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The 2000 presidential election: A content analysis of newspaper media coverage

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THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF NEWSPAPER MEDIA COVERAGE

by

Jennifer Barbara Stein

Bachelor of Arts Degree
The George Washington University
1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree
Hank Greenspun School of Communication
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

Graduate College
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Master of Arts in Communication Studies

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ABSTRACT

The 2000 Presidential Election: A Content Analysis of Newspaper Media Coverage

by

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Following the guidelines of journalistic integrity, media coverage of presidential elections should be fair and unbiased. This study examined the newspaper media coverage of George W. Bush and Al Gore, the two major presidential candidates in the 2000 election. This study examined all issues of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, *Las Vegas Sun* and the *Reno Gazette-Journal* during the 65-day time frame from Labor Day to Election Day 2000. This study tested three research questions and one hypothesis. The research questions asked if the overall amounts of newspaper coverage of George W. Bush and Al Gore were equal and neutral and whether issue coverage was related to date. The hypothesis stated that there would be a difference in campaign issue and candidate coverage between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Results were analyzed using the chi square test of independence. Support was found for both the research questions and hypothesis, indicating that newspaper media coverage of the two major presidential candidates was unfair and biased.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist’s credibility.”

-- The Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics

Every presidential election and corresponding print media coverage of that election is unique. The most recent 2000 presidential election is no exception. Deemed as the closest U.S. presidential race in the past twenty years, the election was filled with new precedent and remarkable outcomes. George W. Bush became the fourth person to have won the presidency despite losing the popular vote (Cable News Network, 2000). Election 2000 showcased “policy options that appeared to be painted in alternative shades of beige” (Norris, 2001, p. 4). A 1999-2000 Gallup poll showed the only issues important to Americans were education, ethics/moral decline, health care, and crime/violence (Norris, 2001). These issues, along with Medicare, prescription drug benefits, and Social Security reform, became the major issues of Campaign 2000, each tailored by the candidates to describe his own message and plan.

Democratic candidate, Vice President Al Gore, was characterized by the print media as “an experienced leader, energetic and hardworking campaigner, who should have been able to draw on all of the credit for the good times under the Clinton years

while sharing none of the personal problems that afflicted the President” (Norris, 2001, p. 4). With the strong economic and social conditions many Americans enjoyed under the Clinton administration, political pundits and Democratic party leaders thought this prosperity would have set the stage for a safe Gore victory (Wayne, 2000).

Republican candidate, Texas Governor George W. Bush, benefited from having “great virtues of instant name recognition and his father’s Rolodex of fundraising contacts, with none of the ideological baggage that doomed the Gingrich revolution” (Norris, 2001, p. 4). Bush was extremely popular as Governor of Texas where he was able to cross over party lines and capture traditionally democratic votes from Hispanics and women (Wayne, 2000). Bush was characterized by the print media as a “more likeable regular guy” than Gore, had low expectations set for his success by the media and therefore the public, and was able to exceed those expectations.

Each candidates’ message was distinct from their own party’s predecessors. Gore’s message centered on the traditional liberal, populist message of “working families,” straying from the centrist message of Bill Clinton’s successful presidential campaigns that were able to garner support from moderate Republicans (Norris, 2001). Bush’s message also took a turn from previous Republican campaign messages by stressing “compassionate conservatism,” realizing that his party had to make changes to its traditional message for a White House victory. In the end, Gore led Bush in the popular vote by more than 500,000 votes but lost the election because Bush had 271 electoral votes to Gore’s 266 (Cable News Network, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

Following the guidelines of journalistic integrity, print media coverage of elections should be fair and unbiased, and should cover the issues in a manner that allows the public to make an informed decision in the voting booth (Lacy, Fico & Simon, 1991, p. 364). Given these guidelines, it was crucial to study further the print media coverage of the 2000 presidential election. This study examined newspaper media coverage of Al Gore and George W. Bush, the two major presidential candidates in the 2000 election. The focus was on the overall tone of newspaper media coverage of the major candidates and major campaign themes to determine if coverage was fair or biased. Bias was defined using Kenney and Simpson's (1993) definition of bias as "a pattern of constant favoritism. Bias occurs when one candidate or party receives more news coverage and more favorable news coverage" (p. 346). For this study, bias was extended to include more positive and negative news coverage. Fairness was defined as the opposite of bias, where candidates receive equal and neutral news coverage. Examining newspaper media coverage for fair, unbiased reporting revealed the extent of the media's journalistic integrity during the 2000 presidential election.

General Background

Over the past several decades, the American voter has become more reliant on mass media for information about political candidates (Graber, 1984; Paletz 1999; Patterson, 1993). The national political parties previously served this informative function, educating their members about the candidates and their ideology (Dautrich, 2000). Today, the media provide abundant information to American voters. Individuals can turn to newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet to get factual information to

make their political decisions. A recent survey found that seven in 10 voters depend mainly on the news media for information to make voting decisions (Dautrich, 2000, p. 125). Since America's press is free and unrestricted by government, the country is fortunate to have access to uncensored, non-government regulated press. As the central agents of political information, the media give the public what is considered a valuable commodity in a democracy (Wasserman, 1999).

With this increased reliance on the media for political information comes great responsibility. Since the American electorate turns to the media to provide relevant and factual information on political candidates and issues, the news media are entrusted to uphold journalistic integrity by providing fair, accurate, and informative news reporting. By being part of the prestigious and powerful media industry, journalists have "pledged to voluntarily limit their own freedom in order to make sure that all voices are represented in the public debate" (Lacy, Fico & Simon, 1991, p. 364). A majority of journalists have accepted the idea that responsible press performance requires adherence to the professional standards of accuracy, fairness and balance (Lacy, Fico & Simon, 1991, p. 364). Codes of ethics and performance standards have been accepted by organizations such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Society of Professional Journalists, and many top newspapers (Lacy, Fico & Simon, 1991, p. 364). These codes urge journalists to "be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information;" "treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect;" "be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know;" and "be accountable to readers, listeners, viewers and each other" (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

Research shows that more than three-quarters of Americans have a favorable view of the press, while at the same time having highly critical opinions of news media for their “perceived lack of fairness, questionable independence, intrusiveness and inaccuracy” (Kellermann, 1992, p. 83). Scholars account for this discrepancy by arguing that American voters are hungry for news that allows them to evaluate the substance of presidential candidacies on the basis of issue positions and on the likely consequences of electing a particular candidate to office (Dautrich, 2000, p. 125). However, when news is provided outside these parameters, such as strategy or horse race type stories, issue-oriented voters view these stories as “nonsense” (Dautrich, 2000, p. 126). Since horse race and other non-issue items tend to dominate media coverage, voters often do not receive the information they desire.

Media outlets consistently come under scrutiny from scholars and the public for several recurring issues regarding their ability to provide fair, accurate and informative news. These issues include the media as a profit-seeking business; objectivity versus selectivity; personal background of journalists; brevity in reporting; and stress on drama, action, violence and personalities (Johnson, 1993; Miller & Denham, 1994; Rhee, 1996). Since most print media outlets in this country must rely on advertising revenue to survive, emphasis is placed on stories that will be able to hold the attention of large audiences and thus provide benefit to advertisers (Paletz, 1999). Campaign stories are often short since political issues must share space with advertising, other stories and editorial (Paletz, 1999). Media coverage can have the appearance of being fair, yet “seldom conveys all of the facts that can help people make independent, informed, responsible and intelligent judgments” (Cavanaugh, 1995; Cable News Network, 2000).

Often what appears to be unfair coverage is the media's emphasis on the drama, action and personalities of the campaign, seeing the campaign as a game and "dwelling on personal differences, backgrounds and conflicts" (Rhee, 1996; Cable News Network, 2000). Print media outlets cite the reason for this type of coverage as providing the entertainment value that the public looks for from the media.

In light of the previously mentioned issues, a question is then raised regarding what the print media's role is and should be during presidential elections. The role of the media is usually categorized as one that shapes public agenda (Iyengar & Kindler, 1994; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981), serves as a link between the public and its leaders (Graber, 1984; Rogers & Dearing, 2000), molds candidate images (King, 1995; Devitt, 1997), and serves as a watchdog for the public (Paletz, 1999). The public and journalists often disagree on the media's actual role, with journalists often denying the significance of their influence on the election (Kellermann, 1992; Pew Research Center, 2000; Turner Learning, 2000).

Bernard Shaw and Judy Woodruff, television anchors for cable news network CNN, have voiced their opinions on the role of the media in elections (Turner Learning, 2000). On the area of shaping the public agenda and influencing the outcomes of elections, Shaw believes "the news media affect the public agenda, not shape it" and cautions of exaggerating "the news media's influence; rarely can the people be told what to think" (Turner Learning, 2000). Woodruff provides a different perspective from Shaw by stating that the media have the power to influence public debate through its role as information provider and that "sometimes influence can actually change the public agenda, as during Watergate..." (Turner Learning, 2000).

The public has a different view about how the media actually handle campaign coverage. A survey conducted by the The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press regarding the 2000 election coverage found 83% of voters felt they learned enough information during the campaign to make an informed choice for president, a percentage much higher than polls from the previous three presidential elections (Pew Research Center, 2000). However, the public's negative view of the press was unchanged in 2000, with four out of ten voters grading media coverage with a 'D' or 'F', and 53% of those surveyed saying the media had too much influence on the outcome of the election (Pew Research Center, 2000). These findings are consistent with previous public opinion polls regarding media's role in past elections. Although the public believes in the importance of media reporting on political leaders and institutions, they disprove of the media serving as agenda-setters (Kellermann, 1992). Instead, the public would prefer objective information to examine the issues, with the attitude of "give us the facts and we'll decide what to do with them" (Kellermann, 1992, p. 89).

Scholarly Approaches

Scholars study the influence and power of the mass media in relation to presidential elections in a variety of ways. The dominant areas of research focus on agenda-setting, coverage of non-issues, such as character and image, content bias, and the "game" of politics. Research has consistently found that traditional news media influences prospective voters' attitudes and preferences toward political candidates (Pfau and Eveland, 1996; Weaver, 1996). These main areas of study will be described briefly to showcase their prevalence in the 2000 presidential election. A more in-depth review of these areas of study will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Agenda-Setting. One of the most highly studied areas of mass media effects on presidential elections focuses on the concept of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting is described as the media's "ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda. Through their routine structuring of social and political reality, news media influence the agenda of public issues around which political campaigns and voter decisions are organized" (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986, p. 4). The media not only influence what the public learns about, but also influence how much importance the public should attach to information (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981). Scholars claim that agenda-setting has major political consequences, whereby media prime voters by influencing the standards by which people judge policies and individuals (Iyengar & Kindler, 1994). Agenda-setting scholars often conclude that overall, people do not pay attention to everything and rely on accessible information to be provided to them (Iyengar & Kindler, 1994). Therefore, "standards people use to judge a president may be substantially determined by which stories are covered and what information is made accessible" (Iyengar & Kindler, 1994, p. 149).

Non-Issue Reporting. Another major area of research focuses on the lack of campaign issue coverage in the press and the extent of reporting on "non-issues," such as image, scandals and missteps, during a presidential campaign. Non-issue coverage is defined as unrelated, mostly brief, and usually non-recurring items about a candidate's background, behavior or ethics (Kerbel, 1994). Image is defined as "the structure of voter perception or cognition in which the voter has organized impressions of the candidate" (Hacker, 1995, p. xiii). The shape of a candidate's image for the voter depends on what the candidate represents to the voter, including their party, actions they have taken,

policies they support, and the voter's evaluation of what the candidate says they represent (Hacker, 1995, p. xiii). Kerbel (1994) believes that image and non-issue coverage are ideal for the media because of the "image-rich, conflict-laden themes that smell of scandal" and create controversial stories for the media to cover (p. 25).

The issues of character, image and presidential capability, dominant in the 1992 and 1996 elections, surfaced again in 2000. Gore was often described as stiff, wooden, and robotic while Bush was seen as a normal, average guy. Attempts at airing scandals also emerged, with allegations placed on Gore for potential illegal fundraising tactics in the White House and aims at linking Gore to Clinton's character flaws. Coverage of Bush scandals focused on his past, with alleged illegal drug use, drinking problems, and his subsequent DUI.

