

The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited

James N. Druckman
University of Minnesota

How does television affect political behavior? I address this question by describing an experiment where participants either watched a televised version of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate or listened to an audio version. I used this debate in part because despite popular conceptions, there is no extant evidence that television images had any impact on audience reactions. I find that television images have significant effects—they affect overall debate evaluations, prime people to rely more on personality perceptions in their evaluations, and enhance what people learn. Television images matter in politics, and may have indeed played an important role in the first Kennedy-Nixon debate.

How does television affect political behavior? Has the rise of television caused citizens to focus more on images than issues? How does television affect what citizens learn about politics? Are television's effects deleterious for the conduct of politics? These questions have captured the interests of a broad set of scholars, pundits, and citizens who worry about a political system based on image (e.g., Lang and Lang 1968; Schudson 1995). Yet, clear answers remain elusive, especially when it comes to competitive political settings such as political debates.

Much of the difficulty in assessing television's impact comes from the challenge of establishing definitive causal relationships with nonexperimental studies. As Putnam (2000, 218) explains, "Without controlled experiments, we can't be certain which causes which. Virtually all nonexperimental studies of the media find it hard to distinguish between 'selection effects' (people with a certain trait seek out a particular medium) and 'media effects' (people develop that trait by

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being exposed to that medium).” In what follows, I describe one of the few experimental studies to examine the causal impact of the television medium on political behavior.¹

Specifically, I investigate how television images during a presidential debate affect the following: (1) the criteria on which individuals base their candidate (debater) evaluations (e.g., the relative impact of image and issues), (2) overall candidate evaluations, and (3) learning about politics. I find that television substantially shapes political attitudes and learning, with the implication being that *images matter in politics*. The normative implications are less clear, however.

I begin in the next section by describing my hypotheses about the effects of television images. I then turn to a description of the experiment, which was quite simple in design: some participants listened to an audio version of a debate while others watched a televised version. Of particular interest is that for the experimental stimulus, I used the famous 1960 first debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. As I will discuss, despite the time gap, this debate served as a strong experimental stimulus. Moreover, many cite the debate as the quintessential example of the power of television images. Yet surprisingly, there is *no* valid evidence that images played any role in the debate (Vancil and Pendell 1987). An experimental reexamination of the debate is thus also of considerable historical interest.² I conclude with brief comments.

The Impact of Television Images on Political Evaluations and Learning

The most straightforward way to assess the independent impact of television is to compare experimentally a televised presentation (visuals with sound) with an audio/radio presentation (sound without visuals) of the same information (e.g., a debate). Using this approach, I can confidently attribute any average differences in reactions to the existence of television images since it is only images that differ between the two media. I expect television images to affect evaluations and learning.

Evaluations

To see how television images might affect candidate or debater evaluations, consider the following two insights from research on political attitude formation. First, people tend to base their evaluations of politicians and political debaters on their political and social predispositions, perceptions of the candidates' issue

¹ The few related experiments (e.g., Crigler, Just, and Neuman 1994; Graber 1990) differ in varying ways from the one conducted here. There also is a related literature that does not look expressly at political variables or contexts (see, e.g., McGuire 1985, 283).

² As I will discuss, I only include experimental participants with no knowledge of the presumed role of television in the debate.

positions, and perceptions of the candidates' image or personality traits, including leadership effectiveness, integrity, and empathy (e.g., Funk 1999; Rahn et al. 1990; Vancil and Pendell 1984). Second, which of these criteria people use depends in large part on which criteria elites or other speakers choose to prime (e.g., Zaller 1992). For example, if elites prime or focus on integrity and not leadership qualities, then voters will likely base their candidate evaluations on integrity at the expense of leadership.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has investigated experimentally if political priming also depends on the information medium, holding elite discourse constant. Yet, it seems quite plausible that the medium matters, as television viewers have access to visual imagery and nonverbal cues that often play an important role in shaping personality evaluations of others. As Graber (1990, 138) explains, "People draw a multitude of inferences from human physical appearance and movements . . . Many people infer personality characteristics from human physical features." For example, judgments about deceptiveness and evasiveness tend to have significant nonverbal components (Druckman, Rozelle, and Baxter 1982, 210–14). The implication is that compared to audio listeners, television viewers will be more likely to make inferences about personality characteristics, and, thus, they will be more likely to rely on personality characteristics in their evaluations. I therefore hypothesize that:

H1: Television viewers will be significantly more likely than audio listeners to use personality criteria (e.g., integrity) when evaluating the candidates (debaters), all else constant.

