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# Why the National Annenberg Election Survey?

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# Why the National Annenberg Election Survey?

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

## *Chapter 1*

# Why the National Annenberg Election Survey?

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON AND KATE KENSKI

### Do Campaigns Matter?

The presupposition of the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) is that understanding campaign dynamics is important because campaigns do matter. Campaigns matter because they elect and because they forecast the positions the president will champion and the leadership capacities he or she will display in office. Much of the survey research on elections has asked: What determines individual voting decisions, and what determines who is elected? While important, these questions ignore the fact that campaigns are designed to elect someone who will lead. Survey questions about the character and competence of a candidate are not simply a vehicle for assessing comparative strategic advantages in gaining votes, but also a means of ascertaining what the public expects of the person who is elected. Nor is an understanding of issue positions of value merely in surmising why one candidate gained more votes, either popular or electoral, than the other. Conducting elections that forecast governance should be a goal of a democracy. Understanding what the public has and has not learned increases understanding of the expectations the citizenry brings to a presidency and at the same time invites us to identify ways to increase learning in campaigns.

What voters know about the candidates and their positions matters because the relationship among campaigning, voting, and governance makes it possible for the citizenry to hold those it elects accountable. By devoting considerable space to questions about what the public learned about candidates and their stands on issues, NAES presupposes that accurate learning about both candidate similarities and differences is as important a goal for elections as actually deciding who wins or loses. The presence of an extensive battery of issue questions makes it possible to ask: Where did the campaigns confuse and where did they clarify the

candidates' stands, and what did voters believe that the campaign of the winner had forecast for governance?

Of course, outcome matters as well. Scholars have long debated whether campaigns really make a difference to the outcome of elections. The first few decades of political research tended to find that there were two types of voters: those who decided before the campaigns began and those who decided at the last minute. Most fell into the former category, leaving researchers with the conclusion that few were truly affected by campaigns. "Despite the many differences among countries and from election to election," wrote communication scholar Elihu Katz, "typically about 80 per cent, or more, of the voters have made up their minds about their vote before the campaign begins, that is at least several months prior to the election" (1971, 306).

Many models from political science suggest that one need not use information collected during a campaign to forecast the winner (for an overview of these models see Holbrook 1996). Using economic indicators and presidential approval ratings prior to general election campaigns, the winners of several presidential elections have been predicted accurately. The 2000 presidential election is one of those elections in which the models failed. By most accounts, Al Gore should have won decisively.<sup>1</sup> *Washington Post* political correspondent David Broder (2001) observes that

a number of these political scientists have developed the notion that all that posturing and planning by candidates and managers, all the debate preparation, all the frantic flying from media market to media market and all the money spent from Labor Day to Election Day basically are wasted motions. Presidential elections, they maintain, are determined by fundamental factors, such as the performance of the economy earlier in the election year or the approval rating of the incumbent president or the degree of competition within the incumbent party's primaries.

Because all these are measurable before Labor Day, they say, they can predict with confidence the outcome of the vote. It turns out they can't. These scholars' models missed Gore's minuscule 50.2 percent margin in the two-party popular vote by a statistical mile. (B7)

Some scholars argue that campaigns have an effect on voter choice by directing public opinion toward an equilibrium of candidate support that is determined prior to the campaign. "Campaigns do matter; they play a very important role in shaping public opinion during an election year and they contribute to the ultimate outcome," notes political scientist Thomas Holbrook. "But at the same time it is important to recognize that the political and economic context of the election can place parameters on the potential effect of the campaign" (1996, 158).

With the increased means of targeting voters and the weakened state

of political party identification over the past few decades, researchers have found that greater numbers of the voters are making decisions during campaigns. In their investigation of when citizens decide, Steven Chaffee and Rajiv Nath Rimal (1996) found that "The determining factors are likely to arise from specific circumstances, such as the number of candidates, availability of key information, and campaign tactics" (277). The variables that affect time of voting decision vary from one election to another. A similar conclusion was reached by J. David Gopoian and Sissie Hadjiharalambous (1994), who found that across five presidential elections, "these data convincingly demonstrate that the events associated with particular campaigns are the major determinants of the composition of the late deciding electorate of a specific election" (71). Because there is always the possibility that a campaign will affect vote choice, the prospect of studying campaigns should not be dismissed before the campaigns have begun.

