

## **Priming and Campaign Context: Evidence from Recent Canadian Elections**

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### **Introduction**

The most obvious place to look for campaign effects is in the realm of persuasion. After all, this is what campaigns are about: persuading as many voters as possible to vote for the party's candidates. We typically think of persuasion as getting voters to change their opinions of the parties, the leaders, or the issues of the day, but this is too narrow a conception. In this paper, we focus on a more subtle, but nonetheless important, form of persuasion: getting voters to change the bases on which they decide their vote. This is precisely what motivates the parties' struggle for control of the election agenda. Parties seek to emphasize considerations that will help them—be it a popular leader or an issue on which they possess a recognized expertise—and to downplay those that will hurt. The agenda-setting competition does not just involve the political parties, though. The media are also potentially critical players (Semetko 1996, Norris et al. 1999). Our focus here is on the media's power to prime (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

### **Priming Voters' Choices**

Priming can be thought of as “an extension of agenda-setting” (Ansolabehere et al. 1991, 127; Semetko 1996, 275). Indeed, Miller and Krosnick (2000) have recently argued that priming occurs **via** agenda-setting.<sup>1</sup> Agenda setting refers to the media's power to influence the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972). In the context of elections, the basic proposition is that the more attention the media pay to an issue, the greater will be its perceived electoral importance. Electoral importance is typically measured in straightforward fashion by the percentage of people identifying the issue as the ‘most important’. Priming occurs when extensive media coverage leads voters to attach more importance to that issue in deciding their vote. Priming can lead people to change their minds, not because they have changed their opinions of the leaders, the issues or the parties themselves, but because the relative weight of those opinions in their decision has changed.

Evidence of priming comes largely from experimental studies (Iyengar 1991, Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and from aggregate-level survey data using before-and-after comparisons. Typical of the latter is Krosnick and Kinder's (1990) study of the role of the Iran-Contra revelations in altering the foundations of support for president Reagan. Until recently, though, there has been little study of priming in the context of an election campaign, using individual-level survey data. A notable exception is Mendelsohn's (1996a) study of priming in the 1988 Canadian election.

What makes Mendelsohn's work particularly interesting is that he develops and tests a set of general propositions about priming effects.

The key proposition is that the personalized nature of media coverage serves to prime leadership and downplay party identification. It follows that voters who are more highly exposed to the media will become increasingly likely to base their vote on leader evaluations as the campaign progresses. Party identification, meanwhile, will become less and less important to their vote decision. Political discussion, though, may provide a possible offsetting influence to the media. Drawing on the work of Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987) and MacKuen and Brown (1987), Mendelsohn hypothesizes that interpersonal communications will serve to prime issues. The logic here is that conversations about politics are likely to focus on aspects of the election that are particularly salient in people's every day lives and that means the issues that affect them. Moreover, political discussion is a much less passive way of acquiring information (Lenart 1994) and so, presumably, the objects of discussion are likely to weigh more heavily in the voting decision.

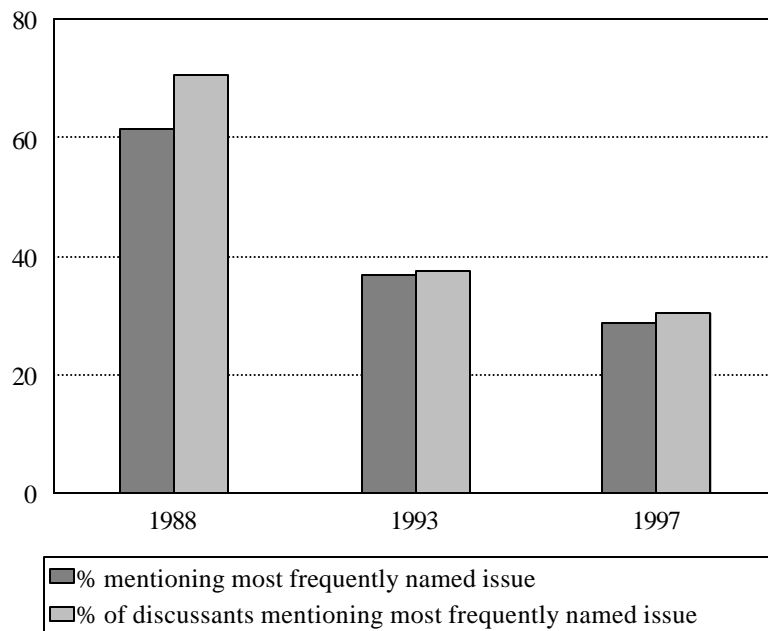
Mendelsohn tests these hypotheses about priming with data from the 1988 Canadian Election Study. The rolling cross-section design of the campaign survey is particularly well-suited to this purpose. Respondents were interviewed throughout the campaign, beginning the day the election writs were issued and ending on the final day of the campaign. The overall sample was broken down into replicates, one for each day of the campaign, with the date of interview constituting a random event. Because each daily replicate is as similar to the others as random sampling variation permits, all that distinguishes the replicates (within the range of sampling error) is the date of interview. This makes for an extremely powerful design for assessing campaign dynamics and media effects.

