

Polls and Elections

Conventional Wisdom: Political Learning During Presidential Nominating Conventions

AARON C. WEINSCHENK

Debates about whether presidential nominating conventions are useful institutions in American politics have emerged in recent presidential elections. Are they needless events or do they serve an important democratic purpose? Do potential voters gain anything from the conventions? In this article, I use panel data collected around presidential conventions to examine how exposure to convention speeches impacts postconvention knowledge about the candidates, controlling for preconvention knowledge levels. I find evidence that campaign information generated during the presidential conventions increases knowledge about candidate positions, although the convention that occurs first in a presidential election appears to have a larger effect on knowledge gains than the convention that occurs second. I conclude that conventions have not outlived their usefulness but are instead important institutions that facilitate political learning and therefore enhance the democratic process.

Keywords: presidential conventions, nominating conventions, political learning, political knowledge, campaign effects

Introduction

The quadrennial presidential nominating conventions typically capture a great deal of attention from the news media, scholars, campaign professionals, and ordinary citizens. Many aspects of these events generate interest, although the bumps in candidate support that can occur after the conventions are usually a hot topic. Scholarly analyses of presidential conventions, of which there have been a relatively small number, have focused heavily on measuring and explaining convention bumps (Campbell, Cherry, and Wink 1992; Holbrook 1996; Panagopoulos 2007; Stimson 2004). Many polling organizations also calculate the size of convention bumps after the dust settles. Interestingly, despite media and scholarly interest in convention bumps, each presidential election seems to generate a discussion about the usefulness of the convention as a political institution. A 2012 article in *The Boston Globe* was titled “Time to shelve the political conventions” and went on to note that “. . . nominating conventions in decades past had something today’s vast high-tech pageants lack: an authentic and indispensable role in the nation’s democratic process” (Jacoby 2012). A 2012 article in the *Los Angeles Times* called the convention a

Aaron C. Weinschenk is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. His research focuses on political behavior, campaign effects, and political participation and has appeared in numerous outlets.

“substanceless media event” (Conventions: Not the taxpayers’ party 2012). Perhaps voters gain little, if anything, from presidential conventions. There are certainly alternative viewpoints about conventions, though. An article in *The Charlotte Observer* published during the 2012 election argued that, “[d]espite what many think, national political conventions craft a message and can have significant impact on elections and policy” (Weiner and Ravenet 2012). A number of political scientists, too, have argued for the importance of these campaign events (Panagopoulos 2008; Stimson 2004; Holbrook 1996; Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Cera and Weinschenk 2012; 2013; Panagopoulos and Endres Forthcoming). Evidence that, at least in some contexts, conventions affect the dynamics of candidate preferences certainly seems to lend support to the argument that these campaign events are not inconsequential to voters. Indeed, a number of studies have found that conventions can have fairly large and enduring effects on candidate performance (Stimson 2004; Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Holbrook 1996; Panagopoulos 2012).

Another argument about the importance of conventions revolves around the idea that they help stimulate voter learning—that they have a civic value. Although Stimson (2004) focuses on assessing the impact of conventions on aggregate level shifts in candidate support, he notes that conventions might also impact voter knowledge about candidates and policies. According to Stimson, “A public nearly always tuned out tunes in for a few days [during the conventions] and those are opportunities to learn about people and programs, times to change views. The more there is to learn, when candidates are unknown, or suffer from inaccurate images as with vice presidents, the more important the occasion. Nothing else in campaigning compares” (2004, 137–38). Interestingly, while many people seem to think that debates are the most important opportunities for voter learning during presidential elections, the conventions should actually provide a better chance for voters to learn about candidates and policies. As Holbrook (1996) has noted, the timing of conventions—early in the general election cycle, when information about candidates and policies is relatively scarce—allows this flow of political information to exercise a large impact on voters. Presidential debates usually occur very late in the campaign process, when most voters have already learned a great deal about the candidates and have made up their minds about which candidate they will vote for (Holbrook 1996). In addition, conventions are unlike other campaign events in that they allow candidates to speak directly to voters (via convention speeches), without having their message filtered through the media. According to Stimson, presidential nominating conventions are “times of intense political learning” (2004, 137). The question of whether voters learn during presidential conventions remains an open one, despite Stimson’s statement, which was made over 10 years ago.¹ Although it seems plausible that voters learn during conventions, hypotheses about political learning during presidential conventions have not been empirically tested.

In this article, I take up the question of whether voters learn during presidential nominating conventions. This is an important question given the abovementioned debate about the utility of modern conventions. It is also important from the standpoint of

1. Interestingly, Holbrook (2010) points out that “. . . little academic research has been done on the role of conventions in voter education (a topic ripe for future investigation) . . .” (13).

democratic theory. During elections, campaigns and campaign events are supposed to help voters acquire information so that they can make informed choices. Voters need to know what candidates stand for so that they can choose the person who best represents their preferences and interests. It would be quite worrisome if voters were not gaining information about candidates and policies during campaigns. Such a situation might represent a breakdown in the democratic process.

