

The Great (Horse) Race for the White House: How the Media Shape our Presidential Elections

Alex Welch, University of Virginia¹

Abstract

Supporters of losing presidential candidates commonly assert that the media conspired against their candidate. As the literature shows, there are many possible ways in which the media can influence presidential elections, especially primaries. The question, then, is in which ways and to what extent do the media influence our elections, and what normative effects do these influences have on our democracy? I seek to demonstrate that the well-demonstrated horse race bias the media display during a presidential election affects the public in more ways than just the “dumbing down” of the race. Instead, a candidate’s position in the polls fundamentally shapes the type of coverage they receive from the media which, in turn, factors into the final electoral outcome. As such, the media often play the role of kingmakers in our society and shape our culture by picking winners and losers. My analysis makes use of quantitative primary election data from the 2012 Republican Primary election cycles, and raises some questions regarding the strangely hostile, yet symbiotic, relationship between the media and Donald Trump in the 2016 cycle.

Introduction

The media play dynamic roles in the lives of the average American. Although the medium through which news and information is disseminated has changed throughout the course of history, the fundamental fact remains that no individual has the time or resources to be knowledgeable about every event going on in their world. After all, even the president can only be briefed about the most important ongoing conflicts. As such, we depend on others to filter the information to which we are exposed so that we have a reasonably accurate idea of what is going on in the world on any particular day. In other words, as put by Walter Lippmann (1922), the media “shine a flashlight” in the darkness to help us to better understand our world. This is especially true when it comes to presidential election coverage. Because there is usually a large

¹ The author is a Ph.D. student at the University of Virginia and a research assistant for the Presidential Oral History Program at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center for Public Affairs. He currently holds a Master’s Degree in Government from the University of Virginia and a Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science from Grove City College (Class of 2013). He is a former Koch Research Fellow with The Center of Vision & Values and was a member of the Life Advocates ministry and College Republicans while at Grove City College. He would like to thank Lee Wishing and Dr. Paul Kengor for the opportunity to contribute this paper to the Vision & Values Conference.

number of candidates vying for the nation's top spot and many of the dominant policy issues are so technically complex, the media choose to filter the election information and present it to Americans in a familiar and friendly format. In this paper, I will show that the "horse race" format of election coverage is not only the most dominant frame of coverage, but it also shapes how the candidates are covered, and it can ultimately contribute to the final outcome on Election Day.

Background

For the past century, there has been a certain ebb and flow with regard to academic understanding of the media's ability to influence public opinion. For nearly thirty years (the 1920's through early 50s) many scholars of American media and politics asserted the power of the "hypodermic needle effect" of the mass media, which posited that the media held a powerful and pervasive influence over the mass public (Bineham, 1988). These scholars pointed to dramatic events, such as the infamous reading of *War of the Worlds* over the radio, which led to mass panic and hysteria, as evidence of this effect. The analogy of the hypodermic needle, in essence, argued that once the media exposed an individual to some information, the individual would accept it without question.

By the mid-50s, however, the academic understanding of media power not only began to shift, but was turned on its head. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) not only rejected the hypodermic model, but instead argued that the media exhibited "limited effects" upon the public. This did not necessarily mean that the public were distrustful or hostile toward the media in ways that many Americans are today, but rather it meant that the influence of the media was diluted through an intermediary in the average individual's life. Instead of watching the national news and mindlessly accepting whatever the news anchor would say, Katz and Lazarsfeld believed that the

average individual would look to a pastor, community leader, teacher, or some other important figure in his own life to make sense of what the news reported and decide whether or not they should believe what was being reported. Moreover, as Katz (1957) pointed out, the average American would be more likely to form their own judgments about a politician by attending rallies or being otherwise involved in politics than they would be to unquestioningly believe a newspaper editorial. The minimal effects model dominated the field for several decades and fit well with some of the other important literatures of the field at that time, such as the Michigan Model of political behavior, which argued that one's political behaviors and opinions are unlikely to change once solidified early in one's adult life (Campbell, et al., 1960; Converse, 1964).

