Overreporting Voting: Campaign Media, Public Mood, and the Vote

GLENN LESHER and ESTHER THORSON

This study used regional telephone survey data collected after the 1996 U.S. presidential election to examine how two possibly important affective variables—public mood and political cynicism—predict actual as compared with self-reported voting. Public mood, a construct introduced by Rahn, Kroeger, and Kite (1996) to suggest how affective processes may play a role in political behavior, is shown to have two distinct but positively correlated dimensions, one positive and one negative. After demographic variables were controlled, perceived media usefulness predicted positive mood about the presidential election, which in turn predicted self-reported voting. Negative campaign attitude predicted negative mood, which, in turn, influenced actual but not self-reported voting. Political cynicism, although correlated with both positive and negative public mood, predicted neither measure of voting. The bifurcation of influence of negative and positive public mood about elections may explain why researchers have often shown positive affect to influence voting (as measured by self-report), and why political consultants have continued to rely on negative campaigning and the reported increases in negative feelings it engenders in voters to influence actual votes.

Keywords campaign media, public mood, self-reported voting, negative campaigns, political cynicism

The decrease in voter participation over the past few decades is alarming. Voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections decreased nearly 13% from 1960 to 1988 (Finkel & Geer, 1998, pp. 580–581; Teixeira, 1992, p. 6). Decreased voting has stirred a debate over the effects of negative political advertising on voter participation. Although some political scientists and critics of today’s political campaign techniques blame low voter participation on intense negative political advertising (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, 1999; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994), others find no evidence for such an allegation (Finkel & Geer, 1998; Wattenberg & Brians, 1999). In fact, Finkel and Geer’s (1998) analysis indicates that the 1992 campaign was the most negative presidential campaign since 1960. Yet, voter turnout increased in 1992 to a level not seen since 1972 (Finkel & Geer, 1998; Wattenberg & Brians, 1999).

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This article explores the influence of the media and campaign negativity on voting in the context of the 1996 presidential election, by examining predictors of two important kinds of citizen behavior. The first is actual voting, as measured by official voter records; the second is self-reported voting. The model that will be used to guide the research posits that people’s perception of the role of the news and advertising media in a race affects their “public mood” and cynicism about politics, and these variables in turn relate to whether people actually vote, what they report about voting, and whether that report is accurate. It is particularly important to examine actual voting because it is often argued that actual voting is poorly represented by self-report (Wanta, Lemert, & Lee, 1997).

The research reported here occurred in a political environment wherein the U.S. audience experienced a great deal of negative campaigning by the presidential candidates. Indeed, the phenomenon of negative campaigning has become so pervasive that campaign consultants, fearing increasing resistance by citizens, have reported modifying their guidelines for attack ads. In examining these changes, political commentator David Broder recently said, “Negative campaigning is rarely pretty. Sometimes it doesn’t feel good either” (Broder, 1995, p. 4A).

It has been hypothesized that negative campaigning affects citizens’ responses to politics in several ways (e.g., Faber, Tims, & Schmitt, 1993; Teixeira, 1987; Tinkham & Weaver-Larisco, 1993). Two intuitively plausible effects are (a) reducing the positive character of what political scientists have labeled “public mood” (Rahn & Clore, 1994) and (b) causing an increase in political cynicism (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Rodgers, 1974). Both effects have, in turn, been implicated as influences in decreased voting probabilities (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Lemert, Elliott, Bernstein, Rosenberg, & Nestvold, 1991). Because of their possible importance in a generalized process of political alienation, these variables are examined in the present study both in terms of their intervening roles and in terms of the impact that news and advertising media have on them.

Literature Review

The following literature review examines (a) research on public mood, (b) the impact of political advertising on voters, (c) political cynicism, and (d) the effects of news media reliance on voting. The relationships posited based on this literature are then tested in a regional telephone survey of known voters and nonvoters conducted after the November 1996 presidential election.

Public Mood Research

Public mood has been defined as a “diffuse affective state, having distinct positive and negative components, that people experience because of their membership in a particular political community” (Rahn, Kroeger, & Kite, 1996, pp. 31–32). The political community can be one’s country, state, political party, or a variety of others. An example of public mood would be the affect an American experiences because of the U.S. winning Olympic events.