Samuel Popkin (1991) maintains that campaigns matter because they provide information about political candidates to voters. He states: "There is no denying that misperception is always present in campaigns. But it is also clear that campaign communications do affect choices, and that they generally make voters more, not less, accurate in their perceptions of candidates and issues" (40).

Many variables can be used as a test of whether or not campaigns matter. Do campaigns enhance citizens' interest in government and public affairs? Do Americans learn about candidate issue positions during political campaigns? Do campaigns affect vote choice? Regardless of the criteria used to determine whether or not campaigns matters, if one does not have data collected daily, some of these effects may be missed.

### Locating Decisive Moments

Historians of presidential campaigns have long speculated about the importance of certain moments that may have turned the outcome in one direction rather than another. Unspoken in their analysis is the assumption that the outcome of presidential campaigns is not a foregone conclusion, that some moments are consequential where others are not, and that determining which moments mattered is important in making sense of whom and how we elect and what it all means for those who govern and are governed.

Locked away in private archives are surveys conducted daily for presidential candidates, but the kinds of daily tracking available from public polls offer answers to very few questions. For example, unanswered questions concerning the 1960 presidential campaign abound. Did Eisenhower's noncommittal response to a press conference question about

Nixon's influence damage Nixon's chances? Did Kennedy's intervention to release Martin Luther King, Jr., from jail swing substantial votes his way? These are the sorts of information one might hope to glean from a well-done daily survey of the national public.

More questions follow from these. Did the Democratic ad excerpting Eisenhower's press conference create an impact separable from that of the press conference statement itself? Was any effect on black voters created by the news play of the action to free King or by the campaign communication that followed, or was any impact created from a synergy of news and ads? Larger social issues were at play in 1960 as well. How widespread was public awareness of, interest in, and responsiveness to Nixon's Quaker heritage and Kennedy's Catholic one? Did public acceptance of a Catholic or a Quaker president increase as the campaign progressed? Did any change in acceptance of a non-Protestant president extend beyond Catholics and Quakers?

Depending on their point of view, different scholars have featured the importance of different events in Kennedy's election. Unsurprisingly, the communication scholars who produced research for Sidney Kraus's *The Great Debates* (1962) saw the first debate as potentially decisive. By contrast, scholars focused on Kennedy's civil rights legacy emphasized the importance of the King endorsement (Wofford 1980).

Had a survey been in the field daily in the general election of 1960, could it have sorted any of this out? First some history. Asked in a nationally televised press conference if he could give us an example of a major idea of Richard Nixon's that he had adopted, incumbent president Dwight D. Eisenhower responded, "If you give me a week I might think of one. I don't remember." That moment was replayed in ads by Kennedy against Nixon in the 1960 campaign (Jamieson 1996). Did that magnified moment move votes, and if so, were the numbers sufficient to give Kennedy the presidency?

Other factors favoring a Kennedy victory may also have been at work. That the black vote would go to Kennedy in 1960 was not a foregone conclusion. The Eisenhower administration had, after all, approved the first major civil rights act since reconstruction and had backed desegregation efforts with federal troops. At the same time, blacks, who are overwhelmingly Baptist, identified with a religious group fearful of the prospect of electing a Catholic president.

Had Kennedy carried the percent of the black vote garnered by Stevenson in 1956, he would have lost the election. In Illinois, for example, which Kennedy carried by 9,000 votes, over a quarter of a million blacks voted for the Massachusetts senator.

