

# The Politics of Conservative Elites and the “Liberal Media” Argument

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*Recent evidence suggests that conservative elites' claims of a liberal media are having an impact upon public perceptions of news coverage. With this in mind, we examine two related questions in the context of the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections. First, what factors may be prompting conservative elites to make allegations of liberal media bias? Second, what factors may influence when news media report these criticisms during presidential campaigns? Findings suggest that these criticisms of news media are at least partly strategic and reflect a dynamic relationship between political elites and journalists during a presidential campaign.*

Claims of a “liberal media,” although hardly new in U.S. politics, have become notably common in recent presidential campaigns as candidates, party officials, and some journalists, pundits, and media watchdog groups have accused news organizations of unfairly favoring Democratic candidates or criticizing Republicans. For example, in 1996, Republican candidate Bob Dole blamed news coverage, particularly that in the *New York Times*, for his inability to overcome Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton’s lead (Kurtz, 1996). Dole and other elite critics of the media cited a Freedom Forum and Roper Center Poll that found that 89% of Washington, DC, journalists had voted for Clinton in 1992 (“Public Perspectives,” 1996). These claims of a liberal media bias echoed similar ones by political conservatives in previous 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 of “Annoy the Media: Re-elect George Bush.”

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Some evidence suggests that these claims of a liberal media have had an effect upon the public. Poll data across the past three presidential elections reveal a remarkable increase in the number of citizens who believe there is a liberal ideological slant in news content. In January 1988, 12% of randomly sampled U.S. adults claimed news media exhibit a liberal bias in news coverage. By September 1996, 43% of randomly sampled adults claimed news media have a liberal bias in news coverage. Notably, the corresponding responses concerning bias against Democratic candidates either declined or remained flat during each of these campaigns.<sup>1</sup> One recent study suggested that this shift in public opinion has not been caused by changes in news coverage of the principal candidates, but rather is related to increasing news coverage of liberal media bias claims, which have been increasingly emanating from Republican Party candidates and officials (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Watts et al. concluded that citizens, rather than personally monitoring news media for partisan leanings, have been "taking cues" from conservative elites in forming perceptions of a liberal media bias.

Additional insight into these relationships is provided by research examining 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," with the result being more positive coverage for Bill Clinton and fairly negative coverage for George Bush in this election (p. 117). Nonetheless, these scholars' survey data suggest that it is primarily citizens' partisan views that color perceptions of media fairness rather than assessments of actual media bias. This is consistent with work suggesting that people with strong political beliefs perceive the media as "hostile" to their outlook (Beck, 1991; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). However, this perspective, without a substantial shift in the ideological leanings of aggregate opinion—from liberal or independent to conservative—does not seem sufficient to explain the changes in the public's view of liberal media bias, and no such shift has taken place. Rather, these studies, in combination with Watts et al. (1999), suggest that the rising public perception of a liberal news media may be the result of ideologically inclined individuals internalizing the claims of conservative political elites.

It also seems likely that allegations of a liberal news media, in addition to influencing public perceptions of media bias, are part of a constellation of factors related to diminishing public confidence in the government and press (Hart, 1994; Izard, 1985; Lipset & Schneider, 1987; Pew Research Center, 1999; Tolchin, 1996). Research and commentary suggest that some of the factors contributing to citizen disillusionment include the widespread antipolitics cynicism of journalists and the emphasis on strategy and process over policy in political news coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993; Rhee, 1997). The reporting of elites' allegations of media bias may represent a form of strategic coverage that stems from, and particularly contributes to, the declining credibility

<sup>1</sup> The survey questions were obtained from the Roper POLL database available through NEXIS. The text of the poll questions, the survey organizations, dates of polls, and sample sizes are available on request from the first author.

of news media, in part because of the documented influence that elite opinion can have on mass opinion (Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994; Mondak, 1993; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992). Further, because political elites have little choice but to rely on news media to disseminate their messages (Dalton et al., 1998; Hetherington, 1996), the motivations that prompt them to level such critiques of news coverage may be complex.

