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# Election 2000: AARP Portrayals of Presidential Candidates and Issues

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## ABSTRACT

The 2000 United States presidential election was one of the closest in history, and issues of importance to older Americans such as Social Security, prescription drugs, and taxes were front and center in the national debate. This article examines how AARP, formerly the American Association of Retired Persons, portrayed the candidates and issues through its two publications: *AARP Bulletin* and *Modern Maturity*.

The 2000 United States presidential election was one of the closest in history (Kranish & Johnson, 2000). Additionally, throughout the summer and fall of 2000, poll data suggested a split electorate (Whitman, 2000). Issues of importance to older Americans, such as social security, prescription drugs, and taxes were front and center in the national debate (Benedetto, 2000). The purpose of this article is to examine how AARP, formerly the American Association of Retired Persons, portrayed the candidates and issues through its two publications: *AARP Bulletin* and *Modern Maturity*. The presidential election cycle is viewed as an important time for public discussion to determine which social issues deserve to be at the top of the political agenda. Often, important issues do not receive adequate media attention in the periods between national elections. Therefore, during a presidential race, it is crucial to observe which social issues are given the most attention. In the case of AARP media, it would be valuable to know whether or not the most widely circulated publications to older people function as an alternative source of information.

## Literature Review

AARP is an association that targets individuals 50 years of age and older, and focuses attention on issues of importance to older Americans. Its publications may be studied within a larger context of print media research and the field of gerontology. The study of mass media content that is targeted at older people requires a synthesis of disparate research because of the emerging nature of the communication gerontology field.

We look first at the history of AARP and its publications. AARP describes itself as a nonpartisan association that promotes social welfare and education for older Americans. It was founded in 1958 and now has more than 30 million members:

AARP membership is open to anyone age 50 or older, whether working or retired. Members receive *Modern Maturity*, a full-color bimonthly magazine that features health, consumer, and financial news and information, as well as entertainment and travel updates and a nationwide calendar of events. Members also receive the monthly *AARP Bulletin*, which offers late-breaking news and feature stories on a wide range of issues that affect midlife and older persons. <<http://www.aarp.org>>

*Modern Maturity* is the bimonthly flagship publication for AARP. Its circulation of 20.4 million is the largest of any magazine in the nation and reflects “the graying of America” (Vivian, 2001, p. 56). AARP mails *Modern Maturity* and *AARP Bulletin* to members, and they are archived on its Web site ([www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)). AARP’s huge membership offers a large *potential* readership base. The next closest magazines in terms of circulation are *Reader’s Digest* (12.6 million), *TV Guide* (11.1 million), and *National Geographic* (8.5 million)—publications that do not routinely focus on political issues. News

magazines, such as *Time* (4.1 million) and *Newsweek* (3.1 million), reach broader but considerably smaller audiences than *Modern Maturity* (Vivian, 2001, p. 57).

We turn now to relevant print media studies. Research into magazines and their portrayal of aging adults is less common than studies about television (Gerbner, 1993; Hilt, 1997). Print media studies traditionally fall into two categories—the readership habits of older adults and their depiction in cartoons and advertising.

Among top-rated general circulation magazines, *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, *National Geographic*, and *Time*, are popular among older readers (Robinson & Skill, 1995). One study found that almost 20% of older adults read general interest magazines (Durand, Klemmack, Roff, & Taylor, 1980). The affluent elderly read many more magazines than their less affluent counterparts (Burnett, 1991). Burnett found that affluent elderly male readers were more likely to read *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report* for news and information. News magazines also target content toward affluent elderly females—an audience that falls under the “well-off, well-educated stratum of the population that the promotion departments of newspapers and magazines like to describe as the ‘opinion-makers’” (Grossman & Kumar, 1981, p. 62).