Since the 1980s, however, American Political Behavioralists have adopted a hybrid understanding of the media's power to politically influence Americans. The biggest catalyst for this change was probably Iyengar and Kinder's classic, *News that Matters* (1987). Using a series of pseudo-laboratory experiments, they demonstrated that news coverage "sets the agenda" by elevating the importance of certain political issues through increased quantity of coverage and primes the viewer to recall certain issues before other issues. In other words, the media's power was found not necessarily in telling people what they should think, but in *how* they should think about an issue—if it is pressing and important or if it falls down to the bottom of the viewer's priorities. Their findings came with the important caveat that the viewer might take what the media provides and interpret it in light of his own pre-dispositions, especially when it involves political figures he supports, an effect that Iyengar and Kinder termed "projection." Supporters of Donald Trump provide a plethora of examples of this effect. For instance, many supporters of Trump interpreted the numerous reports of Trump making political donations to Democratic

politicians as merely indicative of Trump trying to stash up political favors for his future benefit rather than being indicative of Trump's political positions. The idea that the media can set the agenda, yet individuals can resist what they are told has been a prominent idea since *News that Matters*, and lends some flexibility to scholars who can study the relationship between media and public opinion without having to endorse one extreme or the other.²

Having demonstrated that the media *can* have a dynamic effect on an individual's political perceptions, we turn now to the literature on the media and presidential elections. If we accept that the media can at least "set the agenda," it opens up a litany of ways in which the media can shape a presidential election according to their own set of preferences. Some of these ways include choosing whether or not to give any exposure to a candidate, deciding whether to be supportive or critical of a candidate, and picking which aspects of a candidate to cover. Even with the rise of Facebook, Twitter, and campaign websites, it would be absurd to think that a prospective presidential candidate could get very far without a substantial degree of exposure from the more traditional media outlets because television is still the dominant media source for a majority of Americans (Pew, 2014). Outlets such as FOX News, CNN, MSNBC, and the other major broadcast networks can expose candidates to millions of individuals at any given time, and thus, maximize a candidate's name recognition. Consequently, it is important to uncover the factors that determine how and why the media cover presidential elections in the way that they do.

The "how" of this question has been fairly unanimously answered by the literature. Patterson (1993), Sabato (1993), and Hershey (2001) all describe media coverage of elections in terms of the "horse race" or "game frame." What this means, at its most basic level, is that the

² See Ladd (2012) for a full explanation of how distrust in the mainstream media (coupled with trust in talk radio and other forms of alternative media) creates a fundamentally misinformed electorate.

media opt to cover campaigns in the simplest way imaginable—a foot race between the various candidates. In doing so, the focus of coverage shifts from the “issues” to merely how a candidate is faring in the polls and whether or not a gaffe or out-of-context sound bit will cost them a few points in the polls. A candidate’s strategy for victory, therefore, becomes the most important theme, not whether or not they will audit the Federal Reserve, use American troops in the war against ISIS, or what their stance is on any other salient political issue. Patterson (1994) acknowledges that this is largely the result of “reporters needing a story to tell,” but this “story” usually ends up egregiously simplifying the facts of the election. Regardless of how simplified the horse race may make an election, journalists know that the horse race speaks to our love of competition and our rational ignorance of public policy (Downs, 1957). As such, the “game schema” is the overwhelmingly dominant way the media choose to cover elections.

If the extent of horse race coverage’s power ended with simply dumbing-down the election for the American public, it could perhaps be excused as merely journalists needing to tell a story. Instead, several other trends paint a far darker picture. The first such trend is the media’s tendency to spiral into a cycle of dominant negativity in terms of the tone of their election coverage (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011). This is partially a result of the press’s post-Watergate obsession with ending the careers of powerful political figures, but also the result of press frames setting a default narrative of coverage, with this coverage usually being negative from the perspective of the political candidate. This, in turn, contributes to a generally negative environment for the election. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), for example, blame the negative tones associated with campaigning for contributing to low voter turnouts and fostering hostility toward the political process, itself.³

³ On the other hand, Freedman and Goldstein (1999) and Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2001) argue that negativity in campaigns, particularly negative advertisements, benefit our democracy because they help to inform

