any other support no conclusions can be drawn about the hypothesis.

Knowledge about both candidates issue positions from the primary to the general election did not lag behind people's awareness of candidate character qualities. A positive result here would have been a major finding in support of the hypothesis. This occurrence could have validated the ambiguity theory. The evidence is least convincing for Reagan because issue knowledge increased at a statistically significant faster rate than quality knowledge. This is not a random occurrence. The result for Carter was not statistically significant but there was no meaningful change in the knowledge levels for this case. This paper's argument is that the reason why respondents' knowledge of issue positions should lag behind character qualities is that candidates use more ambiguous issue position messages in the general election. This does not seem to be the case for the 1980 election.

### Test 2

The standard deviation test does not provide support for the hypothesis in Reagan or Carter's case. There was more agreement about both candidates' issue position in the

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<sup>35</sup> See Gopoiian (1982).

general election than in the primary. The opposite results are needed to provide evidence for the hypothesis. In test one, respondents learned more about Reagan's issue positions and lost information about Carter's issue positions. The expectation is that people would have a larger increase in agreement about Reagan's issue positions than Carter's issue positions. However, there was a smaller increase in agreement about Reagan's issue positions compared to Carter's issue positions. The difference between the two changes in standard deviations is so small that no conclusion about ambiguity is possible. In Carter's case respondents knew more about his issue positions and were in more agreement than with Reagan's issue positions. The greater increase in agreement about candidates' issue positions compared to their qualities may be due to the occurrence of learning during the course of the election.

#### General Discussion of the Results

The null findings provide no support for the hypothesis. The positive result of the research performed is that this paper provides a research design and data method that can be used by researchers to examine other elections. The 1980 presidential election is a very difficult case to use when trying to find support for a concept such as ambiguity. This paper shows that ambiguity can be defined rather easily but is a difficult concept to measure. Once a method is created to measure ambiguity there can be much disagreement about what amount of evidence is needed to set a level of substantive significance. In most analysis with a large sample size it is usually easier to find statistical significance than substantive significance. Some of the results are statistically significant, but the significance test sets a much more demanding threshold in this model. Achen (1982) points out that under some circumstances statistical significance is not

found, “but the data certainly give evidence in favor of an effect rather than against it. In short, it is perfectly meaningful to say that a coefficient is statistically insignificant and yet very likely to be of real substantive importance (50).” The minimum level of evidence this paper sought was to find issue knowledge moving in the correct direction. This may be viewed as a weak standard but the circumstances in the 1980 election are not conducive to finding ambiguity. Therefore, evidence in the right direction would have signaled ambiguity and the potential to find it in better suited elections. Having issues lag behind qualities would have been accepted as evidence in support of the hypothesis. This evidence was not found. The results did not show this occurrence. There is a reason why people’s knowledge of candidate issue positions was expected to lag behind their knowledge of candidate qualities. The argument in this paper is that the cause is candidate ambiguity. If data were available for an election with less well-known candidates and no incumbents it would be much clearer that a substantive level of significance should be set much higher. If one of these elections were used it would be reasonable to require statistical significance in order to claim support for the hypothesis. Unfortunately, the results presented do not even reach this substantive level of moving in the right direction. Therefore, further research should use data that includes candidates that are less well known and are not incumbents. This one improvement to the model should increase the chances of gaining support for the hypothesis.

#### Further Research

Further research on issue ambiguity using survey data should be modeled after Alvarez and Franklin (1994). Their model asks respondents how certain they are about candidates positions. They accept the assertion that citizens are uncertain if they are not

able to give answers to questions about candidates' positions. The Alvarez et al. model takes another step to further probe the level of uncertainty. Their model is constructed to use follow up questions that ask respondents who did answer questions, how certain they were about their answers. Models can be constructed to examine uncertainty in this way, but the survey must contain questions that are designed to specifically probe the level of uncertainty. This approach was not available in any National Election Study that surveyed respondents during the primaries and the general election.