Beyond the reading of magazines, little research has been conducted into the content. For example, Vasil and Wass (1993) examined nine studies that investigated the portrayal of the elderly in various print media—magazines cartoons, magazine advertisements, newspapers, and birthday cards. Their evaluation of the quality of the portrayals produced mixed results, and *none* of those studies under consideration looked at the *content* of magazine articles. One study that did investigate the content of articles in magazines examined age stereotyping in *Time* (Kent & Shaw, 1980). A content analysis of named individuals appearing in 1978 issues found little age stereotyping. Hilt (2000) studied how *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* covered John Glenn's return to space in 1998. He found “few comments that could be considered ageist or demeaning to older adults” (p. 167). On the whole, however, little attention has been paid to how older adults are portrayed in magazine articles. Pollack (1989) argued that mass media have done an incomplete job of educating themselves about social policy questions that affect the elderly, and too many editors see the problems of elderly people as too boring or depressing for regular coverage.

Numerous studies show that use of mass media increases during middle age through the retirement years (e.g., Dimmick, McCain, & Bolton, 1979). Thanks to health care improvements, the elderly are living longer and have more disposable income than ever before. One study found that 90% of people at retirement age or over said keeping up with the news is extremely important (Lieberman & McCray, 1994).

Williams and Nussbaum (2001) generalize from the research that there are three factors explaining the increased use of television by older people—an increase in leisure time available, an interest in news and public affairs, and the impact of age, sex, and income. However, these factors have the opposite effect on radio listening. Reading is a special case: “The reading of books and magazines remains a popular activity throughout life, with a sharp decline starting around 65 years of age if eyesight begins to fail. The reading habits of older adults are also different from the reading habits of younger adults” (p. 257). Among older adults, the most popular magazines appear to be *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*. Unlike the general circulation magazines, *Modern Maturity* has the luxury of being able to focus content on issues directly of interest to seniors.

## Gerontology and Behavior of Older People

The older population in the United States is increasing dramatically, and it has been referred to as the “graying of America” (Barrow, 1996, p. 6). The over-85 age group represents the fastest-growing segment of the population (Dychtwald & Flower, 1989). Census projections show that by the year 2040, the nation could have more people over age 65 than under age 21, and more than one in four

Americans will be 65 or older. In the 1990 census figures adults 65 and over accounted for one out of eight Americans, compared to one in 25 at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Usdansky, 1992).

There is nothing sensational about people who successfully cope with everyday life. So, according to Atchley (1991), those older people who are given attention in the news are those with “a problem that can be a springboard for human interest or commentary” (p. 289). Aging and its inherent problems occur over time and usually are not associated with the simple situations that are characteristic of news content. Mass media also are accused of showing a bias against elderly people by failing to report information about aging (Powell & Williamson, 1985), leaving some elderly feeling socially insignificant and powerless.

Media have been charged with failing to capture the reality of being old in America, and with creating and reinforcing negative stereotypes about old people (Bramlett-Soloman & Wilson, 1989; Gantz, Gartenberg, & Rainbow, 1980; Hilt & Lipschultz, 1999; Schramm, 1969; Markson, Pratt, & Taylor, 1989). Mass media have overlooked the emergence of elderly people as a major segment of the population—a generalization that has held for more than 30 years (Schramm, 1969).

Mass media agenda-setting, which suggests media tell people which issues are most important, may influence the way people think by focusing viewers’ attention on specific issues (Nussbaum, Thompson, & Robinson, 1989). Mass media set the agenda for the audience by emphasizing certain topics and by slighting other issues through omission. Barton and Schreiber (1978) called for an examination of the internal structures and functions of media organizations as they relate to aging. Such research would reveal how aging as a content topic and as a social issue among staff members is dealt with at critical stages of the mass communication process.

Rubin (1982) called for research into media other than television and aging. *Modern Maturity* has been studied, but only in the context of its advertising. Baker and Goggin’s (1994) content analysis of *Modern Maturity* advertisements revealed an emphasis on the natural effects of aging as decreasing sexual attractiveness and intimacy. No studies have been found of the magazine’s news content or political coverage. The present study used the 2000 presidential election cycle and the first 100 days of the Bush administration as a context for examining issue and event coverage.

