Political Correlates of Television Viewing

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THE DECLINING salience of political parties and the concurrent shift to candidate-centered media campaigns and voting patterns have raised fears of growing manipulation and instability in American politics. The mass media have usually been blamed for the apparently increasing "rootlessness" of the electorate and its abandonment of traditional voting patterns. Yet the evidence attributing these shifts to the media has been inconsistent.

A recent review of research on "voter volatility" (Bybee, et al., 1981) concluded that "the volatility literature suggests that the emerging pattern of television as the dominant source of political information has contributed to growing electoral instability" (p. 81). But the authors' own study found no support for the hypothesis. If anything, television viewing was associated with lower rather than higher levels of volatility.

Abstract This study examines relationships between amount of daily television viewing and political self-designations. It is based on the assumption that television's impact on the political front is not limited to news and specifically "political" programming, but that the entire dramatic structure of network television may contribute to viewers' underlying political orientations. The analysis is based on nine independent data bases, yielding a combined N of 14,067 respondents. The findings show that those who watch more television are significantly more likely to call themselves "moderate," and to avoid the labels of "liberal" or "conservative." The implications of the effects of television viewing on the political process are discussed.

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A study of "candidate voting" (Wattenberg, 1982) found that while party salience *is* declining, and television is particularly indifferent to party labels, strong local party organizations can reverse the decline. Research on the role of media in children's political socialization (Conway, et al., 1981) found that children's media use and level of political knowledge contributed more to political behavior than did gender, grade in school, instructional method, or parental media use, but knowledge had a negative relationship to supporting the party system. The authors called for "greater attention to the creative effects of observation and vicarious experience made possible through the news media" (p. 176).

But what kind of attention? Our long-standing project on television's contributions to viewers' conceptions of reality (e.g., Gerbner, et al., 1980a) points to significant gaps in previous research attention to the media's role in the political process. First, the effects of television may be fundamentally different from, if not counter to, those of other media. Unlike other media, television is used relatively nonselectively and in massive doses. Therefore, it has the potential of exposing viewers to stable content configurations that they do not get from other media.

Secondly, the politically significant content of television is not limited to, and may not even primarily reside in, news and public affairs. The "news and public affairs viewer" that most studies of political influence purport to study is a rare breed. Few turn on *only* news and public affairs. Many of those who respond that they "frequently" view news and public affairs are simply heavy viewers of television. Thus whatever they get out of their exposure can also be attributed to dramatic fare, which makes up the bulk of viewing, and which, with its portrayal of crime, courtrooms, and conflict-ridden urban life, may well be a principal contributor to basic political orientations.

Finally, the declining salience of and support for political parties per se does not necessarily mean the disappearance of politically relevant labels. On the contrary, one can frequently observe the characterization of political—and other—personalities as "liberal," "radical," "conservative," and endowed with other designations that carry political meanings.

The theory we are testing and developing is based on these considerations and on the previously reported results of our ongoing research into political orientations (Gerbner, et al., 1982). It postulates relative standardization, homogeneity, and stability as the most pervasive associations with television viewing. It views television as different from other media (although more inclusive of the cultural

mainstream) in that most viewing is an essentially time-governed ritual. For most viewers who watch several hours a day, the different types of program selections make relatively little difference. We also consider television a pervasive cultivator of significant labels and self-designations, and thus a powerful new force on the political scene.

The world portrayed on network television—the mediated world most viewers attend to most often—is fashioned under the imperatives of mass market appeal. Content analyses of television (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Gerbner, et al., 1978, 1979) and studies of the medium's institutional processes (Barnouw, 1975; Cantor, 1980; Tuchman, 1974) suggest that those imperatives tend to favor the portrayal of conventional, "balanced," middle-of-the-road images and values.

Avoiding extremes has long been television's preferred strategy for survival, as networks and advertisers have come to expect attacks from vocal groups on the right and the left. Faced with such conflicting pressures, the television industry takes the obvious way out—navigating between the extremes, safely in the mainstream, in the comfortable and supposedly nonideological middle ground that holds the largest possible audience.