Mendelsohn was able to show that the campaign primed leadership and muted partisanship, and that both effects were heightened by media exposure. The campaign also primed the central issue of the campaign (the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement). As predicted, though, this was due to the effect of interpersonal communication rather than media exposure. All of these effects held, even controlling for political sophistication.<sup>2</sup>

### **Propitious Circumstances?**

It is possible, though, that the 1988 Canadian election was peculiarly conducive to uncovering this pattern of effects. First, the campaign was dominated, to a degree unusual in Canadian elections, by a single issue, the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (see Figure 1). When asked which issue was most important to them personally, 62 percent of respondents in the 1988 Canadian Election Study mentioned free trade. In the 1993 Canadian Election Study, by contrast, the modal response—jobs—received only 37 percent of mentions, followed by government spending and programmes at 27 percent. And in the 1997 Canadian Election Study, the most frequently named issue—again jobs—was mentioned by only 29 percent of respondents, followed by government spending and programmes at 24 percent. There is reason to believe, then, that the 1988 election was particularly likely to see issue priming

Figure 1: Single-Issue Dominance by Election



It is also likely that the free trade issue dominated political discussion in 1988. Seventy-one percent of those who reported discussing politics with others over the previous week named free trade as the most important issue to them personally. In 1993, though, only 38 percent of their counterparts said jobs and they were scarcely more likely to name this issue than respondents who had not discussed politics in the previous week. By 1997, the figure had fallen to 30 percent. The topics of political discussion, in other words, are likely to have become more varied and less focussed on a single issue.<sup>3</sup> As Mendelsohn himself cautions, the counterbalancing effects of interpersonal communications may be much less evident “under more typical campaign conditions” (p. 121) when no single issue dominates.

More generally, the issue priming effects of campaigns may be contingent on the nature of the issue agenda. The conditionality of these effects is suggested by Norris and her colleagues’ (1999, 182-3) work on agenda-setting in the 1997 British election. The British public apparently “followed its own agenda” (128), an agenda that reflected social and economic concerns. Reflecting as they do the preoccupations of day-to-day living, issues like healthcare and education and jobs will typically be on the public agenda long before the campaign actually begins. The scope for agenda-setting—and, by extension, priming—during the campaign itself will be correspondingly diminished. The 1988 Canadian election, by contrast, brought to the fore exactly the sort of “dramatically new” (Norris et al. 1999, 129) issue that could reshape the public agenda in the relatively short time-span of an election campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the domination of the free trade issue, it is possible that the 1988 election was also particularly conducive to the priming of leadership.<sup>5</sup> The two opposition parties pursued a very deliberate strategy of personalizing the free trade issue as the ‘Mulroney trade deal’ and there is every indication that this rhetorical ploy was effective (Johnston et al. 1992).

Moreover, the campaign featured a particularly acrimonious televised debate among the party leaders during which the Liberal leader, John Turner, accused his Conservative counterpart of selling out the country.

There are grounds to believe, though, that the priming of leadership will prove to be a more general phenomenon. Mendelsohn (1996a) links the priming effect to Iyengar's (1991) arguments about the predominance of episodic framing in news reports. By failing to situate political issues in some broader context, news reports encourage the public to attribute undue responsibility to individual political actors (as opposed to political parties or larger societal forces). Mendelsohn also points to the large body of research that has demonstrated the media's propensity to personalize issues, downplay political parties, and encourage "the rise of candidate-centered politics" (Wattenberg 1991) in the United States.<sup>6</sup> As a presidential system, the United States is particularly prone to the personalization of politics, but the "presidentialization of politics" in some parliamentary system may also be enhancing the salience of leadership (Mughan 1993; McAllister 1996). There is certainly evidence that leadership has a significant independent effect on the vote (though not necessarily on election outcomes) in Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand (Bean 1993; Bean and Mughan 1989; Clarke et al. 1991; Crewe and King 1994; Graetz and McAllister 1987; Nevitte et al. 2000; Stewart and Clarke 1992). Whether leadership has become **more** important to the vote in parliamentary systems remains an open question, but the presumption is that the changing nature of the mass media has played an important role in focussing attention on the party leaders (McAllister 1996), and so have changes in campaign strategy. The personalized nature of media coverage in Canada is evident in the fact that a party will typically receive little or no coverage on the nightly news if the leader takes the day off from campaigning (Mendelsohn 1993).

### **Data and Methods**

The key question is whether leader evaluations become more important to the vote during the campaign itself. They appeared to do so in the 1988 Canadian election. Our primary purpose here is to assess the generalizability of this finding. To this end, we repeat Mendelsohn's analyses using data from the 1993 and 1997 Canadian Election Studies, as well as 1988. Like the 1988 Canadian Election Study, both of these studies used a rolling cross-section design for the campaign-wave survey. Both studies also used Canada-wide surveys and computer-assisted telephone interviewing.<sup>7</sup>

Our setup differs from Mendelsohn's in a number of respects. First, he excluded third-party voters, modelling the vote as a choice between the two major parties. We opt instead for modelling the vote for the winning party and excluding only minor party voters. Conceiving of the election as a contest between the incumbent party and the Opposition party may make a good deal of sense in a classic Westminster-style parliamentary system, but the 1993 federal election shattered Canada's traditional two-plus-one party system. The Progressive Conservative Party, one of Canada's two major parties since Confederation, was reduced to a mere two seats in the House of Commons and lost official party status. So, too, did the New Democratic Party, Canada's traditional third party and social democratic alternative. The contest for the Official

