Chapter 4

Campaign Effects and Media Monopoly:

The 1994 and 1998 Parliamentary Elections in Hungary

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This chapter explores some interactions between campaign resources, campaign style, and campaign impact in a new democracy. The variable of interest is the campaigners' use of a peculiar opportunity structure that authoritarian legacies create. The 1994 and 1998 Hungarian elections showed much similarity in relevant aspects of this opportunity structure. Hence, they can be treated as a natural laboratory to study variance in campaign impact while keeping a host of cultural, social and political variables constant.

Some features of these campaigns were typical for a large number of late democratising countries. First, new democracies often show a dearth of necessary resources for the deployment of most pre- and post-Fordist – or 'pre- and post-modern', 'stage I' and 'stage III' – campaign technologies, in the case of everything from personal canvassing to direct mail.[i] In the absence of long-established party loyalties, it may be extremely hard to tell supporters, swing voters and committed opponents apart. Therefore, get-out-the-vote campaigns may easily backfire. As party organizations are often inchoate, personal

contact with the voters is difficult to establish, and rallies rarely attract substantial audiences. Parties are often many and their ideologies shifting, hence it is unusually hard to calculate vote-maximizing party locations on the relevant issues.

Second, in many post-authoritarian democracies public television is easily available for partisan use. Given various legacies of authoritarian rule, there is often a monopolistic control of television broadcasts. New democracies are middle- or low-income countries, hence government-controlled electronic media may be the only mass media many citizens are exposed to. Spreading partisan propaganda as supposedly non-partisan information programmes on a large and publicly financed provider of political information, often turns into a major political issue, with intriguing implications for campaigns.

Third, the weakness of party loyalties leaves a lot of space for campaign influence. Defeat may mean the total disappearance of a party from electoral competition, and victory seems to be within reach for quite a few competitors. Consequently, party leaders are pushed to make full use of whatever tools of campaigning they can rely on.

We neither claim that the journalists in control of public television programmes are always behaving like committed partisans of the governing parties, nor that they follow some master plan conceived in party offices. But conventional wisdom suggests that partisan motivation significantly shapes public media in many new democracies. The chief government party's influence is variable, just like the means via which this influence is exercised. Direct instruction and briefing of news editors may be unusual, but indirect means seem perfectly capable of achieving a situation where key journalists act like party delegates.[ii]

These means include the appointment of trusted partisans to head public service media, and providing loyal journalists with attractive career opportunities – plus a safe haven when the next government promptly fires them. They can often take it for granted that they will keep or lose their job depending on the electoral success of a party – a situation not unlike that of ordinary campaign personnel.

In this chapter we, first, provide supportive evidence about the centrality and partisanship of public television in the two Hungarian elections. On further particulars of these elections, the reader is referred to Fowler (1998) and Tóka and Enyedi (1999). Here we merely treat them as illustrative examples that are particularly well-suited for exploring a more general issue. We, then, develop our hypotheses about campaign impact and anchor them in scholarly theories about political communication. Finally, we offer empirical tests of the propositions and discuss their implications.

PUBLIC TELEVISION AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN HUNGARY

It is hard to overestimate the importance of electronic media for campaign communication in Hungary. Both in the 1994 and the 1998 elections the major contenders relied mostly on paid advertisements and centrally produced billboards, posters, and leaflets, randomly bombarding voters across the country. However, modest campaign budgets curtailed these efforts: the fattest party coffer in either year contained roughly one US dollar per eligible citizen. Although rallies had a significant place in the campaign of some smaller parties, and mass telephone canvassing made a nebulous debut in 1998, their overall role in the campaigns was secondary to that of mediated messages.

Following the requirements of the election law, the public broadcast media provided equal subsidized air-time for the competitors' election appeals, and aired debates between representatives of over ten parties, i.e. about twice the number of parties (six in both years) than win seats. These debates had a rigid format that perfectly protected the media from any charge of favouritism – the space for each party representative to speak on the pre-determined topics was timed to the second – but excluded any element of interaction, probably turning most attention to the alarm clock constantly running on the screen.[iii] Commentaries unequivocally considered the 'debates' uninformative and painfully boring. The exceptional head-on confrontation between the leaders of the front-runners before the second round of the 1998 elections was unrelated to these officially scheduled rituals.[iv]

In this context, the regular news and information programmes assumed a particularly important role in campaign communications. Television had a pre-eminent role: in a Median poll of eligible voters carried out in the middle of the 1994 campaign, 65 per cent said that television was their main source of information about the election, compared to just 14 and 11 per cent for the newspapers and radio respectively.[v] In the post-election surveys, analysed below, 69 per cent of the 1994 respondents reported watching television every day, whereas 49 per cent read a newspaper with political coverage, and 67 per cent listened to radio news. The respective figures in the 1998 survey were 84, 41 and 69 per cent – a further increase in favour of television.

