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CANDIDATES, ISSUES, HORSE RACES, AND HOOPLA

Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1888-1988

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The rise of television as Americans' primary news source has often been decried as a blight on representative democracy. In this article the authors outline three interpretations of media coverage of presidential campaigns. The authors dismiss the first of these (the "vast wasteland" interpretation) because it assumes, contrary to much existing evidence, that there is a fundamental difference between television and the print media in campaign coverage. The authors then undertake a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the presidential campaigns of 1888, 1908, 1928, 1948, 1968, and 1988 as a test of the two remaining interpretations. According to the "videostyle" interpretation, television has revolutionized presidential campaigns and the way campaigns are covered. By contrast, the "the more things change . . ." interpretation holds that, while television may have altered the style of presidential campaigns, it has not changed the substance of campaign coverage, which focused on hoopla and the horse race rather than on serious issues long before the arrival of television. The content analysis indicates some changes during the post-World-War-II era that are consistent with the "videostyle" interpretation, but over the full course of the last century these changes have been of quite a limited scope, consistent with the "the more things change . . ." interpretation.

One of the best college textbooks on government warns that the "impact of television on American politics since 1952 should not be underestimated." Judging from the literature, this has never been a problem. (Hess 1988, 67-68)

Since the dawn of the television age, news coverage of presidential campaigns has been disparaged for accentuating trivialities while ignoring genuine political substance. The news Americans receive, it is charged, is "superficial, narrow, stereotypical, propaganda-laden, of

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little explanatory value, and not geared for critical debate or citizen action”—in short, “not fit for a democracy” (Bennett 1988, 9). According to an influential investigation of television coverage of presidential campaigns, the nightly news conveys “almost nothing of importance about a presidential election”; the medium’s dubious contribution to the electoral process is said to be “a television audience obsessed with election nonsense,” and from this it is but a small step to the conclusion that “If the mass media’s most far-reaching power is its capacity to determine what people will know about and think about . . . then television network newscasts, during a presidential election, work to the detriment of a rational electorate” (Patterson and McClure 1976, 22, 76, 82).¹

Is television truly the bane of intelligent electoral decision making? Is it fair to characterize television coverage of presidential campaigns as a root cause of the political malaise that descended over the United States during the 1960s and has not yet lifted—a malaise whose most heralded symptoms include widespread alienation from the electoral process, rampant cynicism about political leaders, massive ignorance of even the most basic facts about American government, and the marked decline of the established political parties (see, for example, Robinson 1976)? Or is television, in large measure, merely a whipping boy, a convenient scapegoat for deeper problems of American politics and American political journalism? Our purpose here is to bring to these issues a *historical* perspective too often lacking in considerations of the political role of the media. We begin by outlining three different interpretations of media coverage of presidential campaigns, which we refer to as the “vast wasteland,” “video-style,” and “the more things change . . .” perspectives, respectively.

THE MEDIA-CAMPAIGN NEXUS: THREE INTERPRETATIONS

THE VAST WASTELAND

What we term the “vast wasteland” interpretation, in honor of former FCC (Federal Communications Commission) commissioner Newton Minow’s depiction of the intellectual caliber of television,

amounts to a critique—usually acerbic and sometimes overwrought—of television news. The critique has two main elements: the emergence of television since World War II as the primary source of news about presidential campaigns and the widely held notion that television covers campaigns in a distinctive and highly problematic manner.

Newspapers long exercised “a virtual monopoly over mass political communication” in this country (Kernell and Jacobson 1987). The growth of radio during the 1920s challenged the supremacy of newspapers, but the “age of radio” as a prime political instrument was fated to last less than a generation (Rubin 1981, 147). In 1947, not even one American family in a hundred owned a television set, but only two decades later nearly every home contained at least one (Ranney 1983, 8). It was not long after 1952, the year of the first national coverage of presidential nominating conventions, that television displaced newspapers and radio as Americans’ favorite news source; by 1960, 65% of the public identified television news as their main source of information about the presidential campaign (Rubin 1981, 148; but see Robinson and Levy 1986).

Television’s abrupt displacement of newspapers and radio as the primary medium of news in general and campaign news in particular could have had rather minimal political effects if television covered politics in more or less the same way that newspapers and radio do. However, it is exactly at this point that the vaunted distinctiveness of television coverage enters the picture. In his classic exposition of this idea, Weaver (1972) argues that television news relies on a “narrow and distinctively journalistic model or theory of politics”:

According to this model . . . politics is essentially a game played by individual politicians for personal advancement, gain, or power. 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 (usually election to public office). . . . Governmental institutions, public problems, policy debates, and the like . . . are noteworthy only insofar as they affect, or are used by, players in pursuit of the game’s rewards. (P. 69)

Building on this idea, Ranney (1983) labels television coverage of election campaigns “a form of sports reporting.” As Patterson and McClure (1976) elaborate:

Network reporting treats a presidential election exactly like a horse race. The camera follows the entries around the country trying to capture the drama, excitement, and adventure of a grueling run for the November finish line. The opinion polls are cited frequently, indicating the candidates' positions on the track. The strengths and weaknesses of all the participants are constantly probed, providing an explanation for their position and creating drama about how the race might change as they head down the homestretch. (Pp. 41-42; see also Broh 1980)

Lichter, Amundson, and Noyes's conclusion that in 1988 television news concerned itself "less with measuring the candidates' qualifications for the job than with predicting their chances of winning it" (1988, 33) is simply the latest update of a finding that has been reported throughout the television era (see, for example, Graber 1980; Patterson 1980; Patterson and McClure 1976; Robinson and Sheehan 1983). Thus it seems only natural that Americans "tend to see politics as a moderately interesting spectator sport rather than as a life-and-death struggle over matters of basic personal concern" (Ranney 1983, 70).

Now, no one claims that television either invented or now purveys a wholly unique way of covering campaigns. Indeed, even the medium's harshest critics acknowledge that electoral politics was viewed as a game long before the introduction of television (see, for example, Weaver 1972). Even so, they single out television for special blame for carrying coverage of hoopla and the horse race to unparalleled extremes. It is *television* coverage of presidential campaigns, they charge, rather than media coverage *per se*, that bears the onus for the litany of ills recited above.

