Newspaper Coverage of Prime Minister Elections in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

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Abstract

This study investigates newspaper coverage of prime minister campaigns in Australia (2010), Canada (2011), and the United Kingdom (2011). 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. The statements in these stories were more often negative than positive. Reporters are the most common sources for the statements in these articles, followed by candidates, supporters, and others. Comparison with content analysis of Prime Minister debates in these elections shows that newspapers discuss attacks more frequently than candidates use attacks and address character more than candidates talk about character.

Key terms: newspaper coverage, prime minister, election campaign, horse race, policy, character, tone
Newspapers are an important source of information about presidential campaigns. Hollihan (2001) 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” (p. 79). Hansen’s (2004) analysis of NES data from 1960-2000 indicated that newspaper use was associated with higher levels of knowledge in each of these eleven campaigns. Newspapers can be a significant source of issue knowledge for voters. This is particularly important in countries such as the United Kingdom where candidates are prohibited from running television spots; “major parties are allocated rationed blocks of free time for... party election broadcasts (PEBs) during official campaign periods” (Scammell & Langer, 2006, p. 65). Furthermore, “the maximum length of [PEBs] has declined progressively, from 30 minutes in 1955 to four minutes 40 seconds” pp. 75-76). This means the news as a source of information about candidates and their policies is particularly important.

Another indication of the importance of news coverage of campaigns can be discovered in the theory of agenda-setting. Cohen (1963) explained 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” (p. 13). In other words, news media may not be able to create attitudes (tell people what to think about an issue), but the news can tell people that an issue is something they should be thinking about (tell people it is an important issue). McCombs and Shaw (1972) coined the phrase “agenda-setting” to refer to this phenomenon. Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw (2004) reviewed the work in this area, concluding that “on the whole,” research “tends to support a positive correlation—and often a causal relationship—between media agendas and public agendas” (p. 258). 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, newspapers readers are an especially important group of citizens. NES data from 2000 reveals that Americans who read newspapers are significantly more likely to vote than those who do not (\(\chi^2[df = 1] = 101.93, p < .0001, V = .26\)). This means that newspaper users have a disproportionate impact at the polls. Thus, research on the content of newspaper coverage of election 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 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” (p. 53). But issue knowledge is arguably what voters need most: Patterson and McClure (1976) 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” (p. 49; see also Hofstetter, 1976). Therefore, the nature or content of newspaper coverage of presidential election campaigns merits scholarly attention. This study examines news coverage of elections in non-U.S. countries.

**Literature Review**

Some research investigated coverage of elections in one country by newspapers in another country (Christensen, 2005; Husselbee & Stempel, 1997; Khineyko, 2005). Several studies investigated television news coverage of election campaigns, including Comrie (2012), Dmitrova
Scholars have invested considerable effort into understanding news coverage of political campaigns. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) reviewed this literature, finding that most studies report horse race to be the most common topic, that character was discussed more than policy, and that the tone of news coverage tended to be negative. They also content analyzed *New York Times* coverage of American presidential campaigns from 1952-2000. The three main topics covered were horse race (40%), character (31%), and policy (25%). The three most common forms of horse race in these data were strategy (34%), events (24%), and polls (22%). The tone of coverage was more negative (57%) than positive (39%) with a few reports of defenses (4%). Reporters (statements without any other source indicated) were the most common source (44%), followed by candidates (35%), supporters (35%), and others (5%).

One of the earliest studies of newspaper coverage of election campaigns was completed by Sinclair (1982), who investigated coverage of the 1979 British election: 55% of coverage concerned issues, 34% horse race, and 15% character. Stromback and Aalberg (2008) looked at newspaper coverage of elections in Sweden (2002) and Norway (2005). Horse race and issues received equal attention in Swedish newspapers; horse race was a more common topic than issues in Norway (64% to 36%). The 2005 Danish election was investigated by Hansen and Pedersen (2008). 9% of newspaper ads were mostly or entirely negative, 7% of party election broadcasts were negative, 29% of debates, and 22% of newspaper articles that quoted candidates were negative. Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) content analyzed newspaper coverage of the 2006 Dutch parliamentary campaign. Most statements were positive (63% to 37%) and discussed policy more than character (58% to 42%; “trait” and “value” were combined in the character category). Amponsah (2012), following the approach taken in Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005), looked at presidential campaigns in Ghana, 1992-2004. Horse race comprised 41% of newspaper articles, policy was 30%, and character was 18%. The top three forms of horse race coverage were strategy (40%), events (29%), and endorsements (19%). Coverage was more positive than negative (74% to 19%) with few defenses (7%). Most statements were sourced to candidates (40%) or without a source (reporters, 36%); supporters (19%) and others (5%) were less common. Carstea (2012) analyzed opinion articles on the 2009 Romanian presidential campaign; around 90% of articles were negative. However, results for topic are mixed: policy was more common than horse race in two campaigns whereas horse race was more frequent than policy in two campaigns. In each study that counted both policy and character, policy was a more common topic than character. These studies indicate that newspaper coverage of political elections are mainly positive (three of four cases).

