



8-1994

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Recommended Citation

Mutz, D. C. (1994). Contextualizing Personal Experience: The Role of Mass Media. *The Journal of Politics*, 56 (3), 689-714.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2132188>

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Contextualizing Personal Experience: The Role of Mass Media

Abstract

This study considers competing theories concerning the role of mass media in hindering or facilitating the translation of personal experience into political preferences. Using national survey and media content data that allows evaluations of both media coverage and individual patterns of media use, this study evaluates the influence of mass media on the direct impact of personal experiences on presidential performance as Ronald Reagan completed his second term in office, and on the indirect impact of personal experiences by means of their impact on collective-level issue judgments. Exposure to unemployment news appears to strengthen the impact of personal experiences on presidential performance ratings. Heavy unemployment coverage also increases the extent to which perceptions of national unemployment conditions are generalized from personal experience. Overall, results suggest that mass media may counter the tendency to morselize personal experiences and help legitimize the translation of private interests into political attitudes.

Keywords

mass media, politics

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Contextualizing Personal Experience: The Role of Mass Media

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This study considers competing theories concerning the role of mass media in hindering or facilitating the translation of personal experiences into political preferences. Using national survey and media content data that allow evaluations of both media coverage and individual patterns of media use, this study evaluates the influence of mass media on the direct impact of personal experiences on presidential performance as Ronald Reagan completed his second term in office, and on the indirect impact of personal experiences by means of their impact on collective-level issue judgments. Exposure to unemployment news appears to strengthen the impact of personal experiences on presidential performance ratings. Heavy unemployment coverage also increases the extent to which perceptions of national unemployment conditions are generalized from personal experience. Overall, results suggest that mass media may counter the tendency to morselize personal experiences and help legitimize the translation of private interests into political attitudes.

The effect of a newspaper is . . . to furnish a means for executing in common the designs which they may have singly conceived. . . . It frequently happens . . . in democratic countries that a great number of men who wish or who want to combine cannot accomplish it because, as they are insignificant and lost amidst the crowd, they cannot see, and know not where to find, one another. A newspaper then takes up the notion or the feeling which had occurred simultaneously, but singly, to each of them. All are then immediately guided towards this beacon; and these wandering minds, which had long sought each other in darkness, at length meet and unite (Tocqueville 1835, 203).

For most Americans, the events of day-to-day life are “morselized”; that is, they are not seen as part of a pattern or larger context that lends them political or social significance (Lane 1962). While there are some notable exceptions (e.g., Sears and Citrin 1985), considerable attention has been focused on explanations for the striking lack of political impact of personal experiences found in the realm of social as well as economic problems. Aside from methodological issues, the most widely researched explanation for this pattern is that people do not attribute responsibility for their personal experiences to political causes (see e.g., Brody and Sniderman 1977; Sniderman and Brody 1977; Peffley and Williams 1985). This

An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, 1990, and received the 1991 Ithiel de Sola Pool Award from the APSA Political Communication Section. The author would like to thank Dick Brody for his advice on improving the article and Bob Lee for his help in collecting the data used in this study.

THE JOURNAL OF POLITICS, Vol. 56, No. 3, August 1994, Pp. 689–714
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observation goes a long way toward justifying the dearth of individual-level empirical support for self-interested politics, but it does little to explain why citizens politicize their personal experiences more in some situations than others (see Feldman 1985).

This study concerns the role of mass media in facilitating the political impact of self-interested political attitudes. Information sources have come to play a central role in theoretical explanations for this phenomenon (Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen 1980). Personal experiences are often pitted against collective or “sociotropic” perceptions derived from media sources to demonstrate the surprising impotence of people’s most accessible source of information—their experiences and concerns.

In the economic context in particular, the difference between “pocketbook” and “sociotropic” hypotheses has been construed as a controversy over the kind of economic information posited to have the most influence on economic judgments (Kiewiet 1983). While personal experiences tend to be compartmentalized, information about national conditions is available from mass media in a prepackaged form that is easier to connect to judgments of national political leaders (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Thus sociotropic judgments transfer quite easily to political preferences, while personal experiences do not. Weatherford (1983, 163) concurs, “Unlike the media’s statistical reports on the state of the national economy, the individual’s personal condition stands at some remove from the eventual economic policy judgment” (see also, Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986, 1987; Kiewiet 1983).

Despite general agreement about the importance of information, and information from mass media in particular, there is little consensus as to its role, and little data confirming its importance. This study addresses the two general theoretical perspectives that have been advanced in this area (Sears and Funk 1990); one suggests that high levels of media attention should facilitate self-interested political attitudes (Sears et al. 1980, 1983), while the other predicts precisely the opposite—that the effects of personal experience should be greatest among the inattentive and poorly informed (Weatherford 1983; Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986; Cohen and Uhlener 1991).

MASS MEDIA AS FACILITATOR

One compelling reason to expect greater politicization of personal experience among well-informed citizens is that high levels of exposure to news media may counter the tendency to morselize personal experiences by weaving discrete events into a continuing story (Lang and Lang 1981), thus enabling people to see their problems and concerns as part of a broader social pattern. Lane (1962) referred to this process as one of “contextualizing” individual events and experiences.

Media’s role in promoting problems to the status of social and political issues is well documented (see, e.g., McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes 1974; MacKuen 1981). Moreover, by establishing issues as bona fide social problems, media coverage may also legitimize the politicization of personal experience. For example, the pattern

of self-interested policy attitudes now observable among smokers and nonsmokers appears to be time bound; Green and Gerken (1989) suggest that the shift in attitudes of nonsmokers toward more self-interested policy views is due to the fact that their claims have gained legitimacy in recent years. Nonsmokers do not necessarily dislike smoke more than before, but smoking is now an established *social* problem, enabling self-interest to be more easily channeled toward policy attitudes. By the same token, mothers who have lost children to automobile fatalities have long been against drunk driving, but until the issue became highly publicized through the efforts of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, their personal experiences were not highly politicized. By compiling people's experiences and presenting them in an abstract, aggregate form, mass media aid people in interpreting individual experiences as parts of broader social trends.

The few studies addressing the hypothesis that mass media use or closely-related concepts such as political interest or involvement facilitate the effects of self-interest have been unsuccessful in uncovering this anticipated pattern (e.g., Sears et al. 1980; Sears, Steck, Lau, and Gahart 1983). At best, however, this research question has been a minor issue in studies that focus primarily on other topics.

MASS MEDIA AS INHIBITOR

The notion that self-interested political attitudes should emanate primarily from the poorly informed stems from information processing theories suggesting that, in the absence of alternative sources of information, people will "default" to personal experiences as a source of information on which to base their evaluation of policies and politicians. In studies of the politicization of economic experience, two factors are said to contribute to the tendency to default. First, the information costs associated with being aware of relevant macroeconomic information necessitate habitual mass media use (Weatherford 1983). Without this, people are forced to rely on less representative, but highly accessible, personal experiences. "Interpretation costs" are a second, even more important, factor according to Weatherford (1983); an individual must be able to comprehend the information and connect it to a larger body of politically relevant information. In the absence of mass mediated information about broader social conditions or the ability to comprehend or interpret it, judgments will necessarily reflect more parochial concerns derived from personal experiences or interpersonal sources.

