

**BUSTED BY THE AD POLICE:  
JOURNALISTS' COVERAGE  
OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGN ADS  
IN THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL  
CAMPAIGN**

by

**Michael A. Milburn**

and

**Justin Brown**

Research Paper R-15  
July 1995

The Joan Shorenstein Center

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**PRESS - POLITICS**



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**•PUBLIC POLICY•**

Harvard University  
John F. Kennedy School of Government

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Political campaign advertisements in the 1992 election were a very big business. ABC took in \$24 million from political advertisements, six times what they expected to make.<sup>1</sup> Perot was spending about \$1 million per day on ads between October 4th and election day, putting up a total of \$40 million on advertising.<sup>2</sup> For the last three days of the campaign, Perot bought \$4.2 million of advertising, Clinton spent \$2 million, and Bush \$1 million.<sup>3</sup>

Consistent with the considerable emphasis that candidates give to political advertising, ads continue to be for most Americans an important source of information about political candidates, particularly for their first impressions. A Times Mirror Center survey of 3500 Americans (July 8, 1992) found that 62 percent of the respondents reported that they first learn about political candidates from television ads (p. 2).

In addition, surveys show that a sizable proportion of the electorate reports being influenced by campaign advertisements. A survey conducted at the end of the campaign (Times Mirror, November 15, 1992) found that 38 percent of the respondents said that the candidates' commercials were either "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful" in making their voting decision (p. 23). A New York Times/CBS News poll in October found that close to half of respondents reported that their choice for President was influenced at least somewhat by political advertisements.<sup>4</sup>

The public's level of exposure to political ads during the campaign was fairly high. During the month of October, a series of Times Mirror surveys found that between 60 percent and 68 percent reported seeing Bush ads in the few days prior to the survey, and between 57-64 percent had seen Clinton ads. In a late October poll (Times Mirror, October 22, 1992), 62 percent said they had recently seen Perot ads.<sup>5</sup>

In their book *The Unseeing Eye*, Patterson and McClure (1976) argued that political ads in the 1972 election could be differentiated into two types, "image" ads designed to produce an emotional response, and "issue" ads to commu-

nicate information about candidate positions. In her review of political advertising in the 1980's, Kern (1989) observes that this earlier distinction between image and issue ads has become blurred, and that most recent ads, whether they are designed to deliver information or not, attempt to evoke emotional responses. Jamieson (1992) presents a detailed analysis of the use of emotionally evocative dramatic images in political advertisements in the 1988 Presidential campaign that she argues produced false inferences among viewers about the candidates' positions.

Partly in response to the highly emotional negative ad campaign against Michael Dukakis in 1988 masterminded by Roger Ailes, many television stations and newspapers developed "Adwatch" features designed to educate viewers/readers about political ads in the 1992 election campaign and hopefully to limit the efforts of the campaigns to manipulate voters with inaccurate and misleading information. Brooks Jackson of Cable Network News dubbed his effort in this regard the "Ad Police." How do Adwatch analyses of political ads affect the way in which viewers respond to the political advertisements, and how does Adwatch affect the persuasiveness of the ads? Additionally, how do Adwatch columns affect viewers' political efficacy and involvement in the electoral process?

The intended effect of Adwatch on the electorate can be understood as consistent with McGuire's (1962) inoculation message theory. Inoculation is an attempt to increase resistance to persuasive messages and attitude change. Successful inoculation is believed to require two components: threat and refutation (Papageorgis & McGuire, 1961; Miller & Burgoon, 1973; Pfau & Burgoon, 1988; Pfau, Kenski, Nitz, & Sorenson, 1990; Pfau, 1992). Adwatch presents the candidate's message and then critiques it. In this respect, Adwatch is similar to the two-sided messages with which Lumsdaine and Janis (1953) first discovered the inoculation effect.

In an ideal representative democracy, candidates offer leadership by presenting cogent arguments on issues relevant to governance. These arguments in turn should help voters elaborate their own political thinking and their

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expectations of political leaders. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a) may help explain why elaboration of political thought is often difficult to realize.

Elaboration of thought requires cognitive resources that often are needed for other activities such as managing the daily contingencies of life. Petty and Cacioppo (1986b) explain:

*By elaboration in a persuasion context, we mean the extent to which a person thinks about the issue-relevant arguments contained in a message. When conditions foster people's motivation and ability to engage in issue-relevant thinking, the "elaboration likelihood" is said to be high. This means that people are likely to attend to the appeal; attempt to access relevant associations, images, and experiences from memory; scrutinize and elaborate upon the externally provided message arguments in light of the associations available from memory; draw inferences about the merits of the arguments for a recommendation based upon their analyses; and consequently derive an overall evaluation of, or attitude toward, the recommendation.*

Because elaborating political thought requires cognitive resources, voters may prefer to devote their cognitive energies elsewhere. As a result, candidates may find that they are most persuasive when relying on peripheral cues that demand few cognitive resources.

