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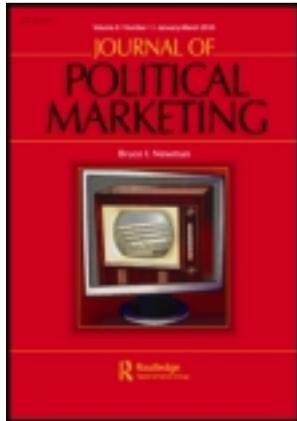
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The Impact of Multimedia Technology on Candidate Website Visitors

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Candidate websites have become a standard part of contemporary campaigns, yet researchers and practitioners know little about how their design affects voters. This article investigates how the decision to present information with multimedia (i.e., audio and/or video) influences the evaluations and vote intentions of candidate website visitors. Results from an experiment show that using multimedia had a modest net benefit resulting from conditional reactions based on participants' party identification and political interest—the candidate's partisan supporters reacted positively while non-supporters, particularly those with limited political interest, were less impressed. These findings provide some initial empirical evidence of the impact that multimedia can have on candidate website visitors.

KEYWORDS *campaigns, candidates, multimedia, voters, websites*

Campaigns are dynamic affairs in which candidates and their staffs are forced to make countless strategic decisions. These decisions range from broad choices about policy and message to precise questions about the day-to-day operations and details of information dissemination. Armed with experience, anecdotal evidence, and gut intuition, campaigns strive to make the best possible decisions knowing that even seemingly minor choices can sometimes tip the balance between winning and losing.

The rise of the Internet presents campaigners with a whole new set of strategic options. Over the past decade, it has become routine, if not expected, for candidates to develop some sort of web presence (see, e.g.,

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Gulati and Williams 2009, 54). The rapid proliferation of candidate websites has been driven by their growing use among voters (Williams 2003; Rainie and Horrigan 2007; Smith 2009),¹ and the opportunities they provide in terms of fundraising, coordinating volunteers, laying out policy positions, and presenting an idealized depiction of the candidate's personal character (see, e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003; Cornfield 2004; Foot and Schneider 2006). In order to fully utilize these opportunities, campaigns have to decide how best to present information on their website.

Research shows that campaigns, at least at the congressional level, are more or less split between those that offer sites with little more than basic text and graphics and those that augment the standard design with more sophisticated multimedia features like audio and video. In fact, the percentage of House candidate websites that included at least one audio or video clip was 30.2% in 2002, 40.4% in 2004, and 40.0% in 2006, while the percentages for Senate candidate websites were 57.6%, 69.2%, and 66.0%, respectively (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 433; Gulati and Williams 2009, 58–59; also see Foot and Schneider 2006, 7–12, 173–174, 179). Thus, there remains significant variability in the use of audio and video—many congressional campaigns choose to incorporate them while a significant number still do not.

The decision to present information with multimedia appears to be a function of not only available resources but also race competitiveness in that candidates in tight races are more likely than those in uncompetitive races to bear the costs of incorporating at least one audio or video feature (Druckman et al. 2007, 435).² The fact that campaigns become more likely to invest in multimedia when voter support is most critical (i.e., tight races) leads to the inference that, all else equal, multimedia might provide an important edge. However, at this point, campaigns have little empirical proof that this decision actually pays off.

This paper offers an initial investigation of the effect that multimedia (defined here as audio and/or video)³ have on those who visit congressional candidate websites. Does the decision to use multimedia actually give campaigns any discernable advantage, and if so, is the advantage widespread or concentrated among certain visitors? Answering these questions will help practitioners determine the utility of using multimedia and thus provide some guidance on how best to design sites to maximize voter support. It will also contribute to our limited understanding of candidate website effects. In fact, determining the impact of a specific website component is an important step in building an accurate picture of the overall effect that these sites can have on voters. As Lupia and Philpot (2005, 1125–1126) explain, “scholars can better understand this communication medium's potential . . . by augmenting existing Internet-level studies with research on how site level phenomena affect individual viewers” (also see Bimber 2000, 329; Shah, Kwak, and Holbert 2001, 142).

I start in the next section with a brief overview of the literature before presenting theoretical expectations about the effect that multimedia could potentially have on website visitors' political evaluations. These predictions are then tested with an experiment in which participants browse either a basic (i.e., no audio or video) or multimedia (i.e., audio and video included) version of a campaign website fabricated for an actual 2006 U.S. Senate candidate. Results show that using multimedia had a modest net benefit resulting from reactions being conditioned by participants' party identification and level of political interest. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings, the limitations of this study, and potential avenues for future research.

CAMPAIGNING ONLINE AND THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF MULTIMEDIA TECHNOLOGY

Research on candidate websites has tended to focus on their development and strategic use. Some have offered large-scale projects, providing detailed descriptions and explanations of how strategic principles help structure presidential (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003; Cornfield 2004) and congressional (Foot and Schneider 2006) campaign sites. Others have focused on how these sites are used to mobilize supporters (e.g., Klotz 2007), raise funds (e.g., Panagopoulos and Bergen 2009), attack opponents (Hicks and Souley 2003; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2010), and discuss policy (e.g., Xenos and Foot 2004; Sulkin, Moriaty, and Hefner 2007; Druckman, Hennessey, Kifer, and Parkin 2010).

Much less is known about the effect that these sites have on voters' political decisions. At a general level, there is some disagreement between those who contend that candidate websites "have a modest tendency to strengthen and reinforce voters' predispositions" (Bimber and Davis 2003, 145) and those who maintain that "web campaigning has an independent and significant impact on the level of electoral support that a candidate receives" (Gibson and McAllister 2005, 2).⁴ Work on specific elements of campaign websites has been limited to studies showing that interactive features (e.g., forums, chat) can, at times, enhance visitors' support by providing a more sophisticated and personal connection with the candidate (e.g., Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown 2003; Song and Bucy 2007).⁵ There has yet to be any analogous work on the effect that multimedia technologies might have on candidate website visitors.