Coverage Bias. Political communication research also examines the difference between fair and balanced coverage and potential bias of the news media in covering political campaigns. Specifically, researchers have focused on public opinion that reveals "an increasing number of citizens believe there is an ideological bias in news content" (Watts, Domke, Shah & Fan, 1999, p. 145). Scholarly research has found support for these bias claims during recent presidential elections (Lowry and Shidler, 1995; Miller, 1993; Johnson et al., 1996). Scholars have raised questions about what constitutes fair and balanced coverage; "Does it mean treating all candidates identically? Should coverage reflect political legitimacy? Can fairness apply to manifest fact or truth, or to differences in the credibility of sources?" (Fico and Cote, 1999, p.124).

Some scholars, such as Steger (1999), find that bias in news coverage is inevitable given the limits of space and time available in the media. He states that the form of the

media's bias is found in the themes or frames used by journalists to select and interpret events, and that this bias has a direct relationship between horse race polls and coverage. Those candidates given coverage and the tone of that coverage "reflects journalists' expectations of candidates' chances of winning the race" (Steger, 1999, p. 40). Campaign 2000 did not seem to bring out many charges of media bias against either of the major candidates, however the media's fairness in coverage of the candidates has yet to be discovered.

Horse Race and the Game. Many media scholars have claimed that the media provide less information on candidates and issues and more focus on the "game" of politics (Domke, Fan, Fibison, Shah, Smith & Watts, 1997; Fico and Cote, 1999; Johnson, Boudreau & Glowaki, 1996). Journalists are viewed as portraying candidates "as players in a game who are principally concerned with winning, and put the focus on who is ahead, who is behind, and how the game is being played" (Steger, 1999, p. 40). Following the central element of the "game schema," these scholars argue that "excessive horse race polls interfere with the media's mission of informing the audience about the important issues facing the nation" (Zhao and Bleske, 1998, p. 13). Scholarly findings have reported that horse race information has consistently outnumbered issue messages in terms of the airtime and print space they occupy (Zhao and Bleske, 1998).

Subsequently, scholars have criticized the media's insufficient election coverage of campaign issues, with more focus on process and strategy than issues (Domke et al., 1997). Some scholars claim that "the story of the race must be told and is. The problem is when strategy stories dominate news, crowding out discussions more relevant to issues of governance" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, p. 74). Reporting on the game has been

evident in political reporting for quite some time, but what is new is how the emphasis on the game and strategy has increased and subsequently decreased attention on policy issues and debate (Wayne, 2000).

During Campaign 2000, media coverage seemed overwhelmed with stories of horse race and strategy. A Brookings Institute study found that almost three-quarters (71%) of all broadcast television election stories from Labor Day to Election Day 2000 focused on horse race and strategy (Norris, 2001). This focus intensified the week before the election, with eight out of every ten stories centered on the horse race (Norris, 2001). Some scholars claim that the emphasis on the horse race was due to the extreme closeness and excitement of the race. “Although some believe news emphasis on horse race was excessive, it was probably justified because of public interest in the margin on election day” (Norris, 2001, p. 5).

The following chapters will examine and expand upon the issues and ideas addressed in this chapter. Chapter 2 will provide a detailed description and synthesis of relevant media effects and political communication literature in the areas of: the main functions and criticisms of the mass media; agenda-setting theory; the “game” of politics and the horse race; coverage of non-issues, such as image, character and missteps; and bias political media coverage. Relevant content analytic studies on media coverage of presidential elections will be discussed in detail to lay the framework for this proposed study. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology that will be used to conduct the proposed study. Chapter 4 will report the results of the study and reveal whether or not support was found for the research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 will entail a discussion of the

findings, elaborate on the significance of the study results, and propose directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of the literature will synthesize the dominant findings in the areas of: 1) the functions of the media in politics; 2) scholarly, media and public opinion regarding the role of media in presidential elections; 3) how the presidential campaign is covered in the print press, including agenda-setting, game and horse race coverage, non-issue coverage, and content bias; and 4) content analyses of print media coverage of presidential elections.

Functions of the Media

Over the past several decades, there have been major changes in the way the public receives political information on presidential elections (Freitag, 2000; Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000; Patterson, 1976). Until the 1960s, American voters received most of their political information, particularly presidential candidate information, from political parties (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000; Patterson, 1976; Sariti, 2000). However, scholars have noted the changing role of the media during the 1960s when “the news media helped legitimize primaries as *the* [emphasis original] democratic way to make nomination choices” (Patterson, 1976, p. 4). The role of selecting a presidential candidate and informing the public switched from the political parties to the mass media, and has

changed the form and function of political information ever since (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000).

There are many ways that the media have changed and come to power in presidential elections. The development of portable technology for cameras allowed media to get around easier and cover more events. Marketing also became an essential element of presidential campaigns, with increased emphasis on strategic dissemination of information to the public. Candidates and their campaign marketing staff recognized the benefits of media coverage and strong relationships with key journalists and editors. The previously held belief that face-to-face campaigning was the only way to win an election changed due to the growth of the media and technology, with candidates and strategists finding the value of using the media to perform this important function (Patterson, 1976). Sabato (2000) argues “the press correctly perceives that it has mainly replaced the political parties as the ‘screening committee’ that winnows the field of candidates and filters out the weaker or more unlucky contenders” (p. 161).

Another contributing factor to the rise in the media’s role in politics is the decline of partisanship among voters (Patterson, 1976; Sariti, 2000). With voters’ less certain of their own party and candidate choices, they become more sensitive to short-term influences, such as election issues and character, which are largely transmitted by the media (Patterson, 1976, p. 6). Therefore, candidates now rely on the media to transmit their messages, and the public relies on the media more than ever to provide enough valuable information to make informed political decisions (Patterson, 1976, p. 6). Davis (1994) summarizes the media’s role best when he states: “The media are salient players in the conduct of the campaign and affect the electoral process. This is so because no

other entity possesses the ability to reach voters the way the media can. Presidential candidates understand that power and solicit media coverage to communicate with voters” (p. 177).

Based on the significant role the print media now play in disseminating political information, it would be appropriate to examine the functions and expectations American society places on the media. These demands are best summarized by Gurevitch and Blumer (2000), who find eight major functions of the media in a democratic society regarding political coverage. These functions include: 1) surveillance of the sociopolitical environment, reporting on developments likely to impinge on the welfare of citizens; 2) meaningful agenda-setting, including the forces that have formed and may resolve them; 3) platforms for an intelligible and illuminating advocacy by politicians and spokespersons of other causes and interest groups; 4) dialogue across a diverse range of views, as well as between power holders and mass publics; 5) mechanisms for holding officials accountable for how they have exercised power; 6) incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in the political process; 7) a principled resistance to the efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence, integrity, and ability to serve the audience; and 8) a sense of respect for the audience member, as potentially concerned and able to make sense of his or her political environment (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000, pp. 25-26).

These functions and expectations of the media in political communication and presidential campaign reporting hold true for all media, including newspapers, and have been found to have varying effects on voters. Multiple studies have found the dominance of the American newspaper as a major source of political information relating to issues

and parties (Chaffee & Frank, 1996; Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Patterson, 1976; Simon, 1996; Weaver & Drew, 1995). For example, a survey of California voters during the 1992 presidential election found “newspaper reading and attention were the two strongest predictors of whether a voter would know about party-issue differences” (Chaffee & Frank, 1996, p. 52). Chaffee and Frank (1996) conclude after their research on newspapers and campaign issues that research “consistently supports the propositions that newspapers are highly informative to their readers and that reading them is a strong predictor of political knowledge in the electorate as a whole” (p. 52). Simon (1996) also found support for the impact of newspapers on political knowledge, finding newspaper users tend to obtain and retain more information on political campaigns, are able to distinguish between the issues, and use the newspaper to reinforce their political attitudes (p. 25). In contrast, television users “are less active politically, less likely to hold political views, and more likely to use candidate images and personal qualities in making a voting choice” (Simon, 1996, p. 25). Most significantly, Simon (1996) found that only adults who follow presidential campaigns through newspapers were found to be more likely to vote than those who used television, radio or magazines as a source of campaign information (p. 28).

Weaver (1996) generalizes that potential voters learn from the media not only which issues and candidates are more important but also more information about issue positions (p. 45). Voters are most likely to learn the importance of issues, candidates and character of candidates from the media and less likely to learn the specific issue positions of various candidates and parties (Weaver, 1996, p. 45). This can be attributed to the way political campaigns are covered in the United States, with emphasis on character and

conflict, but also likely attributed to the limited time and effort put forth by the American people in learning about campaigns (Weaver, 1996, p. 45).

Views on the Role of the Media

Now that the functions and role of the media have been discussed, scholarly, mass media and public opinions on these roles will be reviewed. Scholars, mass media, and the public all hold multiple opinions about print media and their proper role during presidential elections. There is little doubt that print media can and do have an influence on American politics; “News stories often play a crucial part in shaping the perceptions of reality of millions of people in all walks of life, whose actions then reflect the perceptions” (Graber, 1984, p. 2).

Scholars have a wide range of viewpoints on what the media’s role should be in presidential elections. Some scholars, like Graber, focus on what the people want from the media and feel the media should adjust their reporting accordingly. For example, Graber (1993) states that people usually express a “preference for presidential campaign information about the candidates’ personalities, experiences and issue stands,” but end up getting a “heavy emphasis on candidate rankings in the horse race and (information) on campaign strategies” (p. 331). When this information is not given to voters, Graber contends that the public feels cheated by the media (p. 331). The function of the print media, according to scholars, is to provide factual information that the public can use, information that will tell them how the election outcome will affect them and the country (Graber, 1993, p. 331). Weaver and Drew (1995, 1998) follow Graber’s reasoning,

questioning whether the “news media are providing the quality of information assumed to be necessary for the electorate to make informed decisions” (p. 7).

Gurevitch and Blumer (2000) discuss challenges media face in accomplishing their basic functions as journalists. Since the United States print media now are largely run by a few giant media corporations and rely on advertising revenue for existence, stories must be able to capture and maintain an audience (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000). This role of “media as a profit-generator” can create major conflicts in how the media function (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000). For example, many citizens are apathetic to news in general, and political news in particular (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000). Therefore, political stories must compete with other more entertaining stories for time and space (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000). A greater challenge is placed on political news to create stories that are able to maintain an audience to support advertising clients (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000). To keep the business running, “the media tend to dramatize, project conflict, use sporting analogies to create excitement, all of which may help interest the public to become aware of political matters” (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000, p. 28). In summary, there is a difference between the democratic ideals the print media are supposed to serve and the communication structures and practices that actually occur in media organizations (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000, p. 25).

Patterson (2000) furthers the beliefs put forth by Gurevitch and Blumer, agreeing that the print media have been put in a situation that is much different than what they were originally created to do (p. 187). This difference is what Patterson (2000) calls the “miscast institution” (p. 187). Patterson (2000) notes that the United States is the only democracy that organizes its national election campaigns around the news media, and

that the campaign is chaotic because “the press is not a political institution and has no capacity for organizing the election in a coherent way” (p. 187). Patterson (2000) asserts that the media’s charge to search for new and exciting information conflicts with its intentions to provide voters with a reliable portrayal of the campaign (p. 188). In fact, Patterson argues, the role of the press is no longer that of watchdog and conduit of information, but acting as a guide for voting decisions (p. 189). Even though the press has inherited the role of the political parties, the media are very different institutions: “parties are driven by tradition and the interests of constituents while the press is ‘a restless beacon’ looking for new, unusual and sensational stories” (Patterson, 2000, p. 190).

Members of the print media have differing views of their role in presidential elections, yet most agree that there is much room to improve. Jonathan Alter (2000) of *Newsweek* states: “The press never quite gets it: substance sells” (p. 26). Alter (2000) stresses his opinion that the public is hungry for information they can use to make their political decisions, turning to the media as their chief source of information. He argues, however, that “the media likes politics a lot more than policy...The more focus on how the candidates are doing in Michigan or Illinois, the less on their differences over taxes and Social Security” (p. 26). Jennie Buckner, editor and vice president of the *Charlotte Observer*, also found issue coverage to be an important function of the print media, noting that “Our journalism gets better when we listen to voters’ concerns. Readers told us that they really appreciated our issues orientation and candidate grids...” (Robinson, 2000, p. 43). Buckner stated, however, that some issue coverage felt like “eat your spinach issues stories,” causing the *Observer* to work harder at making the stories more relevant and appealing to their audience (Robinson, 2000, p. 44). Marvin Kalb, former

CBS network news correspondent and founding director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, argues that the press must also be able to distinguish between information that is truly newsworthy and information put out by the candidate, such as “the sound bite of the day,” “the message of the day,” and “the theme of the day,” and not be tempted to use this information (Robinson, 2000, p. 51).