Evidence of the "default source" theory is indirect at best. Conover, Feldman, and Knight (1986) found some support for this idea in that the unknowledgeable used personal economic experiences in forming retrospective evaluations of inflation, while the knowledgeable did not. Their evidence suggests that information weakens the impact of personal experiences on political evaluations, but only indirectly by means of the well-known link between collective retrospective evaluations and political attitudes (see also Cohen and Uhlener 1991; Mutz 1992).

Weatherford (1983) has taken this idea a step further by suggesting that personal and national referents form a continuum along which an individual may be

located based on his or her awareness of and ability to interpret mass mediated information about national economic events. The implication of his idea is that there is a trade-off between reliance on personal experience and national referents, so that as reliance on one increases, the other should decrease in strength. He found some support for this hypothesis in that perceptions of prospective collective (business) conditions were weighted more heavily in evaluating economic performance among heavy print media users, and personal (unemployment) conditions were weighted more heavily by low print users. Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare prospective perceptions of business conditions with retrospective personal unemployment experiences since there are variations in both content and time frame, as well as personal versus collective emphasis.

THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF MASS MEDIA

A central concern in evaluating these theories and the empirical evidence bearing on them is what precisely is meant by terms such as “knowledge,” “mass media,” or “information.” Weatherford (1983), for example, defines high and low information as the extent to which citizens habitually rely on printed mass media for information about political issues and campaigns. For Conover and colleagues (1986, 1987), emphasis is on the extent to which citizens have extracted correct information from mass media, such as knowledge of the unemployment or inflation rates. Mutz (1992) on the other hand, uses measures of subjective unemployment knowledge.

Differing conceptual and operational definitions often make it unclear whether researchers are referring to differences in, say, education and socioeconomic status, or to actual exposure to media coverage of the issue at hand. These often-confounded influences are important to differentiate because they suggest different underlying theoretical explanations. Weatherford (1983), for example, attributes greater politicization among those low in the use of print media to a combination of the default source hypothesis and the fact that macroeconomic downturns affect those of low socioeconomic status earlier and more severely than others. In other words, low print media usage and low socioeconomic status are likely to characterize the same people, and these people are more likely to politicize their personal economic misfortunes in part because they have more such experiences to politicize.

In this study I argue that mass media makes a unique contribution to the politicization of personal experience by exposing people to the similar experiences of others. It is through media coverage that the unemployed worker learns she is one of many thousands nationwide, and the crime victim learns that his robbery was not an isolated incident, but rather part of a pattern of increasing drug-related crime. There are, of course, other ways that these individuals might learn about people who share their experiences: the crime victim might talk to neighbors who have been similarly victimized, and the unemployed worker might notice long

lines at the local unemployment office. Nonetheless, media coverage is likely to play an especially important role in encouraging presidential accountability for personal problems. By transcending large distances, media can define problems as national in scope. Learning about others' experiences through interpersonal exchange or personal observation of one's immediate environment cannot provide the breadth of experience necessary to establish that a problem is not personal, nor local, but national in scope. Media coverage legitimizes a problem as something for which national leadership can fairly be held accountable.¹

Exposure to media coverage contributes to the politicization of personal experience in three closely related ways. First, by devoting a great deal of coverage to an issue in a public forum, mass media serve to legitimize it as a collective, social-level problem. For example, a person exposed to a great deal of unemployment news may come to realize that he or she shares this problem with many others, thus it is a social as well as a personal problem. Agenda-setting studies show that mass media are particularly influential in elevating issues to the status of perceived collective problems, even when personal issue salience is unaffected (McLeod, Becker and Byrnes 1974; Becker, McCombs, and McLeod 1975). Increased perceived social salience should, in turn, increase the extent to which people see their personal experiences as part of a broader social trend for which government and politicians may be held accountable.

In addition, media coverage of a shared problem may help to legitimize political blame by encouraging external over internal attributions of responsibility (Weiner et al. 1972), and thus increasing the extent to which political actors are deemed responsible for personal problems.² If an unemployed person is shown coverage indicating that large numbers of others are also unemployed, this should promote external attributions of responsibility for the person's personal predicament.

Third, qualitative aspects of coverage may also influence the politicization of personal experiences since not all coverage is packaged in the same way. For example, coverage that directly attributes responsibility to political causes is more likely to lead to politicization than coverage that is mute on this point (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). The term "accountability journalism" has been coined to refer to coverage that incorporates "explicit linkages to officials responsible for policy outcomes"

¹This is not to suggest that people always hold national leaders responsible for national problems, local leaders for local problems, and so forth, but previous research does suggest that the president is more likely to be held accountable for problems that are perceived as national in scope, regardless of which unit of government actually bears the onus of responsibility.

²Although evidence on the impact of consensus information is mixed, one domain in which it is clearly influential is in attributions for success or failure with respect to abilities (see Nisbett and Ross 1980 for a review). To the extent that the ability to get and hold a job is similar, one would expect information about others to affect attributions of responsibility for unemployment as well. Some evidence also suggests that the effects of consensus information may be brought about as easily by mediated representations of others as by live ones (Bandura and Menlove 1968; O'Connor 1972), and that the effect works best when it is in the form of large numbers of others (Bandura and Menlove 1968).

(Entman 1989, 21). In the mainstream press, however, journalistic norms emphasizing objectivity discourage coverage that directly blames specific political actors for policy outcomes.

More subtle aspects of coverage may be equally important. For example, considerable evidence suggests that when television frames news in an episodic, event-centered fashion, citizens tend toward individualistic rather than societal attributions of responsibility. Frames that emphasize societal or collective outcomes, on the other hand, encourage viewers to hold society responsible (Iyengar 1987, 1989, 1990, 1991).

Television news in particular tends to be dominated by event-oriented coverage (Iyengar 1990; see also Gitlin 1980; Altheide 1987). Television coverage responds most quickly to the ongoing flow of daily events, with little lead time to provide historical context or background. The concentration of event-centered as opposed to thematic frames is probably due partly to the visual nature of the medium (see, e.g., Postman 1985), and partly to the need to capitalize on television's advantage over other media; that is, its ability to respond quickly in relaying events to the public. In all fairness to television journalists, their medium is the least conducive to "contextualizing" as Lane envisioned it.

Daily newspapers insist upon timeliness as well, but their deadlines allow some opportunity for putting events in context. More importantly, the newshole of the average newspaper allows far more information to be conveyed than does a half-hour news broadcast. A script from an average network news broadcast takes up only one-third to one-half of the space on the front page of the *New York Times*. And while space certainly does not guarantee that a story will include contextualizing information, the opportunity to do so is much greater than in television news, and a great many newspapers capitalize on this as a strength in competing for television audiences. In the last 20 years in particular, the shift in newspaper reporting style has been away from reporting single events, toward creating news roundups and analyses that treat individual events as examples of larger problems. As Barnhurst (1991, 110) describes, "In the new long journalism, the house across town didn't burn, instead society confronted a chronic wiring problem in its aging stock of housing."

