November 1993

The Media and Politics: A Content Analysis of the Louisville Courier-Journal During The 1992 Presidential Election

Clifford L. Staten
G. Sam Sloss

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol21/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.
Politics and media are inseparable. It is only the politicians and the media that are incompatible.
— Walter Cronkite

The controversy concerning the role of the media in the political process has raged for many years among citizens, politicians, and scholars. The many indictments against the media include its structural imbalance in favor of incumbents or high profile issues (Graber, 1989), its liberal or conservative bias (Lichter and Rothman, 1981; Schneider and Lewis, 1985; Stanley and Niemi, 1990; and Bozell and Baker, 1991), its anti-incumbent bias (Robinson, 1985; Katz, 1988; and Graber, 1989), its creation of a horse-race syndrome during elections (Graber, 1983 and Traugott, 1991), its failure to address the issues (Graber, 1983 and 1989), and its omnipotence measured in terms of its ability to set the political agenda (Jacob, 1984:47-50; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987:33,60; Graber, 1989; Entman, 1989:86; and Neuman, 1990). These charges should not be dismissed casually because of the importance of the media to the democratic process.

The purpose of this study is to address the issues of media content and structural and political bias with respect to the coverage of the 1992 presidential election by the Louisville Courier-Journal. The study will identify the amount of coverage given to policy issues, campaign events, candidate qualifications, and candidate prospects. The study will also identify how much coverage was devoted to each candidate and the slant or bias toward each candidate.
Doris Graber is considered by many to be one of the foremost experts on the role of the media in the political process.\textsuperscript{2} According to Graber (1989:212) 60% of the newspaper coverage of the 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980 presidential elections focused upon candidate qualifications - both personal and professional, whereas only 40% of the coverage focused upon policy issues. In her study (Graber, 1983:286) of the 1972, 1976, and 1980 elections she found that policy issues also received less coverage than campaign events (such as debates or speeches) and candidate prospects (the so-called horse-race aspects).

Traugott (1991:135) argues that the heavy use of polls during the campaign results in an overemphasis on the horse-race and less discussion of the issues. If issues are not receiving the bulk of the coverage in newspapers, it is difficult for voters to judge candidates on their positions. If one accepts the contention that the voter should select candidates on the basis of their positions on the issues, this finding is disturbing.

Structural bias refers to the imbalance in coverage given to each candidate. Many newspaper editors attempt to give balanced coverage to each major party candidate or at least to strive for rough parity in the number of stories devoted to each major candidate. Yet, for a variety of reasons—devoid of political motives—some major party candidates will receive more coverage than their opponents. The newsworthiness of a story or the prominence of an incumbent may result in an imbalance in the coverage (Graber, 1984:78-79).

Graber (1989:210) points out that Harold Washington received the vast majority of media coverage during the 1983 Chicago mayoral election because there was much interest concerning what a black mayor could do for the city. She also states that during the 1984 Democratic Convention, 85% of the interviews were conducted with liberal Democrats, although at that time they represented only 56% of the Democrats in Congress (Graber, 1989:210).

It is also noted that Vice-Presidential candidates are usu-
ally slighted in the amount of coverage given to them. According to Graber (1989:211), 95% of the coverage goes to the Presidential candidates with less than 5% of the coverage going to the Vice-Presidential candidates.

Political bias refers to slanting the news for partisan or ideological reasons. Various scholars have identified a liberal bias among the reporters of the major news media (Lichter and Rothman, 1981:42-46; Bozell and Baker, 1990:32,39; and Schneider and Lewis, 1985:6-11). Schneider and Lewis (1985:6-11, 58-59) find that editors of the major newspapers tend to be conservative and in 1988 most newspapers endorsed George Bush as opposed to Michael Dukakis (Stanley and Niemi, 1990:73).

Robinson (1985:43-48) in his study of the 1980 and 1984 elections found an anti-incumbent bias in the media. Incumbents are treated more harshly by the media than challengers largely because their record in office is known and provides an easy target (Graber, 1989:210). Katz (1988:6A) found that the Democrats received better treatment than the Republicans (the incumbents) from the media and television networks during the 1988 election.