VIDEOSTYLE

The "vast wasteland" interpretation has been invoked so often that it is now regarded as truth in many quarters. However, it suffers from a defect so glaring as to disqualify it as a persuasive account of the media-campaign nexus: its second main element is directly contradicted by a finding that has been documented in study after study of media coverage of presidential campaigns. Several analyses of campaign stories in newspapers and news magazines have shown that the print media themselves tend to ignore policy issues and to concentrate on campaign hoopla and the candidates' chances of being elected

(see, for example, Patterson 1989; Russonello and Wolf 1979; Stovall 1986), and direct comparisons of television and print media coverage are even more revealing. In a study of television, magazine, and newspaper stories about the 1976 campaign, Patterson (1980) observed the very same coverage patterns no matter what medium he considered; Carey's (1976) comparative study—this one of congressional election reporting by television, magazines, and newspapers—also turned up “remarkably consistent” patterns of coverage; Graber (1980, 166), summarizing the results of her cross-media content analyses of presidential campaigns during the television era, reported “striking uniformity of patterns of coverage”; and Robinson and Sheehan (1983, 152ff.) found that, if anything, television was somewhat *less* fixated on the hoopla and horse race aspects of the 1980 campaign than the print media were. On the basis of all these studies, it seems abundantly clear that television stands out little, if at all, from newspapers in terms of the shortcomings that the “vast wasteland” interpretation specifically attributes to television.

What we call the “videostyle” interpretation, borrowing a term coined by Nesbit (1988), takes this failure of the “vast wasteland” interpretation as its point of departure. Why, it asks, do the much-ballyhooed differences in the way television and newspapers cover campaigns consistently fail to materialize in careful empirical studies? The answer, according to the “videostyle” interpretation, is that television has revolutionized the way campaigns are covered and, indeed, has altered the very nature of campaigns. While the “vast wasteland” interpretation searches in vain for cross-media differences in coverage patterns, the “videostyle” interpretation blames television for having irrevocably changed campaigns, sweeping newspaper coverage along in its wake. The overriding similarity between television and newspaper coverage, seen from this perspective, testifies eloquently to the transformational impact of television.

Political strategists have always designed campaigns to make optimal use of the leading communications medium of the day, rendering other media subject to strategies concocted for the dominant medium. In 1924, when radio made its debut in a presidential race, it was widely predicted that the new medium would indelibly affect campaigns because for the first time every voter would have “the possibility of a

direct reaction to the candidates themselves.” Thus a new era of “image” politics was to be inaugurated, with Franklin Roosevelt’s nominating speech for Al Smith showing the way (Berkman 1987, 423-25). By 1928 both parties were spending heavily for radio time, and the new medium, now capable of reaching 40 million Americans (Chester 1969, 26-27), had become a potent political force. Al Smith’s pronounced East Side accent helped seal the Democrats’ doom that year, but for years thereafter Franklin Roosevelt’s masterly use of radio proved instrumental in keeping the Democrats in power. In very different ways, then, Smith and Roosevelt seemed to bear out earlier predictions that the new medium would profoundly personalize presidential campaigns.

A few decades later, virtually the same scenario was played out anew with the arrival of television as a political force considered so mighty that knowledgeable observers would soon be moved to proclaim that “National political campaigns have become little more than a series of performances calculated to attract the attention of television news cameras and their audiences” (Matthews, 1978, 55) and that “The images on the nightly news count for everything in a presidential election campaign, and beyond. The Presidential Election Show on the nightly news, for all practical purposes, is the electoral process” (Blume 1985, 2).

Television has unquestionably altered the style of presidential campaigns, which are now planned around “photo opportunities” and “sound bites” for the evening news. According to the “videostyle” interpretation, as the candidates and their handlers have learned how to cater to television’s voracious appetite for certain types of stories served up on a certain schedule, the print media have had to change the way they report presidential campaigns—in part because the campaigns themselves have been transfigured and in part because television has carried to the nth degree the redefinition of campaign coverage initiated by radio. In the words of Bogart (1984):

Daily newspapers have been changed in many ways by the emergence of television as a major force in news dissemination and reporting. Television’s vivid imagery has changed the public’s perception of the personalities and places in the news, transformed the news into entertainment, and thus altered the character of press reportage. Perhaps

most important, television's assertive presence has transformed news events themselves. (P. 709)

In sum, the "videostyle" interpretation looks back nostalgically at the good old pre-television days of hard-hitting, issue-oriented campaigns and campaign reportage and regards with disdain the entertainment-oriented triviality that now passes for serious campaign coverage.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE . . .

There is a third interpretation, which denies that the "good old days" were all that good. According to this interpretation, media technologies come and go, but coverage of campaigns today is little different from what it has been for a very long time, and it is therefore inappropriate to single out television as the root of so many political evils. What is really at fault, according to this "the more things change . . ." interpretation, is not television but the journalistic conception of news that has informed campaign coverage for the last century.

This interpretation finds its clearest expression in the work of Robinson and Sheehan (1983, 140-44), who note that harsh criticism of the press for superficial reporting has been a virtual constant of American political history, not a product of the television era. All that has changed is the specific target of the critics' Luddite spleen:

If one goes back through the history of press criticism, a distinct pattern emerges: the most modern medium is always regarded as . . . the most frivolous—first, print, then daily press, then radio, then television. It is, of course, possible that there is a causal relationship between modernity and superficiality, that the newest news medium inevitably behaves the most superficially. On the other hand, just as plausible is a causal relationship between modernity and criticism, the assumption that the newest medium inevitably attracts the loudest complaints. (P. 144)²

Pursuing this thesis, Robinson and Sheehan analyzed the coverage of policy issues in *Boston Globe*, *Columbus Dispatch*, and *Seattle Times* stories about the 1940, 1960, and 1980 presidential campaigns. In 1940, they found, 15% of the stories they coded were issue-oriented; in 1960, 18%; and in 1980, 17%. This "almost mind-numbing stabil-

ity" suggested that "the press was almost precisely as uninterested in policy then as now" (1983, 160-61). Of course, inadequate reporting of policy issues is only one focus of the widespread criticism of campaign coverage in the television era. Moreover, 1940 was the heart of the radio era—not long enough ago to qualify as the "good old days" of election journalism. For these reasons the Robinson-Sheehan analysis, while certainly pertinent, is not conclusive insofar as the "videostyle" and "the more things change . . ." interpretations are concerned.³

