

**REGIONAL POLITICAL SUBCULTURES IN AMERICA:
EVIDENCE FROM POLITICAL ADVERTISING**

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A B S T R A C T

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, we analyze a selection of political advertisements for evidence of variation in the regional political subcultures of the United States. In theory, campaign advertising lies at the critical nexus of politics and policy, the linkage between voters and elected officials. We aim to extend the standing literature on regional variation in ads by examining the full range of dominant subcultures postulated by Elazar, and, more importantly, to contribute to the broader literature on variation in political subculture by taking the ads themselves much more seriously as substantive audiovisual exemplars of political culture. We seek to complement our quantitative analysis of more than 200 campaign ads with in-depth case study of several exemplary spots. The case approach is particularly well-suited to compensate for the notable weaknesses of more quantitative approaches in articulating “the richness of the historical and cultural context of phenomena (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994:43). We find evidence that distinctive subcultural archetypes do appear in campaign ads in each regional subculture. Our analysis also invites the inference that regionally resonant ads may find a more receptive audience among voters – that is, they may be more persuasive.

Daniel Elazar's pioneering analysis of the regional subcultures of American politics has spawned a broad and sometimes contentious stream of research. Scholars have noted that while Elazar's typology has both theoretical appeal and some empirical support (a large body of work confirms its power as a predictor of policy differences among the states, for example), less is known about the processes by which culture is transmitted through the political system. This is especially true when considering the ways regional subcultures are manifest not just in policy differences across states, but in different mass attitudes and elite orientations to politics.

We seek to draw scholarly attention to political campaigns and political advertising in particular as promising points of departure for inquiry into political culture, and more specifically, the variations in regional political subcultures in the United States developed by Elazar. Theoretically, campaign advertising lies at the critical nexus of politics and policy, the linkage between voters and elected officials. We aim to extend the standing literature on regional variation in ads by examining the full range of dominant subcultures postulated by Elazar, and, more importantly, to contribute to the broader literature on variation in political subculture by taking the ads themselves much more seriously as substantive audiovisual exemplars of political culture. We further suggest that regionally resonant ads may find a more receptive audience among voters – that is, they may be more persuasive.

This essay unfolds in four parts. First, we briefly consider some of the relevant academic work on subcultural variations in American politics, and attempt to provide a theoretical context for our investigation of culture and communication. We then discuss how what we know about cognition and communication can guide our explorations of

campaign advertising and the subcultural variations of American politics. We analyze over 200 campaign spots for evidence of difference in the way crime and particularly prison are treated in different subcultures. We then suggest that political advertising grounded in humor may even more readily illuminate cultural differences and unspoken cultural norms and assumptions than non-humorous spots. Our cross sectional crucial case (Eckstein [1975] 1992) analysis of a collection of humorous political advertisements presents descriptive inferences based on several prototypical examples of ads thoroughly grounded in regional subculture. We also present a more detailed analysis of two Minnesota U.S. Senate campaigns, and invite the inference that regional resonance imparts ads with greater persuasiveness for voters. We consider the implications of these findings and suggest potentially promising paths for future inquiry.

Regional Subculture: Elazar's Legacy

Daniel J. Elazar's work has been described as the most comprehensive extant research effort directed at articulating the nature and significance of the regional subcultures of American politics (Rosenthal and Moakley 1984:12; Nardulli 1990; see also Miller *et al* 2006). Within two decades of the publication in 1966 of *American Federalism: A View from the States*, Elazar had become one of the ten most frequently cited students of American politics (Klingemann 1986:657; Nardulli 1990). The torrent of scholarship that has flowed from his theoretical spring runs broad and deep, and defies ready summation (but see Wirt 1991; Nardulli 1990:289; and Kincaid 1982 for useful reviews). For our purposes, however, we can briefly sketch the broad arcs of scholarly inquiry that frame our analysis.

Early work pointed to distinctive patterns of public policy linked to variation in regional subculture (see for example Sharkansky 1969; Johnson 1976; Kincaid 1982). Soon, though, scholars began pushing for evidence of regional subculture in mass attitudes. Here, the findings appeared much less favorable to Elazar's formulation (Schilitz and Rainey 1978; Sigelman 1982; Nardulli 1990; but see also Erickson, McIver and Wright 1989). Factoring in the specification uncertainty inherent in the statistical modeling process, Bartels (1997) suggests that rather than the "strong - sometimes startlingly strong support -- for Elazar's formulation" in linking political culture to policy outcomes described by Erickson, Wright and McIver (1993:175) the linkage "evaporates completely" (1997:664) and argues that their conclusions are overstated (1997:664). Fisher and Pratt (2006), however, do find Elazar's subculture classification an important determinant of the adoption of death penalty statutes and the frequency of executions in the American states. They find this relationship "strong and stable even when controlling for a range of factors linked to the death penalty in prior research" (see also Beavers and Emmert 2000 for evidence linking state high-court decisions and traditionalistic political subcultures).

