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Candidate Appearances in Presidential Elections, 1972–2000

SCOTT L. ALTHAUS, PETER F. NARDULLI, and DARON R. SHAW

Although many recent studies have examined presidential campaigns, most have concentrated on television advertising or news media coverage as the key variables of interest. Few empirical analyses have focused on the pattern of candidate appearances, and almost none have considered changes in these patterns over time. This gap is intriguing because some places should tend to receive more attention than others, and yet we know very little about the electoral strategies that determine where and why candidates make appearances. We expect that presidential campaigns have increasingly emphasized visits to particular locales because these visits are critical for driving the agenda and shaping voter perceptions through local news media coverage. Our analysis of presidential campaign appearances at the county, media market, and state levels in general elections from 1972–2000 indicates that presidential candidate appearances are increasing both in number and in geographic scope over time. While candidate appearances are concentrated in areas with especially dense and large populations, most eligible voters live in media markets that receive at least one visit by a presidential candidate, and the percentage of eligible voters exposed to especially intense personal campaigning has been on the rise. In contrast to our expectations, our findings suggest that presidential campaign appearances have not become more narrowly focused on smaller segments of the American population.

Keywords campaign strategies, candidate appearances, U.S. presidential elections

Soon after the 2000 Democratic National Convention, Al Gore and Joe Lieberman embarked on a boat trip down the Mississippi River. The candidates would stop in riverside towns and cities in the key battleground states of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Missouri, making short stump speeches and basking in the glow of their postconvention poll bounce. Their Republican counterparts were initially unimpressed. In their eyes, the voyage was unoriginal (the trip not only smacked of Bill Clinton and Al Gore’s famous bus adventure after the 1992 Democratic convention, but it was also derivative of the riverboat

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trip into New Orleans taken by George H. W. Bush and Dan Quayle for the 1988 Republican convention) and failed to hit any of the important metropolitan or suburban districts that would presumably decide the 2000 election.

A week or so later, the Republican reaction had changed. Seeking to shore up their lagging numbers in the Hawkeye state, George W. Bush’s team was looking to schedule an appearance in eastern Iowa, where the Texas governor’s numbers had slipped. They soon discovered that there was not an airfield east of Des Moines that could accommodate Bush’s campaign plane. Suddenly Gore’s gambit looked brilliant—the Democrats had managed two solid days of glowing news coverage in a relatively inaccessible portion of a battleground state. As one GOP operative put it, “If he [Bush] were the old man, he could parachute in, but as it is, we’re stuck.”

The point of the story is simple: Presidential campaigns see personal appearances as one of the most important ways for candidates to shape public agendas and popular opinion. But while researchers have given campaign advertising considerable attention in recent years (see, e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Jamieson, 1996; West, 1993), the patterns and effects of candidate appearances still are understood largely through anecdotes. Likewise, scholars have been more interested in news media coverage of the candidates (see Kerbel, 1995; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Patterson, 1993) than in where the candidates go. Studies of the elite national news media, however, ignore the simple fact that local news broadcasts are now the average citizen’s primary source of information about presidential campaigns (Graber, 1997; Just et al., 1996). Furthermore, there is reason to believe that local news coverage is less cynical about politics and more favorable toward the candidates (Shaw & Sparrow, 1999). While the campaigners themselves believe that candidate appearances influence local news media coverage and may affect voters in strategically chosen locales, to date there has been little systematic analysis of candidate appearances and no comprehensive studies encompassing all media markets in the United States.

This study represents a first step in a larger project that will analyze the deployment and impact of campaign efforts designed to move voters and influence electoral outcomes. Candidate appearances represent an important and scarce campaign resource. Studying the allocation of candidate appearances should therefore offer unique insight into the strategic considerations that guide how this resource is invested electorally. Furthermore, changes in the patterns of candidate visits over time should be linked to the increasing sophistication of political marketing strategies and techniques developed over the past quarter century. An analysis of these changes over the modern era of presidential campaigning should clarify the extent to which candidate activity is being redirected in response to changing strategic considerations.

The rationale for the present study is straightforward: We do not know much about a key component of modern presidential campaigns, and the first step in assessing the impact of candidate appearances is to identify why and how such visits are being targeted. The last 10 years have seen an increase in scholarship attempting to conceptualize presidential campaigns and estimate their effects (Bartels & Zaller, 2001; Finkel, 1993; Holbrook, 1996; Shaw, 1999). This interest is understandable, as election campaigns provide the most obvious point of connection and accountability in a democratic society. We contend that anyone interested in campaigns ought to be interested in candidate appearances as well. Most campaign strategists will say that a candidate’s time is the campaign’s most valuable resource, and candidates put an inordinate amount of time and energy into personal appearances. Moreover, it seems that presidential candidates are increasingly attentive to their appearances because (a) the television airwaves have
been saturated with a myriad of political advertisements in recent cycles, (b) the national media tend to favor strategy and horse race over substantive policy stories, and (c) as mentioned earlier, most voters get an appreciable portion of their political information from local news sources. Candidate appearances should also attract the attention of anyone interested in the interplay between strategy and policy. Structural conditions, most notably the allocation of electoral college votes, make it unlikely that presidential candidates allocate their resources randomly. This suggests that some locales receive disproportionate attention, both in the form of candidate visits and (presumably) policy emphasis.

This study examines the patterns of presidential candidate appearances in elections from 1972 through 2000. The emphasis is on where the candidates have focused their visits and how this behavior has changed over time (if at all). Starting with the assumption that candidate behavior is strategic, we seek to identify specific considerations influencing the allocation of candidate appearances across space and time. We look at differences between Republican and Democratic candidates, as well as between incumbents and challengers. Perhaps more than anything else, we aim to establish a baseline from which future research into candidate appearances may be launched.