The second trend is that the media ultimately can determine who wins elections, especially primary elections, by the way in which they cover candidates. Bartels (1987) documented the effect that the media had on the 1984 Democratic Primary contest between Walter Mondale and Gary Hart. Bartels showed that Hart was only able to pick up the support of New Hampshire voters when they believed that he actually had a chance to defeat the presumptive front-runner, and they only believed that Hart could defeat Mondale when the media began to speak more optimistically of Hart's chances. In other words, despite Hart's higher degree of favorability with New Hampshire Democrats, he only began to achieve some electoral success when the media began to speak favorably of his chances of winning. Not only do the media "dumb down" the electorate by framing presidential contests in terms of horse races, but they also contribute to a more cynical and negative political environment and can indirectly determine the outcome of elections by making predictions about the outcome which can sway the election in favor of their predicted winner.

Summarily, even though no scholar today believes in the hypodermic model of media effects, there are numerous ways in which the media control the cycle of presidential elections. By picking and choosing which candidates to cover, the media can maximize the name recognition of their chosen candidate. By framing the contest solely in terms of a horse race, the media can minimize the importance of certain issues and shut out candidates with low poll numbers. And by contributing to the "spiral of negativity," the media can set the public against certain candidates, or at the very least, lead voters to back the "inevitable winner" over a candidate who does not appear likely to win a contest. American voters may not like or trust the

the least-informed citizens by giving citizens reasons to vote against one of the candidates. In their view, negative advertisements are more effective at conveying information than positive or strictly informational advertisements are to the least-informed public. There is some debate, therefore, over the normative implications of a negative political environment.

media, but there are numerous ways in which the media can dictate the terms and outcomes of an election.

Methods and Model

My goal in this paper is to determine if there is empirical evidence to support the trends that the various Behaviorists have described. In particular, I want to find out if there is a feedback loop that exists between a candidate's poll numbers and the tone of media coverage they receive. To that end, I make three hypotheses:

H1: *As a candidate rises in the polls, the tone of media coverage will become more positive.*

H2: *Once a candidate becomes the frontrunner, the tone of coverage will become more negative.*

H3: *When a candidate starts to fall in the polls, the tone of media coverage will become more negative.*

To test these hypotheses, I compiled a dataset of primary campaign poll numbers from the 2012 Republican primary contests, using the RealClearPolitics (RCP) poll averages. I also used data from the 2012 Pew Reports on "Press Coverage of the General Elections." The dataset included all RCP polling averages from the beginning of 2012 until mid-April of that year (at which point, Mitt Romney's victory was all but certain) and covers the campaigns of Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul (The Pew data did not include any measures of media coverage for the other four major Republican candidates.). The RCP data will function as the independent ("x") variables, while the Pew data will serve as the dependent ("y") variable. I do not believe that this process would work *ad infinitum*, as H2 and H3 show, because once this process has catapulted a candidate into the role of "frontrunner," the process will start to work in reverse as the media figures will seek to shoot him down.

Before beginning any statistical tests, however, it is instructive to run a simple naked eye examination of the data to see if the relationship is plausible. The 2012 Republican Primary provides some clear evidence of the hypothesized patterns, as seen below.

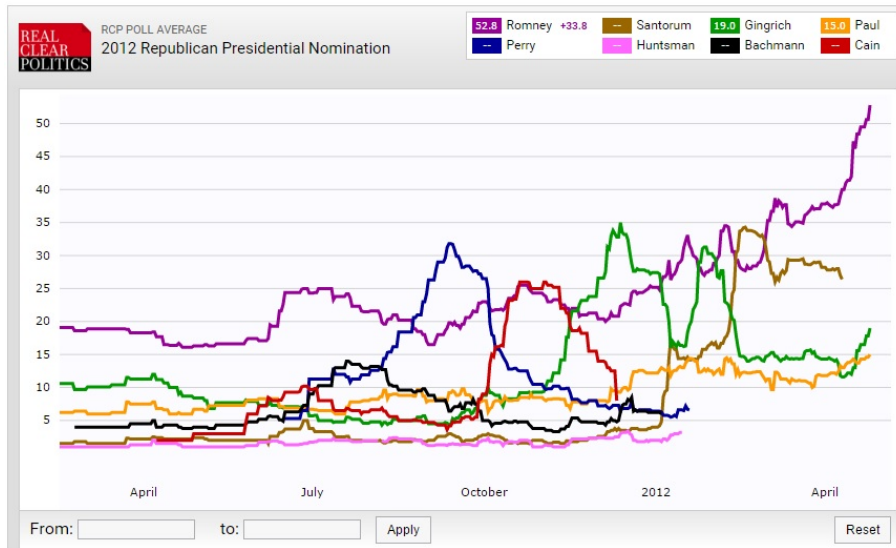


Figure 1: 2012 Republican Primary RCP Polling Averages (Source: http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2012/president/us/republiican_presidential_nomination-1452.html)