Yet, as Wirt (1991) suggests, it is critical to specify the systemic context within which culture, attitudes and policy interact. Noting the "missing link" between subculture and mass attitudes, Lowery and Sigelman (1982:383) identify elite attitudes as a factor worthy of further scholarly inquiry (see for example Kincaid 1982; Marshall *et al.* 1989; and Paddock 1997 for evidence of subcultural variation in elite attitudes). In doing so, they point us toward a theoretical framework that can explain both the presence of subcultural variation in policy and the relative absence of subcultural

variation in mass attitudes. To develop this line of analysis, we need to turn our attention to political cognition: how citizens and elites think and communicate about political issues.

Culture, Cognition, and Political Communication

R. Douglas Arnold offers a way out of this theoretical conundrum wherein evidence of regional subculture appears in policy outputs, but not necessarily in the mass attitudes of citizens. In *The Logic of Congressional Action* (1990), he notes that while public opinion surveys repeatedly find voters know little of either the candidates or their records or positions in congressional elections, Congress rarely passes unpopular legislation. Given the ideological commitments of members, this absence is noteworthy. For Arnold, members of Congress behave *as if* voters were informed essentially because they fear they might become informed, particularly at the hand of “instigators” such as their opponents and organized interests. And so it is that policy responds to public opinion in the absence of the expression of citizen knowledge that would otherwise seem prerequisite to democratic responsiveness. A similar process may be at play when it comes to political culture. Policy makers need not necessarily possess distinctive subcultural orientations to politics for region to matter. If they believe voters might respond to adversaries’ attempts to tap such sentiments, they may make policy accordingly. That is, the validity of policy responsiveness to subcultural variation does not hinge upon observable expressions of subcultural orientations by citizens or elites. It can result solely from elite assessments.

Not surprisingly, in modern American politics, the fear that one’s adversaries might score points with voters is essentially a fear of damaging campaign attacks,

particularly those aired on television. Again, our knowledge of cognition and communication may prove useful. It was the great insight of the pioneering admaker Tony Schwartz to recognize that persuasive audiovisual communication was not about telling something *to* the audience, but rather about drawing out something *from* them that was already inside their minds:

Commercials that attempt to *tell* the listener something are inherently not as effective as those that attach to something that is already in him. We are not concerned with getting things *across* to people as much as *out* of people.

Electronic media are particularly effective tools in this regard because they provide us with direct access to people's minds (Schwartz 1973:96, emphasis in original).

Schwartz's point carries important implications for students of politics, culture, political communication and especially for the study of political advertising. It alerts us to the possibility that the manifestations of variation in regional subculture may be two steps removed from observable behavior. Policy makers anticipate voter response, and it is reasonable that an appreciation of regional political culture would prove to be a valuable heuristic in such a situation. What matters is not that voters articulate regionally resonant views in their response to opinion surveys, but rather that when attempting to predict voter response, elites assume that regionally dissonant policies are particularly vulnerable to oppositional campaign appeals.

Political Campaigns, Ads, and Political Culture

Political campaigns provide a particularly promising point of departure in studies of political culture, as they are where Elazar's political culture might reasonably

be expected to reveal itself. This is particularly so in the American case where state and local campaigns compel candidates to explicitly address voters' geographic identity. Researchers have, for the most part, only recently begun to survey this terrain (see Strachan 2002 which notes different rhetorical patterns of 1950s gubernatorial candidates in Michigan and South Carolina).

Political advertising in specific seems to warrant extended scholarly attention. Campaign spots are the "pottery shards" of political culture. They are physical manifestations of processes normally unseen. They provide a rich audiovisual and narrative representation of the cultural values by which citizens and elites are linked. This is so even if, as suggested above, as an antecedent influence of attitudes, political culture itself stands perhaps twice-removed from observable behavior. Indeed, a theoretical case could be made that even if links such as those between regional subculture and policy outcomes failed to obtain, such links might still appear between regional subculture and political advertising.

Richard Joslyn (1980) previously examined political ads with an eye toward identifying differences in ads across regional subcultures. Joslyn studied a sample of 105 campaign spots, and found support for his hypotheses that ads from individualistic cultures would be more likely to emphasize the partisan and personal identity of candidates than spots from moralistic cultures, and that ads from moralistic cultures would be more likely to emphasize issue positions and group appeals than ads in individualistic cultures. This paper aims to extend Joslyn's work in four ways. First, we expand our analysis to encompass the full range of dominant subcultures by including the third of Elazar's political cultures, the traditionalistic, which was omitted from

Joslyn's study. Second, we probe for cultural differences within a particular policy domain (crime and justice issues) Third, focusing in greater detail on a smaller number of ads, we seek to elaborate more fully the manifestations of political culture in political communication and to take the ads themselves much more seriously as audiovisual indicators of regional political culture. Finally, we explore the possibility that regionally resonant ads might prove more persuasive with voters.

Taking political advertising seriously requires that we pay greater attention to ads as ads, to their audiovisual and narrative elements, as well as their fundamental policy or electoral appeals. Our knowledge of political communication has grown since the earliest studies of ads and regional culture. We now know that the visual aspects of ads matter (Griffin and Kagan 1996; Jamieson 1992), that emotional aspects matter (Kern 1989; Jamieson 1992; Brader 2005), and that emotion, narrative, audio, and visual elements of ads work together and must be viewed holistically to fully gauge their impact (Nelson and Boynton 1997; Richardson 1998, 2003).

