

The *Oprah* Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently

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Do the news media provide voters with sufficient information to function as competent democratic citizens? Many have answered “no,” citing as evidence the proliferation of entertainment-oriented “soft news.” Yet, public affairs-oriented “hard” news is often unappealing to politically inattentive individuals. We argue that news “quality” depends upon how well it enables citizens to determine which candidate best fits their own preferences. In this regard, for politically inattentive citizens, we argue that soft news is more efficient than traditional hard news. Drawing on the logic of low-information rationality, we derive a series of hypotheses, which we test using the 2000 National Election Study. We find that politically inattentive individuals who consumed daytime talk shows (a popular form of soft news) were more likely than their nonconsuming, inattentive counterparts to vote for the candidate who best represented their self-described preferences. This suggests soft news can facilitate voting “competence” among at least some citizens.

Democratic theorists have long argued that a prerequisite for representative democracy is for citizens to vote in their own, subjectively determined, interests (Banfield 1961; Dahl 1961). To do so, of course, they must have sufficient information to determine which candidates will best represent their interests. But since markets, rather than statesmen, govern the provision of information in democracies, the “proper” role of the press in helping citizens fulfill their civic duties remains open to debate (Bennett and Entman 2000; Norris 2000; Schudson 1998; Zaller 2003). This is particularly true for political campaigns, voting behavior, and the primary link between them—news coverage. While many claim the media have an *obligation* to inform citizens sufficiently to enable them to judge which candidate best matches their own, self-defined, preferences (e.g., L. Bennett 1997; Patterson 2000), others observe that because news content is determined by the vicissitudes of the

marketplace, the news media are not well suited for such a role (Baum 2003; Hamilton 2003; Norris 2000; Zaller 2003).¹

For many in the former camp, the current state of political news, and thus of citizens’ political knowledge—as well as, by extension, their competence as democratic citizens—is bleak (L. Bennett 2003; S. Bennett N.d.; Patterson 1994, 2000). But others (e.g., Popkin 1994; Schudson 1998; Zaller 2003) counter that a press that provides limited quantities of political information is not necessarily dysfunctional, arguing that such concerns underestimate citizens’ capacity to make reasoned voting decisions based on relatively small quantities of information. By employing information shortcuts, they argue, typical individuals may act as competent democratic citizens—at least with respect to voting—even if the political information they consume is imperfect and they consume it in small quantities (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1994).

¹Due to voters’ subjective weighting of different considerations, one’s *preferences* over values or public policies might diverge from her “objective” *self-interests*. For our purposes, a voter’s *inherently* subjective preferences are essentially equivalent to her *self-defined* and *subjectively determined* interests. Hence, a voter’s determination of her own self-interest, while arguably *conceptually* prior to, is *observationally* indistinguishable from, her preferences. We employ these terms interchangeably.

Advocates of the former perspective frequently cite the proliferation of soft news as evidence of the news media's failure to equip citizens with proper or sufficient information (L. Bennett 2003; Patterson 2000, 2003). Patterson (2000), for instance, implicitly argues that, *ceteris paribus*, hard news—defined as coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life—is of higher quality than soft news, which lacks a public policy component, featuring instead sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes, and dramatic subject matter. As Zaller states, “soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining” (2003, 129). In short, a prevalent scholarly critique of the contemporary news media is thus that they offer too little *hard* news and too much *soft* news, thereby making it difficult for citizens to obtain sufficient information to make informed vote choices.

Zaller reframes this debate, observing: “the question of news quality is whether news provides a *sufficiently* rich and engaging ration of political information to make democracy work” (2003, 111; emphasis added). We agree, and we suspect that, with the issue framed in this manner, the aforementioned soft news critics would agree as well, albeit continuing to question whether soft news provides *enough* political information “to make democracy work.” Yet, this begs the central questions motivating the present study: (1) How do we know how much information is *sufficient*? and (2) Can citizens extract *sufficient* information from *soft* news to make reasoned vote choices and thus to make democracy work?

As the preceding definition suggests, most prior research (e.g., L. Bennett 2003; Patterson 2000, 2003; Prior 2003) assesses the political utility of news—implicitly or explicitly equated with normative notions of news “quality”—primarily in terms of its content. That is, scholars have focused more on the *supply* of political information than on the nature of citizens' *demands*, or what it is that citizens *do* with the news they consume.

This emphasis, however, conflicts with predominant theories of political participation, which trace the decision to vote to utility maximization (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Given that rational individuals employ heuristic cues to compensate for incomplete information, citizens with different information needs will vary in what they require to fulfill their civic duties successfully. One of the most fundamental such duties is (arguably) voting for the candidate whose economic, social and/or public policy preferences most closely match a voter's own—self-

defined and subjectively determined—preferences (henceforth “voting consistently”).²

In deciding which candidate better matches their preferences, different voters prioritize different things. Some emphasize their economic wellbeing; others prioritize candidates' values or policy positions. Regardless, every voter must assess, in *some* manner, which candidate best matches her own preferences on whatever dimensions are most salient to her. *Voting consistently* merely requires voting for the candidate who really *does* best match one's self-defined preferences.

But how can we assess citizens' capacity to vote consistently while recognizing that rational individuals expose themselves to varying *kinds* and *levels* of political information? Rather than focusing exclusively on the *content* of political news, we investigate how, in making their vote choices, different kinds of *consumers* use different kinds of *news*.³ Some may need *The New York Times* to determine which candidate they “ought” to favor; others may do just as well with *Oprah*.

Soft News and Voting Behavior

Virtually all media outlets that present at least *some* information about public affairs offer a mix of “soft” and “hard” news content; most have offered ever more of the former. Yet some clearly offer more than others. Elsewhere, Baum (2002, 2003) refers to those media outlets that focus *primarily* on such material—including entertainment and tabloid news shows, network newsmagazines, and daytime and late night talk shows—as the *soft news media*. These outlets differ in many respects. Yet, in contrast to traditional, hard news outlets—such as *The New York Times* or network evening newscasts—they all focus *primarily* on soft news themes like crime, disaster, or scandal, and they all cover political issues similarly to one another (Baum 2003). Their audiences also tend to have comparatively little education or interest in politics (Baum 2003; Hamilton 2003).

²Assessment of self-interest may be an information shortcut for some voters, many of whom lack sufficient political knowledge to understand how policy proposals relate to societal effects (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Yet they *do* understand their own circumstances and values and so can extrapolate from these to the state of the nation.