This suggests that while liberals find television too "conservative," and conservatives find it too "liberal," the truth of the matter probably lies—literally—somewhere in between. But where "in between" does television steer its course? Our analyses (Gerbner, et al., 1982) suggest that television's mainstream runs well to the right of center on political issues and closer to traditional liberal positions on demands for government services to a consumer-oriented economy. At the same time, the official media ideology of balance, objectivity, and moderation leads us to expect that heavy exposure to the relatively homogenized presentations of most television fare should cultivate generally "moderate" self-perceptions among viewers.

Competition for the largest possible audience at least cost means striving for the broadest appeals; the underlying demography, action structure, values, and ideology are stable and long-lasting. In news, "balanced objectivity" means, in practice, that the "moderate" center of the visible political spectrum is portrayed as the normal, nonideological solution to controversial and sensitive issues. In general, divergent or deviant positions are presented as mostly to be shunned or suppressed—their proponents are readily dismissed as extremists who are generally canceled out by their balancing opponents on the other side of the moderate "center."

Our research, called Cultural Indicators, has been mapping the

stable and recurrent features of the world of television and relating them to viewers' conceptions of social reality since 1967. We have consistently found that those who spend more time watching television are more likely to express views, beliefs, and assumptions that are congruent with television's portrayals of life and society. Amount of television viewing has been found to make an independent contribution to a wide range of conceptions of reality within and across relatively homogeneous subgroups. These conceptions include images of violence and mistrust (Gerbner, et al., 1979, 1980a), aging and age roles (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, and Morgan, 1980), sex role stereotypes (Signorielli, 1979; Morgan, 1982), racial and sexual minorities (Gross, 1982), science and scientists (Gerbner, et al., 1981a), health-related beliefs and practices (Gerbner, et al., 1981b), and other issues. Some of this work has been critiqued by Hughes (1980) and Hirsch (1980, 1981a, 1981b); for our responses, see Gerbner, et al. (1980b, 1981c, 1981d). (For an extended discussion of some of these points, including independent confirmations, see Hawkins and Pingree, 1982).

We have recently begun to investigate relationships between television viewing and political orientations (Gerbner, et al., 1982). This work, based on four years of the NORC General Social Surveys, suggests that those with greater immersion in the world of television are indeed more likely to present themselves as politically moderate. In this paper, we replicate, extend, and refine that study, using data from the 1982 General Social Survey and four additional data bases, including three large national surveys.

Mainstreaming

Television's associations with outlooks and behaviors need not be unidirectional or of equal intensity across the board. Rather, the patterns depend on the different social, cultural, and political contexts in which people live. In many cases, television seems to diminish or override the influence of these other social forces. This is what we call "mainstreaming:" a convergence of conceptions and attitudes held by the heavy viewers of different groups who share little besides television. If the television mainstream can be thought of as the aggregate common patterns of images and values that pervade television, then mainstreaming is the expression of that shared consciousness by heavy viewers in those groups whose light viewers hold divergent views. Mainstreaming thus reflects a specific kind of systematic interaction between television and background factors, one

which generally results in a narrowing of differences among subgroups.

The key to the notion of mainstreaming rests on the fact that relatively lighter viewers in different groups do *not* share common perspectives. While those who watch more television are more likely to perceive the world as it is presented on television, the beliefs of those who watch *less* television are more diversified and are more affected by other social and cultural influences. In other words, while television may cultivate notion Y among groups whose light viewers are more likely to believe X, it may *also* cultivate Y among groups whose light viewers are more likely to believe Z.

We are not suggesting that television content can or need be directly traced to a specific issue or phenomenon in order to study the possibility of political mainstreaming. Rather, we are asking whether the correlates of heavy viewing include the tendency to see the political world in a manner generally consistent with television's repetitive conventional portrayals.