Crime and Justice: Regional Variation in Campaign Ads

We begin by training our focus on one specific aspect of region subculture: the politics of law and order. Drawing upon Elazar and subsequent scholarship linking regional subculture and support for the death penalty (Fisher and Pratt 2006), we hypothesize that ads from traditionalistic subcultures would be more likely to include narrative or audiovisual references to prisons and incarceration.

To test our hypothesis, we coded more than 200 ads collected in the "best of" campaign ad videotapes compiled by *Campaigns and Elections* magazine for the years 1998 and 2000. Each ad was coded by regional subculture according to Elazar's

typology. We then recorded whether or not the ad made any specific reference to prison or incarceration. Table I presents the breakdown of prison references in ads by regional subculture.

TABLE I.
PRISON REFERENCES IN ADS BY REGIONAL SUBCULTURE

<u>Subculture</u>	<u>Number of Ads</u>	<u>Number of Ads w/ Reference to Prison</u>
Traditionalistic	70	7
Individualistic	64	0
Moralistic	75	1

Fully 10 percent of all the traditionalistic ads in the two collections referred to prison or incarceration. No ads from individualistic states did, and only one from a moralistic state (Montana) did.

The findings are striking. Even stipulating that crime may be higher in the largely southern traditionalistic states, the emphasis on punishment appears only in ads from traditionalistic subcultures. By contrast, references to police, for example, are somewhat less concentrated regionally.

This analysis utilized a broad swath of campaign ads to illuminate a particular manifestation of variation in regional political subculture. To probe more deeply into how campaign ads may communicate political culture, however, we need to explore the ads themselves in much greater detail than is possible analyzing hundreds of ads at a time. We may, moreover, be able catalyze our analysis by specifically focusing on ads

where regional variations might be expected to be most pronounced: those ads that invoke humor.

Humor and Culture in Advertising: The Standing Literature

In an attempt to illuminate subcultural variation in political advertising, humorous spots represent an appealing target for interrogation. Humor is grounded in culture, and relies on culture for its effectiveness. If analysis of humorous spots provides useful evidence of subcultural variation in political advertising, it would be a particularly useful complement to findings based on a broader sample of ads. Humor is a common motif in political spots, and it can provide analytical leverage in the quest to understand how political communication works to “get things out of people.” Humor is contingent upon shared cultural understandings – it is, in effect, culture in context – and its use may prove more accessible to analysts interested in unpacking the interplay of culture and persuasion than non-humorous appeals. Yet, to date, scholars have been slow to probe the use of humor in political advertising (but see Hunter 2000 and Nelson and Boynton 2001).

The link between humor and persuasion has tantalized scholars but has remained elusive. “Few topics in advertising,” Perry, *et al*, write, “have received as much attention, discussion and debate as the impact of humor” (1997:21). Researchers have found humorous television advertising increases viewer attention (Stewart and Furse 1986), enhances recall (Zhang and Zinkahn 1991), contributes to the likability of the ad (Belch and Belch 1984; Gelb and Pickett 1983), and to the likability of the ad’s sponsor (Gelb and Zinkhan 1986, Duncan and Nelson 1985; see also Duncan 1979; Sternthal and Craig 1973; and Weinberger and Gulas 1992).

Yet, when it comes to the actual persuasive impact of humorous ads, the evidence is at best mixed. Studies have found the persuasive effects of humor to be limited by gender (Lammers *et al*, 1983, Perry *et al*, 1997), no more powerful than non-humorous advertising (Sternthal and Craig 1973, Gruner 1976, Brooker 1981, Stewart and Furse 1986) or even less successful than non-humorous appeals (Weinberger and Campbell 1991).

Despite the paucity of empirical validation of the efficacy of humorous appeals, they are quite common in commercial advertising. Weinberger and Spotts (1989) estimated that nearly one-quarter of prime time television advertising in the United States is intended to be humorous, and some estimates are even higher than that (Kelly and Solomon 1975). Humorous appeals are also prevalent in political advertising, though relatively little academic research on this subject has been published. Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991:123) estimate that 15 to 20 percent of all negative political ads use what they call disparagement humor. Wadsworth and Kaid (1987) found between 20 and 21 percent of negative presidential advertising used humor.¹

Time and again, humor has played a leading role in the successful ad campaigns of the underfunded underdog. Yet an exclusive focus on humor would tell but half the story. Candidates frequently evoke humor, and more often than not such attempts are either uninspiring or fall flat. Important clues as to what separates effective from ineffective uses of humor in candidate advertising may well be etched in the fertile soil of political culture, and the way that certain appeals resonate with a region's cultural landscape, while others do not. Surprisingly little research on campaign advertising has focused on how variation in political culture might influence ads' effectiveness (but see

Griffin and Kagan 1996). This nexus of culture and persuasion suggests the transcendent power of regionally resonant campaign communication.

Regional Political Culture and Humor in Political Advertising

For this phase of our study, we analyzed the content of spot advertisements drawn from the “25 Funniest Political TV Spots” videotape produced by *Campaigns and Elections* magazine.² At the most general level, ads from the moralistic states are characterized by self-deprecation and an exaggerated good-government earnestness. In the traditional (southern) states, by contrast, political opponents are literally dehumanized, sometimes even depicted as barnyard animals. Sponsoring candidates in southern states are often portrayed as tough guys with integrity, sometimes literally wearing white hats. This is quite consistent with the hierarchical, elitist notion of politics in traditionalistic subcultures and a stark contrast with the veneration of political action found in moralistic states. Several ads from the more commercialized individualistic states embody the centrality of exchange to politics, and often focus on specific acts of corruption or profligacy by opponents. Here, figurative dehumanization is absent, and we do not find the eager earnestness in sponsoring candidates common in moralistic states. Exploring such ads in detail allows us to more fully articulate the richness of regional political subcultures in ways impossible with quantitative analysis of large numbers of “cases.”