Public mood is based on the same psychological processing as private mood and is likely partially dependent on private mood, but is differentiated by the fact that its object is the political community, however that community may be defined. Public mood is a variable defined at the individual, not the aggregate, level.
Overreporting Voting

Negative and positive public moods have been shown to be two distinct dimensions, not the absences of, or inverse of, each other (Rahn et al., 1996). Positive public mood indexes whether there is success or failure, and thus is tied to responses of efficacy, trust, and confidence. Negative public mood indexes distress and dissatisfaction. It is linked with perceptions of threat and of heightened attention to stimuli. Rahn et al. (1996) discuss extensively the verification of positive and negative public mood as separate dimensions despite the consistent finding that they are correlated.

What is probably most important about public mood is that it has been shown to influence a variety of political attitudes, even after controlling for other variables known to influence them. For example, Rahn et al. (1996) showed that positive, but not negative, public mood predicted people’s beliefs about whether the political community in question could accomplish its goals. This predictive relationship held even when attitude toward the political community was controlled. On the other hand, negative, but not positive, public mood predicted perceived threats to the political community, even after attitude toward the political community was controlled.

Different variables are antecedents to negative and positive public mood. For example, Rahn et al. (1996) showed that external efficacy—the belief that the political system is responsive to its citizens—predicted positive public mood, but mistrust in government predicted negative public mood. Of particular interest here is the finding that external efficacy but not trust in government has been positively related to vote turnout (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Teixeira, 1992). This leads us in the current study to expect that positive mood, but not negative mood, will be related to vote turnout. Based on this research, we employ the same measures of positive and negative public mood that have been previously tested by Rahn.

Although Rahn et al. (1996) investigated the effects of public mood toward the U.S. only, they suggested that the concept of public mood is applicable to any political community. Ognianova, Coyle, and Thorson (1996) examined positive and negative public mood as engendered both by thinking about the U.S. and by thinking about one’s own state of residence. Similar to observations by Rahn et al. (1996), public mood for both the U.S. and one’s own state had two correlated but distinct factors, one positive and one negative.

In the present study, the mood questions focused not on the nation or the state, but rather on how people felt about the 1996 presidential election. Of the variables that Rahn et al. (1996) hypothesize to influence public mood, those most relevant to the current study are individual causes (demographics and political individual differences) and collective causes (media exposure and media reliance). More specifically, we examined public mood as an intervening variable between voting and more traditional variables often studied in campaign contexts. This was done by examining possible antecedents of mood about the election, namely (a) perceptions of negative aspects of the campaign, (b) media reliance, and (c) the perceived usefulness of various campaign media, while controlling for demographic and political variables. Rahn et al. (1996) state that exposure to mediated events has the potential to influence public mood, although they did not demonstrate whether that influence was positive or negative.

Political Advertising and Voting

The role of political advertising has been studied largely in terms of its influence on four dependent variables: attention, knowledge, attitudes toward ad sponsors and their opponents, and likelihood of voting. In recent research, scholars who are concerned
with a purported decline of democratic values and citizen participation in the U.S. have looked closely at the role of political advertising, particularly ads that attack the opponent (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Basil, Schooler, & Reeves, 1991; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Denton, Thorson, & Coyle, 1995; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1989; Lemert et al., 1991; Perloff & Kinsey, 1992; Stewart, 1975). Indeed, since the 1988 presidential race, when political pundits suggested that negative political ads won the race for Bush, the role of attack ads has become the focus of many studies.

A number of studies have examined the effects of ads on voting intention, but few have examined ads’ effects on voting itself. Thorson, Christ, and Caywood (1991) reported that with experimental exposure to ads, support and attack ads had no significant impact on voting intention, although it should be emphasized that the college student respondents were unfamiliar with any of the candidates in the ads. Faber et al. (1993) reported that in a 1988 U.S. Senate race in Minnesota, people reported considerable impact of four specific negative ads on their voting intentions. Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, and Cole (1990) found that negative political advertising did not suppress vote likelihood. Kaid, Chanslor, and Hovind (1992) found that participants in an experiment reported they were more likely to vote when they saw negative candidate ads in television news programs than in either situation comedies or dramas. Ansolabehere et al. (1994) found that exposure to negative advertisements reduced intentions to vote by 5%.