It should be stressed that our use of the term "correlates" in this discussion has deliberate implications. First and foremost, our data are from cross-sectional surveys, thereby preventing the possibility of drawing conclusions about temporal causality, as in before-and-after experiments. But perhaps more fundamentally, we wish to avoid the classic concern with "causality" as a unidirectional and unidimensional notion. (In strict time-order terms, television is the factor which "comes first," since children are now born into a television environment and begin to watch well before they can read or even speak—and certainly well before they adopt political labels.) The critical question is whether television's associations with these labels are independent of other factors which are plausible sources of spuriousness. We believe that both television viewing and political self-designation occur within a dynamic, ongoing system. Heavy viewing is an integral aspect of certain styles of life, characterized by specific ways of looking at the world. Ritualistic exposure to television's repetitive fare can be expected to sustain, nourish, confirm, and strengthen—i.e., cultivate—these orientations, perspectives, and behaviors.

In sum, we are arguing that heavy television viewers should be more likely to approach the political world in more homogeneous and conventional terms than light viewers living under similar conditions. If these assumptions are valid, then we should be able to find systematic relationships between amount of television viewing and the tendency to designate oneself as "moderate," just as we have found

such relationships between television viewing and other relatively homogeneous, mainstream perceptions of the world (Gerbner, et al., 1980a).

Methods

SAMPLES OF RESPONDENTS

The following analyses are based on nine separate data bases, representing 14,067 respondents (unweighted). These are all the datasets in our archives which contain appropriate questions on both television viewing and political self-designations. Five of these are the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys (NORC/GSS) for the years which included a question on amount of television viewing (1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, and 1982). About 1,500 respondents took part in hour-long personal interviews each year (between February and April), for a combined N of 7,526. The 1975 sample was drawn through a combination of block quotas and probability sampling; the other four years are full probability.

Three of the other datasets are also large national surveys. One was conducted for the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company by Research and Forecasts, Inc., between September and November, 1980. This sample consists of 1,610 respondents selected through random-digit-dialing procedures, representative of Americans aged 14 and older, and an oversample of 408 teenagers, older people, and blacks. The general public and the oversampled responses were weighted to match census figures (on age, ethnic origin, gender, education, and family income) to produce a weighted N of 1,610.

Another was conducted by The Roper Organization for Virginia Slims, Inc., in October 1979. This sample represents a multistage stratified probability design at the block level with quotas for sex; personal interviews were carried out in respondents' homes with 2,960 women and 984 men aged 18 and over.

Another national personal interview survey was conducted in 1979. This survey, with 1,635 respondents, was concerned with public attitudes toward science and technology (see Miller, et al., 1980; Miller and Prewitt, 1983).

Finally, for variety, we include data from a small sample of adolescents (eighth graders) from rural Minnesota. Self-administered questionnaires were filled out in class by 294 students, in groups of about 20–25 at a time, under teacher supervision. The data were collected in November 1981.

MEASURES

The independent variable in this research is average amount of daily television exposure, taken from responses to survey questions. Question wordings and response categories varied somewhat among the nine data bases analyzed here, and we made adjustments to increase comparability across samples. For example, the NORC/GSS television question deals with hours on an average day. The Virginia Slims question is coded in minutes, so we divided responses by 60; the Science and Technology question deals with hours in an average week, so we divided responses by seven. More important, this measure is not interpreted as providing absolutely accurate reports of actual number of viewing hours, but is used to differentiate viewers with relatively more or less exposure to the world of television.

When not used as a continuous variable, amount of average daily viewing was trichotomized to allow the comparison of relatively light, medium, and heavy viewers. The divisions were made at the points which provided the closest approximation of an even three-way split within each survey. In general, this translated to one hour or less (light viewers), two or three hours (medium viewers), and four hours or more (heavy viewers).

The dependent variable is political self-designation, along the liberal-moderate-conservative dimension. We are assuming that these labels are salient and meaningful to respondents, owing in part to the generally accepted and frequent use of the terms.

Items measuring political self-designation also varied across surveys. Respondents in the NORC/GSS and Science and Technology surveys were asked to place themselves on a seven-point political scale (with "political" emphasized), ranging from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative." The Virginia Slims question specifically asked respondents about their general outlooks, "politically and socially," placed on a five-point scale. The Connecticut Mutual survey simply asked whether respondents were liberal, moderate, or conservative on most political matters, and a five-point scale was used with adolescents. Except for the Connecticut Mutual survey (which used only three response categories), we recoded respondents as simply either liberal, moderate, or conservative.

