NEW YORK TIMES *COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS*

By William L. Benoit, Kevin A. Stein, and Glenn J. Hansen

This study investigates New York Times *coverage of the Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns from 1952-2000. Content analysis reveals that the most common topic of campaign coverage was horse race. Discussion of the candidates' character was more common than discussion of their policy positions (even though candidates discuss policy more than character in campaign messages). The statements in these stories were more often negative than positive (despite the fact that candidates' messages are more positive than negative). Reporters are the most common sources for the statements in these articles, followed by candidates, supporters, and others.*

Introduction

Newspapers are an important source of information about presidential campaigns. Hollihan explained that "for national political news coverage, the most thorough, comprehensive, and substantive information regarding political campaigns, political issues, and public policies is available to readers of comprehensive large city daily papers."[1] Of course, availability does not necessarily mean use. Hansen reviewed the literature on newspaper use and issue knowledge in presidential campaigns. He found that only seventeen of thirty-four studies on newspaper use found a significant effect on learning. On the other hand, his analysis of NES data from 1960-2000 indicated that newspaper use was associated with higher levels of knowledge in each of these eleven campaigns.[2] Although the literature on voter learning from newspaper coverage of political campaigns is mixed, the evidence suggests at a minimum that newspapers *can* be a significant source of issue knowledge for voters.

Another indication of the importance of news coverage of campaigns comes from the theory of agenda setting. Cohen explained the basic idea that the press "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."[3] In other words, the news may not be able to create attitudes (what to think about an issue), but the news can tell people that an issue is something they should be thinking about (what is an important issue). McCombs and Shaw coined the phrase "agenda setting" to refer to this phenomenon.[4] Weaver, McCombs, and

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Shaw's review concluded that "on the whole," research "tends to support a positive correlation—and often a causal relationship—between media agendas and public agendas."[5] So, not only can the news inform the public but it has the potential to influence public perceptions of which issues are most important.

Furthermore, those who read newspapers may be a particularly important group to study. NES data from 2000 reveals that those who read newspapers are more likely to vote in presidential elections than those who do not. This means that newspaper users have a disproportionate impact at the polls. The 2000 election makes it plain that the outcome of close elections can be altered by a relatively small group of voters. Nor was 2000 the only close presidential election in recent years:

> In 1960, John Kennedy beat Richard Nixon by about 100,000 popular votes. This is a fraction of a percentage (0.2%) of the total vote. In 1968, Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey by 500,000 votes (0.7%). In 1976, Jimmy Carter won by less than 2% of the popular vote. Polls in late September of 1976 showed an unusually large number of undecided voters... In 1980, Ronald Reagan beat Carter by less than 10% of the popular vote, yet two weeks before the election, 25% of the voters were still undecided.[6]

Research on the content of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns is clearly justified.

Specifically, the question of which topics are addressed in news coverage of political campaigns is an important one. Research has shown that the amount of coverage received by candidates, the tone of the coverage, and the amount of horse race coverage focusing on a candidate can influence voters' perceptions of candidates.[7] Furthermore, Farnsworth and Lichter observed that "Polls have repeatedly shown that voters have a very good idea which candidate is likely to win the presidency, but voters are less able to demonstrate their knowledge of issue stands."[8] But issue knowledge is arguably what voters need most: Patterson and McClure note that "Of all the information voters obtain through the mass media during a presidential campaign, knowledge about where the candidates stand is most vital."[9] Therefore, the nature or content of newspaper coverage of presidential election campaigns merits scholarly attention.

Literature Review

Scholars have invested considerable effort into understanding news coverage of political campaigns. Some research investigates campaign coverage in television news.[10] Primary campaign news coverage[11] and coverage of nominating conventions[12] have been investigated. Research has also investigated newspaper coverage of presidential debates.[13] Other studies have investigated news coverage of nonpresidential contests[14] and British elections.[15] Because the research we report here focuses on newspaper coverage of general presidential campaigns, we devote our attention to that literature.

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An early study investigated newspaper coverage of the 1952 contest. Klein and Maccoby found that 60% of stories concerned policy or issues, 16% candidates' personal qualities (character), and 5% was about scandals.[16] McCombs and Shaw (who investigated television, newspaper, and magazine coverage in 1968) reported that horse race coverage was more common than substance (63% to 37%).[17] Russonello and Wolf found 56% of newspaper coverage addressed the horse race, 22% was about policy, and 17% concerned the candidates' character.[18] Graber reported that more stories discussed personal qualities (66%) than issues (34%) in 1968.[19]

Using a somewhat different method (counting mentions instead of stories), Graber found virtually the same result in 1972: more mentions of candidate personal qualities (20,362) than of issues (11,187).[20] Russonello and Wolf also looked at newspaper coverage of the 1976 presidential campaign. The largest category of articles was horse race (47%). The candidates' personal qualities (25%) and issues (21%) each received only about half as much attention as the horse race in the newspapers.[21]