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. 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. (p. 148)

Therefore, although there may be a bias favoring one party in a given 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 investigates the nature of newspaper coverage of prime minister election campaigns in Australia (2010), Canada (2011), and the United Kingdom (2010). These countries and years were selected for two reasons. First, data are available on the political leaders’ debates in these elections, permitting a comparison of candidate messages with newspaper coverage. Second, all three countries have numerous English language newspapers. We ask the following questions:

- RQ1. What is the most common topic of newspaper coverage of non-US political campaigns?
- RQ2. What is the relative proportion of policy and character discussion in newspaper coverage of non-US political 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 non-US political campaigns?
- RQ5. What is the relative proportion of comments from different sources (reporters, candidates, supporters, others) in campaign news coverage?

The Discussion will compare data topic (policy versus character) and tone of newspaper coverage in each country with data from prime minister debates.

**Method**

**Sample**

We selected three newspaper articles on the campaign for each of the 28 days leading up to these elections using Lexis-Nexsus Academic University. The candidates’ names and the date were used to locate the sample (e.g., in the U.K. we searched for “Brown and Cameron and Clegg” for each date in the sample). Articles of only a few sentences and articles comprised of letters to the editor were skipped. The U.K. newspapers sampled here are *Daily Mail*, *Daily Post*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Evening Standard*, *Express*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Mirror*, *Observer*, *Sun*, *Times*. The Canadian newspapers sampled here are: *Ottawa Citizen*, *Toronto Star*, *The Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Globe & Mail*, and *Vancouver Sun*. The Australian newspapers sampled here are: *Australian Financial Review*, *Canberra Times*, *CWNS*, *Dailey Telegraph*, *Guardian Unlimited*, *Herald Sun*, *Mail & Guardian*, *New Zealand Herald*, *Northern Territory News*, *Sunday Age*, *Sunday Herald Sun*, *Sunday Mail*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Advertizer*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Western Mail*, and *Weekend Australia*.

**Method**

Categorical content analysis was employed to describe the content of these news stories. Benoit’s Functional Theory (Benoit, 2007) serves as the theoretical starting point as extended for analysis of campaign news (Amponsah, 2012; Benoit, Hemmer, & Stein, 2010; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). 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). News coverage of campaigns can address five basic topics: policy and character (from Functional
Theory) as well as horse race, voters, scandal, and election information. Horse race coverage is comprised of seven sub-categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, 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 (from the reporter), from the candidate, from a supporter, or from another source.

We used the codebook developed in earlier research (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005) which contained definitions of these categories with an example of each category from newspaper stories. Coders unitized the texts into themes, which are the smallest units of discourse capable of expressing an idea. Berelson (1952) defined a theme as “an assertion about a subject” (p. 18). Holsti (1969) explained that a theme is “a single assertion about some subject” (p. 116). Then each theme was coded for source, topic, tone, and subject.

Cohen’s $\kappa$ was calculated (on a subset 10% of the texts) to determine inter-coder reliability because it controls for agreement by chance. Reliability for topic was .83, $\kappa$ was .87 for form of horse race coverage, the $\kappa$ for tone was .93, and $\kappa$ for identifying the source of statements was .95. Landis and Koch (1977) explained that values of $\kappa$ over .81 represents almost perfect reliability. One-way $\chi^2$ goodness of fit tests were used to test difference in the frequencies of the categories.

**Results**

The first research question concerned topic of news coverage. In all three samples, horse race was the most frequent topic: Australia 53%, Canada 46%, U.K. 39%. See Table 1 for these data and the chi-squares.