METHODOLOGY

A content analysis of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Indiana Edition) was conducted from September 15 through October 31 of 1992.3 The *Courier-Journal* is owned by Gannett which owns *USA Today* (the second largest selling newspaper in the country) and more than 80 newspapers in 36 states (Janda, Berry, and Goldman, 1993:199). Much of the news coverage in the *Courier-Journal* is taken from the wire services and national newspapers. One may assume that its coverage of national politics, including editorials, is similar to the coverage in many newspapers across the country.

All articles which focused on some aspect of the campaign were coded as to the type of article (regular, editorial, editorial cartoon), the number of paragraphs given to each candidate, the focus of the article (events, prospects, qualifications, issues, and strategy), and the slant of the article toward the candidates. (See
the appendix for a copy of the code sheet.)

The amount of space given to each candidate was measured by the number of paragraphs devoted to each in the article. Some newspaper content analyses use column inches, but paragraphs are also used in many because they tend to be of standard size and they are easier to count.

Coverage concerning debates and bus stop tours were classified as campaign events. Candidate prospects consisted mainly of the reporting of polling results concerning level of support for the candidates. Candidate qualifications included both personal and professional attributes such as experience in dealing with foreign policy. The draft issue which was so prominent in the election was categorized as candidate qualifications. Policy issues referred to specific policies which address the problems of the country - such as the deficit and health care. Strategy included such things as reports of why a candidate chose to campaign in some states as opposed to others or why a candidate preferred a particular type of debate format.

The slant of the article referred to how the reporter presented the "facts." Did the reporter write the article in such a way that the reader would come away feeling negative or positive about a particular candidate because the reporter "put a spin on the facts?" In other words, if a reporter stated the level of unemployment at a particular time - this was not necessarily considered to be a negative toward President Bush. The real question was how and in what context the unemployment figures were reported.

Ten individuals coded each article. Agreement among the coders was high because most coding involved simply counting the number of paragraphs. Where coders disagreed on the focus of the article and the slant of the article, a majority rule was used. This ensured the reliability of the content analysis.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Issues
The category of policy issues was the most common focus of the articles (see Table 1). Policy issues were discussed in 43.2% of
TABLE 1 - Issue and Amount of Coverage
(by percentage of articles)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>All Articles</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Editorials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policies</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospects</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that the totals are more than 100% because some articles focused upon several types of issues. Percentages were rounded to the nearest tenth. There were 450 total articles of which 347 were regular and 103 were editorials.
the regular news stories and 37.9% of the editorials. This is close to the findings of Graber (1989:212) who reported 40% of the coverage on policy issues in her studies of the 1972, 1976, and 1980 elections.

Graber (1983:286) and Traugott (1991:135) reported that campaign events, candidate prospects and qualifications all received more coverage than policy issues in previous elections. The findings in this study were just the opposite - policy issues received more coverage than each of the other categories. For all articles policy issues were covered 22% more than campaign events. Editorials were almost twice as likely to discuss policy issues as campaign events. There was 81% more total coverage of policy issues than candidate prospects. If one includes the category of strategy along with candidate prospects as “horse-race” issues, policy issues were still covered more frequently.

For regular news stories, policy issues were followed closely by campaign events (38.9%). The other three categories of candidate qualifications, campaign strategy, and candidate prospects were each covered in about a quarter of all regular news stories.

The category of candidate qualifications was the most common focus for editorials. Nearly half (49.5%) of all editorials dealt with candidate qualifications. Slightly more than a third (37.9%) of the editorials discussed policy issues. Strategies (24.3%), events (19.4%), and prospects (18.4%) were discussed with less frequency in the editorials.

With the emphasis placed on Clinton’s draft record (classified as qualifications) one expected a similar pattern to that reported by Graber (1989:212) where candidate qualifications were covered 50% more than policy issues. However, this was not the case for overall coverage and for regular news reporting. Candidate qualifications were, however, covered more in editorials than were policy issues.

**Structural Bias**

As one may expect there was more coverage of the Republican and Democratic candidates than there was of the Perot campaign
**TABLE 2 - Candidate and Amount of Coverage**
(by percentage of paragraphs)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>All Articles</th>
<th>Regular Articles</th>
<th>Editorials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quayle</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. ticket</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. party</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Republican</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gore</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem. ticket</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem. party</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Democratic</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perot</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockdale</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perot/Stockdale</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Perot and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockdale</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Democrats and Republicans</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Perot and Republicans</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Perot and Democrats</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Perot, Republicans, and Democrats</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Please note that the totals do not reach exactly 100% because of rounding. Percentages were rounded to the nearest tenth. There was a total of 5004 paragraphs coded of which 3649 were from regular articles and 1355 from editorials.
(see Table 2). However, structural bias toward the incumbent and his party was not found in the regular news coverage. Of the regular news stories, the Republicans were mentioned in 59.6% of the total paragraphs compared to 57.7% for the Democrats. The Ross Perot campaign received coverage in 17.9% of the total paragraphs or about 30% as much as the major party candidates.