Robinson and Sheehan analyzed news coverage of the 1980 campaign from January through October, concluding that:

> At every level, in every phase, during each and every month, CBS and UPI allocated more news space to competition between the candidates than to any other aspects of the campaign. . . . "Horse race" permeates almost everything the press does in covering elections and candidates . . . about five of every six campaign stories made some meaningful reference to the competition, but, by comparison, well over half of the same stories made no mention of issues.[22]

Combining both the primary and the general campaign, CBS and UPI devoted 65% of their coverage to the horse race, 26% to issues, and 10% to candidates. Stovall's analysis of this campaign found that horse race accounted for 86% of newspaper coverage in 1980, with the remaining 14% about issues.[23]

Stempel and Windhauser reported on the content of newspaper coverage of the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns. In 1984, issues comprised 39% of stories, followed by campaign events (35%), candidate character (21%), and horse race (5%). In 1988, issues dropped to 22%, campaign events were 34%, character 27%, and horse race 7%.[24] Mantler and Whiteman reported that in 1992, issues accounted for 49.5% of newspaper coverage, followed by horse race at 41.4% and character at 9.1%.[25] Just, Crigler, and Buhr found that 70% of newspaper campaign stories in 1992 referred to policy, 39% concerned horse race, and character was discussed in 34% of stories (note that stories could be classified in more than one category).[26]

Finally, campaign coverage in five newspapers from 1888 to 1988 (sampled every twenty years) was investigated by Sigelman and

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Bullock.[27] They found that candidate traits had remained relatively steady at about 10% of coverage. Policy issues accounted for about 25% coverage. Campaign events accounted for about 40% of stories. One of the main conclusions concerned "the meteoric rise of the horse race theme during the television era."[28]

This research is rich, examining newspaper coverage of many campaigns. Some conclusions can be drawn from this review. Most studies (nine of eleven) found that horse race coverage was the most common topic of newspaper coverage of the presidential campaign. Second, more studies found that policy was discussed more frequently than character (seven of eleven). However, this work has several limitations. First, most of these studies investigated only a single campaign and only one study (Sigelman and Bullock) investigated more than two campaigns. The single longitudinal study used only five elections (each twenty years apart) and ended in 1988. Second, some studies omitted categories and the categories were not defined uniformly in the research. Third, we cannot assess the reliability of much of the data in the literature. Many of these studies do not report any evidence of reliability. Some appear to report only simple agreement, which can overestimate reliability because of the potential for chance agreement.[29] Only one study reported a reliability statistic which controlled for chance agreement (Sigelman and Bullock). Perhaps most important, this work lacks a consistent theoretic framework. Thus, we undertake a longitudinal study of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns from the modern era (1952-2000) to correct these limitations in the literature.

Before we turn attention to the purpose and method, the question of bias in news coverage of political campaigns deserves mention. D'Alessio and Allen conducted a meta-analysis on the research investigating whether candidates from one political party receive more coverage than candidates from the other political party. They report no overall bias in the literature:

> This is not to say that every reporter and every newspaper is unbiased. Quite the opposite: A wide variety of data (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; White, 1950; Millspaugh, 1949) indicates that specific newspapers or specific reporters and editors can show substantial (and substantive) ideological bias.... What the results of this meta-analysis do say is that on the whole, across all newspapers and all reporters, there is only negligible, if any, net bias in the coverage of presidential campaigns.[30]

Therefore, although there may be a bias favoring one party in a given outlet or during a particular campaign, the research does not reveal an overall bias in news coverage of political candidates.

Purpose

This study investigates the nature of newspaper coverage of presidential election campaigns. We ask the following questions:

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RQ1: What is the most common topic of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns?

RQ2: What is the relative proportion of policy and character discussion in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns?

RQ3: What is the relative proportion of the forms of horse race coverage?

RQ4: What is the relative proportion of negative and positive tone in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns?

RQ5: What is the relative proportion of comments from different sources (reporters, candidates, supporters, others) in campaign news coverage?

RQ6: Is there a difference in the amount of coverage devoted to Democratic and Republican candidates?

Finally, after answering each research question with aggregate data (1952-2000), the frequency of these forms of newspaper campaign coverage content (converted to percentages) will be correlated with year of campaign, in order to determine whether there are any trends (significant increases of decreases) in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns over time.