Although newspaper and news magazine coverage have not been the topics of comparative empirical study, it is easy to see them as forming the upper end of a continuum moving toward progressively less episodic, more thematic types of coverage. As Garry Wills (1983) observes, news magazines have made a virtue of the generally long lead time given to their reporters:

they learned to stand off from the flow of discrete items filling daily newspapers, to look for longer trends. . . . Something in the very format of such papers suggests that knowledge merely agglutinates—that you stick discrete new items onto an unchanged body of past knowledge (xvii).

Newsmagazines explicitly aim to summarize and connect otherwise disparate news events. Thus, one would expect between-media differences in the extent to which coverage promotes the politicization of personal experiences.

Overall, then, increased exposure to media coverage surrounding some problem should heighten the extent to which personal experiences are politicized, particularly if that coverage emphasizes thematic frames. The literature on television and priming has amply demonstrated that exposure to issue-specific television news influences the extent to which the president's handling of that issue affects overall assessments of presidential performance (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987). In priming studies, however, the politicization of the issue and its connection to presidential performance is made *for* respondents by asking directly about the president's handling of the particular issue. Whether respondents would attribute responsibility to the president on their own is unclear. Thus the issue raised by Weatherford—whether news coverage primes personal or collective-level referents—is not specifically addressed by the priming literature. Personal experiences have been found to heighten closely related media effects such as agenda setting for some issues, and to weaken it for others (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). The inverse inquiry, whether mass media strengthen or weaken the impact of personal experiences, remains an open question.

This study examines two potential means by which mass media may affect the translation of personal unemployment experience to political preferences: (1) by influencing the *direct* effects of personal experience on political evaluations, and (2) influencing the *indirect* effects of personal experiences by means of their impact on individuals' retrospective judgments of unemployment at the collective level. Since simple retrospective judgments at the collective level have a well-established impact on political evaluations, they are an important indirect means by which personal unemployment experiences may enter into political preferences. Unemployment was chosen for purposes of this study because it represents a narrowly defined form of personal experience that is nonetheless potentially politically potent. There are many other forms of personal economic experience that may enter into political judgments, but my purpose is not to explore the economic bases of presidential approval; instead, I seek to examine the politicization of parallel personal and collective judgments surrounding a single issue in relation to media coverage of that issue.

The direct effects of personal unemployment experience on political preferences should be enhanced by exposure to unemployment news. By weaving individual events into larger patterns, mass media are expected to aid people in contextualizing their personal concerns, and thus in connecting them to political preferences.

Although the default source hypothesis is not very convincing as a reason why those out of touch with mass media should find it easier to directly connect their personal experiences with politicians, a lack of exposure to macroeconomic news seems a quite compelling reason to generalize one's perceptions of collective experience from readily accessible personal experiences. Thus, I expect the indirect effects of personal experiences to be enhanced by low levels of exposure to unemployment news.

METHOD

Data for this study come from a national telephone survey of approximately 1,200 respondents conducted by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center during the fall and winter of 1988–1989³ (see appendix C for details). Professionally trained, paid interviewers asked respondents a large set of parallel questions concerning personal and collective-level unemployment judgments, as well as news media exposure items.⁴

The dependent variable in analyses addressing the first hypothesis—that mass media will strengthen the direct impact of personal concerns on political preferences—is the traditional scale asking respondents to evaluate the president's overall job performance. The question does not address presidential performance specific to handling of unemployment, or any issue in particular. This fact is important in two respects. First, it means that the strength of the expected relationships between issue judgments and performance evaluations will inevitably be less than for issue-specific performance evaluations. Moreover, the goal of these examinations is not to maximize the amount of variance explained, but rather to evaluate the relative importance of parallel personal and collective-level judgments under varying conditions.

Second, it means that the relationships that do exist will reflect the extent to which the president is in fact being held responsible for that particular issue, incorporating both whether people attribute responsibility for the problem to the president in the first place, and whether citizens feel he is handling the problem well. These relationships are more appropriate for a test of the importance of mass media, since quantitative and qualitative characteristics of coverage play a role in making the issue a factor in presidential evaluations to begin with; to assume the importance of the issue to presidential evaluations as a constant would miss some of mass media's potential impact.

The independent variables in these analyses are classified as either personal- or collective-level judgments, depending on whether the question focuses on personal experiences and concerns or judgments at the collective (national) level.⁵ Personal-level items include both retrospective and prospective personal concerns defined both objectively (as in actual experience with unemployment) and subjectively (as in self-assessed personal concern about unemployment).

³Interviewing continued from September 1987 through January 1988 covering an approximately five-month period.

⁴Nonresponse does not appear to be correlated with unemployment experience, despite the tendency for telephone surveys to underrepresent the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum (see Schlozman and Verba 1979). Responses to the survey were representative of the extent of unemployment during this time period, and of that found in other nontelephone surveys (see appendix C).

⁵The one exception to this organizational scheme is a variable indicating the amount of information regarding unemployment the respondent has received interpersonally. This measure does not fall clearly in either camp, but rather represents a level of judgment between these two poles.

Personal-level measures were designed to include those personally worried about unemployment as well as those with actual personal experience. The usual approach in studies of economic voting has been to compare researcher-defined measures of personal concern (typically limited to personal experience) with respondent-assessed collective-level concern. This practice stacks the deck against personal concerns and in favor of the sociotropic model since subjective assessments of reality almost always predict attitudes better than objective reality (Mutz 1992). The addition of subjective as well as objective personal experience measures also maximizes comparability between the personal- and collective-level indicators.

Variables in the collective judgment block include retrospective and prospective judgments about U.S. unemployment⁶ (see appendix A). With the exception of the demographic and party variables, all indicators are coded so that the theoretically expected relationships are positive ones.

Exposure to unemployment news is expected to be a function of both the individual's habitual news media exposure and the prevalence of unemployment coverage at any given point in time. In an attempt to measure issue-specific exposure more thoroughly than in previous studies, I take into account both individual patterns of news media use, and the amount of media coverage of unemployment over the duration of the study.

Measuring News Media Use

Self-report questions on use of news media are notorious for problems of reliability and validity. Traditionally, exposure measures have been used for these purposes. However, as Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) have noted, attention measures tend to have greater predictive validity for measuring television news reception, while exposure measures work best for print use (cf. Price and Zaller 1990b). For this reason exposure measures were used to assess newspaper and news magazine use, while attention was used as an estimate for television news.