## Research Questions

Three research questions were developed for this study. First, how did AARP portray the 2000 Democrat and Republican presidential candidates in its two publications: *AARP Bulletin* and *Modern Maturity*? Second, which social issues did AARP focus on in *AARP Bulletin* and *Modern Maturity*? Third, was AARP’s portrayal of specific political issues related to the problems of the elderly? If so, how did editors deal with content that traditional publications might view as boring or depressing?

## Methodology

The present study used qualitative research in careful description of the coverage of elderly issues. The goal was to preserve the form and content of AARP publications and analyze their qualities (Lindlof, 1995). The description of the social reality created by AARP content was studied within the context of the 2000 presidential election. As such, this study was “exploratory” and “descriptive” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 39).

The present study examined two AARP publications—*Modern Maturity* magazine (bi-monthly) and *AARP Bulletin* newspaper (monthly)—from January 2000 through April 2001. This period covers the presidential primary election, the general election, the election aftermath, and the first 100 days of the administration of George W. Bush. The focus was on coverage of candidates and national political issues of importance to older Americans, defined in this study as people 50 and older receiving AARP publications. Specifically, only stories focusing on the presidential candidates and issues were analyzed. Political coverage was defined as content that either dealt directly with the election or those specific

issues associated with it. No attempt was made to distinguish between social and political issues about aging. Each article that covered political candidates, social or political issues were read in search of themes and patterns in topics and coverage. By definition, issues covered within the two AARP publications were assumed to be issues of importance to the elderly.

Each edition of the two publications was analyzed within this framework. In some cases, a particular story might highlight the candidates and specific issues, including those issues of importance to people 50 and older. In other cases, an article might focus on simply elderly issues or the candidates themselves.

## Results

Most of the AARP's focus on the 2000 election coverage was in the *AARP Bulletin* rather than the more feature-oriented *Modern Maturity*. The *AARP Bulletin*, because it was a monthly tabloid-appearance newspaper, was able to be timelier in developing coverage of candidates and issues.

### *AARP Bulletin*

Between January 2000 and April 2001 the *AARP Bulletin* had extensive coverage of the campaign and its result. An examination of cover story topics revealed that four (26.6%) dealt with health and medicine, three each (20%) with the presidential campaign, the economy, technology issues, and two with lifestyle issues, including scams (13.3%). The cover stories were counted utilizing dominant and manifest categories. Following Krippendorf (1980), the purpose was to provide a simple frame of reference for the qualitative analysis.

In a January 2000 article titled, "Big issues hostage to election," prescription drug legislation, Medicare, and Social Security were described to seniors in a page 3 story as difficult issues likely to be avoided: "But with the 2000 presidential election nearing, observers think it's unlikely that lawmakers will make major headway on these and many other tough issues in what is likely to be a highly partisan Congress" (p. 3). Such reporting, especially for a publication targeting elderly people, appeared to tell older Americans that the election was placing them on the sidelines. In the same issue, Social Security was also addressed in a page 6 interview with a Brookings Institution economist. Finally, a page 28 editorial urged readers to get involved in the election.

In the February 2000 issue, the page 1 cover story was, "We want you! Presidential hopefuls target older voters." This article focused on the leading candidates: John McCain, George W. Bush, Al Gore, and Bill Bradley. Typical of horse-race style coverage, AARP followed the major media model of "giving uniformly skimpy treatment to all candidates except for those designated as front-runners" (Graber, 1993, p. 273). A cartoon showed the four in a race—McCain on a skateboard, Bush in cowboy boots, Gore in roller-blades, and Bradley in high-top basketball shoes (carrying a ball). The article was titled, "Watch out: They're after you! Older voters loom big as 2000 target" (p. 3). The overall impression from the page 3 article is to trivialize the election in terms of important senior issues. Readers are told that while candidates are interested in their vote, the horserace is more important than their issues. In a page 10 article, McCain was shown fielding questions at an AARP sponsored event in New Hampshire. The audience questions at the forum provided some focus on the need to control health care costs. Veteran broadcast journalist Daniel Schorr was profiled on page 14, and lamented the influence of television on the campaign as focusing on personality and appearance. The issue also featured a "Where the candidates stand" article on page 29 listing the positions of Bush, McCain, Gore, and Bradley on Social Security, Medicare, Long-term care and Managed-care patient protections. This feature came closest to describing issue positions by reporting direct quotes from the candidates on each major issue: Social Security, Medicare, Long-term care, and Managed-care patient protections. Clearly, these four items establish a senior agenda. *AARP Bulletin* also listed the candidates' websites.

