

Image Bites, Facial Displays, and Neuroscience: The Underappreciated Value of Political Visuals in Campaign News

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ABSTRACT

Absent from most analyses of political news are detailed assessments of the candidates' nonverbal behavior, which has been shown experimentally to have considerable persuasive influence. Unlike attractiveness and other relatively stable aspects of appearance, facial displays are highly variable and reveal important moment-to-moment information about the emitter's internal state. This talk features findings from two papers, which are part of a larger investigation into political news and the visual framing of presidential elections.

In the first paper, we update Hallin's (1992) landmark investigation of sound bite news by documenting the prevalence of candidate image bites, where candidates are shown but not heard (as opposed to being shown and heard), in general election news over four election cycles. A visual analysis of broadcast network (ABC, CBS, and NBC) news coverage of the 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 presidential elections finds that image bites constitute a greater percentage of total campaign coverage than sound bites with candidates appearing in image bites for almost twice the amount of time per story as sound bites. Even as candidate sound bites continue to shrink over time, image bite time is increasing in duration—and candidates are being presented in image bites significantly more often than journalists. Sound bites are also found to be largely attack and issue focused. Based on these findings, we call for greater appreciation of visual processing, nonverbal communication, and voter learning from television news in the study of media and politics.

In the second paper we argue that facial displays are influential elements within political news and examine the character of televised candidate displays over four presidential election cycles. The analysis considers coverage of major party nominees shown during network news coverage of the general elections from 1992-2004. To motivate our hypotheses, we draw on the biopolitics literature that has identified three classes of displays relevant to the study of nonverbal political behavior: happiness/reassurance, anger/threat, and fear/evasion. The analysis focuses on the relationship between the display types shown in election coverage, the context in which the displays are shown, and candidate standings in the polls.