

Running head: PRIMING VS. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Critique #2:

Media Priming versus Interpersonal Communication
in Determining the Vote

Allison Morgan

Middle Tennessee State University

Media Priming versus Interpersonal Communication in Determining the Vote

In an investigation of the volatility of voters' opinions during an election campaign, Matthew Mendelsohn (1996) argued that such instability could be partially explained by the media's priming of leadership and downplaying of party identification. He suggested that, as a political campaign progresses, those more highly exposed to the media may alter their vote based on candidate character evaluations rather than loyalty to any political party. His theory builds upon information presented by Iyengar (1991), which was primarily concerned with the media and how the way they go about reporting the political world might affect public opinion, and work published by Zaller (1992), which focused on public opinion and how it might be influenced by short-term contextual factors, including the media. Mendelsohn stressed that neither Iyengar nor Zaller conducted their studies in a "real world" setting and stated that his article was designed to examine whether their theories would hold true in a live political setting and whether media priming could, in effect, actually change the outcome of elections.

Describing his approach as "unique," Mendelsohn explained that his study examines the question of priming over a relatively short time period — one election campaign — and has access to both longitudinal and cross-sectional data collected in a non-experimental setting. He used data from the 1988 Canadian Election Study (CES), which employed a rolling cross-section and interviewed about 80 different respondents each of the 48 days of the official campaign period. The 1988 Canadian election provided an ideal opportunity to test for priming, he explained, because vote intentions were highly unstable and opinion was fluid. In his study, Mendelsohn performed a logistic regression analysis, using vote intention as the dependent variable. Three independent variables were introduced: opinion on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which had politicized the population to an unprecedented level, a comparative trustworthiness assessment of the two candidates, and party identification. He then introduced

interactive variables made up of each of the three original independent variables and the date of interview in order to identify the evolution in importance of each of the considerations as the campaign progressed.

His first hypothesis was that those interviewed later in the campaign would be more likely to base their vote on leadership and less likely to base it on party identification. If that turned out to be true, he explained, the conclusion would be that the campaign primes leadership. His second hypothesis was that as the campaign unfolded, the media would prime leadership and ignore partisanship. His third hypothesis was that engaging in political discussions will prime issues. This hypothesis was based on his realization that interpersonal communication can act as a counterweight to the media. To test that hypothesis, he added second-order variables, constructed using the three original independent variables, the date of interview, as well as a dummy variable measuring whether the individual had talked about politics during the previous seven days. The second-order interactives using interpersonal communication were then compared to those using media exposure. For the first hypothesis, the data indicated that as the campaign progressed, partisanship became less significant, while leader evaluations and opinion on the FTA grew in significance. For the second hypothesis, results showed that as the campaign progressed and media exposure went up, leaders became more important, partisanship became less important, and the issue of the FTA remained unaffected. However, as interpersonal communications went up, the FTA became more important, while partisanship and leader evaluations remained unaffected. That data supported Mendelsohn's conclusion that media messages and interpersonal communications may pull in opposite directions. The results also indicated that the media's priming of candidates and downplaying of party might determine the vote, while talking about politics may encourage voters to base their decisions on issues. These findings supported both hypotheses 2 and 3.

Mendelsohn's evidence supported earlier findings on the effect of media priming while pointing out that interpersonal communications can also have a powerful effect. His findings competed with each other, since the results were indicative of both powerful and limited media effects. Despite these competing results, he asserted that media priming of leadership might very well have changed the election outcome. A debatable aspect of this study is Mendelsohn's assertion that the relatively short time frame of the study data is a strength. Since no long-term information was considered, results could be weighted to reflect the opinions formed only in response to the unusually volatile and controversial political campaign. Therefore, the results, which proved that his hypotheses were true in this particular case, might not hold true in a less volatile campaign. Nevertheless, the study, though not overwhelmingly conclusive, does offer insight into how interpersonal communications can limit the power of media priming.

References

Mendelsohn, M. (1996). The Media and interpersonal communications: The priming of issues, leaders, and party identification. The Journal of Politics, 58, 112-125.