Table 1 presents the mean amount of viewing and the percentage in each political self-designation category across samples. These variables are relatively stable across time and surveys, but there are some interesting variations. Across the five NORC/GSS samples, amount of viewing shows no linear trend, but significant deviations from linearity ($p<.01$); mean viewing levels declined from 1975 to 1978 and have

Table 1. Amount of Viewing and Political Self-Designation by Sample

	TV Viewing		*% Who Are*		
Sample (N)	*Mean*	*s.d.*	*Liberal*	*Moderate*	*Conservative*
NORC/GSS					
1975 (1,490)	3.05	2.12	30.1%	40.0%	29.9%
1977 (1,530)	2.93	2.18	28.9	38.8	32.3
1978 (1,532)	2.79	2.16	28.2	38.3	33.5
1980 (1,468)	2.93	2.22	25.5	40.7	33.7
1982 (1,506)	2.98	2.29	26.9	40.8	32.3
Science and Technology (1,635)	2.73	2.41	25.6	38.2	33.6
Virginia Slims (3,944)	2.59	1.86	22.4	34.4	43.2
Connecticut Mutual (1,610)	3.18	1.79	23.5	45.9	30.7
Minnesota Adolescents (294)	4.26	2.08	13.9	65.7	20.4

increased since. The percentage who call themselves moderate has been particularly stable in the NORC/GSS surveys, varying between 38.3 percent and 40.8 percent; neither linear nor nonlinear trends are significant. There is a significant negative linear trend in the percentage who call themselves liberal ($p<.01$), even though this proportion increased a bit in 1982. The percentage of conservatives steadily increased from 1975 to 1980 but declined slightly in 1982; neither linear nor nonlinear trends are significant.

Connecticut Mutual respondents and, not surprisingly, the Minnesota Adolescents, report higher amounts of viewing. Virginia Slims respondents were more likely to say they are conservative, perhaps because the question emphasized "political and social" outlooks. Connecticut Mutual respondents were more likely than others to say they are moderate, perhaps because only three response categories were used. Finally, it is interesting to note the rather high proportion of adolescents (65.7 percent) who chose the moderate label, even with a five-point scale.

CONTROLS

Ten basic controls were used in the analysis: sex, age, education, income, occupational prestige, area of residence (urban/nonurban), race (white/nonwhite), frequency of church attendance, union membership, and political party affiliation. No other factors which appear in most of the surveys seemed relevant. These background demographics also varied in wording and response categories across surveys. As a result, different cutoff points had to be used for subgroup analyses in different surveys, particularly for such variables as income and area of residence. Every attempt was made to match

categories as closely as possible, and we feel they are sufficiently similar to allow meaningful comparisons.

The availability of these measures also differed among samples. All 10 appear in the Connecticut Mutual and NORC/GSS surveys (except for union membership in the 1977 and 1982 GSS). Church attendance is missing in both the Virginia Slims and Science surveys, and the latter has no measure of party affiliation. For Minnesota adolescents, we used only sex, age, and the education and occupational status of the respondent's father. Altogether, we were able to analyze 198 distinct but overlapping subgroups (including overall comparisons).

Results

Overall, there is a consistent tendency for those who watch more television to call themselves "moderate." Table 2 shows the percentage of light viewers in each political self-designation category and the percentage spread between them and the heavy viewers in that category. (Medium viewers are omitted for purposes of space.) This difference is referred to as the cultivation differential, or CD. For example, the top row of Table 2 shows that in the 1975 GSS, 32 percent of the light viewers said they were "moderate"; since the CD = +12, we see that 44 percent of the heavy viewers said they were "moderate." In all nine surveys, heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to choose the "moderate" self-designation, and the re-

Table 2. Simple Relationships Between Amount of Television Viewing and Political Self-Designation

