A Theory of Media Politics

How the Interests of Politicians, Journalists, and Citizens Shape the News

By

John Zaller

Draft October 24, 1999

Under contract to University of Chicago Press

A version of the book was given as the inaugural Miller-Converse Lecture, University of Michigan, April 14, 1997. Versions have also been given at the Annenberg School for Communication at Penn and at the University of British Columbia, and at seminars at UCLA, UCLA School of Law, UC Riverside, Harvard, Princeton, UCLA Program in Communication Studies, and Chicago. What audiences at these places have liked and disliked has been immensely valuable to me in developing my argument, though perhaps not always in the ways they might have expected. I am also grateful to Michael Alvarez, Kathy Bawn, Bill Bianco, Lara Brown, Jim DeNardo, John Geer, Shanto Iyengar, Taeku Lee, Dan Lowenstein, Jonathan Nagel, John Petrocik,Tom Schwartz, Jim Sidanius, Warren Miller, and especially to Larry Bartels, Barbara Geddes, and George Tsebelis for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

Chapter 1

The New Game in Town

Introduction

A few years after he left office in 1969, President Lyndon Johnson was asked by a TV news producer what had changed in American politics since the 1930s when he came to Washington as a young Texas congressman.

> "You guys," [Johnson replied], without even reflecting. "All you guys in the media. All of politics has changed because of you. You've broken all the [party] machines and the ties between us in the Congress and the city machines. You've given us a new kind of people." A certain disdain passed over his face. "Teddy, Tunney.[1] They're your creations, your puppets. No machine could ever create a Teddy Kennedy. Only you guys. They're all yours. Your product." (Halberstam, 1979, pp. 15-16)

In the old days, political disagreements were settled in backroom deals among party big shots. As majority leader of the Senate in the 1950s, Johnson achieved national fame as master of this brand of insider politics. But in the new environment, disagreements are fought out in the mass media and settled in the court of public opinion. The weapons of combat are press conferences, photo opportunities, news releases, leaks to the press, and "spin." When the stakes are especially high, TV and radio advertisements may be used. Politicians still make backroom deals, but only after their relative strength has been established in the public game of "media politics."

By media politics, I mean a system of politics in which individual politicians seek to gain office, and to conduct politics while in office, through communication that reaches citizens through the mass media. Thus defined, media politics stands in contrast to the older system of "party politics," in which, by conventional definition, politicians seek to win elections and to govern as members of party teams. Although party politics is by no means defunct, it now shares the political stage with media politics, an emerging system whose properties are only beginning to be understood.

---

[1] The references were to Ted Kennedy, widely considered at the time to be a likely future president, and to John Tunney, a photogenic, media savvy Senator from California.

When I say that media politics is a *system of politics*, I mean to compare it to such other systems as legislative politics, bureaucratic politics, judicial politics, and, as already suggested, party politics. Within each of these domains, one can identify key roles, diverse interests, routine rules of behavior, and stable patterns of interaction that, taken altogether, define a distinctive form of political struggle.

In my account of media politics, there will be three principal actors — politicians, journalists, and whom is animated by a distinctive motive. For politicians, the goal of media politics is to use mass communication to mobilize the public support they need to win elections and to get their programs enacted while in office. For journalists, the goal of media politics is to produce stories that attract big audiences and that emphasize the "Independent and Significant Voice of Journalists." For citizens, the goal is to monitor politics and hold politicians accountable on the basis of minimal effort.

These goals are a source of constant tension among the three actors. Politicians would like journalists to act as a neutral conveyor belt for their statements and press releases. Yet journalists do not want to be anybody's handmaiden; they wish, rather, to make a distinctive journalistic contribution to the news, which they can better accomplish by means of scoops, investigations, and news analyses – all of which politicians detest. In my account of media politics, journalists value "journalistic voice" at least as much as big audiences,[2] and they care nothing at all about helping politicians to get their story out to the public. If journalists always reported the news just the way politicians wanted them to, or gave audiences only the political news they really wanted, journalism would be a much less lucrative and satisfying profession for its practitioners than it presently is. In fact, it would scarcely be a profession at all.

The public wants, as indicated, to monitor politics and hold politicians accountable with minimal effort. And because there is a surfeit of politicians and journalists vying for public attention in a competitive market, the public tends to get the kind of political communication it wants. But not entirely. The politicians' inherent interest in controlling the content of political news, in combination with journalists'

[2] Journalists may be compared in this regard to professors at research universities, who typically care about undergraduate ratings of their courses only because, and to the extent that, they have to, but care deeply about expressing voice through research. The difference is that professors are much more insulated from market pressure.

inherent interest in making an independent contribution to the news, create a far-reaching set of tensions and distortions.

The argument of the monograph, simply put, is that the form and content of media politics are largely determined by the disparate interests of politicians, journalists, and citizens as each group jostles to get what it wants out of politics and the political communication that makes politics possible.

Although media politics is pervasive in American national life, this book focuses on presidential selection. The reason is methodological. Presidential elections have a fixed structure and recur at regular intervals, thereby making it possible to observe patterns and to test generalizations across multiple cases. Even though media politics probably has the same basic properties in non-electoral settings — e.g., the struggle to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965 or the infamous Federal Government Shutdowns of 1995 and 1996 — it is harder to demonstrate these properties, or sometimes to perceive any sort of regularity at all, in non-electoral settings. Why? Because systematic political analysis depends upon a delicate balance of similarity and difference — a stable common background against which to observe meaningful differences. To a greater degree than almost any other kind of media event, presidential elections have that balance: politicians, reporters, and voters going through the same basic routines over and over, but under somewhat different conditions. And because presidential elections are so important to our democratic life, the differences in conditions are closely studied and painstakingly recorded in the form of polls, news, and books. Little of importance goes unnoticed. As a result of all this, it is easier to discern and measure the dynamics of media politics in this setting than in others. But to reiterate: This book aspires to be more than a study of the role of media politics in presidential elections; it aims to be a study of media politics in a context in which the dynamics of media politics happen to be relatively easy to observe and study. As I shall argue, there are good reasons to believe that the forces that animate media politics are essentially similar in both electoral and non-electoral contexts.

The approach to studying media politics in this book is distinctive in two respects. The first, as already suggested, is that it focuses on the diverse self-interests of the participants and how they shape the nature of media politics. This is a departure from most studies of media politics, which tend to see

media politics through different theoretical prisms. One major strand of media research focuses on the values and conventions of journalists, such as their delight in covering the political "horserace" (Patterson, 1993; Lichter, Rothman and Lichter, 1986) or the routines by which reporters organize their work (Cohen, 1962; Sigal, 1973; Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1980). Another major strand of media research emphasizes the symbolic side of media politics, especially its creation of illusions, images, and spectacles that masquerade as a depiction of reality (Edelman, 1988; Bennett, 1996). Without challenging the validity of insights in previous studies, this book offers as a corrective the view that media politics is, like other forms of politics, driven most fundamentally by conflicts in the goals and self-interests of the key participants. And, in an even stronger corrective to existing research, it maintains that media politics is driven by the self-interest of the public at least as much as by the self-interests of other actors.[3]

The other distinctive aspect of this study is that it is organized deductively rather than inductively. In the inductive mode of analysis, one begins by describing a set of facts and then draws (or *induces*) from them a theoretical explanation. In the deductive mode, one begins by positing a handful of theoretical claims and then logically derives (or *deduces*) from them specific hypotheses which are tested against a set of facts. In keeping with the latter mode of analysis, I shall make a point of deriving all of my hypotheses from clearly stated premises and referring ostentatiously to each deductive inference by number, as in D1, D2, and so forth.

For the type of study undertaken here — that is, a heavily empirical study that employs no strictly formal analysis — the difference between the deductive mode of analysis and the more familiar inductive mode is largely stylistic. Yet I believe the stylistic difference has important practical value. First, in beginning with theory rather than data, the deductive mode tends to focus the reader's attention where I think it belongs — on the general processes at work rather than on the particular and sometimes distractingly colorful facts that are at the base of theories. Second, in focusing attention on theory *per se*, the deductive mode makes it easier to see how the various elements of one's theory logically relate to one another. This, in turn, makes errors of analysis on the part of the researcher (me) and failures of

[3] Perhaps the only study of media politics to emphasize the importance of mass interests in determining media content is that of Bovitz, Druckman, and Lupia, 1997.

comprehension on the part of readers (you) both less likely — though, of course, far from impossible in either case.

Chapter 2

The Players in the Game

The theory of media politics I propose is, in effect, an extension of Anthony Downs' study, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. In this 1957 classic, Downs showed how party competition for the support of rational voters could explain many of the most salient features of democratic politics.[1] But Downs' theory hardly mentioned journalists and gave them no independent role in politics. In the present study, I create a theoretical role for journalists within Downs' democratic system and trace out certain effects of this change. Specifically, I require office-seeking politicians to communicate with voters at least some of the time through a journalistic profession whose interests are "voice" and audience share. Because both Downs' theory and my extension of it are rooted in basic political forces, it is plausible to believe that my theory of media politics applies to political news in the U.S. generally and not merely to presidential elections. I shall later offer some modest evidence for this view.

WHY INVOKE RATIONAL CHOICE?

In following Downs, my theory of media politics takes a loosely rational choice approach to its subject. That is, it treats media politics as the product of *goal-oriented behavior* on the part of key actors in the political system, namely, politicians, journalists, and citizens. The fact that the goals of these actors, as specified below, often conflict is what makes politics — and, as I hope readers will conclude, my theory of

A straightforward implication of rational choice is that individuals take account of the goal-oriented behavior of others with whom they interact. It is extremely hard, in my view, to overestimate the importance of this point for the understanding of media politics (or other forms of political struggle, for that matter). Everyone in politics does what he or she does in significant part because of what others are doing or expected to do. Thus, to take a commonplace example, candidates create the kinds of

[1] Downs' book is, in important respects, an incisive digest of prior theoretical and empiricial work, notably that of Schattschneider (1942), Schumpeter (1942), Key (19xx), Black (1958), and Arrow (19XX).

campaign events they do because of their beliefs about how journalists are likely to cover the events. Or, to take an example that I will develop more fully below, journalists facing multi-candidate fields in presidential primaries routinely limit their coverage to the two or three contenders that they think voters are most likely to favor. When candidates do what they do because of how they think journalists will respond, and when candidates are covered (or ignored) because of how they are expected to fare with voters, one cannot provide a satisfactory explanation by focusing on any single actor in isolation from the others. Rather, one must take at least theoretical account of the full set of actors and, in particular, how the actions and anticipated actions of one set of actors affect the actions of others.

This is not easy to do, but it is more natural to attempt it within a rational choice framework than any other, for this reason: Whereas psychological theories tend to focus on the effects of internal drives and perceptions on individual behavior, and whereas sociological theories tend to stress the effects of external structure on behavior, the notion of strategic behavior that is inherent in rational choice posits that individual behavior is shaped by both external forces (what other individuals are trying to do in a particular situation) and internal drives (personal interests and goals).

Although taking a rational choice approach, I by no means assume that everyone's mind works like a computer, calculating all possible contingencies at each decision point and making the move with the best expected return. I make a much milder set of assumptions: That individuals at all levels of politics <u>try</u> to behave in ways that advance goals that are important to them; that individuals are embedded in groups, such as classes or professions, whose rules and values help them to achieve their goals; and that, thus assisted, individuals establish <u>patterns</u> of behavior that do generally reflect their goals.

Politicians are probably the only political actors who regularly and consciously calculate the expected gain for every important action. But voters who, for example, somewhat mindlessly support the party of their social class, or journalists who are equally mindless in their distrust of authority, may also be rational, in the sense that their basic patterns of behavior may have initially developed and continue to exist primarily because they serve individual goals.

Thus, in my use of rational choice, individual choices need not be calculated, or even self-conscious, in order to represent interest-oriented behavior and hence qualify as rational. A danger in this brand of

"soft rational choice" is that anything anyone does might be sloppily described as rational. But I am quite aware of this danger and do not believe that my theory will suffer greatly from this form of indiscipline.

My basic theoretical posture, then, is that politicians, journalists, and citizens behave in ways that generally reflect individual goals and interests; that in pursuing their various goals, individuals take account of the goal-oriented behavior of other individuals with whom they interact; and that the essential features of media politics can be usefully analyzed as the outcome of all this goal-oriented and strategic behavior.

Rational choice is often seen as a controversial perspective, especially when it invades new intellectual terrain. It is, however, hard for me to see what general objection there can be to the theoretical posture outlined in the preceding paragraph.

THE DOWNSIAN FRAMEWORK

Downs' theory of democracy is based on a handful of theoretical postulates. The most important are that politicians are organized into party teams that care about winning office and nothing else, that voters wish to elect politicians who give them as much as possible of what they want out of government, and that both politicians and voters are cold-bloodedly rational in the pursuit of these goals. What voters want out of government is anything that happens to give them "utility," whether in the form of individual benefits (e.g., social security, low taxes), a prosperous national economy, or social justice for others. There is no requirement in Downs' model that voters be selfish; the only requirement is that voters support parties that deliver what they, as voters, want.

From these simple assumptions, Downs deduces many theoretical expectations that most observers regard as true. For example, Downs argues that, in a two-party system, both parties will converge to the position of the "median voter," that is, the voter who occupies the dead center of the ideological spectrum. This is because if either party moves left or right of center, the other party will then capture of the votes of centrist voters and thereby win the election. The actual tendency of the Democratic and Republican party to stay near the middle of the road in most elections seems well-explained by this argument.

Another of Downs' arguments is that producers are more likely to organize to get what they want out of government than consumers. Consider, for example, the case of dairy farmers. For such people, government policy toward milk is extremely important, since their whole livelihood depends on it. For consumers, on the other hand, milk is only one of hundreds or thousands of things that they purchase. At the same time, there are relatively few milk producers, which makes it easy for them to know one another and organize. Milk consumers, on the other hand, are more numerous and therefore harder to organize. For these reasons, milk producers are more likely to form effective lobbying organizations. This argument, which generalizes to businesses of all kinds, seems a plausible explanation for the advantages that many special interests have in getting their way with government.

Actually, these and other arguments in Downs' book were originally proposed by scholars other than

Economic Theory of Democracy is to pull many such arguments into a cohesive theory about how democracy works if everyone is rational in the pursuit of their political goals.

One of Downs' most intriguing arguments is that it is rational for voters to pay little attention to politics and to rely on simple heuristics, such as party attachment and ideological labels, to decide how to vote. This argument will be especially important to my theory of media politics and so will be considered below in more detail.

Some four decades after it appeared in print, Downs' study still captures some of the most important features of our political system. Politicians who cling to the middle of the road and voters who rely on party attachment remain, as they were in the 1950s, among the most salient features of the American political system. Notably, however, Downs specifies an entirely passive role for the journalistic profession in his theory. The assumption seems to be that reporters reflect the political biases of their publishers but do not otherwise affect the political process.

In the 1950s, this may still have been a plausible assumption. The partisan press of the 19th century, in which newspapers functioned as virtual adjuncts of the parties, had become far more neutral, but some vestiges of the old way remained. For the most part, the mass media seemed unaccountably unassertive, perhaps less assertive than at any other time in American history. In the nomination phase of presidential selection, reporters basically just stood around outside the "smoke-filled rooms" at which

the real decisions were made, hoping for crumbs of information. And they were scarcely more intrusive in general election campaigns. Even in *Time* and *Newsweek*, magazines known for their interpretive style, typical campaign news consisted of chronological accounts of what the candidates were doing, laced with lengthy verbatim quotes from their speeches. There were, to be sure, some publishers who played an active role in politics, but they were acting as agents of their "party team" rather than as members of an independent journalistic profession. In these circumstances, there was no need for Downs to posit an independent role for the mass media in the process of elections and governance.

Circumstances, however, have now changed. The old partisan press is fully defunct, and so, for the most part, is the "lapdog" press of the 1940s and 1950s (this apt term is from Sabato, 1993). Journalists no longer stand idly by while party nominations are made or mechanically relay candidate information to the voters in elections. They are key intermediaries in the process by which competing politicians attempt to mobilize public support in both the nomination and general phases of presidential elections.

The change in the role of the mass media is part of a much larger change in American national politics, a transition away from Party Politics as the predominant form of political organization and toward a new system in which media politics is also important. Elaborating on earlier definitions, I suggest that these terms be understood as follows:

> *The defining characteristic of Party Politics is that politicians compete as members of organized teams. In strong forms of Party Politics, party leaders choose candidates for party nominations, conduct the campaigns for office, and coordinate their activities in office. Voters, recognizing that the parties compete as teams, cast "straight-party ballots" for one of the teams.*
>
> *The defining feature of media politics, as the term is commonly used, is that politicians seek to gain office, and to conduct politics while in office, through communication that reaches citizens through the mass media. Parties and interest groups — formerly unchallenged kingpins of mass politics — are often left on the sidelines as independent politicians do battle by means of speeches, press conferences, advertisements, photo-ops, and various other "public relations" events.*

The basic dynamics of Party Politics have been well-understood for some decades through the work of E. E. Schattschneider, V. O. Key, Jr., Joseph Schumpeter, Kenneth Arrow, and Downs, but media politics is a relatively new form of organization and hence less well understood. My aim in this book is to develop a

theory of the new form and to accommodate it to traditional understandings of American politics, as encapsulated in the work of Downs.

The first step in developing the theory is to specify the general goals of each of the key actors — candidates, voters, and journalists. I begin with candidates, the group whose behavior is easiest to fathom. From the interests of all three types of actors, the dynamics of media politics will later be deduced.

THE GOALS OF CANDIDATES

Downs' theory focused on parties and assumed that their only political goal was to capture and hold political office, formulating policies as necessary to achieve this goal. I make the same assumption, except that my focus will be on individual politicians rather than on party teams.

Going beyond Downs, I shall also deal with the process by which politicians communicate their policy proposals to voters, which is the defining feature of media politics. Let me begin with some historical background.

In the heyday of 19th century party politics, communication with voters was not something that presidential candidates worried about. As titular head of the Democratic or Republican party, they relied on their fellow partisans to conduct their campaigns for them (McGerr, 1986). For the most part, this meant turning the campaign over to city and state units which canvassed door-to-door for the party ticket and offered public entertainment, in the form of torch-light parades and family picnics, as a means of mobilizing support.

Most newspapers in the 19th century had an informal party affiliation and openly boosted its party's candidates. To the likes of Joseph Pulitzer, Robert McCormick, and Otis Chandler, fiercely partisan coverage was more a scared duty than a cause for embarrassment — and it was not a duty that was shirked any more in the news columns than on the editorial pages. Thus, in a study of partisan bias in of the Chicago Tribune between 1900 and 1992, Burgos (1996) found that headlines attacking Democratic candidates at the turn of the century were ten times more frequent than ones attacking Republicans. For

example, following a dinner gathering of GOP luminaries during the election of 1900, the paper proclaimed on its front page:

Hosts Gather At Great Feat
President's Position Correct,
McKinley Was Right
Bryan Denounced As Demagogue.

The person denouncing McKinley in the *Tribune* headline was Robert B. McArthur, the pastor of the local Baptist church. If there were other local pastors who felt that the Republican candidate was the demagogue, they were not given access to the Trib's news pages. As Burgos goes on to show, the Tribune's blatant and one-sided partisanship declined gradually over the course of this century. As a result, the paper had become essentially balanced in its presidential campaign coverage, and at much lower levels of negativity, by the 1970s.

Despite its glorious past, the tradition of unabashedly partisan journalism has been in decline since about 1870, the point at which a group of dissident journalists founded a reform movement dedicated to the ideal of non-partisan and objective coverage (McGerr, 1986). The transformation in the 1960s of such partisan holdouts as the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune and Time magazine marked the final triumph of this movement.

The capacity of local party organizations to mobilize support for candidates has also declined greatly since the 19th century. The upshot is that candidates must now make their own way, both in presidential primaries and in the general election. That is, they must get out on the campaign trail and try to create events that a non-partisan press will see fit to report as news. The new situation is well-characterized by Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar:

> Today, political leaders communicate with the public primarily through news media that they do not control. The news media now stand between politicians and their constituents. Politicians speak to the media; the media then speak to the voters. (1993, p. 1)

Paid advertising helps presidential candidates out of this bind (Jamieson, 1996), but does not eliminate the great need to achieve favorable notice in the "free media."

How politicians go about trying to create favorable news is fairly well understood: On the one hand, they attempt to take actions and create events that promote their campaign agenda and that are so compelling that reporters will feel obligated to report them as news; and, on the other hand, they attempt to avoid situations, such as news conferences, that make it difficult for them to control what gets reported as news.

The kind of coverage that politicians want is also fairly obvious. They seek to be associated with honesty, competence, likability, and popular policies.

Candidates, however, may not always be completely clear about the policies they favor. As Downs argued, a degree of ambiguity may increase their appeal to voters who might otherwise feel distant from them. As Downs put it,

> Ambiguity . . . increases the number of voters to whom a party may appeal. This fact encourages parties in a two-party system to be as equivocal as possible about their stands on each controversial issue. And since both parties find it rational to be ambiguous neither is forced by the other's clarity to take a more precise stand.
>
> Thus political rationality leads parties in a two-party system to becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity (Chapters 7 and 8).

Subsequent scholars have not always agreed with Downs on this point (Shepsle, 1972; Bartels, 1988; Alvarez 1997; but also Page, 1978; Jamieson, 1992, Chapter 9). But whether or not it is rational for candidates to be deliberately ambiguous, it certainly is rational, if they can get away with it, for them to do something rather similar: To take different positions in front of different audiences. For example, during the 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon told northern audiences that he strongly supported the Supreme Court's 1954 desegregation ruling, but, in a TV broadcast beamed to southern audiences, he carefully suggested otherwise (Witcover, 1970, p. 385-86). Often because they are in danger of losing, candidates also sometimes change positions during campaigns; make extravagant or unrealistic promises; or distort the records of their opponents (Jamieson, 1992). When, for whatever reason, candidates do any of these things, they want journalists to report their statements as "straight" news, without any hint of challenge. Also, most politicians (like most non-politicians) have done things in the past that they find embarrassing to admit in public and that they therefore try to keep secret.

For politicians, then, the new goal of media politics is to get certain helpful kinds of campaign information reported as news and to keep other, unhelpful kinds of information out of the news. Put more simply, the goal of politicians is to

Use journalists to "Get Our Story Out."

As we shall see, this goal tends to bring candidates into more or less continuous conflict with journalists, who have no interest in running the kind of news that politicians would most like and some considerable interest in running stories that politicians typically do not like.

THE GOALS OF CITIZENS

I shall assume that citizens have the same basic outlook in the age of media politics that they did in the earlier age of party politics, as theorized by Downs. That is, citizens want to elect politicians who will do what they, as individual citizens, want to have done. Yet, as Downs also argued, citizens are busy people, and they are sensible enough to appreciate that, as individual voters, their chances to affect election outcomes are minuscule. Hence, they instinctively minimize their electoral involvement, hoping for a good result but refusing to put significant effort into it, including the effort necessary to study the issues and candidates in the election. The payoff is simply not there. Voters are more likely to be mugged on the way to the polls than to actually affect an election or other political outcome.[2] Thus, as Downs reasoned, for most citizens most of the time it is individually rational to be ignorant about politics. Citizens will prefer to use their limited time for matters that provide a more direct and certain return for the effort, such as playing with children, working overtime, or perhaps just watching a comedy on TV.

The question that now arises is the attitude of rationally ignorant citizens toward political news. The answer, in broad outline, is obvious: They will mostly disdain it. Yet the little attention voters do pay may be very important to politicians and journalists, since their livelihoods depend on the response of the mass audience to political news.

I should add that there are many kinds of news besides political news. These varieties include entertainment news, consumer news, sports news, and medical news. Most business advertising is also

---

[2] My colleague, Tom Schwartz, claims credit for this formulation of the classic problem.

a form of news, namely, product news. My theory of media politics is concerned only with political news, by which I mean news that is primarily about public policy-making and leadership selection.

So what do rationally ignorant citizens want out of the relatively small amount of political news they consume? I suggest several interests, each following in a loosely deductive sense from the basic notion of rational ignorance.

Rational voters want to keep tabs on political events, if only to know how their tax bills or benefit checks are likely to change. They just don't want to devote much energy to it. Hence, rational voters do not want to be immersed in details, nor do they want large quantities of dense substantive information and analysis, nor do they want news reports that attempt to be encyclopedic and comprehensive, full of context and history about every aspect of the public affairs. Stated negatively, the overriding message of rational voters to their information providers is:

"Don't waste my time!"

Stated affirmatively, the message is:

"Tell me only what I really need to know!"

Remember that this imperative concerns political news but not necessarily other kinds of news. Indeed, the contrast with other kinds of news is illuminating. It is probably *not* rational for citizens to ignore or mostly ignore health news, since it conveys information that can tangibly improve the length or quality of their lives. Even if most health news were boring or irrelevant to one's personal condition, it could still be worth paying close attention to it since the individual benefits of even an occasional story that is personally relevant can be very great. But the same cannot be said for political news. A citizen can spend his entire waking life digesting political news and, in consequence, make extremely wise political choices — and yet be no better off than if he or she had done no studying at all.

What the rational voter wants, then, is help in focusing as efficiently as possible on those matters that absolutely require attention. But what requires attention?

As indicated, voters know — or at least intuitively appreciate — that it is not worth their time to give careful consideration to their vote choices because their power to affect events is tiny. Yet despite this, election outcomes can have quite large effects on individual voters. Depending on who wins, taxes may

be cut or raised, welfare or Medicare benefits may be expanded or slashed, the government may draft young people to fight in overseas wars. In light of this fundamental asymmetry — *elections can affect individual voters far more than individual voters can affect elections* — I reach the following conclusion:

> ***The rational citizen will be more interested in information about how the election is likely to come out than in information that will help him to cast a wise vote.***

To whatever (modest) extent rational voters seek information whose purpose is to help them form an informed opinion or cast a wise vote, they will seek information about matters that are controversial. When elites achieve a consensus on a policy, the policy is likely to be adopted no matter who wins the election, and if this is so, there is no reason for each voter to try to figure out for herself or himself which side is best and which candidate favors it. If, on the other hand, elites disagree, the election outcome may determine what policy is adopted, thus giving voters an incentive to pay some bit of attention. By this reasoning I reach the conclusion that

> *The rational voter is engaged by political conflict and bored by political consensus.*

When elites do disagree, each side works hard to articulate the best arguments for its position and to expose the weaknesses of the other side's position. And they have every incentive to state their arguments in terms that ordinary people can readily understand. By monitoring such disagreements, citizens can often get incisive information on the basis of little effort. Of course, even a little bit of effort may be more than most voters want to make. Yet they know that some of their fellow citizens will be paying attention, if only for the entertainment value of politics, and they want this minority of politics junkies to be able to see what it going on. And finally, even if voters do not themselves want to pay attention to most conflicts, they want to retain the option of paying attention, in case some really important issue should come up. For all these reasons, rational voters do not want political conflict swept under the carpet, away from public view; nor do they want any elite group — politicians or journalists — to monopolize public discourse with its own point of view. Rather:

> *When political elites disagree, rational citizens want exposure to both sides of the argument, and under no circumstances do they ever want to see one side monopolizing public discussion.*

Nonetheless, rational citizens are ambivalent toward elite conflict, including conflict between politicians and journalists. They are, as indicated, engaged by it and (insofar as they pay any attention) wish to know both sides. But they also want to limit their attention to politics, and if elites engage in too much fighting, then paying attention to conflict loses its value as a heuristic. Much like the harried parent who scolds bickering children to "just work it out among yourselves," citizens wish to avoid being called upon to arbitrate all of the numerous issues on which ideologically contentious and often self-interested elites may get into fights. Hence,

> *Rational citizens become impatient with elites who disagree too much, withdrawing attention, trust, or votes, as appropriate.*

Synthesizing the last three of these points, we may say that:

> ***Rational citizens want to be exposed to some but not a great deal of elite conflict.***

An important difficulty with this line of argument is that, although I have claimed that citizens wish to focus on controversial matters because their vote or opinion is more likely to be consequential in such matters, the possibility that an individual voter could ever be pivotal is extremely remote, even in a close election turning on a controversial issue. Thus, as my UCLA colleague Tom Schwartz has observed, the claim that a voter is more likely to be pivotal in a close election is like the claim that a tall man is more likely to bump his head on the moon. In light of this basic political reality, it seems prudent to develop an alternate rationale for the propositions just offered.

Since the difference between news and entertainment is often a subtle one,[3] the most promising line of argument is that citizens watch political news in order to be entertained. The question then arises: What kinds of political news will citizens find most entertaining?

It is beyond my power to develop an original theory of entertainment, so I will work from the conventional view of what citizens find enjoyable in non-political domains of entertainment: sex, violence,

---

[3] As Neuman (1991, p. 114) observes, "Theories of education and mass communication have been troubled by a naive distinction between information and entertainment. Although in common parlance we all routinely make such distinctions, in the practice of day-to-day mass communications the two elements are inextricably intertwined. Neither the communicator nor the audience can meaningfully determine which element of a message or which characteristic of the delivery medium is most successful in attracting attention or in amusing or informing the audience."

suspense, humor, and human drama. Perhaps unfortunately, politics offers relatively little sex or humor — though it must be said that journalists are quick to exploit what there is of them — but politics does offer an abundance of a near-equivalent to violence, namely, political conflict. And where there is conflict, there is often suspense and drama as to how it will be settled. Hence, one might argue that journalists would tend to focus on political conflict because their audience will find conflict more entertaining than consensus.

But how much conflict? To judge from movies and sports, the taste for conflict probably varies greatly across individuals. Some people watch movies like *The Texas Chain-Saw Massacre* and go to ice hockey games, while others prefer *The Sound of Music* and golf. Yet even in the most violent movies, one rarely sees more than one episode of major violence every 15 minutes or so, and the same may be true even for ice hockey. Boxing is more violent, but it has a small audience. If we take something like *Star Wars* as the exemplar of a successful mass entertainment offering, we might infer that the taste of the median entertainment consumer is for some but not a great deal of violence that is well-organized and not too brutal. From this reasoning, I infer that entertainment audiences prefer political news having some but not a great deal of conflict.[4]

As a separate matter, I note the widespread — but by no means universal — popularity of sports broadcasting and sports news. Most sports offers some sort of violence, and all offer the distinctive element of organized competition. From this one may infer that many citizens find competition per se to be entertaining and that, by extension, many will be attracted to political news that describes such competition.

To keep my parallel lines of argument clear, let me recapitulate: Reasoning from the notion of rational ignorance, I infer that citizens want 1) to avoid wasting time on political news whose only purpose is help them develop informed opinions and cast wise votes, and that insofar as citizens want any political

[4] Violent entertainment nearly always includes stereotypically good guys and bad guys, thus suggesting that having someone to cheer for and against is essential to the enjoyment of conflict. If today's citizens fail to enjoy political conflict as much as my discussion suggests — or as much as they seem to have enjoyed it in the 19th century — it may be because the non-partisan press, unlike its 19th century counterpart, does not frame domestic political conflict as a battle between good guys and bad guys. See McGerr, 1986.

news at all, they want news that 2) emphasizes what government is likely to do to citizens more than how citizens can affect what government will do, and that 3) provides some but not a great deal of conflict. Because the latter two or these inferences derive from the debatable assumption that rationally ignorant citizens want any political news at all, I provided an auxiliary justification for them, which is that citizens derive pure entertainment value from news that stresses competition and some but not too much conflict.

This analysis of mass preference for news is not based on the direct testimony of the citizenry, as expressed in public opinion surveys. Such testimony seems to suggest higher levels of public interest in politics than can be justified from the notion of rational ignorance. For example, 49 percent of respondents to a 1992 survey said that they were "very much interested" in that year's political campaigns, while 40 percent professed to being "somewhat interested" and only 11 percent said they were "not much interested." Another question found that 27 percent claim to follow what's going on in government and public affairs "most of the time," 41 percent follow it "some of the time," and 32 percent follow it only "now and then" or "hardly at all."

These numbers, though not extremely high, nonetheless indicate more interest than my theory can comfortably accommodate — but also more than probably really exists. For there is a clear tendency of many citizens to attribute more interest to themselves in verbal statements than they exhibit by their actual political behavior. Thus, Doris Graber (1984) found in her study of the news consumption habits that ordinary citizens were often bored by the news, but that they nonetheless

> . . . grumbled frequently about the oversimplified treatment of all news, including elections news, on television. Yet when the debates and other special news programs and newspaper features presented a small opportunity for more extensive exposure to issues, they were unwilling to seize it. For the most part, the [study subjects] would not read and study carefully the more extensive versions of election and other news in newspapers and news magazines. Masses of specific facts and statistics were uniformly characterized as dull, confusing, and unduly detailed. Such attitudes present a catch-22 situation. If more detail and specificity is resented, how else can the demand for greater depth be satisfied? (p. 105)

Over the years, journalists have occasionally tried schemes to increase the attention citizens pay to news, mostly without success. But as Lance Bennett (1996) reports:

> ...many editors and marketers think that the few noble experiments to improve election issue coverage and offer more in-depth political reporting are up against a basic obstacle: People really do not want more serious news, even when they say they do. (p. 22-23)

W. Russell Neuman (1991) makes the same observation:

> Those who call for public-affairs programming on television do not tend to watch it when it is made available... Those who claim to attend to the media for purposes of acquiring information do score slightly higher on tests of learning and recall, but the differences are surprisingly small...
>
> The key finding ... that must be dealt with candidly if we are to understand the nature of low-salience learning in regard to politics and culture is simply that people are attracted to the path of least resistance. For knowledge acquisition in general, and for public-affairs knowledge in particular, people are not inclined to give such matters a great deal of effort. (p. 95, 103)

Politicians seem to have arrived at a similar conclusion. In the 1996 election, the major party candidates were offered free TV time on an experimental basis by several networks, provided they use it for a serious discussion of the issues. But Dole claimed only about three quarters of the time allotted him and Clinton used his time for what seemed like boilerplate excerpts from his stump speeches. In the last election in Britain, neither party used the full two hours of free TV time they are guaranteed by law, and in Israel, there is a joke that when the candidates claim their free TV time, water pressure throughout the country falls as viewers seize the opportunity for a bathroom break.

The little attention citizens pay to the serious news they currently get suggests that they may want even less. As Bennett writes of newspapers in particular:

> All over the country the trend is to hire market research firms to find out how to win more subscribers. The main casualty of packaging the press has been the amount of space devoted to hard news — whether local, state, national, or international — which has dropped sharply as publishers bend to popular tastes and business pressures. (p. 20)

Perhaps the clearest indication that many citizens are not as interested in politics as they claim to be is how few citizens possess even a rudimentary knowledge of the political system and its leading figures. Only about a quarter can typically name the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and only ten percent the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court — information that is scarcely obscure. In 1992, after nearly four decades of continuous Democratic control of the House of Representatives, only about half

knew which party controlled the House.[5] It is easy to multiply such examples of citizen ignorance (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1995).

The fact that citizens know something about government and politics shows that many pay passing attention to public affairs. But it is hard to make the case that more than a few — more than, say, the mere 10 percent who can name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court — pay much more than that.

THE GOALS OF JOURNALISTS

Journalists are a highly differentiated group. They are spread across newspapers, news magazines, TV, and radio, and they vary in style from "happy talk" TV news anchors to the erudite Robert MacNeil of PBS. My theory of media politics primarily concerns elite journalists, by which I mean journalists who specialize in coverage of national politics or who work for a nationally prestigious organization such as the *New York Times*, CBS News, or *Newsweek*. I focus on this group of journalists because, by common observation, they tend to set the news agenda for other media. I shall sometimes refer to other journalists, especially local journalists who do not specialize in national politics but do sometimes cover it, because they may also affect media politics. But unless I specifically say so, all of my references to journalists should be understood as references to elite journalists.

What , then, do elite journalists want? How, if at all, can their "interests" be generally characterized?

A simple answer to this question is that, like politicians and just about everyone else, journalists want career success. In the case of journalists, career success means producing stories that make it onto the front page or get lots of airtime on the evening news, from whence flow fat salaries, peer respect, and sometimes a degree of celebrity status.

What, we must then inquire, gets onto the front page and the top of the evening news?

---

[5] Actually, 59 percent named the Democrats in the 1992 survey, while about 10 percent named the Republicans. If, as seems prudent, we assume that the 10 percent who named the Republicans were guessing, there must have been another 10 percent who guessed Democrats and happened to hit the right answer. Subtracting the likely percentage of guessers from 59 percent yields 50 percent — an impressively low number for such an obvious piece of information

Certainly one part of the answer is that, in the competitive business of journalism, the stories that make it onto the front page are the ones that the public is interested in. From this it follows that the most successful journalists are the ones who are most adept at appealing to the tastes of the mass audience.

Yet this is scarcely the whole story. For although the tastes and interests of the mass audience must certainly affect the kind of news that journalists provide, it would be very dubious to assume that "what elite journalists want" is to provide the mass audience with exactly what it wants. Indeed, the opposite assumption may be closer to the mark: That what journalists want is to be freed from subservience to the mass audience, so that they can provide the public with the kind of news that they, as professional journalists, feel the public needs. "Too many of us in hard news," as CBS news anchor Dan Rather has bluntly written, "are looking for that extra tenth of a ratings point" and thereby "blurring the distinctions and standards between news and entertainment."[6] In a similar vein, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw has openly pined for the early days of TV news when journalists could dictate to a captive audience. "When I started out in the 1960's," he said in an interview, "there were effectively two network news programs, and at 6:30 P.M. people turned on either Huntley-Brinkley or Walter Cronkite and got their news for the day. And I'd like to have that back again."[7]

The ambivalent attitude of elite journalists toward their clientele – that is, wanting a large audience but not wanting to kowtow to its low brow preferences – is, I believe, similar to that of many other professional groups, including architects, doctors, lawyers, and professors in research universities. What professionals want is to sell their customers the most sophisticated product they can — whether the imaginative structures of elite architects, the heroic scientific medicine of top doctors, the hypercomplex legal instruments of corporate lawyers, or the scientific research of university professors.

By sophisticated, I mean products that are complex, non-routine, and dependent on the special skill of the provider. The reason that, as I suggest, professionals want to offer products that are sophisticated

---

6 "Letter to the Editor," New York Times, March 8, 1994.

7 "Simpson Case Gives Cable An Edge on the Networks, " by Lawrie Mifflin, p. D1, *New York Times*, February 20, 1995.

in this sense is that they can charge more money for them, find them more interesting to work on, and can more readily use them as vehicles for showing off to their peers.

Consider architecture. If an architect had a choice between designing a no-frills "box" or a building, or instead an irregularly shaped, subtly shaded, and elaborately styled "structure" of her own design, which would she choose? The latter, of course, since architects can get higher fees, more intellectual satisfaction, and greater peer recognition for producing the latter type of building. The major constraint on this professional impulse is the consumer, who might want "just a box", or at least something that costs what a box costs.

A primary difference between professionals and others kinds of business people is that professionals are, to some extent, free of market constraints. They achieve this freedom by developing standards of what good professional work consists of, socializing fellow professionals into accepting and applying these standards, and educating the public to accept the standards. To whatever extent they can, professionals also seek institutional support for their standards, whether in the form of favorable government regulation, monopolistic control over work in their jurisdiction, or private sweetheart arrangements. These professional standards may, of course, serve the socially useful purpose of limiting charlatanism and quackery. They may also result in higher quality service than would be produced in a purely competitive market, though any such judgment needs to be made on a case-by-case basis. But they also help professionals to do more lucrative and interesting work than they otherwise could. In economic terms, professional standards constitute an attempt to create cartels in restraint of trade. Or, as George Bernard Shaw more colorfully put it, "every profession is a conspiracy against the laity."

There is a venerable tradition of studies in the sociology of the professions that emphasizes these unsavory aspects of professional life (e.g., Larson, 1978). Yet professional cartels — by which I mean control of a work jurisdiction by an exclusive group — are difficult to maintain, particularly under conditions of rapid social or technological change, and they are doubly hard to maintain in the presence of free market competition (Abbott, 1988). Consider briefly again the case of architecture: Because architects, like journalists and many other professionals, must deal with clients having lamentably unsophisticated "taste," and because even clients who have been socialized into accepting architects'

notion of good taste may lack the money to pay for it, there is always a market for architects willing to forsake elite values by putting up no-frills buildings at low cost. Thus, within architecture and many other work jurisdictions, there can be intense competition between higher and lower status providers.

Frequently, moreover, new groups rise to challenge old ones. Thus, as Abbott has described, social workers challenge psychiatrists for control of the mental health jurisdiction. Likewise, accountants have taken over a large part of the business formerly done by lawyers. Information technologists are displacing traditional librarians. Solo practice physicians have lost ground to numerous groups, from nurses to anesthesiologists and most recently to accountants. Throughout the professional world, there is a continuous jostling among service providers and resultant reshuffling of both work jurisdictions and the rewards that go with them (Abbot, 1988).

The constant challenge for high status or elite professionals, then, is to develop sophisticated services, to fend off competition by lower status and non-professional providers, and to get the consuming public to accept their high status product. Acceptance may be achieved through open market competition, but more often it is achieved by restraining competition through professional codes of conduct and, where possible, legal protection.

All of this applies in a straightforward manner to political journalism . Elite reporters would like to produce a highly sophisticated news product, which in their case means a product rich in journalistic interpretation and critical analysis. They want to do this because – for reasons of pay, status, peer recognition, and intellectual interest – it is more personally rewarding to do so.

Thus, journalists have an interest in creating and selling a form of journalism that offers more than stenographic transcription of what others have said, or one that appeals to the lowest common denominator of the mass market. What elite journalists want is a profession that adds something to the news — a profession that not only reports, but also selects, frames, investigates, interprets, and regulates the flow of political communication. What journalists add should be, in their ideal, as arresting and manifestly important as possible — if possible, the most important part of each news report, so as to call attention to journalists and to the importance of their work. Commenting in this vein on the rise of interpretive reporting in recent years, Patterson (1996b) writes:

> The interpretive style empowers journalists by giving them more control over the news message. Whereas descriptive reporting is driven by the facts, the interpretive form is driven by the theme around which the story is built. As Paul Weaver notes, facts become "the materials from which the chosen theme is illustrated." The descriptive style casts the journalist in the role of a reporter. The interpretive style requires the journalist to act also as an analyst. The journalist is thus positioned to give shape to the news in a way that the descriptive style does not allow.
>
> The interpretive style elevates the journalist's voice above that of the news maker. As the narrator, the journalist is always at the center of the story ... (p. 102)

The extent to which journalists can, in practice, get away with elevating themselves above the newsmakers they cover is limited, since the news consuming public tends to be more interested in the newsmaker than in the news reporter. Yet, as description of the journalistic ideal, Patterson's observation is exactly right.