With this in mind, we examine two related questions. First, what factors may be prompting leading conservative political actors to make claims of liberal media bias? Second, what factors may contribute to whether and when news media report these criticisms during presidential campaigns? Our focus is not on documenting the presence or absence of media bias. Rather our interest is in exploring factors that may be contributing to assertions of a liberal media. We examine news coverage of the past three presidential elections (1988, 1992, and 1996) with a specific interest in the relationships among news media treatment of the principal candidates, the standings of these candidates in public opinion polls, and claims of media bias by elites reported in news stories. To explore these linkages, in each campaign we draw upon two types of data: content analysis of major news media and time-series analysis of public opinion polls on presidential preference.

### **Elites and Claims of Media Bias**

Criticisms of the news media during presidential campaigns seem to be part of a broader trend in political discourse in which news organizations "turn the spotlight inward" by exploring the role, influence, and use by candidates of the news media (Johnson, Boudreau, with Glowacki, 1996; see also Gitlin, 1991; Jamieson, 1992; Kerbel, 1995; Lichter, Amundson, & Noyes, 1988). The 1988 presidential campaign is commonly thought to be the watershed for this kind of political discourse and such news "coverage of coverage" (Bennett, 1992).

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 on the role of news media in political campaigns by journalists, candidates, and pundits. 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*, and the newsmagazine, *Brill's Content*. Other factors likely contributing to greater self-coverage by news media include the growth of conservative talk radio and media watchdog organizations. Although Rush Limbaugh is the most notable conservative radio host, he is not alone. Industry surveys show a large majority of talk radio commentators lean to the political right (Falk, 1998). Media watchdog groups, representing a variety of political perspectives, include the Center for Media and Public Affairs, the Media Research Center (MRC), 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 coverage at its inception in the mainstream press.

Virtually unexplored by scholars, however, are the factors that prompt political elites, particularly ideological conservatives, to criticize the news media for their campaign coverage. One obvious possibility is that these claims of media bias are in response to negative coverage of conservative candidates or positive coverage of their liberal opponents. Whether such coverage represents actual bias or simply reflects reality can be difficult to discern and is not our focus here. What is of relevance is the reasonable possibility that conservatives might interpret negative patterns in coverage as an indication of media bias.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, politicians, party operatives, media watchdog organizations, and some journalists would seem to have considerable reasons and resources to monitor media coverage of presidential candidates closely, and then to respond with criticisms of news content when thought to be appropriate. If conservative elites are responding to news content patterns, then, claims of liberal bias reported in campaign discourse should be systematically related to news coverage that is seen as detrimental to the conservative candidate. Such a reactive relationship by political actors toward news media may be complex and may reflect long-term or short-term coverage trends, suggesting that longitudinal analyses across political campaigns are needed.

An alternative possibility is that criticizing the news media has become a political strategy commonly used by political conservatives in recent years. The conventional wisdom that news media are ideologically liberal—reflected in such phrases as “the liberal media” and “the media elite”—may be perceived by leading conservatives as offering sufficient political capital to merit emphasis during a presidential campaign. If this explanation applies, claims of liberal media bias should be most likely to appear in campaign news reports when conservative elites have substantial control of their message, such as during Republican Party conventions. Ironically, then, it may be that relatively positive news coverage of the Republican candidate, which is the likely result when conservatives can frame and emphasize their desired campaign ideas, actually is the context in which claims of liberal bias appear in news content. From this perspective, an emphasis upon alleged media bias on the campaign news agenda may be conceived primarily as a product of the complex interactions between presidential candidates and their communication strategists on one side and journalists and their practices of reporting on the other. Indeed, recent research has suggested such a “transactional” model of news construction—particularly during presidential campaigns—involving the interaction of elites, news media, and the public (Becker & Kosicki, 1995; Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998; Just et al., 1996).

