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***New York Times' Coverage of American Presidential Primary Campaigns, 1952-2004***

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## Abstract

Reforms initiated in presidential nominating rules in 1972 gave increased importance to primary campaigns and candidates. This investigates *New York Times*' coverage of presidential primary campaigns, 1952-2004. Overall, horse race coverage was the most common topic (66%), followed by character (16%) and policy positions (12%); the amount of horse race coverage was smaller in recent campaigns as coverage of character increased. Horse race coverage consisted primarily of campaign strategy (45%), polls (11%), campaign events (9%), predictions (8%), endorsements (7%), and outcomes. Of these topics, coverage of strategies and endorsements fell in recent elections whereas attention to polls was higher in recent campaigns. News coverage stressed character more, and policy less, than candidate messages. *New York Times* primary coverage was more positive than negative, although the tone of more recent campaigns was more negative compared with earlier elections. Reporters were the most common source of statements (55%), followed by candidates (25%), supporters (11%), and others (9%). *New York Times*' primary campaign coverage was more negative than candidates' television spots, debates, or direct mail brochures from the same time period. More negative remarks concerned Republicans than Democrats, and this tendency was heightened in recent campaigns.

Key terms: presidential primary campaign, newspaper coverage, *New York Times*, horse race, policy, character, tone, sources

Newspapers are an important source of information about presidential campaigns, as Hollihan (2009; 104) noted: “for national political news coverage, the most thorough, comprehensive, and substantive political information regarding political campaigns, political issues, and public policies is available to readers of comprehensive large city daily papers.” The news media can supplement knowledge about the candidates and their policy positions provided by candidates; the news in many cases offers a less biased view than the candidates themselves, and, for those who do not seek out candidate messages, the news is an even more important source of information for voters. Hansen’s (2004) analysis of National Election Studies data from 1960-2000 indicated that newspaper use was related to higher levels of knowledge. Furthermore, newspaper readers are a very 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 ( $\chi^2[df = 1] = 101.93, p < .0001, \phi = .26$ ), which means that newspaper readers have a disproportionate impact at the polls. Studies show 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 affect voters’ perceptions of candidates (Ross, 1992). Thus, newspaper coverage of presidential election campaigns merits scholarly attention.

Most research on newspaper coverage of campaigns has focused on the general election. However, the primary phase is unjustifiably slighted in the research. First, voters typically know less about the candidates and their policies in the primary than the general campaign, so primary campaign messages generally, and news coverage of primary campaigns specifically, can be particularly influential. Second, some elections feature weak incumbents (e.g., Carter in 1980, Bush in 1992), which means the primary may be the most important campaign phase, deciding which candidate has the opportunity to face – and likely defeat – the weak incumbent. Patterson (1994: 35) explained that “The news media do not entirely determine who will win the nomination, but no candidate can succeed without the press.” So, news coverage of presidential primary campaigns matters.

It is important to note that primaries became more important following a series of rules changes initiated by the Democrats after the 1968 campaign (some adopted by Republicans as well). In the Democratic party, delegates were allocated proportionately (rather than by a winner take all rule) for every candidate with at least 15% of the vote. In both parties, delegates awarded from primaries and caucuses were now “pledged” to candidates, not free to vote for the candidate of the delegate’s choice. The number of primaries and caucuses held increased substantially after reforms were instituted (see, e.g., Bartels, 1988; Davis, 1997). Skewes (2007: 8) noted that “the increasing use of the primary election by individual states as a means of selecting delegates” after 1968 “gave the media the powerful role they now have in the nomination process.” It is possible that the nature of news coverage of presidential primaries shifted after the nomination process changed.

#### Literature Review

Scholars have invested considerable effort into understanding news coverage of political campaigns. Some research investigates campaign coverage in television news (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Lichter, Noyes, & Kaid, 1999). Coverage of

nominating conventions (e.g., Adams; 1985; Patterson, 1980) and the general election campaign (e.g., Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991) has been studied. Other research has analyzed news coverage of non-presidential contests (e.g., Graber, 1989; Kahn & Kenney, 1999).

Because the study reported here concerns newspaper coverage of presidential primary campaigns, we focus the literature review on that topic. Patterson (1980) reported that the game (horse race; winning, losing, polls, events) accounted for almost two-thirds of the primary coverage in network news, newspapers, and news magazines in 1976. Substance, including policy and candidate character, comprised about one-quarter of the stories. Graber (1988: 79) found in 1976 that news coverage “during the primaries concentrated very heavily on fleeting campaign activities and vote tallies in state contests, slighting a discussion of the policy stands taken by the candidates.” Robinson and Sheehan’s (1983) found an emphasis on horse race coverage in the primary as well as the general campaign phase during 1980. Brady (1989) analyzed UPI coverage of the 1984 presidential primary campaign: 16% of the lines in these stories concerned the candidates’ policy positions and 23% the candidate’s character and leadership ability; 21% discussed potential success of the candidates, 20% campaign events, 11% attacks on opponents, and 9% their supporters. Farnsworth and Lichter (2003: 59) found that network news coverage of horse race in the primary campaign increased from 49% in 1988 to 78% in 2000.