This hypothesis is consistent with assertions that the rise of television introduced a more imaged-based political environment that accentuates a candidate's personal qualities (e.g., Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon 1992, 80–82, 109; Keeter 1987; Lang and Lang 1968).

It is worth mentioning, as a *corollary*, that television images also might affect overall comparative evaluations. For example, suppose people see one candidate as superior when it comes to personality and another candidate as preferable when it comes to issues. If these people receive their information via television, personality will play a more important role, and they might prefer the personality candidate; in contrast, if they receive their information via radio, they might opt for the issue candidate since image will weigh less in their overall evaluations. In short, candidates with better perceived personalities will benefit from television.

Learning

I also examine the effect of television on learning. Previous research looks at how different media affect learning (recall) in contexts such as news programs. While the results from this work are mixed, I nonetheless expect television viewers to learn more than audio listeners for two reasons. First, television visuals

often work to increase attention, “stimulate psychological involvement,” and enhance learning and memory (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992, 79; see also, e.g., Graber 1990, 2001). Second, people tend to store audiovisual information in both a verbal and visual memory code, whereas they store audio information alone in just a verbal code. The dual-coding hypothesis asserts that the visual codes serve as an additional retrieval cue that facilitates recall (Walma van der Molen and van der Voort 2000, 4).³ Thus, I hypothesize that:

H2: Television viewers will learn significantly more than audio listeners, all else constant.

I also investigate the impact of political sophistication on learning. Previous work shows that relative to less sophisticated individuals, more sophisticated people learn more from any medium due to increased ability and motivation (e.g., Grabe et al. 2000; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992, 96–108). I therefore hypothesize that:

H3: Sophisticated individuals will learn significantly more than nonsophisticated individuals, regardless of medium, all else constant.

There also is reason to expect an interaction between media and sophistication such that variations in media will have a larger effect on less sophisticated individuals. That is, the relative learning advantage of television compared to radio will be more manifest among the nonsophisticated—political sophisticates might depend less on television images to grab their attention, and thus, variations in media will not affect learning for sophisticates (Baum 2002; Eveland and Scheufele 2000, 220). This would be consistent with evidence that suggests that people with advanced cognitive skills learn more from audio than less advanced people (see Pezdek, Lehrer, and Simon 1984). I thus hypothesize that:

H4: Nonsophisticated individuals will learn significantly more from television than audio, whereas sophisticated individuals will exhibit a significantly smaller or no difference in learning from the different media, all else constant.

The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate

I test the hypotheses in the context of a debate because it is an important political setting in which the impact of medium has received little explicit attention (Pfau and Kang 1991, 115).⁴ The specific debate I use is the first Kennedy-Nixon debate from 1960. I randomly assigned some participants to watch (and

³ Walma van der Molen and van der Voort (2000, 4) explain that the visual codes enhance learning and recall particularly when the visual information is redundant with the verbal information. Lang (1995, 94) explains that a talking-heads format such as a debate is not redundant in the sense of the visuals reiterating the verbal message, but it also is not conflicting and may be redundant in terms of behavior.

⁴ There is a sizable literature that examines various debate effects, such as learning (e.g., Kraus 2000, 181–240). I build on this literature by introducing variations in media.

listen to) the debate and others to listen to an audio (radio) version, and then I gauged their reactions. I chose the Kennedy-Nixon debate for both historical and methodological reasons, as I now discuss.

The history behind the first Kennedy-Nixon debate, which was the first televised presidential debate, is well known, and I will not go into details here (see, e.g., Kraus 1962; Lang and Lang 1968, 212–49). Of course the most memorable feature of the debate concerns the drastic difference in the candidates' appearances. In the words of Frank Stanton (2000), president of CBS at the time of the debate, "Kennedy was bronzed beautifully . . . Nixon looked like death." This ostensible difference in appearance led many to conclude that television viewers of the debate thought Kennedy won while radio listeners, who did not see the candidates, favored Nixon. Television supposedly enabled Kennedy to win due to his superior image even though he was not necessarily better on the issues. Assertions about viewer-listener disagreement "prevail in nearly all accounts of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate" (Vancil and Pendell 1987, 16).