Many historians believe that a shift toward Kennedy was precipitated by his call to Coretta King and his brother's call to a local judge—actions

that, taken together, were credited by many in the civil rights movement with securing Martin Luther King's release from jail, where he was being held on charges stemming from a civil rights protest. What role if any did news coverage play? After all, once outside prison King stated, "I am deeply indebted to Senator Kennedy, who served as a great force in making my release possible. For him to be that courageous shows that he is really acting upon principle and not expediency." Did it matter that King's father told his congregation and with it the press, "I had expected to vote against Senator Kennedy because of his religion. . . . It took courage to call my daughter-in-law at a time like this. He has the moral courage to stand up for what he knows is right. I've got all my votes and I've got a suitcase and I'm going to take them up there and dump them in his lap." Did it matter that two million pamphlets containing endorsements from King were distributed outside black churches? What of the possible impact of ads carried on black radio? In one, civil rights leader Dr. Ralph Abernathy said that it was time "for all of us to take off our Nixon buttons because Kennedy did something great and wonderful when he personally called Mrs. Coretta King and helped free Dr. Martin Luther King Jr . . . Mr. Nixon could have helped but he refused to even comment on the case. Since Kennedy showed his great concern to humanity when he acted first without counting the cost, he has my whole hearted support. This is the kind of man we need at this hour" (Jamieson 1996).

The religious dynamic in 1960 has also produced reams of speculation. In the two Eisenhower elections of the 1950s, the Catholic vote split 50-50 between the parties (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1966). One open question in 1960 was, Would Kennedy draw higher than expected numbers of votes from Catholics and drive Protestants even more into the embrace of the Republican party? Ultimately Catholics voted 80-20 for Kennedy in 1960. "Calculating the normal vote to be expected of Catholics," Angus Campbell and his colleagues concluded that "one would expect at least a 63 per cent Democratic margin among Catholics. The difference between 63 per cent and the 80 per cent which Kennedy achieved can provisionally be taken as an estimate of the increment in Democratic votes among Catholics above that which the normal Protestant Democratic presidential candidate could have expected" (87-88).

Working from a model inhospitable to communication effects and relying on data incapable of capturing them, Campbell and his colleagues could not address such questions as: Did Kennedy succeed in reframing questions of religion into ones of tolerance? Did messages from conservative Protestant ministers, arguing that a vote for Kennedy was a vote for the Pope, energize Catholic voters? What, if any, was the

effect on Catholics and Protestants of Kennedy's speech to Baptist ministers at the Greater Houston Ministerial Association? To what extent was the impact of that event magnified by the repeated airing of it in predominantly Catholic areas that had defected to the Republicans in 1956? Higher than expected Catholic turnout in those regions may have been produced by simple religious identification. Alternatively, the Kennedy message may have capitalized on religious identification in ways that produced increased turnout and a vote shift to the Democrat.

Would a survey such as NAES, a survey designed to capture campaign dynamics, have helped address the questions raised by the 1960 campaign? The answers indicate the potential and limitations of the NAES. The NAES uses a daily rolling cross-sectional (RCS) design to track changes in public opinion. The details of the design will be discussed in subsequent chapters. If consumption of news were tracked, exposure to the Eisenhower press conference assessed, and the media placement of the Democratic ad replaying the Eisenhower press conference logged, a daily sample of 300 voters might have been sufficient to sort out the effects of the press conference and the ad. Tracking changes in public acceptance of a Catholic or a Quaker as a prospective president would also have posed no problem. Similarly, the impact of the King endorsement on the population of white voters could have been assessed.

However, confirming the effect of King's endorsement on the black vote would have been impossible. Not only was this a relatively small population, but since potential black voters were widely disenfranchised in the South, the number able to vote was disproportionately low. Answering the question, "Did the King endorsement give Kennedy Illinois?" poses the same problem we faced in Florida in the 2000 election. The size of the sample we drew in 2000 from any one state at any one point in time was simply too small to permit generalization to the state as a whole. And the number of African American voters drawn from within that sample created the equivalent of anecdotal evidence.