It is possible, of course, that there might not be any difference between basic and multimedia-enhanced candidate websites in their ability to impress and persuade visitors. It could be that visitors react primarily to the content of the message without much regard for how it is delivered. It is even possible that a relatively basic site might be more effective than one using multimedia

if visitors are overwhelmed by an abundance of audiovisual material (Sundar 2000; Sundar et al. 2003; Sundar 2004; Bucy 2004; Tisinger et al. 2005).

Still, there is reason to believe that a site with multimedia could improve the candidate's chances more than one without it. Research suggests that audiovisual material might be particularly helpful with candidate image enhancement and policy persuasion, which ought to result in better overall candidate evaluations and more supportive vote intentions.

Multimedia may be superior to text in promoting the candidate's personal image (i.e., perceptions of competency, leadership abilities, integrity, and especially empathy) because they provide "cues that often play an important role in shaping personality evaluations of others" (Druckman 2003, 561; also see Graber 2001, 19; Crigler, Just, and Neuman 1994, 135; Funk 1999). These cues, such as body language and voice cadence, offer a richer and more believable sense of the candidate.⁶ As such, carefully crafted audio and video clips, and the sense of realism they provide, might help in promoting the candidate's image given that voters are more likely to think highly of a candidate with whom they have some sense of familiarity (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Funk 1999).

Multimedia may also help with policy persuasion. Audio and video are considered better than text at attracting attention because people find them more "engaging, interesting, and emotionally involving" (Graber 2001, 4; also see Druckman 2003, 262). Getting voters to take note of a candidate's position is a necessary first step in the persuasion process. Multimedia features have the additional benefit of presenting the candidate's stance in a more organic and thus compelling way. Compared to the starkness of text, audiovisuals infuse expressions and emotions that can help in assuring and persuading voters (e.g., Graber, 1996). Research also confirms that the abundant stimuli in audiovisual content tend to be processed quickly and somewhat unconsciously. Whereas reading requires a certain level of concentration and focus, listening and watching can be more casual and passive. By processing audiovisual information in this way, website visitors could be more accepting, or at least less critical, of the candidate's policy message than they would be if they were deliberately poring over a written statement (Brader 2006, 142; Graber 2001, 38).⁷

Personality and policy are key components of candidate evaluations and vote choices, so it follows that improving image and issue assessments ought to translate into stronger candidate evaluations and vote intentions. All of this leads to the following hypothesis: All else equal, visitors to a multimedia-enhanced campaign website will be more impressed with the candidate's image and policies, and thus more supportive of the candidate overall, than those who visit an identical site without multimedia.

Given the nature of candidate websites and those who visit them, it seems reasonable to expect that these direct effects might be conditioned by visitors' partisanship and level of political interest. Research finds that

political interest helps to determine the likelihood of receiving a candidate's message while partisanship can affect the level of resistance to it (Zaller 1992, 42–48; Taber and Lodge 2006). Basically, high-interest voters are more likely than low-interest voters to receive the candidate's message while the message stands a better chance of being accepted by the candidate's supporters than by those from the opposing party.

This suggests that a site with multimedia might have more positive effects on supporters, and maybe even Independents, than a site without multimedia given that supporters and Independents should be at least open to the appeal. In fact, supporters and Independents with low levels of political interest might be even more positively affected than those with high interest because the audiovisuals can do more to increase their attention and thus receptiveness.

Predictions are not quite as clear for those non-supporters who are known to visit opposing candidate websites from time to time (Bimber and Davis 2003; Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2005; Iyengar et al. 2008).⁸ In this case, a candidate website with multimedia may be more persuasive than one without it if the audiovisual material is able to present an especially compelling case that non-supporters process quickly, without being too critical. However, non-supporters may instead be inclined to engage in motivated reasoning such that they dismiss or even react against the candidate's message (Taber and Lodge 2006). In fact, a site with multimedia might actually be counterproductive with low-interest non-supporters as it could increase their awareness, triggering them to be more critical of information that they would have overlooked if presented to them in written form. According to Zaller (1992, 44), "the likelihood of resisting persuasive communications that are inconsistent with one's political predispositions rises with a person's level of political awareness."

In summary, visitors to a multimedia-enhanced site are expected to be more favorable toward the candidate across image, policy, and general support dimensions than those who visit an identical site without multimedia. These differences may, however, be conditioned by visitors' partisan affiliation and/or interest in politics. Specifically, supporters and Independents are expected to react more or less positively, whereas non-supporters may either react somewhat favorably or they may, especially if they have limited interest in politics, be a little more critical in their assessments.

AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST

To test these predictions, I conducted an experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to browse either a basic or multimedia-enhanced version of a candidate website.⁹ An experimental design has the benefit of ensuring exposure to stimuli and isolating the independent effect that

specific web features can have on visitors. As such, it addresses the need in this literature for “thoughtful lab experiments to tease out the nature, magnitude, and directions of these effects” (Shah et al. 2001, 142; also see Bimber 2000, 239; Lupia and Philpot 2005, 1125).

The study was based on the 2006 U.S. Senate candidacy of Minnesota Republican Mark Kennedy. Kennedy, a third-term congressman from Minnesota’s 6th district, was particularly ideal because he enjoyed some name recognition with participants (57% claimed to “have heard of Mark Kennedy” before the experiment), although the average initial feeling toward him was fairly moderate (4.8 out of 10 on “What did you think of Mark Kennedy before today?”). In addition, at the time of the experiment, Kennedy’s campaign had yet to go online so there was no chance that participants would confuse the experimental site with an existing “Kennedy for Senate” site. However, there was also little reason to suspect the authenticity of the experimental site given that Kennedy was a plausible candidate who had already announced his intention to run.