In the sections that follow, we first lay out the multiple uses that presidential campaigns make of candidate appearances and the reasons why they send candidates to particular locations. We then discuss the unique data sets that allow us to explore patterns of candidate appearances since 1972: electoral data for every county in the continental United States, county-level data on the geographic boundaries of media markets, and county-level measures of candidate appearances in general election campaigns. Because the geographical boundaries of media markets are constructed at the level of counties, these three sources of data have nearly perfect congruence and allow an extremely precise determination of the targeting strategies behind candidate appearances at the county, media market, and state levels. Lastly, we present findings on the patterns of campaign appearances between 1972 and 2000, focusing particularly on the strategic allocation of candidate visits in the 2000 election, for which our data are especially detailed.

A Brief but Useful Guide to Presidential Candidate Appearances

**Historical Overview**

As the images of George W. Bush and Al Gore stumping from the forests of Oregon to the shores of Florida fade into our collective memories, it is important to observe that presidential candidates only sporadically embraced the campaign trail for the first 160 years of the republic. In fact, George Washington’s modest and somewhat disinterested example established the dominant pattern of presidential campaigning. Traditionally, candidates have stayed at home and left the campaigning to surrogate speakers and party organizers (see Boller, 1984; Crotty, 1978; Witcover, 1977). Of course, most of these candidates have been politically active and engaged—just not on the stump. They apparently believed that (a) the benefits of personally campaigning were minimal, (b) much of what one might want to achieve through personal campaigning could be accomplished through other means, and (c) they would be reduced in stature because voters would see them as wanting the office too much.

There were candidates who challenged this thinking. In 1860, Stephen Douglas became the first candidate to conduct a national campaign in person (Boller, 1984). In 1884, James G. Blaine “spent six weeks touring the country and making more than four
hundred short talks” (Boller, 1984, p. 147). In 1896, William Jennings Bryan traveled 18,000 miles on a whistle-stop tour, made more than 600 speeches, and addressed 5 million people.²

One might note the tendency of underdog candidates to have been more vigorous and personally engaged while frontrunners tended to shy away from the campaign trail. In fact, the first presidential campaign of the modern era is probably 1960, when both Vice-President Richard Nixon and Senator John Kennedy hit the road in late August and did not stop until Election Day. Since then, only President Gerald Ford in 1976 pursued a true “front-porch” strategy—rechristened the “Rose Garden” strategy—and this was largely a reaction to the peculiar circumstances through which Ford was elevated to the office. Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton pursued variants of this strategy at times during 1984 and 1996, respectively, but maintained active campaign schedules from September 1 until Election Day.

A New Strategic Environment

Why have presidential candidates come to believe that personal appearances are necessary to an effective campaign? To begin with, there is no longer any public opinion that this activity is inappropriate. The costs of campaigning have thus been reduced to the material costs of undertaking visits to specific locales and the chance a candidate may make a mistake on the stump. More significantly, there are at least five potential benefits to making a personal appearance.

First, many believe that campaigning is crucial to the relationship between leaders and the public. Candidates learn what is on the minds of voters and touch base with various constituencies. This notion is backed by the congressional election research of Fenno (1978) and others.

Second, recent research points to the effectiveness of travel as a means of mobilizing a candidate’s electoral base. In this light, appearances are less rooted in geography than in coalition maintenance. This was most directly pointed out by West’s (1983) research on constituencies and travel allocation in the 1980 presidential election.

Third, some scholars, especially those writing from a rational choice perspective, posit that candidates campaign to establish an image that will attract the most votes. The overriding rationale here is consistent with Downs’s median voter theorem, although it can also be thought of as more image driven (see Popkin, 1991). Logically, this leads to targeting certain voters in certain states. Brams and Davis (1974) contend that the electoral college leads candidates to allocate resources unevenly across the states in order to maximize the probability that a favorable image will be projected in states yielding an electoral majority. Colantoni, Levesque, and Ordeshook (1975) strongly question the particulars of Brams and Davis’s analysis but agree that the electoral college does encourage a strategic allocation of resources in more populous states.

Fourth, it can also be argued that candidates make personal appearances to drive positive local news coverage. And while political scientists have been somewhat slow to verify this fact empirically, scholars of political communication have suspected this for years (see, e.g., Jamieson, 1996, and Hart, 2000). Local news shows traditionally hold significant audiences and are presumably less likely than the national media to be hostile toward the candidates. Furthermore, candidates know that voters perceive local news media reports to be much more credible than television advertisements.

Fifth and finally, closely related to the previous point is the notion that candidates take their case directly to the voters so that they may bypass national news coverage.
The negativity and process orientation of national news coverage (see Kerbel, 1995; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Patterson, 1993) encourage candidates to take their campaign on the road, where they can generate intense local media coverage in strategically chosen locations and wrest control of the political agenda from the national media.

Collectively, the potential benefits far outweigh the decreasing costs of personal appearances by presidential candidates. The result is a strategic environment in which the main question is not whether to campaign, but where.

**Studying Candidate Appearances**

If one accepts the logical argument that presidential candidates are more likely to travel and make personal appearances today than in bygone days, one must also ask how this affects politics. Several potential effects can be attributed to the strategic imperatives of presidential elections. For starters, not all locales appear to be equally attractive. More specifically, one might presume that candidates are more likely to visit places in states that are critical to amassing an electoral college majority. One might also presume that candidates are more likely to visit locales with (a) a history of significant oscillations in voting preference (the so-called swing counties and media markets) and (b) a high proportion of supportive partisans with uneven turnout patterns. In addition, it is reasonable to think that candidates do not visit locales that are supportive of the opposing party. All of this leads us to posit that the allocation of candidate appearances is, as suggested earlier, not random. Certain counties will receive visits during every presidential campaign, while other counties will never be visited.