Opposition was between two new parties, the separatist Bloc québécois and the Reform Party, a new right formation whose strength lay in Western Canada. In 1993, the Bloc secured Official Opposition status with only 13.5 percent of the vote (and 18.3 percent of seats). In 1997, it was the Reform Party's turn, with 19.4 percent of the vote (and 19.9 percent of seats). With the opposition to the governing Liberal Party so fragmented and the vote so heavily regionalized (Nevitte et al. 2000), it no longer makes sense to model the vote as a choice between the incumbent party and the opposition party. Canada now, effectively, has multipartyism under Westminster-style rules.

Secondly, where Mendelsohn used trustworthiness ratings to represent leader evaluations, we use overall leader ratings. As Mendelsohn acknowledges (p. 116), different campaigns and different personalities may bring different traits to the fore. While there is evidence that trustworthiness is a consistently important leadership trait in the eyes of voters, other traits also figure in their evaluations (Bean 1993; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Turcotte 1999). The same is true of media coverage. It thus seems more prudent to use a summary measure of leader evaluation. Accordingly, we base our leader variable on the 100-point leader rating scales. Like Mendelsohn, we use a comparative measure. There is growing evidence that voters do not evaluate leaders in isolation from one another, but make these evaluations on a comparative basis (Miller and Wattenberg 1985, Mishler et al. 1989, Nadeau et al. 1996). As Nadeau and his colleagues (1996, 248) note, "This is perhaps so because elections themselves are by their very nature comparative; two or more candidates vie for a post, and only one secures office." They also point out that the 'point-counterpoint' (Ansolabehere et al. 1993) nature of media coverage encourages leaders to be seen in relation to one another rather than separately. Finally, and critically, leader evaluations are only likely to matter to vote choice to the extent that one leader is judged better than another (Mishler et al. 1989, 230-1). Accordingly, our leader variable is the difference between the voter's ratings of the leader of the winning party and the highest rated of the leaders of the other parties. Respondents who said they knew nothing about a leader were not asked to rate that leader.

Mendelsohn used media exposure as his media variable, represented by the total number of days the respondent said he or she had watched the news on television or read a newspaper in the previous week.<sup>8</sup> The 1993 survey included questions about media exposure, but the 1997 survey only inquired about attention to news about the election on television or in the newspapers. This begs the question of whether comparisons across the three elections are confounded by differences in the media variable. There is reason to believe that media consumption is better captured by attention measures (Chaffee and Schleuder 1986, Mutz 1994, Joslyn and Ceccoli 1996). In particular, exposure measures are likely to understate the impact of television news (Chaffee and Schleuder 1986). Where exposure and attention measures differ is in the implied level of cognitive engagement. Clearly, then, exposure and attention should be viewed as distinct variables whose effects may be different (Krosnick and Brannon 1993). Whether they are, in fact, different is an empirical question. Fortunately, the 1988 study included both exposure and attention, allowing their effects to be compared empirically. It turns out that the basic conclusions are not affected by the choice of media variable.<sup>9</sup> Since the interaction terms involving media attention produced severe multicollinearity problems in 1988 (see below), we have opted to present the results for media exposure only.

The choice of issue variable was complicated for the 1993 and 1997 elections by the lack of a single dominant issue. As we saw above, jobs was the modal response in both elections when respondents were asked to name the most important issue to them personally, followed quite closely by government spending and programmes. For 1993, we have opted for spending cuts. The Liberal Party attacked the Conservative and Reform Party proposals for eliminating the federal budget deficit within five and three years, respectively, arguing that both parties had a hidden plan to cut social programmes. The Conservatives' supposed secret agenda, in particular, was the subject of a good deal of media speculation and may well have been the key to the party's collapse (Johnston et al. 1994). Ultimately, though, the decision to go with spending cuts rather than jobs was an empirical one. In addition to having a more robust initial relationship with vote intention, spending cuts (unlike jobs) were mentioned much more frequently by those who discussed politics than by those who did not. This was similar to the pattern for free trade in 1988 and for jobs in 1997. This was one reason why jobs were selected as the issue for 1997. Also, when respondents were asked to rate the personal importance of a series of issues in the 1997 campaign, many more rated 'creating jobs' as 'very important' (83 percent) than was the case for 'protecting social programmes' (59 percent) or its flipside 'reducing the deficit' (59 percent). And it is clear that negative perceptions about unemployment hurt the incumbent Liberals on election day, despite their efforts to campaign on a record of deficit reduction (Nadeau et al. 2000). Because creating employment is a classic valence issue, we used evaluations of the incumbent's performance on the jobs front as the issue variable. A description of all of the variables is included in the Appendix.