I started by creating two versions of a “Kennedy for Senate” website using material from his past campaigns. The first version—the basic site—was designed to represent a fairly ordinary congressional campaign site by relying on text and simple graphics to deliver Kennedy’s message (see Druckman et al. 2007). The basic site’s home page featured a blue banner and a single picture of Kennedy with a jacket slung over his back (see Figure 1). There were sidebar links to pages entitled “news,” “Minnesota,” “biography,” “multimedia,” “volunteer,” “contribute,” “contact,” and “issues.” The “news” page offered recent stories about Kennedy, the “Minnesota” page gave information about the state, and the “biography” page provided background on the candidate. The “multimedia” page was limited to a couple of candidate pictures while the “volunteer,” “contribute,” and “contact” pages used standard (but inactive) form fields for contacting and helping the campaign. The “issues” section had additional links to separate pages for agriculture, environment, jobs/economy/taxes, education, family values, health care, social security, sportsmen issues, veterans, and the war on terror.

The text for each page was copied, nearly verbatim, from Kennedy’s past campaign sites—only the year (i.e., 2006), office level (i.e., Senate), and district (i.e., from 6th district to Minnesota) were modified. Kennedy’s text mentioned his Republican Party affiliation once (on the homepage) and offered fairly conservative positions on all issues, including strong support for President Bush’s Iraq War policy. The biography section talked about his family and their Minnesota roots, his education, and some of his political accomplishments.¹⁰ In general, the content of Kennedy’s basic site provided a fairly standard depiction of the candidate’s positions and personal attributes.

The experiment’s second website—the multimedia site—mimicked the basic version except that it included some multimedia features, again taken from Kennedy’s past campaigns. The home page greeted visitors with some

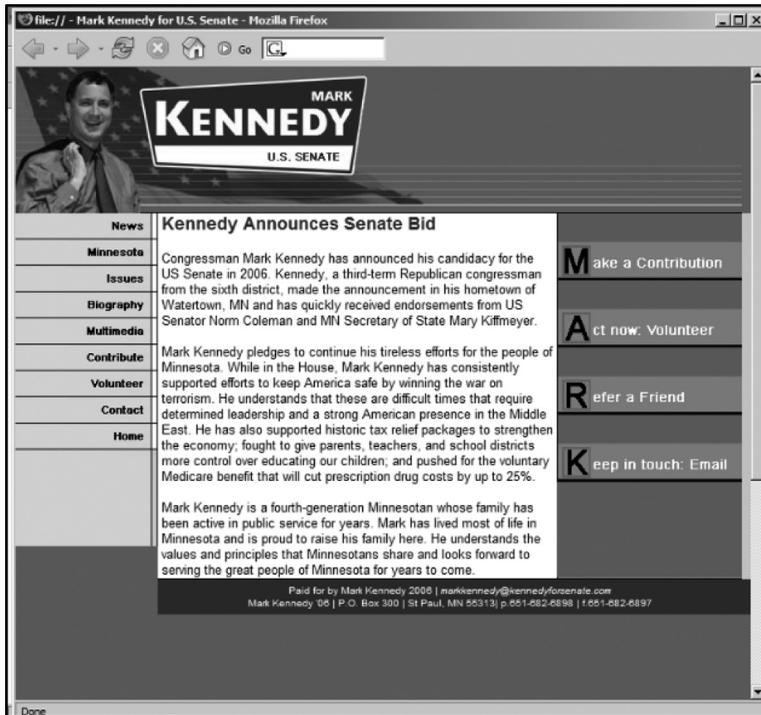


FIGURE 1 Kennedy for Senate basic site.

additional background photos and a slideshow video of Kennedy announcing his candidacy that started automatically when the page loaded (see Figure 2).¹¹ The site also featured six user-controlled videos found on appropriate issue, biography, and multimedia pages. Two of them (“Trip to Iraq” and “The New Iraq”) discussed Kennedy’s support for the troops in Iraq while a campaign spot (“Economy and Jobs”) talked about his support for tax cuts and belief that industry, not government, should create jobs. Another ad (“Seniors”) talked about Social Security and Kennedy’s desire to improve health care and prescription drug benefits. Two final videos (“Importance of Family” and “My Office”), placed on the biography page, show the candidate in his Capitol Hill office discussing his background, his education, his family roots in Minnesota, and the importance of traditional family values. The multimedia site also included five short audio clips (less than one minute each) in which Kennedy expands upon his candidacy announcement and talks about the war in Iraq, tax cuts, deficits, and health care.

It is important to note that the audio and video clips echo the information found in the written text. They do not provide any new facts or details that might influence visitors’ evaluations—they simply reiterate Kennedy’s message through a different medium. As such, the multimedia site does provide a slightly greater volume of information but the key difference is that

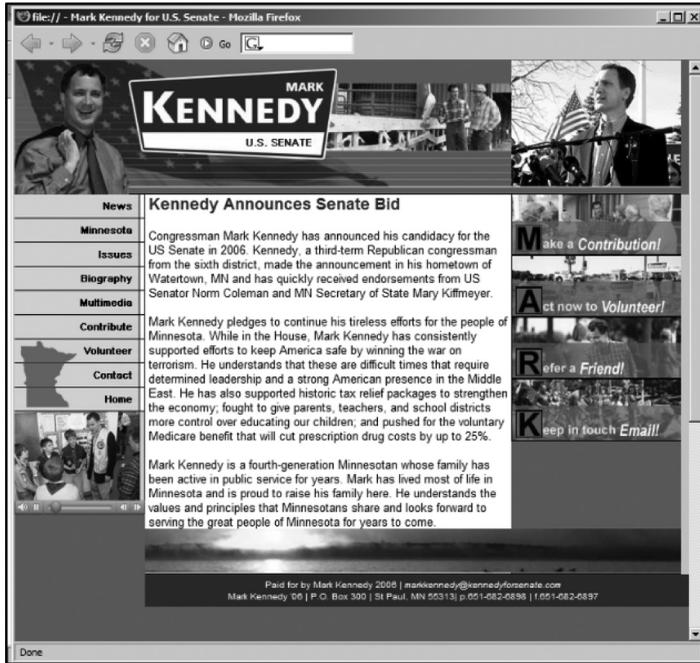


FIGURE 2 Kennedy for Senate enhanced site.

these audiovisual features provide the nonverbal cues that have been hypothesized to affect evaluations of the candidate. In other words, the facts and details are held constant between conditions so that any differences can be attributed to the characteristics of the medium rather than the content of the message.¹²

Finally, to simulate the reality that visitors can exit a website at any time, both sites were posted on the Internet and embedded with links to the Department of Homeland Security, WCCO News, Minnesota Public Radio, the Star Tribune, and St. John's University (where Kennedy was an undergraduate). While participants could have easily left the site, subsequent analysis shows that they felt compelled to stay—either by interest or by virtue of being in an experiment—as only 4.2% of them followed an external link and the average time spent there (of those who went) was 38 seconds.