The rest of this article unfolds in a straightforward manner. First, I provide an overview of the literature on political learning. Second, I discuss a number of hypotheses about political learning during presidential nominating conventions. Third, I describe the data and measures I use to examine the effects of presidential conventions on political learning. The availability of panel data collected immediately before and after presidential conventions makes it possible to provide an empirical test of Stimson's suggestion that voters learn a great deal during presidential conventions. Fourth, I use descriptive statistics and multivariate models to gauge the extent to which political learning occurs during conventions. In the statistical models, I focus on assessing the impact of convention speeches, the most important elements of the conventions, on voter learning. Finally, I conclude by discussing the implications of my results and by commenting on the value of the presidential nominating convention as an institution in American politics.

Political Learning from Campaigns

In this article, I am interested in understanding whether and how voters learn during campaign events. Political learning has been conceptualized in a number of different ways in the literature on campaign effects. One potential way of thinking about political learning is in terms of the strengthened connection between voters' underlying attitudes and assessments and their vote choice that occurs as voters are exposed campaign information. A number of scholars have taken this approach. For example, Arceneaux (2006) uses cross-national survey data to show that, as Election Day approaches, voters place more weight on fundamental variables, such as economic assessments and ideology, when making their vote choices. Stevenson and Vavreck (2000) find a similar effect from campaigns. Using data from 113 elections, they find that in longer campaigns, economic conditions have a more pronounced effect on electoral performance than in shorter campaigns. The implication is that longer campaigns provide voters with a better chance to hear competing campaign messages and to learn about the true state of the economy than shorter ones. More recently, Holbrook and McClurg (2009) look at the structure of vote choices for individuals living in battleground versus individuals not living in battleground states. Their research indicates that people living in battleground states cast votes that are better predicted by fundamental considerations than those in nonbattlegrounds. In short, the previous studies provide evidence that campaigns help voters make "enlightened decisions" on Election Day, primarily through the provision of information.

It is also possible to think about political learning in terms of the persuasive effects of campaign activities and communications. A vast amount of work has been done to determine whether campaigns are capable of changing voter assessments and preferences

(Shaw 1999; Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Ridout and Franz 2011). A number of studies stand out as being particularly relevant to this article, given their focus on conventions. Cera and Weinschenk (2012; 2013) examine how candidate trait evaluations are shaped by exposure to the speeches given during each nominating convention. Interestingly, they find that during each presidential convention, increased exposure to convention speeches improves individual evaluations of the convening candidate and damages evaluations of the opposition candidate, even after controlling for individual party affiliation and preconvention candidate evaluations. Hillygus and Jackman (2003) also study the persuasive effects of campaign events. They find that during the 2000 election, a strong performance during presidential debates or conventions allowed candidates to “bring home” stray partisans (activation) and win the support of political independents (persuasion).

Perhaps the most basic way of thinking about political learning is simply in terms of gains in political knowledge or information that occur after campaign events happen. This approach has been adopted in a number of studies, although scholars have measured voter learning in a variety of ways. Holbrook (1999) examines the impact of presidential debates on political learning. His conceptualization of political learning makes use of an open-ended question that asked survey respondents about the number of good and bad things they had to say about the candidates, a measure that is designed to capture the amount of information that potential voters are able to access and articulate about the candidates. Other scholars have used factual questions to capture political learning during campaign events. In their study on presidential debates, Benoit, Hansen, and Verser (2003), for example, examine the number of issue positions that potential voters are able to correctly identify. Both of these studies find some evidence that debates can foster voter learning, although the effects are often fairly small and only occur in some election years.

Expectations

The abovementioned studies serve as a useful guide for understanding political learning during presidential campaigns and point to a variety of ways that learning could be quantified in the context of presidential conventions. They also suggest a number of hypotheses that are worth investigating during conventions. Most studies on campaign effects carve out an important role for information. As voters are exposed to more information from campaigns, they are expected to form, change/update, or solidify their attitudes (Panagopoulos 2012). Of course, campaigns can impact behaviors as well (Holbrook and McClurg 2005; Bergane et al. 2005; Panagopoulos and Francia 2009). Interestingly, some studies on campaign events (and nominating conventions more specifically) have not directly measured individual exposure to campaign information. Cross-sectional studies, such as Holbrook’s (1999) work on presidential debates, often make use of the timing of interviews (before or after major campaign events) as a proxy for exposure to campaign information. In one of the best studies on conventions to date, Hillygus and Jackman (2003) use panel data to investigate changes in vote intention during the 2000 election but treat political conventions as “intervening events” (588) and examine their

effects by controlling for preconvention attitudes and preferences. Hillygus and Jackman's study was remarkably innovative but, as they note, they do not directly measure exposure to campaign information. Although it is extremely likely that the campaign effects in Hillygus and Jackman's study are due to information generated during the conventions, they point out the importance of measuring campaign information, noting that "[c]ampaign speeches, major endorsements, television advertising, major gaffes and scandals, and the like, may provide influential information to the electorate, but identifying and quantifying the impact of these activities is much more difficult" (588).