CBS News Anchor Dan Rather, in an address to the Radio and Television News Directors Association Annual Convention, stressed his strong beliefs on the role of the media in presidential elections (1993). Rather (1993) listed specific things media could do to improve their credibility and provide the public with the information it wants and deserves, such as: 1) “Make a little noise: at least question when something incompatible with your journalistic conscience is proposed;” 2) “In any showdown between quality and substance on the one hand and sleaze and glitz on the other, go with quality and substance. You know the difference;” and 3) “Information is not bad for news. We are told that people only want to be entertained... We’ve gone on too long believing this nonsense” (Rather, 1993, p. 7).

Finally, the public’s view of the print media’s role in presidential elections is often the subject of major discussion and debate. A focus group conducted in 1999 by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut found participants overall opinion of the media’s performance in the coverage of presidential campaigns to be “lukewarm” (Dautrich, 2000, p. 125). One participant noted, “Because the media are there, I get to see candidates, find out some things about them, and at least know who I’m voting for. But there’s a lot of nonsense that the news covers” (p. 125).

CSRA has found American voters to be consistent over time regarding what information they want from the media (Dautrich, 2000). Particularly, voters claim they yearn for news and information that allow them to evaluate the presidential candidates based on their issue positions and on the potential consequences of electing a particular candidate (Dautrich, 2000, p. 125). A November 1999 survey found 71 percent of those voters surveyed say their presidential vote choice is based on where candidates stand on issues (Dautrich, 2000, p. 126). Lowest on voters' rank of importance are stories that focus on the horse race and on the personal lives of the candidates (Dautrich, 2000, p. 126). Although voters are often amused by these stories and will pay attention to them, respondents said these stories do not become part of their decision-making process (Dautrich, 2000, p. 126).

During the 1996 presidential election, voters again made the assertion that too much information was devoted to candidate's personal lives and too little to issue positions (Dautrich, 2000, p. 127). This changed slightly during the 2000 presidential election, when a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found voters more satisfied with issue discussion during the 2000 election than the 1996 election (Pew Research Center, 2000, p. 3). Dautrich (2000) claims that the media should seek the current time as an opportunity because "more than at any other point in our history, the news media can play a critical role in engaging citizens in electoral politics and in providing information that voters may use to make wise leadership choices" (p. 130).

In summary, the functions of the media ideally, include the promotion of fair and unbiased news reporting in presidential elections. Scholars, media and public opinion all

believe that the media do not always uphold these functions of journalistic integrity. This is a problem when examining fairness in media coverage because it suggests that presidential election information conveyed to the voting public may be biased or unfair.

After discussing the functions of the media and opinion about the media's role in presidential elections, literature regarding what the media actually does during presidential elections will be reviewed.

Agenda-Setting

Research on the agenda-setting function of the media has been studied extensively in the area of political communication (Iyengar & Kindler, 1994; McCombs, 1981; McCombs & Gilbert, 1986; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Patterson, 1976; Rogers & Dearing, 2000; Wanta, 1997; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981). With candidates' ability to easily turn to the media to disseminate their message to the American voter, the mass media are likely the only contact the public has with candidates and politics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kindler, 1994). Therefore, the public relies on the print media to provide the necessary information about political campaigns: "Daily, millions of citizens dutifully glean their knowledge of politics and public affairs from the pages of their local newspapers," state McCombs and Gilbert (1986, p. 1).

This lack of direct contact between candidates and voters, combined with the average voter's lack of interest in an abundance of information, leads to an even greater reliance on accessible media information (Iyengar & Kindler, 1986, p. 148). Many scholars claim that this reliance gives the print media a great deal of influence over the campaign by "setting the agenda" and choosing what information is shared with the

electorate (Iyengar & Kindler, 1994; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981). Agenda-setting researchers tend to focus on two major assumptions: 1) the news media do not mirror reality, but instead filter and shape it; and 2) emphasis by the media, over time on a relatively small number of issues, leads the public into perceiving these issues as more important than other issues (Wanta, 1997, p. 2). This influence can lead to political consequences, whereby some scholars claim media actually affect voters' judgement of politics by influencing the standards by which people judge policies and individuals (Iyengar & Kindler, 1994; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981).

An early study conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on the 1968 presidential election directly tested the concept of agenda-setting using public opinion polls and media content analysis to look for correlations. They describe the news media as maintaining an important role in shaping the public's political reality: "Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position" (p. 176). McCombs and Shaw's positive results laid the groundwork for subsequent research on agenda-setting (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986).

Agenda-setting by the mass media can occur at many different levels in the dissemination of information. Some scholars claim that agenda-setting begins with the function of the news cycle (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986). First, the print media decide what to cover and what to ignore (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986). Second, the information that does make it through to get covered is often treated unequally; some stories are lengthier and prominently displayed while others are downplayed (McCombs & Gilbert,

1986, p. 5). Often, the media tend to focus on the few front runners of a presidential campaign, almost excluding any additional rivals. This leads some to claim that the media have a “major yet implicit role in the selection of party nominees for national office” (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986, p. 5).

In addition to controlling who gets coverage during a presidential campaign, print media may also determine what issues get covered (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Patterson, 1976; Weaver et al., 1981). This control of power may mean that not all of the issues stressed by the candidates are given enough attention in the media (Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981). Patterson (1976) found in his study of the 1976 presidential election that “the issues the candidates stressed most heavily were not the same as those prominently displayed in the news” (p. 41). Scholars have concluded that the coverage of issues in the news, particularly newspapers, is reflective of the interest of the press more than of the candidates (Patterson, 1976; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981)

While much research has found evidence and support for the presence of the agenda-setting function of the mass media, some scholars doubt the reliability of these claims (Jamieson, 2000; Rogers and Dearing, 2000). “Most scholars of agenda-setting seem to take a contingent view of the process: agenda-setting does not cooperate everywhere, on everyone, and always” (Rogers & Dearing, 2000, p. 76). Possible reasons for an individual not being influenced by the media include: an individual’s perception of the media as having low credibility; conflicting evidence from personal experience or other communication channels about the importance of an issue or news event; or the individual holds different values from those reflected by the mass media” (Rogers & Dearing, 2000, p. 77).

Horse Race and Game Coverage

The focus on the horse race and “game” aspects of presidential elections in print media coverage has been the subject of multiple studies (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Farnsworth & Lichter, 1999; Freitag, 2000; Graber, 1984; Lavrakas & Traugott, 2000; Lippmann, 1922; Miller & Denham, 1994; Patterson, 1976; Patterson, 1993; Wayne, 2000; Zhao & Bleske, 1998). Scholars in this field of study define the game as the process by which the media “concentrates on the strategic game played by the candidates in their pursuit of the presidency, thereby de-emphasizing questions of national policy and leadership” (Patterson, 1976, p. 21).

Most of the recent scholarly work on the game coverage of presidential elections is based on the foundation created by Lippmann (1922) and later built upon by Patterson (1976, 1993). Lippmann (1922) claimed the functions of the media are “to signalize events” because they tend to highlight the most important facts about events, lack space to deal with more background and details of events, and know that information must be reported to the public in terms they can understand (p. 11). Patterson (1976) built upon Lippmann’s work by relating it to election coverage, stating that the “simple mechanics of campaigning, the candidates’ travels here and there, their organizational efforts, their strategies, as well as voting projections and returns” are what the media covers (p. 21). A prime effect from this coverage is that while the contest is highlighted, the qualifications of the candidates and their issue platforms are downplayed (Patterson, 1976, p. 22). Patterson (1993) believes that the media use game schema to help information from becoming too complex for the general public to understand (p. 56). However, the media and the voters possess different schematic outlooks, with the media focused on the

strategy schema while the public is focused on politics as a means of choosing leaders and solving problems (Patterson, 1993, p. 59). “By presenting the campaign in an exciting framework of winners and losers, they (the media) make it more attractive to consumers” argue Haynes & Murray (1998, p. 421).

Once the media frame a presidential campaign in terms of game coverage and strategy, the candidates are then seen as game players. In Patterson’s (1976) book, *The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President*, Weaver (1972) states:

The game is a competitive one and the players’ principal activities are those of calculating and pursuing strategies designed to defeat competitors and to achieve their goals. Of course, the game takes place against a backdrop of governmental institutions, public problems, policy debates, and the like, but these are noteworthy only insofar as they affect, or are used by, players in pursuit of the game’s reward. (p. 22)

Jamieson (1993) argues that in the game or strategy schema, “candidates are seen as performers, reporters as theatrical critics, the audience as spectators” (p. 38). She continues that the “goal of the performer is to ‘win’ the votes of the electorate, projected throughout their performance in polls” (p. 38). When candidates are seen as players in a game, all of their activities, words and images are seen as strategic moves to achieve the goal of winning (Wayne, 2000). When the political process is seen as a game, with winning and losing the primary concern over issues and the interests of the people, the public is distanced from the political process (Jamieson, 1993; Patterson, 1993).

A major criticism of media’s focus on the game is the corresponding lack of issue coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Freitag, 1996; Jamieson, 1993; Miller & Denham,

1994). With the excessive focus on the game of the election, horse race polls and strategy stories “interfere with the media’s mission of informing the audience about the important issues facing the nation” (Zhao & Bleske, 1998, p. 14). By definition, Zhao and Bleske (1998) note, “horse race polls contain no issue information” (p. 18). Therefore, those studies that have found the overwhelming coverage of the horse race (Freitag, 2000; Jamieson, 1993; Miller & Denham, 1994) demonstrate the lack of issue information disseminated to the public for their use in decision-making. Media influence “can distort the political process by focusing voters’ attention on sensationalism and trivia that boosts newspaper circulation and audience ratings but does little to further public understanding of the policy choices placed before them” (Davis, 1994, p. 131).

Scholars can account for the game focus by the print media by relating it to the conventions of the news process. As Patterson (1993) notes, the media are “taught to search for what is new and different in events of the past twenty-four hours” (p. 60). The game provides a continual story line for reporters because it is always moving, with “candidates continually adjusting to the dynamics of the race and their position in it” (Patterson, 1993, p. 60). Policy and issue stories, on the other hand, lack the novelty journalists search for. The first time a candidate releases a position statement on an issue, the media will most certainly cover it (Patterson, 1976). Yet, as time goes on, these same issues become less interesting and novel, and therefore less newsworthy (Patterson, 1993). Jamieson (1993) claims the story line of strategy schema encourages voters to ask “who is going to win, not who is better able to serve as president” (p. 38).

Non-Issue Coverage

Scholars who examine non-issue reporting in presidential campaigns stress the significance the public places on factors such as image, character and candidate background (Andersen, 1993; Boorstin, 1987; Devitt, 1997; Hacker, 1995; Kendall & Paine, 1995; King, 1995; Miller, 1993; Trent et al., 1993, 1997) Hacker (1995) defines a candidate's image as "a structure of voter perception or cognition in which the voter has organized impressions of the candidate" (p. xiii). These images depend on what a candidate represents to voters, including their political party, actions they have taken in the past, policies they support, and voters evaluation of what a candidate says they believe in (Hacker, 1995; Trent et al., 1997). Image is not only visual but linguistic as well, and the image merges and overlaps with a candidate's issues until they are almost indistinguishable from one another (Nimmo, 1995).

Kendall and Paine (1995) state voters have a poor level of issue information on a candidate and subsequently rely heavily on image as part of their decision-making process for presidential elections (p. 20). In an ideal situation, voters would have all of the information they need to make rational choices for elections (Kendall & Paine, 1995). However, actively searching out new information that is not provided by the media requires too much work for the average person to manage with all of their other demands (Kendall & Paine, 1995). Therefore, for an individual to vote they must conserve their resources and narrow the number of criteria to examine presidential candidates (Kendall & Paine, 1995; Trent et al., 1997).

Scholars such as King (1995) have also examined personal characteristics of presidential candidates and their relevancy in media reporting. King's analysis of print

media coverage of the 1992 presidential election found explicit assessments of a candidate's character in approximately 7% of all news articles, with the vast majority unfavorable in tone (p. 84). This negative coverage focused on the candidate's character flaws, with Clinton portrayed as "a slippery obfuscator," Bush as an "inept dissembler," and Perot as an "arrogant paranoid" (p. 84). The character issue in 1992 increased dramatically in the media after scandals began to unfold, beginning with the alleged extramarital affair between Clinton and Gennifer Flowers (Miller, 1993).