Method

Sample. We began with the 1952 presidential campaign, which is arguably the dawn of the modern campaign era, the first campaign to include political television commercials. Because of the number of campaigns involved, and availability of texts, we decided to sample a single newspaper, the *New York Times*. This paper is considered by many to be the national paper of record. Its coverage, therefore, may not be typical of other newspapers; however, the news coverage in the *New York Times* is arguably the most influential during this time period. Hollihan explained that:

> The nation's leading papers, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, assign several reporters to cover political campaigns and the volume and quality of this coverage is impressive. Most of the work product of these reporters is shared with other media outlets through the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times/ Washington Post* news service.[31]

This means that the news in our sample has influence beyond the readers of the *New York Times*. Furthermore, McCombs summarizes research

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on the agenda-setting power of the *New York Times*: "The general pattern found is that the agenda-setting influence of the *New York Times* was greater than that of the local newspaper, which, in turn, was greater than that of the national television news."[32] Although the *New York Times* should not be considered a typical newspaper, it is arguably the most important and influential newspaper and well worth scholarly attention.

Method. We created a sample of constructed weeks (representing each day of the week twice, but each day selected from different and consecutive calendar weeks).[33] We began the day before the election was held—the day before the first Tuesday in November—and worked backward in time to create two constructed weeks (fourteen dates per campaign) that reflect the coverage leading up to the election. *New York Times* articles were selected which contained the names of either or both Democratic and Republican candidates in each campaign (e.g., "Kennedy" and "Nixon," "Kennedy" or "Nixon" in 1960; or "Gore" and "Bush," "Gore," or "Bush" in 2000). This means that third party candidate coverage was not a focus of this study.

Categorical content analysis was employed to describe the content of these news stories. Benoit's Functional Theory serves as the theoretical starting point.[34] This theory posits that candidate discourse has only three functions (acclaims, or positive statements; attacks, or negative statements; and defenses, or refutations of attacks). It also holds that candidate messages will address two topics, policy (issues) and character (image). This framework will inform the study; however, it must be extended to do justice to news coverage of campaigns. We therefore propose that news coverage of campaigns can address six basic topics: policy and character (from Functional Theory) as well as horse race, voters' reactions, scandal, and election information. We further stipulate that horse race coverage can be further divided into eight sub-categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, vote choice, fund raising, and spending. Tone is another variable for understanding newspaper coverage. The three functions of candidate discourse from Functional Theory (acclaims/positive statements, attacks/negative statements, and defenses/refutations of attacks) can describe the tone of both candidate and news statements. Finally, statements in a news story can be unattributed (essentially from the reporter), from the candidate, from a supporter, or from another source.

We developed a codebook with definitions of these categories and an example of each category from newspaper stories that were not part of our sample (see the Appendix). Coders unitized the texts into themes, which are the smallest units of discourse capable of expressing an idea. Berelson defined a theme as "an assertion about a subject"; Holsti explained that a theme is "a single assertion about some subject."[35] Then each theme was coded for source, topic, tone, and subject. Cohen's κ was calculated (on a subset 10% of the texts) to determine inter-coder reliability because it controls for agreement by chance. Reliability for topic was .97, κ was .85 for form of horse race coverage, the κ for tone was 1.0, κ for identifying the source of statements was .98, and κ for subject was .88. Landis and Koch explained that values of κ over .81 represent almost

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TABLE 1

Topic of New York Times *Coverage of Presidential Campaigns*

	Horse Race	Character	Policy	Voters	Scandal	Election Information
1952	197 (58%)	116 (34%)	18 (5%)	10 (3%)	0	1 (0.3%)
1956	95 (38%)	78 (31%)	73 (29%)	4 (2%)	0	0
1960	57 (40%)	58 (41%)	22 (15%)	5 (3%)	0	1 (0.7%)
1964	60 (64%)	17 (18%)	16 (17%)	1 (1%)	0	0
1968	103 (56%)	37 (20%)	35 (19%)	8 (4%)	0	0
1972	50 (34%)	42 (29%)	50 (34%)	5 (3%)	0	0
1976	82 (45%)	61 (33%)	38 (21%)	3 (2%)	0	0
1980	92 (42%)	51 (23%)	58 (26%)	18 (8%)	0	1 (0.5%)
1984	116 (28%)	105 (25%)	170 (41%)	20 (5%)	1 (0.2%)	0
1988	98 (31%)	131 (42%)	70 (22%)	14 (4%)	0	0
1992	173 (33%)	181 (35%)	149 (28%)	21 (4%)	0	0
1996	107 (46%)	70 (30%)	32 (14%)	19 (8%)	5 (2%)	0
2000	102 (31%)	94 (29%)	120 (37%)	8 (2%)	0	0
Total	1,332 (40%)	1,041 (31%)	851 (25%)	136 (4%)	6 (0.2%)	3 (0.1%)
r	-.551	.052	.460	.361	.404	-.386
p	.051	.867	.114	.113	.170	.193

Note: The correlations are between the year and the frequency of a topic of coverage.

perfect reliability.[36] One-way χ^2 was used to test difference in the frequencies of the categories. Frequency data was converted to ratio data (percentages) to test for longitudinal shifts.