Between March and June of 2005, flyers, posters, and word of mouth were used to recruit 190 University of Minnesota undergraduates. Students were told that they should come to a computer lab at a specific time if they were “interested in participating in a 25-minute study that looks at the Internet’s effect on citizens.” After reading an instruction sheet and consenting to participate, each student was randomly assigned to a computer that had either the basic or multimedia version of the “Kennedy for Senate” website.¹³ All participants were given headphones, even those assigned to the

basic site that had no audio. Before starting the experiment, participants were told that they could “browse the Internet for the next 10 minutes.” They then began the experiment by clicking on the phrase “start web browsing,” which took them to the home page of either the basic or multimedia site. Participants were then left to browse the site (or other parts of the Internet) for 10 minutes.¹⁴

Each participant was stopped after exactly 10 minutes and asked to complete a post-test survey that started with questions about where they went on the site and approximately how long they stayed on each page.¹⁵ Participants then answered questions about their political opinions, including their feelings about Mark Kennedy and his Senate bid. The remainder of the survey focused on media use, political knowledge, and personal background questions. When they were done, they were paid five dollars, debriefed, and asked not to discuss the experiment with others.

The resulting sample was predominantly white (77.2%) with reasonable balance between men (55.3%) and women (44.7%) as well as between Republicans (37.9%), Independents (15.3%), and Democrats (46.8%). The sample was also split between those claiming to be “not at all,” “not too,” or “somewhat interested” in politics (48.9%) and those claiming to be “very” or “extremely” interested (51.1%). In addition, 92.7% stated that they go online at least once a day, 61.6% typically get political news online, and 64.2% had previously been to a candidate’s website. The majority of participants (98.9%) were younger than 30, which provides some confidence that, because of young people’s familiarity with the Internet, any effects are the result of the technology rather than the participants’ ability to use it (Althaus and Tewksbury 2000, 187). However, having such a young sample means that it differs from the true population of candidate website visitors (Kohut et al. 2008), limiting the generalizability of the findings reported below (see, e.g., Sears 1986; cf. Druckman 2001, 1046; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997, 570–571). Tests confirm that all of these sample characteristics were consistent across the two conditions.¹⁶

RESULTS

Before analyzing the results, it is important to confirm that visitors to the multimedia site did, in fact, have a different experience than those who visited the basic site. All participants were required to report the estimated time they spent on each page while those in the multimedia condition also reported the frequency with which they used the individual audio and video features. Analysis shows that the average multimedia site visitor watched 1.7 videos and listened to 1.1 audio clips. The “Trip to Iraq” video was the most watched (43.9%), while the extended “Candidacy Announcement” audio was listened to most (40.2%). During the 10-minute experiment, multimedia

site visitors spent an average of 2 minutes 57 seconds watching video and 58 seconds listening to audio. While they did not typically fixate on the audio and video clips, they did engage with this material in a way that their basic site counterparts could not. This is initial evidence that, as expected, the audiovisual aspects of Kennedy's multimedia site caught participants' attention, drawing them into his message (see Graber 1996, 90; Druckman 2003, 562).

The following analysis uses one-tailed difference of means tests to compare the two conditions in terms of their assessment of Kennedy's personal image and policy positions as well as general feelings and vote intentions.¹⁷ Impressions of Kennedy's image were assessed with four conventional measures based on responses to questions about how well a word or phrase describes him (see, e.g., Funk 1999). There were measures for competency (intelligent, knowledgeable, hardworking: alpha .763), leadership (respected, inspiring, strong leader: alpha .732), empathy (cares about people, in touch with ordinary people, compassionate: alpha .769), and integrity (honest, moral, decent: alpha .777).¹⁸ Measures of policy support were created for each of the 10 issues on Kennedy's website using a scale from "strongly disapprove" (1) to "strongly approve" (5). Participants also rated Kennedy on a thermometer scale from 1 to 10, where 10 meant "very warm" or favorable (standardized to a five-point scale). Finally, participants specified their intentions to vote for Kennedy as either "definitely would not" (1), "probably would not" (2), "not sure" (3), "probably would" (4), or "definitely would" (5).

Differences Between Basic and Multimedia Site Participants

Table 1 shows that, on a number of dimensions, multimedia site participants were more impressed with Kennedy than those in the basic site condition. While differences on competency were imperceptible (3.49 and 3.49), those who browsed Kennedy's multimedia site had a slightly higher opinion of his leadership ability (2.74 and 2.91) and integrity (3.34 and 3.55). There was also a clear difference on empathy, as basic site participants gave Kennedy a 3.36 compared to 3.61 from those in the multimedia site condition. This suggests that having the opportunity to see Kennedy's mannerisms and hear him speak had some positive effects on the Republican candidate's perceived image.