	% Who Say They Are								
	Liberal			*Moderate*			*Conservative*		
	%L	*CD*	*Gamma*	*%L*	*CD*	*Gamma*	*%L*	*CD*	*Gamma*
NORC/GSS									
1975	30	+3	.05	32	+12	.15*	39	−16	−.22*
1977	31	−4	−.06	36	+7	.09*	33	−3	−.04
1978	33	−6	−.10*	30	+15	.20*	37	−9	−.12*
1980	28	−3	−.05	35	+11	.14*	38	−9	−.11*
1982	26	+1	.03	37	+5	.05	37	−6	−.08*
Sci. and Tech.	29	−6	−.11*	33	+12	.16*	38	−5	−.08
VA Slims	25	−3	−.06*	32	+4	.06*	44	−1	−.01
Conn. Mut.	28	−4	−.03	40	+7	.07*	32	−3	−.05
Minn. Ad.	21	−9	−.19	57	+14	.20*	22	−5	−.13

NOTE: %L = % light viewers in category. CD = Cultivation Differential: % heavy viewers in category minus % light viewers in category.

* $p < .05$.

lationship is significant in all but the 1982 GSS.[1] While there are variations across samples and years, the simple association appears in these nine independent samples.

It is worth noting at this point that the tendency for heavy viewers to call themselves moderate seems to be a specific correlate of television, and not of general media use. These surveys include various questions on newspaper reading, radio listening, and so on. As can be seen in Table 3, other media variables relate to political self-designation in strikingly different ways than does television. In par-

Table 3. Simple Relationships Between Political Self-Designation and Use of Other Media

	% Who Say They Are								
	Liberal			*Moderate*			*Conservative*		
	%L	*Diff*	*Gamma*	*%L*	*Diff*	*Gamma*	*%L*	*Diff*	*Gamma*
NORC/GSS									
Newspaper									
1975	34	−6	−.12*	40	0	.01	26	+5	.11*
1977	31	−3	−.06	40	−3	−.08	29	+6	.14*
1978	31	−5	−.12*	40	−1	.02	30	+5	.09*
1982	30	−6	−.12*	41	−1	−.01	29	+6	.13*
Radio									
1978	26	+5	.09*	38	0	−.00	36	−6	−.09*
1982	26	+2	.04	39	+4	.05	35	−6	−.09*
Science									
Newspapers	24	+1	.01	42	−6	−.09	35	+3	.09
Radio	20	+8	.14*	42	−6	−.08	38	−3	−.04
VA Slims									
"Reading"	20	+5	.10*	36	−5	−.08*	43	0	.00
Conn. Mutual									
Newspapers	26	−5	−.10*	46	0	.00	29	+3	.09
Minn. Ad.									
Movies	13	+3	.12	64	+3	.06	27	−6	−15
Books	10	+7	.29*	72	−11	−.26*	20	+8	.21
Radio	11	+5	.24	66	+2	.06	27	−8	−.22
Newspapers	14	+3	.10	68	−5	−.08	21	+3	.06

NOTE: For Adult Samples:
Radio: low = 0,1 hours; medium = 2,3 hours; high 4 hours or more.
Newspaper: low = under once a week; medium = a few times a week; high = every day.
For Virginia Slims, "Reading" = time spent reading books, magazines, and newspapers (single question).
For Adolescent Sample: All dichotomizations (median split).
%L= % in "Low Use" Group in Category.
Diff = Spread between % in "Low" and "High" Use Groups.
* $p < .05$.

[1] Preliminary analysis of the 1983 GSS, in which the political self-designation question was addressed to half the sample, shows a resumption of the pattern seen in all previous years: heavy viewers are somewhat less likely to describe themselves as liberal and much less likely to describe themselves as conservative.

ticular, relationships with the "moderate" category are negative or zero; there are three weak positive associations, but *none* is significant. Since heavy users of either of these media show no greater tendency to perceive themselves as moderate, we can conclude that the observed relationship between television viewing and self-designation is not a general media use phenomenon, but a pattern unique to television.

In general, heavy newspaper readers are more likely to say they are conservative, while heavy radio listeners tend to say they are liberal. In any case, these data strengthen our contention that television is fundamentally different from other media.