A final possibility worthy of exploration is that claims of liberal media bias are largely unrelated to campaign news coverage and, instead, are prompted by a presidential candidate's poor standing in public opinion polls. It may be that one strategy used by political elites—and, perhaps, conservative elites—is to criticize the news media when things are not going well. It seems plausible that candidates

<sup>2</sup> Whether news media are biased in political news coverage has been a point of debate among scholars for some time (e.g., Bagdikian, 1997; Cook, 1998; Domke et al., 1997; Gans, 1985; Hofstetter, 1976; Lemert, 1989; Lichter, Amundson, & Noyes, 1988; Lowry & Shidler, 1999; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Rothman & Lichter, 1987).

and party officials would perceive this approach as advantageous because such criticism, if reported by the press, might help to shield the candidate in the minds of voters against further negative coverage they encounter. As Goidel, Shields, and Peffley (1997) speculated, it "may be that political elites can facilitate resistance to media messages by claiming that the source of the message is biased" (p. 312). Further, journalists, given their documented ideological leanings toward the left ("Public Perspectives," 1996; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991), represent easy targets for political conservatives, and criticisms of media may well help to rally Republican supporters. If this explanation applies, claims of liberal media bias by elites should be systematically related to a conservative candidate's standing among the public, with a low rating or drop in the polls serving as a prompt for allegations of unfair news coverage.

We explore these three potential explanations for elites' claims of liberal media bias in presidential campaign news coverage, recognizing that these explanations are not mutually exclusive. In so doing, we examine news content and candidates' poll standings on a daily basis in each of the past three elections to assess relationships over time and to provide a comparative analytical framework.

## **Method**

For each of the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections, we used three sets of data, with the first two derived from news media content. The first set constitutes valence—that is, positive or negative—news coverage of the principal Democratic and Republican candidates. The second set consists of political elites' claims of media bias reported in news coverage. The third set consists of time series of public opinion polls about citizens' presidential preferences throughout the campaigns.

We examined these data in the context of three differing presidential campaigns. In 1988, Republican Vice President George Bush overcame a 20-point deficit in the polls to be elected president on the strength of an adequate economy and his own foreign policy background and outlook. He also received some help from the popularity of President Ronald Reagan. In 1992, in the wake of the Persian Gulf War, incumbent Bush led Democrat Bill Clinton by more than 20 points in late March, before Clinton's emphasis on a lagging economy and strong support among women, combined with Bush's unfocused campaign and apparent lack of concern with domestic issues, led to a Clinton victory. In 1996, a robust economy bolstered incumbent Clinton throughout the campaign, and his lead over Republican Bob Dole never dipped below 10 points in the polls. These differing contexts, then, may provide unique insights in this study of the links among media coverage, claims of media bias, and elites' campaign goals.

### *Valence Coverage*

For all three elections, we randomly selected news content from the NEXIS electronic database. Stories were identified as relevant if they mentioned both major party candidates, or any one of them three times. For the 1988 election, news

content reported between September 1, 1987, and November 7, 1988, was randomly 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*. To be consistent with download periods in subsequent elections, we included only content after March 1, 1988, in this analysis. For the 1992 election, we drew newspaper and broadcast content from March 15, 1992, to November 2, 1992. Because H. Ross Perot's third-party candidacy received sizable media coverage and popular support, we selected stories if they mentioned any two of the three candidates or had at least three mentions of any one candidate. (We did not include coverage of Perot in this study, however.) In addition to the newspapers and wire services used for the 1988 download, reports of the following news organizations became available for analysis of the 1992 election coverage: ABC News, Cable News Network, *Boston Globe*, *New York Newsday*, *Orlando Sentinel Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Seattle Times*, and *USA Today*. For the 1996 election, we drew news content from March 10, 1996, to November 5, 1996. Because Perot's coverage and popular support were significantly lower in the 1996 election, Perot was not used to identify election stories. For this search, we used the news outlets from the 1988 and 1992 downloads, as well as 30 additional newspapers from around the country. We omitted the Associated Press from this search.