In any case, the basic idea of the "the more things change . . ." interpretation is that the historical contrasts on which current critiques of media coverage of presidential campaigns are based tend to be greatly overdrawn. A more informed reading of the historical record might, from this point of view, direct attention away from what is thought to have changed over the years and redirect inquiry toward enduring patterns and problems of campaign coverage.⁴

SUMMARY

We have outlined three different interpretations, the first of which we now discard without further ado because the existing evidence has conclusively established that there is little or no difference between newspapers and television in the way they cover presidential campaigns. According to the second interpretation, television has had such a profound effect on the conduct of presidential campaigns that it has redefined the information environment, transforming newspaper coverage in the process. Therefore, even though newspapers and television now cover campaigns in virtually the same way, the information available to prospective voters may be quite different from what was available in the days before television. More specifically, this "videostyle" interpretation leads us to anticipate a major change *over time* in the way campaigns have been presented to the public, with far greater attention being devoted to personalities, hoopla, and the horse race and far less attention being given to policy issues. In sharp contrast, the "the more things change . . ." interpretation views the transitions from the newspaper era to the radio era to the television era as relatively inconsequential insofar as coverage is concerned. What is truly im-

portant, from this perspective, is the basic conception of news that underlies campaign coverage, and that conception has endured over the last century. Accordingly, during the course of the last hundred years only relatively incidental shifts in the nature of campaign coverage should be anticipated.

DATA AND METHODS

In the remainder of this article we pose an empirical test of the second and third interpretations. Since television is a relative newcomer to the media scene, and since prior studies have disclosed no perceptible cross-media differences in campaign coverage, we focus exclusively on *newspaper* coverage of presidential campaigns over the last century.⁵

Our analysis follows the lead of several earlier content-analytic studies (e.g., Graber 1976; Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979; Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Russonello and Wolf 1979) by examining campaign coverage in several different newspapers rather than concentrating exclusively on one. We focus on coverage by five major metropolitan newspapers—the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Washington Post*—of elections at twenty-year intervals corresponding to the three media epochs of the past century—1888 (Cleveland versus Harrison) and 1908 (Bryan versus Taft) during the newspaper era, 1928 (Smith versus Hoover) and 1948 (Truman versus Dewey) during the radio era, and 1968 (Humphrey versus Nixon versus Wallace) and 1988 (Dukakis versus Bush) during the television era. Going farther back in time than the late nineteenth century seems inadvisable in terms of comparability, since before then the press did not report what we would understand today as news and since even by then there was often “as much emphasis in leading papers on telling a good story as on getting the facts” (Schudson 1978, 4-5).

For all five newspapers, we constituted a randomly chosen, composite two-week period during the general election campaign season and analyzed every front-page story about the presidential campaign, that is, every front-page story in which at least one presidential

candidate was mentioned by name.⁶ Our coding unit was the paragraph. The sample contained 5,157 paragraphs, each of which was coded in terms of the type of coverage it most clearly embodied. The five coverage categories were as follows:

- *Candidate traits.* Coverage of a candidate's experience, leadership ability, judgment, character, competence, integrity, knowledge, physical appearance, voice, health, or personal relationships.⁷
- *Policy issues.* Coverage of a candidate's positions on past, current, or future policy issues.⁸
- *Campaign activity.* Coverage of a candidate's itinerary, endorsements, contributions, political rallies, fund-raising events, crowd reactions, or debate preparation and staging.⁹
- *Horse race.* Coverage of a candidate's apparent standing in the campaign, as gauged by statements from informed party leaders, references to fund-raising progress, polls, momentum, or perceptions of public opinion toward the candidate or his opponent(s).¹⁰
- *Information.* Coverage of election-relevant events or phenomena not associated with a particular candidate. For example, "The economy slowed" would be an information statement, while "Candidate A blamed mismanagement for the slowing of the economy" would be a policy issue statement.¹¹

Paragraph scores were assigned by two coders after extensive training with newspaper articles from other presidential election years. The coders were instructed to assign a single code to each paragraph, reflecting the main theme. After intercoder reliability reached an acceptable level in the training sessions, each coder was randomly allotted 40% of the stories in the sample to code independently, and the remaining 20% of the stories were coded by both coders, with the codes assigned on the overlapping stories being used to determine intercoder reliability.¹² For the overlapping paragraphs, disagreements between the two coders were resolved *ex post facto* by randomly selecting the paragraph score assigned by one coder or the other.

FINDINGS¹³

According to the "videostyle" interpretation, newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns during the television era should be quite

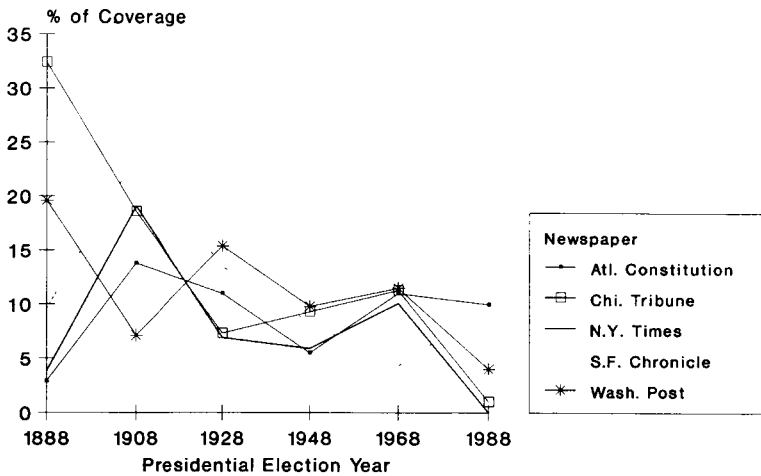


Figure 1: Candidate Trait Coverage, 1888-1988

distinct from that of the newspaper era, with emphasis having shifted markedly away from policy issues and toward candidate personalities, campaign events, and candidate standings and prospects. To the extent that television has completed a job that radio started, the coverage patterns of the radio era should be intermediate between those of the newspaper and television eras. On the other hand, according to the "the more things change . . ." interpretation, no temporal trend in the way newspapers have covered presidential campaigns should be evident; the current media obsession with personalities, hoopla, and the horse race should be just as observable in newspaper coverage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁴

CANDIDATE TRAITS

Turning first to coverage of candidate traits (see Figure 1), we encounter for the first time what will turn out to be a recurrent result: the lack of a single temporal pattern across the five newspapers. Substantively, this means that it was fairly common for one newspaper's coverage of candidate traits to increase over that of the prior

year in our analysis at the same time that another paper was devoting less attention to candidate traits than it previously had. So even though we can and do speak of general trends, we must continually bear in mind that concealed within such trends is likely to be considerable variability among the five newspapers.

More importantly, Figure 1 also reveals that during the last century the candidates' personal traits have never received much coverage. With only two exceptions (the *Chicago Tribune* in 1888 and the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1908), less than one-fifth of any newspaper's front-page election coverage has been devoted to the candidates' physical or psychological attributes, political experience, and qualifications for the presidency.¹⁵ More generally, across the five papers and the six elections, about 10% of the campaign coverage has centered on candidate traits. So even though the candidates' personal images are crucial determinants of vote choice in this country (see for example, Campbell et al. 1960; Kelley 1983), by our reckoning only a small fraction of the news available to voters pertains to the characteristics of the candidates and their qualifications for office.

For our purposes the most important question about coverage of candidate traits is whether it has waxed or waned with the passage of time. Have the electronic media—especially television—so personalized campaign coverage and proven so indifferent to parties and issues that the candidates have become *the* campaign story?

Our answer to these questions comes in two parts. First, there has been no strong trend over time in the direction of more extensive coverage of candidate traits, and the mild perturbations of the time lines in Figure 1 do not trace a pattern consistent with either the "videostyle" or the "the more things change . . ." interpretations.

Second, however, it is also possible to discern a slight tapering off of candidate trait coverage during the television era, at least in coverage of the 1988 campaign. Indeed, not a single paragraph concerning candidate traits was coded for the composite two weeks of *New York Times* coverage of the 1988 campaign, and the *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post* did not far surpass the *Times* in this respect. Even the two papers that carried the most news about the 1988 candidates' personal traits, the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, devoted only a tenth of their coverage to this topic. Clearly, then,

the “up close and personal” *People* magazine-style reporting that is sometimes considered a defining feature of journalism in the television age is not one of the distinctive characteristics of television-era campaign coverage. We do not want to leave the impression that a major lessening of candidate trait coverage has occurred, since, as we have already seen, candidate traits were never a staple of campaign coverage in the first place. But Figure 1 does make it obvious, at the very least, that the television era has ushered in no increase in coverage of candidate traits.¹⁶

POLICY ISSUES

This brings us to coverage of policy issues, the trend lines for which are shown in Figure 2. Over the long run, reporting about policy issues has accounted for roughly a quarter of total campaign coverage. Many critics would consider this too little, contending that for elections to serve as effective instruments of popular control over public policy, the media must supply voters with fairly detailed information about the issues. Others might respond that in light of the centrist, status quo orientation of the American parties, the dearth of issue coverage reflects, above all else, the narrowly circumscribed bounds of political discourse in this country.¹⁷ Without some measure of the *quality* of policy coverage and some reasonable benchmark for how much policy coverage would be appropriate, it is difficult to reach any evaluative conclusions about policy coverage during campaign periods. In any case, for our purposes the issue is less evaluative than descriptive: has coverage of policy issues increased or decreased as the nation has passed from one media era to the next?

If we first concentrate exclusively on the right-hand side of Figure 2, we observe that since 1948, the acme and the “last hurrah” of the radio era, policy issues have declined as a theme of campaign coverage. While the drop-off has not been extremely steep, there has unquestionably been a lessened emphasis on issues during the television era. This evidence seems on its very face to uphold the “videostyle” interpretation and to contradict the “the more things change . . .” interpretation.¹⁸

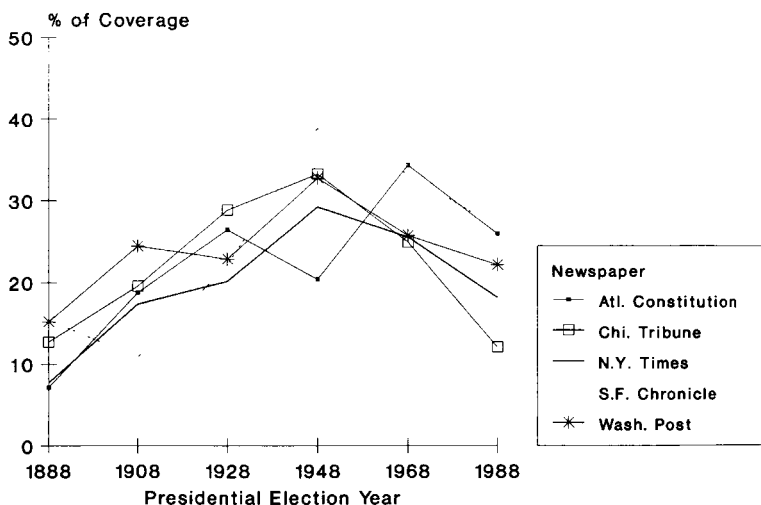


Figure 2: Issue Coverage, 1888-1988

If, on the other hand, we broaden our focus to encompass the entire century rather than just the three most recent elections, we are led to quite a different conclusion. No matter what has transpired since 1948, in 1988 every one of the newspapers devoted at least as much attention to policy issues as it had in 1888, and four of the five papers gave considerably more space to issues in 1988 than they had a century earlier. Even a casual scan of Figure 2 will reveal a general upwards slope in the trend line, albeit with the tailing off at the end of the period that we noted earlier. The very lowest readings in Figure 2 are, with only an occasional exception, those recorded during the newspaper era (especially in 1888). From 1888 through 1948, coverage of policy issues increased steadily, doubling or even tripling in volume. Even with its decline since 1948, the volume of issue coverage has not even begun to approach its newspaper era level. The good old days, when the media are assumed to have paid keen attention to real substance rather than presenting only a miscellany of political trivia, turn out, on closer examination, to have been even less issue-oriented than the television era. This, of course, is not at all the result anticipated by the "videostyle" interpretation.