Miller (1993) found that after every scandal attributed to Bill Clinton, his image as a strong leader continued to push him further ahead in the polls (p. 322). Clinton's strong image was able to overcome the character issues raised by the media, demonstrating the strength and importance of a candidate's image. Shogan (2000) argues that the media's concern with character raises the question of whether the media have met their main responsibility of explaining to the public why and how reporting on personal behaviors of politicians are relevant to politics and governance (p. 61).

Content Bias

Many different forms of bias in the media have been explored, yet for the purposes of this study, the relevant literature on content bias will be discussed. Paletz (1999) states that journalists are guided by the principles of their organization and "usually strive in their news stories to be impartial and fair, to exclude their personal opinions, to achieve balance by including different sides, and to avoid intentional bias" (p. 59). Therefore, the media try to be objective, fair and balanced in their reporting. External influences, such as media ownership and editors, advertising clients, campaign public

relations staff, and reporter's own personal opinions, are given ample opportunity to find their way into election stories. Lippmann (1922) believed early on that media bias is a function of the press itself. He states:

Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have. There are no objective standards here. There are conventions. (p. 223)

Kenney and Simpson (1993) define bias as a pattern of constant favoritism, whereby a candidate receives more coverage and more favorable coverage in the media (p. 346). They argue that "suppression of political leanings in news stories is a mandated ethical obligation of the modern American press because newspapers...play a central role in providing information for decision-makers throughout the federal government and the general public" (p. 346). When these leanings are not suppressed and biased news is reported, Kenney and Simpson (1993) believe this coverage may contribute to inappropriate decisions and policies (p. 346).

Well aware of these potential external influences, scholars have examined whether the media have been able to uphold their journalistic integrity in recent presidential elections (Bridges & Bridges, 1995; Domke, Fan, Fibison, Shah, Smith & Watts, 1997; Weaver and Drew, 1998; Fico & Cote, 1999; Haynes & Murray, 1998; Johnson, Boudreau & Glowaki, 1996; Lowry & Shidler, 1995; Rouner, Slater & Buddenbaum, 1999; Sabato, 2000; Wasserman, 1999; Wayne, 2000; Watts, Domke, Shah & Fan, 1999). Public perception of a biased news media has increased over the past three

presidential elections (1988, 1992, and 1996) note Watts, Domke, Shah & Fan (1999), inspiring current studies of these recent elections.

A commonly accepted line of reasoning in the study of content bias rests on “the acceptance of the reality that most Americans only marginally understand and pay attention to political happenings” (Watts et al., 1999, p. 148). Therefore, the public takes shortcuts, using the media to make political judgments and form attitudes quickly and without much questioning of the source (Watts et al., 1999). An increasingly important tool used by presidential candidates to be a part of this media coverage is to claim bias in the media (Watts et. al, 1999). This puts the media in a position to uphold their journalistic objectivity and fairness by reporting these claims as news to the public and thereby giving more media attention to a candidate (Watts et al., 1999, p. 148).

Not only do candidates use content bias claims as strategy for news coverage, but communication scholars have found these claims to be true in some instances (Fico & Cote, 1999; Lowry & Shidler, 1995; Watts et al., 1999). Watts et al. (1999) found media coverage to be more favorable to Bill Clinton in the 1992 election, but balanced in 1988 and 1996 (p. 156). During the 1992 election, Lowry & Shidler (1995) found the Bush-Quayle ticket was portrayed negatively almost twice as much as the Clinton-Gore ticket and more than three times more negatively than the Perot-Stockdale ticket (p. 33). Lacy, Fico and Simon (1991) found a clear lack of balance in newspaper articles surveyed in their 21-newspaper content analysis, with a lack of opposing views having equal coverage. Rouner, Slater and Buddenbaum (1999) account for media bias as a result of the use of selected, elite sources when journalists seek to balance a story.

Another source of coverage bias comes from what Wayne (2000) calls “the bad news syndrome.” Wayne (2000) describes the bad news syndrome as a journalistic orientation that shapes election news coverage by focusing on the verbal slips, inconsistent statements and mistakes of a campaign (p. 228). He found that there doesn’t seem to be an ideological bias because the treatment seems equal for both major parties. Wayne (2000) believes that this bad news focus embarrasses candidates and encourages them not to be spontaneous, candid or make mistakes (p. 229). “For candidates, bad news is magnified because they don’t get to tell their own stories and have that broadcast to the public” states Wayne (2000, p. 229). Despite this negativity, Wayne believes that the candidates still greatly value media coverage because it provides legitimacy to the candidate and their campaign (p. 231).

The areas of agenda-setting, horse race and game coverage, non-issue coverage and content bias were all explored to showcase how fairness in media coverage and the functions of a free press are not always related to one another. Serious questions are raised regarding the media’s lack of fair, unbiased coverage, when the media can set the agenda regarding what the public should know about presidential candidates and issues, frame stories to highlight the strategic maneuvering and personal lives of candidates, downplay pertinent issue discussions, and portray candidates in different tones of coverage. With the public’s heavy reliance on the media as their main source of political information, it becomes extremely critical for media to provide campaign coverage that is reflective of their journalistic integrity.

Content Analyses of Presidential Campaign Coverage

Now that print media and general media coverage of presidential campaigns have been discussed in terms of agenda-setting, game and horse race, non-issue coverage, and content bias, several key research studies and their findings will be discussed to lay the groundwork for this proposed content analysis. These articles include: Fico and Cote (1999) "Fairness and balance in the structural characteristics of newspaper stories on the 1996 presidential election;" Domke, Fan, Fibison, Shah, Smith & Watts (1997) "News media, candidates and issues, and public opinion in the 1996 presidential campaign;" Kenny and Simpson (1993) "Was coverage of the 1988 presidential race by Washington's two major dailies biased?;" and Wasserman (1999) "The local contours of campaign coverage: State newspapers and the 1988 Super Tuesday campaign."

Fico and Cote (1999) contend that "fairness and balance in reporting election contests is central to a democratic society's ability to make full, informed choices among candidates with differing policy priorities" (p. 124). Their study examined how newspapers covered the 1996 presidential campaign, specifically looking at hard news stories from Michigan's nine largest daily newspapers (p. 124). Research questions include: "1) What percentage of one-sided and two-sided stories favored Clinton or Dole?; 2) How balanced were assertions by Clinton and Dole supporters in stories?; 3) Did the partisan balance of Clinton and Dole stories vary by circulation size, by individual paper, or by the institution of origin of stories?; and 4) Did the partisan balance of Clinton and Dole stories vary by prominence of story placement, by story source, or by the campaign topic covered?" (p. 127).

Fico and Cote (1999) assessed partisan balance using three measures: “how equally the candidates’ assertions were treated in terms of total column inches; how equally their assertions were treated in terms of first-paragraph lead position in stories; and how equally their assertions were treated in terms of story position in the first five paragraphs” (p. 129). Research findings show that stories surveyed were significantly imbalanced in terms of both story structure and partisan domination, with Dole dominating the coverage (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 134). Overall, the partisan balance index showed Dole dominated 58% of the stories compared to 33% for Clinton, and approximately 45% of stories containing assertions by Clinton or Dole partisans were one-sided (p. 130). Fico and Cote (1999) stress the need for more research to “determine if patterns in these stories are typical of election reporting in both partisan and structural balance” (p. 135).

Domke et al. (1997) also sought to discover whether there was any bias in coverage of the candidates or issues during the 1996 presidential election. Based on much discussion during the 1996 election of unfair media treatment of the two candidates, and on the media’s increasing scrutiny over perceived lack of issue coverage, Domke et al. explored these issues further. Specifically, Domke et al. (1997) examined the relationship among news media’s treatment of the two major candidates and media coverage of campaign issues (p. 719). Their content analysis included news stories of the presidential race in the nation’s top 40 newspapers from March through November 1996 (p. 721).

Paragraphs were coded according to whether there was a pro-Clinton, con-Clinton, pro-Dole, or con-Dole theme, and also according to the major issues in each paragraph (p. 722). The results found that the ratio of positive to negative coverage “was

virtually identical for the two candidates in the news media analyzed” (p. 725). However, Clinton did receive more total coverage than Dole in these media sources, with 56% of paragraphs about Clinton and 44% about Dole (p. 725). Research findings also demonstrated that media devoted less attention to the horse race and more attention to candidate character than in previous elections (p. 732). Domke et al. (1997) suggest future research to examine the potential linkages between media coverage of campaigns and the decision-making styles of voters (p. 734).

Kenny and Simpson (1993) took a closer look at media coverage of two leading newspapers in Washington D.C. during the 1988 presidential election, examining whether coverage was balanced and neutral (p. 345). Kenny and Simpson (1993) selected the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times* as the outlets to analyze, noting that “charges of bias have flourished during the past nine years, as the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times* fought a spirited newspaper war” (p. 345). Kenny and Simpson examined stories from Labor Day to Election Day 1988 (p. 348).

Story headlines, prominence of each story, and photograph location and size were coded in categories created concerning relevant issues during the election (p. 351). Results found that the *Washington Times* was far more biased in its 1988 election coverage than the *Washington Post*, whereas the *Washington Post* demonstrated balanced coverage between Democrats and Republicans (p. 352). Kenny and Simpson suggest that future research should include a larger sample of newspapers with different types of ownership to further test the methodology used by this study (p. 353).

Wasserman (1999) also examined local newspaper coverage during the 1988 presidential campaign. Noting that most research on presidential campaign coverage has

focused on national news sources, Wasserman (1999) contended that surveys of “people’s media use habits find that most people rely on the local news sources available in their own local media markets for news about politics and elections” (p. 701).

Wasserman (1999) noted that with a few exceptions, little research has focused on the possibility that significant coverage differences may exist in the local news outlets throughout the country (p. 703). Content analysis was performed on sixteen state newspapers during a ten-week period in 1988, with a 25-day sample selected to represent the sum of the articles (p. 705). Every story about the campaign was analyzed, including news articles, wire service stories, columns, editorials, letters to the editor and magazine articles (p. 705). The amount of coverage given to a candidate was measured by the total number of paragraphs attributed to the candidate in all stories (p. 705).

Wasserman’s (1999) hypotheses include: “1) The more money a candidate spends in a state, the more news coverage that candidate will receive in that state’s top-circulating newspaper; 2) The number of campaign visits a candidate makes to a state is expected to be positively related to the amount of news coverage that candidate receives in a state newspaper; and 3) A candidate’s prenomination status in the horse race is expected to be positively related to the amount of coverage a candidate receives in a state newspaper” (p. 712). Research findings demonstrate that coverage across the newspapers analyzed varied significantly, especially in terms of the candidates’ strategies on the state-level, the number of reporters a newspaper committed to campaign coverage, and journalists’ judgements about what or who is newsworthy (p. 717). Wasserman (1999) suggests future research to examine content data from as many different national and local news sources as possible “to better capture the diversity” (p. 718).

Summary

This literature review has examined several relevant areas of political communication research. Examining the functions of the media tell us how the media are supposed to act. This role includes the media acting as a watchdog, providing meaningful agenda-setting and platforms for discussing the issues, holding officials accountable, resisting outside forces of influence, and demonstrating respect for the audience member (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000). Whether the media actually fulfill these journalistic principles is often discussed and debated.

Scholars claim that the media have not upheld their role in providing accurate, unbiased information on presidential campaigns for a variety of reasons. These reasons include the public's dissatisfaction with a lack of issue information provided by the media for public consumption (Graber, 1993) and the conflicting role of the media as watchdog, a vital source of election information, and also as a for-profit entity that must maintain advertising clients and an entertained audience (Gurevitch & Blumer, 2000; Patterson, 2000). Media opinion on their role in presidential campaigns is mixed, however majority agree there is much room for improvement in providing accurate and beneficial news to the American voter (Alter, 2000; Rather, 1993; Robinson, 2000). The public finds value in the media but would prefer improvements in the media's issue coverage and less focus on strategy and candidate's personal lives (Dautrich, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2000).

