



Presidential Campaigns and the Knowledge Gap in Three Transitional Democracies

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Analysis of panel data from Brazil, Mexico, and Russia suggests that presidential campaigns have ambiguous effects on inequalities in political knowledge. In all three countries, the "knowledge gap" among citizens with different levels of socioeconomic resources stayed the same or widened. At the same time, less affluent and educated citizens who paid a great deal of attention to the campaign learned more than equally attentive high-status citizens. These findings suggest that modern, media-intensive electoral campaigns do provide information to low socioeconomic status citizens in readily digestible form, but they fail to stimulate sufficient attention to politics among these citizens to close the knowledge gap.

Can citizens who have traditionally assumed what Almond and Verba (1963) termed a "passive subject role" become sophisticated about national political actors and issues? Or will only the more elite members of society have the wherewithal to become knowledgeable about public affairs? In this article, we examine changes in levels of political knowledge in Mexico, Brazil, and Russia, paying close attention to the gap in civic competence across high, moderate, and low socioeconomic status (SES) groups. We test whether electoral campaigns in these transitional democracies replicate—or even exacerbate—knowledge gaps. This topic has received some attention in the United States and other industrialized democracies (e.g., Holbrook 2002; Moore 1987; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Nadeau et al. 2001; Prior 2005; Jeri, Barabas, and Bolsen 2004). Never before has it been systematically addressed in a democratizing context.

Using panel survey data collected during presidential elections in Mexico (2000), Brazil (2002), and Russia (1996), we find that levels of civic competence depend heavily on SES. Moreover, high-status individuals tend to learn more from campaigns than low-status individuals, thus exacerbating the knowledge gap. At the same time, the knowledge gap virtually disappears for individuals follow politics closely; low SES citizens who paid attention to electoral campaigns achieved roughly the same levels of political sophistication as did high SES citizens. We conclude that modern campaigns could potentially reduce aggregate knowledge gaps, but in practice are unlikely to do so. The principal obstacle does not appear to lie in the quality of campaign messages; nor is it the case that low SES citizen are inherently less able to absorb political information.

NOTE: An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the 2004 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. We thank Jorge Domínguez, Eric Waltenburg, Damarys Canache, Liz Zechmeister, Charlie Stewart, Buddy Howell, Philo Wasburn, and the anonymous *PRQ* reviewers for helpful comments.

Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2006): pp. 13-22

Rather, differential levels of political attentiveness are to blame for knowledge gaps.

The following section discusses inequalities in political knowledge and how these inequalities might be affected by campaigns. After that we describe our data sources and methods for comparing across the three countries. Gaps in political knowledge during each presidential campaign are then reviewed. That is followed by analyzes of the impact of campaign attention and SES on knowledge acquisition at the individual level. The final section briefly discusses the implications of our findings for scholarly research on political communication and democratization.

THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Scholars have long observed that citizens in democratic countries lack basic information about politics. Many people are ignorant of fundamental civic facts, such as how laws are made, the identities of major political actors in the policymaking process, and what positions these actors hold. Because such knowledge is an important ingredient in political engagement and the quality of citizen judgments, widespread ignorance about politics is generally regarded as problematic for democracy (Lippmann 1998 [1922], 1993 [1927]; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964, 1970; Neuman 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Niemi and Junn 1998; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1999).

One corollary problem is that the political information that does exist in the mass public is not evenly distributed. Despite the existence of "issue publics" who might acquire information about specific policy areas (Krosnick 1990; Key 1967), large numbers of people seem to be pervasively ignorant. Others, by contrast, appear to be relatively well-informed across the board (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse and Dupeux 1962; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: chap. 4). From the standpoint of democratic theory, this highly unequal distribution of political knowledge may be as troubling as low average levels of political knowledge. Because people with fewer resources—such as income and education—tend to be less informed about politics, they are likely

to be less politically engaged and effectual. As a result, inequalities in political sophistication tend to reproduce or reinforce broader inequalities in political life (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: chap. 6; see also, Eveland and Scheufele 2000; Brady, Verba, and Scholzman 1995; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1996; Schattschneider 1960).

Unfortunately, reducing the “knowledge gap” may be as difficult as increasing average levels of political sophistication.¹ Most people are not especially interested in politics, and acquiring information carries a cost (at least in terms of time spent). Moreover, neither time, political interest, nor the capacity to absorb new information is distributed equally in a population. As a result, those who have less inclination or ability to acquire knowledge about politics are unlikely on their own suddenly to start obtaining more of it, and some citizens will remain consistently more informed than others.

Political institutions, however, might alter the balance between the information-haves and the information-have-nots. In cross-national research based on a dozen cases, Gordon and Segura (1997) and Berggren (2001) show that levels of civic competence depend in part on party and electoral systems. In multiparty systems, parties have a greater incentive to differentiate themselves. When this happens, information becomes easier for citizens to obtain and levels of political sophistication rise. In theory, these changes in political discourse could make information especially accessible to lower-SES voters, thus reducing the knowledge gap.

