

**BALANCING ACT: HOW AN UNBALANCED MEDIA AFFECTS THE
ELECTORATE**

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies of media bias generally do not consider intra-campaign shifts in the composition of the coverage, leaving unanswered the question of whether coverage is consistently balanced or merely appears so when all the ups and downs of the election are tallied up. Even this aggregate assessment of balance frequently reveals imbalance in coverage, but there are few studies that test for effects of media imbalance. A lack of comprehensive content analysis data makes substantive work in this area challenging and frequently dependent upon single-election studies or those that examine a single variable over multiple years. This project takes advantage of a highly detailed, project-generated content analysis of all NBC Nightly News broadcasts and *New York Times* articles during the general election period (from just prior to the national party conventions through Election Day) for four election years (1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008) to address the question of whether aggregate and intra-campaign imbalance exists along three axes: volume of coverage (total coverage of the campaign and candidates), share of coverage (percentage of coverage received by each candidate on a given day, not conflated with volume), and tone of coverage (average daily valence score of coverage, positive or negative). Share of coverage is not stable at any point of equilibrium, but swings back and forth, favoring one candidate then the other throughout the general election. Analysis of tone of coverage reveals a surprising correlation between the positive/negative coverage of the candidates, with tone of coverage of the candidates correlating to a statistically significant degree. With this data it is possible to test whether shifts in the composition of coverage cause shifts in electoral support as measured by trial heat polls. Analysis of the data shows a significant relationship between changes in share

and tone of coverage and changes in levels of electoral support. The corollary question, “what attracts media attention?” shows that media outlets are attracted by conflict as determined by a qualitative and quantitative analysis of headlines and share of coverage, and a further test shows a significant correlation between media coverage of an issue and *both* candidates’ mention of that issue in their remarks, though *not* between media coverage and a single-candidate mention of the issue. The end result is a more-comprehensive picture of political reporting, its effect on the electorate, and the ways in which candidates may attract attention than is currently available in the literature. The combination of a multi-election measure with a high degree of intra-campaign diagnostic sensitivity provides a useful benchmark for the further study of media coverage of campaigns, as well as more than sufficient justification for its substantive significance as an area of political study, by virtue of the observed relationship between coverage and levels of electoral support.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mother,
Anna Marie Weikert,
who didn't let being in a hospital bed
keep her from continuing her education.
Her example shows us that mulish obstinacy
is a great asset, despite the pain it may occasionally cause.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Political journalists face the daunting task of providing a balanced and objective description of the political world to the public. The political media face an array of potential stories and multiple occasions for analysis during election season. The media environment of the presidential election campaign and the campaigns themselves are complex and dynamic, and yet we expect that the campaign can be fitted into a neatly-compartmentalized box whereby the view provided is “balanced.” Such an expectation is not only unrealistic but, as demonstrated in the chapters that follow, simply unreal. Candidates compete for coverage, journalists compete for space in their respective publications and broadcasts, news outlets compete for market share, and all are subject to interference by external events – how could such an environment ever produce coverage that is equal in volume, focus, or tone? Media coverage of presidential elections is characterized by imbalance and variability in multiple ways, as logic (if not journalistic conventional wisdom) would dictate in so complicated a context. It is the goal of this project to describe this environment for the reader, determine which actions of the campaigns can manipulate that environment, and examine how this variable environment affects the electorate in four presidential general elections.

News paints pictures of the candidates, their campaigns, their actions, their beliefs, their lives, and their competition with each other. Ultimately, though, what is said about one candidate is not the only consideration. We must also consider what was said *in relation to* what was said about the *other* candidate, how the coverage compares, and examine what impact those differences make in the electorate. This project shows that changes in the share and tone of coverage received by each candidate have a clear impact on their support because elections are, in part, a competition for the ears and eyes as well as the hearts and minds of the voters. The tone of news coverage is relevant in that “good” news is good for a candidate, but this, too, is subject to nullification by the tone of coverage received by the opposing candidate. If both candidates are receiving positive coverage, then how much good could it do for either? If both candidates are receiving negative coverage, how much harm is done to either? The examination of tone in this project reveals that most of the time the candidates are receiving about the same tone of coverage, which has important implications when we consider whether tone of coverage matters (even as it changes). Last, we should be aware of the fact that just as candidates compete, stories and themes compete for the attention of journalists, and they are choosing the “news” of the day from among a wide range of potential stories. This project’s examination of the news and the sources of that news show that of the many potential “news” items available, journalists have a preference for conflict and drama in their stories, and that predictability can be used by candidates to exert some control over their own coverage levels and composition. In short, there is competition between the candidates all over, and not just on the hustings: candidates are competing for press attention, news content of the candidates’ campaigns is competing for supremacy in

column inches and seconds of broadcast time, and the tone of that coverage can determine whether positive news is relatively good and capable of improving their standing among the voters.

In all of this, the political reporter is simply attempting to do the job they have been assigned: to convey the most relevant and newsworthy elements of the campaign to the public in the most factual and objective manner possible (McQuail 2000, 173). After all, what is political journalism for? The simplest, most direct answer is this: political journalism exists to provide citizens with the information they need to responsibly exert their political power in their own best interests (adapted from Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, 17). A simple answer, but with a complicated implementation; after all, journalists are not secretaries taking dictation, and at the same time they are not free agents that tell whatever story they see fit. Journalists are usually acting within the structural constraints of a news-gathering organization, and as such there are certain conscious and unconscious expectations of what they will cover. They are also, though, rather independent in how they choose to cover the events to which they are exposed, even acting within those constraints. This dichotomy leads to a combination of predictability and variability in news coverage of the presidential election campaign.

In one sense, the political journalist is a passive outlet for political communication. There are, as we see in the chapters that follow, periods in the campaign when the volume of news coverage increases substantially. The increases seen during these periods, however, are not the result of journalistic decision-making. They are the result of external events that consistently prompt higher levels of coverage by virtue of the news values they satisfy. These increases in total coverage occur at clearly defined

segments of the general election calendar, and, as we will see in the upcoming chapters, daily totals of volume of coverage in the final sixty days of the campaign are very highly correlated across four different elections, despite the fact that volume of coverage changes dramatically from week to week. Volume of coverage increases during all nominating conventions due to the spectacle, conflict, and novelty that are inherent to the conventions. Vice presidential nominees are announced, platforms decided, major addresses given, and more, leading to a highly news-worthy event. In competitive elections, volume increases around the debates, since they offer direct contact between the two candidates and almost unavoidable conflict between elite actors. And in all elections, coverage increases as we approach Election Day before reaching a peak on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. It appears inconceivable that a news outlet would ignore these events as news stories, regardless of whether their motivation is a sense of drama or civic duty. So, the journalist is largely passive in terms of the timing of political communications.

However, the news *product* that is created, the focus of the stories filed, and the slant and tone of that coverage are very much in the hands of individual (or, just as likely, packs of) journalists and editors. It is in this way that journalists can be seen as active members of the media environment of the campaign. When presented with myriad stories, they or their editors choose what is “newsworthy.” When presented with a number of potential themes for the day’s events, they choose *how* to tell the story. It is because of this active character that we see variation in what and who is covered each day, and how the stories about them are told. This leads to predictable levels of coverage in terms of volume, but unbalanced content of coverage in terms of the component

elements of coverage like tone and which candidate is receiving more coverage on any given day.

Imbalance is not a bad word. Its meaning implies nothing more than a state of being whereby the distribution of an element or elements exist in different proportions. It assigns no motive or malice, makes no implicit or explicit claims of bias of any kind, and is the very model of a non-normative term. The journalistic value of impartiality (as part of the larger value of “objectivity”) includes two components: balance and neutrality (McQuail 2000, 173). Neutrality requires that information should be presented in a non-sensational, fact-based way, and that standard is not at issue here. Balance, though, requires that elements be given “equal or proportional time/space/emphasis” (174), and this standard is poorly suited to the news writing and news selection process of political journalists and political journalism. In the words of one author, “objectivity” in the coverage of an election campaign is characterized as follows:

...The norm of objectivity translates into an attempt by journalists to transcribe, as completely and with as much detail as possible, what happens on the campaign trail. This means taking copious notes on every campaign appearance, press release, handout, and sentence uttered by the candidate and his or her staff; selecting a few of these that seem to be the most notable, developing a theme around which to present these facts...and in this way summarizing the day’s occurrences. (Joslyn 1984, 104)

Thus, the amount of material available from any campaign on any given day may be a variable thing, as would the tone and content of that material. This also does not take into account the additional steps required to assemble a newspaper or news broadcast, which generally includes competing stories from other campaigns. Finally, there is the distinct possibility that a campaign may spend some of its time discussing the opposition, thereby granting some measure of that campaign’s coverage to the opposition. How, in light of all of this, is “balance” to be expected, much less achieved? A story about the relative merits and costs of a new tax bill or about rioting in a particular city can easily

accommodate a requirement of balance, but an ongoing and dynamic political campaign that produces hundreds or thousands of messages and statements per day can hardly be held to the same expectation, even if we assume that all campaigns are managed with equal skill and attended by journalists that share similar notions of the newsworthiness of the material they are covering. However, when assigned to the mass media, some react as if the word “imbalance” is pejorative or perverse. When this work has been presented in a public academic forum, discussants have suggested that a different term be used, since “imbalance” carries negative connotationsⁱ. Why should it be necessary to assume, *a priori*, that imbalance is negative? Political journalism is not chemistry or algebra, where equations can be perfectly balanced out with little effort on the part of practitioners; it is a fluid, dynamic, and variable thing that reacts to (and helps to shape) a complex world of competing ideas and competing campaigns. What rational expectation could possibly lead us to believe that election coverage would be balanced in its composition, regardless of which component element of that coverage we were discussing?

An empirical examination of the content of news coverage during the campaign displays a simple truth: balance in the media’s reporting of a presidential campaign does not exist; or rather, when it *does* exist it does so quite by accident or en route to a new imbalance. Volume of coverage received by each candidate, the content of that coverage, and the tone of that coverage are in a constant state of flux, and with each passing day the ratios of each will change, both towards the same candidate and between the two

ⁱ This, from my personal experience, occurred at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. It was said that “imbalance” was too closely tied to notions of “bias,” and should be avoided as a description of the coverage coded.

candidates. These intra-campaign imbalances are highly relevant because their existence provokes changes in a candidate's level of electoral support, and aggregating them has two negative effects: in the first place, it may mask the variability seen in the media environment and give a false impression of balance (although a close examination shows that even that "balance" is illusory); and in the second place, it prevents us from studying how short-term changes in media coverage impact candidate evaluations by the electorate.

Even if balance is possible, is it desirable? While recognizing the benefits of the norm of balance, there is a competing concern that an attempt to "balance" coverage would lead to a distortion of reality, which is no better a result. When balance manufactures a false impression of the reality of the campaigns, then political journalists are beginning to compromise on other component elements of objectivity, namely factuality (McQuail 2000, 173). So, then, imbalance in the composition of the news and the component elements of that news (volume, tone, and subject) can be seen as a virtue in and of itself. These shifting elements change the composition of the news, and it was the goal of this project to demonstrate that the changing composition of the news causes changes in the electoral fortunes of those candidates competing for office. What's more, actions that precipitate changes in coverage are very likely predictable, making competition for the attentions of the media another element of the modern campaign. There is something to be won.

Research Questions

The fundamental question that drives this dissertation is whether imbalance in the media during a presidential general election campaign has a significant impact on a candidate's electoral support. Naturally, this question makes the assumption that a "balanced" media does not exist at all times; whatever may be determined about the overall balance of the media in the aggregate, *intra*-campaign imbalance is almost certainly unavoidable, regardless of the definition of imbalance used. The term "imbalance" calls for some clarification. There are three component elements we can point to that may have some effect on the support of a candidate: share of coverage (volume received by each candidate, relative to the other, as a percentage of the whole), tone of coverage (valence, both overall and relative to the opposing candidate), and volume of coverage (absolute amount of coverage of each candidate). I propose that shifts in these coverage measures have the potential to alter the ratio of electoral support a candidate for president enjoys, but that previous research has not fully described them or their effect on elections. That research tended to focus on descriptive content analysis of the total election cycle in the aggregate rather than an *intra*-campaign analysis, and/or focused on only a single election. This project considers both the aggregate and *intra*-campaign coverage of the candidates, and does so over four election cycles (1996-2008), with an eye toward generating a more generalizable body of findings.

Subsidiary questions must also be addressed if we are to fully elaborate this phenomenon. First, which of these three types of imbalance provides the most powerful explanation of shifts in electoral support? Is it better for a candidate to command the tone of the news and have a larger proportion of positive coverage relative to one's opponent,

to command a larger share of the news space without regard for tone, to simply overpower the competition and have one's campaign events or most beneficial issues be reported in large doses, or some combination of these? Certainly there are benefits for each, and candidates would likely prefer to have all three, but it seems intuitively plausible that in the event they are in competition, they are not equally matched. This kind of inquiry allows us to identify how different aspects of news coverage interact, which is the more influential, and whether some can be disregarded entirely.

Second, what impact does the news have on voters? Does it make them more (or less) likely to vote for a candidate? Without consideration of this question, the probative value of this project is greatly reduced – while it may be interesting, it would be quite unimportant. Moreover, are all citizens affected in the same way? It is naïve to think that all of those who are news consumers or receive news reports at second-hand are impacted equally or at all by what they see, hear, and read. It is necessary to disaggregate electoral support and compare it against some common demographic factors (primarily party identification and age) to identify how or if the media affect potential vote choices among different strata of the electorate.

Third, does a multi-election content analysis reveal imbalance in the media, in terms of the share and tone of coverage of each candidate? This is a necessary – if somewhat subjective – question. Coding the share of coverage received by a candidate is one thing, but coding the positive or negative potential of such statements is a challenging but manageable proposition. Nevertheless, the question is important. When a candidate receives more positive coverage relative to the opposing candidate, logic would dictate that the candidate enjoys a certain advantage, in an electoral context. If

tone of coverage of the candidates varies, then the conditions under which candidates gain relative tonal advantage also have important implications for our understanding of the media environment and our understanding of how it affects the voters' evaluations of the candidates. It was my goal in this project to first code the share and tone of coverage of each candidate, and then test to see if changes in that share and tone measure had an effect on electoral support.

Last, what causes imbalance in the media? What structural or rational reasons cause a reporter to create or select news of a particular character, subject, or tone? When political journalists create the content of the news, they are *creating* imbalance – it is not happening by accident or at random. Although passive in the choice of whether to cover the campaigns or not (that choice appears to be dictated by the presence of a major campaign event), they are active in choosing how to cover those events, and the daily activity of the campaigns. These choices are pronounced at different times in the campaign life cycle, specifically in response to the conventions and debates, when the events themselves dictate a certain degree of imbalance in coverage. Outside of these events, though, the attractiveness of certain actions or statements by the candidates makes an impact on the share of coverage received by each candidate, which indicates a degree of control over media reporting on the part of the campaigns.

Significance of the Project

Despite a brief period during which media effects were considered “minimal,” the consistently growing consensus is that the media play a significant role in American politics. Recent scholarship focusing on media effects supports and expands on the many

facets of this phenomenon (Bennet & Iyengar 2008, Brians & Wattenberg 1996, Domke et al. 1997, Zaller 1996, and more), and the interest is well placed. It is certainly appropriate to further our knowledge of the behavior of that institution and how the decisions reached by individual voters may be impacted by the information maelstrom that is, one could argue, absolutely unavoidable during the general election campaign. Overall, in the aggregate and across time, the media have shown neither bias nor imbalance (D'Alessio & Allen 2000), but I find evidence that the conclusion offered by D'Alessio & Allen is not necessarily accurate when coding several elections using the same content analysis scheme. I have also examined this presumption of balance on a case-by-case (indeed, a day-by-day) basis over the general elections from 1996-2008 and determined that intra-campaign imbalance exists and causes meaningful change in electoral support. In a close election, small shifts can be substantively significant, and it is at these times that the largest proportion of potential voters is paying attention to the media. If there is a single time or circumstance when media effects, minimal or otherwise, are relevant to our knowledge of how American democracy functions, then surely this must be it.

As the influence of traditional institutions fades and personal networks decline (Mutz 1998), the potential role of the mass media in forming opinions becomes even greater. The reason this somewhat simplistic formulation is worthy of study in the first place is that of the many things that impact vote choice – including party identification, issue salience, heresthetics, demographic factors, etc. – media behavior is among the most variable and subject to rapid shifts. In an omnipresent media environment, these shifts and the role they play in determining the outcome of elections are sufficiently

important to merit further study. This, combined with the growing importance of media as political actors and atrophying personal networks (see, among others, Putnam 2000 and Mutz 1998), gives us every reason to believe that media effects constitute an important sub-field within the discipline of political science. While acknowledging that dealignment is a theory under fire in many ways (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009), what cannot be denied is that despite the distinct possibility that a new age of partisanship has arrived, independent voters and weak party identifiers are still decisive in determining election outcomes, and these are the very voters that are prime candidates for influence by an imbalanced media. As we witness the erosion of traditional applications of party power and the rise of an independent, dealigned, individually isolated, and personally-mediated American voter, one cannot help but return to a consideration of the fourth estate's power, if it is such. If we are to believe that voters reason even in a minimal-information manner (Popkin 1991) then the single-largest promulgator of political information (Graber 1997) must be one focus of our research efforts. I do so here as a means of identifying and illuminating one key concept: despite a potentially balanced media environment (in the aggregate), the fluctuations of volume, share, and tone of media coverage within campaigns cause shifts in electoral support that are small but substantively significant, at least in terms of the margins of victory in many presidential election contests.

Working from this starting point, the subsequent questions of why imbalances occur, which citizens are most affected by them, and whether “what” and “how” the press reports is as important as “about whom” it is reporting, all take on a rich and exciting significance. They are made all the more relevant by the contextual ground shifting

under our metaphorical feet: societies change, and those changes have implications for how information is received and processed, what role mass communication plays in the political game and election contests, and ultimately what the relationship is between the people, the government, and the democratic process. For a start, if media coverage can be manipulated *and* has a significant effect on support for candidates, then as a discipline we benefit from that knowledge. Moreover, *campaigns* can benefit from this knowledge, and not only to the benefit of their selfish electoral outcomes: candidates who are serious about wanting an issue-based campaign can learn how best to attract media attention and direct it to those issues. This has positive implications for democracy in general, and the knowledge level of the electorate in particular.

Scope and Method

There is substantial probative value in addressing these questions with a multiple-election scope, rather than a single election. As an example, consider the question of volume of coverage over the course of an election cycle. If one was studying such a question during the 1996 general election campaign, a content analysis would show that the level of television news coverage of the candidates and campaign graph out in a manner that suggests a high degree of interest by the media during the convention period, followed by decreased interest through the post-convention period. One would observe small peaks of coverage during the debates, and a similar peak come election day, but with nothing approaching the volume of coverage seen during the convention period. If this same researcher were to take these findings and generalize them as applying to all general election cycles, he or she would be making a significant error. When compared

to the following election in 2000, there are stark differences that challenge the previous conclusions and make a case for a substantively different interpretation of the volume-of-coverage patterns observed. While the conventions are still a significant media event, we see that they do not dominate as they did in 1996. In fact, in the final days of the campaign, we see a substantial uptick in the average level of coverage that brings that average higher than that seen during the convention period. This, incidentally, is a pattern that is much more consistent with the other two election cycles included in this dissertation, and is a fairly encouraging sign as we move forward. Common methods for content analysis (which in this case include highly detailed breakdowns of coverage – literally seconds at a time) in addition to a multiple-election scope of analysis allow for more confident assertions and inferences than would otherwise be possible, and in fact which are rare in the political communication literature.

Construction of this Dissertation

This project is organized to provide the most complete picture possible of the media environment during a presidential general election campaign, and then to test whether those descriptive elements have explanatory power. Chapter Two will provide an overview of relevant media effects and political communication literature, engage in a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the phenomena being studied, generate testable hypotheses, discuss the data needed to test them, and define the conceptual and operational definitions of the terms used. Chapter Three will describe the media environment as a whole (coverage of both candidates, collectively) along several axes and over several periods of the general election campaign, so as to provide a clear picture

of what is reported, when, and how over the course of the general election campaign; the multi-election format will also demonstrate that these descriptions are typical, not particular to a specific campaign. Chapter Four will examine variability in coverage of specific candidates and campaigns, and test for the degree of similarity and difference in the coverage of individual candidates in the same election year. Chapter Five investigates what influence the campaigns have on the media agenda, in terms of the issues covered, which also allows for investigation of what political news producers consider “attractive” news. Chapter Six tests whether or not campaigns can affirmatively increase (or, if desired, decrease) their share of coverage by offering attractive stories to the political press. Chapter Seven will then test for effects of shifts in share and tone of coverage, both in the aggregate and among specific sub-groups within the electorate. Chapter Eight will then synthesize these findings and discuss their implications for the study of media, campaigns and elections, and the political system as a whole. The project will conclude with recommendations for future research, so that we may further our understanding of the behavior and effects of this important institution of American democracy.

The study of political news is much more than a simple examination of who said what, when, and why. Because we personally experience so little of the world around us, our dependence on the media to communicate the political world to us magnifies the importance of understanding what they create, when, and why. If we are to be effective citizens, competently managing our public affairs and selecting representatives that are inclined to represent our best interests, then we are wholly reliant upon the mass media to give us the tools to do so. What use is popular sovereignty if we are not capable of

knowing what is happening? This takes on a richer significance when we enter the world of campaigns and elections, since in this instance it is the clear expectation that the electorate is the intended recipient of a great deal of attention and information, and it is the media that provide it to us on behalf of the campaigns. The days of whistle-stop campaigns are gone except as a quaint symbol, and even when such activities were common the newspapers of the day were right there to report on the events. We depend on the media to show us the world, and the way in which they do it has very real consequences. This is the essence of modern American election campaigns. In a world where image is everything, the purveyors of images (whether in print or over the air) have a great deal of power, and it is a vocation worthy of any scholar to endeavor to know what was said, and how it matters. This is in many ways a simple task, but it is also an important one, and like many simple things it will become more complicated on further investigation.

CHAPTER 2

SETTING THE STAGE: LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORY, DATA, AND

DEFINITIONS

Introduction

This project examines the distribution and dynamics of media coverage of presidential candidates, the effects of share and tone of coverage of those candidates on their electoral standing, and how campaigns may influence the content and construction of that coverage. A study of news content and journalist behavior is certainly not unique within the literature, but this project is different in terms of the ways in which it goes about addressing that subject. It attempts to first describe the content of the coverage of the presidential campaign using a broad data set. It attempts to determine the extent to which coverage is controllable by the campaigns. Finally, it attempts to identify which aspects of that coverage have the greatest impact on the preferences of voters. The major contribution of this project to the literature is methodological, in that campaigns and the media coverage of them are rarely studied with such a combination of depth and breadth. Depth is achieved through the level of detail present in the content analysis: very small segments of broadcasts and individual print stories are coded for several variables including tone, length, speaker, subject, and topic. Breadth is achieved by applying the same coding scheme to four consecutive elections. Conceptually, the project is generally

consistent with others in the literature: it assumes that messages are sent and received by the media to the public, and that more and positive news is a benefit to campaigns, while less and negative news is harmful to campaigns. It also acknowledges that many receivers will actively resist the messages that are transmitted.

Before proceeding with description of the content and hypothesis testing, though, it is first necessary to lay out the model and theoretical basis of the project; review the literature relating to news production, the content of the media environment during the campaign, tone of coverage, media effects, and control of the media agenda; and adequately define a number of terms. Being a wide-ranging project in terms of time and cognate disciplines, this section is intended to elaborate on the particular nuances of the terms to be used, the place of this research in the wider literatures, and the intuitive plausibility of the hypotheses offered based on the theoretical underpinnings of other authors. Whenever a number of intersecting and tangential concepts and fields are present, the elaboration of definitions, terms, and theory become much more important, and it is my hope that this chapter will put us all on the same page.

Model

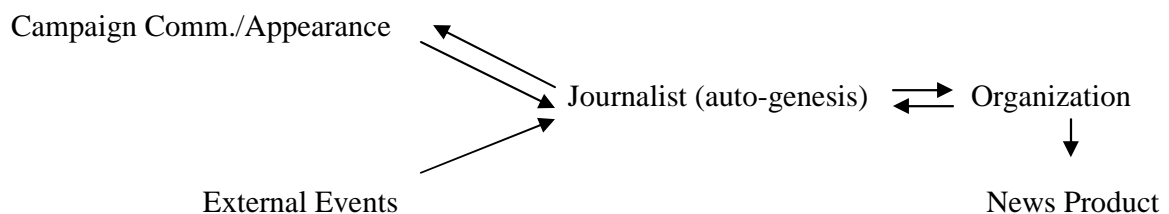
There are two distinct phases under consideration here: news production and transmission, and news reception and acceptance. In other words, what factors determine what the “news” is (and, hence, it’s unbalanced nature), and how does that imbalance affect vote intentions in the electorate? I will start with the news creation environment and what it produces. Specifically, what is the universe of potential stories that may be selected (whether from external events or suggested by the campaigns and/or the news

organization itself), how many stories are not selected but “created” (auto-genesis on the part of the journalist), and how do they move through the news organization en route to transmission? I will then move on to a model of persuasion once those messages are transmitted. They may be considered one unified model of news creation-transmission and reception-acceptance, or treated separately.

Campaign-Media Interactions

We begin with campaigns. What do they want? It is reasonable to conclude that they view positive coverage in the media as a benefit to their campaign – it will improve their chances of winning the election. In the same vein, negative coverage of their opponent should have a negative effect on probability of that opponent winning the election. The inverse is also assumed to be true. Each campaign also has a preferred issue agenda for the campaign, and would like to see those issues raised in the media to increase their salience to the electorate. Therefore, the campaign has two goals with regard to the press: first, encourage positive coverage of their campaign (to include defense from attacks from the opposing campaign) and encourage negative coverage of the opponent (attacks); and second, encourage (to whatever extent possible) coverage of the campaign’s preferred issues (Norris et al. 1999). The campaign can attempt to accomplish this through direct contact (candidate statements, press releases, and surrogate/campaign staff statements), indirect contact (speechmaking), or appearance (candidate appears at an event or location, but does not speak). These three options constitute the means by which campaigns can “offer” stories to the press.

Shifting perspective to the journalist, there are some resistance factors to address. Journalists consider candidates to be strategic actors playing a game, at best (Patterson 1993, Just et al. 1996), and liars, at worst (Jamieson and Waldman 2003). They dislike being managed or worked by the campaigns (Gans 1980, Zaller 1996), and resist attempts at outright scripting or manipulation (Zaller 1996, Flowers et al. 2003). However, journalists do still have a news hole to fill, so some of the material offered by the campaign will be selected by them for story creation, and they also seek out the campaign for information and good stories. This, though, is not the only source for stories. There are also external events (public policy problems, the economy, national security, natural disasters, etc.) and *the stories the journalists create for themselves*. This “auto-genesis” is very common, comprising about half of all stories (Project for Excellence in Journalism). All of these potential stories – campaign-generated, external, and internal – funnel to the journalists, who then choose what topics they will cover. There is one additional source of stories, though, and they move backwards up the chain: it is possible that the news organization – implicitly or explicitly – will suggest stories to the journalist. Once the stories are written, they are communicated to the news organization for further selection. It is the organization that ultimately creates the “news” from the stories offered (Gans 1980), and transmits it to the public. Schematically, the model is as follows:



Essentially, this is a multiple-gate gatekeeping model. Journalists, for reasons of professional growth, will choose stories that are compelling to viewers and are likely to

get on the air – that are “good” news. To satisfy their self-view as “referees” in the political game (Patterson 1993) they will tend to focus on areas where the candidates conflict or on the failings of the candidate or campaign (watchdog tendency), and do so within a game- or analytical-schema (horserace/strategy coverage bias). Professional ethics and standards will create a desire to provide “balanced” and “objective” coverage, but at the same time the desire to tell a simple and compelling story (Jamieson and Waldman 2003, Gans 1980) will work against that impulse, resulting in periodic shifts in the “prevailing” candidate or campaign. This is the result of selecting a “main character” for the story, who will receive a disproportionate amount of the coverage, at least for that day (or, for a longer-running story, series of days). The news organization faces similar pressures, as both a public institution and an industry competitor (McQuail 2000, 191). The news must be objective, but salable, and so there is structural pressure to produce horserace/strategy coverage rather than issue-based coverage. In order to tell a good story (with appropriate dramatic elements, protagonist, antagonist, etc.) the ideal of balance with regard to share of coverage may be temporarily lost, but can be corrected/restored on another day when the opposite campaign is the protagonist. The end result is a news product that shows daily (and possibly aggregate) variability.

These choices will affect the relative share of coverage of each campaign, and campaigns that offer more of what journalists want (conflict and/or novelty) will receive a greater share of that coverage. Even when the campaigns are engaging in conflict-generation by attacking, they may still receive a greater share of coverage, despite the fact that the story they are “providing” to journalists is about the other campaign. The originating campaign (Campaign A) will still receive some amount of coverage as the

originator of the attack, but the focus of the story will seem to be, from the perspective of the journalist, the campaign which is being *attacked* (Campaign B). As a result, to “balance” the equation as it relates to share of coverage, there is ethical pressure to present a story about Campaign A. The net result is a greater share of coverage for A, since their share includes their proportion of the original “attack” story about B, as well as their own.

To summarize: the amount of space the organization is willing to devote to the campaign will depend on the level of interest in the campaign, both on a daily and aggregate basis. There are numerous potential sources of stories, including the campaigns, outside events, news outlets, and the journalists themselves. Share of coverage will likely vary, due to the storytelling challenges to creating genuinely equal levels of total coverage. Tone of coverage is easily balanced even in the presence of imbalance of share, so media will tend to produce balanced tone of coverage even if that coverage is generally positive or negative.

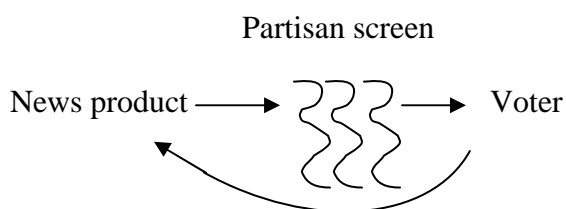
Media-Populace Interactions

Once the news is produced, it is transmitted. This transmission is not perfect, however, and there are two roadblocks to overcome: reception and acceptance. Reception is not universal, however we can safely assume that as a whole the electorate will react to the media since so many receive either direct or two-step information from the mass media. Acceptance is another story, however. Many viewers will resist information that is contrary to their existing considerations. In this case, the most obvious barrier is partisanship. For those who accept the information, though, there

will be an updating of the candidate evaluation for that voter. Since the campaign environment is so information-rich, it does not even much matter whether we consider voters to be making memory-based or on-line processing decisions, though memory-based models would predict a stronger and more immediate effect. The news coverage will change the candidate's standing in the electorate relative to his/her previous standing by virtue of opinion change at the individual level. Positive news for a candidate will increase their standing while negative news will decrease it, and the balance of the two will determine the net change for each candidate, with the net difference between the two candidates causing change relative to the other candidate. Simple exposure may cause an increase as well, though, since some voters are likely to be "activated" regardless of the tone of the news, so an increase in share of coverage alone will also cause an increase in support for the candidate, barring an excess of negative news. So, then, the most likely scenario is that support for a candidate will increase when that candidate's share of coverage increases, as long as the relative tone of coverage is neutral or better by comparison to the opposing candidate.

With regard to content of coverage, there is also a feedback loop from the receiver. If readers/viewers select more of a certain kind of story, then news organizations will be more likely to offer it. This also applies to whether stories persist in the media cycle, or fade, which would also account for persistent but oscillating advantages in share of coverage.

Schematically, the model is as follows:



This suggests that segments of the electorate (those who are least likely to resist the content of the news) will be more likely to demonstrate the changes described than other, less- accepting segments.

Literature Review

Introduction

Whether or not there is balance in the media is a complicated question which has been answered in different ways within the literature, with different conclusions. To begin, some maintain the conventional wisdom that holds that there is a degree of personal or institutional partisanship in reporting (Graber et al. 1998, Patterson & Donsbach 1996, Graber 1997, Kahn & Kenney 2002) that can cause imbalances in coverage. These imbalances are defined as “bias,” and while no standard definitions exist, most include this notion of imbalance as evidence of bias. One definition cites “a systematic tendency to favour (in outcome) one side or position over another” (McQuail 1992, 191). Another defines media bias as “a systematic, persistent *unbalance* in the mainstream news coverage” (D’Alessio & Allen 2007, 432, emphasis added). At the same time, there are others who hold that despite isolated incidences of “bias” in the media (by which they mean “imbalance”), no consistent biases exist overall (D’Alessio & Allen 2000, Patterson 1980, Gans 1979, Iyengar et al. 2004).

This is an important discussion, but I submit that this conventional understanding is not really the best way to classify and discuss the campaign media environment. We should be concerned with whether or not the media demonstrate *imbalance* and why such

imbalance matters. How such an imbalance comes to be is also a focus of this dissertation, and the news production process and the professional behavior of journalists will be examined as well, though not with an eye towards uncovering bias. The main reason for this is that bias is a motivation of the creator of the news, not a component of the coverage itself. There is, simply put, no such thing as “biased” news: the news is whatever the content is, and whether it was created with a biased intent is largely irrelevant in a discussion of news balance and effects. A report that has its roots in a biased perspective is no more or less influential than an identical report that does not, and at the same time the appearance of imbalance does not automatically mean that the coverage is biased. Objectivity in reporting is an oft-cited journalistic ethic, and incorporates the ideals of both balance and neutrality (McQuail 2000, 173). Attempting to fuse the two, though, has the potential to create conflicts between them: after all, could bias not produce a degree of balance in coverage when two campaigns are not equally matched or when the day’s events dictate a different quantity of coverage for each campaign? In this case, we would be applauding the ideal of balance but at the expense of the ideal of neutrality. We should not be conflating “balance” with “the absence of bias.” A much more useful and non-normative perspective is to simply study the content of the news and, if appropriate in a discussion of how imbalance (or balance, for that matter) comes to be, address bias simply as one potential cause of the appearance of certain content.

In the paragraphs that follow, I hope to demonstrate that although the literature in this area is both thorough and appropriate for each discipline, there is an interesting gap in the information provided, which is that there is little discussion of the detailed

composition of the media environment and how that environment influences our preferences in real-time – that is, on a daily basis within an intra-campaign setting, rather than an aggregate accounting at the conclusion of the campaign. What’s more, many important questions fall through the gaps between journalism, political science, and communications. Those who have raised questions of interest to us do not necessarily answer them in a way that we as political scientists would like, and in many cases the data is collected but the appropriate political question (for example, what impact news coverage has on electoral support) is not asked. We will begin with the behavior of political journalists, then move on to a description of the media environment that they create. Next is whether or not that media environment can be manipulated or controlled by the campaigns. Finally, there is a review of the effects that coverage can have, specifically whether share and tone of coverage are meaningful contributors to the level of support a candidate receives.

The Behavior of Political Journalists & The Media Environment

Political Journalists

Political journalists “make” the news – it does not simply “happen” (Epstein 1973, Fishman 1980, Gans 1979). Items are selected from the wide range of possible stories, themes, and events that occur in a given day, and from these selected items journalists create the news. Journalists are not simply “reporting” (Jamieson & Waldman 2003). They are creating a narrative that draws on typical storytelling elements such as drama and suspense to paint a picture of the political world (Joslyn 1984, Lippmann 1922, Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001). After all, we do refer to them as “stories,” and with

good reason. In light of this, we should not view journalists as drones, taking dictation, but as active members of a political community that contribute to and change the environment in which political decisions are made. The news environment they create is subject to influence by the structural demands of news outlets, news values, professional considerations, and the perceived roles of the media in the political process.

There is a remarkable degree of similarity in the news produced by all outlets which can be attributed to similarities in the demands of journalists' parent organizations. In large part, all political journalists are reporting on the same events, so a degree of similarity would be expected. Reflection of a perceivable political "reality" does not fully account for these similarities, though, unless there were only a very few discrete, observable actions on a given day. Since the campaigns provide regular fodder for the political media – more than can be reported on any one day – these journalists could conceivably tell quite different stories on any given day. However, because the processes, motivations, and pressures are similar for most news outlets (Bennett 1996, Cohen 1963), what is news to one outlet also tends to be news to another. These pressures mean that political journalists, for all of their freedom, are not acting completely under their own free will, and have a tendency to produce tabloidized/sensationalized news that is of similar content and focus as that of their competitors (Cowan 1998, Esser 1999, Lasica 1998). There is also a degree of peer pressure at work, and "pack journalism" results in a journalistic tendency to report one's competitors' stories so as not to miss out on the day's "real" news (Crouse 1973). This is even justifiable, in the journalists' eyes: the creation of one news event prompts the creation of others in other news organizations, since the item covered is now "news," and

therefore worthy of the attention of the other news outlets, even if they had not previously considered the event newsworthy (Cohen 1963, 61).

Journalists still exhibit a significant degree of independence, despite the limitations placed on them. For example, journalists have a tendency to ignore press releases from the campaigns (Flowers et al. 2003, Haynes et al. 2002). Journalists do not view it as part of their job to “cheerlead” for the campaigns and release the information exactly as presented – they view their role as an independent body that acts as a critic and watchdog of the political system (Cohen 1962, Patterson 1993), and to a significant extent this is what we see, despite a dependence on “official” information (Iyengar 2008). In fact, when campaigns attempt to “manage” the news and control political journalists, those journalists who become aware of the attempted management actively retaliate. They have a tendency to “replace” the campaigns’ desired messages with more critical messages (Zaller 1998, Miller & Gronbeck 1994). This “rule of product substitution” is defined by Zaller as follows, and showcases the desire for independence among political journalists:

The more effectively reporters are challenged for control of a news jurisdiction, the more assiduously they will seek to develop new and distinctive types of information that they can plausibly substitute for what politicians are providing and that affirm overall journalistic control of mass communication. (1998, 64)

In terms of deciding what “news” is, journalists make use of “news values,” or elements that define the relative importance or significance of an event and contribute to its newsworthiness. Though difficult to define, the term can be understood to mean the value of a particular event as measured by its potential to effect change in social structures or norms, coupled with the degree of salience it presents in the contemporary issue climate. While no comprehensive, commonly-accepted list of news values exists

(such a list may actually be impossible to create, given the different worldviews and social structures of different populations, even in the same country), the most commonly-cited list includes twelve news values, specifically: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elites (nations and people), reference to persons (the episodic, rather than the thematic or serial), and reference to the negative (Galtung & Ruge 1965, 65-71). The theory posits that the more individual news values are satisfied by a particular story, the more likely that story is to appear in the news. This list of news values is subject to condensing and revision (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001, Palmer 1998, Peterson 1979, Peterson 1981), and adjustments are often made to accommodate for the particular circumstances under which these values are employed.

Professional interests also guide journalists in deciding what to select as news. Success in the journalism field is often had by producing meaningful, important news stories, and journalists want they want their stories to top the news or make the front page. This makes them particularly sensitive to the wants and needs of the institutions for which they work (Cohen 1963, Jamieson & Waldman 2003). Other works on media behavior examine the behavior of the media as a function of demands by news consumers (Iyengar et al. 2004, Kerbel 1995, Patterson 1993, Brady and Johnston 1987), demonstrating an increase in strategy and horserace coverage to meet consumer demand for those kinds of stories, by comparison to more substantive issue coverage. Writing and selection are affected by the audience. If the audience prefers competition (horserace) coverage, then it is more likely to receive it (Cohen 1963, 110). Another explanation for this horserace/strategy preference is that issue coverage is generally more

difficult to produce than horserace or strategy coverage, due to the time required to research candidate positions and understand technical details of the issues involved (Kanniss 1995). In many cases, journalists will only discuss issues as a cover for discussing political maneuvering (Patterson 1993, Robinson & Sheehan 1983). Candidates are eager to discuss issues, and do so often and in many forums (Just et al. 1999, Vavreck 2009, as well as this project), but it seems that the media are not quite as interested in reporting on them, in most cases. Whether this is due to the disinterest, lack of connection to the public's wishes, and arrogance of political journalists (Fallows 1996) or the disconnect between what the public says it wants and what it actually consumes (Iyengar et al. 2004) is a difficult question, but the result is still the same.

Journalists view politicians as strategic actors that are attempting to manage their messages and coverage of their campaigns with an eye towards "winning" their particular contest. They view them as acting within a "game schema" (Patterson 1993). Such a view informs the news they create, and in a sense this also make the media strategic actors as well, as this view affects how they report the campaign. Since they presume that candidates are playing a game in which the audience makes the final determination of the winner (literally, in the case of an election contest), they also presume that candidates are exaggerating positives, minimizing negatives, obfuscating, deceiving, and pandering to the audience (Weaver 1972). They have a tendency to report the campaigns in a competitive framework, both between the candidates themselves and between the candidates and the political media (Patterson 1980).

The Media Environment

A day's media coverage of the campaigns can be described as a combination of the volume of coverage of the campaign, the focus of that coverage (which candidate or campaign), the tone of that coverage, and what category of coverage or issue that coverage is about. The research to date supports some general statements about the media environment. First, presidential campaigns in the modern era (since 1968, at least) are always a prominent feature in the news, regardless of the year, and the volume of coverage, despite aggregate variability, remains high (Patterson 1993, Farnsworth & Lichter 2007). The media tend to report in similar ways on similar issues throughout each campaign, utilizing a story frame that is candidate-centered and non-ideological (Kerbel 1995, Graber 1997, Jamieson & Waldman 2003). Political media produce much more horserace and strategy coverage than other types of coverage, namely issue coverage (Benoit et al. 2005, Iyengar et al. 2004, Kerbel 1995, Patterson 1993). When they do not center on the horserace, stories tend to focus on candidates' personal attributes rather than their issue positions (Graber 1976, Klein & Maccobby 1954). The tone of coverage is found to be generally negative, but enough exceptions exist in terms of timing of coverage (tone varies based on when in the campaign it occurs) and within entire elections (some are balanced or positive in tone) that there is doubt as to the correct characterization of tone of coverage, overall. Up to this point, examination of these component elements of news coverage (tone, volume, and content) has almost exclusively been done in the aggregate, without examining daily or periodic variations in coverage, nor has it been examined across multiple elections using the same methodology. Therefore, many of these findings may not be generalizable.

The total, aggregate volume of coverage of general-election campaigns (by number of stories in selected print and broadcast media) has increased in every election year since 1996, and is approaching a high not seen since 1992 (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007). 1992 was a banner year for coverage, with the total volume of election coverage from Labor Day through Election Day tracking approximately 90 percent higher than the volume of coverage during the same period in the subsequent election in 1996. Volume has increased in every general election since then, however (Farnsworth & Lichter 2011, Zeldes et al. 2008). The volume of coverage in 2008 even exceeded that of the level in 1988, which was only slightly less than 1992 (Farnsworth & Lichter 2011). Characterizations that media interest in the campaigns is declining are inaccurate, and not borne out even by researchers' own data (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 55).

Intra-campaign analysis of the available data shows that the volume of coverage of the campaign increases substantially around the national nominating conventions and Election Day. These periods on the general election calendar – the national nominating conventions and the run-up to Election Day – are two times when it is possible to predict that the volume of coverage of the campaigns will increase markedly (Domke et al. 1997, Johnston et al. 2004, Kerbel 1995). Historically, levels of coverage peak during the conventions and then decline, and from the conclusion of the convention period the average levels of volume of coverage rise as the candidates approach Election Day (Stempel & Windhauser 1991). However, these may not be the only times when volume increases. Insufficient data exist to say how volume reacts to external events or campaign events, whether from lack of availability or lack of sensitivity, and the

variation in volume of coverage during the campaign has not been the subject of much academic inquiry.

The aggregate volume of coverage of each candidate is comparable and generally balanced in each general election campaign, when tallied up at the end of the campaign. Total general election coverage, in the aggregate, is usually divided fairly evenly between the two major-party candidates, even in the presence of a third-party or independent candidate (Stovall 1980, Kerbel 1995). There is no evidence available to answer the question of whether, when, or why the volume of coverage of each candidate varies over the course of the general election season, with the exception of the surges in volume of candidate-specific coverage around the conventions.