One study looked directly at the relationship between exposure to ads and self-reported voting, although that study involved large survey data sets in a variety of areas across the U.S. Lemert et al. (1991) reported that after a variety of demographic variables were removed, including party affiliation, there remained a strong relationship between exposure to attack ads and not voting—both not voting for Bush and not voting for Dukakis. Therefore, we might expect a direct relationship between perceived campaign negativity and both actual and self-reported vote behavior, such that people who perceived the election campaign negatively would be less likely to vote.

**Media Reliance and Voting**

Scholars have long been concerned with the effects of the news media on political attitudes and voter behavior. On the one hand, campaign news has been seen as an effective source of political information, acquainting voters with candidates’ positions on important issues and political and personal backgrounds (e.g., Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994; Weaver & Drew, 1993). And for young citizens and immigrants, campaign media have been shown to aid in political socialization (Chaffee, Moon, & McDevitt, 1996; Chaffee, Nass, & Yang, 1990).

On the other hand, news coverage of campaigns has been described as a powerful negative force that turns citizens into cynical, passive spectators rather than active participants (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Patterson & McClure, 1973; Ranney, 1983; Sabato, 1991). Yet, the evidence that links media use to decreased participation and increased negative political attitudes, most notably cynicism, is decidedly mixed. Robinson (1975) concluded that television’s high credibility, mass appeal, and focus on conflict lead television-dependent persons to distrust national government leaders. Similarly, Becker and Whitney (1980) found that television reliance was negatively associated with political knowledge and trust of the local government. O’Keefe, Mendelson, and Liu (1976) found that nonvoters with increased attention to television news were more likely to be cynical. Subsequently, McLeod and McDonald (1985) found that television was positively associated with a propensity to blame politicians for inflation.
Most recently, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that exposure to news about candidates’ campaign strategies, rather than news about political issues, increased cynical reactions among viewers and readers.

Results from other studies, however, show either positive effects or the absence of negative effects from news coverage. Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman (1998) found that media use positively predicted likelihood of voting. O’Keefe (1980) found that newspaper reliance produced more positive evaluations of politics, and television reliance did not produce greater cynicism. Leshner and McKean (1997) found no relationship between using television news media for information about politics and political cynicism in their study of a state election. Similarly, Leshner (1996) found no relationship between either television or newspaper exposure or attention to the campaign and cynicism. He also found that the more respondents paid attention to the campaign through newspapers, the easier they thought the campaign issues were to understand.

Study of political cynicism as a criterion variable is based on the concern that increased cynicism is an indicator of reduced political behavior, most notably a reduction in voting activity. Hence, a major inference often drawn from such data is that cynicism is an intervening variable between media consumption—most notably television ads (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995) and television news (Sabato, 1991)—and voting behavior, such that exposure to campaign media creates cynicism in the electorate, which in turn causes voters to stay home on election day (cf. Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Teixeira, 1992). In keeping with the conventional wisdom that cynicism reduces voter participation, we expected that cynicism would be negatively related to actual and self-reported vote behavior. We expected also that campaign negativity would be positively associated with cynicism, whereas perceived usefulness of the campaign media should be negatively associated with cynicism.

Along with proposing a model by which public mood intervenes between media influences and voter participation, the present study will examine the problem of false reporting of vote behavior, which is a chronic problem in survey research (Wanta et al., 1997). The model will allow the examination of some of the correlates of actual voting and self-reported voting, and the variables that may differentially relate to the two.

Voting Research

The problem of overreporting voting behavior in survey research is not new. The range of false claims of voting in postelection surveys has varied between approximately 5% and 30% (Sigelman, 1982; Silver, Abramson, & Anderson, 1986; Traugott & Katosh, 1979). Recently, however, Wanta et al. (1997) found that more than 50% of nonvoters in their survey falsely claimed to have voted in an Oregon mail ballot election. Interestingly, they found few differences between those who accurately reported their vote behavior and those who inaccurately reported that they had voted. One notable exception was that inaccurate respondents were more likely to feel cynical about politics and government than the accurate respondents. Therefore, we expected that cynicism would be positively related to false self-reported voting.