³News serves purposes other than provision of political information, and facilitating consistent voting is only one of many potential measures of quality. Yet voting is a fundamental democratic civic duty, and, in our view, information provision is among the most important functions of news.

For a combination of instrumental and conceptual reasons, which we discuss below, we focus our empirical investigation on one prominent type of soft news outlet: daytime talk shows. While not “news” shows in the traditional sense, a vast majority of these programs’ content is explicitly intended to be “either personally useful or merely entertaining” (Zaller 2003, 129).

To be sure, some potential voters consume hard news out of an intrinsic interest in politics or public affairs. But do less politically engaged individuals, who do not seek out traditional hard news, manage to extract *quality* information from different media outlets, like daytime talk shows, that maximize their utility as consumers? We argue that, for these latter individuals, the answer is *yes*.

Different people place different values on political news. For individuals who neither understand nor care about politics, consuming political news can be costly—in terms of the effort required to comprehend the information, as well as the lost opportunities to spend one’s time on more appealing endeavors—while offering little expected benefit (e.g., entertainment). All else equal, such individuals are relatively unlikely to consume much hard news. If they *do* encounter any traditional news programs, they are unlikely to pay much attention to or understand the relatively more complex information such shows present (Baum 2002; Hamill and Lodge 1986; Hamilton 2003). Before relatively apolitical individuals will attend to political information, the expected benefit must outweigh the expected cost. This is only likely if such information is cheap to consume.

Why would an individual who is uninterested in and does not understand politics pay attention to political news? Baum (2002, 2003) argues soft news can, under some circumstances, render political information cost-effective for even apolitical individuals. His “incidental by-product” model shows that if substantive political information is presented in an entertaining context, it can be piggybacked (i.e., attached) to information intended primarily to entertain, and hence consumed incidentally, effectively at no extra cost. An apolitical individual may therefore be willing to consume even relatively low-benefit political information, as doing so becomes essentially costless. Since the soft news media make information accessible and entertaining, they are ideally suited for piggybacking. The net effect is that low-awareness individuals who typically ignore most political information are less likely to do so in a soft news context.

Voting consistently, in turn, is not of overwhelming importance to an individual who does not care

about politics. If such an individual votes, she would presumably prefer the candidate who best matches her personal preferences. Yet, by definition, doing so is *not* among her top priorities. Hence, she will be willing to accept a greater risk of error than an individual who cares deeply about her vote choice. For a politically inattentive individual, soft news is of “high quality”—by our definition—if it increases the probability of voting consistently to a degree acceptable to her, such that the expected benefit of the improvement outweighs the expected cost of gaining it. In the aggregate, we should thus observe a greater likelihood of consistent voting among politically unaware soft news consumers, relative to their counterparts who consume no soft news.

All else equal, hard news is better suited for enhancing the probability of voting consistently. After all, gathering more information should reduce the likelihood of inadvertently voting for the “wrong” candidate. Yet, for most political sophisticates, hard news media are both *intrinsically* appealing and, due to their relatively more information-intensive coverage of politics, more efficient information sources than soft news outlets. For such individuals, hard news may also be more entertaining, regardless of whether it enhances their probability of voting consistently. In fact, because highly aware individuals *already* possess substantial political knowledge (Zaller 1992), exposure to campaign coverage via either the soft or hard news media is likely to have a limited effect on their vote choices. However, to the extent doing so has any effect at all, it seems likely to raise their probability of voting consistently, at least somewhat. After all, they possess a sufficient knowledge base to comprehend hard news and integrate it into their overall candidate evaluations. Our first two hypotheses follow.

H1: Among highly politically aware individuals, consuming soft news will have little, if any, effect on the propensity to vote consistently.

H2: Among highly politically aware individuals, consuming hard news will increase the propensity to vote consistently.

In contrast, low-awareness individuals are less likely to be willing to expend significant time and energy to enhance their probability of voting consistently. Since these individuals do not find hard news intrinsically enjoyable, they will typically avoid it. Their real choice is frequently *not* whether to consume hard or soft news, but rather whether to consume soft news or *no* news. Consequently, we argue that low-awareness individuals are better off consuming soft

news than no news at all. After all, research (Baum 2003, 2005; Young 2006) has shown that soft news outlets—including daytime talk shows—do cover presidential politics. And they do so in ways that make such information interesting for their relatively apolitical audiences.

Many low-awareness voters, in turn, base their vote choices more on the candidates’ personal qualities—as an information shortcut—than their policy positions (Baum 2005). By assessing the candidates’ “likeability” (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991), voters can often figure out which candidate best represents their interests, even absent substantial knowledge of their policy positions. Consequently, entertainment-oriented talk show (henceforth “E-talk show”) candidate interviews can help viewers vote consistently even absent significant discussion of policy issues. Nevertheless, despite their “soft” approach to political interviews, E-talk show interviews do address public policy, albeit far less so than campaign coverage by traditional news outlets.

For instance, Baum (2005) content analyzes TV interviews with presidential candidates during the 2000 campaign. Four daytime E-talk shows (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Rosie O’Donnell Show*, *Live with Regis and Kelly*, and *The Queen Latifah Show*) interviewed the major party candidates. These interviews averaged about 27 minutes and included, on average, slightly more than one mention of a campaign-related policy issue per minute.⁴ The corresponding averages for candidate interviews on traditional network and cable news shows, and for a random sample of national news campaign reports not involving candidate interviews, were about 2.5 and 2.6 mentions per minute, respectively.

Given the aforementioned relatively greater complexity of information presented by hard news outlets (Hamilton 2003), we further argue that if the choice is between soft or hard news, low-awareness individuals may *still* be better off consuming soft news. Even if a low-awareness individual is exposed to hard news campaign coverage, she is less likely than her more politically aware counterparts to attend to or comprehend it. Consequently, consuming political information via soft news should enhance low-awareness individuals’ propensity to vote consistently more than consuming no news at all, or consuming hard news alone. This suggests four additional hypotheses.

H3: Politically unaware individuals who consume soft news will be more likely to vote consistently than their counterparts who do not consume soft news.

H4: The consistent-vote-enhancing effect on high-awareness individuals associated with consuming hard news will be smaller than that associated with consuming soft news among low-awareness individuals.

H5: Among politically unaware individuals, consuming hard news will have a weaker effect than consuming soft news on the propensity to vote consistently.

H6: Among politically unaware individuals, consuming hard news will have a relatively weak effect on the relationship between soft news consumption and voting consistently.