Humor in Ads in States with Traditionalistic Political Cultures

According to Elazar, traditionalistic political cultures, concentrated in the American South, couple an ambivalent attitude toward the marketplace with a paternalistic and elitist conception of the commonwealth. There is little role for ordinary

citizens, who in many cases are not even expected to vote. These cultures “accept a substantially hierarchical society as part of the ordered nature of things,” yet are instinctively antibureaucratic because of the way bureaucracy interferes with traditional patterns of interpersonal relationships that lie at the root of the political system. In this political culture, “good government” maintains traditional patterns, and if needed, adjusts them to changing conditions with the least possible upset (Elazar 1966:92-94).

It is interesting to note how while both moralistic and traditionalistic political cultures have at least some ambivalence toward the individualistic notions of markets and exchange, the response in the two cultures is quite different. Moralistic cultures (concentrated in the upper Midwest) seek salvation through an engaged citizenry. Traditionalistic cultures turn to exemplary elites.

An ad for Alabama gubernatorial candidate Fob James reveals both the antipathy toward exchange theories of politics and the desire for rescue by an elite.

[(Roaring twenties style jazz music, somewhat tinny sounding horns); color picture of U.S. Capitol]. *“In Washington they call it Capitol Hill. In Montgomery, [image of state capitol slowly zooming in] it’s Goat Hill. Home of politicians, bureaucrats, lobbyists: the Goat Hill Gang. [Pictures of goats in pen; (goats bleat); picture of state capitol, now closer.] Fob James makes them nervous [goat rolling over on ground; video appears to be rewound to simulate goat’s rolling over repeatedly; back to picture of state capitol, continuing to zoom closer]. They know Fob will break up all the insider-trading games [two goats appear in “wanted” poster, with numbers beneath their pictures, “for taxpayer abuse”]. The politicians will be out, [goats duck behind pen] the taxpayers in [zooming in on*

state capitol, three flags on top of rotunda visible]. *Does the Goat Hill Gang want Fob back?* [Close up of goat shaking head vigorously side-to-side as if to say “no!”; (more bleating).] *The taxpayers do. Fob James: The taxpayer’s governor.* [Color picture of smiling Fob James; (music concludes; goat bleating at end)].

The political insiders are figuratively dehumanized, depicted as goats. The politics of exchange is pejoratively labeled “insider-trading.” The remedy is not the engagement of ordinary citizens or their legislative representatives, but election of an exemplary elite, “the taxpayers’ governor.”

An ad for Texas gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams dramatically conveys the elite orientation of traditionalistic political cultures.

If we’re really gonna win this war on drugs, we’ve got to attack it on all fronts. I’d start early. Beginning in kindergarten I’d teach the three D’s: don’t do drugs. Teenagers smoking marijuana, I’ll take away their drivers license. And if they keep doing drugs I’ll put ‘em in a boot camp. Military discipline, drug counseling, and I’ll introduce them to the joys of busting rocks. Somebody tells you we can’t win this war, you tell them they haven’t met Clayton Williams.

While the ad begins with a communal “we,” the solutions Williams offers are all “I.” Williams, literally wearing a white cowboy hat, embraces the very essence of traditional culture and values. The ad draws its humor from the way that camera pans different scenes (a prisoner work site, a classroom, the outside of school building), always eventually revealing Williams; from the quip at the end of the ad about the “joys of busting rocks;” and to some degree from Williams over-the-top Texas cowboy persona. The way the Williams is gradually revealed to be in each of the ad’s scenes is

actually very similar to the visual technique used by Paul Wellstone in an ad called “Fast-Paced Paul,” discussed below. But where Wellstone is self-effacing, Williams is more self-centered. Where Wellstone is the earnest everyman, Williams comes across as the larger-than-life disciplinarian. Humorist and presidential joke writer Mark Katz noted the different flavor of traditionalistic subcultures in his description of Bill Clinton’s initial reactions to his proposals for self-deprecating humor:

Clinton was raised in a political culture where gentle, self-effacing humor was all but unheard of, and political dinners featured a much meaner brand of funny. In Arkansas, I was told by people who’d know, humor is a stick that you beat other people up with. (Katz 2004:16)

Not all of the cultural resonance of humor in campaign ads is grounded exclusively in the regional *political* culture that Elazar focused on. Some ads draw upon aspects of regional culture more broadly. Mitch McConnell’s ad campaign, designed by veteran GOP consultant Roger Ailes for his 1984 race for Kentucky’s U.S. Senate seat, was credited with helping him overcome a substantial deficit in the polls en route to upsetting incumbent Dee Huddleston. Like several other ads from states with traditionalistic cultures included on the *Campaigns and Elections* videotape, the ad uses a somewhat hefty actor to portray an out-of-touch opponent. In McConnell’s ads, the actor is seen being chased by a hunter and several leashed bloodhounds, seeking to force him to confront his record. The images are quite humorous, as the hunting party travels to various tropical locales where Huddleston was reported to have been giving speeches. The humor also serves to disarm the antagonism that often accompanies negative ads. In addition to charging Huddleston with collecting large speaking fees

while missing votes, one of the ads also criticizes his opposition to school prayer, support for the grain embargo and support for “giving away” the Panama Canal. Such ideological concerns are consistent with traditionalistic cultures, but much less so with individualistic and moralistic ones.