Results

The first research question investigated the topics of newspaper articles on presidential campaigns. The most frequent topic was horse race. This was followed by discussions of the candidates' character and policies. Comments about voters, scandal, and election information were rare and for that reason excluded from statistical analysis. It was obvious that the three largest categories were more frequent than the others; the smallest three categories together comprised less than 5% of the utterances in the sample. A one-way chi-square limited to the three most common topics confirms that they occurred with different frequencies (χ^2 [*d.f.* = 2] = 1094.23, $p < .0001$). These data are displayed in Table 1.

The second research question asked whether newspaper campaign coverage would focus more on policy than character. A chi-square revealed that character themes (31%) were significantly more common than policy themes (25%; χ^2 [*d.f.* = 1] = 18.88, $p < .0001$).

A significant shift in topics over time occurred in this sample. Surprisingly, the percentage of horse race coverage decreased somewhat over time (r = -.551). None of the other categories had significant effects;

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TABLE 2

Type of Horse Race Coverage in New York Times *Presidential Campaign Coverage*

	Strategy	Events	Poll	Predict	Endorse	Vote Choice	Fund Raise	Spend
1952	19 (10%)	30 (15%)	29 (15%)	111 (56%)	7 (4%)	1 (0.5%)	0	0
1956	23 (24%)	61 (64%)	1 (1%)	4 (4%)	4 (4%)	0	2 (2%)	0
1960	18 (32%)	18 (32%)	1 (2%)	5 (9%)	15 (26%)	0	0	0
1964	10 (17%)	3 (5%)	24 (40%)	12 (20%)	11 (18%)	0	0	0
1968	34 (33%)	37 (36%)	15 (15%)	6 (6%)	6 (6%)	0	4 (4%)	1 (2%)
1972	14 (28%)	12 (24%)	18 (36%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	0	2 (4%)	0
1976	18 (22%)	41 (50%)	13 (16%)	6 (7%)	2 (2%)	0	0	2 (2%)
1980	19 (21%)	13 (14%)	46 (50%)	4 (4%)	5 (5%)	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	0
1984	45 (39%)	6 (5%)	55 (47%)	7 (6%)	3 (3%)	0	0	0
1988	74 (76%)	12 (12%)	8 (8%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)	0	0	0
1992	107 (62%)	33 (19%)	25 (14%)	4 (2%)	3 (2%)	0	0	1 (0.6%)
1996	35 (33%)	30 (28%)	21 (20%)	4 (4%)	0	16 (15%)	1 (1%)	0
2000	41 (40%)	24 (24%)	35 (34%)	1 (1%)	0	1 (1%)	0	0
Total	457 (34%)	320 (24%)	291 (22%)	169 (13%)	59 (4%)	22 (2%)	10 (1%)	4 (0.3%)
r	.625	-.287	.315	-.238	-.547	.410	-.238	.011
p	.022	.341	.295	.433	.053	.154	.433	.971

Note: The correlations are between the year and the frequency of use of a form of horse race coverage.

however, there were nonsignificant increases in policy, scandal, and comments about voters. Character did not show a linear trend and election information, which is not a common topic, showed a nonsignificant decrease.

Table 2 provides data to answer **RQ3**: campaign strategy was the most common topic of these stories, followed by reports of campaign events, public opinion polls, predictions, endorsements, vote choice, fund raising, and spending. There was a significant difference in the distribution of these topics (χ^2 [*d.f.* = 7] = 1242.01, $p < .0001$). Considering only the four most frequent forms of horse race comments (all with frequencies over 10%), the differences between these categories were still significant (χ^2 [*d.f.* = 3] = 135.65, $p < .0001$).

Turning to possible changes in forms of horse race coverage, predictions and endorsements showed substantial decreases over time. Coverage of campaign strategies increased over time ($r = .625$). Fund raising and campaign events showed a nonsignificant decrease. Coverage of spending did not have a linear trend. Comments about public opinion polls had a nonsignificant increase over time as did the relatively uncommon vote choice category.

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TABLE 3

Tone of New York Times *Presidential Campaign Coverage*

	Positive	Negative	Defenses
1952	57 (37%)	78 (63%)	0
1956	54 (34%)	103 (66%)	0
1960	31 (35%)	57 (65%)	0
1964	15 (42%)	21 (58%)	0
1968	41 (49%)	43 (51%)	0
1972	15 (15%)	84 (85%)	0
1976	38 (37%)	60 (58%)	5 (5%)
1980	39 (34%)	71 (62%)	5 (4%)
1984	150 (55%)	105 (38%)	18 (7%)
1988	78 (32%)	147 (61%)	16 (7%)
1992	140 (37%)	213 (56%)	24 (6%)
1996	34 (29%)	81 (68%)	4 (3%)
2000	111 (48%)	114 (49%)	7 (3%)
Total	803 (39%)	1,177 (57%)	79 (4%)
r	-.233	.033	.741
p	.465	.915	.004

Note: The correlations are between the year and the frequency of the tone of coverage.