The Kennedy-Nixon debate is so widely treated as definitive evidence about the independent impact of television that the result may be a complacency that inhibits more direct investigation into television's influence (Schudson 1995). Yet, the largely unrecognized irony is that there exists *no* valid empirical evidence that images played any role in the debate. In their exhaustive review, Vancil and Pendell (1987) find that most of the evidence is anecdotal and impressionistic with one exception—a survey by a market research firm, Sindlinger & Company.

The survey reports that more self-identified radio listeners thought Nixon won the debate whereas more self-identified television viewers thought Kennedy won: thus, images appear to cause a viewer-listener disagreement (see "Debate Score" 1960). However, a number of problems plague the survey, including a failure to report methodological specifics such as sample size (making statistical significance unclear), a reliance on self-reported measures of debate exposure that can be highly unreliable (Zaller 1992, 44), and a potentially significant time delay between the debate and data collection. Even more important, the survey makes no attempt to control for a variety of variables including pre-debate preference, religion, and party identification. Chaffee (2000, 334) explains, "By 1960, those who could listen to debates only on radio were far from a random lot. Situated for the most part in remote rural areas, they were overwhelmingly Protestants, and skeptical of Kennedy as a Roman Catholic candidate." Put another way, relative to television viewers, radio listeners may have been predisposed to favor Nixon over Kennedy. This lack of reliable causal evidence means that a prime example of the power of television images may be nothing more than "telem mythology" (Schudson 1995, 116).

While it is impossible to recreate the conditions of the 1960 election and decisively reveal the debate's impact on the 1960 electorate, my experiment provides insight into the plausibility of the viewer-listener disagreement claim. It offers a direct test of television's impact as confounding variables such as party identification can be ruled out due to random assignment. Moreover, unlike what was

probably the case some years ago, I was able to include only participants who had no knowledge of the debate's history.

Aside from the historical interest, I used the debate for a number of methodological reasons. First, participants were exposed to an actual political event, rather than a manufactured stimulus. Second, nearly everyone agrees that there was a clear contrast in the candidates' appearances, with Kennedy looking better (Kraus 2000, 211). While I suspect any type of image to matter, using relatively salient images makes for a good initial test of the hypotheses. Indeed, the differences in appearances allow me to examine potential variations in overall evaluations, which might not be present in other circumstances (such as where the candidates look the same). Third, the debate contained a relatively high degree of issue content (Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon 1992, 38–39) and also focused exclusively on domestic issues that are still relevant today (e.g., education, health care).⁵ Participants could thus learn about familiar issues without a threat of a ceiling effect through which many participants would already know issue details. While the specific content/proposals may be somewhat dated, the debate offers a strong initial test of how media affect the learning process.

Experiment

Participants, Design, and Procedure

I limited participation in the experiment to individuals without prior knowledge of the Kennedy-Nixon debates and the alleged viewer-listener disagreement. This minimized demand effects by ensuring that the results would not reveal a viewer-listener disagreement just because the participants conformed to what they believed to be true. I recruited mostly young people—who are significantly less likely to have knowledge of the debate (Lang and Lang 1990)—from summer courses at the University of Minnesota. A total of 210 individuals participated in the study in exchange for a cash payment.

At the start of the experiment, each participant completed a short questionnaire that asked a variety of demographic questions and asked about knowledge of the debate. Nineteen percent of these participants demonstrated that they possessed such knowledge; these individuals were excluded from the analyses, leaving a total of 171 participants.

Participants were randomly assigned to come to an experimental session that either showed the debate on television or played the audio version. After participants completed the brief pretest questionnaire, I provided them with a description of the historical context, including some background on the times, the candidates, the campaign, and the debates. Participants also were shown still pictures of Nixon and Kennedy from 1960 to ensure visualization of the candidates' identities.

⁵More than 90% of the experimental participants expressed confidence that they understood the issues discussed during the debate.

Depending on the session, participants then either watched the television version of the debate ($N = 85$) or listened to the audio version that mimicked a radio ($N = 86$). I gave participants snacks at the start of the debate so as to make the setting more natural and relaxed. After watching or listening to the debate, participants completed a post-test questionnaire that gauged their reactions. I then debriefed and paid the participants.