In a more suitable study designed to address the issues in this paper, there would be some adjustments to the format currently used in the NES.<sup>36</sup> The first adjustment that could improve the analysis in this study would be to redesign the existing questions to directly probe the amount of respondent uncertainty about candidates' issue positions. The NES protocol is to ask respondents to pick only one point along the scale to represent the candidates' issue position. The interviewers are instructed to persuade the respondents to pick only one position if their answer includes a range of points. If the respondent still gives a range of points after instruction then the interviewer marks the midpoint answer. The second improvement would be to phrase the questions to ask respondents to give a range of candidates' positions on issues (Alvarez 1998).<sup>37</sup> The larger range would show the use of more ambiguity by candidates. The final adjustment could be a direct measurement approach, which Alvarez and Franklin (1994) used in a series of national

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<sup>36</sup> Bartels (1996) believes that there is a clear need for more satisfactory measures of uncertainty about candidates' issue positions. These measures should not have to be built from items in surveys that are designed for other purposes. There should be measures developed specifically for the purpose of examining people's uncertainty about candidate issue positions. This will enable sufficient analysis about uncertainty in the electorate and its effects.

<sup>37</sup> Aldrich et al. (1982) and Alvarez (1992) using the 1980 NES Pilot Study examined this approach. Franklin (1991) also used this method to conducted survey research on respondent uncertainty.

studies from 1991 to 1994. They directly asked respondents their level of uncertainty about candidates' issue positions.

Further research about ambiguity should be conducted because the consequences may contribute to the obstruction of the democratic process. The responsible party theory proposes that parties allow voters to make decisions based on the parties' issue positions and policy stances. The theory posits that parties and their candidates should present issues objectively to educate the public and persuade voters based on the issues. Candidates' use of ambiguity does not provide support for this responsible party argument (Page 1978).

#### Ambiguity and the American Electoral System

One problem with the current electoral system is that voters do not all have equal access to information that indicates which candidate best represents them. Candidates need money to buy access to different media sources and other sources of communication with the voters. They are able to gain access through the contributions of organized interests. Candidates need these party activists to lower the transaction costs of informing, registering and turning out people to vote. The cost of lowering the information barrier to the electorate gives activists in both parties a strong voice in what positions candidates take. Special interests monetary donations may have a disproportionate influence on what candidates specify and what they are ambiguous about. Special interests can put pressure on candidates to in effect repay them for their support. Candidates may be able to accomplish this by taking ambiguous issue stances that do not inform the public on their true positions (Page 1978).

Despite Page's description of the use of ambiguity in campaigns, the electorate has enough information to make vote choices in the current electoral system (1978). In a positive sense candidate ambiguity can be used by candidates to broaden their appeal to a larger portion of the electorate. In this case candidates are able to make their messages appeal to people in both parties. People in both parties can view candidates as representing their interests. In a less positive sense candidate ambiguity can be used as a tool to shield candidates from expressing their actual positions, which are influenced by the powerful special interests. Congress recently attempted to decrease this influence by passing campaign finance reform. Based on Page's analysis of candidates and special interests, there is no incentive for candidates to provide more information to the public (1978). This leads to a conclusion that average people will not be able to gain much higher levels of information if politicians that use ambiguous strategies continue to win elections. The public will have a better chance of becoming informed when ambiguous candidates begin to lose elections and specific candidates begin to win.

The lack of results found in this paper does not allow conclusions to be drawn about ambiguous candidates because ambiguity was not found. If ambiguity was found, it would tell if the ambiguous candidate won the election and what level of ambiguity was used compared to his opponent. This would help in the attempt to determine if candidates use ambiguity to make bipartisan appeals or pander to special interests. Answering this question will help determine if the public can actually gain higher levels of information. If candidates are using ambiguity because of special interests then people may be able to increase their knowledge levels if they elect candidates that are not ambiguous.

The theory that candidates use ambiguity to cater to special interests is one proposal for the usefulness of studying the topic of candidate ambiguity. Despite the lack of results, the conclusion can not be made that special interests do not have an influence. If ambiguity was found then some conclusions could be offered about the possible links between ambiguity and special interests. Based on the results in the paper, no theories can be offered or verified about this relationship.