King (1990) analyzed *USA Today* and *New York Times* coverage of the 1988 presidential primaries. The horse race dominated both papers’ coverage (88.8% for *USA Today*, 73.7% for *New York Times*). Campaign issues (e.g., controversies and gaffes) were the second most common topic at (7.5% and 11.2%). Policy issues (2.1%, 7.5%) and the candidates’ personal qualities (1.6%, 7.5%) were less common topics. Johnson (1993) reported that polls accounted for 23% of newspaper and 29% of television coverage in the 1988 primaries; expectations 22% and 20%, momentum 18%, 15%, organization/finances 14%, 7%, endorsements 8%, 13%, and outcome/delegates were 16% in each medium (this study did not quantify the frequency of policy or character). Just et al. (1996) analyzed newspaper and television coverage of the primary and general campaign of 1992; inspection of their line graphs indicates that roughly 60% of stories mentioned the horse race and the candidates’ character; in contrast, only about 40% of stories addressed issues. In the 1992 campaign, Buchanan (1996) reported that candidates devoted 68% of their talk to issues whereas the media discussed issues in 21% of coverage. He also reported that the tone of media coverage “was substantially more negative than the tone of . . . the candidate discussions of themselves and other candidates” (1996: p. 149). Steger (1999) examined *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* coverage in 1996 primaries, reporting that negative coverage was most common, followed by mixed coverage and, least of all, positive coverage. Horse race coverage was most common, followed by policy and then character. Lichter and Smith (1996) investigated network news coverage of the 1996 presidential primaries. Horse race accounted for 51% of statements, policy 20%, and character 19%. The Project for Excellence in Journalism analyzed news coverage of the early primary campaign in 2000:

Roughly 80% of the early election campaign coverage discussed tactics of the

candidates and parties, fundraising by the campaigns, and internal organizational problems. Only 13% of the stories were about the candidates' ideas, their honesty, or what they had done for their constituents in previous elected offices. (Skewes, 2007: 13)

Again, there is relatively little emphasis in the news about policy and character. Vinson and Moore (2007) examined a variety of candidate messages and news coverage of the 2000 presidential primary in South Carolina. They report that the media stressed horse race (including campaign process) more than candidate messages whereas candidates discussed policy issues and character more than the media. They also found that when issues were discussed, the media mainly talked about the Confederate flag at the statehouse but the candidates tended to stress Social Security, military policy, and education. Benoit et al. (2007) content analyzed coverage of the 2004 presidential primary campaign in local newspapers, national newspapers, and national television news. The coverage privileged horse race (65%) over character (22%) or policy (13% topics). The tone of the news was more positive than negative (53% to 47%). The most common types of horse race coverage were strategy, polls, and events. Finally, more statements were from reporters than candidates, and candidates were quoted more often than others.

So, available research on primary campaign news reports that horse race was the most common topic, more common than policy or character. The tone of coverage was more likely to be negative than positive. Unfortunately, many of these studies do not report any evidence of reliability; those which do report reliability appear to use simple agreement, which can over-estimate reliability from chance agreement (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Second, comparatively few studies examine policy and character as separate topics; rarely does research report the kinds of horse race coverage. No study examines coverage of presidential primaries over time, which could be very important given the important changes that have occurred in rules for the primary. To supplement the current work on news coverage of presidential primary campaigns, we undertake a study of newspaper coverage of presidential primary campaigns to correct these limitations in the literature.

This study replicates an earlier study of general news coverage, so we will review that work as a backdrop for this study. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) analyzed general campaign coverage in the *New York Times* from 1952-2000. They found the three most common topics were horse race (40%), character (31%), and policy (25%). The four most frequent horse race topics were campaign strategy (34%), campaign events (24%), public opinion polls (22%), and predictions (13%). The evaluate coverage was predominantly negative (57% negative, 39% positive, 4% defenses). Finally, these stories relied most on reporters, with 44% of statements not attributed to any other source, 35% from candidates, 16% from supporters, and 5% from other sources. Research has found significant differences in presidential campaign messages from the primary and general campaign, such as more attacks and more policy in the general campaign than the primary (Benoit, 2007). Thus, we should not assume that newspaper coverage of presidential primary campaigns will exactly mirror coverage of general campaigns.

We articulate a theory of campaign news coverage designed to parallel the Functional Theory of Political Campaigns (Benoit, 2007). First, journalists have incentives to seek a large audience of readers and/or viewers. One obvious reason to increase audience size is the profit motive. Today, the news media have an important goal: attracting readers/viewers and, not coincidentally, selling advertising (see, e.g., Schudson, 1995). McManus (1994: 1) observes that “more and more of the nation’s news is being produced by corporations whose stockholders seek to maximize return on their investment.” This pressure can influence editors, publishers, producers, and journalists. The profit motive should encourage news to emphasize topics in stories that are expected to attract readers. Of course, this pressure to make the news profitable will not affect each journalist to the same extent. Some reporters may adhere more fully to the norm of informing the public so voters can make better decisions on election day—although there is more than a hint of paternalism as some journalists may believe they know what is “best” for their readers and viewers. Nevertheless, the profit motive should influence the content of news. Furthermore, human nature should encourage journalists to want to reach a wide audience; surely it is personally as well as economically gratifying to have large numbers of readers and viewers. These two incentives offer both print and electronic journalists a reason to cover campaigns in ways they believe will attract many consumers.