Prior to 1997 public television was practically in a monopoly position. By the time of the 1998 election, however, private television broadcasts could be received by 90 per cent of the population, and provided extensive political coverage. But the key reason for our

analysis of the electoral impact of public television is not just its importance and that it was partisan in tone (like most newspapers), but that it was subject to governmental influence. Indeed, literally all the media personnel who controlled political coverage on public television lost (or pre-emptively quit) their job shortly after the opposition victories of 1994 and 1998; for that matter, they had little reason to expect that they could keep it in such an eventuality. Thus, they were arguably more in the position of being campaigners than public service journalists.

Ironically, the government lost both elections. But this only begs the question whether they would have done better, or worse, even if public television broadcasts had not been designed to serve the electoral interests of the main government party, which in 1994 comprised the centre-right Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), and in 1998 was the ex-communist Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). For the bias did seem to be there. The Democratic Forum (MDF) alone had 64 per cent of the time the first public channel allotted to politics during the 1994 campaign, all featuring neutral or positive coverage. The main challenger, the Socialist Party (MSZP), received only 11 per cent of coverage, a significant part of which was negative. On the satellite-transmitted public channel, *Duna TV*, the Democratic Forum had 83 per cent of the time slots – a stunning figure compared to their 12 per cent share of the vote in that year's election (Lange 1994).

Although we do not have directly comparable data on coverage in 1998, the direction of the bias was similar (this time giving at least two, if not more, bites of the cherry to MSZP), but its extent less pronounced. Indeed, in the surveys that we shall analyse below, 42 per cent of the respondents after the first round of voting in 1998 said that public television was 'always' fair and balanced in its coverage of the parties; this contrasts with

an equivalent figure of 13 per cent in 1994.[vi] In 1994, 45 per cent of respondents said that the MDF was favoured in public television coverage, compared to just 9 per cent who felt the main challenger party, the MSZP, was favoured. Four years later, 22 per cent said the main government party, MSZP, was the one favoured by public television, and 7 per cent attributed this status to Fidesz-MPP, the chief challenger in 1998.[vii]

Given the strong presence of the private channels, fewer people watched public television in 1998 than in 1994, and political coverage also seemed less one-sided. Therefore, the electoral impact of public television exposure could have been bigger in 1994 than in 1998. There was a factor that probably acted in the opposite direction, however. The 1994 campaign took place in the context of a long controversy over governmental control of public broadcasting. This so-called 'media war' regularly filled headlines and editorials between 1991 and 1994, featuring unusual presidential vetoes, Constitutional Court rulings, parliamentary hearings, street demonstrations, and spectacular confrontations between government and the – eventually removed – presidents of public television and radio. There was little chance of not noticing the many critiques of political coverage on public television as strongly biased in favour of the main government party.

Nothing of the above occurred in the 1994-98 period. The right-wing parliamentary opposition of the time was certainly not happy with the political coverage of public television, but did little to undermine its credibility. In December 1995 a media law was passed by an overwhelming super-majority composed of both government and opposition deputies. This created the legal framework for private terrestrial broadcasting. The law took the public broadcast media out of direct government control and placed it under the supervision of boards elected by parliament in which opposition and government

representatives were to have parity. As far as we can tell, the political coverage on public television still favoured a pro-governmental bias during the 1998 election, but its tone was not overtly propagandistic, and it certainly did not stir as much controversy as in 1994. Moreover, dissatisfied viewers could simply switch to the private channels. The lack of such viewers' exposure to public television may even have reduced the chances of its pro-government bias resulting in an unintended boomerang effect of the kind discussed below. Hence, the two Hungarian elections offer a natural setting to explore how different uses of public television promote the electoral interests of the main government party, while holding a number of contextual factors largely constant.

HYPOTHESES

Our postulates about campaign effects are informed by intuitively appealing scholarly theories that may have parallels in the thinking of real-life campaigners. We assume that politicians seek re-election and see, like Zaller (1996), ample space for information effects in elections. If they have more or less monopolistic control over the media, they will ensure that the general tone of coverage is favourable to them. We expect to find some evidence of positive returns on this effort, namely that attitudes towards the main government party and economic evaluations become more positive as exposure to public television increases (Hypothesis 1).

We expect message impact not to be determined by the sender's intent alone. For instance, a recent study has argued that the British audience is so much used to an overtly negative coverage of parties that it discounts much of it. This would explain why positive news coverage consistently increases support for a party more than negative coverage

decreases it (Norris *et al* 1999: 142). In a similar vein, the Hungarian public may be accustomed to pro-governmental bias on public television and might therefore ignore it.

Indeed, the impact of any new information is proportional to how credible the source is in a particular information domain for a particular audience (cf. Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Thus, enduring opposition criticism of biased coverage on government-controlled media may shape message impact, preparing voters to see all the niceties about the government and the dirt about the opposition in the television news programmes as mere confirmation of the government's abuse of power. Indeed, many Hungarian commentators speculated that in the 1994 campaign the biased coverage of public television had an unintended boomerang-effect among viewers, reducing support for the main government party (Hypothesis 2).

Hypothesis 3 expects partisan actors to also try to increase tactical voting where that may benefit them, and to sometimes succeed. These efforts must be particularly strong when uncertainty about the likely election outcome is high, and, due to monopolistic control of significant and supposedly non-partisan media, the contenders are unequally equipped to shape the voters' perception of who may win. Thus, government-controlled television will affect voters' perception of the race in ways that are conducive to prompting a tactical bandwagon towards the incumbents.