**Table 1. Topics of Election News Coverage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Horse Race</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Voters</th>
<th>Scandal</th>
<th>Election Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1217 (53%)</td>
<td>306 (13%)</td>
<td>482 (21%)</td>
<td>74 (3%)</td>
<td>68 (3%)</td>
<td>132 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>516 (46%)</td>
<td>329 (30%)</td>
<td>184 (17%)</td>
<td>72 (6%)</td>
<td>7 (0.6%)</td>
<td>6 (0.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>602 (39%)</td>
<td>584 (37%)</td>
<td>317 (20%)</td>
<td>57 (4%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2335 (47%)</td>
<td>1219 (25%)</td>
<td>983 (19%)</td>
<td>203 (4%)</td>
<td>75 (2%)</td>
<td>138 (3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Australia top three categories chi-square goodness-of-fit test ($df = 2$) = 698.81, $p < .0001$; Canada top three categories chi-square goodness-of-fit test ($df = 2$) = 161.53, $p < .0001$; UK top three categories chi-square goodness-of-fit test ($df = 2$) = 101.69, $p < .0001$.

The second research question asked whether newspaper campaign coverage would focus more on policy than character. This was the case in Canadian (30% to 17%) and British (37% to 20%) newspapers; however, Australian news stories discussed policy more than character (21% to 13%). These data are also reported in Table 1.

Table 2 provides data to answer RQ3 concerning topics of horse race coverage. In Australian news articles, campaign strategy was the most common topic (59%); in Canadian and British newspapers, polls were the most common form of coverage (48% in each country). Overall, reports on campaign events were the second most common topic of horse race (24%).
Table 2. Topics of Horse Race in Election News Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Predict</th>
<th>Endorse</th>
<th>Spending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>712 (59%)</td>
<td>147 (12%)</td>
<td>141 (12%)</td>
<td>155 (13%)</td>
<td>44 (4%)</td>
<td>17 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>127 (25%)</td>
<td>120 (23%)</td>
<td>248 (48%)</td>
<td>15 (3%)</td>
<td>5 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>154 (26%)</td>
<td>131 (22%)</td>
<td>286 (48%)</td>
<td>28 (5%)</td>
<td>1 (0.2%)</td>
<td>2 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>993 (43%)</td>
<td>398 (17%)</td>
<td>675 (29%)</td>
<td>198 (8%)</td>
<td>50 (2%)</td>
<td>20 (1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Australia top four categories chi-square goodness of fit test (df = 3) = 827.54, p < .0001; Canada top four categories chi-square goodness of fit test (df = 3) = 213.59, p < .0001; UK top four categories chi-square goodness of fit test (df = 3) = 225.42, p < .0001. The category “funding” was omitted.

The tone of newspaper campaign coverage was the topic of the next research question. Negative tone was more common than positive tone in all three samples of news stories: Australia 52% to 32%, Canada 55% to 39%, U.K. 58% to 39% (defenses were also reported). Table 3 displays these data. and the statistical tests conducted.

Table 3. Function of Election News Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Defense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>352 (32%)</td>
<td>687 (62%)</td>
<td>75 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>166 (39%)</td>
<td>238 (55%)</td>
<td>26 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>387 (39%)</td>
<td>573 (58%)</td>
<td>30 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>905 (36%)</td>
<td>1498 (59%)</td>
<td>131 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Australia positive vs. negative chi-square goodness-of-fit test (df = 1) = 107.36, p < .0001; Canada positive vs. negative chi-square goodness-of-fit test (df = 1) = 12.83, p < .0005; UK positive vs. negative chi-square goodness-of-fit test (df = 1) = 36.04, p < .0001.

The fourth research question concerned the relative dependence on different sources for campaign articles. Reporters were most often the source (that is, no other source was indicated in these statements) in each country: Australia 74%, Canada 64%, and U.K. 61%. See Table 4 for these data.

Table 4. Source of Election News Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reporter</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Supporter</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>957 (74%)</td>
<td>197 (15%)</td>
<td>89 (7%)</td>
<td>52 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>603 (64%)</td>
<td>244 (26%)</td>
<td>30 (3%)</td>
<td>68 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>868 (61%)</td>
<td>377 (27%)</td>
<td>125 (9%)</td>
<td>44 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2428 (66%)</td>
<td>818 (22%)</td>
<td>244 (7%)</td>
<td>164 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Australia chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 3) = 1686.57, p < .0001\); Canada chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 3) = 869.47, p < .0001\); UK chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 3) = 1169.07, p < .0001\).

**Discussion**

Horse race was the most common topic in these newspaper stories. This finding is generally consistent with U.S. presidential news coverage; however, previous research on horse race coverage in other countries was mixed. In two of the three countries studied here (Canada, U.K.) character was discussed more often than policy, as is the case in the U.S. Horse race coverage is common in election coverage.