The tone of newspaper campaign coverage was the topic of the next research question. Negative tone was more common than positive tone (57% to 39%); a few utterances (beginning in 1976) reported on defenses (4%). Statistical analysis reveals that (excluding defenses), negative comments were significantly more common than positive ones (χ^2 [*d.f.* = 1] = 70.26, $p < .0001$). The frequency of positive and negative coverage did not exhibit a linear trend. Defenses, which were relatively uncommon, had a significant increase over time (see Table 3).

The fourth research question concerned the relative dependence on different sources for campaign articles. Over the forty-eight year time period in the sample, reporters were most often the source (that is, no other source was indicated in these statements). Candidates were the second most common source, followed by supporters and others. A one-way chi-square reveals that these proportions are not distributed equally (χ^2 [*d.f.* = 3] = 1294.66, $p < .0001$). Considering only the two largest categories, reporters are the source more often than candidates (χ^2 [*d.f.* = 1] = 40.74, $p < .0001$). These data are reported in Table 4.

Next, we investigated whether there were longitudinal changes in the *New York Times* sources in its coverage of presidential campaigns over time. There was no significant correlation between campaign year and percentage of themes from reporters, candidates, supporters, or others.

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TABLE 4

Source of New York Times *Presidential Campaign Coverage*

	Reporter	Candidate	Supporter	Other
1952	148 (45%)	29 (9%)	138 (42%)	17 (5%)
1956	89 (35%)	153 (61%)	7 (3%)	3 (1%)
1960	75 (51%)	39 (27%)	19 (13%)	14 (10%)
1964	52 (54%)	11 (11%)	15 (16%)	18 (19%)
1968	110 (59%)	58 (31%)	7 (4%)	11 (6%)
1972	62 (42%)	36 (25%)	44 (30%)	7 (5%)
1976	83 (45%)	49 (27%)	48 (26%)	4 (2%)
1980	122 (55%)	27 (12%)	50 (23%)	21 (10%)
1984	127 (31%)	234 (57%)	45 (11%)	6 (1%)
1988	167 (53%)	117 (37%)	33 (10%)	1 (0.3%)
1992	251 (47%)	216 (41%)	59 (11%)	5 (1%)
1996	105 (45%)	42 (18%)	49 (21%)	36 (16%)
2000	111 (34%)	160 (49%)	37 (11%)	16 (5%)
Total	1,502 (44%)	1,171 (35%)	551 (16%)	159 (5%)
r	-.185	.254	-.205	-.086
p	.545	.402	.502	.780

Notes: Some rows do not total 100% because of rounding. The correlations are between year and the frequency of use of a type of source.

The sixth research question investigated the relative frequency of coverage devoted to the competing candidates. There was no significant difference in number of themes about candidates from the two major political parties (third party candidates were excluded from this analysis; χ^2 [*d.f.* = 1] = 0.2, $p < .65$). Finally, there was no trend toward more (or less) coverage of the candidates of one political party over time. The power of all of the correlation tests reported in this section to detect small, medium, and large longitudinal effects is .09, .26, and .57, respectively.[37] However, we conducted a post hoc test to see if the tone of coverage was the same for candidates of both political parties. Significantly more negative comments (63% to 54%) concerned Republican than Democratic candidates (χ^2 [*d.f.* = 1] = 12.37, $p < .001$, $V = .09$). So, although the amount of coverage devoted to both candidates is not significantly different, coverage of Republican candidates is more negative than coverage of Democrats.

Discussion

Consistent with most of the studies in the literature, the most common topic of coverage of presidential campaigns in the *New York Times* was the horse race. Unlike the majority of previous studies, *New York Times* stories in this sample emphasized character more than policy.

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TABLE 5

Topic and Function of New York Times *Campaign Coverage versus Candidate Messages*

Topic

	Policy	Character	χ^2 (d.f. = 1) $p < .0001$
New York Times 1952-2000	851 (45%)	1,041 (55%)	
Acceptance Addresses	1,223 (55%)	1,099 (45%)	24.37, $V = .08$
TV Spots, 1952-2000	3,102 (61%)	1,968 (39%)	146.77, $V = .15$
Debates, 1960, 1976-2000*	3,952 (75%)	1,295 (25%)	425.12, $V = .25$
Direct Mail, 1952-2000	8,742 (76%)	2,687 (24%)	798.19, $V = .25$

