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Elite Cues and Media Bias in Presidential Campaigns

Explaining Public Perceptions of a Liberal Press

Public perception of a biased news media, particularly media biased in a liberal direction, has increased over the past 3 presidential elections. To examine what might be influencing this public opinion, the authors look at shifts in public perception of media bias, press coverage of the topic of media bias, and the balance in valence coverage of presidential candidates—all during the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections. Their results suggest that the rise in public perception that news media are liberally biased is not the result of bias in valence news coverage of the candidates, but, rather, due to increasing news self-coverage that focuses on the general topic of bias in news content. Furthermore, the increased claims of media bias come primarily from conservative elites who have proclaimed a liberal bias that is viewed as including the entire media industry.

Down by the Mississippi River, Grace Jesberger, a delegate from St. Mary's, PA, determinedly agreed. "From the little I have watched and the comments I have heard on TV, the press is being unfair, very biased," she said, as she shopped in her red and white George Bush T-shirt. "You can write this down. The press are a bunch of left wing, liberal Communists. No, take out Communists. Put down French Socialists."

— *New York Times*, August 19, 1988 (Dowd, 1988)

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In the U.S. presidential campaign of 1996, Republican Party candidate Bob Dole blamed news media coverage as the reason for his inability to overcome Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton's lead. Dole contended, for example, that the *New York Times* only included stories unfavorable to him and not to Clinton (Kurtz, 1996). Dole and other elite critics of the media cited as evidence a Freedom Forum and Roper Center Poll, which found that 89% of Washington, D.C. journalists had voted for Clinton in 1992 (How the public uses the media, 1996). These claims of a liberal bias in news coverage, although hardly new in U.S. politics, have become quite common in recent presidential campaigns. For example, in 1988, many conservative leaders claimed Dan Quayle was unfairly treated by journalists after his unexpected selection as George Bush's running mate, and, 4 years later, Republican Party criticism of news content became the source for the campaign slogan "Annoy the Media: Re-elect George Bush."

The perspective that the news media have a liberal political bias is not limited to certain elites, however. Poll data reveal that an increasing number of citizens believe there is an ideological bias in news content.¹ Furthermore, this belief seems to have risen in recent years. In January 1988, for example, 12% of randomly sampled respondents claimed news media exhibit a liberal bias in presidential election coverage. By November 1996, over two fifths (43%) of randomly sampled respondents claimed that the news media have a liberal bias in election coverage, a substantial increase. The same trend can be seen within the last three presidential seasons: The percentage of the public responding that press treatment of the Republican candidate was unfair (or that campaign coverage was biased in favor of Democrats) increased 13% during the 1988 campaign, 22% in 1992, and 9% in 1996. Notably, the corresponding responses concerning bias against Democratic candidates either declined or remained flat during each of these campaigns.

The central goal of this study is to explore the factors contributing to this rising public perception that news media content contains a liberal bias. With this trend in mind, we examine the relations among news media treatment of the principal candidates in the past three presidential elections (1988, 1992, and 1996); claims of media bias in news stories during these elections; and public opinion about the presence of bias in news coverage. In so doing, we draw, in part, on the ideodynamic model (Fan, 1988, 1996), which uses media coverage as a basis to make predictions of public attitudes. For instance, the ideodynamic model has predicted public attitudes in several presidential elections and issue domains (Domke et al., 1997; Fan & Tims, 1989; Shah, Watts, Domke, Fan, & Fibison, in press), but in-depth analysis of media content has not been used previously to explain changes in public

perceptions of the media themselves. For our analyses, we draw on two types of data: content analysis of major news media and public opinion polls on press bias.

Explaining Perceptions of Media Bias

One potential starting point for an explanation of the rising public perception of a liberal media bias is the perspective that citizens develop "naive theories" about news content based on media consumption (Kosicki & McLeod, 1990). Existing evidence suggests that these "theories" or "media schema"—which include evaluations of media credibility, comprehensiveness, negativity, and power—are often incomplete and misinformed (Becker, Whitney, & Collins, 1980; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994). Nonetheless, a number of studies have found that these media schema substantially influence learning from the news and orientations toward media (Fredin & Kosicki, 1989; Fredin, Kosicki & Becker, 1996; Kosicki, Becker, & Fredin, 1994; McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991). This perspective suggests that people who use the mass media may develop images of the press as liberally biased based on media schema that are strongly held by the public yet often can be inaccurate, particularly with regard to political news and campaign coverage.

The argument that media biases exist in news coverage has been made by some scholars (e.g., Dickson, 1994; Hallin, 1989; Hofstetter, 1976; Kenney & Simpson, 1993; Kuklinski & Sigelman, 1992; Lichter, Amundson, & Noyes, 1988; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Rothman & Lichter, 1987; Stovall, 1988), including Lowry and Shidler (1995), who found that sound bites about candidates were substantially more negative toward Republicans George Bush and Dan Quayle in 1992 than toward other candidates. Even some members of the media, including prominent journalists, such as Jonathan Alter (1993) of *Newsweek* and former ABC-TV correspondent Brit Hume (1993), proclaimed a "liberal bias" in the 1992 presidential campaign.

However, this conception of a liberal news media has been challenged (Bagdikian, 1997; Cook, 1998; Dennis, 1997; Entman, 1996; Gans, 1985; Reeves, 1997), and other scholars and professionals have not found biases in news content analyses across several contexts (Broder, 1987; Domke et al., 1997; Epstein, 1973; Graber, 1996; Just et al., 1996; Lemert, 1989; Patterson, 1993). Although this debate likely will continue for some time, our primary interest is in explaining the rising public perception of a liberal media. In considering these perceptions, the limits of human cognition may hinder the ability of most people to attend to a wide range of media content and maintain a running tally of press treatment of the candidates across a several months-long campaign. Nonetheless, biases in news treatment of the candidates

seem to be the most straightforward explanation for the rising public perception of a liberal press.

A second potential explanation is that people perceive news media content as biased against their ideological vantage points. Indeed, several scholars and professionals have examined media credibility and public perceptions of it, with particular emphasis on the role that personal ideology plays in citizens' perceptions (Becker & Kosicki, 1995; Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1997; Gaziano, 1988; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Gunther, 1988, 1992; Lipset & Schneider, 1987; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). For example, in research on news coverage and public opinion in the 1992 presidential campaign, Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt (1998) found that newspapers "often present multiple, conflicting messages regarding the candidates" (p. 117), with the result being more positive coverage for Bill Clinton and fairly negative coverage for George Bush in that election. Nonetheless, their survey data indicate that it is primarily citizens' partisan views that color perceptions of media fairness rather than assessments of actual media bias, which is consistent with previous work suggesting that people with strong political beliefs perceive the media as "hostile" to their views (Beck, 1991; Vallone et al., 1985). This perspective, however, cannot adequately explain the substantial increase in recent years in the proportion of the American public that views the media as liberally biased. Only a substantial shift in the ideological leanings of aggregate opinion—from liberal or independent to conservative—would seem sufficient to explain the changes over time in the public's views of liberal media bias, and no such shift has taken place.

Finally, perhaps citizens perceive bias in journalism because political elites and leading journalists are giving greater attention to the topic; furthermore, in "self-reporting" these criticisms of media coverage, it seems plausible that the news media have helped to persuade, or convince, the public of widespread biases in news coverage by providing cues to that effect. Thus, press reports of claims of media bias may contribute to the belief that the news media are tilted in a particular ideological direction even though these claims may be unfounded. This theoretical perspective, which we elaborate subsequently, is the one we contend best explains the rising public perception of a liberal news media.