The particular pattern of candidate appearances, however, is still unknown. The reason behind the dearth of empirical analyses of candidate appearances is simple: It is difficult to pin down the variable of interest, both practically and conceptually. At the practical level, gathering data on where candidates make a campaign stop is fraught with peril. News media accounts of candidate schedules can be flawed, since these schedules change at the last minute. Moreover, even the elite newspapers are prone to emphasize stops in certain locales. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* may be much more interested in a Los Angeles speech than in a brief stop in Las Vegas on the way back to the Midwest battleground states. Furthermore, even with a full and complete listing in hand, one may not want to weight all appearances equally. A full day’s worth of campaigning in a critical media market would logically rate more than a single, half-hour whistle stop. Our study addresses these issues by employing an especially broad definition of campaign appearances and by validating our appearance counts against news coverage records.

Conceptual problems also cloud the operationalization of campaign appearance variables. For instance, Bartels (1985) points out that there are instrumental and ornamental reasons for campaign activities. In the case of candidate appearances, the instrumental reason to send a candidate into a state is to win over potential voters. Conversely, an ornamental reason to send a candidate into a state is to satisfy the pleadings of lower-level state campaign officials who desire some attention but are not critical to the campaign’s overall strategic plan. Ornamental appearances are thus designed not to move the aggregate vote distribution but to energize local supporters and party people. Bartels’s distinction could, of course, be expanded since many locales receive visits that are motivated by a rationale other than the desire to win over local voters. Visits to New York, for example, are often designed to reach voters in New Jersey or to generate contributions from wealthy contributors destined to be spent in Wisconsin. Put plainly, shouldn’t we have
different expectations for distinct classes of candidate appearances? We address these conceptual issues directly. Our analysis allows us to distinguish the geographical targeting of visits from the geographical exposure to those visits through local news broadcasts.

**Hypotheses**

The remainder of this paper takes aim at the question of where presidential candidates campaign, bringing to the table unique visit and voting data at the level of counties, media markets, and states. Our expectations about patterns in campaign appearances over the 1972–2000 time period can be summarized in the following hypotheses:

- **H1**: The number of candidate appearances during the general election season should increase over time. This expectation stems largely from three factors that have changed over the 1972–2000 time period: the declining use of the Rose Garden strategy by presidential incumbents, the growing tendency toward bypassing national media coverage in favor of local coverage, and the increased availability of airports around the country that can accommodate the large commercial jets used by the campaigns to transport candidates.

- **H2**: Candidate appearances ought to be concentrated in media markets with relatively large numbers of eligible voters and states with relatively large numbers of electoral college votes. Candidate appearances represent a scarce and finite campaign resource that should be used sparingly in areas that may respond most favorably to them. To the extent that decisions about the timing and location of campaign appearances are guided by strategic considerations, the movement of candidates should tend to be directed to areas that provide maximum exposure to large numbers of voters.

- **H3**: Candidate appearances should be heavy in locales within competitive states and minimal in locales within states that consistently vote for the other party's candidates. Because candidate appearances represent a scarce campaign commodity, visits should be targeted not only to large audiences but also to electorally important audiences, which may be smaller in size but of great strategic significance.

- **H4**: The relative degree to which candidate visits are concentrated in certain states and media markets should increase over time. As the importance of professional campaign consultants has grown over the 1972–2000 time period along with the sophistication of political marketing strategies in presidential campaigns (Asher, 2001; Jamieson, 1996), we should find that the targeting of campaign activities has become increasingly focused on areas with large populations of eligible voters and states with large numbers of electoral college votes, as well as on moving “swing” or persuadable voters, who tend to be geographically concentrated in electorally competitive states and media markets.

**Data**

Our analysis of candidate appearances hinges on the nearly perfect congruence of three data sets coded for every county in the continental United States: the boundaries of television media markets, the number of local appearances made by presidential candidates during the general election season, and county-level geographic and electoral characteristics.
Media Markets

While counties are perhaps the fundamental political geographic unit in the U.S., it is important to note that political information and messages disseminated through television reach the public at the level of the media market. Mapping the county-level boundaries of media markets is thus critical if one is to understand who is exposed to appearances.

Every county in the United States is categorized by Nielsen Media Research as belonging to one of (currently) 210 television media markets. The geographic boundaries of these “designated market areas” (DMAs) are determined by the television viewing habits of each county’s population. Data on local television viewing habits are routinely collected by Nielsen to determine the dominant television source for every county in the United States. A complete listing of county assignments to DMAs is published each year in Nielsen’s *U.S. Television Household Estimates*. We obtained recent copies of this publication from library sources and older copies directly from Nielsen Media Research. However, county-level listings were unavailable for presidential elections before 1972, since prior to that time Nielsen did not maintain a printed list of DMA boundaries by county. For this reason, our analysis of candidate appearances within media markets is limited to elections from 1972 to 2000. In theory, we would prefer data going back to 1960, although the level of travel appears to have accelerated with the technological and media developments of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Candidate Appearances

As observed earlier, national news reports are often selective in covering appearances made by a candidate and are particularly likely to pass over appearances at which a candidate merely gives his standard stump speech. Because of this, appearance counts compiled from media reports alone are likely to be biased systematically in a number of ways. Our approach to compiling appearance data, in contrast, uses a bottom-up search strategy that relies on media coverage primarily to confirm that documented speeches were actually made, and secondarily to identify campaign appearances at which candidates gave no formal statements.