Summarizing my general argument in a form specific to journalism, I propose as a cornerstone of the theory of media politics that

> *Journalists aspire, individually and collectively, to maximize their independent and distinctive "voice" in the news.*

By "voice" I mean any sort of distinctively journalistic contribution, whether it be hidden information, analytic perspective, or simply personality. It is not necessary for my model to work that every journalist have a realistic chance to become Bob Woodward or George Will or Sam Donaldson, whose voices are renowned throughout the land. It is enough that ordinary journalists find it materially and psychologically rewarding to express as much voice in the news as they can persuade their audiences to accept.

The drive for journalistic voice is far from innocuous. In ways I will describe more fully below, it leads journalists to adopt an adversarial stance toward others, most notably politicians, who venture onto their turf and who, as already noted, also wish to control the content of the news; it leads them to create and emphasize distinctive news products over which they can maintain control and which affirm their status as being "in charge" of political communication; and, because so much political conflict now consists of what are, in effect, propagandistic battles for public opinion, the desire for voice leads journalists to contest political parties for "the organization of political conflict." By the organization of political conflict, I mean

the selection of issues and candidates for voter attention; the criteria for so selecting; and the kinds of appeals that are made to voters. As I argue below, reporters often end up selecting the same candidates and issues that party professionals select or would select, but they also make a distinctively journalistic contribution to the process.

Like other professionals, journalists would not describe their motivations in such self-interested terms. They would instead stress their commitment to supplying the hidden information and analytic perspectives necessary for ordinary citizens to understand what is really happening. In their eyes, their aggressive and increasingly interpretive styles of reporting serve to "protect" their news audiences, "who cannot gather their own news," from politicians and others who have "axes to grind" and are trying to mislead the public.[8] But while such motives can lead to the same type of news product as the motive of maximizing voice, it is tempting to interpret them as simply an ideological justification of the role they would like to play. This justification has more than a little validity — most successful ideologies do — but its validity is not the main point for journalists. The main point is the sophisticated conception of journalism that it tends to legitimate.

Yet reporters are constrained in their desire to produce sophisticated product by the need to sell the product to a consuming public that has, as noted, relatively little interest in political news. They are further constrained by their inability to restrict competition from low-brow providers, such as tabloids, "happy talk" anchor personalities, and talk radio. And, as we will see in a moment, journalists must also contend with the challenge of an extra-professional group, politicians, who would also like to control the content of mass communication. Ross Perot's brilliant use of interview programs like the Larry King Show and Today is only one of many indications of this challenge. Hence, when elite journalists like Rather and Brokaw complain about the decline of news standards, they are, in effect, complaining about their inability to maintain control over their work jurisdiction. What they would like is to return to the days when,

[8] The general thrust of this paragraph, along with the particular words in quotations, are adapted from an insightful discussion in Gans (1979, 186) on the importance journalists attach to objectivity. I have altered Gans' meaning by claiming that journalists see the background and analytic perspectives they supply as serving the same function as objective information, namely, "protecting" the public from deception.

owing to the limited number of news outlets, they could do so on the basis of what was, in effect, a professional cartel in restraint of trade.

Although elite journalists project an air of great dignity and cool self-confidence, their most important mass outlets — top newspapers, national news magazines, and network news shows — are all losing audience share. In contrast, local TV news and other forms of soft news are gaining market share. Writing of network TV news, *New York Times* media critic Walter Goodman has written,

> Television news, as your local anchor might put it, is under fire. The target is not the violence that is agitating viewers and politicians, but a creeping tabloidization, not only of local news, which serious observers have never considered of much account, but of national news too, pride of the networks.[9]

What is true of network TV news is, to a lesser but still significant extent, true as well for other mass outlets. Elite journalism is under fire — more-or-less continuous fire — from a mass audience that isn't much interested in politics, lower-status journalists willing to meet the mass audience on its own level, and politicians vying to control their own communication and increasingly adept at doing so. Elite journalists are no patsies in this struggle, and they certainly do not appear to be in danger of going the way of homeopathic healers, mediums, and other once successful but now defunct professional groups. At the very least, they will survive as niche providers in a few big city newspapers, off-peak television hours, PBS, and various cable and small-circulation venues. But elite journalists are in a more precarious position than many outsiders realize, and they know it.

BASIC CONFLICTS IN MEDIA POLITICS

Let us, then, assume the existence of a citizenry with an interest in holding politicians accountable on the basis of minimal political involvement or attention to the news; a journalistic profession with interests in attracting large audiences and expressing journalistic voice; and politicians with an interest in building political support via communication that reaches citizens through the news media. What follows from these assumptions?

---

[9] "'Tabloid Charge Rocks Network News," *The New York Times*, February 13, 1994, section 2, p. 29, 1994.

What follows, generally speaking, is a great deal of tension and sometimes open conflict among the players. The key actors have quite different interests and they frequently jostle with one another in the pursuit of them. The three most basic conflicts may be identified as follows:

- *Conflict between the interests of journalists and citizens*. Journalists would like to produce a more sophisticated news product than many citizens wish to consume.
- *Conflict between the interests of politicians and journalists*. Politicians and journalists both have an occupational interest in controlling the content of the news.
- *Conflict between the interests of politicians and citizens*. The basic interest of citizens is to hold politicians accountable on the basis of what the politicians have accomplished while in office or say they will accomplish if elected to office. Depending, however, on their accomplishments in office or ability to deliver on their promises, some politicians may have an interest in bamboozling the public.

In these and other ways, media politics is rife with actual and potential conflicts between the major actors. But it does not follow that any problem necessarily exists. Perhaps, for example, politicians have an interest in bamboozling the public but are unable, because of journalists' interest in exposing them, to do so. Or perhaps it would be good for democracy if journalists were able to sell the public a little more news than "rationally ignorant citizens" really want to consume. Before we reach any conclusions about whether the conflicts I have identified are helpful, harmful or merely innocuous for democratic politics, it is necessary to know how they play out in practice.

In the course of this book, I argue that these conflicts play out in the form of three patterns of recurring behavior, which I describe as behavioral rules. The rules are:

The Rule of the Market, or the tendency of market competition to force journalists to lower the overall quality and amount of political news.

The Rule of Anticipated Importance, or the tendency of journalists to devote attention to occurrences in proportion to their anticipated importance in American politics.

The Rule of Product Substitution, or the tendency of journalists to substitute their voice for that of politicians in deciding what's news.

The next chapter takes up the Rule of the Market. Chapters 4 and 5 then develop the theoretical and empirical groundwork necessary for testing rules of anticipated importance and product substitution. This testing occurs in Chapters 6 and 7. Finally, Chapter 8 assesses the big question of how media politics helps or harms or otherwise affects the operation of democracy.

Chapter 3

THE RULE OF THE MARKET

We saw in the last chapter that journalists have an ambivalent attitude toward the news audience. On the one hand, they wish to maximize the audience for news. This is because larger audiences mean fatter paychecks, more prestige, and a greater stroke to the ego. Yet, I have not maintained that elite journalists are the humble servants of the mass audience, wishing only to provide the public exactly what it wants. Indeed, this would be a violation of another premise on my argument, which is that journalists want to provide a sophisticated type of news, one that permits them to express "voice." My theoretical argument, therefore, is that journalists seek to exercise their prized voice within limits set by audience tastes.

This sort of tension, I have argued, is universal within the professions. Every professional group wishes, if possible, to have as much business as possible. Yet they typically wish to offer products that are more sophisticated than what the clientele wants. A nearly universally feature of professions, therefore, is the attempt to insulate the profession's work from market pressures. What professionals want is a captive public, one that will pay top value for their product without exercising much control over the nature of that product.

The present chapter looks more carefully at the effect of professional insulation and its opposite, market competition. The argument is that, from religion to medicine to journalism, the effect of professional insulation is to strengthen professional values and the effect of these values on the product offered for sale. Conversely, the effect of market competition is to erode professional values and their effect on product quality.

For example, British TV news, which has until recently enjoyed a state monopoly and still has a subsidy, offers "higher quality" news than TV news in the United States, where numerous providers compete for the news audience. The U.S. produces some high-quality TV journalism, but it is mainly on PBS, where it is shielded from competition by a subsidy. Meanwhile, the lowest quality American TV news is produced in the most competitive news sector, namely, local television. Moreover, the very worst TV news is produced, as we shall see, in the local TV markets that are most competitive. A comparison

of major British and American newspapers is also telling. In this domain, the America media, which still typically enjoy monopolies in their local markets, seem to have the quality edge over media in Britain, where the most important papers compete against one another in a national market.

The method of this chapter is to make as many such comparisons as possible between more and less competitive sectors of the news business. Some of these comparisons are, as will become apparent, extremely soft, in the sense that they depend on little more than impressionistic evidence. Most, however, involve some sort of quantitative indicators. And all run in the same direction: For every set of cases in which I am able to make plausible comparisons, higher levels of market competition are associated with lower levels of news quality.

The chapter begins with a brief look at two well-known professions to which journalists may be usefully compared, the clergy and the university professorate. The next step is to develop fruitful concepts of news quality and news quality. Finally, I present empirical evidence of the relationship between news quality and market competition.

A Look At Two Professions

If insulation from market pressure is what every profession strives for, the professorate at American research universities must be considered one of the most successful professions in the world. This group has managed to convince the public, or at least the public's representatives, that high-quality education requires lifetime job security for professors (tenure), the freedom of professors to teach whatever they want (academic freedom), and the opportunity to do research. Research, as university professors like to say, is the most important product they offer.

But although research professors, with their captive clientele of students, are to a large extent outside the market, there is a great deal of competition among professors. Most of this competition involves entry to the profession rather than advancement within it, and essentially all of the competition is on terms on which research professors wish to compete, namely, the provision of top quality research. Much university research is in such areas as health science and engineering, and obviously has great value to society. Thus, a strong argument can be made that society will be better off if its top researchers -- or at least some of its top researchers – are sheltered from market forces while they conduct basic research.

But whether the insulated life of university professors can be justified or not, professorial life would be quite different if professors were more directly exposed to market forces. Without much doubt, there would be more demand for high-quality teaching and less opportunity for research, among other large changes.

The clergy are an instructive contrasting case. Like other professions, it has attempted to use government to restrict competition, but with strikingly mixed success. In a handful countries – e.g., Sweden, Israel – the clergy have been able to obtain what all professions aspire to obtain: a state subsidy for their services, lifetime job security, and restrictions on the right of competitors to enter the field. In these countries, religion tends to be highly intellectualized, as suits the tastes of the highly educated persons who offer religious service (Iannaccone, 1995). At the same time, church attendance in these countries tends to be relatively low, since the appeal of heavily intellectualized religious doctrine seems to be limited.

In many other countries, however, there are no state subsidies for religion, notable lack of job security, and few if any restrictions on entry to the field, with the result that clergy must compete for their clientele. In these countries, religion has become both emotional and popular. The United States, with its rigid separation of church and state, scores of highly emotional religious creeds, and unusually high levels of church attendance, exemplifies this type of case.

The thesis that market competition tends to erode clerical control, thereby making religion more emotional and more popular, is, as would be expected, controversial within its academic community. And indeed, the thesis is far from proven. But the general argument fits a number of important cases well, and it has recently been extended by a political scientist studying the Catholic Church's response to revolutionary movements in Latin America. Gill (1998) has shown that whether the Catholic religious establishments of this area embrace "liberation theology," thereby siding with the impoverished masses of their countries against the economic elite, is determined by the degree to which they face competition from Protestant missionaries. This obvious case of capitulation to market competition is not, of course, described as such by Church officials. Rather, it is justified in terms of the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the Sermon on the Mount, which argue for solicitude for the poor. But the pattern of

acceptance and rejection of liberation theology by the Catholic clergy, as determined by the level of Protestant competition, suggests that another type of logic is at work.

The situation of the clergy is, I suggest, analogous in important ways to the situation faced by many professionals, including journalists. The work product they would most like to provide – a product always justified in terms of high cultural values – will sell well enough under conditions of restricted competition, so that is what clergy provide when they are insulated from market pressures. But when, for any reason, competition increases, the effect is to undermine the ability of professionals to provide what they consider a "quality" product.

As applied to journalism, this perspective leads to the following specific expectations:

- D1. All else equal, journalists will be best able to produce "high-quality" news when they are most insulated from competitive market pressures. [D1 is short for "deductive inference 1."]
- D2. Increases and decreases in competitive pressure should be associated with increases and decreases in the "quality" of news.
- D3. When a new news program successfully enters a previously non-competitive market, it will locate itself to the "downmarket" side of the existing entrant, since the existing entrant will have been providing higher quality news than market competition can sustain.
- D4. As professionals, journalists should be expected never to lead and always to resist efforts to lower the informational content of news.

It does not seem to me that my argument yields any clear prediction with respect to the entertainment content of news. Journalists know that they are always, to some degree, in a struggle to maximize audience share, and there is no reason that, other things being equal, they should resist bright and lively reporting – that is, news that is entertaining. It is only when entertainment drives out "high-quality" news content that they should object.[1]

DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

[1] This case seems to me comparable to that of teaching in universities. It is no violation of academic values to offer entertaining lectures, and many professors do, indeed, try to be entertaining. Only when entertainment displaces intellectual content is there a violation of academic values.

The first step in evaluating these hypotheses is to measure two key concepts, news quality and market competition. Neither concept is easy to measure and the former is hard even to define. Further complicating the problem is that I wish to make comparisons across a range of times, places, and types of media, sometimes using my own data and sometimes relying on data collected by others. The need, therefore, is for concepts that are easy to operationalize and adapt.

I begin with news quality. Many authors have found it useful to distinguish between an information model of journalism and an entertainment model. Of course, good journalism must both inform and entertain, but the balance may vary. One element of the conception of "quality journalism" to be used in this paper is that it is primarily intended to provide information about the larger world.

The other key element is the content of news. The news media provide information about a great variety of topics, from the activities of government to stock prices to tips on how to pick high-quality Cabernets. Some of this content refers to matters of general social or political significance and is implicitly intended to help citizens in their role as democratic decision-makers; other information is intended primarily for purposes of entertainment or personal consumption. My notion of news quality stresses the former. Thus, I define high-quality news as information about matters of general political or social significance.

Other definitions of quality are certainly possible. For example, journalists might make huge expenditures of energy and enterprise to find out and report how Princess Diana spent the last day of her life. The same can be true of reporting on a more significant subject, such as whether red wine has special powers to prevent heart attacks (as 60 Minutes reported, probably incorrectly). Such stories might therefore be considered high-quality journalism. However, it is precisely the rise of such news reporting, including the several varieties of "news you can use," that many descry as evidence of the decline of news quality. Conversely, it is the kind of news I have described as quality news that the critics of contemporary journalism would like to see increase.

A more important reason for favoring my conception of news quality is that it describes the kind of journalism that commands the greatest prestige within the journalistic profession itself. A perusal of journalism textbooks, which stress public affairs reporting; of the biographies of famous journalists, which never fail to stress the extent to which the ego has done stories of great general significance, and,

indeed, the kinds of journalists who become famous, all support the notion that journalists value the reporting of public affairs information more highly than anything else. Why it is important that journalists value the kind of news I have defined as quality news will be explained in the next section.

I turn now to competition. News is offered to the public in three main formats – print, radio, and television. Within each format, there are different kinds of offerings. In the domain of TV, for example, there are network news shows, local news shows, news magazines, and morning magazine shows. To some extent, different kinds of news programs appeal to different market niches, which means that they do not directly compete. But from inspection of media as different as the *New York Times* and the *New York Daily News*, it is apparent that the boundaries between market niches are vague and permeable, since both papers aspire, in their own ways, to be full-service news providers: *The Times* did not, for example, fail to cover Princess Diana's funeral, nor is it above putting sports news on its front page; the *Daily News*, for its part, does not fail to cover wars, elections, and even certain acts of Congress. One must therefore assume that <u>all</u> news programs that offer their product within the same geographical market are to some degree in competition with one another, such that gains by one tend to reduce the market share of others. Competition becomes more intense as:

- Two or more news providers focus on the same general type of news (e.g., local news)
- Two or more news providers compete in the same medium, such as print or television
- Two or more news providers offer their product in the same time slot.

On the other hand, competition becomes less intense when one or more news programs receives any sort of subsidy whose effect is to free it from the need to win audience share through market competition.

Altogether, then, news competition may be defined as the extent to which two or more news providers offer the same kind of news product to the same audience in the same format at the same time.

By this accounting, competition is especially intense for American local TV news, since several programs offer the same news product at the same time in the same medium. Competition between local TV news and network TV news is somewhat less intense but still significant, since both types of programs use the same medium at the same time. Competition is perhaps least intense between newspapers and TV, since they use different media and different time periods. It may nonetheless be the case that the

greatest competitive threat to newspapers comes from the morning news magazines, which offer the same type of general news product at the same time as most newspapers are delivered.

EVIDENCE CONCERNING THE EFFECTS OF NEWS COMPETITION

The method of this chapter is to make as many head-to-head comparisons of news quality as possible between more and less competitive sectors of the news business. Several kinds of comparisons will be made:

- Over-time comparisons of the same type of news outlet with itself as competitive conditions change.
- Comparisons of different types of news outlets with each other in the same market when competitive conditions differ.
- Comparisons of British and American media.

The quality of this evidence, as acknowledged earlier, varies from rigorously quantitative to merely impressionistic. Future versions of the chapter will, I hope, bring all of the evidence up to a common high standard.

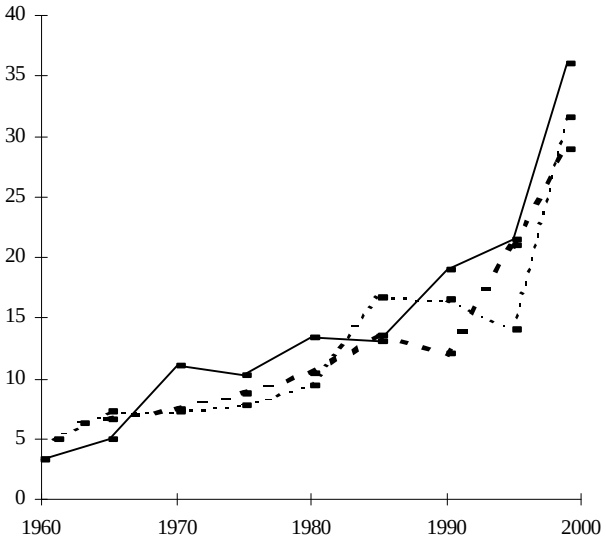
1. Local television news, 1960 to the present. The earliest local TV news shows were often staffed by experienced print journalists bearing the traditional news values of their profession. The programs they produced were immediately popular and profitable, and they grew rapidly. Figure 1 illustrates the trend for three cities. The data show trends for all news programs, including network news and news magazines, but the bulk of the over-time increase is due to local news broadcasts.

INSERT FIGURE 3-1 ABOUT HERE

The quality of local news offered on local news shows declined in this period. In the early 1970s these shows featured information about city government, schools, and state government, but by the late 1980s and 1990s, local TV news shows became heavily laden with stories about crime, natural disasters, and other episodic matters. Many news departments no longer even employ city hall beat reporters or state capital bureaus (McManus, 1994).

These trends have been widely noted in the popular press, but I have found only one quantitative study. It is, however, of high quality. In 1976, a scholar did a content analysis of 10 local news programs in four Pennsylvania media markets (Adams, 1978) to determine the amount of hard news. Sixteen years later, Slattery and Hakanen (1994) returned to the same stations and applied the same coding scheme to

Figure 3.1 Hours of News Broadcasting in
Chicago, New Orleans, and St. Louis



the same programs. They found that the percentage of news about government, education and politics had fallen from 54 percent in 1976 to 15 percent in 1992. At the same time, the percentage of news rated as sensationalistic or human interest rose from 25 percent to 48 percent. By my definition of news quality, this is evidence of decline and hence support for D2. Moreover, Slatter and Hakanen argued that "embedded sensationalism" within stories categorized as government news had led to an underestimate of the amount of sensationalism in current news, and hence an underestimate of the amount of change that had occurred in the 16-year gap between studies.

Why the change? By all accounts, the pressure for change has emanated not from reporters but from upper managements that sought higher audience ratings and profits. In his study of local TV news in *Market-Driven Journalism*, McManus (1994) interviewed one news director who told him bluntly that he had learned to think "with a cash register in my head." As McManus continued,

> [this station manager] refused to permit my access to the station, arguing that he did not want his reporters to think about news values or journalism while gathering stories. Instead, he wanted them to think about ratings. He instructed his reporters to imagine that he was placing a certain number of viewers in their hands at the beginning of their story, he explained, and he wanted them back at the end. (168*)*

Reporters, and even some managers, disliked doing this sort of "market-driven journalism," but felt they had no choice. When McManus challenged his interview subjects for abandoning journalistic values,

> The most common response of those interviewed was something like: "I know you're right. But I hate to think of myself that way." (168)

In a study of a Florida TV station that sought to offer a fare of more serious news, journalist Michael Winerip reported that when the policy of high-quality news was announced,

> the newsroom erupted in applause. Kathy Marsh, a reporter who under the previous regime was assigned to do a special report on penis and bust enhancers, leaped out of her seat, clapping. Dan Billow, who covers the space program at nearby Cape Canaveral, said, "It's like we're having honor restored to our occupation. Wineripi, 1997, p. 31)

Winerip found, however, that the policy of high-quality news was losing out in the ratings war to two stations that emphasized crime, violence and bizarre occurrences. "The thing is, people like it," Winerip

wrote, making it clear that the new station manager had an uphill fight to turn around his ratings before losing his job.

This evidence, even if accepted as applicable to the universe of local TV news programs (which it probably is), is only equivocal support for my claims. It is, after all, possible that owners might seek to maximize ratings and profits even in the absence of competition, and that it is only a coincidence that they discovered a news formula for doing so at the same time that competitive pressures were increasing. I shall address this issue later on. For the moment my claim is only that the evidence concerning local TV news, which involves tandem over-time changes in competitiveness and news quality, is consistent with my general argument as embodied in D2. I note that the qualitative evidence of lack of enthusiasm for "low quality" news among journalists is also consistent with my argument.

2. Newspapers in comparison with local TV news. Although, as noted above, most local TV news programs face heavy competition – typically several shows offering the same product in the same time slots in the same medium – most newspapers have it much easier. The large majority of American newspapers have enjoyed monopolies in their local markets for decades. Except in New York, where there are three city-wide daily papers, no city in America has more than two city-wide papers, and a large majority has only one.

These days the most serious competition for newspapers comes not from other newspapers but from television. It is often observed, probably correctly, that evening TV news destroyed afternoon newspapers, and it now appears that morning TV news programs – which offer a mixture of local and national news, including local traffic and weather reports – are harming newspapers, which occupy the same time slot. Still, since newspapers and TV news are different media, I rate the competition between them as moderate rather than intense.

What, then, is the quality of American newspapers compared to local TV news? In the article cited above, Winerip writes, "Most anyone in the press and academia who has given much thought has concluded that while there are exceptions, local television news is atrocious" (p. 33). I believe that this is an accurate statement and, further, that no one would make such a sweeping statement about American newspapers. There is some evidence, to be reviewed immediately below, that the quality of newspapers

has slipped, but I have found no blanket claims that newspapers are anything like atrocious. My impression, for which there is evidence below, is that most newspapers produce the highest quality journalism they can under the resource constraints they face. I take this as tending to support D1.

The (largely impressionistic) evidence that local newspapers typically offer a higher quality form of journalism than local TV programs is consistent with, but again not strong evidence for, my claim that higher levels of competition are associated with lower levels of news quality.

3. American newspapers, 1950 to the present. The increase in local TV news programming counts, by my conception of competition, as a moderate increase in the competitive pressure on newspapers. At the same time, newspaper circulation has begun to lose readership, most likely because of the competition from television. From 1970 to 1988, total circulation of American newspapers increased, but at a rate less than the general increase in the population (Bogart, 1992, p. 87). In a sample of 67 newspapers gathered for another purpose (see below), I found that circulation has recently begun to decline in absolute terms. Between 1990 and 1998, daily circulation of my newspaper sample fell about 6 percent in the market area of sampled papers. (Newspapers that ceased to exist between 1990 and 1998 within the markets of sampled papers are counted within the denominator on which this change in circulation has been calculated; if failed newspapers are omitted from the calculation, the decline is only 2 percent.)

I have found no studies of trends in newspaper quality during the period 1950 to the present. There are, however, two indications of what appears to be a small but significant declines in newspaper quality. Bogart (1992, p. 89) comments, without presenting any data, that there has been "more emphasis on features relative to news" in newspapers in the 1980s. In the same vein, Diamond (1994) in his book on the *New York Times* describes how the "gray lady" of the 1950s and 60s was forced by competitive pressure to brighten its writing, add more human interest features, and even big color pictures to its news pages. "In pursuit of circulation," as persons interviewed by Diamond said, "the [Max Frankel-led] *Times* was willing to get down and scratch for the same kind of dirt that, in the past, it left to the city's rude tabloids" (p. 9). In his chapter on "Soft Times," Diamond writes:

> It was the summer of 1978. The *Times* was introducing its new sections covering such topics as food, furniture, and design. These daily magazines, one for each weekday, represented the *Times*' prime editorial initiative of the 1970s. They signaled a major investment of both money and staff, the centerpiece of the effort

> to attract new readers. Americans were spending an ever increasing amount of time in front of their television sets. They were getting the first hard reports of developments in Washington, Wall Street, or the Middle East from network news on the nights before their morning papers were delivered. Attracted by nightly television and the early morning shows like "Today" on NBC--and later, by "new media" networks like the twenty-four hour CNN--the traditional audiences for news seemed to be drifting away from their newspapers. Around the country, editors tried new formats to lure readers. The *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Miami Herald* had all taken the lead in developing sections devoted to "life-style" features. (p. 84)

I undertook a few small test bores to see if Diamond's general observations could be supported by quantitative measurement. In particular, I asked a research assistant to rate a sample of front page stories on a five-point scale, where "5" represented "information useful readers in their roles as citizen decision-makers," and "1" represented information that was useful to readers purely as private individuals, such a information about health or entertainment. The stories were from one week of *Times* front pages in 1970, 1980, and 1999. The results showed a decline that was highly statistically significant but substantively rather modest: The mean level of news quality on the five-point scale fell from 4.96 in 1970 to 4.84 in 1980 to 4.44 in 1999. However, it was perhaps notable that the number of front-page stories in the sample weeks fell from 79 in 1970 to 49 in 1980 to 45 in 1999. In expanding font-size and increasing picture content, the *Times* also cut down on the number of stories it could place on the front page.

It would be quite easy to extend these measurements to a larger sample of papers, and I expect to do so. In the meantime, I take the scattering of available evidence, in conjunction with my own strong impression that newspapers have in fact gone somewhat soft, as additional support for the general argument of the effect of competition as embodied in D2.

4. Market size and competitive pressure. Consider the case of TV news, in which production costs are nearly constant with respect to audience size (once a big antenna has been purchased) but advertising revenue increases with audience size. If "low-quality" news is no more expensive to produce than "high-quality" news and has more audience appeal, then every incentive is for owners to move downmarket, except one: Downmarket news is less prestigious than high brow news and some owners value their reputations as producers of quality news. Now imagine two stations, one in a market of 500,000 viewers and one in a market of 18 million viewers, which is about the size of the New York city TV market.

Suppose that, by watering down news quality, a program could attract an additional one percent of viewers in each market. In the small market, this would amount to 5,000 additional viewers, whereas in the big market it would mean 180,000 additional viewers. On the assumption that advertising revenues are a linear function of audience size, the pressure to go after the additional one percent of audience share would be vastly greater in the big market. The expectation, therefore, is that pressures to abandon journalistic values in pursuit of larger audience share would be greater in bigger markets.

There is, however, an opposing logic. Bigger markets can mean more advertising revenue per hour of news programming, which could translate into more resources for the production of each hour of news, which could lead to more reporters, more in-depth reporting, and generally "higher quality" news.

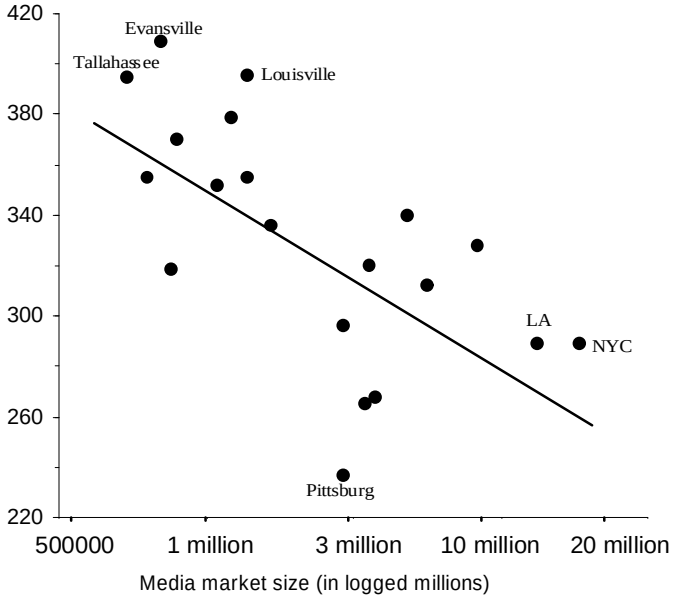
The question, then, is whether the additional revenue generated in larger markets will be captured by owners in the form of higher profits or by journalists in the form of support for higher quality news. Figure 2, showing the relationship between audience size and news quality for newspapers and TV news, attempts to answer this question. The measure of newspaper quality in Figure 2 is the number of Pulitzer prizes won in the period 1977 to 1998. The measure of TV news quality is the "news quality" index produced by The Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia School of Journalism. The TV news index seeks to measure depth of reporting, balance of viewpoints within stories, number of story sources, the expertise of the sources, and the degree of local relevance.

INSERT FIGURE 3-2 ABOUT HERE

As can be seen, the data seem to support both arguments – and hence neither. Bigger markets tend to produce better newspapers but worse TV news. Why might this be? I suggest that the differences in competitive pressures may explain difference in quality. As Figure 3 shows, there is vastly more competition in the provision of local TV news than of local print journalism. Moreover, this differential in competitive pressure increases with market size. The effect of this may be as follows: In the absence of competition, no one knows what might sell best in a market or what kinds of profits can be made. Owners may come to feel, at the urging of their journalistic staff, that they are getting most of the profit that can be squeezed out of the market by offering high-quality journalism since they will never confront any painful evidence to the contrary. Put somewhat differently, newspapers can afford to offer a non-competitive product even in large markets because there is no competitor to punish them for doing so. But in a large

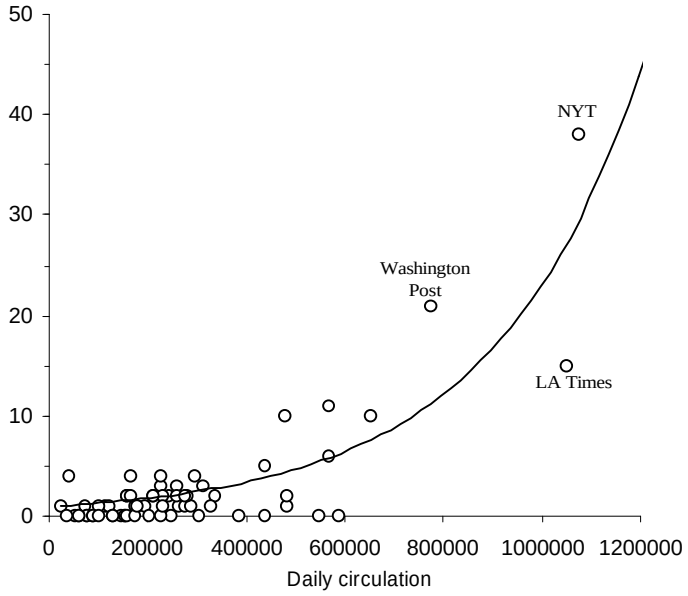
Figure 3.2. *News quality and market size for newspapers and TV news*

Average news quality scores for local TV news markets by media market size in 20 selected markets



Note: News quality was measured by a research team sponsored by Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia University School of Journalism. Data in figure are average of scores for network stations in each of 20 media markets. The news quality scores are published in Rosenstiel et al., 1998.

Number of recent Pulitzer prizes by circulation for a non-sample of daily newspapers



Note: The non-random sample of newspapers was drawn from those available on Lexis-Nexis. The sampling criterion was to pick all of the major papers in Lexus-Nexus (e.g., *The New York Times, Los Angeles Times)*, plus an arbitrary selection of the rest. Total number of cases is 67. Circulation figures are for daily editions and come from the 1998 edition of *Editor and Publisher*. Pulitzer prizes are for the period 1977 to 1998.

market that does have competition, the less successful programs will become aware of their deficiencies in the form of low competitive ratings and will be sorely tempted to break ranks with journalistic orthodoxy. When, as has tended to happen in TV news, this leads to higher audience share, it sets off a downmarket spiral that eventually forces even high-minded owners to abandon their journalistic scruples.

INSERT FIGURE 3-3 ABOUT HERE

Yet, as Figure 3 shows, there are some large markets in which two or, in the case of New York, three newspapers compete. If the previous, TV-directed argument is correct, it ought to be the case that some big city newspapers – in particular, those with competitors – are induced by competitive pressure to go downmarket.

I have used a sample of daily newspapers on the *Lexis-Nexis* information service to test this proposition. To measure news quality, I calculated a "Lewinsky quotient" – that is, the ratio of front page stories about the Lewinksy scandal to front page stories on other serious news topics, namely, stories about Bosnia, the federal budget deficit, and problems in Social Security and Medicare. Although coverage of Lewinsky was often serious, a high Lewinsky quotient – "all Monica, all the time" – would be indicative of commitment to entertainment rather than to "high-quality" journalism.

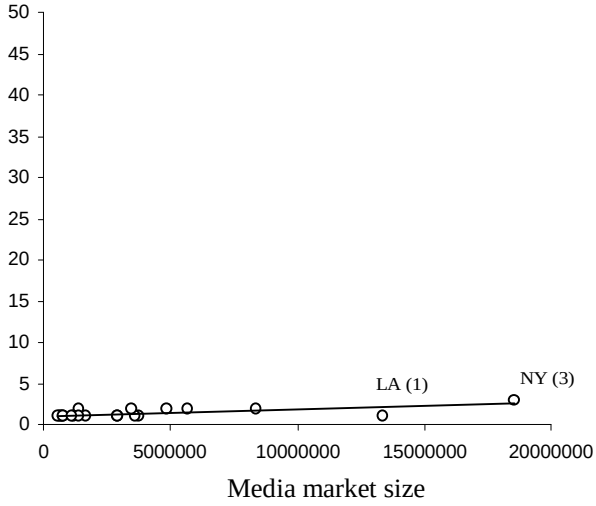
Initial examination of the data supported my theoretical expectation. On a simple difference of means test, the Lewinsky ratio was 59 percent larger in cities in which there were competing dailies ($p = .02$, one-tailed on assumption of unequal variance). However, an examination of a scatterplot of the data, as shown in Figure 4, undermined this result. In this figure, solid black dots indicate newspapers with a city-wide competitor in the same market and clear white dots indicate a newspaper monopoly. As can be seen, the only cases in which competition led to markedly more Lewinsky coverage were cases in which one of the competitors was a tabloid. For the majority of cases in which the competitors were not tabloids, there was no effect of competition. Thus, in a regression which controlled for circulation and the presence of a tabloid, the tabloid dummy had a large and statistically significant coeffieint but the competition dummy had essentially no effect.

INSERT FIGURE 3-4 ABOUT HERE

Although the regression results do not support my argument, they do not really damage it either. After all, the highest Lewinsky ratio occurs, as expected, in competitive markets. What appears to

Figure 3.3. *The effect of market size on level of competition in selected newspaper and TV news markets*

Number of newspapers in 20 selected media markets



Number of TV news programs and program hours in 20 selected media markets

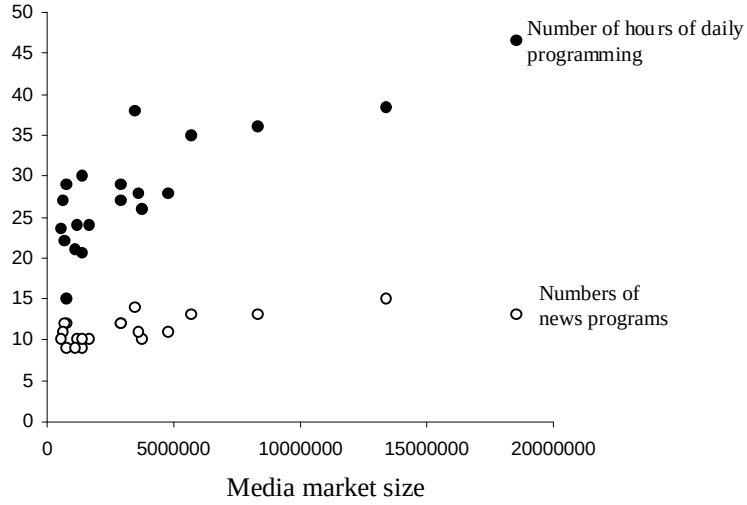
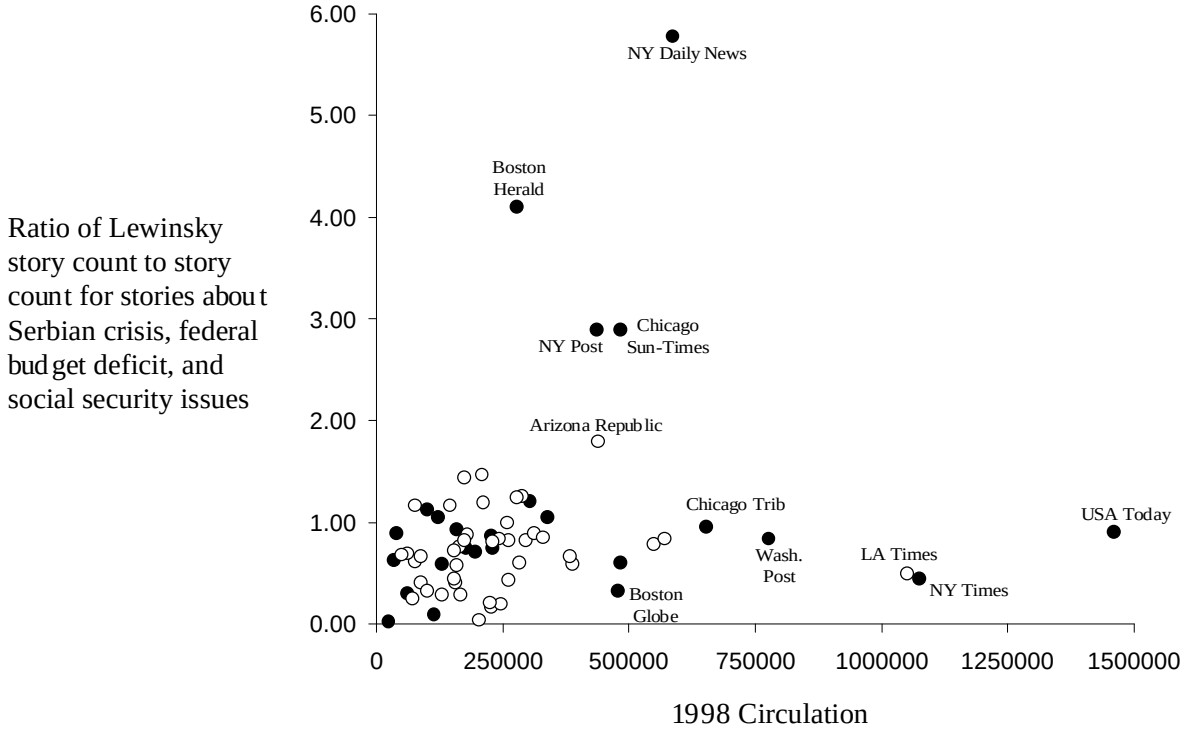


Figure 3.4. *The "Lewinsky quotient" for a sample of U.S. newspapers*



happen is that, in small-to-medium sized newspaper markets, newspaper competition has no effect. The papers probably do compete, but they compete within the standard journalistic paradigm, trying to outdo each other on "hard hitting reporting" rather than on lurid crime and sex news. But as market size becomes large, there is an increase in the chance that one of the competitors will adapt a tabloid strategy.[2] Thus, exactly as in the case of TV journalism, competition alone is not associated with the abandonment of journalistic standards; rather, it is the combination of large market size and competition that has the critical effect. The main difference between TV and print appears to be that, due to lower overall levels of competition in newspaper markets, the necessary combination of market and competitive pressure occurs less often for newspapers.

This argument has two notable implications:

- High-quality big city newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune* could probably increase circulation by repositioning themselves down-market. Doing so would cost them dearly in terms of national prestige, but would probably increase profitability. That these and other high-quality papers generally resist downmarket pressure is probably best explained by an idealistic commitment either to prestige or to quality journalism or to some combination of both.
- The opportunity for profit does not translate into low quality journalism except in the presence of intense competition, as in the case of local television and a few large newspaper markets. In the absence of competition, journalists seem to be able to persuade owners to cast their fates with respectable "high-quality" news.

In a general way, these results are consistent with the basic Rule of the Market: That increases in market competition lead to lower levels of news quality.

I note in passing that another interesting result of this analysis: Whether a newspaper was owned by a chain in general, or by the often-vilified Gannett chain in particular, had no effect on the Lewinsky quotient. It is also interesting that smaller papers did not, in general, have a higher Lewinsky quotient. I take this as evidence that, apart from the resource constraints that prevent small papers from competing effectively for Pulitzer prizes, they aspire to produce high-quality news.

[2] Total newspaper circulation has a substantively large and highly statistically significant effect on the probability

5. **American newspapers, 1900 to 1950**. I have already presented evidence that news quality declines as competitive pressures increase. The argument that the latter causes the former would be stronger if I could run the argument in the opposite direction – if, that is, I could find a case in which news quality increased as competitive pressure decreased. I believe there is one such case: Between about 1900 and 1950, competitive pressure within the newspaper business fell markedly. Although the evidence is less compelling as regards quality, there appears to have been an improvement in news quality during this same period.

Let us look first at the evidence of competitive pressure. According to data compiled by Emery and Emery (1996), the percentage of daily newspapers having no competitor was nearly flat from 1880 to 1920, but shot up suddenly in the decade of the 1920s from about 40 percent to about 80 percent. This is a remarkably sudden consolidation – and all the more so since it occurred in a time of general prosperity and generally high newspaper profits (Mott, 1962, p. 593). Moreover, although the Emery and Emery data do not continue beyond 1930, newspaper consolidation obviously continued, such that by 1950 the vast majority of newspapers had no competitors or at most one.