In this study, I am interesting in studying the effect of individual exposure to campaign information during the conventions on political learning. Overall, I expect that during the nominating conventions, as exposure to the convention speeches increases, potential voters will learn more about the candidates and their policies. The logic behind this hypothesis is straightforward. During presidential conventions, political speeches are the primary mechanisms through which the candidates and parties disseminate information (Cera and Weinschenk 2012). Conventions consist of a variety of events, but the speeches are the centerpiece. The speeches not only provide potential voters with opportunities to evaluate the personalities and traits of the candidates but also to learn information about the candidates' positions. Given that convention speeches serve these functions, among numerous others (e.g., generating excitement, attempting to persuade undecided voters, etc.), the expectation is that citizens who watch more of the speeches will know more about the candidates and their policy positions after the conventions than citizens who pay little attention to the convention speeches. Evidence of this kind of effect would lend support to Stimson's (2004) claim that conventions are "times of intense political learning" (137).

Although it seems reasonable to expect potential voters to learn during the conventions, they may not learn as much from each convention. Previous research on campaigns suggests that during the general election early events are more impactful than later ones (Holbrook 1996). For instance, Holbrook (1999) notes that "debates held relatively early in the Fall campaign result in greater information gains than those held later in the campaign" (72). He attributes this to the fact that during the early stages of the campaign there is relatively little information available. If we apply this logic to political learning during conventions, we should see larger gains during the convention that is held first during a presidential election.

Data and Measures

As the hypotheses above indicate, this study is interested in change over time. Thus, panel data that include measures collected before and after presidential conventions are necessary. In order to determine if an individual learned something after the conventions, we need to know what their baseline level of knowledge looked like. Fortunately, the National Annenberg Election Study (NAES) has conducted panel studies around the conventions. In this article, I use the 2004 Democratic and Republican Convention Panel Studies. In 2004, the NAES conducted four sets of interviews for the convention panel

studies: one before the Democratic convention, one after the Democratic convention (where the respondents interviewed before the convention were reinterviewed), one before the Republican convention, and one after the Republican convention (where the respondents interviewed before the convention were reinterviewed). This produced two separate panel studies (the same respondents were not tracked across all four conventions, although such a study would be incredibly valuable). In 2004, the Democratic convention occurred first and was held from July 26 through July 29. The Republican convention was held from August 30 through September 2. For the Democratic panel, interviews were administered during the 10 days before the Democratic convention and again during the 10 days after the convention. For the Republican convention panel, respondents were interviewed during the 10 days before the Republican convention and were reinterviewed during the 11 days following the convention. Because of the timing of survey delivery directly before and after the Republican and Democratic conventions, the 2004 NAES convention panels are ideal for isolating the effects that the conventions had on political learning.

Although there are a number of ways to conceptualize political learning, in this article I focus on changes in knowledge of candidate positions. In order to measure political learning (from the pre- to postconvention period), I make use of a series of questions that asked respondents about candidate policy stances. For instance, one question asked: “To the best of your knowledge, who favors allowing workers to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither?” The correct answer here was George W. Bush. The surveys asked respondents nine questions like this about candidate issue positions, with topics including Social Security, tax cuts, the income level at which Kerry wanted to repeal the Bush tax cuts, labor union organizing, health insurance, the Patriot Act, corporate taxes, assault weapons ban, and lawsuit limits.² For each question, correct answers were coded as 1 and incorrect answers and “don’t know” responses were coded as 0. Within each survey, the nine items were summed together, resulting in pre- and postconvention measures of knowledge for both conventions.