The distribution of civic literacy could also change over time within a particular country. In all democracies, analysts typically divide the calendar into periods of “governance” and periods of “campaigning” (Hecló 2000). This distinction is not hard and fast, in part because it is not always clear when campaigns for office truly begin. Nevertheless, in the weeks leading up to a major national election, candidates and party officials work tirelessly to draw people’s attention to the race. Speeches and commercials are designed to reduce complex political matters to easy-to-digest messages, while broadcasters raise the salience and approachability of electoral politics by devoting more time to the campaign and to candidate debates. Because fiercely contested election campaigns make large amounts of political information readily available—certainly more accessible than in calmer periods of “governance”—and because office

seekers explicitly target the general population, they could reduce the knowledge gap.

Of course, this potentially equalizing effect is neither necessary nor automatic. Campaigns might increase political knowledge across the board, thus raising average levels of political sophistication but leaving the gap between different segments of the population intact. Electoral campaigns might even exacerbate disparities, if only those who are richest in social and economic resources or most able to absorb political information pay attention to the new stimuli. Finally, campaigns could potentially boost the sophistication of people with moderate resources, who are likely to be exposed to the new information, but may not already possess a great deal of background knowledge about politics.²

Debates about the knowledge gap, and how it might be altered by information flow, have a long tradition in the field of communication (Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien 1970; Tichenor et al. 1973; Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien 1975; Ettema and Kline 1977; Ettema, Brown, and Luepker 1983; Miyo 1983; Viswanath et al. 1993; Viswanath and Finnegan 1996; and Kwak 1999). Recently, analysts of electoral campaigns and political attitudes have begun to address the knowledge gap as well (Holbrook 2002; Moore 1987). Their analyses, however, have thus far been confined to established democracies, especially the United States. As a result, scholars know little about disparities in political sophistication in other countries, especially emerging democracies.

Passing acquaintance with these societies suggests that the knowledge gap is likely to be especially pronounced there. In many transitional democracies, overall levels of civic competence tend to be low, inequalities of all kinds are pronounced, and the overall quality of political representation is often in serious doubt (Conaghan 1994: 29-33; Almond and Verba 1963; Shin, Park, and Jang 2002, 2005; Finkel 2003; Milner and Gronlund 2004; Setzler 2002).³ As a result, understanding the circumstances under which political campaigns actually reduce the knowledge gap seems particularly pressing.

DATA AND MEASUREMENT

One approach to measuring changes in the knowledge gap would be to compare separate slices of the electorate

¹ For stylistic reasons, we use the terms “political competence,” “political literacy,” “political sophistication,” and “political knowledge” interchangeably. Conceptually, knowledge and sophistication may be quite different things, with the latter also capturing factors like attitude stability, attitude constraint, or ideological reasoning. Nevertheless, knowledge of basic political processes and key actors in government is at least a component or prerequisite of broader sophistication and civic competence (Lupia and McCubbins 1998: 20). Moreover, measures of political knowledge and sophistication are highly intercorrelated in practice. In fact, some analysts have argued that factual knowledge scales are perhaps the most reliable and valid indicators of underlying political competence (Luskin 1987); this argument parallels more recent trends toward using factual knowledge scales as proxies for more difficult-to-measure items like media exposure (Price and Zaller 1993).

² This conjecture follows in the spirit of Zaller’s (1992) and Converse’s (1962) nonlinear hypothesis regarding information flow in a campaign. Neither author, however, explored the potential endogeneity of political sophistication.

³ As Shin, Park, and Jang (2005: 204) write, “the citizens of new democracies tend to have a limited understanding...[of] democratic politics.” Similarly, Finkel (2003: 137) notes that “in many fledgling democracies, low participation, intolerance, political ignorance, and alienation are major systemic problems.” Using survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems archive, Milner and Gronlund (2004) focus specifically on cross-national variations in knowledge gaps. They suggest that political information “seems to be especially dependent on formal education where income is more unequally distributed,” a trait that is, alas, all too common in developing democracies.

taken at different points in time. In other words, we would contrast the information held by respondents with high levels of socioeconomic resources (e.g., income and education) to that held by respondents of lower SES. If differences between these groups diminished over the course of the race, we would conclude that the knowledge gap had declined (see Holbrook 2002).

Though eminently reasonable, this approach makes it difficult to draw inferences about the effect of the campaign itself on civic knowledge. Respondents who followed the campaign might know more about politics, but we would be unable to determine whether they knew more about politics *because* they paid more attention to the campaign. For the same reason, it might prove difficult to separate the effects of socioeconomic resources such as income and education from the effects of attention to the campaign. For instance, campaign attention might interact with socioeconomic status to produce knowledge gains in certain segments of the electorate.