Results

In presenting the results, I focus exclusively on the relative differences between viewers and listeners. This is important because the participants undoubtedly possess some historical knowledge about the lives of Kennedy and Nixon (Kennedy's assassination, Watergate). While this knowledge may cause all participants to evaluate one candidate (Kennedy) more favorably than the other (Nixon), random assignment means that on average, the television and audio groups will possess the same historical knowledge, and thus any variation in the *relative* judgments of the two groups will be due to differences in the medium of exposure.⁶

EVALUATIONS. To investigate if different media prime alternative evaluative considerations, I examine the criteria on which participants based their evaluations of who won the debate. The dependent variable is the participants' response to the question of which candidate won the debate, measured on a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating a leaning toward Nixon.⁷ The independent variables come from the three categories previously discussed, including perceptions of the candidates' image or personality traits, perceptions of the candidates' issue positions, and political predispositions and demographics.

For personality perceptions, I follow Funk (1999) by including separate constructed scales for perceived leadership effectiveness, integrity, and empathy. For each of these measures, higher scores indicate a higher evaluation of Nixon relative to Kennedy. (All of the scales have coefficient alphas of .75 or higher.) I measure candidates' issue positions by combining a series of questions that asked participants to rate which candidate held positions closer to their own on a variety of issues that were discussed during the debate (the coefficient alpha is .72). Higher scores indicate closer positions to Nixon. I also include measures of party identification and ideology, both measured on 7-point scales with higher scores indicating a movement toward Republican in the case of party identification and Conservative in the case of ideology. Finally, I include a control dummy

⁶ While the participants were fairly diverse (with about 40% being over 21 years old), the sample did underrepresent Republicans. This could further bias absolute evaluations toward Kennedy. However, since party identifiers are uniformly distributed across conditions, relative evaluations between conditions will not be affected.

⁷ Details on question wording and measurement construction are available from the author.

TABLE 1
Evaluations of Debate Winner

Dependent Variable: Evaluation of which candidate won the debate, with higher scores indicating pro-Nixon			
Independent Variable	Everyone	Audio Listeners	Television Viewers
Leadership Effectiveness	.76** (.15)	.61** (.26)	.70** (.21)
Integrity	.16 (.14)	-.14 (.23)	.38* (.18)
Empathy	.18 (.15)	.28 (.22)	.14 (.20)
Issue Agreement	.34* (.18)	.51* (.28)	.20 (.26)
Party Identification	.04 (.09)	.12 (.14)	-.01 (.13)
Ideology	-.06 (.09)	-.20 (.14)	.03 (.14)
Catholic	-.06 (.04)	-.04 (.05)	-.07 (.05)
Gender	.02 (.03)	.04 (.05)	-.03 (.05)
Constant	-.25** (.07)	-.14 (.12)	-.24** (.08)
R ²	.44	.32	.57
Number of Observations	148	78	70

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$ using a one-tailed test.

variable measuring the participants' gender (0 = male, 1 = female), and a dummy variable indicating if the participant was Catholic since Kennedy may be viewed more favorably by Catholics. For ease of interpretation, I normalized all variables to a 0 to 1 scale and used OLS regression.⁸

The first column of Table 1 reports the results for all participants.⁹ It shows that both issues and image (i.e., personality) mattered. Perceptions of leadership effectiveness is significant ($p < .01$)—the more favorable an audience member's evaluation of Nixon's leadership skills (relative to Kennedy), the more likely he or she would judge Nixon to be the debate winner. Issue agreement also significantly shaped debate evaluations ($p < .05$); greater issue agreement with Nixon

⁸The results are similar if an ordered probit model is used instead of OLS.

⁹The number of observations in each condition drops, in part, because some respondents opted not to answer the question used to identify Catholics. When the Catholic variable is excluded, the results are similar. Also, because I have directional predictions, all reported p -values come from one-tailed tests.

would lead participants to increasingly judge Nixon as the debate winner. The other personality variables and audience political/demographic characteristics are not significant, although Catholicism borders on significance ($p < .055$) with Catholics more likely to favor Kennedy. That both image and, to a lesser extent, issues affect debate evaluations is interesting given long-standing disputes about the relative importance of these two factors (Kraus 2000, 208).