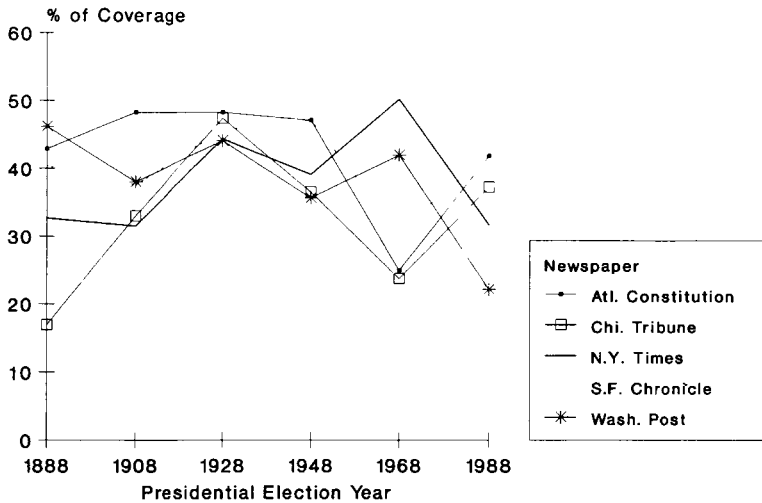


Figure 3: Campaign Activity Coverage, 1888-1988

CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY

It was not until the 1930s that Republican presidential candidates deigned to engage in anything much more strenuous than front-porch campaigning, and the Democrats were not all that far ahead of them (Wayne 1981, 156). On a day-to-day basis, there was literally not much happening in the campaigns of an earlier era, in stark contrast to the frenzy of modern campaigns, where the candidates' days pass in a blur of hurried airport press conferences, flesh pressing with local party faithful, working the long-distance lines to court potential donors, issuing press releases about the opposition's myriad shortcomings, kissing squalling babies, donning Indian headdresses, and even riding in tanks. Given these changing circumstances, it would seem only natural for campaign coverage during the modern era to have converged on the frenetic daily activity of the candidates along the campaign trail.

According to Figure 3, the hoopla of daily campaign activities does attract considerable attention—certainly greater attention than do the candidates' personal traits, and, it would seem, also greater attention

than is devoted to policy issues. If such activities really amount to little more than exercises in symbolic trivia, the oft-voiced charge that the media unduly ignore crucial policy issues while focusing on campaign hoopla appears to be firmly anchored in reality.

Once again, though, it is vital to consider this charge within a longer historical framework. According to Figure 3, coverage of daily campaign activities during the television era has been no more extensive than it was during either the newspaper or the radio eras. In fact, during the television era such coverage has fallen to record or near-record lows. Even though there may have been relatively few daily campaign activities to write about in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is clear that such activities were then the staple of campaign reporting. They still are, though their dominance of campaign coverage has become less decisive than it once was.

The pattern depicted in Figure 3 provides no reason for us to quibble with those who criticize the media for framing campaigns as a string of colorful daily vignettes. On the other hand, Figure 3 strongly suggests that attempts to pin the blame on television for such hoopla-oriented coverage are inappropriate, since newspapers gave heavy play to campaign hoopla long before either radio or television had even been invented—heavier play, indeed, than has prevailed during the television era.

THE HORSE RACE

Of all the criticisms leveled at campaign coverage during the television era, none has proven more persistent than the charge that the media are “horse racist,”¹⁹ and for good reason. By the mid-1980s, only a decade after CBS News and the *New York Times* conducted their first joint national opinion survey, they were averaging, collectively or individually, more than 40 polls per year (Gollin 1987, S89; see also Crespi 1980), and many other media combines were following suit. The consequence has been a surfeit of survey-based stories during the television era. In the 1980 pre-convention period alone, the three networks broadcast a total of 290 poll reports (Broh 1983, 39; see also Stovall and Solomon 1984). Four years later, well over half of the election stories that appeared in the *New York Times* during the final

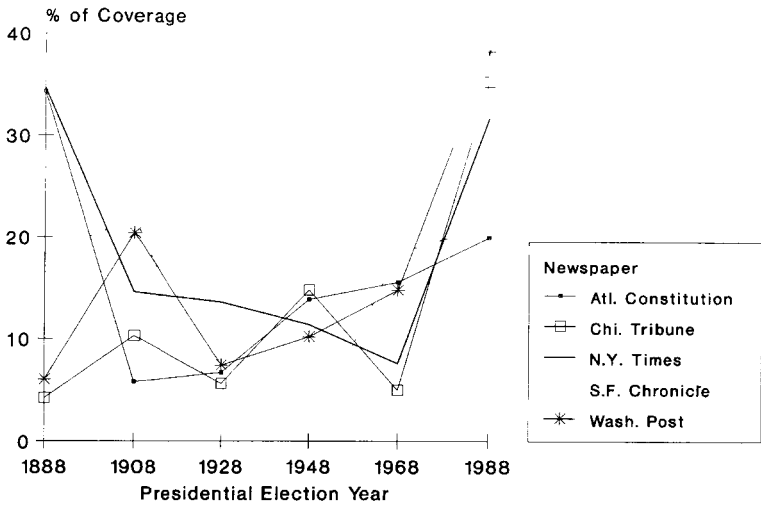


Figure 4: Horse Race Coverage, 1888-1988

month of the campaign made at least some mention of poll results (Patterson and Davis 1985, 124; see also Keenan 1986). And in the last month of the 1988 campaign, the front page of the *Washington Post* featured a poll-related story two days out of every three (Ratzan 1989, 457).