Televised campaign advertisements usually contain peripheral cues such as music and visual images. Viewers are likely to be influenced by peripheral cues such as the expertise or attractiveness of the message source (Chaiken, 1980; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kelman & Eagly, 1965; Kelman & Hovland, 1953; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983), the number rather than the quality of reasons supporting an argument (Eagly & Warren, 1976; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), a "placebic" reason (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978), pleasant music (Gorn, 1982), the visual prominence of a speaker (Borgida & Howard-Pitney, 1983), or even food (Janis, Kaye, & Kirschner, 1965). Peripheral cues are processed more rapidly and with less effort than the substance of a persuasive argument (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a). As a result, voters whose intentions are shaped by peripheral cues would be expected to be more susceptible to attitude change and have less stable political preferences than voters who more carefully scrutinize political messages.

Adwatch attempts both to refute any false claims made by a candidate and to deconstruct

an advertisement's peripheral cues. This is an attempt to encourage voters to evaluate the substance of a persuasive message and reduce the influence of peripheral cues. By evaluating the veracity of a candidate's message, Adwatch focuses on the quality of the candidate's argument. By deconstructing the dramatic and visual content of a message, Adwatch encourages voters to think about peripheral cues rather than allowing these cues to influence them unaware.

We wanted to know whether Adwatch had the intended effect on voters. If successful, Adwatch should increase the elaboration of political thought. This increased elaboration should in turn increase the stability of voters' political preferences and reduce their vulnerability to attitude change. In order to assess the effects of Adwatch, we employed a dual strategy, interviewing a number of political reporters who covered political advertisements during the 1992 campaign, and conducting an experimental test of the effects of Adwatch.

### **Journalists' Reaction to Political Advertising and Adwatch**

The Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press conducted a series of surveys during the 1992 election campaign that focused on journalists' assessment of the political ad campaign, and on the public's utilization of information from political advertisements.

In June of 1992, a survey of more than 400 local and national journalists revealed some skepticism about the effectiveness of the Adwatch approach, with nearly 40 percent of the respondents saying that "press coverage of the campaign commercials has not made them (the commercials) more honest," (Times Mirror, June 4, 1992, p. 37). At the same time, however, 85 percent of the journalists interviewed saw the press coverage of commercials as having a positive effect (p. 47). In a survey conducted in the final weeks of the campaign (Times Mirror, December 20, 1992), a high proportion (77 percent) of a different sample of journalists (n=250) also felt the press coverage of campaign ads had had a positive effect.

We conducted interviews with television and newspaper journalists involved in Adwatch efforts during the 1992 campaign. Included in our sample were reporters from CNN, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times*. We asked three primary questions: (1) What were your specific goals when you produced the Adwatch informa-

tion? (2) How well do you feel you accomplished those goals?, and (3) What would you do differently in the future?

The goals of the various journalists were pretty much the same. First and foremost, they wanted to check the facts in the ad to make sure they were correct, to “identify lies as lies.” In addition, they wanted to assess whether the overall impression communicated by each ad was misleading, even if the facts were technically correct. Some important facts might be left out; “That’s not the whole story,” Brooks Jackson (CNN) would often say. Several reporters pointed out that the campaigns would try to “twist facts” to suit their arguments, not always in a dishonest way, but the facts nevertheless could be twisted and distorted.

Going beyond simply fact checking, Leslie Phillips (*USA Today*) wanted to “deconstruct” the ads, to analyze the use of drama and visuals and the role they played in the overall process of manipulation. This is, however, a difficult task, particularly under the time pressure that all the reporters felt to do the Adwatch as quickly as possible following broadcast of the specific ad. Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s (1992) careful analysis of the Willie Horton ad and the way the juxtaposition of visuals, words on the screen, and voice-over were designed to lead to several misleading and erroneous conclusions was not done under the pressure of a news deadline. Nevertheless, all the reporters agreed that this was an important area of concern for Adwatch.

All the journalists were satisfied that they were able to accomplish their primary goals and that those who were exposed to the Adwatch coverage received important information. Additionally, Renee Loth (*Boston Globe*) noted that Adwatch became part of the campaign discourse, with Adwatch columns from the *Washington Post* cited in the Clinton response ad (48 hours after the Bush ad). Campaigns were much more careful this election to limit the overtly dishonest content in ads because of the Adwatch (Greer said they tried to include in the ads source references to claims made in the ads). Independent expenditure groups such as the one that produced the Willie Horton ad were virtually non-existent in the 1992 campaign. This development lends support to the civil libertarian argument that the best way to confront an unwanted type of speech is to develop ways to encourage opposing types of speech, rather than outlawing the unwanted speech (Baker, 1989).

The primary difficulty with the Adwatch effort was one of obtaining copies of each ad in

time to analyze it. Richard Berke (*New York Times*) noted that this was a way the campaigns could manipulate coverage of their ads, to leave limited time for journalists to cover their ads, although in part this may have been due to the disorganization of the campaigns. Some reporters had the additional problem of fighting with their editors for the space to include their Adwatch analyses, although most had their editors’ full support.