No academic consensus exists on the general, overall tone of coverage during the campaign; some find overall negativity, others find balance, and election years characterized by positivity also exist. Tone, here, refers to whether coverage is generally positive or negative, favorable or unfavorable towards the candidate, and more, though the exact conceptualization differs from one study to the next. The amount of good news vs. bad news has changed over time, with bad news beginning to outpace good news from the 1960s through the early 1990s (Patterson 1993, 20). Tone of coverage of the candidates, overall and in the aggregate, has been found in some years to be more negative than positive, averaging a 55 percent to 45 percent negative-positive split (Benoit et al. 2005, Farnsworth & Lichter 2007). In other elections, though, both broadcast and cable outlets have been decidedly positive in coverage of the candidates (Farnsworth & Lichter 2011). Meta-study of tone of coverage shows balance, overall, in coverage of the campaigns (D'Alessio & Allen 2000). Tone of coverage of both

campaigns, measured as a time-series variable, becomes more negative as the calendar approaches Election Day, regardless of the previous treatment of each campaign during that election season (Johnston et al. 2004, Patterson 1993). More study – preferably utilizing multi-election scope with consistent tone coding schemes – is necessary before making broad statements about whether the media are generally positive or negative in their reporting of the campaigns, and this question is still open.

Democratic candidates consistently receive more-positive coverage than Republican candidates. The media exhibit a clearly pro-Democrat tone in coverage of the candidates in most elections, though this difference does occasionally disappear entirely or end up as a slight pro-Republican tilt (Domke et al. 1997, Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, Farnsworth & Lichter 2011, Waldman & DeVitt 1998). Print media show a degree of statement and coverage bias when measured by outlet: coverage in a paper tends to be more positive and give more statements overall towards the candidate endorsed by that particular paper (Kahn & Kenney 2002, Klein & Maccoby 1954), though newspapers as a medium do not consistently endorse candidates of a particular party (Tedesco 2005). Other studies find balanced tone, overall, for coverage of the presidential candidates (D’Alessio & Allen 2000, Domke et al. 1997, Zeldes et al. 2008). Despite the occasional degree of balance in tone of coverage, it is telling that when we see imbalance in tone of coverage, it is nearly always in favor of the Democratic candidate, and when the tonal advantage *does* occasionally tilt in favor of the Republican candidate, the advantage is always smaller than the comparable advantage held by Democratic candidates (D’Alessio & Allen 2000). Aggregate tonal advantage in campaign coverage, then, goes to the Democrats.

Intra-campaign analysis of tone of coverage towards specific candidates is limited, but shows that coverage during nominating conventions exhibits a positive tilt in favor of the party hosting the convention. The conventions aside, though, most days do not exhibit extremes in valence for either candidate (Johnston et al. 2004). At least one study of intra-campaign media content also shows that on most days the numbers of positive and negative statements about each candidate are similar (Domke et al. 1997). The tone of coverage is not consistently presented, though, and is often insensitive to other potentially valuable representations, which may make generalizations about pro-Democrat tone bias misleading and/or inaccurate. For example, the tone of coverage may be presented as the tone of coverage of each candidate, individually; as a composite measure of relative tone of coverage of both candidates; may be presented as a mean tonal value, individually or collectively; and more. Most data are also not presented as a time-series, creating a gap in the wider literature. In light of the fact that we see periodic tone variations in these studies (Domket et al. 1997, Johnston et al. 2004), it seems logical to examine it during the less-visible moments of the campaign, and there is certainly no reason not to do so on a daily basis so that we may also compare candidates' daily tone of coverage, relative to each other.

The dominant category of coverage in the general election campaign is horserace/strategy coverage, category being conceptualized as a concept that combines stories of like-intent, such as issue coverage (coverage of specific policy positions and events), scandal coverage, etc. In 2000, horserace coverage outpaced issue coverage by nearly two to one, with 71 percent of stories mentioning the horserace while only 40 percent discussed any substantive issue (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 165). This is the

case in nearly all modern elections, wherein more than half of all broadcast news stories about the election were about the horserace (Kerbel 1995, Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, Stempel & Windhauser 1989, Mantler & Whiteman 1995, Domke et al. 1997), and while newspapers were slightly less horserace-centric, 44 percent of their stories were focused on who was winning the race (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 168). Moreover, analysis of the amount of horserace coverage in several elections shows that when no incumbent is running there is even an increase in the amount of horserace coverage (168, 171). We have not yet examined this aspect of coverage as a time-series variable, however, so it is impossible to say how categories of coverage and coverage of issues change throughout the election cycle.

The dominant issue in a campaign varies, but the economy is frequently that issue (Vavreck 2009, Gilens et al. 2007). In 1992, the top issue covered was by far the economy (Kerbel 1995, Alvarez & Nagler 1995), and though the economy is commonly (if not always) a prominent issue in news coverage, the frequency and volume of coverage of any one issue or issue profile varies by election year (Graber 1976, Hillygus & Shields 2005, Petrocik 1996, Vavreck 2009). Indeed, the most prominent issue in a campaign will often change over the life cycle of the campaign (Domke et al. 1997, Tedesco 2005, Carsey 2000). Character references are common in primaries, both by candidates (Bartels 1993) and by the media (Kerbel 1995), and in general elections they sometimes constitute an important issue in the campaign (Graber 1976, Domke et al. 1997).

Limitations

Missing from much of the existing literature is a discussion of whether the liberties and constraints of political journalists produce a balanced or stable product. How does the particular character and process of political journalism affect the way in which news about politics is constructed and delivered? Coverage of the campaign varies from one election to another, and it is worth examining whether any common factors contribute to that variation. Since political journalists are also responsible for covering two competing campaigns, we should also examine whether they are, broadly, providing consistency and balance within that media environment in terms of which candidate is receiving what amount and kind of coverage.

Single-election studies are insufficient to draw very many valid, generalizable inferences about the media environment due to their limited scope and the variability of coverage of each election. While some elements like the dominance of horserace coverage are demonstrated consistently even across multiple single-election studies, most elements of coverage are inconsistent, including the volume of coverage and the tone of coverage of the election. Farnsworth and Lichter study multiple elections and find significant variability in both of these measures (2007) from one election to the next, and comparison of these and other elements between studies also belies the presumption that a single-election study will be generalizable. For example, the percentage of horserace coverage found in Kahn & Kenney 1999 is dramatically different from that found in Kerbel 1995. Single-election studies produce data that is by necessity conditioned by the context of the election year and the specific campaigns being run by the candidates. When we examine the results from multiple-election research we see a high degree of

variability in the components that are measured, strongly suggesting that single-election studies represent only a single data point, regardless of their validity in describing that one data point. Single-election studies, then, greatly limit our ability to identify trends, are not particularly generalizable, and may also mislead us into inappropriate conclusions about coverage more generally. Moreover, they sometimes contradict each other outright, and the fact that the data for each is produced by a different scheme means that comparing between them is often sketchy and sometimes impossible, even when they purport to examine the same election year. For example, there is a 15 percentage point discrepancy (43 percent to 58 percent) between the amounts of horserace coverage during the 1992 election in two in-depth content analyses of approximately the same period in the general election (Kerbel 1995, 23; Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 168).

Multi-election studies are both limited in number and possibly in effectiveness. Only one of any depth of detail was identified within the literature, the *Nightly News Nightmare* series by Farnsworth and Lichter (2003, 2007, 2011), and even within that study there are inaccuracies and methodological limitations. In addition to the earlier discussion of their conclusion that total volumes of campaign coverage are decreasing (which is not borne out by their data), the same is true of a discussion of the amount of time candidates are shown speaking in their own words, which is described as “decreasing” even as the data show the candidates’ share of the locus of coverage has been stable for the last five election cycles (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 92). Content analysis procedures also come into play, since their definition of the general election period does not include the conventions (coding begins on Labor Day, usually after the conventions). The range of dates coded is a limiting factor in other studies as well. One

codes as little as two weeks prior to Election Day for each campaign covered (Benoit et al. 2005), which, although it can answer some questions, cannot paint an accurate picture of the larger campaign season.

Within multiple-election studies, there are other ways in which we might expand on our knowledge. All of those examined for this project report their results in the aggregate, making it impossible to know what variations exist throughout the campaign. This lack of intra-campaign analysis makes it virtually impossible to identify patterns of coverage, or to compare coverage during different phases of the campaign using the same methods and data analysis. Additionally, few of these studies, regardless of their scope, offer any kind of reliability testing of their content analysis procedure.

Examination of these variables (volume, tone, and category of coverage) has not, to date, occurred in a way that allows for examination of the daily variations in the component elements of volume, tone, and category of coverage. Neither do most studies do so (whether in the aggregate or as a time-series) for each candidate, individually. By adding an element of time to our examination of the campaign media environment, and breaking out coverage of each candidate independently, *and* doing so across four elections, we may more accurately describe it and more confidently generalize it.

Theory

The model described earlier predicts that most of the campaign news produced during the campaigns is created to satisfy the gatekeepers who create it. As a result, the motivations of those gatekeepers (political journalists and news organizations) are of paramount importance. In describing the overall (non-candidate-specific) media

environment, then, there are clear theoretical expectations. News organizations operate under an economic imperative that requires them to produce a saleable product, and as a result they would be more likely to transmit campaign news when there is genuine competition between the candidates. Journalists and news organizations alike prefer simple, competition-oriented stories, so when the race is genuinely competitive they will tend to produce horserace/strategy coverage. With regard to the coverage of the candidates themselves, we would expect that the journalistic norm of balance to exhibit itself in ensuring that tone of coverage of the candidates is balanced, both in terms of the total number of positive and negative statements and stories about each, but also by comparison to each other on any given day: that is, in order to avoid charges of bias or favoritism, the overall tone of coverage of each candidate should be about the same as the tone of coverage of the opposing candidate for that day, regardless of whether such coverage is positive, neutral, or negative.

Media Environment Hypotheses

H1: In competitive election cycles, total-cycle volume of coverage will be greater than in non-competitive election cycles.

Competitiveness increases popular interest in the election (Patterson 1993, Kerbel 1995), therefore coverage of a close election will be worth more to the news organization than coverage of a runaway. A competitive election will be considered an election where the mean distance between the candidates in the trial heat polling is less than the margin of error spread for a sample of 1000 respondents. In terms of the variables to be examined, it is necessary to operationalize “competitiveness” and “volume of coverage.”

For competitiveness, when the mean distance between the two candidates in trial heat polls for the entire general election period is less than 6.4%, the race is considered “competitive,” and more than 6.4% is considered “not competitive.” For a measure of volume of coverage, a daily average of volume of coverage as measured by seconds of coverage on NBC and name-mentions in the *New York Times* will be used to create an equal point of comparison in election cycles with differing lengths of the general election campaign. The hypothesis will be tested by a qualitative comparison of the available cases.

H2: In competitive election cycles, total-cycle share of horserace/strategy coverage will be greater than in non-competitive election cycles.

In a competitive election the media will be able to make use of horserace position as a compelling story, while a non-competitive election will tend more towards other story subjects. The operational variable for competitiveness will be the same as that for H1. For total-cycle share of horserace/strategy coverage, a measure will be created of the daily average percentage of horserace/strategy coverage as measured by seconds of coverage on NBC. As in H1, the test will be a qualitative comparison of cases.

H3: Candidates will generally receive coverage that is comparable in tone in all general election periods except the convention periods.

Media actors have an ethical commitment to balance, and as a result tone of coverage of the candidates will be comparable, even if that coverage is not neutral overall. That is, there is no expectation that coverage will be neutral with regard to balance between the number and/or length of positive and negative statements, but where

coverage is generally positive/negative for one candidate, it will be generally positive/negative for the other candidate. Mean daily tone score of coverage of each candidate in the two media will be the operationalized independent variable, while the election period will be the dependent variable, with categories of Convention (the convention period and the days immediately preceding/following them), Post-Convention (the period from the end of the second nominating convention until the final thirty days of the campaign), and Final 30, or the last thirty days up to and including Election Day. For those periods I will compare the correlation between the candidate-specific coverage tone scores for each candidate, as well as conduct an independent samples t-test to compare means for each period. Comparisons will also be made of the mean tone coverage of the campaign as a whole.

Control of the Media Environment

Literature

While the discussion of media effects includes the phenomenon of agenda setting (media influencing the salience of particular issues among those in their audience), it is also appropriate to discuss factors that influence the agenda of the media, a phenomenon referred to as “agenda building” (Lang & Lang 1981, Weaver & Elliott 1985). Presidential input has been shown to influence the media agenda (McCombs et al. 1984), though other work has shown that this influence – especially in a campaign context – is limited, and that the media largely set their own agenda during the campaigns (Patterson 1980, Weaver et al. 1981). This degree of control is not absolute, though. Media are

influenced by candidates (Dalton et al. 1998), campaigns (Jamieson & Campbell 1992), and media norms and ethics (Shoemaker & Reese 1996).

All political actors want to influence the media environment (Just et al. 1996, Gans 1979, Edelman 1988), especially political campaigns, since in influencing the media they influence the agenda of the public as well. In this, the campaigns have a distinct advantage because they know generally what the media want, and the campaigns are acting volitionally to *seek* media attention (as opposed to other subjects of media attention who are selected without their input, such as the victim of a car accident). “It is no secret that reporters and editors search for events with dramatic properties and then emphasize those properties in their reporting” (Bennett 1996, 35). Given that, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the campaigns themselves can actively shape the media environment by offering narratives and news frames that are attractive to political journalists.

Conflict and competition are attractive to political journalists, since they are useful storytelling elements. “Campaigns allow journalists to write stories filled with drama, whether real or contrived. Drama is considered an important aspect of the news, in part because it is thought *to keep audiences interested in continuing news coverage*” (Joslyn 1984, 103, emphasis added). All of this can be juxtaposed with Galtung and Ruge’s basic discussion of “news values” (1963) and when we examine their list we see many elements that are satisfied by the presence of conflict: reference to elites, reference to the negative, reference to the episodic, and threshold, at the very least. We even see this tendency in other areas of political activity: Schattschneider spends time discussing the “contagiousness” of conflict in the introduction to *The Semisovereign People*, and

notes that when violence breaks out, a crowd invariably gathers (1960, 1). There is broad agreement in the literature that the media over-report the conflict-laden portions of the campaign at the expense of the more neutral statements candidates make about their own policies and positions, particularly during the debates (Bitzer & Reuter 1980, Reber & Benoit 2001, Benoit & Currie 2001).

Candidates benefit from an increase in salience of certain issues. Agenda setting is real in the eyes of both politicians and journalists (Walgrave 2008), which suggests two interesting realities: first, that politicians themselves make use of the media in determining on which issues *they* should be focused (though they view this influence negatively; 445); and second, that journalists are aware of the power that they exert in setting the agenda. Campaigns, too, are aware of the realities of media coverage of issues and how that coverage may impact the campaign, which leads to discussions of issue ownership. Issue ownership theory states that candidates of different parties are perceived as being more capable of addressing specific issues better than their opposition, and that candidates do well to emphasize those issues that are most beneficial to them and least beneficial to their opponents (Petrocik 1996, Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). At the same time, candidates may emphasize issues that are traditionally owned by the opposition when they feel they have a demonstrable advantage over their opponent on the issue (Carsey 2000), when they are attempting to neutralize an opponent's advantage on an issue (Holian 2004), when they trail in the polls (Damore 2004), or when the issue is important to a large segment of voters (Downs 1953). In total, there is ample evidence that campaigns are aware of the impact of the agenda on the public, that they attempt to

influence the media agenda and exert some control over the media environment, and find some success.

Limitations

The existing literature does not adequately address the question of whether and how campaigns may attract media attention and/or influence the content of that coverage, at least not in an intracampaign context. Can candidates seek more or less media coverage in a consistent manner? And when a candidate would like to see an issue brought to the fore in campaign discourse, to what extent can the candidate influence which issues are discussed in the media? Neither of these questions is completely answered in the existing literature, despite their importance in an electoral context. Put simply, what kinds of actions within the scope of control of the campaigns are likely to attract media attention or influence the media agenda?

Despite the evidence offered in the literature of the attractiveness of conflict to journalists, empirical tests of the relationship between conflict and publication are not common. Although we may presume some degree of gatekeeping bias exists in the mass media (not in a partisan sense, but rather as a tendency to report on certain types of stories in general), there is surprisingly little work available on the phenomenon – there are actually no studies of gatekeeping bias in broadcast news, though some are found with regard to gatekeeping bias in the print media (D'Alessio and Allen 2000, 145). Even in the absence of a particular bias, it is enough to suggest that some stories are more “attractive” than others and are therefore more likely to be reported. Although studies do exist that consider that dimension of news selection, none do so thoroughly or minutely

by classifying stories and issues within a broad typology (conflictual/non-conflictual, new/old) and then testing the question quantitatively. Some examine the role of intermedia agenda setting, which is the extent to which media outlets set their agenda by examining one or more prominent or competing news outlets (Sweetser et al. 2008, Ragas & Kioussis 2010, Danielian & Reese 1989). Some also examine other aspects of the campaign-media relationship as it relates to agenda setting, but these are primarily concerned with the role of press releases and/or advertising by the campaigns on the media agenda, and often offer mixed and inconsistent results (Dunn 2009, Kioussis et al. 2009, Flowers et al. 2003).

One reason that such work is not frequently undertaken is that it requires the presence of a non-media-dependent source of what is happening on the campaign trail. Without that source, we are unable to determine what is caused by the influence of the campaign and what is simply a reflection of campaign realities: that is, was coverage of an issue or event selected from a larger batch of equally viable issues or events, or was that the most “newsworthy” event by virtue of prominence or importance? Such data is often unavailable, but in this project I have taken advantage of an existing archive of presidential candidate discourse in the form of their public remarks (see the Data section below), and compared what was said to what was reported.

Theory

Gatekeeping is one of the more basic models of communication and news selection, and suggests that journalists and editors decide what is “news” based on selection of stories from a larger pool of potential stories. White’s 1950 study of news

selection decisions by a telegraph wire editor introduced the concept to journalism theory, and it has been expanded on and refined numerous times since then (see the discussion of McNelly earlier in this chapter). Although a bit oversimplified, it can be viewed as the basic function of communicators in any high-information environment: whether a journalist, editor, anchor, or commentator, each can make decisions to include some items at the expense of others, and can exercise almost total negative agenda control (the sole exception being events that are of such notoriety and importance that knowledge of their happening may bypass mass media completely and rely on interpersonal communication).

News values alone are unable to completely explain which stories a journalist or editor will select for broadcast or publication. While the discussion of Galtung and Ruge's news values is an excellent starting point for generating a theory of political news selection, it is somewhat inadequate in that it offers little guidance on understanding which stories will be selected: day to day on the campaign trail, there is a literal universe of potential stories to be written that meet the traditional standards and threshold of "newsworthiness." From among campaign stories, then, a journalist, editor, or broadcaster must select some stories rather than others, so the simple "newsworthiness" test is insufficient, since any number of stories may be considered newsworthy on any given day. Cohen, Bennet and others have made it clear that institutional and structural expectations have a role to play in news production, and that news outlets view presidential campaigns as inherently newsworthy.

I expect that the media will be attracted to two categories of stories: those that show conflict between the candidates (such as a negative allegation or a response by a

campaign to such an allegation) and those that represent something genuinely “new” or unique in terms of issues in the campaign (for example, the release of a previously unpublished policy statement). The “conflict” component is consistent with previous scholarship on the question of what the media reports in the political arena (see Benoit et al. 2004, 2005) of the candidates’ “functional” discourse. Candidates generate three specific types of comment: acclaims (statements that enhance their character or credentials as an officeholder), attacks (downgrading their opponents credentials as an officeholder), and defenses (responding to attacks). The “novelty” component is added because it satisfies so many of the news values that have come to define newsworthiness, and as such a new position or policy statement should be sufficiently important as to warrant media attention. Additionally, novelty is genuinely prized among political journalists, since so much of their daily lives entail watching a repeat performance of the same speeches, events, and activities (Kerbel 1995).

I will also argue that the media are attracted to gaffes or scandals, but this kind of explanation is difficult to test when there is no independent measure of the existence of such gaffes or scandals. We have no way of knowing which (if any) “scandal” stories are not being reported, nor any simple or easy way of defining a “gaffe.” This is in stark contrast to the reports based on campaign statements and remarks, for which we can generate an independent list of issues and subjects, and determine/identify any patterns or predilections on the part of the news media – if certain stories or issues are routinely reported or ignored, it tells us a great deal about the malleability of the media environment during the general election campaign.

So, then, what we are left with are two distinct questions: can candidates attract the attention of the media, thereby increasing their share of coverage; and can candidates influence which issues the media focus on? In the first case, we should expect that conflict will serve as an attractive element to political reporters. Given the self-view of political journalists described by Patterson (1993), arbitrating and commenting on the competition and “game” elements of the campaigns is a natural fit. Conflict is a natural component of any game, and with political journalists acting as commentators of the political game, it is likely that they will view their role in much the same way that sports commentators do. As a result, campaigns that offer high levels of conflict will be more attractive, on average, than those that do not. In the second case (and informed by the first case), we can expect that issues which are being fought over by the candidates (and are therefore mentioned by both campaigns) will be more likely to be covered than those issues that are not. In both cases, what is required to test any hypothesis is the existence of an extra-media information source that can be used to compare what was said to what was reported – this overcomes a standard objection to the “selective gatekeeping” argument of Galtung and Ruge (that it is “news values” that decide what is and is not news) by allowing for a comparison between the “real” campaign and the reported, mediated campaign.

Agenda Building Hypotheses

H4: Issues jointly emphasized by both campaigns, resulting in conflict, are more likely to be reported than issues emphasized by one campaign only.

When both candidates raise an issue in public remarks, journalists are provided with a ready-made competitive story framework, increasing the likelihood that the issue will be covered and transmitted. When a candidate raises an issue in those remarks but is alone in doing so, however, the media must choose whether coverage of that issue is justified, resulting in a lower success rate in issue building. The independent variables will include the presence of an issue in one candidate's remarks on a date, but not in the other candidate's remarks; and the presence of an issue in both candidates' remarks on the same date. The dependent variable is coverage of that issue in that day's news, in both situations. Calculating Lambda as a test of association will test the strength of the relationship in each case, with a chi-square test of significance.

H5: Campaigns that offer more conflict- and novelty-based stories to the media will increase their share of coverage or decrease share of coverage for their opposition.

News organizations are attracted by conflict and "new" information, therefore campaigns that provide more of either/both will be more likely to receive the preponderance of coverage, even when the subject of an attack is the opposing party. The independent variable is the campaign identified as the source of conflict or novelty in *New York Times* headlines, while the dependent variable is the one week lagged daily change in the five-day moving average of share of coverage of the campaigns in the broadcast measure. This lag allows us to see whether the increase in conflict/novelty origination occurs first, then the shift in share of coverage. Utilizing one medium to create the independent variable and the other to create the dependent variable also alleviates some of the endogeneity concerns created by using news reports as a measure of campaign activity as well as a measure of the result of that activity. The hypothesis

will be tested by linear regression, as well as by correlation between the volume of conflict-based headlines with the change in share of coverage of the campaign.

These hypotheses are to be measured in the same dynamic, intra-campaign fashion as the other hypotheses offered here. Aggregate levels of conflict or novelty may correlate to an aggregate advantage in share of coverage, but that does not necessarily mean that conflict caused the advantage. The causal relationship is more firmly established by testing for temporal precedence of conflict: if increased conflict is measured, and then followed by an increase in share of coverage, we can more confidently assert the causal relationship. The same logic applies to the question of the issues covered in the campaign. An aggregate measure of all issue coverage (by issue) and candidate mentions of those issues allows us to say nothing more than that a particular issue was commonly discussed by both candidates and journalists in the same campaign.

Media Effects

Literature

Much of the research into media effects shows small effects, despite the fact that people get most of their political information from the mass media (Graber 1997, and recently confirmed by a 2012 Google/*Washington Post* survey). There are many potential causes for this. It could be a result of counter-balancing effects, whereby campaigns are doing much the same job in swaying public opinion in favor of a candidate via media and message management, and therefore the effects cancel out. Another alternative is that there is so much noise during the campaign that media messages are

minimized or washed out completely by other considerations. A third option is that so many voters are already committed to a candidate (either due to party identification or early decision-making) that there are simply few voters to actually “move.” Of course, we must also consider the possibility that voters are either not exposed to or don’t care what the media have to say. Having said that, media effects *can* be and have been observed in numerous settings, whether by identifying direct influence on vote choice or by identifying indirect effects, such as agenda setting.

Media coverage of the campaigns affects how we think and feel about politics and political actors, and although these effects are small, they are not insignificant. News reports make an impact on what people know about politics, and this in turn affects their attitudes towards political actors (Graber 1988, Miller & Krosnick 2000, Neuman et al. 1992, Popkin 1991). In terms of an election campaign, news reports have a direct impact on candidate evaluations, as well as the criteria on which we base those evaluations (Bartels 1993, Hillygus & Jackman 2003). In this sense, the campaign coverage found in the media has a clear effect on the political system and the voters, since it provides the raw material which informs our political decisions and attitudes. News has more subtle effects as well. It can change our *reported* beliefs even when our underlying beliefs have not changed (Iyengar & Kinder 1987). Although these effects decay, in a close election contest these effects may last long enough to alter the outcome of the election, since they need not be persistent beyond Election Day. Moreover, we are more susceptible to influence by certain messages from candidates over others, especially when those messages are on issues which we consider “owned” by certain candidates or parties (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1994). Reported candidate statements on an issue “owned” by

his or her party (that is, an issue which the public generally believes is best addressed by and/or is a traditional key issue for a party) are more influential than those of the opposing candidate on the same issue.

Changes in volume and tone of coverage have also been shown to cause predictable shifts in levels of voter support for candidates (Domke et al. 1997, Soroka et al. 2009, Hopmann et al. 2010). Polls demonstrate overall stability in public opinion towards candidates, but there is still variation in that level of support. That variation could be explained by the media coverage of each candidate. Statistical models suggest that media coverage of some candidates is the greatest influence upon voters' electoral judgments (Domke et al. 1997, 730). News of the convention has also been shown to impact vote choice and voter dynamics (Hagen & Johnston 2007), and news commentary on the debates also shapes the public's perceptions of the debates themselves (Hellwed et al. 1992). These kinds of direct, preference-altering effects are precisely what we expect from the media, though they are not the only type of effect we can observe.

Agenda setting occurs as well, and is an important effect in terms of the competition between the candidates. Agenda setting was established as a way of conceptualizing the ability of the media to create a framework for how we discuss politics, candidates, and campaigns. Simply put, what the media discuss, the people discuss, and rarely are the people discussing issues or topics that are not being discussed in the mass media (McCombs and Shaw 1972, Iyengar and Kinder 1987, McCombs et al. 1997). As has been famously said, "...the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*"

(Cohen 1963, 13, emphasis in the original). The amount of coverage devoted to particular news stories is a good predictor of how broadly they will be recognized (Price & Czilli 1996). This has a direct impact on the outcome of the campaign, since the issue environment contributes greatly to the criteria on which we evaluate the candidates (Carsey 2000).

There are psychological components to agenda setting as well. The media create “norms” of belief that are more likely to be adopted, even when they conflict with our own beliefs (Comstock & Scharrer 2005). This ability to exert control over options for “acceptable” beliefs in the public is a significant power, and provides media with the power to frame the terms of any political discussion (255). This power is conveyed, at least in part, by the public itself – we view the media as an important institution (Ryfe 2006). We are also less likely to proclaim positions that are not echoed elsewhere, a phenomenon which has come to be known as the “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann 1974).

Whether discussing preference-altering effects or agenda-setting effects, powerful media effects are evident when one message is “louder” than competing messages (Zaller 1992). When information flows are not equal, one may literally “win” out over the others, a phenomenon which has profound implications for the reporting of election campaigns and their ability to change voter preferences and set the public agenda. This is not an absolute, however, nor are all messages equal in their effects. Considerations that are received earlier have greater weight, and later considerations are less impactful when they contradict existing considerations (Zaller 1992). There is also evidence that

negative considerations are more powerful, generally, than positive considerations (Converse 1962, Holbrook et al. 2001).

Our understanding of tone of coverage is limited by the tendency to research tone as an avenue for uncovering statement bias in news coverage. “Statement bias” is described as follows:

Statement bias can take many forms, and is usually handled in a global manner by a researcher who focuses on whether media coverage is “favorable” or “unfavorable” (e.g., Hostetter, 1976), or “positive” or “negative” (e.g. Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). (D’Alessio & Allen 2000, 136-137)

For this reason, much of what we know about tone of coverage is framed in terms of the presence, absence, or potential for “bias,” though it is referring to tonal advantage rather than the cause of that advantage.

Analyses of news content produce conflicting reports on the presence of tonal advantages. Newspapers are generally more positive towards the candidates they have endorsed (Kahn & Kenney 2002). Content analysis of the major television networks’ coverage of US Presidential elections from 1988-2004 demonstrates a generally negative tilt to the news, and what appears to be a tonal imbalance, generally in favor of Democratic candidates (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 122) which may be the result of a liberal tendency among media professionals. Liberals far outnumber conservatives in the media (Patterson and Donsbach 1996), and journalists are more Democratic and liberal than the public at large (Lichter et al. 1986). Newsrooms with a consensus political viewpoint could conceivably produce more positive (or fewer negative) stories about liberal candidates without much notice or effort. Meta-analysis, though, demonstrates that there is no consistent tonal advantage based on partisanship: as previously stated, there is a net of “zero overall bias” (D’Alessio & Allen 2000, 148; see also Patterson 1980, Gans

1979, Iyengar et al. 2004). While this does not preclude the existence of consistent positive or negative treatment within a particular news outlet for a certain candidate or candidates, it does allow us to confidently dismiss any assertion that there is widespread tonal advantage towards any particular ideology in the statements of the mass media as a whole. There is some evidence of within-outlet statement bias, but it is usually substantively insignificant and balanced by other outlets (147).

Certain norms of journalism also influence tone of coverage, specifically what constitutes “news.” For example, a small gain in the polls may or may not be news for a frontrunner, but a slip in the polls would almost certainly be considered news, and this would result in negative coverage (Niven 2001, Bennett 1996). Also, as noted earlier, certain campaign events are treated differently than others. Nomination acceptance speeches are generally more positive and more positively covered, while coverage of debates tends to be more negative (Benoit et al. 2004), leading to the possibility of a certain periodicity or temporal tendency in tone of coverage.

Limitations

This literature can be greatly improved by adding detail to the answers to some basic questions. For example, does it matter what was said, or that something was said at all? Was Barnum correct when he said, “I don’t care what you say about me, just spell my name right”? Theoretically, the content and tone of the message may be less important than the subject of that message (which candidate is the subject of the coverage). To this point, we have limited evidence based on the result of a single election that share of coverage alone (regardless of the content of that coverage) is

sufficient to move electoral support for candidates (Domke et al. 1997). It would be beneficial to test for evidence of that same proposition across several elections and candidates.

With regard to the effect of tone of news coverage on candidate support, the existing literature rarely examines tone of coverage for its own sake and in its own right. Even when tone is investigated, it is often subjected to measures or scope that are poorly suited to describing tone of coverage or its effect on voter preferences and candidate evaluations. For example, assessments of the overall tone of coverage of the candidates rely upon a comparison of the rate of negative statements received by each candidate (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 122). This does not consider the overall valence by considering negatives in comparison to positives and neutral statements, which may create a very different result (suppose one candidate receives low negatives but even fewer positives, as opposed to a candidate that receives a greater number of negative statements but also a high rate of positive statements). This would also change our expectations within the electorate: if negative statements are sufficiently outnumbered by positive statements, then the candidate that receives more negative statements may end up gaining ground on a candidate with relatively fewer negatives, but also fewer positives. In terms of scope, most studies do not include the entire general election campaign, beginning with the conventions.

Coding schemes are also insufficiently described in many works. Some classify most statements on news broadcasts as being “very clear-cut, as confusing or complicated statements are stricken from newscasts” (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 27); this is a bizarre assertion, as coding for tone requires a degree of subjective judgment and decision-

making on numerous statements that are only slightly positive or negative, or are mixed overall. Meanwhile others provide less-well-defined coding schemes (Kerbel 1995) or sometimes none at all (Kahn & Kenney 1999). Ultimately, we have very little sensitive data on the tone of coverage during campaigns, how that tone changes over the course of the campaign, and what affect it has on the candidates' electoral standing.

Also, nearly all of the existing research is either cross-sectional or aggregate for the entire election cycle. This is an area where the testing of dynamic hypotheses would be a great benefit in identifying what components of coverage have the greatest effects on the electorate, but few studies look for media effects using longitudinal data. While this tendency is understandable in discussions of elections since they end on a specific date and have a simple "win or lose" outcome, there is value in understanding how candidates accrete and accumulate (or lose) their votes across the election cycle.

One might also ask, effects on whom? It is unrealistic to expect that all potential voters will be influenced in the same way by the news, and in addition to testing for aggregate effects within the electorate it is also worth examining sub-groups of the electorate for more pointed effects. This question has been addressed in numerous ways in classics of political science literature (Berelson et al. 1954, Campbell et al. 1960, Zaller 1992, and others), but the modern treatments do not tend to disaggregate the sample in a way that allows for comparison of effects between different kinds of potential voters, specifically those who identify with a political party and those who do not.

Theory

Intentionality and time are central elements in describing the kinds of effects that we are looking for in political communication research, especially as they relate to election campaigns (McQuail 2000, 465). Intentionality refers to whether effects are planned, indicating that effects are predictable based on the communication in question, or unplanned, which suggests that the effects are either unknowable or unexpected. Time is a measure of whether the effects are short-term or long-term in duration. All of the effects we commonly discuss in relation to the election campaigns and the transmission of them through the mass media (agenda setting, framing, news learning, propaganda, media campaigns) fall into the planned/short-term quadrant (466). We can further distinguish between preference-altering effects and agenda-setting effects. Preference-altering effects are those that cause a change in the reported candidate assessment and/or voting preference of the voter. Agenda-setting effects are those that determine the issues that voters will use to engage in that assessment. In this study, the primary focus is on preference-altering effects. As such, discussion of the appropriate class of variables should include those that can be measured repeatedly as part of a time series (so as to identify change, as a short-term effect). They should include a measure of media content (so as to identify the “planned” or expected reaction) as well as a measure of electoral support. Examination of the preference-altering effects of the media can, in this way, be measured in a manner that shows whether changes in the message (as produced by the media) cause a change in the preferences of the receivers (the public).

These effects, especially in an electoral context, fall into two broad categories: conversion and activation. Since we are discussing an election campaign, the potential

effects are more or less limited to the vote choice options available to individual voters. Looking for change in levels of support, then, the campaigns can add supporters in only one of two ways: conversion or activation. Conversion entails winning over supporters from the opposition (Klapper 1960). Activation entails adding previously undecided voters to one's own camp by activating certain existing preferences that make the candidate attractive enough to the voter that the voter will then express support for him or her (Gelman & King 1993). Comparing the relative level of support of each candidate by eliminating undecided voters yields a measure that accounts for both of these phenomena.

We must keep in mind that there is not a single media campaign being waged, but at least two in competition with each other. This leads to a requirement to consider exposure in two ways: in the first place, an overall message must be received, which in this case is the news content; and in the second place, the composition of that message is shared between a number of competing campaigns, so a particular *campaign's* message must be received, and be dominant in the overall message content relative to competing messages. In our expectation of what effects will be observable, then, it is necessary to consider that the campaign which is receiving more of the distributed media message has a greater likelihood of being effectual, since it has a greater degree of exposure.

Mediating factors like level of interest and party identification may further alter our expectations. A low level of interest or importance to the receiver and/or the absence of prior commitment should result in a stronger effect (McQuail 2000, 431). Zaller's resistance axiom suggests that voters resist and/or avoid messages that are inconsistent with their existing beliefs (1992, 44), which would result in weaker effects (if any at all) among those with firmly held beliefs. This would include those who profess a strong

party identification, since it follows that party identification will strongly inform voting preferences as well as increase resistance to new information (Campbell et al. 1960, Zaller 1992). In the context of an election campaign, then, we should expect to see a more pronounced effect among those that do not have a strong party identification.

The model that most closely approximates the reception/acceptance reality proffered by Zaller is the “mathematical model” of Shannon and Weaver (see Johnson and Klare 1961, in McQuail and Windahl 1981, 12). In this model, an information source originates a message that is then transmitted by a transmitter. The signal created is delivered to a receiver, but it is subject to interference from noise before reaching that receiver, thus the signal received may not necessarily be identical to the signal sent. The receiver then delivers the message to the destination. In political communication terms, the information source is the campaign or some other external event. A message is provided directly (press release, campaign statement) or contextually (a campaign speech or event) to the transmitter, which in this case is the mass media. That message is transformed into a signal (a report or article) and transmitted. En route to the receiver, though, the message runs up against noise – this may include the receiver’s party identification, preexisting dispositions and considerations, or mediation from an opinion leader – resulting in a different signal received than transmitted. Acceptance of the message (delivery of the message to the destination, in this model) would be the final step, and would likewise be affected by party identification, and it also follows logically that the more messages belonging to one party are transmitted, the more they are likely to be received and have an effect, at least on the part of the uncommitted or non-partisan. This would have the net effect of making independents more likely to respond to the

original message, and gives a clear advantage to the candidate with the larger share of the messages transmitted.

Effects may be different than a simple tonal examination would suggest; negative coverage should not automatically equate to lower electoral standing among voters. The ways in which voters filter news messages negates much of the damage that may be caused by negative coverage, resulting in positive effects by virtue of little more than name recognition. Content, then, is of secondary importance in determining effect among those with an established party identification. This is consistent with the resistance and reception axioms proffered in Zaller's *Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992, 43-44), as well as Converse's early information flow article (1962, 140). Also, negative coverage may not be as uniformly damning to one candidate as we imagine due to a lack of relative advantage on the part of the other candidate. When negative (or positive) coverage of *both* candidates is created and distributed, then neither candidate holds an advantage over the other. If coverage of both candidates is negative, but one candidate received *less*-negative coverage, then the candidate with relatively better coverage may even gain ground, despite being negatively portrayed in the campaign coverage of that day.

However, when there is a clear advantage in tone of coverage, levels of support for that candidate should rise. Even in the presence of resistance from partisans and decided voters, tone of coverage will still be influential for independent or undecided voters, who are unlikely to demonstrate the same level of resistance. There is nothing particularly novel, conceptually, about this statement, but it is nevertheless worth noting, if only so that we can acknowledge that at many points in the campaign the quality of the

tone of coverage towards both candidates is the same, and in those situations our expectations must be moderated. When tone of coverage of both candidates is at approximately the same level of positivity or negativity, then there is no expectation that a candidate's electoral support will rise or fall, despite the tone of that coverage.

Hypotheses

H6: A candidate's level of support will increase when the share of coverage of that candidate increases, if relative tone of coverage is neutral or better.

The candidate who receives more coverage – as long as that coverage is not relatively negative – will both activate and convert more voters than the opposing candidate. The independent variables are the five-day moving average of overall share of coverage (Democrat Share minus Republican Share, creating a relative measure of share of coverage) and the five-day moving average of the overall tone of candidate-specific coverage using the same relative measure. The dependent variable is the five-day moving average of level of support, with a one-week lag to allow time for the reports to be received and new polling to be conducted. The strength of the model and of the individual independent variables will be tested by multivariate regression.

H7: Effects of changes in media coverage will be greater among independents and lesser in party identifiers.

Non-identified voters will be more receptive to new information and more likely to adjust vote preferences based on news coverage. The independent variables are the five-day moving average of overall share of coverage (Democrat Share minus Republican

Share, creating a relative measure of share of coverage) and the five-day moving average of the overall tone of candidate-specific coverage using the same relative measure. The dependent variable is the five-day moving average of level of support, with a one-week lag to allow time for the reports to be received and new polling to be conducted. The strength of the model and of the individual independent variables will be tested by multivariate regression for declared Independents, Republicans, and Democrats, independently.

Definitions

Although definitions vary in their particulars across the literature, the terms used herein will be defined as noted in this chapter. For each, a conceptual definition is discussed, followed by the operationalized definition.

Conceptually, “share of coverage” is the relative portion of media coverage received by a candidate, as a part of the whole (that is, it is not conflated with volume of coverage). Operationally, share of coverage is considered the percentage of two-party coverage received by each major-party candidate, calculated daily. Share of coverage is not a zero-sum measure, wherein the two candidates will receive inverse proportions of coverage, since there are times when “both” candidates are the focus of coverage. However, when reported as a single number, share of coverage is operationalized as the relative advantage in share of coverage (Democratic candidate share of coverage minus Republican candidate share of coverage), which effectively eliminates coverage of “both” candidates as a meaningful contributor to that statistic, since it nulls out.

Tone of coverage refers to the valence of coverage of each candidate from the perspective of the electorate, as measured to be positive, neutral/mixed, or negative. Conceptualizing positive, negative, and neutral coverage requires that we identify a standard – according to whom is the coverage thus, and/or to what effect? In my scheme, the coders were instructed to assume the perspective of a reasonable and independent viewer/reader, and predict whether a statement would make that viewer/reader more likely (positive) or less likely (negative) to vote for that candidate, or stay the same (neutral). Assessment of the positivity/negativity of a statement required an assessment within the statement of a candidate’s quality (experience, education, capability), desirability (character, personal history), or viability (electability, standing in the polls) – in the absence of that a statement is considered neutral. Other schemes in the literature used similar language. In *Crosstalk*, tone was measured on a five-point scale as to whether the audio or visual (depending on which was being coded) was “positive or negative towards the candidate” (34). Kerbel’s scheme (1997) asked whether coverage was favorable, unfavorable, neutral, or mixed (10). The Project for Excellence in Journalism scheme states that “the tone variable measures whether a story’s tone is constructed in a way which results in positive, neutral, or negative coverage for the primary figure as it relates to the topic of the story” (http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/methodology_27). Farnsworth & Lichter’s monographs and the CMPA reports state that they code statements as positive or negative, but do not provide a definition as to what those terms mean, precisely (though they do provide examples of each). The more generic favorable, unfavorable, and mixed also appear in several other content analyses (Kioussis 2004, Johnston et al. 2004, Norris

et al. 1999, Patterson 1993). All of these measures have an implied value that the measurement of positivity/negativity relates to the anticipated impact on the candidate's support. So, then, positive tone refers to the belief that what was said/written will increase the share of support of the candidate in question, while negative tone refers to the belief that what was said/written will decrease share of support for the candidate in question. Neutral/mixed tone indicates that there is no predicted effect or that the effect is uncertain. Coding of tone had a default reading of "neutral," and positive or negative were indicated only when a statement, headline, or story was clearly positive or negative. For more information on the coding scheme and coding process (including tone and all other variables coded), please see the Data section of this chapter, or Appendix A.

The concept of share of support is dependent on one specific interpretation: do we consider the total support for a candidate found in the electorate (i.e., a percentage of the whole) or the total support among those who have expressed a voting preference (i.e., removing undecided voters from any measures, and discussing support as a share of all decided voters only). For this project, the conceptual definition is better served by considering share of support to mean the candidate's share of support among those with a vote preference, since that most closely measures the phenomenon in question (how change in support occurs, relative to the opposition, when there are changes in media outputs). Share of support is operationally defined here as the candidates' share of two-party electoral support, exclusive of undecided voters. As a result, share of support is a zero-sum measure. All measures of support (drawn from trial heat polling that determines voter intent as of the date of the poll) are out of 100 percent. If 23 percent are undecided voters, candidate A received 34 percent of respondents' support, and candidate

B receives 43 percent, share of support is considered to be 44 percent for candidate A and 56 percent for candidate B, so that the shares are out of a total of 100 percent. This also allows for the addition of previously undecided voters to the “decided” camp of their choice, and if undecided voters split evenly, there will be no “increase” in share of support for the candidates. If this were not the case, support may appear to increase if a candidate added some proportion of undecided voters; however, if at the same time the opposing candidate added a similar proportion, then no real increase in share of support occurred. This accounting method allows the measure to retain its clarity and utility. Shift in support is defined as the change in a candidate’s share of support when compared to a previous measure of support (Time 1 vs. Time 2). The exact point of comparison (whether one day’s change or more) will depend on the specific hypothesis to be tested.

Data

The necessary data for this dissertation and the testing of these hypotheses were derived from two existing data sets (for trial heat and presidential discourse data) and one newly-created data set (content analysis of campaign coverage in the print/broadcast media). It was necessary to have as complete a picture of the electoral support of the two major-party candidates during that time period. It was also necessary to locate and/or create data sets that could adequately account for the content, volume, subject, and tone of coverage for four election cycles: 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008. Last, it was necessary to locate an independent (non-media) source of campaign information that could provide some insight into the material being provided to the media, from which they then chose stories to report.