Following Mendelsohn, the analysis proceeds in stages, adding first-order and then second-order interactive terms to the initial estimation. The key independent variables are comparative leader ratings, party identification<sup>10</sup>, and issue position. The first-order interactives are obtained by multiplying each of the three original independent variables by day of the campaign. Their effects indicate how the relative weight of each of the independent variables changed as the campaign progressed. Two sets of second-order interactives are generated by multiplying the independent variables by both day of the campaign and level of media consumption and by day of the campaign and political discussion, respectively. Using these higher-order interactives necessarily creates problems with multicollinearity. As Mendelsohn (1996, 117) notes, though, the practical effect will be to weaken the observed relationships (and thus provide a more conservative test). Multicollinearity makes for inefficiency and this will show up in the form of inflated standard errors. The one instance where multicollinearity appears to be a fatal problem is in 1988 when media attention is used to represent media consumption. Adding the political discussion terms to the model causes the sign on the second-order interactive term for media consumption and issue position to change sign, even while remaining statistically significant. Accordingly, we have chosen to use media exposure instead for the 1988 estimations. This does not materially affect the results in any other respect. All estimation is performed using logistic regression, with vote intention as the dependent variable. The dependent variable is coded '1' for a vote for the winning party (the Conservative Party in 1988 and the Liberal Party in 1993 and 1997) and '0' for a vote for another party. Minor party voters and those with no stated vote intention are excluded from the analyses.

## Findings

Table 1 presents the initial estimation. We can see that each of the three independent variables is significantly related to vote intentions. This is the case for all three elections. It turns out that the effects of comparative leader evaluations were actually stronger in the two later elections. Leadership seems to have been an especially important factor in 1993, the year of Canada's 'electoral earthquake' Not surprisingly, party identification had its weakest impact in the same election. The issue variables are not directly comparable across elections because of differences in measurement, but we can see that the issue effect was a little less robust in 1993.

TABLE 1: The Original Models of Vote Intention

	1988 (exposure)	1993 (exposure)	1997 (attention)
Constant	-.891 (.432)**	.474 (.296)	-.663 (.346)*
Leaders	4.785 (.456)****	7.524 (.452)****	5.600 (.413)****
Party ID	1.864 (.162)****	1.630 (.112)****	2.174 (.122)****
Issue position	1.241 (.113)****	1.160 (.381)***	.639 (.147)****
Media	-.155 (.343)	.202 (.228)	.033 (.360)
Date of interview	-.422 (.346)	-.079 (.231)	-.085 (.267)
Interest in the election	.017 (.408)	-.221 (.260)	.788 (.391)**
Education	1.082 (.467)**	.091 (.329)	.551 (.367)
Talked about politics	.406 (.225)*	-.161 (.163)	-.219 (.211)
% correctly predicted	90.0%	87.6%	88.4%
2 x Log likelihood	766.81 (DF=1,540)	1,464.42 (DF=2,248)	1,121.81 (DF=1,904)
Chi-square	1,359.11 (DF=11)	1,556.39 (DF=11)	1,434.39 (DF=11)
Number of cases	1,552	2,260	1,916

Note: The models include controls for region of residence. Maximum likelihood estimate coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\*\* p<.001    \*\*\* p<.01    \*\* p<.05    \* p<.10

Not only was leadership a more important factor in both 1993 and 1997, but it was only in these two elections that the campaign primed leadership. As Table 2 shows, the predictive power of leadership evaluations significantly increased as the campaign evolved. As election day drew closer, voters became more likely to base their vote choice on their relative evaluations of the party leaders. The 1988 campaign turns out to be the exception. The interactive term actually has the wrong sign, though the effect is not robust enough to infer that the campaign muted leadership.<sup>11</sup>

TABLE 2: The Dynamic Models of Vote Intention

	1988 (exposure)	1993 (exposure)	1997 (attention)
Constant	-.786 (.438)*	.493 (.323)	-.650 (.353)*
Leaders	5.781 (.961)****	5.834 (.872)****	3.941 (.783)****
Party ID	2.181 (.333)****	1.909 (.232)****	2.655 (.277)****
Issue position	.735 (.243)***	1.832 (.843)**	.867 (.303)***
Leader x Date	-1.988 (1.563)	3.356 (1.526)**	3.368 (1.407)**
Party ID x Date	-.640 (.566)	-.540 (.378)	-.858 (.434)**
Issue x Date	1.019 (.424)**	-1.317 (1.355)	-.439 (.500)
Media	-.073 (.345)	.217 (.229)	-.020 (.362)
Date of interview	-.765 (.386)**	-.167 (.339)	-.136 (.285)
Interest in the election	-.051 (.412)	-.214 (.260)	.838 (.393)**
Education	1.197 (.474)***	.101 (.329)	.594 (.370)
Talked about politics	.430 (.226)*	-.160 (.164)	-.209 (.213)
% correctly predicted	90.8%	88.1%	88.8%
2 x Log likelihood	758.87	1,457.08	1,110.70
Chi-square	(DF=1,537)	(DF=2,245)	(DF=1,901)
	1,367.05	1,563.73	1,445.50
	(DF=14)	(DF=14)	(DF=14)
Number of cases	1,552	2,260	1,916

Note: The models include controls for region of residence. Maximum likelihood estimate coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\*\* p<.001    \*\*\* p<.01    \*\* p<.05    \* p<.10

What does get primed in 1988 is clearly the free trade issue. The effect is robust. As the campaign progressed, opinions about the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement loomed larger in people's vote choice. This is hardly surprising. After all, the 1988 election amounted to a virtual referendum on the agreement. Campaigns do not routinely prime issues. There is no hint of a priming effect in either 1993 or 1997. In both years, the effects are no larger than their standard errors and, in any case, have the wrong signs. Clearly, the 1988 election was an exceptional case, dominated as it was by a single issue and aptly dubbed 'the free trade election'.