We counted as an appearance any discrete public event held by a presidential candidate from September 1 until Election Day of each year. We compiled appearance data for 1972 through 1996 by first recording the dates and locations of every major-party candidate speech for our time period, which are contained in the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse CD-ROM (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2000). Because speeches are sometimes scheduled but then cancelled at the last minute, we then verified that speeches were actually made by confirming the dates and locations of stops made by both campaigns. For election years 1980 through 1996, this was done through a detailed NEXIS search of *New York Times*, *CNN*, and Associated Press coverage for every day of the general election season. Confirmation of appearances for 1972 and 1976 was accomplished by reviewing microfilm records of daily coverage given to the campaign by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. These news searches also identified appearances where candidates made no formal statements. These appearances generated news attention (or we would not have become aware of them) but are not recorded in the Annenberg/Pew archive.

Since at the time of this writing the Annenberg/Pew archive has yet to publish speech data from the 2000 campaign, for this most recent election we first compiled a
record of scheduled appearances from the daily campaign logs published independently by CNN and the New York Times. We also searched CNN and New York Times coverage for every day of the general election campaign to identify unscheduled or last-minute appearances and to confirm that the candidates actually showed up for scheduled appearances. Knowing that these national news outlets would give only limited attention to local campaign stops, we used a second confirmatory NEXIS search that analyzed coverage from local and regional newspapers on the day following each scheduled campaign stop to get a more detailed record of the number and location of appearances in those areas. For the 2000 election only, we also compiled data on campaign appearances by the vice-presidential candidates.

Our count of campaign appearances includes debate participation, fund-raising stops, and instances where candidates held public events at which they did not speak, such as when Michael Dukakis tossed a baseball around with Boston Red Sox players in front of television cameras while visiting Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1988. Our definition of appearances excludes only a few recorded events—such as church attendance in Washington, D.C. by sitting presidents—that do not seem to part of the campaign’s activities. We also excluded instances where an appearance was scheduled but did not actually take place. Our theoretical interests guided this inclusive definition of appearances, since any public appearance ought to increase the probability that a given candidate will receive some sort of local television coverage, even if candidates were merely seen and not heard. Moreover, this broad definition helps to compensate for the possibility that the news accounts we used to confirm scheduled appearances might fail to mention that a candidate spoke.

Appearances were recorded at the county level and then aggregated up to the DMA and state levels. Multiple appearances in the same county on the same day were counted separately, such that two different stops in Wayne County, Michigan, on the same day are counted as two county-level appearances. Multiple appearances in the same DMA on the same day were treated similarly, such that two different stops on the same day in the Detroit media market are counted as two DMA-level appearances. We operationalize the amount of local television news coverage given to local campaign appearances by assigning to each county in a DMA the total number of DMA-level appearances from each candidate during the general election.8

**County Characteristics**

Our county data come from research by Peter Nardulli (1994, 2001), who collected voting data for each of 3,109 counties9 in the continental United States (excluding the District of Columbia) for every presidential election since 1828.10 These data contain a rich set of contextual variables capturing various demographic and geographic characteristics of each county. In particular, Nardulli decomposed voting patterns for each election into a long-term, “normal vote” component and a short-term, campaign-specific component. Estimates of the normal two-party vote for each county were constructed from a 5-year moving average procedure where the normal two-party vote in 1984, for instance, was estimated by averaging the two-party vote proportions for 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992.

We use a state-level measure of the normal vote to categorize states by level of electoral competitiveness. Using state-level normal vote data from 1828 through 2000, Nardulli (2000) developed a measure of state competitiveness based on the probability of an electoral upset (where a normally Democratic state gives a plurality to a Republican
candidate, and vice versa) under different levels of normal voting. Nardulli’s analysis showed that electoral upsets occurred in 49% of cases for states with normal partisan balances of between 48.5% and 51.5% of the two-party vote, in 24% of cases for states with normal partisan balances of between 51.5% and 55% favoring one party or another, and in only 11% of cases for states with normal partisan balances of more than 55% favoring one party. We thus categorize states with less than 45% normal Democratic vote shares as secure Republican states, those with a 45% to 48.5% normal Democratic vote as leaning Republican states, those with a 48.5% to 51.5% normal Democratic vote as competitive states, those with a 51.5% to 55% normal Democratic vote as leaning Democratic states, and those with more than a 55% normal Democratic vote as secure Democratic states.11

Patterns of Candidate Appearances, 1972–2000

Figure 1 shows that the total number of candidate appearances between September 1 and Election Day has clearly increased since 1972. Our analysis excludes appearances within the Washington, D.C. media market, since the daily public activity of incumbent presidents consistently would make this media market an extreme outlier in our data set. Moreover, including such appearances would generate the misleading impression that incumbent presidents are much more active on the campaign trail than they actually are. As one would expect, candidate appearances vary in number according to candidate status, with challengers making relatively more appearances than incumbents and candidates from both parties making equivalent numbers of campaign stops during the open races of 1988 and 2000. Interestingly, the increasing number of visits over time is primarily due to the increased visibility of Republican candidates in later years. While the number of Republican visits climbs over the eight elections studied here, we see that no recent Democratic candidate has been as active on the hustings as McGovern was.

Figure 1. Number of presidential candidate appearances during the general election season. Included are all campaign-related public appearances by each presidential candidate from September 1 until election day of each year.
in 1972. Indeed, appearances by Democratic candidates declined through the 1970s, increased substantially between 1984 and 1988, and then declined again until 2000. Thus, the increasing amount of travel by presidential candidates in recent years comes primarily from the growth in Republican campaign appearances. By this measure no recent campaigner has been as vigorous as Bob Dole, who made 138 appearances in 1996 during an election in which concern about his advancing years became a salient campaign issue.