In 1988, there were 18,678 identified stories, of which 5,920 (31.7%) were sampled. In 1992, there were 40,395 identified stories, of which 7,358 (18.2%) were sampled. In 1996, there were 70,116 identified stories, of which 12,215 (17.4%) were sampled. 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 election. This expansion occurred because, over time, more news content became available via NEXIS. Recognizing these changes in data sets between campaigns, we performed all statistical tests within election seasons. At the same time, comparisons across elections offer insight into broader patterns in news coverage.

For each election, once stories were retrieved, they were filtered to remove text not directly relevant to the campaign (e.g., text that focused solely on the candidates' spouses). This filtering was accomplished through use of the InfoTrend computer content-analysis program, which reads a computer program in the FiltScor language (Fan, 1988). With this program, the analyst uses the computer language to enter idea categories, words that tap or reveal those idea categories, and rules that allow pairs of ideas in the text to be combined to give more complex meaning. Using this computer program, we then coded remaining paragraphs for positive or negative coverage of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates in each election. Using the paragraph as the unit of analysis, and allowing each one to be scored in several categories, Buchanan (1991) argued, "provides a much more accurate reflection of the nature of news coverage than arbitrarily classifying each story into one and only one category" (p. 180).

We coded the valence coverage of the candidates using virtually identical computer categories and 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, we coded paragraphs as pro or con for the candi-

dates, with each paragraph given a total score of 1. Each paragraph could be scored as positive and/or negative to both candidates within a given campaign, depending on the ideas expressed in the text. Thus, a paragraph that contained one con-Clinton idea and one pro-Dole idea would be scored as .50 con-Clinton and .50 pro-Dole. Similarly, a paragraph that contained two pro-Dukakis ideas would still be scored as 1 pro-Dukakis. The resulting summated scores (two for each candidate) were then equal to the number of paragraphs that corresponded to a particular coding category for that candidate. These scores were tallied on a daily basis during each of the presidential campaigns.

An example of text that would be scored pro-Clinton is this statement: "Clinton has been successful at attracting women voters." In this sentence, the words "Clinton" and "successful" are in close proximity and would lead to the scoring of the idea as pro-Clinton. Moreover, the statement "Clinton attacked Bush on his lack of leadership on the economy" would be coded as con-Bush. This scoring would be based on the words "Clinton," "attacked," and "Bush," with coding rules recognizing that "attack" should precede the candidate for it to be coded as "con." Rules also incorporated negation produced by such words as "not." For example, the statement that "Dole has not been successful at attracting women voters" would be coded as con-Dole.

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, yielding a reliability coefficient of .83. For 1992, the two human coders and the machine agreed on 166 of 204 paragraphs, yielding a reliability coefficient of .81. For 1996, the two human coders and the machine agreed on 177 of 230 paragraphs, for a reliability coefficient of .77. These were based on paragraphs already determined to be relevant to the candidates and, therefore, represented a more stringent criterion than scoring all paragraphs within each news story. This level of computer-human agreement reflects the limitations inherent with any computer-based content analysis. Confidence in findings would have been 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 or during the intercoder reliability checks.

Using this approach to gain insight into whether campaign news coverage patterns appear to prompt elite claims of media bias 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 don't receive news coverage. Such potential "news agenda biases" merit examination in future research. Notably, though, liberal biases in issue coverage were not apparent in the 1996 presidential campaign in one study of 43 major news media outlets (Domke et al., 1997). Domke et al. found that the economic plans and character of both Clinton and Dole each received considerable attention, trailing only horse race news in total content; further, 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" (p. 727).

For the present study, two primary reasons guided our decision to examine

campaign news patterns 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; 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 by journalists, it seems plausible that political conservatives would expect that journalists covering the principal candidates for the nation's most important political office would demonstrate their professional objectivity by producing comparable and balanced coverage of the candidates and their ideas. Thus, whereas any single news story (or days of stories) may well be more positive toward one candidate than another for countless reasons, it may be that political elites might interpret such a tilt in news coverage across multiple media outlets as an indication of bias in news coverage. Our methodology offers insights into such a possibility.