Different authors give different reasons for the great newspaper shakeout. My hunch, supported by some initial compilation of data, is that newspapers were, in effect, redefined in the two decades prior to consolidation. In 1880, the typical big city newspaper was four to eight pages long, mixed different kinds of news in haphazard fashion, and had three or four, and sometimes as many as 10 or 12, competitors. But about that time newspapers began to grow in size and depth, adding more pages, separate sections on sports, business, culture, and fashion, and, in general, becoming more like the multifaceted cultural fountainheads of today. But cities that could support three or four of the old four-pagers could not for long support so many multi-purpose papers. This led eventually to the somewhat odd situation in which many newspapers were being driven out of business but those that remained were larger and more profitable than ever.

In any case, the low point for competitive newspaper pressure was probably the 1920s. Profits were high, consolidation was proceeding rapidly, and – a key point – there was not yet significant competition from radio. In most cities, one or two newspapers ruled the news market.

---

that a tabloid competitor will emerge.

The 1920s were also the time of one of the most important reform movements in the history of journalism. The decades in which the pressure for consolidation was building – and in which, therefore, competition was probably at its peak – were the time of “yellow,” “muckraking,” and generally sensationalist journalism. But beginning in about 1920, a reaction set in in the form of a movement for "objective” news reporting. “In its original sense,” writes Streckfess, “objectivity meant finding the truth through the rigorous method of the scientist” (1990, p. 975). In Schudson’s (1978) account, objectivity was likewise a more rigorous reporting method. According to Walter Lippmann, who is credited by Streckfess and Schudson with leading the movement for objectivity, a central purpose of the new creed was to make journalism less a “romantic art” and more an application of “trained intelligence” (cited in Streckfess, p. 981). Although these conceptions of objectivity are different from my notion of high-quality news, they are clearly an attempt to increase the information content of news in relation to its entertainment value. The key question, then, is how the objectivity movement affected actual news content.

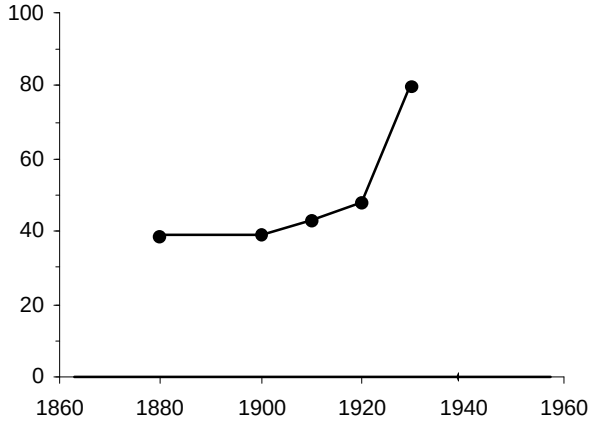
According to a careful content analysis of six big-city newspapers over the period 1865 to 1955 (Stensaas, 1986), certain elements of objective journalism pre-dated the objectivity movement of the 1920s. Stensaas measures objectivity as the extent to which stories make assertions that are strictly “observable or verifiable” (p. 13). Thus, to be counted as objective, Stensaas required, on one hand, that stories avoid statements of the writer’s opinion and, on the other, that stories link assertions of fact either to concrete events or to statements by particular sources. Stensaas’s findings are shown in Figure 5, along with the Emery and Emery data on decline in newspaper competitiveness. As can be seen, the decline in competitiveness is not well-timed for explaining the increase in objectivity, as measured by Stensaas. Stensaas’ data thus fail to support my theoretical expectations.

INSERT FIGURE 3-5 ABOUT HERE

Yet this is not the end of the story. For one thing, Stensaas’ data refer to six newspapers that survived well into the 20th century and may, for that reason alone, be atypical of the newspaper universe; by contrast, the Emery and Emery data refer to the universe of American daily newspapers, most of which were small. The two time series thus refer to rather different populations. For another, contemporary

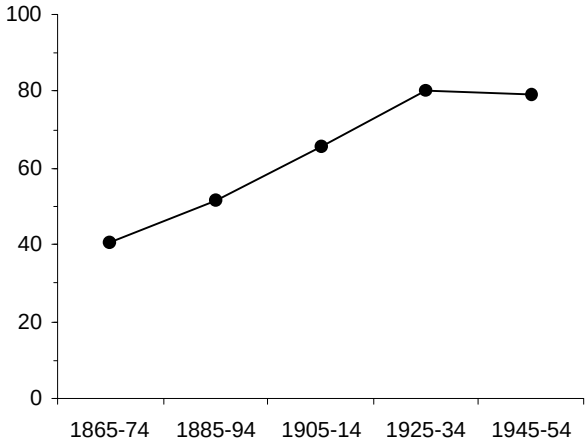
Figure 3.5. *Certain trends in news competition and news quality, 1865 - 1955*

Percent of all daily newspapers having no daily competitor



From *The American Press: An Interpretive History*, Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, 1996, p. 293.

Percent of sample of big city daily newspaper stories rated as objective



From *The Objective News Report: A Content Analysis of Selected U.S. Daily Newspapers for 1865 to 1954*, Harlan S. Stensaas, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1986, University of Southern Mississippi, p. 57.

observers felt that the objectivity movement did made a difference. Writing in the *Yale Review* in 1931, Lippmann said it had brought about a "revolution" in news writing over the previous decade:

> The most impressive event of the last decade in the history of newspapers has been the demonstration that the objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news is a far more successful type of journalism to-day than the dramatic, disorderly, episodic type.[3]

This assertion merits further study, which I hope soon to supply. In the meantime, it remains clear that sometime between 1900, a time of famously sensational journalism, and about 1950, American newspapers toned down in terms of sensationalism and toned up in terms of quality. During this same interval, the level of competition within the newspaper business also fell dramatically. This could be a coincidence, but it seems more likely that the decline in competition created the breathing space in which the new, duller style of newspapers could establish itself.

6. **Network TV news, 1969 to 1997**. We have seen in Figure 1 that local TV news, much of which goes head-to-head with network news in the same time slots, has grown dramatically, and that the most dramatic growth has come in the last 10 years. My theoretical expectation, therefore, is that network news will have declined in "quality" in the last decade. In a small test bore into the data, I asked a research assistant to use the Vanderbilt TV News Abstracts to assess the percentage of the network news broadcasts devoted to serious coverage of national government and foreign affairs. The results, based on the analysis of three months of programming in each of three years, are shown below:

[3] Cited in Streckfess, p. 981.

Percent of Network News Devoted to

Stories about Government and Foreign Affairs

	1969	1981	1997
ABC	62%	57	42
CBS	55	60	40
NBC	58	59	27
Average	58	59	36

As can be seen, there has been a marked decline in “news quality,” with all of the decline occurring after 1981. The timing of the change thus accords well with the increase in competitive pressure – though, obviously, more empirical work is needed to tie down the timing question.

Ken Auletta’s book on the Big Three networks in the 1980s, *Three Blind Mice*, points out that more than competitive pressure affected changes in network news content. Each of the networks was taken over by a new owner in the 1980s who was more concerned with profit than previous ones. Thus, the drive for profits can be considered an alternative explanation for the decline in news quality in this case. Yet, as Auletta also shows, the rise of new TV networks, including CNN and Fox, and cable programming occurred at the same general time as the ownership changes. In the absence of other evidence, we might therefore have to throw up our hands and say that we have no way of telling which factor is important. But inasmuch as news quality seems to have fallen wherever competition has intensified, and even in media, such as the *New York Times*, in which no ownership change has occurred, we can feel reasonably confident in ascribing causal importance to competitive pressure. The key factor has been well-described by NBC Anchor Tom Brokaw: "When I started out in the 1960's," he said in an interview, "there were effectively two network news programs, and at 6:30 P.M. people turned on either Huntley-Brinkley or Walter Cronkite and got their news for the day. And I'd like to have that back again."[4]

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Auletta’s book was his description of how network news journalists had managed to convince owners that their news shows should not have to make a profit, as they generally failed to do in the 1970s. Their argument was that news had such special importance in a democracy that it ought to be exempted from the need to produce profits. They added, however, that

their news programs were flagship operations whose prestige value did help the profitability of other network operations. These are exactly the kind of arguments that professionals of all kinds make when they want to get themselves exempted from market pressures. But when the new owners of the 1980s refused any longer to accept them, the journalists at first resisted, then squealed, then capitulated, as my general argument would suggest. I take this as evidence consistent with D4.

7. Network news magazines, 1970 to present. The news magazine 60 Minutes began broadcasting in the late 1960s and for some 15 years maintained a well-deserved reputation for high-quality television journalism. From its prime time spot on Sunday night, it was also able to attract consistently large audiences. But about 1980, its success began to attract competitors, ABC's 20/20 and NBC Magazine. The competition moved up another notch around 1990, when Primetime Live, 48 Hours, Turning Point, Fox Files, and Eye-to-Eye began to appear. Thus, 60 Minutes has had at least two competitors since about 1980 and a half-dozen since 1990.

It is possible to estimate the news quality of these various shows by examining *TV Guide* listings in newspapers, which often carry a description of story content. For example, "Discussion of the Shah of Iran's Secret Police" and "President Nixon's Vietnam Troop Withdrawal Plan" were listed as stories and rated as "5" on the news quality scale described earlier. ("5" represents "information useful to readers in their roles as citizen decision-makers," while "1" represents information that is useful to readers purely as private individuals.) An "interview with Elizabeth Taylor" was rated as "1."

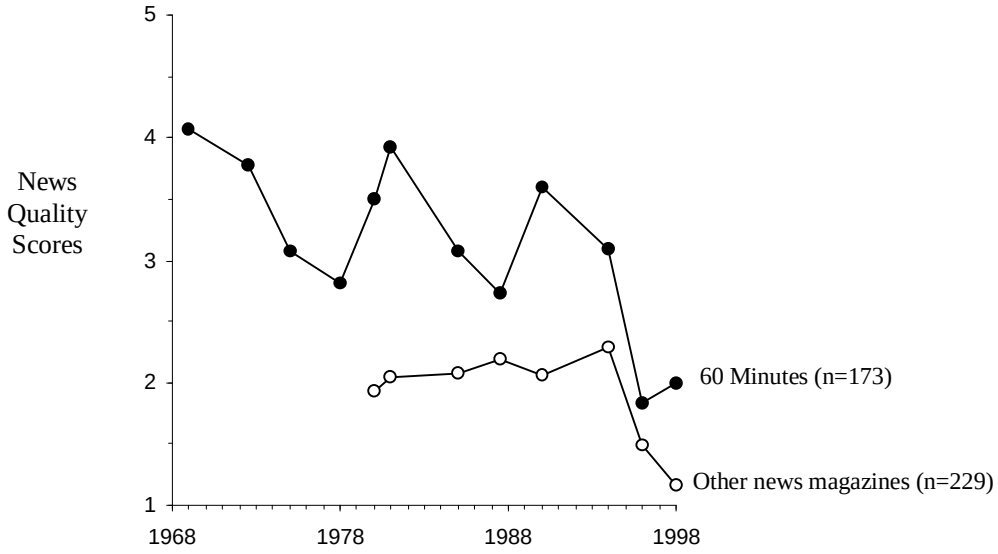
The results obtained from this exercise are shown in Figure 6 and support my argument in two ways: 1) The new entrants to a previously non-competitive field came in at distinctly lower levels of news quality, consistent with D3, and 2) 60 Minutes initially resisted but was eventually forced to go downmarket to meet the competition, consistent with D2. Note that the biggest decline in 60 Minutes news quality occurs only after 1994, at which point the level of competition had grown quite heavy.

INSERT FIGURE 3-6 ABOUT HERE

These results, which are based on the coding of 173 stories from 60 Minutes and 229 stories by its various competitors, cast the original 60 Minutes show in a very favorable light. In the decade or so in

[4] "Simpson Case Gives Cable An Edge on the Networks, " by Lawrie Mifflin, p. D1, *New York Times*, February 20,

Figure 3.6. *Trends in news quality among network news magazine shows*



which 60 Minutes had no direct competition, the average quality score for its stories was about 3.8 on the same scale on which *The New York Times* front page stories now average 4.4. This is a very respectable rating for a TV show attempting to reach a mass audience, but also very difficult to sustain in the face of heavy competition. [I note that all of these numbers are preliminary and that further coding may produce changes.]

8. Comparison of British and American TV News. Since the BBC had a monopoly on national TV news coverage for some two decades and still retains a substantial subsidy, the expectation is that it would produce higher quality news than American network news. I have found no relevant data comparing British and American media and have not yet had time to collect any. However, Semetko et al. (1991) do make a systematic comparison of NBC coverage of the 1984 election with BBC coverage of the 1987 parliamentary election. Most of their evidence (much of it quantitative) has no bearing on my argument, but their report makes it clear that the BBC provided more news with more information about the candidates' positions on issues than their American counterpart, which makes the BBC news "higher

Thin as this evidence is, there can be little doubt that the BBC provides higher-quality news than its American counterparts, as expected by D1.

9. Comparison of British and American Newspapers. The Semetko study also compares American and British newspaper coverage of the two elections, but, again, most of the evidence is irrelevant to the concerns of my chapter. However, two pieces are relevant. The study examines the length of the average campaign story, which can be taken as an indicator of depth of coverage. And it also provides counts of the number of straight news versus feature stories, which can be taken as an indicator of concern for information versus entertainment.

The comparisons are made for three classes of papers: 1) Typical American newspapers (*Indianapolis Star* and *Louisville Courier Journal*); 2) British broadsheets (*Times* and *Guardian*); and British tabs (*Sun, Daily Mirror, Daily Mail*). The two American newspapers compete in local markets

---

1995.

which they monopolize, while all British papers compete in a frenzied national market. The expectation, therefore, is that the American newspapers will provide "higher-quality" news, in the sense I have used this term.

At first glance, they do seem to. The two American papers ran stories that were slightly longer (at 20.3 inches) than the British broadsheets (19.4 inches) and much longer than those in the tabs (8.9 inches).[5] And the American papers ran a much higher ratio of straight election news to features news than either of the British groups (see Table 8.3).

It would be foolish to maintain that two small American papers provide coverage that is, in any general way, better than that of the elite British press. At the same time, the data in the previous paragraph may well indicate that the British papers are being forced to work harder to hold market share than the monopolist American papers. Again, D1 seems to be supported.

10. Competition for the BBC. After two decades of BBC monopoly, two commercial news programs have been introduced in Britain, one in the 1980s and one in the 1990s. This leads to two clear theoretical expectations: That the new entrants should provide "lower quality news" than the BBC, and that the presence of downmarket competition should pressure the BBC to go downmarket as well.

In a series of publications, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch make clear that the first expectation is supported (fn). The two new stations, one of which has a state subsidy, provide less election coverage and more "horse race" entertainment than the BBC – though, as Blumler and Gurevitch emphasize, the new programs are still well above the quality level of American network news. As they comment, "Britain's approach to its 1997 campaign was still largely sheltered from those building commercial and competitive pressures that were so much more rampant in the U.S. system" (p. 19, "Americanization Reconsidered: UK-US Campaign Communication Comparisons Across Time," ND).

The second expectation is more difficult to evaluate. On the one hand, the two new stations have certainly brought pressure on the BBC to change. But, on the other hand, the BBC has not changed much if at all. Blumler and Gurevitch quote a news reader who says, "There has been a growing perception, fed by market research, that many people are not digesting political reporting from the BBC as well as

[5] See Table 8.2, p. 152.

they might. It was not as accessible as it should be" ("Change in the Air: Campaign Journalism at the BBC in 1997," p. 20, ND). Yet BBC programming remained as lengthy and issue-oriented as ever. Blumler and Gurevitch write,

> An editor even spoke of the 'fantastic luxury' he enjoyed, since "Nobody would say that was a jolly interesting programme but the ratings went down." And when evidence of a significant drop in the audience became available, the newspeople tended to rationalize, arguing that they were not going to be deterred from doing their duty as public service broadcasters. In a producer's words, "We are relaxed about it. We have been told from the top that the BBC has a duty to do this." (ibid, p. 11).

The attitude seemed to be the same in the 1993 election, when one producer said that the BBC was "prepared to test 'viewers' boredom thresholds' to do justice to the campaign" (1995, Crisis of Public Communication, p. 169).

I interpret these remarks as evidence that the BBC is, in fact, under pressure to go downmarket to meet its new competition, but has so far been successful in resisting the pressure. In the classic manner of professionals, BBC journalists are prepared to be as boring as they have to be to uphold the standards of their profession (and class) – so long as the subsidy holds out.

Thus, the evidence from the effect of competition on the BBC supports my D4 (that journalists will resist competitive pressure to dumb down the news) but not my D2 (that competition will lower news quality). However, it seems too early to take the disconfirmation of D2 in this case very seriously.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A central tension of media politics is between journalists, who wish to produce a sophisticated news product, and ordinary citizens, who want something much less sophisticated. The best evidence of the kind of product journalists would like to produce comes from markets in which they face relatively little competitive pressure to cater to mass tastes. In these markets – modern American newspapers, TV network TV news in the 1960s, and British television – we find a relatively high-quality news product and a determination to keep it so. But from markets in which competition is greater, especially local TV news, we find a lower quality news product that is, one must assume, closer to what mass tastes in news actually are.

The most significant shortcoming of this analysis is its failure to consider how news organizations may attempt to build niche markets that afford a degree of insulation from unfettered competition. The essential idea in niche-marketing is to develop a product that appeals to a particular, well-bounded segment of the market; in appealing to such a clientele, one is protected from competition with other, more general service providers. An example of successful niche markets is Spanish-language news broadcasting, which has developed in many American cities.

The difficulty in developing niche markets for news is that there are few market boundaries that are as impermeable as the language boundary that protects Spanish-language broadcasting. What seems to have happened in the American news business is that news organizations that enjoy any degree of insulation from market pressure, such as monopolist newspapers still enjoys or network TV news for a brief time enjoyed, have become a de facto market niche for relatively high-quality news.

What impresses me, however, is how very small the potential niche for high-quality news in the U.S. seems to be. The U.S. has two high-quality national newspapers, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, each widely available in the U.S. Together their circulation is about 3 million. The audience for Lehrer News Hour, widely though not universally available, is currently about 1 million and falling. And the audience for National Public Radio, which is almost universally available, is 7.7 million daily. Given this total of roughly 12 million consumers of elite news, given that the adult population of the U.S. is about 230 million, and given that elite news services are available in a very large fraction of the nation, the niche audience for serious news in the U.S. is trivially small, probably only five or so percent of the potential market. The rest of the audience is up for grabs under conditions of more-or-less general competition – conditions that, as I have argued, prevent journalists from offering as much serious news as they would like.

It is interesting to ponder exactly how much freedom most journalists enjoy to depart from what a perfectly competitive market might force them to offer the public. My guess is that the typical print journalist enjoys more discretion than most car manufacturers, who would like to load their products down with expensive gizmos but are greatly constrained by component pricing and cutthroat competition, but less than what the most successful professions, such as research professors and lawyers, have been

able to manage.[6] I would guess, however, that TV journalists have little if any freedom to depart from what market pressures demand. Whatever exactly journalists do manage do get away with, it is a good bet that, like other professional groups, they are constantly trying to upgrade the sophistication of their professional product, for the basic self-interested reason that sophisticated products return greater pay, social status, and intellectual satisfaction.

[6] Many members of my own professional group, political scientists, are acutely aware that the public supports their research activities, through its taxes and tuition payments, at higher levels than it would if given a direct choice.

Chapter 4

Struggle to Control the News

Except when they enjoy a state monopoly on the news, journalists are under constant audience pressure to keep the news short, simple, and “dumbed-down.” The technology-induced explosion of competition within the news business in recent decades has, as we saw in the last chapter, intensified that pressure. High-quality professional journalism, though not yet an endangered species, is on the defensive across Europe and the United States as business-minded news programs increasingly cater to audience tastes.

Nor is the market the only source of pressure on journalists. Politicians are increasingly adept and aggressive at “managing the news” – that is, staging news events that constrain journalists to report the words and pictures that the politicians wish to have conveyed to the mass audience. Candidate George Bush’s visit to a New Jersey flag factory in the 1988 campaign is a good example of how such news management works. From a flag-bedecked podium at the factory, the candidate declared, "Flag sales are doing well and America is doing well and we should understand that and we should appreciate that." The statement was vacuous, but the visual imagery was spectacular, and since the candidate did little else that day, the media had no choice but to report the event.

Journalists are thus fighting a two-front war to control their professional turf. On one side, they must fend off market competition that forces them to dilute the news values that are their professional bread-and-butter. And on the other side, they must struggle with politicians to maintain control of their work product.

This chapter focuses on how journalists manage this dual struggle. It begins with a theoretical sketch of the basic tension between journalists and politicians. It then develops two rules of behavior that serve journalists’ interests in the on-going struggle.

THE BASIC CONFLICT

Important politicians such as presidents and presidential candidates feel they have a right to give a speech or take an action and have it straightforwardly reported as news. But journalists, jealous of their autonomy and voice, do not cede this right. They have their own ideas about what news consists of. Hence politicians often find themselves jumping through journalistic hoops in order to get their story out, and they resent having to do so. Moreover, politicians sometimes refuse to jump through the hoops, instead creating events so compelling — in terms of visual images, symbols, or drama — that journalists have no choice but to report the events as news, even if they don't think they really are news. In this way, politicians force journalists to jump through their hoops. Bush's appearance at a flag factory was an example of this. Politicians also resent the criticism that journalists routinely heap on them. It is one thing to be attacked by one's partisan opponents, but another to be attacked, as regularly occurs, by the supposedly non-partisan press. "They [reporters] love to destroy people," President Clinton has been quoted as saying, "That's how they get their rocks off."[1]

In the ideal world of politicians, therefore, campaigns would generate information and journalists would dutifully pass all of this information — and only this information — on to the public. News reports of campaign activities would differ little from paid advertisements, except that they would be free and would run under the byline of a reporter.

Politicians have important resources in the struggle to control news content. Most importantly, they determine, in both a positive and negative sense, the day-to-day content of campaigns. On one hand, they take actions and stage events that promote their campaign agenda and that, with the advice of their media advisors, are often so compelling that reporters feel obliged to report them as news. On the other hand, they attempt to avoid situations, such as news conferences, that make it difficult for them to control the kind of news that gets made.

Both elements were present in the flag rally discussed above. The Bush campaign calculated that journalists would be unable to resist the visual appeal of the patriotic setting, even if what the President said was somewhat vacuous. Also, campaign managers kept Bush physically separated from reporters on that day, so as to prevent journalists from asking questions that would force Bush to address questions that would distract from his primary message of patriotism. If, as campaign managers try to

---

1 From *Behind the Oval Office*, Dick Morris, p.99.

ensure, journalists can find nothing more interesting to report, they are constrained to report what the candidates offer up.

All this smacks of manipulation. But politicians have little choice but to try to influence news content in this manner. With the demise of parties as campaign organizers, political news is one of the most important means — and through long stretches of time, the only means — of mobilizing the public support presidents need to get elected to office and to be effective while in office. A president or presidential candidate who always spoke with complete candor, without any strategic thought to the kind of news his words and actions would make, would be as remiss in his duties, and as foolish, as a lawyer who always told the jury everything he thought about his client. And he would succeed at his job just about as well. *When politics is conducted by means of mass communication, politicians must approach communication strategically rather than sincerely*. Candidates who fail to be strategic will be beaten by — that is, judged by voters to be inferior to — candidates who do behave strategically.

But if candidates are constrained to approach communication strategically, journalists are not constrained to like it, and most do not. But why exactly not? Couldn't journalists sell as many newspapers, or get as many audience rating points, by providing "straight" reports of lavishly-staged campaign events? Why do journalists so often feel compelled to make sarcastic or other negative comments when, as in the case of the flag factory rally, the candidates do such a good job of appealing to the "production values" of journalists?

The answer to these questions, as I have suggested, is that reporters would cease to be professionals – and hence cease to enjoy the social status, pay, and self-satisfaction that go along with being a professional – if they were forced into the role of "news readers" for politicians. Hence journalists insist that it is their professional prerogative to determine what counts as news and they resent what they see as the incessant efforts of politicians to manipulate them. They have no objection to reporting the speeches and other campaign events staged by candidates. But in the ideal world of journalists, candidate-initiated information would be only the bare starting point rather than, as candidates prefer, the totality of news reports. As journalist Eleanor Randolph has written,

> Journalists who cover politics bridle at any suggestion that their job is simply to transmit campaign speeches like a conveyor belt from the campaign trail to the

> reader or viewer. They say their job is to give some idea of what kind of presidents these candidates would be — which means looking beyond the portrait presented by the campaign managers. ... "The premise we have to challenge as journalists is that the candidates have the exclusive rights to control the dialogue," said David S. Broder of *The Washington Post*.[2]

As indicated earlier, journalists always want to add their own information and analyses to stories, and they want the material they add to be as important as possible. When, in contravention of this ideal, journalists can find no important information or perspective of their own to add to a news story, they feel frustrated: Either they have failed to do what, as professionals, they expect of themselves, or someone (usually a politician) has prevented them from doing their jobs as they feel they have a right to do them. If the latter is the case, they take countermeasures.

One of the simplest of these countermeasures is acid commentary – what Mark Levy (1981) has

[3] Thus, in the case of the flag factory visit, journalists did run the visual images that the Bush campaign wanted, but they framed them in terms that were anything but helpful to the vice-president. On NBC, Tom Brokaw announced that "The vice president wrapped himself in the flag again." Dan Rather said on CBS that, "George Bush gives his 'my patriotism is better than yours' the hard sell." ABC's Brit Hume reminded viewers of an event a week earlier in which the Vice-President had used the word America 31 times in 15 minutes, for an average of twice a minute.[4] NBC's Lisa Myers added that Bush's use of national symbols "lead some to quote Samuel Johnson that patriotism is the last

---

2 "Candidates Limit Media Access; Aides Fear Reporters Will 'Step on' Message," Eleanor Randolph, *Washington Post*, Sept. 21, 1988, A1.

3 The elements of Levy's insightful argument are different than mine, but still, as it seems to me, essentially similar. In his view, journalists "disdain" news when "competitive pressures" force them to report information they believe to be "tainted." By tainted, Levy means information that is not genuine news according to standard journalistic criteria; by competitive pressures, he means the expectation that most journalists will be reporting the story, thus forcing all others to go along; by disdaining news, Levy means "role distancing" behavior by which the journalist signals the audience in such a way as to maintain credibility despite reporting "tainted" news. Translating my argument into Levy's categories, I would say that when politicians manipulate reporters into reporting information that reporters believe to be vacuous or phony, the information is "tainted." The competitive pressures to which Levy refers are, in my model, market pressures to provide the mass audience what it wants. Thus, I think individual journalists would report stories like the flag factory visit even if they knew others were not, simply because they recognize that the Bush campaign had created the elements of an appealing story. What Levy calls "disdaining news" is, in my model, simple one kind of "media negativity," as described in the next chapter.

4 "Goldwater Quip about Bush Reflects Changing Dynamics of Campaign on TV," Lloyd Grove, *Washington Post*, September 23, 1988, A16

refuge of scoundrels."[5] Thus, although all three networks carried Bush's rally at the flag factory, the coverage may not have won many votes for Bush. "That," as campaign manager Lee Atwater said afterward, "was one flag factory too many."[6]

In many cases, journalists go beyond acid commentary. They may openly challenge the president's (or other politician's) account of events, give space in their stories to critics, or, in rare cases, conduct full-fledged investigations. As we shall see in Chapter 7, media negativity of all kinds is correlated with the attempts by campaigns to dominate the campaign agenda.

Conflict between politicians and journalists for control of the news is often, quite literally, a contest to see who can get more news space or air time. Candidates exhaust themselves flying around the country to create campaign events that are so compelling in a staged, Hollywoodish sort of way that the journalists have no choice but to report them as news. Journalists, for their parts, can become almost openly jealous of what many seem to regard as "their" air time and newspaper space. Thus, the length of the average candidate sound bite on the evening news has fallen from about 42 seconds in 1968 to less than 10 seconds in 1988 and 1992 (Adatto, 1990; Hallen, 1991; Patterson, 1993). The length of candidate statements quoted on the front page of the *New York Times* has fallen from an average of 14 lines to an average of six lines in the same period (Patterson, 1993, p. 76).

The struggle is especially fierce on live TV, where journalists surrender their usual right to edit what politicians say in exchange for the right to do a live interview of an important personage. Once when ABC anchor Peter Jennings observed a politician being interviewed and apparently hogging time on another news program, he exclaimed: "I hope I never interview a politician on the nightly news that way, because when they're on live they just own the fucking time" (Rosenstiel, 1993, p. 29). This sort of jealous reaction led to a famous incident on the evening of the 1996 election. As is customary, all of the big network news teams had gathered their star correspondents onto special sets for live broadcast of the election results. These shows are an American ritual, and one of the top opportunities for correspondents to strut their stuff. As part of the ritual, President Clinton was permitted by the networks to make a victory statement on live TV. But the President went on much longer than expected, relegating numerous star reporters to

---

[5] Cited in "A Campaign Dominated by Images, Not Issues," by Ed Siegel, *Boston Globe*, September 24, 1988, p. 10

off-screen silence. In the ABC studio alone, those crowded out of the limelight by the longwinded president included Sam Donaldson, George Will, Cokie Roberts, Peter Jennings, Jeff Greenfield, and David Brinkley, plus other correspondents in the field. Also wasting was ABC's flashy, high-tech graphics display set, which had been built in order to exhibit large quantities of statistical data. The longer the President spoke, the more reporters' segments had to be cut back or canceled, as each of the ABC stars was no doubt well aware as he or she listened to the President go on. All this apparently became too much for Brinkley. After getting back on camera (though seemingly unaware that he was), he blasted Clinton's victory speech as "goddamn nonsense" and "one of the worst things I've ever heard " and "totally unnecessary.... Everything in there he's already said." Brinkley concluded of the newly victorious President: "He's a bore, and will always be a bore."[7]

What is most notable about this event, however, is not Brinkley's lapse of professionalism, but the fact that ABC, as well as the other networks, ran Clinton's half-hour speech at the length they did. Obviously, they would have preferred to reduce it to a minute or two, perhaps just a soundbite, so as to save the time for their own correspondents. But journalism is, as my theory holds, constrained by the public's wish to have original exposure to what politicians are saying. Thus, once the public realized that Clinton was making a victory statement, it was hard for the networks to cut him off.

The same constraint is at work in campaign reporting generally. Even though a fast-paced exchange between Sam Donaldson and George Will or a witty commentary by Cokie Roberts would probably be more interesting than a politician's speech, the public wants to see the speech anyway, or thinks it does. And certainly the public has no natural sympathy for the occupational aspiration of journalists to express voice. These attitudes strengthen the hand of politicians in their turf war with journalists, constraining journalists to run stories they might prefer to ignore. Yet, the public also remains both easily bored by politicians and suspicious of them, and so is willing to cede journalists considerable leeway to make the news more interesting and to entertain allegations that politicians have shaded truth or engaged in other subterfuges or shenanigans. This, of course, strengthens the hand of journalists against politicians.[8]

---

6 Germond and Witcover, 1989, p. 408.

7 *Washington Post*, November 7, 1996, "Brinkley's Parting Shots at Clinton," by John Carmody, p. E1

8 It should be noted that the goals of neither politicians nor journalists imply any tendency to lie or make false statements. Their competing goals imply only that, from the infinite variety of true facts that might

This three-cornered conflict — *politicians and journalists struggling to control news content within constraints set by the mass audience* — is, as I claim, at the heart of media politics. Yet, as described so far, this conflict explains little about the actual dynamics of media politics. What is needed is a more specific account of how the conflict plays out. It is to such an account that I now turn.

THE RULE OF ANTICIPATED IMPORTANCE

Reporters must peddle their product to an audience that, as maintained earlier, wants exposure to all important politicians and points of view but doesn't want to waste its time on unimportant ones. But who determines what is important and what isn't? At times, the answer to this question is obvious, as in the case of President Clinton's victory speech. But in many other cases, the answer is not obvious. Uncertainty about what is important is an opportunity for journalists to express voice by using their own judgment to determine what is important, and every indication is that reporters eagerly seize upon this opportunity. Meanwhile, politicians who fail to meet the journalistic criteria of importance — whatever exactly they are — have difficulty getting any coverage at all, much less controlling the nature of the coverage they get.

Consider the case of presidential primaries. Except when an incumbent president is seeking re-election, each party fields 5 to 10 experienced and reasonably well-funded candidates who would like to be president. For a mass audience that doesn't want to waste its time on politics, this is too many candidates to learn about. Even the C-SPAN crowd doesn't want to study this many platforms and delve into this many political backgrounds. Recognizing this, journalists are highly selective in their coverage, ignoring most of the field and covering only those two or three who seem most likely to succeed.

---

be reported as news, each side wishes to focus selectively on what serves its own goals. Each side, that is, wishes to tell a different partial truth.

Of course, politicians or journalists may, in practice, lie or make false statements, but nothing in the logic of media politics impels them to do so. Nothing, moreover, quickens the passion for truth in one side more than a demonstrably false statement by the other. As a result, it is normally a serious error to make false statements, since this simply gives the other side ammunition in the contest for control of news content.

It is an interesting question whether it is easier for politicians or journalists to get away with untruths and misleading statements. My impression is that each side thinks it is easier for the other side to lie — easier for politicians to lie because they control the government and can speak faster than reporters can investigate; and easier for journalists to lie because politicians have no ready means of rebuttal. Whichever is the case, however, neither politicians nor journalists can achieve long-term success in their professions by a strategy of consistently distorting the truth.

Politicians who are blessed with media coverage in these conditions have at least a chance to succeed; others bear a considerable handicap.

Likewise in general elections. There are normally four or five third party candidates on the ballot in most or all of the 50 states, but the public doesn't want to waste its time on them. Many voters hardly care about the major party candidates, let alone the minor party candidates. Hence journalists ignore minor party candidates unless there is some indication that they will be unusually consequential.

This problem is entirely general. There are always more ambitious politicians, more controversial issues, and more serious national problems demanding attention than the public cares to know about. Hence, the need for selectivity arises in every domain of public life. And in each of these domains, the public's demand for selectivity is the journalist's opportunity to exercise the discretion that, as professionals, they relish.

In deciding exactly how to use this discretion, journalists follow a rule that is very close to the public's rational interest in wanting to be told only what it really needs to know. That rule, which I call the Rule of Anticipated Importance,[9] may be initially stated as follows:

> *Coverage of candidates and issues should be allocated in proportion to its marginal value for shedding light on future developments in American politics*

Thus, in the case of multi-candidate fields, the press will cover candidates it expects to do well, and to ignore candidates it expects to do poorly. Similarly in other domains of politics, reporters will concentrate their energy and attention on issues and problems that they expect to be most important to future events.

The reference to the "marginal value" of coverage indicates that journalists will concentrate on candidates and issues that are relatively new and unknown, for whom the value of any new information will therefore be especially high.

The Rule of Anticipated Importance can also be justified from the auxiliary assumption that citizens value political news primarily for its entertainment value. The justification is as follows: Citizens who turn

[9] Although it may have an older pedigree, I encountered this general idea in Entman and Page (1995). They noted that in coverage of Congressional hearings on the Gulf War, reporters seemed to be interested in the statements of policy-makers in proportion to the importance of the policy-maker rather than the inherent importance or novelty of the statements.

to political news for entertainment must do so for some special reason, since they would otherwise consume the more conventionally "pure" entertainment offered up by Hollywood and the professional sports business. That special reason has to do with the charisma of power. What makes political news distinctively entertaining is that it involves powerful and important people. Not just any politician or political program is fascinating; only those who possess or are likely in the future to possess power have appeal. In allocating coverage according to the Rule of Anticipated Importance, journalists are assured of covering individuals and topics having the special charisma that only political power bestows.

It is often said the only thing that journalists really care about is "what sells newspapers," commands high ratings, or serves other commercial needs. But what is it that sells newspapers or gets high ratings? In grounding my argument in specific claims about what a rational public will find interesting or entertaining, I have tried to flesh out an otherwise vague argument about how journalists pursue commercial values.

I have maintained that journalists devote coverage to candidates whom they anticipate will be important. But this is not all. Journalists also devote more of their enterprise, time and talent to candidates whom they expect to do well, hoping to be able to "score" on them. To be blunt: journalists are most harsh when dealing with the most powerful politicians. What, after all, is the point of launching a major journalistic investigation of a candidate who is unimportant and going nowhere? The public won't care, and so will little notice what journalists might report. Journalists therefore want to make their mark on bigger fish, so as to be more noticeable. Hence a more general form of the Rule of Anticipated Importance can be stated as follows:

> ***Journalistic resources of all kinds — coverage, talent, effort — are allocated to candidates in proportion to their marginal value for shedding light on future developments in American politics***

The Rule of Anticipated Importance is a powerful one, since it serves the audience interest in conserving its time, the interests of journalists in expressing discretion and voice, and the commercial interest of "selling newspapers." The only actors not served by it are politicians who are judged by

reporters to be unimportant. But politicians' only real opportunity for redress is to do something that will make them seem more important — that is, to play to reporters' sense of what is newsworthy.

I should add that, in saying that politicians must play to reporters' sense of what is newsworthy, I do not mean to imply that reporters make these judgments arbitrarily. To the contrary, Chapter 6 will offer considerable evidence that reporters' sense of anticipated importance is grounded in a very plausible sense of actual importance.

THE RULE OF PRODUCT SUBSTITUTION

Once politicians establish themselves as important by winning an important nomination or office, the power equation between them and reporters shifts radically. Politicians are no longer in the position of hoping for crumbs of coverage from journalists; they know that journalist must cover them and try to determine the nature of that coverage. Thus, one of the first moves of a newly powerful politician is to beef up his or her staff of campaign consultants and public relations specialists. Their purpose is to create words and images that make their candidate look good and that journalists will convey to the public as "news."

The elite journalists who are on the receiving end of an important politician's strategic communication do not relish this position. They feel constantly pressured into providing what might be called "pass-through" coverage of candidates' public relations events, but they do not find it professionally gratifying to do this.

But there is, as I have been arguing, a dilemma here. Public relations events, having been created by highly skilled professional campaign staff, often have real mass appeal. Thus, however much reporters may wish to ignore professionally unrewarding campaign communications, they cannot entirely ignore the tastes of the mass audience. This dilemma is rooted in the basic tenets of the model of media politics: On one side is a public that wants, in general, to see what important political figures are doing; that does not want, in this particular case, to cede to journalists the right to censor the kinds of images that presidents and presidential candidates can present to the public; and that therefore wants some

degree of original exposure to what the candidates are doing — especially so if the visuals are striking.[10] On the other side are professionals who hate reporting "press releases" (broadly construed) but nonetheless feel constrained to do so.

The response of journalists to this dilemma is captured by what I call the Rule of Product Substitution, as follows:

> *The more effectively reporters are challenged for control of a news jurisdiction, the more assiduously they will seek to develop new and distinctive types of information that they can plausibly substitute for what politicians are providing and that affirm overall journalistic control of mass communication.*

The claim here is that if politicians are so thorough and effective in staging news events that journalists have no opportunity to express voice, journalists will "fight back" by substituting information and perspectives into the news that are distinctively their own. What journalists substitute must, however, meet two constraints. First, it must permit politicians some opportunity to speak directly to the mass audience. This is because, as explained, the public dislikes having any one group dominate communication. Thus, journalists cannot offer general commentaries on the election in place of stories that show what the candidates are doing. Second, like a detergent company that wants to get consumers to buy liquid gel instead of soap bars, journalists must offer something that is the functional equivalent of the product they replace, i.e., something that provides information about the campaign. Much horserace coverage -- in which, for example, journalists let the candidate deliver his sound bite of the day but then explain how everything he has said is really just an appeal for votes – meets both of these constraints. Clever editing of sound bites to show how the candidate has contradicted himself also does so. Thus, much of the information that journalists substitute for candidate-supplied information – cynical commentary, investigations, and so forth – will reflect unfavorably on the president or presidential candidate. But this need not always be the case. If a journalist were to dig out *positive* information that a powerful official was keeping secret, I believe it would have just as much prestige value as negative

[10] The ability of ordinary citizens to act on this preference is obviously limited, but it is plausible to suppose that citizens would be upset if journalists simply stopped covering presidential events deemed by journalists to be exercises in public relations, and that journalists would be sensitive to such dissatisfaction.

information. Thus if, to take a hypothetical example, a bachelor president were to secretly wed while in the White House, or if a billionaire president were to secretly give most of his wealth away to charity, I conjecture that reporters would be as eager to report this type of secret information as comparable negative information. For it is not the negativity per se that is valued; it is the opportunity for a journalistic contribution to the news.

Clever politicians find ways to turn journalists' occupational interest in the expression of voice to their own benefit. Perhaps the easiest way to do this is to offer journalists a leak or, even better, an exclusive interview. Journalists are nearly always happy to accept such stories, and to report them in more-or-less the same terms that the politician wishes to have them reported, because they are able to call attention in these stories to their own role in the creation of the news.

Leaks and exclusive interviews are, by definition, limited in their effectiveness, since one cannot leak information or give exclusive interviews to the whole press corps at once. Candidates do, however, have the option of press conferences, press availabilities, and other forms of direct access to the candidate by reporters. Reporters appreciate these events since they can, by the questions they force the candidate to confront, seize control of the campaign agenda from the candidate.

Yet the fact that media access involves the potential loss of agenda control for the candidate makes candidates reluctant to grant such access. Generally speaking, they are most inclined to grant media access when they know what the reporters are likely to ask about and wish to be questioned on that subject. And this, in turn, lessens the value of access to reporters, making them feel manipulated by the campaign rather than genuinely "in charge" of their professional turf.

The Sources of Media Negativity

The game of media politics consists, in my theoretical argument, of virtually continuous struggle between politicians and journalists to control the content of news. Given the occupational stakes involved, struggle follows, and given the existence of struggle, mutual dislike among politicians and journalists would seem to follow as well. Finally, given mutual dislike, it is no surprise that much media coverage of politics and politicians is highly negative.

High levels of media negativity are thus a direct implication of my theory of media politics. But not uniformly high levels of negativity. I shall argue later that increases in media negativity since the 1950s, and more recent increases in media negativity in parts of the European press, are a journalistic response to more aggressive attempts by politicians to control the news. Beyond this, the Rule of Anticipated Importance holds that journalists are more apt to launch serious investigations of – which is to say, "dig up dirt" on – candidates who have importance in American politics. Also, the Rule of Product Substitution holds that reporters will be more negative in their coverage of candidates who attempt to manipulate the news. And since only the more important politicians will be in positions to make heavy-handed attempts at news management, they are the ones most likely to be heavily criticized by the media.