Trial Heat Data

The trial heat data are the same that were used in Wlezien and Erikson 2002 & 2005, with similar data sets generated since then for the 2008 election cycle, using the same methodology so that the same data could be applied to all four elections. Trial heats were dated using the middle day of the length of time the survey was in the field, with even-day polling windows being rounded up to the later middle day. Support for each candidate was measured by asking respondents the question, “If the election were held today, how would you vote?,” or some variation thereof. For a full description of the data collection procedures, see Wlezien and Erikson 2002 and Wlezien and Erikson 2005. These data are quite thorough: for the time period 1980-2000, the average polling days per election was 126 (Wlezien and Erikson 2002, 973) with most of those days falling in the final 90 days until Election Day, which allows for almost daily measurement of the general election window utilized here, and as we move into the 2004 and 2008 elections the available polling data is even more thorough, and there are literally no days without observations of support. However, this still left the question of the actual content analysis of media coverage during the general election.

Content Analysis of Campaign Coverage

The first step in the content analysis procedure was the establishment of the sampling frame. The study would best be served by the analysis of multiple news sources, especially if the sources were delivered by diverse means – that is to say, print and broadcast media. In terms of print media, the *New York Times* was selected by virtue

of its role as a news hegemon that influences the agenda of other news outlets (Danielian & Reese 1989, McCombs et al. 1991, Roberts et al. 2002). Its inclusion was, if not automatic, certainly an easy choice. A well-functioning database of *Times* articles (and dozens of other sources) is LexisNexis, and a complete and comprehensive record of full-text articles were easily accessible for the entire time frame of the study. Broadcast media initially presented a profound challenge, as no such database of broadcast news was readily available. However, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive now makes available streaming video of all news broadcasts from CNN and NBC Nightly News, so it was NBC that was selected to represent the broadcast news media. CNN was considered as well, but NBC has a larger audience (in fact, the largest of any broadcast network) and more closely approximates the coverage of the other two broadcast networks (see Kerbel 1995). With these two sources, it was possible to obtain the primary source material for all news coverage of the general election cycles of 1996-2008. The dates in question spanned from ten days before the opening of the first national party convention through Election Day. Establishing a sampling procedure was unnecessary, since coding was completed for a complete census of coverage during these dates.

This sampling frame is consistent with comparable studies in the literature, in terms of both media selected and time frame. Quite a few of the studies in the literature use the *New York Times* exclusively (Boyle 1996, Benoit et al. 2005, Kioussis 2004, Patterson 1993). Others use print outlets exclusively (those just cited, as well as Stempel and Windhauser 1988, 1991) or broadcast outlets exclusively (Kerbel 1995; Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, 2011; Johnston et al. 2004; Domke et al. 1997). Others use (as I do here) a combination of print and broadcast media (Just et al. 1996, Norris et al. 1999, Project

for Excellence in Journalism [index]). My choice of the *Times* and NBC Nightly News is not atypical (the *Times* showing evidence of intermedia agenda setting power and NBC Nightly News being the most-watched broadcast news program), and both media are consistently used throughout the literature for content analysis studies. As for the time frame, the frame of this analysis is typical. Among those that study the general election only (or make a distinction between the primary and general elections in-text), some review a smaller portion of the general election than I have chosen here. My content analysis begins ten days prior to the opening of the first nominating convention, which guarantees that every element of the general election campaign is captured (convention, campaign, debates, Election Day). The same cannot be said for those that begin on Labor Day (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007), do not include the final days of the campaign (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008, 2012), include only the final days of the campaign (Benoit et al. 2005), or specific campaign events (Benoit et al. 2001, Benoit & Currie 2001, Hagen & Johnston 2007). Several others include roughly the same dates and/or code for the entire election cycle including the primaries (Kerbel 1995, Johnston et al. 2004, Domke 1997, Patterson 1993, Just et al. 1996).

Selection of materials within these sources was determined by the presence of either candidate's name in the headline (in the case of print news) or in the abstract (in the case of the broadcast news). For broadcast stories, those that bore the category label of "Campaign [Year]" were also included, even if neither candidate's name appeared in the summary, as it clearly qualified as campaign coverage. Since there was no search engine or algorithm in use (every relevant day of broadcast news was reviewed in its entirety), this method was employed in broadcast but not in print. The sheer number of

stories in each edition of the *Times* made relying on strict search parameters necessary, so as to avoid any bias. Print material was searched using the Advanced Search form in LexisNexis Academic, with a search limited to *The New York Times* (including all editions), either candidate's name or both candidates' names in the headline, and within the dates selected. The only missing data consists of those days when the NBC Nightly News broadcast was preempted by other programming (and was therefore unavailable in the VTNA database) or when technical difficulties affected the media file from the VTNA website. These, however, were limited in their occurrence (95 percent of days in the time frame were coded), and on only one occasion did more than one such day fall back-to-back.

Determination of categories of content was only slightly different for each medium, but overall were chosen so as to maximize the compatibility of the two when the time came for analysis (all results reported herein include BOTH measures, unless otherwise indicated). The component elements measured are those that are commonly found in the literature, and allow the data to be used to test the hypotheses detailed here as well as others, as the need may arise. NBC coverage was coded into the following measures: Lead, which describes the overall topic of the story; subject, which describes the content/issue area of each statement; speaker, which indicates who is speaking (be it the anchor, a reporter, the candidate, etc.); candidate, which indicates whether the focus of the statement is the Democrat, Republican, both, or neither; tone, which indicates whether the statement is positive, neutral, or negative from the perspective of the average voter's evaluation of the campaign being discussed; and the length of the statement in seconds. The *New York Times* coverage was coded into slightly different measures,

though there is a high degree of overlap and analogousness: Headline, which was the headline of the story; candidate name found in the headline, which indicates whether the focus of the headline is the Democrat, Republican, both, or neither; the tone of the headline, which indicates whether the headline is positive, neutral, or negative from the perspective of the average voter's evaluation of the campaign being discussed; the name count for each candidate (number of times the candidate's name appears in the article); and the subject of the article, which is a holistic analysis of the overall subject of the article, indicating a preponderance of commentary on a particular subject. Images (photographs, graphics, video, or speaker facial expressions) were not coded.

Tone was incorporated into the content analysis used here by recording whether a statement (in the broadcast medium coded) or the story (in the print medium coded) would be seen as "good" news for the candidate or campaign, "bad" news for the candidate or campaign, or neutral. This was done not from the perspective of what the campaign would consider good news but rather from the perspective of the public. Coding was completed from the perspective of a reasonable and independent viewer/reader, and predicted whether a statement would make that viewer/reader more likely (positive) or less likely (negative) to vote for that candidate, or stay the same (neutral). "Positive" or favorable statements were those that suggested a positive attribute of the candidate's capabilities or experience (candidate quality), character or personal narrative (candidate desirability), or electability/support in the electorate (candidate viability). "Negative" statements suggested a weakness in those three areas. In every instance, the default code was neutral, which is to say that coding was approached from a skeptical point of view in which a statement would need to be clearly

positive or negative to prompt such a code. Below, in Table 2.1, are examples of each type of statement.

Table 2.1 – Examples of Statements and their Tone Coding

Text	Code	Explanation
"Experts report that Gore's plan to tap oil reserves would have no real effect on gas prices for the average consumer, even in the short term."	Negative	Describes Gore's support for a plan that "experts" believe would be ineffective policy
"There are serious doubts in the electorate that Sarah Palin has the experience and skills to serve as Vice President, having stumbled in her first two national television interviews."	Negative	Questions Palin's experience (candidate quality) and indicates that a significant portion of the public has doubts about her candidacy (viability)
"Courting undecided voters is one strategy the Gore campaign is using to lure 'swing' voters."	Neutral	Description of campaign activity. No analysis or facts provided that relate to candidate quality, viability, or desirability
"The senator took the fight over Vietnam service ads to the President's gate today."	Neutral	Description of campaign activity, but does not provide any context other than a description of events
"Clinton's recent success in bringing together Palestinians and Israelis is bound to help his image as a president who gets things done."	Positive	Presents Clinton in a positive light (desirability) by associating his efforts with further success in the Middle East peace process, and suggests he is an effective president.
"Polls in several key states show an upkeep this week, and the convention is an opportunity to show that in this time of danger, President Bush is the best man to lead the country."	Positive	Points to gains in polls (increased viability) and Bush's experience as president during a national security crisis (candidate quality)

All statements are quoted from NBC Nightly News broadcasts during the general election periods of the 1996-2008 elections.

Some items were generally coded as positives or negatives. Reference to an ongoing scandal was coded as a negative, regardless of the particular tone of the statement, the logic being that reminding voters of a moral, professional, or ethical transgression is fundamentally negative coverage, whatever else it might be. Even if a statement was essentially neutral or positive (for example, “the Clinton campaign has done a good job of deflecting attention from the Whitewater scandal”), its reference to previous or ongoing bad acts should be seen as a net negative influence on levels of

public support. “Positive” coverage of a scandal or gaffe seems practically impossible, at least in the short-term environment of the general election campaign. It is possible that over time some gaffes will become an acceptable or even amusing part of the candidate’s political persona (the old “we’ll look back on this and laugh one day” mindset), but it is hard to believe that a candidate would endear him or herself to voters through the repetition and perpetuation of the fact that the candidate, in the midst of the Cold War, stated that “there is no Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe.” Such statements must have a presumption of negativity in terms of their influence on voters.

There were few uniform positives. Statements by the candidates themselves – unmediated coverage of the candidates’ own words – were typically coded as positive unless the statement was a repeat of a gaffe or obviously damaging statement. In the same vein, coverage by the media of the candidates’ own issue positions (a common feature in the policy/issue coverage during the campaigns, when a segment would describe each candidate’s position on an issue of the day) were typically coded as positive. These types of “straight” reporting in which there was little or no analysis or commentary on a stated position of the campaign or coverage of the candidates’ own words were coded as positive since they represent a clear articulation of a candidate’s policy, and in the absence of clear evidence of the policy’s insufficiency or potentially negative consequence, a reasonable receiver would consider them evidence of a candidate’s ability to formulate responsible policies. While it is possible that circulation and discussion of an unpopular position on an issue *could* cause general harm to a candidate (a belief in the necessity for tax increases, for example), at no time in the

coding process did it seem to be evident. In nearly all cases, the coverage presented both sides as reasonable positions on the issue in question.

The coding units for each medium were slightly different. Coding of the NBC Nightly News segments was in seconds of coverage per statement. A statement was considered to be a comment or series of comments by the same speaker on the same subject with the same overall tone. If any of the three characteristics shifted, even in mid-sentence, time was stopped, the statement recorded, and the clock restarted on a new statement. For print coverage, stories were coded in their entiretyⁱ, and tone was determined by the perceived preponderance of positive or negative coverage. Had each story been coded by sentence or paragraph, a far smaller sample of stories would have been required (rather than measuring the entire population of stories for each election, which was the option elected here), which would erode the reliability and validity of the work to very little real benefit. Since this level of sensitivity *was* available with the broadcast coverage, its sacrifice was not particularly important in the print coverage, especially since in so many other respects the two media were so similar.

After collection, the data were processed to create a measure that acted in such a way as to avoid conflating tone with volume, in the event that was desired. Each candidate was assigned a daily tone score ranging from 1 to -1, with 1 meaning that a candidate had a perfectly positive day and -1 meaning that a candidate had a perfectly negative day. The sum of coverage for each story or statement (depending on medium) was divided by the total coverage of that candidate within that medium for that day. In the broadcast coding, the level of measurement is seconds of coverage broken down by

ⁱ NB: Editorial coverage was excluded from all measures of share and tone of coverage.

statement. So, if a candidate received 150 seconds of coverage overall, with 60 seconds being positive, 31 seconds being negative, and 59 seconds being neutral, the tone score for the candidate is calculated as follows:

$$60 + (-31)/150 = 0.19$$

A similar measure was created for print coverage, but there the level of measurement was at the story level rather than at the statement level. The same logic applies, though, in terms of creating a -1 to 1 measure of overall tone. If a candidate was the subject of 5 positive stories, 2 negative stories, and 3 neutral stories, tone is calculated as:

$$5 + (-2)/10 = 0.30$$

When tone scores for both media were used, the mean of both was calculated as the total bi-medium tone score for the day (in these examples, 0.25).

Measures were also created that incorporated coverage of “both” candidates, but as most of this coverage was coded as being neutral, they are of limited utility. Additionally, a composite “overall” tone score was created which summed the tone score of the Democratic candidate with the inverse of the tone score of the Republican candidate, which allows us to examine whether bad news for one candidate acts as “good” news for the opposing candidate. Such a measure means that the tone score range increases to 2 to -2, as a candidate may receive all good news on a day when the opposition receives all bad news, resulting in a perfect positive/negative day.

The recording unit for the broadcast coverage was seconds of coverage per statement. A statement was considered to be a comment or series of comments by the same speaker on the same subject with the same overall tone. If any of the three characteristics shifted, even in mid-sentence, time was stopped, the statement recorded,

and the clock restarted on a new statement. The average statement length was just over 16 seconds, across 135,593 seconds (about 38 hours) of coverage. For print coverage, the recording unit was bifurcated: one unit was the headline; another the article itself, as a whole, with candidate name counts included. This “split” recording unit was to allow maximum flexibility within the study, allowing for the inclusion of the entire population at the expense of a small degree of diagnostic sensitivity. Had each story been coded by sentence or paragraph, a far smaller sample of stories would have been required, which would erode the reliability and validity of the work to very little real benefit. Since this level of sensitivity *was* available with the broadcast coverage, its sacrifice was not particularly important in the print coverage, especially since in so many other respects the two media were so similar.

These units of analysis for print and broadcast coverage are common in the literature. For print, I code at the story level, which was the case in nearly all of the analyses in the literature (Patterson 1993 and Just et al. 1996 did limited coding for tests at the paragraph level, though never for tests that measured for effects of tone, volume, share, or subject of coverage). In the broadcast literature the most common unit was the “statement,” which is roughly analogous to a sentence and includes a complete idea from the same speaker. My standard was that a statement was a length of speech in which the speaker, topic, and tone remained constant; when any of those component elements changed, a new statement was started. This is essentially the same standard as the others, except that mine provided a more precise definition of “complete idea,” whereas the others did not take appear to take tone into account as part of what constituted a “statement.”

The size of the coding unit for the broadcast coverage makes it more sensitive to smaller changes in tone, but allows it to capture more subjects of coverage: if a single statement of any length is made on an issue or topic, it will appear in the broadcast data, though not in the print data. This creates a potentially false impression about the number of issues covered in the *Times* coverage of the campaigns, since oblique mentions of issues in their coverage would not appear in the coding. By the same token, the size of the coding unit in the print coverage would have a tendency to overstate the tone of any day's coverage, since there are fewer units per day: for example, on 11 August 1996, there were nine stories in the *Times* but 25 coded statements from that day's broadcast coverage. These minor considerations are substantively insignificant, though. Even considering the potential for excess influence of tone by the print stories, print and broadcast tone is normally quite similar. Also, coding every sentence or paragraph in the print media would allow for a greater degree of sensitivity in terms of content analysis, but might serve to overstate certain items that appear late in a story and may have a much-reduced impact by comparison to items earlier in the story. In total, the use of two complete data sources, without sampling, allows for a great degree of confidence in the description of the content in this time frame.

The coding scheme's reliability was established by an intercoder reliability test. With regard to intercoder reliability, a large segment of the content was coded and compared to the coding completed by the author. The volume of coverage subjected to the reliability test was in accordance with the guidelines found in Lacy & Riffe (1996) for an assumed level of agreement of 85 percent (common in "meanings" coding, such as determining the tone of coverage or the subject of a statement). In the broadcast data,

there were roughly 10,000 coded units. The recommended intercoder reliability test amount is 141 units, which at an average of 13 seconds per statement in this content analysis equals approximately 1,847 seconds. At a per-day average of 301 seconds of coverage, this comes out to approximately six days. Six dates were selected by random number generator, and those days were coded. The end result was 138 statements. Agreement (by Krippendorff's Alpha) is as follows, by variable:

Tone	0.81
Speaker	0.98
Length	0.95
Candidate	0.90

For the print coding, the recommended volume was 103 units, so 103 stories were randomly selected from the stories coded. Agreement (by Krippendorff's Alpha) is as follows, by variable:

Tone	0.85
Candidate	0.98

These figures are all considered acceptable, and are consistent with others reported in the literature. Tone is clearly the most subjective measure, and it clears the 0.80 threshold in both media. The other measure which appears in both media is Candidate – which measures which candidate is the subject of the story or statement – and has a rate of agreement over 0.90. The two broadcast-specific codes (Speaker, which identified whether the speaker was a reporter, anchor, candidate, etc.; and Length, which measured the length of the statement) also showed very robust comparability.

Campaign Discourse

The source of campaign discourse data was the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse. This archive provides the location, date, and text of every set of public remarks given by presidential candidates during the time frame in question. Each set of remarks was further coded by Annenberg/Pew to identify the topics and issues touched upon within the remarks. This data set was particularly useful because it provided a record of the “real world” campaign being waged by the candidates themselves, rather than relying simply on the campaign as reported by the media. Regrettably, the only year within this study that was covered in the archive was 1996, the program having ended at the conclusion of that election cycle.

Issue Agreement and Coverage

Data for these tests (whether candidates’ joint emphasis of issues corresponds to their coverage in the press) were taken from the content analysis of NBC’s *Nightly News* and *New York Times* articles, as well as the aforementioned Pew-Annenberg Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse (the range of which runs from September 1st through Election Day). For every day for which data was available, the issues which were mentioned in the candidates’ remarks were noted (coded with a “1”). This was completed for each candidate individually, as well as for their “agreed” issue days (those days on which both candidates mentioned an issue). Likewise, the content analysis data was scaled to the dates in question, the issues covered were placed in a spreadsheet, and when they appeared on a given day they were noted (coded with a “1”). These two sheets were then merged, and subtotals were created at each change of date. Where a “0” was

seen, the issue was neither mentioned by either candidate nor by the media on that day. Where a “1” was seen, the issue was mentioned by either the media or the candidate(s), but not both. Where a “2” was seen, the issue was mentioned in candidate remarks *and* reported in the news that day. This is relevant data because one question to be answered here is whether candidates can attract attention to a particular issue, and if so, how? One place to look will be whether the media respond to issue prompts from individual candidates, both candidates in conflict on the same issue, or some other collection of factors. The next phase was to prep the data for testing, by creating variables to test for agreement. For each of the five top “candidate” issues (crime, education, healthcare, fiscal policy, and the economy), a corresponding variable was created to allow for testing of agreement. For each observation, three outcomes were possible: the candidate remarks and media report would agree, one would be present and not the other, or both would be absent. With this transformed data set, it was then possible to test for correlation between the two variables (candidate issue references and media issue reporting).

Conclusion

The literatures that can be brought to bear on the questions of media imbalance and its effects are clearly extensive, though most stop short of asking the questions of how and why such imbalances in tone, share, or content impact vote choice; whether they are persistent across elections; whether imbalances tend to occur at certain points in the campaign; and whether the campaigns can attract the attention of and/or set the agenda of the media. This dissertation will address those shortcomings by utilizing a multi-election scope that includes the full range of the general election timeline and its events;

measuring intra-campaign imbalance in share, tone, and content (which will allow us to identify preferences on the part of the media in reporting along certain dimensions or on certain issues); and measuring those shifts in balance against shifts in support for the candidates in question. The result will work to reconcile the gaps between the communication, journalism, and political science literatures, and fill a lacuna in our knowledge of the content and appearance in the media environment of the general election campaign.

In conclusion, then, we have here an attempt to define the space in which this project will work. The terms, as defined, should provide clarity to the reader when they appear in later chapters, and while they may differ subtly from other such definitions, I do not believe that any depart so much as to be considered anomalous or inappropriate. The literature in this area is interestingly dense and sparse at the same time: it covers enormous amounts of ground, but the manner in which it does so leaves plenty of unanswered questions. In part, this is owing to the relatively young nature of this area of study, and this project is well-situated to add to that literature and fill in some of the lacunae which have been observed. It is the logical expansion of works that have focused on single elections, and the data collected is adding to the sensitivity and subtlety of our measures of the information environment of the modern presidential campaign. In service of that data, the theoretical basis for this project takes into account the psychology of information reception and acceptance, the realities of news production and selection, and news consumption demographics. In all, I feel that we are well-equipped to move on to the first stage of the project: describing the campaign coverage life cycle, and discussing what is said and when during the presidential general election campaign.

CHAPTER 3

COVERING THE GENERAL ELECTION, GENERALLY

Election campaigns are portrayed as dynamic, fluid things by the media, but this portrayal is illusory. It is true that media coverage varies in focus and volume over the course of a general election campaign. It is also true that campaigns evolve and shift in focus over time. As Election Day approaches, the focus on the horserace becomes almost irresistible to reporters, news directors, and commentators, and numerous potential scenarios are played out. What is of distinct interest is that despite the varying candidacies, campaigns, and circumstances over the years, we see surprisingly little variation from year to year in the coverage of the campaigns for the presidency, both in the aggregate composition of that coverage or in the daily or periodic changes in it. Each phase of the campaign, from conventions through Election Day, has common characteristics. Clear patterns emerge from the apparent chaos, but unless one has watched hours of coverage at one sitting it is not particularly noticeable. The rhythms of the reporting, the rotation between reporters on different trails, the speculation over the impact of the day's events, and even the language used by journalists show that across almost two decades of reporting, very little actually changes. This is, despite the staid impression it imparts, a great advantage: it makes creating a generalized picture of the campaign media environment all the more feasible. This chapter will describe the

coverage of the general election campaign, generally, without splitting out coverage by candidate or party. It will also compare competitive campaigns to non-competitive campaigns to identify effects of the presence or absence of a good horserace.

Volume and Content of Coverage in Four Election Cycles

Volume of Coverage

What kinds of events provoke larger amounts of coverage? Is this a common occurrence, or do the media have only so much space to give to the election campaign? These questions are not simply trivia or minutiae: if campaigns routinely compete for a more or less fixed volume of coverage, there are implications for campaign tactics and strategy that may prove to be significant. If news outlets are simply filling a set volume of minutes or inches of coverage, then the media environment becomes a zero-sum environment, with all that that entails. The ability to “take” coverage from an opponent by securing it oneself presents an altogether different dynamic than an environment where a non-exclusive body of time is available. This is especially relevant in light of the potential effect of commanding the share of coverage ratio, which the model suggests will increase a candidate’s share of support.

The absolute volume of overall coverage of both candidates (total coverage of the campaign) follows a fairly clear pattern in these four elections: volume of coverage, as a per-day average of seconds of coverage on NBC and name mentions in *The New York Times*, is closely connected to whether or not an election is “competitive” or not. This finding is consistent with other recent content analyses (Farnsworth & Lichter 2007), but the content analysis used here has the advantage of measuring the entire general election

campaign instead of simply a portion of it. These increases suggest that the perception of news organizations with regard to the coverage of campaigns is that they are either more civically desirable or more commercially viable in a competitive election, and as such are being rewarded with additional space in the media environment.

Since media outlets need a saleable product in order to satisfy their institutional needs, they must have something interesting to sell. Competitiveness, then, is of central importance to the amount of coverage devoted to the election, overall. 1996 appears to be anomalous in terms of volume of coverage, presumably owing to the relative ease with which Clinton won reelection. At no time was the race particularly competitive, with Dole's "high water mark" in the general election coming at around 16 August, with 81 days until election day, when he trailed Clinton's 53 percent of the projected vote by "only" six points, at 47 percent. As such, media interest in the election very likely waned. Overall levels of coverage were, on average, lower for this campaign than any other, and never really surged anywhere near the level of the convention coverage, when deficits in the polls can be rapidly erased. When they were not, coverage settled into a low background hum, at least by comparison to the other elections under consideration here.

As demonstrated in Table 3.1, of the four elections studied here, three were competitive (2000, 2004, and 2008). Each of these three elections saw a mean daily advantage in trial heat polling of less than 6.4 percent, meaning that, on average, the distance between the two candidates was within the margin of error of a sample of 1,000 voters. There is a 28 percent increase in volume of coverage between the non-

competitive election and the competitive elections, clearly supporting the hypothesisⁱ. Interestingly, though, among the three competitive elections, the degree of competitiveness does not appear to be a major factor in the overall volume of coverage: the most competitive “competitive” election, 2000, has less daily coverage than the other two competitive elections. Moving beyond a quantitative analysis, though, a qualitative review of the coverage and the context of the campaigns shows that 2008 was a more politically “interesting” election year, what with the involvement of both candidates in addressing the financial crisis in October 2008. The novelty of America’s first multiethnic presidential candidate and second female vice presidential candidate also increased interest in the election. Finally, the fact that the 2008 campaign had less competition than the others because of its late starting date (the Summer Olympics had already ended before the first convention got started) meant that there was relatively more space in the news hole to fill, and much of it was filled with campaign news.

Table 3.1 – Comparison of Mean Daily Volume of Coverage During the General Election Period in Competitive vs. Non-competitive Elections

<u>Year</u>	<u>Mean Advantage</u>	<u>Mean Coverage</u>
1996	17.4	328
2000	1.0	384
2004	2.0	408
2008	5.4	474

Mean advantage measures the average daily point difference in trial heat polls from the start of the conventions through Election Day. Mean coverage is the average daily volume of coverage as measured by seconds of election coverage on NBC and number of candidate name mentions in the New York Times.

ⁱ In competitive election cycles, total-cycle volume of coverage will be greater than in non-competitive election cycles.

Looking at the specific periods during the campaign itself, there are spikes in the volume of coverage devoted to the campaign at different points in the calendar. Major campaign events provide clear signposts that appear to dictate the volume of coverage at different periods during the campaign. These were consistently observed across the 2000-2008 election seasons. First is a substantial burst of coverage during the convention period, typically with a dip during the interim between the two conventions, however brief (though in 2004 it was more than a month). Following the convention period and entering the post-convention period, volume of coverage finds an equilibrium point that is typically about half of the convention period volume. The next surge in coverage comes just before the first debate. After the first debate there is a general decline in coverage over a period of several days, before coverage volumes rebound en route to Election Day, when coverage peaks at approximately the same level as the convention coverage. This concave linear pattern is consistent across these three elections, and hints of it also appear in 1996, though the surge towards Election Day is notably absent.

The campaign-event-driven nature of the volume of coverage is unmistakable, with the traditional events (conventions, debates, Election Day) acting as touchstones for the media and prompt more coverage of the campaigns. It is the rare series of events that creates a significant increase in volume outside of these events, though two are noticeable: a particularly contentious and new-policy-packed week in September 2000, and a series of Iraq War-themed disputes between the candidates in 2004. These conflict-laced events are highly attractive to journalists. The bump in volume of coverage seen in the first week of September 2000 is the result of the confluence of several “attractive” campaign items. For one, poll results released at that time showed Bush and Gore trading

the lead in tracking polls rather frequently (sometimes daily), and all were well within the margins of error for the poll, indicating a statistical tie even after the conventions: this was, in fact, a very close race. In the same period, *both* candidates released major policy plans, often in the same area (economy, education) or in the opponent's traditional policy area (the Bush prescription drug plan, for example). The rhetorical back-and-forth over the merits of the plans added an additional layer of conflict to the campaigning, and there were fresh conflicts every few days. Also in this period were two gaffes: the Cheney open-mike "A—hole" gaffe and the somewhat-memorable "RATS" ad. A Bush campaign ad featured a graphic that seemed to fill the screen with the word "RATS" (while zooming in on the word "Democrats") for a fraction of a second. Whether deliberate or not, this was a point of media and campaign discussion for several days, as was the Cheney comment. Taken together, we see a ten-day period that includes a number of new policy plans and disputes, a pair of gaffes, and all taking place in the context of a very tight race. The combination was enough to create a noticeable increase in coverage. The 2004 bump (beginning on approximately 10 September) was fueled by a similar combination of policy dispute/political miscue, when a series of attacks/counterattacks on the policy towards Iraq coincided with reports that previously-published records of Bush's National Guard service (damaging to the president) may have been fake, and that CBS did not adequately work to verify their authenticity before including them in a broadcast. This finding suggests that there is a limit on the volume of coverage that any one candidate can provoke through the course of "normal" campaigning, and that absent a number of coverage "triggers" the level of coverage is generally determined by the presence or absence of the major campaign events.

To demonstrate the consistent increases and lulls in the amount of coverage being devoted to the campaigns, I correlated the daily volume of coverage across these four elections by number of days until Election Day for the final sixty days of the campaign, plus Election Day itself (results are seen in Table 3.2). The results show that volume of coverage is significantly correlated in all four elections, demonstrating that there are predictable increases and decreases associated with the events of the general election campaign.

Table 3.2 – Correlation of Volume of NBC Coverage in the Final Sixty Days of the Campaign, 1996-2008

		Correlations			
		1996	2000	2004	2008
1996	Pearson Correlation	1	.613**	.441**	.580**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	61	61	61	61
2000	Pearson Correlation	.613**	1	.727**	.752**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	61	61	61	61
2004	Pearson Correlation	.441**	.727**	1	.725**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	61	61	61	61
2008	Pearson Correlation	.580**	.752**	.725**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	61	61	61	61

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Overall, then, we can consider the media environment during the general election campaign to be a campaign event-focused environment. Whether this constitutes a lack of ability or lack of willingness to devote more time to spur-of-the-moment events (as opposed to the fixed dates of the other events) is not clear, but clearly the preference exists for that which the media can anticipate. This also, by inference, renders somewhat moot the relative power of non-campaign external events or the campaigns themselves to

influence the volume of coverage of the campaign. The surges in volume that we see are so consistent that the most we could say is that it is possible that external events may limit (or enhance, if they are campaign-related) the peaks seen at various times during the election, but not much more than that.

The Content of the News

Turning from how much campaign news there was to *what* that coverage was about, there is at least one reliable conclusion that can be reached: news outlets far prefer campaign, horserace, and strategy coverage to coverage of issues. This is not a new finding, but this project demonstrates it across several elections, and also delves into how the context of the election (its competitiveness) and phase of the election affect how much coverage is devoted to the horserace. In addition to strategy/horserace coverage and issue coverage, the only other type of story that has a substantively significant presence in the course of the general election campaign is the scandal or gaffe, and we can see with relative clarity in Figure 3.1 that when time and space are required for coverage of scandal, coverage space is primarily taken from issue coverage.

In the creation of this measure, it was necessary to group like-types of coverage for comparison. Once all broadcast content was coded (print coverage, not being broken down into small enough units of analysis, was not included), the subject of each timed element (13.1 seconds per segment, on average, over the four election cycles) was then further placed into one of four general categories (based on those used in Kerbel 1997): Campaign, Issue, Scandal/Gaffe, and Non-issue. Each contained specific categories of

coverage, and there was no overlap (each segment was coded into only one general category). Content of each is as follows:

- Campaign: Coverage of the campaign itself, including the horserace, poll results, personality coverage, debates (horserace, format, and political issues surrounding the event, not issue-specific coverage of the content of the debate), ads and ad buys, fundraising, and conventions.
- Issue: Issue-based coverage that addressed an issue substantively, not merely as part of a discussion of campaign strategy or horserace. For example, “The Iraq War is causing President Bush some campaign trouble this week...” is coded as Campaign coverage, whereas “Senator Obama favors increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan” is coded as Issue coverage.
- Scandal/Gaffe: Coverage of misstatements, scandals, and other events unrelated to the job performance, positions, or campaigning of the candidates, but is derogatory in nature to the candidate.
- Non-issue: Self-referential coverage (news media covering themselves), human interest coverage, and local interest stories that are unrelated to the campaign or public policy issue.

Grouping categories of coverage in this way lets us examine the balance of coverage overall, and whether it is coverage that is issue-based, allowing for a spatial evaluation of the candidates and their positions on political issues; focused mainly on the campaign and personality of the candidate, not what policies we can expect from a candidate once elected; or scandal or gaffe coverage that has little to do with either the campaign or the issue positions of the candidate, but that call into question the personal

failings of the candidate. For this reason, certain categories of coverage that are often broken out and treated separately are here included in the same measure. Personality coverage, for example, is often treated as being distinct from campaign coverage, but for the purposes of evaluating the overall media environment – and whether it is providing policy positions of candidates and communicating that information to voters – there is little material difference between coverage of a campaign event and coverage of a candidate’s personal history.

Scandal and gaffe coverage deserves some qualification as well. To qualify, coverage needs to be persistent coverage of an event that is a uniform negative for the candidate, is not part of an ongoing pattern of behavior (a one-off event), and is not directly related to an issue or policy. Examples include investigation of Sarah Palin’s firing of a state trooper as part of an alleged personal vendetta (“Troopergate”), the revelation of Clinton advisor Morris’s relationship with a prostitute, and (as an example of a gaffe, albeit one of a visual nature) John Kerry being photographed in a space suit. Over the four election cycles, there were fifteen events characterized as scandals or gaffes:

- 1996: Morris Prostitution Scandal, Whitewater, White House Travel Office
- 2000: Monica Lewinsky, Gore Illegal Fundraising, Bush DUI, Cheney “A—hole” open microphone gaffe, “RATS” ad
- 2004: Heinz-Kerry accosts reporter, Kerry in Space
- 2008: Troopergate, Bristol Palin pregnancy, Obama and Ayers, Palin family shopping spree, “Lipstick on a pig” gaffe

These are events or stories that are often not particularly relevant to the campaign (though one could make the argument that they reveal something about the candidates’ character),

but are simply too attractive for journalists to resist. A candidate’s wife snapping at a reporter (Theresa Heinz-Kerry) is not a significant event in a campaign and certainly has little business being offered to a national audience for consideration, but it is nevertheless something that was reported (repeatedly) by the national media.

As we can see in Table 3.3, campaign coverage dominates the overall media environment, and generally by at least a three-to-one ratio over issue coverage. However, in competitive elections there is a marked increase in the amount of Campaign coverage. In the competitive election years, approximately three-quarters of all election news was devoted to strategy/horserace and personality elements, while Issue coverage was only approximately one-fifth of election news. In 1996, however, there was much more Issue coverage and approximately twice the amount of Scandal/Gaffe coverage than in the competitive election years. This is indicative of a political press that is attempting to find a good story to tell, and when its dominant storyline has been removed, it turns to saleable scandal and gaffe coverage. The data clearly supports the related hypothesisⁱⁱ.

Table 3.3 – Percentage of Coverage Devoted to Categories of Coverage from Convention through Election Day, 1996-2008

	1996	2000	2004	2008	Mean
Campaign	67%	74%	77%	78%	74%
Issue	24%	22%	21%	18%	21%
Scandal/Gaffe	9%	4%	1%	4%	5%
Mean Advantage	17.4%	1.0%	2.0%	5.4%	

Mean advantage measures the average daily point difference in trial heat polls from the start of the conventions through Election Day. Campaign, Issue, and Scandal/Gaffe measure the percentage of coverage of each category on NBC’s Nightly News and The New York Times.

ⁱⁱ In competitive election cycles, total-cycle share of horserace/strategy coverage will be greater than in non-competitive election cycles.

These issues also compete for the same time in a given broadcast. Consider Figure 3.1, below. The five day moving average ratio of each of these (campaign, issue, and scandal/gaffe coverage) was plotted over time and as percentages making up a whole of daily coverage to null out differences in volume of coverage, and the results were consistent with previous results. Clearly, campaign coverage dominates the media environment, even on a daily basis. Only very briefly (a matter of two to four days), and on only four occasions, in 2000, 2004 and 2008 does issue coverage hold a majority position in the broadcast coverage. For the balance of coverage in these elections, campaign coverage is firmly in command, with 2008 being particularly meager in its coverage of issues, which is all the more surprising given the myriad domestic and international difficulties facing the candidates. During the 2008 convention period, we see virtually *no* discussion of issues, even compared to the other election cycles. Even accounting for the size of the media hole around the conventions, issues are not particularly prominent.

1996 stands out as an anomalous year, while the other three elections were quite comparable in terms of the type and timing of coverage. The low level of competitiveness in 1996, as previously noted, appears to have changed the typical situation, in this case by prompting higher levels of issue and scandal coverage. Freed from the requirement (or pleasure) of discussing the horserace, issue debates occurred with surprising frequency during the 1996 campaign, if only on a limited set of issues (“values,” foreign policy, and fiscal/economic policy dominated coverage by at least a two-to-one ration over all other issues). Owing to the absence of punditry on campaign strategy, electoral competition, predictions, polls, and other aspects of the horserace,

there was simply more room to give. Scandal coverage also increased dramatically, in part because President Clinton provided large amounts of fodder for such coverage, but also because there was less of a need to discuss the maneuvering of the campaigns since there was little chance that any action by Dole would change the outcome. It would appear that in the absence of a compelling horserace, journalists revert either to “public service” mode, and pursue the coverage that several sources say they “should” be covering (including, incidentally, Sabato 1991), or to tabloidization and a focus on the scandalous. Finally, across all four elections, non-issue coverage was never of sufficient quantity to make more than a negligible impact on the content of coverage (constituted less than one percent of overall coverage, and on any given day never topped five percent of coverage), and as such it was eliminated from consideration here.

The media (or NBC News, at least) demonstrate a clear preference for the mechanical or dramatic aspects of the campaign, such as the results of polls or the political maneuverings of the campaigns. These elements allow for ease of presentation because they are familiar (examples include reactions to debate performance by a candidate), they allow for increased importance and intensity due to their dramatic character (an emerging scandal), or both (recapping a previous scandal or gaffe). They only occasionally grant center stage to policy debates and discussion. Within the broadcasts themselves, the form which issue coverage frequently takes is that of a contrast between the candidates’ positions on likely topics for debate. These stories routinely fell in the post-convention period, in the run up to the debates, which we can observe in Figure 3.1 is the period most likely to show increases in issue coverage.

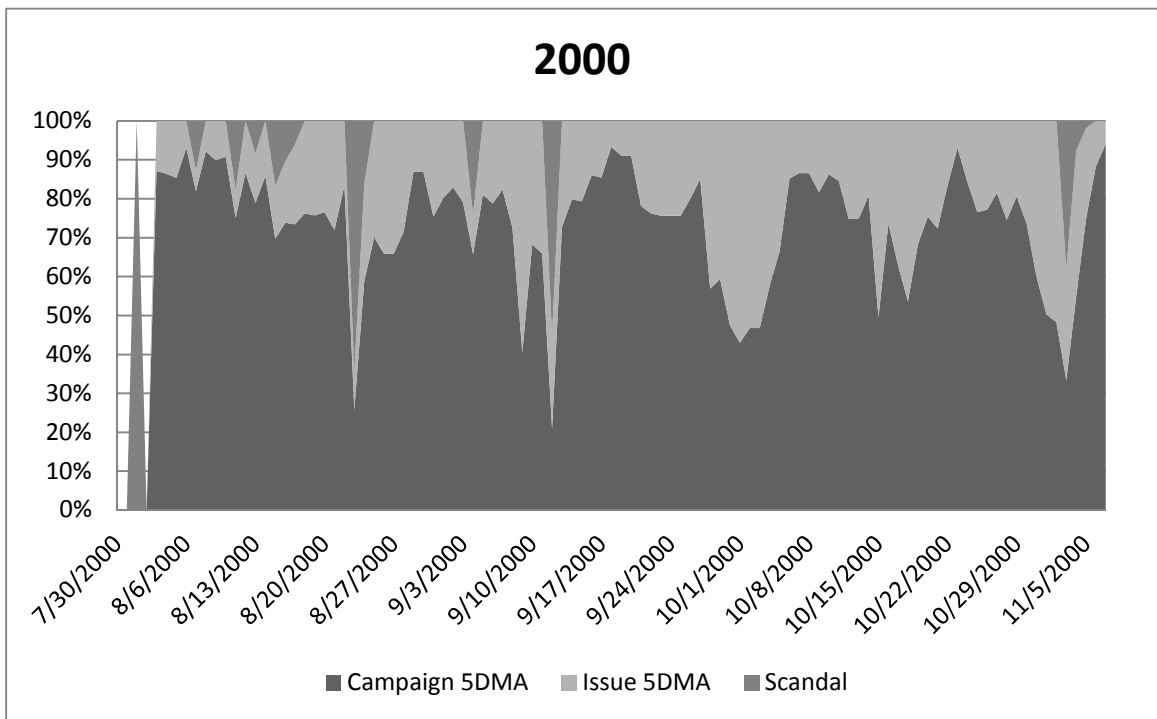
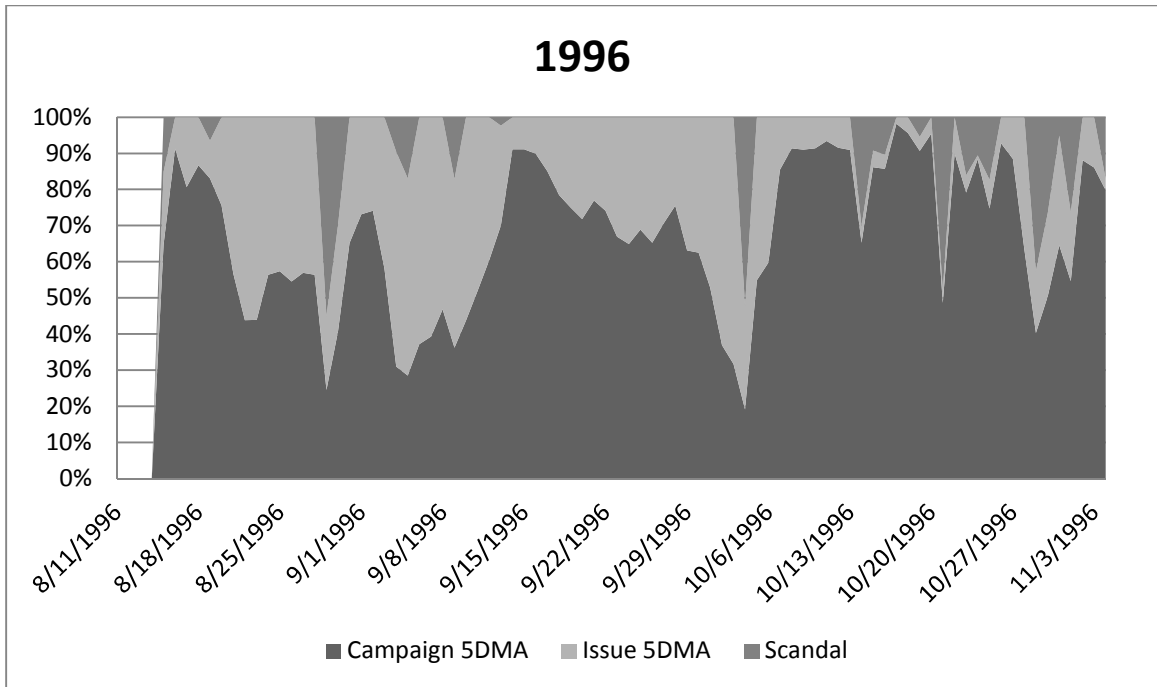
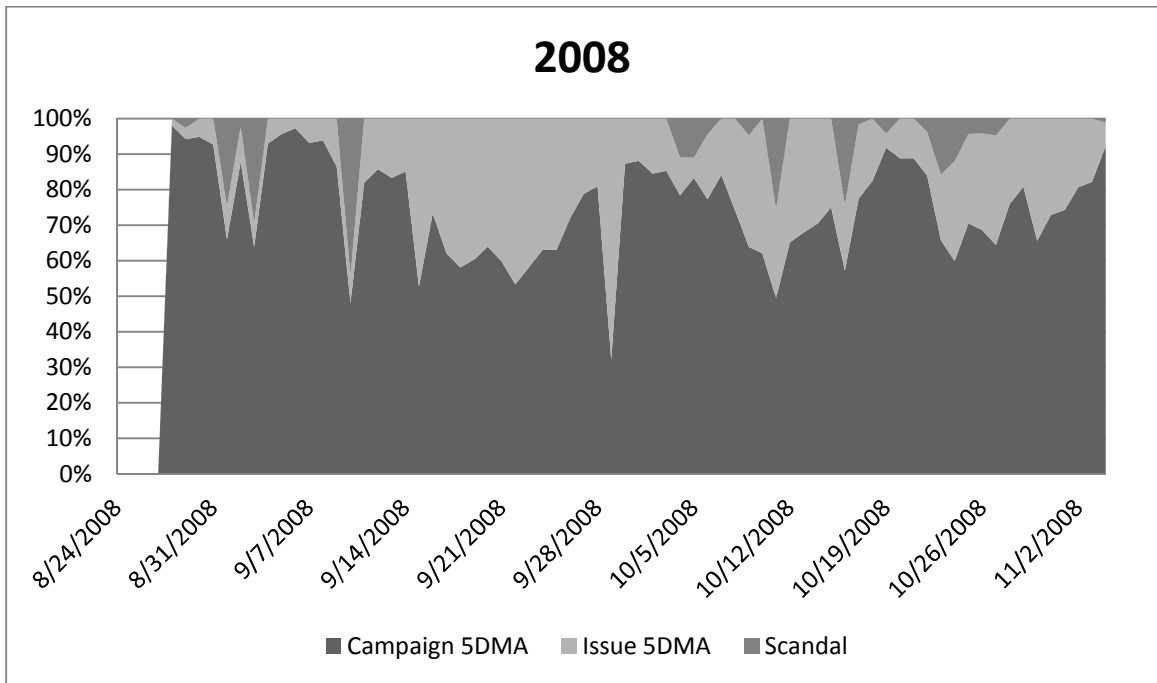
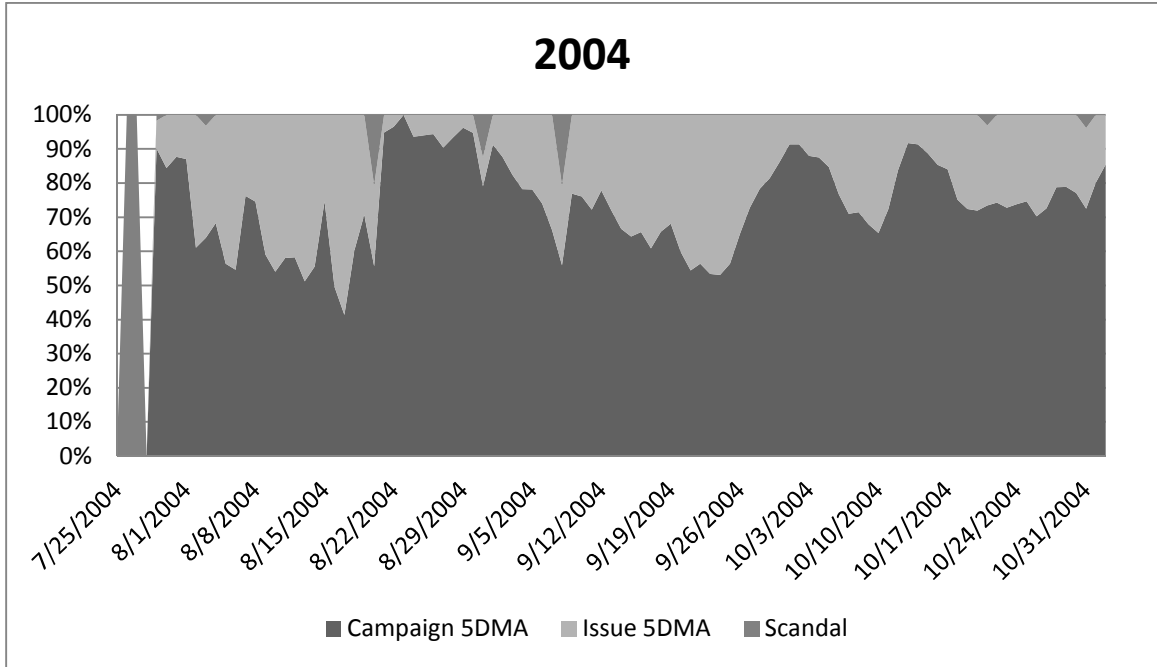


Figure 3.1. 100% Stacked Area Graph of Ratios of Categories of Television Coverage.