Media Self-Coverage and Elite Cue-Taking

Political communication scholars recently have begun to focus on the degree to which news media are "turning the spotlight inward" in campaign coverage (Bennett, 1992; Buchanan, 1991; Gitlin, 1991; Jamieson, 1992; Johnson,

Boudreau, & Glowacki, 1996; Lichter et al, 1988), using terms such as “reflexive reporting,” “process coverage,” and “meta-coverage” to define this practice. Conceptually, these terms refer to what is considered a relatively new kind of campaign discourse: news coverage that explores the role, influence, and use by candidates of the news media (Gitlin, 1991; Kerbel, 1995).

An increase in the amount of campaign coverage on the topic of media bias would seem to be a natural result of the increasing focus by journalists, candidates, and political pundits on the role of news media in political campaigns. For example, consider the rising number of news programs and media outlets primarily devoted to covering the media, including CNN's *Reliable Sources*, National Public Radio's *On the Media*, CNBC's *Equal Time*, and news magazine *Brill's Content*. Other factors likely contributing to greater self-coverage by news media include the growth of both conservative talk radio hosts and media watchdog organizations, particularly those with newsletters and web sites. Although Rush Limbaugh is the most notable conservative radio host, he is not alone; indeed, industry surveys show a large majority of talk radio commentators lean to the political right (Falk, 1998). Media watchdog groups, with a wide variety of political perspectives, include the Center for the Study of Media and Public Affairs, the Media Research Center (MRC), Accuracy in Media, and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. As just one example of these groups' increasing presence in the political arena, the conservative MRC spent several million dollars during the 1996 presidential campaign as part of its “Media Reality Check '96” project, which received wide press coverage. Furthermore, newsletters such as *AIM Report*, *Media Watch*, and *Notable Quotables* do not directly reach a mass audience, but they consistently remind journalists and elites about the importance of media content.

That public opinion on many topics is influenced substantially by heuristics, particularly “cues” by elites—that is, what societal leaders say and do, and the manner in which news media report these actions—is the conclusion of a growing body of research (Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber, & Fan, 1998; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992). This line of theorizing is based on an acceptance of the reality that most Americans only marginally understand and pay attention to political happenings (Converse, 1964). Instead, citizens make political judgments using shortcuts, in particular relying on trusted sources of information (Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994; Mondak, 1993). According to this perspective, many people do not understand issues and concerns through direct experience, nor do they hold strong attitudes about the topic. Rather, they form attitudes “on the fly,” often in response to elite cues in the news media. Accordingly, which elites, information, and ideas are prominent in media content is obviously important.

For many citizens, information about presidential candidates is gained primarily through news coverage. As Hetherington (1996) argued, "The mass media have become the nearly uncontested provider of political information" (p. 374) for the public during presidential elections (see also Dalton et al., 1998). Candidates (and their handlers) realize that they must actively engage the press as a player in the game of politics. One important tool for presidential candidates is their ability to critique the news media for supposed biases in coverage. In turn, the press, based on journalistic norms of objectivity and fairness, as well as their tendency to cover political "strategy" over "policy," report these claims as news to the public (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Graber, 1996; Patterson, 1993; Watts, 1997).

Research Hypotheses

As discussed, public opinion surveys from the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections indicate that a growing percentage of the public perceives news media to be biased in a liberal direction. To explore the factors contributing to this rising perception, as the starting point for our analysis, we examine whether (a) valence—positive or negative—news coverage of the candidates is or has become particularly one-sided in favor of Democratic candidates, and (b) whether there has been an increase in the amount of news coverage reporting claims of liberal media bias during the last three presidential elections. The data from these content analyses will form the basis for testing our hypotheses.

For our first prediction, we attempt to model changes in public opinion concerning media bias. Valence coverage of the presidential candidates is something that citizens can experience directly and identify as they read and watch news coverage of the campaign. Indeed, it seems likely that citizens regularly form impressions of whether news content is positive or negative (or neither) toward a particular candidate, with these impressions at least partly tied to one's own political leanings (Beck, 1991; Dalton et al., 1998; Vallone et al., 1985). However, it seems unlikely that most members of the public could—over time—maintain a continuous accounting of the ideological orientation of vast amounts of campaign coverage, given the limits of human information processing (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Graber, 1988).

It seems plausible, then, that the public, when forming impressions of the ideological fairness of campaign coverage, might be influenced by claims of media bias that are reported in news content. This influence might be particularly likely if the individuals claiming bias are seen as experts and insiders, such as the presidential candidates and other political officials, or leading members of the press. Although people who criticize the news media

may be perceived by some citizens as acting in a self-interested manner, other citizens who view these individuals as trusted sources for information would seem likely to pay close attention to the claims of media bias. It is our contention, therefore, that citizens draw on news coverage of the media as a cue when forming their own understanding of media bias. We now state our first hypothesis:

H1: The rise in public perception during the past three presidential campaigns that news media coverage of the Republican and Democratic candidates has a liberal bias will be due primarily to news coverage that reports claims of liberal bias and not to differences in valence coverage of the candidates.

Furthermore, it may be that at least one important set of elites providing "cues" to citizens suggesting media bias is conservative political actors, who, we suspect, are not only driving media coverage of bias, but insuring that the media bias is framed as a liberal bias. During a presidential election, these individuals predominantly would include the Republican Party candidates (both for president and vice president) and leading Republican officials. Although Democratic candidates and officials also may criticize the news media for alleged bias, the number of conservative media watchdog groups and talk radio commentators who discuss the topic would seem to make it more likely that conservative elites would be confident in speaking out against perceived media bias. In addition, as "the role of the media" becomes a regular topic and part of presidential campaign discourse, it seems likely that more and more claims of media bias would emanate from candidates and party officials, with fewer coming from other sources, such as journalists themselves. Indeed, mounting public disenchantment with the press in general would seem to make news media a safe target for elites of all stripes. We now state our second hypothesis in two parts:

H2a: Within each of the past three campaigns, presidential candidates and party officials will be more likely to claim a liberal than conservative news media bias.

H2b: Within each of the past three campaigns, presidential candidates and party officials will be more likely than journalists to be the source for claims of liberal media bias in news coverage.

Finally, the extent that elite claims might influence public perceptions may be tied to the perceived pervasiveness of news bias. In making assertions about unfair journalism, elites—as well as citizens—might view the bias as residing at the individual level (e.g., journalists such as Bob Woodward or

Sam Donaldson); the institutional level (e.g., outlets such as the *New York Times*); or at the industry level (virtually all mainstream news media). Of these three levels, it seems plausible that claims of an industry-wide bias would have more persuasive weight on the public, because the perceived effects are seen as more substantial than if a single journalist or news media outlet exhibited a bias. For conservative elites, in particular, the phrases such as “the liberal media” and “the media elite” have become embedded in contemporary political culture and may possess considerable rhetorical weight. Liberal elites, in contrast, do not seem to have a comparable phrase, thus suggesting that they would be less likely to characterize a media bias as being industry-wide. We now state our final hypothesis:

H3: Within each of the past three presidential campaigns, claims of liberal bias in news coverage will be more likely to suggest that media bias exists across the entire media industry than claims of conservative bias.