How does the relationship between television viewing and political self-designation vary among subgroups? Which groups tend to show the basic pattern and which tend to deviate? Table 4 presents aggregate results for each subgroup, *averaged* across the nine surveys (or across as many surveys as include a given control variable), and

Table 4. Average Within-Group Relationships Between Television Viewing and Political Self-Designations (Weighted by Sample Size)

	% Who Say They Are								
	Liberal			*Moderate*			*Conservative*		
	%L	*CD*	*Gamma*	*%L*	*CD*	*Gamma*	*%L*	*CD*	*Gamma*
Overall	29	−3	−.06	35	+10	.12	37	−6	−.09
Male	30	−2	−.03	32	+9	.12	39	−7	−.10
Female	27	−4	−.06	38	+9	.11	36	−5	−.08
Young	40	−5	−.07	32	+9	.13	28	−4	−.06
Middle	27	−4	−.06	34	+10	.14	39	−7	−.10
Old	18	0	.02	38	+7	.10	43	−8	−.11
Lo Educ.	23	+1	.02	39	+7	.09	38	−7	−.10
Hi Educ.	38	−4	−.08	33	+8	.11	35	−5	−.03
Lo Income	29	−4	−.05	35	+8	.11	36	−5	−.06
Md Income	28	−2	−.04	35	+11	.14	37	−9	−.12
Hi Income	31	−4	−.08	32	+10	.12	37	−6	−.06
Lo Occup.	27	−2	−.03	37	+8	.10	36	−6	−.09
Md Occup.	30	−7	−.10	36	+10	.12	35	−4	−.05
Hi Occup.	29	−2	−.02	31	+9	.11	40	−8	−.10
White	28	−5	−.09	34	+11	.14	38	−5	−.07
Nonwhite	35	+4	.05	33	+5	.08	32	−9	−.14
Urban	35	−5	−.08	33	+7	.10	32	−3	−.04
Nonurban	24	−2	−.03	35	+11	.15	41	−9	−.13
Union	30	−2	−.01	35	+11	.13	35	−9	−.15
Nonunion	29	−4	−.07	33	+10	.13	38	−6	−.08
Democrat	37	−6	−.07	37	+6	.07	27	+1	.00
Independent	32	−7	−.10	36	+9	.12	32	−3	−.05
Republican	14	+5	.12	30	+11	.15	57	−16	−.19
Lo Attend.	36	−8	−.10	36	+9	.10	28	−1	−.02
Hi Attend.	23	+2	.04	34	+10	.13	44	−13	−.17

NOTE: *%L* = % light viewers in category. CD = Cultivational Differential: % heavy viewers in category minus % light viewers in category.

weighted by the number of cases in each sample to adjust for the wide range of sample *N*'s.

The relationship between amount of viewing and the tendency to choose the moderate self-designation (middle columns of Table 4) reveals very few differences worth noting. In all 24 subgroups, on the average, heavy viewers are more likely to say they are moderate. The association is weakest among nonwhites and Democrats. But all of the other average CD's are between +7 and +11, with gammas ranging from .09 to .15—again, the across-group variations in this pattern are not particularly pronounced.

The data for the percentage of conservatives also reveal a highly consistent pattern across subgroups. All coefficients are negative except among Democrats, and the average relationship is particularly strong among Republicans and high church attenders (the two groups in which light viewers are most likely to be conservative). Thus, these variations illustrate the notion of mainstreaming as a convergence among heavy viewers of counterpart subgroups.

Relationships in the liberal column, on the other hand, are smaller and less consistent. While most of the average within-group associations are negative, in four subgroups (those with less education, nonwhites, Republicans, and high church attenders) heavy viewers are slightly *more* likely to be liberal. Except for the case of nonwhites, those three positive associations also reflect a convergence among heavy viewers. The groups whose light viewers are most likely to be liberal show negative associations, while the groups whose light viewers are least likely to be liberal are the ones showing positive associations. For example, there is a spread of about 23 points between light viewing Democrats and Republicans in the tendency to choose the liberal label; this is reduced by about half, to 12 points, between heavy viewing Democrats and Republicans. Similar patterns hold in terms of age, education, and church attendance, but this paradigm clearly does *not* fit the differences between whites and nonwhites.

In sum, across all major subgroups in each of the nine samples, heavy viewers are consistently more likely to present themselves as moderate. They are also generally less likely to say they are either liberal or conservative, although the relationships between amount of viewing and the percentage of liberals tend to be weaker and show more exceptions.