Figure 3.1 (continued)



On those occasions where Scandal coverage is prominent, there is no question that to make way for this coverage the broadcast would force issue coverage into the

background. This conclusion is supported graphically in Figure 3.1, which shows spikes of issue coverage driving wedges into the space occupied by Issue coverage. While in many cases it is clear that Campaign coverage is also compelled to yield some ground, at no time is it completely obliterated, as issue coverage frequently is (see the 1996, 2000, and 2008 elections in particular). The logic behind this result is evident: scandal coverage has inherent electoral implications, which are explored within the same stories. The emergence or continuation of coverage of a scandal or gaffe leads naturally to discussion of the real or potential impact on the campaigns – no such necessity attaches to issue coverage in its own right, except in the most extreme cases (consider the impact if Osama bin Laden had been captured in the fall of 2004, for example). Real issue “victories” are rare, and are not likely to be a regular feature in the campaign or its coverage.

Where Issue coverage is most dominant, however, it is hamstrung in competition with Campaign coverage due to the circumstances of its emergence. Where we see increases in issue coverage it is not difficult to discern the cause: periods of high levels of issue coverage are characterized by the presence of conflict between the candidates on the same issue (which will be further explored in Chapter Five). However, this too is cause for comment on electoral implications by journalists, which virtually guarantees that it is practically impossible to maintain high levels of coverage of policy and issues *except in the absence of electoral competitiveness*. This is the situation in 1996, and it is no coincidence that during that election cycle there was a substantial level of policy debate played out NBC and in the *Times*.

How campaign, issue, and scandal coverage interact over the course of the campaign (and its component periods) shows only one period when issue coverage surges in any meaningful way, and that is during the period between the close of the conventions and the first debate. Even there it only averages 31 percent of coverage, and campaign coverage is still firmly in control of the news space. The remaining three periods show a consistent ratio of campaign to issue coverage, with campaign coverage enjoying a four-to-one advantage. Scandal and gaffe coverage maintains a respectable, if small, presence throughout the election, as the specific events arise.

Table 3.4 – Mean Percentage of Categories of Coverage by Period, 1996-2008

	Convention	Post-Convention	Debates	Post-Debate
Campaign	79%	68%	81%	76%
Issue	17%	31%	17%	18%
Scandal	5%	4%	2%	5%

Conclusion

Examination of the volume of coverage at different points in the campaign and the content of that coverage provide a useful picture of the general election media environment in which the campaigns operate. It is characterized, in general and assuming a competitive election season, by several key attributes:

- The amount of time outlets are willing to devote to the campaigns is largely dictated by the presence or absence of the “major” events of the general election season: the conventions, the debates (at least the first debate), and Election Day.
- Strategy/horserace coverage is the norm in broadcast coverage of the election season, with only brief periods when issue coverage is in ascendance.

- The presence of scandal or gaffe coverage has a tendency to displace issue coverage, at least in the three elections coded herein.

Having considered these issues individually, let us now turn to consideration of the campaign timeline, period-by-period. Examining these same phenomena in this manner allows us to more clearly demonstrate how the media environment changes (along several axes) over the course of the campaign. The campaign periods have been broken down as follows: the convention period, the post-convention period, the debate period, and the post-debate period/ Election Day (which includes those few days in November before voters head to the polls).

The Campaign Coverage Life Cycle

The Convention Period

The national nominating conventions constitute the traditional start of the general election period, but it is worth pointing out that the election season has no clear-cut beginning. Certainly, though, this is a fine choice from the standpoint of an examination of share of coverage, especially in light of the enormous imbalances created by coverage of the party conventions. In addition to an increase in each party's share of coverage over the four-day convention period (as well as in the days beforehand, when anticipation grips the media), we also enter this period expecting to see a substantial increase in the level of *positive* coverage of the candidates during their own convention. Before we reach the conventions, though, it is first necessary to begin with a baseline of analysis of coverage, so our discussion starts with an examination of coverage of the pre-convention period, defined here as the ten days prior to the first convention.

Coverage in the pre-convention period is, in many respects, unremarkable. As the run-up to a major campaign event there is certainly attention on the campaigns, but it shows more in a burst of activity as the convention moves closer than in a steady rise. In each year, coverage in the three days preceding the convention is substantially greater than in the week prior to that period (the only exception being if a vice presidential selection is announced earlier, as we will see below). Share of coverage in this period is tilted in favor of the candidate whose convention will shortly begin, but there is not the overwhelming imbalance that is observed during the convention proper. In terms of content of coverage, there is no true pattern. Some years (1996, 2004) appeared to be rather issue coverage-rich, while other years (2000, and especially 2008) showed only limited amounts of issue coverage. In all years, though, coverage increased in overall volume as the candidates moved towards the opening of the first national party convention.

The content of coverage during this period has one consistent tipping point, after which coverage becomes intensely campaign-oriented as opposed to issue-oriented: the selection of the running mate and Vice Presidential candidateⁱⁱⁱ. In fact, once the Vice Presidential nominee is announced, issues tend to fade from view almost immediately, and often for the duration of the pre-convention coverage. In 1996, 47 percent of the pre-selection coverage was issue coverage, but that figure dropped to 9 percent of the post-selection coverage. In 2000 issues fared better, but had less distance to fall: from 22 percent to 16 percent. 2008 was a staggeringly anemic year for issue coverage, but still

ⁱⁱⁱ Only 1996, 2000, and 2008 are included in this analysis, since in 2004 Kerry chose John Edwards as his running mate more than ten days prior to the convention. During this same period, the rate of issue coverage was 31 percent, and Kerry's tone score was 0.27.

the trend persists: only 7 percent of pre-selection coverage was issue-based, but that figure dropped to less than 1 percent after Biden was announced as Obama's running mate. This is a clear demonstration of both the limitations of the news hole (the fact that there are only so many minutes in a broadcast and column inches in a newspaper) and of the media's preference for campaign and strategy coverage of the candidates.

This pre-convention period is a period of transition, from the relative quiet of the presumptive-nominee stage to the circus-like "coronation" stage that is the national nominating conventions. Although there are occasional discussions of poll results, there is a tone of relative equality in discussing the chances of each candidate: reporters (broadcast and print) and anchors alike use phrases that indicate that anything can happen in the election to come, that the outcome is uncertain, and that the candidates have much to gain or lose in the coming conventions. By the time we reach the 24-48 hours before the opening of the convention, volume of coverage has increased dramatically since the beginning of the coding period nine days before. Volume of coverage increased by over 300 percent in 2000, which was the smallest increase of the four election cycles – in 2008 it increased over 800 percent, and over 700 percent in 1996. The selection of the vice presidential candidate, the impending convention period, and the occasional gaffe (McCain's lack of knowledge on the number of houses he owned at the time, for example) bring some of the largest volumes of coverage of the campaign, at least through the run-up to Election Day. It is in this environment that the coverage of the conventions begins.

There are common topics of coverage during the convention period. First among these is the convention itself – though, not as one might expect. The actual *content* of the

convention is rarely discussed, but the *circumstance* of the convention is quite prominent. In virtually every convention season, there is coverage devoted to protesters outside the convention venue (though in later years, this was discussed from a security angle). This is an example of news media seeking to satisfy their ethical standards of balance and objectivity: the protests themselves are frequently (commonly, in fact) of little import, lack organization, and/or fail to demonstrate any real cohesion, yet they represent an opposing side that can be presented to the public. One notable exception to this is the substantial protests in New York City during the Republican convention in 2004. Thousands of protesters took to the streets, and there were well over one thousand arrests according to reports on NBC News – this, however, was not the typical experience, as even a casual review of the protest stories during other conventions demonstrates, which limits the power of any event-focused story explanation. Coverage of protesters is not limited to the opposition (Clinton endured some demonstrations from members of his own party over welfare reform at the 1996 convention, for example), but that is the norm. Protest coverage is also a means of providing something novel to the public, as the increasingly stage-managed conventions limit the availability of contrasting material to report – in fact, the phrase “stage-managed convention” turns up hits in a LexisNexis search of the *New York Times* that refer to *every* convention in this study. Resistance to media management by the campaigns on the part of media outlets (Zaller 1998) – which often results in negative and/or off-message coverage – is a likely explanation for this commonality.

Additionally, in five out of eight conventions (three Republican, two Democrat) we see stories whose primary focus is the funding of convention parties and activities by

corporations and/or interest groups, and in all eight this phenomenon is referenced in at least some story regarding the convention itself. It is noteworthy that this coverage does not seem to be prompted by the opposition – commentary on it is almost uniformly provided by members of public interest groups (Common Cause, League of Women Voters), and is generally negative. The regularity with which this issue appears is, again, not surprising. In light of the efforts of convention organizers to present a clean, non-controversial series of evenings, which in turn presents their candidate in the best possible terms, it is natural for media outlets to focus on anything inconsistent with that image. In that same vein, major party conventions themselves have an undeniable air of populism about them: there are visuals of large halls packed with the party faithful from across the nation. Delegates to the national conventions are typically chosen through precinct and district elections or caucuses, and delegates themselves are viewed favorably (according to a 2004 Pew Center poll, 81 percent of party identifiers stated that delegates “think of people like me” when transacting the business of the convention). The image of these same delegates being wined and dined by moneyed interests is, it would seem, an irresistible target for journalists. Certainly the consistency of the appearance of such coverage (across the years one can even observe similar language being used in separate stories) suggests a view among journalists that this is an area worthy of attention and presents a clear demonstration of the press engaging in “public interest” coverage.

In terms of volume of coverage, the conventions are, without question, the most heavily-covered campaign event of the general election period. The only period that exceeds the convention period is the final run-up to Election Day, when in three of the four election cycles the average level of coverage for that period was equal to or greater

than the volume of convention coverage. This coverage is largely anticipatory. Stories about the candidates and seconds of coverage actually decline as the conventions progress, with the earlier days typically receiving more attention. For the eight conventions coded here, the heaviest day of convention coverage was one of the first two days in five of them. Common subjects for coverage across all conventions include biographical and personal information about the candidates and their families (coded as “Personality” coverage), horserace coverage of the state of the race leading into and out of the conventions, and coverage of a small number of issues (though this coverage is not as substantial, by comparison to the other categories). In this period, “political” coverage wins out – discussion of the conventions, the occasional scandal or gaffe, strategy coverage and the like.

In no year does issue coverage constitute even half of the total coverage during the course of the convention period, and in most (seven of eight conventions) it does not even approach a quarter of the coverage. 2008, for example, was particularly devoid of issue coverage during the conventions: it constituted only 7 percent of the coverage of the Republican convention, and an astonishing 2 percent of the Democratic convention. This is also remarkable in that the average amount of issue coverage across all four election cycles is 21 percent, which suggests that the convention period is no more likely to prompt issue coverage than any other period in the season. If the goal of the campaigns was to focus media attention on the political and/or organizational aspects of the convention, they were demonstrably successful. If it was not, then they were markedly unsuccessful.

The Post-convention Period

Conventional wisdom tells us that the general election campaign begins in earnest once both parties have completed their nominating conventions, and the period following the conventions and leading up to the debates is once more one where patterns of coverage are observable. As the only genuinely “free” period of the general election campaign (that is to say, a period when campaigns may set their own course, free from the requirements of conventions, debates, and the final scramble leading up to election), we might expect to see a diverse set of choices made by the press in their coverage of the campaigns, but this is not the case. Coverage of the campaigns is wholly predictable in this period, from the content of the coverage to the volume of coverage. Whether this is the result of a certain laxity on the part of those tasked with reporting the news or of the schedule-driven, logistically-minded nature of a campaign on the road is not clear, but there can be no doubt that it is in this phase that coverage is at its most staid, with only the occasional scandal or gaffe breaking up the visual and textual landscape.

Network news coverage in particular is almost metronomic in the manner and rhythm of the day’s political reporting, with all the predictability of watching a ball at a tennis match: first the field reporter of one campaign recapping the day’s events, then the field reporter following the opposing campaign, with transition material thrown in by the anchor in between individual reports and segments. The places in which the reporters find themselves are almost incidental to the reporting. There is rarely an event that is not tagged with at least the state in question (apparently it is sufficient to report that the candidate is “campaigning in Michigan”), but there is remarkably little discussion of the particulars of the events, what the candidates said at these events, nor even the electoral

implications of being in a particular state or region. The first two are not terribly surprising – one campaign stop is much the same as another to those covering them for days at a time – but the last seems unusual, at least given the horserace focus of the modern presidential campaign. As discussed in Chapter Two and will be demonstrated in more detail later, the reporters tend to prefer stories which pit the candidates against one another. Outright attacks on an opponent are almost certain to be mentioned, as are policy areas where debates occur between the candidates, even if played out on different stages and in different time zones. Otherwise, the standard formula describes the day's activities, where the campaign is headed next, usually with some context of horserace standing to provide a feel for which candidate is leading or trailing.

It is in this period that, as much as they can in the modern presidential campaign, issues dominate reporting. All four campaigns exhibit patterns of coverage during this period that emphasize issues, with five-day moving average rates of issue reporting hovering near 40 percent of the total campaign coverage for the day. When contrasted with the relatively anemic level of issue coverage during the convention period, this is a substantial jump. In all campaigns except 2000, this increase is also quite stable, and the large spikes of scandal/gaffe coverage in 2000 likely ate up much of the time available in the newscast. However, despite the occasional aberration, this is a period where issues achieve a level of parity, if not dominance, on the political stage.

The candidates themselves provided numerous issue topics for the media to report, if they (journalists) chose to do so. For the purposes of this dissertation, I examined the coded content (courtesy of the Pew/Annenberg Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse) of every speech delivered by the two major party nominees in

1996. Over the course of the period under investigation here (the general election campaign), the candidates averaged approximately two speeches per day, and in each speech raised an average of approximately six issues (5.8 per speech). While many of the topics and themes shifted over the course of the campaign (though some core issues persisted throughout the campaign), the issue-oriented campaign appears to be a reality, as there were no periods when candidates were *not* discussing the issues, even if the same cannot be said of the media. At least in terms of the candidates themselves, there is surprisingly little discussion of the horserace in public fora.

As the debates approach, we almost invariably see an increase in both the total coverage and coverage of issues in the campaign. This reporting frequently consists of longer segments comparing the issue positions of the candidates on a specific issue. This is the only time that the coding reveals a clear intention to provide policy information to the public, which is surprising, given the previously stated goal of political journalists (political journalism exists to provide citizens with the information they need to responsibly exert their political power in their own best interests). These pieces are rarely seen outside of this period in the general election campaign, and this focus on issues can be contrasted with the larger amounts of personality and personal history coverage seen in the Convention period. We also generally see an increase in the volume of coverage of the campaign, which is typically flat through the post-convention period. Increased excitement as a televised showdown looms between the two candidates is almost certainly the explanation for this increase in coverage through the tail end of the post-convention period, and many reports contrasting the positions of the candidates in the run-up discussion of which issues are most likely to benefit/hurt each candidate add

material to the day's reporting, thereby increasing the total volume as well as the proportion of issue coverage. It is on this note that the post-convention period ends, and we enter the debate period.

The Debate Period

News coverage of the debates is characterized by a high degree of run-up and anticipation, pre-debate preparation and strategy coverage, and speculation as to the potential impact (what each candidate has to gain and lose) but very little coverage of what was actually said in the debates, after the fact. This continues a trend which is noticeable across the board, to include the conventions: there appears to be a decidedly low level of follow-up coverage of events. For both the conventions and the debates, the day or days immediately preceding the event itself is characterized by increased activity and a substantial amount of coverage, but once the event begins or has passed there is very little follow-up. Reports of candidate preparation are common, especially if they provide good visuals: Gore walking on the beach with a gaggle of "normal" citizens, soliciting their views, was one particularly memorable example.

In terms of coverage of the debates themselves, there is virtually no coverage of what was said by candidates during the debates. Brief shots of the candidates (less than three seconds, on average) are the norm, with reporters talking over them, and few enough of even these glimpses of the debate. For all four campaigns and over their entire general election length, there is an average of four aired candidate statements per day, at an average length of 10.7 seconds each. During the debates, though, the average number of aired candidate statements per day actually *drops* to 3.7, and a length of 10.1 seconds

each – moreover, most of these are not statements made during the debate itself. Across ten debates for which the NBC broadcasts from the following day were available, there aired only two minutes of candidate debate statements out of 65 minutes of debate coverage. More than half of those statements also came in a single year (2000), when NBC aired a series of “fact-checking” segments after each debate.

There was also some minor gaffe coverage. In 2004, Kerry’s “I voted for it before I voted against it” line appeared on NBC the day after the first debate, while in 2008 a John McCain reference to Barack Obama as “that one” was also broadcast. Though not a key feature in the debates that fall within the scope of this study, past debates have served as launching pads for some of the more memorable gaffes and one-liners in presidential campaign history (Ford’s “Free Poland” gaffe; Reagan to Carter, “There you go again...”; Bush surreptitiously checking his watch during a debate with Clinton in 1992). Either such gaffes were considered much more significant than those seen here in 2004 and 2008, or they are not being reported as frequently as they were in the past. The majority of coverage centers on analysis by pundits, who demonstrate a clear preference for campaign and strategy coverage. For all of the debate coverage in these four elections (over an hour’s worth), only in the wake of the third and final 2008 debate was any candidate shown explaining an issue position. It is telling – and not a little bit dispiriting for those who advocate for responsible civic discourse – that the ratio of issue coverage to campaign coverage actually *decline* during the debate period.

Despite the limited presentation of the candidates’ own words, some issue coverage is commonplace in the debates, though much of that coverage comes as a result of a desire to catch candidates in misstatements. Another method is through interviews

of “average” citizen panels: groups of undecided voters are gathered by news outlets, watch the debate, and then offer opinions. The citizens themselves frequently express a desire to see candidates provide solid, clear plans of action on policy. In response, the most common questions asked by the network interviewer were, “Who do you think won the debate?” and “Do you now know how you will vote?” In the final analysis, citizen input into media reports (whether during the debate period or not) is rare and stereotypical: citizens are used as human backdrops at events, provide useful figures in human interest stories that relate to some policy, or act as one-person anecdotal polls of how the candidates are faring. It was a noteworthy incident (by virtue of its rarity) when a citizen was prompted for a comment on issues or policy by an interviewer; what little such commentary there was was usually spontaneous, suggesting either that citizens when speaking to journalists rarely have or offer policy opinions, or that news directors and/or editors simply don’t feel their views add to the quality of the report.

As campaigns move out of the debate period, coverage makes its final shift into a “last days” mode. Candidates lay on their final schedules based on their electoral strategy, campaigns begin to focus on the mechanics of Election Day, and the media enter a period of unparalleled prediction and prognostication. Unless the debates have prompted a large shift in support, nearly all electoral speculation becomes focused on the “path to victory.” Analysis of the campaigns centers on which states the candidates must win to secure enough electoral votes to win the White House, and/or the travel schedule of the campaign: for example, there were three stories in two days on Dole’s planned marathon campaigning schedule in the final week. Let us now consider the final phase of both the campaign and the coverage of it: post-debate and Election Day.

The Post-Debate Period and Election Day

As the campaigns move beyond the debates, media speculation as to the outcome reaches a distinctly feverish intensity. If a candidate is trailing by a significant margin, as Dole was in 1996, this is the time when open discussion of the “failed” campaign becomes more common, and the stories take on a dubious (if not outright pessimistic) air. It is a time when extended use of electoral maps becomes more common, in the hopes of divining the outcome and, at the same time, imagining different scenarios that may lead to an upset. In competitive races, this is also when “key” states are highlighted – bellwethers of the outcome are identified, and become the focus of intense deliberation. At the same time, the candidates’ final travel plans are discussed, as the last tactical moves by the candidates are detailed nightly. In such an environment, it should come as no surprise that coverage of policy and issues slows to a trickle as compared to the pre-debate period. This was the case even in 1996, when Dole had virtually no hope of catching Clinton, banking on a combination of unlikely wins, including California. Coverage of Dole in the final days (when he completed a four-day marathon of campaigning) focused primarily on glitches in the campaign stops and, interestingly, summaries of his political career and likely future plans. In examining the volume of coverage figures, however, it seems as if the networks and papers should be able to make the time for all manner of coverage, since there is a steady and significant rise in the volume of coverage during this period, routinely doubling between the last debate and Election Day.

Election Day coverage is, itself, quite routine and lacking in substance, focusing on the final actions of the campaigns. Indeed, the longer the campaign continues, the more simple the coverage becomes: issue coverage fades, predictions become more concrete, and campaign coverage becomes the only show in town. It is nearly formulaic in its creation: B-roll of the candidate voting in his or her home precinct, discussion of the final campaign stops, and details on where and how the candidate will watch the results come in later that night. Interestingly, predictions as to the outcome are not particularly common on Election Day. The campaign ends with less a bang than a whimper, and, consistent with the pattern noted earlier, the amount of coverage on Election Day proper is generally less than the days preceding it (2008 is the lone exception). The broadcast ends with a plug for the evening's coverage of election returns for all offices, and undoubtedly after the camera light blinks off a frantic technical and news crew prepares for the long night ahead.

Conclusion

In both of the preceding parts, it has been my goal to describe the coverage of the campaign, based on my minute observations of four consecutive election campaigns, in terms that are sufficiently general that we may imagine them as being applicable to a number of future election cycles. The conclusions offered at the end of the first part of the chapter and the description of the shifts over the course of the campaign in the second part of the chapter are supported by the empirical observations made, and where there are exceptions, they are noted in the text. It is also apparent that the competitiveness of the campaign has a substantial effect on the news that political journalists produce, in terms

of the focus of the stories; and the news that media organizations broadcast and print, in terms of the volume of coverage of the campaign. A competitive election yields more coverage overall and a greater emphasis on strategy and outcome, whereas a less-competitive election results in less coverage and an increase in the non-horserace elements of the campaign.

Coverage of each period of the campaign cycle – defined herein along the terms dictated by the coverage itself as being relative to the major campaign events (convention, debate, election) – shows a certain logic and order. It appears a process that is less susceptible than we may imagine to excessive manipulation, since it hews closely to only a few key events. Volume of coverage of the campaigns is essentially fixed, making the media somewhat passive in terms of what will be covered and how much. For now, let us turn to another key question: does coverage of individual candidates differ, and if so, how and when? We may, at least, move forward in the knowledge that the general election media environment and its steady, rhythmic pulse are far from unknowable: in fact, they are quite approachable and reliable, allowing us to focus on what variability does exist.

CHAPTER 4

COVERING TWO CANDIDATES

This chapter moves from examining the media environment as a whole to examining the differences and similarities in coverage of two competing candidates within that environment. In the process of covering “the election” or “the campaign,” journalists are in fact usually covering individual campaigns, not the general election itself. As a result, imbalances occur in the component elements of news coverage that may have an effect on levels of candidate support. This chapter will compare the share of coverage received by each candidate in the study’s four elections to identify any periodic or persistent advantages enjoyed by each candidate and party, as well as how and when those advantages appear, change, and disappear. It will also examine the tone of coverage of the candidates, which is “balanced,” after a fashion, at most points of the campaign even as it is rarely neutral. The effect of these imbalances will be examined later, but in this chapter my goal is to demonstrate their existence and their consistency with the model outlined previously in this dissertation.

Share of Coverage

It is a central purpose of this dissertation to demonstrate that intra-campaign levels of coverage of the two major party candidates are fundamentally imbalanced and

unequal. The model described here suggests that an impartial media should have a desire to provide roughly equal time and attention to each candidate, but at the same time there is an impulse (of journalists and their news organizations) to forge interesting stories that combine the news values of novelty and conflict (Joslyn 1984, Bennet 2003). However, constructing stories with this goal results in focusing more on one campaign than the other, which results in imbalance. Even the organization of the broadcast itself is not necessarily helping: allowing equal time in coverage for the reporter tracking each campaign makes no guarantees that each reporter will discuss the campaign to which they are assigned. Frequently, a reporter following the Democratic candidate discusses the candidate's response to the Republican candidate's misfortunes (or fortunes), and this is, in form and effect, coverage of the *Republican* candidate. Even allowing for the occasional tilt on account of a sensational event, gaffe, or major policy initiative (and accounting for the normal shifts seen during the conventions) the frequent imbalances observed in share of coverage are both real and rather remarkable.

Aggregate balance is a useful starting point in this discussion: overall, candidates receive *approximately* the same share of campaign coverage, but there is still imbalance. D'Alessio & Allen's 2000 findings, which show, over time and in the aggregate, no obvious advantage for either party, are victims of their own breadth. By creating a meta-analytic measure they run the risk of aggregating results that null out advantages in each election, and even then they report that "52.7 percent of airtime went to Democrats, leaving 47.3 percent to Republicans. This is not a large difference, although it is larger than some would like" (149). Turning to the content analyzed here, within individual elections we see some aggregate imbalance tilted towards the incumbent party, and of

varying degrees of magnitude. Overall, the share of coverage is similar, but in no way equal or balanced. In fact, the mean advantage in share of coverage over the course of the general election is measured to be 10.6 percent, or nearly twice that found by D'Alessio and Allen in 2000.

Table 4.1 – Aggregate Share of Coverage, 1996-2008

	FULL GENERAL ELECTION			FINAL 60 DAYS OF CAMPAIGN			FINAL 30 DAYS OF CAMPAIGN		
	Democrat	Republican	% Diff	Democrat	Republican	% Diff	Democrat	Republican	% Diff
1996	9375	8611	8.1	4668	3108	33.4	2866	2321	19.0
2000	10391	9906	4.7	5598	4665	16.7	3970	3478	12.4
2004	12140	14176	14.4	6156	7855	21.6	3749	4511	16.9
2008	10984	12950	15.2	7361	9203	20	5288	5664	6.6

Percentage of total coverage of each candidate by seconds of candidate-specific coverage on NBC's Nightly News and name mentions in the New York Times. Full General Election measures from ten days prior to the start of the first nominating convention.

That overall double-digit advantage in candidate-specific coverage exists throughout the election calendar. Even when comparing share of coverage as Election Day approaches, candidates have aggregate advantages of 10 percent or greater during all but one period: the final thirty days of the 2008 campaign. Even if we discount the 1996 figures (1996 is anomalous in most measures of media output for the general election period, owing to a lack of competitiveness), there is still an evident imbalance in the amount of coverage received by each candidate. Likewise, there is apparent imbalance when we examine the daily variation in share of coverage of the candidates. Figure 4.1 shows that there is significant variation in the share of coverage over these elections, and that the candidate with the share advantage varies over the course of the election as journalists and news outlets shift from focus on one party to the other.

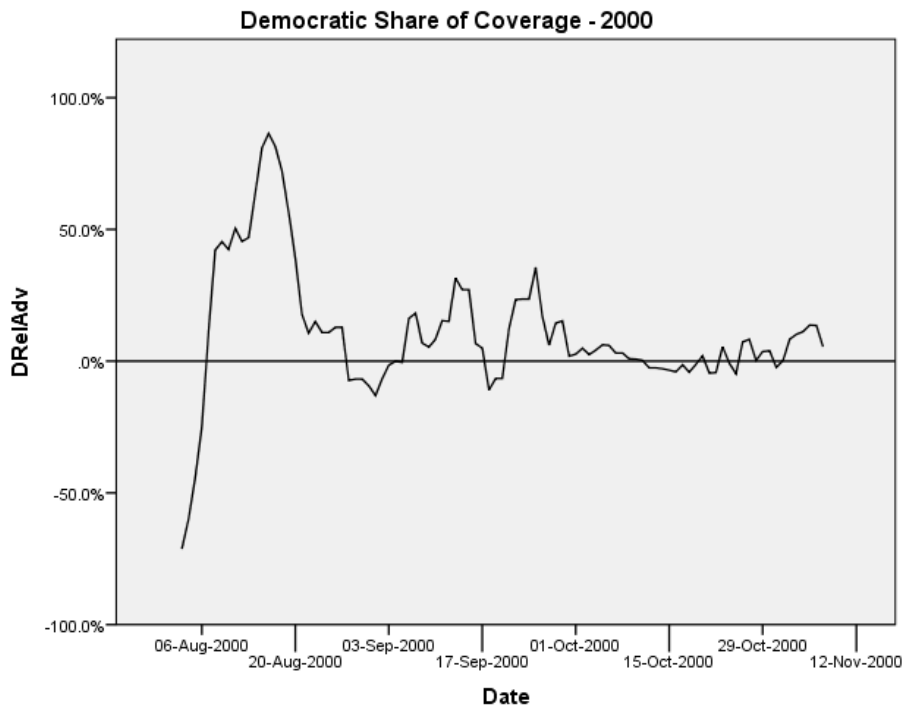
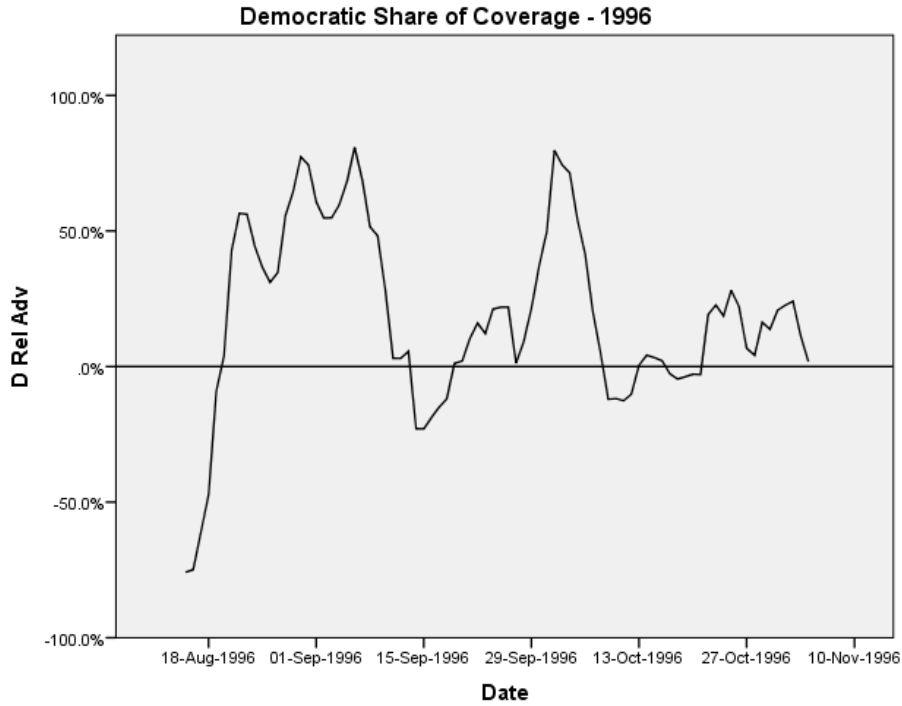
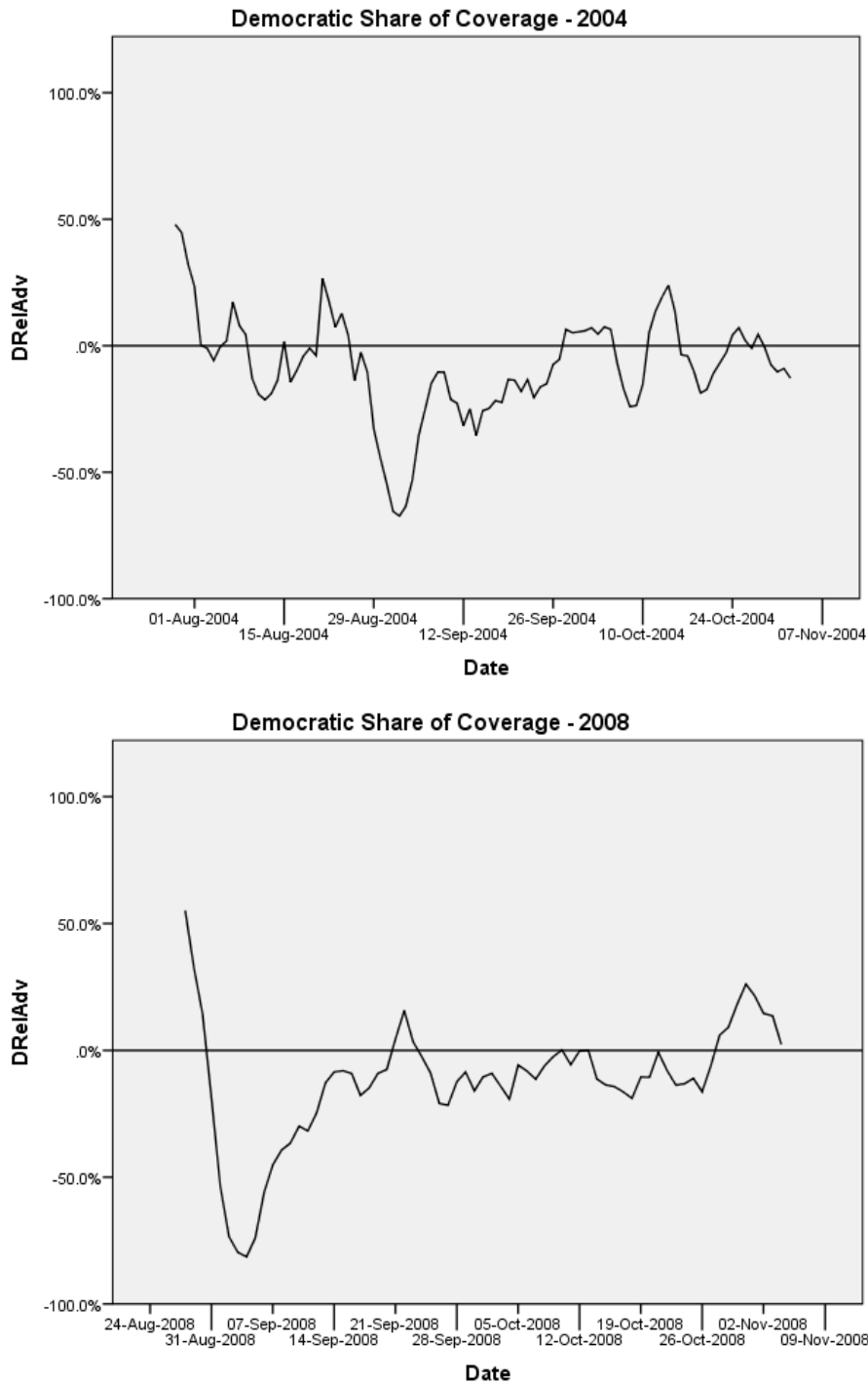


Figure 4.1. Relative advantage in share of coverage of the Democratic candidate, over time. Y-axis was calculated by subtracting the Republican candidate's share of coverage from the Democratic candidate's share of coverage (five-day moving averages for both).

Figure 4.1 - Continued



Shares of coverage were significantly correlated between both content sources used in this study. With few exceptions, shares of coverage – even resulting from two distinct data collection methods – are quite similar (the mean of the correlation for each

year is .663, and is significant at the 0.01 level). This provides a convenient test of both reliability and validity. The alternative form test of reliability supports the conclusion that these lines can be considered a reliable representation of media coverage as a whole. Additionally, the face validity of each can be more confidently asserted, as it would be a remarkable coincidence if the candidate-of-coverage coding (in seconds of broadcast coverage) happened to match the name-count coding of the print coverage. As they correlate significantly, we can safely believe that each is measuring the phenomenon accurately.

Turning to the actual content of the figure, we see frequent shifts of share of coverage of 20 points or more (four in 2004 alone, in both media, even *without* counting the convention coverage), a result all the more remarkable when one considers that the lines represent five-day moving averages, which are naturally resistant to large swings in share of coverage. This means that there are frequent *and* persistent shifts in the level of coverage received by each candidate. Convention coverage naturally and appropriately results in extreme variance in share of coverage. With an intense focus on the candidate being nominated it is no surprise that the convention periods show an appropriate peak/trough in terms of share of coverage, hence the high peak and deep trough that open each graph. What is much more significant is that there are multiple occurrences of media surges above what we might consider “normal” levels of coverage throughout every election cycle. They occur regularly throughout all cycles (that is to say, they are not restricted to one election season), and are not party-specific. They are generally smaller in magnitude than the extremes seen during the conventions, but not always (see

1996). Clearly, share of coverage is not consistently in favor of one candidate, nor is it balanced, overall or day-by-day.

Tone of Coverage

Logically, tone of coverage matters when discussing the effects of news coverage. Positive coverage can be presumed to be good and helpful, while negative coverage can be presumed to be bad and harmful. In a dynamic and competitive environment, though, this is not necessarily the case, since we have to consider relative tone, not just measured individual tone. This dissertation approached the question from a purely descriptive perspective, initially, so as to begin with an empirical answer to what is an empirical question: how do the media treat the candidates? This adds the tone component to the more traditional view of the content- and issue-based “information environment” (Jerit et al. 2006, and described here in Chapter Three), which, in an electoral context, must be considered a vital component of media coverage because of its potential to persuade. We see a number of interesting things when starting with the results of a detailed content analysis, and among these findings there are two which stand out most starkly. First, on average, coverage of candidates is slightly more positive than negative; *however*, coverage of candidates in three of four elections trends towards negativity as we approach Election Day, with the lone exception being 2008. Conventional wisdom (and much of the literature in Chapter Two) often holds that the media are generally negative in their coverage, if for no other reason than it limits accusations of bias. Clearly, such an assumption is not warranted based on the findings here. It is the second point that holds far more interest, however: the average tone of coverage of a candidate is not simply the

result of events or opinion, but is related to a significant degree to the tone of coverage of the *opposing* candidate. This second point may not seem to be particularly significant until the relationship is shown graphically – at that point, one sees that the media “balances” tone coverage towards *both* candidates, and that negative coverage for one usually means negative coverage for the other as well. This bizarre “dance” is seen across all four elections, and was among the most intriguing nuggets unearthed by the content analysis herein. It also allows us to more precisely consider the effects of tone, since such a correlation has implications for the discovery of evidence of the effects of tone on support. After all, if tone of coverage is generally at the same level of positivity or negativity (whether on the same day or in a short succession of days) then any movement in levels of support that would ordinarily be caused by tone would be necessarily blunted. This may account for the contradictory findings with regard to the impact of tone found in the literature, where some (Norris et al. 1999, 185) find that tone is an important factor in electoral decision-making, while others (Hopmann et al. 2010, 401) find the opposite. A good place to start is describing the observed changes and tides in tone of coverage over the course of the general election campaign, and determining whether there is any obvious sign of partisan coverage bias, event-driven valence, or historical variation.

The Tone Dance

This project is concerned with the examination of tone of coverage over the course of the general election campaign, not only an aggregate measure of overall tone. It is the goal of many a scholarly researcher to discern and detect bias (imbalance, really) in

tone of coverage. Whether arguing in favor of a corporate ownership theory of conservative news bias or a journalist-centric theory of liberal news bias, studies abound. Meta-analysis shows, on average and in the aggregate, no overall imbalance (D'Alessio and Allen 2000), but that is hardly the end of the discussion. Using that logic, manic-depressives would, in the eyes of psychologists, be quite level-headed individuals. For that reason I think it important to determine whether intra-campaign changes in tone of coverage exist. Finally, it is not entirely clear what causes changes in tone of coverage, assuming they are variable to some meaningful degree, though certain actions do seem to lead to generally positive or negative coverage. This section is concerned with addressing these four related questions:

- What is the general tone of coverage of candidates in the period in question, and does it exhibit any specific patterns?
- Is there an apparent partisan imbalance across these four elections, and if so, in which direction?
- Do we observe variations in intra-campaign levels of tone, rather than overall levels of positivity/negativity towards the candidates?
- Are these shifts in tone tied to any particular campaign events or actions on the part of the campaigns?

Before discussing the effects of tone of coverage, it is first necessary to simply demonstrate what tone the media take with the candidates.

Describing Tone of Coverage

Tone of coverage in these two media outlets is consistent, although it is not always balanced. As Table 4.2 shows, tone of coverage of the candidates is quite balanced for the NBC coverage. In two elections (1996 and 2000) the Republican candidate received more positive coverage than the Democratic candidate, and in two elections (2004 and 2008) the Democratic candidate received more positive coverage. The logical conclusion here is that the incumbent party is more likely to receive negative coverage from the broadcast media, with no apparent partisan bias. Also, coverage of the candidates is generally positive. In only one year (2004) is coverage of *any* candidate in either medium more negative than positive, and the mean across all four election cycles is positive for both candidates.

Coverage becomes less balanced, however, in the *New York Times* data. Here we see a clear and distinct advantage in two elections in terms of tone for the Democratic candidate. This is not to say that the *Times* is hostile to Republican candidates: in fact, coverage of the Republican candidate was more positive in the *Times* than on NBC.

Table 4.2 – Aggregate Candidate-specific Mean Daily Tone Scores by Medium

Election	D-NBC	R-NBC	D-NYT	R-NYT	D Tone	R Tone
1996	0.06	0.12	0.35	0.11	0.20	0.12
2000	0.10	0.11	0.29	0.24	0.20	0.17
2004	0.01	-0.03	0.20	0.20	0.11	0.08
2008	0.20	0.10	0.28	0.07	0.24	0.09
Mean	0.09	0.07	0.28	0.16	0.19	0.12

Mean of daily tone score, not conflated with volume. Average tone score of both media is shown in bold, in the final two columns.

