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Newspaper Coverage of the 2008 General Election Presidential Campaigns

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Abstract

News coverage of political campaigns is very important to the political campaign process. Some voters pay little attention to debates or other sources of information about the candidates and their policies. The news is one important source of this information. Newspapers can also supplement and reinforce the information possessed by voters who do attend to campaign messages. This study content analyzed news coverage of the 2008 general election presidential campaign (New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today). Horse race coverage was most common topic (45%), followed by themes about character (32%), and policy (23%). The tone of newspaper coverage was more positive (51%) than negative (39%; 9% of themes reported the candidates’ defenses).

Key Terms: Newspaper coverage, 2008, presidential, general campaign

Introduction

Newspapers serve as an important source of information about presidential election campaigns. Hollihan (2001), for example, noted 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” (p. 79). Hansen (2004) found that only 17 of 34 studies on newspaper use found a significant effect on learning. Nevertheless, his analysis of National Election Study (NES) data from 1960-2000 showed that newspaper use was associated with higher levels of knowledge in every one of these 11 campaigns. At a minimum, newspapers can be a significant source of issue knowledge for voters.

Furthermore, those who read newspapers may be a particularly important group of citizens to study. NES data from 2000 reveals those who read newspapers are more likely to vote in presidential elections than those who do not ($\chi^2[df=1]=101.93, p<.0001, V=.26$). This means 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. (Zakahi & Hacker, 1995, p. 100)

Thus, 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 (Ross, 1992). Furthermore, Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) observed “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” (p. 53). But issue knowledge is arguably what voters need most: Patterson and McClure (1976) note “Of all the information voters obtain through the mass media during a presidential campaign, knowledge about where the candidates stand is most vital” (p. 49; see also Hofstetter, 1976). 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 (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Hallin, 1992; Jamieson, Waldman, & Devitt, 1998; Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999; Kern, 1989; Lichter, Noyes, & Kaid, 1999; Patterson & McClure, 1976; Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). Primary campaign news coverage (Adams, 1987; Brady, 1989; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Graber, 1988; Hofstetter & Moore, 1982; Johnson, 1993; King, 1990; Patterson, 1980; Robinson, 1980; Robinson & Lichter, 1991; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983) and coverage of nominating conventions (Adams, 1985; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004a; Patterson, 1980) have been investigated. Research has also investigated newspaper coverage of presidential debates (Benoit & Currie, 2001; Benoit, Hansen, & Stein, 2004a; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004b; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000; Patterson, 1980; Reber & Benoit, 2001). Other studies have investigated news coverage of non-presidential contests (Graber, 1989; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Serini, Powers, & Johnson, 1998; West, 1994) and British elections (Coleman, 2011; Sinclair, 1982). Because the research we report here focuses on the nature of newspaper coverage of general presidential campaigns, we devote our attention to reviewing that literature.

One of the earliest studies published on campaign news coverage investigated the 1952 contest. Klein and Maccoby (1954) found that 60% of stories concerned policy or issues, 16% candidates’ personal qualities (character), and 5% was about scandals. In the 1968 campaign, McCombs and Shaw (1972), who investigated television, newspaper, and magazine coverage, reported horse race was more common than substance (63% to 37%). Russonello and Wolf (1979) found 56% of newspaper coverage addressed the horse race, 22% was about policy, and 17% concerned the candidates’ character. Graber (1971) re-
ported more stories discussed personal qualities (66%) than issues (34%) in 1968.

Using a somewhat different method (counting mentions instead of stories), Graber (1976) found virtually the same result in 1972: more mentions of candidate personal qualities (20,362) than of issues (11,187). Russonello and Wolf (1979) 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.

Robinson and Sheehan (1983) analyzed news coverage of the 1980 campaign from January through October, concluding:

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. (p. 148)

They concluded that, combining both the primary and the general campaign (January through October), CBS and UPI devoted 65% of their coverage to the horse race, 26% to issues, and 10% to candidates (p. 149). Stovall’s (1982) analysis of this campaign found that horse race themes accounted for 86% of newspaper coverage in 1980, with the remaining 14% about issues.