Method

Telephone interviews with 400 randomly selected registered voters in Kansas City, Missouri, were conducted by the Center for Advanced Social Research at the School of Journalism, University of Missouri—Columbia. Interviews were conducted between
mid-February and mid-March 1997. Registered voters’ names were first randomly sampled from the Kansas City Board of Election’s voting records. The sampled names were matched with a separate list of telephone numbers for the same area. Seven respondents were deleted from the analysis because the addresses given by the respondents were not the same addresses provided by the Board of Election, and therefore we could not be certain that the respondent was indeed the same person for whom a voting record was obtained. The response rate was 55%. Sixty percent of the respondents were male, and 40% were female. The average age of the sample was 51; 72.5% said they were “White.”

The sample yielded a high percentage of voters. Slightly more than 84% of the respondents actually voted in the November 5, 1996, election according to the voting records supplied by the Kansas City Board of Election. However, the Board of Election “officially” reported that only 55% of the registered voters turned out to vote (Scott, 1996). The voting rate of those who refused to respond to the survey was 75%. Thus, a caveat is that voters were somewhat more likely to participate in the survey than were nonvoters.

**Design**

To test the role of positive and negative public mood and cynicism in actual and self-reported voting, the three variables were examined in a path analysis. Public mood and cynicism are thought to intervene between three sets of predictor variables (media reliance, perceptions of the usefulness of campaign media, and negative campaign attitude) and two criterion variables (actual voting and self-reported voting). Public mood and cynicism can be said to intervene if three conditions are met: (a) Predictor variables are strongly associated with the intervening variables, (b) the intervening variables are strongly associated with the criterion variables, and (c) the predictor variables are poorly associated with the criterion variables (Babbie, 1989). To test whether the conditions are met, cynicism, negative public mood, and positive public mood were regressed on the three predictor variables (media reliance, perceived media usefulness, and negative campaign attitude), with demographic and individual political variables included as controls. Then the two criterion variables (self-reported voting and actual voting) were regressed on the three intervening variables. Finally, by regressing the two criterion variables on the three predictor variables, direct relationships, if any, can be observed.

**Criterion Measures**

The two criterion measures in this study were actual voting and self-reported voting. Actual voting was measured as whether or not the respondent voted in the November 1996 election based on the actual voting records obtained from the Kansas City Board of Election. Self-reported voting was measured with the question “In the presidential election, whom did you vote for?” Respondents who reported that they voted for Clinton, Dole, Perot, or another candidate were coded as saying that they voted. Respondents reporting that they did not vote or who refused to answer were coded as not saying that they voted. Because we were most interested in respondents who said that they voted but did not in fact vote, this coding system is appropriate.

**Control Variables**

Control variables included a set of demographic measures and two political measures. The demographic variables for the sample were measures typically used in surveys of
this type: education, age, income, race, and gender. The two political variables were campaign interest and party identification. Campaign interest was measured by the question “What would you say your level of interest was in the recently concluded campaign?” Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from very uninterested (1) to very interested (5). Party identification was measured by a traditional 5-point affiliation scale that ranged from strong Republican to strong Democrat.

**Predictor Measures**

Media usefulness was computed by summing respondents’ answers to the reported usefulness of seven presidential campaign information sources. Each response was recorded on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 = not at all useful, and 10 = extremely useful). The seven sources were television talk shows, television news stories, televised ads, televised debates, Internet/World Wide Web, newspaper items, and free airtime given to the candidates (α = .70).

Media reliance was a forced-choice measure asking respondents which news medium they most often used to keep track of what was happening in the presidential campaign. Their choices were local TV news, network TV news, newspapers, radio, magazines, Internet, World Wide Web, or other. Each response item was dummy coded so that a 0 reflected a response of not using that medium and a 1 reflected a response of using that medium most often. A respondent could choose only one medium.

The negative campaign attitude variable was a summed index of two measures. Respondents were read two statements and asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, strongly disagreed, or were neutral with the following statements: “This presidential campaign has relied too much on mudslinging and name calling” and “This presidential campaign was more negative than the 1992 presidential campaign was.” Both items were scored so that agreeing with the statements received higher values (r = .32, p < .01).