The final prediction was that the campaign would mute partisanship. In all three elections, the interaction term has the correct sign, but the coefficient is only robust in 1997. As the campaign unfolded, partisanship came to matter less and less to the vote, just as leader evaluations came to matter more. Only in 1997, then, are the two key hypotheses both confirmed. The 1997 campaign clearly primed leadership to the detriment of partisanship.

Table 3 addresses the role of the media. Here the key prediction was that over the course of the campaign, the media would prime leadership and mute party attachments. Again, the expected pattern only holds for 1997 (see Table 3). As the campaign progressed and as media consumption increased, voters came to rely more on their relative evaluations of the leaders and less on their partisan cues. In 1993, on the other hand, the media only primed leadership, and in 1988 only the free trade issue was primed. In both years, the term involving party identification did at least have the right sign, hinting at the possibility that the media did mute partisanship. In fact, in 1993, the interaction term approaches statistical significance. In both 1993 and 1997, though, the issue term was not only nonsignificant but had the wrong sign.

This leaves the role of political discussion. Mendelsohn hypothesized that interpersonal communications would serve as a buffer against media messages. While media consumption would prime leadership, talking about politics would make issues more salient. For 1988, the prediction is neatly confirmed (see Table 4). Comparative leader evaluations became more important as the campaign unfolded and as media consumption went up. Conversely, as the propensity to talk about politics increased over the course of the campaign, the free trade issue grew in significance **and** the impact of leadership declined. There is clear evidence, then, for the proposition that the media and interpersonal communications pull voters in opposite directions when it comes to what matters to their vote. This pattern, though, is peculiar to 1988. There is not even a hint of a similar pattern in either 1993 or 1997.<sup>12</sup> In fact, if anything, political discussion enhanced the importance of leadership in 1993, suggesting that interpersonal communications may actually have reinforced media messages. It appears, again, that the 1988 election was a special case where a single issue dominated political discussion to an unusual degree. While we do not have any direct evidence on the content of people's conversations about politics, the data on the most important issue (see above) strongly suggest that the issue content of political discussion was more varied in both 1993 and 1997.

TABLE 3: Fully Specified Media/Dynamic Models of Vote Intention

	1988 (exposure)	1993 (exposure)	1997 (attention)
Constant	-.769 (.442)*	.413 (.331)	-.627 (.354)*
Leaders	4.641 (.773)****	5.945 (.685)****	3.858 (.571)****
Party ID	2.084 (.279)****	1.843 (.181)****	2.599 (.207)****
Issue position	.952 (.195)****	1.411 (.560)**	.688 (.227)**
Leader x Media x Date	.287 (1.811)	5.640 (1.983)**	8.375 (2.206)****
Party ID x Media x Date	-.653 (.626)	-.699 (.436)	-1.421 (.567)**
Issue x Media x Date	.838 (.461)*	-1.184 (1.449)	-.265 (.674)
Media	-.219 (.344)	.189 (.267)	.008 (.376)
Date of interview	-.594 (.361)*	-.066 (.271)	-.045 (.279)
Interest in the election	-.020 (.410)	-.211 (.260)	.877 (.394)**
Education	1.161 (.472)***	.131 (.330)	.580 (.371)
Talked about politics	.418 (.225)*	-.156 (.164)	-.305 (.216)
% correctly predicted	90.2%	88.2%	88.5%
2 x Log likelihood	762.36 (DF=1,537)	1,454.06 (DF=2,245)	1,096.52 (DF=1,901)
Chi-square	1,363.56 (DF=14)	1,566.76 (DF=14)	1,459.68 (DF=14)
Number of cases	1,552	2,260	1,916

Note: The models include controls for region of residence. Maximum likelihood estimate coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\*\* p<.001    \*\*\* p<.01    \*\* p<.05    \* p<.10

### Discussion

Campaigns can clearly affect the bases on which people decide their vote. As the weeks pass, some considerations will grow in importance while others become less salient. This is the essence of priming. Previous studies of priming have emphasized the contingent nature of priming effects, focussing on individual level conditioning factors like political interest and knowledge about politics (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Weaver 1991). Here we have added to that body of work by demonstrating the conditioning effect of the campaign itself. Campaigns, even within a single political system, are not all of a piece. It seems that the 1988 Canadian election was unusual in the degree to which a single issue dominated the campaign. The priming effect of the campaign was clear: as the weeks passed, the free trade issue became increasingly important

TABLE 4: Fully Specified Dynamic Models (Media versus Talk)