Finally, we expect partisan actors to share the intuition of salience theory, which holds that strategic self-positioning on issues is not the typical form of electoral competition. Rather, election campaigns merely influence the salience of different considerations for voters. Campaigners avoid, as much as possible, the topics where their rivals are believed

to have a more attractive position; they seek to direct voters' attention to considerations that put the sender at an advantage in the electoral arena (Budge and Farlie 1983).

This resonates well with the theory of accessibility bias, which holds that more easily retrievable information 'tends to dominate judgements, opinions and decisions', especially 'in the weights individuals assign to various considerations when expressing attitudes or making choices' (Iyengar 1990: 2). Clearly, election campaigns often try to achieve exactly this kind of priming effects (see chapter 5 in this volume). Given the degree of governmental influence on public television in Hungary, we expect to find evidence of such pro-governmental priming effects by public television (Hypothesis 4).

DATA AND MODELS

The analysis below relies on panel survey data collected at the time of the two elections by the Political Science Department of the Central European University. Technical information about the surveys and the variables in the analysis are included in the appendix to this chapter. For the sake of brevity, we discuss the operationalisation of the above hypotheses together with the findings.

Four linear regression equations were run for each year (see Tables 4.1 to 4.4, respectively). The first three assessed the impact of public television on campaign-affected determinants of the vote: short-term changes in party sympathy, short-term changes in economic evaluations, and voters' perception of who may win the election. The fourth equation explored direct influences on vote choice, with the dependent variables of the first three equations becoming independent variables together with an

indicator of those issue attitudes that the main contenders were trying to prime voters on in these elections.

It is likely that party affect may be linked to all other determinants of vote choice – i.e. economic evaluations, perceptions of the expected winner and issue attitudes – via reciprocal causation. But in the absence of better data, the equations only control for what are presumably the strongest of these reciprocal effects, namely the impact of early-campaign party affect on perceptions of the likely winner and within-campaign changes in economic evaluations. Because of this limitation we may slightly underestimate the total effect of the latter variables on vote choice. But, unfortunately, we have no data to estimate television's impact on within-campaign changes of issue attitudes, and thus must ignore a possible type of campaign effects.

Economic evaluations and public television exposure were measured identically in both elections, but the choice of issue variables and the way we coded the perception of the likely winner were determined according the particular context of each election (see below). The coding of vote choice reflects the likely calculus of the people who designed the pro-governmental coverage on public television. We presume that these people wished to see the government re-elected. Given Hungary's electoral and party system, this vastly simplified the determination of the utility of a vote (or non-vote) for them.[viii] To capture this calculus, we coded the dependent variable 1 for respondents who voted for the main government party, 0 for voters of the main challenger party, and 0.5 for all other respondents. The construction of the party affect variable followed the same logic. To derive early-campaign party affect, the respondents' ratings of the main challenger party in the pre-election poll were subtracted from their ratings of the main government

party. Then, a parallel measure was created from their post-election ratings of the two parties, and the within-campaign change of affect? Was calculated as the difference between early-campaign and post-campaign measurements.

FINDINGS

Our simplest test is shown in Table 4.1. Campaigners' are naturally concerned with overall party sympathies, and they see them as a major influence on the vote – rightly so, as Table 4.4 confirms. Hypothesis 1 expects exposure to public television to lead to a more positive evaluation of the main government party, and/or a more negative evaluation of the main opposition party during both election campaigns. In contrast, Hypothesis 2 expects a boomerang effect, at least in 1994: because of the blatant pro-governmental bias of public television, exposure to public television should have reduced sympathy for the incumbents and increased the liking of the opposition. Hence, the dependent variable is within-campaign change of party affect, and the independent variable of interest is exposure to public television broadcasts.

We control for early-campaign party affect, since the starting value powerfully limits how one's response to the questions on party affect could change during the campaign. People who had a maximum score to begin with could not become any more positive during the campaign. Similarly, after a maximally negative initial score, within-campaign change – if any was observed – had to be in the positive direction. In recognition of this methodological artefact, the equation controls for the sizeable, but theoretically irrelevant, negative effect of early-campaign evaluation.

Table 4.1 about here

As Table 4.1 reveals, exposure to public television did significantly increase sympathy for the main government party and/or reduced sympathy for the main challenger during the 1998 campaign. In 1994, however, we see a negative effect, i.e. the opposite of what was intended. Despite the pro-MDF tone of the programmes, the more one watched public television during the campaign, the more one's sympathy shifted towards the challenger. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported by the 1998 but not by the 1994 data, thus lending credence to Hypothesis 2 instead.