Even if the overall number of candidate visits has been on the rise, the reach of the campaigns may be no greater today than in 1972 if these visits are targeting a small number of highly populated or strategically important areas. Not surprisingly, the data show that presidential candidates tend to visit larger media markets containing greater numbers of potential voters. One way to demonstrate this tendency is to array counties from urban to rural and examine the mean number of DMA-level appearances each type of location tended to receive. Figure 2 shows this breakdown for all eight election years combined, excluding counties in the Washington, D.C. market. Candidate visits are in many ways an urban phenomenon, with a small number of especially populated urban and suburban counties attracting a relatively large number of appearances in any year. In contrast, the vast majority of counties are located in rural areas, and these typically receive very little attention from the campaigns. Despite the well-known tendency for urban voters to support Democrats and for rural voters to support Republicans, we see in Figure 2 little evidence that the number of appearances in these locations diverged markedly according to candidate partisanship. Tests confirm that all of the observed between-party differences in Figure 2 are statistically significant except for the case of second-tier center cities, yet these significant differences arise because Democrats tended to visit nearly all areas slightly more often than Republicans, largely owing to the Republican Rose Garden strategies of 1972, 1976, and 1984.

![Figure 2. Mean number of appearances per county type. Appearances are averaged across all elections from 1972 to 2000.](image-url)
The rough similarity of visit patterns can be illustrated with a glance at the geography of candidate visits in the 2000 general election. Figure 3 shows that Bush and Gore visits tended to concentrate in similar heavily populated areas. Aside from the Albuquerque–Santa Fe DMA—one of the rare cases where a single DMA covers nearly an entire state—Gore and Bush both studiously avoided the rural West, South, and Northeast. Both campaigns concentrated candidate visits in media markets serving the urban Northeast, the more populated areas of the Midwest—notably the St. Louis and Chicago DMAs—and the urban centers of California and Florida. Other most-visited markets seem targeted for strategic reasons, notably those covering the states of Oregon, Washington, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Only a few media markets were targeted for visits by only one campaign, notably Gore’s visits to the Nashville and New Orleans DMAs and Bush’s visits to his state capital in the Austin DMA and to several smaller California markets. Indeed, a DMA-level correlation of .83 for number of appearances by the two major-party candidates in 2000 shows that the travel patterns of the two campaigns were almost identical to one another.

This degree of similarity is not unusual for presidential campaigns in the last quarter century. Figure 4 reports the correlations between numbers of Republican and Democratic campaign visits measured at the level of individual counties, DMAs, and states (all of these analyses exclude visits to counties within the Washington, D.C. market). While the high correlations even at the county level may be surprising at first glance, the tendency for competing campaigns to avoid the same, largely rural areas helps account for the high degree of similarity in the targeting of appearances. Nonetheless, opposing candidates usually travel to the same states and media markets in a given election year. Strategic considerations specific to each election provide some variance in the size of correlation coefficients over time, but Figure 4 shows that the two major-party presidential candidates in each election have been going to the same places fairly consistently since at least 1972, with the exception of state-level visits in 1996. The degree of similarity was historically high in 2000 at the DMA and state levels, but the elections of 1976 and 1988 were hardly less homogeneous when it came to the geographic allocation of campaign stops. The lowest correlations in the series come not in election years where both candidates make large numbers of visits to different places, but rather in three years (1972, 1984, and 1996) when one candidate was an incumbent president who made fewer appearances than his opponent.

Although presidential candidates tend to visit the same places, the rising number of campaign appearances over time has tended to broaden the reach of campaign events to include less populous states and media markets. Correlations between the number of eligible voters and the number of candidate appearances at the level of media markets (Figure 5a) have been on the decline since 1972, as have the correlations between number of electoral college votes and number of candidate visits to states (Figure 5b).13 Candidates in recent elections not only made more visits, but also—in contrast to our expectations—made more visits to a wider variety of places than used to be the case. This tendency probably reflects the growing importance of strategic considerations informed by the newer style of campaigning, which are also reflected in the year-to-year fluctuations in the size of correlation coefficients. Yet, campaigns today are much more likely to visit relatively less populated areas than campaigns of a quarter century ago.

There has also been a shift in emphasis by candidates of the two parties. Before 1988 in the DMA-level data and 1992 in the state-level data, Democratic appearances were more highly correlated with population size than Republican appearances, particularly at the state level. Yet, in the later years for each series it is the Republican candi-
Figure 3. 2000 presidential candidate campaign appearances: Bush (top) and Gore (bottom). The number of appearances takes into account all public appearances in a media market. The period under analysis is September 1–November 7, 2000.
dates who have focused their appearances in larger states and media markets. This shift can largely be explained by the increased amount of Republican campaign activity targeting California in these later years, as well as the amount of Bush travel to Texas in 2000. Omitting visits to California reversed the state-level relationships in 1996, dropping the correlation for Dole visits to .48 while raising the Clinton correlation to .63. Excluding visits to California and Texas in 2000 raised the state-level correlations for both candidates and eliminated the differences between them, bringing Bush to .60 and Gore to .59.