Table 1 also shows that there were some statistically significant differences on certain key issues. Multimedia site participants gave Kennedy higher marks than those in the basic site condition for his positions on jobs/economy/taxes (2.81 and 3.14), family values (2.32 and 2.65), Social Security (2.67 and 2.96), and the war on terror (2.59 and 3.04)—all issues that were discussed in at least one audio or video clip.¹⁹ Health care, which was also featured in an audio spot ("Health Care") and a video ("Seniors"), was

TABLE 1 Basic and Multimedia Site Evaluations

	Basic (<i>n</i> = 83)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 107)
Image		
Competency	3.49	3.49
Leadership	2.74	2.91 [#]
Empathy	3.36	3.61*
Integrity	3.34	3.55 [#]
Issues		
Agriculture	3.29	3.36
Environment	3.16	3.41
Jobs/Economy/Taxes	2.81	3.14*
Education	3.07	3.22
Family Values	2.32	2.65**
Health Care	2.92	3.13 [#]
Social Security	2.67	2.96*
Sportsmen Issues	3.12	3.15
Veterans	3.16	3.22
War on Terror	2.59	3.04***
Overall		
Candidate Evaluation	2.39	2.74*
Vote Intention	2.41	2.82**

****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05. [#]*p* < .10. In one-tailed difference of means tests.

also marginally significant (2.92 and 3.13).²⁰ There were no clear differences between conditions on any of the other issues (i.e., agriculture, environment, education, veterans, and sportsman issues). These results provide some evidence that the nonverbal cues in audiovisual material can, at times, provide a more persuasive representation of the candidate's message than written text.

These gains on image and issues were matched, as expected, by some additional support for Kennedy in terms of overall evaluations and vote intentions. Those visiting the multimedia site gave him a feeling thermometer score of 2.74 compared to 2.39 from those in the basic site condition. They also signaled significantly stronger intentions to vote for the Republican candidate (2.41 and 2.82).

Taken together, these results generally fit the pattern hypothesized above inasmuch as those in the multimedia condition rated Kennedy higher than those in the basic site condition in terms of certain image and policy factors, as well as overall feelings. However, it should be noted that these differences, even when significant, were substantively modest in that many of the average scores provided by those who had visited Kennedy's multimedia site remained around the measure's midpoint. For example, multimedia site participants "neither approved nor disapproved" (3) of most of Kennedy's issue positions, while their vote intentions fell just short of the "not sure" mark (3). I now break these results down by partisanship and political interest to see what role they might have played in conditioning the effect that Kennedy's websites had on participants' evaluations.

Conditional Differences Between Basic and Multimedia Site Participants

Table 2 presents the differences between conditions for Democratic participants. The first two columns show that Democrats did not differ much in their evaluations depending on whether they visited Kennedy's basic or multimedia site. There were no statistically significant differences in terms of Kennedy's image, and Democrats who visited the multimedia site only rated two of his policies—family values (1.76 and 2.33) and the war on terror (2.12 and 2.44)—significantly higher than the low baseline set by basic site visitors. The only other significant difference was on vote intentions (1.70 and 2.08). Despite the statistical significance of these differences, multimedia site Democrats still generally disapproved of Kennedy's conservative positions and opposed the idea of voting for him. In short, exposure to Kennedy's multimedia site did little more to persuade Democratic participants than exposure to his basic site.

The subsequent results in Table 2 shed some light on why there were so few differences among Democrats in general. The third and fourth columns show that, among Democrats with little interest in politics, the few differences that actually reached statistical significance were, in fact, negative.²¹ Low-interest Democrats who visited Kennedy's multimedia site rated him

TABLE 2 Democrats' Evaluations With Political Interest

	All Democrats		Low-interest Democrats		High-interest Democrats	
	Basic (<i>n</i> = 40)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 49)	Basic (<i>n</i> = 15)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 22)	Basic (<i>n</i> = 25)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 27)
Image						
Competency	3.20	3.09	3.47	3.29	3.03	2.92
Leadership	2.47	2.52	2.86	2.79	2.25	2.31
Empathy	3.00	3.25	3.33	3.54	2.80	3.04
Integrity	3.05	3.21	3.50	3.46	2.78	3.01
Issue						
Agriculture	3.13	3.08	3.27	3.50	3.04	2.74
Environment	2.98	3.12	3.33	3.18	2.76	3.07
Jobs/Economy/Taxes	2.34	2.69	3.07	3.00	1.90	2.44*
Education	2.95	2.84	3.87	3.23*	2.40	2.52
Family Values	1.76	2.33***	2.40	2.65	1.37	2.06***
Health Care	2.78	2.90	3.67	3.00**	2.24	2.81*
Social Security	2.58	2.61	3.27	2.82*	2.16	2.44
Sportsmen	2.88	2.98	3.00	3.00	2.80	2.96
Veterans	3.00	3.02	3.13	2.91	2.92	3.11
War on Terror	2.12	2.44*	2.42	2.59	1.93	2.32
Overall						
Candidate Evaluation	1.81	2.11	2.37	2.41	1.48	1.87*
Vote Intention	1.70	2.08*	2.20	2.36	1.40	1.85*

****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05. In one-tailed difference of means tests.

significantly lower on education (3.87 and 3.23), health care (3.67 and 3.00), and Social Security (3.27 and 2.82). In each case, Kennedy received fairly solid evaluations from low-interest Democrats viewing the basic site, while those in the multimedia site condition gave him lower scores that were closer to the midpoint or below. Assuming that low-interest Democrats paid little attention to Kennedy's basic site would fit with Zaller's claim that "politically inattentive persons will often be unaware of the implications of the persuasive communications they encounter and so often end up 'mistakenly' accepting them" (Zaller 1992, 44–45). In this case, it seems that low-interest Democrats may have been content to skim inattentively through Kennedy's basic site, while his multimedia site alerted them to be more critical of his conservative message.

The last two columns in Table 2 show that Kennedy's multimedia site had a more positive effect on high-interest Democrats. While there were no significant results for any of the image measures, there were positive and significant differences between the conditions on three key issues—jobs/economy/taxes (1.90 and 2.44), family values (1.37 and 2.06), and health care (2.24 and 2.81)—as well as the candidate evaluation score (1.48 and 1.87) and vote intentions (1.40 and 1.85). High-interest Democrats in the basic site condition were quite critical, giving Kennedy some of his worst scores, while their counterparts on the multimedia site were somewhat less so. This suggests that reading text may have led high-interest Democrats to focus and counter argue, whereas consuming audiovisual material may have made them less analytical and thus a little more accepting, although by no means supportive, of Kennedy (Brader 2006, 142; Graber 2001, 38; Taber and Lodge 2006).