**Intervening Variables**

We examined three variables that were thought to intervene between the predictor and criterion variables: political cynicism, positive public mood, and negative public mood. Political cynicism was a mean index of three items representing respondents’ beliefs about politics and government (α = .53). Respondents were read three statements and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each on a 4-point scale: “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on”; “Politicians’ votes are for sale to the highest bidder”; and “Government spending is usually inefficient and wasteful.” Respondents who agreed with the statements scored highest on the cynicism scale. The low alpha for political cynicism will be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

Positive and negative public mood were treated as separate variables. Respondents were asked the question stem, “When you thought about the election, how often did you feel . . . ,” for four items: hopeful, happy, sad, and angry. Positive public mood was a mean index of hopeful and happy (r = .64, p < .01), with higher scores indicating a more positive public mood. Negative public mood was a mean index of sad and angry (r = .36, p < .01), with higher scores indicating a more negative public mood. As reported in Table 1, factor analysis clearly showed that the four mood items loaded on two factors. Hopeful and happy loaded on one factor, and sad and angry loaded on another.
Path analysis was the primary analytical tool. All possible paths between the predictor variables (media usefulness, media reliance, and negative campaign perceptions) and the intervening variables (positive public mood, negative public mood, and political cynicism) were tested with hierarchical multiple regression equations in which demographics and the political variables served as controls. Then all possible paths between the intervening variables and the criterion variables (actual voting and self-reported voting) were also tested with regression equations. Finally, all possible paths between the predictor variables and the criterion variables were tested with hierarchical multiple regression equations to ascertain direct effects.

Results
The first analysis compared actual voting with self-reported voting (Table 2). Respondents who reported voting and who actually voted constituted 76.8% \((n = 302)\) of the sample. Of those who did not vote, 74.2% \((n = 46)\) falsely reported that they did. The latter number was high relative to Wanta et al.’s (1997) finding that slightly more than half of the nonvoters inaccurately claimed that they had voted in their survey during a mail-ballot election.

Correlations between positive public mood, negative public mood, and political cynicism were as expected. First, positive and negative public mood were negatively

### Table 1
Factor analysis results for the public mood items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Factor 1 (positive public mood)</th>
<th>Factor 2 (negative public mood)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hopeful</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance explained</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
Relation of self-reported to actual voting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-reported voting</th>
<th>Did not vote</th>
<th>Voted</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not say they voted</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29(^a)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said they voted</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. \(\chi^2(1, N = 393) = 14.80, p < .001.\)
*Includes 20 respondents who refused to report their voting behavior, but who actually voted.
correlated \( (r = -0.21, p < 0.01) \). Positive public mood was negatively correlated with political cynicism \( (r = -0.22, p < 0.01) \), and negative public mood was positively correlated with political cynicism \( (r = 0.25, p < 0.01) \).

To test the predictors of the three intervening variables—positive public mood, negative public mood, and political cynicism—a series of hierarchical multiple regression equations was used. The predictor variables were tested in separate equations, in which the control variables were entered first into the regression equation. These results are shown in Table 3.

The control variables related differently to positive and negative public mood. Being White was a significant negative predictor of positive public mood but a significant positive predictor of negative public mood. Being interested in the campaign and being a Democrat were additional significant positive predictors of positive public mood. Being Republican was the only other control variable that predicted greater negative public mood. Similar to negative public mood, the predictors of political cynicism were race (positive) and party identification (negative). The control variables predicted nearly twice as much variance in positive public mood as they did for negative public mood, and nearly three times as much for political cynicism.

Media reliance predicted none of the intervening variables. Media usefulness, the index of how useful respondents rated seven campaign information sources, was a strong and positive predictor of positive public mood but did not predict negative public mood. Media usefulness also predicted less political cynicism. As expected, negative campaign attitude—the degree to which respondents thought that the campaign was negative—was positively associated with both political cynicism and negative public mood. The relationship between negative campaign attitude and positive public mood was not significant.

The next set of tests was a series of regression equations (Table 4) wherein each of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical regression tests of three predictors of positive mood, negative mood, and cynicism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Predictor variables | Intervening variables |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Positive public mood | Negative public mood | Political cynicism |
| Block 1: Controls | | | |
| Race (White) | \(-0.17^{***}\) | \(0.21^{***}\) | \(0.11^*\) |
| Campaign interest | \(0.24^{***}\) | | |
| Party ID (Democrat) | \(0.24^{***}\) | \(-0.18^{**}\) | \(-0.20^{***}\) |
| Controls \( R^2 \) | \(0.17^{***}\) | \(0.092^{**}\) | \(0.061^{*}\) |
| Block 2: Media reliance (block of 8 dummy variables) | | | |
| Block 2: Media usefulness | \(0.25^{***}\) | | \(-0.14^{**}\) |
| Block 2: Negative campaign attitude | | \(0.17^{***}\) | \(0.13^{**}\) |

*Note. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients except for the \( R^2 \) values for the control equation (italics). Blank spaces denote nonsignificant beta coefficients.