The incentive to seek a large audience means that journalists have a reason to seek out and emphasize news that is both novel and interesting – or, to be precise, news that journalists think readers will see as novel and interesting. Journalists want to report what is new; after all, the very name of this profession – “*news*” – emphasizes how important is the need for reporting novelty. Campaign events, such as rallies, change every day. Buchanan (1996: 154) notes that “the media . . . is obsessed with the process, the inside political story.” Similarly, Petrocik (2004: 140) explains that “Reporters do not typically have the substantive policy knowledge to do much more than report what candidates are saying and. . . the ‘news’ requires something ‘new’ to report, while candidates spend their campaign repeating the themes of their candidacy.” We know that message repetition can enhance learning and persuasion (see, e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1989); it should not be surprising given their goals that candidates repeat themes whereas journalists seek to report the novel. McChesney (2004: 78) noted that this pressure has intensified recently: “New commercial news media enabled by new technologies—in particular, round-the-clock TV news channels and the Internet—have intensified the need for fresh and attention-getting stories.” Political polls are now taken frequently during important races and the relative positions of the candidates can shift from poll to poll. In contrast, although candidates occasionally announce new policy proposals, change their policy positions, or develop them in greater detail, there is no doubt that the horse race changes more often and more rapidly than policy positions. Similarly, new information occasionally arises about a candidates’ character, but that occurs less often than changes in the horse race. Furthermore, the horse race, by definition, is about competition, which can add suspense and interest to stories (unless it is clear that one candidate will be a runaway winner). So, in order to keep the news “new” and interesting—and presumably attract readers and viewers—news coverage should have a tendency to stress horse race more than policy or character. As Marcus, Newman, and MacKuen (2000: 137) explain, “Journalists have

discovered that a narrative form that emphasizes winners and losers, heroes and villains, attracts an audience.” Similarly, Hamilton (2004: 12) argues that

The human interest stories involved in elections will attract a segment of viewers in search of entertaining stories. But satisfying this demand will lead news outlets to substitute horse race coverage of who is ahead and who is behind for policy discussions, and will shift the focus to the candidates' personal lives rather than their policy pronouncements.

So, the desire to attract viewers tends to foster an emphasis on the horse race as well as on character over policy.

On the other hand, the substantive importance of a story appears to be a less important consideration in the news. Graber (1989: 86) notes that newspaper and television editors indicated 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.” 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. Further statements on the same issue become progressively less newsworthy, unless a new wrinkle is added” (1994, p. 61). Thus, news can be expected to devote considerable time and space to the horse race as they seek a wider audience.

A second factor that encourages journalists to focus on the horse race is the fact that it is impossible for a reporter to be an expert on every possible policy topic: foreign trade, terrorism and national defense, taxation, transportation, welfare, the environment, health care, Social Security, education, commerce, and so forth. It is much easier for reporters to become experts on campaigning: “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” (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003: 168). Similarly, Schudson (1995: 10) explained that an emphasis on strategy in news coverage occurs because “Political reporters tend to be politics-wonks rather than policy-wonks, absorbed in ‘inside baseball’ analysis rather than fascinated by the question of how government should run the country.” Skewes (2007: 56) provides this comment made by Martin Kasindorg, a reporter for *USA Today*:

There are always, throughout the election, a lot of stories on polls and horse race aspects. Political writers are kind of like sports writers – they're covering the game. Political writers are more comfortable covering the politics than covering the policies.

It makes sense for reporters to stress that which they know most about in their stories (although *New York Times* reporters might be more informed about policy than the average reporter). In fact, some reporters apparently believe horse race coverage is what prevents a campaign from being “a mighty dry and colorless affair” (Floyd, 2004: 1B). For these reasons, we predict that:

H1. News on political campaigns will emphasize horse race coverage more than policy or character.

Furthermore, the desire to attract a large audience should influence the tone as well as the topic of campaign coverage. An emphasis on attacks in news coverage, a

negative tone, may be thought to attract an audience because conflict is interesting. Patterson (1994: 136) explains that “Reporters are drawn irresistibly to controversy.” Reporting the candidates’ attacks on one another provides conflict, heightening interest in the story. The notion that the press is a watchdog policing our government, increasing since the Vietnam War and Watergate, may have encouraged the press to be more cynical. Patterson (1994: 19) explained that:

The rules of reporting changed with Vietnam and Watergate, when the deceptions perpetrated by the Johnson and Nixon administrations convinced reporters that they had let the nation down by taking political leaders at their word. Two presidents had lied; therefore no politician was to be trusted.

This watchdog mentality may also encourage an emphasis on negative tone. Reporters may be able to create the impression of impartiality if they criticize all candidates indiscriminately. So, the need to create interest (through controversy) along with distrust fostered by earlier presidential misbehavior combine to encourage negative coverage.

H2. The tone of news coverage of political campaigns will be more negative than positive.

H3: The tone of news coverage of political campaigns will be more negative than that of candidate messages.

Research shows that news coverage of presidential primary and general debates has more attacks than the debates themselves (Benoit, Hansen, & Stein, 2004; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004); this prediction extends that work to encompass all coverage rather than just coverage of debates.