The 2 × 2 matrix below summarizes our theoretical predictions, from which we derive our hypotheses. It presents the predicted magnitude and direction of the effects of exposure to different types of news by different types of consumers on the likelihood of voting consistently.

News Characteristics	Consumer Characteristics	
	Low Political Awareness	High Political Awareness
Complex (Hard News)	Small Effect	Medium Increase
Simple/Accessible (Soft News)	Large Increase	Small Effect

Dependent Variable: Voting Consistently

To test our hypotheses, it is necessary to measure the consistency between a voter’s preferences and her vote. This, of course, presupposes the existence of some objective standard by which we can evaluate whether a voter *has*, in fact, voted consistently. After all, to at least some extent, a voter’s political preferences are subjective. Voters weigh issues differently; some prioritize candidates’ personal ethics or values, while others care more about their policy positions. Different voters care more or less about different policies. While we cannot calculate *perfectly* which candidate best matches a voter’s preferences, we believe a useful approximation is possible. For this purpose, following Lau and Redlawsk (1997), we rely on a semi-objective, experimentally derived measure of voting “correctly.” (We have replaced the term “correctly” with

⁴Late-night E-talk show (e.g., *Tonight Show*) candidate interviews (not addressed in the 2000 NES) averaged about 17 minutes and included about .56 issue mentions per minute, for a total of approximately 9.5 total mentions of campaign-related issues per interview.

“consistently,” which we believe carries fewer normative implications.) Lau and Redlawsk experimentally tested a measure of “correct” voting based on the congruence of each voter’s chosen candidate with her own stated issue preferences, weighted by the intensity of those preferences. They found that their measure *outperformed*—that is, the subjects were more likely to vote “correctly” than—those same voters in a mock election where they were constrained to select limited amounts of campaign information.

Lau and Redlawsk tested their “correct vote” concept against all NES surveys between 1972 and 1988. They developed an algorithm measuring respondents’ issue preferences and their self-reported “closeness” to a series of societal groups (e.g., “labor unions” or “business”), where respondents’ closeness to a given group was statistically significantly related to their probability of voting for one or the other candidate. Their algorithm also incorporated respondents’ perceptions concerning the major party candidates’ stances on the issues, as well as respondent and candidate ideologies and party identification. Finally, their algorithm employed the “directional” method (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989) in order to take into account the *intensity* (i.e., magnitude) and valence of the differences between the candidates’ “true” issue positions—as determined by the model—and the issue positions of the respondent. (For a detailed discussion of how the algorithm is calculated, see Lau and Redlawsk [1997, 596–97]. For a summary of factors included in the algorithm, see our online appendix located at <http://www.journalofpolitics.org>.)

The Lau and Redlawsk algorithm produces a summary statistic for each candidate, where a positive value indicates that voting for a given candidate is “correct” for a given respondent. The statistics for the two candidates are then combined into a single summary indicator, where a negative (positive) value represents a predicted “correct” vote for one (the other) candidate. We compared these predictions against respondents’ actual self-declared vote choice. Based on this comparison, we created a dichotomous dependent variable, called “Consistent Vote,” scored 1 whenever the predicted and actual vote cohered, and 0 otherwise.⁵

We apply Lau and Redlawsk’s model to the 2000 NES. We replicate their algorithm, with three excep-

tions. First, to estimate the candidates’ actual issue positions, Lau and Redlawsk rely on the opinions of NES respondents whose political knowledge—based on a battery of factual knowledge questions—exceed the overall mean in the survey. We employ alternative means of calculating the candidates’ actual policy positions. Our models interact media consumption with respondents’ political awareness. Hence, factual knowledge would be endogenous to Lau and Redlawsk’s estimate of candidates’ “true” issue positions, as highly aware individuals would, by definition, tend to vote more correctly according to the algorithm. After all, their opinions form much of the basis for determining what constitutes a correct vote. We also believe that defining as “experts” all respondents who exceed the overall survey mean is too lenient, particularly given that the mean respondent answered correctly only about one-third of the political knowledge questions.

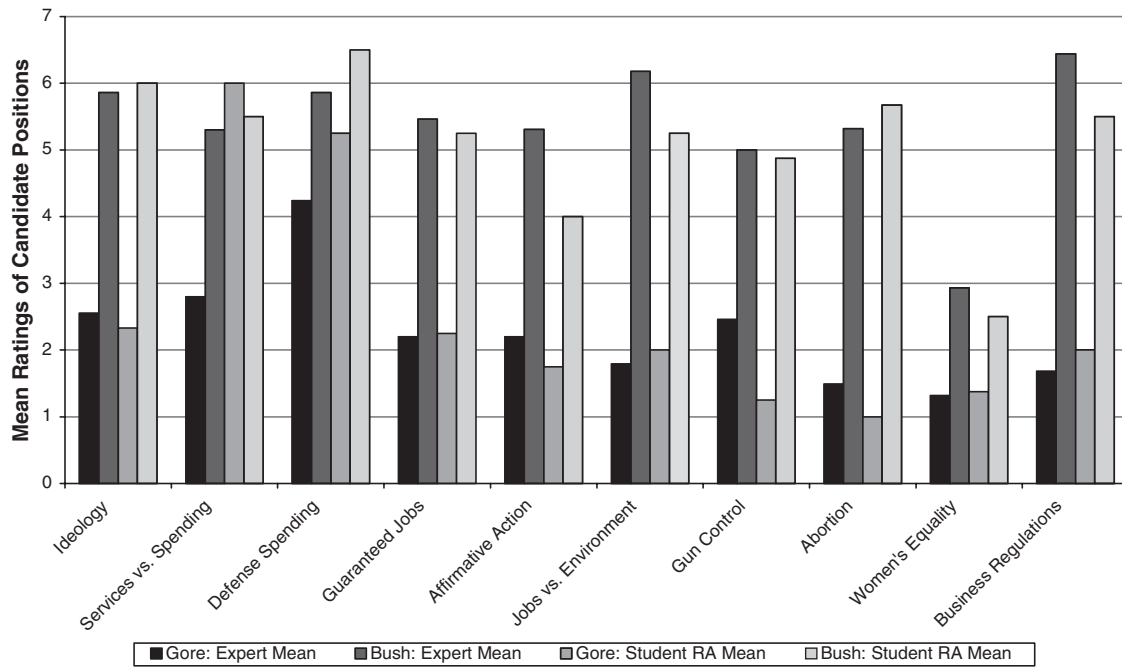
Consequently, we employ two alternative measures of the candidates’ “true” policy positions. First, we surveyed a group of actual experts. We asked about 80 political scientists with expertise in American politics to rate the candidates on the issue scales employed by the NES survey. We received 40 replies and employed the mean ratings of these 40 experts as our first estimate of the candidates’ “true” issue positions. Notably, the standard deviation on our experts’ assessments is far smaller than that for the estimates of Lau and Redlawsk’s NES “expert” respondents: .64 for our experts versus 1.02 for NES respondents whose factual political knowledge exceeded the survey mean. Our experts were thus in greater agreement on the candidates’ positions.⁶