Information and transaction costs involved in voting favor the portion of the electorate that is able to pay. The people and groups that are best able to overcome these costs are the wealthy, educated, organized groups and large businesses. This creates a class bias in the electorate in which the top tiers are able to wield large amounts of influence on the politicians (Page 1978). Elites have money and connections to support reelection bids that enable them to have specific influence with candidates. Candidates make promises to elites about actions they will take if elected in order to secure more money and organizational support. The general electorate is not privy to these special favors. The average voter can be subject to ambiguous messages because candidates want to fulfill their promises to elites but also gain electoral support. Candidates' use of ambiguity does not help to inform and lower transaction costs for the average voter. The incentives candidates receive from the few powerful interests make ambiguity an attractive option. Candidates can take ambiguous positions publicly and privately assure donors that they will take specific positions or actions.

Candidate ambiguity also goes against Adam Smith's vision that the pursuit of individual self-interest leads to the maximization of the common good. Candidates have

the incentive to be ambiguous but this same ambiguity is harmful to the functioning of electoral democracy (Page 1978).

The solution is to change candidates' incentives. The electorate needs to put a higher value on candidates specifying their positions even when they disagree. This may be a difficult task to accomplish. Another approach would be for the media to put candidates in positions that force them to communicate to the electorate their issue positions in a clear unambiguous manner. The media have a powerful influence on public opinion and they may be able to conduct more direct questioning of candidates on specific issue positions. This could be done in debate forums and press conferences. The media could ask questions that are phrased to get candidates to give specifics. They could use follow up questions to probe candidates' original answers, which could lead to candidates giving more specific information on their positions. This is sometimes accomplished by the media but more effective and consistent questioning and interviewing of candidates will extract more specific information that will help inform the public. These are a couple ideas that may create an environment in which candidates are not so ambiguous about their issue positions (Page 1978).

In the political arena it must be accepted that there are barriers against having a highly informed public. One can only expect the electorate pay a reasonable amount of attention and expend a reasonable amount of effort to become informed. There will always be minority interests that are solely dedicated to influencing candidates that the majority of the electorate will not be able to compete with (Page 1978). Ambiguous issue positions may be used by candidates to attain office but it should not be so pervasive that people are unaware of candidates' issue positions and therefore, cast an uninformed

ballot. Candidates and the media should have some level of responsibility for informing the public about candidates' positions.

## CHAPTER 10

### CONCLUSION

The lack of evidence derived from the examination of the 1980 election signals that the existence of ambiguity in presidential primary and general elections is a difficult theory to analyze and support. The examination of an election with an incumbent and a well-known challenger does not support the effects of ambiguity. Test one, the test for the amount of knowledge people had about the candidates did not provide support for the hypothesis. Test 2, the test for the amount of agreement about the candidates' positions also did not provide support. Additionally, the results for Reagan under the percentage change test provide strong evidence against candidate ambiguity despite the fact that he was the challenger and less well known than Carter. The standard deviation test gave no support for the hypothesis.

The results in general do not provide any encouragement that ambiguous messages are effective for candidates. The evidence does not show that the electorate receives these messages. The results show that it is difficult to find evidence of ambiguity when using survey data not specifically designed to probe ambiguity. Choosing a more conducive election such as the 1988 presidential election could also help generate stronger support for the hypothesis. If the 1988 election were used the issues of incumbency and a well-known challenger would not create the problems and null results found in this paper.

Further study is needed to more specifically establish how ambiguity in issue positions exactly fits into candidates' strategy to win the presidential primary and ultimately the general election. These studies need to more clearly measure the effect of ambiguous messages on voters. If people are to cast a ballot for the candidate that truly represents their interests and what they believe in, it is important to know the candidates' issue positions. This research can help people understand when candidates are most likely to express their true positions and when they will be ambiguous. If the electorate knows that candidates send out their true issue positions during the primary and then are more ambiguous during the general election, people will know when to pay attention and become informed. This will, in turn, enable them to cast a more informed vote.

Informed voters should be a goal of people dedicated to a responsible electorate with responsible leaders. However, it seems some candidates put the goal of attaining office ahead of informing the public about what they truly stand for. Hopefully this research has provided some insight into when the electorate can become informed about politicians true issue positions and therefore, allow people to elect a representative who reflects the positions they support.

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