Many journalists appear to consider the candidates’ character, or personality, to be more interesting than policy, so they emphasize character in the belief that this will attract readers. Clarke and Evans (1983: 39-42) surveyed 82 reporters who covered U.S. House of Representative races in 1978 (and content analyzed the newspaper stories in these papers), concluding that:

Candidates are above all recognized for speaking out on particular policy positions.... Strikingly, issue-related topics recede when reporters turn to analyzing the strengths and weaknesses that they think will determine the election.... On the whole, candidates do not dwell on these [personal] characteristics in their appeals to voters. Yet journalists believe that they are important factors in determining the outcome of a congressional race.

So, candidates focus more on issues than personal characteristics in their appeals to voters (campaign messages), whereas journalists believe that personal characteristics are more important to the election outcome. Skews (2007: 57) notes that “in covering candidates for the White House, the one aspect of coverage that journalists universally agreed was important. . . was coverage of the candidates’ character.” For example, Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* explained that issue stories are the ones “we suspect are to most readers the least accessible, the first ignored, and in many ways the least satisfactory” (Skews, 2007: 57). Recall that Hamilton (2004) noted that the desire to attract consumers who seek entertainment can lead to stories that privilege character over policy.

H4. News coverage of political campaigns will emphasize character more than policy.

H5. News coverage of political campaigns will emphasize character more, and policy less, than candidate messages.

We also investigated four research questions, following the previous study of *New York Times'* presidential campaign coverage:

RQ1. What is the relative proportion of the forms of horse race coverage?

RQ2. What is the relative proportion of the themes from reporters, candidates, supporters, and others?

RQ3. Is there a difference in the tone of comments about Democratic versus Republican candidates?

RQ4. Has the proportion of comments (topic, tone, source) in news coverage of presidential primaries shifted over time?

Testing these predictions, and answering these research questions, should provide insight into news coverage of presidential primary campaigns.

#### Purpose

This study investigates the nature of newspaper coverage of presidential primary election campaigns. We test the predictions with data from *New York Times'* coverage of presidential primary campaigns from 1952-2004 (H3 and H5 also use data from previous content analyses of presidential campaign messages). A longitudinal analysis is worthwhile for several reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, the presidential primary campaign has become more important as nominating rules changed; it is possible that changes in news coverage ensued from changes in the nominating process. Furthermore, in the 1960s and 1970s, network television news became more important as sources of information for citizens. Over the period of 1952-2000, National Election Survey respondents reported less learning from newspapers over time; data from the Newspaper Association of America indicate that average newspaper readership has declined between 1964 and 1997 (Benoit & Hansen, 2004). These changes in newspaper use and circulation might be reflected in news coverage of primary campaigns. Then we answer the research questions on source and tone of coverage. Finally, the frequency of these forms of newspaper campaign coverage content will be correlated with year of campaign, in order to determine whether there are any trends (significant increases or decreases) in newspaper coverage of presidential primary campaigns over time.

#### Method

##### Sample

We started 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 only a single newspaper, the *New York Times*. This paper is considered by many to be the national paper of record. We do not know whether its coverage is typical of the coverage in other newspapers; however, arguably the news coverage in the *New York Times* is highly influential. Hollihan (2009: 104) 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 are impressive. Most of the work of these reporters is shared with other media outlets through their news services.

Other reporters and editors follow the *New York Times* closely, which means that our sample has influence beyond the readers of the *New York Times*. Skewes (2007: 33) observed that “The stories that run in the *New York Times* influence what other media outlets carry in their own columns and programs.” Selection of the *New York Times* to sample is justified.

We obtained three constructed weeks from each presidential campaign, one prior to the New Hampshire primary in each year and two after the primary (that is, we began seven weeks prior to the primary and selected an article from a Monday in week seven, an article from the Tuesday in week six, and so on, so the sample spanned 21 weeks). The data for 2004 were collected for another study using five weeks of primary coverage (Benoit et al., 2007), so these data were converted to the same metric as the data for the other years. We searched for articles with the names of primary candidates and “primary.” We verified that each article selected had the presidential primary as a principle focus; if not, we selected another article.

To test hypotheses three and five, we employed the results of previous studies of primary television spots, primary debates (because we do not have data for primary debates for every year, the years without primary debate data were excluded from news data for this comparison), and primary direct mail brochures (Benoit, 2007). These messages were coded for tone (function) and topic (policy versus character) using the same procedures employed in the analysis of *New York Times*’ primary campaign coverage. Then the first three research questions will be answered. RQ4, about shifts in coverage over time, will be reported immediately after each relevant hypothesis is discussed.

#### Procedures

This study replicates the methods used in the study of *New York Times* coverage of general campaign news (Benoit et al., 2005) as well as the studies generating data from candidate messages (Benoit, 2007). Categorical content analysis was employed in all these studies. A codebook was developed with definitions and examples of all categories (see Benoit et al., 2005). Coders unitized the texts into themes, which are the smallest units of discourse capable of expressing an idea. Holsti (1969: 116) explained that a theme is “a single assertion about some subject.” Then they coded each theme for source, topic, subject, and tone.