Examination of various mass media effects, such as agenda-setting, game and horse race coverage, content bias, and non-issue coverage, yielded interesting results. Research has continued to find the media's agenda-setting influence in presidential

campaigns, thereby influencing public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver et al., 1981; Iyengar & Kindler, 1994). Other scholars find the recurring framing of the presidential election as a game or horse race, and doubt its beneficial impact on helping voters select candidates (Patterson, 1976; Jamieson, 1993, 2000). The problem with game coverage, according to scholars, is the emphasis of candidates as players in a game and the lack of issue coverage as a result (Patterson, 1976; Jamieson, 1993, 2000). In the area of content bias, scholars have found many instances of media favoring one candidate over another, or certain issues over others (Paletz, 1999; Domke et al., 1997; Watts et al., 1997). Finally, scholars who study non-issue coverage and their effects on the campaign argue that image and character can have a great impact on the outcome of the campaign because these stories overshadow issue coverage (King, 1995; Miller, 1993; Trent et al., 1993, 1997).

Finally, several key research studies were examined to lay the framework for the current proposed study. These studies provide solid examples of well-constructed content analytic studies of newspaper coverage of recent presidential elections. These researchers have looked at fairness and bias in reporting in both national and local newspapers, and have found content bias in presidential election coverage, a lack of focus on campaign issues, a heavy focus on the game and horse race, and the dominance of non-issues in campaign reporting.

The relationship between journalistic integrity and obstacles in obtaining fair and unbiased news coverage was discussed throughout this chapter. With research consistently finding bias, sensationalism, and lack of issue orientation in presidential campaign media coverage, the need to conduct further research is evident. It must be

determined whether media coverage of the 2000 presidential election reflected biased against a candidate or an issue to gauge whether journalists upheld their integrity by providing fair and accurate news reporting.

What is not known from the studies reviewed in this chapter is whether these findings are consistent with media coverage of the last presidential election. The findings of the content analytic studies, combined with political communication research findings over the past fifty years, encourage a content analytic examination of newspaper coverage of the 2000 presidential election.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Following the guidelines of journalistic integrity, media coverage of elections should be fair and unbiased, and should cover the issues in a beneficial manner to the American voter. Given these guidelines, it was crucial to study further newspaper media coverage of the 2000 presidential election. This study examined the media coverage of George W. Bush and Al Gore, the two major presidential candidates in the 2000 election. Journalists will have upheld their ethical responsibilities to the American people if the results show fair and unbiased reporting. Ralph Nader and other presidential candidates were excluded from this study because the focus was on the two major presidential candidates representing the two major political parties in the United States. Examining potential bias toward Nader or others was not integral to determining a liberal or conservative bias in the media, as Nader was unaffiliated with both major political parties and represented the smaller and less-popular Green party.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The focus of this study examined the overall fairness of newspaper coverage of the two major presidential candidates, and also the major issues of media coverage during the campaign. Fairness was defined as both equal amounts of and neutral treatment in newspaper coverage between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Bias was defined using

Kenney and Simpson's (1993) definition, or "a pattern of constant favoritism. Bias occurs when one candidate receives more favorable news coverage" (p. 346). For this study, bias was extended to include more positive and negative news coverage. Three questions and one hypothesis were generated for the current study. Two research questions examined the issue of campaign fairness.

RQ1: Are the overall amounts of newspaper coverage of George W. Bush and Al Gore equal?

RQ2: Are the overall amounts of newspaper coverage of George W. Bush and Al Gore neutral?

The third research question examined issue coverage and date.

RQ3: Does issue coverage change over time from Election Day to Labor Day?

The hypothesis generated for this study compares two key variables, campaign issue and candidate coverage, in order to measure bias.

RH1: There will be a difference in campaign issue and candidate coverage between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

Campaign issues are defined as the major themes and political platform issues of the campaign and are described in more detail in the Appendix.

Procedures

Content Analysis

This study was performed using content analysis. Content analysis allows for the images of particular groups in society, such as presidential candidates or political parties,

to be assessed (Wimmer and Dominick, 1987). The strengths of content analysis are that it is systematic, objective and quantitative. According to Wimmer and Dominick (1987), "systematic evaluation simply means that one and only one set of guidelines for evaluation is used throughout the study." (p. 166). Objectivity is strengthened with operational definitions and rules for classification of variables being explicitly stated and "comprehensive enough that other researchers who repeat the process will arrive at the same decisions" (p. 166). Finally, quantification of data aids researchers in precisely revealing data and interpreting the findings. The limitations of content analysis include not being able to make statements about the effects of content on an audience, and findings are limited to the framework of the categories and definitions used in a particular analysis (Wimmer and Dominick, 1987).

Sample

This study considered hard news content in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, the *Las Vegas Sun* and the *Reno Gazette-Journal* from Labor Day through Election Day, 2000. This included stories of local origin or wire service stories that were located in the front or regional sections of the newspaper. The "Nevada" section of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* is an example of a regional newspaper section. This study examined all issues of each newspaper during the 65-day time frame. The time period for this study was selected because it is known as the prime campaign season for presidential elections, a time when the American voter starts to pay more attention to the campaign and the issues (King, 1995; Lowry & Shidler, 1995). The three newspapers selected have the top circulation in the state of Nevada, and are the main source of print news information for Nevada residents.

This study examined local Nevada newspapers for several reasons. Wasserman (1995) states that “surveys of people’s media use habits find most people rely on the local news sources available in their own local media markets for news about politics and elections” (p. 701). With recent changes in campaigning, such as how the presidential nominating process now gives individual states much more power, presidential candidates are forced to target individual states and local news media (Haynes & Murray, 1998; Wasserman, 1995). Therefore, media studies that concentrate on national news sources may provide an “incomplete picture of the character of local news coverage and learning during the presidential campaign” (Wasserman, 1995, p. 703).

The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* was established in 1905 and is owned by Donrey Media Group, a large media conglomerate. The newspaper has a circulation of 158,970 during the week and 214,609 on Sundays (Standard Rates and Data Service, 2001). The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* is known to have a more conservative and libertarian ideological view. The *Las Vegas Sun* was established by Hank Greenspun, with the first issue produced in the 1950s. The *Las Vegas Sun* is predominantly owned by the Greenspun family. The newspaper has a circulation of 34,300 during the week and 214,609 on Sundays as it is circulated in combination with the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Standard Rates and Data Service, 2001). The *Las Vegas Sun* is characterized as a more democratic, liberal publication. The *Reno Gazette-Journal* was established in 1870 and is owned by Gannett. The newspaper has a circulation of 67,710 during the week and 84,981 on Sundays (Standard Rates and Data Service, 2001). The *Reno Gazette-Journal* has a reputation as a balanced, slightly liberal publication.

Coding

All stories in the front and regional sections of the newspaper were first analyzed to see if they were campaign stories. Coders were trained to identify a story as relevant if it contains both the words “Bush” and “Gore,” or at least three occurrences of “Bush” or “Gore” (Domke et al., 1997). The result was 5,086 newspaper paragraphs coded for further analysis. Individual paragraphs were then scored by coders for the two key variables, campaign issue and candidate treatment in coverage. Additional variables, such as date, reporter, section, and story source, were also coded. A paragraph must have contained reference to both a candidate and an issue to be scored. If more than one candidate was mentioned in a paragraph, all candidates and issues mentioned were given credit for that paragraph. If both a candidate and an issue were not mentioned in a paragraph, coders did not score that paragraph. A drawback to using this unit of analysis was that it was less precise than counting the number of lines or column inches mentioning a candidate. Paragraph mention was used, however, because there was greater efficiency in using it as a unit of analysis.

There were two distinct category systems for this study, reflecting the two key measures. These category systems were pretested on 10% of the sample for intercoder reliability, resulting in 87% agreement. Coders met and discussed how they coded their samples. After detailed discussions, coders came to an agreement on what constituted relevant newspaper data. One major source of difference between coders was the use of the “other” category for the issue coverage variable. While one coder used this category for all information that did not fit into the other three categories, another coder did not

see this as codeable data and did not score these paragraphs. This issue was resolved by deciding to focus on coding only data that fit into the three major categories.

Measures

The first category was a measure of campaign issue. Data appropriate for answering the research questions concerning fairness was coding using the following categories: (1) substantive issues (2) qualifications (3) horse race and (4) other (Domke et al., 1997; King, 1995; Miller & Denham, 1994). Substantive issues includes economic concerns to general society, ideology, social policy, foreign affairs and political reform. Qualifications includes the positive and negative traits of a candidate's character as well as their qualifications, such as education and leadership experience. Horse race includes all discussion about the ongoing travails of the campaign, including conventions, debates, polls, and endorsements. Other includes issues that are mentioned but do not fit into the other three categories.

These categories were believed to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Using several broad categories for coding campaign issue coverage allowed data to be analyzed to see what type of information the media provided on the election. For example, did stories assist voters in decision-making by focusing on relevant issues and qualifications of the candidates? Or did the media inform voters on public opinion by focusing on horse race and campaign strategy? The coding instrument for this content analysis can be found in the Appendix.

The second category measure was candidate coverage, and was used in relation to the first measure to answer the research hypothesis. Candidate coverage was coded as one of the following: (1) positive-Bush; (2) negative-Bush; (3) neutral-Bush (4) positive-

Gore; (5) negative-Gore; and (6) neutral-Gore. Each paragraph could have been scored for up to all six categories depending on the ideas expressed in the text (Domke et al., 1997). Allowing each paragraph to be scored in several categories was a coding strategy advocated by several scholars (Domke et al., 1997; Buchanan, 1991). These scholars found that such an approach "provides a much more accurate reflection of the nature of news coverage than arbitrarily classifying each story into one and only one category, as political content analysis has occasionally done" (Domke et al., 1997, p. 736). Guidelines for scoring a paragraph's treatment of a candidate are discussed in Appendix I.

A paragraph was scored as positive, negative or neutral for either candidate. Based on Domke et al.'s (1997) methodology, a positive score for a candidate could be a result of the language used to: describe the candidate (e.g., "Gore has been successful at attracting the African-American vote"); describe the candidate's position on the issues (e.g., "Gore's position on foreign policy is representative of what the voter feels on the issue"); describe the candidate's character (e.g., "Bush is a strong moral leader for our nation"); describe the candidate's position in the polls (e.g., "Bush continues to gain public opinion momentum in the polls"); or other similar positive value statements.

A negative score for either candidate could be a result of the language used to: describe the candidate (e.g., "Gore is on the defensive"); describe the candidate's position on the issues (e.g., "Bush's inexperience in foreign affairs has become a key target for Democrats"); describe the candidate's character (e.g., "Gore lacks the moral character to lead the country"); describe the candidate's position in the polls (e.g., "Gore cannot gain momentum in the polls and continues to trail behind Bush"); or other similar negative value statements (Domke et al., 1997).

Analysis Plan

Prior to analysis and before grouping the data from all three newspapers, tests of difference were run to determine whether there were any major differences, biases or problems with any of the newspapers in the sample. A frequency table for the coverage variable was generated to answer the research question. Coverage and issue variables were combined to test the research hypothesis.

The two measures were crosstabulated, creating a four by six matrix. Results from this study were analyzed using the chi square (χ^2) test of independence. Chi-square allows a researcher to "use categories and determine if there are differences between the number of data that fall into each category" (Reinard, 1998, p. 339).

A frequency table was also generated to examine source coverage of the issues for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. These two measures were crosstabulated, creating a three by three matrix. Results from this study were analyzed using the chi square (χ^2) test of independence. Finally, a frequency table was generated to examine the variables of issue coverage and date. No further statistical analysis was run for this analysis.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

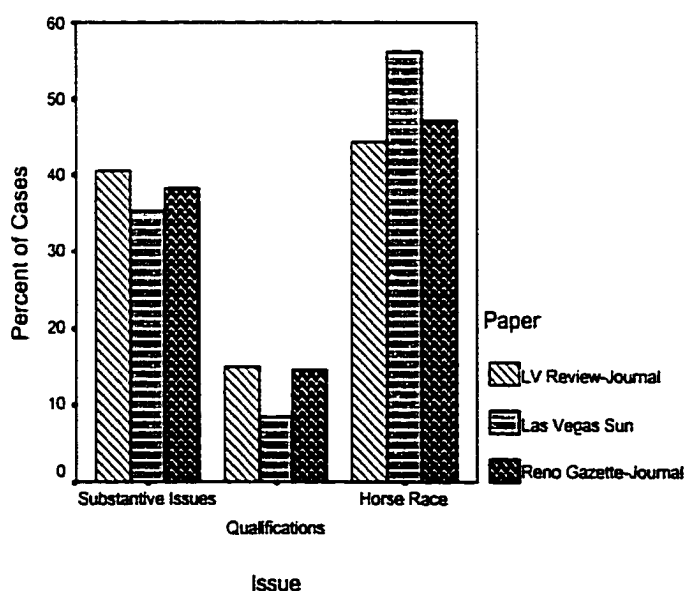
This study examined 5,086 paragraphs of newspaper data. An overview of results follows. An election-related story ran every day in at least one of the newspapers examined, with an average of 78 paragraphs analyzed per day. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* accounted for 43.5% of the overall sample, with 28.9% from the *Las Vegas Sun* and 27.6% from the *Reno Gazette-Journal*. Almost all paragraphs, 92.2%, were found in the front section of the newspaper. Paragraphs were written by 116 different reporters, with the top ten reporters accounting for 37% of the total sample with 1,891 paragraphs. Top reporters include: Raum (395 paragraphs), Fournier (335 paragraphs), Morrison (245 paragraphs), Glover (219 paragraphs), Sobieraj (192 paragraphs), Mears (171 paragraphs), Balz (122 paragraphs), Woodward (79 paragraphs) Brownstein (68 paragraphs), and Rake (65 paragraphs). There were 16 different story sources found within the newspapers, with over half originating from the Associated Press (57.6%). Other top sources include: Staff writers (13.7%), Knight Ridder (7.1%), the *Los Angeles Times* (6.5%), and the *Washington Post* (5.5%).