Properly establishing the link between campaigns and changes in political knowledge requires panel data, in which the same people are tracked over the course of the race. With this in mind, we draw on data from three large panel surveys conducted during national campaigns: the Mexico 2000 Panel Study, the Brazilian 2002 Contextual Voting Study, and the 1995-1996 Russian Election Study. To our knowledge, these surveys represent the only large-scale panel datasets of electoral contests in transitional democracies that include measures of political sophistication.⁴ Our analysis thus represents as broad an examination of the impact of campaigns on the knowledge gap as existing data permit.

Given panel data, a second challenge concerns measurement of political competence. Although many indicators have been devised to measure political sophistication, a number of scholars argue that basic knowledge of neutral facts is perhaps the single best yardstick (Luskin 1987; Zaller 1992; Price and Zaller 1993). For two out of three cases—Brazil and Mexico—these sorts of factual items are available. In the Mexican sample, survey participants were asked the sorts of questions found in civics textbooks: “Could you tell me the names of the three branches of government? Could you tell me how many members there are in the Chamber of Deputies?” In the Brazilian survey, ques-

tions focused more on leaders and current policy issues: “Do you know who the Vice-President is? Do you know the party of the President? Can you identify a trading partner in Mercosur?” To create omnibus measures of political sophistication both in the early campaign period and after the presidential election, we added up the number of correct responses to these questions in the first and the last panel waves.⁵ For the Mexican sample, this index ranged from 0 to 4; for Brazilians, it ran from 0 to 3. We thus treat “textbook” and “current events” knowledge items as comparable markers of general political literacy.⁶

The surveys administered in Russia did not include any directly analogous knowledge questions on multiple waves. Consequently, we gauged respondents’ political competence through two assessments offered by the interviewer: how “sharp” the individual seemed; and how adept he or she was at answering questions about politics.⁷ In the Russian sample, the two interviewer evaluations are highly correlated in each wave (.72 in the first panel wave, and .73 in the last); averaging scores yields a summary measure of civic competence that is functionally comparable to the informational indices created for the Mexican and Brazilian respondents.⁸ Importantly, these interviewer scores correlate

⁵ In Mexico, the three branches of government are the presidency, the legislative branch, and the judiciary; there are 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the Mexican Congress. In the first survey wave, 57 percent did not know any of the answers, while 2 percent were correct on all four items; after the election, these figures shifted to 43 percent and 7 percent, respectively. Mercosur is a regional trading bloc that includes Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. In the first wave of the Brazilian survey, 21 percent of the sample gave no correct responses, and 34 percent knew all three facts; after the election, these percentages were 20 percent and 36 percent. For each additive scale, reliabilities were acceptable (α fell between .68 and .84). Mondak (2001) argues persuasively that the most valid way to measure political knowledge is through multiple-choice questions where “don’t know” responses are strongly discouraged; for those few survey participants who insist on answering “don’t know” rather than guessing, choice options should be randomly assigned. Unfortunately, this instrumentation was not used in Mexico or Brazil. In the Mexican interviews, “fill-in-the-blank” questions similar to those in American National Election Study surveys were employed. In Brazil, multiple-choice items were used, but “don’t know” responses were not actively discouraged. Consequently, the number of Brazilians refusing to choose an option was far higher than in the Mondak study, ranging from 23 to 36 percent. If these “don’t know” responses were randomly assigned, the reliability of the knowledge measure would drop, as one would expect—but there would be no offsetting gain in validity. (That is, the knowledge index would not moderate to any greater extent the relationships between ideological positions, candidate evaluations, and attitudes toward public policies; cf. Mondak 2001: 233-37.) It seems most reasonable in the case of Brazil, therefore, to treat “don’t know” responses as equivalent to incorrect answers.

⁶ When “textbook” and “current events” items appear together in survey questionnaires, researchers often treat them as comparable indicators and tally them all into a single measure of political knowledge (Cassel and Lo 1997, and Jennings 1996).

⁷ These ratings are similar to the interviewer judgments that typically appear on American National Election Study questionnaires, items that are said to be excellent proxies for general political knowledge (Bartels 1996, 2005; Zaller 1985).