The tendency for heavy viewers to choose the moderate label holds up under more stringent controls. We analyzed partial correlations between amount of viewing and the tendency to choose each of the three political self-designations under single and multiple simulta-

neous controls within every available subgroup in each of the nine surveys. This yields 1,628 first-order partials and 198 nth-order partials for each political self-designation category.

Table 5 summarizes the results. The table shows how many partial relationships between television viewing and each political self-designation category are positive or negative and how many of these are significant.

The most important finding is the paucity of negative relationships in the "moderate" column. About 80 percent of the correlations are positive under either single or simultaneous controls. Of these, about half of the first-order partials and about 40 percent of the nth-order partials are significant—far more than could be attributed to chance. In contrast, *none* of the negative correlations between amount of viewing and the tendency to choose the moderate label are significant under simultaneous controls. Thus, with considerable consistency, heavy television viewers are more likely to say they are moderate. Strictly speaking, of course, the within-sample tests are not independent since respondents belong to more than one subgroup, but the stability of the basic pattern under controls is impressive.

This again shows that the tendency for heavy viewers to see them-

Table 5. Summary of Within-Group Partial Correlations Between Amount of Viewing and Political Self-Designation

	Partials Between Amount of Viewing and % Who Are:		
	Liberal	*Moderate*	*Conservative*
First-Order Partials			
Positive	43.2%	84.2%	17.9%
(*N*)	(703)	(1371)	(291)
% Sig.	15.6	49.7	5.8
(*N*)	(110)	(682)	(17)
Negative	56.8	15.8	82.1
(*N*)	(925)	(257)	(1337)
% Sig.	23.1	1.2	47.3
(*N*)	(214)	(3)	(632)
Nth Order Partials			
Positive	38.4%	78.3%	30.3%
(*N*)	(76)	(155)	(60)
% Sig.	5.3	39.4	13.3
(*N*)	(4)	(61)	(8)
Negative	61.6	21.7	69.7
(*N*)	(122)	(43)	(138)
% Sig.	21.3	0	34.8
(*N*)	(26)	(0)	(48)

NOTE: First-order columns each based on 1,628 correlations, representing all possible first-order partials within all available subgroups in each sample.

Nth-order columns each based on 198 correlations, representing simultaneous implementation of all available controls within all available subgroups in each sample.

selves as moderate generally reflects a narrowing on both ends of the political spectrum. The majority of relationships between viewing and choosing either the liberal or the conservative label are negative. (Multiple controls increase the percentage of negative associations in the liberal column but decrease the percentage in the conservative column.) Compared to the positive correlations in the moderate column, these negative relationships are less likely to be significant. Still, the trend is clear: heavy viewers are generally less likely to choose either the liberal *or* the conservative label. Moreover, relatively few of the positive associations between viewing and choosing either the liberal or conservative labels are significant.

These findings reflect aggregate patterns across all nine surveys. There are, however, some important variations among the samples. Table 6 summarizes the nth-order simultaneous partials between

Table 6. Nth-Order Within-Group Partial Correlations by Sample (Multiple Simultaneous Controls)

		Relationships Between Amount of Viewing and % Who Are:					
		Liberals		*Moderates*		*Conservatives*	
	(N)	*Pos.*	*Neg.*	*Pos.*	*Neg.*	*Pos.*	*Neg.*
NORC/GSS							
1975							
Total	(25)	12	13	20	5	2	23
Sig.		2	1	10	0	0	11
1977							
Total	(23)	2	21	16	7	16	7
Sig.		0	5	2	0	5	0
1978							
Total	(25)	1	24	23	2	8	17
Sig.		0	13	17	0	0	5
1980							
Total	(25)	12	13	25	0	8	17
Sig.		0	3	9	0	0	5
1982							
Total	(23)	10	13	3	20	20	3
Sig.		0	1	0	0	3	0
Science							
Total	(20)	8	12	18	2	3	17
Sig.		1	0	7	0	0	9
VA Slims							
Total	(23)	18	5	21	2	2	21
Sig.		1	0	8	0	0	8
Conn.							
Total	(25)	7	18	20	5	7	18
Sig.		0	3	7	0	0	6
Minn.							
Total	(9)	6	3	9	0	1	8
Sig.		0	0	1	0	0	0

amount of viewing and political self-designation for each survey. Within each sample, the bulk of relationships in the moderate column are positive, with one striking exception: the 1982 GSS. In this, the most recent survey in this study, 20 out of 23 partial associations between viewing and choosing the moderate label are *negative*, and the same number of relationships in the conservative column are *positive*.