At first this may seem like a jumbled mess, but upon closer inspection, several clear patterns quickly emerge. The first is that there are several inverse parabolic trends representing Mitt Romney’s challengers. Rick Perry (the blue line) was the first major challenger to surpass Romney in the polls, but his time at the top was very short-lived and he began to tumble in the polls around the same time that Herman Cain (the red line) began to surge. Once Cain began to tumble, Newt Gingrich (the green line) began to surge until he began to fall in the polls and Rick Santorum (the brown line) began his surge. Gingrich is unique in that he had two surges and declines, but eventually Santorum completely replaced him as the anti-Romney candidate. Only when Santorum’s descent began did Romney finally begin to surge. Michele Bachmann also experienced a similar brief surge and peak followed by a decline in the polls, but her rise and fall

was not nearly as dramatic as the other candidates. This particular election, in short, provides some evidence that the hypothesized relationship is plausible.

Figure 2 (below) shows the amount of media coverage devoted to each candidate during the small sliver of the primary season when Gingrich was falling, Santorum was rising, and Romney was more or less holding steady. Although this not a perfect proxy for media tone, it lends additional plausibility to the hypothesized relationship. Romney’s attention remained more or less constant throughout the time interval, while Gingrich’s quickly declined after his peak and Santorum’s increased during his surge. At the very least, this suggests that media coverage is partially driven by poll numbers, which makes the relationship plausible.

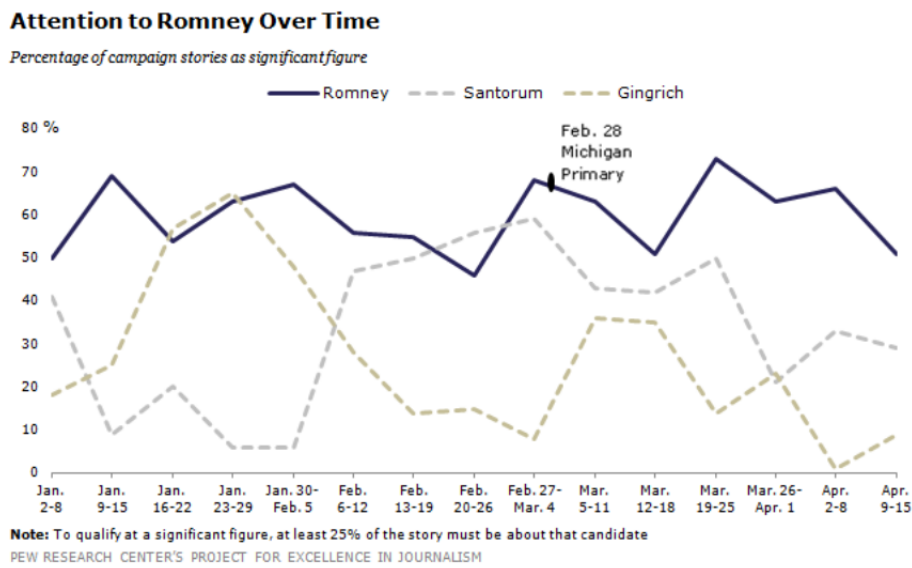


Figure 2: Amount of Media Coverage for Republican Presidential Candidates (source: “How the Media Covered the 2012 Primary Campaign,” Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism.)

Results

The first step in this process is always to use the simple bivariate OLS [ordinary least squares] regression as a check to ensure that the basic relationship is empirically defensible. As the results show below, there is definitely a strong relationship between the positivity of press coverage and a candidate’s poll numbers.