Tone

	Positive / Acclaims	Negative / Attacks	
New York Times 1952-2000	803 (41%)	1,177 (59%)	
Acceptance Addresses	1,846 (76%)	576 (24%)	576.67, $V = .36$
TV Spots, 1952-2000	3,072 (61%)	1,998 (39%)	230.12, $V = .18$
Debates, 1960, 1976-2000	3,312 (63%)	1,935 (37%)	204.70, $V = .18$
Direct Mail, 1952-2000	8,036 (70%)	3,393 (30%)	663.83, $V = .18$

Sources: Acceptance Addresses: Benoit et al., 1999; Benoit et al. 2003. TV Spots: Benoit, 1999; Benoit et al. 2003. Debates: Benoit et al., 2002. Direct Mail: Benoit & Stein, in press.
*χ^2 for *New York Times* coverage versus debates calculated only on newspaper coverage of the campaigns featuring debates (1960, 1976-2000).

Much less common were discussions of voters, scandal, and election information. The emphasis on horse race coverage (rather than policy or character coverage) means that the *New York Times* has less potential to inform voters about the candidates and their issue positions, and less opportunity to perform an agenda-setting function, than if more coverage were devoted to policy and character. The emphasis on horse race (and, secondarily, on character) is likely due to the need to keep stories new (poll positions change more than policy positions) and interesting (the assumption is probably that character is more interesting than policy). It is surprising that the *New York Times*, considered the newspaper of record, appears to stress personality more, and issues less, than the newspapers studied in other research.

We can also compare the *New York Times* relative emphasis of policy and character in campaign coverage with the emphasis of these topics in presidential candidates' own campaign messages. The *Times'* emphasis on character does not accurately reflect the topics of presidential candidates' messages, which emphasize policy: e.g., nomination acceptance addresses,[38] television spots,[39] and direct mail advertising.[40] These differences are statistically significant for each message form, as the topic portion of Table 5 reports. So, based on these four candidate message forms, it is clear that the *Times'* presidential campaign coverage emphasizes character more, and policy less, than the candidates them-

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selves in their messages. So, we cannot blame the candidates for the *New York Times'* emphasis on character over policy.

The data reported here reveal that the percentage of horse race stories has decreased somewhat over time. Of course, the fact that over one-third of presidential campaign coverage is horse race is still a substantial proportion. Sigelman and Bullock found an increase in horse race coverage; however, their sample included only two years in common with this study (1968 and 1988), which makes it difficult to compare the two studies.[41]

Farnsworth and Lichter's analysis of television news coverage reported an increase in horse race coverage from 58% in 1988 to 71% in 2000.[42] Horse race coverage in *New York Times* stories from these years was 31%, 33%, 46%, and 31%, suggesting that *New York Times* campaign coverage is in some ways unlike television news coverage. Scholars have complained about the emphasis on horse race coverage,[43] so perhaps the *New York Times* has responded to this criticism.

Looking more closely at horse race coverage, *New York Times* stories on the presidential campaign focused most on campaign strategies, followed by campaign events, polls, and predictions. Discussion of endorsements, vote choice, fund raising, and spending were much less common in this sample. Strategic coverage increased over time. Predictions became less common over time; furthermore, although the correlation did not reach significance, there is a tendency for more recent campaigns to discuss polls more, so it is possible that polls are to some extent replacing the predictions from the past. Jamieson and Waldman explained that "The prevalence of strategic coverage can be partly explained by the fact that most political reporters, particularly those who cover campaigns, are greater experts in politics than they are in policy."[44] Knowing more about politics than, say, Social Security legislation or tax policy would make strategic coverage easier to provide.

Themes with a critical or negative tone were about half again as common as stories with a positive tone. We can again compare the tone of *New York Times* presidential campaign coverage with the tone of presidential campaign messages themselves. In contrast to the newspaper articles, candidate messages over this time period had more positive than negative statements: i.e., acceptances,[45] television spots,[46] debates,[47] and direct mail advertising.[48] These differences are significantly different for each message form as the bottom of Table 5 reports. Thus, the newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns in this sample was significantly more negative in tone than the candidates' own messages. Again, the *New York Times* cannot merely say that it reports on the candidates' attacks; attacks are reported disproportionately more in these stories than they are used in the candidates' own messages.

Others have commented on the negative content of news coverage. Hart noted that "political news is reliably negative."[49] Jamieson, Waldman, and Devitt observed that "In every presidential general election since 1960 reliance on news reports for information about the campaign would lead one to conclude that it contained a far higher level of attack than was in fact the case."[50] This sample of stories in the *New York*

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Times reinforces these conclusions. Presumably, the conflict embodied in attacks is thought to be more interesting than acclaims.