For our second alternative assessment of the candidates’ true issue positions, we relied on the judgments of *fully informed* researchers. We asked five undergraduates and one graduate student to read literally everything the candidates said during the 2000 campaign. All candidate speeches, advertisements, press releases, and other statements are available on a

⁵We exclude nonvoters and those who reported voting for an independent or third-party candidate, as the algorithm makes no predictions in this regard. Theoretically, a respondent could receive a score of zero, in which case the algorithm would make no prediction. However, none did so.

⁶The mean ideological score for our 40 experts was 4.75 on a 1–7 scale, where 7 represented “extremely liberal” and 1 “extremely conservative.” The corresponding average among NES “expert” respondents was 3.55. Hence, our experts were more liberal than Lau and Redlawsk’s. Our liberal and conservative experts might disagree on the candidates’ issue positions, which might influence our estimates of the candidates’ “true” positions. In fact, among our experts, the average difference between liberals and conservatives was only about 7%, while the standard deviations are nearly identical. Among liberal NES “experts,” the standard deviation remains virtually unchanged, at 1.0. This suggests that even after controlling for ideological differences, our experts converged more than the NES “expert” respondents. Hence, our experts’ estimated issue positions are likely more reliable than those of the NES “expert” respondents, as defined by Lau and Redlawsk.

FIGURE 1 Mean Ratings of Candidates' "True" Positions by American Politics Experts and "Fully Informed" Student Research Assistants (RA's)



CD-ROM ("In their Own Words: Sourcebook for the 2000 Presidential Election"). After our researchers read all of its contents, we asked them to rate the candidates' positions on each pertinent issue area.

Figure 1 summarizes the estimates of our American politics experts and student researchers on each issue dimension included in the "correct vote" algorithm. Each question asked respondents to rate the candidates' issue positions on a 1–5 or 1–7 scale. For instance, the "Services vs. Spending" question asked respondents whether each candidate would like the government to provide fewer services in order to reduce spending, provide more services even if it meant an increase in spending, or keep spending at about the same level as in 2000. Respondents rated the candidates on a 1–5 scale, where 1 represented "reduce spending and services a great deal," and 5 represented "increase spending and services a great deal." We normalized all scales to a 1–7 interval. (The complete survey questionnaire is available in our online appendix.)

The evaluations of our "fully informed" researchers correlate at .87 with those of our "experts."⁷ For the students, the overall standard deviation across all issue dimensions was .65, again far smaller than that of the NES "expert" respondents, and nearly identical to the

political scientists.⁸ Despite significant differences between the ratings of the two groups on several issue dimensions, there were *no* instances where switching from one to the other indicator altered the algorithm's summary prediction for a respondent. Hence, we report only the results based on the estimates from our expert survey. (Results using the latter estimates are available from the authors.)

The second difference between Lau and Redlawsk's algorithm and ours concerns approval of the incumbent president. They add a small constant derived from the incumbent's approval rating among NES "experts" to the estimate of the "correctness" of voting for Gore, but not for Bush. In our view, approving of the incumbent in a situation where his vice president is on the ballot ought to influence equally the "objective" appropriateness of voting for either candidate. Hence, we include this factor in our estimation of the "consistency" of voting for Bush.⁹

Finally, Lau and Redlawsk derived their final summary estimates of each respondent's "correct"

⁷A t-test indicates that the differences between the two groups are statistically insignificant.

⁸The mean ideological score across our six research assistants was 4.83 on the identical 1–7 scale.

⁹Presidential approval is closely related to partisanship, which is a strong predictor of vote choice. Thus one could argue that this factor ought not to be included in an algorithm intended to test the exogenous influence of short-term information flows. However, excluding incumbent approval from the algorithm has no material effect on our reported results (see our online appendix).

vote in two different ways, calculating: (1) the overall mean value across the various factors included in the summary estimate, and (2) the total sum of all factors included in the summary estimate. These methods correlate at over .98. Lau and Redlawsk employ the first method. At the margins, we prefer and hence report results employing the second, as it preserves the full ranges of variation in the original variables. However, the two methods produce comparable results.

Independent Variables

The 2000 NES includes a series of questions concerning media consumption habits, one of which asks respondents how often they watch daytime talk shows. We investigate the implications of watching these programs, as well as traditional hard news shows (including national network news and newspapers), for respondents' voting behavior. Our key causal variable is based on the following question: "How many times in the last week have you watched daytime television talk shows such as 'Oprah Winfrey,' 'Rosie O'Donnell,' or 'Jerry Springer?'" Because only 9% of respondents reported watching more than three such shows, we collapse this indicator into four categories, coded: 0 = none, 1 = one time, 2 = two times, and 3 = three or more times. Overall, 28% of respondents indicated that they had watched at least one daytime talk show during the prior week. (For the recoded scale, $\mu = .61$ and $\sigma = 1.07$.)

While this indicator does not explicitly measure exposure to *presidential politics* on daytime talk shows, we believe that, in addition to being the best—to our knowledge, the *only*—available indicator for testing our hypotheses in close proximity to a presidential election, it is also reasonably valid. There are two reasons for this. First, Baum (2005) reports that the major party presidential candidates made six appearances on daytime talk shows during the 2000 campaign (plus four on late-night talk shows).¹⁰ The more an individual watched daytime talk shows during the fall of 2000, the more likely she was to have been watching when a candidate appeared. Second, the NES asks respondents about their talk show viewing *in the week prior to the interview*. All but one of the candi-

dates' daytime talk show appearances took place during the pre-election wave—beginning on September 5, 2000. Hence, the relationship between watching daytime talk shows and encountering candidate interviews while doing so was far higher during this period than at any other time.