The tendency for campaigns in recent elections to target appearances to a broader range of less populated areas does not, however, mean that more people today are exposed to local campaign appearances than was the case in earlier elections. The percentage of eligible voters living in areas with at least one DMA-level appearance by either candidate has grown only slightly since 1972 (Figure 6a). In any given year, slightly less than half of counties and around a third of media markets get at least one visit by a presidential candidate, although 1992 was an exception that broadened considerably the geographic distribution of campaign appearances. Nonetheless, these counties and markets are among the most heavily populated in the country, and because of this between two thirds and three quarters of eligible voters live in areas that get at least one campaign appearance by either candidate. This percentage has risen only slightly over time, despite the fact that the percentage of counties and DMAs receiving at least one campaign appearance has grown, peaking in 1992 but still higher in 2000 than in 1972. More recent campaigns are targeting a broader geographic range of voters, but the addition of these less populated areas generates only a slight increase in the total number of eligible voters exposed at least minimally to local campaign activity.

This picture changes when we look at the areas of the country targeted by relatively intense local campaign activity. Figure 6b shows that the percentage of eligible voters, counties, and media markets with five or more total DMA-level appearances (including

Figure 4. Correlations between Democrats and Republican appearances by state, DMA, and county levels.
candidates of both parties) has grown over time, particularly in recent years. Although in 2000 only about 1 in 10 DMAs and counties received relatively high numbers of candidate appearances, the percentage of counties and DMAs with five or more visits more than doubled between 1972 and 2000. The percentage of eligible voters exposed to relatively intense personal campaigning has also grown over this time, especially in the last two elections. Although the strategies for targeting candidate visits may be more sophisticated today than in 1972, the recent impact of these political marketing efforts has been to maintain roughly the same level of minimal appearance exposure as was found in 1972 while increasing the geographical reach of relatively more intense personal campaigning by the major-party candidates.

Figure 5. Correlations between number of candidate appearances and (a) size of eligible voter population within media markets and (b) number of state electoral college votes.
The widespread exposure of the U.S. population to at least minimal numbers of local campaign appearances by major-party candidates does not mean, however, that appearances are targeted at an especially wide range of locales. To the contrary, electorally competitive states—those with normal votes nearly evenly split between Democrats and Republicans—tend to get the largest average number of visits per election cycle. Figure 7 shows the average number of appearances targeted to states with different levels of electoral competitiveness as well as the average number of DMA-level appearances per county in different kinds of states. These data are averages across the entire series of

Figure 6. Relative concentration of combined candidate appearances over time, among eligible voters, counties, and DMA.
Candidate Appearances in Presidential Elections

a. State-Level Targeting of Candidate Appearances

![Bar graph showing the mean county-level appearances per state for different types of states.]

- Secure Republican States (n=127)
- Leaning Republican States (n=127)
- Competitive States (n=66)
- Leaning Democratic States (n=53)
- Secure Democratic States (n=11)

b. County-Level Exposure to Candidate Appearances

![Bar graph showing the mean county-level appearances per county for different types of states.]

- Counties in Secure Republican States (n=8,535)
- Counties in Leaning Republican States (n=9,139)
- Counties in Competitive States (n=3,989)
- Counties in Leaning Democratic States (n=2,695)
- Counties in Secure Democratic States (n=214)

Figure 7. Relative concentration of campaign appearances by level of state competitiveness.

elections. Figure 7a shows that the mean number of county-level appearances in a state is closely associated with that state’s voting tendencies. Competitive states get the most visits, followed by states leaning toward one or another party and secure states. States that lean toward the Republican party in normal voting—those with a normal Republican share of the two-party vote between 51.5% and 55%—receive only somewhat fewer visits on average than competitive states and quite a bit more than states leaning toward
the Democratic party. This difference reflects primarily the smaller number of states that lean toward the Democratic party, and the fact that any successful candidate must depend heavily on nominally Republican states, which together hold the bulk of electoral college votes.

Figure 7a reveals an unexpectedly high degree of similarity in the ways that Republicans and Democrats target personal appearances. The only observed difference that attains conventional levels of significance is for secure Democratic states—Massachusetts in 1984, Massachusetts and Rhode Island in 1988 and 1992, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York in 1996 and 2000—where Democratic candidates appear twice as frequently as Republicans (the $t$ statistic for leaning Republican states is a marginally significant $p = .07$). However, Democratic candidates appear just as frequently in secure Republican states as their opponents do, and Republican candidates appear just as often in secure Democratic states as Democratic candidates appear in secure Republican states. Candidates disproportionately target competitive states with appearances, but strategic considerations nonetheless draw candidates regularly to even “hostile” states.

Although competitive states receive, on average, as many as four times the number of appearances that electorally secure states receive, when we look at county-level exposure to appearances rather than state-level targeting of appearances (Figure 7b), we see that the structure of media markets in the U.S. diffuses these appearances over a much broader range of states than is targeted by the campaigns. It is still the case that counties in competitive states tend to be exposed to a larger average number of visits than states leaning to one of the parties, but at this level of analysis such differences are quite small. The biggest shift in emphasis from state-level targeting comes among counties in secure Democratic states, which have even higher levels of media-market exposure to candidate appearances than counties in competitive states. Moreover, these high levels of exposure hold for both Democratic and Republican candidates. This coincidence occurs because two of the three secure Democratic states contain two of the largest media markets in the country: the New York and Boston DMAs. In 2000, the states of New York and Massachusetts received a combined total of just five Gore visits and three Bush visits (Rhode Island received none), but because these visits were communicated through such large television markets, extremely large proportions of eligible voters in each state were exposed to them.

All of the observed differences between parties in Figure 7b are statistically significant owing to the large numbers of observations, but few seem of much consequence: Democratic candidates tended to have more DMA-level appearances across the board because they were less frequently incumbents in the elections considered here. It would appear that the potential for exposure to nearby candidate appearances through local television broadcasts was quite evenly distributed across all states except perhaps for secure Republican states, which tend to be smaller and more rural than other states and therefore less likely to attract candidate visits from either party.