Humor in Ads in States with Individualistic Political Cultures

In Elazar’s typology, individualistic political culture “emphasizes the conception of the democratic order as a marketplace.” In such cultures, Elazar writes, “politics is a business.” There is, he notes, “a strong tendency among the public to believe that politics is a dirty – if necessary – business . . . since a fair amount of corruption is expected in the normal course of things, there is relatively little popular excitement when any is found unless it is of an extraordinary character” (Elazar 1966:86-89).

Perhaps then it is not surprising that the stereotypical overweight politician so common in the ads from states with traditionalistic political cultures is nowhere to be found in the ads from states with individualistic cultures on the *Campaigns and Elections* tape. The object of the humor is instead particular actions politicians have taken, not politicians *qua* politicians. A 1990 ad for Indiana U.S. Senate candidate Baron Hill, for example, features an exaggerated stream of junk mail flying out of an unsuspecting Hoosier’s mailbox and raining from the skies on two elderly women shielding themselves with umbrellas from the deluge to dramatize his opponent’s abuse of the congressional franking privilege. An ad for Illinois gubernatorial candidate Neil Hartigan pictures on oversized bee buzzing frenetically to the tune of “Flight of the Bumblebees” around a rose garden, presumably the one at the governor’s mansion that his opponent paid \$375,000 to build.

Humor in Ads in States with Moralistic Political Cultures

In moralistic political cultures, according to Elazar, politics is considered one of the great activities of man in his search for the good society. It is ideally a matter of concern, indeed a civic duty, for all citizens, and not just those pursuing political careers. Politicians are expected to serve the community; politics is not seen as a legitimate field for personal economic enrichment. "Good government," in moralistic political cultures, "is measured by the degree to which it promotes the public good and in terms of the honesty, selflessness, and commitment to the public welfare of those who govern" (Elazar 1966:90-91).

Ads produced in 1992 for Russ Feingold, Democratic U.S. Senate candidate from Wisconsin (a state with a deep progressive tradition), reflect the orientation toward politics and politicians in states with moralistic cultures. In one, Feingold begins by describing himself . . .

Hi. I'm Russ Feingold the underdog running for the United States Senate.

Underdog. That's the story of my life. They said a kid from Janesville would never win a Rhodes scholarship, but I did. They said I couldn't beat an incumbent state senator, but I did. Now they say I won't be your next United States Senator. I don't have a fortune to spend on expensive TV commercials like my opponents. But I don't think wild spending is what people want in a senator anyway. I think people want a senator who's in touch with the problems of ordinary families and I believe that's me, and I think these home movies will prove it.

Feingold describes himself as earnest and somewhat modest. Next, the ad uses humor to draw distinctions with his primary opponents . . .

Our first home belongs to millionaire Joe Checota. He's one of my opponents. Let's see if he's around. Wow! Look at these iron gates! I guess there's nobody here. Nice spread, huh? It's enough to make me feel like an underdog. The next home belongs to congressman Jim Moody, my other opponent. This is his home in Washington, D.C. He's lived there for years, but he does visit Wisconsin. The congressman has another home in Jamaica but we don't have a budget to fly there so this brochure is going to have to do.

The ad eventually returns to Feingold's earnest, good government credentials, as he points to his garage doors on which he has painted three campaign pledges in large letters. He then invites viewers inside his home . . .

C'mon, let's go inside. Here's the kitchen. We got plenty of closet space. Look -- no skeleton.

The ad concludes by reprising the themes of moralistic political culture:

Now here's the family room. My wife and I work hard to pay for this and we don't have a lot of money to throw around. But money isn't what I really need. What I need is your vote. And you can't buy votes in Wisconsin anyway. Time after time, good people without a lot of money have won elections here. Why? Because Wisconsin likes underdogs. (Daughter's voice) Dad? Yeah Allie. Can I go to Cheryl's house? You can do anything if you put your mind to it.

According to Elazar's typology, the state of Washington also has a moralistic political culture. Gubernatorial candidate Joe King's advertisements shared the characteristic earnest, good-government sensibilities of Feingold's Wisconsin ads. In his ad, King denounced packaged politics:

When I first started running for governor, I was frustrated by soundbites and TV ads. . . . So I wrote this plan about how I'm going to govern Washington. . . . Then I tried giving it away. And then I got a polite suggestion from a constituent.

(Shopkeeper): Hey Joe! Why don't you mail it?! [back to King] So I have and in a few days you'll be getting it. (Narrator) Joe King and his plan. Because real issues take longer than 30 seconds.