A replica of the test is offered in Table 4.2. The incumbents in both 1994 and 1998 saw their chief electoral liability in the pains of post-communist economic transformation. Indeed, right before the 1994 and 1998 elections, respectively 64 and 40 per cent of respondents thought that the economic conditions in the country became worse in the previous 12 months, while only 16 and 27 per cent thought that things had improved.[ix] Even these figures, however, showed that popular evaluations of the economy were already turning more optimistic compared to the dramatic lows of 1992 and 1996. No surprise, then, that a prime concern of pro-government propaganda in both campaigns was to convey good news about the economy. According to the spirit of Hypothesis 1, therefore, exposure to public television must have made viewers' evaluation of the state of the economy more favourable during both campaigns.   Hypothesis 2, again, suggests the opposite, i.e. that a boomerang effect occurred. As above, the large but theoretically uninteresting negative effect of the early-campaign evaluation is controlled for in the analysis of within-campaign changes.

Table 4.2 about here

The 1994 results once again support Hypothesis 2: no matter how citizens felt about the economy at the beginning of the campaign, the more they watched public television, the less their economic evaluations became optimistic in the course of the campaign. In the 1998 data, exposure to public television shows a positive but statistically non-significant effect on within-campaign changes of economic evaluations. Again, the findings suggest that the less blatant 1998 campaign on public television did less damage to the government's chances for re-election than its 1994 counterpart.

It might be speculated that all these seeming effects of public television broadcasts were merely spurious. Indeed, they could have been caused not so much by public television itself, but either by the real world events that it willy-nilly covered, or by some peculiar aspect of audience composition. However, when we added a host of socio-demographic and media exposure variables to the two equations, the impact of public television remained unchanged, and the respondents' frequency of reading newspapers failed to register a significant effect (data not shown).[x] We conclude that it was the coverage of the public television (or the opposition's reaction to it), rather than the composition of the audience or the real-world events covered by public television and newspapers alike, that can account for the apparent boomerang effect of public television broadcasts on short-term attitude change.

Ultimately, several explanations remain for the spectacular difference in campaign impact between the two elections. Since it differed in direction, and not just magnitude, the 1991-94 media war probably offers a more plausible explanation than the mere difference of degree in how blatant the public television's bias was in 1994 compared to 1998. A

plausible alternative is that viewers who could be offended by the overtly propagandistic coverage of public television had little choice but to watch it in 1994, while in 1998 they could simply switch to the private channels, thus reducing the backlash against public television coverage. Whichever explanation is best, they all find the reason for the boomerang effect in the extraordinary visibility of the underlying intent and bias in public television coverage. Where they disagree is over whether the extraordinary visibility was caused by the coverage itself, or by the media war, or by the lack of private television. Our next equation is designed to test Hypothesis 3. Did exposure to public television make viewers more likely to perceive the state of the election contests in ways conducive to a tactical swing away from the opposition and/or shift to the main government party? Support for Hypothesis 3 would be provided by a positive impact of public television exposure on perceptions that might have prompted a tactical bandwagon towards the main government party.[xi]

In both elections, arguably the best chance for a tactical bandwagon to the main government party was created by a mistaken, but not unusual, perception of the relative standing of those parties that were actually trailing in the polls behind the MSZP – the biggest vote-getter in both years despite its defeat in 1998. In 1994, pro-government strategists presumably pondered the idea that some liberal voters might move their way if they had believed that only the MDF could prevent the left-wing MSZP winning the election. Consequently, our dependent variable was coded 1 for everyone who named MDF as the likely winner of the election, and -1 for everyone who named one of the liberal parties.[xii] Similarly, it only made good sense if the 1998 MSZP-campaign had portrayed the widely resented FKGP as the main challenger, rather than the far more popular Fidesz-MPP.[xiii] In reality, the latter was closing the gap in the polls with the main

government party, but prior to the election many citizens still deemed the FKGP more likely to win than Fidesz-MPP. Given the majoritarian aspects of the Hungarian electoral system, this misperception could no doubt benefit the government parties, and therefore our dependent variable for 1998 was coded 1 for everyone who named FKGP as the party most likely to win the election, and -1 for everyone who named Fidesz-MPP.

Public television broadcast no polling information in either election, despite its ready availability. The polls reported in the press revealed, in both elections, a fairly widespread misperception in the public – exactly along the above lines – about the standing of the second and the third most popular parties. Thus, the withholding of polling information – though probably not the only means used to this effect – can be read as *prima facie* evidence that public television deliberately tried to confuse people about where the major competition to MSZP came from.

Its success in manipulating popular perceptions can be judged from Table 4.3. The impact of public television exposure on the perception of the likely winner was in the expected direction in both years, and reached statistical significance in 1998. The explanation for the non-significance of the effect in 1994 might be that the pro-government campaign tried to spread a visibly self-serving message in that year, i.e. that the main government party was ahead of either of the two liberal parties. In comparison, the 1998 pro-government message was more sophisticated, merely misrepresenting who was the strongest opposition force.

Table 4.3 about here

Hypothesis 4 attributes a pro-governmental priming effect to public television broadcasts. This proposition is assessed with the help of the two *interaction terms* included in the fourth equation (see Table 4.4). The equation takes vote choice as the dependent variable, and controls for exposure to public television, perception of the likely winner, relevant issue attitudes, and early-campaign party affect and economic evaluations as well as their change during the campaign. Note that the sum of the Early-campaign Economic Evaluations and the Change in Economic Evaluations variables equals the Post-Campaign Economic Evaluations, i.e. the variable that, multiplied by Public TV Exposure, forms one of the two interaction terms focused on in the analysis.