However, coverage of the Democratic candidates was far more positive than either coverage of Democrats on NBC or of Republicans in the *Times* for 1996 and 2008. 2000

and 2004 were, for both media, somewhat surprisingly balanced. I use the word “surprisingly” because it is in those two years that George W. Bush was running on the Republican ticket. Bush (who represented the very image of a southern, religious, free-market social conservative) presented a clear target for liberal-biased media, if they were of a mind to avail themselves of their own bias, and yet these are the years when we see the most equal treatment (by tone) of the Republican candidate. In fact, “maverick” John McCain – seen by many as a moderate Republican – suffered from roughly the same disparity in tone as Bob Dole, whom conventional wisdom, his own supporters, and a humorous anecdote in his own 2000 book peg as an arch-conservative. Given that, it is hard to argue that the *Times* exhibits an anti-Republican bias. At best, one might argue that they occasionally exhibit a slight pro-Democrat bias. It is, however, something to bear in mind when we turn our attention to the effects of tone of coverage later on in this project.

Overall, taking both media into account, tone favors the Democratic candidates. On one hand, we should probably not read too much into the finding. This is not a consistent result in both media (NBC’s coverage occasionally favored Republicans, after all), nor do we see sizeable differences between the two parties. On the other hand, there is a certain consistency within the results. There is no denying that even when there is a Republican advantage in tone of coverage, it is slight (a mean average advantage of 0.035), and yet when there is a Democratic advantage it is much more pronounced (a mean average advantage of 0.218). I am content, for the time being, to refrain from passing judgment beyond stating that there is a subtle Democratic preference within the *Times* data. Within the literature we see studies that demonstrate outlet-specific

tendencies towards positive treatment of one party over another, which wash out in the aggregate when we consider media outlets as a whole (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007, D'Alessio and Allen 2000), so a broad statement of media bias would be inappropriate even in the face of this finding.

An interesting finding, also noted earlier, is that coverage of candidates is more positive than negative. This goes beyond simply stating that someone benefits from the day's news: after all, even if both candidates had been mauled by the press, there is still one candidate who got the worst of it and one who was only slightly less maligned, rendering an "in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king" effect. What I note here is that the net tone of coverage of each candidate, *in its own right*, is very slightly positive. This is not only true when discussing the average daily tone, without including volume. Even when the volume factor is taken into account, coverage of nearly all candidates was still positive (see Table 4.3). Six of eight candidates (the sole exceptions both being sitting presidents at the time of the election) received, overall, more positive than negative coverage on NBC during the course of the general election campaign (the broadcast coverage, being the more sensitive of the two measures owing to the detail of that analysis, was used to generate the findings in Table 4.3). Here again we see a distinct advantage for the Democratic candidates, with only Clinton trailing his Republican challenger in terms of the absolute difference between seconds of positive and seconds of negative coverage. The Republican candidates trail the Democratic candidates by a ratio of nearly 2:1 in positive to negative coverage.

Table 4.3 – Total Seconds of Positive and Negative Coverage (broadcast) for Each Candidate

Election	D Pos	D Neg	D Net	R Pos	R Neg	R Net
1996	3080	3271	-191	2293	2082	211
2000	3414	2167	1247	2774	2066	708
2004	3167	2618	549	3731	3905	-174
2008	4171	1246	2925	4126	2482	1644
Sum			4530			2389

D Net and R Net indicate the net difference between positive and negative coverage for each candidate.

Coverage is more positive than negative for candidates even when we exclude the tone of coverage during the conventions, which provide a boost in the levels of positive coverage overall. Daily tone score averages were computed using the mean of all tone scores (the daily data, not the five-day-averaged data) from NBC and the *New York Times*, beginning ten days following the final convention’s close and running through Election Day. Although most years decline by some amount, and some years see a clear move towards the negative side of the tone scale, only one actually crosses into general negativity (2004, for Republican coverage), and even then only to an average tone score of -0.01. Overall, the tone scores hold up extremely well outside of the Convention period. While this seems to run counter to findings in other works (specifically, Farnsworth and Lichter 2007), I would point out that their data includes only the days after Labor Day, which may account for some of the difference seen here. As the campaigns move towards Election Day, tone becomes generally more negative for both candidates.

Table 4.4 – Average Daily Tone of Coverage Excluding Convention Coverage

Election	D Tone	R Tone
1996	0.21	0.06
2000	0.19	0.17
2004	0.05	-0.01
2008	0.20	0.03

In summary, I can make certain general statements about the overall tone of coverage during the general election campaign, and begin answering the first two questions to be addressed in this chapter: what is the overall tone of coverage, and do we see any particular partisan bias? Coverage of both candidates, in most years, is more positive than negative. This is true both in terms of the daily tonal average (only Bush in 2004 has generally negative coverage) and the total volume of positive vs. negative coverage. Only Clinton in 1996 and Bush in 2004 have more negative than positive coverage, which is most likely the result of one of two campaign dynamics: one, that political journalists are more critical of incumbents running for reelection; or two, that incumbents are more likely to be attacked by the opposition, as they are running on the record of the past four years. Additionally, there is a tonal advantage in favor of the Democratic candidates in most elections. Without making a claim of outright bias, it must be noted that both outlets examined in the project exhibit an empirically demonstrable level of positivity towards Democrats to a degree that outstrips that of the Republicans, even as both candidates receive generally positive coverage. Daily tone scores from the *New York Times* show a uniform advantage for Democratic candidates (in only one year, 2004, does the Republican even pull level with the Democrat). In addition, NBC aired coverage of Democratic presidential candidates that was more positive than negative, and the difference between the two was 190 percent larger for Democratic candidates than Republican candidates. So, to answer our first two

questions, coverage in the aggregate is generally positive for all candidates, but Democrats are, on average, *more positively* treated than Republicans.

We can now move on to intra-campaign shifts in tone of coverage. As previously noted, one goal of this project is to identify persistent, multi-election trends in media coverage of presidential candidates. Just as this was done with share of coverage, it will now be done with tone of coverage. Examination of shifts in tone of coverage revealed an interesting phenomenon: tone of coverage of one candidate appears to “follow” tone of coverage of the other candidate. Consider the graphs in Figures 4.2 and 4.3, which show the five-day moving average of daily tone score for each candidate (candidate-specific coverage, not conflated with volume). Figure 4.2 charts the tone of coverage using only the NBC data (which demonstrated less bias overall, and was more sensitive besides) and Figure 4.3 shows the merged measure of tone that incorporates the *New York Times* tone scores.

The figures below illustrate a remarkable degree of congruence. Although there are some periods of divergence early in the election cycle (during the convention periods), the lines settle into a steady course through most of the remainder of the election cycle. The NBC-only lines in Figure 4.2 are more stable than those in Figure 4.3 that add in the tone measures from the *Times*, but even those exhibit a healthy degree of correlation. In fact, tone of coverage of the individual candidates in each election are correlated with each other to a highly significant degree ($p < 0.01$) in Figure 4.2 (mean coefficient of 0.59), and in all but 2000 for the merged tone measure in Figure 4.3 (mean coefficient of 0.33).

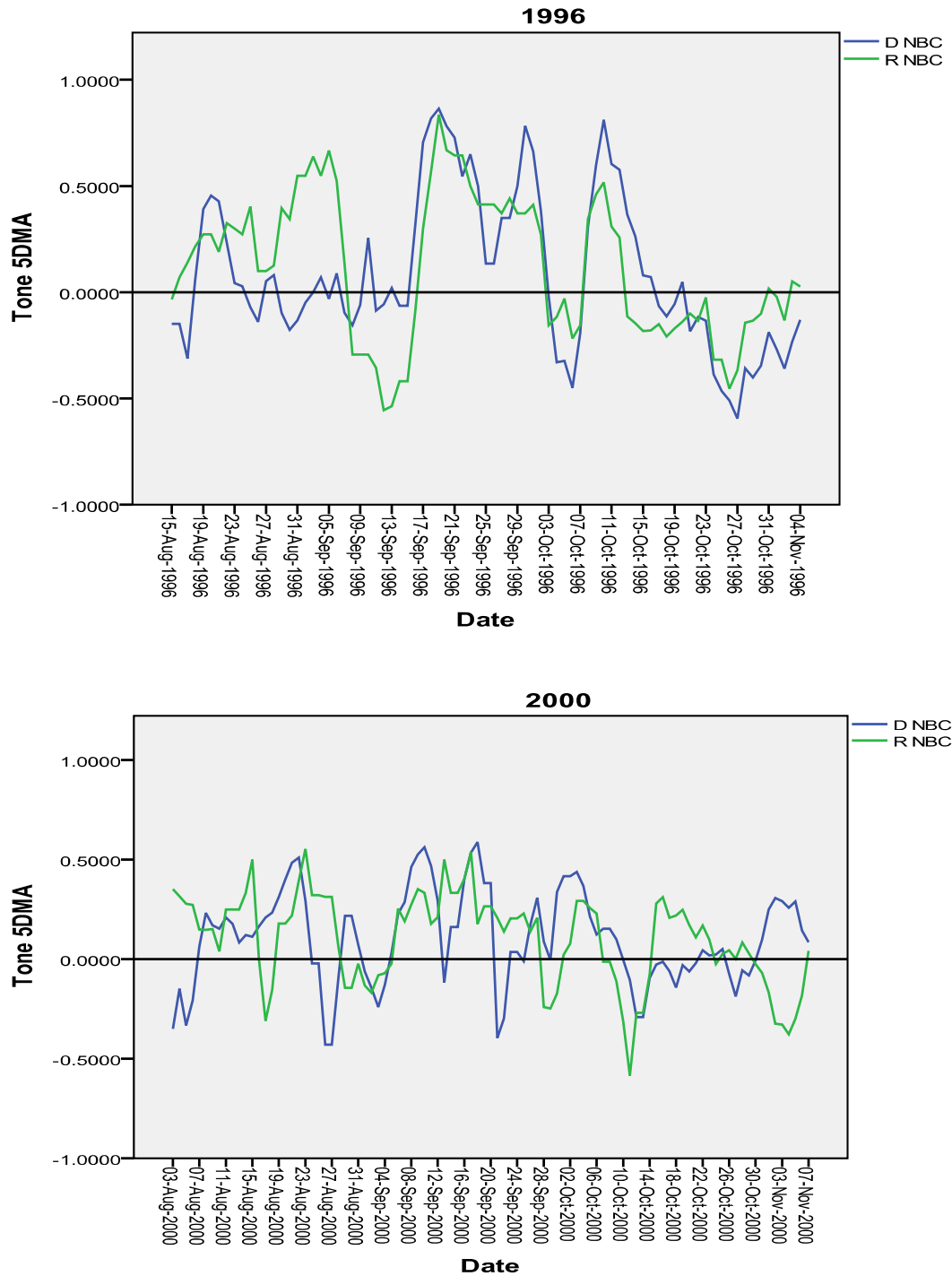
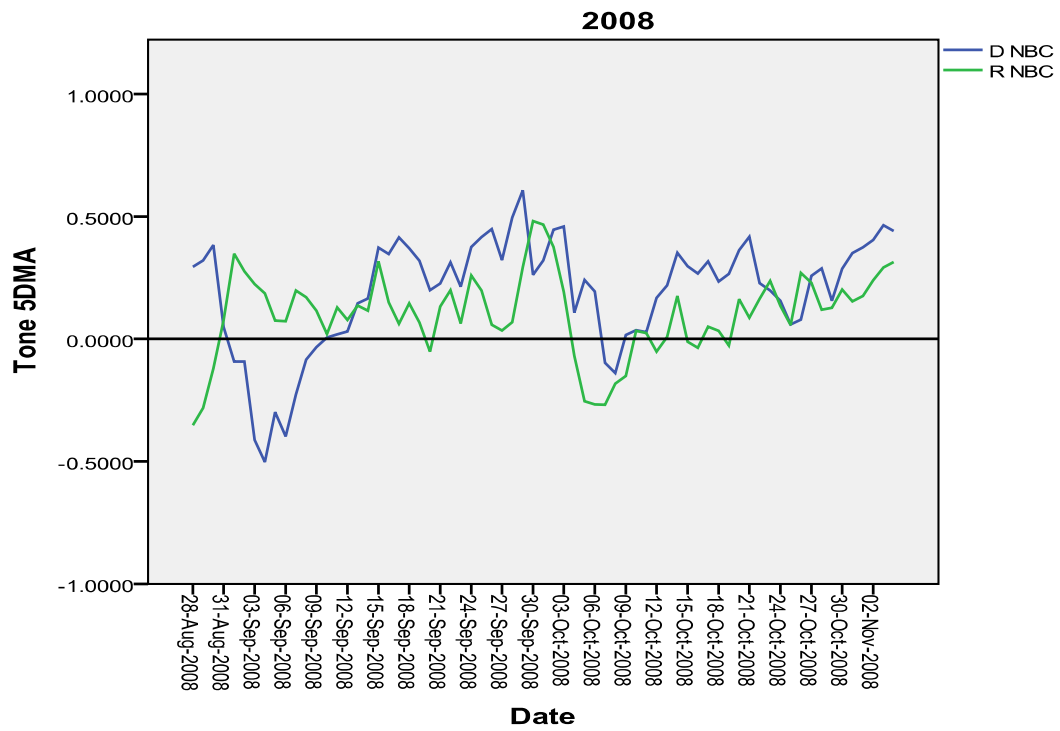
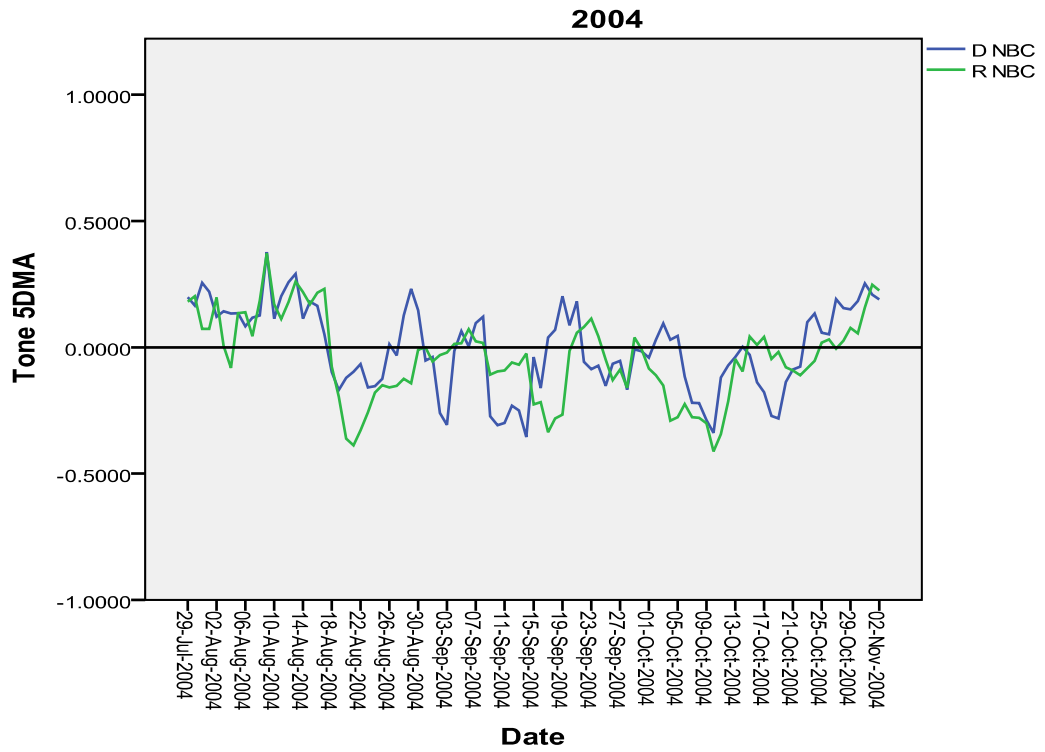


Figure 4.2. Time Series Analysis of Five-day Moving Average Tone Score for Broadcast, Candidate-specific Coverage.

Figure 4.2 (continued)



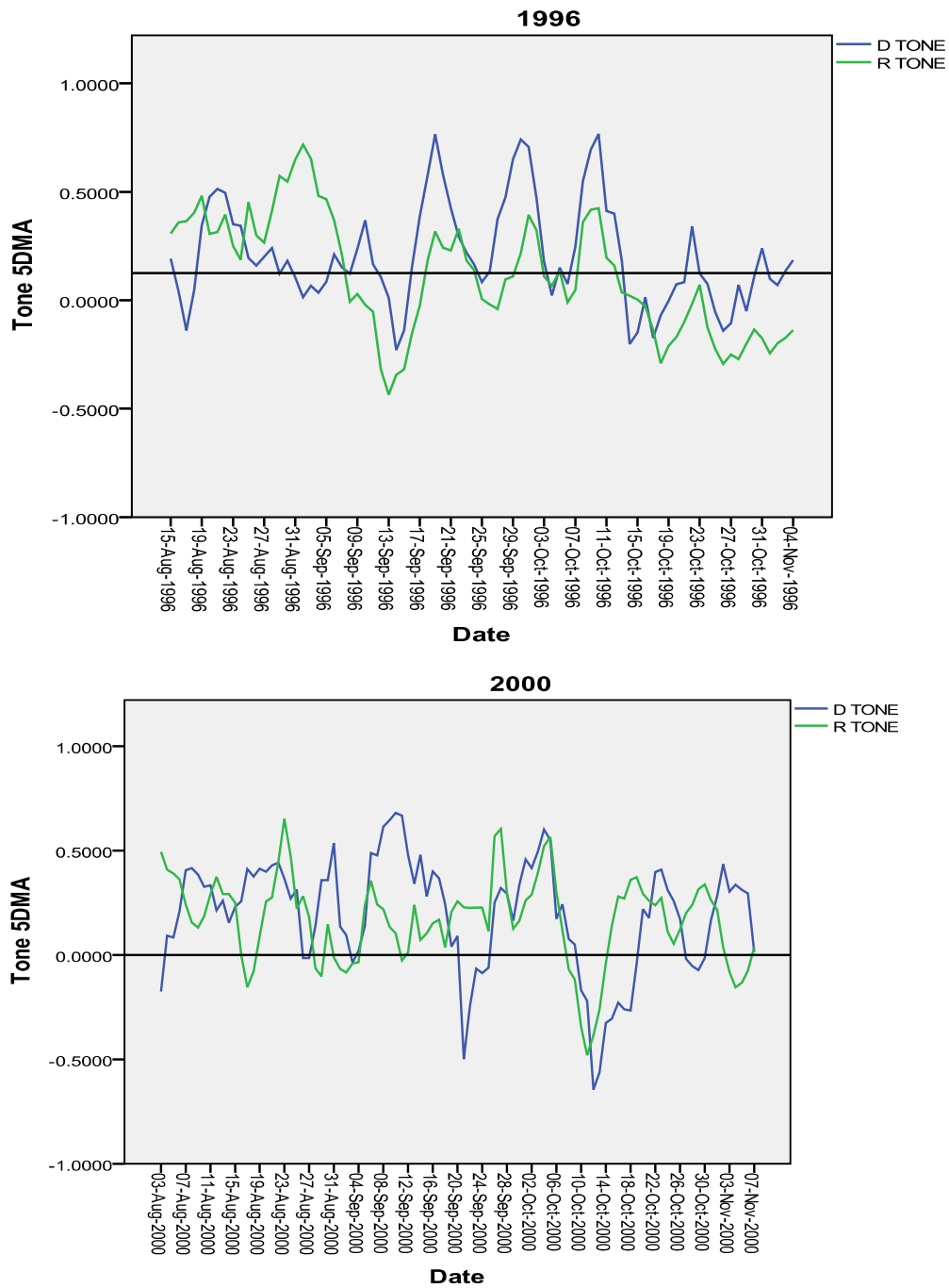
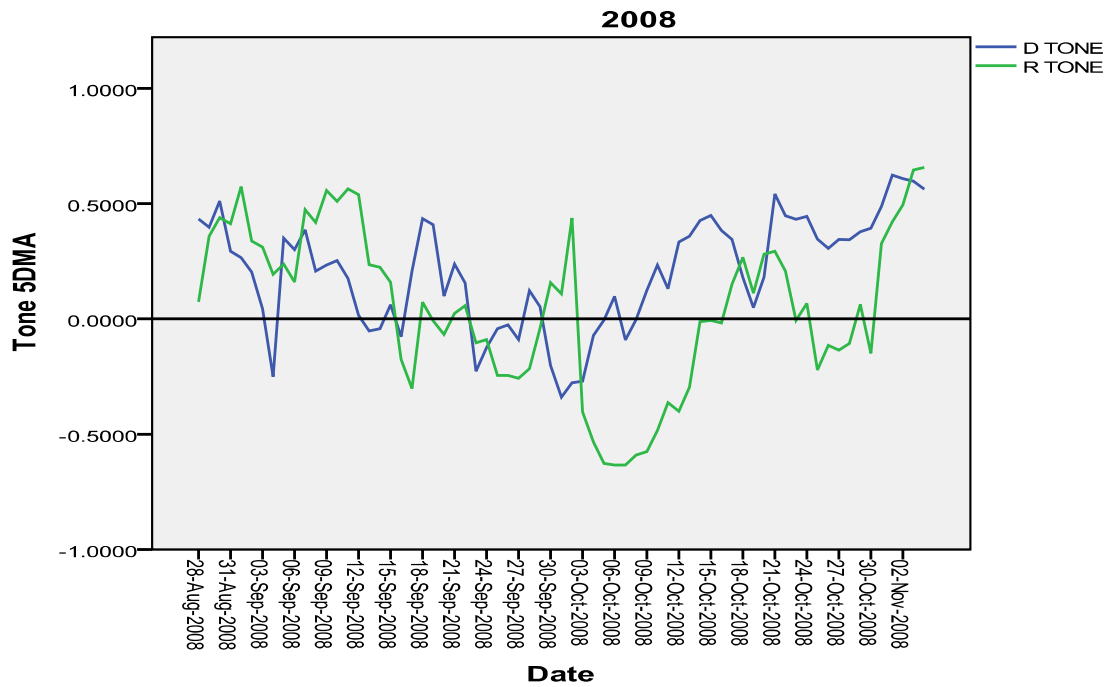
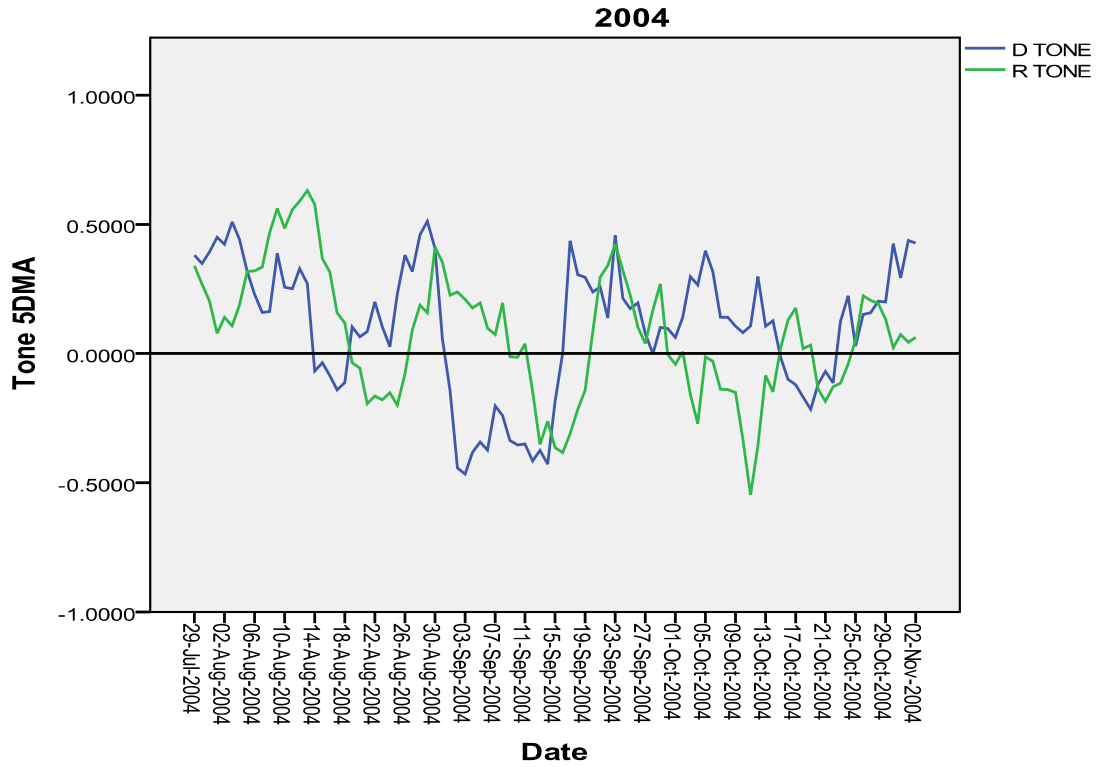


Figure 4.3. Time Series of Five-day Moving Average Tone Score for Print and Broadcast, Candidate-specific Coverage.

Figure 4.3 (Continued)



To further demonstrate the similarity of tone of coverage between the two candidates, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean tone of coverage at different stages of the campaign, with the results reported in Table 4.3. As expected (based on the visual evidence in Figure 4.2), by far the most common occurrence is that a comparison of mean tone yields an insignificant result, with only two exceptions: the 1996 convention period when Dole's tone score was very positive, and the final thirty days of the 2008 campaign when the same was true for Obama. In all other campaign periods and in all years (and for the total campaign, though the results are not reported here), the mean tone of coverage scores do not significantly differ. This, in conjunction with the high level of correlation between tone scores on a daily basis, is strong evidence in support of the third hypothesis, that tone will be significantly similar for candidates during all periods except the conventions.

This tone "dance" is, frankly, not what was expected by the model when tone was first measured for this project. Essentially, the expectation was that one of two influences would predominate: balance or objectivity. The model predicts that there would be very little variation at all, news directors and editors having reviewed the material for the evening's broadcast/day's publication and applied the journalistic ethic of balance to the tone of the day's news. However, in terms of the objectivity norm, there was also the possibility that tone would be driven by an objective description and analysis of the day's events for each candidate, and therefore we would see no relationship whatsoever between the two tone plots. Each candidate would have his good days and bad days, and they would be reported as such, the journalistic standards of objectivity having been

applied as appropriate and the tone naturally derived from the subjects of the stories reported. The results, though, suggest that some form of both occurred.

Table 4.4 – Comparison of Means by Independent Samples T-test for Convention, Post-Convention, and Final Thirty Days of the Campaign

	Dem Tone	Rep Tone	t	df	p
CONVENTION ONLY					
1996	.042 (.300)	.218 (.126)	-2.686	30	.012
2000	.055 (.199)	.176 (.202)	-1.703	30	.099
2004	.057 (.161)	.050 (.089)	0.152	30	.880
2008	-.078 (.278)	.072 (.201)	-1.634	26	.114
POST-CONVENTION					
1996	.222 (.357)	.223 (.405)	-.013	70	.990
2000	.175 (.275)	.173 (.200)	.054	94	.957
2004	-.007 (.165)	-.043 (.176)	1.073	101	.286
2008	.168 (.273)	.146 (.163)	.364	62	.687
FINAL 30 DAYS					
1996	-.047 (.367)	-.059 (.234)	.144	48	.886
2000	.014 (.156)	-.046 (.225)	1.196	52	.237
2004	-.029 (.170)	-.077 (.167)	1.111	58	.271
2008	.223 (.154)	.084 (.147)	3.677	62	.000

Dem Tone and Rep Tone report mean tone score of candidate-specific coverage (Standard Deviation in parentheses), from -1 to 1. CONVENTION ONLY represents tone during and immediately preceding/following the nominating conventions. POST-CONVENTION represents all days following the convention period (and, in 2004, the inter-convention days, since there was a month gap between the conventions) until the beginning of the final thirty days of the campaign. FINAL 30 DAYS represents the final thirty days up to and including Election Day.

On a given day, a news outlet receives coverage of each candidate from the reporting staff and notes his activities, any salient issues raised, his attacks or responses to attacks, and outside events that affect the campaign. The most newsworthy stories are selected, and the day’s broadcast or publication begins to take shape. In this sense, the process is objective and event-driven, and the “gatekeeping” model is operable, subject to

the news values of the specific events. However, at the same time, a journalistic ethic towards balance asserts itself. At this point, the more newsworthy items have been chosen, but to focus only on one candidate's good or bad fortune may open the outlet up to charges of bias. As a result, news stories are selected that paint the opposing candidate in a similar light as the candidate whose stories are driving the day's coverage. If such a scenario were, in fact, reality, we would expect to see much the same confluence as we see in Figures 4.2 and 4.3.

A qualitative analysis of these shifts of tone of coverage was undertaken to attempt to determine what was causing the shifts. The best explanation that emerged was that periods of joint negativity were characterized by the presence of a high number of attacks and counterattacks on the part of the candidates. In other words, much of the negativity in tone was the result of the candidates' own words: since a statement made by a candidate attacking his opponent was coded as negative coverage (as, indeed, it is), and since attacks were often shown in tandem, the overall tone for the day was driven downward for *both* candidates, leading to joint-negative periods. These attacks did not necessarily correspond, either - whether related to the same issue or not, when an attack was shown for one candidate, a corresponding attack from the other candidate was often aired. Add to this the fact that the reporters, anchors, and pundits would often amplify this effect by repeating and discussing the attacks, and what we see is strong negative pressure on the measure of tone at a given time.

Examination of periods of positive coverage was a bit less clear. Positive coverage was, firstly, characterized by the absence of attacks, but that is not terribly surprising. Joint-positive periods most often appeared when volume of coverage was

relatively low, and when the content of that coverage was mainly concerned with comparison (by the broadcast) of candidate issue positions. Those segments – which focused on a presentation of each candidate’s position on a particular issue or issue area – contained generally positive coverage for both candidates. These segments generally appeared in the Post-convention period. Another consistent facet of joint-positive coverage (though not generally at the same time as the issue-comparison segments) was the presence of candidate interviews conducted by the specific news outlet. Candidate interviews by the media allow for lengthy periods of positive coverage, since the candidate is providing the content in his own words. News outlets nearly always interview both candidates, on successive days, which creates only a very slight phase shift in the coding, but appears in graphical form as an upward trend at about the same date. Why each of these segments appear when they do is not clear. By comparison to attacks, which are “scheduled” (for lack of a better term) by the campaigns, the timing of these positive segments is decided entirely by the media.

In any case, it is certainly clear that it cannot simply be the campaign’s activities that drive candidate-specific tone of coverage, unless we are prepared to believe that the candidates behave in such similar ways that coverage of them yields the same average tone. As for the major common campaign events (conventions, debates), there is no apparent connection between their appearance and the tone of coverage a candidate receives, except for a general trend towards positive coverage during the conventions (though even this is not universal, as we saw in Chapter Three). Turning to the debate period, we see that, in fact, this is among the more balanced periods in terms of tone, regardless of the winner or loser of the debate. “Winning” the debate (determined by

using overnight polling by CNN, asking respondents which candidate won the debate) correlates to a tone advantage over the opponent over the next two days in only six of eleven debates, or just more than half – which, of course, means that in just under half of the cases the “winner” received more negative coverage than his opponent in the days immediately following the debate. Overall tone for the debate period (mean average of the combined tone scores of each candidate from the day before the first debate to the day after the final debate, NBC coverage only) is slightly more positive for the Democrats at 0.11, which is consistent with previous findings in this chapter that show a general tonal favorability towards the Democratic candidate. Ultimately, though, tone does not appear to be particularly sensitive to the major campaign events, which puts it in a different category than volume of coverage, which was decidedly event-driven.

We can now turn to answering the second two questions in this section: is there a general level of positivity or negativity towards candidates, or do we see large shifts in tone; and are any observed shifts in tone tied to traditional campaign events? There can be no doubt that significant shifts in tone of coverage towards both candidates occur, even when large daily changes are smoothed out with a moving average and a normalized scale to prevent volume from overshadowing the ratio of positive to negative coverage. The remarkable finding here is not that shifts in tone occur, but that they occur in generally the same direction for *both* candidates at the same time (to such a degree that the tone scores of the candidates correlate to each other to a statistically significant degree). At the same time, shifts in tone do not appear to be tied to any particular campaign events, though they are tied to campaign *actions* (specifically, negative periods feature candidates on the attack). Aside from the expected reaction of tone during the

conventions (generally positive), there appears to be little predictable reaction to the debates.

In describing the general election media environment in terms of tone, then, we can reasonably assert that it is, first and somewhat surprisingly, a generally positive environment. Candidates receive overall tone scores for the course of the general election that are more positive than negative, and all but two candidates (both incumbents seeking reelection) received a larger absolute volume of positive coverage than negative coverage. Second, it is also an environment that appears to favor Democratic candidates, in terms of the overall tone of coverage, but only slightly. Third, shifts in tone of coverage are common, and the media do not appear to exhibit any consistent positive or negative treatment of candidates: both candidates have their good and bad days and weeks. In fact, these bad days tend to fall on the opposition's bad days as well, which has significant implications for the search for evidence of tone effects. Last, we see that tone is generally positive during the conventions (though not to any remarkable degree – tone is generally positive, but modestly so), but intervention analysis shows that it does not otherwise react predictably to other campaign events (primarily, the debates).

The conclusion that I reach here is not that tone is irrelevant to those exposed to media content, but rather that since coverage of both candidates is more or less equally positive or negative there is only so much damage that can be wrought by any spate of coverage. The implications for campaigns have the potential to change the way in which candidates view media management. If bad news all around means no real harm to either candidate, then provoking negative coverage of the opposition via a direct attack or criticism is potentially an effective defense against one's own negative coverage. We can

assume that this would drive the average tone of coverage to the negative, but in the eyes of the candidate, so what? If shared negativity is no negativity, then the worst one does is maintain one's current standing in the polls. This is not to say that there are not degrees of negativity: obviously, some allegations are more damaging than others. Despite that, the "best defense is a good offense" argument potentially applies here.

The general positivity of the tone of coverage towards the candidates shown here is interesting. It suggests a number of things about the approach of political journalists to coverage of the campaigns, and sets aside some misperceptions about media treatment of candidates. Clearly, the media are not uniformly out to "get" the candidates, at least when the situation does not merit such treatment. An image of political journalists as wolves on the hunt or as sharks waiting for the next feeding frenzy are not supported by the data shown here, and whatever "gotcha" journalism exists does not manifest itself as solely negative coverage: there is also a counterbalance of positive coverage. No bias that I am aware of exists in the coding scheme that would result in a tendency to lean towards positivity, and it would seem that there are more than enough statements made in the media with the potential to help one side or the other. This is not to suggest that periods of excess negativity do not exist, but it is worth noting that the positives ultimately outweigh the negatives when examined at the daily level. In reviewing the coverage, I agree that it does seem as if negativity is rampant, yet when all of the numbers are in we see that there was more positivity than it seemed at the time. This may well be a manifestation of a perceptual bias on our own part, whereby negative coverage tends to jump out at us, whereas positive coverage simply fades into the background. In any case, a "negative" media system is not seen in the two news outlets

studied here, even if it does elsewhere, and there is no reason to believe that other media outlets are significantly different from these in terms of tone.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to illustrate differences in the coverage of the two candidates during the general election campaign in two areas: share of coverage and tone of coverage. In both areas we see a high level of variability, but in only one is there genuine imbalance. Tone of coverage, for all of its variability (a genuinely “neutral” day, when positive and negative statements balance each other, is a rarity), remains balanced between the two candidates. Rarely is coverage much more or less positive for one candidate than the other, and tone scores are quantitatively similar throughout most of the election cycle and across all years. In that sense, it is “balanced,” but it is important to clarify exactly how, since that term would give a false impression without this explanation, suggesting that it is “neutral.” It should also be noted that this balance is not quite as balanced as it could be: Democratic candidates seem to receive a larger share of positive coverage than Republicans, on average, though this imbalance is not sufficiently large or consistent as to merit charges of systematic bias – only, perhaps, a slight degree of favoritism.

Share of coverage, on the other hand, is both highly variable *and* imbalanced. Large peaks and troughs are visible in the graphical analysis of relative advantage in share of coverage, and not only during the conventions. Additionally, share of coverage is not even balanced in the aggregate, contrary to the conclusion reached by D’Alessio and Allen’s meta-analysis of statement bias (2000). This net imbalance is seen for the

complete general election period, as well as in distinct phases of the campaign. This finding is important, because it calls into question the conclusion that news coverage of the campaigns is essentially equal in the aggregate, and therefore any intra-campaign variations are of minor importance, and any effects should largely cancel each other out. Imbalance in the media environment is real, and if it causes preference-altering effects then journalists and news outlets are potentially changing the outcome of elections by their choice of stories and subjects

CHAPTER 5

MEDIA AGENDA BUILDING AND THE CAMPAIGNS

As already noted, the news does not simply “happen,” it is created. The media agenda is built, not born, and as a result it is subject to influence. The theoretical model employed here suggests that news is selected and modified at various steps in the news production process, and is not reflective of some basic reality. Since this is a study of the impact of the campaigns on the media, and the impact of the news on how the people view the campaign, it is highly relevant to consider the extent to which campaigns can successfully set the media agenda. We will begin with a review of a fundamentally important component – what do candidates actually *say* – and relate that to what is reported in the press. Conflict and novelty are the keys to attracting media attention, and campaigns are in a position to offer both. This can be demonstrated in terms of what issues are discussed in the press: of the myriad issues mentioned by the candidates, only a few appear in print and over the airwaves. Overall, when it comes to coverage of the campaigns, conflict is king, and if that is true in campaigns, then the issues that are covered by the media should be those on which the candidates both disagree *and* voice that disagreement at the same time, creating the simple and attractive story dynamic that journalists prefer to employ. Other issues will likely be ignored, or at least not come into the picture until journalists and news outlets find their own reasons for including them.

For the Record

So, what do candidates say? To answer this question, we can make use of the Annenberg-Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse. The dataset includes transcripts of public remarks at all events for both major presidential candidates for the year 1996 (and earlier, but this is the only year within the scope of this study), between September 1st and the end of the election cycle (either Election Day or the evening prior)ⁱ. Each transcript provides the date and location of the event, the candidate speaking, a list of subject headings that describe the contents of the speech and, of course, the remarks themselves. The project makes use of nearly 900 distinct subject headings, but they were re-coded here to match the codes used in the content analysis. Nearly all of the project subject headings fit easily into an existing coded category (for example, “Disaster Relief – Florida” was re-coded into “Natural Disasters”). Additionally, I read each set of remarks to get an overall sense of how the speeches themselves changed over the course of the general election campaign. I was also curious to note any distinctions that could be made between the candidates in terms of the frequency of their mentions of the campaign, strategy, the opposing candidate, the media, or any other material that may not have been significant enough to warrant a subject heading mention. Such a review was necessary, since it allows for a comparison between the discourse of the campaign and the *reported* campaign, which are frequently (if not typically) not the same thing. See, by way of explanation, the quote offered in *Edited for Television*: “We don’t, as a general rule, report what the candidates *say*” (Kerbel 1998, 56; emphasis in the original). In any

ⁱ According to the project’s director, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the archive is a complete record of all prepared remarks given in public from text. The remarks were sent to the project by the respective campaign staffs (personal correspondence).

case, this archive provides a useful real-world “template” against which we can compare media coverage to what is actually being said in the course of the campaign. While this archive does not allow us to take into account advertising, leaks, external events, and other factors that may affect coverage, it does at least allow us to identify what the candidates – the focus of all of this attention – are bringing to the table.

Stump speeches, as other authors have noted, are exercises in repetition. They change gradually, if at all, and wholesale changes are virtually unheard of. In nearly every case (at least in 1996), any speech that departed significantly from the standard stump speech was being delivered to a specialized group (veterans, union members, etc.) for which a more “tailored” set of remarks was offered. In examining the text of the candidates’ speeches, it is not difficult to see that there is no shortage of issue discussion on the candidates’ part. The mean number of issues discussed in each set of public remarks for the year studied was 5.79 per speech, and this measure was approximately the same for both candidates: Clinton’s speeches were slightly more issue-broad, at 5.84 per speech, but Dole trailed only slightly at 5.52 issues per speech. The candidates, between them, discussed 35 issues over the three months of codingⁱⁱ. Though the issue profile for each candidate and his speeches differed, the non-issue content spoken by each candidate bore a high degree of similarity to the other. For one, despite the overwhelming advantage of strategy and horserace coverage in the media, candidates spend very little time on those aspects of the campaign. In fact, it is rare for any remarks to contain more than a few mentions of the competitive nature of the campaign in

ⁱⁱ Annenberg-Pew codes were re-coded to correspond to the codes used in the content analysis procedure used herein. For the coding scheme used in this project, see Appendix A.

introduction, and the customary “we’re going to win” language in conclusion. This is to be expected, given that the horserace is a media frame, rather than a campaign frame, but it was useful to see that media focus on the horserace is not prompted by the campaigns, but by the journalists themselves. Both candidates did, in the waning days of the campaign, also seem disposed towards urging audiences to vote, and the frontrunner urged audiences to take nothing for granted, but there was very little competitive language in these speeches. This voter turnout theme was popular with the media as well, and in competitive years we see an average of more than ten minutes of voter turnout coverage in the two weeks preceding Election Day (624 seconds in 2000, 637 in 2004, and 609 in 2008).

Clinton was the more likely of the two candidates to mention a non-issue, campaign-centered event or factor, though this seems, at least on the surface, to be more of a candidate-centered trait. Reading over a random selection of speeches from campaigns of the past 20 years shows that this does not appear to be a common trait of either incumbents or challengers, Republicans or Democrats. Into the modern era (for which we do not have the same depth of data available, but the ever-increasing reach of services like YouTube makes full-length video of some speeches available) there is at least anecdotal evidence that, occasionally, campaign issues can become more prominent in campaign remarks. McCain, in 2008, spent a fair amount of time on the stump discussing media treatment of Sarah Palin, which did not bear directly on any issue, though at the time it was occasionally framed as a civil rights or gender issue.

Turning to the issues addressed by each candidate, each candidate’s speeches were coded by the study and recoded to match the issue codes for this project, and from

those codes a list of “top” issues was created. For each candidate, I compiled a list of the ten most-commonly included issues in his remarks. This list does not account for the absolute volume of time spent by each candidate on the issue, only the number of speeches in which the issue appeared. In order to be included in the Pew-Annenberg coding, an issue was required to be the subject of at least one paragraph within the text, so each counted observation represents an opportunity for the issue to be covered by political reporters (as opposed to simply a casual mention-in-passing). The candidates delivered 186 speeches between September 1st and Election Day, at regular intervals (usually 1-2 per day). There were occasionally periods when no candidate made an appearance, but the norm was at least one speech by each candidate on any given day of the election cycle.

The issue agenda pursued by a candidate is not (or, rather, should not be) arbitrary. Agenda setting causes changes in issue salience, and in turn changes the standards and conditions under which candidates are evaluated by voters, and campaigns are wise to attempt to actively manage the agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Carsey 2000, Petrocik 1991 and 1996, Riker 1993). Issue ownership theory suggests that candidates of different parties are perceived as being more capable in addressing specific issues better than their opposition, and that candidates do well to emphasize those issues that are most beneficial to them and least beneficial to their opponents (Petrocik 1996, 826). At the same time, candidates may emphasize issues that are traditionally owned by the opposition when they feel they have a demonstrable advantage over their opponent on the issue (Carsey 2000), when they trail in the polls (Damore 2004), or when the issue is important to a large segment of voters (Downs 1953). Holian (2004) also shows that

campaigns may be able to “neutralize” the traditional advantages held by one party on a certain issue, as Clinton did in 1996 (95). In light of this, we see that there are incentives in both directions: candidates may, by turns, wish to emphasize traditionally owned issues or those of the opposition, depending on the campaign and the electorate.

The Clinton campaign speeches offer a familiar profile of issues for a left-of-center candidate (see Table 5.1). Education and the welfare state top Clinton’s agenda during this period, with mentions in approximately 68 percent of his remarks. Also mentioned in at least half of Clinton’s speeches were crime, healthcare, science (primarily in the earlier stage of the general election campaign), and the economy. He addressed 29 issues in total, with 13 issues appearing in at least 10 percent of stump speeches. The content of the speeches spent approximately equal time on both prospective and retrospective comments, emphasizing the accomplishments of the first Clinton administration as well as the proposed programs for the second Clinton administration. Clinton delivered 110 speeches between September 1st and Election Day, or 1.7 speeches per day.

The Dole campaign, also keeping close to traditional Republican issues, focused on issues that can be considered comfortable and beneficial to most Republican candidates. His top issue, by far, was fiscal policy, which was mentioned in 82 percent of his remarks. The next two issues – each appearing in more than half of Dole’s remarks – were crime and values, the latter of which referred to the need to restore integrity to the presidency (a not-so-veiled reference to Clinton’s as-yet-not-fully-exposed personal weaknesses). 26 issues were addressed, with a slightly broader base than Clinton’s: despite the recurring theme of fiscal policy (taxing and spending), 17 issues were

mentioned in at least 10 percent of Dole’s remarks. Dole also spent about equal time on the past and future, but he obviously took a more negative view of the previous four years. Dole delivered 76 speeches during the general election period, or 1.17 per day. This was fewer than Clinton by a significant margin, and Dole’s speeches were not appreciably longer than Clinton’s, nor did they address as many issues overall. Having said that, both candidates were undoubtedly active campaigners, and the amount of travel shows that both reached a wide variety of audiences, locales, and interests.