The ad includes humorous video clips of King hawking his plan on the streets to unsuspecting and sometimes disinterested citizens. A follow-up ad suggests that citizens actually are engaged, as one voter who finds the King Plan in his mailbox one morning but doesn't read it encounters all the riders in his morning car pool, all the passengers on the elevator at work, and even his dog back at home engrossed in reading the King Plan.

Regionally Resonant Ads and Persuasiveness in Two Minnesota Senate Campaigns

The potential political significance of culturally resonant communication can be seen in a brief analysis of the Minnesota U.S. Senate races of 1990 and 1996. In May of 1990, only 20 percent of Minnesotans even recognized Carleton College political science professor Paul Wellstone's name (McGrath 1990:14A). His, opponent, Rudy Boschwitz, by contrast, had the highest approval rating in the state and a stout campaign war chest (Alger 1996:69). While not solely determinative of election outcomes, campaign spending has been unambiguously linked to candidate vote share (Gerber 1998, Lau and Pomper 2002). Wellstone's success as an underfunded challenger, then, becomes all the more intriguing.

Wellstone's ad campaign was deeply grounded in the distinctive culture of Minnesota politics. Perhaps this was because Wellstone's campaign team (particularly Bill Hillsman and North Woods Advertising) was itself directed by operatives intimately familiar with the political culture in the Land of 10,000 Lakes. That culture is perhaps the purest example of Elazar's moralistic culture in the United States. Dean Alger, quoting the *Almanac of American Politics* writes,

... Minnesota is "a distinctive commonwealth with high traditions of probity and civic-mindedness," and it has "a vibrant tradition of clean politics."

... Those political figures who are perceived as dragging politics in Minnesota into the mud are in dangerous territory (1996:67).

This would serve as the reference point for Wellstone's humorous appeals, providing both cultural connection and some protective insulation to shield his sharp comparisons from the stigma of "negative" or "attack" politics.

Wellstone's first campaign spot, "Fast-Paced Paul," would set the tone for the entire campaign. The ad begins with Wellstone, outdoors in his short shirt sleeves against blue skies and green trees, speaking to a camera that bounces around just enough to suggest home video: "Hi, I'm Paul Wellstone, and I'm running for the United States Senate from Minnesota. Unlike my opponent, I don't have six million dollars so I'm going to have to talk fast." The ad unfolds as Wellstone strides quickly through scenes rich with quintessential Midwestern iconography: his family, his house of 21 years, and his son's farm. Then the ad turns to scenes designed to highlight Wellstone's positions on issues of concern to Minnesota voters. "We must stop the poisoning of the air, and the land, and the water," Wellstone says quickly, standing briefly in front of a

forest pond before briskly striding off into the next scene. “I’ll lead the fight for national health care,” he says, now standing before an emergency care center, before quickly turning and marching toward the next scene. “I’ve been a teacher for 24 years,” Wellstone notes, appearing before schoolhouse doors as the pace of the ad picks up yet further. “Labor endorsed ...” he says, appearing in a factory parking lot for less than a second. As he zips past a city hall building, the voice-over narrator says, “Paul Wellstone won’t slow down after he’s elected.” Wellstone then jumps aboard a humble green and white school bus adorned with a large Wellstone campaign sign. The final scene shows the bus, in fast motion, driving away, another oversized Wellstone sign prominently displayed on the bus’s backside, as the words “Vote for Paul Wellstone November 6” are superimposed on the screen.

The ad paints a picture of an energetic challenger promoting the public good while spoofing the traditional candidate biography ad. The spot’s opening frames not only introduce the underdog candidate, but they subtly signal a key Wellstone campaign tactic, criticism of his opponent’s financial advantage, and the connotation that it might well be corrupt, at least by Minnesota’s good government standards.

To overcome Boschwitz’s huge edge in campaign cash, throughout the campaign Wellstone had pushed for televised debates. Boschwitz, the chair of the Republican National Senatorial Campaign Committee, had written a 1985 memo advising GOP incumbents to avoid debates where possible. The memo became public, and would leave Boschwitz vulnerable to Wellstone’s charges that he was avoiding a debate on the issues (Alger 1996:69). That charge would be given voice by a 2-minute spot that would be voted by the readers of *Campaign* magazine as the “best political commercial in

history." The ad, entitled, "Looking For Rudy," builds upon the style of the 1980s film "Roger and Me" about the crusade of an everyman with a video camera, Michael Moore, who sought to track down General Motors CEO Roger Smith and force him to confront the bitter realities of his company's elitist neglect of the Flint, Michigan community (where the company had been born), and its now unemployed former GM workers.

While a portable camera follows Wellstone, he embarks on a trek across the Twin Cities to find Rudy Boschwitz in order to debate the issues of interest to Minnesotans. In the ad, Wellstone asks various citizens if they wanted to see debates between the candidates. Several voice their support for the idea. One woman in a diner with two small children in her lap reasons, "some people have more money than others to play with, and if you debate, you are kind of standing there without money."

According to the ad's creator Bill Hillsman, they wanted to create the feel of a "regular guy against the system" (Alger 1996:83). The ad succeeds in reinforcing Wellstone's little guy image and modest means, images that are particularly resonant in moralistic political cultures like Minnesota. More importantly, the ad, and particularly the "free media" coverage it generated, convinced the Boschwitz camp to agree to a date for the debate. As Hillsman noted, "Boschwitz's people called up and said, 'OK, we'll schedule the debates, but you've got to pull the ad.'" To that point, the ad had aired just a few times, but it had been given extensive play by local TV newscasts. What the Boschwitz team didn't know, Hillsman noted, was that the Wellstone campaign could not have run the ad any more because it lacked the funds to do so (Starr 1999:26).