A further problem in measuring media use stems from the fact that these behaviors are often not strongly correlated across media. Thus, a comparison of people high and low in print exposure inevitably includes some who are low on print use but high on other media or vice-versa. Given the strong similarities between national media agendas, this strategy makes it difficult to isolate those most likely to have been exposed to news that was prevalent across media.

The raw media measures in this study are positively correlated ($r = .12$), but not to an extent that would justify combining them into a single index indicating high versus low media exposure. The usual approach to this problem is to let indicators for each medium stand alone. However, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and

⁶Conover and colleagues (1987) found that retrospective assessments of economic conditions did not have much influence on economic forecasts, thus suggesting the causal ordering of variables used in the analysis of indirect effects.

Stokes (1966) noted that individual differences in media use approximate a Guttman scale, suggesting that despite weak correlations, underlying media use patterns reflect a unidimensional concept, moving from television to newspapers to news magazines to form a scale of progressively higher levels of media use.

These data easily surpass conventional criteria for a successful Guttman scale (see McIver and Carmines 1981). As anticipated, most respondents fall within one of the four scalar types: either they are low on all three media, watch television only, watch television and read a newspaper regularly, or use all three media regularly. If a person uses only one medium, it is quite likely to be television; those who read newspapers are also very likely to watch television news; those who read news magazines are very likely to both read newspapers and watch television news.⁷

This pattern indicates that levels of news media use and exposure to certain types of news frames probably are confounded in real world settings. Those with the heaviest overall consumption of news media also tend to be exposed to more thematically framed news from news magazines and newspapers, while those who rely primarily on television are exposed to more episodically framed material. Since heavy exposure to news media is part of a conglomeration of personal traits including political interest and sophistication, it is difficult to disentangle greater exposure to thematic frames from greater political sophistication. However, combining patterns of news media exposure with additional information on the extent of unemployment coverage over time makes it possible to identify media influences that are independent of stable personal traits.

Measuring Media Coverage

Although media use measures have been found to reflect a stable underlying phenomenon (e.g., Price and Zaller 1990a), the formation of political attitudes depends upon external circumstances as well as individual differences. The flow of media coverage surrounding issues varies across situations as well as across people, and the quantity and quality of information available in the environment at a given time puts an outside limit on how much information even the most attentive citizen can receive.

In order to make a more definitive statement about the role of mass media, these survey data are combined with data on the amount of media coverage. Using a computer-assisted content analysis of AP wire service coverage, I assessed the sheer amount of coverage of unemployment during the approximately five-month

⁷The Guttman scale has a coefficient of reproducibility of .94 and a coefficient of scalability of .74, with 83% classified correctly. High and low levels assigned for each medium were: newspaper exposure: 7 days a week (high), 1-6 days (low); news magazines: read regularly (high) or not (low); television news: little or no attention (low), some or a lot of attention (high). Five percent of the sample had at least one missing value and thus could not be classified. It should be noted that there is potential for the politicization of personal unemployment experience in all four media groups. Overall, 20% of the sample reported some unemployment experience, but the variation across media groups was not as pronounced as anticipated; personal experiences were reported by 24% of the "no media" group compared to 15% of the "all media" group and 20% of each of the other two groups.

period of the study (see appendix B). To insure that indicators reflect at least briefly sustained periods of high and low coverage, coverage scores for each day were based on a 10-day weighted average where coverage was assigned a half-life of one day.⁸ By matching coverage indicators across the full period of the study with respondents' date of interview, characteristics of the then-current media environment could be ascertained. By splitting coverage scores at the median coverage figure, respondents were designated as having been interviewed during periods of heavy or light unemployment coverage.

By combining measures of individual media exposure with measures of media coverage, I come closer to gauging individual exposure to unemployment news than with either measure individually. There is, of course, no way of knowing if specific stories ran in particular media outlets, nor if specific audience members were in fact exposed to specific stories.⁹ Nonetheless, the similarity of coverage agendas across national media suggests that those with a pattern of heavy news media exposure during a period of heavy unemployment coverage are most likely to have been exposed to this news, and thus most likely to be affected.

While crude in its ability to identify specific individuals heavily exposed to unemployment news, this design has the crucial advantage of ruling out potential simultaneity problems common to self-reported measures of issue exposure, yet eliminates the possibility that media effects are entirely attributable to audience characteristics. Calling patterns for the rolling cross-sectional sample ensured that date of interview was a random event so that groups interviewed during periods of high and low unemployment coverage are otherwise comparable (see appendix C).¹⁰ Any differences in the politicization of personal judgments between the two groups is likely attributable to coverage differences.

Analysis Strategy

The analysis of media's direct impact proceeds in three stages. First, to parallel other studies, I compare the predictive power of personal and sociotropic judgments among those with varying patterns of news media exposure. Next, I

⁸The choice of time frame is of necessity somewhat arbitrary since there is no consensus as to the appropriate time lag for media effects; moreover, the lag is likely to differ for different types of effects and different types of media content. This particular time lag was chosen on the basis of previous, closely related research (see, e.g., Eyal 1981; MacKuen 1981; Mutz 1992).

⁹Short of an experimental design, the only way to better establish an individual's actual exposure to news of this kind would be to incorporate self-report measures on exposure to unemployment news. However, questions of this variety generate severe simultaneity problems and become easily confounded with individual differences in memory and the personal salience of a topic; people for whom unemployment is highly salient will be more likely to remember and report being exposed to unemployment news even though others may have been equally exposed. In addition, the level of attention and retention of media coverage necessary to produce the hypothesized effects is very minimal and would not necessarily mean that the information or even the memory of exposure could be recalled (see, e.g., Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989).

¹⁰This was further confirmed by comparing the two groups using five demographic variables including age, sex, race, education, and family income.

examine the combined effects of patterns of news media exposure and media coverage. Finally, I examine media's indirect effects on political attitudes by virtue of its influence on the formation of simple retrospective judgments. By repeating the same series of analyses described earlier, I subject the hypothesis of indirect effects to the same battery of tests.

The central focus in all of the models tested is an interaction between level of mass media use of coverage and the weighting of personal considerations in forming political preferences.¹¹ A secondary issue involves comparing the predictive power of collective-level judgments relative to personal ones in order to assess the feasibility of Weatherford's (1983) hypothesized trade-off between the two.¹²

RESULTS

The Direct Effects of Personal Judgments

To get an overall picture of the relative contributions of personal and collective-level judgments across patterns of news media exposure, independent variables are divided into four blocks. The block of demographic variables is comprised of the usual indicators of respondents' age, gender, education, race, and income. A second

¹¹To identify these interactions I first regressed presidential job approval on the independent variables within media subgroups to identify overall patterns in the weighting of personal and collective judgments. If the confidence interval surrounding the coefficients in the groups being compared did not overlap (see Greene 1990), the key interactions were confirmed by including all respondents in a single equation that incorporated a dummy variable designating high and low levels of mass media use or coverage (coded as 0 or 1), and an interaction between mass media and the variable of interest, as well as the main effects of all variables and indicators of party and demographic characteristics. In order to eliminate the potential for nonrecursive relationships, party and demographic variables erred on the side of overcontrolling for the effects of key independent variables (see Kiewiet 1983). The null hypothesis (that media use or coverage does not influence the weighting of personal considerations) was tested by evaluating the increment to R^2 associated with the interaction terms. This conservative procedure insures that there are significant differences in the weighting of personal considerations, and that those differences are not merely a result of constraining coefficients in the interaction equations to be equal across subgroups.