⁸ “Sharpness” was coded on a four-point scale ranging from “very dull” to “significantly sharper than most respondents.” Skill in addressing the

⁴ Organizers of the Mexico 2000 Panel Study include Miguel Basañez, Roderic Camp, Wayne Cornelius, Jorge Domínguez, Federico Estévez, Joseph Klesner, Chappell Lawson (Principal Investigator), Beatriz Magaloni, James McCann, Alejandro Moreno, Pablo Parás, and Alejandro Poiré. Support for the Mexico 2000 Panel Study was provided by the National Science Foundation (SES-9905703) and *Reforma* newspaper. Data from the study, and further details about it, are publicly available at: <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/faculty/C.Lawson.html>. We are grateful to Barry Ames, Lucio Renno, and Andy Baker for making available the Brazilian panel data used in this article, which is not yet publicly available. Timothy Colton and William Zimmerman conducted the 1995-1996 Russian Election Study. It is publicly available at the I.C.P.S.R. (Study Number 3323). Of course, we alone are responsible for the analysis and interpretations offered here.

highly with political knowledge in the one wave in which questions about "political facts" were asked.⁹

The items used to differentiate citizens based on the political resources at their disposal also varied slightly from country to country. In each case, we factor analyzed education and self-reported family income to create a single measure of resources. This factor accounted for a sizeable portion of the variation in the two items (74 percent in the Mexico sample, 68 percent in Brazil, and 58 percent in Russia). Individuals falling in the top third of the factor score distribution were coded as having "high SES," and those in the bottom third were labeled as "low."

Our approach means that SES, like political competence, has a highly contextualized meaning. Education and income levels are substantially higher in Russia than Brazil, and Mexicans are on average wealthier than Russians or Brazilians. As a result, respondents who were classified as high or low SES did not have the same levels of resources in any absolute sense.¹⁰ Rather, individuals within each country had more or fewer resources relative to each other.

As with individual survey items, survey administration differed substantially across the three cases. The Mexico 2000 Panel Study was nationally representative; even with attrition it remained essentially a microcosm of the Mexican mass public (Domínguez and Lawson 2003: 345-50). The Russia sample was likewise meant to be nationally representative, though approximately 4.4 percent of the potential population in troubled regions was excluded, as was a rather large institutional and uniformed services population. The Brazilian sample was limited to two cities (Juiz de Fora in the state of Minas Gerais state and Caxias do Sul in the state of Rio Grande do Sul); this segment of the Brazilian electorate was presumably better informed and more heavily exposed to campaign information than the general population (Ames, Baker, and Renno 2003; Ames Renno, and Baker 2002). Stratification methods, refusal protocols, re-contacting procedures, attrition rates and timing of surveys also differed

survey items was coded on a three-point scale, ranging from "poorly" to "well." These two measurements were recoded to a 0 to 1 scale before averaging.

⁹ In the middle wave of the three-wave Russian panel survey, respondents were asked if they could identify previous heads of state and various world leaders. Regrettably, this was the only wave in which such measures were taken. After completing the survey, interviewers rated the respondent's "sharpness" and ability to answer the survey questions, much as they did in the other panel waves that are analyzed below. The correlation between the average interviewer evaluation and the knowledge scale was a very large .54, which is similar to what would be found in the American National Election Studies. In the 1994 ANES, e.g., the correlation between interviewer ratings of information levels and an index of factual knowledge items is .61.

¹⁰ Education was measured somewhat differently across the three countries. In the Mexican surveys, respondents were asked to name the level of schooling at which they stopped their formal education; Brazilians and Russians identified the number of years they spent in school. In each case, income was measured by asking how much money all members of the family earned per month.

across the three cases.¹¹ In Mexico, respondents were interviewed up to four times—February, late April/early May, early June, and just after the election in July of 2000. In Russia, respondents were interviewed in November-December 1995, December 1995-January 1996, and July-September 1996 (after the second round of the presidential election). Finally in Brazil, respondents were interviewed three times in 2002—March or April (depending on the city), August and October (between the first round of the election and the second). The different lengths of time between panel waves, not to mention the different numbers of waves themselves, could presumably affect changes in political sophistication. For our purposes, however, these studies all have one important element in common: they were all designed to bracket the presidential contest.

Beyond survey instrumentation and design, the political context differed markedly in each of our three cases. Although all three races were media-intensive, candidate-centered contests, the stakes and competitiveness varied. The Mexican campaign technically featured a number of candidates, but only three of these commanded a substantial share of the vote, and only two ever had a serious chance of winning (Francisco Labastida of the incumbent Institutional Revolutionary Party and Vicente Fox of the victorious National Action Party). The Brazilian contest was a four-man race with a subsequent run-off between the two leading candidates, but Luis Inacio Lula da Silva ("Lula") was a front-runner for at least the latter half of the campaign. The Russian election was somewhat competitive, but the ultimate outcome—a victory for Boris Yeltsin—was never seriously in doubt. These differences in the level of competition across the three cases might well have influenced citizen engagement.

Styles of campaigning and voter mobilization also differed across the three countries (and parties within each country). Extensive extralegal contributions in all three countries, combined with minimal reporting requirements, make it impossible to estimate the total volume of spending. That said, Mexico's campaign appears to have been somewhat more costly, Brazil's second most, and Russia's least. In Mexico, parties spent the bulk of their funds on television advertising; in Brazil, where television time is apportioned to parties but ads are not allowed, production costs and other forms of campaigning occupied a larger percentage of candidates' budgets. Meanwhile, biases in free media varied, with Mexican television being roughly balanced and Russian television heavily tilted toward the official candidate.