If, after controlling for the direct effect of its component parts, the interaction term registers a positive effect on vote choice, then the impact of post-campaign economic evaluations on the vote was bigger among frequent viewers of public television than among other voters. A negative effect of the same interaction term would imply the opposite: namely that among frequent viewers voting support for the main government party was less dependent on positive economic evaluations than among other citizens, and voting support for the main challenger was less dependent on negative economic evaluations. Both effects would constitute evidence of priming vote choices on particular kinds of considerations by public television, although the negative effect of the interaction term may be better described as "de-priming" on the economy, i.e. a reduction of the weight of economic evaluations in the vote function.

However, the mere statistical significance of priming effects would only support Hypothesis 4 if the direction of priming had been consistent with the intentions of pro-government campaigners. We can only infer intent indirectly. The 1994 MDF campaign

had a compelling reason to reduce the dependence of voting decisions on retrospective economic judgements: the latter, as we saw, were overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, the pro-governmental campaign on public television – arguably even more than the party's own campaign – tried to prime voters' decisions on another consideration: the perils and sins that can be associated with the communist past. While it was much debated by commentators whether priming in this direction could have possibly benefited the MDF in 1994, the inference that the intention and the attempt were present in the campaign was widely accepted.

This helps to operationalise Hypothesis 4: in 1994, exposure to public television had to decrease the impact of economic evaluations on the vote, and increase the impact of anti-communist attitudes. Anti-communist attitudes are measured by the issue attitude variable in the 1994 data. To assess the priming of voters by public television on this issue domain, the issues-with-exposure interaction term was entered into the equation. Note that the issue variable, and its interaction with exposure, will refer to an entirely different issue domain in the analysis of the 1998 data, reflecting a different campaign agenda.

Table 4.4 about here

The positive impact of the issues-with-exposure interaction term in 1994 signals that the more people watched television, the more likely anti-communists voted for the main government party – or at least not for MSZP – and the more likely pro-communist voters did the reverse.[xiv] The direct impact of economic evaluations on the vote appears to have been weak anyway – of course, they may have had a large indirect influence on the vote via party affect – but the effect further decreased proportionate to public television

exposure, as shown by the negative effect of the interaction term in Table 4.4. Thus, the results suggest that in 1994, pro-governmental priming of the vote on anti-communism rather than economics worked very much as intended, despite the boomerang effect of public television on other attitudes in the same year.

Regarding 1998, it is not entirely clear whether government propagandists aimed at priming voters on economic performance or not. Popular evaluations of the economy were still predominantly negative (see above). Nevertheless, the MSZP seemed confident that the state of the economy was good enough to enable it to win the election. At any rate, its lacklustre 1998 campaign lacked clear issue content, apart from claiming success and competence in economic management. This emphasis may have primed voting decisions on the state of the economy.

However, the main challenger did run an issue-oriented campaign in 1998. This may have reflected the greater opportunities than in 1994 to put across relatively complex opposition messages, via the new and non-partisan private television channels, but probably also on public television. In 1998, the opposition front-runner, Fidesz-MPP, called for higher welfare spending in particular areas, and for a stronger state more resolutely fighting corruption and promoting law and order (see Fowler 1998: 258-259). Two prominent issues covered by our data were the abolition of tuition fees in higher education and means-testing the eligibility for child-care allowance – i.e. to repeal two prominent innovations in the 1995 austerity package that did more than anything else to define the legacy of the 1994-98 socialist-liberal government.

Our data (not shown) reveal that on both issues an overwhelming majority in the public favoured the position of Fidesz-MPP over that of the government. Yet, the opposition campaign still faced an uphill battle. It had to explain that Fidesz – previously a strongly monetarist liberal party – had become a stauncher advocate than the MSZP of the cherished welfare provisions of the former communist regime. The dull way the campaign debates were organized on the public channels, and the relatively modest coverage of the opposition in the news programmes were certainly obstacles to this effort. Thus, public television served the main government party by hampering the communication of the opposition messages on these welfare state issues.

Accordingly we operationalise Hypothesis 4 in the 1998 context the following way: exposure to the pro-governmental public television primed vote choices on the state of the economy, and reduced the impact of the two welfare state issues on voting support for the MSZP vs. the Fidesz-MPP. The issue attitudes variable, therefore, measures the respondents' support for the unpopular governmental policies on child-care allowances and tuition fees.

As Table 4.4 shows, public television primed vote choices largely as expected by the hypothesis. The main effect of the issue attitudes variable in 1998 was positive – i.e. the more voters agreed with the government's line, the more likely they were to vote for the MSZP, and the less likely to vote for the main challenger advocating the repeal of these policies. This was only good news for the opposition, since the government's position was very unpopular. Hence, only the MSZP benefited from the fact that the issue-with-exposure interaction negatively influenced the vote: that is, the more people watched television, the less their votes were moved by the issues of child-care allowances and

university tuition fees. The impact of the other interaction term (economic evaluations with exposure) was positive, suggesting that the more one watched public television, the more likely one's vote choice was directly influenced by economic evaluations. The significance level of the effect of the two interaction terms may seem less than impressive, but further checks suggest that the reported findings are robust.[xv]

As in the case of all previous equations, we experimented with controlling for socio-demographic and further media exposure variables, and also with a change in the coding of the dependent variable.[xvi] The relevant results remained the same (data not shown). Hence, we are reasonably confident that Hypothesis 4 is supported by the 1994 and 1998 data, both with regard to economic evaluations and issue attitudes: public television primed voters on issues as the pro-government campaign desired.