¹²The models used to test for the effects illustrated in the figures and tables are as described. In each test, the dummy variable indicating level of media coverage is coded so that the interaction represents the additional impact of the test variable in the indicated subgroup.

Model for Direct Effects:

$$\text{Approval of President} = a + b_1(\text{personal experience}) + b_2(\text{personal concern}) + b_3(\text{retrospective perception at national level}) + b_4(\text{prospective concern at national level}) + b_5(\text{interpersonal information}) + b_6(\text{level of media coverage or media use}) + b_7(\text{media use or coverage} \times \text{variable of interest}) + b_8(\text{Democrat}) + b_9(\text{Republican}) + b_{10}(\text{age}) + b_{11}(\text{race}) + b_{12}(\text{family income}) + b_{13}(\text{gender}) + b_{14}(\text{education}) + e.$$

Model for Indirect Effects:

$$\text{Perception of Problem at National Level} = a + b_1(\text{personal experience}) + b_2(\text{personal concern}) + b_3(\text{interpersonal information}) + b_4(\text{prospective concern at national level}) + b_5(\text{level of media coverage or media use}) + b_6(\text{media use or coverage} \times \text{variable of interest}) + b_7(\text{Democrat}) + b_8(\text{Republican}) + b_9(\text{age}) + b_{10}(\text{race}) + b_{11}(\text{family income}) + b_{12}(\text{gender}) + b_{13}(\text{education}) + e.$$

block consists of two dummy variables representing Republican and Democratic party affiliations. The third and fourth blocks assess the relative importance of personal- and collective-level judgments. To establish whether the impact of these variables varies across patterns of news media use, I first calculated the results for a restricted model in which the impact of all variables was constrained to be the same across subgroups. This model is then compared to an unrestricted model in which separate slope and intercept coefficients are possible for different categories of news media use (see Wright 1976 for details).¹³

Table 1 demonstrates several general patterns. First, the importance of party identification to presidential approval becomes somewhat greater as one progresses up the media scale. The importance of subjectively assessed personal concern about unemployment also steadily increases across media exposure groups (from $b = .04$ in the “No Media” group to $b = .20$ in the “All Media” group), but this pattern does not represent a statistically significant interaction across groups, nor are any of the individual coefficients significant. The impact of personal experience also remains consistently insignificant across all patterns of news media use. Overall, the contribution of collective judgments appears to increase with greater amounts of news exposure, particularly for retrospective and prospective unemployment judgments. The coefficient corresponding to retrospective assessment of national conditions goes from $b = -.01$ in the No Media group, to a significant $b = .24$ in the All Media group; likewise, the coefficient for prospective national unemployment is an insignificant $.18$ among the No Media group, and a highly significant $.37$ among the All Media group.

Despite these patterns, a comparison of the restricted and unrestricted models suggests that the difference between the predictive power of the restricted and unrestricted models is not significant ($F = 1.09$, $p > .05$). Even if one estimates the additional contributions of allowing the personal and collective judgment blocks to vary individually by group, there is no evidence that people with varying patterns of news media exposure rely on personal and collective judgments differently ($F = .08$, $p > .05$; $F = 1.08$, $p > .05$, for personal and collective contributions, respectively).

Overall then, there is no significant difference across patterns of news media use. The results in table 1 jibe well with null findings from similar studies in which the predictive power of personal judgments has been broken down by closely related variables such as political sophistication (e.g., Sears et al. 1980). If this type of effect is truly driven by exposure to issue-specific news coverage, then it is not surprising that such a crude indicator should fail to uncover significant differences. It is heavy media consumption, in combination with heavy unemployment coverage, that should produce greater accountability for personal-level judgments.

¹³Nonscalar types were recoded to the scalar pattern closest to their pattern; that is, the one requiring fewest changes to “match” the scalar pattern. This resulted in a normally distributed scale with the largest concentration of people in patterns 2 and 3.

TABLE 1
PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE UNEMPLOYMENT JUDGMENTS AS PREDICTORS
OF PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL BY PATTERNS OF NEWS MEDIA USE

	Restricted Model	Unrestricted Model			
		No media	TV only	Newspaper and TV	All Media
Sex	-.16 (.08)	.12 (.28)	-.29 (.14)*	-.24 (.14)	.19 (.22)
Race	-.23 (.11)*	-1.34 (.41)**	-.13 (.17)	-.11 (.18)	-.25 (.32)
Education	-.12 (.04)**	-.21 (.13)	-.10 (.06)	-.11 (.06)	-.06 (.10)
Age	-.00 (.00)	-.02 (.01)*	.00 (.00)	-.01 (.00)*	.00 (.01)
Income	.04 (.02)	.10 (.10)	.07 (.04)	-.00 (.04)	.04 (.06)
Democrat	-.63 (.10)***	-.30 (.34)	-.67 (.17)***	-.68 (.17)***	-.59 (.26)*
Republican	.71 (.10)***	.66 (.37)	.51 (.17)**	.78 (.16)***	.93 (.25)***
<i>Personal Judgments</i>					
Personal concern	.09 (.04)*	.04 (.14)	.10 (.07)	.10 (.08)	.20 (.12)
Personal experience	.12 (.11)	.29 (.39)	.22 (.18)	.03 (.18)	-.25 (.32)
<i>Collective Judgments</i>					
Retrospective	.15 (.04)***	-.01 (.14)	.14 (.07)*	.18 (.06)**	.24 (.11)*
Interpersonal	.10 (.04)*	-.15 (.24)	.11 (.07)	.19 (.07)**	.08 (.10)
Prospective	.18 (.06)**	.18 (.21)	.13 (.10)	.14 (.10)	.37 (.16)*
<i>Media Groups</i>					
No Media	.11 (.18)				
TV Only	.35 (.13)**				
Newspaper/TV	.23 (.12)				
Constant	2.38 (.44)***	3.97 (1.89)*	1.63 (1.47)	1.80 (1.45)	.98 (1.29)
Total R ²	.31			.34	
N	(992)	(150)	(358)	(335)	(149)

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. A comparison of the restricted and unrestricted models suggested no significant difference in the proportion of explained variance ($F = 1.09, p > .05$; see Wright 1976 for details on these calculations).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

As might be expected, individual levels of media use do not affect the politicization of personal unemployment concern during periods of light media coverage of unemployment. But during periods of relatively heavy media coverage of unemployment, heavy media users are more likely to politicize their personal concerns than light users. Table 2 compares the effects of personal-level unemployment judgments by patterns of news media exposure. In order to retain a sufficient number of cases in each coverage/exposure subgroup, the four patterns of news media use were collapsed into two groups representing high and low patterns of exposure. The significant interaction between personal concern and media exposure demonstrates that exposure increases the importance of personal-level