Thus, both the Rule of Anticipated Importance and the Rule of Product Substitution have direct implications for the conditions under which journalists will be most likely to provide negative coverage of candidates. Chapters 6 and 7 will further develop and test these implications. But in order to conduct the tests, it is necessary to develop a workable measure of media negativity. This task, which is more difficult than it initially appears, is first taken up in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

The Nabobs of Negativism

"*Too much attitude* is the main problem of the press today,"[1] said a White House correspondent quoted by James Fallows in his book on the press, *Breaking the News*. Fallows himself writes,

> To judge by the coverage, everything [in public life] is a sham. Conflicts are built up and they blow over, and no one is sincere. As onlookers we can laugh at and look down at the participants, because everyone knows it's all done for effect. (p. 179, 181)

Presidential campaign coverage has become so negative that it is now "a barrier between the candidates and the voters rather than a bridge between them," says Harvard scholar Thomas Patterson. "Election after election, the press tells the public the candidates are not worthy" (p. 25).

These views are widely echoed in the writings of other academics, in public opinion polls, in self-criticism by journalists, and in the speeches of the politicians who are the target of the media onslaught. When Vice-President Spiro Agnew complained in 1970 that the media had become "nattering nabobs of negativism," it was widely seen as a partisan attack. Today, the view that media negativity has gotten out of hand is almost universally accepted.

From many points of view, this development is a puzzle. Why would reporters, who typically profess love of public affairs and fascination with politics, insist on "tearing down" so much of what they cover? Why has a profession struggling with the pressures of market competition dished out so much more negativity than, by all indications, its mass audience wants? Why don't reporters and politicians strike a mutually beneficial bargain: Easy access to information for journalists in exchange for positive coverage for the politicians? Given that both journalism and public relations are now thoroughly professionalized, why haven't media relations become smoother rather than more conflictual?

The answer, as I will argue, is a generalized competition between politicians and journalists for control of the news. Politicians have a constant need to mobilize mass support and, except for mass advertising, news is the principal means by which they do so. Their wish to control the content of the

[1] Emphasis in the original.

news is therefore a deep occupational interest. But if journalists were to concede control of the news to politicians – if they were to become people who simply read or reprinted the press releases of politicians – their professional status would fall to zero. Their occupational interest is to make some independent contribution to the news, and criticism of politicians is one important means by which they do so.

How exactly the competition between politicians and journalists plays out will be analyzed in Chapters 5 and 6. The task for this chapter is to develop and validate a measure of media negativity that will carry the weight of this analysis. In particular, this chapter will develop measures of media negativity for three separate media: national news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*; the *New York Times*; and TV network news.

The task is not straightforward. Everyone agrees that the news media must report a certain amount of negative news. It is only when reporters cross over some invisible line and begin to express "bad attitude" that they become, in the eyes of some, nabobs of negativism. But determining when journalists have crossed this line presents daunting problems.

FROM PARTISAN TO NON-PARTISAN NEGATIVITY

Media negativity is nothing new in American politics. Consider the following paragraph from the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of the 1896 election:

> William J. Bryan, Democratic candidate for President, was denounced as worthy only of contempt, a dangerous man, a teacher of Anarchy, an advocate of the Gospel of Hate ... of wallowing at the feet of the Tammany King .... and the foe of law and order by the Rev. Robert B. McArthur this evening.[2]

The *Tribune's* scathing coverage of Bryan is quite easy to explain: It was a Republican newspaper and Bryan was a Democrat. To be sure, the Tribune was unusually partisan, even in the heyday of the partisan press. But Michael McGerr, describing Joseph Pulitzer's relatively independent New York World, writes

[2] Cited in Burgos, 1997.

> Eager for Democratic victory, [Pulitzer] used most of the weapons from the arsenal of party journalism. News stories in the World attacked James J. Blaine, portrayed a dispirited Republican party, and proclaimed the certainty of Cleveland's election. The paper, like most New York journals, did not run the party ticket on the editorial masthead because, as an editorial explained, "it is not necessary. Every column of our paper tells the story of our devotion to the principles of the Democratic party." But the World did celebrate Cleveland's triumph with a traditional display: three roosters crowded "VICTORY" on the front page.
>
> This conventional partisanship was a basic element of Pulitizer's journalism. He used the World to sell his politics, and he believed his politics sold the World.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, then, most American newspapers had a reliable partisan bias and this bias explained most of the negativity in their coverage. And some of this negative coverage was indeed *very* negative.

Although there has been no systematic examination of the decline of this sort of "partisan negativity," it is obvious from any cursory examination of newspaper archives that such a decline has occurred. A few papers, including the *Chicago Tribune*, remained blatantly partisan through the 1930s. But for many newspapers, the blatant partisanship of the 19th century died relatively early in the 20th century. Why this happened is an open question. There are many conjectures and essentially no published evidence. But by the 1950s, most American newspapers had become, for whatever reason, mostly if not entirely neutral.[3]

Not only did American newspapers cease by the 1950s to be overtly partisan; they also ceased to be very negative. "Lapdog journalism" is the way that Larry Sabato has described the journalism of the mid-twentieth century. But beginning sometime in the 1960s, journalism took a turn toward the negative. The new negativity was not simply a revival of the old partisan negativity, in which each paper supported one party and lambasted or ignored the other. Rather, the new negativity was heaped on all sides without fear or favor. Some, including Vice-President Agnew, have claimed that the new negativity was a mostly anti-Republican negativity, and there is some evidence to support this view. But Democratic Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton would deny that journalists ever cut them any slack, and as we shall see in

[3] As late as 1948, however, the *Tribune* carried a prominent front page story on Soviet Dictator Joseph Stalin's endorsement of Harry Truman in that year's presidential election (Burgos, 1997).

Chapter 6, much of what seems to be media bias against Republicans is better explained as journalistic reaction against the aggressive news management practiced by many Republicans.

The new media negativity seems to have escalated steadily since the 1960s. Our task now is to measure the new negativity so that we can first delineate its upward course and then explain it.

Conceptions of Negativity

If, for example, one candidate attacks another and journalists report the attack, no one can blame journalists for negativity. Nor, if a candidate is behind in the race or loses a debate, can the media be blamed for reporting that the candidate is losing the election.

What reporters can be and often are blamed for is negative coverage that they themselves have initiated. Thomas Patterson provides an extended example of this type of negativity in a "Reality Check" report by CBS correspondent Eric Engberg. In that report, Engberg questions candidate Clinton's 1992 statement that he could not yet offer a firm opinion on NAFTA because of its complexity. As Engberg exclaims:

> Time Out! Clinton has a reputation as a committed policy wonk who soaks up details like a sponge, but on an issue which will likely cost him votes no matter what side he takes, the onetime Rhodes scholar is a conveniently slow learner.

Commenting on this passage, Patterson contends that Clinton was not, as Engberg charged, dodging the NAFTA issue. Rather, Clinton was making truthful statements of his own actual ambivalence toward what was, after all, 1,078 pages of densely worded text. As Patterson also points out, Clinton maintained his ambivalent attitude during his presidency. Patterson writes,

> The Engberg news story ... is a case study in journalistic half-truths that pass for incisive analysis. If Clinton the candidate was circumspect in his support for the North American Free Trade Agreement, so is Clinton the president. In a meeting with Mexican president Salinas, Clinton said, "I reaffirm my support for the [NAFTA]. And I restate my belief that some trade issues between our nations still need to be addressed."

But if Patterson's case is a prime example of what many people regard as excessively negative media coverage, it is also an excellent example of the difficulty of measuring media negativity. For no one, including Patterson, would argue that reporters should ignore politicians' lies or half-truths. Yet it is

hard, except in unusual cases, to say when a politician has committed some actual offense and when a reporter merely thinks the politician has. Thus, in a published review of Patterson's book, *Washington Post* journalist E. J. Dionne (1994) argues that Engberg's rap on Clinton was quite fair. Dionne writes:

> Engberg had it right, as any honest Clinton adviser would readily admit. NAFTA was a terrible issue for Clinton because it divided his constituency. It did take him an eternity to take a stand. But Patterson doesn't go into the politics of the issue. He simply dismisses Engberg's comments as "fatuous." He takes a similar approach throughout the book, blaming the press for the things candidates themselves do for their own political purposes (p. 50)

So who is right? Patterson, who stresses the true complexity of the issue as the reason for Clinton's hesitation, or Dionne, who stresses the equally indisputable political bind that NAFTA presented for Clinton?

This type of question is one that cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of fair-minded and intelligent observers, as the disagreement between Patterson and Dionne attests. It is, moreover, the kind of question that comes up over and over if one attempts to distinguish "appropriate media negativity" from

I shall therefore take another approach: To measure the sheer amount of media-initiated negative coverage, regardless of the appropriateness of the negativity tone. For while fair-minded people may disagree over whether a particular criticism is merited, they may nonetheless agree on whether a negative comment has been offered or not.

The key element in this approach is media-initiation of the negativity. Hence reports of attacks by an opposition candidate will not be counted as media negativity, since reporters do not initiate them. An exception will also be made for reports that one of the candidates is doing badly in the electoral horse-race, since a losing performance by at least one candidate is the inevitable product of political competition.[4] What will count is any coverage in which reporters themselves initiate coverage that reflects badly on a given candidate. Negativity could involve anything from a snide remark to a barrage of

[4] If, however, a reporter reaches large conclusions about a candidate's general competence, or lack thereof, on the basis his performance as a campaigner, it is counted as media-initiated criticism.

critical commentary to a major journalistic investigation. The amount of media-initiated negative coverage, taken as a fraction of all coverage, will be the measure of media negativity.

It should be noted that measuring negativity in terms of sheer quantity does have drawbacks. The most important is that there is no necessary relationship between quantity and normative appropriateness: No matter how much (or little) negativity exists, it may still be too little (or too much), depending on what is actually merited. But, as the Patterson-Dionne disagreement indicates, analysts are unlikely to be able to reach agreement on the merits anyway. Meanwhile, a strength of the quantity approach is that it enables us to get on with the systematic analysis of what the reporters are doing.

Having now decided on a conception of media-negativity – i.e., any negative information, except information about the political horse race, that reporters themselves initiate – I can proceed to a more detailed discussion of how to count it. As will become apparent, there are still some difficult issues to be decided.

MUST NEGATIVTY INVOLVE AN EXPLICITLY NEGATIVE STATEMENT?

The sources of media-initiated criticism are often individual reporters, who take it upon themselves to offer critical commentary on some subject, as in the Engberg example above. But the source of negativity can also be collective, as when the press corps as a whole becomes obsessed with covering a matter that one of the candidates finds embarrassing. Media coverage in 1992 of Bill Clinton's alleged affair with Ginniger Flowers is an example. Sabato (1993) documents many other such "feeding frenzies."

Much of what I shall consider negative coverage contains no explicitly negative evaluation. Again, the Flowers story is an example, since most of this coverage simply reported information suggesting an affair without offering any sort of evaluation. But since the reporting involved a matter that Clinton had denied, and that was obviously embarrassing to his candidacy, it should, in my view, be counted as negative coverage.

The alternative approach, used by some scholars, is to count only explicitly negative evaluations as media negativity. An example of this was Engberg's comment that Clinton was "a conveniently slow learner" on NAFTA. The advantage of this approach is that it involves a very clear standard of negativity,

which then makes the coding of news stories easy and more reliable. The disadvantage, however, is that it misses a great deal of what almost anyone would recognize as negative coverage. Indeed, cases in which the reporters create major negative stories on the basis of straight — *often scrupulously straight* — reporting of embarrassing facts or alleged facts can be found throughout the period of this study and are among the most memorable stories of the campaigns. Examples include: In 1948, Thomas Dewey's contemptuous remark about a railroad engineer who caused his campaign train to lurch; in 1952, Richard Nixon's "secret fund," which was heavily covered by the press without much direct comment (except on the editorial pages); in 1956, Eisenhower's health, which the press also reported in excruciating detail; in 1964, the Walter Jenkins affair; in 1972, the Thomas Eagleton affair; in 1976, Jimmy Carter's *Playboy* interview; and in 1992, the Gennifer Flowers story. *Most of what I have classified as media-initiated criticism consists, as in these examples, of ostensibly straight news about topics that candidates do not wish to have reported and discussed.*

WHAT TO COUNT?

It is useful to compare my concept of media-initiated criticism with the notion of "bad press" developed by Robinson and Sheehan (1983) in their highly regarded study of media coverage of the 1980 presidential campaign, *Over the Wire and On TV*. These researchers count material as bad press if it involves "negative information" that has arisen from any source except the following: non-campaign events (e.g., economic news); attacks by partisan opponents, criminals, or anti-Americans; or any aspect of horserace competition.

Given this definition, "bad press" for Robinson and Sheehan is to some degree a residual category. In practice, however, their concept and mine are likely to identify much the same material: Negative information that has originated in neither non-campaign news events nor horserace coverage nor partisan attacks is likely to be information that the press itself has raised.[5]

[5] The only point of difference is over statements that arise from non-partisan sources, which Robinson and Sheehan always include, and that I include only if it appears that reporters have sought them out. If, for example, an environmental group holds a press conference to denounce a candidate, the rules used by Robinson and Sheehan would count coverage of this event as bad press, whereas I would not, because the press did not initiate the story (even though it did use its discretion to report it). If the same denunciations were carried in a feature story on the environment and in the form of statements by individual environmental experts, Robinson and Sheehan would continue to count the remarks as bad

My approach to tallying, or counting, criticism is, however, markedly different from that of Robinson and Sheehan. They seek to measure bad press at the level of the news report as a whole, characterizing each story as bad press, good press, or something else. I measure negativity at the level of each individual story element, typically the sentence but sometimes at the level of a clause or even phrase. In addition, I have developed a somewhat elaborate coding schemes to capture the content of each sentence. For example, for coding campaign stories in *Time* and *Newsweek*, I developed the following codes for specific forms of media negativity:

Candidate uses unfair, sleazy campaign tactic
Candidate is inconsistent, fuzzy on issues
Candidate takes wrong, ill-advised position on issue
Candidate is immoral person
Candidate lacks competence, ability
Candidate is cold person
Candidate is dangerous, crazy
Other press criticism

For example, press attention to Dewey's contemptuous remark toward the engineer on his campaign train was coded as indicating that Dewey was a cold person; the Eisenhower health story was coded in terms of personal competence and ability, since the suggestion was that the General might not be fit to serve as president; Gennifer Flowers' allegation was coded as a media-initiated suggestion that Clinton is personally immoral.

The coding scheme contains numerous other codes, including, for example, positive and negative codes for partisan attacks: thus, a candidate who can get the press to report his attacks gets a positive "own message" code and the target of the attack gets a (non-media-initiated) negative code. Most stories end up getting a mix of positive, negative, and neutral codes, with only some of the negative codes reflecting media-initiated negativity.

Robinson and Sheehan acknowledge that stories may contain a mix of positive and negative elements, but they nonetheless code only the story as a whole. Their rule is that if a story contains three

---

press, and here I would go along on the presumption that the press had actively sought out the comment. In practice, this difference in counting rules is not very consequential, in my opinion.

times more negative information than positive, the story, taken as a whole, is bad press. Thus, isolated negative evaluations, or negative comments that are offset by equal amounts of good press within the same story, are not counted as bad press by Robinson and Sheehan. Using the same three-to-one rule, Robinson and Sheehan also measure "good press" at the level of the story as a whole.

I can best illustrate both the approach I have taken and how it contrasts with the standard work of Robinson and Sheehan by means of an extended example. In their book, Robinson and Sheehan provide the following partial transcript of a UPI story. By their coding scheme, this story is, as they say, "neither good nor bad press, essentially colorless" (p. 113):

> Ronald Reagan today declined to characterize his handpicked running mate Geroge Bush as a second choice to Gerald Ford . . .
>
> Bush appeared at a nationally broadcast news conference and said, "We're delighted . . . I'm very pleased to have been selected. . . "
>
> Bush, reminded by several questioners how he had differed on many issues with Reagan during a sometimes bitter primary campaign, reacted sharply saying he did not intend to stand on the podium and 'be nickled and dimed to death' over differences with the former California Governor.
>
> Bush, who clashed with Reagan in the primaries on abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment, said the big issues this fall will be unemployment in the economy and foreign affairs.

By my coding scheme, these four sentences would get seven separate codes. The first sentence would be coded as a media-initiated negative reference to Bush, because it principally consists of the suggestion, which has almost certainly been raised by reporters rather than Reagan, that Bush is a second-choice selection for vice-president. The second sentence would be coded as a positive reference to Bush, because the reporter permits him to assert his positive feelings about his selection, albeit in a somewhat defensive context. The third sentence would get a positive and a negative code for Bush — the negative code for the press-supplied reminder that Bush differed from Reagan on many issues during the primaries, and the positive code for the report of Bush's response to the press. Finally, the fourth sentence would get a positive code for Bush for his assertion of what the real issues in the campaign will be, and a negative (but not media-initiated negative) code to the Democrats for Bush's reminder about the

weak state of the economy. There would also be a media-initiated negative code for the reminder that Bush and Reagan had been at odds about important policies in the past even though Bush seemed no longer to consider them important.[6]

By my coding scheme, then, this passage contains about equal amounts of good and bad news — four media-initiated critical references to Bush, but also three instances in which Bush was able to get out his own message. On balance, therefore, the story appears neutral, and in this sense my coding agrees with that of Robinson and Sheehan. Yet by my scheme of counting media-initiated criticism, this story is 56 percent negative, which is a large departure from the Robinson and Sheehan coding, which simply counts the story as a whole as neutral.

Yet, despite this difference, our approaches might well produce similar results across a wider range of cases. I suspect, for example, that the rest of the UPI story, which Robinson and Sheehan do not reprint, is more neutral than the passages they do reprint, so that if my scheme were applied to the whole story, the result would probably not be 50 percent media-initiated criticism, but more like 20 percent, which is closer to Robinson and Sheehan's score of colorless neutrality. Likewise, stories that contain enough negative material to be called "bad press" by Robinson and Sheehan — counting it, in effect, as 100 percent negative — would probably get less than 100 percent bad press by my coding. Hence, over many stories our approaches could well produce fairly similar results.

The point of this extended example, as I hope has been clear, has been neither to disparage the Robinson and Sheehan approach nor to acclaim my own. It has been, rather, to explain as clearly as possible what I have done and how it compares with a standard piece of work, so that readers will know what lies beneath the statistical summaries I report.

WHAT'S IN A FRACTION?

[6] In my calculation of scores, I make separate tallies for each party, so that if a candidate talks only about himself, his remarks affect only his party's scores, but if he talks about both parties, his remarks affect the scores of both parties. Thus, in my scheme, a candidate quoted as saying "I'm great" gets a positive code for having his message reported. If he is quoted as saying "The other guy is a bum," two codes are assigned — a positive code for the party making the assertion and a negative code for the target of the remark.

There is one additional methodological issue to face. In a sense, it is simply a technical question of how best to combine the content data into an estimate of negativity. But it is also a substantive question, in that how one counts the data determines the estimate of how much negativity exists — and, of course, one's judgment of whether the amount of negativity that exists is too high. I can best illustrate the importance of this issue by comparing my approach to that of Patterson (1993). He describes his measure of negativity as follows:

> [It] is based on favorable and unfavorable references to the major-party nominees in 4,263 *Time* and *Newsweek* paragraphs during the 1960-1992 period. "Horserace" references are excluded; *all other evaluative references are included* [emphasis added].

Thus, Patterson conceptualizes media negativity to include reports of candidates' attacks on each other as well as reporters' own evaluations. It also includes evaluational remarks from voters — "soccer moms," "angry white males," and so forth — explaining why they like or dislike a particular candidate.

My coding of *Time* and *Newsweek* was not designed to measure Patterson's concept. However, my coding scheme does include codes for candidate and other partisan attacks, partisan praise and self-puffery, and instances of both media-initiated praise and criticism.[7] Hence it is possible to construct a measure from my data that ought to capture much or perhaps most of what Patterson's measure does.

Patterson's measure of media negativity may be expressed as follows:

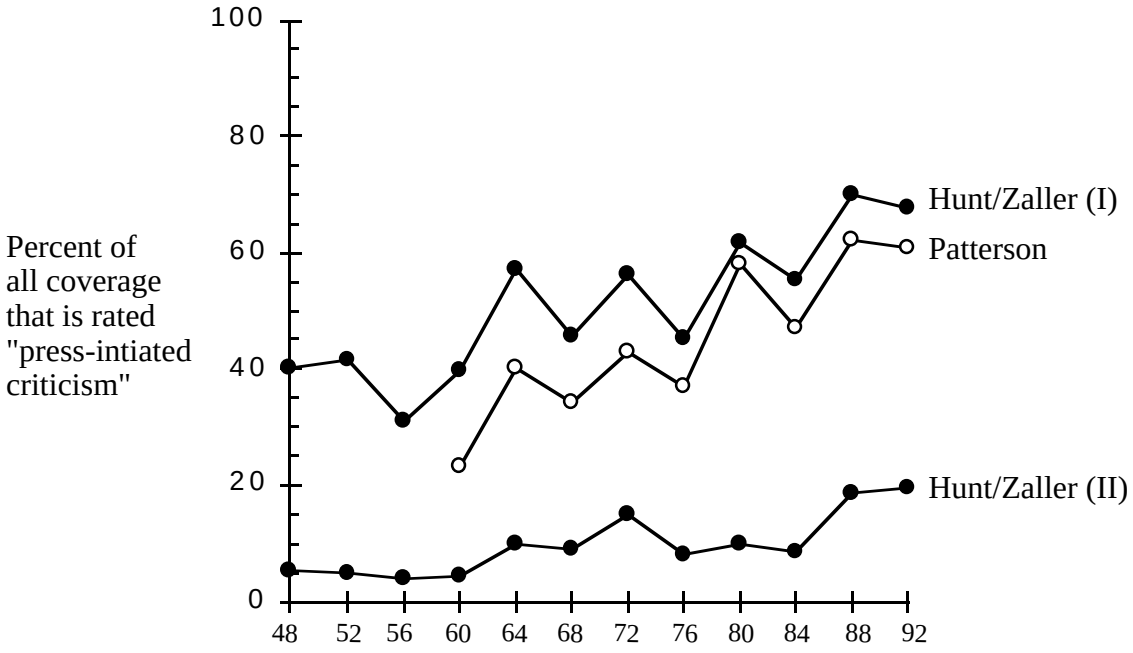
$$\%\ \text{Bad News} = \frac{(All \quad negative \quad evaluations)}{(All\ negative\ evaluations) + (All\ \ positive\ evaluations)}$$

Despite the differences in coding and sampling periods, when I calculate media negativity by this formula, I get results very close to what Patterson got, as shown in the top two lines in Figure 1. The r-squares between the upper trend lines is .92.

INSERT FIGURE 5-1 ABOUT HERE

[7] My coding scheme includes voter appraisals, but as part of "horse race" coverage, since they almost always appear in the context of such stories. Unfortunately, I cannot extract them from this larger category.

Figure 5-1. Three estimates of trends in negativity of press coverage of presidential elections.



Middle line shows Patterson (1993: 20) estimates of trends in "bad news" coverage of presidential candidates in *Time* and *Newsweek*. Upper line shows shows attempt to replicate Patterson results from Hunt/Zaller coding. Bottom line shows trends in "press-initiated criticism" as a percentage of all coverage.

The two sets of estimates are not, however, identical. Despite the substantial co-variation in year-to-year trends indicated by this statistic, my estimate of negativity is consistently a bit higher than Patterson's. The difference, however, is quite likely due to an artifact rather than to real differences in coding standards. Patterson's estimate covers the entire election year, whereas my estimate is based on data from only the final six weeks of the fall election campaign. As Patterson also shows (Figure 6.1, p. 221), overall levels of media negativity were about ten percentage points higher in the fall campaign than in the spring and summer phases of presidential selection. Hence, my estimate of media negativity, based on the fall campaign alone, ought to show higher levels of negativity than Patterson's estimate, based on the whole year. And this is exactly the difference that appears in the data.

These results indicate, if nothing else, that Patterson's coders and mine, though using different coding rules, made very comparable judgments about the amount of negativity that existed in a given election year. Yet reliable data cannot, by themselves, settle the question of how much media negativity exists. Given the same set of data, there are several different methods of calculating negativity. Patterson made his calculation by the method described immediately above. I propose, however, that a more valid estimate of media negativity can be obtained by calculating media negativity as a percentage of all campaign coverage, as follows:

$$\% \text{ Media negativity} = \frac{\text{(Press-initiated negativity only)}}{\text{(All campaign coverage, period)}}$$

This method of calculating negativity differs from Patterson's in two key respects: Its numerator is moderately smaller, in that it omits candidate and other partisan attacks, and its denominator is much larger, in that it includes all campaign coverage in the given year.

The estimates of media negativity obtained from the new method are shown as the lowest of the three trend lines in Figure 1. As can be seen, the new method yields estimates of media negativity that are consistently lower than Patterson's. This is to be expected: Shrinking the numerator and increasing the denominator of a fraction, as I have done, will necessarily make the fraction smaller. But does the new method yield more valid estimates?

Both of my departures from Patterson's method can be disputed. Omission of candidate and other partisan attacks from the denominator leaves out material that the public might find alienating, whether the reporters are responsible for it or not. And journalists do, after all, decide how much of the candidates' attacks on one another to report as news. Yet, on the other hand, some candidates run campaigns that are genuinely more aggressive and negative, and it could be misleading to assign responsibility for this negativity to the press. For example, if, as may be the case, underdog candidates offer more partisan attacks on the frontrunner than the frontrunner reciprocates, Patterson's method would make it seem that the press was picking on frontrunners by running more negative information about them. Since the press already stands accused by Patterson and others of being especially tough on frontrunners, it is important to create a measure that does not artificially create such a finding by a spurious method.

The danger of putting all coverage in the denominator, as I have done, is that the denominator could be changing over time in ways that distort the trend in negativity. In fact, the total amount of campaign coverage does vary somewhat across years, but not, I believe, in ways that distort the actual level of media-initiated criticism. First, the size of the *Time* and *Newsweek* "newsholes" for campaign coverage has increased since 1948. Yet, the change was mostly complete by 1968, so that total amount of coverage has been roughly flat in the period in which the increase in media-initiated negativity has occurred. Other aspects of campaign coverage have also changed since 1948, but, except for negativity, there have been no important time trends in the composition of campaign coverage.[8] Hence, the

[8] In particular, there has been no increase in the amount of horserace coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek*. Though there has been considerable year-to-year variation, the average has been about 25 percent of codable references (and less than 20 percent in the last two elections). The major difference since 1948 has been how horserace information has been handled. In the early period, the news magazines published state-by-state summaries of the race that were segregated from other campaign coverage — and that were very dry by current standards. In the current period, coverage is more thematic and more integrated into regular coverage, thus giving a horserace flavor to much of the overall reporting. Patterson (1993), in the discussion associated with his Figure 2.1, notes the greater integration of horserace coverage as a change from use of "policy schema" in campaign coverage to use of "game schema." Though Patterson reports no data pertaining to horserace coverage in the news magazines, a large amount of change along the lines he describes seems to have occurred. Yet the integration of horserace coverage into general campaign coverage, though important, does not eliminate the possibility of other kinds of content within stories framed by a game schema, most notably, media-initiated criticism of the candidates for matters not directly related to the horserace.

appearance of change in negativity in *Time* and *Newsweek* is not an artifact of change in any important aspect of the denominator; it is due, rather, to change in the numerator — which is to say, an increase in the actual amount of negativity.

Meanwhile, Patterson's approach has a denominator problem of its own, one that is, in my opinion, far worse than mine. For in calculating negativity as a fraction of all evaluational statements rather than all coverage, his measure is subject to distortion due to changes in the overall amount of evaluational material or due to small changes within a small volume of coverage.

Consider the following example. Suppose that, in some campaign, the media offer one negative evaluation and two positive ones. By Patterson's counting scheme, that comes out to 33 percent negative (1/(1+2) = .33. If, in the next campaign, the media offer two negative evaluations and one positive evaluation, Patterson's counting method will show that coverage has become 67 percent negative – (2/(1+2) = .67 – which is a doubling of negative coverage. Yet, because the sheet quantity of negative coverage is still low – only two negative comments – this would be a very misleading finding.

Although I do not claim that the number of negative comments in Patterson's measure is actually as low as in this example, the example does show the kind of problem to which the Patterson measure is vulnerable.

TOO MUCH NEGATIVITY?

Comparison of the two methods of calculating negativity, as summarized in Figure 1, make an interesting point about the amount of negativity that exists in the media. By Patterson's measure, 70

Horserace coverage in the *New York Times* has, by my coding scheme, increased only moderately, from about 15 percent of all codable references in 1948 to about 28 percent in 1992. This is a much smaller change than Patterson finds for changes in the use of the game schema, though direct comparison is difficult because of differences in concepts and in our denominators. By Patterson's data, it appears that about 70 percent of front-page *Times* stories used a game schema in 1992, compared to about 40 percent in 1960. (I have attempted to read these estimates off his Figure 2.1; e.g., .70 = .82 X .85; see the note to Figure 2.1.) My "story element by story element" estimate for horserace coverage in the *Times* in 1960 is just 18 percent.

Horserace coverage on TV has varied greatly from year to year but has shown no time. By my coding scheme, 28.5 percent of air time was given to horserace material in 1988 and 34.4 percent in 1992. These estimates agree fairly closely with those of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, which estimated network news horserace coverage as 27 percent of coverage in 1988 and 35 percent in 1992 (cited in Patterson, p. 73).

percent *of all evaluational references* are now negative, while by my method, about 20 percent of campaign coverage consists of media-initiated negativity.

The two estimates are not, as I have taken pains to show, mutually inconsistent, but they give very different impressions. From the estimate of negativity presented in his book, as well as some more qualitative evidence, Patterson contends that media negativity has gone beyond the point of responsible journalism and become "a barrier between the candidates and the voters." But that conclusion is much less compelling if my estimate, which is that only about 20 percent of media coverage is negative, is accepted as correct.

So which is correct? For the reasons given, I believe that my measure, which calculates negativity as a fraction of all coverage rather than as a fraction of a small subset of coverage, is preferable. But no single number – whether 70 percent or 20 percent or something in between – will answer the question of how much negativity is too much. For the key question is how much negative coverage politicians get in relation to how much they deserve, and that is a question that depends on a substantive reading of each story in relation to what the given politician actually did.

I have not, as explained earlier, attempted to make such judgments. I can, however, give readers a sense of the kinds of media reports that have been classified as media-initiated negativity. Data from the *New York Times* will work best for this purpose, so I will briefly introduce readers to how *Times* stories were coded.

My coding of the *New York Times* is based on abstracts of stories appearing in this newspapers rather than the original stories. These abstracts are regularly published in *The Index of the Times.* Following is a random sample of abstracts that have been coded as instances of “media-initiated

9

[9] Each “element” of each story abstract has been coded, with a story element defined as the text between periods or semi-colons. All coverage has been included except editorials, op-ed pieces, picture captions, speech excerpts, and any explicitly partisan commentary, such as cartoons. The procedure was first to code material under the rubric of presidential election, to proceed next to coverage under the names of the principal candidates, and finally to examine U.S. politics and policy for campaign references not included in previous sections. A strenuous and cumbersome effort was made both to capture all relevant references and at the same time to avoid double counting. This effort was made necessary by the fact that the organizing rubrics of the *Times Index* were not consistent across the period of study.

1. Gov Clinton, stung by recurring questions about his credibility, gives television interview from his mansion in Little Rock, Ark, in effort to control campaign coverage . . . (M), S 11, A 31:1

2. Clinton and Bush campaigns have started using paid-for airtime to fling mud, ushering in season of negative advertising

3. Gov Bill Clinton and his running mate, Sen Al Gore, have campaigned together on 20 of 52 days since their nomination in July... subtext is to draw comparisons between Democratic package and Republican one, since Pres Bush almost never shares stage with Vice Pres Quayle [also positive code for Clinton]

4. Newsmen from at least 6 natl pubs and Dem Natl Com agents have been at work for wks searching through data ... for material on Agnew ...probes focus on old charges of conflicts of interest

5. Nixon lr to securities indus leaders pledging to ease Govt regulatory policies disclosed; aide A Greenspan says it was not made pub because it covers 'narrow policy area'..

6. Sen Brooke flies to Cleveland to rejoin Nixon campaign; says he is bewildered about Nixon's remarks on school desegregation but stresses he is not leaving campaign...[10]

7. Pres Reagan, during televised briefing, says he will meet on September 28 at White House with Soviet Foreign Min Andrei Gromyko ... denies he has been motivated by election campaign and by criticism that Soviet-American relations have worsened under his Administration and that he has not met with any Soviet leader ...

8. Pres Reagan assails suggestions from some Democrats and news commentators that he showed signs of age in debate with Walter Mondale...

9. Mayor A Starke Taylor of Dallas insists that Republican National Convention is still the 'free enterprise' convention city leaders said it would be, even though city's taxpayers will end up paying from $1 million to $1.5 million for convention-related expenses ...

I stress the element of random selection in these examples. There were some 420 examples of media-initiated negativity in the coverage of the campaigns of Nixon in 1972, Reagan in 1984, and Clinton in 1992. From each of these campaigns, I randomly selected three examples, as shown above. This method of selection makes it likely that the stories will be reasonably representative of the entire set of media-initiated negative stories.

[10] In a broadcast on southern regional television that was initially missed by much of the northern press, Nixon suggested reservations about the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education. Reporters, in subsequently seeking the reaction of Senator Edward Brooke, a black Republican Senator who was a member of Nixon's campaign, found a way to provide information about the incident to northern audiences.

The criticisms in these examples obviously vary greatly in their seriousness, with subtexts that range from an allegation of garden variety hypocrisy (item7) to fitness for office (item 8) to possibly illegal corruption (items 4, 5).

Stories like these constitute roughly 10 percent of all *New York Times* campaign stories in the period 1968 to 1996. As I have said, I cannot say whether this figure represents more or less negativity than was actually warranted. But I hope that this exercise has given the reader a reasonably clear idea of what typical media negativity looks like and how much of it there is in relation to other kinds of coverage.

Overview of Media Negativity Data

As indicated, this study is based on content coding of the national news magazines (*Time* and *Newsweek*), the *New York Times*, and network TV news. Figure 2 gives a visual overview of the data from each of these media. (Additional details of the coding are contained in the Appendix to this chapter.) Two points stand out. The first concerns the pattern of partisan bias and the second concerns the amount of media negativity. Prior to about 1968 there was relatively little media-initiated negativity, and what there was had a slight anti-Democratic slant. But from 1968 onwards, there is notably more media-initiated negativity, and it mostly runs against Republican side. The big exception to the pattern of apparent anti-Republican bias is Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton, who, across all four media, got as much or more criticism as any Republican, including Richard Nixon. The Clinton case should stand as a warning against concluding prematurely that the media are guilty of anti-Republican bias; later evidence will indicate that there is little if any party bias in media coverage of presidential campaigns.

Nonetheless, large changes in media behavior seem to have occurred in 1968 and, taken altogether, they suggest a sort of *regime change* in media behavior. Prior to 1968, the media seem to have been a somewhat timid and slightly pro-Republican institution. After 1968, the media seems to be a much more assertive and often pro-Democratic institution.

The apparent regime change in 1968 is most striking in the case of *Time* magazine. Up to and including 1964, it was reliably Republican. But its behavior changed sharply in 1968, when, for the first time in the post-war period, it was much more critical of the Republican nominee, Richard Nixon. The

change at *Time* was almost certainly part of another, even larger regime change at the magazine: A change of leadership. In 1964 the unabashedly Republican publisher, Harry Luce, retired, and in 1968 Luce's managing editor and alter ego, Otto Fuerberger, followed suit. In both cases, the replacements were professionals who gave greater freedom to workaday journalists (Halberstam, 1979).[11]

INSERT FIGURE 5-2 ABOUT HERE

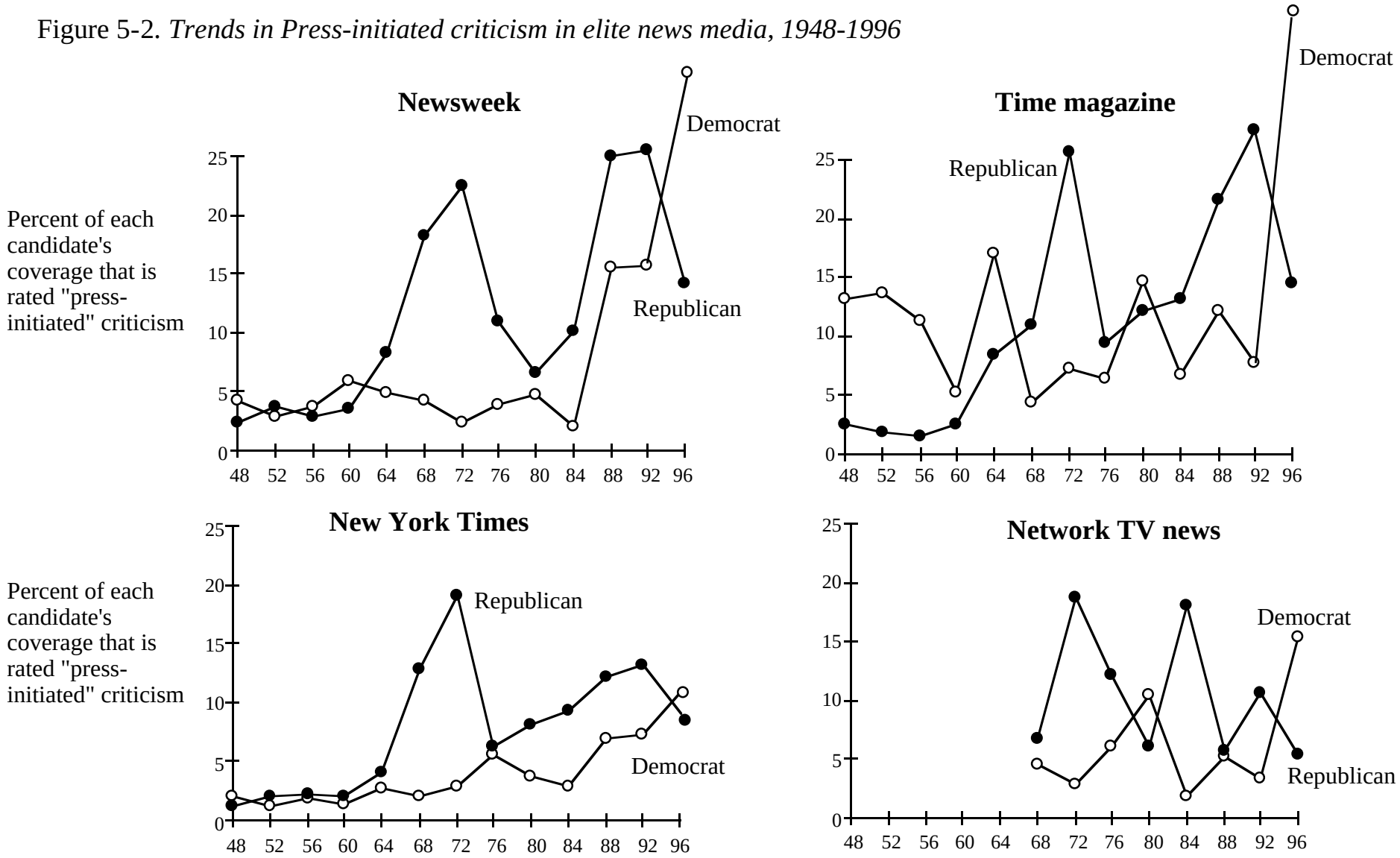
Meanwhile, the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* were switching in the 1960s from rough neutrality to often but not always pro-Democratic leanings. There is a clear suggestion in the data that *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* may have begun moving left in 1964, when for the first time in the post-World War II period both showed a noticeable tilt toward a Democratic candidate. But, however this may be, the big change came, as it did for *Time*, in 1968. As we shall see later on, 1968 also seems to have been a turning point in the way candidates behaved toward the media.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main point of this chapter has been to develop a plausible measure of media-initiated negativity and to familiarize the reader with what it measures. Chapters 5 and especially 6 will put this measure to work in analyzing patterns of interactions between politicians and the media.

[11] As Halberstam (1979) has recounted, a similar regime change was occurring at about the same time at another traditionally Republican publication, the *Los Angeles Times*, and with the same result: By 1968, the venerable Republican mouthpiece was leaning left. Also at about the same time at the traditionally Republican *Chicago Tribune*, public incorporation led to the appointment of a professional editor and a decline in right-leaning partisanship on the news pages (Burgos, 1996).

Figure 5-2. *Trends in Press-initiated criticism in elite news media, 1948-1996*



Note: Data are based on last six issues of the fall campaign in *Time* and *Newsweek*, and October and November in the *New York Times* and on network TV news.

APPENDIX

This book reports content analyses of presidential election coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines from 1948 to 1996, TV network news from 1972 to 1996, and *New York Times* coverage over the period 1948 to 1996. Only for the news magazines has it been possible to code the actual stories. For the other media, abstracts of media content have been used, as described below.

All coding has been done by Mark Hunt, a recent graduate of UCLA. Technically, Hunt is a professional research assistant to this project, but he has done more work than I have been able to pay him for simply because he finds it interesting. On two occasions, I have made a careful evaluation of his coding and found the quality very high.[12] Comparison of his coding with findings from other studies, as well as the internal structure of the data he has created, indicate that the reliability and validity of his work on this project have been high. Note, for example, that when Hunt's coding is compared with results published in Patterson's study, as in Figure 1, the correlation is .96.

Coding of newsmagazines was based on an elaborate 39-code scheme, as briefly described above and available from the author upon request. Because this monograph focuses on negativity, it makes little use of data from the full coding scheme, as all codes are usually collapsed to either "media-initiated criticism" or "other." Some use is made of the horserace codes, however.

The coding scheme was designed to capture overall coverage at the level of each individual candidate rather than at the level of the campaign as a whole. Hence, any story that referred to both candidates has been counted as part of each's coverage. This has led to a considerable amount of what

[12] Near the beginning of this research, Hunt and I both coded 30 weeks of news magazine coverage of the presidential primaries. The correlation between our codes -- aggregated at the level of weekly summaries -- was .96. In a later project unrelated to this one, I wrote out coding instructions and, on the basis of this written communication only, asked Hunt and two other people to code some news magazine data. One of the other coders had extensive coding experience and the other had none. Aggregated at the level of weekly summaries, their scores correlated at the level of .70, with no coder standing out as good or bad. However, Hunt's coding proved more valid in practice: for his coding, the correlation with the dependent variable in the analysis was .71, while for the other coders it was around .50. See Zaller and Chiu, 1996, especially note 9, p. 404, and associated text. Another evaluation project, based on a sampling of Hunt's coding for this project, is in process and will be included as part of the published report of this research.

amounts to double-coding at the level of the campaign as a whole, even though it is single-coding at the level of individual candidates. For example, the statement that "Nixon calls McGovern too radical" would be counted in Nixon's coverage as positive partisan coverage, because the press has reported Nixon's campaign message, and counted negatively in McGovern's coverage as negative partisan coverage, because he has been the target of a partisan attack (though not a media-initiated attack).[13]

The main part of my analysis is based on coverage at the level of individual candidates (especially Figure 2), for which these counting rules are well-suited. But in few places I sum the individual candidate scores in order to make statements about coverage at the level of the campaign as a whole. The counting rules are not ideally suited for such statements. Yet because I deal with rates rather than absolute amounts of coverage, and since the major party candidates get fairly equal amounts of coverage, it seems unlikely that these campaign-level statements are misleading.