It is here that the transcendent power of culturally grounded humorous communication can be seen in bold relief. The ad's story line resonated deeply and

echoed loudly in the cloistered arena of the campaign. Its leverage was not to be found in ad buys and gross-ratings-points, but in its clever and memorable evocation of a devastating humorous story line ripped from the fabric of popular culture, in a way particularly resonant with the moralistic political subculture of the state of Minnesota. The ad's entertainment value further insured that it would be a prominent feature of the "free media" coverage of the campaign. Little if any of this would emerge from quantitative analysis of large numbers of campaign ads.

The humorous Wellstone messages communicate values of civic engagement, ideals of "good government" and a connection with the plight of ordinary folk trying to make life better for society. More to the point, this overall message of "Minnesota's interests vs. special interests" makes sense in the moralistic political culture described by Elazar. Humor, then, serves as a means to an end, not an end itself. It is in that context that the success of the ad campaign can be judged, as well as contrasted with the subsequent use of humor six years later when the two rivals met in a re-match. Then it would be the Boschwitz campaign that would seek to score points with its clever commercials.

Consultants on both sides of the race agreed that Boschwitz was determined to hit back in 1996 in the same humorous style that Wellstone had hit him in 1990 (Jasperson 1999). The focus of Boschwitz's attacks was ideological in nature, emphasizing Wellstone's extreme liberalism as opposed to Boschwitz's position in the "mainstream." According to Elazar, ideological appeals are more characteristic of traditional political cultures and tend not to resonate as well in moralistic cultures. Many of the attacks on Wellstone used 10-second ads, aired with considerable

frequency, to emphasize their message that Wellstone was "embarrassingly liberal." In one of the first attacks, "Paul's Friends," the narrator claims "Paul Wellstone is so liberal that he funded a study on how sheep eat weeds." The ad shows a visual image of a sheep eating grass followed by a loud "Baaaaaa!" at the close of the ad. In another ad, "Arms," a cartoon caricature of Wellstone shoots its arm out to the side and holds a liberal sign every time the narrator mentions another time that Wellstone voted for more taxes. When the announcer mentions that Wellstone raised taxes 47 times, the little arm shoots out frenetically flashing the word liberal every time from the side of the pudgy cartoon character.

Two additional 10-second ads use a similar humorous tone to make fun of Wellstone. The ad, entitled "Big Top," shows three visual frames. The first frame shows a picture of a circus while a narrator says "big top." The second frame shows a picture of New York City while the narrator says "big apple." The third frame shows a picture of Paul Wellstone while the narrator says "big spender." This ad communicates the idea that Wellstone is so liberal that he is the epitome of or the picture dictionary definition of a big spender while also associating him with the circus and New York City. In "Crowning," a crown sits on a plush cushion surrounded by money. A narrator claims that Paul Wellstone is the biggest spender in the U. S. Senate, and in fact it is his "crowning achievement." In this ad, Wellstone is the "king" of spending. In both, the circus and royal march music serve as an exclamation point of silliness for the ads.

These types of ideological appeals communicated through ridiculing humor were considered to be hysterically funny by the Boschwitz campaign strategists (Jasperson 1999). The more important issue, however, is whether or not this use of

humor resonated with Minnesota voters. These ads appear to be clever ways of tapping into existing pictures in our heads by going "under the radar" through rapid exposure and linking Wellstone to negative concepts of embarrassing behavior and extreme views through association with other concepts that are part of our cultural understanding. In an over-time analysis of the relationship between Boschwitz's advertisements and favorability ratings of the two candidates, however, Boschwitz's ads were found to be ineffective in harming Wellstone (Jasperson 1999; Jasperson and Fan 2002). They were neither significant in hurting Wellstone's favorability nor in improving Boschwitz's own favorability.

This evidence suggests that the Boschwitz ads' images did not successfully connect with what was already in voters' minds about Wellstone at the time these ads aired. Overall, the success of the humorous message depends on the receptivity of the target. Elazar's typology suggests that the self-deprecating, populist humorous appeal was more appropriate than the ridiculing ideological humorous appeal for the particular political culture of the state of Minnesota. Ironically, Rudy Boschwitz's own campaign ads from his debut Senate race in 1978 (which used playful self-deprecation by mimicking the familiar commercials he had "starred" in for Plywood Minnesota, the company he founded) were exemplars of the kind of humor most likely to be effective in moralistic political cultures.

Subcultural Variation in Campaign Ads: Additional Evidence

To supplement the in-depth analysis of campaign ads we have just presented, we can return to the broader range of campaign spots featured in the Campaigns and Elections "best of" collections for 1998 and 2000. Here we find still further empirical

evidence of the imprint of regional political subculture on political communication. As was the case in the collection of humorous spots, we can readily identify certain ads that stand out as exemplars of their regional subculture in all three subvariants. Ads for Oregon Democratic Senate candidate Ron Wyden echo the themes of earnest public service so prominent in moralistic political cultures. Many ads from states with traditionalistic subcultures refer to tradition, values, and antipathy toward bureaucracy. Perhaps most tellingly, prototypical ads from one subculture do not appear in states with other subcultures. We found no ads in traditionalistic states that included quintessentially moralistic language like “perhaps the best trained governor in waiting California has ever produced.” Nor did we find ads in individualistic states evoking exemplary elites that way a Zell Miller ad in Georgia did: “called down from the mountains where he was teaching.” While neither time nor space allows us to subject these ads to the level of detailed analysis found above, we find the overall empirical pattern a compelling one.