Data

For all three presidential elections, we used three sets of data, with the first two derived from news media content. The first constitutes positive and negative news coverage of the principal Democratic and Republican candidates, reported daily during the 1988, 1992, and 1996 campaigns. The second consists of news coverage of alleged media bias during the same three elections. The final set of data consists of aggregated public responses to poll questions on perceptions of media bias, asked during each of the three presidential campaigns. These data are discussed in depth in this section.

Media Coverage Data

For all three elections, news content was randomly drawn from the NEXIS electronic database. Stories were identified as relevant if they mentioned both major party candidates or any one of them three times.² For each election, once the stories were retrieved, they were filtered to remove text not directly relevant to the election. This filtering was accomplished through the use of the InfoTrend computer content analysis program, which reads a computer program in the FiltScor language (see Fan, 1988). The analyst uses the computer language to enter (a) idea categories, (b) words that tap or reveal those idea categories, and (c) rules that allow pairs of ideas in the text to be combined to give more complex meaning. Computer rules were written to remove irrelevant paragraphs, such as those that focused solely on the

candidates' spouses or on someone with the same last name as one of the candidates.³ The remaining stories were then coded for two things: (a) valence—positive, negative, or both—coverage of the Democratic or Republican presidential candidates in each election; and (b) coverage of alleged bias in news coverage for or against the candidates, their parties, or their ideologies.

Valence coverage. Based on extensive rules established to address the syntactical structures of sentences, the valence coverage of the candidates was coded using virtually identical rules for all three elections. The rules were merely adjusted to account for shifts in candidates, idiosyncratic phrases, and events particular to an election. For each election, paragraphs that contained positive or negative statements about the candidates were coded as favorable or unfavorable for the candidates. Although rarely the case, each paragraph could be scored as positive or negative to both candidates within a given campaign, depending on the ideas expressed in the text. Of course, many paragraphs did not contain any valence content and were not coded as positive or negative for either candidate.⁴

Use of this approach to gain insight into potential biases in news coverage of candidates has both strengths and limitations. The most obvious limitation is that we cannot account for any biases manifested in terms of which issues do or do not receive news coverage. We acknowledge that such "news agenda biases" are not addressed in this study and merit examination in future research. Notably, though, liberal biases in issue coverage were not apparent in the 1996 presidential campaign. In analyzing 43 major media outlets, Domke et al. (1997) found that the economic plans and character of both Clinton and Dole received considerable attention, trailing only horse race news in total content; furthermore, character coverage was much more negative for Clinton than for Dole and became particularly prominent in news content "at roughly the same time as Dole and others decided to emphasize it" (Domke et al., p. 727).

For this study, several rationales guided our decision to analyze potential news biases by focusing on the valence of coverage of candidates. First, the norm of objectivity has long been the standard by which journalists measure (and defend) their professionalism, integrity, and accuracy (Mindich, 1998; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1972). At the core of the concept of objectivity are the criteria of fairness and balance—that is, equal, unfettered treatment of individuals and groups on differing sides of a topic. With such publicly declared standards, it seems likely that journalists covering the principal candidates for the nation's most important political office would attempt to demonstrate their professional objectivity by

producing comparable and balanced coverage regardless of the merits of the candidates and their ideas. Although any single news story (or days of stories) may well be more positive toward one candidate than another for countless reasons, a noticeable tilt in news coverage across multiple media outlets over a campaign lasting several months would seem to suggest a bias in news coverage.

Second, in recent presidential elections, it has become commonplace for individuals—from candidates to citizens to media watchdog groups—to claim that news organizations contain an unfair abundance of negative stories about one candidate or positive stories about an opponent. Indeed, with the massive campaign machinery in today's presidential contests and the careful attention paid to controlling news coverage, it seems likely that campaign strategists would closely monitor the evaluative tone in media content about the candidates. At the same time, several media watchdog groups, such as the nonpartisan Center for the Study of Media and Public Affairs, watch for ideological bias by analyzing the amount of positive and negative news coverage received by the presidential candidates (e.g., see Bozell, 1995; Cheney, 1996; Efron, 1971; Lichter, 1996; Lichter et al., 1988; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Rothman & Lichter, 1987). At a minimum, then, our valence measure is consistent with conceptions of media bias among some elite individuals invested in the political process.

Third, and particularly relevant to our interest in the link between news media and public opinion, the amount of favorable and unfavorable coverage of principal candidates has been found to exert substantial influence on citizens' preferences for president (e.g., Domke et al., 1997; Fan, 1996; Fan & Tims, 1989; Shah et al., in press). This body of scholarship, with a focus on over-time change in opinion, has examined the influence of news coverage on candidate preferences on a daily basis during the course of presidential campaigns. Previous research, then, highlights the importance of examining media coverage for potential biases in the positive and negative treatment of the candidates, because any bias would be politically meaningful.

Coverage of media bias. The InfoTrend content analysis computer program also was used to analyze stories about alleged media bias in the coverage of the elections.⁵ Each paragraph then was manually read by human coders, who discarded all nonbias stories, thereby further improving reliability. This mixed computer and manual method was used for each of the three elections.

As a first step, the manual coding identified claims of liberal bias, conservative bias, or both; claims of bias for or against either Democratic or Republican party goals; and claims of bias for or against either principal candidate.

For the analysis, these claims were collapsed into two categories: (a) claims of a bias favoring liberals, or (b) claims of a bias favoring conservatives. The coding also identified the source and ideology of the source of each claim of bias. Finally, the coding identified the characterization of the level of bias in each claim—that is, whether the bias was seen as that of a particular reporter, the media institution, or of the industry as a whole.⁶

Public Opinion Data

The public opinion data consist of survey time-series questions from each of the three election periods that ask whether media coverage is fair or unfair toward a particular candidate or biased toward or against a particular ideology. Each time series for each election (a) uses the same question wording within elections; and (b) is made up of between two or four data points, as these questions were not asked very frequently. Although the public opinion measures are admittedly not as complete as we would like, they still offer important insight into public perceptions of news bias during each election and changes over time across elections.⁷

Public perceptions of a liberal media bias have increased over the three elections, as shown by data in Table 1, which reports survey marginals for four types of questions. The first two question categories ask whether the news media have been fair to (or favored) a particular candidate. The third category asks whether the news media have been fair or unfair to the Democratic or Republican candidates. The fourth question asks whether the news media have been biased in favor of the liberal or conservative point of view. The actual questions and response options varied over time.