TABLE 2
THE POLITICIZATION OF PERSONAL UNEMPLOYMENT CONSIDERATIONS
DURING PERIODS OF HEAVY MEDIA COVERAGE

	Low News Media Exposure [#]	High News Media Exposure [#]
<i>Personal-level Judgments</i>		
Personal concern about unemployment	.06 (.09)	.31 (.09)**
Personal experience with unemployment	.39 (.20)	-.23 (.23)
<i>Collective-level Judgments</i>		
Prospective perceptions of national unemployment	.10 (.08)	.22 (.12)
Retrospective perceptions of national unemployment	.10 (.08)	.22 (.08)**
Interpersonal information about unemployment	.21 (.10)*	.08 (.09)
Constant	.78 (.86)	2.63 (.90)**
Total R ²	.32	.30
N	(252)	(277)

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the five-point presidential job approval scale. The interaction between media exposure and personal concern is significant ($b = .44, p < .001$), as are the main effects of media exposure ($b = -1.35, p < .001$). $N = 529$. A battery of demographic and party identification variables was also included in the equations that produced these coefficients (see appendix A).

[#]Low news media exposure is defined as those in the no media and television-only groups. High exposure consists of those in the newspaper and all media groups.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

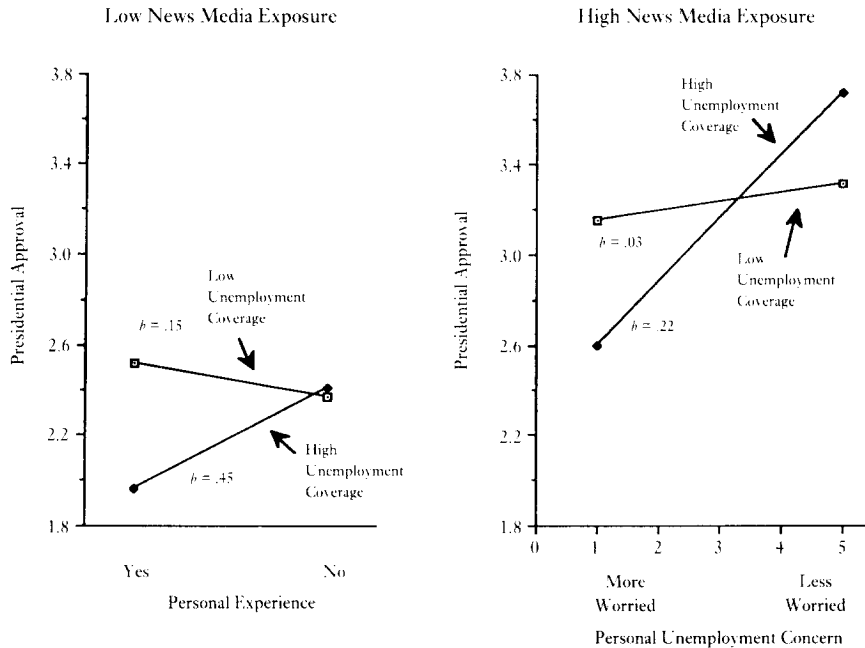
concerns specifically when the potential effects of media are greatest—during periods of heavy unemployment coverage.

For personal experiences, the coefficients are opposite the expected direction, though not significantly different. But the apportioning of influence demonstrates how findings bearing on this hypothesis may differ considerably based on the type of personal-level variables examined. Heavy media users may have fewer experiences with unemployment to politicize, but their personal concern is far more politically potent, particularly given that they are the type of people most likely to vote and to be politically active.

Thus far, findings have demonstrated that during periods of heavy unemployment coverage certain types of people are more likely to politicize their personal concerns than others, but since the comparison has been between heavy and light media users, it is difficult to discern whether exposure to news media or some other attribute closely associated with it is driving this phenomenon. Control variables

FIGURE 1

THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA COVERAGE ON THE POLITICIZATION
OF PERSONAL UNEMPLOYMENT CONSIDERATIONS



Note: Among those low in news media exposure, the interaction between personal experience and media coverage is statistically significant ($b = .60 (.26)$, $p < .05$), as are the main effects of unemployment coverage ($b = -1.16 (.48)$, $p < .05$). $N = 470$. Among those high in media exposure, the interaction between personal concern and media coverage is statistically significant ($b = .24 (.12)$, $p < .05$), as are the main effects of unemployment coverage ($b = .79 (.38)$, $p < .05$). $N = 529$. A battery of demographic and party identification variables was also included in the equation that produced these coefficients (see appendix A).

can only rule out a small number of plausible rival hypotheses. What, then, are the effects of increased levels of media coverage—an influence clearly independent of individual differences?

As figure 1 illustrates, heavy coverage of unemployment increases the importance of personal judgments, but this effect manifests itself differently among those high and low in patterns of news media exposure. Among those with low media exposure, greater coverage corresponds to greater politicization of personal experiences. The additional contribution of personal experiences for those interviewed during periods of high coverage produces a large and significant coefficient

($b = .60(.26)$, $p < .05$). Among heavy users, greater coverage corresponds to the politicization of subjectively assessed personal concern about unemployment ($b = .24(.12)$, $p < .05$).

The significant interactions with coverage levels demonstrate that personal-level judgments play a more powerful role in influencing political preferences when media coverage is heavy. Furthermore, the type of personal judgments that are politicized makes a great deal of sense given the known correlates of media use. Among the television-dependent and nonmedia groups—people who by virtue of their socioeconomic position are also more vulnerable to economic downturns—actual experiences with unemployment are politicized. Among the two print-intensive media groups, it is subjective personal concern rather than actual experience that becomes politicized during periods of heavy coverage.

In evaluating the impact of media on the direct effects of personal and collective judgments on presidential performance, it should also be noted in figure 1 and table 2 that media use and media coverage both have significant direct effects on presidential performance, in addition to their significant interactions. In both cases these effects are negative. For example, among generally low media users, being interviewed during a period of high unemployment coverage lowered respondents' approval of Reagan by 1.16, despite the fact that national unemployment remained low throughout this period. In analyses involving levels of news media use, the overall pattern is driven to a large extent by the "television only" group whose enthusiasm for Ronald Reagan surpasses all others. This finding jibes well with the popular, but typically undocumented, claims about Reagan's ability to produce pleasing television images that encourage a "teflon-like" accountability (cf. Weisman 1984, King and Schudson 1988).