In March, a page 12 story was titled, “In Iowa, Bradley puts focus on health care.” The Democrat had spoken to an AARP gathering. He identified himself as the presidential candidate that would do the most about the health care problem. However, the story mentioned that Bradley had lost both the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary to Al Gore. On the next page, John McCain was featured in an article titled, “‘Earnings test’ decried.” McCain told more than 600 AARP members that he would push for a repeal of the earnings test for Social Security beneficiaries. An *AARP Bulletin* page 28 editorial in that issue agreed: “Time to the end the earnings limit on Social Security” (p. 28). McCain had surprised George W. Bush in New Hampshire, and was shown campaigning in South Carolina. The next month, the publication reported on a United States House of Representatives vote (422-0) to repeal the Social Security limit. The story featured an interview with House Speaker Dennis Hastert.

The only campaign material in the April 2000 issue was a page 31 editorial titled, “Voters need to look beyond sound bites” (p. 31). The editorial directed readers to the AARP website. The earnings test legislation was signed into law, and AARP reported on this in its May issue. In that same issue there was just one page 31 campaign story: “Bush and Gore joust over Social Security” (p. 31). The article identified the likely major party nominees. Bush said, “. . . I happen to think it’s broke, and I think this country needs to elect somebody who will spend the [political] capital to fix it.” Gore responded to the proposal to cut taxes by calling it a “risky tax scheme.” Overall, AARP had left the primary season and politics behind for the time being. Instead of politics, AARP turned to other concerns such as telephone scams and hormone replacement therapy.

In June, two page 2 stories (“Gore tells AARP Bush plan would imperil SS” and “Bush unveils Social Security retirement account plans”) again focused on the Social Security issue, which was clearly judged as the important senior citizen issue by AARP. The stories featured color photographs of each, Gore speaking to 9,000 AARP members in Florida and Bush speaking to an unidentified number of voters in California. In the July-August issue, two more Social Security articles and an editorial were featured. In “Voters face clear choice on Social Security plans,” a public policy expert noted that the 2000 campaign was unique in that voters had “a clear-cut choice” (pp. 6–7). In a page 28 column, “Social Security emerges as a key campaign issue,” AARP Executive Director Horace B. Deets wrote: “While AARP has not endorsed either candidate’s position on Social Security, we have developed a set of principles . . .” (p. 28). They were: AARP supported protecting Social Security funds and using budget surpluses to extend solvency; AARP supported creation and expansion of Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) as an addition but not replacement for Social Security benefits; AARP opposed further raising of the retirement age for full benefits; and AARP supported a continued contribution-based formula for benefits.

In an editorial, the *AARP Bulletin* urged voters to be informed and get out to vote for all races, not just the presidential contest. The AARP principles could be used by voters planning to judge candidates in the fall election, but it is not clear how they might do that given the limited media attention provided on Social Security.