Table 1 reveals a number of patterns. First, public perception of a liberal media bias increased over the three elections. In each of the question categories, the average number of respondents who see the media having a liberal or pro-Democratic bias was higher in 1996 than 1992. It is a bit harder to judge between 1992 and 1988, given shifts in the wording of questions. For all three elections, bias is almost always seen as liberal bias, with the final question category most predominantly showing that pattern. Second, public perception of a liberal media bias increased within each election period, with the greatest shift occurring in 1992.⁸

Due to the lack of consistent question wording, the data are least clear for 1988. In some surveys during that election, the public claimed that the media had a liberal or Democratic bias; in others, citizens said the media were more unfair to Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis than to Republican candidate Bush. In looking over time within question categories, however, the data are crystal clear: Public perceptions of bias in media coverage have risen for

Table 1
Public Opinion of Media Bias During the 1996, 1992, and 1988 Presidential Elections

Response	1988				1992				1996			
	10/87	1/88	8/88	11/88	3/92	4/92	9/92	11/92	2/96	4/96	7/96	11/96
Questions of fairness I ^a												
Fair to Republican	—	—	—	21	78	74	71	61	—	—	68	65
Unfair to Republican	—	—	—	13	13	21	22	35	—	—	23	32
About right	—	—	—	51	X	X	X	X	—	—	X	X
Don't know	—	—	—	12	9	5	5	4	—	—	8	3
Questions of fairness II ^b												
Fair to Democrat	—	7	—	9	68	55	74	77	—	—	72	73
Unfair to Democrat	—	16	—	23	23	40	21	19	—	—	20	24
About right	—	55	—	55	X	X	X	X	—	—	X	X
Don't know	—	22	—	13	9	5	5	4	—	—	9	3
Questions of bias I ^c												
Favors Democrat	16	9	22	—	—	—	—	—	—	20	—	—
Favors Republican	11	10	7	—	—	—	—	—	—	14	—	—
Neither	62	58	58	—	—	—	—	—	—	53	—	—
Don't know	11	23	13	—	—	—	—	—	—	13	—	—
Questions of bias II ^d												
Liberal	—	12	—	—	27	—	—	—	29	—	—	43
Conservative	—	6	—	—	21	—	—	—	13	—	—	18
Even	—	52	—	—	33	—	—	—	48	—	—	33
Biased other	—	19	—	—	X	—	—	—	X	—	—	X
Don't know	—	10	—	—	19	—	—	—	10	—	—	5

Note. If cells are empty, the question was not asked at that time. "X" represents option not given for that question.

a. Questions of fairness in media coverage of Republican candidate during presidential election.

b. Questions of fairness in media coverage of Democratic candidate during presidential election.

c. Questions of Democratic or Republican bias in media or media coverage.

d. Question of liberal or conservative bias in media or media coverage.

all question categories from 1988 to 1996, in many cases in dramatic fashion. Furthermore, the perceived bias is almost always seen as a liberal bias.

Results

Our analysis focuses on exploring some of the factors that might be contributing to this rising public perception that news media coverage in presidential elections exhibits a liberal bias. As a starting point, we begin by analyzing in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections whether (a) there were identifiable biases in valence news coverage of the principal candidates, and (b) news coverage of alleged media bias has increased and how such coverage has been framed. We then test our three hypotheses, which examine the linkages between media content and public opinion and explore the nature of the media bias coverage.

Valence Candidate Coverage and Claims of Media Bias

Potential biases in valence news coverage in each election can be determined by computing the percent of total candidate coverage that favors each candidate. This can be calculated in two steps. First, the number of positive paragraphs about the Democratic candidate and the number of negative paragraphs about the Republican candidate are added, producing a total amount of coverage favoring the Democratic candidate. Next, the amount of coverage favoring the Democratic candidate is divided by all favorable and unfavorable coverage for both the Democratic and Republican candidates. The result is a measure of the percent of valence coverage that favors the Democratic candidate, as represented by the following equation: Bias in favor of the Democrat = $(\text{Pro-Democrat} + \text{Con-Republican}) / (\text{Pro-Democrat} + \text{Con-Republican} + \text{Pro-Republican} + \text{Con-Democrat})$.

The amount of favorable coverage for each candidate in the three elections is shown in Table 2. In 1988, the valence coverage was split nearly evenly between the two principal candidates. The valence coverage for the 1992 presidential election was not as closely balanced. Consistent with other research on the 1992 election, media coverage was found to be more favorable to Democrat Bill Clinton than to Republican George Bush. In 1996, however, the parity found 8 years earlier resumed.

These results indicate that, although coverage leaned slightly toward the Democratic candidate, the campaign coverage on the whole was evenly balanced in two of the three elections analyzed. Only 1992 had a potentially meaningful advantage in coverage for the Democratic candidate. Similar conclusions have been reached by other scholars studying campaign

Table 2

Paragraphs Favoring the Democratic and Republican Candidates for the 1988, 1992, and 1996 Presidential Elections

Paragraphs	1988	1992	1996
Favorable to Democratic candidate	50.3% (<i>n</i> = 29,378)	54.2% (<i>n</i> = 47,530)	50.6% (<i>n</i> = 64,123)
Favorable to Republican candidate	49.7% (<i>n</i> = 29,059)	45.8% (<i>n</i> = 40,238)	49.4% (<i>n</i> = 62,540)
Total	100% (<i>n</i> = 58,437)	100% (<i>n</i> = 87,768)	100% (<i>n</i> = 126,663)

coverage of the 1992 election (Dalton et al., 1998; Lowry & Schidler, 1995). The advantage in coverage for the Democrat in that election may be due to the fact that the incumbent Bush presided over an economic downturn and suffered from poor public approval ratings tied to his perceived indifference over domestic concerns. The data, then, suggest (a) that valence coverage was not overtly biased for the Democratic candidate in the 1988 and 1996 election seasons although leaning a bit to the left in 1992, and (b) there does not appear to be a trend of increasing bias in valence coverage for the Democratic candidate across the three elections.

To examine whether any candidates perhaps consistently received a "net daily advantage" in media coverage during each campaign, we constructed a variable based on the following computation: The number of paragraphs favorable to the losing candidate and unfavorable to the winning candidate were subtracted from the number of paragraphs favorable to the winning candidate and unfavorable to the losing candidate for each data point in the time series. For example, the net news advantage of Bush for the 1988 election was: Net Advantage for Bush = (Pro-Bush + Con-Dukakis) – (Pro-Dukakis + Con-Bush). The resulting net news advantages for each day of the elections are displayed in Figure 1 for 1988 (Bush over Dukakis), for 1992 (Clinton over Bush), and for 1996 (Clinton over Dole).

These graphs show several interesting patterns. First, the victorious candidates received an increasing advantage in the final days of the campaigns. This may be caused primarily by the heavy amount of horse race coverage that favors a front-runner near the end of an election (see Domke et al., 1997; Patterson, 1993). Second, candidates consistently received an advantage during their conventions, with that distinction becoming more pronounced with each election. On the whole, coverage tended to be fairly balanced. Bush in 1988 started off with a negative net advantage in daily coverage, but it