Nevertheless, to compensate, at least in part, for the imprecision of our key causal variable, we replicate our results with a modified version of the talk show consumption indicator, weighted by the number of days, at the time of a given respondent's NES interview, since the last candidate appearance on an E-talk show:

$$\left(\frac{\# \text{ of } E\text{-talk shows watched in prior week}}{\text{days since last candidate } E\text{-talk show appearance}} \right)^{.11}$$

We base this weight factor on two assumptions: (1) as the proximity of a candidate E-talk show interview to a given NES interview increases, so too will the relationship between talk show viewing and the probability of encountering a candidate interview while viewing, and (2) the more recent a respondent's media consumption, the more accurate her recollections of that consumption. We further discuss and report the results from this robustness test below, in our investigation of possible selection effects.

The control variables fall into four categories and include many of the most widely employed variables in the study of American voting behavior (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 273–75) and in Baum's (2005) investigation of E-talk show effects on vote choice. These are: (1) demographics (age, education, gender, race, religiosity), (2) political attitudes (strength of partisanship, ideology, participation in the campaign, preference for divided government, intent to vote for opposition party candidate), (3) political disaffection (trust in government, external efficacy), and (4) media consumption (national network TV news, local TV news, newspapers, political talk radio, politics on the internet, cable access, TV campaign ads, morning TV news shows).¹²

¹¹For the weight, $\mu = 16.7$, while the median is six days. For NES interviews between September 5 and 11, the most recent prior E-talk show interview (a June Gore appearance on *Live with Regis and Kelly*) occurred between 88 and 94 days prior to the NES interview. This inflates the *mean* relative to the *median*.

¹²Price and Zaller (1993) find that survey respondents tend to overstate their media consumption when asked about their "typical" consumption of broad media categories. The questions employed herein ask respondents to recall their consumption of specific programs during the prior week, thereby, according to Price and Zaller, partially mitigating this problem. Moreover, *differences* in the probabilities of holding an attitude, as media exposure varies, should not be affected by systematic overreporting of the *level* of exposure. Along these lines, Price and Zaller point out

¹⁰This pattern continued unabated in 2004. For instance, John Kerry and George W. Bush appeared on *Live with Regis and Kelly* and *Dr. Phil* (as well as *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), while John McCain campaigned for Bush on *The View*.

Following Baum (2005), we also create an indicator of respondents' political awareness. Zaller defines political awareness as "the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered" (1992, 21). In order to capture both parts of Zaller's definition (attention and understanding), we create a scale derived from four elements: (1) interest in government and public affairs, (2) attention to the 2000 election, (3) level of political information, as estimated by the interviewer,¹³ and (4) factual political knowledge, derived from a series of ten questions. We collapsed each element to a 0–1 interval and then summed them to create our political awareness indicator. The resulting variable, which combines objective measures with respondents' self-assessments, runs from 0 to 4 ($\mu = 2.5$ and $\sigma = 1.0$).¹⁴ To determine whether consuming talk shows and hard news have differing effects on different types of respondents, we separately interact daytime talk show and traditional news consumption with political awareness.¹⁵ To estimate traditional news consumption we create a scale based upon respondents' self-declared frequency of watching national network TV newscasts and reading daily newspapers during the prior week.¹⁶ (See online appendix for question wording and coding.)

that self-reported media consumption questions are appropriate for studies (similar to ours) aimed at showing that exposure to different media have different attitudinal consequences.

¹³Zaller (1992, 338) reports that the interviewer's assessment performed as well as most scales constructed from 10 to 15 direct knowledge questions. He also (Zaller 1985) looked for, but failed to find, any evidence of a systematic bias in favor of higher-status individuals, such as white males.

¹⁴Self-reports of interest in politics or public affairs can be somewhat unreliable. Yet, the alpha reliability score for the four items included in the summary scale is .70, indicating that the scale is fairly reliable. A factor analysis indicates that the four items load strongly on a common underlying factor, with factor loadings ranging from .61 to .80. Moreover, the 4-item scale correlates more strongly with a variety of other factors related to political awareness—including "hard" news exposure, intent to vote (pre-election) or *having* voted (post-election), caring about the outcome of the presidential election, political trust, external political efficacy, strength of partisanship, campaign participation, and campaign attention via national TV news—than do any of the individual items, or any other combination of them. (See our online appendix for reliability and validity test results.)

¹⁵Among respondents who report consuming *no* daytime talk shows, 180 scored at least one standard deviation below the mean on our political awareness scale, while 229 scored at least one standard deviation above the mean. Among those who report consuming three or more daytime talk shows during the prior week, the corresponding numbers are 49 and 20 respondents below and above the mean level of political awareness, respectively.

¹⁶For the hard news consumption scale, which is normalized to a 0–7 interval, $\mu = 3.37$ and $\sigma = 2.24$. We tested our hard news index

Statistical Results

Table 1 presents the results from five logit analyses testing our six hypotheses. Model 1 excludes all but two controls—strength of candidate preferences and political participation—both of which are potentially critical factors influencing the probability of a consistent vote as well as of willingness to reevaluate one's vote choice based upon new information.¹⁷ We include this preliminary model to determine whether any of our results are artifacts of model specification. In fact, the key coefficients in the basic model, though not identical to the fully specified models, are nonetheless similar in magnitude and significance. Hence, we can proceed more confidently to the fully specified models.

In Model 2, we add all control variables, except Party ID, which is also included in the "correct vote" algorithm. Including it as a control effectively places it on both sides of the equation. Model 3 replicates Model 2, with Party ID as a separate control variable. Presumably because it *is* included in the algorithm, including or excluding party ID makes virtually no difference for the results. Hence, we focus our discussion on Model 2, excluding Party ID as a control variable.

Turning to our hypothesis tests, we begin with Hypothesis 3 (H3), which predicts that politically unaware soft news consumers will be more likely to vote consistently than their counterparts who do not consume soft news. For ease of interpretation, we employ a simulation technique (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000) to transform the key coefficients from Model 3 into probabilities, as well as to estimate the statistical significance of the predicted effects. The two top quadrants in Figure 2 illustrate the results, separately presenting the effects of talk show consumption among respondents who do and do not consume hard news (top-left graphic) and the effects of hard news consumption among respondents who do and do not consume soft news (top right graphic), as respondents' political awareness varies from one standard deviation below, to one standard deviation above, the mean.¹⁸

using a variety of media consumption indicators, including local and morning TV news. None performed as well as our specification.

¹⁷Excluding political participation modestly weakens the relationships. The only control variable that *significantly* affects the key relationships is strength of candidate preferences. This suggests that voters who feel strongly about a candidate have a relatively "strong" reason for doing so, and hence are unlikely to vote inconsistently, even if they are not particularly knowledgeable about politics.

