Newspaper Coverage of Senate, Gubernatorial, and Mayoral Elections.

William L. Benoit  
(Professor of Communication Studies, Ohio University)

Jessica Furgerson  
Jennifer Seifert  
Sarah Sargardia  
(Ph.D. Students in Communication Studies, Ohio University)

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Abstract

This study investigates newspaper coverage of election campaigns for Senate (2010), governor (2010), and mayor (2009-2011). Content analysis reveals that overall the most common topic of campaign coverage was horse race (in mayoral coverage character was the most common topic and horse race was the second most common topic). The most common form of horse race in coverage of each office was strategy. Discussion of the candidates’ character was more common than discussion of their policy positions in each sample. Overall the statements in these stories reported acclaims more than attacks (except for Senate coverage). Comparisons of news coverage with candidate’s statements during the campaign shows that the news has fewer acclaims and more attacks than the candidates’ own messages. Reporters are the most common sources for the statements in these articles, followed by candidates, supporters, and others.

Key terms: election campaign, newspaper coverage, horse race, policy, character, tone
Newspapers are an important source of information about political 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.

Another indication of the importance of news coverage of campaigns comes from the theory of agenda-setting. Cohen (1963) explained the basic idea that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). In other words, the news 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) provided a review of 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, those who read newspapers are a particularly important group of citizens. NES data from 2000 reveals that those who read newspapers are more likely to vote than those who do not ($\chi^2[1] = 101.93, p < .0001, V = .26$). 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.

**Literature Review**

Scholars have invested considerable effort into understanding news coverage of political campaigns. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) reviewed the literature on news coverage of presidential campaigns: Research tends to find that coverage stresses the horse race generally, character over policy, and tends 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%). This review will focus on research investigating Senate, gubernatorial, and mayoral elections.

**Senate News Coverage**

Tidmarch and Karp (1983) examined 1978 newspaper coverage of House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections, finding that House races receive less press coverage than either Senate or gubernatorial races, incumbents receive more coverage than challengers, and competitive (close) races have a higher chance of being covered. They found that Senate and House campaign coverage consisted more of horserace than candidates’ policy or character and qualifications. Incumbent candidates received more coverage than challengers; however, more coverage did not necessarily equate to better coverage (in the case of those incumbents who lost the race, much of their coverage focused on scandal). Tidmarch and Karp found that 67.9% of all articles on House and Senate races focused on horserace, followed by 23.4% focusing on policy issues and only 8.6% reporting on character or qualifications (see also Tidmarch, Hyman, & Sorkin, 1984).

Hale (1987) examined newspaper coverage of the 1984 Texas Senate race reporting that the majority of articles (over 60%) reported on horserace/contest issues, followed by issues (24%), candidate characteristics (8.3%; 6.5% of articles had more than one major topic). Kahn (1991) examined coverage of 24 Senate campaigns between 1984 and 1986, found that coverage of Senate races focuses more on policy (28%) and less on horse race (11%). Focusing specifically on coverage of foreign affairs, Wells and King (1994) found that discussion of these issues in stories on Senate campaigns was almost entirely absent. Despite heavy coverage of foreign affairs stories in these papers, Wells and King found that campaign coverage focused most heavily on horserace, followed by domestic policy issues, personal attributes, and foreign policy issues.

Several studies have focused specifically on the role of gender in relation to Senate campaign coverage. Goldenberg and Kahn (1991) found coverage of female candidates focused more on their viability as a candidate and less on their issue positions (with 27 percent of coverage focused on horserace issues, as compared to 21 percent for male candidates). Discussions of female candidates' viability are also more negative in tone than those of male candidates. See also work by Kahn (1992) and Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart (2001).