Even if well done and improved every four years, NAES will leave unanswered a large number of tantalizing questions. However, three characteristics of contemporary politics make it possible to use NAES to help sort out the impact of some forms of communication such as ads, news, and debates. First, ad effects can be teased out because in most recent presidential general elections about half of the country received no paid presidential advertising. Second, debate effects can be isolated because a large part of the potential audience does not watch most of any debate. Third, the influence of news can be assessed because there are large differences in the amount of news watched and read by different parts of the public. If those effects change over time, daily tracking may capture the movement. So, for example, by comparing those who



reported watching the first general election debate of 2000 to those who consumed news but not the debate, we can answer the question: Did the debate affect perceptions of Gore, or was the change in those perceptions reported in the national surveys only evident in nonviewers? Did the effect of debate viewing decay over time? By examining Gore's standing day to day in the time period leading up to the first debate, we also can answer the question: Was his standing dropping in response to news coverage that preceded the debate, or did the decline begin with his first head-to-head confrontation with George W. Bush? Because presidential debates are so tightly clustered, so that there are only a few days between one debate and another, it is, of course, difficult to isolate the effect of a single debate. This problem compounds the difficulty of asking, What effect did President George W. Bush's petulant performance in the first debate of 2004 have on perceptions of him or his ability to lead?

### Do Communication Dynamics Exist, and, If So, Can the Rolling Cross-Sectional Design Find Them?

By giving us the tools to assess campaign dynamics, the design of the NAES allows us to study ways in which changes in exposure affect the other factors at play in an election. Scholars have argued that many individuals do not pay much attention to politics between elections. As Election Day draws near, people begin paying more attention to politics. How much do people in the United States watch and read campaign news during presidential elections? Does exposure vary over time, or is it constant? Is it the same for different types of media? From December 1999 to January 2001 and from October 2003 to November 2004, the periods covered by the NAES rolling cross-sections, exposure to news varied across time and by medium. NAES respondents were asked how many days in the past week they had watched network and cable news.<sup>2</sup> They were also asked whether they had looked at information on the Internet about the presidential campaign.<sup>3</sup> Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show the responses to these television news and Internet exposure questions across the general election at the daily level. Seven-day centered moving averages are used to smooth the data and reveal the campaign dynamics.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, many people watched more television news about presidential politics after Election Day 2000, when the election was still undecided, than immediately before.<sup>5</sup> In both graphs, Internet exposure to information about the presidential campaign increased as Election Day approached.

What about other types of exposure to information? How did talking about politics vary across the elections? Since online exposure to political information increased during the campaign, it would not be surpris-

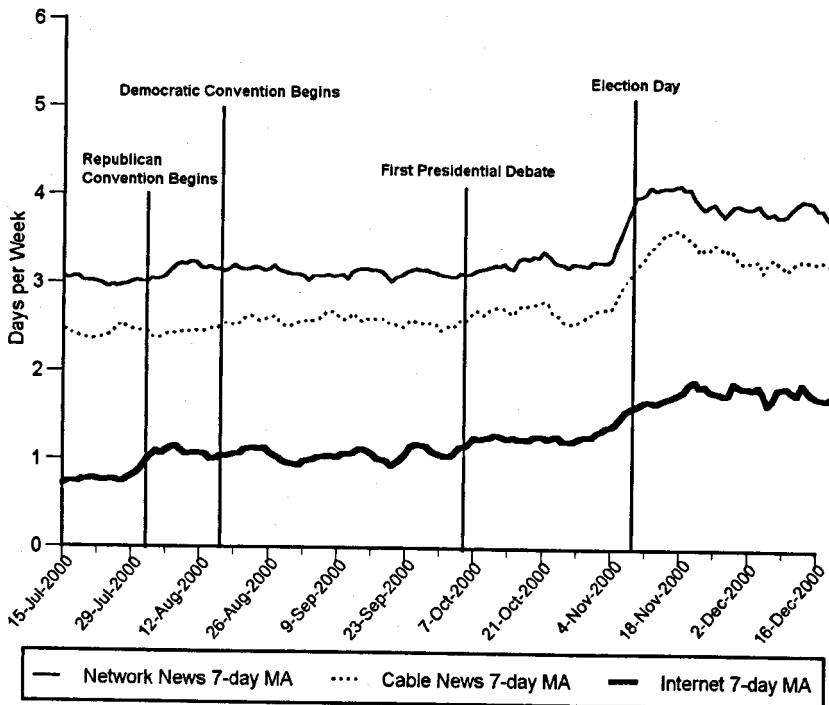


Figure 1.1. Exposure to network news, cable news, and presidential candidate information on the Internet from July 15 to December 19, 2000 (MA, moving average).