Table 1: Bivariate Regression of Media Positivity Against Poll Numbers

| Variable | Coefficient | Std. Error | t | p | 95% CI |
|----------|-------------|------------|-------|--------|--------------------|
| RCP | .425 | .0629 | 6.76 | 0.000* | (.3010, .5495) |
| Constant | 23.7971 | 1.5439 | 15.41 | 0.000* | (20.7506, 26.8438) |

*p < .05

*R² = 0.20

What these simple results show is that we can definitely reject a null hypothesis of no relationship between how positive the media’s coverage is of a candidate and their poll numbers. The results yield the relationship of $\hat{y} = 23.7971 + .425x$, which means that for every one-point increase in a candidates polling numbers, they will get .425 points more of positive media coverage, all else equal. The other values in the table merely show that the independent variable has an effect on the dependent variable (And the R² value tells us that about 20% of the variation in the dependent variable can be explained strictly by the independent variable, which is not a small finding.). Figure 3 (below) more clearly illustrates these results. At the very least, we have found a strong, palpable correlation between positivity of press coverage and increasing poll numbers.

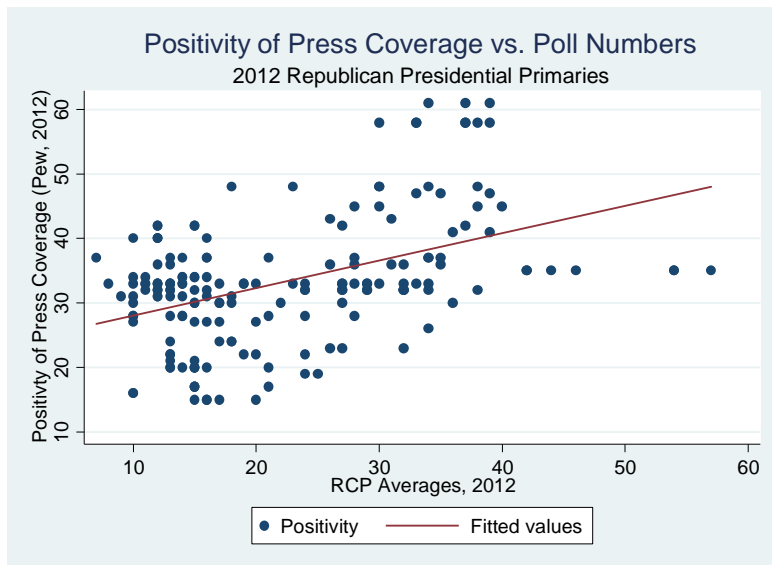


Figure 3: Positivity of Press Coverage vs. RCP Polls in 2012 GOP Primary

Running these same kinds of regressions on media neutrality and attention also yielded results supportive of my initial hypothesis. As Table 2 shows, the coefficient for neutrality is almost a mirror image of the coefficient for media positivity. What this essentially tells us is that as a candidate's poll numbers go up, neutral media coverage generally turns into more positive media coverage for the candidate, which would generally be considered "beneficial" for the candidate. Table 3, moreover, provides the strongest results, yet, by showing that as the candidate goes up in his RCP average, he will, on average, gain 1.5 additional points of media exposure. This is an intuitive finding, as media outlets would be derelict in their duty if they failed to cover a surging candidate. Combining these three simple regressions together, it appears that increasing one's poll numbers leads to more coverage, more positive coverage, and less "neutral" coverage.

Table 2: Bivariate Regression of Media Neutrality Against Poll Numbers

| Variable | Coefficient | Std. Error | t | p | 95% CI |
|----------|-------------|------------|--------|--------|------------------|
| RCP | -.4133 | .0401 | -10.31 | 0.000* | (-.4925, -.3342) |
| Constant | 44.4925 | .9836 | 45.23 | 0.000* | (42.55, 46.23) |

*p < .05

*R² = 0.3725

Table 3: Bivariate Regression of Media Attention Against Poll Numbers

| Variable | Coefficient | Std. Error | t | p | 95% CI |
|----------|-------------|------------|-------|--------|---------------------|
| RCP | 1.7493 | .0951 | 18.39 | 0.000* | (1.5616, 1.9370) |
| Constant | -6.9638 | 2.3328 | -2.99 | 0.003* | (-11.5672, -2.3605) |