The story becomes even more intriguing when we look at audio listeners and television viewers separately in the second and third columns of Table 1. Recall that I hypothesized that television would prime viewers to rely more on personality traits. The results support the hypothesis insofar as television viewers relied on *both* their perceptions of leadership effectiveness and integrity when evaluating the debaters whereas audio listeners relied *only* on leadership effectiveness. Statistical analysis confirms that integrity played a significantly more important role for viewers than for listeners (i.e., the integrity coefficient is significantly greater in the television condition than in the audio condition; $p < .05$).¹⁰ Judgments about integrity can have significant nonverbal components, and this presumably led television viewers to give more weight to integrity. It also is consistent with Schudson's (1995, 118) description of the televised debate: "the insecurity [Nixon] showed betrayed his manner and motive in public life."

Notably, the increased impact of image among television viewers overwhelmed the issue effect; issue agreement remains a significant factor for audio listeners but not for television viewers.¹¹ This resonates with research suggesting that television amplifies the impact of image at the expense of issues (Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon 1992, 45).

The results demonstrate that the medium can prime alternative standards of evaluation. Television primes its audience to rely more on their perceptions of candidate image (e.g., integrity), whereas audio alone primes an increasing reliance on issues. It is well documented that elite discourse primes alternative evaluative criteria (e.g., Zaller 1992); the evidence presented here shows that priming also depends on the medium through which individuals obtain information.

The increased impact of image in the television condition also affected overall evaluations. Specifically, respondents viewed Kennedy as possessing significantly more integrity than Nixon.¹² Since television enhances the weight people attach to integrity in their overall evaluations and people saw Kennedy as having substantially more integrity, this meant television viewers were likely to be more

¹⁰To test this, I reestimated the first (pooled) model and included a dummy variable for experimental condition as well as an interaction between each variable and the condition dummy variable. This analysis revealed a significant interaction between the experimental condition and integrity. There are no other significant interactions.

¹¹However, the issue agreement coefficient for the audio listeners is not significantly larger than the coefficient for the television viewers.

¹²On a 7-point scale, Kennedy's average integrity score is 5.45 (with a standard deviation of 1.11), and Nixon's score is 4.27 (1.20) ($t_{167} = 9.10, p < .01$).

pro-Kennedy in their overall evaluations. Indeed, television viewers (2.57, with a standard deviation of 1.40) were significantly more likely to think Kennedy won the debate than audio listeners (3.28, 1.30) ($t_{166} = 3.39, p < .01$). This is compelling evidence that television—by enhancing the impact of image—can make a difference in overall candidate (debater) evaluations. It also is the first clear empirical evidence consistent with the widespread assertion of viewer-listener disagreement in the first Kennedy-Nixon debate.¹³ In sum, television images have an independent effect on individuals' political judgments: they elevate the importance of perceived personality factors, which can in turn alter overall evaluations.

LEARNING. I next analyze learning from the debate. To measure learning, I asked the participants to answer five factual questions covering information discussed during the debate. Recall that I expect television viewers to have learned more than audio listeners due, in part, to the attentional advantage of television. The first row (and first two columns) of Table 2 shows that this was indeed the case—those who watched the debate scored an average of 4.00 correct answers whereas those who listened scored an average of 3.59 correct answers ($t_{165} = 2.52, p < .01$). This complements the literature on learning from debates (e.g., Holbrook 1999) by showing that the amount learned depends on the information medium. Moreover, the enhanced learning that comes from having access to images highlights one potentially positive aspect of television (see Graber 2001). Interestingly, along with the previous result, it also suggests that television may enhance issue learning while simultaneously priming a reliance on personality perceptions.

The next two rows of Table 2 present learning results separately for political nonsophisticates and sophisticates. To measure political sophistication, I used an approach similar to Rahn, Aldrich, and Borgida (1994, 196) by standardizing and summing self-reported interest in politics, exposure to newspaper news, behavioral participation in political activities, and the number of correct answers to a five-question political information test (the coefficient alpha for the scale is .64). I then used a median split to compare political nonsophisticates ($N = 83$) to sophisticates ($N = 86$).

The first notable result comes from the third column (and second and third rows) of the table that shows that consistent with my hypothesis, sophisticated participants (4.01) learned more than nonsophisticated participants (3.56) regardless of medium ($t_{165} = 2.76, p < .01$). The second and third rows of the table also show support for the hypothesis that the medium mattered for nonsophisticates but not for sophisticates. Nonsophisticated viewers learned significantly more than nonsophisticated listeners ($t_{80} = 2.92, p < .01$); in contrast, sophisticated viewers did not learn significantly more than sophisticated listeners ($t_{83} = .60$,

¹³There also is a significant difference in terms of total percentages, with 81% of viewers thinking that Kennedy won compared to only 60% of listeners. I find analogous differences on a variety of other measures including hypothetical vote choice and evaluations of debate performance.