Second, in recent presidential elections it has become commonplace for people at varying levels of political engagement 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 watch for ideological bias by analyzing the amount of positive and negative news coverage received by the presidential candidates (e.g., Bozell, 1995; Cheney, 1996; Efron, 1971; Lichter, Amundson, & Noyes, 1988; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Rothman & Lichter, 1987). At a minimum, then, our valence measure was consistent with other conceptions of media bias among some elites invested in the political process.

To examine the overall distribution of coverage of the Democratic and Republican candidates, we computed the amount of coverage that favored each candidate in each presidential election. This was calculated in two steps. First, we added the positive paragraph scores for the Democratic candidate and the negative paragraph scores for the Republican candidate, producing a total amount of coverage favoring the Democratic candidate. Next, we divided the amount of coverage favoring the Democratic candidate by all favorable and unfavorable coverage for both the Democratic and Republican candidates. The result was the percent of valence coverage that favored the Democratic candidate.

In 1988, the valence coverage was split nearly evenly between candidates, with Democrat Dukakis receiving 51.4% of all favorable coverage. Valence coverage for the 1992 election was not as balanced, however. Consistent with other research on this election, news coverage was found to be more favorable to Democrat Clinton, who received 54.4% of favorable coverage, than to Republican Bush. In 1996, though, the parity found 8 years earlier recurred, with Democrat Clinton receiving 50.5% of all favorable coverage. These results suggest that, although coverage leaned slightly toward the Democratic candidate, campaign coverage on the whole was evenly balanced in two of the three elections analyzed. There was a potentially meaningful advantage in coverage for the Democratic candidate only



in 1992. Similar conclusions about the 1992 campaign coverage have been reached by other scholars (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Lowry & Shidler, 1995). Whether particular patterns of candidate coverage were related to elites' claims of media bias during the course of these campaigns was the focus of our analysis.

### *Media Bias Coverage*

A second download of media content from NEXIS was undertaken to analyze news coverage discussing alleged media bias in candidate coverage during these presidential campaigns. We identified stories about media bias by the existence of words such as "bias," "distort," "unfair," "slant," "twist," or "unfair" in the same paragraph as both (a) some variation of "liberal," "conservative," "Democrat," or "Republican," and (b) words such as "broadcast," "network," "media," "Times," "press," or "coverage." The dates for these downloads closely paralleled the dates for the valence coverage in each election.

This download focused primarily on two types of media outlets: the major news organizations included in the valence content analysis and several media outlets that tend to present more in-depth analyses of the campaign process.<sup>3</sup> We performed this separate download for bias coverage for three reasons. First, a political actor may perceive bias in certain news outlets, say the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*, yet for several reasons may receive coverage of his or her criticisms in another media outlet. Second, if the news media analyzed for valence coverage are indeed biased in a liberal direction, then their campaign coverage might be less likely to include claims by political conservatives of media bias. Third, holding constant the media outlets across elections allowed us to examine if allegations of liberal media bias had risen in recent presidential campaigns, as previous research had suggested but not documented (see Bennett, 1992; Watts et al., 1999). In 1988, there were 639 identified stories, in 1992 there were 620 identified stories, and in 1996 there were 521 identified stories. We included all identified stories in the download.

We initially filtered each paragraph through computer rules and reading by two human coders, who, similar to the computer-aided filtering of the valence coverage, removed text not directly related to claims of media bias (e.g., text referencing the press could not immediately precede a word such as "secretary" or "conference").<sup>4</sup> Then, for each election, manual coding identified claims of liberal bias

<sup>3</sup> Claims of media bias were identified in news stories drawn from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*, Associated Press, United Press International, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *New York Newsday*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Arkansas Democrat*, *New Jersey Record*, *Orange County Register*, *San Diego Union Tribune*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*.

<sup>4</sup> For the valence coverage, the search string used to identify stories in NEXIS was this: a certain number of occurrences of the last names of the principal candidates. For the media bias coverage, we included in the search string several synonyms for terms, because we would rather have filtered out unrelated stories before coding than miss some common variation of media bias allegations. Roughly 37% of the downloaded content was filtered out as not applicable to media bias coverage. This was not unexpected, because we cast a wide net in identifying the stories.

or conservative bias, 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: claims of a bias favoring liberals, or claims of a bias favoring conservatives. As a second step, the coding identified the source of the claim: candidates, party officials, journalists or media pundits, media watchdog organizations, and citizens.