\(^{*}p < 0.05. \quad ^{**}p < 0.01. \quad ^{***}p < 0.001.\)
the three intervening variables was used to predict separately actual and self-reported voting. First, two separate regression equations were computed with cynicism as the predictor variable and with actual voting and self-reported voting as the criterion variables. Neither equation reached the $p < .05$ significance level. In addition, two separate regression equations were computed with positive public mood as the predictor. Positive public mood significantly and positively predicted self-reported voting ($\beta = .11, p < .05$) but did not predict actual voting. Finally, two separate regression equations were computed with negative public mood as the predictor. Negative public mood significantly and positively predicted actual voting ($\beta = .11, p < .05$) but did not predict self-reported voting.

The final set of equations examined the direct relationship between the three sets of predictor variables (media usefulness, medial reliance, and negative campaign attitude) and the two criterion variables (actual voting and self-reported voting). Significant direct relationships would weaken the argument that political cynicism and public mood are intervening variables.

A series of six hierarchical regression equations was computed, two for each of the three predictor variables. The results are shown in Table 5. None of the control variables predicted actual voting. Campaign interest and income were the only significant predictors of self-reported voting, with those interested in the campaign and those earning less over-reporting their voting behavior.

None of the three predictor variables was a direct predictor of either actual voting or self-reported voting. Media reliance, perceived usefulness of the campaign media, and negative campaign attitude—thought by many to reduce the likelihood of voting—predicted neither actual nor self-reported voting. The fact that there were no direct effects of any of the predictor variables on either vote measure provides evidence that mood intervened between these variables and the voting measures.

The full path analysis model is shown in Figure 1. The model shows that positive public mood intervened between media usefulness and self-reported voting. Negative public mood intervened between negative campaign attitude and actual voting. Although political cynicism was predicted by both media usefulness and negative campaign attitude, it predicted neither measure of voting. The importance of public mood is demonstrated in this model: When the effects of control variables were removed, none of the predictor variables in this model was directly associated with either measure of voting. But their indirect relationships with voting emerged when public mood was included in the model.
Table 5
Hierarchical regression tests of three predictors of vote behavior and reported vote behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>Actual voting</th>
<th>Self-reported voting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block 1: Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign interest</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.20***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls $R^2$</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2: Media reliance (block of 8 dummy variables)</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2: Media usefulness</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2: Negative campaign attitude</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cell entries for the second blocks are $R^2$ change values (italics); otherwise they are standardized regression coefficients. Blank spaces in Block 1 denote nonsignificant beta coefficients. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Discussion

This study examined the role of public mood and cynicism as intervening variables between media variables and two measures of voting. Both positive and negative public mood intervened significantly, such that positive public mood predicted self-reported voting and negative public mood predicted actual voting. Political cynicism was not a significant predictor of either voting measure.

One caveat here is that the reliability estimate for cynicism in this study was lower than comparable measures of cynicism found in recent studies. Such estimates generally have ranged between .62 and .72 (Leshner & McKean, 1997; Ognianova et al., 1996;
Thus, it is possible that the failure of cynicism to predict self-reported or actual voting may have been due to the low level of reliability for the cynicism index in this study. A second caveat is typical of all cross-sectional data. Although we made careful use of control demographics, the linkages we found between public mood, voting, and media and attitudes about the campaign are simply correlational. Certainly, the responses to the mood questions could have been influenced by the election outcome. But the model posited here is consistent with the conceptualizations of public mood and its relationship to behavioral variables. Thus, an important next step is to examine how public mood about an election directly influences self-report and actual voting.

Media usefulness negatively predicted political cynicism and positively predicted positive public mood, but it did not predict negative public mood. Negative campaign attitude was positively related to both political cynicism and negative public mood, but not to positive public mood. Media reliance did not predict either positive or negative public mood or political cynicism. In turn, positive public mood predicted greater self-reported voting and negative public mood predicted greater actual voting. That is, respondents who had a positive public mood about the election were more likely to say they voted but were not more likely to actually vote. Also, respondents who had a negative public mood about the election were more likely to vote, but were not more likely to self-report voting, which seems to counter previous research (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Teixeira, 1992). Overall, the three conditions that would allow the conclusion that public mood intervenes between the predictor and criterion variables used in this study were met.