I am also interested in measuring respondent exposure to campaign information—specifically, the convention speeches. The NAES panel studies included a number of measures that capture the extent to which individuals were exposed to the speeches. In the Democratic National Convention (DNC) panel, respondents were asked three questions about exposure to the convention speeches. The first question asked how much of Bill Clinton’s speech respondents saw or heard (did not see or hear, few minutes, half hour, one hour, or entire speech). The second question asked how much of John Edwards’ speech respondents saw or heard (did not see or hear, few minutes, 20 minutes, entire speech). The last question asked how much of John Kerry’s speech respondents saw or heard (did not see or hear, few minutes, half hour, one hour, or entire speech). Each of these variables was coded so that higher values corresponded to higher levels of speech exposure. The variables were then averaged together and rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Cronbach’s alpha for the DNC speech exposure variable was quite high at .82. The

2. Question wordings provided in Appendix A.

Republican National Convention (RNC) panel also asked three questions about the convention speeches. The questions asked about exposure to Zell Miller's speech (did not see or hear, few minutes, 10 minutes, or entire speech), Dick Cheney's speech (did not see or hear, few minutes, 20 minutes, or entire speech), and George Bush's speech (did not see or hear, few minutes, half hour, one hour, or entire speech). Again, the speech variables were averaged together and rescaled to run from 0 to 1. Cronbach's alpha for the RNC speech exposure variable was .83, indicating a high level of reliability.

While exposure to the convention speeches is the key independent variable of interest, I include a number of control variables in the statistical models of political learning presented below. Controlling for other factors allows us to be more confident that any campaign effects that we observe are actually attributable to the campaigns. The control variables were all selected based on their theoretical relationship to knowledge and include a measure of whether a respondent watched or listened to any coverage of the convention on local news programs, national news programs, or political talk shows after the convention, income, education, age, race, sex, the extent to which a respondent reported following what is going on in government and public affairs, a measure of the strength of a respondent's partisan attachment, the extent to which a respondent discussed politics with their family or friends during the past week, and a measure of general political knowledge (based on answers to factual questions about the vice president, congressional veto, Supreme Court, and party control of the U.S. House).

Analysis and Results

Political Learning During the 2004 Democratic National Convention

In order to begin analyzing voter learning during the conventions, I present some basic descriptive statistics. Because the DNC occurred first in 2004, I start by analyzing those data. In order to get a preliminary sense of changes in voter knowledge during the DNC, it is helpful to take a look at the average number of correct answers on the knowledge measures. Figure 1 presents aggregate data on average knowledge (percent correct out of total number possible) before the DNC and the average knowledge after the convention. Overall, it appears that at the aggregate level average knowledge increased after the 2004 DNC. A difference of means test indicates that the difference between pre- and postconvention knowledge levels is statistically significant ($p < .05$). Of course, because Figure 1 pools all of the items together, it does not allow one to see which of the knowledge items saw substantial changes from the pre-convention period to the postconvention period. Figure 2 provides a look at changes on each knowledge question. It is interesting to note that eight of the nine items show an increase from the pre-convention period to the postconvention period, although the sizes of the gains vary across the different measures of knowledge. Overall, according to a series of difference of proportions tests, five of the items show statistically significant increases from the pre- to postconvention period. The largest gain occurred for the item measuring knowledge of the income level at which Kerry wanted to repeal the Bush tax cuts (\$200,000), with the pre-convention knowledge

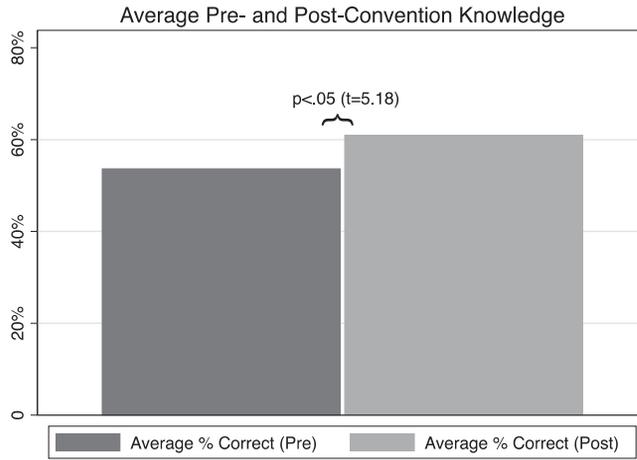


FIGURE 1. Knowledge about Candidate Issue Positions before and after the 2004 Democratic National Convention

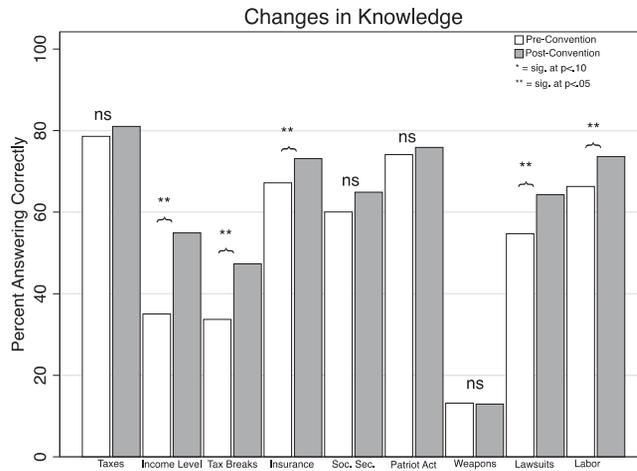


FIGURE 2. Comparing Pre- and Postconvention Knowledge, 2004 Democratic National Convention

level being 35% and the postconvention knowledge level being 55% (an increase of 20 percentage points).