The 39-code scheme used for the newsmagazines could not be reliably applied to the abstracts of *New York Times* stories. Hence an abbreviated, six-code scheme was developed, one of which codes was "media-initiated negative," as described above. The other codes were "positive horse race," negative horse race," "other positive" (which included most of candidates' own statements, including partisan attacks), "other partisan negative" (including cases in which a candidate has been the target of an attack, and "other").

As with news magazines, most stories, and some story elements within a story, have been assigned multiple codes. For example, a statement that "Nixon ahead of McGovern in *Times* Poll" would be positive horse race for Nixon and negative horse race for McGovern. A statement that "Nixon aide denies *Washington Post* story of Watergate break-in" would be coded as "other positive" (to credit Nixon's denial) and "media-initiated negative" (to indicate that the story originated with a charge by journalists). Randomly chosen examples of these abstracts are given above in the text.

---

[13] But if Nixon said, "I'm the right candidate for America," it would count in his coverage only. Likewise, if a story said, "Nixon ahead of McGovern in critical states," it would count as positive horserace for Nixon and negative horserace for McGovern. But if the story said, "Nixon excites crowds on campaign trail," it would be positive horserace coverage for him only.

Coding of network television news on ABC, CBS, and NBC was based on news abstracts published by the *Vanderbilt Television News Archive*. The abstracts provide less detail than the Times abstracts, so data obtained from them may be less reliable, as noted below. The coding scheme distinguished ten categories: 1) all references that the candidate would consider positive, including quotes of his own statements and those of supporters; 2) positive horserace for candidate; 3) negative horserace for candidate; 4) neutral horserace; 5) horserace, but direction, if any, unclear from abstract; 6) neutral background or general campaign relevant news; 7) candidate is target of partisan attack; 8) event news that is bad for candidate (e.g., report of faltering economy); 9) media-initiated criticism; 10) uncodable.

The Vanderbilt abstracts have become more sparse in recent years, as indicated by the fact that the amount of uncodable material rose from about two percent in the early period to about 12 percent in 1992. The uncodable material may have had an actual slant, but its direction was not evident from the abstract. In the analyses reported in this monograph, uncodable material has been excluded from the denominator on which rates of negativity have been calculated. This exclusion is tantamount to assuming that the uncodable material contained media negativity at about the same rate at the material that could be coded.

The Vanderbilt abstracts supply the total time for each story, but not the amount of time taken up by each part of the story. The general rule was to treat each sentence (that is, text separated by periods) as a distinct story segment and to assume that each segment received an equal amount of the total time for the story. This procedure, though a rough one, was constant across all story types and so probably would not tend to create bias.[14]

The following example illustrates the counting procedure. All punctuation is original, but the division into numbered story elements reflects the coding rule:

1. (Studio: Garrick Utley) The candidacy of Ross Perot featured; President Bush's attack on Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton this week recalled.
2. On Today, PEROT – comments [i.e., a quote from Perot].

[14] Some exceptions were made when they seemed appropriate. In cases, for example, in which a report was exclusively positive or negative, the anchor's introduction was coded as having the same tone as the report, on the assumption that it would be setting up the material that followed.

3. Perot's ad on the American economy shown; economic solutions in his book United We Stand outlined on screen.
4. Perot spokesman Orson SWINDLE - says the people wanted to see Perot's ad show again.
5. New, shorter Perot ad shown.

The first element, which seems to be the anchor's introduction to a story on Perot, was considered neutral for Perot. The remaining four elements, which appear to present generally pro-Perot material without any suggestion of criticism, were coded positive for Perot. According to the Vanderbilt abstracts, the whole segment ran 140 seconds, so each of the five segments was assumed to be 28 seconds. Since four of the five segments were rated positive for Perot, 80 percent of story — a total of 112 seconds — was rated as "other positive" coverage of Perot. Perot also got 14 seconds of neutral code for Utley's introduction. In addition, Bush receives 14 seconds of "other positive" positive code for his attack on Clinton, and Clinton, as the target of the attack, gets 14 seconds of (non-press initiated) negative code.

Estimates of media negativity across these several media are moderately comparable for the years 1968 to 1996, as the following intercorrelation matrix indicates.

	New York Times	*Newsweek*	*Time* magazine
Network TV news	.62	.46	.62
New York Times		.83	.75
Newsweek magazine			.86

The average of these correlations is .59. The average of comparable correlations for the period 1948 to 1964 is much smaller, about .28.

Chapter 6

The Rule of Anticipated Importance

In the 1996 election, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole were both vulnerable to media slams on a similar set of allegations. Each candidate raised millions of dollars in "soft" and arguably illegal campaign money, with substantial amounts of it coming from foreign sources. Clinton's foreign contributions came principally from Asia, Dole's from the Caribbean. Also, each was rumored to have cheated on his spouse. For Clinton, these affairs were mostly old news (except for the one with Lewinsky, which the media didn't yet know about). For Dole, the affair was old but not yet old news, and the *Washington Post's* Bob Woodward made a major investment in investigating it, including, it must be assumed, the rumor that Dole had paid for an abortion for his 1970s mistress.

One might suspect that, with each candidate vulnerable to roughly the same extent for the roughly the same presumed offenses, the mass media would make a point of being even-handed in the investigation of both sets of allegations. But this was not the case. Despite the media's reputation for anti-Republican bias, reporters paid almost no attention to Dole's alleged transgressions. Even after the *Washington Post* had Woodward's meticulously researched account of Dole's affair in hand and ready for print, it declined to run it. Instead, reporters focused their attention on Bill Clinton, most notably the allegation that he had engaged in illegal fund-raising, which became the subject of intense media investigation in the last month of the campaign.

Because the news media did not seriously follow up on the Dole allegations, it is impossible to know how comparable they were to the Clinton allegations. But there is reason to believe that the allegations had some degree of substance.[1] This pattern of highly selective media negativity perfectly illustrates the Rule of Anticipated Importance. Since Clinton maintained a commanding lead over Dole throughout

[1] On Dole's questionable fundraising, see "Politics: The contributors; Foreign G.O.P Donor Raised Dole Funds," Leslie Wayne, *New York Times*, October 21, 1996, B8. Concerning the allegation that Dole secured an abortion for his mistress, see "Press Clips," James Ledbetter, *Village Voice*, November 5, 1996, p. 20.

1996, there was never a point at which Dole's anticipated importance warranted a heavy investment of resources in attacking him.

I should perhaps add that the Rule of Anticipated Importance does not focus on media negativity per se. The claim, rather, is that journalistic resources of all kinds, including space and air time, depend on the anticipated importance of the object of coverage. The present chapter develops a series of empirically observable implications of Rule of Anticipated Importance on resource allocation and presents the evidence necessary to evaluate them. Most refer to highly specific, empirically measurable features of presidential elections. There is also a special analysis of the candidacy of Ross Perot. No single piece of evidence is definitive, and many of the empirical regularities that I cite could be explained as well by other theories. I contend, however, that no other theory can as effectively explain the range and number of empirical regularities as the Rule of Anticipated Importance.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

As discussed earlier, ordinary voters do not want to study the records of every senator and governor (and billionaire) who may decide to run for president. They want to know only about the two or perhaps three who have a realistic chance of winning. As also explained earlier, journalists are delighted to provide this kind of screening service, since it gives them an opportunity to exercise journalistic voice.

Yet nothing in my theory of media politics implies that journalists will make these screening decisions arbitrarily. On the contrary, their incentives are to accurately anticipate what will happen and to report it in a timely fashion. These incentives derive from two sources, one internal to journalism and the other external. The external incentive is the "cry wolf" syndrome. If journalists were to regularly pick out and boost weak candidates while ignoring strong ones, too many of the favored picks would fall flat and too many of the ignored ones would do well, thus eventually embarrassing the profession.[2] So journalists have a collective incentive to get the story right. Reinforcing this collective incentive — and perhaps the key to it — is the cutthroat competition that exists among individual journalists. Although journalists, like

[2] The sensitivity of a minimally attentive and not very self-assured public to failures of press prediction should not be overestimated, as the novelist George Orwell drives home in his book *1984*; it is likely, however, that some sensitivity exists.

stock market investors, often run in packs, each individual reporter, like each individual investor, has an incentive to find undervalued candidates and invest in them. Thus, poor choices by existing pack leaders create opportunities for would-be pack leaders, and journalism is full of such ambitious individuals. The collective interest of journalists in making good picks, in combination with individual interests in pointing up weak picks, creates a strong incentive for journalists to pay attention to the evidence as they decide which candidates to cover and which to ignore.

This leads to my first deductive inference from the Rule of Anticipated Importance, which concerns the earliest stage of presidential elections, the period of the so-called "Invisible Primary" (Buell, 1996). This is the period prior to the Iowa and New Hampshire contests, when candidates have begun to campaign but primary election balloting has not actually begun. The inference, labeled D5 for "Deductive Inference Number Five," is as follows:

> D5**.** *The amount of coverage allocated to candidates in the Invisible Primary will be roughly proportional to standard indicators of political strength — because stronger candidates have greater anticipated future importance.*

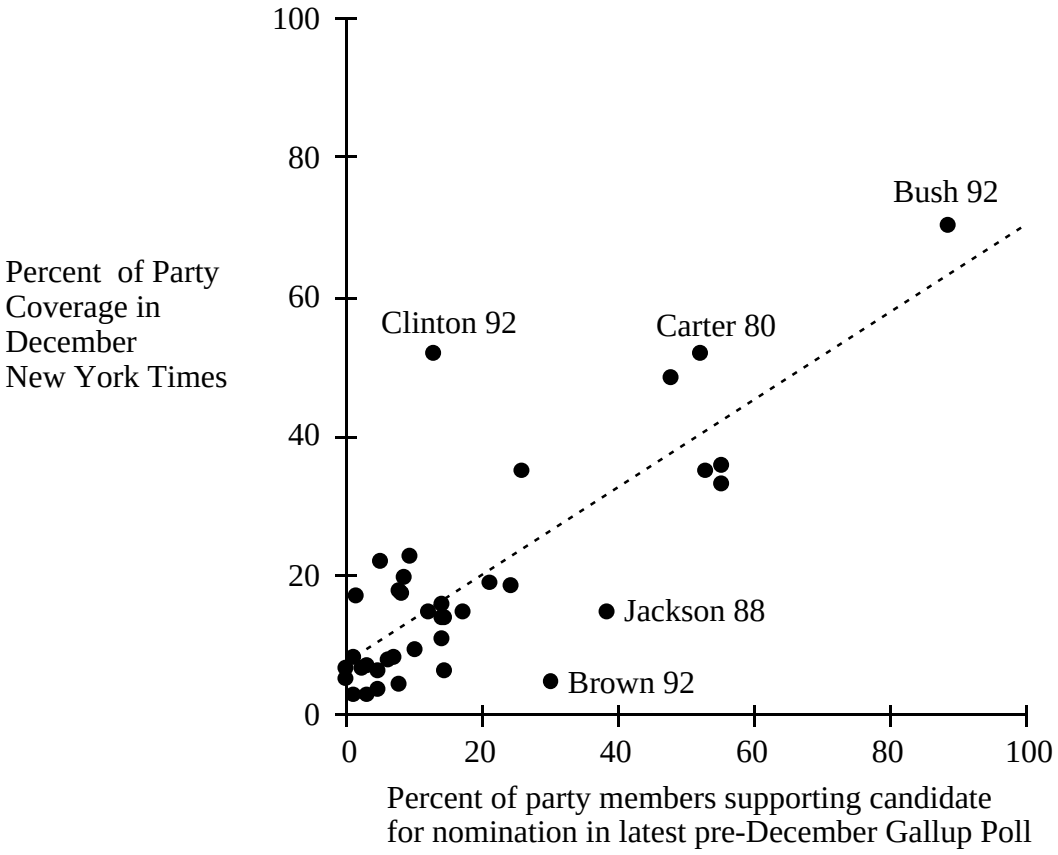
The most obvious indicator of a candidate's strength in the Invisible Primary is his or her standing in the polls, which regularly query citizens about which candidate they favor for their party's nomination. One would therefore expect to observe a strong relationship between poll standing and amount of press coverage.

Buell (1996) and Mayer (1996) have presented a good deal of evidence tending to support this inference, and Figure 6-1 presents some more. For all candidates who have run in the Invisible Primary between 1980 and 1996 and received any degree of support in the polls, Figure 6-1 shows the relationship between Gallup Poll standing in the last pre-December poll in the year prior to the election and amount of coverage in the *New York Times* in that December. Poll support and amount of coverage are measured as fractions of all poll support and all coverage within a given party, respectively.

INSERT FIGURE 6-1 ABOUT HERE

A handful of points in Figure 6-1 are labeled as aids to interpretation. In 1991, for example, President Bush was favored by 78% of Republicans in the last pre-December Gallup Poll and received 70 percent

Figure 6-1 . *Poll standing and percent of coverage in New York Times*



Note: Estimate of coverage based on number of references i *New York Times* abstracts; poll coverage omits Don't Know in calculation of support rates

of the campaign coverage allocated to Republican candidates in the *New York Times*. The simple correlation between December coverage and pre-December poll standing is .81. The corresponding correlation between December coverage and January poll standing is even higher, .91. This suggests that journalists are, as my theory would suggest, doing a better job of anticipating the future than reflecting the present.

There is, however, an alternative interpretation for these simple correlational data, which is that *New York Times* stories (along with similar coverage in other media) cause January support for candidates rather than anticipate it. Since I cannot rule out this possibility on the basis of the present evidence, I do not claim that these data prove the Rule of Anticipated Importance, but only that they are consistent with it. This evidence, however, is only the initial piece of a larger pattern of theory and data. Let me therefore continue with my argument.

Although reporters have strong incentives to pay attention to the polls as indicators of a candidate's future importance, there is no expectation that they will be slaves of the polls, for two reasons. First, reporters understand that polls are highly fallible indicators of political strength, and that, particularly in the early stages of presidential contests, they may measure a candidate's name recognition rather than any real support. Second, reporters do not want to be overly dependent on any single source, since this would limit their own ability to decide what to cover and ignore. Hence, in making coverage decisions, reporters give weight to other qualities, especially intangible ones that require journalistic judgment, such as a candidate's capacity to give a good speech, to attract a good professional staff, to win support among party activists, and to perform well in front of television cameras. Here, for example, is how veteran reporter Jules Witcover explains his decisions about which presidential contenders to cover and ignore during the period of the Invisible Primary:

> ... If a guy is a bomb, it's our job to ignore him... If I have decided that a guy doesn't deserve any more attention than I give him, it's not because of the polls. It's because I've been out there... I've heard what people say, and I've heard what [the candidate is] doing, and I've made a judgment that this guy is just not cutting it.[3]

[3] From "The Campaign for Page One," PBS Frontline documentary report, 1984.

In light of these considerations, the Rule of Anticipated Importance leads to a second deductive inference:

> D6. *Some candidates will get considerably more press attention than standard indicators of political strength alone would seem to indicate, while others will get considerably less, and, further, these departures will be intelligible in terms of clear strengths and weaknesses of the affected candidates*.

A close look at Figure 6-1 reveals three points that are far enough from the trend line to be considered outliers: Jerry Brown and Jesse Jackson in 1992, who got little coverage in the *Times* despite relatively strong poll results; and Bill Clinton, who got heavy coverage despite poor poll numbers.

All three outliers are readily intelligible in terms of the Rule of Anticipated Importance. Brown and Jackson, though riding high in the early polls, had shown in previous presidential races that there were sharp limits to their appeal — Brown because of his image as the flaky "Governor Moonbeam," and Jackson because too few whites would support an African-American minister with strongly liberal credentials. Meanwhile, Clinton, though unknown to most ordinary citizens, was well-known to the national press, which judged that he had the political skills and ideological flavor necessary to go all the way.

I do not claim that these or other journalistic judgments were necessarily correct, but I do contend that most informed political observers would grant that they were at least plausible — just the kinds of judgments, according to my theory, that rationally ignorant citizens want reporters to make and that reporters relish making.

Another test of D6 is that the candidates who go on to win a party nomination ought, if reporters are doing a good job of anticipating future events, to get somewhat more coverage in December than their poll standings alone would justify.[4] Candidates with strong financial backing ought also to get more coverage, since money helps win votes once balloting begins. Both expectations are met. Controlling for poll standing, Table 6-1 shows that candidates who went on to win their party nomination in the period 1980 to 1996 got 12.3 percentage points more December coverage in the *New York Times* than

[4] I thank George Tsebelis for suggesting this test.

candidates who did not win a party nomination. Fundraising in the year prior to the election, as reported to the Federal Election Commission, also predicts heavier press coverage.[5]

INSERT TABLE 6-1 ABOUT HERE

The Invisible Primary ends with the primary contests in Iowa and New Hampshire, whereupon the Visible Primary commences. This phase of the nomination process runs for several months in a drawn-out sequence of state-level contests. Since 1976, it has been conventional wisdom that the earliest contests winnow down the field of candidates to a relative handful, and may, in addition, create sufficient momentum to propel an early winner all the way to nomination (Matthews, 1978; Polsby, 1983; Bartels, 1988). In the most rigorous analysis of momentum, Bartels (1988) has been able to quantify the boost that winning the New Hampshire primary gives to overall chances of winning the nomination.

Given that early primary contests break many campaigns while making a select few, the Rule of Anticipated Importance leads us to expect that

> D7. *Journalists will allocate more coverage to early primaries than to late ones, since early primaries contribute more marginal information to who is likely to win nomination.*

There is much evidence consistent with this expectation, especially as regards the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries, which almost always get highly disproportionate treatment (see Adams, 1987). But "almost always" indicates that exceptions do occur, and these exceptions are, as in the analysis of the residuals in Figure 6-1, quite informative.

In 1992, Tom Harkin was the clear winner of the Iowa caucuses, but got little media attention and no momentum out of it. The reason was that Harkin was a Senator from Iowa, and this led reporters to interpret the result as the victory of a favorite son rather than a rising star. The media, as this indicates, are not impressed by early wins per se; they are impressed by early wins only insofar as they augur genuine political strength, which the victory of a favorite son does not.

---

[5] Something like the Rule of Anticipated Importance seems also to be operating in congressional races, where local reporters try to cover candidates who have a chance to win and to ignore others. See Westlye (1991).

Table 6-1 . *The effect of poll standing and subsequent capture of party nomination on December coverage in New York Times, 1980-1996*

	B	Beta	t-ratio
Poll standing (in %)	0.44	.58	4.71
Later Wins Party Nomination (0-1)	9.1	.22	1.79
Fundraising Year Prior to Election (in millions)	0.18	.20	2.35
Intercept	5.0		
N= 46			
Adjusted r-square = .71			

Note: Dependent variable is percent of party coverage in *New York Times* going to each candidate. Poll standing and funding data are based on latest pre-December Gallup poll; "don't know" responses omitted in calculation of candidate support rates, as reported in Mayer, 1996, Table 2.1, Table 2.3 and Political Hotline service . *New York Times* coverage was estimated by the number of references in *New York Times Abstracts*, where semicolons delineated references.

The 1992 New Hampshire primary offers another example of the same lesson. With Bill Clinton wounded by press allegations about extra-marital affairs and draft evasion, Paul Tsongas won the Democratic contest. But the national press corps was unimpressed. They considered the former Massachusetts Senator a merely regional candidate who was too lacking in political charisma to win a major party nomination. Hence they refused to give Tsongas, who was noted in several stories as resembling TV's Mr. Rogers, the bonus coverage that winners of the New Hampshire primary traditionally get. "I just don't see Paul as the real story," said one reporter in asking his superior to assign him to cover someone else. "I don't know ten reporters in one hundred who think he can be the nominee," said another (Rosenstiel, 1993, p. 135-6).

I take the examples of Harkin and Tsongas — like those of Jerry Brown and Jesse Jackson — as prime cases of the Rule of Anticipated Importance in action. Reporters pay attention to objective indicators of likely success, notably poll standings, key victories, and fundraising prowess, but not in a mechanical fashion. They also take account of subjective judgments about who is, in Witcover's terms, "a bomb" and "not cutting it." My claim, thus, is that both the general tendency of reporters to allocate heavy coverage to the winners of early primaries, and reporters' departures from this tendency in the particular cases of Harkin and Tsongas, tend to support the Rule of Anticipated Importance.

As I have laid out this argument, the cases of Harkin and Tsongas are classic examples of exceptions that do tend to prove a general rule. The general rule in D7 is that reporters allocate extra coverage to early contests because they believe they contain more information about future events than other contests. But when, as in the case of Harkin in Iowa and Tsongas in New Hampshire, reporters have particular reason to believe that early contests are poor portents of future events, they withhold the usual bonus coverage, thereby revealing that the motivation underlying the general rule.

Another well-recognized regularity of the primary election process is that poorly rated candidates who suddenly do "better than expected" receive large amounts of coverage in the short term. Thus, as Polsby (1983) has observed, the most important candidate to beat in any election is always that elusive fellow named "expected." The Rule of Anticipated Importance provides a ready explanation for this phenomenon:

D8. *Since candidates tend to be covered in proportion to media estimates of their future success, candidates who suddenly do "better than expected" will have been underestimated and hence undercovered in the past, and so will merit a ration of unusually heavy coverage.*

The first four deductions from the model attempt to explain which candidates get covered and how much. I turn now to the nature of this coverage: Which candidates get covered favorably and which unfavorably?

A central claim of my model is that reporters seek to make a distinctive journalistic contribution to the information that gets reported as news. Reporters can, on certain occasions, express journalistic voice by injecting positive information about candidates into news stories. Explaining why a "dark horse" candidate is likely to do especially well in the future, or why a candidate has done "better than expected" in the New Hampshire primary, are examples of occasions on which journalists will eagerly report positive information about presidential candidates.

But such occasions are uncommon, especially for candidates who have established themselves as pack leaders. Journalists count on such candidates to provide more-than-adequate amounts of positive information about themselves, and therefore concentrate their own energies on finding negative information about them. And in keeping with the Rule of Anticipated Importance, they may be expected to concentrate especially on information about little known candidates (because the marginal value of their contribution is larger) and stronger candidates (because stronger candidate have greater future importance). This leads to two further deductions:

D9, D10. *For top tier primary candidates, reporters will offer press-initiated negative information a) in positive proportion to how well the candidate is doing in the horse race and b) in negative proportion to how much is already know about the candidate.*

For primary elections from 1976 to 1992, Zaller and Hunt (1995) examined *Time* and *Newsweek* coverage of all candidates who made it into the "top tier" — that is, the elite circle of candidates who won or came close to winning a major primary and were generally considered potential nominees.[6] The

[6] A total of 19 candidates in both parties made our cutoff. The two weakest candidates who nonetheless made it into our study were Jerry Brown, in the period after he won several primaries late in the 1976 contests, and Pat Robertson, in the period after finishing second in Iowa and winning the Michigan

results were consistent with D9 and D10: Within the top tier, stronger and less known candidates got the highest rates of press-initiated criticism.[7]

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Similar considerations come into play in coverage of general elections, but lead to different expectations. As in the primaries, stronger candidates ought to attract more press-initiated criticism. The argument here can best be stated as an interrogative: Why spend time flogging a dead or dying horse? Why bother to criticize someone who's going to lose? Reporters ought, rather, to concentrate their fire on candidates who have a future.

If it sounds strained to suggest that the press is especially tough on front runners and incumbents because it cares about their power to influence future events, perhaps it will help to think about the matter in terms of resource allocation. Press-initiated criticism is often a form of enterprise reporting. It utilizes the best journalistic talent for long periods of time with no certain returns. Why squander such resources on hopeless challengers, non-incumbents, and third parties with no capacity to affect outcomes? Who cares what their shortcomings are?

Here is yet another version of the same argument: From the crassly commercial point of view of "selling newspapers," why would anyone waste time exposing the shortcomings of losers? No one would care.

The inference, therefore, is:

> D11. *Press-initiated criticism of candidates in general elections will be positively associated with political strength.*

Because, as we have seen, the Rule of Anticipated Importance implies that journalists should provide more information about less known figures, it might be further argued that reporters should concentrate their attention on the lesser known of the two general election candidates, namely, the candidate of the non-incumbent party. (Every election in the last 48 years has been contested by either an incumbent

---

caucuses in 1988. Candidates remained in the study only during the period in which they remained viable.

[7] Hagen (1996) shows that candidates are more likely to attack their rivals when the rivals become more successful. That phenomenon is separate from my empirical result, which concerns press-initiated criticism only.

president or, in a few cases, an incumbent vice-president.) This argument is sound as far as it goes, but there is an important countervailing argument: Incumbent candidates are newsworthy not because they are less known, but because they are the current occupants of very powerful offices, thus giving them automatic "anticipated importance." Incumbent presidents — and also incumbent vice-presidents, when they run as presidential candidates — also often carry baggage from their term in office that attracts press scrutiny even when the incumbents are well-known. For example, Richard Nixon was suspected in 1972 of Watergate crimes, Jimmy Carter bore responsibility for handling the Iran hostage crisis in 1980, and George Bush had to live with press suspicions over the Iran-Contra scandal in 1988, all of which matters attracted press criticism. Our expectation, then, is that one of the candidates will attract more scrutiny because of the power and baggage that come with incumbency, and the other will attract more scrutiny because he is the lesser known candidate, thus yielding no clear prediction beyond D11.

These data on media negativity, as described in Chapter 4, will constitute the dependent variable in the test of D11 that follows.[8] The main independent variable will be "political strength," which can be measured in a variety of ways from poll and electoral data. Rather than pick the one measurement that "works best," which tends to capitalize on chance variation in the data, I have used an average of the most plausible measures.[9] As control variables, I use party, year, and incumbency status. None of

---

[8] Actually, the data in Figure 2 cover different time periods for different media. For TV and the *New York Times*, they cover the entire fall campaign, from September 1 to election data. But owing to resource constraints, the *Time* and *Newsweek* data include only the final six campaign issues. One reason, for example, that *Time* and *Newsweek* were so much more critical of Clinton in 1996 than the other media is that the press-initiated controversy over illegal fundraising broke in the last weeks of the campaign, and so constitutes a larger fraction of coverage in the newsmagazines than in the other media. Both to eliminate this sort of problem and to facilitate another test to be reported below, my analysis of press criticism in this section will use data from October 1 to election day.

[9] The dependent variable in the analysis will be press criticism during October, as explained in the previous note. Presumably the measure of political strength should refer to the same period. To get such a measure, I used the average of Gallup's early October poll and the actual election returns. It was unclear, however, whether I should use the average of the candidate's support in the two indicators or the average of a candidate's two-party support, thus excluding undecided survey respondents and supporters of third party candidates from the calculation of the political strength of the two major party candidates. My solution was to average the two averages, or more clearly put, to average each candidate's 1) percent support in the October poll, 2) percent of the two-party vote in the October poll, 3) percent support in the election, and 4) percent of two-party vote in the election.

In a recent paper, Bartels (1997) suggests averaging coefficients obtained from running separate regressions for each potential measure. The implicit assumption in this recommendation is that each potential measure defines a unique model. In the present case, however, I am undecided between alternative indicators rather than alternative models, which is much less serious than uncertainty over

these variables is required by theory, but the test of D11 will be more credible if it controls for these possibly confounding factors. The appropriate measure of incumbency, however, is uncertain: It could count presidential incumbents, incumbent presidents and vice-presidents, or something in between. Given this uncertainty, I again resort to the average; specifically, I have created a measure that gives one point to incumbent presidents, a half point to incumbent vice-presidents running for the top job, and zero to non-incumbents.

The results, divided into two time periods to reflect the visual break in the data in 1968, are shown in columns 1 to 4 of Table 6-2 for each of the four media outlets. I have used logit in this analysis to take into account the floor effects that are apparent in Figure 2. For the earlier period, the results show a time trend toward more negativity in two of the media and a party bias in favor of Republicans in *Time* magazine, but no consistent tendency for stronger candidates to get more criticism. The time trend, moreover, is almost wholly due to Time magazine's attacks on Johnson in 1964. The one medium with a coefficient for Political Strength that approaches statistical significance has the "wrong" sign: That is, in *Time*, stronger candidates get <u>less</u> criticism. Hence D11 fails for the earlier time period. In the second time period, however, Political Strength has the expected effect in all four media and achieves statistical significance in three of the four. This supports D11. Also note, however, that all four media now register a significant pro-Democratic bias. I shall return to this disturbing indication of media bias in the next chapter.[10]

INSERT TABLE 6-2 ABOUT HERE

To test the overall statistical significance of these findings, I transformed the criticism scores in each media to a common mean, averaged them, and made a logit transformation. Results of a test based on these overall scores are shown in the fifth column of Table 6-2. As can be seen, Political Strength has a moderate overall effect, with a standardized coefficient of .40. The t-ratio for this coefficient implies a one-sided p-value of .015.

---

models, so my form of averaging seems preferable — and not only because it avoids the Draconian penalties built into Bartels' procedure.

[10] Patterson (1993, Chapter 3) reports several figures that relate press negativity to a candidate's standing in the polls. But owing to differences in his measurement of press negativity, as described in Appendix A, and his use of time categories, I cannot be sure of the applicability of his results to D7.

Table 6-2. *Models of press-initiated criticism, 1948-1996*

		Newsweek	*Time*	*NY Times*	TV	All media
1948 to 1964						
Year	ß =	0.70	0.20	0.66	n.a.	0.56
(0 to 4)	b =	0.19	0.14	0.17		0.16
	t =	2.53	1.02	2.34		2.38
Incumbent		-0.09	0.21	0.39	-	0.30
(0, .5, 1)		-0.08	0.46	0.32		0.27
		0.27	0.90	1.14		1.05
Political strength[a]		0.30	-0.38	-0.30	-	-0.02
(percent vote share)		-0.01	-0.05	-0.01		-0.44
		0.92	1.64	0.91		1.61
Democratic Candidate		0.21	0.79	-0.32	-	0.50
(0 or 1)		0.16	1.50	-0.23		0.39
		0.74	3.86	1.11		2.05
Intercept		-3.09	-1.88	-3.78	-	-3.62
Adjusted r^2		.31	.64	.28	-	.50
Number of cases		10	10	10	-	10
1968 to 1996						
Year	ß =	0.45	0.48	0.34	-0.01	0.36
(5 to 13)	b =	0.18	0.13	0.10	-0.00	0.10
	t =	2.42	2.74	2.29	0.08	2.58
Incumbent		0.12	0.41	-0.06	0.64	0.31
(0, .5, 1)		0.24	0.56	-0.09	0.98	0.43
		0.58	2.10	0.36	4.79	2.01
Political strength[a]		0.35	0.18	0.49	0.34	0.40
(percent vote share)		0.05	0.02	0.05	0.04	0.04
		1.68	0.90	2.98	2.50	2.52
Democratic Candidate		-0.35	-0.25	-0.54	-0.20	-0.36
(0 or 1)		-0.64	-0.31	-0.72	-0.28	-0.46
		1.76	1.31	3.48	1.57	2.43
Intercept		-6.47	-4.70	-5.43	-4.51	-5.23
Adjusted r^2		.47	.53	.68	.78	.70
Number of cases		16	16	16	16	16

Note: The dependent variable is the log odds of the proportion of each candidate's October coverage that has been coded press-negative. The first entry in each cell is the standardized coefficient, the second is the unstandardized logit coefficient, and the third is the t-ratio

[a] An average of early October poll strength and final vote share, as described in text.

Although this analysis has grouped 1964 among in the earlier time period, it might make sense to regard it as a transitional election. On the one hand, the press was more critical than in any previous election in this dataset, which was, as it turned out, an omen of a big change to come. But, on the other hand, the increased negativity was confined to one outlet, *Time*, which was still a Republican organ, and therefore seems better understood as Harry Luce's last partisan attack on a liberal Democrat than as an instance of Johnson's anticipated importance.[11] Meanwhile, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* were actually more critical of Goldwater, the landslide loser, than of Johnson — a clear indication that they were not yet paying attention to future importance. On the whole, then, 1964 seems a better fit with the earlier press regime than with the later one.[12]

The notion that a candidate's standing in the political horserace affects the inclination of journalists toward criticism fits quite well with qualitative evidence. During the 1996 campaign, Margaret Warner of the *NewsHour* asked the press secretaries of recent losing candidates whether reporters had treated losers differently. The following exchange ensued with Marlin Fitzwater, who was President Bush's press secretary in the losing effort of 1992, and Maxine Isaacs, who played the same role for Walter Mondale in 1984:[13]

> MS. WARNER: Does the press start to treat you differently as it looks worse?
>
> MR. FITZWATER: Well, they treat you better I think when they see disaster ahead.
>
> MS. WARNER: A sudden wave of sympathy comes over--
>
> MR. FITZWATER: They're at their worst when you're on top, winning, and they're going for you, and, uh, so at the end, you know, reporters are coming up and saying, you know, the--he has really done a great job, what a great guy--and he has this dignity and inner strength--yeah--well, let's see that in print.
>
> MS. WARNER: Do you find the same thing?

---

[11] Although *Time's* attack on LBJ produced the most negativity to date in these data, I doubt that it surpassed the partisan venom of Republican outlets during Franklin Roosevelt's time.

[12] These results in Table 6-2 are indeed sensitive to whether 1964 is counted among the early or late cases. That is, if 1964 is counted among the early ones, there is no time trend toward greater negativity in the early period. And in the later cases, the p-value on Political Strength coefficient in the overall model falls from .037 to .029, though remaining statistically significant at exactly the same level. (This regression test omits TV from the comparison, since TV data are not available in 1964, and also restandardizes the criticism scores to include 1964, a wholly technical adjustment.)

[13] November 1, 1996.

MS. ISAACS: Absolutely.

THIRD PARTY CANDIDATES

The Rule of Anticipated Importance has implications for Third Party candidates as well as Major Party ones. Most Third Party candidates receive scant attention in the mass media. The reason, as Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus (1996, p 35) write, is that

> . . . broadcasters and publishers do not think they warrant attention . . . As James M. Perry of the *Wall Street Journal* put it, "We base [our decision] on the simple proposition that readers don't want to waste their time on someone who won't have a role in the campaign. We're not going to run a page-one spread on a fringe candidate. We don't have a multiparty system. Until we do, nobody's going to cover these candidates."

The presence of numerous potential "third party" candidates in each election cycle — in 1980, some 150 presidential aspirants filed preliminary statements with the Fair Election Practices Commission — virtually forces reporters to ignore most of them. Yet some Third Party contenders manage to get the press to take them seriously. How do they do it?

The straightforward implication of the Rule of Anticipated Importance is that reporters want to cover candidates who have strong potential support and are therefore destined to do reasonably well if covered, and to ignore movements that have no realistic chance of gaining support no matter how much they are covered. The press, in other words, wishes to report and if possible to anticipate the news, but not to make it.

This argument leads to the inference that reporters will cover Third Party candidates in direct proportion to how well they expect them to do in the election. If, therefore, we imagine a scatterplot in which "percent public support" is on the X-axis and "percent share of coverage is on the Y-axis," we should observe that all points cluster along a line with intercept 0 and slope 1. Thus if a candidate had 10 percent of public support, he would get 10 percent of coverage; if he had 20 percent of public support, he would get 20 percent of coverage, and so on. The line defined by such a series of points might be called the "equal share line."

But it is not quite so simple. In many cases, Third Party candidates who have no chance to win may nonetheless affect the election, either by tipping the balance toward one of the major party candidates or

throwing the outcome into the Electoral College. In addition, Third Party candidates tend to be new to national politics and hence relatively unknown. This means that the public's interest — and therefore reporters' interest — in new information about them will be high. From the Rule of Anticipated Importance, both of these auxiliary considerations lead to the expectation that Third Party candidates may get somewhat more coverage than their level of political support alone would suggest. Hence the inference I reach is:

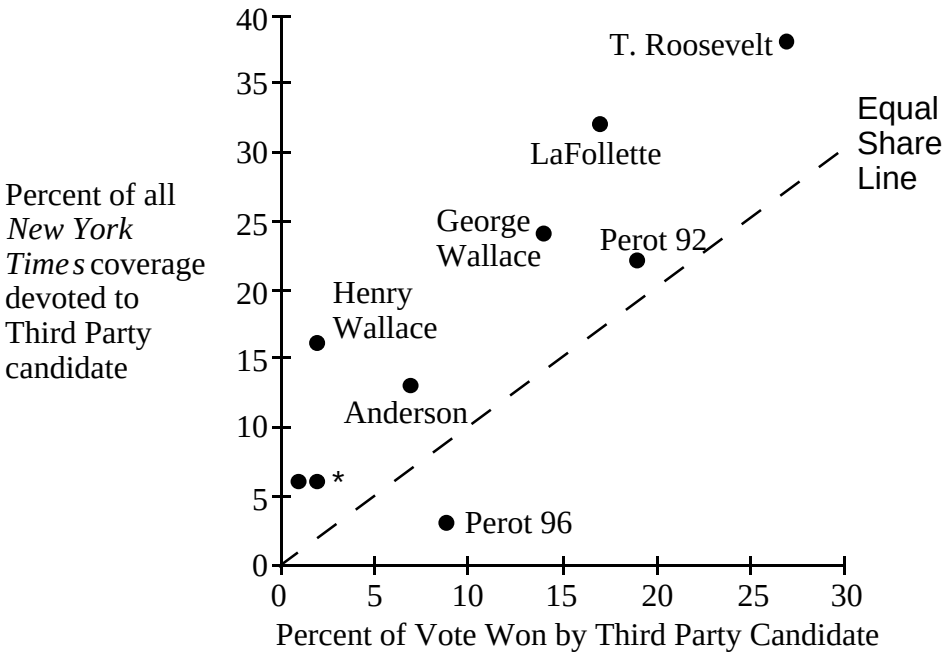
> D12. *Third Party candidates will be covered at a level somewhat above what would be expected on the basis of their public support alone, if they are new to national politics or capable of affecting the outcome of the major party contest.*

Data on the allocation of *New York Times* coverage to major Third Party candidates from 1912 to 1992 are shown in Figure 6-2. The results, except for very minor Third Party candidates, are fully consistent with D12.

INSERT FIGURE 6-2 ABOUT HERE

Other data confirm that this pattern of Third Party coverage is not unique to the *New York Times*. In the last five weeks of the 1948 campaign, Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond each got seven percent or more of total campaign coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines (but only two percent of the vote each); in 1968 George Wallace got 28 percent of the coverage in the two news magazines (but 13.5 percent of the vote); in 1980 John Anderson got 10 percent of coverage (but 6.6 percent of the vote); and in 1992 Ross Perot averaged 23 percent of newsmagazine coverage (but 19 percent of the vote). For network TV news, the percent of all October coverage was 26 percent for Wallace in 1968, 11 percent for Anderson in 1980, and 22 percent for Perot in 1992. Thus, in each of these cases in all four media, Third Party candidates were covered at rates that were proportional to political strength yet somewhat above the "fair share" coverage line. These departures from a rule of strict "equal share" coverage are so consistent as to make it unlikely that reporters were actually trying to achieve it. Reporters obviously pay considerable attention to viability in allocating coverage, but, equally obviously, it was not the only thing they were paying attention to.

Figure 6.2. Press coverage of major Third Party candidates



* Lemke, Thurmond

In striking contrast to these results, however, all four elite media gave Perot substantially less coverage in 1996 than his percentage share of the vote, which was 9 percent. This result also fits D12. In Perot's second run for the presidency, he was no longer novel, and, in contrast to the 1992 race, the 1996 race was so much a runaway that no Third Party candidate could affect the outcome of the Major Party contest.

There is, of course, a chicken-and-egg problem here. Media coverage could, as I have suggested, reflect reporters' anticipation of election results. But it could also be a cause of election results, in the sense that more coverage could lead to more support rather than, as I maintain, vice versa. Hence I claim the data in Figure 6.2 as consistent with my model rather than as tending to prove it.

Third Party candidates, like their major party brethren, often suffer press-initiated criticism. The incidence of such criticism ought to be consistent with the Rule of Anticipated Importance, as follows:

> D13. *Press-initiated criticism of Third Party candidates will be positively associated with political strength.*

This expectation holds. Within each of the four media outlets separately and all of them together, Political Strength in the early October Gallup poll and vote share in the November election were significant predictors of Media Negativity.[14] On average, each additional percentage point of the Political Strength led to an additional 8 percentage points of Media Negativity.[15] Note that the dependent variable in this analysis is the proportion of all coverage that is press-initiated criticism. Hence the result is more than a mere repetition of the previous finding that amount of coverage is proportional to political strength: Stronger candidates get more coverage, and a larger proportion of that coverage is negative.

This result is important in two respects. First, it suffers no chicken-and-egg problem. That is, it is unlikely that high levels of press criticism are the cause of political strength rather than vice versa. And second, the finding goes against the grain of a plausible alternative hypothesis, namely, that press criticism of stronger candidates is motivated by a desire to make the race closer and therefore more

---

[14] In the all-media test, I used a fixed effects model that controls for correlated errors within each media and within election years. For both poll strength and vote share, the effect of Political Strength was significant at about p=.035, one-tailed. (The fixed effects model was an OLS regression that included dummy variables for each election year and each medium.)

[15] The intercept in both models was about 7 percentage points.

exciting, rather than, as I have claimed, by anticipations of future importance. For if journalists were motivated only to make the horse race closer, as a counter-argument would assert, increases in Third Party strength would lead journalists to boost Third Party candidates in general elections – and to withhold negative coverage – up to the point at which they take the lead in the race. Yet, as the data indicate, this is not how journalists behave. I stress that both of these points are clean findings of considerable theoretical interest.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF ROSS PEROT

On February 23, 1992, Ross Perot appeared on CNN's Larry King show and said that he would become a candidate for President. Unsurprisingly, the national media failed to take notice. Perot had no prior electoral experience, no mass following, and no clear plan for capturing the White House beyond a promise to finance a first-class campaign from his private fortune. By any reasonable standard, his "anticipated future importance" was negligible. Nonetheless, his candidacy caught on. A month later, two national polls found that about 20 percent of the public preferred Perot in a three-way race with Bill Clinton and then-President George Bush. At that point the national media began to pay attention. Over the few weeks, virtually every important news outlet profiled the candidate, including his bold plan for a 50-cent gasoline tax to help balance the federal budget. Riding this wave of mostly positive publicity, Perot pulled ahead of Bush and Clinton in the polls in late May, and through about mid-June his lead continued to edge upward. But media coverage then turned sour — massively so. According to Zaller and Hunt (1995), Perot got far more press-initiated criticism than any presidential candidate in the history of the new nominating system. Perot's support in the polls now plummeted, and in mid-July he withdrew from the race.