Stempel and Windhauser (1991) 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%). Mantler and Whiteman (1995) reported that in 1992, issues accounted for 49.5% of newspaper coverage, followed by horse race at 41.4%, and character at 9.1%. Just, Crigler, and Buhr (1999) found 70% of newspaper campaign stories in 1992 referred to policy, 39% concerned horse race, and character was discussed in 34% of stories (stories could be classified in more than one category). Buchanan’s (1991) analysis of the 1988 campaign found 65% of coverage concerned horse race, 18% policy, and 17% character. Farnsworth and Lichter (2011) examined the 2008 general election campaign, reporting that 41% of the coverage concerned the horse race and 35% policy.

Campaign coverage in five newspapers from 1888 to 1988 (sampled every 20 years) was investigated by Sigelman and Bullock (1991). They found candidate traits had remained relatively steady at about 10% of coverage. Policy issues accounted for about 25% coverage, with a small decrease starting in 1948. Campaign events accounted for about 40% of stories and this showed a slight drop over time. One of the main conclusions was “the meteoric rise of the horse race theme during the television era” (p. 21).
Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) content analyzed *New York Times’* coverage of American presidential campaigns from 1952-2000. The most common topic concerned the horse race (40%), followed by character (31%), and policy (25%; voters, scandal, and election information accounted for the remaining 5% of themes). They analyzed horse race coverage into several specific topics, including strategy (34%), campaign events (24%), polls (22%), predictions (13%), endorsements (4%), expressions of vote choice (2%), fund raising (1%), and spending (0.3%). They also reported 39% of statements were positive, 57% negative, and 4% reported a candidate’s defense. Benoit, Stein, McHale, Chattopadhyay, Verser, and Price (2007) replicated this analysis for the 2004 presidential campaign. Horse race themes constituted 59% of themes, with character and policy at about the same levels (19%, 20%). The three most common types of horse race coverage in 2004 were strategies (68%), polls (14%), and campaign events (5%). More evaluative statements were negative (58%) than positive (36%), with a few reports of defenses (5%). So, most studies indicate horse race is a more common topic than policy or character in coverage of American presidential campaigns; character is usually discussed more than policy, and the tone of coverage tends to be negative rather than positive.

This research is rich, examining newspaper coverage of many campaigns. Some conclusions can be drawn from this review. Most studies found horse race coverage was the most common topic of newspaper coverage of the presidential campaign. Second, more studies found policy was discussed more frequently than character. However, this work on news coverage of presidential campaigns has several limitations. First, most of these studies investigated only a single campaign. As just noted, some studies omitted categories and the categories were not defined uniformly in this research. Many of these studies do not report any evidence of reliability. Some appear to report only simple agreement, which can over-estimate reliability because of the potential for chance agreement (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). Only one study reported a reliability statistic which controlled for chance agreement (Sigelman & Bullock, 1991).

Before turning attention to the purpose and method, the question of bias in news coverage of political campaigns deserves mention. D’Alessio and Allen (2000) conducted a meta-analysis on the research, investigating whether candidates from one political party receive more coverage than candidates from the other political party. The authors 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. (p. 148)
Therefore, although there may be a bias favoring one party in a given news outlet or during a particular campaign, the research does not support a conclusion of an overall bias in news coverage of political candidates.

**Purpose**

This study extends the work of Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2007) and Benoit et al. (2007) to the 2008 presidential campaign. We ask the following questions:

RQ1. What are the topics of newspaper coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign?

RQ2. What is the relative proportion of the forms of horse race coverage in the 2008 presidential campaign?

RQ3. What is the relative proportion of negative and positive tone (and the frequency of defense) in newspaper coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign?

Together the answers to these questions will enhance our understanding of newspaper coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign.

**Method**

**Sample**

Election day in 2008 occurred on Tuesday, November 4. Our sample comprised two constructed weeks (see Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998) leading up to election day: July 22 Tuesday, July 30 Wednesday, August 7 Thursday, August 15 Friday, August 23 Saturday, August 31 Sunday, September 8 Monday, September 16 Tuesday, September 24 Wednesday, October 2 Thursday, October 10 Friday, October 18 Saturday, October 26 Sunday, November 3 Monday. “McCain” and “Obama” were the search terms employed in the search. Three national newspapers were sampled: *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. Lexis-Nexis Academic University was employed to obtain the sample.