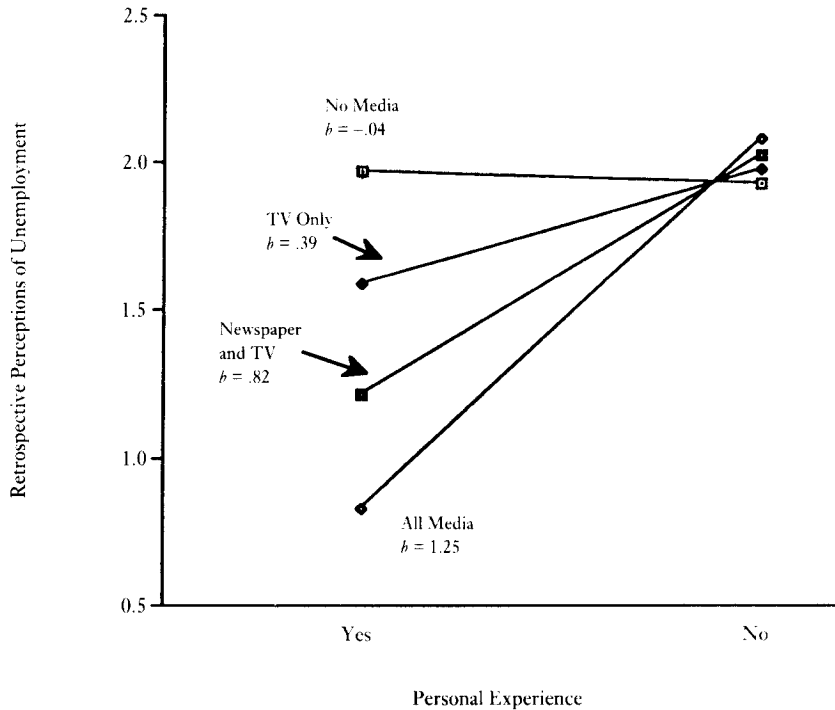
The Indirect Effects of Personal Judgments

The political impact of retrospective economic evaluations is well known; because of their political importance, I focus next on the process through which these collective retrospective evaluations are formed, particularly when and to what extent personal circumstances inform retrospective collective evaluations.

Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which individual patterns of news media exposure influence the process of forming retrospective unemployment judgments. Contrary to expectations, there is a clear, systematic increase in the importance of personal experiences as one moves from one end of the news media exposure scale to the other. Exposure interacts with personal experiences to form a pronounced, statistically significant pattern ($b = .43 (.16)$, $p < .01$). Among those low in exposure to all media, personal experiences have a negative, nonsignificant coefficient; among those high in all kinds of media exposure, this same coefficient is large and highly significant. The two groups in between illustrate intermediate steps moving toward progressively greater reliance on personal experiences in forming retrospective assessments of unemployment.

FIGURE 2

THE EFFECTS OF NEWS MEDIA EXPOSURE ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH
RETROSPECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL UNEMPLOYMENT ARE
GENERALIZED FROM PERSONAL UNEMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE



Note: The interaction between news media exposure and personal experience is significant ($b = .43$ (.16), $p < .01$), as are the main effects of news media exposure ($b = -.81$ (.29), $p < .01$). $N = 1,062$. A battery of demographic and party identification variables was also included in the equations that produced these coefficients (see appendix A).

It is tempting to interpret this pattern purely as a result of individual levels of political sophistication; political junkies see the political implications of their personal experiences because they routinely connect virtually everything to politics. This may in fact be the case. However, the similar pattern in table 3 suggests that this result may be at least partly driven by exposure to unemployment news. Consistent with the results for patterns of media exposure, when coverage was heavy, people were significantly more likely to use personal unemployment experiences in judging national economic conditions. The interaction between extent of media coverage and personal experience was significant ($b = .36$, $p < .001$), as were the main effects of coverage ($b = -.66$, $p < .001$).

TABLE 3
EFFECTS OF MEDIA COVERAGE ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH RETROSPECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL UNEMPLOYMENT ARE GENERALIZED FROM PERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS

	Low Coverage	High Coverage
<i>Personal-level Judgments</i>		
Personal experience with unemployment	-.20 (.17)	.24 (.17)
Personal concern about unemployment	.21 (.06)***	.23 (.08)**
<i>Collective-level Judgments</i>		
Prospective perceptions of national unemployment	.39 (.09)***	.13 (.12)
Interpersonal information about unemployment	.21 (.06)**	.18 (.09)*
Constant	1.32 (.67)*	2.29 (.73)**
Total R^2	.26	.22
N	(564)	(479)

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is retrospective perceptions of national unemployment conditions. The interaction between personal experience and coverage is significant ($b = .36, p < .001$) as are the main effects of media coverage ($b = -.66, p < .001$). A battery of demographic and party identification variables was also included in the equations that produced these coefficients (see appendix A).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Do mass media legitimize the translation of personal concerns into political preferences? Based on examinations of the direct impact of personal-level judgments concerning unemployment, exposure to unemployment news does appear to strengthen the impact of personal experiences on presidential performance ratings. This pattern was not in evidence if one compared patterns of news media exposure in isolation from coverage levels. However, those high in news media exposure were more likely to politicize personal concerns during bouts of heavy coverage. Moreover, even those low in news media exposure were more likely to hold the president accountable for their personal unemployment experiences when unemployment coverage was heavy, thus indicating that heavy coverage may at times overcome modest levels of attention to news and public affairs. In total, the evidence suggests that mass media may, in fact, counter the tendency to morselize personal experiences and help legitimize the translation of private interests into political attitudes.

There is little or no support, however, for the suggested trade-off between personal and collective-level judgments. In many cases, mass media simultaneously increased the importance of both personal and collective-level judgments. Some findings are suggestive of the trade-off pattern, but no single analysis produced both a significant increase in the importance of personal-level judgments and a significant decrease in the importance of collective-level judgments or vice-versa.

A third question this study set out to resolve was whether mass media might influence the relationship between personal experiences and political preferences indirectly, by means of their impact on retrospective national judgments. Contrary to the expectations of the default source hypothesis, both high news media exposure and heavy unemployment coverage substantially increased the importance of personal judgments to retrospective perceptions at the national level. By far the simplest explanation would be to view this finding as simply an extension of the generally greater number and strength of relationships between constructs among the well-informed (e.g., Converse 1964; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). However, the fact that this relationship is influenced by coverage levels as well as by patterns of news media exposure casts some doubt on this interpretation.

Whether media serve to facilitate the translation of personal to political views must depend to some extent on the accuracy of media portrayals of an issue. To the extent that media accurately reflect the experiences of large portions of the nation, media consumption should reassure many people that their problems and concerns are shared by many others. On the other hand, coverage that lags behind the collective experiences of the nation will not mirror most people's concerns and will contribute to the impression that their lives are not representative of the larger collective. Over time, this experience should discourage people from relying on personal experience as an indicator of the collective condition.

An examination of the accuracy of mass media coverage of unemployment is beyond the scope of this study (see Harrington 1989, Stein 1975). However, this explanation allows for the possibility that media may act as both liberator and suppressor of the politicization of personal considerations through the accuracy as well as the nature of its content. Of course, the difference between these findings and those from the small number of similar studies also could be attributed to methodological differences such as whether the dependent variable is vote choice, general presidential approval, or approval specific to a given issue or, more likely still, to differing conceptual and operational definitions of the groups being compared.