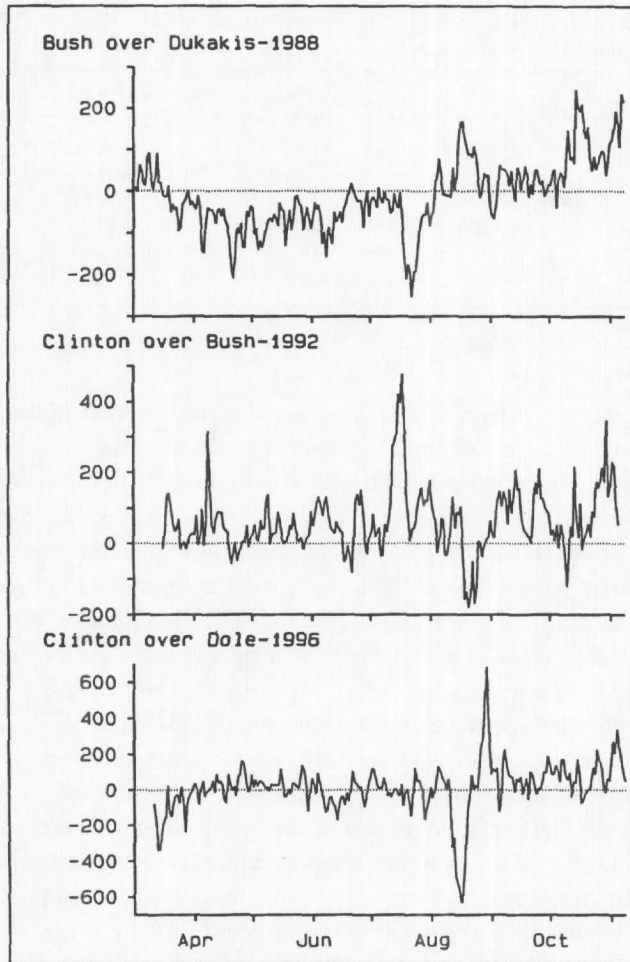


Figure 1. Modeling Public Opinion of Liberal Media Bias in the 1992 Campaign

turned into a positive advantage after the conventions, when the campaign became progressively more heavily covered. In 1992, Clinton's coverage was consistently more positive than Bush's, which further augments the findings about differential press coverage in the election. Clinton and Dole in 1996 stayed fairly even throughout the election until the last month, when it became apparent that Dole could not overcome Clinton's sizable lead in the

Table 3

Paragraphs Suggesting a Liberal or Conservative Media Bias in News Self-Coverage for the 1988, 1992, and 1996 Presidential Elections

Claims of media bias	1988	1992	1996
Favors liberal/ Democratic candidate	79.1% (n = 34)	71.8% (n = 89)	91.0% (n = 131)
Favors conservative/Republican candidate	20.9% (n = 9)	28.2% (n = 35)	9.0% (n = 13)
Total	100% (n = 43)	100% (n = 124)	100% (n = 144)

Note. $\chi^2 = 16.7, p < .001$.

polls. On the whole, no systematic or serious liberal bias appears in the valence coverage of these campaigns.

In contrast, news coverage of claims of media bias reveals data that are more one-sided. As shown in Table 3, this "self-coverage" by the analyzed news organizations has focused consistently on the alleged presence of a liberal media bias during each of the past three presidential elections. Thus, although the valence candidate coverage in recent elections is fairly balanced, with the possible exception of 1992 (as shown in Table 2), claims of a liberal slant dominate discourse about news media bias. The percentage even rises across elections (1988 vs. 1996), with differences between elections statistically significant. Furthermore, that similar patterns in this kind of news coverage were found across expanding samples of media outlets for these election seasons suggests a close similarity among major news media in how this topic is being covered. These results, then, suggest that the rising public perception of a liberal news media may have more to do with news self-coverage of media bias than with biases in valence news content.

Furthermore, it is intriguing that news coverage of media bias does not appear to be related to imbalances in positive and negative treatment of the candidates. The one election in which valence coverage did favor the liberal candidate—1992, when 54.2% of valence coverage favored Clinton—is the one election in which news coverage suggesting a liberal media bias has the lowest percentage. This may be partly due to the increase in claims of conservative bias voiced by the Clinton campaign in reaction to coverage of his alleged marital infidelity and draft dodging. Therefore, results in Table 3 indicate that coverage has consistently focused on allegations of news media as being liberally biased, and that this frame has grown in proportion over time, becoming an almost hegemonic frame in 1996.

Hypothesis 1: Modeling Media Effects on Public Opinion

Our first hypothesis predicts that the rising public perception that news media coverage of presidential campaigns has a liberal bias is due primarily to news coverage that reports claims of liberal bias and not to differences in valence coverage of the candidates. To test this hypothesis, we focus on news coverage and public opinion in the 1992 campaign, for three reasons. First, we are interested in accounting for the substantial increases in public perceptions of liberal media bias that consistently occurred during the past three presidential elections. With this as a goal, our aggregate-level analysis attempts to explain the over-time relation between campaign news coverage and public opinion during a specific campaign. Second, there was sufficient movement in public opinion and multiple measures of media bias during this election to use the ideodynamic model, which uses news coverage as a basis to predict daily changes in public opinion. Finally, this election also contained the only meaningful bias in positive and negative news treatment of the candidates, as Democrat candidate Bill Clinton received 54.2% of valence coverage. This modeling, then, offers insight into what seems to drive public perceptions of media bias during a presidential election: biases in valence candidate coverage or coverage of claims of media bias.

In our model, these two types of news content are posited to have persuasive information that leads to an increase or decrease in the perception of ideological bias in media content. We decided to model public perceptions of a bias against Bush, because poll data reveal greater variance in public perceptions in an anti-Bush bias, rising from 13% in March to 35% at election time in early November, than of a pro-Clinton bias, which dropped from 23% to 19% over the same dates. For this analysis, we added pro-Clinton paragraphs with con-Bush paragraphs to create a pro-liberal coverage parameter, also added con-Clinton with pro-Bush paragraphs to create a pro-conservative coverage parameter. These categories of coverage were constructed in this manner to keep the number of parameters in the equation to a minimum, which is necessary due to the small number of poll points (four). For the coverage of media bias, information is of two types: claims of liberal bias and claims of conservative bias, at time t .

In our formal ideodynamic model, persuasive information is treated as time-dependent persuasive force functions for favorable Democratic, favorable Republican, liberal bias, and conservative bias paragraphs. Each F function for time t is the sum of the number of paragraphs in news media coverage of the appropriate valence or bias claim, each one given its maximal value on the story date followed by an exponential decay with a 1-day half-life. Previous research indicates that the 1-day decay rate provides a good fit for the

relationship between media coverage and public opinion polls (see Fan, 1988, 1996; Fan & Tims, 1989). The results reported here use this decay rate.

The model is based on the simple premise that public perception of news media as unfair to Bush is a function of (a) the level of previous public perceptions of news media as unfair to Bush modified by the recruitment of those who had perceived the news media as fair to Bush (caused by increases in information favorable to the liberal candidate—that is, pro-Clinton and con-Bush—and liberal bias claims); and (b) the loss of those who had perceived the news media as unfair to Bush (caused by increases in information favorable to the conservative candidate—that is, pro-Bush and con-Clinton—and conservative bias claims). Although we recognize that there are many possible influences on public perceptions of media bias, the news media are clearly a primary source of persuasive information on this topic. Therefore, we tested whether bias in valence candidate coverage or coverage of claims of news bias better predicts public opinion about media bias.

In mathematical terms, the model is

$$\begin{aligned} \text{OpinionUnfairToBush}_t = & \text{OpinionUnfairToBush}_{t-1} + \\ & [(k_{\text{ProClinton}} F_{\text{ProClinton}_t} + k_{\text{ConBush}} F_{\text{ConBush}_t}) + \\ & k_{\text{LibBias}} F_{\text{LibBias}_t}] \text{OpinionFairToBush}_{t-1} - \\ & [(k_{\text{ProBush}} F_{\text{ProBush}_t} + k_{\text{ConClinton}} F_{\text{ConClinton}_t}) + \\ & k_{\text{CnsvBias}} F_{\text{CnsvBias}_t}] \text{OpinionUnfairToBush}_{t-1} \end{aligned}$$

where “opinion unfair to Bush” and “opinion fair to Bush” represent public perceptions that the media coverage of Bush is unfair or fair, respectively, and the k parameters are the persuasibility constants describing the percentage of the population recruited by the corresponding paragraphs translated into persuasive force functions. The two public opinion variables add up to 100% because all undecideds are excluded and the numbers renormalized. We used the usual ideodynamic method (Fan, 1996), in which opinion that the media is unfair to Bush at time $(t-1)$ was not empirical opinion at time $(t-1)$, but was opinion that the media was unfair to Bush at time t predicted for the prior time interval based on persuasive force functions F . This method permits computations to be made at the 24-hour time intervals used for the prediction and the assessment of statistical significance from public opinion time series with very few time points that are not spaced uniformly in time. However, due to the limited number of poll points (four), statistical significance is not possible to obtain with four parameters. The purpose of this test is to gauge the relative predictive power of the parameters so as to respecify a model containing only those parameters with sufficiently strong predictive power. By limiting this model to only contributing parameters, statistical significance can be obtainable.