The journalists had several recommendations for future Adwatch efforts.

(1) *Be more systematic.* Brooks Jackson (CNN) felt that the press needs to develop an intelligence network in order to see all the ads. As it was, journalists were completely dependent on the campaigns for the ads, and many ads, particularly those shown only in specific regions, were not given to the press. Some sort of pooled coverage, comparable to the pooled exit poll results as was the case on election night in the New Hampshire primary, might be effective.

(2) *Broaden the ad coverage.* Coverage of ads from House and Senate races was very limited. Examples of ads from these races, even if not from a person’s own state, can educate voters about forms of manipulation.

(3) *Expand truth squad efforts.* Ads are not the only venue in which influence attempts are made and misleading facts are presented. Thomas Rosensteil (formerly, *Los Angeles Times*) suggested that the Adwatch approach should be extended to all forms of political speech; for example, candidates’ sparring with each other, candidates’ stump speeches, and 30-minute infomercials. Leslie Phillips (*USA Today*) noted that politicians are often ahead of journalists. Clinton, she observes, has figured out ways to go around the traditional press with electronic mail and cable channels, and the press needs to be responsive to new developments in candidates’ communication.

A corroborating perspective on Adwatch is provided by the media consultants who produce the advertisements. Ken Swope, who produced ads in 1992 for Tom Harkin in the Democratic presidential primaries and for Leo McCarthy in California who ran for the Democratic nomina-

tion for the U.S. Senate against Barbara Boxer, feels that Adwatch had a “chilling effect” on the content of ads produced, but a positive chilling effect. Ad professionals knew they had to avoid making any wild and unsubstantiated charges, and they also had to avoid innuendo for which they could be called on the carpet.

### **An Experimental Test of the Effects of Adwatch**

In addition to assessing journalists’ reactions to Adwatch, we conducted an experimental test of the effects of watching political ads following exposure to Adwatch information.

#### *Method*

Fifty-seven subjects were recruited from introductory classes in psychology and sociology at the University of Massachusetts/Boston. All subjects received a chance to win \$500.<sup>6</sup>

We established two conditions, the Adwatch condition and a comparison condition. In both conditions, subjects watched two political ads from the Bush campaign, then two ads from the Perot campaign, then two ads from the Clinton campaign. Before seeing the ads for each specific candidate, the subjects read newspaper articles about the ads they were about to see. The two conditions were distinguished only by having two different forms of the questionnaire; each questionnaire contained one of the two different sets of newspaper columns, described in more detail below.

We conducted the experiment in the week immediately prior to election week in November. Subjects signed up for one of seven different experimental sessions. For each session the questionnaires for the two different conditions were alternated when passed out, thus randomly assigning subjects to one of the two experimental treatments.

We informed subjects that they would be watching several political advertisements, and that prior to watching each ad they would be reading a newspaper column about the advertisement. We also told subjects that they would be asked to write down all the thoughts that occurred to them while they watched the ads. We knew that after the first ad, subjects would anticipate this question being asked of them for ads two through five, so we wanted our measurements for ad one to be the same.

We exposed subjects in groups to the political commercials rather than individually because of our need to balance two constraints. First, we

needed to wait a sufficient amount of time into the campaign to acquire ads from the three principal candidates and to obtain Adwatch columns about these specific ads. Secondly, we felt it was important to conduct the experiment *prior* to the election because we felt the frame of mind of subjects viewing the political advertisements would be considerably different following the election. We were unable to distinguish any significant differences across the different group treatment times.

#### *Political Advertisements*

All the subjects watched six political advertisements, two ads from the Bush campaign, two Perot ads, and then two Clinton ads. Detailed information on the ads is presented in Appendix 1.

#### *Adwatch Content*

In the Adwatch condition, subjects read newspaper columns from the *Boston Globe* written by Renee Loth, the political reporter assigned to cover political advertising in the 1992 presidential campaign. These columns contained the scripts of the ads themselves, an analysis of the accuracy of the information in the ads, and an assessment of the likely effectiveness of the ads.

In the control condition, prior to viewing the ads the subjects read a column from *USA Today* that mentioned the ads they were to see, but which contained no information about the arguments or content of the ads.

How similar was the content of the *Boston Globe* Adwatch columns compared to treatment of the same ads in other newspapers? We compared *Boston Globe* columns to Adwatch columns for the same ads from other newspapers including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*. The *Boston Globe* columns were comparable to newspaper coverage of the same ads in the number of arguments used and the points made, sometimes including more arguments than columns in other papers, sometimes less.

For example, for the Clinton ad titled, “Curtains,” the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* all pointed out that the announcements about the unemployment rate and the economy were juxtaposed with comparable Bush statements that were taken out of order and hence misleading. The *Globe* column included additional points, observing that while Bush vetoed unemployment compen-

sation bills, he then supported two extensions and didn't veto any after March 1992 as the ad implies.