**Gubernatorial News Coverage**

Although the majority of research on gubernatorial news focuses on issues such as partisan and structural balance (Fico, Alumit, & Diddi, 2004) and agenda setting (Fico & Freedman, 2001), several studies have focused on the campaign news coverage of gubernatorial races. Research has also analyzed campaign newspaper coverage to assess gender differences between candidates running for various levels of office (Serini, Powers, & Johnson, 1998) and frequency of horserace and issue experts as sources (Freedman & Fico, 2004); however, few have centered on tone and function. Devitt (1999) conducted a content analysis of the newspaper coverage of four gubernatorial races finding that although campaign coverage emphasized issues (31.5%) more than personal characteristics (14.5%), strategy (54%) was the most common frame. Kahn (1995) investigated news coverage of gubernatorial races. Utilizing 24 U.S. Senate races and 21 gubernatorial races between 1983 and 1988, Kahn (1995) found that in gubernatorial races horse race accounted for 15% or coverage with personality traits accounting for 13% and issues accounting for 72%.

**Mayoral News Coverage**

In their early study of the 1983 Chicago mayoral election, Grainey, Pollack, and Kusmierek
found that newspaper coverage predominantly featured specific coverage of each candidate (97% of all coverage) with general campaign issues (69% of all coverage) and traditional platform issues (23% of all coverage), respectively, trailing behind in terms of preponderance of coverage. Comprised of comments relating to the each candidate's campaign, problems, and support, Grainey et al.'s findings are consistent with previous research on horse race coverage. Analysis of mayoral elections in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York all indicate a tendency for news coverage of these campaigns to focus on the horse race (61% in 1989 and 57% in 1991) rather than key issues (18% in 1989 and 37% in 1991) or candidate qualifications (Peer & Ettema, 1998). In both Detroit and L.A.'s 1997 and 2001 mayoral elections horse race coverage was more prominent than coverage of the candidate's policy and character combined (Borquez & Wasserman, 2006; Detroit 1997: horse race 80%, policy 56%, character 18%; Detroit 2001: horse race 70%, policy 27%, character 20%; L.A. 1997: horse race 60%, policy 38%, character 16%; L.A. 2001: horse race 67%, policy 30%, character 15%). Additional research has explored differences in new coverage of mayoral candidates based on gender differences (Atkeson & Krebs, 2008), group membership (McClanegan & Ragland, 2002) as well as race (Peer & Ettema, 1998). Despite the slowly increasing scholarly attention mayoral elections remain largely unaddressed, warranting our analysis of these campaigns.

This research is rich, examining newspaper coverage of many campaigns. Some conclusions can be drawn from this review. Research indicates that horse race coverage is a common topic of newspaper coverage of non-presidential campaigns, with some exceptions where issues predominated. Second, several studies found that policy was discussed more frequently than character. In the main, this research does not investigate type of horse race (e.g., polls, strategy, events), tone of coverage, or sources cited in stories.

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; Millsopugh, 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 political election campaigns for US Senate, governor, and mayor. We ask the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the most common topic of newspaper coverage of non-presidential campaigns?

RQ2. What is the relative proportion of policy and character discussion in newspaper coverage of non-presidential campaigns?
RQ3. What is the relative proportion of the forms of horse race coverage?
RQ4. What is the relative proportion of negative and positive tone in newspaper coverage of non-presidential campaigns?
RQ5. What is the relative proportion of comments from different sources (reporters, candidates, supporters, others) in campaign news coverage?

Method

Sample

First 10 races for each level of office were selected. 2010 was chosen; in order to locate enough articles on mayoral campaigns we expanded the mayoral sample to 2009-2011. Then we used Lexis-Nexus Academic University to locate campaign articles. The candidates and the date were used to locate the sample. Three newspaper articles about the campaign were chosen for each of the 28 days leading up to these elections. Articles of only a few sentences and articles comprised of letters to the editor were skipped.


Method

Categorical content analysis was employed to describe the content of these news stories. Benoit’s Functional Theory (e.g., Benoit, 2007) serves as the theoretical starting point as extended for analysis of campaign news (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. It is important to follow these procedures because the Discussion compares the content of news coverage with results of previous studies on the content of candidate messages. 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 (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 was .82-.87, $\kappa$ was .84-.91 for form of horse race coverage, the $\kappa$ for function was .86-.92, and $\kappa$ for identifying the source of statements was .95-.97. 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. Frequency data was converted to ratio data (percentages) to test for longitudinal shifts.