Our analysis of presidential election coverage over the last century leaves no doubt about the meteoric rise of the horse race theme during the television era (see Figure 4). In 1988, between one-third and two-fifths of all the paragraphs coded for three of the five newspapers (the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*) concerned the horse race aspect of the campaign, marking a major shift toward horse race coverage since the radio era.

However, horse race coverage of presidential elections is by no means a television era innovation. Newspaper straw polls can be traced all the way back to the 1820s (see Smith 1990), and election projections of one sort or another were fairly widespread long before the major polling breakthrough of 1936, when Gallup, Roper, and Crossley all correctly forecast Roosevelt's landslide victory (Crespi

1980, 462; Converse 1987, 87). Indeed, the old-style forecasts sometimes conveyed far more faithfully than their latter-day counterparts the atmosphere of the racetrack; consider, for example, the following story, headlined "Big Bets in Chicago," which appeared in the October 19, 1908, edition of the *Washington Post*, reporting that the odds on the national and state election had been announced by "sporting men" as 1 to 5 on Taft, 7 to 2 on Bryan, 1 to 2 on Deneen, 8 to 5 on Stevenson, and 10,000 to 1 on others. Odds on combination bets were reported as 4 to 5 on Taft and Deneen, 2 to 1 on Taft and Stevenson, 6 to 1 on Bryan and Deneen, and 9 to 1 on Bryan and Stevenson. The story reported heavy play on Bryan and Stevenson at these odds.²⁰

This item and the broader point it illustrates are not mere antiquarian curiosities, for if we are to understand the modern tendency to cover elections as though they were sporting events, we must recognize that the same tendency was common during the newspaper era. One of every three paragraphs in front-page stories about the 1888 campaign in the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *New York Times* discussed the current standings or the likely outcome of the election, and across all five papers approximately one paragraph in five treated the campaign as a horse race. Seen in a longer time frame, then, the steep rise of horse race coverage during the television era has, for three of the five papers, simply returned them to a level approaching the intense horse race focus they displayed a century earlier. This is not to gainsay the change that has occurred during the television era but to identify that change as a reversion to, and intensification of, a time-honored way of covering presidential campaigns rather than as a novel mode of coverage.²¹

CONCLUSION

Figure 5 summarizes our findings by depicting the long-term trend in each type of campaign coverage, averaged across the five newspapers, highlighting the following trends:

- In none of the six elections did candidate traits receive extensive coverage. Further, while the introduction of the progressively more "person-

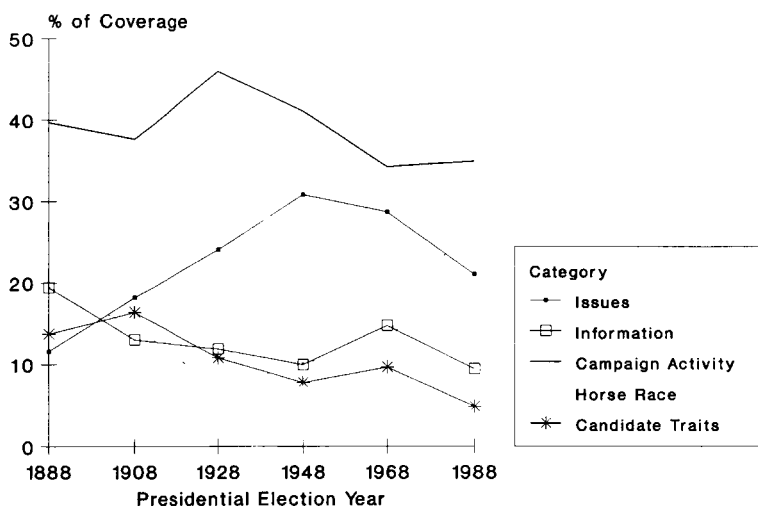


Figure 5: Overall Coverage Pattern, 1888-1988

alistic" media of radio and then television might have been expected to enhance the personal side of campaign coverage, our analysis indicates that during the last century there has been, if anything, a slight diminution in coverage of candidate traits.

- During the last century, policy issues stand second only to daily campaign activity as a focus of newspaper coverage. In a nation whose press is routinely lambasted for superficial political reporting, this finding is itself noteworthy. To be sure, coverage of policy issues has declined during the television era, but this decline followed six decades of steadily expanding issue coverage. As a consequence, in spite of their recent slippage, policy issues currently receive greater coverage than they did during the newspaper era.
- Daily activity on the campaign trail dominated presidential campaign coverage throughout the last century. The focus on campaign hoopla is, as modern critics lament, a hallmark of campaign coverage during the television era, but it was also the predominant focus of coverage during the newspaper and radio eras. Rather than intensifying during the television era, the focus on daily campaign activity has dimmed slightly over the years.
- Horse race coverage has surged dramatically during the latter stage of the television era, elevating it for the first time over the fairly prominent role it played during the newspaper era.

Where does this leave the “videostyle” interpretation, which castigates television for undermining the role of policy issues in presidential elections and for transforming campaigns into empty symbolic exercises? The answer to this question depends, to a considerable degree, on the time frame one adopts.

An adherent of the “videostyle” interpretation might interpret our findings as follows. First, the foremost coverage trend of the television era has been a dramatic upsurge in horse race coverage compared to the levels observed during the radio era. Second, during the television era coverage of policy issues has turned perceptibly downwards from the upward trajectory it had established over the preceding six decades. Taken together, the rise of horse race coverage and the downturn in policy issue coverage seem altogether consistent with the “videostyle” interpretation.

However, if we take the longer view that our data afford, we see, first, that while coverage of policy issues has slipped somewhat during the television era, issue coverage remains a good deal more prominent than it was during the good old days to which the “videostyle” interpretation looks back so fondly. If the ideal of substantive campaign coverage is a sustained focus on policy issues, then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that television era coverage more closely approximates the ideal than did newspaper era coverage. Moreover, during the television era we have not observed any trend in the direction of more personalistic, candidate-centered coverage of campaigns—a trend that the “videostyle” interpretation strongly anticipates. And even though coverage of campaign hoopla has, as charged, been the predominant journalistic theme of the television era, this has always been the predominant journalistic theme, no matter what the era.