	1988 (exposure)	1993 (exposure)	1997 (attention)
Constant	-.630 (.450)	.384 (.340)	-.620 (.357)*
Leaders	5.045 (.821)****	5.632 (.710)****	3.855 (.648)****
Party ID	2.080 (.284)****	1.813 (.187)****	2.663 (.238)****
Issue position	.797 (.203)****	1.384 (.603)**	.780 (.249)**
Leader x Media x Date	5.106 (2.425)**	3.678 (2.413)	8.156 (2.715)***
Party ID x Media x Date	-.626 (.903)	-.904 (.565)	-1.132 (.750)
Issue x Media x Date	-.836 (.610)	-1.264 (1.643)	.213 (.859)
Leader x Talked x Date	-5.171 (1.750)***	2.253 (1.609)	.141 (1.544)
Party ID x Talked x Date	.113 (.691)	.240 (.412)	-.292 (.506)
Issue x Talked x Date	1.907 (.449)****	.127 (1.163)	-.495 (.550)
Media	.119 (.358)	.167 (.277)	.023 (.379)
Date of interview	-.680 (.372)*	-.044 (.279)	-.073 (.283)
Interest in the election	.033 (.418)	-.211 (.260)	.887 (.396)**
Education	1.075 (.487)**	.132 (.331)	.566 (.374)
Talked about politics	.066 (.238)	-.116 (.197)	-.318 (.221)
% correctly predicted	90.9%	88.4%	88.7%
2 x Log likelihood	737.19	1,451.64	1,095.50
	(DF=1,534)	(DF=2,242)	(DF=1,898)
Chi-square	1,388.73	1,569.17	1,460.70
	(DF=17)	(DF=17)	(DF=17)
Number of cases	1,552	2,260	1,916

Note: The models include controls for region of residence. Maximum likelihood estimate coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\*\* p<.001    \*\*\* p<.01    \*\* p<.05    \* p<.10

to people's vote choice. As predicted, no such effect was detectable in either of the two subsequent elections. In neither election did a single issue or set of issues dominate the public agenda, and the issues that were uppermost in voters' minds—social spending and jobs—were not the sorts of issues that are susceptible to priming. They were neither novel nor dramatic in the way that free trade was in 1988. Instead, they reflected ongoing concerns that were likely to have been salient to voters even before the campaign began. The scope for issue priming, via the media or personal discussion, was correspondingly limited. Since new and dramatic issues do

not, by their very nature, appear routinely on the public agenda, we can conclude that issue priming may be the exception rather than the norm.

What may well be more normal is the priming of leadership. This effect was apparent in both 1993 and 1997. As predicted, leadership became more salient over the course of both campaigns, and media consumption clearly played a role in priming leadership. As the campaign progressed and as media consumption increased, relative evaluations of the leaders became more important to the vote. In 1988, though, this priming effect only appeared when the dynamic effects of political discussion were incorporated into the model (and it was completely offset by the pull of political discussion in the opposite direction).<sup>13</sup>

The results for party identification were less clearcut. The expectation was that the media would mute partisanship. There was evidence of this effect in both 1993 and in 1997, but only in 1997 was the effect statistically robust. It is certainly plausible that campaigns will tend to downplay partisanship. The original Michigan model conceptualized voters as having long-term affective ties to a particular party that predispose them to vote for that party. Short-term forces, though, may intervene to sway their vote. Figuring prominently among those short-term forces are their evaluations of the leaders. If short-term forces do induce temporary defections, then partisanship **should** become decreasingly important as the campaign progresses. This muting of partisanship, though, will be contingent on the pull of the short-term forces. A comparison of the results for the 1993 and 1997 campaigns lends weight to the notion that the priming of leadership and the muting of partisanship are related: the more leadership is primed (as media consumption goes up and the campaign unfolds), the less important party identification becomes to the vote.

There is very little support for Mendelsohn's prediction about the priming effects of interpersonal communication. As he suspected, the 1988 campaign was probably exceptional in the degree to which a single issue dominated political discussion. When the issue agenda is more varied and the issues themselves reflect voters' ongoing priorities, political discussion appears unlikely to serve as a counterbalance to the media's emphasis on the leaders. Indeed, it is possible that political discussion actually reinforces media messages. Clearly, we need to know more about the content of political discussion. We cannot assume that political discussion will revolve around the issues of the day. Like media coverage, interpersonal communication may focus on the leaders or on the horserace.

If the media prime leadership, do they also prime the horserace? Mendelsohn (1996) presents data in an appendix to his paper showing that strategic considerations became more important as election day drew nearer, though he did not examine the role of media consumption in this. Small daily sample sizes and collinearity limit the number of interactive terms that can reasonably be included in a single model. We can, at least, outline some hypotheses worth pursuing, though. The 1988 Canadian election may well have been atypical in the extent to which strategic considerations mattered and this, again, reflected the dominance of the free trade issue. With both opposition parties campaigning against the agreement, the vote choice may have revolved to an unusual degree around the question of which of the two parties had the best chance of defeating the Conservatives. In a parliamentary system, though, what really matters is the strategic context at the constituency-level and so we should not expect to find strong overall

effects. Even in the 1988 election, only an estimated six percent of voters appear to have voted strategically (Blais and Nadeau 1996). Only by exception, then, would we expect horserace coverage to have significant priming effects on strategic considerations.