Horse race was the dominant issue covered, accounting for 47.7% of all coded paragraphs. Substantive issues were discussed in 37.8% of all paragraphs, and candidate qualifications in 12.8% of all paragraphs. The fourth category, other, accounted for only 1.7% of all coded data and consequently was dropped from further analysis. Overall

coverage of the two presidential candidates was almost completely equal, with George W. Bush receiving 50.4% and Al Gore receiving 49.6%. Bush received 10.3% positive coverage, 16% negative coverage, and 24.1% neutral coverage. Gore received 11.9% positive coverage, 14.5% negative coverage, and 23.1% neutral coverage.

Prior to further analysis and before grouping the data from all three newspapers, tests of difference were run to examine any bias by individual newspapers. A significant difference was found between the newspapers in relation to their coverage of issues, $\chi^2(6, N = 5086) = 66.03, p < .000$. This analysis was based on the idea that an individual paper's issue coverage would be proportional to that paper's portion of the overall sample. For example, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* made up 43.5% of all paragraphs coded, hence one would expect that the same paper would constitute 43.5% of all paragraphs coded as substantive issues. This analysis showed such was not the case. See Figure 1.

Figure 1 Issue Coverage by Newspaper



The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* printed much more coverage on qualifications than expected, and the *Las Vegas Sun* printed much less on qualifications. A difference was also found between the newspapers in relation to their treatment of the candidates, $\chi^2(10, N = 5086) = 33.80, p < .000$. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* printed more negative-Gore coverage and less neutral-Gore coverage than expected. The *Las Vegas Sun* printed more neutral-Gore coverage while the *Reno Gazette-Journal* printed less neutral-Gore coverage. Consequently, separate analyses of the research question and hypothesis were conducted for each of the three newspapers.

Las Vegas Review-Journal

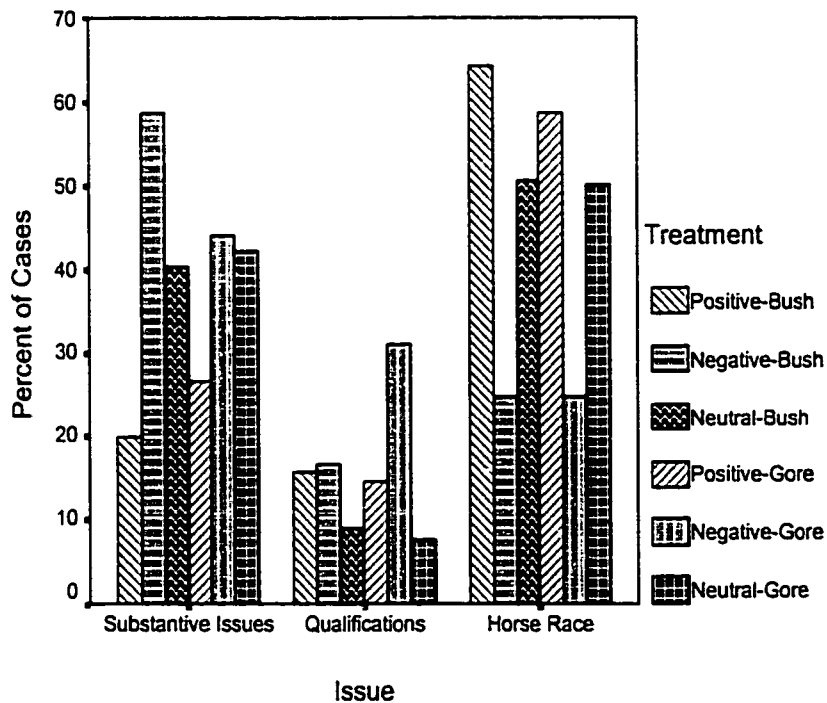
The research questions were designed to assess whether overall amounts of newspaper coverage between George W. Bush and Al Gore were equal and neutral. For the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, frequencies show almost equal amounts of coverage for each candidate, with George W. Bush receiving 50.1% of total coverage and Al Gore receiving 49.9%. However, Bush received more neutral coverage than Gore, 23.6% to 21.5%. By definition, these findings support an answer to the research questions. There was almost equal coverage for the candidates, but neutral news coverage accounted for only 45% of all coded paragraphs.

Table 1 Frequencies for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Positive-Bush	223	10.1	10.1	10.1
Negative-Bush	364	16.5	16.5	26.5
Neutral-Bush	521	23.6	23.6	50.1
Positive-Gore	274	12.4	12.4	62.5
Negative-Gore	354	16.0	16.0	78.5
Neutral-Gore	475	21.5	21.5	100.0
Neutral-Gore	475	21.5	21.5	100.0
Total	2211	100.0	100.0	

The hypothesis states that, in terms of bias, there will be a difference between campaign issue and candidate coverage. Support was found for the hypothesis, $\chi^2 (10, N = 2176) = 257.81, p < .000$. In terms of substantive issue coverage, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* had fewer than expected positive-Bush paragraphs and more than expected negative-Bush paragraphs. In terms of qualifications, there was much more negative-Gore coverage.

Figure 2 Treatment Coverage by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*



Las Vegas Sun

Frequencies demonstrate fairly equal amounts of coverage for each candidate, with George W. Bush receiving 48.9% of total coverage and Al Gore receiving 51.1%.

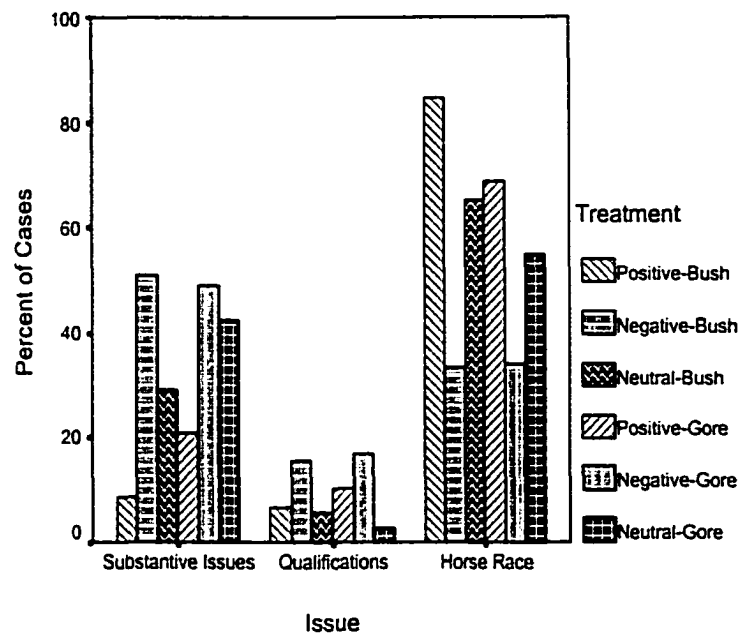
However, Gore received more neutral coverage than Bush, 27.8% to 24%. By definition, these findings demonstrated a partial answer to the research questions. There was almost equal coverage for the candidates, but neutral news coverage only accounted for a little over half of all coded paragraphs at 51.8%.

Table 2 Frequencies for the *Las Vegas Sun*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Positive-Bush	152	10.3	10.3	10.3
Negative-Bush	214	14.5	14.5	24.9
Neutral-Bush	353	24.0	24.0	48.9
Positive-Gore	157	10.7	10.7	59.6
Negative-Gore	186	12.6	12.6	72.2
Neutral-Gore	409	27.8	27.8	100.0
Total	1471	100.0	100.0	

Support was found for the hypothesis, $\chi^2 (10, N = 1445) = 187.91, p < .000$. In terms of substantive issue coverage, the *Las Vegas Sun* had fewer than expected positive-Bush and positive-Gore paragraphs and more than expected negative-Bush and negative-Gore paragraphs. In terms of qualifications, there was much more negative-Gore and negative-Bush coverage. Finally, regarding horse race, there was more positive and negative Bush coverage and more negative-Gore coverage. These findings show that there is no overall candidate bias but much more universal bias on almost all of the categories.

Figure 3 Treatment Coverage by the Las Vegas Sun



Reno Gazette-Journal

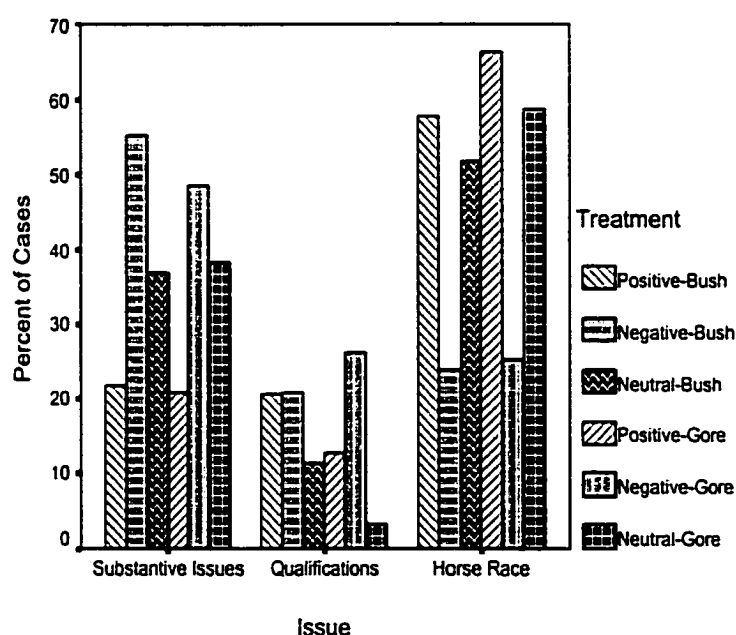
Frequencies demonstrate somewhat equal coverage for each candidate, with George W. Bush receiving 52.6% of total coverage and Al Gore receiving 47.4%. However, Bush received much more neutral coverage than Gore, 24.9% to 20.7%. By definition, these findings demonstrate a partial answer to the research questions. There is almost equal coverage for the candidates, but neutral news coverage only accounted for 45.6%, less than half of all coded paragraphs.

Table 3 Frequencies for the Reno Gazette-Journal

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Positive-Bush	151	10.8	10.8	10.8
Negative-Bush	237	16.9	16.9	27.6
Neutral-Bush	350	24.9	24.9	52.6
Positive-Gore	176	12.5	12.5	65.1
Negative-Gore	199	14.2	14.2	79.3
Neutral-Gore	291	20.7	20.7	100.0
Neutral-Gore	291	20.7	20.7	100.0
Total	1404	100.0	100.0	

Support was found for the hypothesis, $\chi^2 (10, N = 1378) = 174.94, p < .000$. In terms of substantive issue coverage, the *Reno Gazette-Journal* had fewer than expected positive-Bush and positive-Gore paragraphs and more than expected negative-Bush paragraphs. In terms of qualifications, there was more positive-Bush coverage and much more negative-Gore and negative-Bush coverage. Finally, regarding horse race, there was less negative Bush and Gore coverage and more positive-Gore coverage. These findings again demonstrated that there is no overall candidate bias but much more universal bias on almost all of the categories.