ing if political conversation also increased as Election Day approached. Figures 1.3 and 1.4 make further use of the data by looking at political discussion across the general elections. Respondents were asked how many days in the past week they had discussed politics with their family or friends.<sup>6</sup> They were also asked whether they had discussed politics with people at work or on the Internet.<sup>7</sup> As Election Day approached in both elections, talking about politics with various types of discussion partners increased. In 2000, after Election Day failed to produce a decisive presidential winner, talking about politics increased greatly. These examples demonstrate that media exposure and talking about politics were not stable variables across the presidential campaigns. The RCS design has made it possible to capture the dynamic nature of these phenomena.

While communication dynamics exist, so too do unanticipated moments that elicit communication. An RCS design makes it possible to

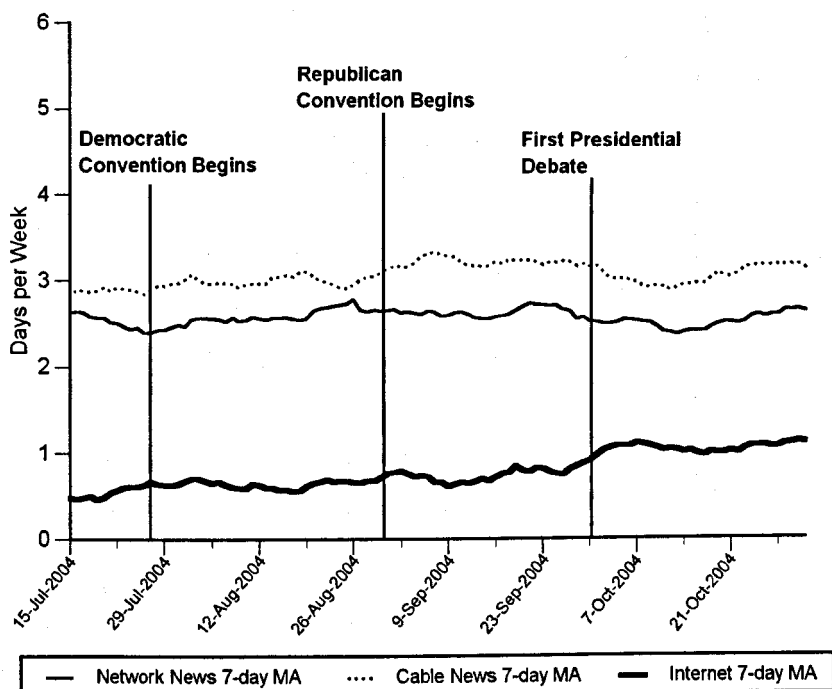


Figure 1.2. Exposure to network news, cable news, and presidential candidate information on the Internet from July 15 to November 1, 2004 (MA, moving average).

capture these moments. Who would have foreseen that the fate of a Cuban child, a decision about releasing oil from the petroleum reserve, or a conviction for driving under the influence of alcohol would play roles in the 2000 election? Who would have foreseen the emergence of the so-called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth or Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* in 2004, or anticipated the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the Chechen attack in the school in Beslan, or the last minute appearance of a tape by Osama bin Laden? Making sense of such occurrences requires a survey that is in the field daily. If perceptions of the state of the economy are assumed to play an important role in the process by which voters make decisions, then having the ongoing capacity to capture shifts in public perception is important as well.