The results also revealed that reporters are the source heard most often in newspaper stories because unattributed statements account for almost half of all themes. When they do indicate a source, it is most likely to be a statement from a candidate. Occasionally someone who supports a candidate is quoted and, far less frequently, another source such as an expert or independent observer. Although he only reports data for one campaign, Patterson reported that in 2000, television news relied most on reporters: "The two candidates received only 12% of the election coverage. Anchors and correspondents took up three-fourths of the time, with the rest allocated to other sources, including voters, experts, and group leaders."[51] These data indicate that television news relies even more on reporters, and less on candidates and other sources, than newspaper coverage. This distribution of sources could be in part related to the emphasis on horse race, in which the news media generate their own polls (instead of quoting candidates); the preference of reporters for discussing campaign strategy[52] also means more statements from reporters (unattributed statements).

The sample of *New York Times* articles revealed no change in the relative reliance on these sources over time. Research on television news, on the other hand, indicates that reliance on candidates as sources may be decreasing over time. Hallin found that the length of quotations from candidates in television news stories decreased from an average of 43 seconds in 1968 to 9 seconds in 1988.[53] Steele and Barnhurst found that over the same time period, journalists talked more frequently over time.[54] These studies suggest that television news changes more over time than newspaper stories in coverage of presidential campaigns.

As the literature review indicated, news coverage in one outlet may favor one candidate more than another in a given election year, but there is no overall bias toward one political party. In our sample of the *New York Times*, the amount of coverage is equivalent, but evaluative comments about Republican candidates is more negative than coverage of Democratic candidates.

Conclusion

What might be the implication of this focus more on horse race and character rather than on the issues? Recall that Farnsworth and Lichter observed that voters have better knowledge of where the candidates stand in the polls than where they stand on the issues. Emphasis on horse race over issues surely contributes to the state of voter knowledge.

Why does the news focus more on horse race than on substantive issues? Graber explains that a survey of newspaper and television editors found that the three most important factors in choosing whether to air or print a story are conflict, proximity, and timeliness; "Conspicuously absent from their choice criteria was the story's overall significance."[55] Furthermore, Patterson explains that "Policy problems lack the novelty that the journalist seeks. . . . The first time that a candidate takes a position on a key issue, the press is almost certain to report it.

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Further statements on the same issue become progressively less newsworthy, unless a new wrinkle is added."[56] In the 2000 campaign, for example, the first time George W. Bush proposed a plan for younger workers to invest Social Security funds in the stock market, it was news. However, later discussions of proposed changes to Social Security were simply not as newsworthy as the initial announcement, even if they contained more specific details about Bush's plans.

Other deleterious effects could result from the nature of presidential campaign coverage. Capella and Jamieson's research suggests that "strategy frames for news activate cynicism" in the audience. They caution that the effect is small and at times only approaches significance although it is consistent. They also note that "the effect occurs for broadcast as well as print news, and. . . the combination is additive."[57] The fact that *New York Times* election coverage emphasizes campaign strategy could have undesirable consequences for voters.

Furthermore, it is possible that the predominantly negative tone of campaign coverage—more negative than the candidates' own messages—could be detrimental to democracy. For example, Just, Crigler, and Buhr observed that "If candidates spend most of their time attacking each other, journalists should not be blamed for reporting that they do. On the other hand, if reporters distort the candidates' messages, they may heighten the cynicism or negativity of the campaign."[58]

In fact, a study by Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino concluded that negative advertising reduced voter turnout.[59] However, this study did not analyze the content of *television advertising*; instead, it examined the content of *news stories about the campaign*. So, although the authors claimed to have shown that negative advertising reduced turnout, in fact their study demonstrated that *negative news coverage depressed turnout*. It is possible that the negativity of newspaper coverage of the presidential campaign could have the same pernicious effect.

This study provided a theoretical framework for examining the topics, tone, and source of news coverage of political campaigns. It also provides a framework for understanding the various types (subcategories) of horse race coverage. It provides a substantial longitudinal look (1952-2000) at one of the most important newspapers, the *New York Times*. Finally, it compares the content of newspaper coverage of the campaign with the content of the candidates' messages.

One limitation of the study was our approach to sampling. Using constructed weeks allowed us to investigate a longer time period than other studies of one or two campaigns, but there is a trade-off because we did not content analyze as many stories from each campaign. Furthermore, using the names of the Democratic and Republican nominees could have reduced the number of stories in the sample concerning third party candidates (e.g., George Wallace, John Anderson, Ross Perot, Ralph Nader). Another limitation is that the sample only included news stories from the *New York Times*. It is clear that this is not a typical newspaper; however, arguably it is a particularly important one.

Appendix and Notes follow.