Figure 2 plots the persuasive force functions F used for the prediction (top four frames). The major contributor is paragraphs suggesting a liberal media bias with an estimate k value of 0.14. All k values for the parameters Conservative Bias, Pro-Conservative, and Pro-Liberal are much smaller (0.0000027, 0.0016, and 0.0019, respectively), indicating they had effectively no predictive power.

The bottom frame in Figure 2 plots the four survey points (see Table 1 for specific survey values) used for the prediction. These points are rectangular boxes with the height being the 95% confidence interval, based on sample size, and the width corresponding to the beginning and ending dates of the survey. The solid line is the ideodynamic prediction initialized by the first survey value and then computed every day using the persuasive force functions F in the top four frames. The model explained 79% of variance in public perceptions of a liberal media bias, with a root mean square deviation of 3.7%.

Because the valence coverage parameters contributed negligibly to the prediction, the analysis was rerun removing the candidate valence persuasive force functions F . With only two remaining persuasive force functions—those for Liberal Bias and Conservative Bias—and their two associated k constants in the model, the estimated k value of Liberal Bias rose to 0.30. The k value of Conservative Bias remained very low, at 0.0000018. The dotted line in the bottom frame of Figure 2 represents the ideodynamic prediction using the persuasive force functions F in the top two frames. This model explained 78% of the variation, with a root mean square deviation of 3.7%. Furthermore, with only the two parameters, we found that news coverage containing claims of liberal bias was a statistically significant predictor in explaining public perceptions of a liberal media ($p < .025$).

Thus, the analysis for this hypothesis, in combination with the results in earlier tables and figures, strongly suggests that public perception of a liberal media bias is shaped not by biases in valence treatment of the principal candidates but by news self-coverage of potential media bias, which has predominantly focused on allegations of liberal bias.

Hypothesis 2: Elite Cues

With evidence suggesting that news coverage of claims of liberal media bias influences public opinion on this topic, we turn now to closer examination of the nature of the media "self-coverage." If, as we theorize, the coverage of media bias is being driven by elites making claims, we would expect that the primary elites cited in news coverage will be Republican candidates, Republican campaign and party officials, and Republican supporters. Specifically,

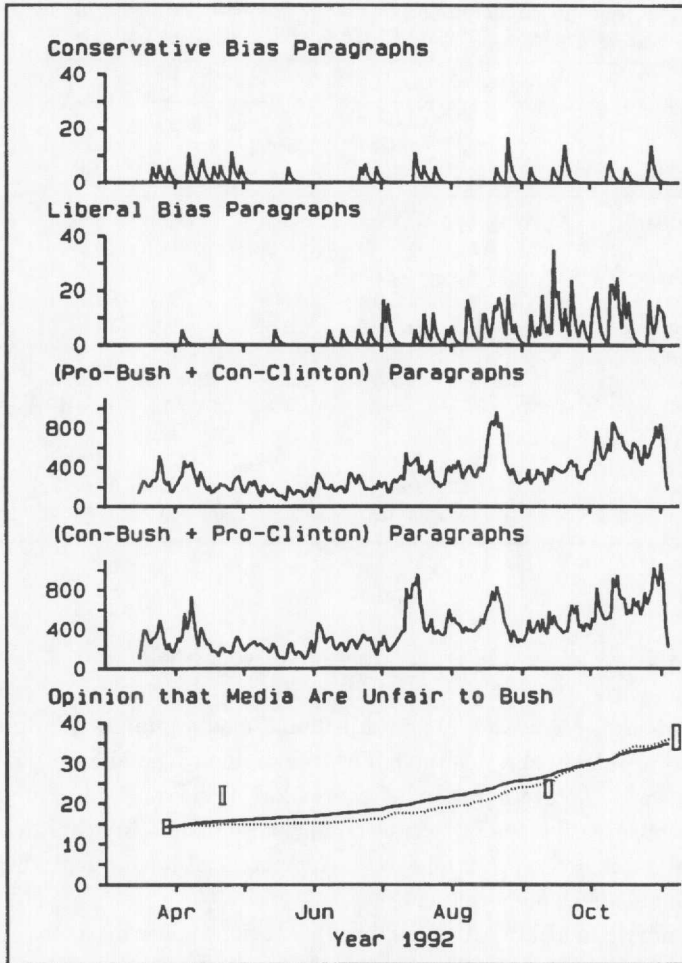


Figure 2. Net News Advantage in the Valence of Candidate Coverage by Paragraph

for our second hypothesis, we make the related predictions that within each of the past three elections, presidential candidates and party officials (a) will be more likely to claim a liberal than conservative news media bias, and (b) will be more likely than journalists to be the source for claims of liberal media bias in news coverage. These predictions can be tested by looking at the coverage of claims of bias (both liberal and conservative in nature) and seeing what source was linked to the allegations.

Table 4

Sources in Paragraphs Suggesting a Liberal or Conservative Media Bias in News Self-Coverage for the 1988, 1992, and 1996 Presidential Elections

Source of Claim	1988		1992		1996	
	Liberal bias	Conservative bias	Liberal bias	Conservative bias	Liberal bias	Conservative bias
Candidate	14.7% (n = 5)	22.2% (n = 2)	24.7% (n = 22)	17.6% (n = 6)	56.5% (n = 74)	7.7% (n = 1)
Party officials/ supporters	41.2% (n = 14)	0.0% (n = 0)	59.6% (n = 53)	47.1% (n = 16)	29.8% (n = 39)	53.8% (n = 7)
Journalists/ media pundits	44.1% (n = 15)	77.8% (n = 7)	15.7% (n = 14)	35.3% (n = 12)	13.7% (n = 18)	38.5% (n = 5)
Total	100% (n = 34) $\chi^2 = 5.5, p = .06$	100% (n = 9)	100% (n = 89) $\chi^2 = 5.7, p = .06$	100% (n = 34)	100% (n = 131) $\chi^2 = 12.1, p < .01$	100% (n = 13)

In Table 4, claims of liberal and conservative media bias are broken into three categories for each presidential election: (a) candidates, (b) party officials and supporters, and (c) journalists and media pundits.⁹ A number of patterns are clear from this table. First, as predicted, candidates and party officials and supporters were much more likely to claim a liberal media bias than a conservative one in each election. These results indicate that when political elites are sources in news about potential media bias, they overwhelmingly allege a liberal bias.