One way to interpret these data is compare news coverage with the candidates’ own statements. Research has investigated debates in all of these three countries in these elections (Benoit, 2011; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2012; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, in press). In each of the three countries newspaper articles emphasized character more, and policy less, than the candidates did in the debates. Table 5 reports these data and the statistical analyses. Cultural differences could be at work here; more of the studies reviewed in the literature review are from Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, as well as nearby Netherlands). The data reported here are from English-speaking countries (of source, many Canadians speak French).

**Table 5. Topics of News Coverage and Candidate Messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian News Coverage</td>
<td>482 (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Debates</td>
<td>205 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian News Coverage</td>
<td>184 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Debates</td>
<td>407 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK News Coverage</td>
<td>317 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Debates</td>
<td>1259 (78%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Debate data from Benoit (2011), Benoit & Benoit-Bryan (in press), and Benoit & Benoit Bryan (2012).*

Australia chi-square \((df = 1) = 16.58, p < .0001, \varphi = .12\); Canada chi-square \((df = 1) = 131.5, p < .0001, \varphi = .35\); UK chi-square \((df = 1) = 463.77, p < .0001, \varphi = .43\).

Overall, campaign strategy was the most common topic; polls were most common form of horse race in Canada and the U.K. Jamieson and Waldman (2003) 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” (p. 168). Knowing more about politics than, say, immigration, crime, or tax policy would make strategic coverage easier for journalists to write their stories.

The tone of coverage was predominantly negative in each country (51% negative themes, 39% positive themes, and 4% defenses). The literature review indicated that research on newspaper coverage in other countries was more often positive than negative. As noted before, the three countries studied here are culturally different from those investigated in past research. Previous research has investigated the content of election debates in these three countries. Not only was news coverage mainly negative; in each country the news coverage was more negative than the candidates themselves in debates. These data are reported in Table 6.
Table 6. Tone of News Coverage and Candidate Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive/Acclaims</th>
<th>Negative/Attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian News Coverage</td>
<td>352 (34%)</td>
<td>687 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Debates</td>
<td>181 (66%)</td>
<td>93 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian News Coverage</td>
<td>166 (41%)</td>
<td>238 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Debates</td>
<td>293 (51%)</td>
<td>284 (49%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK News Coverage</td>
<td>387 (40%)</td>
<td>573 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Debates</td>
<td><strong>1000</strong> (62%)</td>
<td>604 (38%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Australia chi-square (df = 1) = 93.1, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .27$; Canada chi-square (df = 1) = 8.96, $p < .005$, $\phi = .1$; UK chi-square (df = 1) = 117.39, $p < .0001$, $\phi = .21$.

Others have commented on the negative content of news coverage. Hart (2000) noted that “political news is reliably negative” (p. 173). Jamieson, Waldman, and Devitt (1998) 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” (p. 325). This sample of stories reinforces these conclusions. Presumably, the conflict embodied in attacks is thought to be more interesting than acclaims.

The fifth research question revealed that reporters are the source heard most often in newspaper stories, because unattributed statements account for almost half of all themes. When journalists 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 (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. This distribution of sources be in part related to the emphasis on horse race, in which the news media generates its own polls (instead of quoting candidates); the preference of reporters for discussing campaign strategy (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003) also means more statements from reporters (unattributed statements).

Conclusion

This research investigates news coverage of election campaigns in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Horse race was the most common topic of coverage; character was more common in two of the three countries (and policy was discussed more than the candidates in prime minister debates in each country). The tone was mainly negative and, again, more negative than the candidates’ utterances in debates. What might be the implication of this focus more on horse race and character rather than on the issues? Recall that Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) observed that 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 influences the state of voter knowledge.
Why do the media focus more on horse race and scandal rather than on substantive issues? Graber (1989) 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” (p. 86). 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). In the 2000 campaign, for example, the first time Bush proposed a plan for younger workers to invest Social Security funds in the stock market, that 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.

There could be other serious effects on the electorate from the nature of presidential campaign coverage. Capella and Jamieson’s research suggests that “strategy frames for news activate cynicism” in the audience (p. 159). 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” (p. 159). The fact that New York Times coverage of presidential elections emphasizes campaign strategy could have a deleterious effect on 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 (1999) 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. (p. 35)

In fact, a study by Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino (1994) concluded that 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 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 (sub-categories) 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 presidential campaign with the content of the candidates’ own messages.
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News on Australian, Canadian, and UK Campaigns

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