The rolling cross-section design of the Canadian election studies provides a powerful means of examining campaign effects. One weakness of our research design for exploring priming effects is that we were not able to incorporate measures of media content into our models. The inference that the effects of media consumption mirror patterns of media coverage is plausible, though. There is ample evidence that media coverage in Canada, as elsewhere, is typically dominated by the horserace and by leadership (Mendelsohn 1993, 1996b; The National Media Archive 1993). It should be noted that the media priming hypothesis does not require the media to focus increasing attention on leadership for priming to occur. As Fan (1988) argues, what really matters is the cumulative effect of repeated patterns of coverage.

In this study, we have emphasized the contingent nature of priming and we have offered some propositions about the conditioning effects of campaigns. Our study, though, has only compared campaigns within a single political system. What differences might we expect across political systems? The most obvious distinction to make is between presidential and parliamentary systems. McAllister (1996) has argued persuasively that leadership effects should be strongest in presidential systems and the fact that “candidate-centered politics” (Wattenberg 1991) first became visible in the United States lends weight to his argument. Candidate-centered politics are, of course, particularly conducive to the priming of leadership.<sup>14</sup> Semetko (1996) has also pointed to the possible importance of the electoral system, the argument being that politics will be more party-centered in systems with proportional representation. It follows that there will be less scope for priming leadership. A final contextual variable that needs to be taken into consideration is the nature of the party system. Semetko (1996) suggests that stronger party systems (like Britain’s) afford party elites more discretion in setting the campaign agenda. To the extent that the media’s power to prime presupposes their power to set the campaign agenda, priming effects will be weaker.<sup>15</sup>

This discussion of context begs the question of how we should characterize the institutional setting, and hence the potential for priming, in the case of Canada. On a continuum of parliamentary systems, Canada would rank toward the “presidentialized” pole. Indeed, even back in the 1970s there was a good deal of speculation about the presidentialization of Canadian politics and the dominance of the executive (Smith 1977, Savoie 1999). More interesting than the phenomenon of presidentialization, perhaps, is the fact that Canada has a party system in flux. In the unfamiliar terrain of multipartyism under Westminster-style rules, comparative leader evaluations may serve as a particularly valuable guide to vote choice.

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## APPENDIX

### QUESTION WORDING

#### Vote Intention

Which party do you think you will vote for: the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, the New Democratic Party, [the Reform Party][Bloc québécois] or another party? In both 1993 and 1997, the Bloc québécois was listed in Quebec and the Reform Party was listed outside Quebec. Coded 1 for the winning party and 0 for any other (non-minor) party.

#### Leader Evaluations

Now let's talk about your feelings towards the political parties, their leaders and their candidates. I'll read a name and ask you to rate a person or a party on a thermometer that runs from 0 to 100 degrees. Ratings between 50 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favourable toward that person. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you feel unfavourable toward that person. You may use any number from 0 to 100. How would you rate [randomized name of leader]? (1988)

Now, I'll ask you to rate each leader on a scale that runs from 0 to 100. Ratings between 0 and 50 mean that you rate that person unfavourably. Ratings between 50 and 100 mean that you rate that person favourably. You may use any number from 0 to 100. How would you rate [randomized name of leader]? (1993)

Now we're going to ask you how you feel about the party leaders using a scale from 0 to 100. 0 means you really dislike the leader and 100 means you really like the leader. You can use any number from 0 to 100. How do you feel about [randomized name of leader]? (1997)

The comparative leader evaluation was the evaluation of the leader of the winning party minus the evaluation of the highest rated of the remaining leaders, re-scaled to run from -1 to 1.

#### Issue Position

As you know, [Canada/the Mulroney government] has reached a free trade agreement with the United States. All things considered, do you support the agreement or do you oppose it? 'Oppose' was coded -1, 'neither support nor oppose' and 'don't know' were coded 0, and 'support' was coded 1 (1988)

If you had to make cuts, would you cut spending in the following areas a lot, some, or not at all? Pension and Old Age Security, Health care, Unemployment Insurance, Education. 'A lot' was coded 0, 'some' was coded .5, and 'not at all' was coded 1. The items were combined into a simple additive scale, re-scaled to run from 0 to 1, where 1 indicated no cuts at all (1993).

How good a job do you think the Liberal government has done in creating jobs? Has the Liberal government done a very good, quite good, not very good or not a good job at all? Re-scaled to run from -1 'not good at all' to 1 'very good', with 'don't know' coded 0 (1997)

**Party Identification**

Thinking of federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, NDP, or none of these? (1988)

In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, N.D.P, [Reform][Bloc québécois] or none of these? (1993/1997)

How strongly [name of party] do you feel, very strongly, fairly strongly, or not very strongly? (1988/ 1993/1997)

Those who identified very strongly or fairly strongly with the winning party were coded 1. Those who identified very strongly or fairly strongly with another party were coded -1. Non-identifiers were coded 0.

**Media Exposure**

How many days in the past week did you watch the news on TV? How many days in the past week did you read a newspaper? The responses were combined and then re-scaled to run from 0 to 1 (1988/1993)

**Media Attention**

How much attention did you pay to news on TV about the election campaign? Would you say a great deal, quite a bit, some, very little, or none? How much attention did you pay to articles in the newspaper about the election campaign? Would you say... Responses were combined and re-scaled to run from 0 to 1 (1988)

On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means no attention at all, and 10 means a great deal of attention, how much attention did you pay, over the last few days, to news about the election on TV? ...and news about the election in the NEWSPAPER? The two items were combined into an additive scale, re-scaled to run from 0 to 1 (1997)

**Interest in the Election**

Would you say that you are very interested, fairly interested, not very interested, or not at all interested in the campaign? Re-scaled to run from 0 to 1, with 'very interested' coded 1 (1988/1993)

On the same scale, where 0 means no interest at all and 10 means a great deal of interest, how would you rate your interest in this particular election campaign? Re-scaled to run from 0 to 1 (1997).