Cohen’s (1960)  $\kappa$  was calculated on a subset 10% of the texts to determine inter-coder reliability because it controls for agreement by chance. Reliability for topic of utterance was .83, for tone was .92, for identifying the source of a statement was 1.0, for target of utterance it was .94. Landis and Koch (1977) explained that values of  $\kappa$  over .81 represents almost perfect reliability, so these data should be considered reliable.

Chi-square was employed to testing the distribution of the frequency of themes in news coverage versus candidate messages. This statistic is appropriate for investigating differences with frequency data. For longitudinal analysis, we divided the sample into two equal time periods: 1952-1976 and 1980-2004. The reforms to the nomination process were initiated in 1972, so these data generally reflect pre- and post-reform news coverage (all reforms were not initiated in 1972, but major reforms were implemented by 1980). Log-linear analysis was used to test the relationship of the three variables when

considering tone, political party, and early versus recent campaigns.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that the horse race would be a more common topic in newspaper coverage of presidential primary campaigns than policy or character. This prediction was confirmed: Horse race was by far the most common topic in these primary stories at 66% of themes; character was the second most frequent topic at 16% and policy was third at 12% (voters, election information, and scandal each constituted less than 5% of the coverage). A chi-square goodness of fit test reveals that the differences among the three most common topics are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 [2, 4620] = 2799.39, p < .0001$ ). Contrasting the two time periods revealed a decrease in the reporting of horse race themes in recent years (76% to 60%) as the proportion of character themes increased (6% to 23%;  $\chi^2 [2, 4620] = 2565.41, p < .0001, V = .24$ ). However, even with a drop in horse race coverage in recent campaigns, this topic still comprised 60% of all themes. These data are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1 Topic of New York Times' Coverage of Presidential Primary Campaigns**

	Horse Race	Character	Policy	Voters	Election Info.	Scandal
1952-1976	1400 (76%)	103 (6%)	204 (11%)	124 (7%)	10 (0.5%)	0
1980-2004	1831 (60%)	696 (23%)	386 (13%)	68 (2%)	34 (1%)	24 (0.8%)
Total	3231 (66%)	799 (16%)	590 (12%)	192 (4%)	44 (0.9%)	24 (0.5%)
General*	1332 (40%)	1041 (31%)	851 (25%)	136 (4%)	3 (0.1%)	6 (0.2%)

\*Benoit et al. (2005)

The tone of newspaper campaign coverage was addressed in the second hypothesis, which predicted that coverage would be primarily negative. The percentage of positive comments was larger than that of negative comments (54% positive, 42% negative, 3% defenses); a *chi-square* goodness of fit test calculated only on positive versus negative comments was significant ( $\chi^2 [1, 2190] = 33.29, p < .0001$ ). Recent campaign coverage had more a negative tone than earlier ones ( $\chi^2 [1, 2190] = 9.18, p < .005, \phi = .06$ ).

Table 2 Tone of New York Times Presidential Primary Campaign Coverage

	Positive	Negative	Defenses
1952-1976	263 (63%)	156 (37%)	1 (0.2%)
1980-2004	967 (52%)	804 (44%)	76 (4%)
Total Primary	1230 (54%)	960 (42%)	77 (3%)
General*	803 (39%)	1177 (57%)	79 (4%)

\*Benoit et al. (2005)

The second hypothesis investigated the tone of news coverage; H3 anticipated that news coverage of the presidential primaries would be more negative than the candidate messages themselves. This hypothesis was confirmed: Overall, news coverage was mostly positive (56%), but, excluding defenses, *New York Times*' coverage was significantly more negative than candidate TV spots, debates, or direct mail advertising from the same time period (see Table 3 for the data and the *chi-squares* comparing news coverage with each candidate message form). Unlike news coverage, with a rough balance between positive and negative tone (56% positive, 44% negative), candidates messages used many more positive than negative statements (71% to 29% in TV spots, 65% to 35% in debates, and 85% to 15% in direct mail advertising).

Table 3 Tone of New York Times Primary Campaign Coverage versus Candidate Messages

	Positive	Negative	$\chi^2$ ( $df = 1$ ), $p$ <.0001
<i>New York Times</i> 1952-2004	1230 (56%)	960 (44%)	
TV Spots, 1952-2004	<b>3501 (71%)</b>	1451 (29%)	143.44, $\phi = .14$
Debates, 1960, 1968, 1972, 1980-2004*	<b>9984 (65%)</b>	5446 (35%)	60.46, $\phi = .06$
Direct Mail, 1952-2004	<b>7776 (85%)</b>	1361 (15%)	908.15, $\phi = .28$

Sources: TV Spots: Benoit, 1999; Benoit et al. 2003. Debates: Benoit et al., 2002. Direct Mail: Benoit & Stein, 2005.

\* $\chi^2$  for *New York Times*' coverage versus debates calculated only on newspaper coverage of the campaigns for which primary debates are available (1960, 1968, 1972, 1980-2004).