¹⁸For *all* reported results, we vary political awareness in the identical manner.

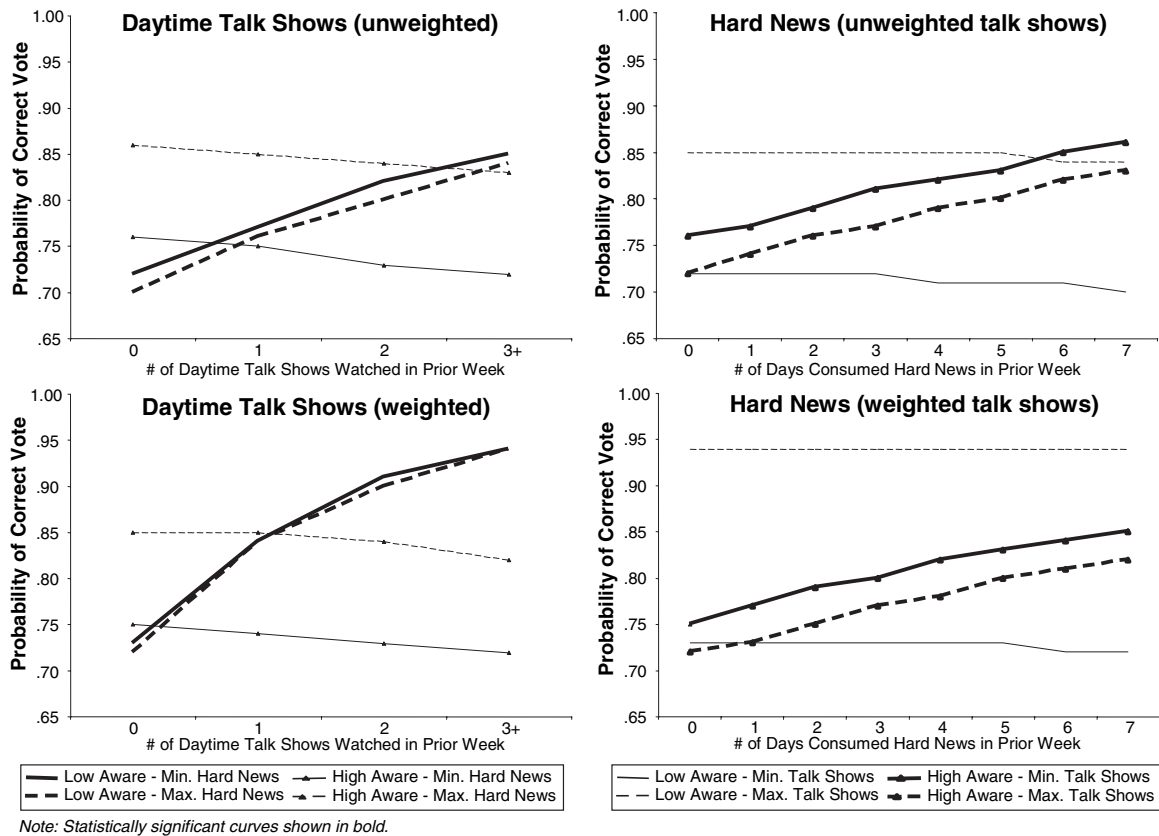
TABLE 1 Logit Analyses of Correlates of Consistent Voting

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Media Consumption					
Daytime TV Talk Shows	.364 (.202) [^]	.513 (.240)*	.494 (.240)*	.082 (.084)	1.226 (.578)*
Hard News ^a	-.124 (.107)	-.076 (.128)	-.066 (.130)	-.072 (.125)	-.066 (.127)
Local TV News	—	-.036 (.020) [^]	-.037 (.020) [^]	-.038 (.020) [^]	-.036 (.020) [^]
Morning News TV Shows	—	-.133 (.068)*	-.135 (.068)*	-.129 (.067) [^]	-.128 (.067) [^]
TV Campaign Ads	—	-.349 (.232)	-.365 (.234)	-.122 (.639)	-.358 (.230)
Talk Radio	—	.052 (.073)	.070 (.074)	.059 (.072)	.052 (.073)
Cable Access	—	-.358 (.215) [^]	-.370 (.214) [^]	-.363 (.215) [^]	-.367 (.214) [^]
Campaign News on Web	—	.191 (.190)	.188 (.191)	.181 (.190)	.188 (.191)
Demographics					
Education	—	.042 (.039)	.048 (.039)	.041 (.039)	.041 (.039)
Age	—	.006 (.006)	.004 (.006)	.005 (.006)	.005 (.006)
Male	—	-.129 (.180)	-.114 (.182)	-.138 (.180)	-.122 (.179)
White	—	-.447 (.348)	-.386 (.349)	-.453 (.347)	-.445 (.347)
Black	—	-.314 (.426)	-.445 (.434)	-.277 (.426)	-.270 (.427)
Guidance from Religion	—	-.018 (.074)	-.008 (.075)	-.025 (.074)	-.021 (.074)
Political Knowledge & Attitudes					
Political Awareness	-.238 (.152)	.095 (.179)	.098 (.180)	.096 (.245)	.065 (.178)
Cross-party Vote Intention	—	-.685 (.364) [^]	-.657 (.383) [^]	-.632 (.366) [^]	-.668 (.364) [^]
Strength of Candidate Preferences	.672 (.160)***	.458 (.192)*	.448 (.191)	.457 (.192)*	.469 (.192)*
Strength of Partisanship	—	.299 (.093)***	.280 (.093)**	.290 (.093)**	.293 (.093)**
Campaign Participation	.212 (.447)	.247 (.482)	.242 (.480)	.243 (.484)	.286 (.487)
Ideology	—	.005 (.003)*	.002 (.003)	.005 (.003)*	.005 (.003)*
Party Identification	—	—	-.106 (.053)*	—	—
Prefer Divided Government	—	-.384 (.203) [^]	-.398 (.204)*	-.386 (.203) [^]	-.386 (.203) [^]
External Political Efficacy	—	.208 (.223)	.229 (.222)	.198 (.222)	.201 (.222)
Trust in Government	—	-.271 (.100)**	-.289 (.100)**	-.267 (.100)**	-.251 (.100)**
Interaction Terms					
Pol. Awareness × Talk Shows	-.127 (.073) [^]	-.165 (.084)*	-.164 (.084)*	—	-.357 (.205) [^]
Pol. Awareness × Hard News	.039 (.038)	.049 (.044)	.048 (.044)	.049 (.043)	.046 (.044)
Pol. Awareness × Campaign Ads	—	—	—	-.086 (.232)	—
Constant	.083 (.403)	1.531 (.960)	1.856 (.971) [^]	1.621 (1.044)	1.580 (.952) [^]
χ^2	40.37***	77.66***	80.54***	74.03***	78.36***
Pseudo R ² (N)	.033 (1081)	.076 (988)	.081 (988)	.073 (988)	.076 (988)

[^] $p \leq .10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$; Heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors in parentheses.