The "candidates" category consisted of news content that quoted, either directly or indirectly, the presidential and vice presidential candidates or their spouses. The "party officials" category consisted of news content that quoted, either directly or indirectly, campaign spokespeople or other party leadership (e.g., Newt Gingrich, Richard Gephardt). The "journalists-media pundits" category consisted of news content identified as produced by editorialists, opinion writers, media pundits, or any instances where the paragraph did not clearly indicate a source and appeared to be written by a reporter. The "media watchdog organizations" category consisted of news content that quoted, either directly or indirectly, research, data, or viewpoints of individuals identified as affiliated with an organization that monitors media content for ideological biases. The "citizens" category consisted of news content that quoted, either directly or indirectly, people who claim to perceive news media bias but are not a representative of any media or political organization. Because the focus of this study was on examining factors that may be prompting political elites to claim news media bias, citizens' claims were not included in the analysis.

Intercoder reliability for these two variables was .92. Notably, in addition to being consistent with the valence analysis, this coding approach recognizes that elites' claims of liberal bias appear to be having an influence upon public perceptions of news media (Watts et al., 1999). In theoretical terms, therefore, each claim may be viewed as potentially persuasive on public opinion and, thus, should be measured separately.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Public Opinion Polls*

For each election, we developed a time series of public opinion data from polls available through the Roper Center's POLL database. We identified polls for the spans of time paralleling the collection dates for news media coverage. The focus of these time series was the proportion of poll respondents supporting the Republican Party candidate out of the total respondents supporting both the Republican and Democratic candidates (polls including Ross Perot were not included). To-

<sup>5</sup> Perfect data to measure elites' claims of media bias do not exist. There is no practical way to capture every claim of media bias. We can measure the claims of media bias that get reported in campaign news coverage. Although this is an approximation of all media bias allegations, news reports are perhaps the best source for tracking such claims because of journalists' close proximity and regular interaction with candidates, handlers, and party officials. At the same time, the reality of journalism is that there are many factors that influence which messages by political officials end up in campaign news reports (Gans, 1979). Examining claims of media bias in news content offers insight into when elites choose to make these claims and also sheds light on when journalists decide to report these allegations. Such insights contribute to understanding the complex processes of news construction that occur on a daily basis in presidential campaign coverage.

ward the end of campaigns, when there was more than one poll per day, at most two polls were chosen per day and then averaged, using the criteria of high number of respondents and low number of days from beginning to the end of the survey.

The basic question for the POLL database polls was

If the [year] election were being held today, and the candidates were [Democratic candidate] for President and [running mate] for Vice President, the Democrats, and [Republican candidate] for President and [running mate] for Vice President, the Republicans, would you vote for [Democratic candidate and running mate] or for [Republican candidate and running mate]?

The vice presidential candidates were included in the question only after the party conventions. We used a total of 139 polls for 1988, 78 for 1992, and 250 for 1996. The fewer number of polls in 1992 was due to the exclusion of polls containing questions about Perot.

## **Results**

Our analysis focused on examining some of the factors that might have contributed to political elites' claims of news media bias in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential campaigns. As a starting point, we analyzed news coverage discussing alleged media bias, how such coverage has been framed, and whether it has increased across the past three campaigns. We then examined factors that might have prompted allegations of media bias.

### *Claims of Media Bias*

The distribution of claims of media bias by political elites across the 1988, 1992, and 1996 campaigns is shown in Table 1. These data show that claims of a liberal slant overwhelmingly dominated this type of political discourse, consisting of roughly 95% of all media bias claims in each campaign. The data also reveal that allegations of liberal media bias rose markedly over time, nearly doubling from 1988 to 1992, and then rising another 18% in 1996. These results provide support for scholarship suggesting these trends (Bennett, 1992; Watts et al., 1999). These data, then, indicate that political elites have consistently argued the existence of a liberal bias in news coverage, with this perspective increasing substantially over the course of these elections. The few numbers of claims of conservative media bias preclude further analysis using these data.