Table 3 shows a similar pattern among independent participants, although small sample sizes suggest that any significant differences should be taken with caution. The first two columns reveal that there were only three real differences in how Kennedy was evaluated by Independents in the two conditions. He received significantly higher, albeit not particularly strong, ratings from multimedia site Independents on Social Security (2.36 and 2.89), the war on terror (2.30 and 3.02), and overall feelings toward the candidate (1.96 and 2.61). Table 3 also shows that, just as with Democrats, low-interest Independents who browsed the multimedia site tended to be more critical of Kennedy than their reasonably supportive counterparts in the basic site condition, whereas differences among high-interest Independents tended to be positive. In fact, despite expectations based on their presumed openness to the candidate's message, low-interest Independents who visited the multimedia site gave Kennedy lower marks for empathy (4.31 and 3.44), integrity (3.89 and 3.33), education (4.00 and 3.31), and vote intentions (3.33 and 2.69), while high-interest Independents in the multimedia condition gave him higher scores on environment (2.75 and 3.60), the war on terror (1.92 and 3.13), and overall candidate evaluations (1.56 and 2.70).

TABLE 3 Independents' Evaluations With Political Interest

	All Independents		Low-interest Independents		High-interest Independents	
	Basic (<i>n</i> = 11)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 18)	Basic (<i>n</i> = 3)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 13)	Basic (<i>n</i> = 8)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 5)
Image						
Competency	3.52	3.48	3.89	3.61	3.39	3.17
Leadership	2.63	2.72	3.33	2.81	2.45	2.50
Empathy	3.22	3.26	4.31	3.44*	2.81	2.83
Integrity	3.11	3.31	3.89	3.33*	2.81	3.25
Issues						
Agriculture	3.27	3.44	3.67	3.46	3.13	3.40
Environment	3.09	3.61	4.00	3.62	2.75	3.60*
Jobs/Economy/Taxes	2.55	3.11	3.17	3.23	2.31	2.80
Education	2.91	3.17	4.00	3.31*	2.50	2.80
Family Values	2.33	2.56	3.00	2.72	2.08	2.13
Health Care	2.73	3.06	3.33	3.08	2.50	3.00
Social Security	2.36	2.89*	3.00	3.00	2.13	2.60
Sportsmen	3.18	2.89	3.33	3.00	3.13	2.60
Veterans	3.00	3.11	3.00	3.23	3.00	2.80
War on Terror	2.30	3.02*	3.33	2.97	1.92	3.13*
Overall						
Candidate Evaluation	1.96	2.61*	3.00	2.58	1.56	2.70*
Vote Intention	2.18	2.61	3.33	2.69*	1.75	2.40

****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05. In one-tailed difference of means tests.

The results in Table 4 show a more consistent pattern among Kennedy's fellow Republicans. While Republicans viewing the basic site were generally quite favorable toward Kennedy, their multimedia site counterparts were even more positive on a number of dimensions, including leadership (3.12 and 3.45), empathy (3.85 and 4.18), education (3.28 and 3.73), Social Security (2.91 and 3.43), the war on terror (3.29 and 3.78), and vote intentions (3.39 and 3.83). In all of these cases, Kennedy's multimedia site was associated with higher-than-average ratings on a five-point scale. In other words, compared to his basic site, Kennedy's multimedia site bolstered his standing among those who would have been its most likely visitors (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003).

The remaining columns in Table 4 show that differences between the conditions were generally positive, although rarely significant, for both low- and high-interest Republicans. Unlike their Democratic and independent counterparts, low-interest Republicans who visited Kennedy's multimedia-enhanced site were more positive than those who visited his basic site. The differences, however, only reached significance for empathy (3.82 and 4.29), education (3.11 and 3.86), and the war on terror (3.04 and 3.56). In addition, although high-interest Republicans in the multimedia group gave Kennedy some of his best ratings, they only exceeded those of

TABLE 4 Republicans' Evaluations With Political Interest

	All Republicans		Low-interest Republicans		High-interest Republicans	
	Basic (<i>n</i> = 32)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 40)	Basic (<i>n</i> = 19)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 21)	Basic (<i>n</i> = 13)	Multimedia (<i>n</i> = 19)
Image						
Competency	3.85	3.98	3.82	3.91	3.91	4.06
Leadership	3.12	3.45*	3.05	3.35	3.23	3.55
Empathy	3.85	4.18*	3.82	4.29*	3.89	4.06
Integrity	3.80	4.04	3.79	3.93	3.82	4.17
Issues						
Agriculture	3.50	3.68	3.47	3.90	3.54	3.42
Environment	3.41	3.68	3.53	3.67	3.23	3.68
Jobs/Economy/Taxes	3.48	3.70	3.39	3.50	3.62	3.92
Education	3.28	3.73*	3.11	3.86*	3.54	3.58
Family Values	3.01	3.10	2.88	2.95	3.21	3.26
Health Care	3.16	3.45	3.26	3.43	3.00	3.47
Social Security	2.91	3.43**	3.00	3.14	2.77	3.74***
Sportsmen	3.41	3.48	3.16	3.29	3.77	3.68
Veterans	3.41	3.53	3.32	3.48	3.54	3.58
War on Terror	3.29	3.78**	3.04	3.56**	3.67	4.02
Overall						
Candidate Evaluation	3.25	3.56	3.18	3.50	3.35	3.63
Vote Intention	3.39	3.83*	3.26	3.52	3.54	4.16*

****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05. In one-tailed difference of means tests.

high-interest Republicans in the basic site condition for Social Security (2.77 and 3.74) and vote intentions (3.54 and 4.16). Still, there is some evidence that Kennedy gained among his fellow Republicans by presenting his case with vivid technologies rather than relying on static text.