A brief look at the effects of the remaining variables in Table 4.4 completes our analysis. Naturally, party affect/support? had the greatest direct effect on vote in both elections. Its change during the campaign had a sizeable effect too, so public television's impact on it (see Table 4.2) indirectly influenced vote choices too. The perception of the likely winner only affected vote choice in 1998, but not in 1994. It seems, then, that even if public television shaped these perceptions more strongly, this would not have benefited the main government party in 1994.[xvii] In 1998, however, the effect worked as expected. In the case of two voters with otherwise identical values on all independent variables, the one who thought that the widely resented FKGP would win became more likely to vote for the main government party and less likely to vote for Fidesz-MPP than the one who thought that the latter would win. Hence, public television's impact on perceptions (see Table 4.3) yielded electoral payoffs for the MSZP in 1998.

Our most interesting finding concerns the direct impact of public television exposure on the vote – reaching statistical significance in 1994 only.[xviii] This negative effect signals that in 1994, among otherwise identical voters in terms of party affect/support? and so forth, those who watched more public television became less likely than others to vote for the main government party, and more likely to vote for the main challenger. Our theory explains this neatly. The media themselves became an issue directly bearing on the vote either because dissatisfied viewers could not switch to private channels, or because of the tone of the coverage itself, or because of the media war. The more one watched the public television, the more plausible and salient became the charges about governmental abuse of the media, and the more likely a defection from MDF was to follow. Hence the direct effect of exposure to public television on the vote.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have argued that public television is likely to be a very central weapon in election campaigning in many new democracies. A relatively poor supply of campaign resources for parties and weak party loyalties in the electorate on the one hand, and likely governmental control of an unusually important channel of political communication on the other, make the partisan use and abuse of the media both highly likely and potentially a major political issue in itself. We outlined plausible reasons why an imprudently blatant use of this campaign device may actually hurt the re-election bid of incumbents.

We offered some empirical tests of the proposition in the context of Hungarian elections and found some evidence for such boomerang effects. We also showed that these are not inevitable. In some contexts public television coverage did seem to help the pro-

governmental campaign by increasing sympathy for the main government party and/or reducing sympathy for the main challenger, by priming vote choices on particular considerations as pro-government campaigners apparently wished, and by promoting such perceptions of the likely winner of the elections that could induce a tactical bandwagon to the incumbents in some sections of the electorate. Moreover, our theory seemed to offer sensible explanations of where, when, and in what respect the pro-governmental coverage of public television helps the incumbent's campaign, and where it hurts it.

Our preferred explanation for the contradictory effects of public television is that blatant propaganda backfires (probably through the reactions of the competitors that it triggers), while subtle messages may work. These are, of course, just hypotheses, distilled from a single case study. But they are anchored in our findings: boomerang effects of public television coverage occurred in the 1994 campaign, but not in 1998; even the generally unsuccessful 1994 campaign on public television achieved its intended priming effects; even the relatively subtle 1998 pro-governmental coverage failed to persuade voters about the rosy state of the economy; public television could impact on citizens' perceptions of the likely winner when the pro-governmental message was more sophisticated, but not in 1994, when it was more obviously self-serving.

At a more general level, our reasoning implies that the fit between campaign resources on the one hand, and the chosen targets and methods on the other, influences campaign impact. Campaigners make choices with an eye on their resources, but some assets may facilitate counterproductive choices. Pursuing the matter still further, counterproductive choices may be attributed to the force of circumstances. After all, why was the pro-governmental bias of the Hungarian public television

so unwisely blatant in 1994? Lack of experience, or the absence of the checks and balances provided by competing channels may have been part of the story. But, then, why did the post-1998 centre-right government return to the high-handed interventionism of the 1990-94 governments? An often-heard justification of the media policies of the centre-right gives a plausible account. It argues that the (self-)selection processes to elite positions under state-socialism were such that most journalists of the immediate post-communist era are natural partisans of the centre-left and the liberals. Consensual and laissez-faire policies would only sustain an imbalance that has to be combated by the right to improve its lot. In this light, the apparently counter-productive pro-governmental campaign on public television in 1994 could be seen as either the result of pursuing the long-term goal of transforming the media system at the expense of short-term vote-maximisation, or as a structurally induced misperception of strategic opportunities. In either case, the choices were just shifting shadows of slow-moving constraints. But they had their own effects.