Nearly fifty years ago Carl Hovland observed that cross-sectional surveys were unlikely to find short-term persuasion and opinion change (Hovland 1959). They are also unable to tie the impact of specific events to shifts in attitude. For example, writing about the 1988 campaign,

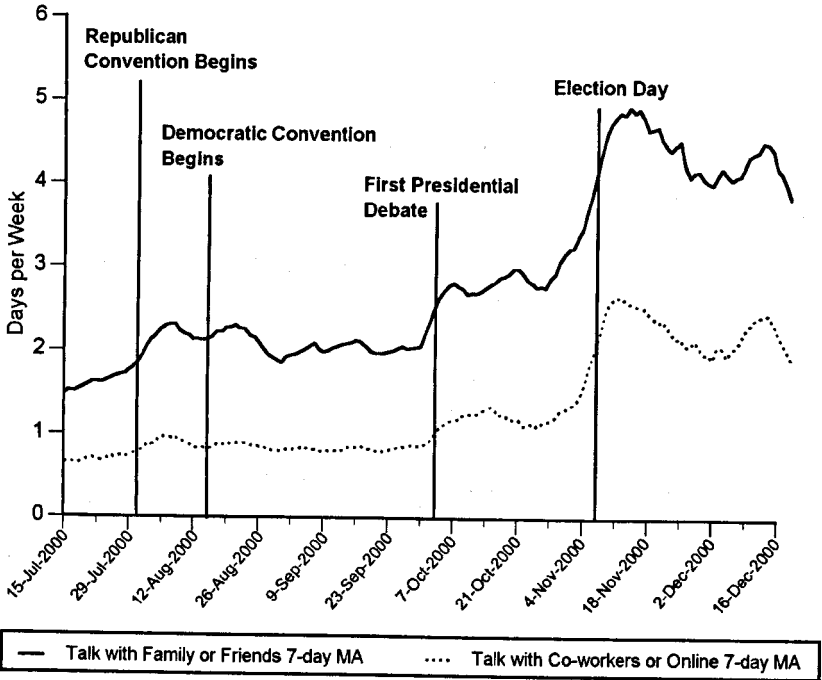


Figure 1.3. Talking about politics with family or friends and with coworkers or online from July 15 to December 19, 2000 (MA, moving average).

Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde argued that “the vice-presidential candidates had an effect on the candidates, and vice versa” (1991, 530). They draw their evidence from the fact that between September and November that year George H. W. Bush dropped four points in favorability among Gallup respondents, Michael Dukakis and Dan Quayle dropped six, but Lloyd Bentsen jumped by five. What their data can’t tell is what role, if any, the debates played in producing those changes.

Even when the method involved located communication effects, scholars who weren’t looking for them missed them. Becker, McCombs, and McLeod (1975) showed that the pioneering Columbia researchers Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) overlooked the fact that, among voters who were exposed to media messages in opposition to their predispositions, substantial persuasion occurred. In addition, the early studies showed an agenda-setting effect, although the scholars conducting the studies didn’t interpret it as such. In fact, media exposure increased.

If communication in campaigns mattered, most cross-sectional

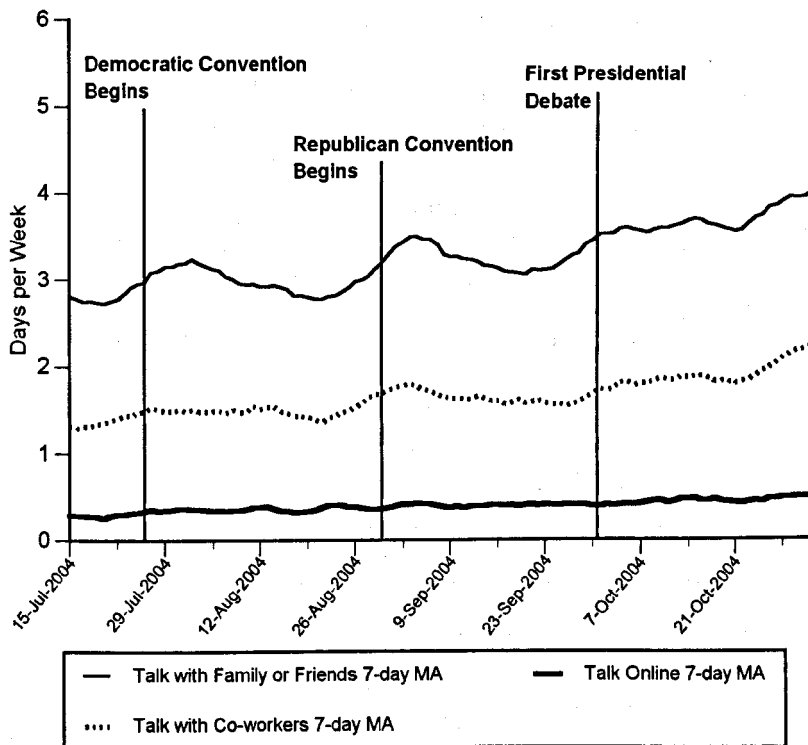


Figure 1.4. Talking about politics with family or friends, with coworkers, or online from July 15 to November 1, 2004 (MA, moving average).