**Method**

Content analysis was employed to describe the content of these news stories. We followed the procedures set forth in Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) and followed in Benoit et al. 2007); Benoit’s Functional Theory (2007) served as the theoretical starting point. 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 was extended to include horse race as a topic and the notion that horse race coverage can be divided into eight sub-categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, vote choice, fund raising, and spending.

The codebook from Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) was employed for this study, with definitions of these categories and an example of each category from newspaper stories not part of our sample; examples of each category taken from
the codebook are supplied in the Appendix. Coders unitized the texts into themes, which are the smallest units of discourse capable of expressing an idea. Berelson (1952) noted a theme is “an assertion about a subject” (p. 18). Holsti (1969) wrote that a theme is “a single assertion about some subject” (p. 116). Each theme was coded for general topic. Horse race themes were further identified as type of horse race. Comments with evaluative content (positive or negative) and defenses were also identified.

Cohen’s (1960) 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 ranged from .88 to .95; for tone it ranged from .74-.97 (reliability is reported as a range because multiple coders analyzed the texts). Landis and Koch (1977) explained values of κ between .61 and .80 reflect substantial agreement among coders; ks over .81 represents almost perfect reliability. One-way χ² 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 (45%); this was followed by discussions of the candidates’ character (32%) and policies (23%). Comments about voters, scandal, and election information were comparatively 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 (χ² [df = 2] = 32.91, p < .0001). These data are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Topics of 2008 General Campaign Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Horse Race</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008 NYT, WP, UAST</td>
<td>205 (45%)</td>
<td>147 (32%)</td>
<td>106 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 Debates</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>357 (30%)</td>
<td>850 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 TV Spots</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>323 (42%)</td>
<td>452 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-2000 NYT</td>
<td>1332 (41%)</td>
<td>1042 (32%)</td>
<td>851 (26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The second research question investigated the type of horse race comments in these stories. Strategy and campaign events were the most common forms at 28% and 27% respectively. The next most common topics of horse race coverage were spending (15%) and fund-raising (14%). Polls were discussed in 8% of themes; predictions, endorsements, and discussions of vote choices each comprised less than 5% of themes. Table 2 displays these data. There was a significant difference in the distribution of these topics (χ² [df = 7] = 105.46, p < .0001).
Table 2. Type of Horse Race Coverage in 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Predict</th>
<th>Endorse</th>
<th>Vote Choice</th>
<th>Fund Raise</th>
<th>Spend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008 NYT, WP, UAST</td>
<td>(28%)</td>
<td>(27%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>(4%)</td>
<td>(2%)</td>
<td>(14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-2000</td>
<td>(34%)</td>
<td>(24%)</td>
<td>(22%)</td>
<td>(13%)</td>
<td>(4%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The tone of newspaper campaign coverage was the topic of the final research question. Positive tone (51%) was more common than negative tone (39%); a few utterances reported on defenses (9%). Statistical analysis reveals that excluding defenses, negative comments were significantly more common than positive ones ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 4.14, p < .05$).

Table 3. Tone of 2008 General Campaign Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Defensive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008 NYT, WP, UAST</td>
<td>140 (51%)</td>
<td>107 (39%)</td>
<td>25 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 Debates</td>
<td>750 (58%)</td>
<td>457 (35%)</td>
<td>97 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 TV Spots</td>
<td>279 (34%)</td>
<td>505 (65%)</td>
<td>3 (0.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-2000 NYT</td>
<td>803 (39%)</td>
<td>1177 (57%)</td>
<td>79 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Discussion

As in most of the previous research, the most common topic of newspaper coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign was the horse race, which accounted for 45% of themes in this sample. Why do the media focus more on horse race rather than on substantive issues? Graber (1989) explains a survey of newspaper and television editors found 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” (p. 86). Furthermore, Patterson explains “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. Further statements on the same issue become progressively less newsworthy, unless a new wrinkle is added” (1994, p. 61). In the 2008 campaign, for example, the first time a candidate discussed Iraq, that was news. However, later discussions of this topic were simply not as newsworthy as the initial announcement, even if they contained more specific details about Bush’s plans. This emphasis on the horse race matters: Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) observed voters have better knowledge of where the candidates stand in the polls than where they stand on the issues. News’ emphasis of horse race over issues surely contributes to the state of voter knowledge.