Appendix: Data sets and variables

The data used in the chapter are made available via the Hungarian data archive, TARKI. Random route samples of the adult population (1,200 respondents at a time) were interviewed with standardized questionnaires in April 1994 (about three weeks before the first round of the 1994 election), March 1998, and April 1998. The last two data sets (collected approximately six and three weeks before the first round of the 1998 election, respectively) are merged in the data analysis below. Between the first and second round of balloting, as many of the respondents in the pre-election interviews as could be reached were contacted again, with 719 and 1525 of them successfully re-interviewed in May 1994 and May 1998, respectively. Only these respondents were included in the analyses reported here. The data were weighted so that in both years the weighted proportion of 40 non-overlapping demographic groups (defined in terms of gender, age, urban vs. rural place of residence and education), and of the overlapping group of Budapest residents, corresponded to the findings of the 1996 micro-census by the Central Statistical Office.

Variables:

Public TV Exposure: frequency of watching the first channel of public television measured on a six- (in 1994 five-) point scale running from 0=never to 1=every day.

Early-Campaign Party Affect: the difference between the respondent's pre-election rating of the main government party (MDF in 1994, MSZP in 1998) and the main challenger party (MSZP in 1994, Fidesz-MPP in 1998) on a seven-point feeling thermometer. Positive values stand for more positive evaluation of the main government party than the main challenger.

Change in Party Affect: the difference between respondent's Early-campaign Party Affect
and a parallel measured derived from the post-election data. Positive values
indicate that over time the difference became more favourable (or less
unfavourable) for the incumbents.

Early-Campaign Economic Evaluations: pre-election responses to 'Do you think that in
the last 12 months the economic situation (1) has got much worse, (2) has got
somewhat worse, (3) stayed the same, (4) has got somewhat better, or (5) has got
much better?'

Change in Economic Evaluations: the difference between the pre- and post-election
retrospective economic evaluations (measured as described above), with positive
values standing for change towards more favourable retrospective assessments.

Post-Campaign Economic Evaluations in interaction with Public TV Exposure: the
product of the two variables.

Issue Position: respondents' position on selected issues, with high values indicating more
agreement with government than opposition. For 1994, the issue variable is the
respondents' rating of the importance of 'removing former communists from
positions of influence' in the pre-election survey. For 1998, the issue scale runs
from -10 to +10, and sums the original post-election responses, recorded on eleven
point scales, to self-administered questions about respondents' preferences
between tuition-free higher education vs. cost-based tuition at universities, and
universal vs. means-tested eligibility for child-care allowance.

Issue Position in interaction with Public TV Exposure: the product of the two variables.

Perception of the Likely Winner: the respondents' pre-election response to a question
about which party is going to win the election. In 1994, the responses were coded

as: 1=MDF, -1=SZDSZ or FIDESZ, 0=all else. In 1998, the responses were coded

as: 1=FKGP, -1=Fidesz-MPP, 0=all else.

Vote Choice: the respondents' post-election recalls of which party list they voted for. To

reflect the utility of the vote for pro-government campaigner, the 1994 responses

were coded as: 1=MDF, 0=MSZP, 0.5=all else. In 1998, the responses were coded

as: 1=MSZP, 0=Fidesz-MPP, 0.5=all else.

Table 4.1: The net impact of public television exposure on changes in party evaluations during the 1994 and 1998 campaigns

	1994		1998	
	beta	(sig.)	beta	(sig.)
Public TV Exposure	**-.10**	**(.006)**	.07	(.008)
Early-Campaign Party Affect	-.45	(.000)	-.36	(.000)
Adjusted R-square:	.21		.13	
Number of cases in the analysis:	627		1330	

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients (and their level of significance in parentheses) derived from regressing the Sympathy Change variable in the 1994 and 1998 data sets, respectively, on the variables named in the table.

Table 4.2: The net impact of public television exposure on changes in retrospective economic evaluations during the 1994 and 1998 campaigns

	1994 beta	(sig.)	1998 beta	(sig.)
Public TV Exposure	-.13	(.000)	.02	(.437)
Early-Campaign Party Affect	.14	(.000)	.13	(.000)
Early-Campaign Economic Evaluations	-.60	(.000)	-.64	(.000)
Adjusted R-square:	.35		.38	
Number of cases in the analysis:	629		1324	

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients (and their level of significance in parentheses) derived from regressing the Change in Economic Evaluations variable in the 1994 and 1998 data sets, respectively, on the variables named in the table.

Table 4.3: The net impact of public television exposure on perceptions of the likely winner during the 1994 and 1998 campaigns

| | 1994 | | 1998 | |
	beta	(sig.)	beta	(sig.)
Public TV Exposure	.03	(.393)	**.06**	**(.014)**
Early-Campaign Party Affect	.18	(.000)	.18	(.000)
Adjusted R-square:	.03		.04	
Number of cases in the analysis:	652		1392	

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients (and their level of significance in parentheses) derived from regressing Beliefs about the Race in the 1994 and 1998 data sets, respectively, on the variables named in the table.