What is most notable about the events that launched the Perot candidacy in 1992 is how disconnected they were from the traditional bases of power in American politics — or any base of power whatsoever. As an Independent, Perot had no ties to the political parties and hence no built-in partisan support. As the self-proclaimed enemy of special interests, he got none of the group endorsements and organizational support that often sway voters. Nor did any nationally prominent politician embrace his

candidacy. The whole spring campaign — in both its ascent and descent phases — was driven by words and images carried in the mass media. It was, in other words, an unusually pure case of media politics.

Given this, my theory of media politics ought to have something to say about the Perot candidacy. And, indeed, it does. All but one of the major turns in media coverage of both Perot's 1992 run for the presidency and his 1996 campaign are, as I will now seek to show, well-explained by my theory of media politics in general and the Rule of Anticipated Importance in specific.

The one important feature of the Perot phenomenon that the theory cannot explain is what happened in the first weeks after Perot's announcement on the King show. An obscure but energetic political activist and organizer, Jack Gargan, had been urging Perot to run for president for some months. In November, 1991, Gargan had induced Perot to speak to members of his group[16], and in a newsletter mailed to 100,000 group members at about the time of Perot's appearance on the King show, Gargan had urged group members to contact Perot and ask him to run. Also, producers of the morning talk shows on CBS, NBC, and ABC invited Perot to appear on their shows after seeing him on CNN. Perot's performance on these and other news shows was, by all accounts, extremely persuasive, and it launched his campaign. In particular, the combination of the Gargan newsletter and the TV show appearances rapidly generated 1.1 million phone calls to Perot's Dallas headquarters from people wishing to volunteer in his campaign. It also seems to have netted Perot about 7 percentage points of the roughly 20 percent support he had in the earliest polls (Hunt and Zaller, 1995). The reason my theory cannot explain this development is that the primary actors were not the national news media, but a grass roots organizer and the producers of morning "Infotainment" programs. But the theory can explain what came afterward.

- *The Rise of Ross Perot in spring 1992*. According to the Rule of Anticipated Importance, reporters cover candidates who appear likely to be successful. The three indicators of likely success that I discussed earlier were poll standing, financial viability, and the demonstration of raw charisma. By late March, Perot had abundantly succeeded on all three indicators, whereupon coverage began (D5, D6).

[16] The group was THRO – Throw the Hypocritical Rascals Out – which urged the defeat of all incumbent members of Congress.

The great volume of this coverage may be explained by D6. (See Zaller with Hunt, 1994 for further discussion of the emergence of Perot.)

Although theories based on the notion that the press pays attention only to candidates of the two major parties or "responsibly" screens out unsuitable candidates might be surprised or embarrassed by the coverage given to Perot, my theory is not, since it makes no reference to such factors.

• *After Perot's candidacy takes off, media coverage turns extremely negative*. According to D9 and D10, candidates who emerge as viable presidential candidates are criticized by the press in positive proportion to political strength and in negative proportion to their prior experience. In May and June, Perot was leading in the three-way race for president and had no prior political experience. Thus, the extremely heavy criticism is again consistent with expectations from the model.

• *Perot got generous amounts of coverage in the 1992 general election but stingy coverage in 1996*. In particular, he got more than his "fair share" of coverage during the 1992 fall campaign, when he was a new force in American politics and seemed capable of affecting the race between Bush and Clinton, and less than "fair share" coverage in 1996. As explained earlier, this is consistent with D12.

• *The press was tougher on Perot in 1992, when he was stronger, than in 1996*. On the network news, 8.5 percent of Perot's coverage was press-initiated negative in 1992, compared to 3.7 percent in 1996. For *Time* these figures are 27 percent and 11 percent; for the New York Times they are 14 percent of all coverage and 6 percent. These data are consistent with D13, which holds that the rate of press-initiated criticism is proportional to political strength. *Newsweek*, however, fails to show this pattern: 30 percent of Perot's 1992 coverage was press-initiated negative, compared to 40 percent in 1996. This failure of expectation does not seem very serious, however, in light of drastic reduction in Perot's coverage in 1996, when it was only 3.7 percent of election coverage, compared to 30 percent of all election coverage in 1992. And overall evidence suggests D13 holds strongly, as shown in Table 6-3.

The October 23, 1992 edition of the MacNeil/Lehrer *NewsHour* provides an interesting insight into journalistic criticism of Perot. Jim Lehrer opened the usual Friday night political discussion with Mark Shields and David Gergen by noting that "the big news of the week is the surge in the -- the Perot surge. There is some indication now that it may have stopped." But Shields and Gergen disagreed that the

surge has stopped, offering several reasons to believe that Perot remains a force in the election and in American politics generally. This part of the discussion ends with Shields observing, "But he's had a free ride. He [Perot] hasn't had the kind of [media] scrutiny that ..." [17] Here Lehrer interrupts to describe pressure from the Bush campaign on the media to be tougher on Perot.

The interesting point is Shields' perception that the press was giving Perot a "free ride." Although this was scarcely true in a literal sense, it may well have been true in another and more important sense: Given that "the big news of the week" was Perot's continuing "surge," Perot may have been getting less "scrutiny" than, by the Rule of Anticipated Importance, he merited. But the scrutiny deficit did not last long. The next day, at a Saturday taping of an appearance for the 60 Minutes show, reporter Leslie Stahl induced Perot, apparently through a ruse (Goldman et al., 1993, p. 595), to say on camera that he had quit the race in July because of fear that the Republicans planned to sabotage his daughter's wedding. His comments were released as a wire story that evening, critically discussed on the Sunday morning talk shows, and became the basis of extremely critical news reports on Monday on all three networks programs. Coverage of Perot's remarks that Monday became, in fact, the single most negative night of TV news for any candidate in October (Zaller and Hunt, 1995), thereby causing a five-point drop in public support for Perot over the next few days and ending his surge.

The upshot, then, is that both the amount of Perot's criticism in 1992 and its timing reflected Perot's political strength or, as I prefer, anticipated importance.

The Special Case of Horse Race Coverage

One of the first deductions from my model was that a rational citizen would know — or at least be able to intuitively sense — that elections are likely to have more effect on him than he is likely to have on them. That is, the chances that an election may affect individual welfare (taxes, benefits, military obligation) are quite real, whereas the chances that an individual can affect an election outcome are quite negligible. In light of this asymmetry, citizens should be more interested in consuming coverage about

[17] The second part of this comment, referring to press scrutiny, does not appear on the Nexis transcript of the show, but is clearly audible on my VCR tape of it.

who is likely to win than issue coverage helping to inform them on how to cast a wise vote. I therefore infer that

D14. *Reporters will provide more horserace coverage than issue coverage.*

My data collection was not designed to test this proposition. Although it did measure the frequency of horserace references in some media, it made no effort to measure issue coverage. However, Thomas Patterson's study of media behavior, *Out of Order*, attempts to measure both. Patterson's (1993) conclusion is that

> The dominant schema for the reporter is structured around the notion that politics is a strategic game. When journalists encounter new information during an election, they tend to interpret it within a schematic framework according to which candidates compete for advantage (p. 56).

Patterson's claim here is not that the bulk of information conveyed in the news concerns the political horse race; it is, rather, that news tends to be framed, or organized, by concern about the strategic game between the candidates. Thus, issues may be discussed, but discussion is typically framed in terms of the impact of the issue on the election outcome rather than as a guide for citizens in choosing between the candidates or choosing the best policy. Patterson finds that, in recent years, about 70 percent of all *New York Times* coverage of presidential campaigns is framed in terms of what Patterson calls the "game schema," as against about 15 percent of what he calls a "policy schema" and about 15 percent of coverage in other schemas.[18] I take this as empirical support for D14.

The Rule of Anticipated Importance has a further implication for the kind of coverage candidates get. The closer a candidate gets to actually winning the election and assuming office, the greater the anticipated importance of general information about him, especially information about the policies he has promised to implemented. For candidates on the verge of losing, by contrast, this sort of information becomes completely uninteresting. From the view of the Rule of Anticipated Importance, the only thing interesting thing about losing candidates is whether can get themselves back into a competitive race.

[18] I have attempted to read these estimates off his Figure 2.1; e.g., .70 = .82 X .85; see the note to Figure 2.1.

To test this implication, which was suggested to me by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, I divided coverage of candidates into two exhaustive categories — horserace coverage and everything else. The expectation is that

> D15. *In the final month of the campaign the greater a candidate's political strength, the larger the proportion of coverage that will be devoted to substantive information and the lower the proportion devoted to horserace matters.*

To make the test of this inference more stringent, I set aside press-initiated criticism, since we already know that winning candidates get more of this non-horserace form of coverage.

The data strongly support D15. Within each of the four national media, there is a negative correlation between Political Strength and the proportion of a candidate's coverage that was devoted to horserace matters. In an overall test, in which the dependent variable is the average of criticism across all four media, the correlation was -.54.

Concluding Remark

I noted in the opening chapter that there is an important methodological advantage in detecting general patterns of media behavior in the context of presidential elections. It is that presidential elections have a fixed structure and recur at regular intervals, with politicians, journalists, and voters going through the same basic routines over and over, except under somewhat different conditions. This common structure has made it possible to see the effects of differences in conditions, thereby confirming or disconfirming various arguments that might be made.

Nowhere has this methodological advantage been on greater display than in this chapter. For a set of eight general elections, 16 major party candidates, and dozens of lesser politicians, it has been possible to obtain comparable measures of political strength and test their effect on media coverage.

Given that the interests of politicians, journalists and citizens are the same in other news domains, it is quite likely that the Rule of Anticipated Importance holds in these other domains as well – domains such as foreign policy news, Congressional politics, and economic policy-making. Indeed, the basic idea for the rule was initial formulated by Entman and Page (1997) in the context of a study of the Gulf War.

But because of lack of comparability of cases within these domains, it will be much harder, if not impossible, to marshal the sort of systematic data presented in this chapter.

Chapter 7

The Rule of Product Substitution

Although a central tenet of my theory of media politics is that politicians and journalists struggle with one another for control of the content of news, that struggle has not been much in evidence in my analysis so far. I have, to be sure, depicted journalists covering some candidates while ignoring others, and heaping extra criticism on frontrunners while letting also-rans off lightly. But these patterns of coverage have had, by my account, little to do with a jealous professional desire to control news content. Reporters' primary motivation has been to provide a rationally ignorant public with the kind of information it wants, viz., information about politicians having future political importance.

The analysis in this chapter brings the struggle between politicians and journalists to the forefront. Its subject is the effort of "important" political candidates to control their news message to the public and the response of journalists attempting to keep control over their professional turf. The central theoretical claim, for which I offer several discrete pieces of evidence, is that the harder candidates work to constrain what journalists report about them, the harder journalists work to find something else they can report instead. I refer to this effort as product substitution. The nature of this substitution is by now familiar — instead of long sound bites from high-minded speeches, images of enthusiastic crowds, and litanies of group endorsements, the mass audience is treated to investigations of possible illegalities, "reality checks," and other media-initiated negativity. The specific expectation is:

> D16. *Media-initiated criticism will be positively associated with campaigns' level of news management.*

To test this claim, it is necessary to measure the attempts by politicians to manage the news, and to do so for each of the 16 major party campaigns since the new press regime began in 1968. Mainly because of the need to get comparable information from so many campaigns, this is no easy matter. One possible source of information about news management is the testimony of campaign officials. But their statements are too general and too infrequent to provide a basis for systematic comparison among campaigns. This leaves journalists as the only viable source of comparative information. For every

recent election, they have provided day-by-day and sometimes hour-by-hour accounts of the activities of the major candidates in the fall phase of the campaign. These accounts, as I shall argue, provide a reasonable basis for measurement of candidates' efforts at news management.

But journalistic accounts of campaigns must obviously be approached with caution. As we saw in Chapter 5, reporters are more apt to criticize Republican than Democratic candidates, which creates the appearance of bias — and quite possibly more than mere appearance. And if reporters' stories are biased, how can we trust them to provide accurate descriptions of the day-to-day activities of candidates?

This concern, though real, cannot be permitted to block investigation. For it remains possible that reporters are not biased against Republicans, and that they more often criticize them only because Republicans are, on average, more likely to practice the kind of news management that reporters dislike — and that, as I have emphasized, reporters dislike on an entirely non-partisan basis. At this point in my argument, there is no reason to believe that Republican candidates campaign differently than Democrats, but there soon will be.

In effect, then, we have competing hypotheses. One is that journalists are biased against Republicans; the other is that Republicans are more inclined to practice the type of news management that attracts press criticism. Either or both hypotheses could be true. And there is a third, even more challenging possibility: That Republicans are more prone to aggressive news management than Democrats, but only because reporters are more apt to criticize them. The challenge of this analysis is to devise an empirical test that will shed impartial light on these various possibilities.

My approach will be as follows: I will begin by using press accounts to reconstruct as fully as possible the day-to-day activities of presidential campaigns. As described below, all specific campaign activities of any importance — and only specific activities — will be noted. From these basic descriptions will be gleaned quantitative measures of what I shall call News Management. For example, one measure of news management will be the physical exclusion of reporters from campaign events. Though this rarely happens at important campaign events, it does happen at minor ones, and more frequently in some campaigns than others. When it does happen, I will assume that reporters will note it — and, critical to my analysis, they will note Democratic exclusions as reliably as Republican ones.

I will also note more subtle indicators of campaign style, such as frequency of speeches, whether they occur in friendly or unfriendly territory, and number of press conferences. Even if the reporters were biased against Republican candidates, it is unlikely that they would be so biased as to fail to report their speeches and press conferences.

Having collected many such indicators, my main analysis will take the form of a multiple regression in which the dependent variable is media-initiated criticism of each candidate in October, and in which the independent variables are news management style as measured in September, media-initiated criticism as measured in September, the party of the candidate, political viability, incumbency, and year of the election.

The control variable for September press criticism is especially important. As noted, it can reasonably be argued that candidates attempt to manage press coverage only because the press is attacking them. Press criticism from the first half of the campaign will be used to control for any such defensive tendency on the part of candidates. Since, as would be expected, September criticism of candidates is strongly correlated with October criticism ($r=+.80$), this is a very strong control. If an aggressive news management style in September predicts media-initiated criticism in October even after controlling for September criticism and other variables, including party, I will take it as evidence that a candidate's style of news management is a causal determinant of media-initiated criticism.

To set the stage for this analysis, I begin with a brief look at the nature of presidential campaigns in the U.S., especially the new style of electioneering that developed around 1968. This examination lays the groundwork for developing a measure of news management style from the observable activities of presidential campaigns.

The General Strategy of News Management

Since presidential candidates first began to campaign actively for office at the end of the 19th century, they have sought to control the image they projected to the public. The attempt to exercise such control is inherent to political campaigning. But the rise of electronic communication, especially TV, dramatically affected the calculus on how to go about it. Before television, candidates sought to visit as big a part of

the vast nation as possible, partly, it seems, to invigorate local party organizations and the partisans they could reach, and partly to create a show of energy and enthusiasm for the national audience. Thus, as late as 1960, Republican candidate Richard Nixon made a point of visiting all 50 states, including remote Alaska and Hawaii. Such a strategy makes no sense in the TV age. Already in 1952, aides to Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson urged him to reduce the number of purely local campaign events and to concentrate on a handful whose real target would be an electronic audience. As one journalist wrote:

> Governor Stevenson ... is concentrating on the formal speech, carefully prepared ahead of time, for presentation primarily by radio and television. His advisers are telling him that the whistle stop technique is out of date, that such stops can be used from time to time, primarily as a backdrop for a television or radio audience scattered over an entire state or region...[1]

Stevenson appeared to take this advice, holding even fewer campaign events than Dewey had in his play-it-safe 1948 campaign. But this was only the beginning. The trend toward fewer campaign events is shown in Figure 4. These data, based on campaign activities in the last two weeks of September of each election year, have been compiled from accounts of presidential campaigns in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The data represent an attempt to count of all rallies, photo opportunities, radio speeches, motorcades, fund-raisers, meetings with dignitaries, and any other formal events that were mentioned in newspaper accounts of the campaign.[2] As the Figure shows, the number of such events varied from 1948 and 1960, with some candidates running extremely energetic campaigns and others doing little. Truman's legendary whistle stop campaign in 1948 marks a high-point; the fact that he roared back from an initial deficit to win the race while his opponent was hardly campaigning at all is an interesting suggestion that presidential campaigns really can make a difference – at least they can if only

---

[1] *The New York Times*, September 18, 1952, p. 26

[2] Even if, as is certainly the case, some events were missed, the trend across time ought still to be roughly valid. The major threat to validity of the trend data is that they might reflect changes in reporting conventions rather than changes in candidate behavior. But this seems unlikely. News accounts in all periods routinely describe candidate behavior over the entire campaign day, including what the candidates do when they are not doing anything. Data through 1964 are based primarily on the *Times* and after that primarily on the *Post*. The coding period was September 16 to September 30. As described below, I subsequently expanded the coding period to September 10 and increased the number of media that were examined, but only for the period beginning in 1968.

one side is campaigning. The 1956 campaign, in which neither candidate did much campaigning in September, was an early low-point. The most probable reason for this dip is the combination of Eisenhower's 1955 heart attack and Stevenson's forward-looking campaign style. For joint intensity of both candidates, 1960 was the peak. After that, the rate of campaign activity in both parties fell off rapidly, first on the Republican side and then on the Democratic.

INSERT FIGURE 7-1 ABOUT HERE

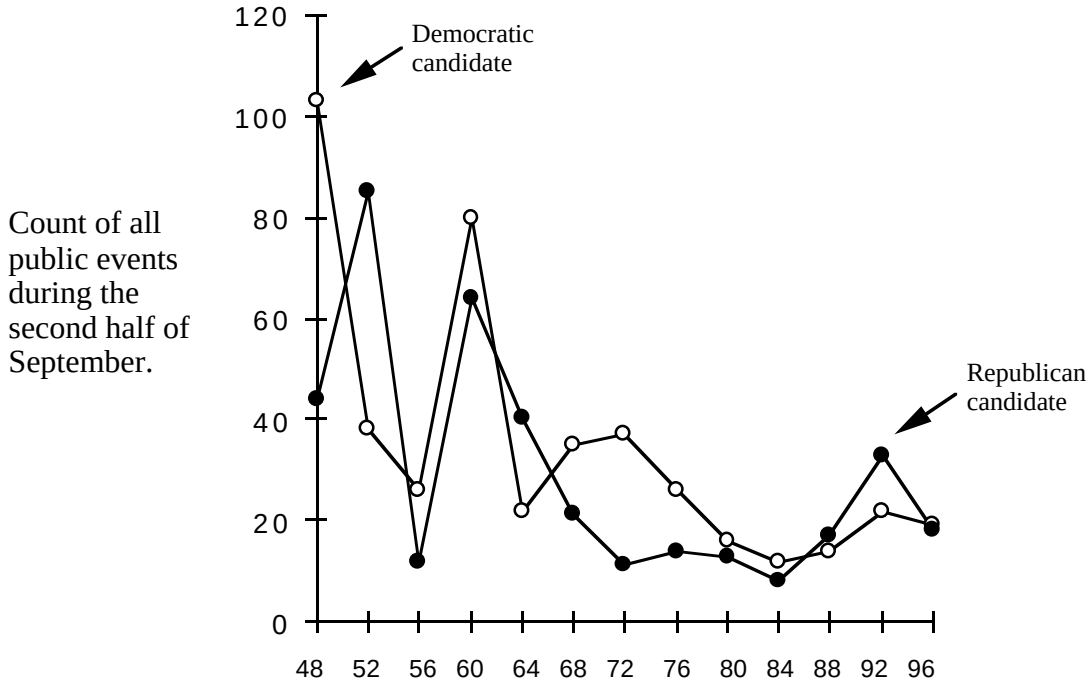
Once candidates began to concentrate on a smaller number of events whose real purpose was to reach a regional or national audience, the imperative to manage the news created by those events became acute. Nixon's 1968 campaign was probably the first to fully recognize and systematically exploit the new strategic context. "Nixon and [campaign manager John] Mitchell had decided that a good deal of what goes on in the usual political campaign was wasted effort" (Chester et. al, 676). Hence they cut out whistle-stop tours, in which the candidate made 10 or more speeches every day; instead they focused each day on a few — or often only one — carefully orchestrated, made-for-TV event. The Nixon campaign also virtually abandoned the ancient custom of night rallies, reasoning that because they occurred after the TV news deadlines they were not worth the effort.

The rallies and other events that Nixon did hold were carefully staged so as to give reporters only one thing to report — the message the candidate wanted to get out — and campaign officials were relentless in their efforts to focus the attention of reporters on that message. At one point, for example, reporters sought but were denied permission to come into a broadcast studio to watch Nixon read a speech into a microphone. Why not let us watch, the reporters pleaded. Because, a campaign official named Frank Shakespeare told them, "If that happens you're going to write about the lights, the cameras and that sort of thing and you're not going to understand what happens in the living rooms across America ."[3]

Shakespeare's instinct was sound. Journalists, like other professionals, value the opportunity to exercise initiative, and they dislike anyone else telling them what to do. So if journalists had been permitted to watch the speech, they would certainly have been hoping for some little event or telling detail

[3] Frank Shakespeare, as cited in Jamieson, 1996, p. 260. The quote is Shakespeare's recollection of the occurrence.

Figure 7-1. *Frequency of campaign events, 1948 to 1996*



Source: *Washington Post* and *New York Times reports*

— perhaps the way the studio was lighted, but more likely a stutter, sweat on the brow, or last minute coaching from an aide — that would enable them to put their own stamp on the story. And, precisely to prevent journalists from doing this, the campaign shut them out of the event, leaving them with nothing to report but the substance of the speech itself.

Most of the techniques by which campaigns attempt to control what journalists report are more subtle than physical exclusion from campaign events. In general, campaign officials follow a two-pronged strategy. The first is to create primary events that the public will find interesting and that journalists will therefore feel compelled to report as news whether they want to or not. The second is to avoid any sort of activity that reporters might choose to cover instead of the main event. Thus, from the campaign's point of view, an ideal campaign day is one in which the candidate stays in his hotel room all morning, comes out to deliver a snappy sound bite in front of a cheering crowd and a striking backdrop, and then retreats into the hotel for private meetings the rest of the day. Journalists are then left nothing else to report except the snappy line, the cheering crowd, and the striking backdrop (see Arterton, 1981; Bennett, 1996, Chapter 3). Although the demands of electioneering make this simple scenario unachievable in practice, the basic strategic ideal — *to control what reporters can report by serving up a sharply limited number of carefully crafted events* — is at the heart of modern media campaigning.

Nothing in the theory of media politics implies that reporters resent the first prong of this strategy, the creation of well-crafted campaign events. Compelling political theater sells newspapers, lures TV news audiences, and entertains even jaded reporters. What journalists resent is the second prong. Their opportunities to express voice are greatest when there are numerous, diverse events to provide the raw materials for stories; when unexpected and serendipitous episodes occasionally intrude on the campaign; and when reporters themselves can help set the campaign agenda by raising questions and issues to which the candidates respond. In snuffing out these opportunities, campaigns are, in effect, challenging journalists for control of the news. In light of this, my attempts to measure news management will concentrate on the second of the strategic prongs, namely*, the concerted effort to eliminate serendipity and otherwise avoid giving anything for journalists to report except what the campaign itself wishes to have reported.*

It is often suggested that there is something illegitimate in efforts by candidates at news management, but I do not make that claim. Efforts to avoid activities that are likely to produce unfavorable media images are, as I have indicated, inherent to campaigning. For professional reasons, journalists do not like such efforts, but that is another matter. Modern campaign practice represents nothing more than an attempt to rationalize and control what any good campaign does anyway. The rationalization, however, conflicts with the interests of journalists, who would prefer to see more free-wheeling campaigns. My view of the resulting contest between politicians and journalists is similar to that of Nixon, who, after he had left office, wrote of the new style of politics he helped to pioneer:

> ... Public officials devote enormous energy to trying to rig the news to be reported their way. When two savvy insiders, reporter and official, are in the ring together, each trying to bamboozle the other, neither should complain.[4]

It should be added, however, that the effort to control media images through news management has costs as well as benefits to campaigns, especially if it becomes heavy-handed. One cost is that it angers journalists, who, as I have argued, find ways to even up the score. Another is that control requires attention and resources that could be used for other purposes. And, finally, control tends to sap campaigns of drama and spontaneity, thus undermining their appeal.

Particular Forms of News Management

The preceding section discussed the general strategy of news management. Let me now proceed to more specific forms. The aim of this section will be provide an overview of the particular behaviors that I will attempt to capture in my measure of News Management.

In extreme form, news management involves, as mentioned earlier, the physical exclusion of reporters from events. But the cost for this form of news management is extreme as well. It is that reporters become enraged and typically respond by turning out lurid stories about "isolated," "secretive" and "reclusive" officials. Even members of the public who dislike the media have no rational interest in opposing its efforts to open up "secret" activities and may resonate to the kind of criticism journalists heap on reclusive candidates.

---

[4] Nixon, 1990, p. 299.

In consequence, campaigns look for more subtle ways of controlling what journalists can report. One centers on choice of campaign venue. Candidates may confine their campaigning to friendly partisan strongholds where they will encounter only cheering crowds but also little drama. Or they may campaign in neutral settings where the risks of disruption that reporters could seize upon are somewhat higher but the number of votes to be won and the interest generated may also be higher. Or, if candidates feel especially daring, they may take the campaign to opposition territory, where they increase the risk but also probably also the potential gain from their efforts. On one such venture, Ronald Reagan used a black ghetto as a backdrop for dramatizing incumbent President Carter's failure to solve the problem of urban poverty. Reporter Lou Cannon describes the scene as follows:

> Soon [local residents] formed a shouting crowd which jeered at Reagan and alarmed the Secret Service. Reagan could not hold a press conference because the crowd shouted, "Talk to the people, not to the press." When Reagan tried to talk to the people, he was heckled unmercifully. Finally, in his most effective burst of emotion since Nashua, Reagan shouted back at a heckler, "I can't do a damn thing for you if I don't get elected." The crowd quieted down enough for Reagan to finish his presentation, though a few still jeered when he left. Reagan's commanding presence had once more dramatically saved the day. The evening television news showed an angry but controlled candidate forcefully putting down a hostile black crowd in a manner which won the respect of the crowd itself. It was the perfect image for a candidate campaigning on the theme that his opponent was a failed leader, but it was a near-run triumph which had narrowly courted disaster. (Cannon, p. 270-271)

This excerpt shows a campaign taking a risk and getting good press out of it, but just barely. Campaigns normally seek more control than this, and certainly Ronald Reagan's campaigns usually did. By the time of his 1984 reelection effort, Reagan's advance team was routinely screening members of the crowds that would see Reagan, keeping potential hecklers as far away from the rally site as possible, avoiding unfriendly territory, and preventing the candidate from getting into unscripted exchanges with friend or foe.

The two candidates in the 1968 election were a study in contrasts with respect to unscripted exchanges. Hubert Humphrey frequently held rallies on college campuses where he knew hecklers were likely to be present, and when he encountered them, he tried to engage them in dialogue, sometimes setting aside his prepared speech in order to do so. Nixon, on the other hand, once canceled a rally and

simply sat in his hotel room rather than speak before a crowd that would have some protesters in it. He liked to answer questions from members of the public, but only under the most controlled conditions. Reporter Jules Witcover describes one such Nixon question session as follows:

> The telethon was too extremely important for the campaign . . . to be left to random phone calls. So the Nixon media boys devised a shrewd system for preserving the appearance of authenticity without the substance. Questions were written by the staff on subjects and in language that would be most helpful to the candidate. Then, when questions in the same general area were called in, the ersatz questions were substituted, using the names or the original callers (1970, p. 445)

An important part of news management is careful rationing of the access of reporters to the candidate. Press conferences and press availabilities can sometimes be useful for getting the campaign's message out, but only when the candidate wants, for some reason, to be asked questions that reporters wish to ask. For example, candidates often hold press conferences or press availabilities when their opponent has made a gaffe on which the press is seeking comment. Otherwise, press conferences are at best a distraction: They enable reporters to force the candidate to address issues of their own choosing, thereby seizing control of the agenda from the campaign itself. Lynn Nofziger, a former press secretary to Ronald Reagan, lays out the basic logic:

> Let's look at a hypothetical case. This week the candidate wants to emphasize national defense. At every stop he will talk about national defense. The schedule has been set up carefully. He visits a naval base, an air base, a shipyard, a missile base. He makes a speech to the American Legion and another to the Reserve Officers Association.
>
> After a couple of days of this the press grows bored. And the questions start coming — about the candidate's health, or what he thinks of something his opposition has said, or about anything else that is irrelevant to the topic of the week.
>
> ... reporters would have the candidate answer those questions even though to do so would detract from the point the candidate has been trying all week to make...[But] I am not going to let him answer their questions if I can help it.

As Nofziger explains, "It was my job... to keep the candidate and the campaign on track. Otherwise the other guy wins" (p. 18). Many campaign officials share this view, and so routinely deny reporters the opportunity to question the candidate except under the special conditions just noted. Thus, on a day on which the Reagan campaign theme was wooing ethnic voters, the following rather typical scene unfolded:

> ... Reagan ends up [a walking tour of a Lithuanian neighborhood] at Ramune's Restaurant and Delicatessen, where he is scheduled to stop for coffee....This, too, will make fine pictures, and Reagan's staff shuttles the national and local press through the delicatessen so that they can record the scene....While Nofziger and others herd the press through, shooing off anyone who tries to ask Reagan a question, Reagan chats somewhat absently with the people on either side of him... When Reagan begins to answer a question from a local radio reporter ("What did you think of your welcome here?"), Nofziger and another aide almost have apoplexy. "No interviews!" Nofziger shouts, waving his arms and diving for the reporter. "Just let me reply to this one," Reagan says to Nofziger calmly, and then he says, "Most heartwarming. Anyone who wouldn't be thrilled is unconscious." (Drew, 1981, p. 272)

Nofziger's evident assumption is that if reporters have any opportunity to question the candidate, they will quickly use it to change the subject, so that even friendly questions must be prevented. My contention in the Rule of Product Substitution is that Nofziger is exactly right. Constrained — or as the reporters themselves would put it, manipulated — by the campaign to produce stories about Reagan's walk in a Lithuanian neighborhood, reporters will look for something else they can do stories about instead.

Of course, another reason that campaigns try to keep their candidates from speaking to reporters is that the candidates may misspeak. Reagan and Bush were particularly prone to foot-in-mouth disease, as Elizabeth Drew (1989) has written:

> … the campaign team feared letting the candidate out very much on his own, speaking for himself. With Reagan, the worry was that he would engage in rambling detours (as he did in the first debate with Mondale) or display his tentative grip on the facts. With Bush, the concern was that what came to be called his "silly" factor — his propensity for saying odd things — would be on display.[5]

In a moment of candor, Bush seemed to accept this view of himself — and, in the same breath, to illustrate why the view of him as a bungler was correct. When asked at a rare news conference whether his campaign chairman, James Baker, had been keeping him away from reporters to maintain tight control over his campaign's message, the president replied: "It wasn't Jimmy. It was just some low-level hand-wringers who think I'm going to screw it up."[6]

---

[5] Page 338. For an example of how the press responded when cut off from a candidate, see Chester et. al, 1969, p. 689.

[6] "Bush Talks of Lasers and Bombers," Maureen Dowd, New York Times, September 17, 1988, A8.

Consider also the following excerpt from a Los Angeles Times story on the 1996 campaign of Robert Dole:

> Reporters following Dole who were interviewed in recent days noted that they seldom get to talk with the candidate. He has not had a press conference for the national media since March, they complained, and traveling reporters rarely get background papers or briefings on what the campaign is trying to accomplish. . . .
>
> ... "It's really hard to say whether Dole's aides don't know how to deal with the press or they don't want to do anything that might help us or whether they just hold us in such contempt that they're not going to go out of the way for us," said Jodi Enda, who has been covering Dole since the primaries for Knight-Ridder newspapers. "Whatever the reason, I think it only hurts them."
>
> "Generally reporters like Dole," she added. "He's nice. He's funny. He's easy to talk to when you talk to him, but . . . the staff worries about every little thing he says getting into print. . . . "
>
> Of course, earlier in the campaign, "little things" that Dole said – particularly his offhand comments about tobacco perhaps not being addictive [which became a running campaign story in 1996] – did get into print, causing huge difficulties and making Dole's aides understandably gun-shy.
>
> But, Enda said, one reason that such comments made for big stories was that "we didn't have much ready access to him, so we wrote about everything we got."[7]

I noted earlier that candidates may limit press access in part because they fear the press is out to get them. But when candidates fear the press, the reason is often not so much that the press is out to get the candidate, as that the candidate can't deal effectively with the sort of pressure the press puts on everyone.

Perhaps no one made a greater effort to isolate himself from the press than Nixon, and, probably for this reason, no one earned greater enmity from the press than he did. The following passage reveals the state to which journalists sink when deprived of access to the candidate:

> Reporters and columnists who had covered Presidential campaigns for many years ... [e]ventually realized, even accepted, that it was not going to be possible to put questions to the candidate. They fell into a state of what one can only call torpor. As a mark of the state that intelligent men and women could be reduced to by this organized tedium, there was the controversy which broke out in South Dakota over whether or not Nixon shaved his nose. There were two schools of thought on this: some said that bristles on the nose

[7] Eleanor Randolph, "Squeeze on Media Coverage May Be Bad News For Dole," October 3, 1996, p. A1.

> are unheard of, others that Nixon did have them. After much craning and peering, the matter was settled by a distinguished columnist who declared that at a certain angle he could see the cut hairs glinting in the sunlight. (Chester et al., p. 689)

In Nixon's case, reduced contact with the press was indeed motivated by belief that the press was out to get him[8] — though to judge from the data reported in Figure 2 of Chapter 5, Nixon had little to complain about the amount of press criticism he got in the 1960 election. Neither candidate got much, and Nixon got even less than Kennedy. But however this may be, other candidates, especially Republicans, have often followed Nixon's example of avoiding the press in order to limit the ability of reporters to seize control of the campaign agenda.

The more candidates isolate themselves from the press, the more they must rely on press secretaries or other surrogates to respond to press queries about the issues that arise in any campaign. Reliance on surrogates for such matters has several advantages, but this is perhaps the most important: Anything a press secretary says will be less newsworthy than it would be if the candidate himself had said it. Hence, having a press secretary handle sensitive matters is a way of downplaying the importance reporters can attach to them and thereby controlling what reporters can write. For this reason, reporters dislike being forced to deal exclusively with surrogates on sensitive issues, as many campaigns force them to do.

One of the arts of news management is to find ways to get the media to carry one's message while keeping the candidate's direct exposure to reporters at bare minimum. Ronald Reagan's campaign team came up with an unusually clever idea in 1984 when it had the candidate visit the home of an eight-year-old black child who had written the president a letter. Accompanied by his wife Nancy, the president had dinner with the boy and his family, where he offered the child a gift of jelly beans, the president's favorite candy. Reporters were not present at the visit, but afterwards the parents spoke graciously to the cameras about the president's gesture. Thus, the president got highly positive coverage on network TV news as an apolitical father figure who concerned about all Americans – and all without a single second of direct exposure to reporters' prying eyes and shouted questions.

---

[8] Wicker, 439-40. Nixon was especially angered by an incident in the 1960 campaign when reporters suggested at a news conference and in stories that Nixon was using the anti-communism issue in demagogic fashion. See New York Times xxx. This was, however, one of the few instances of media-initiated criticism of Nixon in that campaign.

Although this event was unusually successful, it is a general type of activity that is fairly common in elections. Mark Hunt, who first recognized the type, gave it a fitting name, "Closed Photo Opportunity" -- that is, a photo opportunity at which the media are blocked from full access to the candidate. The distinguishing feature of a closed photo opportunity is that candidates meet with groups or individuals as part of their official campaign schedules, thereby focusing news coverage on what is usually a direct or indirect endorsement, but fail to appear in public themselves. In this way, candidates campaign through the news media without having to directly expose themselves to reporters. Sometimes, of course, candidates do appear in public to talk about an endorsement they have received, but press avoidance often makes more sense. Thus, in 1972, the Democratic major of Philadelphia, Frank Rizzo, made news by endorsing Nixon for re-election and was rewarded with a private meeting with Nixon at the White House. Afterward, Rizzo made himself available to reporters, telling them about the $52 million in revenue sharing that Nixon had promised to Philadelphia. Meanwhile, Nixon remained in the White House. If Nixon had appeared with Rizzo, reporters would probably have asked the president about something of greater national significance than a revenue sharing grant to Philadelphia, and this could only have undermined the message that the campaign wanted to get out to the voters – that a Democratic mayor had endorsed Nixon and been rewarded for it. Hence there is little mystery in why Nixon left Rizzo to speak to reporters on his own.

Even when candidates do meet with reporters, they seek to do so under conditions that minimize the ability of reporters to gain the upper hand. For example, candidates may agree to answer a few press questions, but only on a noisy airport tarmac that permits the candidate to pretend he hasn't heard any question he doesn't wish to answer. Even full-blown press conferences may be staged by campaigns in ways that make it hard for reporters to pursue their own agendas, as the following excerpt shows:

> On one occasion, when the traveling press started to complain midflight to Dulles, [Reagan aide Stu] Spencer announced that there would be a press conference upon landing.
>
> "They couldn't talk to their editors, they couldn't look at the wires, they couldn't prepare," [Spencer] says, quite pleased with himself. "They were so goddamm mad at me. We had a great press conference -- I thought" (9/13/1980, p. C1).

Each of these forms of news management involves concretely observable behavior and is therefore susceptible to direct measurement from press reports. One must, as I have noted, be concerned about press bias, but so long as it is possible, as I believe it is, to rely on the press to give unbiased reports on such matters as the number and location of rallies; whether attendance at rallies is open or controlled by the campaign; whether protesters who sometimes show up at rallies are permitted to remain or physically removed; whether citizens who are permitted to ask questions at town hall meetings have been selected by the campaign or not; the occurrence of press conferences and press availabilities; whether reporters have been permitted to attend particular events or not — then it is possible to gain at least a rough idea of the news management styles of different campaigns.

A Measure of News Management

On the basis of these ideas and observations, I developed a set of 48 codes, each denoting either high/positive or low/negative concern for news management. For example, excluding reporters from a fund raising event is coded as a positive indicator of news management, while taking reporters' questions at an informal "press availability" is coded as a negative indicator. Similarly, screening attendance at rallies is counted as a positive instance of news management, while taking unrehearsed questions from crowd members is counted as a negative instance. A sample of positive and negative codes, grouped into six subscales, is shown in Table 7-1.

Insert Table 7-1 About Here

Working with these codes, Mark Hunt, my research assistant, sifted through written accounts of each presidential campaign from 1948 to 1996. Specifically, he examined campaign stories covering the period September 10 to September 30 in the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Vanderbilt TV News abstracts and, for elections since 1980, the Associated Press wire.[9] Each time a candidate gave a speech, spoke to reporters, or took any of the other codable behaviors, Hunt recorded the behavior. Altogether, he noted about 1,100 behaviors, or roughly four per active campaign day per

[9] In some years, one or both of the candidates took time off from campaigning for a special reason, such as debate preparation. When this occurred, replacement days were added to make up for the time off. If,

Table 7-1. Sample Codes for News Management Scale.

Message control

1. Candidate cancels major rally or event in order to avoid demonstrators (positive).
2. Candidate refuses to debate major party opponent (positive).
3. Candidate responds to specific opponent attacks, excluding debates (negative).
4. Candidate takes questions from group or individual, where questioner(s) have been screened or selected by the candidate himself. (Includes friendly talk show.) (positive).
5. Candidate engages in exchange -- that is, back-and-forth discussion -- with demonstrators or hecklers in crowd (negative).

Crowd exposure.

6. Rally or speech in unfriendly territory, e.g., Clinton addresses VFW Convention during draft controversy (negative).
7. Rally in controlled setting; audience screened or selected by campaign. (positive).

Willingness to debate

8. Candidate refuses to debate with major party opponent. Positive.

Interview access

9. Press conference for national press (negative).
10. "Press availability;" i.e.,, candidate meets informally with group of reporters (negative).
11. On his own initiative, candidate engages in light, non-substantive banter with reporters (negative).

Interview restrictions

12. No one in the campaign will respond to queries about sensitive issue, including press secretary. (positive).
13. In response to queries from reporters about sensitive issue, the candidate or press secretary issues statement, but no one will verbally respond to questions. (positive).
14. Candidate has interview with selected print journalist(s) with restrictions on content. (positive).
15. Candidate refuses request from traveling journalists for press conference (positive).

Media exclusion

16. Any public or quasi-public event from which reporters are excluded, e.g. fund-raisers. (positive).
17. Campaign creates impediments to reporting of news (e.g., party workers hold up signs to block picture-taking). (positive).

candidate in the period 1968 to 1996. The average of four per day is, however, somewhat misleading. Some candidates did almost no campaigning, such as Richard Nixon in 1972, while others did a great deal, such as George Bush in 1988. As part of the coding task, Hunt copied the newspaper text that he relied upon in assigning codes into electronic files, and these files have been put on my webpage. Thus, each of the 1,100 behaviors coded for the News Management scale has a publicly available justification.[10] Further information on coding of candidate behavior is available upon request.

Converting 48 codes and l,100 candidate behaviors into a usable measure of news management is not a straightforward task. To do so, I grouped the 48 codes into six subsets, as indicated in Table 1, and gave each candidate a score on each subset of items by adding up positive and negative points. Note from Table 7-1 that three of the subscales refer to behavior of candidates toward reporters and three refer to the management of campaign events independent of reporters. As Table 7-2 shows, scores on these subscales are correlated with negative coverage within each of the four media. When I performed a principal components analysis on the six subscales, all loaded reasonably well on a common factor, as shown by the in the last column of Table 7-2.