For editorials there was a distinct pattern of structural bias toward the incumbent, George Bush. The Republicans were covered in 52.7% of the total paragraphs, whereas the Democrats were covered in 39.0% of the total paragraphs. Ross Perot was mentioned in 12.5% of the total editorial paragraphs.

As in previous years (Graber, 1989:211), vice-presidential candidates received far less coverage than the presidential candidates. For George Bush and Dan Quayle the split was 84.6% to 15.4%. The Bill Clinton and Al Gore split was 92.1% to 7.9%. The Ross Perot and James Stockdale split was 96.1% to 3.9%. For the two challengers the split was similar to the 95% to 5% reported by Graber (1989:211). Two factors may explain the higher coverage of Vice-President Dan Quayle. The first is the extra coverage due to the “Murphy Brown” incident. A second is the fact that Dan Quayle is from Indiana and Louisville is on the Kentucky-Indiana border. Southern Indiana is serviced by the Louisville Courier-Journal.

**Political Bias**

The greater coverage received by the Republicans should not be interpreted as an advantage. While the Republicans received more coverage than the challengers, the coverage was more negative, especially in the editorials (see Table 3).

Using a seven-point scale with one representing a negative slant, four representing neutrality, and seven representing a positive slant the overall slant of the articles was more negative for George Bush than for Bill Clinton. The Bill Clinton-Al Gore political bias score for editorials was 3.96, whereas George Bush and Dan Quayle received a 2.97, and Ross Perot and James Stockdale received an average score of 3.40. These findings were consistent with those reported by Robinson (1985:43-48) who
TABLE 3 - Candidate and Political Bias
(1=unfavorable to 4=neutral to 7=favorable)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>All Articles</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Editorials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bush/Quayle</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton/Gore</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perot/Stockdale</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that there were 450 total articles of which 347 were regular and 103 were editorials.

Table 4 - Editorial Cartoon Bias
(percentage of cartoons)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bias</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anti-Bush</td>
<td>80.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti-Clinton</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti-Perot</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that the total is more than 100% because some cartoons were anti Bush and Clinton. Percentages were rounded to the nearest tenth. There was a total of 63 cartoons.
found incumbents received more negative coverage.

The differences in political bias were significantly less in regular news coverage. On the seven-point scale, both Bill Clinton and Ross Perot had essentially neutral average scores (4.05 for Clinton and 4.00 for Perot). George Bush received a slightly negative score (3.74).

Cartoons (see Table 4) are a special type of editorial. They are, by their very nature, poking fun at someone. Of the 63 cartoons, 51 (80.9%) poked fun at or were classified as anti-Bush. Only nine (14.3%) made fun of Bill Clinton. Of these nine, only two were aimed exclusively at Bill Clinton with the other seven aimed at either Bill Clinton and George Bush or at all three candidates. George Bush had 44 cartoons directed specifically at him. Even Ross Perot, who had less coverage than the two major candidates on both regular news stories and editorials, had more cartoons aimed at him (nine exclusive; 12 total) than at Bill Clinton.

The more negative editorials and cartoons of George Bush are not unexpected as the newspaper did endorse Bill Clinton. Neither is it surprising to find that for regular news stories Bill Clinton and Ross Perot received neutral coverage and George Bush near neutral coverage. Newspapers attempt to present balanced news coverage in regular news stories.