The fourth hypothesis predicted that newspaper primary campaign coverage would focus more on character more than policy. As Table 1 reveals, this was indeed the case. Character accounted for 16% of the comments whereas policy constituted only 12%. A *chi-square* goodness of fit test confirmed that these frequencies of these two categories are significantly different ( $\chi^2$  [1, 1389] = 31.14,  $p < .0001$ ). H5 compared the relative emphasis on policy versus character in newspapers with candidate messages. As Table 4 reveals, *New York Times* presidential primary stories stressed character more (58%), and poFebruary 11, 2009licy less

(42%), than candidates' TV spots, debates, and direct mail advertising from the same campaigns. Unlike news coverage, each of these candidate message forms stressed policy over character (54% policy and 36% character in TV spots, 69% policy and 31% character in debates, 62% policy and 38% character in direct mail advertising). These data and the *chi-squares* comparing the topics of news coverage with each candidate message form are reported in Table 4.

Table 4 Topics of New York Times Primary Campaign Coverage versus Candidate Messages

	Policy	Character	$\chi^2$ ( $df = 1$ ) $p < .0001$
<i>New York Times</i> 1952-2004	590 (42%)	<b>799 (58%)</b>	
TV Spots, 1952-2004	<b>3061 (54%)</b>	2614 (46%)	58.7, $\phi = .09$
Debates, 1960, 1968, 1972, 1980-2004*	<b>13248 (69%)</b>	5966 (31%)	471.46, $\phi = .15$
Direct Mail, 1952-2004	<b>6020 (62%)</b>	3636 (38%)	199.47, $\phi = .13$

Sources: TV Spots: Benoit, 1999; Benoit et al. 2003. Debates: Benoit et al., 2002. Direct Mail: Benoit & Stein, 2005.

\* $\chi^2$  for *New York Times'* coverage versus debates calculated only on newspaper coverage of the campaigns from which primary debates contributed data (1960, 1968, 1972, 1980-2004).

The first research question investigated the nature of horse race coverage. Six topics were most common: strategy (45%), polls (11%), campaign events (9%), predictions (8%), endorsements (7%), and reports of primary outcomes (7%). A *chi-square* goodness of fit test shows that these topics did not occur with equal frequency ( $\chi^2$  [5, 2814] = 2532.13,  $p < .0001$ ). Five other topics comprised less than 5% of the news coverage each (viability: 3%; spending: 3%; vote choice: 3%; fund raising: 2%, and electability: 2%). The frequency of the top six categories differed between early and recent campaigns ( $\chi^2$  [5, 2814] = 198.46,  $p < .0001$ ,  $V = .27$ ). The largest shifts occurred with strategic coverage (decreased from 53% to 39%), polls (increased from 4% to 16%), and events (increased from 7% to 12%). Strategic coverage remained the most common form of horse race even as it decreased over time. These data are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5 Type of Horse Race Coverage in New York Times' Presidential Primary Campaign Coverage

	Strategy	Poll	Events	Predict	Endorse	Outcome
1952-1976	740 (53%)	53 (4%)	93 (7%)	133 (10%)	121 (9%)	69 (5%)
1980-2004	719 (39%)	294 (16%)	212 (12%)	116 (6%)	115 (6%)	149 (8%)
Total	1459 (45%)	347 (11%)	305 (9%)	249 (8%)	236 (7%)	218 (7%)

General*	457 (34%)	291 (22%)	320 (24%)	169 (13%)	59 (4%)	--
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\*Benoit et al. (2005).

Table 5. continued Type of Horse Race Coverage in New York Times' Presidential Primary Campaign Coverage

	Viability	Spend	Vote Choice	Fund Raise	Electability
1952-1976	72 (5%)	35 (3%)	52 (4%)	25 (2%)	7 (0.5%)
1980-2004	41 (2%)	56 (3%)	32 (2%)	51 (3%)	50 (3%)
Total	113 (3%)	91 (3%)	84 (3%)	76 (2%)	57 (2%)
General*	--	4 (0.3%)	22 (2%)	10 (1%)	--

\*Benoit et al. (2005).

The second research question concerned the relative dependence on different sources for campaign articles. Reporters (otherwise unattributed statements) were most common at 55%. Candidates were quoted or paraphrased in 25% of campaign coverage, supporters accounted for 11% of comments, and 9% of statements were from other sources. This distribution is significantly different from what would occur by chance ( $\chi^2 [3, 4905] = 565.29, p < .0001$ ). There was a difference in allocation of sources between early and recent campaigns ( $\chi^2 [3, 4905] = 29.26, p < .0001, V = .08$ ). The largest shifts were more comments from candidates and fewer from supporters in recent campaigns. See Table 6 for these data.

Table 6 Source of New York Times' Presidential Primary Campaign Coverage

	Reporter	Candidate	Supporter	Other
1952-2976	1014 (55%)	397 (22%)	251 (14%)	182 (10%)
1980-2004	1705 (56%)	807 (26%)	306 (10%)	243 (8%)
Total	2719 (55%)	1204 (25%)	557 (11%)	425 (9%)
General*	1502 (44%)	1171 (35%)	551 (16%)	159 (5%)

Note. Some rows do not total 100% because of rounding. \*Benoit et al. (2005).