In a Bush ad, "Guess," the *Globe*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times* all included three arguments/statements about the ad, while the *Los Angeles Times* included seven. The *Boston Globe* Adwatch appears to be generally representative of national newspaper Adwatch coverage, at times somewhat more extensive in its analysis, at times a little less.

### Questionnaire

Before watching any advertisements, and then again after watching all the ads, subjects completed "thermometer scale" ratings on the candidates. On these scales, we asked subjects to rate on a drawing of a thermometer how warm or cold they felt toward each candidate from 0 to 100, with 50 being neither warm nor cold.

After viewing the two ads for Bush, again after viewing the two Perot ads, and also after viewing Clinton's ads, subjects responded to the instruction: "List all the thoughts that came to your mind as you watched the advertisements for \_\_\_\_\_."

A coder blind to the experimental hypotheses and conditions coded each protocol for issue-focused thoughts, strategy-focused thoughts, positive thoughts, and negative thoughts. Thoughts for each candidate were coded in terms of their reaction to that candidate's message. For instance, in the protocol asking for thoughts about candidate Clinton, negative thoughts toward candidate Bush would be coded as positive and positive thoughts toward candidate Bush would be coded as negative. For each thought-listing protocol, three measures were computed: proportion of issue-focused thoughts, proportion of positive thoughts, number of evaluative thoughts both positive and negative.

Finally, after the ads, subjects completed a series of political attitude questions, including measures of political efficacy, political interest, media exposure, and basic demographics.

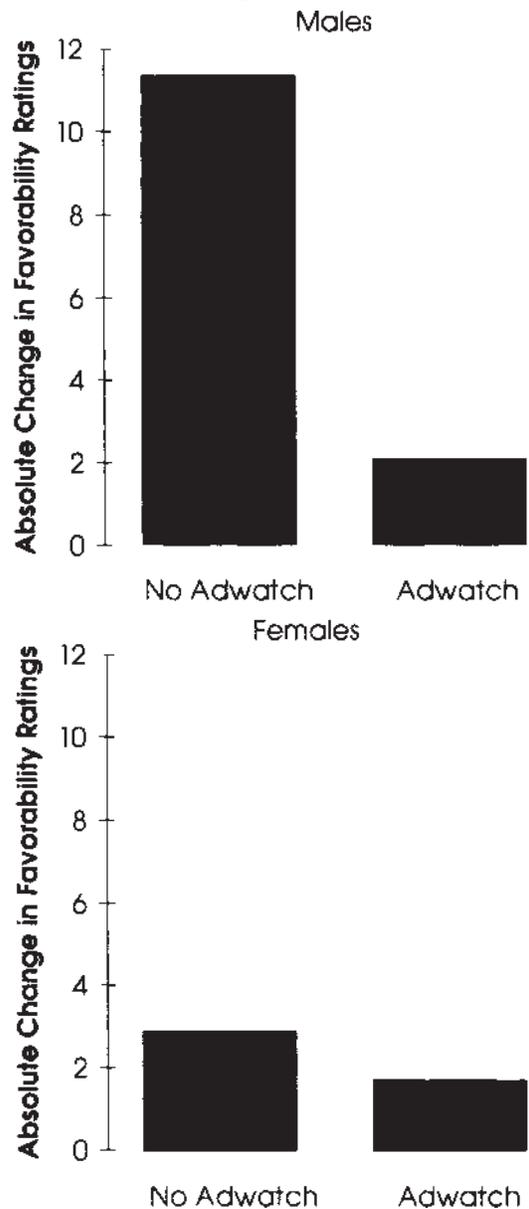
### Results

*Attitude Change.* To assess whether Adwatch inoculated subjects against attitude change, we computed the absolute value of the change in favorability for each candidate and then averaged across candidates for each subject. This average attitude change value provided a measure of subjects' vulnerability to persuasion. A marginally significant effect for subjects' sex was obtained in which males' attitudes (amount of

change=7.0) changed more than females' (amount of change=2.33) ( $F_{(1,53)}=3.71, p<.06$ ).

*Inoculation.* We hypothesized that Adwatch would inoculate subjects against attitude change. As predicted, subjects' attitudes toward the candidates changed less in the Adwatch condition (amount of change=1.9) than in the control condition (amount of change=6.0) ( $F_{(1,53)}=5.02, p<.05$ ). One would expect that the benefit of the Adwatch inoculation would be greater for those with greater vulnerability to attitude change. In this case, males would be expected to benefit more from Adwatch than females. The interaction between Adwatch and subjects' sex

**Figure 1**  
Effect of Adwatch on Attitude Change After Viewing Political Ads



approached significance ( $F_{(1,53)}=3.06, p<.09$ ). As seen in Figure 1, males in the control condition changed the most. Both the main effect for males and the interaction can be attributed to the substantial attitude change for males in the control condition.