**Political Discussion**

Over the past week, have you discussed politics with other people? 'Yes' was coded 1, 'no' was coded 0 (1988/93)

In the last few days, have you talked about the election with friends and relatives often, occasionally, or not at all? And have you talked about the election with other people often,

occasionally, or not at all? Respondents who answered 'often' or 'occasionally' to either question were coded 1. Those who responded 'not at all' to both questions were coded 0 (1997)

**Education**

What is the highest level of education that you have completed? The 11 levels of education were re-scaled to run from 0 to 1. (1988/1993/1997)

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1. This is at odds with conventional wisdom, which assumes that priming is mediated via accessibility. In other words, the more attention the media pay to an issue, the more likely that issue is to come to mind and thus influence people's political judgments.

2. Political sophistication was represented by education, political interest, and propensity to engage in political discussion.

3. Intriguingly, despite the prominence of the free trade issue in 1988, the number of respondents reporting that they had engaged in political discussion (58 percent) was actually lower than in the two succeeding elections (70 percent in 1993 and 74 percent in 1997). It should be noted, though, that the 1997 figure is not directly comparable to the earlier figures because respondents were asked two separate questions, one about 'friends and relatives' and a second about 'other people'. Also, there was no reference to 'the past week'.

4. Debate about the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement was cast very much in terms of competing claims about jobs and social programmes (which may also help to explain its capacity to dominate the campaign agenda), but the issue itself was clearly new to the public.

5. There are also measurement considerations that could have led the effects of leadership to be inflated. The 1988 Canadian Election Study only obtained leader ratings from those respondents who said that they knew 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' about the leaders. It is reasonable to assume that leader evaluations will have more effect among those who know more about the leaders, and there is evidence from the 1997 Canadian Election Study to suggest that this is indeed the case (Blais et al. 1999). Excluding those who knew only 'a little' about the leaders could thus have served to overstate leader effects.

6. Though Bartels' (2000) recent article represents a fundamental challenge to the partisan decline thesis in the United States.

7. The campaign-wave sample sizes were 3,609 in 1988, in 1993, and 3,949 in 1997. The response rates were 57 percent, 64 percent, and 59 percent, respectively. The principal investigators were Richard Johnston, André Blais, Henry E. Brady, and Jean Crête for the 1988 Canadian Election Study, Richard Johnston, André Blais, Henry E. Brady, Elisabeth Gidengil, and Neil Nevitte for the 1993 Canadian Election Study, and André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau, and Neil Nevitte for the 1997 Canadian Election Study. All three studies were funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

8. It was not feasible to examine the effects of each medium separately. Mendelsohn's (1994) earlier work had demonstrated that media exposure primed leadership, whether the respondent relied on television or on print.

9. The same is true of differences in the measurement of political interest. Mendelsohn used interest in politics generally, but the 1993 survey only measured interest in the election. Since both forms of interest were measured in the 1988 and 1997 surveys, it is possible to compare the results. Whether general political interest or interest in the election is used, the results are the same. Accordingly, for the sake of consistency across elections, we present the results using interest in the election.

10. Only those who identified very strongly or fairly strongly with their chosen party were counted as identifiers. There is good reason to believe that the traditional measure of party identification overstates the number of identifiers. When asked whether they think of themselves as close to any particular political party, weak identifiers are no more likely than leaners to answer in the affirmative (Blais et al. 1999). This suggests that they lack the sort of psychological attachment to their party that the concept of party identification implies.

11. It is consistent, though, with detailed analysis of campaign dynamics showing that ratings of Mulroney had less impact on the Conservative vote following the televised leaders' debates (Johnston et al. 1992, chapter 8).

12. Given the multicollinearity problems entailed in the use of second-order interactives, the models were re-estimated without the media terms. The results were even less favourable to the proposition about the priming effects of political discussion. They suggested that, just like the media, political discussion primed leadership and, at least in 1997, muted partisanship.

13. Mendelsohn himself found that the priming effect of media consumption was not very robust (the statistical significance was "underwhelming", p. 119), until the political discussion terms were added to the model.

14. A case could be made that the primaries prime leadership long before the official campaign begins. The long gap between the primaries and the campaign proper, though, suggests that ample scope for priming remains in the runup to election day.

15. Other, more idiosyncratic, factors to bear in mind are the legal context and the length of campaigns. Norris and her colleagues (1999, 115-6), for example, suggest that the legal regulations governing political broadcasting, and especially the requirement of "political balance", may limit the media's agenda-setting role. As for campaign length, it is plausible that longer campaigns are more conducive to priming effects. It is worth noting, though, that the 1997 Canadian campaign (at 36 days) was almost two weeks shorter than the previous campaign and yet media priming of leadership (and the muting of partisanship) was even more in evidence.