¹¹ For further details on the Russia survey, see: <http://webapp.icpsr.umich.edu/cocoon/ICPSR-STUDY/03323.xml>. Barry Ames and his colleagues plan to release a technical report on sampling for the Brazilian study in the near future; in terms of survey method, neighborhoods were the primary sampling unit. Within both Brazilian cities, approximately 20 neighborhoods were randomly selected. Within each of these neighborhoods, census tracts were randomly selected; households were then chosen at random within a given census tract, and respondents were polled using the "last birthday" method.

≡ TABLE 1

CHANGES IN POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE OVER THE COURSE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN: MEAN SCORES, WITH STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES

	N	Early Campaign	Post-Election	Gain
Mexico				
Whole Sample	1,082	1.17 (.04)	1.62 (.05)	.45 (.04)
Low SES	377	.36 (.06)	.70 (.09)	.34 (.06)
Middle SES	369	1.17 (.07)	1.70 (.08)	.53 (.07)
High SES	282	2.25 (.07)	2.75 (.06)	.50 (.07)
Brazil				
Whole Sample	2,953	1.72 (.02)	1.77 (.02)	.06 (.02)
Low SES	1,018	1.09 (.03)	1.11 (.03)	.02 (.03)
Middle SES	974	1.74 (.03)	1.82 (.03)	.08 (.03)
High SES	961	2.40 (.03)	2.45 (.03)	.05 (.02)
Russia				
Whole Sample	2,429	.73 (.01)	.72 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Low SES	726	.62 (.01)	.60 (.01)	-.02 (.01)
Middle SES	730	.78 (.01)	.77 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
High SES	673	.79 (.01)	.77 (.01)	-.02 (.02)

Note: In each country, socioeconomic class was measured through a factor score based on the respondent's level of education and family income; this factor accounted for 74 percent of the variation in these two items in Mexico, 68 percent in Brazil, and 58 percent in Russia. The samples were divided approximately into thirds to identify *low*, *middle*, and *high* SES groups. Political knowledge in Mexico and Brazil was measured by counting the number of correct responses to a battery of "civic information" items (a scale running from 0-4 in Mexico and 0-3 in Brazil, with α reliabilities falling between .68 and .84). In Russia, interviewer evaluations of a respondent's "sharpness" (a continuum ranging from "very dull" to "significantly sharper than most respondents") and ability to answer the survey questions ("poorly" to "well") were averaged and put on a 0-1 scale. Source: Mexico 2000 Panel Study, Waves 1 and 4; Brazilian 2002 Panel Study, Waves 1 and 3; Russian Election Study, 1995-1996, Waves 1 and 3.

Finally, the broader political significance of each race also differed from country to country. Mexico's 2000 contest was perhaps the first free and fair presidential election in that nation's history; it resulted in the surprising defeat of the world's longest-ruling party. Brazil's was not the first presidential election since democratization, but the prospect of a leftist victory made the race a major turning point; like Mexico's contest, it signaled both change and democratic consolidation. Russia's election, by contrast, was the last passably competitive contest that that country would have before it lapsed back into authoritarianism.

As a result of all these differences in survey design and political context, raw survey data are not comparable across our three cases. We cannot, for instance, draw conclusions about relative levels of political sophistication in Brazil, Mexico, and Russia (e.g., that Russians are more knowledgeable than Mexicans or Brazilians). Fortunately, the goal of our analysis does not require us to make these sorts of problematic inferences. Rather than compare levels or rates of change in political knowledge across countries, we seek to assess *relative* amount of learning across different types of respondents *within* each country. Given this aim, the differences in survey design and political context across our three cases are actually assets. If the same type of finding holds across different populations under different conditions, we may feel more confident about the generalizability of our findings.

One final data challenge concerns measuring campaign attentiveness. In order to assess whether campaign stimuli affected the knowledge gap in any of the countries, we must come up with reasonable measures of exposure. In each of the surveys, respondents were questioned about their television viewing habits, recall of ads, and exposure to particular campaign events, such as debates. If we wished to compare the relative impact of televised news broadcasts as opposed to, say, campaign commercials, these various measures would be of use. However, given our interest in making broad generalizations, we will not attempt to model these campaign effects. Instead, we rely on a simpler, and admittedly blunter, indicator of exposure to the presidential campaign, a three-point measure of attentiveness to the campaign taken either at the height of the race (in Mexico and Brazil) or immediately after the election (in Russia).¹²

AVERAGE KNOWLEDGE GAINS

How did the campaign affect the aggregate distribution of political knowledge in Mexico, Brazil, and Russia? Table 1 compares aggregate-level mean scores for civic knowledge

¹² In the Mexican panel, this measure of campaign interest is taken from Wave 3 of the survey (June 2000). In Brazil, the interest item is taken from Wave 2 (August 2002).