Second, when looking at which types of sources appear most often in news content about media bias, the data show two patterns. Among sources claiming a liberal media bias, candidates represent the smallest percentage (14.7%) in the 1988 election, when news "self-coverage" first became a staple of campaign coverage (Bennett, 1992). By 1996, however, candidates had become the highest percentage (56.5%). Meanwhile, as candidates become a bigger proportion of sources for liberal bias discussion, the percentage of news media sources shrinks considerably. In contrast, among people claiming a conservative bias, the candidate category shrinks to almost nothing over the three elections, although the category of party officials and supporters of the candidate grows to the biggest proportion. Furthermore, for each election, the percentage of news media sources remains at least one third of all sources making claims of conservative bias.

Table 5

Perceived Level of Bias in Paragraphs Suggesting a Liberal or Conservative Media Bias in News Self-Coverage for the 1988, 1992, and 1996 Presidential Elections

Perceived Level of Bias	1988		1992		1996	
	Liberal bias	Conservative bias	Liberal bias	Conservative bias	Liberal bias	Conservative bias
Journalist	11.8% (n = 4)	11.1% (n = 1)	0.0% (n = 0)	0.0% (n = 0)	0.0% (n = 0)	15.4% (n = 2)
Institution	17.6% (n = 6)	55.6% (n = 5)	10.1% (n = 9)	34.3% (n = 12)	3.8% (n = 5)	23.1% (n = 3)
Industry	70.6% (n = 24)	33.3% (n = 3)	89.9% (n = 80)	65.7% (n = 23)	96.2% (n = 126)	61.5% (n = 8)
Total	100% (n = 34)	100% (n = 9)	100% (n = 89)	100% (n = 35)	100% (n = 131)	100% (n = 13)
	$\chi^2 = 5.6, p = .06$		$\chi^2 = 10.4, p < .001$		$\chi^2 = 29.6, p < .001$	

In news coverage that discusses potential media bias, then, conservative candidates, party officials, and supporters have dominated the discourse with allegations of liberally slanted news content. Furthermore, the most elite of these sources—the candidates—have become the predominant sources of claims of liberal bias by the 1996 election. This same trend is not found for the sources of claims of conservative media bias. Therefore, if the public is taking cues from elites on this topic, which we theorize, then the evidence indicates that these cues overwhelmingly have suggested there is a liberal bias in news content.

Hypothesis 3: Level of Perceived Media Bias

Finally, our analysis explores just how wide is the perceived bias suggested by these claims. In particular, do claims of liberal and conservative bias differ in how pervasive the media bias is considered to be? Specifically, our hypothesis posits that within each of the past three presidential campaigns, claims of liberal news bias will be more likely to suggest that the bias exists across the entire media industry than claims of conservative news bias. This prediction is based on the possibility that claims labeling a bias as industry-wide would have more persuasive potential than claims labeling a bias as limited to a particular journalist or media institution. Table 5 explores how widespread the bias is thought to be by the individuals making allegations of media bias.

As shown in Table 5, among those claiming a liberal bias in news content, this bias is overwhelmingly characterized as industrywide during all three elections. Furthermore, despite the consistently high percentages for these claims, there is an increase across elections. Claims of a conservative bias also shift toward an industrywide perspective across elections, but at no time does this category rise above 66%, thus never passing the lowest level of industrywide liberal bias claims.

These results, then, indicate that claims of a liberal media bias, emanating predominantly from conservative elites (and increasingly from candidates) as shown previously in Table 4, consistently and overwhelmingly frame the bias as industrywide. Although our data cannot address this, it seems possible that such a wide characterization by conservative political actors, reflected in the now commonplace phrases "the liberal media" and "the media elite," may be contributing to the rising public perception of liberal news coverage in presidential elections.

Conclusions

Analysis across the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections offers some intriguing insights into public perceptions of media bias and how they are shaped. In particular, this research suggests that criticisms of media coverage—driven by conservative elites, and reported and discussed in news stories during these campaigns—have been a substantial influence behind the rising public perception of liberal media bias. Indeed, analysis of a wide range of news content indicates that discourse on media bias in the past three presidential campaigns has focused overwhelmingly on allegations of liberal bias; has emanated increasingly from political elites (particularly if the claim is of a liberal bias); and has predominantly conceived of the bias as existing across the entire media industry. Furthermore, when we focused specifically on the 1992 election, we found coverage of claims suggesting a liberal bias to be a powerful predictor of the rising public perception of a liberal media.

At the same time, the results both across and within elections suggest that positive and negative news content about the Democratic and Republican candidates is not related to public opinion about media bias. To be clear, we recognize that there may be other conceptions of media bias that are not addressed here. In particular, our content analyses do not capture potential "news agenda" biases—that is, biases in terms of which issues do or do not receive news coverage. However, our focus on the valence coverage received by the principal candidates is closely modeled on the traditional journalistic norm of objectivity, particularly its core notion of balance. We did, indeed,

find remarkable balance in candidate valence coverage in the 1988 and 1996 campaigns in the media outlets examined, although, in 1992, a slight bias favoring Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was observed. When we looked further at the 1992 campaign, however, differences in candidate valence coverage were found to be much less likely than were claims of media bias to predict the growing public perception of a liberal news media. This pattern of results, therefore, points to claims in the media of liberal bias and not to differences in valence coverage of the candidates as a primary cause of the rising public perception of a liberal news media in recent presidential elections.

These results suggest one way in which individuals may develop what scholars refer to as “naïve theories” about the media or “media schema” via news content itself, particularly the now widespread phenomenon of “coverage of coverage” (Bennett, 1992; Johnson et al., 1996). Such news self-coverage, the growth of which is likely tied in part to the proliferation of media watchdog organizations and talk radio commentators’ regular focus on news coverage in recent years, provides a forum for elites—including some journalists—to discuss issues of media performance and accountability. These discussions often focus on politics and tend to be presented in compact, sound-bite formats that can be easily understood by interested members of the public. It certainly seems plausible that the opinions of elites, who are commonly quoted in this kind of news content because of their status as official sources, would provide important cues for citizens as they form impressions of whether news coverage is biased or not. This process seems particularly likely to take place if the elites quoted in news content are considered trustworthy sources by at least portions of the citizenry.

Because people who can be influenced by mediated messages are obviously those who use the media, they therefore are able to assess directly whether news coverage is biased or not. In reality, however, the political environment seems much too complex for people to keep a running tally of whether media coverage is fair or unfair to a candidate or party. After all, people do not undertake extensive content analyses like those performed in this study. Furthermore, people do not experience all, or even most, media content. If political actors claim that the press is biased, yet a person’s direct media experiences suggest differently, a person may assume that the bias being discussed exists in media that he or she does not use. In considering these factors, it may be that citizens have begun to view elites as “surrogates” for the public in keeping watch over the media, which would be an ironic reversal of the democratic ideal of citizens relying on news media to monitor elites. Such a scenario of citizens taking cues from elites about media behavior would seem only to be encouraged by the opposition among many

journalists to established forms of professional accountability beyond legal statutes. Clearly, more research on the linkages among perceptions of media bias and citizens' political cognitions seems warranted, particularly as self-coverage continues to spread.