INSERT TABLE 7-2 ABOUT HERE

An obvious concern in measuring candidate behavior from media reports, as I have done, is that the reports may be biased in some way. This concern, however, is greater for some subscales than others. For example, one can be confident that when candidates give on-the-record interviews or press conferences, some reference to it will appear in print (e.g., "speaking with reporters on Air Force One, the President said…"). Similarly, one can be confident that when candidates exclude reporters from events, reporters will usually note it (often in the form of a complaint). On the other hand, one cannot be confident that every case in which a campaign screens access to its rallies will be noted; the most one can hope is that there will be more frequent references to such screening for candidates who screen more. In light of this concern, it is reassuring that all six subscales of the news management scale have zero-order relationships with media negativity, as shown in Table 7-2.

---

however, candidates refrained from campaigning without special cause, no replacement days were added.

[10] See www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/zaller/data.files/campaign.conduct.files/. There is a separate file for each election year. The files are in Word format.

Table 7-2
Correlations between News Management Subscales and Media Negativity

	Correlations with media negativity					subscale loadings
	Newsweek magazine	*Time* magazine	*New York Times*	Network TV news	Row average	on general news management factor
[Limited] interview access	.18	.25	.41	.44	.32	.56
[Un]willingness to debate	.23	.29	.54	.28	.34	.57
Interview restrictions	.39	.39	.47	.44	.42	.39
Media exclusion from events	.41	.29	.57	.50	.45	.66
[Limited] crowd exposure	.18	.22	.37	.67	.36	.54
Message control	.23	.30	.49	.39	.35	.46
Column average	.27	.29	.48	.45		

NOTE: Cell entries are correlation coefficients based on scores of 16 major party candidates from 1968 to 1996. Underlined entries are averages of correlations in the indicated row or column.

Figure 7-2 shows the scores of each of the major party candidates on the overall News Management scale over the period from 1968 to 1996. Table 7-3 shows the mean scores of the two parties on each of the six subscales of the overall measure. From both visual inspection and statistical analysis of these data, it is clear that the only important trend is a large average difference between Democratic and Republican candidates. This difference appears on every subscale and in almost every election. (Table 7-3 missing).

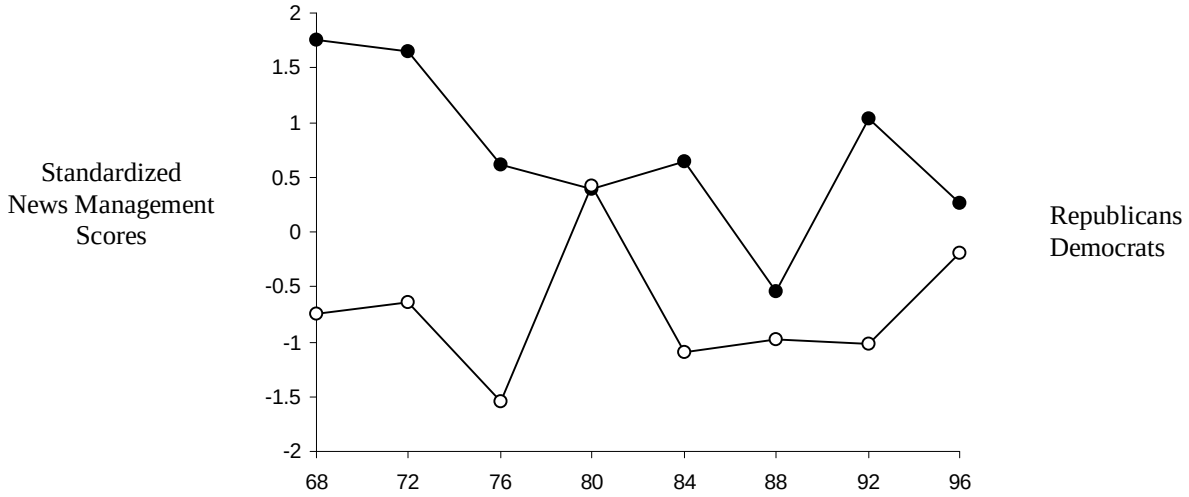
INSERT TABLE 7-3 AND FIGURE 7-2 ABOUT HERE

Why such large party differences exist is tangential to my analysis, but is an interesting question. An obvious possibility is that Republicans have a rational basis for fearing press criticism and therefore take steps to contain it. But Republicans are not only more restrictive in press relations; they also tend to be more controlling with respect to campaign events that have nothing to do with the press. For example, when Democratic candidates take questions from ordinary citizens, they are apt to randomly select people from open rallies, whereas when Republican candidates take questions from citizens, the questioners are more likely to have been screened by campaign officials beforehand. Republicans are also more likely to control access to their rallies than Democrats.

My hunch is that party differences in campaign style are rooted in the enduring and well-known philosophical differences that distinguish the parties. Republicans have traditionally been the party of law, order, and stability, whereas Democrats have been the party of free-wheeling reform. When freedom of the press becomes controversial, Republicans are also more apt than Democrats to favor restrictions. In a study of personality differences between delegates to state party conventions, two psychologists write that:

> The Republican style appears to reflect a steady, dependable personality, particularly attuned to focused attention and purposeful effort, but the Democratic style is expressive of a strong, restless personality, given to immediate responsiveness and robust initiative. To some extent, the former style embodies the abiding concern for proper conduct that makes social life possible; the later style conveys the verve and forceful social presence that makes it fascinating. The prototypical Republican leader tends to be thoughtful in both senses of that term, considerate of others and deliberate in action; the prototypical Democratic

Figure 7-2. Standardized News Management scores for major party candidates, 1968 to 1996.



> leader, when intensely impelled to autonomous action, may be thoughtless and headstrong.[11]

It does not seem far-fetched to extend this observation to a suggestion that deeply rooted ideological differences between the parties may explain why the more conservative party favors a more controlled campaign style and the more liberal party favors a more free-wheeling one.

The reasons for party differences in campaign style are beside the point of my main argument. What is important is whether party differences in campaign style exist and whether they may affect how reporters cover candidates of the two parties. Let us therefore look more closely at the relationship between Media Negativity and News Management.

Main Empirical Results

Table 7-2 has shown levels of News Management, as measured in September, are correlated with higher levels of media negativity, as measured in October. This is the main empirical result so far and the one needed to confirm D16. But in order to be certain that this relationship is a causal rather than a spurious one, it is necessary to control for potentially confounding variables, as follows:

- Inspection of the data indicate that, beginning with Nixon in 1968, Republican candidates tended to make more aggressive efforts at News Management than Democrats. This makes it necessary to control for the party of the candidate. Absent such a control, any effect of News Management could be a spurious indicator of media bias against Republicans.
- As Patterson (1993), in particular, has shown, media negativity has increased in recent decades. To control for this general trend, it is necessary to control for year of the election.
- We saw in Chapter 6 that reporters are more inclined to dig up negative information about candidates who are politically strong. This reflects the Rule of Anticipated Importance. To control for a candidate's anticipated importance, I use the average of his share of the two-party vote in the early October Gallup poll and the final election results.
- Candidates may resort to aggressive management as a response to media negativity toward them. To control for this possibility, I control for the September level of media criticism. Since September criticism is correlated with October criticism at the level of r = .77, this is a strong control.

---

[11] Constantini and Craik, 1980.

• The data indicate that reporters are more critical of incumbents. Hence I add an incumbency control variable.

Using the five control variables just described in a regression having only 16 observations makes it difficult to show the effect of the variable of interest, news management. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that three of the five controls are correlated with news management at the level of r = .50 or greater. Nonetheless, Table 4 shows that news management has a significant effect.

INSERT TABLE 7-4 ABOUT HERE

The dependent variable in Table 4 is media-initiated negativity, which has been formed by combining negativity scores from all four media (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, television network news). The key independent variable is news management, which is a linear combination of the six subscales in Table 7-2, as weighted by the factor scores from a principal components analysis.

Look first at column 1 of Table 4, where the effect of news management on criticism is both statistically significant (p = .03, one tailed) and substantively large. (The standardized coefficient of .51 means that a change of 1 SD on the news management scale is associated with a change of .51 SDs in press-initiated criticism.) Column 2 of Table 4 breaks the news management scale into two subscales – a three-item subscale that I shall call event management (crowd exposure + message control + willingness to debate) and a three-item subscale that I shall call reporter management (media exclusion + interview restrictions + lack of interview access). In the regression in column 2, reporter management has a very large and significant effect, while event management has almost none. Column 3 shows that, when reporter management is taken out of the model, event management has a moderate but statistically marginal effect on media negativity.

The latter results suggest that how a candidate treats reporters has a big effect but that little else matters. Yet it would be mistaken to accept to this conclusion. The two subscales of news management are, to begin with, correlated at .80. In light of the measurement error that no doubt exists in both subscales, this is a high correlation – one strongly suggesting that event management and reporter management tap a common syndrome. It is quite possible that the vagaries of measurement error, in combination with multicollinearity in a small dataset, have made it artificially easier to show effects for one

Table 7.4
Effects of News Management on Media Negativity, 1968 to 1996

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
News management	β =	.51	-	-	-
(Mean = 0, SD =1)	b =	.53			
one sided p-value =		.03			
Reporter management	β =	-	.55	-	-
(Mean = 0, SD =1)	b =		.57		
p-value =			.05		
Event management	β =	-	.04	.26	.34
(Mean = 0, SD =1)	b =		.04	.27	.36
p-value =			.44	.15	.03
September media criticism*	β =	.18	.17	.20	-
(Mean = 0, SD = .87)	b =	.22	.20	.12	
p-value =		.30	.28	.29	
Political strength**	β =	.38	.39	.37	.44
(range 36 to 62)	b =	.06	.06	.05	.06
p-value =		.03	.03	.05	.01
Year	β =	.34	.38	.26	.28
(0 to 7)	b =	.15	.17	.11	.06
p-value =		.02	.01	.07	.04
Democratic candidate***	β =	.14	.18	-.02	-
(0 or 1)	b =	.29	.35	-.04	
p-value =		.28	.34	.47	
Incumbent	β =	.15	.12	.24	.32
(0, .50, 1)	b =	.32	.25	.52	.68
p-value =		.25	.30	.17	.04
Intercept		-3.47	-3.63	-3.16	-3.79
R-square		.84	.86	.79	.78
Adjusted r-square		.73	.73	.65	.69

Note. Estimation is by means of Ordinary Least Squares. Number of cases is 16. All p-values are one-tailed. The dependent variable is a weighted average of the October media negativity scores of Newsweek, Time, the New York Times, and television network news. To create this variable, I standardized all four variables; averaged them so as to give equal weight to each type of media, that is, one-sixth weights to each news magazine, one-third weight to the newspaper and one-third weight to television news (which was already an average across the three major networks); and restandardized the final variable to mean 0 and SD 1.

* September criticism scores from the *New York Times* and television news were standardized and combined. (September scores for *Time* and *Newsweek* are unavailable.)

** An average of a candidate's support in the early October Gallup poll and in the final vote.

*** The non-incumbent nominee of the incumbent party receives a score of .50.

part of the syndrome than for the other, even though the overall syndrome, rather than either part alone, is what matters.

A partial test of this supposition is possible. Note that the coefficient for party is small and statistically insignificant in columns 1, 2, and 3, and, further, that it has the "wrong" sign in two of the tests. (The positive sign indicates that, contrary to the usual expectation, the media appear to be slightly more critical of Democrats than Republicans.) These results suggest that party is a superfluous control variable with no real effect at all. Note also that September media criticism was included only to control for the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between media negativity and candidate behavior toward the reporters, and that there is little reason to worry about such reciprocity if we are testing the effect of event management by itself. Given this, it is reasonable to omit party and September media criticism as control variables when testing the effect of event management separately from the effects of media control. The results of such a test, as reported in column 4 of Table 4, show that event management is both statistically and substantively significant when freed of the need to compete with a set of highly collinear and arguably superfluous rivals.

The conclusion I draw from these results is that attempts by candidates to manage journalists and campaign events are part of a common syndrome and have common effects on media negativity. It may be, as the evidence in column 2 suggests, that reporters are more sensitive to attempts to manage them than to attempts to manage campaign events. But it is quite possible that attempts to measure the former seem more important simply because they are easier to measure accurately.

Other issues raised by these data are as follows:

- Although this analysis is based on 16 candidates, they competed against each other in only eight elections. This raises the possibility of correlated errors across pairs of observations in the same year. To evaluate this possibility, I calculated the within-year correlation of residuals for the model in column 1 of Table 4. A positive correlation would indicate that reporters are more negative toward both candidates in some years and more positive toward both in others. A negative correlation would indicate that reporters pick a favorite within each election, such that if they are harsher toward one they tend to go easier on the other. The observed correlation turned out to be positive, but it was neither large (r=.17) nor statistically significant (p=.69, two-tailed, n=8 paired observations). This

result suggests that correlated errors are not a problem in these data. I nonetheless estimated a fixed effects regression model to control for within-year correlated errors. More specifically, I ran a regression in that included a dummy term for all of the elections years but one, thus controlling for any year-specific disturbances. The results indicated that correlations among error terms was minimal, since the joint F test on them had a significance level of .48. The coefficient estimates for the key variables, Political Strength and News Management, were hardly affected by the seven dummies, but their standard errors were greatly enlarged. As a result, the significance levels of the coefficients for News Management and Political Strength fell in each case to p<.15, one-tailed. If, however, the arguably extraneous control variables – incumbency, party, and September media[12] -- are dropped, both News Management and Political Strength are statistically significant at about p=.01, one-tailed.

- In fixed effects models in which the only independent variables were Political Strength and Press Management, the two variables had effects on Media Negativity at about the .01 level of significance, one-trailed. In a similar model testing Event Management and Political Strength, both variables were significant at the .025 level, one-tailed.
- The News Management variable may have somewhat larger effects for Republican candidates compared to Democratic ones. The same is true for its component parts, Press Management and Event Management. But these differences do not approach statistical significance in these small samples and are, in my opinion, best understood as the product of chance variation.[13]

This last set of results – especially the results for the eight Republican candidates alone – are quite notable. For if News Management explains differences in Media-negativity both across parties and within parties it must be more than simply an alternative way of measuring the party affiliation of the candidate. This, in turn, exonerates the media of the taint of an anti-Republican bias to their coverage. Reporters

[12] The F-test for the joint significance of these three variables in the fixed effects model was p=.58.
[13] In a model including News Management, Political Strength, Year, Party, and Party X News Management for all 16 cases, the interaction term does not approach statistical significance (p=.77). In a standard fixed effects model, the p-value is .85.

do, of course, have biases, but they appear to be biases in favor of campaign openness rather than in favor of one of the parties.

Because the key variables in this analysis have no natural metric, it is hard to say much more about the sizes of the effects observed in these data than the standardized Beta coefficients say. But it is perhaps worth noting that the two biggest campaign scandals in American politics, Watergate in 1972 and Campaign Finance in 1996, were visited upon candidates whose scores on my predictor variables put them well within the danger zone: Nixon in 1972 had the highest score of any candidate since 1968 on Political Strength and News Management — a prescription for highly negative coverage; and Clinton in 1996 was tied with Dole for the highest score on the Year variable, had the highest score of any Democrat on Political Strength (but only moderate overall), and also had second highest score of any Democrat on News Management (but average overall).[14] Hence, the high Media Negativity scores of these candidates are reasonably well accounted for by my model.

The implication of these results is that if Nixon had been in a close race with McGovern in 1972 and had been open to the press besides, reporters might have made little fuss about Watergate. For 1996, the implication is that if Clinton had been in a closer race and had been nicer to the press, the Democratic party could have raised as much "soft money" as it wanted without stirring up much criticism among reporters. Are these implications plausible?

This is hard to say. The overall results do, however, suggest that media criticism of candidates is heavily situational, in the sense that it is determined as much by journalistic interest in voice (as captured by the News Management variable) and public interest in powerful figures (as captured by the Political Strength variable) as by what the candidates have done to merit criticism. This does not imply that journalists concoct the negative information they report about candidates; it implies, rather, that of the abundance of negative information that might be reported, journalists invest resources in digging out information the pertains to candidates who are politically strong or take an aggressive approach to news

[14] If the suspicion lingers that high scores on News Management are caused by press criticism rather than vice versa, I observe that, in Nixon's case, his score on News Management was almost as high in 1968, when he faced no scandal, as it was in 1972. In fact, Nixon has the two highest scores on News Management in the sample. In the case of Clinton, recall that News Management is measured in September, while the scandal on campaign finance broke in mid-October.

management.[15] Candidates get some criticism strictly on the "merits" — the base level of criticism for an average candidate in 1996 is about 12 percent — but the high r-squares on the models reported in Table 4 indicate that much of the variance in criticism from one candidate to another is situationally determined.

Reagan's 1984 coverage stands as counterpoint to the argument that situational factors drive media negativity. According to his scores on News Management and Political Strength, which were both very high, Reagan should have received a mountain of press criticism. Yet, as Figure 2 shows, he received only a moderate amount – more than his hapless opponent, but less than half what would have been expected on the basis of the prediction equation in Table 4.[16] One of the negative stories Reagan did get in 1984 is worth noting. It is a back-page, nearly vacuous item in the New York Times about a Reagan TV commercial that featured a large bear stalking through the woods as a metaphor for the Soviet Union. The point of the story was that the bear used in the commercial was not actually Russian but American — an indication, as the story insinuated, of dissembling by the Reagan campaign.

No reporter would have bothered to do such a story about Mondale in 1984. Who would pay any attention to it? But Reagan, an incumbent president with excellent prospects for re-election, was a target worth going after, especially since the ads seemed to be working very well. What makes this story notable, in my opinion, is that it shows how far reporters were willing to stretch in order to criticize Reagan. "The Russian bear that wasn't" is thus an example of the situationally determined criticism that reporters heap upon frontrunning candidates who adopt a strategy of heavy-handed news management.

It is an interesting question why, if my analysis is correct, candidates persist in news management techniques that offend the media and tend to result in press criticism. Why not simply ease up and get better coverage in return?

---

[15] When asked at a roundtable discussion why his newspaper failed to investigate reports that Bob Dole's alleged affair in the 1960s had resulted in an abortion, an editor for a nationally prominent paper replied, in part, that he faced a tradeoff between expending scarce resources on Clinton or Dole, and felt that Dole, as a hopeless candidate, was not worth the effort. Roundtable on Media Coverage of the 1996 Presidential Election, August 29, 1997, Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington D.C.

[16] In fact, Reagan's 1984 coverage contributes the single biggest residual – that is, missed prediction – in the dataset. From Figure 2 it can be seen that only network news was especially tough on Reagan in 1984; according to the model, all media should have criticized him at about the level that TV did .

Much of the reason seems to be the belief of campaign consultants, especially on the Republican side, that candidates gain more from the controlled images they are able to get the media, especially TV, to carry than they lose from the criticism, much of it petty and strained, which journalists visit upon them in return. This belief is on open display in an oft-told tale from Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign. Frustrated that Reagan campaign consisted of vacuous hoopla, CBS News reporter Leslie Stahl assembled a repetitive montage of campaign scenes that seemed to her especially vacuous — cheering crowds, colorful balloons rising into the sky, Reagan smiling and waving — and used it as visual backdrop for an acid commentary about Reagan's supposedly empty campaign. But, as related by Schudson,

> a White House official called [Stahl] soon after the piece aired and said he'd loved it. "How could you?" she responded. He said, "Haven't you figured it out yet? The public doesn't pay any attention to what you say. They just look at the pictures." Stahl, on reflection ... came to believe that the White House was probably right: all she had done was to assemble, free of charge, a Republican campaign film, a wonderful montage of Reagan appearing in upbeat scenes. (1995, p. 115)

It is hard to believe that media stories about Watergate and Clinton fundraising were quite as harmless as Stahl's attack on Reagan's campaign style, but there is, as we shall see below, no systematic evidence that press criticism of candidates during the final phase of the election campaign has any negative effect whatsoever — and a slight suggestion that it might even help, at least in the short run. Consistent with this possibility, I spoke to another Republican adviser who said that the Bush campaign knew in 1988 that it might be criticized by journalists for visiting flag factories, but felt that this sort of criticism from none-too-popular journalists could actually be helpful among swing voters. No doubt this kind of thinking is the biggest part of the reason that campaigns are as willing to anger the media as some obviously are.

Chapter 8

Has All of Politics Changed?

"All of politics has changed because of you." That was Lyndon Johnson's assessment of the accomplishments of the newly aggressive journalistic establishment of the 1960s. Was he right?

In one sense, American national politics has indeed changed over the last 50 years or so. Much more of the nation's business is now conducted publicly through press conferences, political road shows, paid advertising and other forms of mass communication.[1] A century ago, politicians spoke to voters mainly through political parties; now they address them directly in the mass media, including the paid media. This is as true for presidents who wish to pressure Congress into passing their legislative program as it is for presidential candidates who would like to win their party's nomination.

But is this a deep change or a surface change? Does it mean that different kinds of political groups are winning political battles for different kinds of benefits, or that the same old groups are using new means to old ends? Is American politics really different, or is it just conducted by different means?

Another question centers on the quality of the communication by which much politics is conducted. Can media politicians easily bamboozle the public through false promises and demagoguery, or are they basically truthful and honest in what they say? Is news better or worse in the era of media politics than it was in the 19th century heyday of party politics?

These are obviously large questions and I am not so foolish as to think I can definitively answer them. I do, however, have evidence and arguments that bear on them, leading to the following general conclusions:

- All of politics has not changed in the era of media politics. The leaders of political parties are for the most part masters of media politics rather than its victims. At least as regards presidential nominations, parties are still tremendously important for organizing both elite and mass politics. As regards general presidential elections, party accountability for performance in office greatly affects electoral outcomes. The degree of continuity in presidential politics over the past 50 to 75

years is, all told, surprisingly high.

- The quality of mass communication in media politics is certainly not high. This is because the large majority of citizens is not interested in, and probably never has been interested in, high quality political communication. But mass communication seems to be mostly fair and honest, at least insofar as it is in the interest of majority opinion for communication to be honest.

MEDIA POLITICS VS. PARTY POLITICS

Since the birth of mass political parties in the early 19th century, the United States has had a two-party system, and since the replacement of the Whig party by the Republican party in the 1850s, the two major parties have been the Democratic party and the Republican party. The rise of media politics has not challenged, or even importantly disturbed, the dominance of these two political organizations. In this fundamental sense, continuity reigns in American national politics.

- A widely accepted view is that the rise of media politics has been associated with the rise of candidate-centered politics, which has in turn meant greater political instability and less political accountability. In President George Bush's description of the 1992 presidential election, politics has simply become more "wacky." In an impressive early analysis of the new, media-driven system of presidential nominations, Nelson Polsby (1983) suggested that it would be prone to fads and contagions. This view is, I believe, widely shared. [more citations needed]

Instability is actually fairly easy to measure. In the period from 1900 to 1964, the average inter-election swing in the presidential vote was 7.7 points, including any effects of third party candidates on the vote. In the period from 1968 to 1996, the comparable inter-election swing was essentially the same, 8.12 points.[2]

---

[1] See especially Kernell, 1997.

[2] These figures were calculated as follows: Starting with the 1900 election, the percent of the national vote won by the Democrat in the given election was subtracted from the percent won in the previous election, and the average absolute value was calculated. For example, William Jennings Bryan won 45.5 percent of the vote in 1900 and 46.7 percent in 1896, for an absolute difference of 1.2 percentage points. The average of these interelection swings in the Democratic vote from 1900 to 1964 is 6.67 percent; for the period 1968 to 1996, it is 7.53 percent. The corresponding figures for Republican candidates are 7.72 percent and 8.18 percent. The average of the Democratic and Republican figures are those reported in the text.

For the period since the rise of public opinion polling, it is also possible to measure instability within election campaigns. Starting in 1948, the Gallop organization has regularly measured public support for the major party candidates in January of the election year, just after the party conventions, and in the first week of October. In the period from 1948 to 1964, the average swing from January to the election was 14.8 points percent; in the period from 1968 to 1996, this figure was 14.9. The comparable figures for the swing from the post-convention period to election day are 4.7 percent for the early period and 5.1 percent for the recent period. And finally, the figures for average swing from early October to election day are 4.0 percent and 4.3 percent.[3]

It would be very hard to read these data as evidence that American presidential politics had become less stable in the new age of media politics. But if politics are not any more fluid, perhaps they are more "wacky." Perhaps, that is, Americans are about as changeable as they used to be, but are changing in ways that are strange, difficult to predict, or somehow irrational.

This does not seem to be happening either. In fact, the trend is in the other direction: The outcomes of presidential elections are, if anything, more intelligible and easier to predict in recent decades. They also appear to involve more party accountability than in the past. To see this requires a brief digression.

A major theme in recent research on presidential elections has been "retrospective voting." The idea is that voters use elections to cast a retrospective verdict on the performance of the incumbent president and his party. If the country has been prosperous, remained at peace, and avoided serious political scandal, voters tend to re-elect the incumbent or the candidate of the incumbent party. But if the country has suffered four years of bad times, the incumbent party tends to get tossed out. As V. O. Key, Jr. put it, voters tend to act the role of "rational god of vengeance and reward."

Advantaged candidates are only too eager to encourage the electorate in this role. Non-incumbent Richard Nixon, running for president in 1968 against a backdrop of several hundred combat deaths a week in Vietnam, racial disturbances in the cities, and a youthful counterculture that many voters found shocking, declared throughout his campaign that:

---

[3] For 1948 to 1992, these data are from Stanley and Niemi, 1995, p. 96. For 1996, data are from Gallup polls published on Hotline on January 10, August 30, and October 4. Calculations were made in the same manner as in the previous note.

> When you're in trouble, you don't turn to the men who got you in trouble to get you out of it. I say we can't be led in the '70s by the men who stumbled in the '60s.[4]

In perhaps the most famous political exhortation of the last 20 years, Ronald Reagan, who in 1980 had the good political fortune to be the non-incumbent candidate for president in the midst of an economic depression and the Iran hostage crisis, declared to the audience watching the presidential debate:

> Next Tuesday, all of you will go to the polls, you'll stand there in the polling place and make a decision. I think, when you make that decision it might be well if you would ask yourself: Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment in the country than four years ago? Is American as respected throughout the world as it was... And if you answer all of those questions yes, why then I think your choice is very obvious as to who you'll vote for. If you don't agree ... then I could suggest another choice that you have. This country doesn't have to be in the shape it is in.[5]

Four years later, when Reagan sought re-election in the midst of an economic boom, he again asked voters whether they were better off than four year ago — and got the answer he hoped and expected to get, a landslide re-election to office.

Figure 8-1 provides some systematic evidence of the extent of retrospective voting in U.S. presidential elections for two time periods. The upper graph is for presidential elections from 1932 to 1964 and the lower graph is for the elections from 1968 to 1996. For each graph, the horizontal axis is a measure of national prosperity, namely, the percentage change in "disposable income" for the average American in the year of the election.[6] For example, the upper figure shows that in the year of the 1932 election, average disposable income in the U.S. fell about 15 percent. In 1936, by contrast, average spending rose by about 10 percent.

The vertical axis shows the percentage of the vote won by the incumbent presidential party. Thus, in

---

[4] Newsweek, November 4, 1968, p. 28.

[5] Bartels, 1992, p. 271.

[6] More specifically, the data show the average growth rate in inflation-adjusted disposable personal income per capita in the four quarters of each election year. The economic data are from the *Survey of Current Business*, Table 3, p. 164, August, 1997. The original data were not population adjusted; to make the per capita adjustment, population data were taken from the following sources: For the period to 1988, *National Income and Product Accounts of the United States: 1929 to 1988*, Table 2.1 of vol. 1 and 2, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Department of Commerce, Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, February, 1993. for the period 1989 to1991, *Survey of Current Business*, July 94, Table 2.1, p. 62; for the period 1992-1996, *Survey of Current Business*, July 94, Table 2.1, p. 62.

1932, for example, it can be seen that the candidate of the incumbent party (Hoover) got about 40 percent of the vote. But in 1936, when the economy was stronger, the candidate of the incumbent party (Democrat Franklin Roosevelt) got more than 60 percent of the vote.

INSERT FIGURE 8-1 ABOUT HERE

Each of the points in Figure 8-1, many of which are labeled, refer to a particular election between 1932 and 1996. Looking at the overall pattern of these points, one can see that they tend to form a line running from the lower left to the upper right, as summarized by the actual solid lines. What these solid lines show is that as average personal income rises, the incumbent presidential party tends to get a larger share of the vote.[7]

Note, moreover, that the relationship between growth in personal income and vote for the incumbent party seems to be about as strong in the era of media politics as in the preceding period.[8] Thus, politics in the current era does not seem to be either whacky or strange. It seems, as in the previous period, to reflect a healthy concern for the actual performance of the incumbent party.

The election-year economy is not, however, the only determinant of voting in presidential elections. Another dimension of party performance concerns war and peace: Parties that lead the nation into costly wars fare less well at the polls than do parties that maintain peace. Thus, the Democratic party, which led the nation into World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam war, appeared, as we shall see in a moment, to pay a price in the elections of 1944, 1952, and 1968.

The positions of the candidates may also to affect election outcomes: Candidates who are closer to the center of public opinion seem to do better than candidates who adopt "far out" or "ideologically extreme" positions.

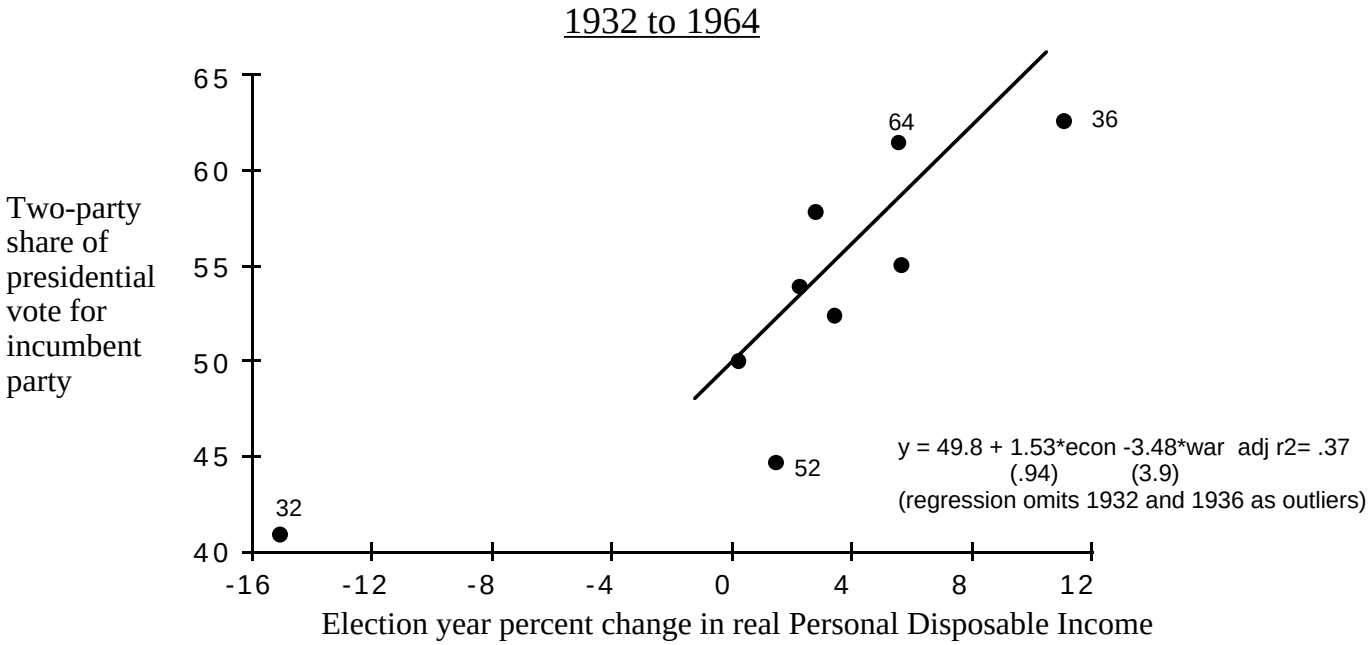
The reason I say that ideological extremity "seems" to affect voting is that this is a very difficult point to prove. This difficulty stems from measurement: From 1932 to 1996, there have been 17 elections and

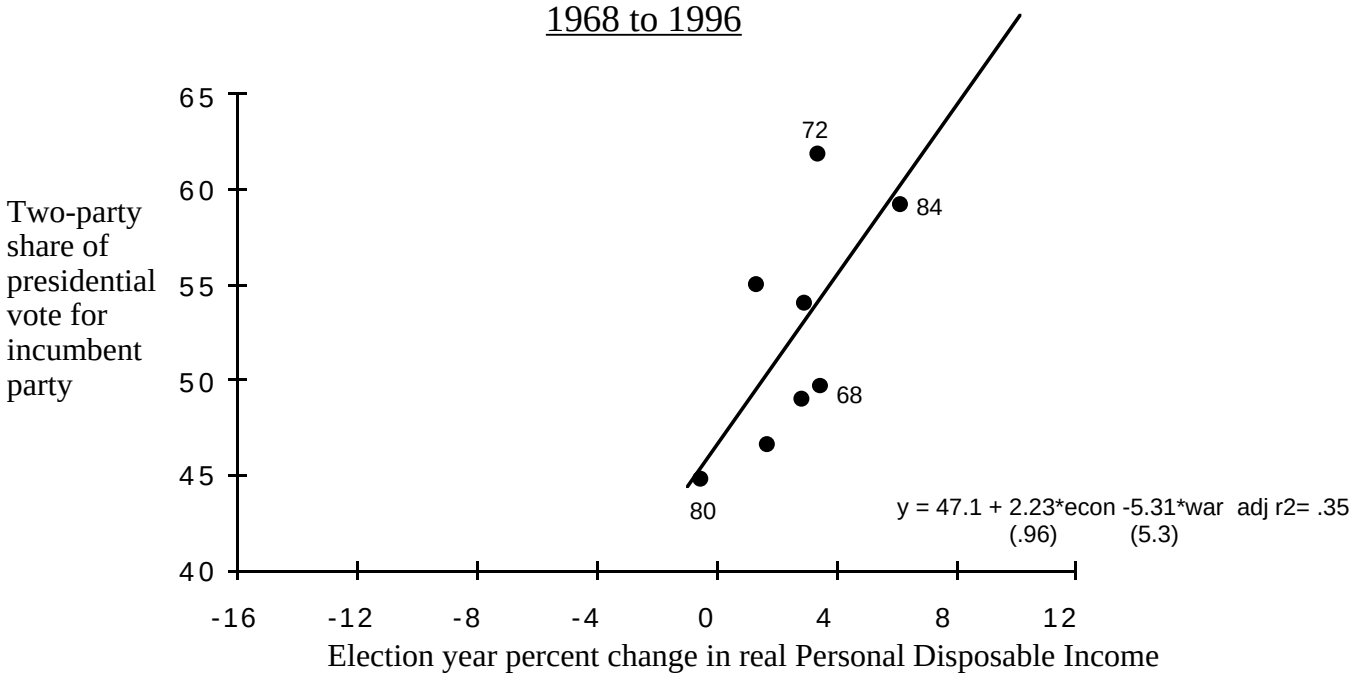
---

[7] The regression line for the earlier period omits 1932 and 1936 as outliers; including them would flatten the line in the upper graph, thereby making it appear that the presidential vote was more structured and less erratic in the period of media politics.

[8] The relationship between the economy and the vote seems, however, to be notably weaker in the period before 1928. In fact, to judge from official reports of the economy in the period 1892 to 1928, economic voting is nearly nil in this period. This is based on GNP data published in *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, Bureau of the Census, 1975, Part 1, series F4, p. 224.

Figure 8.1. *The effect of peace and prosperity on the presidential vote*





The first scholar to tackle this problem in the context of presidential elections was Steven Rosenstone (1983), who studied elections from 1948 to 1980. He obtained his measure of ideological location by asking some 40 scholars of presidential politics to rate each major party nominee on two ideological dimensions, which he called New Deal social welfare liberalism and racial liberalism. As he explains,

> [Raters] were instructed not to judge how the public perceived the candidates, or to recall the results of public opinion polls. Rather, I asked the scholars to score the candidates' actual positions on these dimensions "the way an insightful political observer of the day would have evaluated the actions and positions of the candidate prior to the election." (p. 174)

Since I need evaluations of candidates from 1932 through 1996, I could not simply use Rosenstone's measurements. Hence, I asked my Research Assistant, Mark Hunt, to replicate them. That is, I asked him to rate each of the 34 major party candidates since 1932 on a simple left-right scale. Hunt was unaware of the specific hypothesis I was testing, and, having read extensively about all recent elections as party of this study, he was well familiar with the positions of the candidates on the major issues of the day. To his task simple, I asked him to use only a single ideological dimension. My instructions were:

> Please rate the ideological position of each presidential candidate listed below on a left-right ideology scale. There are, of course, many dimensions of ideology -- social welfare, race, foreign policy. In making your ratings, use whatever dimension or dimensions were most important in public debate at the time of the election.
>
> Do not rate the candidates on the basis of your impressions of what the public thought their positions were, or what public opinion polls indicate that the public thought. Rather, rate the candidates on the basis of the actual positions and actions they would be expected to take in office, given what was publicly known about them at the time of the election. Candidates who run in more than one election may be rated differently if their positions change or better information has become available at the time of the second election.
>
> Use a rating scale running from -3 (most conservative) to +3 (most liberal), where 0 is

> the actual position of the median voter in the national electorate at the time of the election. You may use fractions or decimals (e.g., 2.5, -.30, etc.). In sum, rate the actual position of the candidates in relation to the actual position of the median voter (and regardless of what voters themselves may have perceived these positions to be.)

With Hunt's ratings, it was possible to calculate which candidate in each election was closer to the zero point — that is, the position of the media voter — and by how much. It was possible, that is, to measure the relative ideological extremity of the two candidates in all 17 elections since 1932. As a check on the validity of this measure, I compared it with a measure of ideological extremity based on the average of Rosenstone's two ideological dimensions. For the period in which the two measures overlap, namely 1948 to 1980, they correlate at +.90.

Altogether, then, I have numerical measures of what might be considered the "political fundamentals" of any presidential election:

• Whether the country has been economically prosperous under the leadership of the incumbent party, as measured by growth in real personal disposable election during the calendar year of the election.

• Whether the country has avoided costly wars, with the elections of 1944, 1952, and 1968 counted as wartime elections.

• Which candidate is closer to the center of public opinion, as rated by Hunt.

The effects of these “political fundamentals” — peace, prosperity, and moderation — are shown in columns 1 to 4 of Table 8-1 for two time periods, 1932 to 1964 and 1968 to 1996. Because of the difficulty in measuring ideological extremity, I present results with and without this variable.

INSERT TABLE 8-1 ABOUT HERE

Given the small number of cases available for analysis – nine in the first period and eight in the second – several variables fail to achieve statistical significance. But if the question is whether these key variables have less impact on presidential now than in the past, the answer is clear. There is absolutely no such evidence. Difficult wars and extremism seem to have about the same impact in both time

Table 8.1. Determinants of Presidential Election Outcomes

	1932 to 1964		1968 to 1996		1948-1996
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Change in Real Disposable Income [a]	0.28	.85	2.88	2.07	2.53
	(.25)	(.00)	(.01)	(.04)	(.00)
Relative Ideological Extremity of Incumbent Party Candidate [b]	-3.36	-	-3.49	-	-3.17
	(.09)		(.03)		(.01)
Difficult War [c] (1944, 1952, 1992)	-4.64	-	-4.04	-	-1.82
	(.08)		(.15)		(.23)
Net Media Negativity (mean = .75; SD = 1.28)	-	-	-	-	.54
					(.23) [d]
Intercept	52.5	51.5	43.6	46.9	
N of cases	9	9	8	8	13
Adjusted r-square	.78	.66	.73	.35	.80

Note: Dependent variable is two-party vote for the incumbent presidential party candidate. Estimation is by OLS. One-sided p-values are shown in parentheses.

[a] For columns 1-4, economic performance is measured as percent change in inflation-adjusted Disposable Income during calendar year of presidential election. Source is *Survey of Current Business*, Aug. 97, Table 2A, p. 152. In column 5, economic performance is measured as the average percent change in RDI in quarters 12 to 15 of each presidential term, according to the preliminary Commerce Department estimates that were available on election day. The latter measure is available only for elections from 1948. Data are taken from the October issues of the *Survey of Current Business*.

[b] A measure of whether the incumbent party is more or less ideologically extreme, as based on candidate ratings discussed in text. E.g,, in 1964 incumbent Democrat Lyndon Johnson was rated as a +2 on a 7-point ideology scale and Republican challenger Barry Goldwater was rated as –3. Hence, the score of the incumbent party on "relative ideological extremism" was –1, meaning that it was one point less extreme than the challenger party. In 1972, incumbent Richard Nixon war rated as two points less extreme than challenger George McGovern.

[c] Note that 1992, which followed the successful Gulf War, is not counted as referendum on a "difficult war."

[d] Note that this is a one-sided p-value even though the coefficient has the wrong sign.

periods, while economic performance seems to have a larger impact in the recent period.[9]

As a final test of the "growing instability" thesis, I examined the effect of Media Negativity on the vote for the incumbent presidential party for the period 1948 to 1996.[10] I did so by simply adding a Media Negativity variable to the basic regression model in Table 8. The Negativity variable was scored as "Media Negativity toward the incumbent party minus Media Negativity toward the challenger party," where Media Negativity was calculated as a weighted average of the scores shown in Figure 5.2.[11] Hence, the expected effect is negative, meaning that the candidate that gets more Media Negativity should, all else equal, do worse in the election. As it turns out, however, the effect is small and quite close to zero. To the extent that there is any effect of Media Negativity at all, it is somewhat positive, such that Media Negativity helps rather than hurts.

This finding is an estimate of the effect of Media Negativity over the course of the entire general election campaign. Shaw (1995) has examined the effect of media negativity by means of day-by-day tracking polls. He finds that when a candidate's gaffes or misstatements are given heavy play in the media, the effect is generally to produce a statistically significant dip in public support, followed by a rebound to the initial level. Some campaign events, notably party conventions and debates, produce lasting effects, but purely media-driven events do not, according to Shaw.

We may summarize these results by saying that voters respond to "political fundamentals" but not to Media Negativity.

At least in retrospect, the null effects of Media Negativity on general election vote choice are unsurprising. For one thing, modern presidential campaigns are nothing if not reactive. Hence, when they do something that generates potentially damaging criticism, they typically desist before the criticism

---

[9] If a term for Economic Performance X Year is tested in a model having all cases from 1932 to 1996, the interaction term achieves marginal statistical significance (p = .08, two-tailed). Thus, the impact of the economy on the vote seems to be increasing in recent elections. The data series on RDI begins in 1929. However rough estimates of GNP exist for every election since 1892. Using the GNP data. I tested a model which included variables for GNP, year, GNP X year, and war (counting 1920 as a war year). The interaction term achieves significance at the level of .02, two-tailed.

[10] These are the only years for which I have a Media Negativity measure.