TABLE 2

Learning from the Debate: Mean (Standard Deviation; N) Number of Correct Answers to 5 Factual Questions

	Television Viewers	Audio Listeners	Television Viewers AND Audio Listeners
All Participants	4.00 ^a (.94; 82)	3.59 ^a (1.16; 85)	3.79 (1.08; 167)
“Nonsophisticated” Participants	3.93 ^b (1.03; 41)	3.20 ^b (1.23; 41)	3.56 ^c (1.19; 82)
“Sophisticated” Participants	4.07 (.85; 41)	3.96 (.96; 44)	4.01 ^c (.91; 85)

^{a,b,c} $p < .01$ using a one-tailed t -test.

$p < .30$). This result stems from the nonsophisticated audio listeners having an attention deficit; sophisticates had an easier time than nonsophisticates attending to the audio version (i.e., the sophisticates’ attention was not as dependent on imagery).¹⁴ Indeed, the outlier low score comes from the nonsophisticated listeners whose 3.20 average is significantly lower than sophisticated viewers and listeners and the nonsophisticated viewers.

All of the results are confirmed with an ANOVA where the F ratio for the media main effect is $F_{1,163} = 7.15$, $p < .01$, the F ratio for the sophistication main effect is $F_{1,163} = 8.11$, $p < .01$, and the media by sophistication interaction is $F_{1,163} = 3.72$, $p < .056$. In sum, sophisticates learn more than nonsophisticates, all else constant; however, this learning gap closes when the medium is television: television enhances learning among nonsophisticates.

Conclusion

Speculations about the impact of television on political behavior abound. Yet, there are few direct experimental tests of television’s political impact. My experiment, comparing television with audio, demonstrates that television images matter—they prime people to rely more on personality perceptions when evaluating candidates, which, in turn, can affect overall evaluations.¹⁵ Images also

¹⁴ An alternative hypothesis is that medium matters less for political sophisticates because they are more likely to engage in on-line processing, making recall measures of learning invalid for sophisticates (Rahn, Aldrich, and Borgida 1994). In analyses that are available from the author, however, I find this to be unlikely.

¹⁵ An alternative explanation for the results is that the Nixon visual in the television condition primed viewers to think of Watergate whereas its absence in the audio condition prevented listeners from doing so. In this scenario, viewers might have downgraded Nixon and focused more on image because they were thinking of Watergate whereas the listeners were not. The results then would stem not from the general impact of television images, but rather from the idiosyncratic nature of Nixon’s life. I collected various types of data to test this explanation and found no evidence for it. Details are available from the author.

enhance political learning, at least among nonsophisticates. The experiment provides evidence that Kennedy may have done better on television because of his superior image.

Future work is needed to extend my results to different contexts and populations. On the one hand, I suspect the results to generalize insofar as the processes I examined, such as priming, have proven to be robust across contexts and populations (Miller and Krosnick 2000, 313). Moreover, the Kennedy-Nixon debate is similar in structure to many other political debates. On the other hand, more recent debates may be less issue-oriented and include candidates who work harder to minimize appearance flaws. People also may process information differently in alternative political venues (see, e.g., Rahn, Aldrich, and Borgida 1994). I relied on younger participants to avoid demand effects; however, it is possible that younger people process televised information differently. In short, while my results offer a strong starting point for further exploration, more work is needed.

Some might take my results as an indictment of television. Yet, in some contexts, imagery may serve as useful information that enhances the quality of evaluations. As Schudson (1995, 117–18) asks, “Is television imagery so obviously superficial? Was it not important, and truthful, to see that Kennedy, despite his relative youth, was able to handle the most public moment of his life with assurance? Was it not important, and truthful, to see Nixon, despite his vast experience, looking awkward and insecure?” The point is that assessing the competence of political judgments is quite complicated. One not only needs to offer a clear normative model but, in this case, must also consider the relationship between issues and image and the information contained in each.

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James N. Druckman is assistant professor of Political Science, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455-0410.

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