designs were ill equipped to capture or explain that fact. In 1984 the National Election Studies (NES) planning committee responded to these concerns with a weekly RCS design.<sup>8</sup> Decades after the first election studies, those who looked for communication effects through the lens provided by an RCS design found them. In their path-breaking studies of Canadian elections, Richard Johnston, André Blais, Henry E. Brady, and Jean Crête (1992) confirmed that the RCS could detect debate effects. Drawing on the lessons he and his colleagues learned in their Canadian work, Richard Johnston wrote the protocols for the NAES and supervised their implementation in 2000.

Begun in November 1999 and carried through inauguration day 2001, the first National Annenberg Election Survey was an attempt to transcend the limitations of cross-sectional surveys with a daily assessment of the knowledge, dispositions, beliefs and behavior of the U.S. electorate. The NAES was implemented again for the 2004 presidential campaign,

with interviews beginning in October 2003 and ending in mid-November 2004. The survey was designed to ascertain how elections work and to permit scholars to draw inferences about the ways in which they forecast governance. In 2004, NAES data were released regularly to the press and public on the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) website, a process directed by former *New York Times* reporter Adam Clymer. These press releases, as well as the NAES 2000 and 2004 data and documentation, are on the disk accompanying this book. In the following chapters, Daniel Romer, Kate Kenski, Kenneth Winneg, Christopher Adasiewicz, Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, Russell Tisinger, and Natalie Jomini Stroud explain the design and uses of the NAES.

### Notes

1. The March 2001 volume of *PS: Political Science & Politics* 34 (1) contains articles that discuss how political science models fared in predicting the 2000 election.

2. Network news: for 2000, see variable cE01, for 2004, see variable cEA01. Cable news: for 2000, see variable cE02, for 2004, see variable cEA03.

3. The wording of the Internet questions changed from 2000 to 2004. In 2000, respondents were asked: "How many days in the past week did you see information about the campaign for president online?" (cE21). After the election, they were asked: "How many days in the past week did you see information about presidential politics online?" (cE22). In 2004, they were asked: "How many days in the past week did you access information about the campaign for president online?" (cEA22). Individuals who answered that they did not have Internet access in response to a previous question were coded as 0, meaning that they had not seen or did not access information about the campaign for president or presidential politics online. In 2000, the Internet access question was cE20, and in 2004, it was cEA21.

4. The process of smoothing data will be discussed in Chapter 6.

5. In 2000, the RCS was extended past Election Day because the outcome of the election was not resolved until mid-December.

6. For 2000, see variable cK05. For 2004, see variable cKB01.

7. In 2000, a single question about discussing politics with co-workers or online was asked (cK09). In 2004, we assessed political talk with co-workers (cKB03) separately from political talk online (cKB05). If respondents did not have Internet access (cEA22), they were coded as talking politics online 0 days per week.

8. The 1984 American National Election Study was conducted by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research, under the general direction of Warren E. Miller. Santa Traugott was the director of studies. Board members during the planning phase of the 1984 NES included Ray Wolfinger (chair), Richard A. Brody, Heinz Eulau, Morris P. Fiorina, Stanley Kelley, Jr., Donald R. Kinder, David R. Mayhew, Warren E. Miller (ex officio), David O. Sears, and Merrill Shanks. The 1984 NES planning committee included several NES board members (Kinder, chair, Brody, Kelley, Miller, ex officio, Sears, and

Wolfiger) and three other scholars, Stanley Feldman, Ethel Klein, and Steven J. Rosenstone.

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*Capturing Campaign  
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The National Annenberg Election  
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