For the first time since February, the campaign was the cover story in September. In the page 1 story, “‘A lot is at stake,’ Bush, Gore collide over Social Security’s future,” the election was called “a referendum on the future direction of Social Security.” The story continued on page 3: “Hot debate on Social Security’s future.” The publication showed two campaign-style signs representing the two positions. One read, “PERSONAL ACCOUNTS ARE RISKY BUSINESS” with the word “risky” in red letters. The other sign read, “IT’S OUR MONEY: LET US INVEST IT!” with the words “our” and “us” in red letters. The signs roughly reflected the Gore (risky) and Bush (invest) positions. The same article continued on page 25 with specifics about each plan and campaign website addresses. In another article, the *AARP Bulletin* listed a host of campaign issues and political party websites (pp. 3, 31). In another story, “Social Security debate raises many questions,” the Bush and Gore plans were compared in terms of whether they would solve the long-term problem, how the rival plans affect average people, and how retirement accounts in each plan differ (pp. 24, 26). In the final election story in this issue,

“AARP launches voter campaign,” survey results were reported. The poll asked adults which issues were most important in choosing a president. Respondents said family values (27%), education (24%), Social Security (18%), prescription drugs/Medicare (10%), and tax cuts (9%) were most important (p. 29). It was interesting to note that a majority of AARP’s own readers thought issues other than Social Security were most important in choosing a president. The other concerns listed reflected issues highlighted by mainstream national media covering the campaign—largely a candidate-driven agenda.

In October 2000, the presidential candidates were on the cover in an article titled “‘Where I stand,’ Presidential contenders speak directly to *AARP Bulletin* readers.” There were two articles beginning on page 3 (“Gore, Bush speak out on issues,” Vice president offers details on drug proposal,” and “GOP nominee states case for his drug plan”). The focus of both stories, continued on pages 10–11, was the Medicare prescription drug coverage. In addition to extensive quoting of both candidates, the publication used a box comparing each plan. In a separate story, the *AARP Bulletin* reported that issues affecting older Americans had become more important than in previous elections. At the same time, another story reported that Americans were not sure how to fix Social Security. In a page 20 column, AARP’s Deets wrote that, “For many American families, Election 2000 will be nothing less than a referendum on their economic futures” (p. 20). While AARP clearly had a position on Social Security reform, the organization’s coverage adopted an objective journalism tone—perhaps in fear of alienating Republican readers.

With Election Day approaching, the November issue featured two “What if . . .” articles on the future of the nation under Bush or Gore (pp. 3, 30–31). AARP forecasted that if Bush were elected, the likely outcome would be retirement reform; if Gore were elected, the likely outcome would be a prescription drug plan. A page 28 editorial again urged people to vote; however, AARP never endorsed a candidate in the 2000 election.

In December, with the election result in doubt because of the Florida recount, the AARP story was titled, “Americans stay ‘cool’ while they wait, Eyes are on Florida as recount proceeds” (pp. 3, 10). The article described the confusion with the so-called “butterfly” ballot, which led some voters to inadvertently vote for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan rather than Gore: “Because many of those complaining about the ballot were elderly, some critics singled out older voters for blame, charging they were the problem rather than the ballots” (p. 10). However, AARP Executive Director Horace B. Deets responded by saying that the issue affects voters of all ages, not just older people. Given the amount of national attention afforded the voter confusion story, it is clear that AARP’s limited reporting on it gave readers the impression that it was time to move forward.

On page 10, the *AARP Bulletin* wrote, “Older voters make a difference.” Among voters 60 and older, 51% voted for Gore and 47% for Bush. The story added that older voters in Iowa and Wisconsin kept Gore in the race. In its page 20 editorial, the paper urged bipartisan cooperation, regardless of the result. AARP took a decidedly non-controversial tone.

By January 2001, it was finally known that George W. Bush would be America’s 43<sup>rd</sup> president. The page 3 story was entitled, “Bush puts national unity at the top of his agenda” (pp. 3, 12). Bush restated his interest in education, tax relief, and Social Security reform. The *AARP Bulletin* also interviewed political analyst David Gergen on page 24 about Bush’s priorities. He said the prolonged election fight did not diminish the institution of the presidency, but he did not relate the outcome to its effect on older Americans.