Although the descriptive statistics presented above provide a preliminary sense of what political learning looked like during the 2004 Democratic convention, the only thing that we can glean from the graphs is that levels of knowledge changed from the pre- to postconvention period. The graphs do not provide any insight into the mechanisms that foster political learning during conventions. It is unlikely that conventions

TABLE 1
Effect of Speech Exposure on Postconvention Knowledge, 2004 Democratic National Convention

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i> <i>b/se</i>	<i>Model 2</i> <i>b/se</i>
Pre-Convention Knowledge	0.60*	0.45*
	0.03	0.04
Speech Exposure	0.90*	0.69*
	0.20	0.21
Post-Convention Coverage	—	0.21
		0.17
Income	—	-0.00
		0.04
Education	—	0.07*
		0.03
Age	—	-0.00
		0.00
White	—	0.39*
		0.21
Sex	—	0.28*
		0.14
Follow Politics	—	0.13+
		0.10
Partisanship Strength	—	0.09+
		0.07
Political Discussion	—	0.08*
		0.03
General Political Knowledge	—	0.20*
		0.08
Constant	2.28*	0.54
	0.18	0.47
<i>N</i> of Obs.	446	446
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.45	0.50

Notes: * $p < .05$ (one-tailed); + $p < .10$ (one-tailed).

happen and people just magically know more afterwards; something must be going on during conventions to foster changes in knowledge. In this article, I am interested in the extent to which exposure to campaign information—via the convention speeches—helps voters learn about the candidates. In order to examine whether the speeches impact knowledge, in Table 1 below I present the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models where postconvention knowledge is modeled as a function of exposure the convention speeches. Given that higher values on the speech variable indicate more exposure to the speeches, this variable should have a positively signed coefficient. One of the most important features of the model is the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable (the measure of preconvention knowledge). Without controlling for preconvention knowledge, it would not be possible to make claims about individual knowledge levels changing over time. Model 1 includes the just speech exposure measure and the lagged

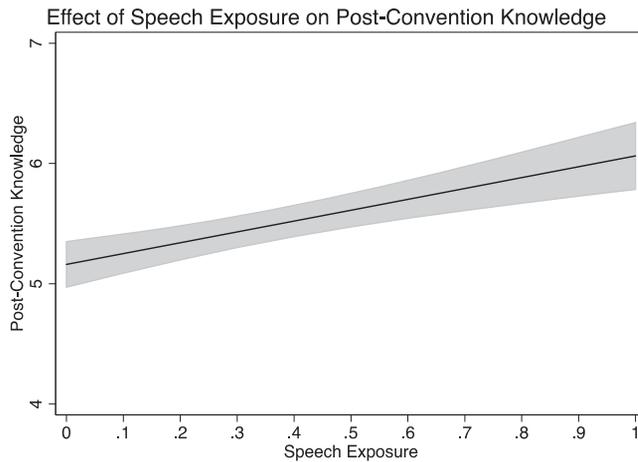


FIGURE 3. Effect of Speech Exposure on Postconvention Knowledge, 2004 Democratic National Convention

dependent variable and Model 2 adds the control variables mentioned above. This enables a comparison of how the effect of the campaign exposure measure changes once additional factors are considered.

The results in Table 1 provide evidence that exposure to the speeches during the DNC had a positive effect on knowledge about the candidates' positions. In both models, as exposure to the convention speeches increases, postconvention knowledge increases, even after controlling for preconvention knowledge.³ In both models, the coefficient on the speech variable is statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level (one-tailed test) and positively signed. It appears that potential voters learned through exposure to the speeches given at the DNC. The addition of control variables in Model 2 does not change the level of statistical significance on the speech variable and the sizes of coefficients do not differ significantly across the model specifications (difference of coefficients test z score = .75, $p = .23$).

In order to get a visual look at the substantive impact of exposure to the convention speeches, Figure 2 presents a graph of postconvention knowledge levels (controlling for preconvention knowledge) as speech exposure moves from its minimum value to its maximum value (along with the 95% confidence intervals). Given the similarities between Model 1 and Model 2, I use the results presented in Model 1 to generate the predicted effect of the speech exposure measure. When the speech variable takes on a value of 0, the predicted level of postconvention knowledge is 5.16 and when the speech variable takes on a value of 1, the predicted level of postconvention knowledge rises to 6.06, which represents an increase of 17.5 percentage points. Exposure to the convention speeches clearly has a positive impact on postconvention voter knowledge.