Figure 4 Treatment Coverage by the *Reno Gazette-Journal*

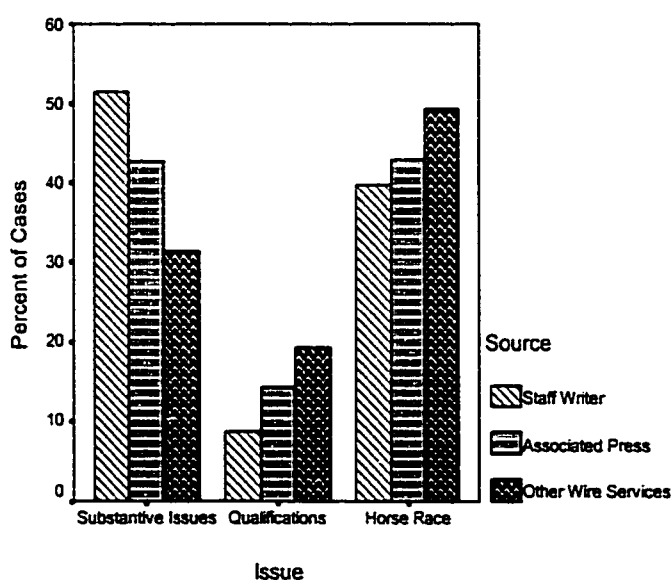


Story Source and Coverage Bias

These results suggest that additional analysis of data may reveal the source of coverage biases. Story source may be related to candidate treatment. As a result, the next section of this chapter will examine story source in relation to issue coverage.

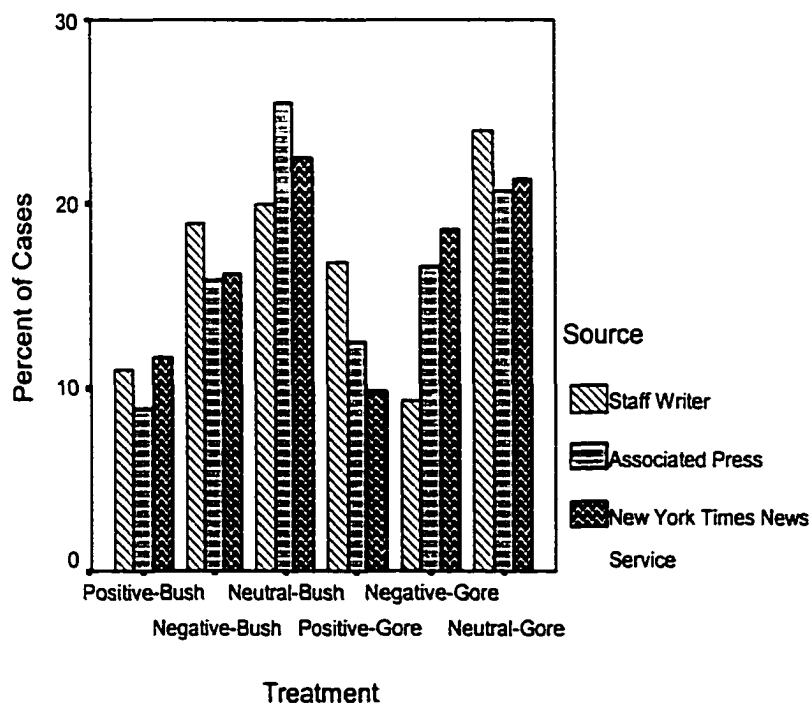
Chi square analysis was performed on all three newspapers with story source as the independent variable and issue coverage and treatment as the dependent variables. However, too many cells did not have the minimum expected count for two papers, the *Las Vegas Sun* and the *Reno Gazette-Journal*. The following analysis examined only the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Support was found for the hypothesis, $\chi^2 (4, N = 2167) = 51.72, p < .000$. For staff writers of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, there was more than expected substantive issue coverage and less than expected qualifications coverage. For the Associated Press, there was more than expected substantive issue coverage. For all other wire services, there was less than expected substantive issue coverage and more than expected qualifications coverage.

Figure 5 Story Source and Issue Coverage in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*



For staff writers, there was more than expected negative-Bush coverage and less than expected negative-Gore coverage, $\chi^2 (10, N = 2211) = 33.70, p < .000$. There was also more than expected positive-Gore coverage. For the Associated Press, there was less than expected positive-Bush coverage and more than expected negative-Gore coverage. Finally, regarding other wire services, there was more than expected positive-Bush and negative-Gore paragraphs, and less than expected positive-Gore coverage.

Figure 6 Story Source and Treatment in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*



These results demonstrate that overall for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, staff writers generated more positive coverage of Al Gore, the Associated Press generated less

favorable coverage of both candidates, and other wire services were more favorable to George W. Bush.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study focused on fairness and bias in newspaper coverage of the 2000 U.S. presidential election. As discussed in Chapter 1, scholars have discovered different results regarding fairness and bias in media coverage, and these findings can now be explored in light of the results of the current study. This chapter will begin with a discussion of the results of this study, followed by strengths and limitations of the study, and will conclude with suggestions for future research.

The research questions focused on the area of campaign fairness and asked whether overall amounts of newspaper coverage of George W. Bush and Al Gore were equal and neutral. The results provided an answer to the questions, with overall amounts of newspaper coverage almost equal for both candidates. However, a majority of the coverage was not neutral in treatment. George W. Bush received more neutral coverage in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* and the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, while Al Gore received more neutral coverage in the *Las Vegas Sun*. The results demonstrate that newspapers did balance their coverage by providing almost equal space to each candidate, as was the case with Domke et al.'s (1997) research. The difference, however, is in how they treated the candidates. With all three newspapers containing half or less of their paragraphs written in a neutral tone, a majority of the coverage was unfair to one or both of the candidates. This finding contradicts the belief that journalists adhere to "professional standards of

accuracy, fairness and balance” (Lacy, Fico & Simon, 1991, p. 364). The results of this study showed the opposite was true, and that coverage was not fair.

Support was found for the research hypothesis in all three of the newspapers examined. The research hypothesis focused on bias and stated that there would be a difference in campaign issue and candidate coverage between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Indeed, each of the papers treated the candidates differently. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* was more negative to George W. Bush on issues and more negative to Al Gore on qualifications. The *Las Vegas Sun* was more negative to both candidates on issues and qualifications and more positive to George W. Bush on horse race. Finally, the *Reno Gazette-Journal* covered both candidates more positive on issues, more negative on qualifications, and less negative on horse race.

These findings show that although there was bias in the tone of the coverage, the bias was not directed at one candidate. Both candidates received their share of bias in all three newspapers in all of the categories. The media set the agenda with a strong focus on the horse race, followed by issues and qualifications. These findings also lead to a discussion of the analysis conducted on story source.

As reported in Chapter 4, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* demonstrated source bias, where staff writers reported more positive coverage of Al Gore, the Associated Press reported more negative coverage of both candidates, and other wire services more favorable to George W. Bush. With over half of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* paragraphs coming from the Associated Press, a more negative impression of both candidates was conveyed to the public. Other wire stories, accounting for one-third of *Las Vegas Review-Journal* paragraphs, portrayed George W. Bush more favorably.

Finally, staff writers made up less than one-fifth of all stories and created a positive impression of Gore.

Although the majority of the coverage was from the Associated Press and therefore negative toward both candidates, there were almost twice as many positive-Bush paragraphs as positive-Gore paragraphs in staff writer and other wire service coverage. This is a problem because the coverage of the presidential candidates came across with some form of opinionated treatment, potentially influencing public opinion (Fico and Cote, 1999; Lowry and Shidler, 1995; Miller, 1993; Johnson et al., 1996).

These results also show how much newspapers rely on the Associated Press and other wire services to provide their stories. Instead of dedicating staff reporters to write election stories, editors pull stories off the wire to fill space and cover the election. Newsrooms often use wire stories from the same reporter, as discussed in Chapter 4, with over one-third of all sampled election paragraphs written by the top ten reporters. Newspapers sampled also used the same articles to cover a story, contributing to homogeneity in news coverage. This can be a major problem because so much power and influence is given to one wire story reporter. Their story may be printed in dozens of newspapers across the country, with a wide audience getting the same information and potentially the same biased treatment of the candidates.

Relying on wire services for presidential election stories is also a problem because of the focus of these stories. As discussed in Chapter 4, Associated Press stories were fairly consistent in their coverage of issues, qualifications and horse race. However, other wire services were far from being equal on their coverage. Other wire services focused much more on qualifications and horse race and less on issues. Referring back to

discussions in Chapter 1, focusing on the horse race and not on the issues makes the media's commitment to journalistic integrity questionable. What service is being provided to consumers if they read about polling and campaign strategy instead of issue coverage?

The purpose of this study was to see if the media followed the guidelines of journalistic integrity. These guidelines ask the media to provide fair and unbiased coverage, and to cover the issues in a manner that allows the public to make an informed decision in the voting booth (Lacy, Fico & Simon, 1991, p. 364). Based on the results of this study, the media did not uphold their standards of journalistic integrity. Coverage was both unfair and biased toward both candidates. It is easy to understand why the public has such conflicting opinions of the media. The public depends on the media for fair and unbiased news but that isn't always what they receive. Instead, media give personal opinion, focus on non-issues and have a lack of issue coverage. One must then question how many individuals recognize biased information when it is given to them and how many assume the stories they read to be factually sound.

With a majority of Americans turning to the media as their main source of political campaign information, the print media examined in this study did not provide the public with the information they claim they both need and desire to make an informed voting decision (Dautrich, 2000). With no major claims about unfairness or bias made by either candidate about the election, the media coverage had the appearance of being fair. However, like in previous research conducted by Cavanaugh (1995), media coverage did not convey "all of the facts that can help people make independent, informed, responsible and intelligent judgments."

Issue Coverage and Date

Based on the results discussed in Chapter 4, a question was raised regarding a potential relationship between the variables of issue coverage and date. For example, were stories on horse race or issues more prominent at certain times over others? An analysis of date and issue coverage will now be discussed.

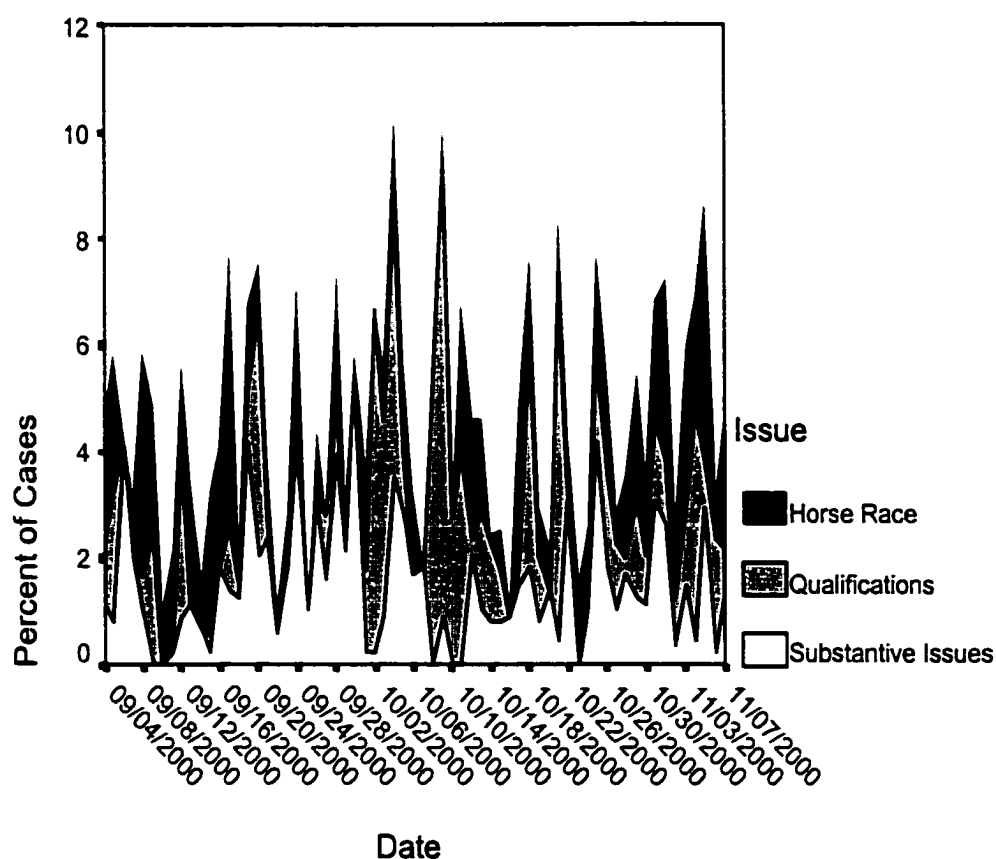
Examining issue coverage over time allows one to see where and how the election stories were covered. It shows the peaks and low points in coverage and offers a partial explanation of the data. The peaks in coverage of this analysis are very pronounced and have interesting corresponding data to explain what was happening during the campaign. Figure 7 provides a visual image to better understand the fluctuation in issue coverage.