As justification for these allegations of media bias, elites—obviously, conservative elites the vast majority of the time—consistently argued that news coverage of the candidates was unfair in some fashion. A few excerpts from the news content offer insight into the shape and tenor of this discourse.

In 1988, many claims of liberal bias were directed toward news coverage of George Bush's selection of Dan Quayle as his vice presidential nominee. For example, on August 25, a *Washington Post* story said, "Republicans and some

**Table 1. Elite Claims Suggesting a Liberal or Conservative Media Bias in News Coverage for the 1988, 1992, and 1996 Presidential Elections**

Claims of media bias	Presidential Election		
	1988	1992	1996
Favors liberal/ Democratic candidate	95.4% ( <i>n</i> = 83)	91.9% ( <i>n</i> = 147)	96.3% ( <i>n</i> = 182)
Favors conservative/ Republican candidate	4.6% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	8.1% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	3.7% ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Totals	100% ( <i>N</i> = 87)	100% ( <i>N</i> = 160)	100% ( <i>N</i> = 189)

press critics have accused the media of being unusually 'shrill' or even anti-patriotic in pursuing details of Quayle's background. A conservative media watchdog group yesterday said that the networks had indulged in 'a blatant anti-conservative bias.'" Further, elites often argued that treatment of Quayle merely reflected broader patterns of campaign coverage. On October 27 in *New York Newsday*, the following exchange was reported:

Later in the same conversation, Bush indicated he felt the press had been unfair in its coverage of the election campaign. When the man said he'd managed to persuade his wife, a Democrat, to vote Republican in November, Bush responded, "that's good," adding that "the media sure isn't on our side."

Four years later, media bias allegations often carried a more strident tone. On August 14, a *New York Times* article said:

Repeating a charge made by several Republican campaign aides this week, Mrs. Bush also accused the press of favoring Mr. Clinton over her husband. When asked why she thought reporters were biased, she replied with a smile that was more cold than coy, "I'll be damned if I know, unless they are just liberals."

A *U.S. News & World Report* article on September 14 said:

The claim of unfair treatment—from skewed convention coverage to criticism of relief efforts in Florida—has been a constant theme from the Bush campaign in recent weeks. "I think we know who the media want to win this election—and I don't think it's George Bush," Republican national committee Chairman Rich Bond complained. "You guys are still trying to elect a Democratic president," former White House Chief of Staff John Sununu shot at ABC's Sam Donaldson on the CNN show, "Crossfire."

In the end, conservatives' animosity toward the press tended to be channeled into one primary criticism—that overly negative news coverage of Bush's handling of the economy had damaged his campaign. As Bush was quoted on the "MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour" on election night, "I think people have been told [by the media] recession, recession, recession. Ninety-two percent on the evening news and leading in[to] the networks . . . 92% negative."

In 1996, criticisms of the media tended to suggest a general anticonservative pattern in news coverage of the presidential candidates. A June 28 Associated Press story said,

The Republican message is being distorted by news media that "are so biased they don't even recognize their bias," House speaker Newt Gingrich said Friday. "There is a constant, every-morning bias by the lead media," reflecting "the left's propaganda version of reality," Gingrich, R-Ga., said in an interview.

Late in the campaign, in particular, Bob Dole criticized the news media. For example, in a United Press International story on October 26 he said: "The country does not belong to the liberal media, it does not belong to Bill Clinton." However, perhaps revealing of the sentiment of all involved (e.g., Dole, party leaders, and journalists), the opening sentence of a *New York Newsday* article on October 25 read: "A frustrated Bob Dole yesterday lashed out at the 'liberal media' and even American voters, suggesting his low standing in the polls was due to biased reporting and a public that had not bothered to examine President Bill Clinton's record."