*Listed Thoughts.* Inoculation theory proposes that the threat to attitude change contained in the inoculating message motivates an audience to generate counterarguments. In this study, counterarguments would be measured as negative thoughts about the candidates' advertisements. Controlling for subjects' initial level of negative thinking, we found no evidence in the

thought-listing procedure that Adwatch increased negative thoughts in the post-advertisement measure ( $F_{(1,52)}=0.58, p=.45$ ). However, the pre-measure indicated that subjects' thinking about the election already was predominated by 77 percent negative thoughts.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model proposes that the elaboration of thinking (i.e., an increase in both positive and negative thoughts) indicates allocation of cognitive resources to the quality of a message. As a result of this elaboration, viewers should be less vulnerable to persuasion through peripheral cues and more attentive to the substance of a candidate's message. Controlling for subjects' initial level of evaluative thinking (both positive and negative thoughts), we found that Adwatch elicited significantly more evaluative thoughts (average=5.5) than the control condition (average=4.7) ( $F_{(1,52)}=4.21, p<.05$ ).

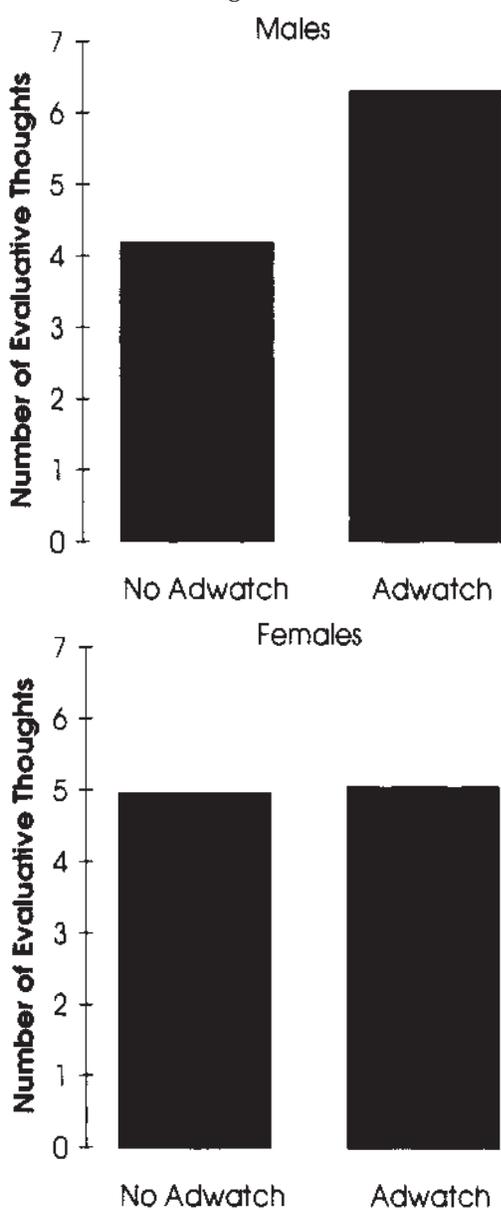
We also obtained a significant interaction between subjects' sex and the Adwatch effect for evaluative thinking ( $F_{(1,52)}=5.07, p<.05$ ). As seen in Figure 2, Adwatch increased evaluative thoughts substantially more for males than for females. In fact, the main effect for Adwatch can be attributed almost entirely to male subjects.

The attitude change data examined earlier suggested that males were most vulnerable to change in response to the candidates' messages (see Figure 1). This vulnerability was substantially reduced by Adwatch. The number of evaluative thoughts corresponds closely to the attitude change data. This suggests that the stability of preferences produced by Adwatch occurred primarily because subjects elaborated their thinking about the candidates' messages.

Many of the positive and negative thoughts in reaction to the ads that subjects reported related specifically to the arguments in the ads. For example, as a positive statement following the Bush ad, one subject wrote, "Bush has many future plans. The job improvement, export, education (build schools) makes me feel he can do the job as president." Another wrote, "The second one (ad) is probably so true it is pathetic. I think Bill Clinton will increase every tax he can think of and a few if he thinks hard enough he wants to increase." This was coded as a positive thought since it supported the position taken in the Bush ad.

The negative thoughts most often did not follow directly from the arguments in the Adwatch columns. For example, coded as a negative thought in reaction to the Bush ad, one person wrote, "What a jerk," and another wrote,

**Figure 2**  
Effect of Adwatch on Evaluative Thoughts After Viewing Political Ads



“Lies, lies, lies, lies, lies. George Bush is for the rich in this country and not the poor or the working class.” It appears that rather than simply providing a set of arguments that the subjects mimic back while watching the ads, the columns have primed for many people an oppositional frame of mind that allowed subjects to generate or retrieve reactions to the ads that were not included in the Adwatch columns.

Adwatch had no effect on subjects’ issue-orientation ( $F_{(1,53)} < 1$ , not significant). Thus, Adwatch did not increase the extent to which individuals thought about issues when asked to list their thoughts following viewing the ads. This suggests a potential limitation of Adwatch that will be discussed more fully below.