More importantly, these findings comprise the first empirical evidence of mass media's capacity to legitimize the translation of personal concerns to political preferences. Mass media may, in fact, serve as the "beacon" Tocqueville envisioned, particularly for heavy consumers of news media content, and for issues widely covered by the press. Nonetheless, patterns of media exposure are inevitably confounded with a host of other personal attributes. This study has attempted, so far as it is possible in real world contexts, to control for these rival interpretations.

Fortunately, the over-time aspect of this study design made it possible to rule out the possibility that the observed effects were entirely attributable to characteristics of the individuals drawn to various forms of media. Since the pattern of findings is even more consistent when one compares the effects of levels of media coverage, the conclusion that media make a unique contribution to the politicization of personal considerations gains credence. Nonetheless, some plausible rival interpretations remain. For example, history presents one threat to the validity of this interpretation. Although those interviewed during heavy and light unemployment coverage were randomly selected and confirmed to be demographically similar, they were still interviewed at different points in time, and one cannot control for other changes in the nature of the political and social environment that may have paralleled levels of unemployment coverage.¹⁴

Moreover, some caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings across issues. Coverage of unemployment, in particular, may not be representative of most media coverage. Iyengar (1991) finds that television coverage of unemployment is the most thematic of the five issues he examined. If coverage is progressively more thematic in newspaper and news magazine coverage, unemployment coverage may be more likely to promote politicization than coverage of other issues. Furthermore, coverage of other issues may be more susceptible to distortion than coverage of economic issues since they come with regularly released indicators that provide periodic "reality checks" for reporters.

Finally, this study also illuminates some longstanding misconceptions about the nature of mass media influence. Since the early work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), media have been conceptualized as weak competitors of personal experiences to be relied upon only in the absence of more compelling, personal-level information (see also Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980; Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). The analyses of direct effects in particular make it clear that this is a falsely contrived competition; mass mediated information facilitates the effects of personal experiences while simultaneously maintaining significant independent effects.

Manuscript submitted 1 August 1992

Final manuscript received 4 November 1993

APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Retrospective Perceptions of Unemployment. Would you say that over the past year people in the United States have had a harder time finding enough work, an

¹⁴There is no evidence to suggest that greater personal experiences with unemployment simultaneously influenced both coverage and the formation of public opinion since unemployment rates remain stable throughout this period.

easier time, or have things stayed about the same? Is that a little harder/easier or a lot harder/easier? (Coded as 5-point scale; high = easier.)

Prospective Perceptions of Unemployment. How about people out of work during the coming 12 months—do you think that there will be more unemployment than now, less unemployment than now, or about the same? (Coded as 3-point scale; high = less than now.)

Interpersonal Information about Unemployment. How often do other people talk to you about their employment problems, that is, having trouble finding or keeping a job? Would you say they talk to you about job security or unemployment problems everyday, three or four times a week, once or twice a week, or less often than that? (Coded as 4-point scale; high = less often.)

Personal Concern about Unemployment. How about you, or people in your own household . . . over the past year, have you been more worried about finding a job or keeping the one you have, less worried about these things, or have things stayed about the same? Is that a little more/less worried or a lot more/less worried? (Coded as 5-point scale; high = less worried.)

Personal Experience with Unemployment. In the past year have you or anyone in your family been laid off or had trouble finding a job? (Yes = 1, No = 2.)

Presidential Performance. Overall do you approve or disapprove of the way Ronald Reagan is doing his job as president? Is that strongly approve/disapprove or somewhat approve/disapprove? (Coded as 5-point scale; high = approve.)

Newspaper Use. How many days in the past week did you read a newspaper? (Coded 0 through 6 = low, 7 = high.)

News Magazine Use. Do you read a weekly news magazine such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News and World Report* on a regular basis? (Yes = high, No = low.)

Television Use. How much attention do you pay to national news on television? Would you say that you pay a lot of attention, some attention, only a little attention, or no attention at all to national television news? (Little or no attention = low, some or a lot = high.)

APPENDIX B

DESCRIPTION OF CONTENT ANALYSIS

Measures of unemployment coverage were obtained using a computer-assisted content analysis of AP wire service coverage (see Fan 1988 for details). First, a

random sample of 1,000 stories was downloaded from the Nexis news database. Any story qualified if it included the stem *jobless* or *unemploy*. One thousand stories were randomly selected from all AP wire service stories within the relevant time frame that met these specifications.

Next the sample was carefully examined for irrelevant content. The reliability was quite high with only a few inappropriate stories due to unemployment stories emanating from other countries. The sample was subsequently filtered to eliminate stories on unemployment problems in other countries by dropping stories from the International Section (a distinction noted in the header of each story). The remaining stories were scored for the total number of paragraphs mentioning a key word or words including *jobless*, *unemploy*, *seeking job*, *discouraged worker*, *layoff*, *job*, *employment*.

APPENDIX C

SURVEY SAMPLING PROCEDURES

The Letters and Science Survey Center (LSSC) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison runs a continuous national telephone survey. The Center’s sampling procedure begins with a sample of telephone numbers representative of currently working residential telephone numbers in the continental United States (including both listed and unlisted numbers) purchased from Nielsen Media Research.

One person is selected at random from among the adult (age 18 or older) members of the sample household. The interview is conducted using a computer-assisted telephone interview system. Each sample number is called up to 10 times, using a “day of the week” calling strategy. Each day’s interviews constitute a random sample of the population on that day. This requirement means that it is necessary to deal with the problem of nonresponse in a special way, using a procedure first suggested by Kish and Hess (1959) and elaborated upon by Madow, Hymann, and Jessen (1961). The procedure depends on replacing current not-at-homes with not-at-homes saved from previous sample draws. Because the kinds of people not home on one day of the week may be different from those not at home on another, the replacement scheme is day-of-the-week specific. Some measure is added to the variability of the resultant estimates. Nonetheless, each day’s interviews can be aggregated with those for other days to produce a probability sample for arbitrary contiguous blocks of time.

To assess the quality of the survey, the distributions of social and demographic characteristics of the Survey Center’s respondents were compared with those of the CPS and the National Survey of Families and Households. The Letters and Sciences Survey Center’s response rate is approximately 52% if one includes both refusals and unresolved numbers in the denominator. This is considerably lower than the CPS and the NSFH; however, comparisons suggest that distributions of respondents are quite similar with respect to major demographic variables including household size, region, age, sex, household income, marital status, religious

preference, unemployment, and church attendance. Differences result from the fact that LSSC is a telephone survey which consequently underrepresents minorities who are less likely to have access to telephones. Educational comparisons are difficult because the LSSC uses educational classifications based on the 1990 census concept; however, it appears to underrepresent those with less than 12 years of education, again due to the prevalence of telephones.

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