This experiment found that, among visitors in general, a campaign website with multimedia generated more support for the candidate than one without multimedia. These general gains were, however, conditioned by mixed reactions from participants depending on their party identification and political interest. Low-interest Democrats and Independents who visited Kennedy's multimedia site were more negative toward him than those who visited his basic site, while high-interest Democrats and Independents in the multimedia condition tended to be marginally more sympathetic than those in the basic site condition. Kennedy's multimedia site seems to have sparked low-interest Democrats and Independents to be more critical, while it was able to convince high-interest Democrats and Independents to be somewhat more accepting than those who picked apart the written statements on his basic site. Republican participants, regardless of political interest, gave Kennedy fairly solid ratings after browsing his basic site, while those who visited his multimedia site gave him even stronger numbers. In fact, Kennedy received some of his highest ratings from his fellow Republicans

in the multimedia site condition. In other words, Kennedy's message was most persuasive when visitors were open to it and it was presented in a visually and aurally stimulating way.²²

CONCLUSION

Campaigns are filled with countless decisions, including how best to promote a candidate online. It is clear that campaign teams are quite deliberate in designing their sites, although they have generally made these decisions with little concrete knowledge of their effect on site visitors. This study provides some initial empirical evidence that even seemingly small design choices can, at times, have some discernable effects on how the candidate is evaluated. In particular, this study found that incorporating multimedia into a candidate website had some benefits among the candidate's fellow partisans while the impact on non-supporters was more reserved or even negative, depending on political interest.

These results should be seen as preliminary rather than conclusive, however, given the limitations of this study. As mentioned above, the sample consisted of college-aged students so it deviated from the true population of candidate website visitors who are typically a little older (Kohut et al. 2008). Therefore, we cannot be entirely certain that these results would hold among a more representative population given the particular attributes of young people. It could be, for example, that young people's significant exposure to news and political material via the Internet and/or their limited engagement with the candidate caused them to react differently to the multimedia site than older visitors would have. As such, this college-aged sample limits the generalizability of the results.

This study is further limited by the fact that it was conducted in a lab with a single Republican candidate. In this way it did not mimic an actual campaign because participants received the candidate's message in isolation from other candidates and campaign information from the media. In addition, given that there are differences in how partisans receive and process information (Amodio et al. 2007), further research is needed to determine whether the same effects would occur if the stimulus had been a Democratic candidate's website. There is also some question about how the timing of the experiment (i.e., early in the campaign) might have affected the results. Participants, particularly those who are relatively young, may have reacted differently later in the campaign, after learning more about the race and possibly becoming more invested in a particular candidate. For these reasons, the results found here really represent more of a starting point for future research than a conclusive analysis of how multimedia use on candidate websites affects voters.

With these caveats in mind, this study still has some interesting implications for campaign practitioners and researchers. The results speak, first of

all, to the importance of investigating links between campaign strategies and voting behavior (McGraw 2003, 395). Rather than treating candidate websites as inconsequential, researchers ought to take more seriously their impact on the growing number of voters who visit them each year. The results also confirm the necessity of investigating seemingly small choices about candidate website design. We now know that choices about information presentation, interactivity, and other features can have some influence on perceptions of the candidate and vote intentions. Understanding how these component parts work is necessary to build a general explanation of how, when, and why candidate websites will affect voters. In other words, this type of study provides insight into why some candidate websites are generally more effective than others.

This study also provides campaigners with some preliminary empirical evidence of how incorporating audiovisual material into a candidate website affects different visitors. This study found that a multimedia-enhanced site provided more consistent benefits among supporters than non-supporters. The implication is that candidate websites with multimedia may provide campaigns with a net benefit, at least among young voters in certain situations, assuming that supporters are more likely to visit than non-supporters, particularly non-supporters with limited political interest. In other words, a candidate website with multimedia might outperform one without multimedia to the extent that supporters make up a good portion of the visitors, as they often do (Bimber and Davis 2003; Rainie et al. 2005; Iyengar et al. 2008). As such, it seems as though candidates might be making a reasonable investment given that multimedia features appear to be a little more than just bells and whistles; they can have some real political benefits with certain voters under the right set of circumstances.

NOTES

1. Williams (2003, 4) calculates that individual major- and third-party Senate candidate websites received between 1,000 and 800,000 hits each in 2000; by 2002, the number ranged from 6,800 to 1.6 million per site. Candidate websites affect even more voters indirectly through activists spreading information (Foot and Schneider 2006, 86, 129–155; Smith 2009) and reporters gathering material (Bimber and Davis 2003, 68–72).

2. Even relatively simple audio and video clips that are produced and uploaded “in-house” require time, effort, and technical expertise, while contracting this work to professional consultants adds financial costs on top of the time and effort required of candidates and staffers. Trent and Friedenber (2008, 374) note that professionally produced television spots can run into the thousands, if not tens of thousands, of dollars, while a search of consultants in *Politics* magazine shows, for example, that voiceover work for audio spots can cost as much as \$385.00 for the first hour. Putting these features into a site requires additional costs; for example, one consulting firm charges \$1,200 for a basic campaign site (i.e., without audio or video), while a site with “streaming media” is \$4,000 (i.e., more than 3 times as much). These costs are not always prohibitive, but they are nonetheless significant enough to cause campaigns to consider whether incorporating multimedia is really worth it.

3. “Multimedia” has been used to describe features ranging from photographs to form fields. In this paper, “multimedia” is defined as a presentation that uses audio or video, rather than text, to convey information. The terms “multimedia” and “audio and/or video” are used synonymously throughout.

4. Work sponsored by the Pew Foundation (Cornfield and Rainie, 2003, Rainie et al. 2005) shows that more than a third of candidate website visitors find them “useful” in helping decide for whom to vote, although it is not clear whether this means that they actually change visitors’ political opinions and/or vote choices.

5. Stromer-Galley et al. find that, unlike multimedia, candidates generally seek to avoid using interactive features because they can compromise message control (Stromer-Galley 2000; Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002; Stromer-Galley and Baker 2006). In addition, Warnick et al. (2005) find that some web-based interactivity increased issue position recall, although too much of it interfered with the recollection of site content.

6. According to Brader (2006, 19), “the combination of moving images and sound provides a window into distant places and events in such a way that they feel ‘real,’ as if the viewer were ‘there’ in some sense, lending an aura of truth and authenticity to what is seen and heard.” Graber (1996, 87–89) adds, “The perceived realism of visuals lends them credibility. . . . Americans find audiovisual news more appealing, interesting, and believable than other forms. . . . Most situations in life have visual dimensions, making experiences that lack visuals seem unrealistic.”