≡ TABLE 2
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS AND ATTENTION TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

	Attentiveness to the Campaign			Total	(N)
	Low	Moderate	High		
	%	%	%	%	
Mexico					
Low SES	71	21	9	101	(224)
Middle SES	60	31	9	100	(218)
High SES	32	44	25	101	(158)
Brazil					
Low SES	57	18	25	100	(909)
Middle SES	39	25	35	99	(863)
High SES	27	29	44	100	(826)
Russia					
Low SES	23	59	18	100	(723)
Middle SES	14	60	26	100	(729)
High SES	12	60	27	99	(671)

Note: Percentages sum horizontally; numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding. Attentiveness to the presidential campaign was measured approximately four weeks before the election in Mexico, seven weeks before the first round election in Brazil, and immediately after the presidential election in Russia. Mexicans who expressed "little" or "no" interest in the campaign, Brazilians who followed the campaign "only a little," "very little," or "not at all," and Russians who found the campaign "uninteresting" or "completely uninteresting" were put in the *low campaign attentiveness* group. Mexicans and Brazilians with "much" interest and Russians who found the campaign "very interesting" were put in the *high campaign attentiveness* group. The remaining respondents were put in the *moderate campaign attentiveness* group. The correlation between SES and attention to the campaign is .30 in Mexico, .23 in Brazil, and .13 in Russia. Source: Mexico 2000 Panel Study, Waves 1 and 3; Brazilian 2002 Panel Study, Waves 1 and 2; Russian Election Study, 1995-1996, Waves 1 and 3.

at the beginning and the end of the campaigns, both for the sample on the whole and broken down by socioeconomic class.¹³ We see the greatest amount of learning taking place in Mexico. In the first wave of the panel, respondents had an average score of 1.17 on the 0-4 scale. Following the 2000 election, the mean rose to 1.62. In the Brazilian sample there was a significant increase as well, though this difference is not as striking (1.72 before the election, 1.77 afterwards, based on a 0-3 scale). Even less overall change surfaces in the case of Russia. We suspect that the gain in information is so noticeable in Mexico for two reasons: exceptionally intense competition and generally low level of political knowledge at the beginning of the race.¹⁴

Turning our sights to variations within each sample, we find that all three countries had large knowledge gaps. In both the first and the second panel waves, those with high SES knew significantly more than those with low SES—in Brazil and especially Mexico, dramatically more. In terms of overall changes in political knowledge, large gains in average

knowledge surface for all status blocs in Mexico, whereas political competence in Russia barely changed. Gains in Brazil were modest but statistically significant for the middle and high SES groups (based on paired samples *t*-tests).

Knowledge gaps appear to have widened or stayed the same during the period in question. High and middle SES Mexicans, for instance, learned significantly more than low SES Mexicans. The story for Brazil was much the same, if we compare the middle to the low SES bloc. Meanwhile, in Russia the three SES groups learned (or failed to learn) at roughly the same rate. If the campaign season had any effect within each transitional democracy, it was primarily to enrich the storehouse of information for those citizens who were already advantaged. The Mexican case most clearly illustrates this point. One possible reason for this outcome, as shown in Table 2, is that socioeconomic class was more highly correlated with attentiveness to the campaign in Mexico.

Even though the Mexican presidential campaign of 2000 represented a more dramatic turning point than contests in Brazil and Russia, the vast majority of low SES respondents (71 percent) reported paying little attention to it. Fewer than one out of ten individuals in this group claimed to follow the election closely. This finding stands in marked contrast to Mexicans in the high SES bloc, where 32 percent were inattentive and a quarter were highly interested. With fewer Mexicans in the low SES group following the campaign, there presumably would be less potential to reduce the knowledge gap.

¹³ We should note that taking part in the first-wave interview could have affected information levels measured after the elections, perhaps by increasing the respondents' interest in the campaign. We see little reason to suspect, however, that any such effects would significantly bias our analysis.

¹⁴ If we had more than three country cases, it might be possible to model the effects of campaign intensity on changes in levels of political sophistication. In the future, as more large-scale panel surveys are administered in emerging democracies, researchers will be able to move in this direction.