It also seems important to consider what might be some factors motivating (a) political actors to make claims of media bias, and (b) news media to report and discuss these allegations. In considering the first point, the results here indicate that increasing claims of a liberal media bias have been coming from conservative elites, most predominantly Republican candidates, who, it seems plausible, have attempted to use this message to shape public opinion. In fact, it may be that coverage of bias claims, although perhaps inevitable in a journalistic environment aspiring to report the news "objectively," contributes to the low esteem in which the press is held by the public. Polls have shown that the public is increasingly cynical and lacks confidence in government and politics (Dionne, 1991; Hart, 1994; Izard, 1985; Lipset & Schneider, 1987; Robinson, 1975; Tolchin, 1996), and the news media are considered partly responsible for this trend through their tendency to frame politics primarily in terms of strategy with little emphasis on policy or issues (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993; Rhee, 1997; Watts, 1997). Because news self-coverage during presidential campaigns, by its very nature, would seem to be strategic, political elites may see it as closely tied to their ultimate success. As a result, in making assertions of media bias, candidates may not be trying to critique the press so much as attempting to generate favorable voter reactions toward themselves and unfavorable reactions toward their opponent. Research, then, might examine whether coverage of media bias allegations is related negatively to public confidence in the press as well as whether such coverage affects candidate poll ratings.

As to why the news media regularly report critiques of media performance, particularly those emanating from political conservatives, a number of possibilities seem plausible. First, these criticisms may now be a staple of rhetoric in presidential campaigns, particularly among members or supporters of the Republican Party. If so, as such criticisms have become commonplace in campaign discourse, journalists have little choice but to report these charges to demonstrate that they are not biased. Second, this rise in media self-coverage is likely tied to the dramatic increase in the number of media outlets in the past decade. With so many more media sources, including many devoted solely to news content, it seems inevitable that self-coverage, including claims of media bias, would become a larger part of political news. Third, in a related point, the growth of "alternative" media presenting a

different picture of the news—such as radio talk shows, dominated by conservatives, and the Internet—and the growth of media watchdog groups critiquing the news may have forced journalists to address external criticisms internally. Finally, it seems likely that journalists gain in recognition and prestige, both among the public and peers, by becoming part of the political process through their participation in news self-coverage. As Fallows (1996) noted, this increased status has practical advantages for reporters, too: “When you call to make an appointment, the secretary recognizes your name. The person you want to interview has an idea who you are” (p. 95). At a minimum, the motivations for journalists to report and discuss claims of media bias are not likely to be simple, because the end result is self-criticism in a publicly documented manner.

Finally, news media self-reporting may have an inevitable cyclical effect. The increasing “coverage of coverage” in recent years has been spurred, and shaped, in part by political elites and scholars who claim there is a liberal media bias and by academics and pundits who increasingly argue that media are important to the political process. This type of content, in all likelihood, increases public perceptions of the media as important to the political process, further raising in salience the role of media as an important topic on the public agenda and one worthy of consideration by political actors and scholars. Thus, the cycle repeats and the news media find themselves more and more becoming the focus of attention in the political process. As a result, the news media move further away from the notion of covering (or helping to construct) the news and more commonly move closer to being the news. Whether this is a good or bad thing depends on one’s view of the role of journalism, perhaps, but it clearly deserves more thought—by all parties involved.

Notes

1. Data from Roper Poll in NEXIS electronic database (see Table 1). Poll data are discussed later in article.

2. For the 1988 election, news content was randomly drawn from September 1, 1987, to November 8, 1988. News stories were drawn from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Associated Press, United Press International, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and *St. Petersburg Times*.

For the 1992 election, news content was drawn from March 15, 1992, to November 8, 1992. Due to the presence of H. Ross Perot as a third-party candidate with sizable media coverage and popular support, stories were selected for this election if they mentioned any two of the three candidates or at least three mentions of any one candidate. However, for the purposes of this study, Perot was excluded from analysis because he did not clearly represent a liberal or conservative perspective. In addition to the

newspapers and wire services used for the 1988 download, the following news organizations became available for analysis of the 1992 election coverage: ABC News, Cable News Network, the *Boston Globe*, *New York Newsday*, *Orlando Sentinel Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Seattle Times*, and *USA Today*.

For the 1996 election, news content was drawn from March 10, 1996, to November 6, 1996. Because his coverage and popular support were significantly lower in the 1996 election, Perot was not used to identify election stories. For this search, the news sources from the 1988 and 1992 downloads were used as well as 30 additional newspapers from around the country. The Associated Press was omitted from this search.

The number of media outlets from which content was drawn increased across the elections, from 8 outlets in the 1988 campaign to 45 in the 1996 campaign. This expansion occurred because, over time, more news content became available via NEXIS. With recognition of these changes in data sets between campaigns, almost all tests of significance are performed within election seasons. We have conducted analysis to test for the possibility that the observed relationships were due to increases in the number of news outlets across elections. Holding the news outlets constant, data was reanalyzed, yielding no significant difference in the observed relationships (see Shah et al., in press).

3. Although spouses clearly are part of presidential politics, polls showing a rising public perception of liberal media bias usually identified candidates by names or political party affiliation; to closely parallel this, for our analytical strategy we focused specifically on news treatment of the candidates.

4. After the computer analysis, two people selected a sample of paragraphs and coded them as a check against the reliability of the computer coding. For 1988, the two human coders and the machine agreed on 198 of 240 paragraphs, or 66% greater than chance, yielding a Scott's Pi reliability coefficient of 0.83 (Scott, 1955). For 1992, the two human coders and the machine agreed on 166 of 204 paragraphs, or 61% greater than chance, yielding a Scott's Pi reliability coefficient of 0.81. For 1996, the two human coders and the machine agreed on 177 of 230 paragraphs, or 54% greater than chance, for a Scott's Pi reliability coefficient of 0.77. These were based on paragraphs already determined to be relevant to the candidates and hence represent a more stringent criterion than scoring for all paragraphs within each news story. This level of computer-human agreement reflects the limitations inherent in any computer-based content analysis. Confidence in findings would be substantially diminished, however, only if systematic biases (e.g., overscoring of con-Dukakis or underscoring of con-Clinton paragraphs) existed in the coding; such biases were not apparent at any stage in the development of the coding rules nor during the intercoder reliability checks.

5. A story on media bias was identified by the existence of words such as "bias," "unfair," "slant," "skew," "liberal," "conservative," and so on, in the same paragraph as words such as "broadcast," "media," "Times," "press," "coverage," so long as the words implying the press did not immediately precede a word such as "secretary" or "conference."

6. The Scott's Pi intercoder reliability between two human coders ranged from .92 to .99, occurring 73% to 92% greater than chance, depending on the variable.

7. The survey questions were obtained from the Roper POLL database available through the NEXIS system. The text of the poll questions, the survey organizations, dates of polls, and sample sizes are available on request from the first author, at the following address: Mark D. Watts, Institute for Public Opinion Research, Florida International University, 3000 NE 151st Street, ACII 301, North Miami, FL 33181-3000; e-mail: wattsm@fiu.edu.

8. The one time when public perception of an anti-Clinton media bias was high occurred in April 1992, when 40% of poll respondents claimed to see such a bias. It is interesting to note that Clinton and his campaign managers spoke often about alleged

bias against him during the Democratic primaries that year, which is consistent with our theory of elite cues influencing public perceptions of media bias.

9. The category "candidates" is made up of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates and their spouses. The category "party officials/supporters" include primarily campaign spokespeople and other party members. A small part of this category includes voters who are identified as a supporter of one of the two candidates. Finally, the "journalists/media" category includes editorialists, opinion writers, media pundits (e.g., George Will), or any instances where the paragraph did not give any discernable hint of a source and it appeared to be written by a reporter.

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