*p < .05

*R² = 0.6539

Table 4: Bivariate Regression of Media Negativity Against Poll Numbers

| Variable | Coefficient | Std. Error | t | p | 95% CI |
|----------|-------------|------------|-------|-------|------------------|
| RCP | .0014 | .0622 | 0.02 | 0.982 | (-.1213, .1242) |
| Constant | 31.4714 | 1.5256 | 20.63 | 0.000 | (28.4609, 34.48) |

*p < .05

*R² = 0.000

One surprising finding, as shown in Table 4, however, is that there appears to be no bivariate relationship between negative coverage and RCP polling averages. A regression between these variables returns essentially null findings, which would suggest that negative coverage is essentially constant, averaging between 28% and 35% of the total primary season election coverage, and it is unaffected by a candidate’s poll numbers. This, obviously, does not support my hypotheses, but the overall findings from the series of simple bivariate regressions are enough to merit more complex types of analyses. After all, these simple regressions are helpful in establishing plausibility, but are ripe candidates for problems of endogeneity [a term used in econometrics that describes various problems stemming from a correlation between the error term and at least one explanatory variable that jeopardize the validity and strength of the causal relationships], such as omitted variable bias and reverse causality.

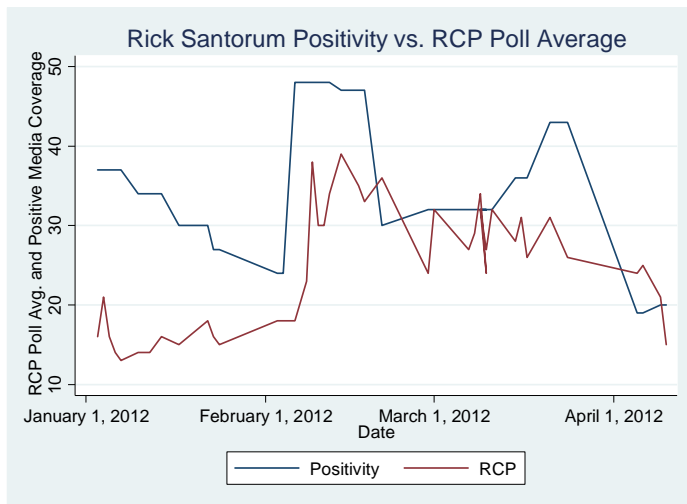


Figure 4- Rick Santorum Positivity and RCP Polling Average (January 1, 2012- April 15, 2012)

My data were able to bring out a few more pieces of evidence supporting my hypotheses. Figure 4 shows Rick Santorum’s levels of positive media coverage and polling average over the time period under consideration. As the graph illustrates, both trends generally follow the same patterns, illustrating a level of correlation between them. In particular, right about mid-February of that month, both Santorum’s polling average and media positivity shot through the roof, right

around the time when Santorum won three Pyrrhic victories in Missouri, and Minnesota and the Colorado Caucus (I call them “Pyrrhic” because none of those three contests actually won Santorum any delegates for the national convention.). Nonetheless, it demonstrates a media bias toward giving positive coverage to surging candidates. Conversely, around mid-March in this graph, we can see downward spirals in both the positivity of Santorum’s media coverage and his poll numbers. This suggests a sort of feedback loop between the tone of media coverage and the candidate’s poll numbers (which means that both phenomena causally impact the other).