Table 4.4: Effects on the vote during the 1994 and 1998 campaigns

	1994 beta	(sig.)	1998 beta	(sig.)
Public TV Exposure	-.07	(.023)	-.03	(.250)
Early-Campaign Party Affect	.73	(.000)	.68	(.000)
Change in Party Affect	.39	(.000)	.36	(.000)
Perception of the Likely Winner	-.01	(.796)	.10	(.000)
Early-Campaign Economic Evaluations	.25	(.030)	-.10	(.206)
Change in Economic Evaluations	.36	**(.014)**	-.11	(.194)
Issue Position	-.29	(.024)	.14	(.036)
Post-Campaign Economic Evaluations in interaction with Public TV Exposure	-.26	(.019)	.13	(.070)
Issue Position in interaction with Public TV Exposure	.36	**(.005)**	-.13	(.057)
Adjusted R-square:	.46		.46	
Number of cases in the analysis:	610		1265	

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients (and their level of significance in parentheses) derived from regressing Vote Choice in the 1994 and 1998 data sets, respectively, on the variables named in the table.

Notes

i   On these terms, see chapters 7, 8, and 1, respectively.

ii   Part of the explanation is the understandable lack in many new democracies of a culture of public service journalism, and the dominance of a 'political advocate' rather than 'watchdog' and 'information provider' role definition among journalists.

iii   The topics were apparently selected with the consensus of the parties, and only included major policy areas, broadly corresponding to the jurisdiction of cabinet ministries.

iv   We shall not deal with this event because it was in no way the initiative or under the control of the media personnel who staged the pro-government campaign on public television. At any rate, the debate took place ten days after the first round of the election, and one day after the last interviews were done for the post-election wave of the 1998 survey.

v   Other information sources were mentioned by just 7 per cent of the respondents. These data were made available to us by the Median Public Opinion and Market Research Institute, and refer to a random route sample (N=1200), weighted to match the demographic composition of the adult population.

vi   In both years, 15-16 per cent could not answer, while the rest saw more or less bias in television coverage. The sources are the post-election waves of the studies described in the Appendix.

vii   Most of the remaining respondents either could not positively answer these questions, or thought that the coverage was always fair and balanced. Ten per cent

in 1994, and 3 per cent in 1998 mentioned other parties as most favoured by the coverage.

[viii] Hungary has a mixed electoral system and the coalition alternatives, at least for informed actors, are exclusive and fairly clear in advance. The fate of the government is decided mainly in the single-member constituencies, in multi-candidate yet essentially two-way races. In both 1994 and 1998, each party in the government coalition had its own candidates in all constituencies, but MDF in 1994 and MSZP in 1998 was rightly expected to be the main vote-winners among the incumbents nearly everywhere. The erstwhile voters of the smaller parties were believed to have a relatively weak propensity to strategically rally behind the strongest candidate of their side in the second round. Thus, for someone interested in the survival of the government, votes for the main government party had the highest positive value, and votes for the main challenger party the most negative value.

[ix] The remaining respondents saw no change or did not know. The sources are the pre-election waves of the studies described in the Appendix.

[x] We used the following socio-demographic controls: gender, age, age squared, education, employment status, place of residence, log of family income, frequency of church attendance, and former communist party membership. The additional involvement variables were frequency of reading any newspaper with some political coverage, frequency of listening to radio news, interest in politics, and – in 1998 – frequency of watching any of the three main private television channels.

xi   We have no data on within-campaign changes in the perception of the likely winner. Therefore, early-campaign perceptions define the dependent variable.

xii   This coding reflects the complexity of the strategic context. In some of the last polls, and in the election, SZDSZ came second and MDF third, but in most polls published in the months before the election FIDESZ – then SZDSZ's chief partner in the liberal electoral alliance formed for the 1994 election – was in second place and MDF in third or fourth.

xiii   This idea was so much in the air that foundations sympathizing with the Fidesz-MPP even sponsored media polls to counter the mistaken impression.

xiv   The estimated impact of the issues-with-exposure interaction is inflated by the obvious collinearity with the issue attitude variable, but when we removed the latter variable from the equation, the impact of the interaction term still remained positive and statistically significant (data not shown).

xv   Given the inevitable multicollinearity between the interaction terms and their component parts, we re-estimated the equation by excluding three variables from the analysis: early-campaign economic evaluations, change of economic evaluations during the campaign, and issue attitudes on their own. Furthermore, the issues-with-exposure interaction term was altered to reflect that a drop, not an increase, is expected in the welfare state issues' impact on the vote as public television exposure decreases. The new formula multiplied the issue attitudes variable by (1 - public television exposure), rather than by public television exposure. In the results so obtained (not shown), both with and without controls

for socio-demographic variables and further media exposure variables, the two
interaction terms registered the same effects as in Table 4.4 but with p<.05.

[xvi] The alternative coding assumed that for partisans of the main government party,
votes for allies were slightly better, and votes for smaller opposition parties
slightly worse, than abstention. Accordingly, voters of possible allies were coded
0.75, and voters of the possible allies of the main challenger as 0.25.

[xvii] Maybe there were simply too few voters who could have been persuaded to vote
for the incumbents just for a fear of an MSZP-victory.

[xviii] The non-significant effect in 1998 is hardly a surprise: we would not expect mere
watching of the programme to prompt a vote for the government. Rather, it should
be through the impact of exposure on party affect, perceptions, issue concerns and
so forth that we would expect pro-governmental coverage to boost behavioural
support for the government.