*Perceived Political Efficacy and Voting Intention.* We asked two questions about political efficacy each on a 0 to 6 scale. The first question asked subjects how much effect they felt they had on government decisions. The second asked subjects whether they felt elections increased or reduced government indifference. We found that the two questions were not strongly correlated,  $r = -.08$ , and so we analyzed the responses to these two questions separately. We labeled the first question perceived personal efficacy and the second question perceived government indifference.

There was a significant main effect for gender, with women (average=5.3) reporting substantially greater personal efficacy than men (average=3.8) ( $F_{(1,53)} = 6.19, p < .02$ ). Although personal efficacy was greater in the Adwatch condition (average=5.1) than the control condition (average=4.5), the difference was not significant ( $F_{(1,53)} = 2.70, p = .11$ ). A significant interaction on personal efficacy was obtained between subjects’ sex and the Adwatch manipulation ( $F_{(1,53)} = 4.76, p < .04$ ). As seen in Figure 3, Adwatch increased personal efficacy in males but had no positive effect on females. By increasing personal efficacy in males, Adwatch effectively eliminated the gender difference found in the control condition.

As with perceived efficacy, there was a significant interaction between subjects’ sex and Adwatch for perceived government indifference ( $F_{(1,53)} = 6.96, p = .01$ ). As seen in Figure 4, Adwatch increased perceived government indifference for females and decreased it for males. Neither the Adwatch manipulation nor subjects’ sex had a significant effect on perceived government indifference ( $F_{(1,53)} = 0.96, p = .33; F_{(1,53)} = 1.98, p < .20$ , respectively). In fact, the means were in the opposite direction from the personal efficacy question with women and subjects in the

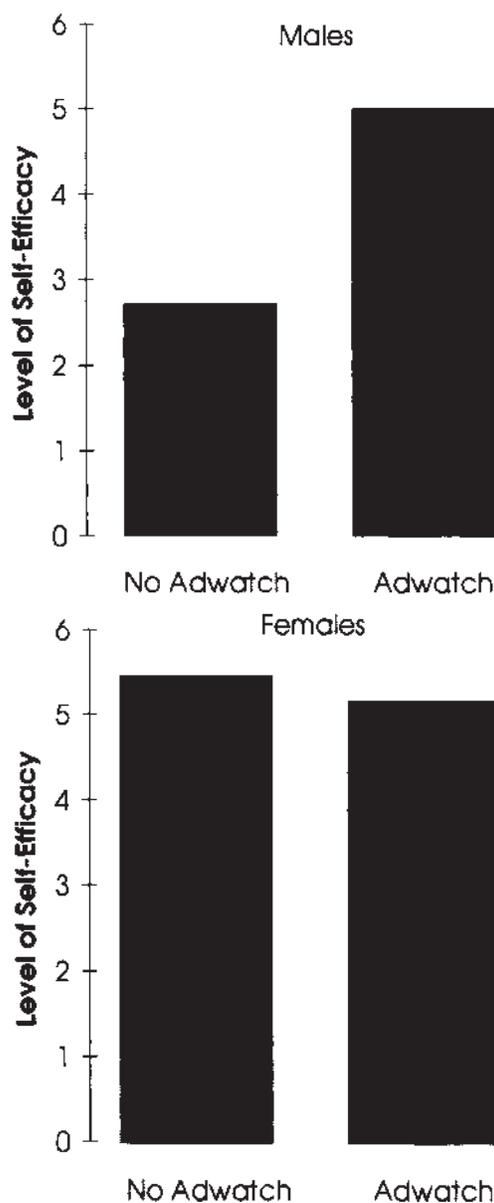
Adwatch condition reporting a greater perception of government indifference.

Although voting intention was somewhat stronger in the Adwatch condition (average=7.6) than in the control condition (average=6.8), the difference was not significant ( $F_{(1,53)} = 1.39, p < .25$ ).

### Discussion

The results of our experiment indicate that Adwatch columns have the potential to be effective in reducing the impact not only of illegitimate attempts at persuasion, but also of political campaign advertising in general. Prior exposure to Adwatch helped protect subjects

**Figure 3**  
Effect of Adwatch on Perceived Political Self-Efficacy



against attitude change. Adwatch did not increase negative thoughts toward candidates' messages, nor did it increase subjects' issue orientation. Instead, Adwatch elicited an increase in evaluative thinking. This suggests that peripheral cues and not the quality of the candidates' arguments elicited attitude change in the control condition. When subjects in the Adwatch condition allocated more cognitive resources to the advertisements, they were less likely to be influenced by the candidates' messages.