While competitive states tend to be targeted for more appearances than other states, Figure 8 reveals that the allocation of appearances to competitive states has remained remarkably stable over the past quarter century. Since the number of competitive states changes over time (the parentheses in Figure 8 contain the number of competitive states in each election year), the clearest way of tracking change is to examine the allocation of appearances to each competitive state in a given election year. Figure 8a shows that the average number of appearances in competitive states has risen over time for both parties, which is what we would expect to see if campaign efforts have become increasingly focused on moving persuadable voters in strategically important states. However,
since the total number of candidate appearances has risen over time, the pattern in Figure 8a could arise merely from the increased amount of campaign travel across the board in recent years. A clearer picture of changes in the allocation of appearances over time is given by the percentage of candidate appearances going to each competitive state (Figure 8b). Looking at the data in this way reveals no evidence of a gradual increase in the targeting of appearances to competitive states, and no difference in targeting strategies among Democratic and Republican campaigns. On the contrary, the allocation of such appearances was quite consistent between 1976 and 1996. While the
2000 election saw an unusually heavy concentration of appearances in competitive states, this degree of concentration is comparable to that of 1972. In short, it does not appear that competitive states today receive proportionately more candidate appearances than they did in the past.

**Considering the Full Ticket**

We might also wonder how appearances by presidential candidates are used in conjunction with vice-presidential visits and campaign advertising. Our data on these possibilities are limited to the 2000 election, but our data for this election are quite detailed. Not only did we identify the location of visits made by vice-presidential candidates, but we also obtained from the Bush campaign detailed cost data for advertising buys by both campaigns and both national parties in every DMA in the continental United States.\(^\text{14}\)

The vice-presidential candidates made slightly fewer visits over the general election period than their presidential counterparts, with Cheney making 117 appearances between September 1 and Election Day as compared with Lieberman’s 118. Yet, Table 1 shows that the DMA-level correlations between presidential and vice-presidential appearances are relatively lower than that between appearances by the two presidential candidates. It would appear that the vice-presidential candidates are going to somewhat different areas than their top-of-the-ticket counterparts, although the size of the correlation between Lieberman and Cheney visits suggests that they were less likely to be pitted against one another in the same media markets than were Bush and Gore. The geographic distribution of campaign advertising is another matter. The .95 correlation between the number of gross rating points of Republican and Democratic advertising shows that ads for both Republicans and Democrats are targeted almost invariably to the same media markets, while the much smaller correlation between Republican ads and appearances as well as between Democratic ads and appearances suggests that advertising is not merely or even primarily used to supplement candidate appearances. Rather, our inspection of the ad and appearance data suggests that advertising is being targeted to a much broader range of locations than are visits. For instance, our data show that Republican ads aired in 56% of media markets during the general election, while Bush

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*Note. Variables are measured at the DMA level. All correlations are significant at the p < .05 level. GRPs = combined gross rating points from campaign and national committee (i.e., soft money) ad expenditures.*
visited only 28% of media markets during the same period. Likewise, Democratic ads aired in 47% of media markets during the general election, while Gore personally visited only 24% of markets. The broader reach of campaign advertising thus seems to account for the relatively low correlations between ad exposure and candidate visits in both campaigns.

Conclusion

The increasing sophistication of segmentation and targeting strategies used to allocate campaign resources suggests that the capacity of presidential campaigns to affect electoral behavior has never been greater, a possibility that has given rise to grave concerns about the health of American democracy. The potential impact of these technological developments has been enhanced by the unprecedented level of campaign contributions made available to party elites, which may enable them to maximize the potential impact of the new style of political campaigning. However, the preliminary analysis presented here raises the possibility that these concerns of pundits may be overblown. We find little evidence that the rise of increasingly sophisticated campaign techniques over the 1972–2000 period has fundamentally altered the allocation of candidate appearances across the United States. While the number of candidate appearances during the general election season has increased since 1972, and while the dynamics of each election are in many ways unique, appearances do not tend to be targeted much differently today than they were a quarter century ago. Candidate appearances are still concentrated in relatively populous states and media markets, but the degree of concentration has been declining rather than increasing over time. Although candidate appearances are targeted at electorally competitive states, candidates still tend to visit states that consistently vote for the opposing party’s candidates, and the allocation of candidate visits to electorally competitive states has remained remarkably stable over time. Those concerned about potential distortions in elite attentiveness due to the electoral college, or to the electoral impact of campaign appearances, should cautiously welcome these results. It is true that not all locales (and, thus, not all voters) receive political attention in the form of visits from presidential candidates. Many do, however, and their number is increasing.

The analyses presented here should be viewed as the first installment in a broader effort to better understand presidential campaign strategies and their impact on electoral behavior and electoral outcomes. This project has the potential to make important contributions to our understanding of campaign strategies and effects because it joins several unique sets of data, each of which is the result of a great deal of scholarly effort. It takes advantage of both temporal and spatial variation in campaign efforts and election returns, at a unique time in American electoral history, to make empirically based statements about both theoretical and policy-oriented concerns. Future research will provide more insights into the theoretical and normative concerns raised by the incorporation of information age technologies into presidential campaigning. By enhancing the array of independent variables that can be introduced into the analysis, and extending the time frame somewhat, we will be able to say more about the tactics deployed by campaign strategists, as well as how they have changed over time. More importantly, we will be able to investigate whether candidate appearances and campaign advertising produce consistent deviations from normal voting patterns and electoral outcomes.