7. Brader (2006, 142) explains, “Cues like those in campaign ads often trigger emotional responses but not conscious awareness on the part of the individual. . . [thus] the capacity to counter argue is less useful. . . . This is not to say that political appeals can never be rejected; indeed, the more explicit and open the appeal, the more we should expect that the capacity to assimilate or resist plays a role. However, responses to emotional cues of the sort often appearing in campaign ads occur automatically and, even when a person is aware of a change in feelings, she may not fully appreciate why that change occurred. She is still capable of both recognizing that she disagrees with the message of the ad and rejecting its arguments, but she may not be able to control easily the fact she feels less (or more) inclined to reject those arguments this time around.”

8. Bimber and Davis (2003, 111) note, “while it is true that most people visit candidate websites after having decided for whom they will vote, enough citizens to be potentially electorally significant, particularly in a close race, are undecided at their first visit” (also see Rainie et al. 2005, 12). This may be particularly true for congressional candidates’ sites as voters often go online for information about candidates with whom they are less familiar (Bimber and Davis 2003, 114–118).

9. All materials and procedures were approved by the University of Minnesota’s Institutional Review Board.

10. By mentioning his party identification, presenting conservative positions, and discussing his Minnesota-based family and biography, Kennedy’s website made it clear that he was not to be confused with Senator Ted Kennedy.

11. Although the home page of the multimedia site included a handful of additional static photos, the primary difference between the two sites was the inclusion of 5 audio and 6 video clips. While these pictures muddy the experimental waters a little, their effect is undoubtedly small given that they appeared only on the front page and were overshadowed by the much more numerous audio and video features.

12. The multimedia material was not translated into text for basic site participants for three reasons. First, it would have meant deviating from the verbatim text from Kennedy’s past campaign sites. Second, the language from an ad is not always consistent with the style of the written text, which could have produced an awkward written message. Third, writing out the transcript would have made the written text repetitive. This decision is further supported by results showing that participants visiting the multimedia site did not fully utilize this extra volume of information—they appear to have largely skipped over the written text when audiovisual features were available. For example, the health care page featured a 25-second audio clip. While basic site visitors who went to this page ($n = 42$) report spending an average of 56 seconds reading it, those in the multimedia condition ($n = 38$) only spent an average of 46 seconds on this page. This suggests that while participants used the multimedia features when they were available, they did not take advantage of the increased volume of information by both reading the text and using the audio or video feature. If they had, their average time on the page would have been much longer.

13. A control group was not used because Kennedy’s emerging status with most participants would have made survey results from a condition with no exposure unreliable.

14. Along with these verbal instructions, each participant received written instructions that included the following: “. . . After you fill out the consent form, I will direct you to a computer and ask you to spend 10 minutes browsing the Internet. Please follow the on-screen instructions and raise your hand if you have any questions or encounter any technical difficulties. Once you have browsed for 10 minutes, I will ask you to complete a survey. . . .”

15. A post-test design has the advantage of easy administration. The downside is that post-tests collect all information from participants after they have interacted with the stimulus. In this case, it means that

measures of pre-test recognition and feelings, as well as participant background information, may have been influenced by the experimental material. To address this, I followed standard survey protocol (e.g., Fowler 2002) in placing these questions at the end of the survey, long after participants had viewed the site and after they had answered a number of media exposure and political knowledge questions. Also, tracking software was not used to record participant browsing due to costs and ethical issues.

16. Cross tabulations by condition for party identification, gender, race, academic major, and having visited a candidate website in the past all produced insignificant chi-square statistics (i.e., $p > .10$ in two-tailed tests). Means comparisons for age, political activity, political interest, frequency of Internet use, and frequency of getting news online all produced insignificant t -scores (i.e., $p > .10$ in two-tailed tests).

17. One-tailed tests of significance are used due to the directionality of the hypotheses (Blalock 1979, 163).

18. Specifically, participants were asked "How well does the word/phrase ____ describe Mark Kennedy" ranging from "not well at all" (1) to "very well" (5). The composite measures were divided by three to create a five-point scale.

19. Economic issues were mentioned in the "Deficit" and "Tax Relief" audio spots as well as in the "Economy and Jobs" video, whereas family values were emphasized in the "Importance of Family" video. In addition, Social Security was a central theme of the "Seniors" video, while the war on terror appeared in an audio recording ("Progress in Iraq") and two videos ("Trip to Iraq" and "The New Iraq").

20. This correspondence does not necessarily mean that individual audio or video files are directly associated with higher approval on specific issues. The nature of this experiment makes it difficult to isolate the impact of individual features. In particular, comparing basic site participants to multimedia site participants who did not use a particular feature to those who did use it is complicated by the fact that those in the second group—i.e., multimedia site visitors who did not use a particular feature—likely used other features that could affect their approval on a given issue. For example, it is difficult to prove that the "Importance of Family" video was directly responsible for high family values approval because, although there is a significant difference between conditions, those multimedia site participants who did not watch the video are more supportive of Kennedy's family values policy than the basic site participants (2.317 and 2.718, $t_{159} = 2.604$, $p = .005$), even though neither watched the video, and as supportive as those multimedia site participants who did watch the video (2.718 and 2.585, $t_{105} = 1.14$, $p = .1266$). Therefore, differences between conditions should be seen as the result of general multimedia use and its benefits rather than specific features having a direct impact on particular evaluative dimensions.

21. Participants who were "not at all interested," "not too interested," or "somewhat interested" in politics were categorized as low-interest (48.5%) while "very interested" or "extremely interested" participants were categorized as high-interest (51.5%).

22. These results, although based on an experiment during the 2006 election, are likely to hold for some time given that multimedia use on candidate websites seems to have leveled off (Druckman et al. 2007; Gulati and Williams 2009) and it is unlikely that the process driving these effects will change—audiovisuals have long been associated with personality cues and persuasion (see Graber, 2001).

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