Analyzing the data displayed in Figure 7, much insight can be gained regarding issue coverage and date. Starting at the beginning of the sample, there are major surges in coverage of all three issue categories. This is because the sample began on Labor Day, the unofficial start of the public's involvement in the presidential campaign. During the first week analyzed, both candidates revealed their issue platforms as well as conducted major campaign visits throughout the country. This produced an abundance of issue and horse race coverage. Another peak is seen during the third week in September, when Al Gore visited Las Vegas. His visit created a significant increase in paragraphs about issues he discussed, as well as polls and campaign strategy discussed relating to his visit.

The beginning of October shows another spike in the data for all three issue categories, representing the discussion of a presidential debate. This spawned multiple paragraphs of horse race on the details of the debates, issue coverage on what each candidate discussed, and qualifications coverage of each candidate's preparedness for the

office. The second week in October had major horse race coverage and reflects both Republican Vice Presidential candidate Dick Cheney's visit to Las Vegas and post-debate discussion and polling. The activity in the third and fourth weeks of October reflects the coverage of the final debate, Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Joe Lieberman's visit to Las Vegas, and Bush's attacks on Gore's credibility for his association with Bill Clinton.

Figure 7 Issue Coverage by Date for All Three Newspapers



The final week of the campaign shows the largest surge of horse race coverage, as well as qualifications coverage. News coverage during this time focused on the final

campaign push and personal attacks on each candidate's character and readiness to be president. The smaller yet still notable amounts of issue coverage reflect discussion of which candidate's platform would be best for the country.

Strengths

This study had several major strengths, specifically regarding methodology and research findings. First, the methodology used in this study was based upon previous research by several prominent scholars in the fields of political communication and mass media effects. This prior research added much credibility to the coding scheme used in this study and provided a strong reference to insure reliability. In terms of data collection, every story in the front and regional sections of the newspapers in this sample was meticulously reviewed for qualification into the study. Those stories deemed valid for review were thoroughly analyzed and coded objectively. The size of the sample, 5,086 paragraphs, lends much credibility to the study and the subsequent results. The sample shows that all campaign stories in the three newspapers examined were included as the entire time period was reviewed, leaving little ambiguity or sampling error.

Second, the findings of this research validate the purpose of the study. With bias and unfairness found in each newspaper, a notable discovery has been made regarding Nevada's print news coverage. These findings add to the growing number of studies that demonstrate media bias in political coverage. Although finding a lack of journalistic integrity is not desirable for society, it can be beneficial to communication scholars. These findings can help scholars determine what information the media is

communicating to the public and even look for solutions to these less than desirable results.

Limitations

This study contains limitations caused by the category system used for coding and by the inherent nature of content analysis. Although they are based on previous research by Domke et al. (1997), the categories for coding did not allow for as much exploration of the data as desired. For example, a paragraph about a public opinion poll that was conducted about the candidate's qualifications was coded as horse race. This was because the major theme was about the horse race of the campaign. The secondary theme, the candidate's qualifications, were not accounted for in overall issue coverage because of the way the variables were defined. This is a problem because paragraphs were scored for their major theme and the minor theme could not be counted. Another example would be paragraphs that were scored regarding advertising a candidate's stand on an issue. The major theme was horse race, as advertising is part of campaign strategy. However, the secondary theme of issues was not scored because of the coding scheme. Future coding schemes should allow coders to examine whether a paragraph qualifies as a codeable data and also allow the coders to compare their sample in relation to the categories.

The current coding scheme for measuring candidate treatment was no doubt created by Domke and others so as to link candidate and coverage to the same paragraph. In essence, linking two concepts, in the case of candidate and coverage, violates traditional social science procedures by combining two separate concepts as one. The current scheme doesn't allow for separate analysis of candidate, coverage and other

variables such as treatment and story source. Future research efforts should attempt to develop coding schemes where the concepts are mutually exclusive.

A third limitation of this study is a result of the process of using content analysis. As discussed by Wimmer and Dominick (1987), flaws with content analysis include not being able to make statements about the effects of content on an audience, and findings are limited to the framework of the categories and definitions used in a particular analysis. Although excellent data were gathered from this study, there is no way to determine how the bias found in the content affected readers. One cannot determine if biased media coverage influenced how someone viewed a candidate or voted in the election. Also, since the category scheme is unique and defined variables in a certain manner, it would be difficult to compare these results to results of similar content analytic research. For example, the category of substantive issues used in this study may be separated out into multiple categories in other studies. Therefore, it is hard to generalize the results of this study from other research to look for consistent patterns of bias.

Future Research

Further research on media coverage of presidential elections should be conducted. Building upon research from previous studies, this study provides an additional reference for researchers to examine how the media cover presidential candidates. Research should be expanded to include more media outlets, both print and electronic. Wasserman (1999) makes this suggestion as well to examine content data from as many different national and local news sources as possible “to better capture the diversity” (p. 718). Future

research should also look at a sample outside of a single state and make comparisons between the coverage received in one state versus another.

Increasing the sample to include other states and major publications would help examine trends in coverage and see if there are any larger issues at hand. Finally, future research to examine the potential linkages between media coverage of campaigns and the decision-making styles of voters (Domke et al., 1997). Incorporating surveys or public opinion data would help gauge whether media coverage and bias has an effect on voters, and would take data, like this survey, one step further.

APPENDIX

CODING INSTRUMENT

CODING INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER

COVERAGE OF 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

1. The focus of this content analysis is to examine newspaper coverage of the issues and the two major candidates of the 2000 presidential election (George W. Bush and Al Gore). Specifically, it is to determine how each candidate was portrayed, if horse race themes received more attention than substantive issues, and if these issues were attributed to one candidate more than another.
2. As a coder, it will be your job to look through the newspapers and specific dates randomly assigned to you. You will be looking for any news stories located in the front and regional sections of the newspaper that discuss at least one of the presidential candidates. The Nevada section of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* is an example of a regional newspaper section. Editorials or advertisements are not included in this study and should not be scored.
3. You will need to look at every story in those two sections and pay careful attention that a story is not overlooked. It is quite possible for presidential candidates to be mentioned in stories that have no relation to the election.
4. When you find a story that meets the above criterion, take out a tally sheet and begin to score the article. Fill in the tally sheet completely, writing down your coder initials, the date of the article, the newspaper the article is from, the location of the article in the newspaper, the headline of the story, the reporter/author of the story, the reporter's designation and/or affiliation.
5. Once these details are written down, look at the article, paragraph by paragraph, and make note of when a candidate is mentioned and what it is regarding (i.e., horse race). For each relevant paragraph that mentions a candidate and an issue, determine what candidate is being discussed (Bush or Gore), what the tone is of the paragraph (pro, con or neutral), and the subject of the paragraph (substantive issues, qualifications, horse race, or other). Then code this information on the coding instrument. Refer to page 72 of this document for more detailed descriptions of the categories. Paragraphs can be scored more than once, such as if two candidates were mentioned, or if more than one issue was mentioned. If there are paragraphs in an article that you are scoring that make no mention of a candidate and an issue, do not code it.
6. Continue to repeat step 5 until you have read the entire article. Then move on and continue to scan the rest of the sections. *Use a new tally sheet for each story.*
7. When you have finished scanning both the front and regional sections of the paper and issue date you were assigned, move on to your next assignment until all are completed.

CODING INSTRUMENT FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS
OF 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

Coder Initials _____

Date: Month-Date-Year ____/____/2000

Newspaper _____

1. Las Vegas Review-Journal
2. Las Vegas Sun
3. Reno Gazette-Journal

Location of the hard news article in the newspaper _____

1. Front section
2. Regional section

Reporter/Author (Last Name): _____

Source: _____

(Staff Writer = 1, Associated Press = 2, New York Times = 3, USA Today = 4, Cox News Service = 5, Courier-Journal = 6, Gannett News Service = 7, Los Angeles Times = 8, Washington Post = 9, Baltimore Sun = 10, Knight Ridder = 11, Chicago Tribune = 12, Scripps-McClatchy Service = 13, Newsday = 14, Wire Reports = 15, Orlando Sentinel = 16)

Candidate Treatment in Relation to Campaign Issues

Place the appropriate code for each issue and candidate and their treatment (positive, negative or neutral). The paragraph must mention or allude to both a candidate and an issue to be scored. Use one coding box per paragraph. Page 71 has a detailed description of the campaign issues.

<u>Campaign Issue Coverage</u>	<u>Candidate/Treatment</u>
1= Substantive Issues	1= Positive-Bush
2= Qualifications	2= Negative-Bush
3= Horse Race	3= Neutral-Bush
4= Other	4= Positive-Gore
	5= Negative-Gore
	6= Neutral-Gore

1st Paragraph	
Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment

2nd Paragraph	
Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment

3rd Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
4th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
5th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
6th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
7th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
8th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
9th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
10th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
11th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
12th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment
13th Paragraph Campaign Issue Coverage	Candidate/Treatment

How to Score Candidate Mentions

- A positive score for either candidate could be a result of the language used to: describe the candidate (e.g., “Gore has been successful at attracting the African-American vote”); describe the candidate’s position on the issues (e.g., “Gore’s position on foreign policy is representative of what the voter feels on the issue”); describe the candidate’s character (e.g., “Bush is a strong moral leader for our nation”); describe the candidate’s position in the polls (e.g., “Bush continues to gain public opinion momentum in the polls”); or other similar positive value statements.
- A negative score for either candidate could be a result of the language used to: describe the candidate (e.g., “Gore is on the defensive”); describe the candidate’s position on the issues (e.g., “Bush’s inexperience in foreign affairs has become a key target for Republicans”); describe the candidate’s character (e.g., “Gore lacks the moral character to lead the country”); describe the candidate’s position in the polls (e.g., “Gore cannot gain momentum in the polls and continues to trail behind Bush”); or other similar negative value statements.

Definitions of Campaign Issues/Concerns

Adapted from Domke, Fan, Fibison, Shah, Smith and Watts (1997) “News Media, Candidates and Issues, and Public Opinion in the 1996 Presidential Campaign”

Substantive Issues -

- **Pocketbook:** all discussion of economic concerns relating to general society (e.g., “jobs,” “inflation”), including federal budget and deficits (e.g., “debt,” “deficit”), minimum wage, taxes, financial interests (e.g., “federal reserve,” “prime rate”), and trade agreements.
- **Ideology:** based on rhetoric stressing ideology, including discussion of such topics as capitalism, conservatives and liberals (e.g., “the left” and “the right”), and partisanship.
- **Social Policy:** issues primarily discussed in terms of broader policy implications such as health care (e.g., “Medicaid,” “health insurance,” “entitlement”), education (e.g., “school choice”), the environment, welfare, poverty, race relations (e.g., “affirmative action,” “immigration”), abortion (e.g., “pro-life,” “pro-choice”), same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and gun control and other topics relating to society as a whole (e.g., “crime,” “drugs,” “death penalty,” “veterans,” “student loans,” “technology”).
- **Foreign Affairs:** all topics concerning U.S. foreign interests, such as crises in the Middle East (e.g., “Palestine,” “Arafat”), the Balkans, and Russia, “nation building” and defense spending.
- **Political Reform:** discussions about political reforms in areas such as advertising (e.g., “negative advertising,” “mudslinging”), fundraising, PAC money, and special interests.

Qualifications:

- **Character/Qualifications:** positive traits (e.g. “courage,” “integrity,” “trust,” “leader”) and negative traits (e.g. “arrogance,” “slick,” “soft”). Also includes all of the candidate’s qualifications (e.g., “education,” “political leadership experience”).

Horse Race:

- All discussions about the ongoing travails of the campaign, including the primaries, conventions, polls (e.g., “registered voters,” “margin,” “survey”), electoral college, debates, endorsements, and pundits (e.g., “momentum,” “popularity,” “frontrunner,” “landslide”).

Other:

- Other issues that are mentioned that do not fall into the other three categories.

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