The third research question asked whether the tone of *New York Times* primary campaign coverage favored one political party. To answer this question, we employed *log-linear* analysis. The test for tone and political party was significant ( $G^2 [df = 1] = 55.62, p < .0001$ ). Table 7 reveals that coverage of Republican candidates was roughly split between positive (48%) and

negative (52%) tone. However, the tone of Democratic coverage was much more positive (59% positive, 41% negative). Contrasting early and recent campaigns, the *log-linear* analysis indicates that coverage of recent campaigns is more negative ( $G^2 [df = 1] = 9.38, p < .005$ ). The three-way interaction is significant ( $G^2 [df = 4] = 91.09, p < .0001$ ) and inspection of the means in Table 7 reveals that negative comments about Democrats increased 7% in more recent campaigns while critical remarks about Republicans increased 12%.

Table 7 Tone of New York Times' Primary Coverage for Democrats and Republicans

	Positive	Negative
1952-1976		
Democrats	163 (66%)	85 (34%)
Republicans	100 (58%)	71 (41%)
1980-2004		
Democrats	793 (55%)	581 (41%)
Republicans	174 (42%)	223 (54%)
Total		
Democrats	956 (59%)	666 (41%)
Republicans	274 (48%)	294 (52%)

### Discussion

The predictions from the theory of political campaign coverage advanced here held up well in this study. Primary campaign coverage in the *New York Times* stressed the horse race over candidates' policy positions or character. This finding is consistent with previous research as indicated in the literature review. Candidates actively avoid accusations of inconsistency, so they have an incentive to try to present consistent personas and policy positions over time. This means that candidates' policy positions are usually similar over time and so often not considered "news." On the other hand, such information as today's campaign events and the most recent polls are likely to be "news" in the sense that they can shift from day to day. Focusing on what is *new* rather than on policy or character serves the journalists' desire to have large audiences and the profit motive of news. Therefore, it is not surprising that the *New York Times* would slight coverage of policy and character in favor of horse race, although it is unfortunate. Perhaps those who dislike the emphasis on horse race can take heart from the fact that strategic coverage of the primary campaign in the *New York Times* is decreasing somewhat over time. Farnsworth and Lichter's (2003) finding that horse race in television coverage from 1988-2000 increased from 49% to 78%. This points to a need for more analysis of television coverage (both prior to 1988 and after 2000).

We can also compare the *New York Times*' primary and general campaign coverage (Benoit et al., 2005). Statistical analysis of the horse race, character, and policy reveals a

significant difference between primary and general campaign coverage ( $\chi^2 [2, 7844] = 641.28, p < .0001, V = .29$ ). Horse race is an even larger component of primary (66%) than general (40%) campaign news. Of course, there are more candidates in the primary (e.g., in 2004 at some point in time 10 different candidates contested the Democratic nomination; Bush and Kerry were the only candidates in the general campaign with much visibility), which translates into more campaign events, campaign strategy, and comparisons (polls) to report. With more horse race coverage in the primary campaign, both character (16% to 31%) and policy (12% to 25%) receive less attention in the primary than the general campaign.

When it is not discussing the horse race or game, *New York Times* primary campaign coverage stresses the candidates' character more than their policy positions. Character is stressed more than policy in both campaign phases. This is consistent with a journalistic desire to highlight character over policy. Brady (1989) also found that character was discussed more often than policy. Of course, most presidential primary candidates are comparatively unknown—think of Ron Paul in 2008, for instance—so some emphasis on character is understandable during the primary campaign phase. Furthermore, there ought to be fewer policy differences between primary contenders (compared with general election competitors), because they are from the same political party in the primary. This could also encourage more emphasis on character, particularly in the primary. Furthermore, the emphasis on character is increasing over time. Comparing early and recent primary coverage, the proportion of remarks devoted to character increased sharply after 1980, from 6% to 23%. The altered rules for securing the nomination have increased the importance of individual candidates and this is reflected in the news coverage (Wattenberg [1991, 1998] discusses the decrease in party influence and the increase in candidate-centered politics).

*New York Times'* primary campaign news coverage privileges positive comments over negative ones, although the preference for positive over negative comments has moderated over time. However, candidate messages are much more positive (65%-85%) than the news. This tendency to emphasize the negative (more than candidates) can reinforce the journalists' image as independent, show them as democratic "watchdogs," and stimulate reader interest through conflict. Others have commented on the negative content of news coverage. Hart (2000: 173) noted that "political news is reliably negative." Jamieson, Waldman, and Devitt (1998: 325) 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." This sample of stories in the *New York Times* reinforces these conclusions, particularly when one considers the tone of candidate messages. General campaign coverage is even more negative than primary campaign coverage ( $\chi^2 [df = 1] = 23.89, p < .0001, \phi = .08$ ). The heightened negativity of general campaign coverage may in part reflect the fact that general campaign messages tend to be more negative than primary messages (Benoit, 2007).

This study found that campaign strategy is by far the most common horse race topic at 45%. Polls were mentioned in 11% of themes; slightly less common were discussions of campaign events (9%), predictions (8%), endorsements (7%), and outcome (7%). Surprisingly, the proportion of strategic coverage (although still quite high overall at 45%) is decreasing over time, along with discussions of endorsements and viability. On the other hand, it is perhaps not surprising to see that the percentage of themes about public opinion polls is increasing over time. Although strategic coverage is still quite high, it is possible that some reporters are shifting their

emphasis somewhat from strategic coverage to polls, which may appear more objective. It also appears that more polls are conducted in recent campaigns, providing more polls to report on. Certainly the sharp comparisons involved in a poll (directly comparing candidates) fuels horse race coverage.