^aNational Network News + Daily Newspapers.

FIGURE 2 Probability of Voting Consistently as Daytime Talk Show or Hard News Consumption and Political Awareness Vary



These relationships support H3. The thick lines in the figure denote statistically significant curves ($p < .05$ for the talk show graph and $p < .10$ for the hard news graph), while the thinner lines represent insignificant relationships. Among low-awareness respondents who report consuming *no* hard news, as talk show consumption increases from its minimum to maximum values, the probability of voting consistently increases by 13 percentage points, from .72 to .85 ($p < .05$). As predicted by H6, variations in hard news consumption have virtually no effect on this relationship. The corresponding increase among low-awareness respondents who consume the *maximum* quantity of hard news is 14 percentage points, from .70 to .84 ($p < .05$).

The top-right graphic in Figure 2 also supports H1, which predicts at most modest effects of consuming soft news among highly aware individuals. Among these latter respondents, a maximum increase in talk show consumption is associated with small and statistically insignificant effects on the propensity to vote consistently, regardless of hard news consumption.

We turn next to Hypotheses 2, 4, and 5. Model 3 in Table 1 also tests these hypotheses. The top-right

graphic in Figure 2 illustrates the results. Beginning with H5, among low-awareness respondents who do not consume talk shows, a maximum increase in hard news consumption is associated with a small and statistically insignificant decline of 2 percentage points (from .72 to .70) in the probability of voting consistently. The corresponding effect among low-awareness maximum talk show consumers is a statistically insignificant decline of one percentage point (from .85 to .84). Consistent with H5, these effects are far smaller than those associated with consuming soft news.

H2 and H4 predict that consuming hard news will increase the propensity of highly aware individuals to vote consistently, but less so than the corresponding effect of consuming soft news on low-awareness consumers. The two bolded curves shown in the bottom graphic of Figure 2 indicate that among highly aware respondents, a maximum increase in hard news consumption is associated with increases of 10 (from .76 to .86) or 11 (from .72 to .83) percentage points, respectively, among respondents who consume minimum or maximum quantities of daytime talk shows ($p < .10$).

Looking across the top two graphics in Figure 2, we see that, as also predicted by H4, consuming talk

shows has a modestly stronger effect among low-awareness respondents than the corresponding effects of consuming hard news among highly aware respondents. Taken together, these results are largely supportive of H2 and H4—though more strongly so in the former case.

Finally, Model 4 of Table 1 indirectly tests the incidental exposure model underlying our news quality framework. This table includes an interaction between exposure to campaign ads on TV and political awareness in place of the interaction between daytime talk shows and political awareness. If low-awareness respondents consume political information in the soft news media largely via piggybacking, then viewing campaign ads should not affect their probability of voting consistently. After all, campaign ads are unambiguously political—and recognizable as such—rather than being geared primarily toward entertainment. Hence, low-awareness individuals should tend to either avoid or ignore them. TV ads also seem unlikely to influence highly aware individuals, who typically will not view partisan political messages as credible unless the source is a fellow partisan (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Miller and Krosnick 2000). In fact, our results support the model. No meaningful interaction arises between consuming TV campaign ads and the probability of voting consistently, regardless of respondents' levels of political awareness.

Possible Selection Effects

Our talk show exposure indicator could be capturing some internal characteristic(s) of viewers having little to do with exposure to campaign information. For instance, compared to nonviewers, daytime talk show viewers tend to be less politically aware or engaged and to hold weaker candidate preferences (Baum 2005). Even though we control for these and other factors, it remains possible that a disproportionate number of individuals interested in the election but undecided about the candidates, who typically do not watch daytime talk shows, elected to tune in to help resolve their uncertainty. This would call into question the incidental by-product model underlying our hypotheses. To test this possibility, we employ the weighted variant of our talk show variable. If our results are driven by the differing internal characteristics of E-talk show viewers relative to nonviewers, we should not find a systematic relationship between the timing of E-talk show interviews relative to NES interviews and the probability of voting consistently. Instead,

weighting the talk show indicator ought to *weaken*, rather than *strengthen*, its utility as a proxy for any such internal characteristics.

If, however, our interview subjects *are* responding to the *content* of E-talk shows, then the shorter the time gap between candidate appearances on such shows and their NES interviews, the *stronger* ought to be the relationship between talk show consumption and the probability of voting consistently. After all, previous research (e.g., Druckman and Nelson 2003; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell 2002) has shown that, like the precision of people's memories, the effects of exposure to new information, including media effects, tend to erode over time.¹⁹ Consequently, all else equal, the closer the proximity of the hypothesized stimulus (i.e., the candidate E-talk show interview) to the response (i.e., the NES interview), the greater the extent to which variations in our talk show indicator will capture the likelihood of consuming E-talk show candidate interviews and the more accurate ought to be the respondents' recollections regarding their media consumption.

To test these possibilities, Model 5 in Table 1 replicates Model 2, employing the weighted talk show consumption indicator. The results, shown in the bottom half of Figure 2, indicate that the effects of consuming daytime talk shows, weighted by the proximity of the NES interview to the most recent candidate appearance on an E-talk show, are even *stronger* than the corresponding effects associated with the unweighted daytime talk show indicator. A maximum increase in daytime talk show consumption by a respondent interviewed on the day following a candidate appearance is associated with 21 and 22 percentage point increases in the probability of voting consistently, for respondents who consumed the minimum and maximum amounts of hard news, respectively (from .73 to .94 and from .72 to .94, respectively, $p < .05$). The effects of variations in hard news consumption are virtually unchanged from Model 2.²⁰

¹⁹Some research—the so-called “sleeper effect” literature (see Gillig and Greenwald 1974)—suggests that individuals forget their own assessments of source unreliability (i.e., discounting cues) more quickly than the actual content of media messages (or at least disassociate the former from the latter). If so, media effects would increase over time, net of the erosion of the discounting cue. Yet, psychologists have found these effects hold only when discounting cues are received *after* the message (Kumkale and Albarracín 2004), which is not the case in our study. (See online appendix for additional discussion of the sleeper effect argument.)