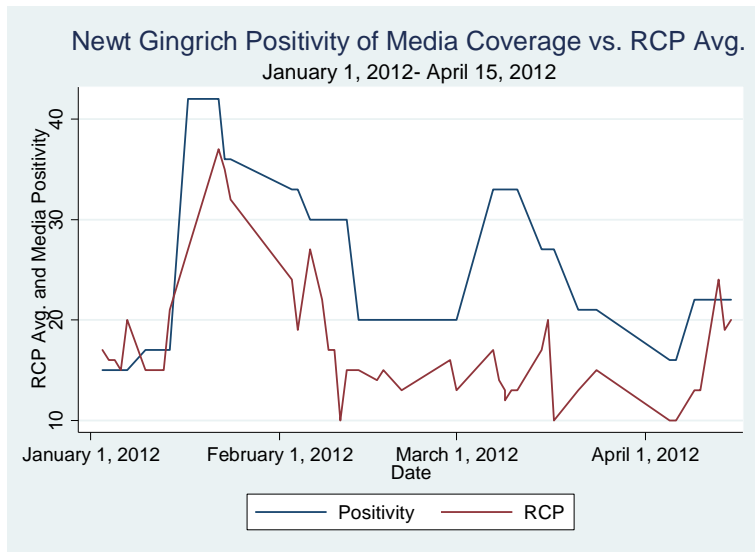


Figure 5- Newt Gingrich Positivity and RCP Polling Average (January 1, 2012- April 15, 2012)

The trends are even more pronounced in the case of Newt Gingrich’s 2012 campaign. The graph shows the two separate surges he enjoyed as well as the corresponding surges in positive media coverage. In both instances, however, where Gingrich peaked in his poll numbers, his positive media coverage had plateaued and was beginning to turn negative again. This, again, is consistent with the cycle of the horse race coverage theory of media coverage.

Mitt Romney’s results are shown in Figure 6, and his are a little more difficult to interpret in light of our model, but some trends are apparent. First, his media coverage stayed more or less constant throughout the months when Santorum and Gingrich both experienced their surges and

brief moments as front runners. By about mid-March, however, when Santorum was beginning his final downfall and Gingrich was experiencing his campaign's final rally, Romney enjoyed his highest levels of media positivity as his nomination began to look inevitable. His lowest point came after Santorum's trio of Pyrrhic victories, but then began to rapidly surge as he won important and meaningful primaries and the problems underlying Santorum's woefully inept campaign organization became abundantly clear. After this peak, however, his media positivity sharply declined, as we would expect, from a media ever eager to destroy a frontrunner or nominee.

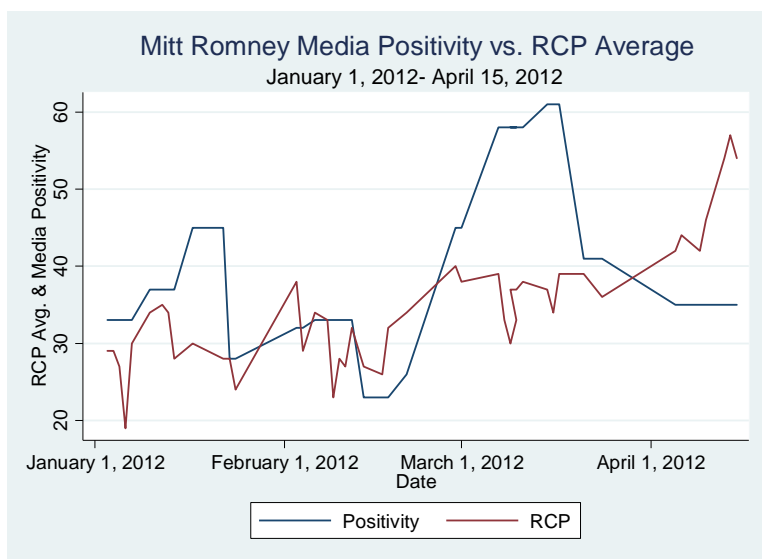


Figure 6: Mitt Romney Positivity and RCP Polling Average (January 1, 2012- April 15, 2012)

Discussion

These preliminary findings generally support my hypotheses. Although they are largely descriptive and rudimentary, they provide some quantitative evidence that media frames depend largely on the horse race and the momentum a candidate may or may not have at that particular moment. Future research should aim to more clearly demonstrate that the relationship between the tone of media coverage and a candidate's place in the polls functions as a sort of feedback loop where each phenomenon causes the other. In addition to multivariate regression models

with control variables and interactions, time series analyses, such as Granger Causality tests could be utilized to more clearly articulate the nature of this relationship. Nonetheless, these preliminary findings provide some evidence that the media are not especially “objective” in how they choose to cover presidential elections. Instead of mere anecdotal evidence that a certain reporter on FOX News was “in the tank” for a specific candidate, my results do show that media figures tend to adjust the tone of their reporting based on poll numbers.