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APPENDIX
Coding Categories

Horse-race coverage: candidate's comparative standing among contenders

opinion poll

Rep. Richard Gephardt of Missouri has overtaken former Vermont governor Howard Dean as leader for the Democratic presidential nomination in Iowa, according to a *Des Moines Register* poll. The Iowa poll shows Gephardt is the first choice of 27% of Iowans who say they definitely or probably will attend the precinct caucuses Jan. 19. Dean is the favorite of 20% (11/10/03, p. 15A).

polls show [Edwards] in single digits in the two states that in January kick off the national delegate selection (11/11/03, p. 11A).

fund raising: donations obtained to finance campaign expenses

President Bush has raised nearly $84 million since beginning his re-election campaign in May, and he has $70 million of that left to spend (10/15/03, p. 8A).

Wesley Clark raised more than $3.5 million in the first two weeks of his Democratic presidential campaign. That was more than some rivals who have been in the race for months (10/6/03, p. 16A).

spending: expenditures of campaign funds

The North Carolina senator [Edwards] has spent more than $1.5 million in Iowa and New Hampshire combined (11/11/03, p. 11A).

Bush is spending money at about half the rate he did four years ago, when he had competition in the GOP primaries (10/15/03, p. 8A).

endorsements: statements by others advocating support of a candidate in the election

Gephardt has 21 endorsements from unions with total membership of more than 5 million (11/11/03, p. 11A).

The two largest unions in the AFL-CIO bypassed Gephardt, a longtime labor ally, and will endorse Howard Dean on Wednesday (11/11/03, p. 11A).

predictions of outcomes: speculations about the outcome of elections

Clark, Edwards and Lieberman appear to be in a tight battle for third place and momentum (1/2 6/04, p. 1A).

campaign strategy: which states to contest, changes in campaign personnel, which issues to stress, whether to participate in a primary debate

Sen. John Kerry fired his campaign manager Monday (11/11/03, p. 10A).

Strategists for retired general Wesley Clark and Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman say they plan to take part in nationally televised debates in Iowa, but it's very unlikely they will devote any time or resources to the state (10/21/03, p. 10A).

campaign events: campaign rallies, debates (who, when, where, format: *but not what candidates said in debates*), spots (not including what candidates *say in spots*), other appearances

Where to tune in. The first debate among the nine Democratic presidential candidates will air: 11:35 p.m. Saturday on ABC News Radio (5/2/03, p. 2A).

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The contest for the Democratic presidential nomination intensifies today with the first candidate advertising. The Iowa TV campaign by Howard Dean is the latest example of the aggressive tactics the former Vermont governor is using to boost his profile and put pressure on rivals (6/17/03, p. 9A).

Policy: a candidate's position on an issue like education, the war in Iraq, taxation

Kucinich expressed a "desire to end the North American Free Trade Agreement, which he says costs U.S. jobs." Kucinich expressed "support for a national health care system" (10/14/03, p. 7A).

Joe Lieberman called Monday for a restructuring of the income tax code that would raise rates for the wealthy and cut them for the middle class" (10/14/03, p. 7A).

Character: a candidate's personal qualities or traits, including experience in office or leadership

Kerry's new TV ad "touts his foreign-policy credentials as a military veteran and member of the Foreign Relations and Intelligence committees" (11/11/03, p. 10A).

"I was always the kind of officer who spoke out and said what he believed was right, not what the boss wanted to hear," Clark said (10/14/03, p. 2A).

Scandal: accusations of wrong-doing (illegal or immoral; not policy differences)

A sex scandal in the administration of Democratic Gov. Paul Patton (10/30/03, p. 7A).

Voters (other than polls and primary/caucus vote outcomes)

Experts in both parties say swing voters are a shrinking breed (10/31/03, p. 12A).

The television viewing audience for the highest-rated debate this fall–the October 9 forum in Phoenix on CNN–was smaller than the audience for the lowest-rated prime-time entertainment show on network television. That debate was watched by 1.8 million Americans (10/24/03, p. 5A).

Election Information: dates of primaries/caucuses, financing laws, costs of advertising, registering to vote, polling locations/times, electoral college, polling machines

One in eight will be using the same type of punch card voting machines [in November's general election] blamed for many of Florida's problems (7/13/04, p. 1A).

Positive Tone: Elizabeth Edwards "is a doting mother, accomplished speaker, and adroit political advisor" (7/9/04, p. 5A).

Elizabeth Edwards "exudes warmth [and] accessibility" (7/9/04, p. 5A).

Negative Tone: Kerry "praised celebrities who had made nasty, vulgar remarks about President Bush" (7/12/04, p. 8A).

While voters wondered about John Edwards' experience and foreign policy credentials, the Kerrys talked about his good looks (7/12/04, p. 8A).

Defenses: The assertion [in Bush's ad] that Kerry missed a vote to lower health care costs is debatable. The Bush-Cheney campaign cited two votes that Kerry missed. Both were motions to limit debate on legislation, not votes on the bills' merit (7/9/04, p. 5A).

All examples taken from *USA Today*.

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