≡ TABLE 3
EFFECTS OF SES AND CAMPAIGN ATTENTION ON POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

	Mexico	Brazil	Russia
Knowledge, Wave 1	.278 (.026)**	.420 (.017)**	.464 (.019)*
Low SES	-.536 (.109) **	-.285 (.042)**	-.079 (.010)**
Middle SES	-.107 (.080)	-.082 (.035)*	.006 (.010)
Campaign Attentiveness	.004 (.064)	-.002 (.027)	.059 (.011)**
Attentiveness * Low SES	.333 (.120)**	.118 (.044)**	.029 (.015)*
Attentiveness * Middle SES	.138 (.098)	.041 (.040)	-.002 (.016)
Constant	.360 (.083)	-.154 (.051) **	.399 (.016)**
LR χ^2_{DF}	311.34 ₆	1,174.6 ₆	
Pseudo R ²	.147	.143	
R ²			.373
N	600	2,598	2,123

Note: In the Mexican and Brazilian samples, negative binomial regression models were fit; for the Russian sample, coefficients were estimated using OLS. Standard errors are given in parentheses. # = $p < .10$; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$. The dependent variable in each case is post-election knowledge level, measured by a count of correct informational items (Mexico and Brazil) or interviewer evaluations along a continuum (Russia). Sources: Mexico 2000 Panel Study, Waves 1, 3, and 4; Brazilian 2002 Panel Study, Waves 1-3; Russian Election Study, 1995-1996, Waves 1 and 3.

SES also overlapped significantly with attentiveness in Brazil and Russia, though not to as great a degree. In each case, the low SES group was approximately twice as likely as high SES respondents to ignore the presidential campaign. Compared to the Mexican respondents, however, lower status Brazilians and Russians voiced slightly more interest in the election. Only 57 percent and 23 percent, respectively, appear in the "low attentiveness" category. Such tendencies may have helped hold the knowledge gap in check over time.

Simple differences in levels of attentiveness across SES groups could thus account for changes in the knowledge gap. It is also possible that the impact of exposure to the presidential campaign is itself conditioned by socioeconomic status. For example, in democratizing contexts, individuals at the lower end of the SES continuum might not experience the same gain in political sophistication if they follow the election. All the years of living as "subjects" rather than "citizens," coupled with a lack of formal education and material resources, might impede their ability to process and retain incoming political information. If this is the case, knowledge levels for the low SES respondents might never "catch up" with those of the more highly educated and affluent.

On the other hand, at the start of a presidential campaign lower status citizens might have more potential to learn about political actors and issues. Individuals with advanced schooling and ample resources may have become relatively sophisticated about politics well before the election. Campaign ads, televised debates among the candidates, door-to-door leafleting, and the other elements of popular mobilization that are now an integral part of democratic elections around the world could have an especially large effect on the less advantaged. Addressing the impact of political attentiveness on gains in political sophistication is best done through micro-level modeling. We turn to this in the next section.

MODELING KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

If gains in political competence were actually a product of the campaign, we would expect attention to the campaign to predict increases on the political knowledge scale. In fact, we would expect campaign attention to exercise an influence over and above the effects of SES. Moreover, if interest in the campaign has the potential to narrow the knowledge gap, there should be a significant interaction between class and attentiveness. To model these effects, we employ the following regression equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Knowledge}_{\text{Post-Election}} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Knowledge}_{\text{Early Campaign}} \\ & + \beta_2 \text{Low SES} + \beta_3 \text{Middle SES} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{Attention to the Campaign} \\ & + \beta_5 (\text{Low SES} * \text{Attention}) \\ & + \beta_6 (\text{Middle SES} * \text{Attention}) + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

The inclusion of the lagged dependent variable on the right-hand side controls for knowledge in the first wave, thus permitting stronger causal inferences (Finkel 1995; Wooldridge 2002, 66). We would expect a great deal of stability in political competence over just a six-month (Mexico), seven-month (Brazil), or ten-month (Russia) period.¹⁵ By taking into account initial levels of political competence, we can directly assess the potential for campaigns to reshape the distribution of civic information. Because the dependent variable in Mexico and Brazil is a count of correct answers, we employ a negative binomial

¹⁵ Pearson correlation coefficients between knowledge scores at the beginning of the campaign and in the post-election wave are .64 (Mexico), .72 (Brazil), and .55 (Russia). These correlations indicate a high degree of continuity. Yet they are far below 1.0, which suggests that at the individual-level political sophistication shifted a fair amount over the course of the presidential campaigns.

≡ TABLE 4

JOINT EFFECTS OF CAMPAIGN ATTENTION AND SES: PREDICTED LEVEL OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN
(WITH 95 PERCENT CONFIDENCE INTERVALS)

	Attentiveness to the Campaign		
	Low	Moderate	High
Mexico			
Low SES	.83 [.68–1.00]	1.16 [.97–1.37]	1.66 [1.17–2.23]
Middle SES	1.56 [1.37–1.76]	1.80 [1.59–2.02]	2.08 [1.64–2.63]
High SES	1.99 [1.69–2.33]	1.99 [1.76–2.25]	2.00 [1.67–2.38]
Brazil			
Low SES	1.19 [1.07–1.30]	1.33 [1.25–1.42]	1.50 [1.36–1.64]
Middle SES	1.58 [1.46–1.70]	1.63 [1.55–1.72]	1.70 [1.57–1.84]
High SES	1.78 [1.64–1.92]	1.77 [1.67–1.87]	1.77 [1.64–1.89]
Russia			
Low SES	.57 [.54–.60]	.66 [.64–.67]	.75 [.72–.77]
Middle SES	.69 [.66–.71]	.74 [.73–.76]	.80 [.78–.82]
High SES	.68 [.65–.70]	.74 [.72–.75]	.80 [.77–.82]

Note: These estimates were derived via *Clarify* software from the regression findings in Table 3, with early-campaign civic knowledge set to its mean value.

regression model. For the Russian sample, we estimate OLS coefficients. These regression findings are given in Table 3.