With President Bush in office, the first 100 days of his administration received substantial attention. In February 2001, the page 1 cover story was about cutting taxes. The *AARP Bulletin* also discussed the privacy of medical records as an important issue on the political agenda. The Deets page 20 column that month urged responsible use of the budget surplus. By March, the focus on tax cuts continued: “Debate over tax cut plan will shape U.S. agenda” (p. 4). The editorial addressed Bush’s prescription drug plan saying that there should be a bipartisan measure that would include coverage for all beneficiaries. Finally, in April 2001, the *AARP Bulletin* again focused on the Bush agenda: “Tax cuts: What they could mean for you” (pp. 8–9). The story offered hypothetical tax cut figures. A box summarized the Bush plan.

### *Modern Maturity*

Between January 2000 and April 2001, there was limited coverage of presidential politics in *Modern Maturity*. Not until the September-October issue of the magazine did the election surface, but it was not the cover story. There was a “Presidential Voters Guide.” The Bush and Gore positions were given on Social Security, Medicare, long-term care, and managed care patient protections. AARP also targeted the guide to provide readers with the positions of United States Senate candidates in *their* states. The magazine issue also listed political Web sites.

In the November-December issue the election was the cover story. A panel of writers and cartoonists offered open letters to the next president. For example, columnist Ellen Goodman wrote that the next president should “think family.” She emphasized the needs of older people. A “Talking Heads” cartoon feature quoted Ed Asner, Tom Brokaw, Lauren Hutton, and others. Mary Tyler Moore urged the next president to “bring scientific advances from the animal lab to the patient’s bedside” (pp. 48–49). A final article contemplated what qualities the nation’s first woman president would need to have. Overall, the election coverage in the magazine was feature-oriented.

In the months following the disputed election, *Modern Maturity* never returned to the subject. The magazine, which already had begun to target baby boomers, was renamed *mm* beginning with the March-April 2001 issue. The name changed again with the March-April 2002 issue to *AARP Modern Maturity* to better reflect reader perceptions. During the period under study, the magazine featured entertainers such as Sean Connery, Paul McCartney, Paul Newman, Judge Judy, Steve and Cokie Roberts, Shirley MacLaine, and Clint Eastwood—all on the cover in 2000–2001.

### **Patterns and Themes**

Overall, AARP had a consistent pattern of placing Election 2000 within the context of many other ongoing concerns of elderly people. Clearly, the election was defined in terms of its potential effect on Social Security, first and foremost, as well as Medicare and other policy issues. These issues overshadowed other campaign issues—foreign policy, education, and taxes. An observable pattern during the period under study was that the election was one among many important concerns for older Americans.

The language employed by AARP throughout the period under study fit a theme of the importance of seniors and their issues in society. While the AARP agenda placed a fair amount of importance on, for example, Social Security, it did so with a tone that suggested to readers that they needed to be realistic in their expectations for reform. The message seemed to be that their vote was important, but their voices may or may not be heard. Even as the controversial Florida recount occurred, the AARP message was to stay cool and move on. This fit a theme of conservative advocacy—one apparently utilized by AARP in its lobbying efforts. This pragmatism leads coverage to lean toward non-controversial positions.

### **Conclusions**

This research examined 16 months of political coverage by AARP. The first research question was: “How did AARP portray the 2000 Democrat and Republican presidential candidates in its two publications: *AARP Bulletin* and *Modern Maturity*?” The *AARP Bulletin* offered the only detailed coverage of the 2000 presidential election and its aftermath. *Modern Maturity*, on the other hand, was entertainment-oriented and downplayed the election. The second research question was: “Which social issues did AARP focus on in *AARP Bulletin* and *Modern Maturity*?” The *AARP Bulletin* focused on: health and medicine, the presidential campaign, the economy, technology, Internet and privacy, and other life-style issues. The third research question was: “Was AARP’s portrayal of specific political issues related to the problems of the elderly? If so, how did editors deal with content that traditional publications might view as boring or depressing?” The *AARP Bulletin* featured much coverage of Social Security and prescription drug costs in its election reporting. By contrast, *Modern Maturity* appeared to avoid looking like a magazine targeted only at the elderly population. Returning to the typology employed in the study,



most of the coverage during the period was focused on candidates and elderly issues—not broader social issues. Clearly, AARP did target messages to its 55-plus age group.