Table 5.1 – Most Common Issues Mentioned by Candidates in 1996

Issue	Clinton Mentioned	Dole Mentioned
Education	75	29
Welfare/Poverty	72	0
Crime/Guns/Drugs	67	43
Healthcare	61	32
Science	60	0
Economy	56	17
Environment	47	0
Volunteerism	33	0
Fiscal Policy	32	62
Race	30	0
Constitution	0	21
Fundraising	0	25
Role of Government	0	33
Social Security	0	23
Values	0	40

Columns indicate the number of speeches in which a candidate mentioned each issue. Table includes the top ten issues mentioned by each campaign, regardless of whether the opposing campaign mentioned the issue. Bold indicates issues common to both campaigns.

There were, naturally, differences in the issues discussed between the candidates (since each candidate would prefer to focus on issues beneficial to their own candidacy), but there were also, as noted in Table 5.1, some areas where both campaigns raised the

same issues. The candidates shared five of their top ten issues, specifically (and alphabetically): crime, economy, education, fiscal policy, and healthcare. Such agreement does not come about by accident: rather, it is the result of a calculation. Candidate control over many areas is subject to conditions and circumstances, but certainly in this case – candidate remarks – the candidates are unconstrained except by their own campaign strategies and goals. This kind of heresthetic calculation is common in campaigns (see, for example, Riker 1986 and Carsey 2000), and the rational assumption one can reach regarding the focus of campaign remarks is that, when there is issue agreement, one of two things is happening: either one campaign is emphasizing a popular or salient issue and compelling the opposition to respond to it, or *both* campaigns believe that the issue will be of benefit to their campaign. If it is the second, then one campaign has miscalculated, since with the benefit of hindsight we can observe which campaign benefited from the inclusion of an issue. If the first, however, then it is theoretically possible to drive the opposition to address issues to which he or she is ill-suited. One hypothesis to be tested here is whether it is also true that an issue emphasized by both campaigns is more likely to receive coverageⁱⁱⁱ, and rather than test this proposition in the aggregate (which increases the likelihood of confounding by virtue of external events), it will be tested here by examining whether dual-candidate mentions of an issue on the same day increases the predictability of that issue being covered in that day's news.

One facet of this topic that must be considered before moving on to media coverage of issues is the role of agenda setting, both for the candidates and the media.

ⁱⁱⁱ H4: Issues which are jointly emphasized by the campaigns will be covered by the media, while issues which are mentioned by only one candidate will not.

Do candidates discuss issues of interest to the public? The media? Both? Regardless of the answer, it is relevant to ask which issues the public felt were the most important in 1996. Open-ended polling on the “most important problem” to be addressed in 1996 was only available in June and July (prior to the start of coding period), and indicated agreement in three separate polls that the five most important issues were crime, the economy, fiscal policy, values, and education^{iv}. According to a poll conducted at the start of the coding period^v (referenced here to be investigate if issues of importance were those discussed by candidates, at the time they were discussed), the most important issues did not vary much from earlier open-ended polling responses, and the important issues were drugs & crime, education, the economy, the federal budget deficit, fiscal policy (taxes), and moral leadership. Crime & drugs and education were tied for first with 17 percent of respondents, the economy received 14 percent, deficit reduction netted 13 percent of respondents, tax policy received 7 percent, and moral leadership was last on this list with 6 percent. While the number of response alternatives here is limited due to the closed-ended nature of the question, we can at least see a clear demarcation between concern over the top three issues (two, really, since deficit reduction and tax policy are both fiscal policy issues) and the bottom three. Not only this, but the two top vote-getters

^{iv} New York Times Poll, June 1996; Pew News Interest Index Poll, July 1996; Gallup Poll, July 1996. All used an identical question: “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?”

^v U.S. News, Sep, 1996. Retrieved Dec-21-2010 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.libproxy.temple.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html
Question text: Which of the following is the most important issue for the next president to deal with: fighting the drugs and crime problem, improving education, cutting taxes, improving the economy, cutting the federal budget deficit, or focusing on strong moral leadership? And which issue do you think is next most important for the (next) president to deal with?

in this poll correspond precisely to the two most common issues discussed by the candidates (in the aggregate) in their speeches, as recorded by the Pew-Annenberg archive. It is possible that frequent mention of these issues results in public acknowledgment of their importance, or vice versa. It is highly relevant that both the public and the candidates, in the aggregate, agree on the importance of campaign issues. An additional guide is an issue-rating measure^{vi} put in the field at about this same point that asked respondents to rate the importance of ten issues, which offered a broader selection of issues. The results (see Table 5.2) also indicate that education and crime were the two most important issues facing the electorate in 1996.

Table 5.2 – Popular Rating of Issue Importance at the Start of the 1996 General Election Campaign

Issue	Mean Rating
Education	8.8
Crime	8.6
Healthcare	8.4
Taxes	8.1
Environment	7.7
Political Reform	6.9
Abortion	6.5

^{vi} Wirthlin Quorum Survey, Sep, 1996. Retrieved Dec-21-2010 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.libproxy.temple.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html
 Question Text: (When people choose which political candidates they are going to vote for, they usually consider the candidates' positions on a number of issues. Some issues may be more important than others. I'd like you to think about the issue that is most important to you when you vote. Let's call that issue a '10' and let's call your least important issue a '1'. Where would you rate each of the following issues on that scale from 1 to 10?)... [Issue].

Issue Reporting and Conflict

Having identified the most commonly discussed issues among the candidates and the most important issues in the minds of the electorate in 1996, we can now turn to what the media reported that election year. Media were considered to have covered an issue when the discussion centered on a policy debate or a candidate issue position, and/or the effect of the issue on the lives of the people or the nation. Statements that address issues in a competitive, political, or strategic context were coded as Strategy/Campaign statements. For example, the statement, “Senator McCain’s support for the war in Iraq is likely costing him votes in swing states” is a horserace statement, despite the backdrop of foreign policy. Even a cursory examination of the coded content demonstrates the media preference for horserace and strategy coverage (see Chapter Three). It is equally clear that issue coverage is not the media’s first priority, and that the vast majority of issues mentioned in the candidates’ speeches are not reported in any substantive way: in neither breadth nor depth of coverage do we see a commitment to issue reporting. Just to compare, the candidates raised in 1996, on average, more than five issues per day, *per candidate*. The media sources coded here, by comparison, reported on only an average of 1.4 issues per day, and 17 of 65 days (26 percent) had no issue coverage at all. Volume of issue coverage totaled only an average of 56 seconds per day on NBC over the course of the general election in 1996. This number drops considerably if we include only the 65 days for which we have the candidates’ remarks (beginning in September), as 1996 was particularly issue-rich during the convention period, so this figure of less than one minute per day on issues, on average, is actually understating the lack of issue reporting. There are no observable period effects here, either – of the eleven most issue-heavy days,

five occurred in September and six occurred in October. In fairness, it would be nearly impossible to cover *all* issues raised by the candidates, since they address a broad range of issues at nearly every opportunity for public remarks, but certainly it is fair to note that although the candidates spend little time on strategy and horserace coverage in their remarks and the bulk of their time on issues, the media (at least those coded here) do not seem to follow suit.

In the aggregate, we see virtually no relationship between the issues discussed by the individual candidates and the volume of media coverage of that issue. Table 5.3, below, shows the results of regressing volume of coverage of issues on the number of days an issue was mentioned by a candidate, as well as the same regression for the *total* issue mentions by *both* candidates. The decision to utilize “days on which an issue was mentioned/covered” as the operational definition of the variables was made to de-emphasize volume as an influence on candidates and journalists alike. This is justifiable for several reasons. First, it leaves intact the structural arrangements of the news-production process. Candidates speak, and the political press selects what to report. Certainly when candidates speak at greater length on a specific issue (though even a cursory examination of the candidates’ remarks show that this is rare) they provide a greater selection of sound bites and positions on that issue, but it is equally true that if political reporters choose to report on a different issue in the same speech there is more than enough material to choose from, given the ever-shrinking space given over to candidate remarks in the media.

As Table 5.3 shows, there is a significant relationship between the total number of issue mentions by *both* candidates and the volume of coverage on a specific issue. This

relationship disappears, though, when we compare single-candidate aggregate issue mentions and volume of coverage of that issue. When it comes to the aggregate issue agenda of the press, then, it appears that there is a relationship between what the candidates discuss and the media transmit to the electorate, but only to the extent that the probability of those issues being transmitted increases significantly when both candidates are discussing those issues.

Table 5.3 – Regression of Media Reporting of Issue by Volume on Aggregate Issue Mentions by Candidates

	Both Candidates		Clinton		Dole	
	B	Std Dev	B	Std Dev	B	Std Dev
Volume of Coverage	3.3	1.5	2.2	2.1	2.5	2.2
Significance	.040		.308		.287	
N	29		29		29	
r²	.147		.039		.065	

Independent variables used are total issue mentions by each candidate, individually, and combined (for “Both Candidates”). Dependent variable is total volume of coverage of that issue by seconds of coverage on NBC’s Nightly News and number of stories about that issue in the New York Times.

Four of the five “shared” issues in each candidate’s top ten are among those that are covered by the media during the campaign. It is interesting to note, however, that these issues are not the *most*-covered (see Table 5.4). While the candidates’ top issues are also the public’s top issues (correlation only, since it is unclear whether one is causing the other or if external factors are causing both), media mentions of the top two issues of the public/politicians are actually 4th and 8th on this list (crime and education, respectively). Healthcare, which is the third most-commonly mentioned issue by both candidates as well as the third most-important issue in the view of the public is not even represented, even though to crack the media top-ten required only two days in which the issue was even mentioned. Healthcare was only mentioned on one day of the general election period. At the very least, this suggests that issue salience – as determined by

candidate speeches and/or public opinion polling – is not the most significant factor in determining which issues the media will cover. If it were, we would expect to see an increase in the number of days in which those issues received attention, *even if* the overall media focus was on horserace and strategy coverage.

Table 5.4 – Most Common Issues Covered by the Media in 1996

Issue	Days Mentioned	Conflict Rate (N)
Values	20	88% (8)
Foreign Policy	16	69% (26)
Fundraising	12	60% (5)
Fiscal Policy	11	63% (16)
Crime/Guns/Drugs	10	63% (8)
Economy	7	27% (11)
Immigration	3	66% (3)
Education	2	33% (3)
Abortion	2	50% (4)
Race	2	0% (0)

Bold indicates issues emphasized by both campaigns.

What, then, determines the most commonly-mentioned issues in the press? As stated earlier in this project (see the Literature Review of what motivates journalists in Chapter Two), it is conflict that is attractive to the media. In the table above, a “Conflict Rate” was measured, to bolster support for this conclusion. *New York Times* headlines were coded for presence or absence of conflict language, that is, they included mentions of competition between the candidates (“Clinton and Dole compete for Florida’s seniors”), mentions of “attacks” by or against candidates, and violent or war-like metaphors (“Dole still battling for black voters”). Conflict language was much more common in headlines that addressed issues that were more-commonly reported. This suggests that some issues are simply more conflict-friendly than others, and that they are in turn receiving greater levels of coverage.

Taking the three most-reported issues in 1996 into account, we see that this theme runs through each issue, and in a far more compelling way than in the other issues. The most-reported issue by number of days in the spotlight is Values. Material coded in this manner was that which meets the following standard (see Appendix A for the complete coding scheme): “References to ‘Values’ refers to any mention of ethical, honorable, or dignified behavior with regard to the Office of the Presidency, the campaigns, or the like. It is distinct from areas of personal credibility or a ‘say anything to get elected’ mentality, which is properly coded as either a campaign item or a credibility gap item.” Dole frequently cited Clinton’s ethical and moral failings as President – it was his third most-common issue, and was mentioned in more than half of his speeches. Comments of this type – those that call for a return to moral leadership in the Oval Office – are inherently attack-oriented, since they impugn the current (or, at least, recent) officeholder and his or her party, by association. Moreover, it was during this time that the media were also reporting on the Whitewater case and the Morris prostitution case, in addition to Clinton’s existing reputation for questionable behavior in and out of office, so it is not difficult to imagine how these reports came to be included in a day’s news selection, as they were consistent with Clinton’s public persona, and therefore presented a familiar theme to the reporters.

Foreign policy, as the second-most-mentioned issue in the media during this time, is also primarily a conflict-based issue, both between the candidates and among the participants on the world stage. Foreign policy coverage, as observed by the author during the course of the content analysis for this project, rarely focuses on the cooperative or diplomatic elements of foreign affairs. For every infrequent story about a

new trade deal, there are several others about a potential trade war or retaliation for tariffs. For every international agreement, there are several stories about increasing tensions or the ineffectiveness of those same agreements. In this case, the bulk of foreign policy coverage was the result of Iraqi incursions into Kurdish areas and the violent US response, as well as a summit between Israeli and Arab leaders at the White House; the Israeli-Palestinian situation is, not coincidentally, perhaps the most conflict-laden mediation of the modern era. Not only this, but the issue elicits coverage of conflict between the candidates: of eighteen conflict-based headlines relating to foreign policy, in the *Times* during the 1996 election, half were focused on disputes between the candidates or their surrogates on the foreign policy goals and strategies of the United States. One other element of foreign policy coverage in this election dealt with campaign contributions from foreign interests, which leads us to our third-most-common issue in coverage of the 1996 election.

Fundraising and campaign finance are common topics in media coverage of elections, especially in 1996. Distinguishing “horserace” fundraising coverage from “issue” fundraising coverage is a bit sticky, but disentangling the two elements is not impossible. When mentioned in a strategic context (i.e., which candidate has raised more money or is running short of funds), fundraising is campaign coverage. However, statements that focus on the potentially corrupting effects of campaign contributions, contributions from questionable sources, and/or the process of raising funds, this can be considered issue coverage. In this one issue we are able to combine at least two attractive elements: competition, since availability of funds is essential to campaigning; and scandal, since many fundraising stories detail questionable contributions or (in 1996 and

2000, prior to the passing of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act) non-disclosure of soft-money donors or amounts. Coverage of this type comes in the guise of a policy debate, but appeals more to the entertainment interests of readers and viewers. It is telling, then, that by comparison to education (the issue that is ranked second in importance by the public and ranks second in salience by the candidates), fundraising stories appear in twelve days of coverage whereas education policy is mentioned only in two. Education, along with many other issues, simply lacks the element of conflict or scandal that is inherent in the top issues noted here.

One Candidate, Two Candidates, and Media Issue Reporting

One candidate speaking alone on an issue is not nearly as attractive to the media as *both* candidates sparring over an issue, in a further extension of the conflict hypothesis. The goal of this section of the chapter is to demonstrate that joint emphasis of issues has a statistically significant relationship to their likelihood of being reported in the media, and in that regard the goal is met. In order to do so, crosstabs were created to compare the frequency with which candidate mentions of an issue on a particular day corresponded to reporting of that issue in the media for that day. For the period in question (September 1st, 1996 through Election Day), there were a total of fifteen issues reported on by the media coded here. Of those fifteen issues, nine were never mentioned by a candidate and the press on the same day – clearly, for those nine issues, there is no observable relationship between candidate mention of the issues and coverage of them in the press. There were two issues (Foreign Policy and Values) which were mentioned by one candidate and were covered by the press on the same day, and four issues (Crime,

Economy, Education, and Fiscal Policy) which were mentioned by *both* candidates and reported by the press on the same day.

As a basic fact, then, a clear majority of issues that were covered by the press were not mentioned by the candidates at the time they were covered, and of those that were covered by the press, most were mentioned by both candidates. Twice as many issues (four of five, or 80 percent overall) received what appears to be two-candidate-prompted coverage than received single-candidate-prompted coverage (two of nine, or 22 percent overall). To further test the hypothesis, crosstabs were created to generate tests of association and significance between candidate mention of an issue and reporting on that issue. For “mentioned by both candidates,” the categories were “mentioned by both” or “not mentioned by both” (even if mentioned by one and not the other), whereas for “mentioned by one candidate” the categories were “mentioned by either candidate” or not (and for those two issues, they were never mentioned by both).

Table 5.5 – Association of Candidate Issue Agreement and Media Issue Reporting

Issue	Mentioned by Both Candidates				Mentioned by One Candidate	
	Crime	Economy	Education	Fiscal Policy	Foreign Policy	Values
Chi-square	5.37	12.58	7.52	12.04	3.110	4.64
Asymp. Sig.	.020	.000	.006	.001	.078	.031
Lambda	.111	.188	.125	.190	.059	.091

N for all measures is 65, with 1 degree of freedom.

For days on which the candidates emphasized the same issue, we see that there is a significant relationship between candidate discussion and reporting on that issue. Removing the “healthcare” issue from consideration (since there were no days on which the media reported on it in the Pew-Annenberg window of September 1st through Election Day, which suggests that there are some issues on which the media have a strong aversion to reporting despite its discussion by the candidates), we find statistically

significant correlations between joint mentions of an issue and media reports of that issue for crime, education, fiscal policy, and the economy ($p < 0.01$, in three of four cases). Additionally, the lambda values for each are in the 0.1-0.2 range, suggesting a weak but present relationship. The two covered issues with single-candidate mentions are weakly significant (one at the 0.05 level, the other at the 0.10 level) but both have extremely low lambda values, which indicates that candidate mentions of those issues did not appreciably increase the probability that they would be reported upon. This certainly supports the hypothesis, and the fact that it does so when single-candidate issue mentions do not tells us something useful about how the media choose which issues to emphasize. It is this very comparison that allows us to begin to disentangle the public issue salience consideration from the candidate-prompted coverage consideration. Consider: issue salience for the public is in place as of the beginning of the election cycle, and is presumably fairly static throughout the campaign, so coverage of those issues would occur throughout the campaign, with a possibility that coverage would be more common when either candidate mentioned the issue (setting the media agenda). If it was simply issue salience driving coverage, then we would see a correlation between candidate issue mentions – even individual candidate issue mentions – and media coverage of the issue, as well as when there is issue-agenda conversion between the candidates. However, we do not, and this allows us to take advantage of the conditions offered to demonstrate that the presence of one variable (joint-issue mention by candidates) is superior to the other (single-candidate issue focus).

Conclusion

This chapter argues that media coverage of issues is not merely anemic, it is also not particularly sensitive to the wants and needs of either the people or the candidates. The issues that were measured to be of greatest import to the electorate correspond closely to the issues most-mentioned by the candidates, but those issues are not the most-covered by the media coded here. Media coverage is, though, what we should expect if the dominant media frame is conflict. The most-commonly-covered issues in this year are those that feature frequent conflict between competing parties and actors, with easily-identifiable protagonists and antagonists and/or a clear conflict on these issues between the candidates themselves.

Which brings us to the candidates: their remarks appear to be a contributor to the issue agenda selected by the media, but only in a limited fashion. It is an influence, but not a controlling factor. Regression of candidate discourse on volume of issue coverage shows that when taken as a whole (issue mentions by both candidates, for the entire cycle) the candidates' discussion of issues makes those issues more likely to receive press coverage. However, this relationship falls off when we examine the relationship between individual candidate issue mentions, which suggests that one voice is not (usually) enough to provoke issue coverage on the campaign trail. This one-candidate vs. two-candidate dynamic is also evident when looking at this phenomenon on a daily basis: one candidate's mention of an issue is not significantly related to coverage of that issue that day (in ten of eleven cases), whereas when both candidates mention the same issue, it is significantly related to coverage of that issue (in four of five cases).

Ultimately, the media set their own issue agenda, with only limited input from the people or the candidates. Even the little issue coverage provided (and bear in mind that

1996 was *the* year for issue coverage in this study – all others featured less) does not sync with the issue concerns of the public and the campaigns. This is a clear demonstration of the influence of the modern political press, since it is on these issues that the people will evaluate the candidates, and neither the people nor the candidates are contributing much to the selection criteria. We turn now to whether candidates are successful at using conflict to attract attention to their campaigns, rather than their issue agenda.

CHAPTER 6

ATTRACTING ATTENTION

The goal of this chapter will be to provide empirical evidence that political reporters, editors, and news directors favor conflict and novelty, and that campaigns may take advantage of those predilections to increase the share of coverage received by their campaign. As discussed in the model elaborated in Chapter 2, campaigns can theoretically attract coverage by offering journalists stories that are consistent with their professional goals and norms – stories which offer conflict and novelty (which are professionally useful) and stories that fit into a clear storytelling mold (which are typical in journalism). By doing so, they increase the probability that their stories will be included in the day’s news, increasing their share of coverage even when the story may seem to provoke coverage of the opposing campaign (as when a campaign initiates an attack). Ultimately, then, campaigns can actively attract attention to their campaign, should they wish to do so.

We can observe conflict as a factor in coverage in several areas. Examining *New York Times* headlines for all elections, there is an empirically observable level of conflict written into print headlines. I selected a random sample (using an online random-number generator) of 100 headlines from each election cycle, 1996-2008. Competitiveness of the election overall appears to be a factor: only 27 percent of 1996’s headlines used conflict language, which was the lowest level of the four election cycles. The number increased

to 35 percent in 2000, reached its peak in 2004 at 42 percent, and held relatively steady at 39 percent in 2008. It is telling, I think, that more than a third of headlines, on average, focus on this dynamic of the election. Given what we know of the overwhelming advantage issue speech has in the candidates' own remarks, this demonstrates that not only do media outlets not report on the issues, they in fact actively frame the election in terms of conflict, both in terms of conflict between candidates and to a lesser extent between their positions/ideas. This is consistent with the findings of other research: Fridkin and Kenney found that candidates were most successful at framing the terms of a story when attacking the opposition (2005, 75). The hypothesis to be tested, then, is that providing more of the same (conflict/novelty) will increase the amount of coverage the campaign receives overall.

Testing this hypothesisⁱ is challenging for at least one reason: we have no real way of knowing what is *not* being reported, which means that any test must be considered partially flawed. Attempts to identify independent, "real" campaign conflict without the assistance of the media proved to be unfruitful in most cases, and at best only sporadic mentions of conflict-based, potentially-reportable campaign actions were found, so their inclusion would lead to more false conclusions and inaccurate inferences as their exclusion. To minimize the endogeneity problem, different media were used for the independent and dependent variables, even if both were media outlets. *Times* headlines were used as a proxy measure to create the independent variable (level of conflict and novelty offered by the campaign). All headlines for all four elections were coded as to whether they were conflict- or novelty-oriented, and a sum for each candidate for each

ⁱ H5: Campaigns that offer more conflict- and novelty-based stories to the media will increase their share of coverage or decrease share of coverage for their opposition.

day was subtotaled and used as the independent variable. The dependent variable is the share of coverage measure which had already been created using the NBC data, providing some methodological distance between the two variables. For both measures, five-day moving averages were used to smooth the lines. Figure 6.1, below, shows correlations between the Conflict and Novelty measure and the Share of Coverage measure, by candidate. To test the relationship, I correlated the amount conflict/novelty offered by each campaign (as derived from the headlines coded) to that campaign's share of broadcast coverage. A second test regressed share of coverage on conflict, using the same measures. The correlations are shown below in Figure 6.1, and the regression results are found in Tables 6.1 and 6.2.

As you can see, the correlations support the hypothesis, in the proper directions and with robust coefficients and a high level of statistical significance, in most cases. The hypothesis would lead us to expect the following: a positive and significant correlation between the party-specific conflict measure and share of coverage measure (ConflictD and DemShare, ConflictR and RepShare), and a negative correlation between the opposing-party measures of the same. *At least* one of these relationships was found for both parties in each election cycle. 1996 shows a fit for the positive relationship: increases in both parties conflict score correlated to increases in their share of coverage, and with a moderately high coefficient (over 0.4 in both cases). This year also shows that the negative relationship is supported, though at a lower level of significance.

Correlations - 1996

		ConflictD 5DMA	ConflictR 5DMA	DemShare	RepShare
ConflictD 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	1	.153	.464**	-.214
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.169	.000	.053
	N	82	82	82	82
ConflictR 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	.153	1	-.095	.407*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.169		.394	.000
	N	82	82	82	82
DemShare	Pearson Correlation	.464**	-.095	1	-.789**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.394		.000
	N	82	82	82	82
RepShare	Pearson Correlation	-.214	.407*	-.789**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.053	.000	.000	
	N	82	82	82	82

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlations - 2000

		ConflictD 5DMA	ConflictR 5DMA	DemShare	RepShare
ConflictD 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	1	-.150	.003	.048
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.143	.975	.643
	N	97	97	97	97
ConflictR 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	-.150	1	-.322**	.279*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.143		.001	.006
	N	97	97	97	97
DemShare	Pearson Correlation	.003	-.322**	1	-.708**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.975	.001		.000
	N	97	97	97	97
RepShare	Pearson Correlation	.048	.279*	-.708**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.643	.006	.000	
	N	97	97	97	97

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 6.1. Correlation Between Level of Conflict and Novelty and Share of Coverage, by Candidate, 1996-2008.

Figure 6.1 (continued)

Correlations - 2004

		ConflictD 5DMA	ConflictR 5DMA	DemShare	RepShare
ConflictD 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	1	.311**	-.073	.026
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002	.477	.797
	N	97	97	97	97
ConflictR 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	.311**	1	-.227*	.306**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002		.025	.002
	N	97	97	97	97
DemShare	Pearson Correlation	-.073	-.227*	1	-.669**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.477	.025		.000
	N	97	97	97	97
RepShare	Pearson Correlation	.026	.306**	-.669**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.797	.002	.000	
	N	97	97	97	97

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlations - 2008

		ConflictD 5DMA	ConflictR 5DMA	DemShare	RepShare
ConflictD 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	1	.204	.267*	-.368**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.093	.027	.002
	N	69	69	69	69
ConflictR 5DMA	Pearson Correlation	.204	1	-.200	.031
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.093		.099	.803
	N	69	69	69	69
DemShare	Pearson Correlation	.267*	-.200	1	-.790**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.027	.099		.000
	N	69	69	69	69
RepShare	Pearson Correlation	-.368**	.031	-.790**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.803	.000	
	N	69	69	69	69

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

2000 shows a solid result for the positive relationship for the Republican side of the equation, but a virtually nonexistent positive relationship on the Democratic side; this, though, is counterbalanced by the fact that the *negative* relationship does hold up. An increase in the Republican conflict measure results in a significant drop in the Democratic share of coverage, which is still consistent with the hypothesis, especially since the share of coverage concept is necessarily a measure of competition for coverage space. We see this same pattern in 2004 and 2008: At least one positive and one negative relationship bear out, at significant levels.

Turning to the regression analysis of conflict and share, we see that the results are mixed, but hold up for at least one campaign for each election cycle (and both in 2008). In 1996, Democratic conflict resulted in a significant increase in candidate share of coverage, while in 2000 the opposite was the case. 2004 showed no relationship whatsoever between Democratic conflict and coverage, but the Republican campaign had an appropriate and significant increase. 2008 provides the clearest support for the hypothesis, with both campaigns receiving large increases in share of coverage as a result of conflict generation, with significance levels below 0.001 in both cases and high r-squared values. Overall, this is useful (if not entirely conclusive) evidence in support of the hypothesis.

Table 6.1 – Regression of Candidate Share of Coverage on Same Candidate Conflict Generation

	1996		2000		2004		2008	
	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep
B	14.44	1.12	-2.955	7.73	0.08	8.99	20.45	16.15
Std. Error	6.37	4.46	4.139	2.47	2.50	3.18	4.36	4.05
Significance	.027	.803	.477	.002	.975	.006	.000	.000
N	68	68	96	96	96	96	81	81
r²	.071	.001	.005	.094	.000	.078	.216	.166

Candidate Share of Coverage is the five-day moving average of candidate-specific share of coverage. Candidate Conflict is the five-day moving average of the number of conflict headlines generated by that candidate.

Analyzing the effect of conflict generation on the candidate’s campaign is only one half of the potential impact, though – there is still its impact on the opposing candidate to consider. When examining the potential *negative* impact of candidate conflict generation on the opposing candidate’s share of coverage, a similar picture emerges. As shown in the regression results in Table 6.2 (which shows the regression of the opposing candidate’s share of coverage on the opposing candidate’s conflict score), conflict generation creates significant negative pressure on the opposing candidate’s share of coverage. This confirms the findings in the previous table, and I would point out that this is not simply a natural byproduct of a zero-sum environment. Since there is also an amount of coverage devoted to “both” or “neither” candidate, it was entirely possible that candidate-specific coverage could increase for one candidate while remaining stable for the other, but this data suggests that is not what occurs. Additionally, in certain cases, the negative effect on opposition coverage is greater than the positive effect on one’s own coverage.

Table 6.2 – Regression of Opposing Candidate Share of Coverage on Same Candidate Conflict Generation

	1996		2000		2004		2008	
	Dcon/Rshare	Rcon/Dshare	Dcon/Rshare	Rcon/Dshare	Dcon/Rshare	Rcon/Dshare	Dcon/Rshare	Rcon/Dshare
B	-11.30	-3.16	1.24	-9.72	0.91	-6.77	-18.41	-7.89
Std. Error	5.77	3.68	2.67	2.93	3.51	2.99	5.68	4.73
Significance	.053	.394	.643	.001	.797	.025	.002	.099
N	81	81	96	96	96	96	68	68
r²	.046	.009	.002	.104	.001	.051	.135	.040

Candidate Share of Coverage is the five-day moving average of candidate-specific share of coverage. Candidate Conflict is the five-day moving average of the number of conflict headlines generated by that candidate.

Conclusion

News selection is anything but random. That much has been plain to any observer at least since Cohen’s 1963 classic *The Press and Foreign Policy*, and since that time agenda setting and journalistic research have shown that the media have certain criteria that determine newsworthiness. The material shared here only reinforces that belief, and confirms its application to the political campaign setting. It is clearly possible to “attract” the attention of the media by offering conflict-laden stories (attacks, defense from attacks, etc.) or emphasizing common issues. With that knowledge, one might also logically conclude that to a certain extent candidates can “duck” coverage, if so desired. This has profound practical implications for campaign strategists, in large part because of the findings in the previous chapters: *tone* of coverage of one candidate correlates to the tone of coverage of the other. *Volume* of coverage, however, is largely fixed (with very few exceptions), which means that candidates are competing (or not competing, should they wish to avoid coverage) for a fixed amount of news coverage on any given day.

There is also something to be said for using this information to help define the heresthetic competition over the course of the campaign which, as the issue ownership

literature suggests, already occurs. As a tactical measure, campaigns could monitor the opposition to identify which issues they feel are better-suited to their own campaigns, and choose to focus on those as a means of bringing a helpful issue into the media discussion. At the same time, they can avoid emphasizing those issues which are beneficial to the opposition, so as to deny the opposition that issue. Or, as sometimes happens, a campaign could combine this tactic along with the previous conflict-based tactic and attack an opponent on a beneficial issue, thereby forcing the opposition to respond, which creates both conflict and issue agreement. Where this research adds to this dynamic is in the finding that when issues are jointly emphasized, they are more likely to be covered in the media, and therefore more likely to reach voters, increase issue salience for that issue, and add it to the agenda of the campaign, which in turn affects voting calculus on the part of the electorate. These tactical maneuvers, if properly timed, could create a strategic media advantage for one party over the other, with a clear tactical campaign advantage and significant electoral benefits. Attracting attention to favored issues provides one more motivation to seek issue convergence, rather than divergence, and adds to other explanations for the inconsistent results in tests of Riker's "Divergence Theory" (see Pfau and Kenski 1990, Damore 2004 and 2005, and Simon 2002).

When all is considered here, it is clear that shifts and imbalances in share of coverage, tone of coverage, and issue agenda are far less event-driven and free-flowing than they may appear (or, at least, they need not be so). They need not occur organically: they are, in large part, dictated by media norms and campaign action (or inaction), which adds an element of agency to the discussion. If media content and the issue agenda can be influenced by the campaigns, then the media environment can be subject to control, or

at least influence, by the campaigns. The next logical question is whether creating these imbalances has an impact on levels of electoral support, and it is that question which will be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

THE EFFECTS OF UNBALANCED NEWS

While the preceding chapters were primarily concerned with describing and analyzing the variability, vagaries, and vicissitudes of the general election media agenda and environment, it is the goal of this chapter to answer a question of equal significance: Does that variability matter, in an electoral context? If we accept, as has been demonstrated, that there are changes in the media environment, and further that such changes include the focus of media coverage (by candidate) and the tone of that media coverage, then such imbalances must have a meaningful impact on electoral support if they are to be of any scholarly or practical interest at all. To that end, this chapter focuses on two conceptualizations of media attention: the concentrated, gaffe-and-scandal oriented attacking media observed during a “feeding frenzy,” and the daily variability in the share and tone of coverage model offered and expanded upon in this and previous chapters. The results demonstrate that feeding frenzies are not automatic harbingers of doom for the campaign, which prompted a desire to test the effects of share and tone of coverage independently via multivariate regression. The results of this examination are presented in this chapter, and demonstrate that “winning” the share of coverage battle is sufficient to increase a candidate’s electoral support even without consideration of the tone of that coverage, but that tone of coverage is still a meaningful factor in determining effects.

There are a number of distinct challenges facing academic researchers in attempting to find evidence of statistically and substantively significant media effects. First, there is the difficulty of establishing the degree of reception of media messages within the population as a whole: in order to be impactful, a message must be received. However, we are in receipt of such messages all day long without, perhaps, actively realizing it: news reports drift into our ears while waiting in a checkout line, a spouse comments on a story read in the morning paper, a news break pops up in the middle of a sporting event, and so forth.

Second, we are continually presented (especially in a campaign environment) with the countervailing information flow problem (Zaller 1992). With two campaigns actively attempting to reach voters via the mass media, shifts in support will almost certainly be small and, therefore, difficult to detect. Even small effects, though, may be significant. There is little virtue in arguing as others have in the past (Gelman & King 1995) that the campaign seeks its “equilibrium” point and ends around there on Election Day, and even this interpretation is not free from consideration of the importance of small media effects in a close election. Priming effects (Bartels 2006, Druckman 2004, Campbell 2000, as well as Gelman and King) rely on media reports, and a great deal of learning regarding the campaign is done via media exposure to campaign messages (Graber 1997), making it at the very least a useful heuristic.

We have moved beyond the notion that campaigns do not matter. While still a subject of intense debate on its particulars, the notion that campaigns do more than simply make noise – that they impact candidate evaluations, the issue context of the campaign, vote choice, turnout decisions, and more – is now firmly established (Hillygus

2005, Holbrook 1996, Hillygus and Jackman 2003, Wlezien and Erikson 2002, Popkin 1991). Also, since voting decisions are made at different points in the campaign (psychologically and practically, since early voting by as much as a month or more is now commonplace and only expanding), imbalances that create even small effects can have larger net effects on electoral outcomes, and may also impact voter turnout rates to a significant degree, as well as the makeup of the voting public (Gronke et al. 2007). Those who are most likely to engage in early voting are older, better-educated, and are both *more* likely to be politically aware and *do not* display extreme partisan or ideological sentiments (Gronke and Toffey 2007, 26). These are the very voters that we would theoretically expect to receive and be susceptible to media messages.

Last, there is the fact that media messages themselves are composed of a number of dynamic elements (length of report, tone/valence, subject matter, images, percent of the total volume of coverage, etc.) that may create competing influences even within the same report: the competition between these elements may act to create different effects in different recipients, resulting in effects that net-out to near zero in the electorate as a whole. It is a goal of this chapter (and, indeed, this entire work) to identify if and on whom the media has an effect in terms of persuasion of vote intention, and the size of that effect. The difficulties of detecting them are challenges that will be addressed in due course. Also, identifying “small” effects does not mean that we are seeing their full scope and should simply stop there: although a somewhat facile analogy, it is possible that the small effects we can observe are the tip of a larger iceberg whose full extent we cannot appreciate owing to the complexities of finding discrete effects in a hectic and

cacophonous political and social environment. As Zaller puts it in his chapter “The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revived”:

Other scientific disciplines have long since learned that the ease or difficulty of observing a phenomenon has little to do with its magnitude or ultimate importance. Scientists routinely struggle for years or decades to establish what are eventually taken to be basic truths. (1996, 18)

Moreover, measurement error and timing can account for at least some of the limitations in identifying the proper magnitude of media effects. When measurement error is corrected and effects are studied in periods when beliefs are not already firmly and widely held (as they often are in the latter stages of an election contest), effects are quite robust (Bartels 1993).

The chapter will first examine feeding frenzies, as identified by Sabato (1991), their composition, and their observable effect on electoral support. It will then turn to a regression analysis of the effects of changes in the share and tone of campaign coverage on overall electoral support during the 1996-2008 elections. In conclusion, the same test will be run, but on a disaggregated electorate, breaking out independents and party identifiers to observe whether those that are not party-committed exhibit larger effects than partisans, as the model (and the literature on party identification) predicts.

Rethinking the Effects of Feeding Frenzies

When we think of massed media attention, we often think of feeding frenzies in reaction to some scandal or gaffe. Are these occasions of negative and intense media attention truly damaging? It is certainly true that individual cases might prove to be important determinants of the fate of a campaign, but as this section will show there is little empirical evidence to support the idea that the “feeding frenzy” phenomenon is

uniformly damning. Each frenzy offered in Sabato's 1991 book is prompted by a circumstance that is uniformly negative: there is simply no larger upside potential for the candidate by the exposure of, for example, plagiarism or racial insensitivity. It is certainly tempting to argue that massed media attention – especially coverage that casts the candidate in an undesirable light – would consistently produce downward pressure on levels of support, but the examination of six crucial cases does not support that conclusion. In the absence of compelling evidence, then, we should not be too quick to assume *a priori* that the effects are simply classified. In fact, the reality may be more complicated – as the examination in Chapter Four demonstrated, negativity is not simply negativity. It is necessary to consider the tone of coverage of the opposing candidate and what environment the combined tones create. For now, though, these cases will be examined on the assumption that negative coverage has negative effects on a candidate's support. The results suggest that something unusual is going on, and that a large share of coverage – even negative coverage – does not automatically hurt a candidate.

To identify “classic” feeding frenzies, I consulted the primary substantial writing on the subject: *Feeding Frenzy: Attack Journalism & American Politics* (Sabato 1991). Of 23 examples from presidential politics, only six occurred during the general election campaign *and* could be tied to a specific date for analysis. Those six included Agnew's “fat Jap” comment (1968), the revelations about vice presidential candidate Eagleton's mental health (1972), Ford's “free Poland gaffe” and Carter's “lust in the heart” *Playboy* interview (1976), and Dukakis' mental health and Quayle's assorted revelations (1988). Each was plotted according to the date the incident in question first appeared in the national media, whether via nightly network news (as recorded by the Vanderbilt

Television News Archive abstracts) or the *New York Times*, (as stored in the Lexis-Nexis database), although it should be noted that in every case there was virtually no lag between these two sources in terms of the date of the relevant reports – one day was the largest gap of the story “breaking” in one or the other medium. The remaining seventeen items on Sabato’s list occur during the primary season or were persistent reports/rumors that could not be tied to any one date, and as such are unsuitable for analysis of kind. For each of these frenzies, NBC news content was coded using the same scheme utilized for the rest of this projectⁱ; and levels of electoral support were measured using the same Wlezien & Erikson trial heat data set.

My examination of news coverage during these periods shows that the media impact of the presence of a “feeding frenzy” is limited to creating increased negativity in the tone of coverage, while volume of coverage remains essentially unchanged. Coding began from three days prior to the incident through the five days subsequent to the incident (nine total days of coverage). In three of the six cases (Agnew, Eagleton, and Dukakis), only two consecutive days of coverage of the scandal are noted, and the amount of coverage of the frenzy-inducing incident was minimal in comparison to overall coverage of the campaigns that day: less than half, by comparison to the “normal” campaign coverage. The other three cases (Ford, Carter, and Quayle) show persistent and repetitious coverage of the prompting issue, though the level of coverage of the incidents never outweighs that of normal campaign coverage with the exception of one day during the 1988 examination of Quayle’s background (National Guard service, charges of

ⁱ The same coding scheme was used, but the items measured were limited to length (to allow measures of volume), tone (to measure valence), campaign receiving the coverage, and subject of coverage.

plagiarism and sexual harassment). Total volume of coverage is likewise only negligibly affected, if at all, and no substantial increases in volume are noted in any of the six cases when levels of coverage are compared to the days preceding the incidents. Certainly, though, levels of negative coverage did increase (in all cases) for the candidate who was the focus of the frenzy, and even without repetition it is certainly possible that these events would trigger a maintained downward trend in support.

Of the six “Feeding Frenzies” that can be tied to specific dates, none present any real visual evidence of damage to the candidate in question, even when the frenzy was drawn-out and persistent – in fact, there is no pattern to speak of (see Figure 7.1). In 1968, we see a near-term rise in support for the Republican ticket, even though the perpetrator of the frenzy-precipitating incident (Agnew) was a Republican. We see this same pattern repeated in 1972, following revelations of vice presidential candidate Eagleton’s mental health history – the precipitous drop in the polls that occurred around that time actually pre-dated the breaking story of Eagleton’s hospitalization for depression by nearly a week. The result – counterintuitive as it may seem – was an increase in support for his party’s ticket by the time the next poll was fielded, approximately one week later. It is important to note that these shifts in support – for the better – occur in the days immediately following the revelations in question, when the story is most fresh and the damage is waiting to be done. This is not at all consistent with a belief that the “feeding frenzy” is a harbinger of disaster and negativity for the campaign. Although the news itself may be bad, there is no immediate (or, even, apparent) negative impact on electoral support.

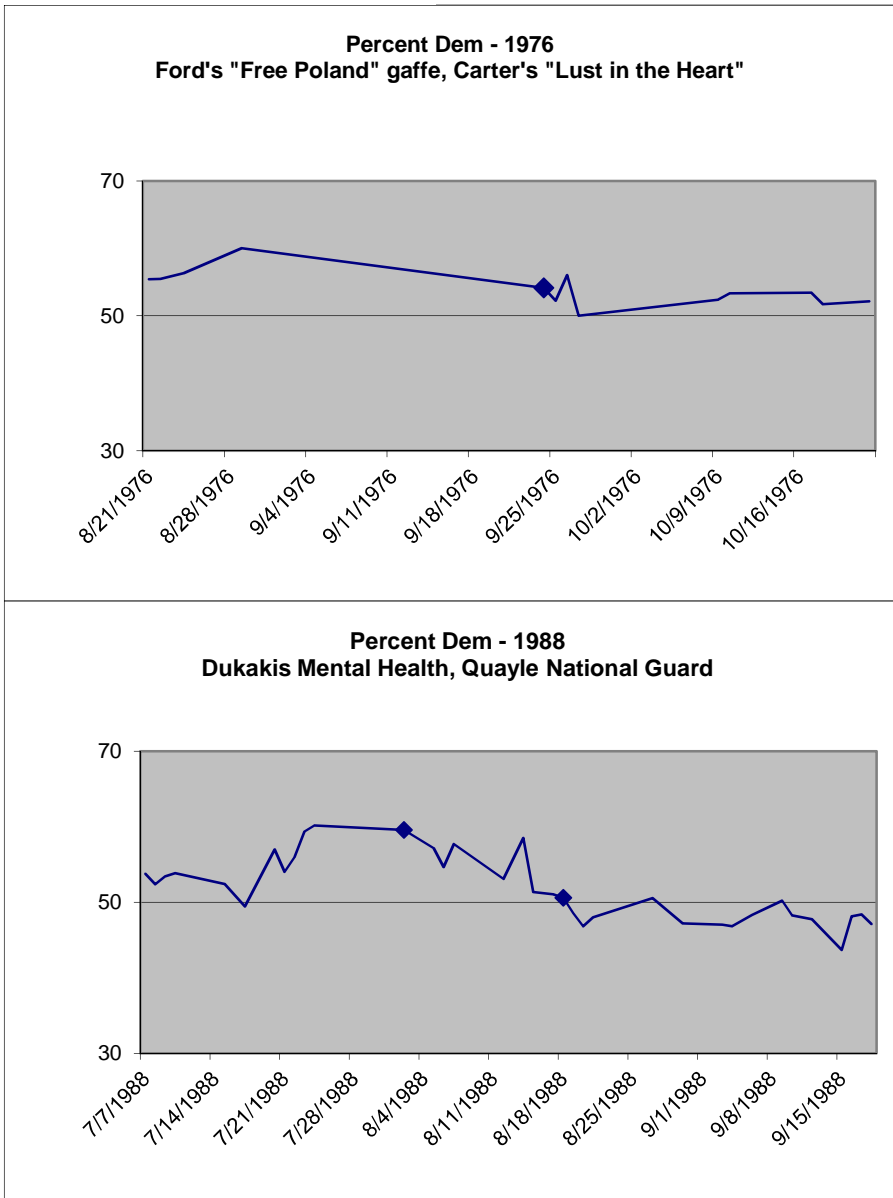
In examining the second pair of frenzies, we see no real pattern of support gain or loss. 1978's post-frenzy movement is erratic, showing no discernible pattern. We might consider this case more of an anomaly, since two competing gaffes/frenzies (Ford's "Free Poland" gaffe during the Presidential debate and Carter's "lust in the heart" interview with *Playboy*) occurred at virtually the same time (within the same three-week polling gap). 1988 is an intriguing case in that, once again, we have two "frenzies" to consider within a relatively short time frame – questions about Dukakis' mental health occur within a few weeks of a series of reports about Dan Quayle's fitness for high office (plagiarism, National Guard service, etc.). We do see a clear decline in the fortunes of the Democratic contender following reports of past mental health problems, which would be consistent with the "feeding-frenzy-as-campaign-killer" viewpoint, but we see this decline continue despite assistance from multiple revelations about the past of Republican vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle.