**Results**

A one-way chi-square calculated on the three most common topics confirms that they occurred with different frequencies. In Senate and gubernatorial coverage horse race was the most common topic at 47% and 33% respectively; in mayoral news character was the most common topic at 37% (followed by horse race, at 30%). These data, including the chi-square analyses, are reported in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Topics of Election News Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horse Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Presidential data from Benoit, Stein, & Hansen (2005)*

Top three categories: Senate chi-square goodness-of-fit test ($df = 2$) = 243.98, $p < .0001$; gubernatorial chi-square goodness-of-fit test ($df = 2$) = 10.43, $p < .01$; mayoral chi-square goodness-of-fit test ($df = 2$) = 52.05, $p < .0001$.

The second research question asked whether newspaper campaign coverage would focus more on policy than character. In all three samples character was discussed more often than policy.
in newspaper stories. Combined, character accounted for 31% of news coverage whereas policy was 25%. These data are also displayed in Table 1.

Table 2 provides data to answer RQ3 investigating type of horse race. In each sample campaign strategy was the most common form of horse race coverage (34%). Events (24%), polls (22%), and predictions (13%) are the next three most common forms of horse race coverage overall.

**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>Fund Raising</th>
<th>Spending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>294 (36%)</td>
<td>117 (14%)</td>
<td>169 (21%)</td>
<td>114 (14%)</td>
<td>66 (8%)</td>
<td>27 (3%)</td>
<td>20 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>210 (32%)</td>
<td>176 (27%)</td>
<td>90 (14%)</td>
<td>22 (3%)</td>
<td>10 (2%)</td>
<td>121 (18%)</td>
<td>29 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>164 (28%)</td>
<td>122 (21%)</td>
<td>23 (4%)</td>
<td>57 (10%)</td>
<td>69 (12%)</td>
<td>120 (20%)</td>
<td>37 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>668 (32%)</td>
<td>415 (20%)</td>
<td>282 (14%)</td>
<td>193 (9%)</td>
<td>145 (7%)</td>
<td>268 (13%)</td>
<td>86 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Presidential data from Benoit, Stein, & Hansen (2005)
Top four categories: Senate chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 3) = 122.61, p < .0001\); gubernatorial chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 3) = 173.97, p < .0001\); mayoral chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 3) = 131.9, p < .0001\).

The tone of newspaper campaign coverage was the topic of the next research question on tone of coverage. Senate news articles reported more attacks (55%) than acclaims (39%, and 6% about defenses) statements, whereas gubernatorial and mayoral stories had more acclaims than attacks (gubernatorial: 53% acclaims to 43% attacks; mayoral: 52% acclaims to 44% attacks). See Table 3 for these data.

**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>Senate</td>
<td>341 (39%)</td>
<td>474 (55%)</td>
<td>52 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>658 (53%)</td>
<td>526 (43%)</td>
<td>50 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>541 (52%)</td>
<td>461 (44%)</td>
<td>43 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1540 (49%)</td>
<td>1461 (46%)</td>
<td>145 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Presidential data from Benoit, Stein, & Hansen (2005)
Positive versus negative: Senate chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 1) = 21.7, p < .0001\); gubernatorial chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 1) = 14.72, p < .0001\); mayoral chi-square goodness-of-fit test \((df = 1) = 6.39, p < .05\).

The fourth research question concerned the relative dependence on different sources for campaign articles. Reporters were most often the source of statements in the news (that is, no other source was indicated in these statements) at 57%. Candidates were the second most common source (31%), followed by others (9%) and supporters (3%). These data are reported in Table 4.
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>Senate</td>
<td>853 (55%)</td>
<td>506 (32%)</td>
<td>79 (5%)</td>
<td>126 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>903 (49%)</td>
<td>702 (38%)</td>
<td>41 (2%)</td>
<td>197 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor</td>
<td>1250 (67%)</td>
<td>422 (23%)</td>
<td>61 (3%)</td>
<td>130 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3006 (57%)</td>
<td>1630 (31%)</td>
<td>181 (3%)</td>
<td>453 (9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Presidential data from Benoit, Stein, & Hansen (2005)
Senate chi-square goodness-of-fit test (df = 3) = 1008.28, p < .0001; gubernatorial chi-square goodness-of-fit test (df = 3) = 1084.19, p < .0001; mayoral chi-square goodness-of-fit test (df = 3) = 1918.44, p < .0001.