As anticipated, there is a significant amount of stability in levels of civic competence. Coefficients for the lagged dependent variables are fairly substantial and highly significant. At the same time, Mexicans, Brazilians, and Russians in the low SES group evidenced significantly lower knowledge scores after the election, compared to higher status respondents (the excluded dummy category). These main effects, however, tell only part of the story. As suggested above, socioeconomic resources and campaign attention also interact to shape political sophistication. These influences are measured by the multiplicative terms. To the extent that the sort of information disseminated by campaigns tended to increase the knowledge gap, or that high SES respondents were better equipped to absorb political information, we would expect a positive interaction between SES and campaign attention. That is, at each level of campaign attention, high-resource respondents absorbed more information. If campaigns merely replicated the knowledge gap, we would expect no interaction effects; attention to the campaign should have the same effect on all respondents, regardless of their SES. Finally, if campaigns reduced the knowledge gap—as we suspected above—campaign attention should bring greater gains for lower SES respondents than for high SES respondents.

This latter outcome is, in fact, what the results show. Although campaign attention helped all respondents in Mexico and Russia (with the slope being statistically significant in the Russian sample), it seems to have been particularly valuable for low SES respondents—that is, the coefficient on the interaction term for low SES was positive. In each nation, the interaction between interest and SES is statistically significant.

Table 4 presents these results in a more accessible way, using simulations derived from the model in Table 3 (cf. King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000; Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003). Entries represent predicted values for post-election political knowledge, as conditioned by socioeconomic class and attention to the presidential campaign. We also present 95 percent confidence intervals around these estimates, to differentiate trivial from significant variations in knowledge levels.

As the results indicate, campaign attention and SES interacted in significant ways. Campaign attention indeed had a pronounced and statistically significant influence on knowledge acquisition for the low SES group, but its effect within the high SES group was slight, vanishingly slight in the case of Mexico and of Brazil. Regardless of their interest in the campaigns, the better educated and affluent citizens in these two countries were far more knowledgeable. Yet among the more interested, SES hardly matters: low, middle, and high blocs all demonstrate about the same level of proficiency. Similar patterns are visible in Russia. As attention rose, so did political sophistication. This was true for the electorate on the whole, but lower status Russians experienced significantly greater gains. The knowledge gap that remained at the end of the 1996 presidential race was practically nonexistent for respondents who had been drawn into the contest.

CONCLUSION

Our findings offer a decidedly mixed assessment of the effects of political campaigns. All told, they tend to increase political inequalities in societies where such inequalities are already quite pronounced. This result is driven not by the fact that lower class citizens are incapable of learning from

a campaign, but rather by the fact that they pay less attention to the campaign in the first place.

On one level, these results are deeply disappointing. Political campaigns represent one of the best opportunities for ordinary people to learn something about political life. Not only does learning during campaigns appear to be limited—at least in Brazil and Russia—but the learning that does occur accrues mainly to already advantaged citizens. At best, election campaigns in the aggregate reinforce existing disparities in political competence; at worst, they exacerbate these disparities. These findings contrast with those from the United States, where at least some elements of campaigning appear to reduce the knowledge gap (Holbrook 2002).

Fortunately, the story is not as bleak as these aggregate-level findings would suggest. Citizens clearly can learn a great deal from campaigns if they pay attention to them, and these knowledge gains are particularly strong among lower class citizens. If campaigns engage such citizens, then knowledge gaps should decline.

Although data constraints necessarily limit our analysis to the three large countries discussed here, it is worth asking how these conclusions might apply to other transitional democracies (e.g., Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Poland, South Africa, Taiwan, or South Korea). All told, the consistency of our findings across such disparate cases points to a strong default hypothesis. Despite major differences in sampling, measurement, and political climate, presidential campaigns in Mexico, Brazil, and Russia had essentially the same influence. At least for countries where modern campaign techniques are widespread, national electoral contests have only mixed effects on inequalities in political sophistication. Although campaigns can potentially reduce the knowledge gap, in practice they are unlikely to do so. Instead, modern campaigns tend to replicate existing inequalities in political competence.

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Received: August 28, 2004

Accepted for Publication: August 2, 2005

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