In other words, the coverage patterns outlined above provide less support for the “videostyle” interpretation than may initially appear to be the case. Still to be reckoned with, however, is the recent ascendancy of horse race coverage, a trend that seems to fit hand in glove with the “videostyle” interpretation. But we believe that even this trend can be explained without invoking television’s uniqueness as a medium or turning the account into an antitelevision diatribe.

As we have repeatedly noted, treating elections as horse races is a long-standing journalistic convention, not an invention of the televi-

sion era. What is noteworthy about the horse race coverage of the late nineteenth century is not that it existed at all—for, given what even then were well-established journalistic norms, that was only to be expected—but that it was based on so little hard data. As a more objective style of political reporting took hold in the twentieth century (see, for example, Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988; Roshco 1975; Schudson 1978), campaign coverage became less overtly partisan and speculative. Treatment of presidential campaigns as horse races languished as newspaper reports concentrated on what the candidates were actually saying and doing.

The development of opinion polling during the 1930s brought an element of objectivity to horse race coverage, but the occasional polls of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s warranted only passing attention. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s, when it became feasible to conduct national surveys by telephone and to report the results overnight, that polls emerged as virtually an everyday tool of political reporting in general and of campaign coverage in particular (Paletz et al. 1980). To be sure, the television networks, along with the news weeklies and major newspapers, contributed to the development of these surveys. But we would argue that it is the new technology of campaign polling rather than the advent of television per se that accounts for the re-emergence of the horse race theme in campaign coverage. The ready availability of a continuing stream of new information about whom the voters would choose “if the election were being held today” fits perfectly with the well-seasoned journalistic definition of campaigns as competitive games and with the immense appetite of modern journalism for fresh facts (see Crespi 1980).

In sum, we regard the upsurge of horse race coverage during the television era as a natural outgrowth of three intersecting forces: the age-old journalistic conception of campaigns as horse races, the twentieth-century diffusion of the norms of objective reporting, and the ready availability of survey data occasioned by advances in opinion polling during the last two decades. If this interpretation is accurate, then it would seem that the arrival of television has been more coincidental than instrumental in the recent proliferation of horse race campaign coverage.

So it is plausible to dismiss even the evidence most consistent with the "videostyle" interpretation on the grounds that it reflects the operation of forces well beyond the control of television, the prime mover in the "videostyle" interpretation. This brings us back to the "the more things change . . ." interpretation. Figure 5 makes it clear that during a century notable for its profound technological and cultural transformations, newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns changed remarkably little in many respects. Newspapers in 1988 were still devoting nearly the same amount of attention to daily campaign activities as they had in 1888, and the passage of a hundred years certainly brought about no night-and-day changes in the volume of coverage of policy issues, candidate traits, and even the horse race aspect of presidential campaign. This is not to say that the contours of campaign coverage have remained entirely fixed, for they have not. Policy issue coverage and horse race coverage in particular have both waxed and waned perceptibly over the years, beginning very close to one another, tracing nearly opposite trajectories, and ending, after a century's time, very close to one another again. Thus trends that have struck many contemporary observers as epochal appear, in the hindsight that the present analysis affords, to be of much more modest scope—modern variations on themes established long ago. Much has changed, but the basic campaign coverage patterns of a century ago remain largely intact today. This is not, of course, to say that the *impact* of televised campaign coverage is identical to the impacts of the predominant media of earlier eras, for such a conclusion would take us far beyond the realm of the content analysis reported here. It is, however, to say that if the impact of television on presidential campaigns and electoral decision making differs from the earlier impacts of newspapers and radio, then the sources of that differential impact presumably have little to do with the *substance* of campaign coverage.

NOTES

1. Analyses of the effects of television viewing during presidential campaigns seem to bear out these charges. It has been established that regular newspaper readers are more likely to

perceive issue differences between presidential candidates than are television-dependent voters (Wagner 1983) and that television viewers weigh the candidates' personal qualities more heavily and discount the candidates' party affiliation more frequently (Keeter 1987). Similarly, while exposure to campaign messages in the newspaper apparently enhances the voter's ability to offer a reasoned explanation of why he or she supports a particular candidate, exposure to campaign messages on television seems to have the opposite effect (Clarke and Fredin 1978; see also Patterson and McClure 1976, 49ff.).

2. Roshco (1975, 31) provides a telling historical case in point of this tendency to blame modern communication technology for the nation's assorted ills: "As the Civil War drew closer, the press reported new crises in rapid succession. The unfamiliar immediacy with which news was now being disseminated disturbed some editors as well as politicians. A Philadelphia paper reflected this apprehension when it denounced the telegraph as 'a curse to the country' and warned its readers 'to beware of this new power in our midst. . . . Its whole stock in trade consists in the perpetual excitement of the community.' "

3. Patterson (1980, 28; see also Patterson and Davis 1985, 122) cites what he interprets as evidence pointing in the opposite direction: "In the 1940s, Paul Lazarsfeld and Bernard Berelson found that about 35 percent of election news dealt with the fight to gain the presidency; a considerably larger amount, 50 percent, was concerned with subjects of policy and leadership. In 1976 those proportions were reversed." Others read the relevant pages of *Voting* and the *People's Choice* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944) rather differently. Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 127-28), after pointing to "the superficial coverage of presidential campaigns" during the modern era, indicate that the *People's Choice* "echoes contemporary results with near perfect fidelity." Thus the current coverage pattern is alternatively interpreted as a reversal or a continuation of the pattern of the 1940s. We are unable to resolve this contradiction, since, like Robinson and Sheehan (1983, 157), we find nothing in the pages of the *People's Choice* or *Voting* that warrants either interpretation.

4. Kraus (1988, 77-88) builds a parallel argument with regard to presidential debates. The Lincoln-Douglas debates are conventionally seen as the ideal of what debates should be, and recent presidential debates as a falling away from the nineteenth century ideal. Kraus argues, however, that the Lincoln-Douglas debates are open to the very same criticisms that have been leveled at the presidential debates of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; hence "the more things change . . ."