Comparing the five most common topics in primary and general coverage, there is a significant difference ( $\chi^2 [df = 4] = 243.77, p < .0001, V = .25$ ). Strategic coverage and discussions of endorsements are more common in primary than general campaigns; polls, events, predictions are more common topics of general election coverage. Strategic and endorsement coverage could be increasing there are more candidates implementing campaign strategies in the primary phase. More candidates in the primary, on the other hand, would not necessitate more polls, just more names in a given poll.

Reporters (that is, statements not attributed to others) are the most common source in *New York Times'* primary campaign coverage. Although he only reports data for one campaign, Patterson (2003) 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" (p. 63). These data indicate that television news relies even more on reporters, and less on candidates and other sources, than newspaper coverage. The *Times* relies somewhat less on reporters (44% to 55%) and more on candidates (35% to 25%) in general than primary campaign news; these differences are significant ( $\chi^2 [df = 3] = 199.77, p < .0001, V = .16$ ). An increase in percentage of themes attributed to candidates in recent years again is consistent with an increase in the importance of individual candidates following nomination rules changes. Perhaps there are so many candidates to track in the primary that reporters are less likely to use quotations and paraphrases in that phase. Hallin (1992) 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. Steele and Barnhurst (1996) found that over the same time period, journalists talked more frequently over time. These studies suggest that television news changes more over time than newspaper stories in their coverage of presidential campaigns.

*New York Times* coverage of primary campaigns tends to report more negative comments about Republican than Democratic candidates; this tendency increased in recent election coverage. Similarly, in *New York Times'* general campaign news (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005), significantly more negative comments concern Republicans than Democrats. D'Alessio and Allen report no overall bias in news coverage of campaigns; however, the lack of an overall bias does not mean every news outlet provides balanced coverage.

Finally, the content of *New York Times'* coverage of the primary campaign was compared with the content of the candidates' own messages. In fact, news coverage in this newspaper stresses character more than the candidates do themselves. Petrocik (2004: 139-140) observed that

Issue coverage is quite sparse. Candidates spend about all their time talking about issues, their assets, and their opponent's liabilities, while the press devotes the majority of its resources to the horse race, process, novelty, personalities, mistakes, controversies, and attacks and counterattacks.

Similarly, primary news coverage in this sample has a more negative tone than the candidates'

own messages. General news coverage also emphasized policy less than candidate messages and were more negative than candidate messages (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Clearly, campaign news coverage is not a mirror that merely reflects the candidates' messages; it distorts the candidates messages as it reports them, downplaying policy and accentuating the negative.

#### Conclusion

This study offers several advances over the existing literature. First, no other study of primary campaign news coverage offers this kind of longitudinal analysis: 1952-2004. Our sample is limited to a single newspaper, but arguably the *New York Times* is the most important such outlet (it would be interesting for future work to contrast other media outlets). We report reliability employing a statistic that controls for agreement by chance. We investigate multiple topics: topics, tone, source, and target of coverage. We analyze horse race coverage into its component categories (e.g., strategy, events, polls). We compare the content of news coverage with the content of the candidates' own message forms (primary television spots, debates, and direct mail advertising). This study offers an extension of previous research on *New York Times'* coverage of the general presidential election. We contrast early and recent campaigns; our data cannot demonstrate that changes in nominating rules caused observed shifts in news coverage of the primary campaign, but that must be considered a potential source of influence. Furthermore, we advance a theory of news coverage of campaigns which can guide further work in this area.

The result of this focus more on horse race and character rather than on the issues is that citizens learn more about "winners and losers in primaries than. . . anything else" (Robinson & Chauncey, 1985: 61). Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) agreed that voters know which candidate is leading the pack, but people have less issue knowledge. The emphasis on the horse race in news coverage means that voters do know the candidates' poll numbers. Thus, the news media, because the amount of coverage steadily decreases over time while the emphasis shifts from issues and candidate qualifications to the horse race, is less useful to voters than many assume.

Other serious effects on the electorate could result from the nature of presidential campaign coverage. Capella and Jamieson's (1997: 159) research suggests that "strategy frames for news activate cynicism" in the audience. They caution that the effect is relatively small and at times only approaches significance but it is consistent. They also note that "the effect occurs for broadcast as well as print news, and. . . the combination is additive." de Vreese (2004; see also de Vreese & Semetko, 2002) report that strategic news coverage is associated with political cynicism. Crigler, Just, and Belt (2006: 149) found that "subjects who viewed the strategy/game news stories became significantly more cynical than those who viewed more substantive news." So, the fact that *New York Times* coverage of presidential elections emphasizes campaign strategy could have a deleterious effect on voters. Perhaps we can derive some comfort from the fact that, although campaign strategy dominates news coverage, horse race coverage may be diminishing somewhat over time.

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 (1999: 35) 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.

Thus, it is important to understand the nature of news coverage of presidential campaigns generally and presidential primary coverage in particular.

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