3. To account for the possibility that the effect of speech exposure varied by levels of preconvention knowledge, I tested an interaction between speech exposure and preconvention knowledge. The interaction was not statistically significant (t score on interaction coefficient = $-.84$, $p = .404$).

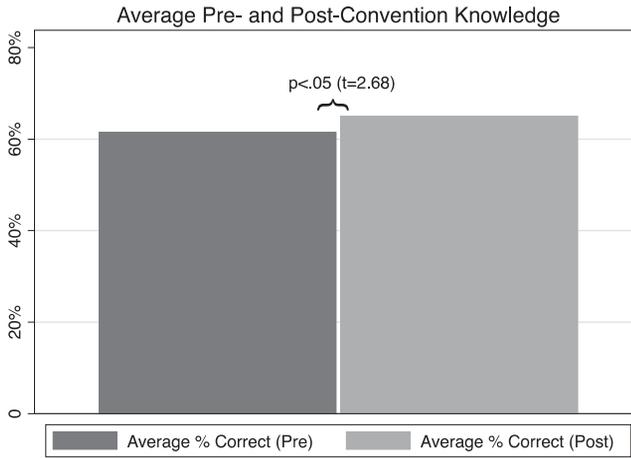


FIGURE 4. Knowledge about Candidate Issue Positions before and after the 2004 Republican National Convention

Political Learning During the 2004 RNC

It is now appropriate to consider political learning during the 2004 Republican convention, which followed the Democratic convention. Before turning to an individual-level analysis of how exposure to the campaign speeches impacted changes in knowledge following the RNC, I provide a look at aggregate data from the RNC. Figure 4 provides a look at the pre- and postconvention knowledge levels. As I did for the DNC, I calculated the average knowledge level (percent correct out of total) before the RNC and the average level after the convention. It is interesting to note that, at the aggregate level, knowledge appears to have increased from the preconvention to postconvention period ($p < .05$). Interestingly, the change in knowledge during the RNC was smaller than the change in knowledge during the DNC. During the Democratic convention, the preconvention knowledge level (average percentage correct out of the total number of questions) was 53.6% and the postconvention knowledge level was 61% (an increase of 7.4 percentage points). For the RNC, the preconvention level was 61.5% and the postconvention level was 65% (increase of 3.5 percentage points). It is also worth noting that preconvention knowledge for the RNC starts very close to where postconvention knowledge for the DNC ended, which makes sense (although again it is worth noting that the RNC panel study entails a different sample than the DNC study). Figure 5 provides a look at the changes on the nine knowledge questions used to construct the overall knowledge measures. Once again, a number of the changes are statistically significant, although the sizes of the changes vary across the items. Here, a series of difference of proportions tests indicate that three of the items show significant differences from the pre- to postconvention period. During the RNC, the biggest gains occurred on the items measuring which of the candidates wanted to allow workers to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market (George W. Bush) and support for extending the Patriot Act (Bush). During the

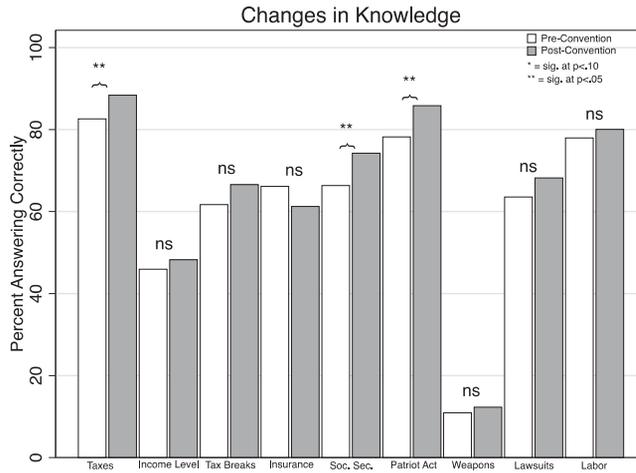


FIGURE 5. Comparing Pre- and Postconvention Knowledge, 2004 Republican National Convention

preconvention period, 66% of people were able to correctly answer the question about Social Security and during the postconvention period 74% of people were able to answer correctly (an increase of eight percentage points). During the preconvention period, 78% of people answered the Patriot Act question correctly and during the postconvention period 86% of people answered correctly (also an increase of eight percentage points).