²⁰A similar weighting on the hard news indicator performed poorly, presumably because campaign coverage is virtually ubiquitous in the traditional news media.

In the latter model, the maximum probability of voting consistently for low-awareness frequent daytime talk show viewers is actually higher than for their highly aware counterparts who consumed the maximum quantity of hard news. Though counterintuitive, this is likely an artifact of the extreme range of the distribution represented by frequent daytime talk show consuming respondents interviewed *just* after a candidate appearance on an E-talk show.

If the internal characteristics of respondents were driving our results, we would also expect that during weeks in which the candidates appeared on daytime talk shows, the audiences for such shows would be at least somewhat different than in periods in which the candidates made no appearances. In particular, candidate-attracted audience members might be *more* politically aware and engaged—after all, they would have gone out of their way to find campaign information in a relatively improbable place—but *less* strongly committed to their party's candidate.

The maximum number of candidate appearances on daytime talk shows in any single week was two. Hence, respondents who reported watching *more* than two such shows during the prior week *could not* have done so exclusively to see candidates. To determine whether candidate-seeking, occasional viewers differed materially from regular talk show viewers, we divided talk show viewers into four subgroups, based upon whether: (1) they reported watching *one or two* versus *three or more* daytime talk shows in the prior week, and (2) their interviews took place within seven days of a candidate appearance on a daytime talk show. For each subgroup, we calculated averages for political awareness, strength of partisanship, campaign participation, probability of having “strong” candidate preferences, and probability of caring about the election outcome. The results (see online appendix) indicate that there are *no* statistically significant differences for any of these five factors regardless of frequency of talk show viewing or timing of the interview.

As a final test for selection effects (see online appendix), we replicated our models, substituting game shows (*Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy*) for talk show consumption. Like daytime talk shows, game shows are entertainment oriented. Yet they are virtually devoid of political content. Once again, if the *internal* characteristics of viewers who prefer entertainment-oriented media—net of the factors in our models—account for the reported patterns, then we might anticipate similar patterns associated with consuming game shows and talk shows. If, however,

the relationships are attributable to the *content* of daytime talk shows, then game show consumption should not influence the propensity to vote consistently. In fact, regardless of their political awareness, game show viewers were *not* more likely than non-viewers to vote consistently. This further suggests that self-selection into daytime talk show audiences is not driving these relationships.²¹

Conclusion

Citizens' ability to vote consistently depends on the information they consume, but not in the manner that many scholars have assumed. Our finding that some individuals derive civic-oriented “quality” from news consumed primarily for entertainment should give at least some pause to those who decry the proliferation of soft news in the media marketplace. The apparent quality of these citizens' vote choices, given their media consumption, also suggests significant resourcefulness among the less politically engaged segments of the public.

Looking to the interaction of political behavior and news consumption, we render an understanding of quality that extends to hard or soft news, and thereby focuses our analysis on the conditions under which quality results from the interaction of citizens' news consumption and their political decision making. As much as possible, this places the assessment of news quality in the hands of citizens we understand to be rational. Upon doing so, we discover that, at least with respect to voting, most citizens are able to act in their own interests, even if their predilection is for Oprah Winfrey instead of Jim Lehrer.

Patterson calls for a standard of news quality that “requires the non-elite press, and not just the elite press, to contribute to an informed public” (2003, 141). Our understanding of news quality serves this agenda. We found that for some voters, one of the *least* “elite” press outlets—daytime talk shows—does “do good” among the very voters who cause most worry for many democratic theorists: the politically unengaged.

Indeed, a democratic theory which takes seriously the proposition that individuals act to maximize their

²¹We have not accounted for all possible correlates of voting consistently or all factors potentially related to the decision to consume talk shows, some of which may correlate with consistent voting. We have, however, sought to account for the *most likely* correlates of talk show viewing and consistent voting. All have proven either insignificant or largely orthogonal to our predicted relationships.

utility, and which grants that citizens need not retain reams of information in their heads in order to be good citizens (Zaller 2003), does not need to rely on elite prescriptions for news consumption. Rather, low-awareness voters' ability to maximize their personal utility extends not only to their media-consumption choices but also, in the narrow case of soft news consumers, to their low-information vote choices.

We found that low-awareness talk show consumers enhanced their propensity to vote consistently to such an extent that they effectively caught up—in this admittedly narrow sense—to their highly aware counterparts (see Figure 2).²² While we by no means conclude from this that soft news can transform a low-awareness voter into a political sophisticate, voting consistently does not require that it do so. In U.S. presidential elections, the vote choice is typically dichotomous. Relative to some democratic electoral institutions that ask voters to decide between literally dozens of candidates, the American two-party, plurality-rule electoral system greatly simplifies the work of typical voters. Most of the time, and for the vast majority of Americans, “voting consistently” merely requires weighing two candidates to determine who is likely to best represent their interests.

Given, in turn, that low-awareness voters tend to be among the least strongly wedded to their political attitudes and preferences (Zaller 2004), they are most likely to be willing to alter their vote choice in response to new information, conditional on *receiving* it (Baum 2005; Zaller 1992). The soft news media are well suited—indeed, expressly intended—to capture the attention of these relatively apolitical voters (Baum 2003, 2005).

Consequently, for low-awareness individuals, even a relatively small increase in information may enhance the ability of low-awareness voters to figure out which of the two major-party candidates best represents their interests, thereby resulting in a switch from an inconsistent to a consistent vote. Indeed, our findings suggest that less politically aware citizens can act reasonably effectively in the voting booth without much hard news, presumably because alternative sources, such as daytime talk shows, provide them with sufficient political cues to vote in their own interests.

²²If we reformulate our political awareness scale to include only the two knowledge items (excluding interest and attention), while the overall pattern remains similar, low-awareness talk show consumers no longer fully “catch up” (see online data appendix). This may result from excluding the *motivation* element of our indicator, which presumably moderates the gap between “low” and “high” awareness.

Even though E-talk shows focus far more on candidates' personalities than their policy positions (Baum 2005), there is no reason to believe that the political information contained in these programs, however limited in scope or personality oriented, is fundamentally inaccurate. This suggests that, in the context of U.S. elections, a little information may indeed go a long way, particularly for the least politically aware voters. It further suggests that when low-awareness Americans tune in to Oprah, Regis, or Leno, democracy may well be strengthened, rather than weakened.

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