Examining the last quarter century of presidential elections allows us to document the deployment and impact of advances in transportation, changes in campaign strategies, and the maturation of political marketing efforts. But already developments such as
the Internet are providing new tools to campaign strategists. The potential for candidates to personally connect with millions of voters via the Internet could significantly change the nature and scope of candidate travel and profoundly affect the future conduct of presidential elections. “Virtual” town halls might serve as a focal point of the campaign and dramatically reduce “in the flesh” appearances. No one can predict how new technological advances will affect presidential campaigns and elections in the distant future, but to the extent that candidate visits continue to be the centerpiece of presidential campaigns—as we expect them to be well into the 21st century—a better understanding of their allocation and impact will clarify the importance of campaign activities to the most foundational of democratic institutions.

Notes

1. Bush senior strategist Karl Rove told this story on February 10, 2001, at a conference on the 2000 campaign hosted by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication. The parachuting reference refers to the elder Bush’s parachuting out of an airplane on his 70th birthday.

2. Bryan’s opponent in that election, William McKinley, presented a fascinating contrast by conducting the paradigmatic “front porch” campaign. McKinley received a long list of carefully selected visitors with an eye toward cultivating key constituencies and energizing the party faithful.

3. In a few instances, Nielsen Media Research splits counties into two sections when the viewing habits within a single county diverge substantially. In such cases, we assigned the county to the DMA containing a majority of its population. We should also point out that Nielsen’s DMA boundaries account only for the audiences of commercial broadcast television stations, and viewing patterns for cable, satellite, and public broadcasting stations are therefore excluded from these assessments. In addition, the boundaries of many DMAs change somewhat over time as Nielsen reapportions counties to different media markets in response to shifts in county populations and viewing habits.


5. Built up from documents held by presidential libraries as well as private collections of documents from presidential campaigns dating back to 1952, the Annenberg/Pew archive is a comprehensive database of all general election campaign events at which speeches were made.

6. For 1980 and 1984, Associated Press reports were the sole source of confirmatory data; the New York Times and Associated Press reports were used for 1988.

7. Nonetheless, it was usually the case that candidates said something at campaign stops, and that candidates kept their scheduled appearances. For those reasons, the counts from our validated appearance data were only somewhat higher than the number of appearances recorded in the Annenberg/Pew archive. For instance, in 1996 the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse contains 111 speeches made by Clinton and 78 speeches by Dole between September 1 and Election Day, while our records identify 138 Clinton appearances and 101 Dole appearances.

8. A similar approach was used by Jamieson (2000, pp. 93–124) and her collaborators in their analysis of attack advertising in the 1996 general election, where the total number of gross rating points of campaign ad exposure in a given media market was assigned to each of the component counties of the media market. It is important to note a limitation of the DMA-level appearance measures used here, which should tend to underestimate the actual exposure to and the electoral impact of candidate appearances. The geographical boundaries of designated market areas capture the dominant audience base for any television market, but it is still the case that significant spillover audiences for a given DMA exist in adjacent DMAs. Because these audiences
are exposed to television broadcasts originating from outside their own media markets, television exposure to candidate appearances can extend well beyond the boundaries of the media market in which the appearances occur. Moreover, DMA boundaries take no account of cable television audiences, which may be exposed to redirected content from broadcast stations in nearby DMAs or, in the case of cable superstations like WGN, from distant local markets. Unfortunately, because cable systems are often organized within a single city or county, the relatively small audience sizes for any single cable broadcast and the complex geographical structure of cable markets make it exceedingly difficult to model the likely impact of broadcast content redirected through cable systems. The joint impact of spillover audiences and cable market structures should tend to diffuse exposure to candidate appearances beyond the geographical boundaries of DMAs.

9. This definition of counties includes the county-equivalent subdivisions of Louisiana (“parishes”) and other states that do not designate these subdivisions as “counties.”

10. Twenty-one of these counties contain both first-tier central cities and the suburbs surrounding those cities. In these cases, Nardulli collected detailed information that allowed him to separate voting trends in the urban and suburban areas of those counties. Our descriptive analysis of campaign visits uses the “combined” data set consisting of 3,109 counties, where cities and suburbs within a single county are combined into a single observation.

11. The allocation of states among these categories changes over time, most noticeably in the case of secure Democratic states. By our definition, there were no secure Democratic states between 1972 and 1984, one in 1984 (Massachusetts), two in 1988 and 1992 (Massachusetts and Rhode Island), and three in 1996 and 2000 (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York). Note that Washington, D.C. is excluded from the county data set.

12. First-tier center cities include the largest urban areas like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia; second-tier center cities include smaller urban areas like San Jose, El Paso, and Memphis.

13. The number of candidate visits to each state is calculated by aggregating appearances at the county rather than DMA level. These correlations therefore reflect the targeting of candidate appearances rather than actual exposure to those visits at the DMA level (on this distinction, see discussion below).

14. In accordance with previous work (e.g., Shaw, 1999), we use a transformed measure of these advertising expenditures, since raw dollar amounts are unsatisfying measures of advertising exposure for two reasons. First, the cost of advertising varies across media markets as a function of how many households each market contains. Second, the cost of advertising also varies within each market depending on the time of day, network, and program on which an ad is aired. For instance, prime-time advertising is generally more expensive than daytime advertising, in large part because more people watch television during prime-time hours. We address these problems by transforming dollars-per-market measures into market-level estimates of gross rating points, which measure the relative reach and frequency of ad exposures in a given population. This transformation was accomplished by dividing the total amount of campaign and national party money spent on ads in a market by the average cost per rating point for that market, which is available from several sources. These average cost per point estimates take into account market size and within-market cost fluctuations to produce a measure of advertising exposure that can be compared across markets.

References