In this study, men were more vulnerable than women to the persuasive effects of political advertisements. We can only speculate about why this occurred. The greater stability of

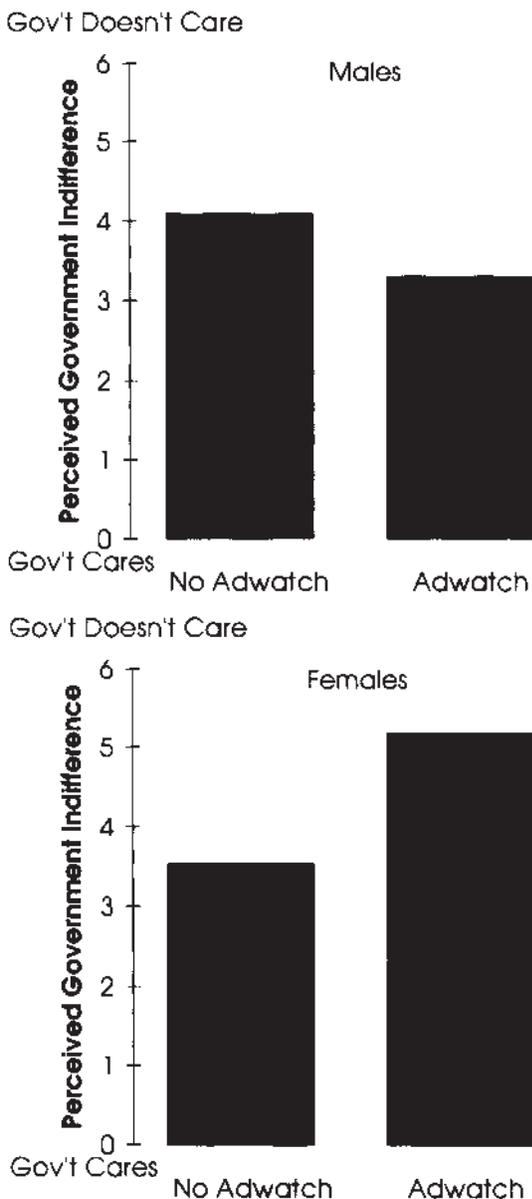
women's preferences may be a consequence of the "gender gap," the strong tendency of women to vote for Democratic candidates. In the final weeks before the general election, more women than men may already have decided on how to cast their votes. As a result, they would be less vulnerable to attitude change.

Whatever the source of male vulnerability to attitude change in the general election, it appears to be the cause of several interactions between subjects' sex and the Adwatch manipulation. Men benefited from Adwatch more than females in terms of reduced attitude change, perceived government indifference, increased critical thinking, and perceived personal efficacy. Since women showed less susceptibility to persuasion than men, there was less potential for Adwatch to reduce susceptibility among women.

The experimental situation we used, however, was an optimal situation for obtaining effects of Adwatch: viewers reading the Adwatch columns immediately afterward seeing the ads and then being asked to formulate their thinking about the ads and the candidates. What was the actual effect during the 1992 campaign, when there was almost always a time lapse between exposure to Adwatch information (if there was exposure to Adwatch) and viewing the campaign advertisements? Surveys conducted in Los Angeles by the Just, Crigler et al. Democracy '92 Project indicated that Adwatch information from the *Los Angeles Times* was a frequently recalled piece of campaign information. In a survey of 601 Los Angeles citizens between October 26th and October 31st, they found that 28 percent of the respondents said they had seen newspaper coverage of political ads in the previous week (Alger, Kern, & West, 1993).

A possible alternative explanation for our experimental results is that subjects were less influenced by the campaign ads in the Adwatch condition because the revelations about the ads influence attempts alienated them from the electoral process. We do not believe this to have been the case, particularly given the results presented in Figure 4 concerning changes in political efficacy. Males increased significantly in their feelings of political efficacy in the Adwatch condition compared to the control condition, while females increased slightly, although not significantly. If our attitude change results represented merely increased alienation, we should not have found these increases in feelings of self-efficacy. Nevertheless, the increased feelings of governmental indifference among females suggests that while Adwatch

**Figure 4**  
**Effect of Adwatch on Perceived Government Indifference**



may have stimulated viewers to think more about the ads, engaging in cognitive counter-arguing while watching the ads, the information in Adwatch may also have stimulated feelings that there is so much misuse of facts that all politicians care about is getting elected.

## Conclusion

Our experimental test of the effects of Adwatch columns on individuals' reactions to political campaign ads indicates that Adwatch reduces the influence of the ads. The Adwatch columns increased the amount of thinking about the ads, allowing subjects to access information and feelings about the candidates and the ads that did not come to mind when simply watching the ads. Adwatch also increased subjects' feelings of political efficacy, particularly for males.

Adwatch appears to be one of the most important journalistic developments in covering political campaigns in recent years. It has considerable potential for the future of campaign coverage, but journalists and news departments must continue to expand their efforts as candidates find new ways (e.g., 30-minute infomercials, talk show appearances) to communicate potentially misleading information to voters. This will necessarily involve news organizations committing greater resources to coverage of campaign ads and campaign information, but the benefit to the campaign process appears well worth it.

Despite the apparent benefits of Adwatch, however, our study indicates several potentially negative consequences of Adwatch. Adwatch did not, as anticipated, increase viewers' amount of issue thinking when viewing the ads. In addition, Adwatch increased women's perception of government indifference.