Given the aggregate-level data presented above, it is now appropriate to examine the individual-level effects of exposure to the RNC speeches on knowledge. The RNC panel study contained the exact same measures as the DNC, so I am able to produce the same models that were shown in Table 1. In Table 2, I present the results of regression models (OLS) where postconvention knowledge is the dependent variable and preconvention knowledge is included as a predictor. Again, I present two model specifications in order to see how the addition of control variables influences the results. In Model 1, the speech exposure variable is statistically significant ($p < .05$, one tailed) and positively signed, although it is interesting to note that the coefficient is smaller in the RNC model than in the DNC model (Model 1 in Table 1). In Model 2, the speech exposure variable remains positively signed, but the level of statistical significance changes slightly ($p = .079$, one-tailed).⁴ Once again, compared to the speech exposure coefficient shown in Model 2 in Table 1, the coefficient in the RNC model is much smaller. It appears that exposure to the convention speeches given during the Republican convention did help potential voters learn about candidate positions, although the Democratic convention had a larger effect (both at the aggregate and individual level). The notion that the first

4. As I did in the DNC model, to account for the possibility that the effect of speech exposure varied by levels of preconvention knowledge, I tested an interaction between speech exposure and preconvention knowledge. The interaction was not statistically significant (t score on interaction coefficient = $-.00$, $p = .999$).

TABLE 2
Effect of Speech Exposure on Postconvention Knowledge, 2004 Republican National Convention

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i> <i>b/se</i>	<i>Model 2</i> <i>b/se</i>
Pre-Convention Knowledge	0.61*	0.50*
	.03	.04
Speech Exposure	0.59*	0.26+
	0.16	0.18
Post-Convention Coverage	—	-0.05
		0.15
Income	—	0.05+
		0.03
Education	—	0.08*
		0.03
Age	—	0.00
		0.00
White	—	-0.08
		0.18
Sex	—	0.19+
		0.12
Follow Politics	—	0.24*
		0.10
Partisanship Strength	—	0.04
		0.06
Political Discussion	—	0.07*
		0.03
General Political Knowledge	—	0.12*
		0.07
Constant	2.24*	0.45
	.19	0.43
<i>N</i> of Obs.	431	431
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.48	.52

Notes: * $p < .05$ (one-tailed); + $p < .10$ (one-tailed).

convention would have a larger impact on potential voters fits nicely with previous research on the importance of the timing of campaign events (Holbrook 1999; Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Holbrook 1996).

Although it appears that potential voters do learn from convention speeches, one potential limitation to political learning is that a relatively small portion of people watches all of the convention speeches. During the DNC, 10.76% of people watched all of the speeches. A much larger portion of potential voters (25.11% of people in the DNC study) do not see or hear any of the speeches. Viewership rates were similar for the RNC. During the Republican convention, 14.85% of people watched all of the speeches and 24.83% of people did not see or hear any of the speeches. These results are not too surprising. In an analysis of conventions over time, Panagopoulos (2007) finds that convention viewership has steadily declined from 1964 to 2004. According to his data, 25% of

households with televisions routinely watched convention coverage during the 1960s but ratings have dropped to about 15% of households for the most recent conventions. Thus, while presidential conventions are a great opportunity for potential voters to learn about candidates, many citizens bypass the opportunity to hear directly from the candidates and their closest allies.

Are Gains Confined to Candidate-Specific Knowledge?

The previous analyses focused on knowledge about candidate policy positions. One interesting question that remains is whether knowledge gains are confined to candidate positions or whether potential voters learn more about politics (e.g., institutional features of U.S. government) in general during the conventions. Given the content of convention speeches, it should be the case that potential voters learn about the candidates and not about government in general. If exposure to the convention speeches impacts general knowledge about politics, it would call into question the argument made above that convention speeches provide very specific information to potential voters that is focused on candidates and their preferred policies. Fortunately, the NAES enables a test of how exposure to the convention speeches impacts general political knowledge. In both convention studies, respondents were asked (during both pre- and postconvention studies) questions about their general levels of political knowledge (a general knowledge index based on four factual questions about U.S. government was included in Tables 1 and 2 above to make sure the results were robust). In Table 3, I use a postconvention measure of general political knowledge (range is from 0 to 4, with 0 indicating no correct answers and 4 indicating correct answers to all of the knowledge questions) as the dependent variable. The following variables are included as controls: preconvention knowledge (based on the same four factual knowledge questions), income, education, age, race, sex, the extent to which a respondent follows politics, partisanship strength, and the extent of political discussion. In order to determine whether exposure to the speeches impacts general political knowledge, I include the speech exposure variables used in the models above and the measure of exposure to any postconvention media coverage.

Comfortingly, the results in Table 3 provide evidence that the speech exposure measure does not have a statistically significant effect on the postconvention measure of general political knowledge (controlling for preconvention knowledge). It appears that the convention speeches facilitate learning when it comes to knowledge about the candidates' policy positions, but do not have an impact on general knowledge (e.g., processes and institutions) about U.S. government.

Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this article was simple: to understand the effect of campaigns on political learning. I focused on what are arguably the most important campaign events during presidential elections—the nominating conventions. Using high-quality panel data collected immediately before and after the 2004 presidential conventions, I was able to study

TABLE 3
Effect of Speech Exposure on Postconvention General Political Knowledge

<i>Variables</i>	2004 DNC	2004 RNC
	<i>b/se</i>	<i>b/se</i>
Pre-Convention General Knowledge	0.68*	0.53*
	0.03	0.04
Speech Exposure	0.07	-0.07
	0.09	0.10
Post-Convention Coverage	0.05	0.12
	0.08	0.08
Income	0.00	-0.01
	0.02	0.02
Education	0.02	0.04*
	0.01	0.02
Age	-0.00*	-0.00
	0.00	0.00
White	0.06	0.05
	0.10	0.10
Sex	0.11*	0.10
	0.06	0.07
Follow Politics	0.01	0.04
	0.04	0.05
Partisanship Strength	-0.01	-0.01
	0.03	0.05
Political Discussion	0.00	-0.01
	0.01	0.03
Constant	1.06*	0.99*
	0.21	0.24
<i>N</i> of Obs.	446	431
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.58	.41

Notes: * $p < .05$ (one-tailed); + $p < .10$ (one-tailed).

how exposure to convention speeches influenced postconvention knowledge, controlling for preconvention knowledge. Exposure to both the Republican and Democratic conventions had a positive impact on postconvention candidate knowledge, but exposure to the speeches during the RNC had a much less pronounced effect on political learning than exposure to the speeches during the DNC. Although there has been debate about the utility of modern presidential conventions, the results here lend support to arguments suggesting that conventions are still valuable institutions. Although the nominees are now known well before the conventions occur, conventions provide potential voters with an important opportunity to observe and learn about the candidates. The data presented above indicate that political learning does indeed occur during the conventions, in spite of the pageantry. The modern presidential convention is not a pointless institution that has outlived its usefulness but instead is an important one that facilitates political learning and therefore enhances the democratic process.

This article shed light into the dynamics of presidential nominating conventions, but there is still much more work that needs to be done in order to fully understand

conventions. In the future, scholars should consider investigating whether voters learn about candidates' biographical information during the conventions. Given the importance that many voters place on candidate traits, it would be worthwhile to examine learning beyond the context of policy positions. It may also be worthwhile to measure political learning in other ways. There are a variety of ways to conceptualize political learning during campaigns, as I mentioned above. In addition, future researchers should consider applying the model of convention effects developed in this article to conventions in other years to see if the hypotheses advanced in this article hold in the context of other presidential elections. The NAES did not conduct panel studies in 2008 or 2012, but if they conduct panel studies in future presidential elections, this analysis should be replicated. It would also be fruitful to track voters over a longer amount of time. This study used two-wave panel surveys conducted during the 2004 election to study intra-individual changes in political knowledge. It would be incredibly interesting to see how long the campaign-induced changes in political knowledge detected in this article persist. Such a study would undoubtedly be expensive to conduct, but it would provide important insights into the durability of campaign effects. In the end, researchers have only just scratched the surface in understanding how presidential conventions influence potential voters.

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Appendix A: Question Wordings for Knowledge Measures

All items asked in identical form in the pre- and postconvention surveys in both the DNC and RNC panel studies.

To the best of your knowledge, who favors making the recent tax cuts permanent—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don’t know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct Answer: Bush.*

John Kerry says that he would eliminate George W. Bush’s tax cuts on those making how much money—over \$50,000 a year; over \$100,000 a year; over \$200,000 a year; or over \$500,000 a year? If don’t know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct Answer: over \$200,000 a year.*

To the best of your knowledge, who favors eliminating tax breaks for overseas profits of American corporations and using the money to cut corporate income taxes—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don’t know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct answer: Kerry.*

To the best of your knowledge, who favors the federal government helping to pay for health insurance for all children and helping employers pay the cost of the workers’ health insurance— George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don’t know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct answer: Kerry.*

To the best of your knowledge, who favors allowing workers to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don't know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct answer: Bush.*

To the best of your knowledge, who wants to extend all provisions of the USA Patriot Act in order to fight terrorism—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don't know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct answer: Bush.*

To the best of your knowledge, who urges Congress to extend the federal law banning assault weapons—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don't know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct answer: both.*

To the best of your knowledge, who wants to limit the amount of money people can be awarded in lawsuits—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don't know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct answer: Bush.*

To the best of your knowledge, who wants to make it easier for unions to organize—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both, or neither? If don't know: Anyone come to mind? *Correct answer: Kerry.*