Conclusion and Future Directions:

Because of the limitations inherent in the available data on campaign advertising, we have sought to avoid sweeping claims of causality. Instead, we have combined both qualitatively detailed analysis and descriptive empirical evidence to probe the plausibility of the claim that regional political subcultures are alive and well in the American states. Our findings suggest that this is indeed the case.

Our analysis is blessed and afflicted with the strengths and weaknesses of case study more broadly (see Gerring 2004). We have argued that culturally resonant ads may be more effective as appeals to voters. Here, our aims are principally theoretical

and exploratory rather than confirmatory (reflecting the state of knowledge in this area) and so our argument is framed in suggestive terms, rather than falsifiable ones. Further, because we seek to identify causal mechanisms rather than measuring causal effects (how much influence) our case method is well-matched to our task (Gerring 2004:348).

The principal virtue of case study is the depth of analysis it allows. Here, by limiting cases, we have been able to illuminate the audiovisual manifestations of regional cultural archetypes in campaign ads. We have also been able to draw upon a crucial case to probe the persuasive capacity of culturally resonant political advertising.

We do not doubt that there are approaches that might more precisely delimit political subcultures (see Lieske 1993) or model various causal effects. Yet the great virtue in Elazar's formulation is parsimony. It explains a lot (an imposing array of policy outputs and elite orientations) with a little (a theory operable in terms of three distinctive subcultures). In pursuit of more precision, three categories can become ten or more very quickly, and even 50 without much effort.

While we have documented the limitations of the present study, alternative approaches too are burdened with substantial liabilities. Bartels' analysis of specification uncertainty in quantitative modeling is telling. The vulnerabilities of survey research are also well-known. Yet, we would suggest that such work is worth undertaking, as our projects such as ours, in order to provide a richer range of knowledge with which we can seek to understand vital cultural and political questions.

Our analysis has sought to make several contributions to our understanding of the nexus of humor, culture, and communication in political advertising. The findings of this study support the contention that the manifestations of regional political culture

can be seen in campaign advertising. We also suggest that advertising that evokes values and associations congruent with a state's dominant strain of political culture may be more effective than advertising whose appeals lack such resonance. Such factors may go a long way to explain critical election outcomes that elude explanation by conventional models where candidates with huge spending advantages are expected to win.

Our findings suggest several potentially promising lines of analysis for future research. Scholars may wish to probe further the ways in which the imprint of regional subcultures is manifest in non-humorous advertising. Further, while Elazar's typology can be used to generate a single cultural indicator for each state, it is actually based on assessments of dominant and subdominant strains of culture in different regions within each state. Future work may wish to probe whether such cultural differences within states are manifested in political communication, or whether even more nuanced comparisons at the state level are appropriate, especially in localized races such as those for congressional seats.

Our work has been rooted in Tony Schwartz's insight that effective advertising is not about telling things to viewers, but drawing out what is already in them. To that end, future work may be designed to more deeply probe viewer response in light of the nexus between humor and political culture. If researchers focus their efforts on what is in viewers' minds, in their own terms, they may be better able to tap the veins of thought and emotion where culture and communication run deep.

NOTES

¹Hunter (2000) found that less than 2 percent of the 47,109 political ads cataloged by the Political Commercial Archive of the Political Communication Center at the University of Oklahoma were coded as humorous by the center, but there are many reasons why this number may be misleading. While it is the largest single repository of campaign commercials, the collection is neither exhaustive nor representative. It is also possible that not all humorous ads were coded as such. This is impossible to determine for certain because the center's coding criteria for humor is proprietary, and unavailable for scholarly cross-examination.

²In fact, the tape consisted of 42 spots, (not all of which were humorous), dating back to John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign. Studies of the content of political advertising must inevitably confront thorny issues of data selection. While the Campaign Mapping Project out of the Universities of Texas and Pennsylvania and political scientist John Geer have both assembled exhaustive collections of presidential campaign spots, no such data exist at the subnational level. Even the data collected by the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), which tracks ad buys in the nation's top 100 media markets excludes perhaps 15 percent of the country; the data is also available only for elections since 1996. Analysis is further complicated by the fact even knowing how often an ad was aired does not reliably gauge exposure – only attempted exposure. Nor are copies of all ads still in existence or available to researchers, even for a single race in a single state. In short, there is no meaningful way to assemble a truly “representative” or random sample of subnational ads because the total universe of ads is unknown. Because our purpose is to further the theoretical and interpretive

understanding of humorous political appeals, however, data selection problems are somewhat less consequential. Given paucity of inquiry in this area, the aim of this study is to demonstrate the plausibility of empirical insights that can advance the theoretical foundations upon which future work can proceed, rather than formal testing of quantitative hypotheses.

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