In an ideal democracy, the press has a responsibility to hold political leaders accountable while at the same time not undermining their capacity to lead. While the press may be doing more to hold political leaders accountable, little is gained if the press at the same time increases feelings of governmental indifference.

Some modification of Adwatch may be required to focus voter attention on issues relevant to governance. In an analysis of the 1952 presidential election, Dahl (1956) offered this foresightful warning:

[I]t must be remembered that a great many voters do not really perceive a choice between candidate A and candidate B; for many people the only perceived alternatives are to vote for one of the candidates or not to vote at all. (p. 127)

Since 1960, there has been a consistent decline in voter turnout (Kinder & Sears, 1985; Milburn, 1991).

Ideally, voters select the candidate whose policies best match their own political attitudes (Krosnick, 1988). Unfortunately, it is not clear that most voters' political thinking is sufficiently elaborated to allow them to make a meaningful choice between candidates. Krosnick and Milburn (1990) found in national surveys that expression of political opinions has declined consistently over the past thirty years. Given our finding that Adwatch did not increase the subjects' issue orientation, this suggests that the press should embed Adwatch information in the context of a more thorough discussion of the issues raised in the specific political advertisements. Adwatch may not have been perfect, but it is nevertheless a significant advance in election coverage.

APPENDIX 1  
POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS

The subjects in both conditions viewed the following six ads:

*Bush ads*

Ad title: "Win"

This ad was taken from an economic address that Bush delivered. It started with Bush saying, "The world is in transition. The defining challenge of the '90's is to win the economic competition. To win the peace, we must be a military superpower, an economic superpower, and an export superpower." In the ad, Bush stresses support for free trade, education, and legal reform.

Ad title: "Guess"

In this ad, an announcer says, "To pay for his increased spending in Arkansas, Bill Clinton raised state taxes. And not just on the rich. He increased the sales tax by 33 percent, imposed a mobile home tax, increased the beer tax. He assessed a tourism tax, created a cable TV tax, supported a tax on groceries. And now if elected president, Bill Clinton has promised to increase government spending by \$220 billion. Guess where he'll get the money?"

Speeded-up images of Bill Clinton give a humorous and frenetic pace to the ad.

*Perot ads*

Ad title: "Kids"

An announcer begins this ad by saying, "Our children dream of the world that we promised them as parents, a world of unlimited opportunity. What would they say if they knew that, by the year 2000, we will have left them with a

national debt of \$8 trillion?"

Images of children fade into each other as Perot's economic message about the deficit is presented.

Ad title: "Red Flag"

Again using an announcer instead of Perot, the voice-over says, "While the Cold War is ending, another war is now upon us. In this new war, the enemy is not the red flag of communism, but the red ink of our national debt, the red tape of our government bureaucracy."

Throughout the ad, a red flag waves on the screen and the spoken words appear written on this red background.

*Clinton ads*

Ad title: "Change"

The announcer says, "Something's happening. People are ready. Because they've had enough. Enough of seeing their incomes fall behind and their jobs on the line. Enough of a government that just doesn't work. They're ready for change. And changing people's lives, that's the work of his life."

This is a recitation of Bill Clinton's economic accomplishments as Governor of Arkansas.

Ad title: "Curtains"

This ad juxtaposes video of Bush making statements such as, "Thirty million jobs in the next eight years," and "I'm not prepared to say we're in a recession," with an announcer saying, "1990—America's jobless rate hits a three-year high," and "March 1992—Jobless rate hits a six-year high."

## Endnotes

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1. Carter, B. (1992). Projected network loser in presidential race: CBS. *New York Times*, November 2, 1992, Section D, p. 1.
2. Widder, P. (1992). Money, approach setting apart Perot's ad effort. *Chicago Tribune*, October 30, 1992, p. 17.
3. Richard L. Berke, "What is Scarier Than Halloween? Tune In to Candidates' Ads and See." *New York Times*, October 31, 1992.

4. Richard L. Berke, "Volleys of Data Replace Blatant Attacks of 1988," *New York Times*, October 29, 1992, Section A, p. 24.

5. Times Mirror surveys released on October 8th, 15th, and 22nd found the following percentages for exposure to Bush and Clinton ads:

	10/8	10/15	10/22
Seen Bush ad	68 %	66%	60%
Seen Clinton ad	64%	59%	57%

6. While college students in general can be a non-representative group of respondents, the population at UMass/Boston is much more diverse than at most universities. The average age of our sample was 25, with a range between 18 and 49, and only 33 percent of the subjects' parents had gone to college. Thus, they comprise a reasonably representative sample. Our confidence in the results we present here is strengthened by the fact that when past studies have asked the same questions of a sample of UMass/Boston undergraduates and of a probability sample of Massachusetts residents, the results have been virtually identical (Jussim, Milburn, & Nelson, 1991; Milburn, Conrad, Sala, & Carberry, 1993).

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