It is interesting to note that the newspaper’s endorsement of Bill Clinton did not translate into positive coverage for him. Rather, it seems that the endorsement protected him from negative coverage only. Bill Clinton’s coverage was neutral in both regular stories and editorials. The editorial cartoons directed at him were kept to a minimum. George Bush and Ross Perot, to a lesser extent, received negative editorial and cartoon coverage.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed all 1992 presidential election news stories, editorials, and cartoons in the Louisville Courier Journal (Indiana Edition) during a six-week period preceding the election. In comparing coverage received by the Democrats and the Republi-
cans, there was an absence of structural bias in the regular news stories. In the editorials the structural bias was weighted in favor of the Republicans. There was very little political bias in the regular news stories with Bill Clinton and Ross Perot receiving virtually neutral scores and George Bush receiving a slightly negative score. Political bias was much more evident in the editorials and cartoons where Bill Clinton received largely a neutral score and George Bush received a significant negative score. Ross Perot received political bias scores between the two major candidates.

The lack of a positive bias toward the endorsed candidate should not be surprising. Newspapers by their very nature are critical. It is their job to ask tough questions and point out weaknesses and errors by the candidates. What this study may suggest is the that a newspaper’s endorsement of a candidate does not necessarily translate into a positive bias in news stories or editorials. The effect of an endorsement is to protect the candidate from the traditional critical eye of the media. Possibly the best a candidate, even one that has received an endorsement, could ever hope for from a newspaper is neutral coverage.

While policy issues were covered in only 43% of all articles, they did receive more coverage than candidate qualifications, campaign events, election strategy, and candidate prospects. Why policy issues received more coverage relative to other issue categories in this election than in previous elections is not clear. Several factors could explain the difference. Clearly the major topic of the campaign was the state of the economy. Both Bill Clinton and Ross Perot focused their entire campaigns on this one issue. George Bush, who tried to focus on the character issue and qualifications, was forced to address this issue as well. Robinson (1981:191) refers to this as a mediality—a featured event of such political significance that it must be given more weight when analyzing media content.

Another possible explanation is that the *Louisville Courier-Journal* does a better job than other newspapers in covering policy issues. In the past it has received many awards for its reporting and coverage of political issues. This conclusion,
however, can not be supported at this time due to the limitations of the case study method.

A final explanation is that the media are finally responding to their critics who argue that they are preoccupied with "glitz" at the expense of policy issues. This study clearly found that policy issues were covered more than campaign events, strategy, and candidate prospects. Whatever the reason for policy issues receiving more coverage, one would hope this is a trend that will continue in the future.
NOTES

1 The authors would like to thank the students in Clifford L. Staten's Y205 Elements of Political Analysis class at Indiana University Southeast for their participation in coding more than 500 articles from the Louisville Courier Journal. The students are as follows: Carey Bowling, Marc Cantwell, Charles Keenan, Steve McAtee, Trent McNeeley, Traci Robinson, Tina Rogge, Tom Rothring, and Lisa Rowe. This article would not have been possible without their tireless efforts.

2 Her book Mass Media and American Politics published by Congressional Quarterly and now in its 3rd edition is considered by many to be the "classic" in the field.

3 The Indiana Edition of the Louisville Courier-Journal differs from the regular edition in that there is an additional weekly section in which news events particular to the state of Indiana are covered. The Louisville Courier-Journal has a circulation of approximately 327,000 in Kentucky and Indiana.
Appendix
Code Sheet for the Louisville Courier Journal—Indiana Edition

Date:
Title of Article:
Author:
Page Number:

Type of Article: Regular _____ Editorial _____ Cartoon _____

If Cartoon, you need only to answer the following:
Slant of Cartoon: anti-Bush _____ anti-Clinton _____ anti-Perot _____
anti-Bush,Clinton _____ anti-Bush,Perot _____ anti-Clinton,Perot _____
anti-Bush,Clinton,Perot _____

Did the article have a photograph that accompanied it?
yes _____ no _____

Total number of paragraphs focusing upon some aspect of the presidential campaign:

Number of paragraphs devoted to: Clinton _____ Gore _____ Democratic Ticket _____
Democratic Party _____ Bush _____ Quayle _____ Republican Ticket _____
Republican Party _____ Democratic and Republican _____ Perot _____
Stockdale _____ Perot and Stockdale _____ Perot and the Republicans _____
Perot and the Democrats _____ Perot, the Democrats, and the Republicans _____

Focus of article: candidate prospects _____ campaign events _____
candidate qualifications (personal and professional) _____ policy issues _____
campaign strategy _____ other _____

Overall slant of article:
For Bush/Quayle negative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 positive NA
For Clinton/Gore negative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 positive NA
For Perot/Stockdale negative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 positive NA
BIBLIOGRAPHY


101