Similarly, newspaper stories were more likely to discuss the candidates’ character (32%) than their policy positions (23%). As in past studies, when these stories address the horse race they were most likely to discuss strategies and campaign events. There could be other serious effects on the electorate from the
nature of presidential campaign coverage. Capella and Jamieson’s research suggests “strategy frames for news activate cynicism” in the audience (p. 159). They caution the effect is relatively small and at times only approaches significance but it is consistent. They also note “the effect occurs for broadcast as well as print news, and . . . the combination is additive” (p. 159). Furthermore, analysis of the general election TV spots from 2008 (Benoit & Glantz, 2012) reveals that the advertisements from McCain and Obama stressed policy more than character (58% to 42%). Hence, the newspapers’ emphasis on character did not reflect the emphasis of these topics in the election; it was a deliberate choice by the newspapers. The emphasis on campaign strategy may not be a desirable feature of newspaper coverage: We do need to know about the candidates’ character, but they propose and administer policy for the federal government.

One noticeable difference between horse race coverage in 2008 and coverage of earlier campaigns is that fund-raising and spending were much more common (and remaining categories tended to be less common) that in earlier campaigns. Much of this shift can be attributed to Obama’s campaign: Salant (2008) reported that in the 2008 general election campaign, “Obama... spent $740.6 million, eclipsing the combined $646.7 million that Republican President George W. Bush and Democratic nominee John Kerry spent four years earlier” (Salant, 2008). So, Obama raised and spent more than any other candidate for president – and in fact raised and spent more than the previous two candidates together. In that light it makes sense for news coverage to focus on these two categories more than in past elections.

Another difference in 2008 is that the newspaper coverage had more positive than negative evaluative comments. This could be a reaction to complaints about the negativity of election coverage. It is surprising to see the candidates in their TV spots attacked more than they acclaimed (65% to 34%; Benoit & Glantz, 2012). Furthermore, a study by Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino (1994; see also Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995) concluded negative advertising reduced voter turnout. However, this study did not analyze the content of television advertising; instead, it analyzed the content of news stories about the campaign. Therefore, although the authors claimed to have shown that negative advertising reduced turnout, in fact their study demonstrated negative news coverage depressed turnout. It is possible the negativity of newspaper coverage of the presidential campaign could have the same pernicious effect. However, voter turnout was higher in 2008 than in recent years (United States Elections Project, 2011), perhaps in part because of the positive coverage of the campaign.

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.
Conclusion

This study added to our understanding of news coverage of American presidential elections, content analyzing a sample of stories on the general election in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. Newspaper coverage of the election is an important source of information about the candidates and the policies they embrace. As noted earlier, newspaper readers are more likely to vote, exerting more influence in the voting booth than non-readers. The most common information supplied to readers concerned the horse race between the candidates (45% of all themes). The news prefers to emphasize the competition and that which changes every day (e.g., where the candidates are holding events). Less information is provided in newspapers on the candidates’ character (32%) and policies (23%). Strategy and campaign events were the most common topics, followed by fund raising and spending – probably because Obama raised and spent more money than any other presidential candidate in history. Unusually, this campaign coverage had more positive than negative evaluative comments.

Newspaper coverage of the general election campaign in 2008 followed some of the trends established by previous research, but some differences (e.g., tone) emerged. In the 2012 campaign, neither candidate accepted federal financing for the general election. It will be interesting to see if an increase in importance on fund raising by candidates will be reflected in newspaper coverage of the 2012 general presidential election.

References


Authors’ Note: William L. Benoit, Ohio University, Jayne R. Goode, University of Dayton, and Mark Glantz, St. Norbert College.