Chapter 3

LEGISLATIVE TELEVISION:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICIANS

*Learn your lines, don't bump into the furniture and, in kissing, keep your mouth closed.*

Ronald Regan advising Senators in 1986 on how to deal with televised coverage of the Senate.

Television increases the information available to voters. This assertion appears obvious and unobjectionable. A more interesting and debatable question is how this change in information alters voter behavior? How is the politician transformed in the voter’s mind by the innovation of legislative television?

The previous chapter discussed the effects of informational changes on the behavior of consumers in general and voters in particular. That literature leads us to expect responses by voters to changes in cost of acquiring information. Also, it lays a theoretical groundwork that can be applied to the specific case of televised legislatures.

How does televising legislatures affect the reelection of incumbents? A simple hypothesis is that more legislative exposure provides free advertising for incumbents and will work towards their reelection. We develop an explanation of the effects of televised legislatures on election outcomes in this chapter. Our hypothesis goes beyond the obvious point that televising legislatures increases voter information about incumbents. Our interest lies in the type of information provided in televised sessions and in the responses of different types of constituencies to more information about legislator behavior. Our conclusion is that incumbents will sometimes be helped by coverage and will sometimes be hurt by coverage.

The chapter is organized as follows. The second section briefly discusses the distinction between search and experience products. The types of information provided in advertisements for search and experience goods are the main focus of attention. The third section extends the search versus experience distinction to the advertising of political services. We identify the circumstances in which televised sessions will help or hinder incumbent reelection. The fourth section discusses the effect of a technological advance such as televised sessions on the cost of acquiring information. This has implications for the type of information voters will seek and on the outcome of incumbent reelections. The fifth section summarizes the chapter.

The Relationship Between Citizens and Politicians

Economic analysis of political information is not new. Much of the literature has developed the “rational ignorance” theme, i.e., a voter has little incentive to become informed about politics because the expected benefits of an individual’s vote is trivial. The focus has been on why voters will not expend many resources to become informed. To the extent voting occurs, voters want to discover candidate qualities at the least cost. Changes in information and the cost of information will illicit responses by voters.

Two processes concerning how voters determine the qualities of political candidates are suggested in the literature on product advertising. Products are classified according to which of the two processes is the most efficient way for consumers to evaluate quality. The product categories are search products and experience products. The titles of the two categories provide cues to their meanings. Search products are those for which it is cheaper to compare actual qualities to advertised qualities prior to purchase. Experience products are products for which the actual qualities are not known to the buyer until after the purchase. It is cheaper to discover the qualities of experience products in other ways, learning brandnames and reputations, for example.

As discussed in the second chapter, the distinction between search and experience products is important because it affects the type of information contained in product advertisements. The information contained in advertisements for search products is primarily “direct information” and the advertising content of experience products is “indirect information.” Direct information describes specific characteristics of the product and indirect information identifies the product’s brandname and past reputation. Search product advertisements contain direct information because the consumer is making up his mind prior to purchase so he seeks specific characteristics to compare. The indirect information contained in experience product advertisements will stress the identity of the product and the longevity of the brandname because specific qualities about the product will not be detected prior to purchase. For experience products, higher advertising levels signals higher quality. For search products, the level of advertising is not necessarily a signal of higher quality; in some cases it is a sign of lower quality. Search product advertising will convey accurate information because consumers will recognize inaccurate information before buying and are less likely to purchase. With experience products, repeat purchases help to insure advertised quality but some false advertising of product quality may occur.

Political Services and the Content of Political Advertising

The analysis of commercial advertising can be extended to political