Each "frenzy" is shown with the trial heat results from the preceding and following thirty days, to place the shifts in context, but it seems clear from a cursory examination of these graphs that the case for an electorally meaningful "feeding frenzy" is, at best, overstated or more subtle than one would imagine. Neither do the major party conventions confound the results with the possible exception of 1988, when stories about Quayle's exploits may have limited the Republican "bounce," but would still appear as an increase in near-term support; it is possible the rise was not as great as it *would* have been, absent these reports.



Figure 7.1. Electoral Support in the Aftermath of “Feeding Frenzies”. Trial Heat level of support on y-axis.

Figure 7.1 (continued)



These must be considered crucial cases, given their potential to have a direct impact on the outcome of their respective impending elections, and this failed test reflects much more than the probabilistic nature of social science. It is an expression of the challenges of detecting media effects even when they should be most apparent – even if overall levels of coverage did not rise appreciably, these were certainly events where

directly negative coverage was broadcast and/or printed regarding a specific candidate. It is also possible that the reason they are not apparent in these cases is that we are operating under a false assumption that tone of coverage is a strong influence on the effect of news coverage, or that tone of coverage affects the candidates independently, without consideration for the tone of coverage of the other candidate. This leads us, naturally, to the following question: If it is true that sensational negative coverage does not cause predictable shifts in levels of support, what does? If share and tone of coverage are the answer, it requires us to establish a statistically significant relationship between shifts in the share and/or tone of coverage received by the candidate and a corresponding shift in that candidate's electoral support. According to the model described here, those effects should be more prominent among those least likely to resist media messages.

Daily News Coverage and Electoral Support

As discussed in Chapter Two, the model here supports the expectation that an increase in share of coverage may provoke a corresponding increase in the degree of support for a candidate, if for no other reason than that any news prompts an evaluation of the candidate (Zaller 1998). This point of evaluation represents an opportunity for the candidate to gain in support relative to the opposition, as voters who have not yet devoted sufficient time and/or attention to the campaign begin to reach a voting decision. In light of that, we should expect to observe a net increase in the vote share a candidate can expect to receive as his or her share of media coverage increases. Additionally, tone of coverage should make a contribution as well: as coded, negative coverage in this content analysis is expected to promote negative evaluations of a candidate and lower support,

while positive coverage is expected to promote positive evaluations of a candidate and increase support. However, it is *relative* tone that is to be tested here, since less-negative coverage of one candidate relative to the other should still result in a relative increase in support for that candidate. It would be naïve, however, to expect that all voters will be equally susceptible to influence. According to the model, independents – since they have a lower probability of resistance to news messages – should show greater effects than partisans, and that expectation will be tested here.

Locating Effects in Different Groups

Effects should be seen in the entire electorate, but that does not necessarily mean that is the best place to look for them. The most obvious discriminating factor is party identification. *The American Voter* made a compelling and enduring argument that party identification is a meaningful psychological facet of our identity (as did Lippmann 1922 and others before Campbell et al. 1960), and that it colors our perceptions of politics and, most especially, political choice. In this way, party identifiers are much more likely to maintain a consistent vote choice *and* reach that decision earlier than non-identifiers, making it less likely that the shifts in support that we observe over the course of the general election campaign are the result of changes in support among partisans. Such shifts are most likely the result of vacillation by non-identifiers, methodological limitations or error, or the addition of supporters from among the previously unaware or undecided. In any case, the presence and operation of party identification as a vote determinant has a clear role to play in any examination of media effects. Resistance to

dissonant political messages is a key functional component of the perceptual screen created by party identification (Zaller 1992, Lippmann 1922)

This project is clearly interested in those who do not identify with either party: the self-identified “Independents,” and it is this group that should exhibit the most traditional manifestation of large media effects, since the level of resistance (based on party identification) should be lower than that of the identifiers. Assuming they are in receipt of the message, the tone and relative volume of coverage of each candidate should have a predictable effect on support. There is, though a caveat: the self-identification question may lead some to claim to be independent when they are, nonetheless, partisan. As Wolfinger puts it,

A very different interpretation of the last quarter century results if one distinguishes between respondents who are adamant about their independence and those who concede closeness to a party. ... In short, the vast majority of self-defined Independents are not neutral but partisan—a bit bashful about admitting it, but partisan nevertheless. Once this is recognized, the proportion of the electorate that is truly neutral between the two parties is scarcely different now than from what it was in the Eisenhower era. (Wolfinger 1995, 184-185)

This should be kept in mind when considering the regression results.

First, we will consider the electorate in the aggregate. The disaggregated polling data is more limited than the aggregated polling data, which is by its very nature more easily tracked and collapsed into a single measure, allowing for a nearly daily check on share of electoral support. Not only is this a more robust measure, it is also substantively significant: even if disaggregation demonstrates that certain groups are more susceptible to media reporting than others, this is rendered moot if such influences cancel each other out or are undetectable in the aggregate. Finally, given the significant correlation of tone of coverage between candidates, tone will not likely contribute as much as share of

coverage to the value of the model, but when it *does* diverge it should correspond to appropriate positive or negative shifts in support within the electorate.

In determining where among the disaggregated polling populations we should look to observe media effects at work and what those effects should look like, there are several guidelines we might use. Clearly, we should see a greater degree of variability in support for candidates among independents than among partisans, whose vote preferences should be stable, barring some substantial shock. This should be understood as being not an absolute measure of support (since each candidate will undoubtedly perform well within his own party), but of the amount of deviation seen within each population: party identifiers should be more steadfast in their support, relative to changes in share of coverage. Regression should also show larger effects among independents compared to partisans, and to the electorate as a whole.

Testing for Media Effects: Data Collection and Treatment

As discussed in Chapter Two, data collection for these tests was straightforward, and required creation of a measure of relative advantage in tone, a measure of relative advantage in share of coverage, and a measure of change in level of electoral support. Generating measures of share of coverage and tone of coverage was completed using the content analysis described earlier of NBC Nightly News and *New York Times* coverage of the general election campaigns for 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008. Trial heat data were likewise quite thorough, and allowed for almost continuous measurement of the mean level of electoral support for each candidate during the general election cycle within the full electorate (Wlezien and Erikson 2002, Wlezien and Erikson 2005). A slight

departure was required for the disaggregate measures, as the requisite data sets were not always available to disaggregate voter support by party, so there was not the same continuous measure of support available. All polls in the general election window of the election (from the nominating conventions through Election Day) whose datasets were available via the Roper Center and provided party identification data were included in the analysis. Party identification was coded by party; Independents were only so-coded if the respondent selected that specific option, and did not include those who simply expressed disinterest or refused to answer (this coding is consistent with ANES coding on the party identification question). Additionally, no distinction was made between weak identifiers and stronger identifiers, since not every poll allowed respondents to make that distinction. When it was present, though, support for all party identifiers was grouped into a single measure of partisan support for each candidate. For each election, change in share of support was regressed on a lagged change in share of coverage, using five-day moving averages of each. The length of the lag, five days, was to allow for shifts in balance of coverage to be measured by the trial heat polls, thus ensuring that the opening of the polling window occurred *after* the shift. At the same time, the lag is short enough that any effects seen will have had a minimal amount of time to decay and/or be affected by a shift in the opposite direction. Both the aggregate and disaggregate measures were tested using linear ordinary least squares regression. All four elections were tested for effects on the fully electorate. Only the 2000, 2004, and 2008 elections were tested here for the partisan-specific effects. 1996 has shown to be anomalous as an election year due to lack of competitiveness, and the remaining three elections still allow for comparison of several election cycles.

Regression Results

The regressions show limited but significant effects of shifts in the composition of news coverage among the electorate at large and among independents, but not among party identifiers. Table 7.1 reports the results of regressing support on share and tone of coverage among a representative sample of the entire electorate, as measured by trial heat polls and the content analysis described previously. The model achieves statistical significance in all years ($p < 0.05$), and is significant (or near-significant – $p < 0.1$) for each independent variable in four of six measures, with overall support of the general effects hypothesisⁱⁱ. Table 7.2 reports the regressions of the same variables, but disaggregated by party identification, and demonstrates support for the second effects hypothesisⁱⁱⁱ. The coefficients are not especially robust, but given the challenges involved in identifying media effects without the benefit of a measure of exposure, they are substantively significant and consistent with other reported findings in the literature, in terms of their magnitude.

Analysis of these results focused on the overall strength of the model (effect of share and tone as combined component elements of coverage on levels of electoral support), as well as on the explanatory power of share and tone, respectively, in predicting levels of support. As a model, it is fairly successful. It achieves significance in all four elections, and the overall fit as measured by the r-squared statistic is improving

ⁱⁱ H6: A candidate's level of support will increase when the share of coverage of that candidate increases, if relative tone of coverage is neutral or better.

ⁱⁱⁱ H7: Effects of changes in media coverage will be greater among independents and lesser in party identifiers.

as we approach the present day, suggesting an increasing role of news in electoral evaluations and vote intention.

Table 7.1 - Regression of Support on Share and Tone of Coverage in the Electorate

	1996			2000			2004			2008		
	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.
Share	.004 (.003)	.216	.099	.007 (.004)	.184	.076	.010 (.003)	.336	.002	.005 (.003)	.296	.076
Tone	.008 (.003)	.324	.017	.010 (.005)	.248	.044	-.001 (.004)	-.025	.807	.004 (.003)	.228	.171
Sig. of Model		.016			.042			.012			.001	
N		77			93			96			68	
r ²		.132			.087			.112			.238	

Share of Coverage represents the relative advantage in percentage of the five-day moving average of two-party candidate-specific news coverage received in NBC News and New York Times coverage of the General Election, which is measured from ten days prior to the first nominating convention. Tone of coverage measures the relative advantage in five-day moving average of tone score in the same media for the same time. Support is the five-day moving average of mean level of two-party decided support, and is lagged by one week to allow effects to be observed.

In terms of the individual elements, share of coverage is the more reliable of the two in determining level of support. Tone, as described earlier, is significantly correlated between the two candidates in presidential elections: positive or negative coverage for one candidate usually occurs at the same time as correspondingly positive or negative coverage of the other candidate. As a result, tone is an imperfect predictor of changes in support, though with enough separation between the two candidates it does function as expected (relatively positive news causes increased support, relatively negative news decreases it). Share, though, achieves statistical significance (or near-significance) in all four elections, with coefficients that are in the proper direction and of similar magnitude, and shows that an increase of 10 points in relative advantage in share of coverage corresponds to a 0.1 percent increase in share of support. High levels of relative advantage in share of coverage are also not uncommon: as noted in Chapter Four,

approximately 14 percent of all days of coverage saw a candidate with 80 percent or more of that day's news coverage.

Table 7.2 demonstrates support for the second hypothesis: that those who are most susceptible to acceptance of new information (independents) are more likely to show predictable media effects than those who are effectively screening news of the candidates (partisans), and in addition those effects are significantly larger than are seen in the broader electorate. Owing to the smaller number of observations the model results for independents do not always reach the .05 level of significance, but even *with* the smaller number of observations the r-squared value is nearly as robust (2008) or even more so (2000, 2004) than in the aggregate. In comparing the three groups, we see that the independents demonstrate much more flexibility overall with regard to vote intention change as a function of news composition change, by comparison to the partisan groups, though interestingly tone of coverage does not appear to make a significant difference in terms of predicting change in support. The partisan groups also exhibit a very large amount of variance, with standard error values that are typically more than twice that of the independents and aggregate electorate.

The data also show that it is change in share of coverage that is causing change in support, rather than the other way around. It was necessary to test whether it was these small changes in support that caused changes in the share of coverage allotted to each candidate by the media outlets which were included in the content analysis. Although this seems unlikely (ironically, this would be more believable if the net effects were larger and more easily detected by a casual observer), it is still important to establish the direction of the causal arrow.

Table 7.2 – Regression of Support on Share and Tone of Coverage Among Independents, Democrats, and Republicans

Independents

	2000			2004			2008		
	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.
Share	.012 (.013)	.176	.336	.055 (.025)	.382	.030	.151 (.076)	.459	.067
Tone	.020 (.011)	.318	.088	-.003 (.010)	-.054	.751	-.010 (.023)	-.106	.656
Sig. of Model		.054			.074			.175	
N		33			40			18	
r ²		.176			.131			.208	

Democratic Identifiers

	2000			2004			2008		
	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.
Share	-.007 (.017)	-.085	.676	.008 (.010)	.129	.446	.008 (.025)	.081	.756
Tone	.003 (.008)	.084	.680	.008 (.004)	.328	.057	-.005 (.007)	-.166	.529
Sig. of Model		.886			.039			.795	
N		33			40			18	
r ²		.008			.160			.030	

Republican Identifiers

	2000			2004			2008		
	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.	B (Std. Error)	Stand. Coeff.	Sig.
Share	-.040 (.055)	-.129	.481	.013 (.016)	.146	.427	.011 (.023)	.116	.633
Tone	.040 (.027)	.271	.146	-.004 (.006)	-.109	.551	-.012 (.008)	-.378	.132
Sig. of Model		.169			.402			.264	
N		33			40			18	
r ²		.112			.048			.163	

Share of Coverage represents the relative advantage in percentage of the five-day moving average of two-party candidate-specific news coverage received in NBC News and New York Times coverage of the General Election, which is measured from ten days prior to the first nominating convention. Tone of coverage measures the relative advantage in five-day moving average of tone score in the same media for the same time. Support is the five-day moving average of mean level of two-party decided support, and is lagged by one week to allow effects to be observed.

Certainly there is a theoretical justification for the belief that a surging candidate will attract attention. However, when the lag is removed from the measure of support (in other words, when the reported date of the poll is synced to the date on the share of

coverage, exactly), in every case the relationship becomes weaker. This suggests that it is the shift in share of coverage that occurs first, with shift in support following apace. With this information, we can be more confident that changes in level of support are not causing the media to increase their coverage of the candidate in question. It is also possible that campaign events themselves are causing changes levels of electoral support, acting as a confounding variable, but that conclusion is not logically supportable. The number of individuals who have a direct experience of any campaign event is very small by comparison to the viewership of a network news broadcast and the readership of a paper with the circulation of the *Times*. This would all suggest that the observed effects are the results of changes in share and tone of coverage causing changes in electoral support, and that the relationship is positive.

When Tones Diverge

With such a high degree of similarity in tone of coverage between the two candidates, we are presented with a dilemma: how can we best determine the effect of tone of coverage on support when tone of coverage is relatively consistent (whether consistently positive or negative)? The answer is to identify areas where tone diverges, and then determine whether share of support moves in the “correct” direction (that is to say, negative tone results in negative movement in support, while positive tone results in positive movement in support). To do so, I divided the daily tone score averages into blocs and compared shifts in support during those periods, to provide some contrast in tone during individual periods. The results show that when tone is clearly in favor of one candidate over another, that candidate benefits in the electorate.

Daily average tone scores (overall measure of Democrat vs. Republican tone, with volume removed as a factor) were broken into seven categories, labeled by integers, -3 through 3. Scores that favored the Republican (negative daily tone scores) were placed in the three negative categories (less than -0.50, -3; -0.50 through -0.30, -2; and -0.30 through -0.10, -1) and scores that favored the Democrat were placed in the three positive categories, at the same break points. The “0” category was left for tone scores that were at or near balanced between the two candidates (-0.10 through 0.10).

The results demonstrate a certain value even from a purely descriptive standpoint. Even going beyond the overall tone averages, we see that Democratic candidates receive more relatively positive days of coverage than Republican candidates, overall. In only one year (1996) does the Republican candidate have more good days than the Democrat, and in that year President Clinton and the assorted scandals with which he was identified (Whitewater, the Morris prostitution case) resulted in a fair number of self-inflicted wounds. Turning to the effects of tone, however, we are now in a position to examine whether divergence of tone corresponds to the appropriate movement in support for each candidate.

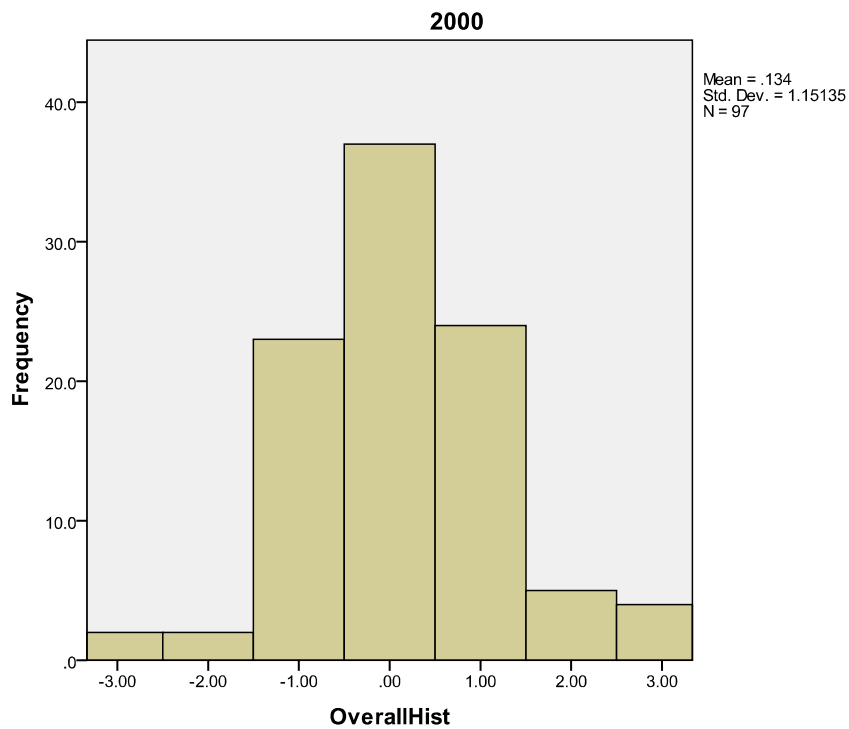
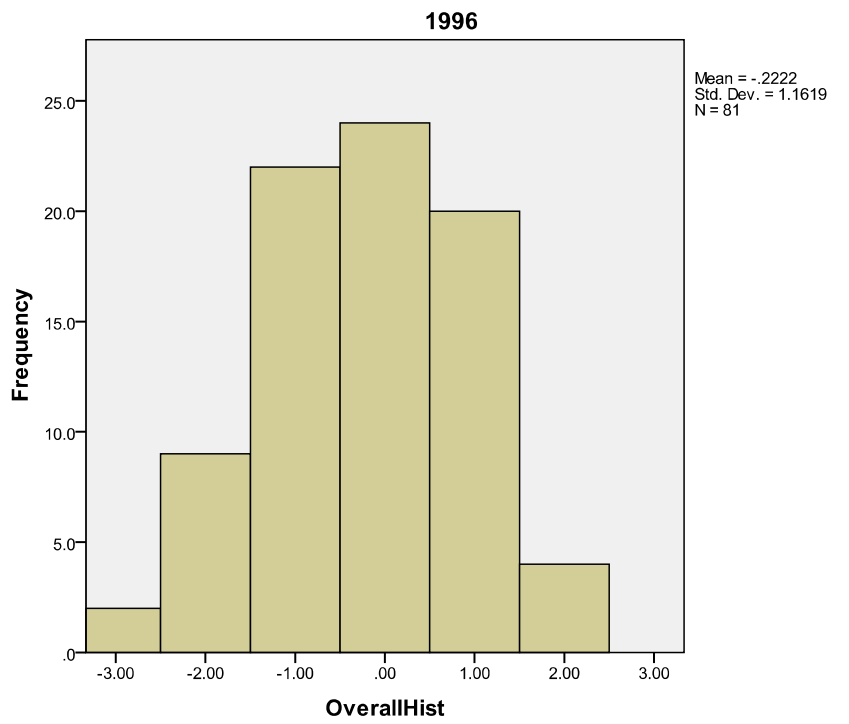
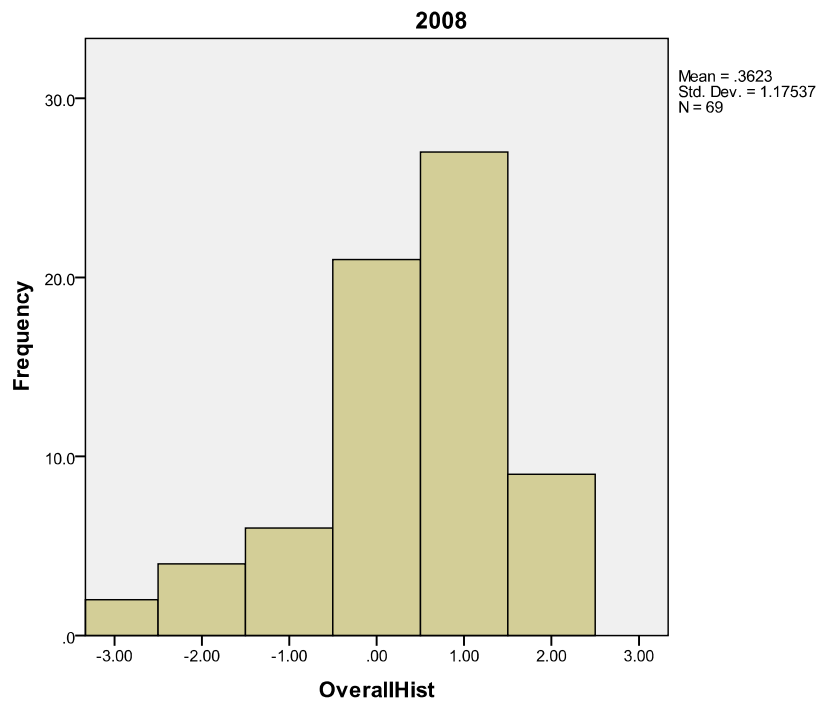
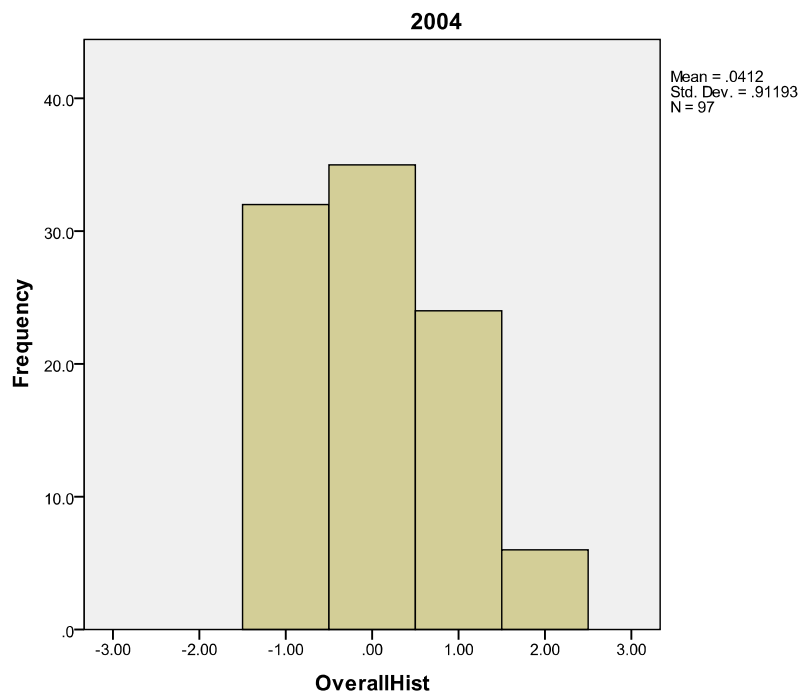


Figure 7.2. Daily Average Tone Score Histograms: 1996-2008.

Figure 7.2 (continued)



Of 344 days of coverage, from the day prior to the opening of the first convention through Election Day, 88 could be categorized as decidedly favoring one candidate or the other in terms of tone – those that fall in the -3, -2, 2, and 3 labeled blocs above. When we then compare those days with their corresponding shifts in support, we see clear support for the effects of tone of coverage on electoral support when a rate of agreement is measured – that is, when tone is clearly in favor of one candidate, how frequently does support for that candidate increase? Table 7.3 shows clearly that tone agrees with direction of movement as we move further from the “center” of the tone spectrum. Examination of these results shows that across the “0” row, there is more or less a random distribution of positive versus negative shifts, with rates of agreement falling around 50 percent. As we move towards the higher and lower categories, however, we see rates of agreement that reach as high as 100 percent, indicating that as relative tone towards the specific candidate improved, support improved along with it.

Table 7.3 – Rate of Agreement between Tone Advantage and Electoral Support Movement at Different Levels of Tone Divergence

Tone Bloc	1996	2000	2004	2008	MEAN
3	NA	75%	NA	NA	75%
2	75%	80%	83%	78%	79%
1	30%	63%	38%	74%	51%
0 (D)	54%	54%	49%	71%	57%
-1	77%	65%	63%	67%	68%
-2	67%	100%	NA	75%	81%
-3	100%	100%	NA	100%	100%

The “0” bloc is coded as rate of agreement towards the Democratic candidate, since there is no predicted outcome on days with balanced tone.

It is necessary, of course, to address the challenge of making valid statistical inferences from a relatively small number of observations. In determining the rates of

agreement at the margins (the 3s and 2s), all were calculated using a single-digit-sized population. This analysis holds up even when we aggregate cases in each bloc across all four elections, however. Of the 88 days that tone clearly favors one candidate over another, shifts in support agree with the day’s tone in 80 percent of observations. As we would also expect, this number increases when we consider only the most extreme cases: days that fall into the “3” and “-3” blocs correspond to correct increases in candidate support in 90 percent of cases (9 of 10). While acknowledging that results based on a limited sample size should be viewed with appropriate skepticism, I submit that this test allows us to see beyond a thorny methodological problem, and yielded precisely the results we would expect if tone has an effect of levels of electoral support.

Variable Support and Partisanship

In all three elections, standard deviation in daily share of support is significantly higher among Independents than among partisans, and the gap only appears to be growing: in 2000, there is a 1.7 and 0.8 point difference between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents (see Table 7.4). The difference is 2.4 and 2.0 in 2004, and increases to 3.6 and 4.4 in 2008. The mean difference across all three election cycles is 2.4 points, with Independents showing more than twice the variability in support.

Table 7.4: Standard Deviation of Daily Share of Support for Democratic and Republican Candidates Among Partisans and Independents

	Democrats	Republicans	Independents	N
2000	2.3	3.2	4.0	33
2004	2.0	2.4	4.4	40
2008	2.2	1.4	5.8	18

Differences between standard deviations of Democrats/Republicans are all significant to the .001 level except for the Republicans in 2000, which was insignificant.

This is a statistically significant amount of variance, when comparing partisans to independents. The evidence presented earlier also suggests that this variability is not simply the result of a wishy-washy segment of the electorate: the independent voters are *reacting* to something, and as the chapter has already presented evidence that shifts in coverage are causing shifts in support, this variability in support is at least in part a reaction to news coverage of the campaigns. This is consistent with previous work on the impact of news on decided and undecided voters (Hopmann et al. 2010, 389), and it stands to reason that a greater proportion of independents are flexible or undecided, relative to partisans.

Discussion

The results of these regressions make a compelling case for both media effects in the electorate as a whole – even allowing for a large uninterested and/or uninformed segment of that electorate – and for identifying “fugitive” effects where they are most likely to be hiding. This project adds to the growing consensus that media effects are quite real, even when discussing direct, preference-altering effects, and it does so while demonstrating real-time preference shifts that correspond to changes in the composition of news reports. This has important implications for both the study of political communication and the behavior of campaigns and journalists in the modern era.

In terms of our study of political communication, this chapter adds an element of comfort and justification to the continued search for robust media effects. By demonstrating that preferences are being updated as the campaign progresses, and further demonstrating a higher degree of flexibility among independents, we can make the case

that the campaigns *do* matter and are not simply activating voters (Gelman and King 1993). The perceptual screen of party identifiers is certainly a barrier to more impressive influence by the mass media, but it is not an insurmountable one, or rather it is one that is not always in place. As approximately one third of the electorate identifies with no party, there are still a substantial number of voters that are subject to media influence when making their voting decision, and just as clearly, some number of those voters are also changing their minds based on what they see and read. It also suggests that campaigns are a fight for voters' eyes and ears as much as for their hearts and minds. Campaign attempts to reach and influence the voters via the mass media are not at all a new innovation, but our study of them may be affected by the ability to quantify the effects of the campaigns' success or failure.

Continuing in this vein, these results say something about the power of journalists and news organizations to impact the elections that they cover. The press have always occupied a strategic middle-ground in American politics as purveyors of political information and watchdogs of the political class (Patterson 1993), but these findings suggest that the construction of the day's news is as important (or possibly more so) than the actual content of that news. When share of coverage is a more-reliable predictor of shifts in support than tone of coverage, then traditional notions of good and bad news – and, therefore, of the value of objectivity in reporting – must be reevaluated. If imbalance in share of coverage is the norm – and the content analysis data utilized here shows that it is – then the media are shaping the voting preferences of the electorate in ways they may not understand, and with a product that is unbalanced not as the result of

bias but of the structural constraints and behavioral norms of news organizations and journalists.

As discussed in Chapter One, this has profound implications for the impact of media imbalances on early voters, who may be making their “final” voting decisions during media swings that favor one candidate over another. In 2008, for example, it is estimated that nearly one-third of all ballots were cast early, and in eleven states early voting now comprises more than 50 percent of the total ballots cast (this, in addition to Oregon, that votes entirely by mail). In-person early voting is available in 31 states, and in several (Texas, Georgia, Iowa, Ohio) early voting – in-person – can occur more than two weeks before Election Day (Early Voting Information Center, earlyvoting.net). This is all the more reason why total-campaign-level balance in the media (which the content analysis here suggests is not the norm, in any case) is not substantively relevant to this discussion: intra-campaign imbalance still has the potential to alter the outcome of the election, even beyond the last-minute shocks or shifts in share of coverage.

At the end of the day, Bartels’ assertion that media effects are not as much minimal as fugitive is empirically supported when we search in the right places. These aggregate effects are present in all of the elections under review here, but appear to be minimal. However, when we eliminate one particular barrier to those same media effects, there is a marked increase in their magnitude, and they are no less reliable, on average and acknowledging the limiting effect of a smaller sample size, than their aggregate-electorate brethren. If other such barriers are identified and removed, we may yet find the robust and pervasive media effects that our instinct and reason tell us are present in the American electoral system.

Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter shows that the share and tone of news coverage does, in fact, have an effect on levels of support (contrary to at least one earlier study, Hopmann et al. 2010, which showed no effect of tone). In this case, the effects of tone of coverage are of substantial importance: if tone of coverage is a relevant and meaningful variable, then the large swings in tone seen throughout the campaign (and when they occur) are of great import, especially when one candidate is able to create some tonal “distance” between himself and the opposition. That, I believe, is the key factor: all too often, tone is too similar between candidates to have much measurable effect. Perhaps Warhol’s famous saw is appropriate, after all, at least as it relates to the certain periods in the campaign for the Presidency: “Don’t pay attention to what they write about you. Just measure it in inches.” Share of coverage contributes a great deal to electoral support, whether by virtue of activation or conversion.

Likewise, effects are most pronounced among independents. This is not a surprising finding, but it is further confirmation of the impact of news on voter preferences – while partisans are somewhat influenced, independents are rather strongly influenced. This is wholly consistent with the model employed here, and supports the conclusion that news coverage of the campaign is a significant contributor to the election’s outcome. News variability and susceptibility to influence by the campaigns have been demonstrated in earlier chapters, and this chapter goes further by showing that preferences and/or levels of support are shifting along with that variability. They are also

doing so in several recent elections, with the strongest effects in the most recent of those studied here – in other words, effects are increasing in their strength as we approach the present day.

Having concluded with the hypothesis-testing chapters, we can now move on to a discussion of these findings, *in toto*. The ground covered thus far provides a picture of a dynamic and volatile system that, nevertheless, exhibits certain stable behaviors and patterns, and responds to campaign stimuli in a limited fashion. The contributions of this chapter verify that not only are these factors subject to some degree of influence, if not control, but that they have a meaningful effect on elections. Consideration of the complete organism that is media coverage of the campaigns is no small task, but the preceding chapters have provided the tools and evidence necessary to begin to view and evaluate the entire campaign-media landscape. Let us turn to that now.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of this project has been to construct the framework upon which we may hang a larger understanding of media coverage of presidential elections and the effects of that coverage. Development of this area of research is important to both the political science and communications disciplines, as well as to the practical worlds of campaigns, elections, and voters. In a hyper-interconnected world with so many potential news sources (every blog, website, podcast, and social media group), media of all kinds are of greater importance than ever, and their potential to increase (and decrease) electoral support in the form of votes, money, and momentum must be of central importance to political scientists in all corners of the globe. The results of this study by no means settle the question of media effects, nor are the descriptions of the media environment offered herein to be considered comprehensive, but they add to our collective knowledge of the situation and, I hope, offer some valuable insights into the ways in which media do (and do not) affect our election outcomes.

Democracy relies absolutely on the dissemination of information. It is no accident that the only private institution protected by the Constitution is the press, and no accident that it has become so ubiquitous in our lives. As we move into the future, the study of media and media effects cannot be ignored. This concluding chapter will discuss how we have arrived at this point, and discuss where we should be going from here. I will review the central findings and their place in the literature, as well as what they mean for the model employed here. That will be

followed by a discussion of their implications, and the chapter will conclude with a description of the next-steps in the study of this phenomenon.

Results

Overview

The results of this study have been elaborated in detail in the previous chapters, so I will not overly-belabor them here. There is value, though, in bringing all of the separate findings together in one place, especially in so wide-ranging a project. Over the course of these chapters the media environment has been described and analyzed, an empirical analysis of the conflict-based “attractiveness” hypotheses have been tested, and the effects of share of coverage and tone of coverage have been measured. First I will present the hypothesis-by-hypothesis test results, and then review them in the context of the broader literature. So, to review, brief results of the hypotheses tested are as follows:

H1: In competitive election cycles, total-cycle volume of coverage will be greater than in non-competitive election cycles. 1996 was the only non-competitive election within the scope of this project, with a mean separation of 17.4 percent between the two candidates in trial heat polling for the general election period. The mean daily volume of coverage of the 1996 campaign was 22 percent lower, on average, than the mean daily volume of coverage of the other three elections (15 percent less coverage than the next closest election in 2000, and just over 30 percent less than the most-covered election in 2008).

H2: In competitive election cycles, total-cycle share of horserace/strategy coverage will be greater than in non-competitive election cycles. Again, comparing 1996 to the other three elections, there is a clear separation between them with regard to the amount of

horseshoe/strategy coverage, though it is a significant contributor even in 1996. In 1996, 71 percent of coverage was of candidate and campaign activities (or analysis of them), while in the other three elections the percentage increases to an average of 77 percent.

H3: Candidates will generally receive coverage that is comparable in tone in all general election periods except the convention periods. Tone of coverage, like share of coverage, is far from stable. However, unlike share of coverage (which, if variable, means that there is imbalance between the candidates) it is possible to “balance” tone of coverage by reporting on the candidates with comparable levels of positivity or negativity. That balance is demonstrated here by correlating tone of coverage for the conventions and the remainder of the general election, independently, as well as through an independent samples t-test (comparison of means). Both support the hypothesis. Comparison shows negative and/or insignificant correlations for all elections during the convention period, but highly significant and positive correlation of tone for the remaining two to three months of the general election campaign. The t-tests also support the hypothesis – tone of coverage “fails” the test in almost every comparison (suggesting that the means are not significantly different). Tone of coverage is most dissimilar during the conventions, is most similar in the post-convention period, and becomes somewhat more dissimilar in the final thirty days of the campaign. Overall, tone of coverage of each candidate is significantly correlated to the other, and not significantly different between them, for most of the general election campaign.

H4: Issues which are jointly emphasized by the campaigns will be covered by the media, while issues which are mentioned by only one candidate will not. Regressing total volume of coverage of an issue on the number of times both candidates mentioned that issue in their remarks in 1996 yields a significant relationship. However, regressing coverage of issues on the

number of times each candidate individually mentioned that issue does not. Looking at individual issues and daily mention/coverage of them, in ten of eleven cases single-candidate mention of an issue is not significantly related to coverage of that issue on that day (using the chi-squared test of significance). However, in four of five cases there is a significant relationship between *dual*-candidate mention of an issue and news coverage of that issue, and in all four cases the lambda values are two to three times larger than for the single-candidate issues mentioned and covered.

H5: Campaigns that offer more conflict- and novelty-based stories to the media will increase their share of coverage or decrease share of coverage of their opposition. In every election cycle, the conflict-share relationship is correct in at least one direction: increased conflict origination results in a significant increase in the originating campaign's share of coverage or a decrease in the opposing campaign's share of coverage. This conclusion is supported by correlation of each campaign's conflict-generation score and the two campaigns' share of coverage at the same time, as well as by regression analysis of the same variables.

H6: A candidate's level of support will increase when the share of coverage of that candidate increases, if relative tone of coverage is neutral or better. Regression of level of support on share of coverage and tone of coverage shows significant effects for the model. Examination of the individual contributions of share and tone show that share of coverage is always significant or near-significant (p-values never rise above 0.1) and is consistent in the magnitude and direction of its effect on support. Tone, on the other hand, is less reliable. At times it is more-significant and has a larger effect than share of coverage (1996, 2000), but in other elections it is highly insignificant (2004, 2008) or in the wrong direction (2004). Overall, though, the predictive power of a share of coverage and tone of coverage model is demonstrated

H7: Effects of changes in media coverage will be greater among independents and lesser in party identifiers. Regression analysis of the same variables, but with sub-samples that are disaggregated by party identification, shows a clear advantage in looking for media effects among independents. Not only are the effects much more robust in magnitude by comparison to examination of news coverage effects on the full electorate, but there is virtually no relationship between advantages in share and/or tone of coverage and changes in levels of support among the partisan sub-groups. Independents are also much more likely to exhibit shifts in support more generally, while partisans are not – there is a significant difference in the standard deviation of levels of candidate support among independents and partisans, with independents showing a greater amount of variance over the course of the general election campaign.

Results in Context

As a piece of research within the broader literatures, there are a number of findings within this study that confirm, clarify, and challenge the findings of other researchers, and there are other findings which are unique within the literature. A substantial number of existing findings were confirmed in this study, but this is not merely an echo of previous work: the methodological advantage of studying multiple elections through the lens of a fine-grain content analysis makes the confirmation of existing findings a worthwhile enterprise. In other areas, these findings allow us to bring evidence to bear on one side of an existing academic debate. And, of course, at times the findings either challenge existing research or simply answer questions that have not yet been asked and answered. For each major section of this project (description of the media environment, description and effects of share of coverage, description and effects of tone of coverage, and control of the media environment) there are a number of

primary (hypothesis-related) and secondary findings that are described below, as is their relationship to existing research.

The Media Environment

The media environment, as discussed in Chapter Three, is rather predictable in many ways. For one, competitiveness matters. The competitive elections of 2000, 2004, and 2008 were significantly different in terms of the volume of coverage of each campaign by comparison to 1996, which suggests that competitiveness is the key contributor to the volume of coverage of the campaign (as suggested by Kerbel 1997) rather than any degradation in commercial viability (as argued by Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Also, coverage of the campaign is very similar from one news outlet to another, with significantly similar share and tone of coverage between the two outlets chosen for this study, consistent with previous work (Bennett 1996, Cohen 1963, Crouse 1973). Volume of coverage is not only predictable in terms of how much coverage there will be of the campaigns overall, but also *when* that coverage will occur: it peaks around the major campaign events (conventions and Election Day), which we have seen in other research (Domke et al. 1997, Johnston et al. 2004, Kerbel 1995), but here we also see that coverage increases during the debates in election years when the race is competitive, though not when it is not. It is patently unusual to see a spike in volume of coverage outside of these events, with only two observable spikes in the entirety of four full election cycles.

The content of that coverage is likewise predictable: the media prefer coverage of strategy and the horserace, and generally do not cover issues to any great degree. All four coding periods showed that more than half of all coverage is devoted to the non-policy-related actions of the campaigns, which confirms earlier findings on this subject (Iyengar et al. 2004,

Kerbel 1995, Patterson 1993, Brady and Johnston 1987, Benoit et al. 2005, Stempel & Windhauser 1989, Mantler & Whiteman 1995, Domke et al. 1997). What we might add here, though, is that competitiveness once again changes our expectations: the non-competitive election year of 1996 showed an increase in issue coverage and a decline in strategy-horserace coverage, even as it showed a decrease in overall coverage of the campaign. This, it should be noted, is despite the fact that candidates discuss issues extensively (and almost exclusively) on the campaign trail, as the Annenberg-Pew data confirms, and as others have found (Just et al. 1999, Vavreck 2009).

Share of coverage is somewhat less predictable, which was a central argument in this project: at any given time, one candidate may dominate the news of the campaign relative to his/her opponent. The content coded here and the analysis of that data disputes previous findings that overall coverage of the candidates is generally balanced in terms of volume (D'Alessio and Allen 2000, Kerbel 1995, Stovall 1980), and the general appearance of aggregate balance is misleading. There is substantial variation in share of coverage, and the norm is *imbalance* rather than balance, both overall and on a day-to-day basis. Extremes in share of coverage are observable throughout the campaign, even outside of the convention periods.

In terms of tone of coverage, there are several aspects that are addressed here, specifically the overall tone of coverage, trends in tone of coverage during the campaign, and partisan advantage in tone of coverage. Scholars differ on whether the media are generally positive, negative, or balanced in their treatment of the campaign (Patterson 1993, Benoit et al. 2005, Farnsworth & Lichter 2007, Farnsworth & Lichter 2011, D'Alessio & Allen 2000, Johnston et al. 2004), but the evidence here is that tone is slightly positive, overall (consistent with some outlet-specific findings in Farnsworth & Lichter 2011). Tone of coverage is generally positive during

the conventions (though sitting presidents are treated a bit less-positively) and trends downward from there (confirming the results in Patterson 1993 and Johnston et al. 2004). Tone of coverage is generally balanced between the two candidates on a daily basis (as was seen in Johnston et al. 2004 and Domke et al. 1997), but it is not *stable*, in that it varies dramatically in terms of the *measurement* of the tone of that coverage.

Also confirmed here is whether a consistent dominant issue emerges from a broader analysis. The findings here are consistent with previous research, in that the dominant issue of any campaign may vary from one year to the next and also *within* one election cycle, though the economy is usually a prominent issue and often a dominant one (Alvarez & Nagler 1995, Carsey 2000, Domke et al. 1997, Gilens et al. 2007, Graber 1976, Hillygus & Shields 2005, Kerbel 1995, Petrocik 1996, Tedesco 2005, Vavreck 2009).

The media environment exhibits intracampaign variability in nearly all measures (volume, topic, tone, and share of coverage), and predictability (in spite of this variation) in some, using both intracampaign and intercampaign comparisons. Volume of coverage consistently increases and falls off at specific points in each election cycle even though the total volume, measured daily, is variable over the course of the campaign and may vary in terms of total coverage for the campaign cycle. Topics of coverage are predictable in that horserace and strategy coverage is dominant and issue coverage is secondary, but specific issue areas covered vary depending on the way these issues are discussed by the campaigns, and also vary from one campaign to another. Tone of coverage is widely variable during the campaign with periods of overall positive and negative coverage, but daily tone of coverage is statistically comparable between candidates during most of the election cycle. Share of coverage varies over the course

of the campaign as well, even though total coverage received by each candidate, in the aggregate, is similar when we compare across several campaigns.