More importantly (from a normative perspective), this paper offers some evidence that the media do play a role as kingmakers in our general election process. While they may not be especially proactive in trying to jumpstart the campaign of a candidate toiling in the margin of error on these polls, they can contribute to a candidate’s surge once it has started and they can contribute to a candidate’s decline once it has started. A good example of this would be Barack Obama’s ascent in 2008. Farnsworth and Lichter (2011) showed that Barack Obama received almost 22% more positive media coverage than Hillary Clinton did in the 2008 Democratic Primary. The contest between those two candidates is a classic example of all of these trends discussed earlier. The presumptive front-runner, Hillary Clinton, received generally good, but unspectacular, coverage until Barack Obama began his surge. The only difference is that once Obama became the front-runner, he did not lose his media advantage over Clinton. And his media-backed momentum certainly carried through into the fall, where he received media positivity rates double-digits higher than even his running mate, Joe Biden, and certainly higher than John McCain and Sarah Palin (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011).

Future research should expand upon my dataset to include more than just the 2012 Republican Primary. The 2008 Democratic Primary, as just mentioned, would be a great case study for this topic, as would the 2016 Republican Primary. In fact, the 2016 GOP case will be

especially important to study because it includes the curious case of Donald Trump, a candidate for whom none of the normal rules and paradigms seem to apply. Trump and the media seem to enjoy an oddly symbiotic relationship whereby Trump will criticize the media and the media outlets will show and analyze his criticism for large portions of their shows. This, in turn, benefits both Trump *and* the media by giving Trump free airtime to trumpet his message and driving up the clicks and ratings for the media outlet. No matter how negative their coverage of Trump may be, this relationship works to the advantage of both parties in a way that my theory and models cannot explain. Although attacking the media is an easy way for a Republican candidate to boost his numbers,⁴ Trump's war on the press (which includes booing reporters and cameramen at just about every rally) is probably the most hostile a candidate for president has been since the days of Richard Nixon. Only time will tell if Trump's approach to the media constitutes a new paradigm of candidate and media relations, or if he represents an idiosyncratic case that results from his forceful character and skills as an entertainer. Regardless of whether Trump is the catalyst for a new paradigm or if more normal patterns reemerge in subsequent presidential elections, future research should incorporate the 2016 Republican primary season.

Conclusion

No matter how we try to slice it, the media affect, among other things, our perceptions of American political life. Even if Americans actively resist certain things that the media say, we still depend upon the media to "shine a flashlight in the darkness" by covering the numerous moving parts of our political system and piecing it all together into some kind of cohesive story that Americans can understand. Without the media, even in this age of information, Americans

⁴ Ladd (2012), however, shows that antipathy toward the press is not exclusively a "Republican" or conservative phenomenon. Although Democrats do not distrust or loathe the media to quite the extent that Republicans do, it is still not uncommon for candidates to take swipes at the media. Bernie Sanders, for instance, has been quite willing to call out the press for being against him as a matter of corporate principle. For leftist criticism of the press, see Parenti (1986) and any work by Robert McChesney.

would likely be far less informed when it came time to vote at the polls than they already are. This paper provides some evidence, however, that the media reactively frame their coverage of presidential candidates in accordance with what media scholars dub the “horse race.” In doing so, they act as partial kingmakers by feeding the rise of surging candidates and fueling the demise of declining candidates. Combining this with Bartels (1987), it should be clear that the tone of media coverage, especially when they focus on the odds of a candidate winning, can decide the outcome of an election. In our particular case study, various anti-Romney candidates experienced brief periods of highly positive media coverage concurrent with their surges in the polls. But these same candidates lost this positive coverage when their poll numbers fell. And once Romney lacked a viable opponent, his media positivity quickly fell. From all this, we can conclude that the horse race coverage the media utilize during a presidential election is not just some misguided way to frame an election in terms that the general public can understand, but it fundamentally shapes how the candidates are covered and can ultimately be the deciding factor on Election Day. Normatively, this should concern individuals who idealistically view the media as the “Fourth Branch” of government and as the ultimate check on our elected officials. If the horse race drives coverage, then those in the media are not doing their jobs.

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