Discussion

Senate and gubernatorial campaign coverage emphasized the horse race; mayoral newspaper articles discussed character most and then horse race. An emphasis on the horse race is consistent with past research in this area. Character was discussed more than policy in these three sets of data. This is again consistent with the literature. One way to interpret this finding is to compare news coverage of races with discourse from candidates themselves. Previous research has investigated the topics of senate debates and TV spots, gubernatorial debates and TV spots, and mayoral debates (TV spot data from Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit & Airne, 2009; Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt, 2010; Brazeal & Benoit, 2001; Pier, 2002; debate data from Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007, and Benoit, Henson, & Maltos, 2007). In every comparison, news stories discussed character more, and policy less, than candidates. See Table 5.

Table 5. Topics of News Coverage and Candidate Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate News Coverage</td>
<td>331 (44%)</td>
<td>425 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Debates</td>
<td>2537 (70%)</td>
<td>1064 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Spots</td>
<td>3286 (56%)</td>
<td>2583 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial News Coverage</td>
<td>546 (48%)</td>
<td>601 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial Debates</td>
<td>3166 (73%)</td>
<td>1150 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial Spots</td>
<td>2839 (60%)</td>
<td>1921 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayoral News Coverage</td>
<td>483 (40%)</td>
<td>735 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor Debates</td>
<td>1132 (70%)</td>
<td>479 (30%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. TV Spot data from Airne & Benoit (2005); Benoit & Airne (2009); Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt (2010); Brazeal & Benoit (2001); Pier (2002); debate data from Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne (2007), Benoit, Henson, & Maltos
News coverage in these samples stresses campaign strategy. 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, Social Security legislation or tax policy would make strategic coverage easier to provide. Note in particular the paucity of themes about polls in mayoral campaigns. We believe fewer polls concern mayoral campaigns, compared with Senate and gubernatorial races.

Senate coverage in this sample was more positive than negative. This was not the case for governor and mayor races: these stories contained more positive than negative statements. Again, one way to interpret these findings is to compare news coverage with statements from the candidates themselves. Prior research has investigated candidate statements in senate, gubernatorial, and mayoral debates as well as senate and gubernatorial TV spots. Table 6 reports these data; in every level of office news stories contained more attacks and fewer acclaims than the candidates’ own statements.

Table 6. Functions of News Coverage and Candidate Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acclaims</th>
<th>Attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate News Coverage</td>
<td>341 (42%)</td>
<td>474 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Debates</td>
<td>2370 (65%)</td>
<td>1275 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Spots</td>
<td>3929 (67%)</td>
<td>1945 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial News Coverage</td>
<td>658 (56%)</td>
<td>526 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial Debates</td>
<td>3007 (70%)</td>
<td>1309 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial Spots</td>
<td>3392 (71%)</td>
<td>1364 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayoral News Coverage</td>
<td>541 (54%)</td>
<td>461 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayoral Debates</td>
<td>1285 (80%)</td>
<td>326 (20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. TV Spot data from Airne & Benoit (2005); Benoit & Airne (2009); Benoit, Delbert, Sudbrock, & Vogt (2010); Brazeal & Benoit (2001); Pier (2002); debate data from Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne (2007), Benoit, Henson, & Maltos (2007).
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.

These stories show that reporters are the source heard most often in newspaper stories, because unattributed statements account for over half of all themes (57%). When they do indicate a source, it is most likely to be a statement from a candidate. Occasionally someone who supports a candidate is quoted and, far less frequently, another source such as an expert or independent observer. Although he only reports data for one campaign, Patterson (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

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 contributes to the state of voter knowledge.

Why do the media focus more on horse race 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 news coverage of elections emphasizes campaign strategy could have a deleterious effect on voters. Recall that Patterson and McClure (1976) argued that policy is the “most vital” information for voters (p. 49). Democracy is being short-changed by the topic of news coverage of campaigns.

Furthermore, it is possible that the predominantly 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.
References