The AARP's focus on concerns of older people, along with a large circulation of its publications, means that the organization plays a potentially more important role than general mass media in coverage of select social issues (Pollack, 1989). AARP may fill gaps in media reporting on the problems of elderly people, seen by some as too boring or depressing for regular coverage. However, *Modern Maturity* failed to offer a serious alternative for political coverage. While the lesser-known *AARP Bulletin* did a better job, it may receive less attention from readers. The impact of both publications has not been established in research on AARP. It is not known what effect, if any, the publication had on the election through influence upon older readers.

It is known that AARP has had difficulty in attracting attention of “baby boomers,” and the organization has made adjustments in its publications. *Modern Maturity* was changed to *mm* for the March–April 2001 issue as one way to de-emphasize the word “maturity” for those 55 and older. Additionally, for those 50–55, AARP is now offering a publication called *My Generation* to hook younger readers (Nohlgren, 2001; O'Briant, 2001). One recent study suggested that “boomers” would not consider themselves “old” until age 70 (Hall & Tian, 2001).

The present study was limited to two AARP publications during a 16-month window. It focused on political and social issues coverage. Future research would want to include the new AARP publication, study a longer period of time, and begin to address readership and effects issues. It may be that AARP's lobbying role means that its publications serve that function as much or more than reader needs. A broader study might include the perceptions of policy-makers on AARP coverage. Further, the nature of elderly issues needs to be studied in the broader mass media and compared to AARP positions. For example, although AARP said the election was a referendum on Social Security, during the honeymoon period that followed, their publications accepted President Bush's top agenda item—cutting taxes—as the most important issue. However, in the February 2002 *AARP Bulletin*, there was a return to concern about Social Security. In a cover story Special Report AARP said, “Americans learn the truth about privatization: ‘There's no free lunch.’” More research on agenda-setting would be useful. Likewise, little is known about more practical concerns, such as the demand for large-print editions for the sight-impaired. Research on this topic should be done because it is known that magazine reading declines among older people with eye problems.

Agenda-setting remained an important concept when studying publications during an election cycle. AARP's horse-race style coverage mirrored the mass media model, which lacked in-depth treatment of issues and candidates. The 2000 election year appeared to spawn discussion on Social Security and other issues important to older people. In the case of AARP, it is not clear that their publications served as an alternative source of information to mainstream media.

The 2000 presidential election served as the backdrop for this study. It would be valuable to also study AARP outside of the election context. Given the direction of AARP's *Modern Maturity* as an entertainment magazine, the *AARP Bulletin* is likely to be the publication focused in the future on serious issues. Increasingly, AARP's website also may have the potential to be influential in formation of political orientations and public opinion. Regardless, it is clear that AARP and its constituency will be increasingly important in the years ahead as America grows older.

In a broader sense, the present study fuels the need for extensive research in the emerging area of communication gerontology. There is a place to make important linkages between the already established fields of communication and gerontology. For example, the social disengagement literature offers potential in this area. Social disengagement, the argument that society and older people are mutually obliged to withdraw from each other, may be useful in understanding lifestyle changes affecting media use. Researchers suggest that media serve as a substitute for interpersonal contact. Two areas of future research are television and Internet use. As has been shown in the present study, print publications also may substitute for interpersonal interaction. It could be argued that disengaged older Americans

may be satisfied with a message from a group such as AARP that it is acceptable to be marginally involved in politics and political issues. The theme of conservative advocacy fits nicely within this frame. Communication between AARP and its readers, in this sense, is likely to reflect the context of an older population where some members are more active than others.

#### **COLUMBIA ONLINE CITATION: HUMANITIES STYLE**

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