The study also examined the nature of public mood. The data strongly supported the notion that public mood is a complex construct. Public mood consisted of two separate factors, one positive and one negative, rather than a single bipolar scale. The data in this study thus comport well with Rahn et al.’s (1996) finding that public mood is composed of two separate dimensions. In addition, the predictors of positive and negative public mood were different, as was the pattern of their associations with the voting measures.

Perhaps the most important finding here concerned the problem of false reporting of voting, a difficult problem of often unknown magnitude in survey research. Although the present sample was skewed toward voters, nearly three quarters of those who did not vote reported that they had voted. This proportion is high relative to Wanta et al.’s (1997) recent study of a mail ballot, a vote format they believe elicits more false voting reports than traditional ballot elections. According to Wanta et al., if respondents had merely forgotten whether or not they voted, then one could expect that forgetting would be equally distributed between those who said they voted but did not and those who said they did not vote but who did. Of the 29 respondents who did not say that they voted, only 3 (less than 1% of the entire sample) voted but said they did not (the rest either refused or were missing), suggesting that the overreports were driven largely by respondents providing the socially desirable answer to voting. Yet, Belli, Traugott, Young, and McGonagle (1999) claimed to have reduced the number of overreports by adding memory cues about voting behavior in their “experimental” questionnaire wording, especially when compared with a more standard question wording. They concluded that the reduction of overreports in the “experimental” case suggests that forgetting vote behavior may contribute to overreports when questions without such cues are used in survey research. In any case, the fact that at least 13% of those who claimed to have
voted in the current study did not vote suggests that extreme care should be taken when assuming self-reported voting matches actual voting. Moreover, the difference in variance between the two voting measures was substantial enough that they were associated with entirely different sets of variables.

Finally, public mood appears to be an important construct to consider when examining how media, demographic, and political variables relate to actual and self-reported voting. The present results suggest that voting may come from people who feel negative about an election, such that having a more negative attitude about the campaign can increase actual voting through negative public mood. Equally interesting, a more positive public mood leads people to self-report that they voted but not to actually vote. These results may eventually be used to explain the seemingly contrary ways that negative campaigns affect people. People often express outrage about negative campaigning, but political campaign professionals continue to believe so strongly in its effectiveness that its use continues to grow (Kern, 1989; Perloff & Kinsey, 1992). The present results indicate that the more negative people’s attitude about the election, the more likely they are to actually vote. However, researchers who rely on self-reported voting measures argue that the more positive people’s public mood, the more likely they are to vote. In light of the present results and the critical difference in how these two groups measure voting, the contrast in their findings is not surprising. But it suggests that media researchers’ theories, to the extent they predict only self-reported voting, will need to be modified when applied to actual voting.

Notes

1. The lone study that compared the validity of self-reported voting after a significant amount of time after a November election was reported by Belli, Traugott, Young, and McGonagle (1999). They found that self-reported voting showed no significant change between samples surveyed in December (72.1% reported voting) or January (74.9% reported voting, non-significant difference) after a November election.

2. The “official” vote turnout is calculated as a ratio of documented voters to the total registered to vote, many of whom cannot vote (e.g., moved and did not notify election board or died). By state law, boards of election may not remove a person from the registration list unless certain criteria are met. The Board of Election in the city in which the survey was conducted calculated a percentage of “inactive” records, which increased turnout to 62.4%. “Inactive” has legal status and includes people on the voter registration list who were later found to be ineligible based on the above criteria. Even so, the Board of Election cannot accurately identify the true level of people who can vote and, therefore, substantially underestimates voter turnout. We suspect that this may be a problem for all survey research on voting.

3. The distinction between intervening and mediator variables is made here. Mediators would reduce the direct effects of the predictor variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). If there are no direct effects and if there are significant relationships between two variables only as a function of a third, then the third variable acts as an intervening variable.

4. Although logistic regression is a suitable analysis technique when the criterion variables are dichotomous, we opted for standard regression. Regression is robust, appropriate, and useful when criterion variables are dichotomous (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Overall, 1980) and permits the direct comparison of standardized regression coefficients and $R^2$ values.

References