[11] From 1948 to 1964, the average gives equal weight to *Time, Newsweek,* and the *New York Times.* From 1968 to 1996, the average gives one-third weight to TV, one third weight to the *The New York Times,* and one third weight to the two news magazines (i.e., one sixth weight to each).

can bite. In 1988, for example, Bush got excellent TV news footage of his visit to Findlay, Ohio, the self-proclaimed flag capital of America. But reporters considered the event empty and manipulative, and so when Bush visited a flag factory several days later, declaring that "Flag sales are doing well and America is doing well and we should understand that and we should appreciate that," the media cooperated with Democrat Michael Dukakis in making Bush look foolish. "That," concluded Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater afterward, "was one flag factory too many" (Germond and Witcover, 1989, p. 408). Thereafter, the Bush campaign found better ways to campaign than visiting flag factories, thus depriving academic analysts like me of the opportunity to see what the effect of continuing press ridicule might be.

This difficulty is rooted in the basic tenets of the theory of media politics: Candidates want to generate news that will win votes, so few are likely to persist for long in activities that the media can effectively criticize. Campaigns may be willing, as discussed in the earlier example of the Leslie Stahl story on Reagan's supposed manipulativeness, to trade off some kinds of criticism in exchange for the advantages of image control, but they are unlikely to set themselves up for really serious criticism. Hence much of the criticism they get is likely, as in Stahl's piece on Reagan, to be small-time or even shrill.

Exceptional cases do, however, arise. One involved Gerald Ford, whose assertion of lack of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe set off a media "feeding frenzy," as Sabato (1993) describes it. This frenzy did affect public support for Ford — until Ford, after several days of stubborn refusal to admit a mistake, finally backed down, whereupon the controversy ended and his public support gradually returned to the level it had been (Sears, 1978). Most candidates, however, do not persist in ill-advised statements as long as Ford did. It is perhaps not an accident that this, my best example of a major party presidential candidate suffering from the effects of media criticism, was provided by a candidate who won the presidency by appointment rather than competitive election. Ford, in short, may have been a less politically adroit president than most men who serve in the White House.

Another illuminating case of media frenzy developed over Ross Perot's statement that he had initially dropped out of the presidential race because of fear that Republican party operatives would sabotage his daughter's wedding. This case was unusual in several respects: First, it produced deeper and longer lasting effects than most such episodes, namely, a five point drop that fatally disrupted the momentum

Perot had been building, as discussed earlier. Yet, even in this case, public opinion returned to its previous level within a few days. Second, Perot's remark was a blooper of unusual magnitude — the sort of error one would scarcely expect from a professional politician. Third, Perot was not a professional politician. Together, these points make this incident the sort of exceptional case that really does prove a rule: Serious media criticism can bite, which is why, as I am here arguing, so few skilled politicians, as almost all presidential nominees are, give the media as much ammunition to use against them as Perot did. Hence what we observe in most presidential campaigns is a stand-off, in which candidates routinely challenge reporters for control of news content by manipulating their images, blurring or changing their policy positions, and making questionable attacks on their opponents' records — just up to the point at which reporters might be able to effectively criticize them.

Media attacks on Bill Clinton's fundraising in the 1996 campaign offer a more typical example of why press criticism normally fails to produce big effects. First, notwithstanding the fact that his campaign had already spent most of the money it had raised, Clinton immediately did what he could to back down, in two important ways. First, his campaign promptly and noisily returned the particular sums of money that were the object of the most intense media criticism, claiming that campaign workers had made errors. Second, Clinton insisted that he personally supported campaign finance reform and, after a long build-up, grandly announced a plan that he said would clean up the mess once and for all. Meanwhile, the President went into almost complete press isolation, granting no interviews and rarely coming close enough to reporters to permit them even to shout questions. This left journalists with little to report except the arcane details of its investigations and Clinton's own, boldly stated support for campaign finance reform. Under these circumstances, Clinton's losses were minimal to non-existent — *at most* the loss of only a few percentage points of support in the weeks after the campaign finance story broke.[12]

The other main reason that press criticism in the fall election period typically fails to produce effects is that so much else has gone on and is going on by this point in the presidential campaign. Both candidates are well-known to the public; both are spending tens of millions of dollars on campaign

[12] Clinton margin over Dole in the Gallup CNN Polls of October 7-8 and 9-10 was 53-36; in the final Gallup CNN Poll the margin was 49-36.

advertisements; both can count on the loyalty of many millions of party identifiers; both are affected by a record of incumbent party accomplishment or non-accomplishment on the economy that is hard to hide even from the most rationally ignorant voters. And finally, however much press criticism of the candidates there is, there is also a steady stream of more traditional hoopla and partisan attacks and counterattacks to diffuse the press criticism.

Many of these factors, however, are absent in presidential primary elections. The attachment of tens of millions of voters to one of the major parties is neutralized because the fighting takes place within each of the parties. Voter familiarity with the candidates is lower, and advertising budgets are smaller (except in a handful of early primaries). Campaigns, often operating on shoestrings or expanding rapidly, are less able to orchestrate events and news. As a result, important media effects would be expected to occur — and there is evidence that they do. Bartels (1988) finds that the volume of press coverage (or non-coverage) helps creates momentum that advantages some candidates, especially ones who are not previously known to the public. My work with Hunt (1995; also Zaller, 1996b) shows that swings in positive and negative press coverage drove the rise and late-season declines of candidates Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Gary Hart in 1984 in a regular boom-and-bust cycle. This media-driven cycle, we also argue, drove the rise and fall of Ross Perot in the spring of 1992, when he raced from obscurity to leadership in the three-man race for president in just three months, but then fell back under a withering barrage of press-initiated negativity.

Two distinct effects seem to be present in presidential primaries: the effect of coverage per se, and the effect of negative coverage. Both amount of coverage and amount of negative coverage can, as argued earlier, be accounted for by the Rule of Anticipated Importance. Much of Perot's coverage was also explained by this rule. Thus, the dynamics of media politics as outlined in my theory seem quite important to understanding presidential nominations.

Yet the effects of media politics, even when large, by no means necessarily undercut the role of parties in presidential primaries, and may often reinforce it. This is because what reporters pay attention to in deciding which presidential candidates to cover includes the ability of candidates 1) to generate enthusiasm among party activists in straw polls and party conventions, as in the Witcover remark cited

earlier; 2) to raise money from each party's network of campaign donors; 3) to collect endorsements from party officeholders; and 4) to attract talented staff and consultants from the pool of party professionals. These various actors collectively constitute a good approximation of what Aldrich (1995) calls the modern "in-service" political party. By voting with their cheers, wallets, reputations, and feet, these party insiders go a long way toward creating the "anticipated importance" that determines which candidates the media will cover and ignore.

The tendency of the media to help focus public attention on party favorites is somewhat undermined by their tendency to be especially tough on frontrunners once they become established as such. Yet, as also noted earlier, media "scrutiny" falls most heavily on frontrunners who lack much prior political experience, and because party activists have tended to favor experienced insiders over less experienced outsiders, the media have tended, on balance, to favor the choice of the activists. To mention the two most notable cases: In 1984 and 1996, experienced but uncharismatic insiders (Walter Mondale and Bob Dole) got significantly less criticism than their less experienced outsider opponents (Gary Hart, Steve Forbes and Pat Buchanan).[13]

It is notable that since 1980, which was when the dynamic features of the current system of presidential primaries first became widely understood within the political community, candidates favored by party insiders have never been beaten by an outsider, despite an abundance of charismatic outsiders and some charismatically challenged insiders. In view of the inherently populist nature of the current process, this must be considered somewhat surprising. Part of the explanation is no doubt the skill and savvy of party professionals, who will naturally tend to dominate whatever system exists. But part of the explanation is also probably due to the behavior of journalists who, in following the Rule of Anticipated Importance, have tended to support the candidates of the party elites more often than they have undercut them.

The "invisible primary" phase of the 2000 presidential nominations has done nothing to undercut

[13] The data on Mondale and Hart are shown in Zaller and Hunt (1995) and indicate a nearly two-to-one advantage to Mondale in amount of press-initiated criticism; I do not yet have final tallies on Dole, Forbes, and Buchanan, but the ratio looks like it will be even more favorable to the experienced insider than it was in 1984 .

anything of these arguments. For one thing, the invisible primary is no longer nearly so invisible as it used to be. Given the tendency of the primary system to create momentum for early winners, candidates are organizing earlier and earlier, and journalists, recognizing that what happens in this phase of the contest may determine the outcome, are covering it more heavily than in the past. [This is based on my impression; I do not have systematic data on this point.]

But although the media are covering the invisible primary more heavily than in the past, they are certainly not dominating it. On the Republican side, George W. Bush has managed to dominate fund-raising, early endorsements, and the hunt for talented staff. If, as seems more likely than not, Bush is able convert these early advantages into crushing electoral victories when the mass phase of the nomination process begins in February, party insiders will have won another nomination.

On the Democratic side, the choice of the party insiders, Al Gore, is far from being a shoo-in. Rather, he is locked in what seems a close fight with Bill Bradley, a former U.S. Senator and professional basketball star. If Gore wins, it will be because of his insider connections to the network of fund-raisers, activists, and media consultants that his mentor, Bill Clinton, tapped into.

But what would it mean if Gore were to lose the nomination to Bradley? Or, though less likely, what would it mean if Bush were to lose to the person who seems his most serious rival, Senator John McCain?

What seems most salient about the 2000 race as it has shaped up so far is that party insiders – by which, again, I mean office holders, activists, money-givers, and political advisors – have managed to winnow the field of would-be nominees from about a dozen in each party to just two in each party, each of whom is a very plausible nominee of his party. If any of these four wins his party's nomination, it would be indicative that party insiders – even though divided among

party nomination processes.

The only "outsider" candidate who seems at this writing to have a chance to win is the self-financed millionaire, Steve Forbes. If he wins, it will be plausible to say that the Republican party cannot control its presidential nomination under the current nominating system. But a Forbes win is unlikely.

In this theoretical account, candidates for presidential nominations struggle first for the support of party insiders and then for the support of voters in presidential primaries. Because media coverage is linked to these two struggles via the Rule of Anticipated Importance, journalists end up reinforcing the role of party insiders more than they undermine it.

The media may help reinforce the importance of parties in non-election periods as well. In a widely respected article, Lance Bennett (1990) argued that reporters tend to "index" the slant of their coverage of foreign policy crises to reflect the balance of opinion within the government. Opinion within the government is, of course, largely Democratic opinion and Republican opinion. Hence, when the parties decide to fight about something, press coverage tends to be split along lines their reflect opposing partisan views, and when the parties agree well enough that they wish not to fight, coverage is one-sided in the direction of their agreement.

In a recent paper, Dennis Chiu and I (Zaller with Chiu, 1996) draw a distinction between "Source Indexing," which is the idea that reporters mechanically reflect what official sources tell them, and "Power Indexing," which is the idea that reporters pick and choose among sources in accord with their estimate of the source's power to affect future events. Thus, for example, reporters tend to pay more attention to the speeches of Members of Congress when they are in a position to influence a foreign policy decision than when they are not. Although the quantitative data cannot distinguish the two conceptions of indexing, qualitative evidence suggested that the notion of Power Indexing, which is essentially the same as the Rule of Anticipated Importance, better fits the overall evidence. But according to either Source Indexing or Power Indexing, reporters take cues from parties on which issues are likely to be important, thereby effectively ceding to parties and their leading figures considerable leeway in setting the nation's agenda to suit their needs and interests.

In these important ways, the incentives inherent in their professional work lead reporters to reinforce rather than override the efforts of parties to organize and conduct the business of politics. The systematic tendency of media politics to reinforce Party Politics in this way is, I believe, one of the most important implications of my theory of media politics. Yet reporters do not only reinforce party control of politics, as I discuss in the next section.

The motivations of journalists as they seek to express voice and protect their professional turf from encroachment by politicians are about as normatively admirable as the motivations of self-interested business persons to make big profits — and about as useful to society. I mean this as a major point in favor of the system of media politics that my theory attempts to capture. Just as abundant goods, efficiently produced, are the by-product of self-interested competition among profit-maximizing business persons, so it can be argued that timely political information, much of it negative or horse-race oriented, is the useful by-product of competition between journalists and politicians to control news content.

One may reach this conclusion by either of two arguments. The shorter and more familiar one is that both politicians and journalists are, after all, attempting to attract and hold the attention of the mass audience. If either could monopolize the competition, there might be danger that the mass audience would be ill-served. But given the intense competition that exists, both among media outlets and between politicians and journalists, the resulting communication ought to be at least fairly close to what citizens want. Insofar as there are departures from what a perfectly competitive situation would generate, they are likely to be in the direction of whichever group has the upper hand. If journalists have the upper hand, departures are likely to make the news look more like what network news looked like in the early days of TV when journalists were able to enforce a cartel over production of it, or like Public Broadcasting, which is to some extent free of market constraints, looks today. If politicians have the upper hand, departures are likely to make politicians, especially incumbent politicians and very well-financed ones, look better than they otherwise would. But, again, given the strong market pressures that exist, departures from competitive equilibria may be expected to be either relatively small or relatively short-lived or both.

The longer and less familiar argument on behalf of the value of communication generated by media politics entails an open assault on one of the sacred icons of American political culture, namely, the ideal of democratic citizenship bequeathed by the liberal reform movement of the late 19th century and the Progressive movement of the early 20th century. According to this ideal, citizens should keep well-informed about politics and decide between candidates on the basis of the issues. Candidates should, according to the ideology of Progressivism, facilitate this ideal by taking clear stands on the issues and

the press should devote most of its attention to making sure they do so. Thus — and only thus — is genuine democracy possible. Yet, it is obvious that the mass media fail to deliver the heavy ration of issue-based information envisioned by the Progressive ideal. Hence, in order to defend the media, I must attack the ideal.

To attack the Progessive ideal of citizenship is no easy task. Virtually every important spokesperson of American political culture endorses it, including journalists, candidates, political philosophers, and most social scientists, including most political scientists. Yet scarcely anyone seems to recognize that this ideal is a relatively recent cultural construct and that American politics has, in some respects, deteriorated since its adoption.

Prior to about 1890, the dominant institution of American politics was the political party and the dominant conception of citizenship was one of exuberant partisanship. At election time, parties held family picnics and music festivals; organized thousands of volunteers into night-time torchlight parades, including fireworks; and fostered frivolous but entertaining competition, such as "pole raisings" in which groups of local partisans would lash together two trees to form the tallest possible pole — which would, of course, always be topped with a party banner or other symbol. Interspersed with this entertainment was an abundance of speeches and oratory which, because of its partisan tone, drew enthusiastic responses from the crowds gathered to hear it. Citizens, thus, took their politics and entertainment in one big, highly palatable package. As historian Michael McGerr comments:

> Popular politics fused thought and emotion in a single style accessible to all — a rich unity of reason and passion that would be alien to Americans in the twentieth century.

In this context, partisanship and citizenship were closely intertwined. A good citizen was a good partisan -- he supported a party and its principles, volunteered his time to work for them, and received in return large measures of entertainment and satisfaction. As McGerr comments:

> Spectacular campaigning encouraged the voter to see himself as a member of a well-defined community rather than as an unimportant figure lost in a sea of electors. Indeed, spectacle made membership in the community appear, in part, to be contingent on the revelation of one's partisan preferences, on the demonstration of

one's political involvement.

The old style of party-based politics did not die an entirely natural death. Though it might eventually have died anyway, it was attacked and killed by a generation of liberal and Progressive reformers for being too emotional and irrational, as McGerr (1986) demonstrates at length. The reformers were especially harsh on parties, prohibiting many corrupt practices but also undermining the capacity of parties to conduct campaigns in the traditional manner. These same reformers advanced a new style of politics, which they called educational politics, from which grew the advertising-based politics we have today. The central claim of this new ideal is that citizens should choose their leaders on the basis of careful and well-informed deliberation.

It is probably not a coincidence that the decline of spectacular, party-based politics has been associated with numerous visible indications of decline in popular interest in politics, most notably, a decline in voting participation. "The new mix of [candidate] advertising and education failed to stir the people," writes McGerr. "Indications of their political withdrawal became clearer with each presidential election from 1900 to 1920," and has become especially pronounced in elections at the end of the century. The new politics, as Michael Schudson (1998) has written, "have left the public sphere not only cleansed but bleached of the colors that had made people care about it."

The point of this truncated account is not to urge a return to torchlight parades and pole-raisings. It is, rather, to suggest that the way to increase popular involvement in politics might be to make it more entertaining, even at the expense of what academics, reformers and other intellectual types considering to be the real substance of politics.

The reference to intellectuals is one that I believe needs underscoring. From at least the turn of the 20th century to the present, leading political intellectuals — mainly elite journalists, political scientists, self-styled citizen reformers, and private foundations — have bemoaned the lack of serious ideological and issue content in American politics. They have also consistently attacked the political parties and the mass media for failing to provide more of it. During this whole time, almost no one has denied their complaints, allowing them to acquire the status of truisms.

My suggestion is that the truisms of political intellectuals may not actually be true. A politics of issues

and ideology may suit those who have a professional interest in politics and often advanced degrees from elite universities, but it may not suit anyone else. If the goal of reform is to increase the meaningfulness of politics to the masses of ordinary citizens, it may be that it should proceed in the opposite direction.

Typical of the reforms that appeal to elite reformers is the journalist Paul Taylor's proposal to elevate campaign discourse by giving blocks of free TV time to the presidential candidates for uninterrupted discussion of the issues. This proposal was implemented by three or the four major networks in 1996, but was largely a bust.

One problem that came up immediately was the danger that viewers would simply turn off the issue commentary when it came on. To prevent this, reformers wanted the networks to "roadblock" viewers by airing their segments at the same time. It is odd that a reform designed, in part, to reduce popular alienation from politics would feel a need to resort to this kind of tactic. But the networks, which were reluctant to give away free segments to begin with, were even more reluctant to try to force viewers to watch them — no doubt because there was no way to “roadblock” viewers from fleeing to local news or entertainment programming.

As it turned out, the candidates were hardly more enthusiastic about the free time than were the networks or the citizenry. Bob Dole failed to use up the time allotted him, and Bill Clinton, though long-winded enough to fill up any vacuum in the airways, simply recited campaign boilerplate. Citizens, for their part, mostly failed to notice or care about the experiment, and no one has seriously suggested that it had any effect on the campaign, even as a good example.[14] This matches the experience in Great Britain, where the parties routinely fail to use all the free time they are allowed by law, and also the experience in Israel, where there is a joke that, when the politicians come on TV to use their free time for issue discussion, water pressure throughout the country falls as citizens rush to take bathroom breaks.

If citizens do not seem to want as much substantive politics as the Progressive ideal of citizenship suggests they should — or at least not in heavy doses or pure form — how, beyond my general argument about the salutary effects of competition, do we evaluate the particular communication that citizens get?

---

[14] "Free TV-Time Experiment Wins Support, if Not Viewers," Lawrie Mifflin, *New York Times*, whenever.

Let me consider separately the two types of campaign journalism that are most often criticized — horserace coverage and press negativity toward the candidates.

Horserace coverage is, first of all, coverage that focuses on the element of organized competition. As noted earlier, millions of Americans find competition per se to be entertaining and, despite the obnoxious frequency of commercial interruption, spend many leisure hours watching an athletic version of it on TV. Given this, horserace coverage may function in the same way that spectacular politics once did — as a magnet to attract the interest of citizens, after which citizens may stay around and learn something, like hearing a speech at the end of a torchlight parade.

Moreover, the particular horserace coverage that citizens get from presidential campaigns is laced with substantive political information. Thus, voters routinely hear that as part of a strategy to woo this or that group, a candidate is changing his program on this or adopting a new proposal on that. Or voters may hear that a candidate's misstatement has angered some particular group, thus lessening the candidate's chances in the election. For some critics of the media, this is bad, since it makes politics seem a mere game. Politics, they believe, should be serious and edifying. Evidence for this view, however, is both limited and inconclusive.[15] What would be worse, in any case, would be if citizens got no news at all of the substance of politics.[16]

In a somewhat unusual convergence of research traditions, both political scientists and economists have agreed that citizens do and should pay attention to what political groups and group leaders are saying, using this information as a cue for making up their own minds.[17] Thus, horserace stories about what "angry white males" and "soccer moms," "generation X," and other momentary distillations of

---

[15] Cappella and Jamieson (1997) find that when experimental subjects absorbed news about a mayoral campaign in a city other than their own, they were less interested and more alienated when the news was framed in horserace terms. But this was a case in which, by design, the experimental subjects had no psychological involvement in the issue, as if hearing about a baseball game about two non-descript teams from another place. When, in another study, experimental subjects took in news about President Clinton's health care reform package, an issue that had personal relevance to many citizens, the horserace frame did not diminish citizen interest.

[16] It is sometimes argued that horserace coverage drives citizens away from politics. But why would a news organization drive citizens away from one of its most important products, namely, coverage of politics?

[17] On the political science side, see especially Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; on the economics side, see Downs, 1957, p. xx.

sentiment may provide information to voters that is not only interesting but politically useful.

Horserace coverage may not be intellectuals' ideal format for conveying information about the substance of elections. But in a variety of underappreciated ways, horserace coverage may provide voters with an extremely palatable mix of entertainment, information, and politically useful cues. Reformers who think otherwise might try reading news articles backwards, because that is about how easy it would be for many modestly educated voters to understand the type of discourse the reformers would like to have.

Another complaint about campaign coverage is that it is much too negative, and much of the public agrees. Commenting on what he takes to be evidence of excessive negativity by the media, Tom Patterson writes:

> News coverage has become a barrier between the candidates and the voters rather than a bridge connecting them...
>
> Of course, a campaign is sometimes plagued by the candidates' deceit and pettiness, and the media should inform the voters about it. But the press has gone way beyond that point... (p. 25)

Patterson acknowledges that much press negativity is a response by journalists to efforts by politicians to manipulate the news, but he contends that their reaction has been "irresponsible journalism" that "poses a severe threat to the press's watchdog function..." by undermining the credibility of the press among the general public (p. 26).

Like Patterson, Robert Lichter and Richard Noyes' (1995) recent study of the press coverage of the 1988 and 1992 presidential elections is concerned with more than press negativity. But they document numerous instances in which press criticism seems either to miss its mark or to distract from more important events or both. Hence the first of their recommendations on how to improve press coverage of elections is that the reporters "Lose the Attitude." As they explain,

> News organizations need to stop confusing a sharp tongue with serious oversight... the focus should be more on hard news, and less on soft core commentary.
>
> ... Rampant "positivism" offers as many dangers as unchecked negativism, including flackery and favoritism. Journalists need to rediscover the virtue of neutrality in their

reports and to edge back out of their own spotlight. (p. 272, 273)

Notwithstanding these concerns, which must certainly be taken seriously, I believe it is far more difficult than is often recognized to specify how much negativity is too much. One problem is that it is almost impossibly difficult to arrive at credible evidence of how much negativity exists. As I discussed briefly above, there is, by my calculation, only about a third as much press negativity as Patterson finds (see Chapter 5). But this is still only an extremely rough estimate, dependent almost as much on measurement assumptions as on data.

Another vexing question is the choice of baseline for assessing the present level of negativity. By almost any counting method, press negativity has risen dramatically since the 1950s, but why use the 1950s as baseline? Going a bit further back in history, one encounters the era of the partisan press, which was also extremely negative.

Blatantly partisan negativity has been in decline since late in the 19th century, and seems to have died out almost entirely by the 1960s. Burgos (1996) has documented this decline in an analysis of the partisan slant of headlines in two holdout newspapers, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, in the period 1900 to 1992, as summarized in Figure 8.2.

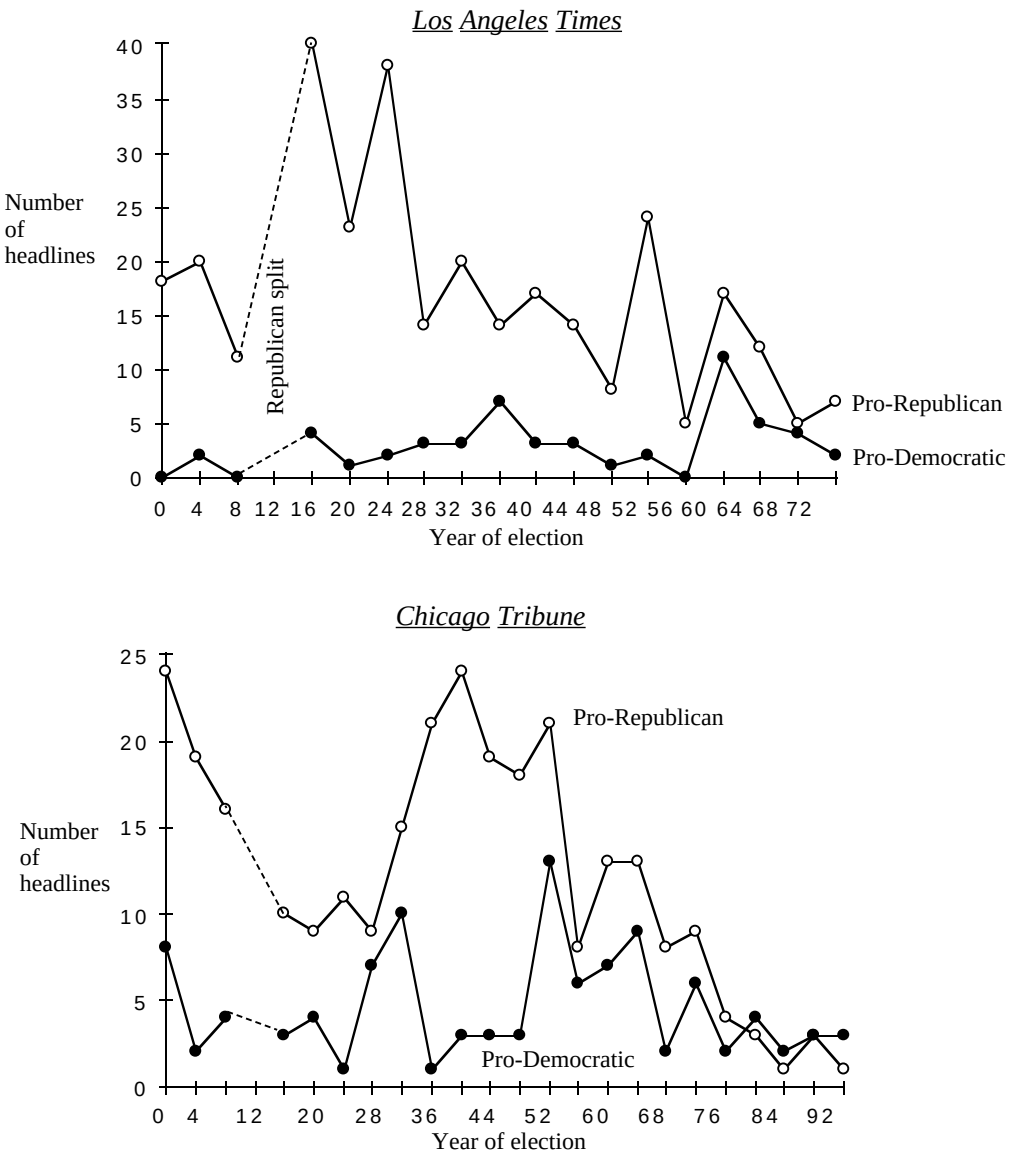
INSERT FIGURE 8-2 ABOUT HERE

If one examines the decline of partisan negativity, as shown in Figure 8.2, in conjunction with the rise in negativity in the newly non-partisan press, as shown in Figure 5.2, one might reasonably conclude that the 1950s were a low point in press negativity in all of American history. The justification for using such a period as a baseline for assessing the current level of negativity is by no means obvious.

Patterson's most developed argument for believing that media coverage is too negative is that, contrary to the impression one gains from the media, presidential candidates tend, if elected, to keep the electoral promises they make. Politicians, as he goes on to suggest, are for the most part honorable people whose shortcomings are systematically exaggerated by the media and who don't deserve the kind of hyper-critical scrutiny the media visit on them.

But there is a problem of inference here. The fact that most politicians behave honorably in the current system cannot be taken as evidence of how they would behave in the presence of a less vigilant

Figure 8.2. *Partisan slant of campaign headlines in two Republican newspapers*



Source: "The Second Hands of History: Partisanship and the Corporate Transformation of American Journalism," Russell Burgos, Unpublished paper, UCLA.

press, any more than the fact that most car owners put money in parking meters when the police are around can be used as evidence about how car owners would behave if enforcement were scaled back. Even if most politicians and drivers are, in some general sense, honorable, politics or parking could change radically if enforcement were suddenly reduced.

This is more than just speculation. Press reports and campaign biographies contain numerous instances in which candidates took actions, or refrained from taking actions, in order to avoid press criticism. Even Ross Perot seemed to run a more careful campaign the second time around. Here are some specific examples:

• In 1980, President Carter wanted to avoid presidential debates with Ronald Reagan, but agreed to do so anyway. As Germond and Witcover write, Carter decided to debate because his

> strategists felt their man was being hurt too much by the appearance that he had been dodging...."We felt we were boxed in," one Carter insider said later. "What would you all have written if Carter had said no? You would have handed us our head....There was no way out" (1981, 274).

• On the weekend before the 1980 election, President Carter was trailing in the race and faced with failure of his last-ditch efforts to obtain freedom for the 52 American hostages held by Iran. Compounding his problem, according to journalist Jeff Greenfield, was "the deeply ingrained suspicion of the press" which prevented the President from exaggerating what he had been able to accomplish in the faltering negotiations with Iran. The press felt he had overstated his success in resolving the crisis earlier in the year when, on the day of a critical primary, Carter called a 7:20 a.m., nationally televised news conference to dramatically announce a development that never materialized. Reporters were also still upset that Carter had called the aborted hostage rescue mission, which ended with the collision of two U.S. aircraft at a desert rendezvous point, a "limited success" despite the fact that eight Americans were killed and no hostages were rescued. As Greenfield (1982, p. 297) continued,

> When [Carter] went on national television at 6:25 p.m. to announce a "positive step" toward resolution of the crisis, he did so after his aides, according to a post election comment by media advisor Gerald Rafshoon, had rejected the idea of attacking the Iranian Government. "It would have been demagogic," Rafshoon said — and, it could be added, the press would have been quick to attack any posturing on the part of Carter as another illegitimate use of the Oval Office for political gain. Instead, Carter simply said ...

Discussing the same events, Carter aide Hamilton Jordon later wrote, "We spent the rest of the day deciding how to respond [to the stalled negotiations with Iran]... We had to play it down the middle to avoid the press charge we were using the crisis for election purposes" (1982, p. 362).

• During the 1992 campaign, criticism by the press of the Republicans' "Willie Horton campaign" in 1988 continued to give Bush managers pause. "In the absence of Atwater and Ailes," wrote one team of journalists, "the campaign was afflicted by post-Willie Horton stress syndrome, a morbid fear of crossing boundaries of ethics and taste and getting caught...."[18] Germond and Witcover report that "[Bush campaign official Mary] Matalin recalled that she and [campaign manager Robert] Teeter wanted to consider doing ads on Clinton's Arkansas record between the two conventions but 'were dissuaded because of how you all would respond.'" (1993, p. 423)[19]

• During the 1960 campaign, Richard Nixon attacked John Kennedy as a spokesman for "national disparagement" whose policies would "serve not the cause of freedom but would work toward the cause of surrender." With McCarthyism a recent and still vivid memory and the Cold War going at full tilt, reporters saw this attack as a renewal of the red-baiting that had marked Nixon's early career. As the *New York Times* reported in its lead sentence, the attack was "reminiscent of previous controversial Nixon campaigns," and reporters at a news conference pressed Nixon on whether he meant to say that Kennedy was espousing a policy of surrender to the Soviet Union. Nixon denied this implication and, according to the *Times*, toned down his rhetoric in subsequent speeches.[20]

• During the 1992 campaign, Ira Magaziner, one of Clinton's policy experts, prepared a position paper promising to lower federal heatlh care costs while providing coverage to the 37 million Americans who were uninsured. According to Bob Woodward, the plan was opposed by Gene Sperling, another policy expert:

---

[18] Goldman et al., 1993, *Quest for the Presidency*, p. 523

[19] Consistent with Matalin's claims, Jamieson found that as media ad watches declined by 55 percent from 1992 to 1996, the percentage of presidential ads containing misleading claims rose from 14 percent in 1992 to 52 percent in 1996(Bennett, 1997: 1162). At an academic conference at which these findings were discussed, a worker from the 1992 Bush campaign said he could recall three or four instances in 1992 in which the Bush campaign refrained from running a negative ad on Clinton out of concern for media criticism.

[20] *New York Times*, September 22, 1960, p.1; September 23, p. 8.

> Sperling suspected that no one outside the campaign, no independent specialist, would support Magaziner. He knew that journalists would immediately check the numbers, and it would make news if no one else supported them. Expert validation was essential. He told Magaziner that he wouldn't include the health care numbers in the plan unless a respected outside authority back them up. Sperling suggested Henry Aaron, an economist at the well-established Brookings Institution and a recognized health policy expert.
>
> Sperling and Magaziner phoned Aaron for a three-way conference call. As Sperling expected, Aaron …declined to support anything close to Magaziner's estimates….
>
> Sperling offered to let Magaziner find his own experts.
>
> "They're all wrong," Magaziner insisted.
>
> "Ira," Sperling replied, "you might be the smartest person in the world, but in presidential politics, if the experts don't verify you, you get hit on national television, and then it's a
>
> (Woodward, 1995, 33-34).

In the absence of the threat of media negativity, would Carter really have refused to debate Reagan in 1980, thus undermining what was not yet but has since become a strong tradition of presidential debates? Would Carter have made a "demagogic" appeal on Iran on the eve of the election, as an aide feared? Would Bush have launched a new Willy Horton style campaign in 1992 — most likely in the form of a "family values" campaign against Clinton's personal life — except for fear of "getting caught" by the media? Would the Bush campaign have spent even more time in 1988 visiting flag factories? If given free rein, would Nixon have persisted in, or perhaps ratcheted up, the charge that Kennedy was soft on communism, as he had at other times?

One cannot know. But it seems a safe assumption that in the heat of close elections in which the stake is the presidency of the United States, more than a few candidates, perhaps all of whom are honorable men, would succumb to the temptation to say what they need to say. George Bush was quite willing to admit his attitude on this matter as he entered his uphill re-election battle in 1992: "I'm certainly going into this as a dog-eat-dog fight and I will do what I have to do to be re-elected."[21] One cannot, then, assume that the tenor of political campaigns would remain as it is in the absence of a press corps eager, for the most self-interested of reasons, to score points on politicians.

It might be argued that, in a vigorous two-party system like our own, an aggressive press corps is

---

[21] Cited in Patterson, 1993, p. 50.

unnecessary because the parties will keep each other honest. Who, after all, has more incentive to point out a candidate's flaws than the candidate of the other party?

I see two rejoinders to this argument. The first centers on demagoguery. Though hard to define, demagoguery occurs when one politician makes flagrantly false or misleading charges that others find it difficult to rebut, presumably because the attacks appeal to popular fears or prejudices. The last great demagogue in American politics was Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose unsupported charges of communist conspiracies in the early 1950s went unrebutted for several years, during which many careers were seriously damaged, because mainstream politicians were afraid to take him on. It is sometimes argued — with good reason, in my opinion — that part of the reason the U.S. became involved in Vietnam was that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were afraid of the McCarthyist attacks they might suffer if they could ever be accused of "losing" Vietnam (Zaller, 1998).

Although nothing like McCarthyism has occurred in recent decades, the danger of milder forms of demagoguery cannot be lightly dismissed, as my review of campaign incidents a few pages ago shows. In such circumstances, when one party loses the ability to check the other through free debate, it may be quite useful to democratic politics to have a third participant in the debate, a national press corps.

Critics of the press maintain that journalists can be as irresponsible as anyone else, and that, because they are unelected, their irresponsibility is especially dangerous. The first point is certainly correct, but the idea that journalists are unconstrained by the mass audience is, as I have argued throughout this monograph, simply wrong. Like politicians, journalists must constantly appeal to their audience's notion of what seems plausible and right, and if they fail to do so, they lose out in the kind of election that matters to them — the struggle for ratings and market share. Journalists can, to be sure, loose touch with the mass audience, but so can every other professional group, including politicians and professors. My point here is that journalists have strong incentives not to lose touch and that these incentives affect their behavior. In this basic sense, journalists are responsible participants in national politics and, as such, as likely as anyone to make useful contributions.[22]

[22] The degree to which politicians are responsible to the public that elects them should not be exaggerated. See Ehrenhalt (1991).

The other reason that electoral competition may fail to keep the parties honest is that, like other service providers in mass society, the parties may collude to keep attractive products off the market if, for one reason or another, each is better off if the product is not offered. A current example is campaign finance reform, which cuts against the interests of both parties but was brought onto the national agenda by journalists, whose interests would be served by campaign finance reform.[23] From an earlier era, civil service reform may be an issue that neither party had an interest in pursuing except for strong external prods from the turn-of-the-century muckraking press. The possibility that nominally partisan politicians may form "a cross-party conspiracy among incumbents to keep their jobs" (Mayhew, 1974, p. 105) is another reason for encouraging pressure from outside the party system.

From a more benign viewpoint, E. E. Schattschneider (1960) has forcefully argued that parties cannot argue about everything at once. They pick certain fights while ignoring others, "organizing" the former into politics and the latter out. Slavery was one issue that was organized out of politics for many decades, and racial segregation was likewise kept off the agenda an even longer time by an agreement among the parties not to fight about it. If such things can happen, it ought to be generally valuable to have a third force, with a base outside the party cleavage system, with an interest in seeking out and publicizing potentially important but neglected issues and trying to "organize them into politics."

The general point, then, is that two-party competition by no means guarantees that the public will be apprised of all issues on which it may wish or need to receive information. This being the case, information provided by the on-going competition between politicians and journalists may be expected to have positive social value.

To be sure, information is not the only by-product of the clash between politicians and reporters. A great deal of mutual dislike is also created, and this is transmitted to the mass audience along with the news. As Patterson (1996a, p. 4) observes, "Reporters have a decidedly low opinion of politics and

---

[23] The more money candidates can raise, the more they can rely on paid advertising rather than news reports to communicate with voters, thereby undermining the importance of news and the journalists who produce news. This creates a journalistic self-interest in limiting money in politics. The interest of the TV networks in such reform is difficult to specify: on one hand, most campaign funds are spent on TV advertising; but on the other hand, campaigns increasingly spend through local stations rather than national buys.

politicians, and it slants their coverage of Republicans and Democrats alike " — slants it, as Patterson maintains, toward an excess of cynicism and negativity. Perhaps so. But politics is unavoidably conflictual in any case, often seemingly excessively so. For the reasons just given, I do not see grounds for arguing that conflict between the two parties is the only such conflict that can yield positive value.

If there is a fundamental problem in the system of media politics, it is not the politicians, who have little choice but to approach news-making in a strategic manner, since news is a primary means of communicating with voters in an age of weakened parties. Nor should journalists, for all of their irritating faults, be made out as villains, since journalists provide an essential check on the manipulative and collusive impulses of candidates and their managers. The problem, if there is one, is the system of media politics itself, a system that demands more attentiveness from citizen-voters, on issues from health-care reform to presidential nominations, than it is individually sensible or in many cases possible for them to give. With inattentive sovereigns at the base of governance, some degree of confusion and disharmony would seem unavoidable in any democratic polity. But this is not a problem with media politics alone; it is a problem with democracy in general (Schumpeter, 1942/75, pp. 256-64). The role that its incentives have led the journalistic profession to carve out for itself in our democracy seems more a part of the solution than a part of the problem.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

[Following is a sketch of the argument with which I intend to end the book]

In the heyday of party politics in the 19th century, nearly all newspapers had an informal party affiliation. They supported its candidates, lambasted those of its opponents – and offered much unwanted advice on what “true Democratic principles” or “true Republican principles” demanded. What this meant is that, in practice, both parties had secure lines of communication to the mass electorate. Any sort of partisan attack that party leaders wanted to make would be broadcast throughout the country without fuss or complaint.

As briefly described in Chapter 3, these lines of communication were cut sometime between 1900 and 1950 by the rise of the professional, non-partisan press. Professional reporters continued to convey

each candidate's main activities and message – and as late as the McCarthyist period of the 1950s, they did so without much regard for the plausibility of what the politician was saying. Thus, when presidential candidates sought to "use journalists to get our story out," they were generally able to do so. This was essential, since party organizations were losing many of their foot soldiers in this period, and since candidates did not yet have massive advertising budgets to communicate with voters through paid media.

But partly in response to what most journalists felt were the excesses of McCarthyism, reporters in the 1960s displayed some significant resistance to what politicians wanted to have in print. The politician to feel this first and most sharply was perhaps Lyndon Johnson, whose Vietnam policies were frequently questioned in the new media. Journalists did not themselves originate these questions, but they gave access to the opinions of dissidents within the foreign policy establishment. And from Johnson's point of view, this was media resistance to his policies.

It is probably no accident that it was at this particular juncture, the 1968 presidential election, that candidate Richard Nixon went on a sort of political offensive to regain control of political communication. Nixon had long had famously strained relations with the press, and when he ran for office on a plan for ending the Vietnam War which he steadfastly refused to reveal to the public, it was predictable that the increasingly assertive press would give him a tough time. There were two principal elements to Nixon's offensive. First, he raised unprecedented amounts of money for paid campaign advertising, thereby obtaining complete control over a significant fraction of campaign communication. Second, he instituted a novel and aggressive system of campaign news management, as described in Chapter 7.

Both thrusts of Nixon's offensive have been strengthened with time. Campaigns, first on the Republican side and later on the Democratic side, raised news management to the level of a social science. And candidates have, despite the reforms of the 1970s, found ways to raise and spend increasingly large amounts of money on campaign advertising, thereby increasing the fraction of communication that they can directly control.

Technology, moreover, has been on the side of the politicians. The multiplication of broadcasting channels has increased market competition which, as we have seen, weakened professional journalism. Candidates have rushed to do business with the less professionalized members of press corps, who have

typically been quite happy to let themselves be used to get the candidate's message out. Loss of audience share by the highly professionalized network news programs, and more recently the decline in newspaper readership, means that the fraction of remaining communication that can be controlled by politicians, either through local TV news or paid advertising, is rising.

It was not implausible for Lyndon Johnson and other astute observers in the 1960s and 1970s to believe that media politics, as the term has been used in this book, might overwhelm party politics. But the offensive launched by Nixon in 1968 has prevented that from happening. We are therefore left with a political system in which professional journalists are an important force, but in which parties and their leading politicians hold the greatest share of the power. The United States is primarily ruled by a system of party politics rather than media politics.

#