Control of the Media Environment

Since there is variation in the media environment during the general election campaign, it is useful to consider whether the campaigns can exert influence over that environment. Here again we see competing explanations for what sets the media agenda during a campaign. Some find evidence for inter-media agenda setting (Lang & Lang 1981 and Weaver & Elliott 1985), others that candidates and campaigns are influential (McCombs et al. 1984, Dalton et al. 1998), some that the extra-media factors such as the structure of news organizations and media norms and ethics build the agenda (Jamieson & Campbell 1992, Gans 1979, Cohen 1963), and still others that the media largely set their own agenda during the campaign (Patterson 1980, Weaver et al. 1981). Here I offer evidence in support of the idea that the campaigns and candidates can actively seek out media attention by their behavior, specifically by offering conflict and novelty.

This test manifests the challenge of knowing what is *not* being reported, which in this particular case was not possible given the data available. However, it was possible to test for whether the share of coverage of a candidate corresponded to the number of conflict-based stories which that candidate generated, and by using a different data source for the creation of the conflict-generation measure (print) and the share of coverage measure (broadcast), it was at least possible to create some methodological distance between the two, and hopefully reduce the endogeneity concerns. The results showed correlations and support from regression analysis that were both significant and in the appropriate direction for all years: when one campaign offered conflict (attacks/defense from attacks, or new/responses to policy positions), their share of

coverage increased and/or the share of coverage of their opposition decreased. This expands on existing findings (Benoit & Currie 2001, Bitzer & Reuter 1980, Reber & Benoit 2001) that the media over-report on the conflict-laden parts of debates, and demonstrates that tendency across the entire general election.

At the same time, the conflict theory was supported by an examination of which issues were most popular in coverage of the campaign. Several authors (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994, Carsey 2000, Damore 2004, Downs 1953, Holian 2004, Petrocik 1996) offer different explanations as to *why* campaigns attempt to influence the media agenda, but do not empirically test for when/how they do so. Volume of mentions by candidates of an issue did not determine the likelihood of that issue being reported in the press. Moreover, single-candidate mentions of an issue were not sufficient to provoke coverage in the media. On issues, though, where *both* candidates mentioned an issue in their remarks, it was more likely to appear in print and over the airwaves. If a candidate wishes to see an issue covered, then, he or she can either choose to comment on an issue emphasized by their opponent or attempt to force their opposition to respond on a particular issue: both would result in a significantly greater probability that an issue will be covered. Conflict, then, appears to be a central component in attractive the attention of the media and increasing one's share of coverage.

Effects of Changes in News Coverage

Many authors have found that news coverage of politics and candidates causes small changes in our political attitudes and evaluations (Bartels 1993, Graber 1988, Hillygus & Jackman 2003, Iyengar & Kinder 1987, Miller & Krosnick 2000, Neuman et al. 1992, Popkin 1991). This is both confirmed and refined in this study. Some recent work has examined how

intracampaign changes in coverage affect voters (Domke et al. 1997, Hagen & Johnston 2007, Hellwed et al. 1992, Hopmann et al. 2010, Soroka et al. 2009), though these studies use combined measures of tone, volume, share, and sometimes topic of coverage to reach their conclusions. As a time-series variable, shifts in share of coverage alone predict shifts in share of support to a significant degree, even without accounting for the tone, volume, or subject of that coverage. This confirms Zaller's 1992 finding that the "louder" message wins out among the public, and share of coverage alone is seen as a preference-altering effect. This study shows that this is true in an election campaign setting, whereas Zaller's test was on issue preferences in the public. These effects are seen both in the aggregate and among what might be termed "susceptible" populations. Less-partisan voters are most likely to be affected by news coverage. Partisans are less likely to be affected by shifts in share of coverage, or indeed anything at all: variance in levels of support is much lower for partisans than independents, as anticipated.

The literature is largely silent on intracampaign levels of tone of coverage for each candidate and their potential effects (the lone exception being Domke 1997). Tone of coverage, though, is at times a significant contributor to changes in level of support in the electorate. This finding is somewhat inconsistent, though, and is not as reliable as share of coverage in predicting changes. This is the result of another surprising finding: tone of coverage of each candidate correlates to the tone of coverage of the other candidate, in the aggregate, and deviations within the campaign are rare and mainly confined to the convention period. In other words, most of the days' campaign news is positive or negative, regardless of who is receiving the coverage. This means that tone of coverage matters, but gets few opportunities to do so, since very often the news is uniformly (and not selectively) good or bad for the candidates, so very little relative advantage exists. When tone *does* diverge, though, it shows that it does make a significant

impact on levels of support in the electorate. The conclusion we may reach is that both tone and share of coverage matter, but since tone is so consistent between the candidates (the correlation is both significant and robust) it typically does not have the opportunity to cause much in the way of effects on electoral support.

Conclusion

These findings all point to a media environment that is fluid and variable, influenceable, and influential. There is variability in share of coverage and tone of coverage, but tone of coverage is generally balanced, with very little relative advantage for either candidate. Campaigns can influence the issue agenda of the media, further advancing their cause (if they are correct in their assessment of which issues will benefit their campaigns). They can also influence share of coverage, increasing their own or decreasing that of their opposition by being a source of relatable and useful stories for political journalists. All of this variability also appears to influence voters (especially independents) in terms of their anticipated voting preference, which suggests that not only are media effects real, but that the battle for them can be waged, won, and lost.

Returning to the Model

The model described in Chapter Two (news production, transmission, and reception) describes a multifaceted relationship between the campaigns, journalists, and news organizations, in which all are potential sources of news stories. Campaigns want “good” news about their candidates (positive, and more of it) and both offer stories and are sought out for their input on stories by journalists. Journalists are receivers of input from all directions, up and down

the chain, as campaigns and their own news organizations recommend stories, and yet they also “create” their own news and seek input from the campaigns and prefer stories that are focused on the competition-oriented aspects of the campaign and fit into a traditional storytelling framework. The news organizations themselves both recommend stories to their own reporters and select from the material those reporters submit to ultimately “create” the news. News creation at both the journalist and organization level is geared towards commercial viability and the satisfaction of professional norms of journalists, specifically their role as referees and critics of the political process. This news is then transmitted to the public, who receive and accept it at different rates and in different ways, with partisan resistance being the most likely roadblock to acceptance. News organizations are also sensitive to which stories are popular with the public, and will provide more of the news they desire and consume.

The empirical observations made here largely support this model. The macro-level elements of campaign news (how much coverage, and of what is that coverage comprised) are clearly related to the level of competitiveness of the campaign. Both volume and the proportion of issue to campaign coverage are sensitive to this consideration. Journalists and/or news outlets show a preference for strategy and horserace coverage since it satisfies many of the values which make a story “newsworthy,” which is also consistent with the increases in share of coverage seen when a campaign increases its level of conflict-generation. The effects of this news, as observed here, are also consistent with the perceptual screen issue caused by partisanship. Independents are shown to be much more sensitive to changes in the relative advantage candidates may gain in share and tone of coverage, while partisans appear to be largely immune to those changes. These shifts among independents (and, very likely, weak partisans) are of sufficient magnitude as to be detectable in the full electorate as well.

One area where revision to the model may be necessary is in the degree to which the interests of the public influence the media agenda. In reviewing the public-candidate-media issue agenda for 1996, data were generated on the priorities of the public, the most-mentioned issues by the candidates, and the amount of coverage of those issues in the press. While there was substantial overlap between the “most important” issues facing the country in the eyes of the public and the degree to which the candidates addressed those issues in their public remarks, there was surprisingly little correlation between those issues and those most-covered by the media. This suggests that the press are much less sensitive to the demands of the public than the model would suggest, at least so long as the “pack journalism” model holds and most outlets are producing similar news on the same topics. It is possible, of course, that what the public *says* they care about and what they *actually* consume in the media environment are substantially different things (hence the disconnect in the analysis of Fallows 1996 and Iyengar et al. 2004), but the empirical evidence here suggests that there is only a very limited level of public influence over the media issue agenda, and certainly very little over the amount of campaign and strategy coverage compared to issue coverage.

Implications

The findings reported above have important implications in a number of areas. At the very least, from a practical perspective, they provide evidence that media coverage of campaigns affects not only how the voters discuss the campaign (agenda setting), but also that the coverage affects whom the voters are supporting. Moving beyond that basic conclusion, though, there are at least two others that merit discussion: competitiveness in an election affects both coverage and effects of coverage, and “media politics” activities of campaigns can be an effective campaign

tool. In terms of the philosophical, these findings suggest that it is not only what news is reported that can impact the outcome of an election, but how much of it, which prompts consideration of the appropriate role of the media and how their power could potentially be abused. Since it is virtually impossible to avoid either the consequences of elections or the process of election campaigns, these findings should be of interest to virtually all citizens in general, and to those who engage in and study elections in particular.

Interpreting why tracking polls move as they do is a favorite pastime of media figures: in fact, it is one of the more common themes in coverage of the election. That is why it is all the more interesting that their own coverage has a role to play in determining where those polling numbers are headed. I feel confident that most major media figures (reporters, anchors, analysts, news directors, and more) believe that their words affect perceptions of the candidates, but I doubt very much that they would have anticipated just how their coverage matters.

Intracampaign share of coverage is not a metric that I have seen employed in many other studies of media effects (Domke et al. 1997 being the sole exception), and that it is sufficient to explain shifts in support – whatever size the effect – tells us something meaningful about how voters make use of the media to reach political conclusions. It isn't nearly as much *what* is said, but more the fact that it is being said at all. That we can now add one more explanatory variable to the discussion of what moves the electorate is sufficiently satisfying, from a research perspective. It may even alleviate concerns about the impact of bias, at least in the statement-bias sense, since the results here are shown to hold even when measures of tone are considered separately from measures of share. The correlation and balance of tone between the candidates on a daily basis was by far the most surprising finding in this project, and the implications of this finding are wide-ranging. Not only does this finding color our discussion of how media affect

perceptions, but it also has a role to play in our discussion of implications for campaigning, below.

Another implication is less surprising, but still of interest: competitiveness matters. In measure after measure, 1996 was an anomalous election year. There was nothing particularly special about that year: it shared characteristics with the other election years. The general election period was relatively short, but so was the election in 2008. It was a reelection campaign, but so was 2004. It was an election held during a period of relative happiness and prosperity, but then again, so was 2000. The most obvious distinction that can be drawn among these elections is that 2000, 2004, and 2008 all featured election campaigns that were relatively competitive (sometimes intensely so, with multiple lead changes, as in 2000), while 1996 did not. The Clinton-Dole contest of 1996 was essentially over before it began. Dole never seriously challenged Clinton's lead, and the coverage of that particular campaign was different from each of those that followed. It was lower in volume, overall; higher in the ratio of issue coverage; and represented a much smaller proportion of the total news volume of any given day, compared to the other election cycles examined here. This is something we should bear in mind when conducting future research, but it is also something that we should bear in mind when examining past research that studies only a single election: if that election year was not particularly competitive, then the results of any study of it should be viewed with a significant measure of skepticism, as the findings from competitive elections do not appear to apply to non-competitive elections, and vice versa. Competitiveness increases the stakes of the coverage, in terms of how large an effect might be needed to change the outcome of the election, but it seems that competitiveness also changes the ways in which campaigns are communicated.

This research also supports the school of thought that politics has become a media-management and image-driven exercise. Certainly, the campaigns are in competition for media attention. The volume of coverage available to the candidates is predictable and, to a greater or lesser extent, fixed. It is a commodity that they compete for. The topics of that coverage (whether strategy, issue, personality, or otherwise) are likewise fairly stable. So, then, since we are discussing a media environment that tends to vary only in terms of the share of coverage and the tone of coverage, and since those ratios affect levels of support, in a very real sense the campaign has incorporated the media as an arena for competition. What's more, it is also evident that campaigns *are* capable of attracting the attention of the media, whether they are doing so deliberately or not. Since attention usually equals support, the decisions made by a campaign that affect the attractiveness of the campaign to media outlets are really attempts to influence the outcome of the election.

This, in one sense, justifies the view held by the media that the campaigns are acting strategically in their relationship with the media, and that those actions should be considered a part of the "game" schema (Patterson 1993, 57). Where this research can add to that notion is in how the tone of coverage of the campaign can factor into the decision of whether to seek coverage or not. Certainly, tone matters: but what is also clear is that when tone of coverage of the candidates is more or less the same there is only so much that it *can* matter. This means that campaigns can make the tactical decision to seek or avoid coverage, depending on how tone relates. For example, if coverage of your campaign is in a negative phase, competing for share of coverage is not in the best interests of your campaign, *unless coverage of the competing campaign is at the same or greater level of negativity*. In such a situation, share of coverage is still desirable, despite the overall negativity of the coverage – this is both counterintuitive and

slightly perverse, but nevertheless it is supported empirically. At the same time, if a disparity in tone exists, campaigns can actively seek to drive down the tone of coverage of the opposition by attacking, an activity that the media find to be attractive and increases the probability that it will be selected and disseminated, thereby giving another option to campaigns in their attempt to manipulate the campaign's media environment.

Media politics has the power to change not only the impact of media coverage, but even who is benefitting or not from that coverage. As Zaller quotes in *A Theory of Media Politics*, Lyndon Johnson's view of what has changed in American politics is this:

"All you guys in the media. All of politics has changed because of you. You've broken all the [party] machines and the ties between us in the Congress and the city machines. You've given us a new kind of people." A certain disdain passed over his face. "Teddy, Tunney. They're your creations, your puppets. No machine could ever create a Teddy Kennedy. Only you guys. They're all yours. Your product." (Halberstam, 1979, pp. 15-16)

In reading this passage, one cannot help but consider something like the potential candidacy of Donald Trump in the run-up to the 2012 Republican primaries. A Politico-George Washington University poll fielded between 8 and 12 May 2011 showed that 71 percent of Americans believed Trump had "no chance" to win the election, and 26 percent felt he had never been serious about running. At the same time, though, between April 1st and May 16th (the day before Trump officially bowed out), Trump's name appeared in fifteen headlines in the *New York Times*. In the same time frame, declared candidate (and former House Speaker) Newt Gingrich received only five headlines, while front-runner Mitt Romney (a former governor and declared candidate) received only three. In this case, the "popular" candidate decided not to run and was never considered a viable or realistic candidate by the public, but it is significant for those also competing for the same media space that he was covered at all, since the data and analysis here show that coverage matters.

Finally, this work has serious implications for our understanding of the role of the media in presidential election campaigns. We cannot ignore that media effects appear to be real, and can be based on something as simple as which candidate receives a greater share of the day's news coverage. Past work has discussed the potential impact of an attack-minded, negative press (Sabato 1992, 2003), as well as the poor job done by the media in covering the campaigns (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003, 2007), and several other components of the campaign-media relationship. What many of these works ultimately argue for, though, is reform in how news outlets cover the campaigns, and often by describing what a "correct" or "sociotropic" or "responsible" media would produce. I do not share their sentiments. I would not presume to know what was best for Americans, American democracy, or our electoral system. What I do say, though, is that in light of the findings here – from the comparable tone of coverage, to the generally fixed volume of coverage, and other aspects of the media environment – the most important goal of any media outlet seeking to limit their impact on voters would be to ensure, to whatever degree possible, that they provide equal amounts of coverage of each candidate on a daily basis. I do not suggest that they should wish to do so nor that they will, but we should certainly be aware of the potential impacts if they do not. As we have seen here, the potential impacts are significant, and may become more so in the future. The number and means of communication may change, but certainly mass media (in whatever form) will not be departing the political scene any time soon, and in fact will likely only become more prominent. For this reason, if no other, this research is important.

Limitations

It has been my consistent position that there exist a number of clear limitations to this study, both in terms of the general study of media effects and of the particular study of the presidential general election campaign environment studied here. The first is that there is an inherent danger in attempting to extrapolate the results of a two-source content analysis onto *all* media. Second, there is the level of detail of that content analysis, which was much deeper in the broadcast medium than the print medium. Third, we have the challenge of a “noisy” campaign environment, in which dozens (if not hundreds) of inputs are impacting the share of support in the electorate. Last, there is the question of internal validity: asserting validity is, I believe, appropriate, but I recognize that in the absence of a measure of media usage (and even in its presence) the connection between the independent variables (coverage and tone in the print and broadcast media here) and dependent variable (share of support in the electorate) is tenuous. These limitations are real, but they are also acceptable in the sense that they are common throughout the literature, and wherever possible I have attempted to nullify their impact on the results reported here.

The inclusion of only two media sources was both deliberate and regrettable. So limited a sample invites attacks on the generalizability of the findings, but is unavoidable in any by-hand content analysis (as opposed to computer-assisted), barring the addition of an army of research assistants. After all, the actions of one or two media outlets can hardly be considered representative of *all* media. Having said that, I would endeavor to defend the results on the grounds that there is, even between the two sources here, a high level of consistency in coverage in terms of share, volume, tone, and topic. Despite occasional departures, on most days the amount of coverage of the campaigns was similar, the material covered was virtually identical

(allowing for non-event-driven stories such as profile pieces on spouses, etc.), and tone was generally consistent: correlation between tone of coverage of each candidate in the *Times* and on NBC was both in the correct direction and statistically significant in six of eight cases. I can also point to the fact that coverage was consistent across several elections, which at least allows us to assert that the conclusions drawn apply generally across time to these two outlets. Finally, from a purely practical standpoint, there is only so much that one researcher (or even a team of researchers) can evaluate and analyze in a given project, and there will always be a need to say “enough” short of a large-enough sample to satisfy all readers. I am content that this project has gone at least as far – and in many cases, farther – than other studies in the discipline, and unearthed significant results. If the worst we can say is that the findings only apply to these two outlets, but that they appear to predict changes in the aggregate electorate, then that is a caveat I will happily embrace.

In terms of the content analysis itself, there was a high degree of detail in the broadcast medium, but rather less so in the print medium. This was a deliberate choice, and the results were not adversely affected. The inclusion of the television data was a happy surprise that was not anticipated when the project was first conceived, owing to the difficulty of accessing such data over such a long period. The decision of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive to make available in streaming format the NBC and CNN nightly news broadcasts made it possible to do so, however, and for that I am extremely grateful to them. This data was, of necessity, coded to a very high degree of precision: the spoken word as delivered by such broadcasts requires precise parsing. This took time, and I believe that the time was well spent; however it did cut into the coding time available for the other medium. Coding of the print medium presented a difficult choice: code a sample of stories to a high degree of detail, or code *all* stories with a lesser degree

of detail. In opting to code all stories to a lesser degree of detail, the research could now claim to report on the coding of *all* campaign stories in both media, which completeness made for a more robust analysis of the media environment. Sampling would result in concerns about the sensitivity of some key measures in the study, since one area of relative advantage in this study was the intra-campaign measure of the media environment whereby measures were taken daily. Given the high level of detail in the broadcast medium, it seemed like a reasonable compromise to limit coding of the print medium to coding of headlines (for topic, tone, and candidate) and the story as a whole (for the same, plus candidate name-counts), rather than coding paragraph-by-paragraph. This is still a level of detail sufficient to compare the two media, as well as to test the hypotheses offered here. In the future, however, greater detail can only be an asset to studies such as this.

We also face a challenge in that campaigns are cluttered and confusing environments with many competing (and often contradictory and countervailing) influences. Identifying large media effects has proven to be a significant challenge in the discipline, and this project is no different. The effects seen, though statistically significant, are small. This limited level of *substantive* significance is concerning, at least on its face, and this concern is not easily dismissed. Given this limitation, we should approach our analysis of media effects from a cautious position, and treat them as they are, not as we might believe them to be. There is no harm in accepting that, for the moment, the best we can say is that we can *observe* small effects even as we attempt to uncover larger effects. Small changes in electoral support still have the power to alter the outcome of elections, and recent history offers us several examples of races that would have seen a different outcome with the addition or subtraction of some small level of support. In the meantime, the search for larger effects may continue, and researching how

different campaign stimuli interact requires inclusion of media effects, especially as those media expand and change. Social media, for example, may offer us an opportunity to see larger effects than traditional print or broadcast media, if only by virtue of their ubiquity. At the moment, at least, we can observe small effects despite the chaotic maelstrom that is the modern campaign for the presidency.

The final limitation of this study is the question of the internal validity of the results. To be certain, there is a connection between the variables presented here, but is it a causal connection? The polling data available do not offer the answer to the question, since very few tracking polls ask about media usage. Even if they did, the connection would still not be firmly established (since it is still possible that a third variable is causing changes in media coverage and levels of support); this research was not undertaken in an experimental setting, which method would have offered a bit more confidence in the causal nature of the independent variables. In light of this, we must treat these results with an appropriate degree of skepticism. I still, however, have a high degree of confidence in the relationship posited here between coverage in the media and support in the electorate. Americans receive most of their political knowledge from media and advertising, and unless they are irrational, this information and the manner in which it is presented will have some effect on their vote choice. It seems far too great a coincidence, too, that those in the age demographic most likely to have been exposed to broadcast news were also those whose changes in support most closely matched the changes in coverage. So, skepticism is certainly warranted, but as is cautious optimism with regard to the validity of the findings.

These limitations (and, I feel certain, others that have not yet occurred to me) are real, but are by no means unique. They are common to most studies in the sub-field, and I believe that

they offer no real threat to the value of the work overall. All can be addressed in due course by further study, broader and more detailed data collection, and the use of both field and laboratory methods. I do not dismiss them (nor is it my intention to minimize them), but certainly they are within the bounds of tolerance for the phenomena being studied. Campaign effects *are* difficult to isolate, and content analysis is constantly beset by concerns over whether the right material (and enough of it) is being analyzed. The next section – recommendations for future research – outlines some of the research agenda that I believe will bolster these findings and allow us to make more confident assertions in this area of study.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are at least two substantial areas in which we can improve our knowledge and the validity of our inferences with regard to media effects on presidential election campaigns, and I approach this question of how to proceed from the position that the best way to advance this study is by expanding our knowledge of the content of media reporting on the campaigns and isolating the causal variables in question. The first item can be accomplished through the creation of an ongoing content analysis project with a staff capable of analyzing the coverage of campaigns by multiple media outlets, using the same procedures for each outlet and election cycle, making the data more consistent and increasing its utility. Second, I believe that this is an area that is ideal for experimental methods that can better-isolate the independent variables and get a better sense of the size of their effects. With the proper data and the proper methodology, we will be able to make great advances in our knowledge of the media environment, how it changes and reacts to the campaigns and the people, and what role it plays in the American democratic process. Before we get to that point, though, let me take a moment to discuss the

tools and methods that may improve the study of media effects in general, and then we will turn to future research questions to be answered.

I believe that the single greatest contribution that we may make to the study of political media and media effects is the creation of a central, continuously-updated, broadly-drawn content analysis database. This is an area of study that, for all of its depth, is still in need of a basic archive of coded data with which to work. Content analysis is undertaken by each author in his or her own way and to his or her own ends, which makes comparing the results of different studies a very difficult enterprise, riddled with caveats and calibrations. In the process of searching for data for this project, none were available in the area of completed content analysis. In some cases, those who had the data were not willing to make it available (Center for Media and Public Affairs), but in most cases the data were simply for one election, or one race. One potential exception to this state of affairs would be the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), who code in an ongoing fashion but have (to date) only the 2008 election cycle available. It is my sincere hope that this project will continue for years to come, and that future coding can take into account some of the dynamics discussed here such as tone of coverage and share of coverage. At present, coding is focused in large part on the subject of the coverage and the format of that coverage (interviews, pre-recorded segment, etc.), and more variables can be added. Even this, though, may not suffice: since stories are coded in their entirety, we run afoul of the sensitivity problem discussed earlier. Still, it is a hugely valuable resource, and if continued it will provide a solid, publicly-available base from which we can access all manner of useful data, and at the very least it shows that such an ongoing program of content analysis is feasible. Additional detail would also be desirable in determining the precise mechanism(s) that

drive story selection and creation by political journalists themselves, and this has been an area of focus for PEJ in at least one study (“2008 General Election”).

Another facet to consider is the potential contribution of experimentalism to questions of this type. Experimentalism is on the march in political science, with the number of published articles that use this method roughly doubling each decade since the 1980s (Morton and Williams 2006, 3). The great advantage of experimental research is the ability to make causal inferences with a high degree of confidence, and it is precisely this which is lacking in our study of media effects: we must always struggle to connect media reporting to changing political attitudes and choices, which is a very difficult gap to bridge (Zaller 1996 provides an excellent discussion on this topic). With an experimental design, however, we can isolate the independent variable and determine its effects (including the magnitude of those effects), which greatly increases the validity of the findings. Experiments are particularly useful in areas where it is necessary to account for a number of potential influences, and existing work in the fields of voter turnout and advertising effects (Green et al. 1998, Arceneaux and Huber 2007, Arceneaux 2005, and more) have shown very promising results. There is no reason to believe that the application of these methods would be of any less value in regard to the question of media effects and the impact of shifting share and tone of coverage, as well as the corollary questions to be discussed next. While acknowledging that experimentalism in the area of generic media effects is not rare, I find relatively few studies of campaign media effects in the existing literature.

In terms of questions left unanswered here, the one that seems the most relevant is the impact of editorial content on electoral support. The material coded here was uniformly “news” content, with editorial content being omitted. However, a great deal of what many believe to be news content is actually editorial content and punditry, particularly with regard to the broadcast

media. The vast majority of prime time broadcast material on CNN and Fox News is editorial, not news, and other editorial programming is interspersed throughout our broadcasts (consider shows like *Meet the Press* and *This Week*). It is not entirely clear what the impact of such coverage is, or, necessarily, what now constitutes the political media. As Mutz (2002) states, "...what citizens call news now covers dozens of channels and many programs that are not ostensibly news programs" (123). Presumably most viewers of a Bill O'Reilly or Rachel Maddow are decidedly conservative or liberal, respectively, but viewers of other programs (especially the *Crossfire*-style or roundtable programs) may represent a better mix of the electorate in terms of party identification and strength of identification. The share, content and tone of coverage on these programs may add some useful elements to research of media effects on electoral support.

A further aspect of media that may provide some excellent insights into the changing media environment would be the effects of social media on evaluations of candidates. The "sharing" and "liking" of certain stories, articles, videos, and assorted news content is hardly new, but it is now easier than ever via social media. Not only does this result in increased exposure for certain news and commentary, but it also comes at the recommendation of a friend or acquaintance. This may serve to bolster the credibility of the item shared, coming as it does from a (presumably) reputable source (one's own friends). The impact of these articles and stories may therefore be greater than those that are presented as part of a news broadcast or newspaper printing, since the sharing of such a piece is both selective and directed. When one receives a specific recommendation to read/view a piece of news or commentary, there is a potentially greater likelihood of reception; since it was referred by an acquaintance, there is a greater likelihood of acceptance, with the referring friend acting as the opinion leader. Social

media, in other words, may well lead to a resurgence of the two-step information flow model, with opinion leaders directing others to certain conclusions by sharing and commenting on political issues. Certainly it offers no less an opportunity than a gathering of acquaintances at the local diner counter, and just as certainly the reach of social media has grown dramatically in recent years: we would do well to incorporate it into media research at every available opportunity. Relatively few have, at least in the published literature.

On a similar note, there are several other communication components that may potentially affect what inputs voters are exposed to or which are influential. I include in this category things like media selectivity, whereby voters choose newspapers or networks based on perceived partisan leanings (or real political leanings, in the case of that newspaper's or network's editorial content). That this occurs is not surprising (Festinger's classic *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, among others, explains why), but it may certainly explain the relatively unwavering support among partisans in the face of "bad" news or shifting levels of coverage. On the other side of the coin, however, there are things that may increase the impact of the news, especially relative to advertising. Consider the effect of those who use Digital Video Recorders (DVRs). For these individuals, much of the exposure they may have had to advertising is simply "lost" as they skip through the ads, the absence of which may affect both levels of knowledge and the influence of other media information sources (the largest of which would be broadcast or print news). These and other potential research projects will help to refine the findings here and continue the expansion of our knowledge of the role of the media in influencing the outcome of elections.

Conclusion

A major challenge of media effects research is that media effects are difficult to predict among a population so varied in its media usage habits, levels of political knowledge, and reactions to political inputs. As Lippmann wrote in *Public Opinion*, it requires us to apply “the method of reason to deal with an unreasoning world” (1922, 259). One cannot make universal declarations about the operation and impact of the media as they relate to the political world, because the complexity and conditionality of both renders such declarations too constraining and, therefore, brittle, subject to the endless exceptions that exist in the political world. Predicting how thousands of subtly different (and, at the same time, fundamentally the same) political news stories will affect millions of people, each of whom brings to the table a different perceptual screen, level of political sophistication, intelligence, attention, and experiences is a practical impossibility except in the broadest of terms. What can be said about the American political media and the effects it imparts is this: Imbalance in coverage is the norm, those imbalances produce measurable effects, and those imbalances can be actively pursued and successfully created.

The American media is fundamentally unbalanced in its coverage of presidential election campaigns, despite the appearance of balance that we see when the quantifiable elements of that coverage are aggregated together (and even that “balance” is not quite balanced). “Unbalanced,” here, should not be taken to mean that it is deranged, although some might consider it so, but rather that it simply lacks a stable equilibrium point in many components of coverage. This is not at all unexpected, when one considers the issue rationally: in fact, it would require a preternatural deftness of touch and clarity of focus in selecting, producing, and editing the news. Such a rendering would not be possible in any daily news format. Nor would it be

particularly desirable: the world, especially the political world, *is* unbalanced, and reporting it as such is not dishonest. The dishonest and inherently negative outcome would be to attempt to cram the day's political news into a predetermined shape, size, and color in order to satisfy the normative demands of one view of journalistic ethics. Such a presentation would only pervert our views of politics and record an inaccurate "first, rough draft of history" for posterity. This study uncovered no outright bias or malice, and the imbalances that were observed had all the earmarks of natural reactions to covering an organic, dynamic event that unfolds over a period of months. Surely, imbalance of this kind is forgivable and understandable, and probably desirable.

It is not, though, inconsequential. Media imbalance affects the electorate – or, to be more precise, it affects some segments of the electorate. It is not alone in doing so, and surely there are thousands of influences that share this role. It is somewhat akin to watching the ripples, waves, peaks, and troughs on the open ocean: the number of competing forces makes for a muddled and variable appearance. These media effects are important, though, because of the incredible reach enjoyed by the mass media. Political journalism reaches and touches Americans in the tens of millions, every day, and can do so even to those who have little to no interest in being reached. This ubiquity is an astonishing thing, and when we consider that we depend on the mass media to show us the world (in the most literal sense) there is little surprise that it affects our political evaluations. These effects are worthy of our continued attention and study because neither the media nor politics are going anywhere: if anything, they are becoming more prominent in both informational and entertainment roles. Politics is history, and it is also show business. In this sense, media and politics are made for each other, and when media reporting impacts political choices, we should sit up and take notice, especially when (as seen here) the content of news reports reacts to the actions of the campaigns themselves. Not only do the

campaigns determine what they will do, their actions can influence if and how those actions will be covered.

Ultimately, this question of media imbalance and the influence it creates is of greater import because the creation and selection of the news is influenced by the campaigns that benefit from the news. The political journalist is not primarily an influence-seeking actor. News, as the name implies, is primarily a means of providing those exposed to it with new information. Whereas other sources of political information are necessarily seeking to create a particular point of view or support some specific interest or candidate (advertising, political parties, and even one's friends, family, and neighbors), news exists to *inform*. Certainly, information may influence or persuade – I would never argue otherwise. However, what was uncovered in this project was that the *construction* of the news broadcast was influential. There is a significant difference there, and though I do not argue that it should be changed or regulated, it is something that we should be aware of as political scientists and citizens. Campaigns will continue, media will report and comment on those campaigns, and those reports will continue to influence the outcome of elections. We should not be ignorant of the reality of that coverage, nor of how it is likely to affect voters. Since campaigns can influence the construction of the news, they can co-opt the news media and use them to their own ends, *even if* political journalists believe that their reporting is not likely to help that campaign. As we saw earlier, the tone and content of a news story are not really the most influential elements when determining the likely influence of that story. Media attention – good or bad – can be a benefit to the campaign regardless of the substance of the stories disseminated, and campaigns can attract that attention. Media imbalance is a reality, and it is meaningful in an electoral context, and it is subject to the influence of self-interested political actors. What this project shows is that a battle can be waged

for control of the media environment, and that since that environment is generally stable in the composition of its “assets” (time), such a battle can actually be “won.” Winning the battle will not always have the same impact on the electorate, nor do I promise that it will always (or, even, frequently) determine the winner of an election, but I can state with confidence that it has the potential to do so, especially in competitive elections, which incidentally is when these effects are most likely to appear. That alone is sufficient to justify the significance and importance of this project and others like it, and I look forward to continuing to map and evaluate the performance, role, and impact of the media as they communicate the political world to the populace that controls the destiny of that political world

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APPENDIX

CONTENT ANALYSIS CODE BOOK

Introduction

This coding scheme is designed to measure the volume, tone, and content of coverage in presidential general election campaigns using both broadcast and print media. For each medium, a separate coding process will be described, and those sections will be followed by the list and description of the topics of coverage, which are common to both media. The final section will address coding for tone or valence (positive, neutral, or negative coverage). Terms that appear in ALL CAPS are variable names.

Content Analysis – Broadcast

Story selection in the broadcast medium is done by identifying key words in the title or synopsis of the segment in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive abstracts. In NBC's daily news coverage, review the day's stories. Any title or synopsis that includes at least one candidate's name is to be coded. Additionally, if the candidates' names do not appear *but* the title of the segment is "Campaign [Year]" or "Campaign for President" or some variation thereof, that segment is to be coded as well. These selection criteria ensure that *all* campaign-related or candidate-specific coverage is included.

Coding for broadcast material is done by "statement." A statement is considered to be any portion of spoken broadcast that has a unified set of components. These components are:

- Speaker: the individual speaking, such as an anchor, reporter, candidate, etc.
- Topic: what the statement is about, as well as whom the statement is about. For example, if two sentences are both about Social Security, but the first is a description of the

position of the Democratic candidate and the other is a description of the position of the Republican candidate, then those are separate statements by virtue of the fact that they address different candidates.

- Tone: positive, negative, or neutral language, in terms of the predicted effect on the electorate.

The minimum statement length is three seconds. Once a statement concludes (when one of the three components moves out of alignment), stop the clock, and complete the coding on the variables to be coded. These include:

- DATE: The date of the story.
- LEAD: A brief description of the story in question (for example, “Buchanan Endorses Dole”).
- SUBJECT: What the statement is about (see list of topics in this codebook, though new topics may be added to the list as coding continues and new issues/dynamics appear).
- SPEAKER: The identity of the speaker. The codes used are as follows:
 - R – Reporter
 - A – Anchor
 - S – Surrogate (an official or unofficial representative of the campaign, or a speaker with a known affiliation to or preference for a candidate)
 - SO – Opposition Surrogate (used when a surrogate of the opposing campaign is addressing his or her opposition)
 - P – Pundit or unaffiliated speaker, such as the head of a government watchdog group (Common Cause, etc.)
 - X – Citizen (“Man/Woman on the Street”)

- CR – Presidential or Vice Presidential Candidate (Republican)
- CD – Presidential or Vice Presidential Candidate (Democrat)
- SR – Spouse of the Candidate (Republican)
- SD – Spouse of the Candidate (Republican)
- O – Other
- CANDIDATE: Which candidate is the subject of the statement?
 - D – Democrat
 - R – Republican
 - B – Both (used when both candidates are mentioned by name in the same statement, or when a generic phrase such as “the campaigns” or “the candidates” is used). “Both” is *not* used when the reference to the opposing candidate or campaign or party is made only to place the comment in context. For example, “Democrats believe that the Bush White House’s war in Iraq has resulted in the loss of support of a number of independent voters” is coded as being about the Republican candidate even though the opposition party is mentioned.
 - N – Neither
- LENGTH: Length of the statement, in seconds.
- TONE: Tone of the statement, in terms of the predicted impact on the electorate. *Note:* When CANDIDATE is “Both,” tone is coded relative to the Democratic candidate.
 - P – positive
 - N – negative
 - O – neutral

Once the statement is coded, the segment continues with the next statement. When the story ends, coding for the segment ends, even if there is additional material at the end of the segment: for example, program notes about upcoming shows on a similar topic are not coded (i.e., “see more of the governor tomorrow on *Meet the Press*”).

Content Analysis – Print

Story selection in the print medium is done by identifying key words in headlines in the *New York Times*. To be included, the headline must include the name of one or both candidates, as identified by a Lexis-Nexis search of the *Times* for the dates in question. To avoid over-representing certain stories, only *one* story is coded even if the story appeared in more than one edition of the paper. Duplicate stories (those with identical headlines and identical length) are left out, though “updated” stories that appeared in later editions *are* included, even if they share a headline with a previous story. Editorial content is not coded. Speech or debate transcripts (“common carrier” reports) are not coded, as they are not mediated. “Excerpts,” on the other hand, are coded, as they may exhibit bias. In most cases, tone in such excerpts is considered positive (“in their own words” statements – see Tone section below).

Coding is completed in two phases: coding of headline, and coding of story. In contrast to the broadcast coding, each statement is not coded separately here. Instead, each headline and story is coded by the preponderance of material included, in the estimation of the coder, in terms of content and tone. Coding of each headline and story includes the following data:

- DATE: Date the story appeared.
- SECTION/PAGE: Section and page on which the story appeared, separated by a space.
- HEADLINE: The headline coded, verbatim.

- HL SUBJECT: What the headline is about (see list of topics in this codebook, though new topics may be added to the list as coding continues and new issues/dynamics appear).
- HL CANDIDATE: Which candidate is the subject of the statement?
 - D – Democrat
 - R – Republican
 - B – Both
- HL TONE: Tone of the headline, in terms of the predicted impact on the electorate.

Note: When CANDIDATE is “Both,” tone is coded relative to the Democratic candidate.

 - P – positive
 - N – negative
 - O – neutral
- DEM NAME: Number of times the Democratic candidate’s name appears in the story.
- REP NAME: Number of times the Republican candidate’s name appears in the story.
- SUBJECT: What the story is predominantly about (see list of topics in this codebook, though new topics may be added to the list as coding continues and new issues/dynamics appear).
- CANDIDATE: Which candidate is predominantly the subject of the story?
 - D – Democrat
 - R – Republican
 - B – Both
- TONE: Tone of the story, in terms of the predicted impact on the electorate. *Note:* When CANDIDATE is “Both,” tone is coded relative to the Democratic candidate.

- P – positive
- N – negative
- O – neutral

All stories that contain either or both candidates name are coded, for each date range in question.

Topics (SUBJECT) of Coverage

The following list of topics – to be used for all SUBJECT variable fields – is comprehensive, but not exhaustive. Additional topics may be added as new issues and dynamics appear in the campaign coverage. These, though, should account for nearly all coverage.

Additional description is noted in parentheses, when needed.

- Abortion
- Ads and Ad Buys (ads shown on news broadcasts are coded as having been spoken by the reporter, and the subject is the subject/target of the ad, not the party sponsoring the ad)
- Affirmative Action
- Age (age of the candidate as a consideration of fitness for office, whether older or younger)
- Appointments (refers to the qualities or background of the individual appointed or to the administrative process of securing that individual's nomination)
- Ballot Initiatives
- Bipartisanship (presence or absence of bipartisan action or mood)
- Campaign (description of campaign activities or actions, to include horserace/strategy commentary and other generic campaign-related statements)
- Civil Rights

- Congress (usually references the impact of the presidential campaign on down-ticket races, but occasionally refers to the interactions between sitting presidents and the Congress)
- Convention (coverage of the execution of the convention, as well as any statements describing convention activities, arrangements, or speeches that are not otherwise classifiable by issue or activity)
- Credibility Gap (used when there is a suggestion in the language that the candidate is being “misleading,” “exaggerating,” “embellishing,” or like terms that denote a tendency to misrepresent the truth. It is also used to denote a candidate who is being cast as a “flip-flopper.”)
- Crime
- Death Penalty
- Debates (structure, format, preparations for, or goals of the campaign during the debates. When the discussion is of the impact of the debates on standing, “campaign” should be used. All issues/debate content is coded as normal by the appropriate issue code.)
- Disability Policy
- Drugs
- Economy
- Education
- Election Day (candidates’ plans, not results)
- Energy Policy
- Entertainment Industry
- Environment

- Experience (refers specifically to a candidate’s governing experience or lack thereof.
“Personality” refers to personal history items unrelated to governing.)
- Family Values
- Finance Reform (campaign finance regulations/changes)
- Fiscal Policy (taxing and spending)
- Foreign Affairs
- Fraudulent Voting/Registration
- Fundraising (campaign fundraising, to include effectiveness, shortfalls, methods, etc.)
- Gaffe – [identifier] (identifies a gaffe, or a misstatement, action, or other event that is unrelated to the job performance, positions, or campaigning of the candidates, but is derogatory in nature to the candidate)
- Gay rights/issues
- Government Reform (descriptions of increasing/decreasing the size of the government or addressing inefficiencies/corruption)
- Guns/Gun Rights
- Healthcare
- Hispanics voters/issues
- Home Ownership
- Human Interest (usually non-candidate-specific material that is used as a narrative backdrop for campaign coverage)
- Immigration
- Impeachment

- Intellect (statements that suggest a candidate may not be mentally capable of holding the office)
- Issue Profile (refers to statements that discuss what the campaigns are focusing on – usually a list of issues, but without any substantive statements about them)
- Local Profile (descriptions of local areas, personalities, and attributes, usually as background on a campaign story)
- Media Access (refers to statements that discuss whether candidates are or are not available to the media)
- Military Support (readiness, support for military families)
- National Security
- Natural Disaster
- Other Personalities (occasional references to other intra-party candidates during the Convention, such as Hillary Clinton in 2008)
- Party Politics (conflict within/between the parties, or descriptions of the party platform that are not attributed to the candidate)
- Personality (personal history or attributes)
- Poll Results
- Protests (usually with regard to the conventions, but not exclusively)
- Populism
- Questionable Fundraising
- Race
- Scandal – [identifier] (more serious than a gaffe, exhibiting uniformly derogatory or negative implications for the candidate)

- Self-referential (media coverage of the media; may also include charges of bias, racism, or sexism on the part of media and media coverage)
- Senior Citizens
- Social Security
- Staff Change (campaign staff changes)
- Stem Cell Research
- Supreme Court (includes descriptions of decisions and doctrines of activism and restraint as they relate to justices, but *not* statements relating to potential appointments to the Court, which should be coded under “Appointments”)
- Tobacco
- Urban Revitalization
- Values (refers to any mention of ethical, honorable, or dignified behavior with regard to the Office of the Presidency, the campaigns, or the like. It is distinct from areas of personal credibility or a “say anything to get elected” mentality, which are properly coded as either Campaign or Credibility gap.)
- Vice President/President Relations
- Voter Turnout
- Welfare and State Assistance
- Women and Women’s Issues
- Young voters and issues

Coding Tone of Coverage

There are three possible codes for tone – positive, neutral, and negative. These characterizations are to be construed as being positive, negative, or neutral in terms of the impact of that coverage on the candidate evaluations and vote choice of a viewer or reader. Coders should approach coding for tone from the position that the assumed tone is neutral until it is clear that it is otherwise. We are assuming here that the viewers or readers are rational: items that are negative for the candidate are presumed to degrade the evaluation of that candidate in the mind of the voter, and affect their vote choice in a negative way. Positives are presumed to have the opposite effect. In most cases, the code will be neutral, but certain items will be clearly positive or negative. Examples would include the following:

- Results of a poll that show a lead for one candidate (positive for that candidate)
- Scandal or gaffe coverage (negative)
- Reports of poor judgment or a past bad decision (negative)

Some items are uniformly positive or negative. All scandal and gaffe coverage is negative, with the possible exception that a candidate's defense of him or herself may be coded as neutral – however, reminding voters of these incidents is almost always a negative, even in defense. Leading in polls is nearly always a positive, unless the story is that lead is shrinking or should be larger. Issue positions of candidates, when reported in a direct manner by the media, are coded as positive coverage. Statements in the candidates' own words are coded as positive unless the selection of those words is clearly designed to cast the candidate in a negative light (a misstatement or flubbed line, for example). In other cases, though, judgment must be exercised. Remember that the default position is neutral: when in doubt, code as neither positive nor negative.

For all statements and stories, consider whether the statement would make an unaffiliated and undecided voter *more* or *less* likely to vote for the candidate in question. If the statement or story would make the candidate appear more favorable to a reasonable receiver, code the statement or story as positive; if unfavorable, then code as negative. If neither or mixed, code as neutral.