A somewhat similar pattern occurs in the 1977 GSS, but only in the conservative column. Relationships between television viewing and the tendency to choose the liberal label also vary over time and across surveys. But the 1982 relationships are the clearest and most drastic exception to the general rule. Although none of the 1982 negative associations between viewing and choosing the moderate label is significant, these data reflect a complete reversal of the trends found in all other datasets. It is certainly too early to determine whether this signals a real shift in the pattern observed between 1975 and 1980 (all our other adult samples fall between these dates), or a temporary fluctuation which will disappear in subsequent years. In any case, heavy viewers in 1982 are generally more likely to call themselves conservative.

Conclusion

The amount of time people spend watching television relates systematically and consistently to how they position themselves along the liberal-moderate-conservative political continuum. These data show that heavy viewers are more likely to present (and presumably, perceive) themselves as "moderate, middle-of-the-road."

This conclusion must be tempered somewhat by the results in the 1982 GSS, where we find an almost complete reversal from the otherwise consistent pattern of self-proclaimed moderation. It is possible that these data merely reflect random fluctuations and that subsequent surveys will replicate the dominant patterns. As we noted in footnote 1, the 1983 GSS data show the previous pattern of heavy viewers describing themselves as moderate, thus supporting the possibility that 1982 was a temporary fluctuation rather than a shift in the political climate.

In any case, our primary finding does not seem to be spurious, at least in terms of the demographic subgroups we considered. The question of the *direction* of any causal association between television viewing and political self-designation would be moot if the relationship were to be explained by any of these variables. Of course, radical leftists and ultra-conservatives probably do not watch much television, and no one would argue that their light viewing "causes" their

political outlooks. But this does not explain or negate our interpretation of these data, unless the approximately three-fifths of the adult population that call themselves liberal or conservative can be considered particularly "extreme."

The notion that heavy viewing is merely symptomatic of some set of "moderate" predispositions cannot, of course, be ruled out on the basis of cross-sectional data, but it seems far-fetched. In fact, that explanation cannot easily account for the exceptions found in the 1982 GSS, unless one argues that suddenly conservatives are watching more television. Whether we are seeing the effects of political transformations or subtle changes in television content—or both—we prefer to conclude that television is part and parcel of these constellations which it helps to maintain.

Except for the 1982 data, these findings may be part of a more general phenomenon: the cultivation of homogeneous, "average" self-perceptions. Ongoing analyses (Gerbner, et al., 1982) reveal that people whose objective social class is low and who watch more television are more likely to call themselves "middle class"; among high SES respondents, however, heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to call themselves "working class." In addition, heavy viewers are more likely to say they have "average" incomes, particularly as real income increases. Again, these patterns may be traced to general program policies or conventions and they may stem from long-term, cumulative exposure to shared, common imagery among large and otherwise heterogeneous publics.

In general, television cultivates "moderate" self-designations and a convergence upon the political mainstream. But that does not necessarily mean that television is a force for genuine moderation. Again, the actual positions on issues taken by heavy viewers under these labels (Gerbner, et al., 1982) does not fit the image of political centrality or moderation. Viewing seems to blur traditional differences and to blend them into a relatively homogeneous mainstream that is less volatile in terms of extremes and openness to alternatives. It is typically perceived as "moderate"; whether that conception is shifting and the label "conservative" is becoming a more acceptable label for the mainstream, possibly replacing "moderate," we do not yet know. But we know from previously reported data that the mainstream bends to the right on issues dealing with minorities and personal rights, reflects the anxieties and mistrust of television's violent "mean world," and tilts to expansive populism on some welfare economic issues. A volatility of substantive orientations may hide behind the relatively stable and bland political label that television tends to cultivate.

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