5. Long-term historical content analyses of political coverage in newspapers are rare; examples include Batlin (1954), Kernell (1986), and Kernell and Jacobson (1987); as noted above, Robinson and Sheehan (1983) coded coverage patterns in 1940, 1960, and 1980, though by our standards, which extend back to the pre-radio era, this would not fully qualify as long-term.

6. The dates were September 14, 17, 18, 22, 26, 27, and 30, and October 10, 11, 19, 20, 28, 29, and 30.

A brief comment concerning our front-page focus is in order. Confining attention to front-page stories is standard practice in content analytic studies, since it is prohibitively time-consuming to code every story and since front-page stories are, by definition, the most important. However, Emmett Buell (personal communication 1990) has uncovered substantial differences between front-page and other newspaper stories during the 1988 preprimary season; page-one stories, Buell found, were much more likely to mention a large number of candidates, while stories in other parts of a paper were more likely to home in on only one or two candidates. While this exact comparison does not bear on our analysis, similar differences might emerge in coverage of, say, horse race versus policy coverage. Since we coded only front-page stories, we

cannot address this possibility. In what follows, then, it must be borne in mind that when we refer to coverage patterns, we really mean *front-page* coverage patterns.

7. For example, a paragraph in the October 19, 1908, *Washington Post*, reporting that William Howard Taft appeared to be showing the strain to which he had been subjected during the past two weeks. His voice was husky, though his capacity for hard work seemed undiminished.

8. For example, a report in the September 26, 1968, *New York Times*, to the effect that Vice President Humphrey had proposed that Social Security pensions be increased by 50% over the next 4 years.

9. For example, a report in the October 11, 1908, *Chicago Tribune* indicated that during a campaign rally, few crowd-control devices had been used, fireworks had been shot off, fires had been ignited, and bands had played.

10. For example, a report in the September 18, 1988, *Washington Post*, to the effect that George Bush may be in firmer command of the presidential race than national polls had suggested, thanks his growing support in southern and western states.

11. For example, a report in the October 29, 1988, *San Francisco Chronicle*, that a congressional committee had reported that government officials overseeing a plant had known for decades that the plant was releasing thousands of tons of radioactive uranium waste into the environment, but had done little to remedy the situation.

12. On the 1,148 overlapping paragraphs, the two coders assigned the same score 952 times and differed 196 times, for 83% agreement. Cohen's kappa for the intercoder agreement matrix is .77 ($SE = .02$, $z = 43.2$, $p < .001$), indicating agreement significantly beyond chance (Cohen 1960). Both the overall agreement percentage and the kappa statistic exceed the traditional thresholds of .80 and .60, respectively (Hartmann 1977), signifying adequate inter-coder reliability.

13. Although no formal statistical models are presented, we should note that we have conducted a wide array of statistical tests. For example, taking the individual paragraph as our unit of analysis, we conducted multiple discriminant analyses of the five-category coverage variable, with dummy variables for year and newspaper serving as the predictors. We also conducted a series of probit analyses in which the dependent variables were dummy variables for each coverage category. These analyses and others underlie the interpretations presented below, but we have not presented the analyses themselves, because we found that the simple time lines presented below were a much more effective means of conveying our findings than were the results of the formal statistical tests.

14. Since informational coverage served as something of a residual category in the content analysis and has no immediate bearing on the two interpretations under consideration, we shall not present separate results for this category.

15. By far the most extreme case is that of the *Chicago Tribune* in 1888. Our scan of the five newspapers strongly suggests that the norm of "objective" reporting that began to diffuse during the late nineteenth century was a late arrival at the *Tribune*, which, like many other news papers of the day, was "often uninhibited in support of [its] favored candidates" (Rubin 1981, 56) and carried news reports "heavily interlarded with opinion" (Roshco 1975, 30). In 1888 the *Tribune* ran frequent front-page editorials praising Benjamin Harrison and lambasting Grover Cleveland, and was the only one of the five newspapers analyzed here to editorialize openly on the front page. Hence we believe that the unusually personalistic focus of the *Tribune's* coverage in 1888 reflects, more than anything else, that paper's status as a latecomer to the norm of objective political reporting.

16. This conclusion runs against the grain of Wattenberg's (1984) argument that the media have contributed to the decline of political parties by lavishing attention on the presidential candidates while paying little heed to the parties. The seeming contradiction between Wattenberg's argument and ours reflects different definitions of candidate coverage. If everything the candidates say or do and everything that is said about or done to them is classified as candidate coverage, then Wattenberg is certainly correct to conclude that the media are highly attuned to the candidates; after all, virtually everything that occurs during a campaign relates somehow to the candidates. If, however, the category of candidate coverage is reserved for information concerning the candidates' personal traits (the approach followed here), then it is by no means accurate to characterize the media as highly candidate oriented.

17. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 128) put it, "That presidential campaigns are seldom portrayed as clashes over policy may have a good bit to do with the campaign events themselves: candidates' discussion of their policy positions usually plays a modest role in the typical presidential campaign. No news medium can be expected to cover a campaign that never was."

18. Our policy issues category made no distinction between domestic and international issues. However, it is conceivable that the unusually high density of issue coverage in 1948 and 1968 reflects the importance of international issues in those years, whereas 1888, 1908, and 1988 were more politics-as-usual years.

19. This derivative of the original horse race metaphor was apparently coined by Robinson and Sheehan (1983).

20. A more typical, albeit less colorful, example of horse race coverage in the days before modern opinion polls appeared in the *Washington Post* on September 26, 1928, in a report of considerable pro-Smith talk in Wisconsin, especially in Milwaukee. Well informed observers, according to the report, gave Smith a 50-50 chance of carrying the state, with the outcome to be determined by the Lutheran vote.

21. One might suppose that the volume of horse race coverage of a particular campaign would reflect the closeness of the campaign. After all, there is no real point in horse race coverage of a campaign whose outcome is a foregone conclusion. Of the six races in question, only two (1928 and 1988) were runaways; these were, respectively, the campaigns with the least and the most horse race coverage. More generally, we can detect no relationship between closeness and the volume of horse race coverage.

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