#### *Factors Prompting the Claims*

As data in Table 1 and the news excerpts show, conservative elites often, and increasingly, accused news media of exhibiting a liberal bias in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential campaigns. Given research that shows that people with strong political beliefs view the media as "hostile" to their outlook (Beck, 1991; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), it is not surprising that leading political conservatives perceived ideological bias in news coverage. However, it is intriguing that claims of liberal media bias in news discourse were not matched by opposing claims by ardent political liberals. This suggests that other factors may contribute to conservative elites' decisions to state publicly these allegations. Therefore, we examined factors that appear to be related to conservatives' claims of liberal media bias.

Certainly, news coverage of the principal presidential candidates may be an important factor. Indeed, it might be that conservative elites' claims of liberal media bias are spurred by overly negative coverage received by the Republican candidate, or overly positive coverage received by the Democratic candidate, regardless of whether such coverage is merited. Although either of these patterns of campaign coverage does not necessarily indicate liberal media bias, such a perception (and, in turn, reaction) would be understandable. Alternatively, as discussed earlier, it may be that claims of a liberal bias appear in news discourse when the Republican candidate and allied conservatives can exert greater control

**Table 2. Number of Days After an Elite Claim of Media Bias Was Made That It Was Reported in the News Media**

Days	Claims of Bias
0	22.8% ( <i>n</i> = 38)
1	62.3% ( <i>n</i> = 104)
2	5.4% ( <i>n</i> = 9)
3	1.2% ( <i>n</i> = 2)
4	1.8% ( <i>n</i> = 3)
5	1.2% ( <i>n</i> = 2)
6	0.6% ( <i>n</i> = 1)
7	0.6% ( <i>n</i> = 1)
8 and above	4.1% ( <i>n</i> = 7)

Note. *N* = 167.

over their message. If so, such claims of media bias should occur in the context of favorable coverage of the Republican candidate, because conservative leaders would seem to have the greatest ability to disseminate their desired messages in such an environment. Finally, it also may be that claims of a liberal bias are precipitated by a consistent low standing or drop in public opinion polls by the Republican candidate.

We examined the relation of these three factors to conservatives' claims of liberal bias using time-series analysis in each of the past three presidential campaigns. To determine the length of lag time for this analysis, in our manual coding we assessed how quickly an elite allegation of bias was reported in the news media. That is, how many days after a claim was made did it get reported in the press? This coding was an attempt to overcome a common weakness in time-series analysis: Researchers often decide upon a time lag without empirical rationale. Although the number of codable bias allegations was limited because the specific date of many claims could not be determined, we coded 38.3% (167 of 436) of allegations. The data (for both liberal and conservative bias claims) are shown in Table 2. Of these bias claims, roughly 90% were reported in news stories within 2 days. Although these data are not without limitations, they suggest that media bias allegations reported in campaign news stories reflect comments made by elites in the very recent past. These data, then, contributed to our choice of a lag length of a 1-day half-life in these time-series analyses, as discussed below.

For this analysis, in each campaign we examined whether daily claims of liberal media bias reported in news stories appear to be prompted by (a) the degree of favorable coverage of the Republican candidate (determined by subtracting con coverage from pro coverage for this candidate), (b) the degree of favorable coverage of the Democratic candidate (parallel computation for this candidate), and (c) the Republican candidate's standing in public opinion polls. We designed this analysis to assess whether political elites vocalize any perceived biases in news coverage soon after detrimental news patterns. This seems plausible for two reasons: first, so that elites might convince news media to rectify coverage trends

**Table 3. Time-Series Regression of Elite Claims of Liberal Media Bias on Candidate Valence News Coverage and Republican Candidate Standing in the Polls**

1988 Election	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic
Democratic candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.007	.003	2.10*
Republican candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.015	.006	2.56*
Republican poll standing	.075	.030	2.49*
1992 Election	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic
Democratic candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	-.004	.002	-1.89
Republican candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.012	.003	4.29**
Republican poll standing	-.059	.014	-4.27**
1996 Election	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic
Democratic candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.002	.002	0.95
Republican candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.003	.002	1.49
Republican poll standing	-.123	.050	-2.49*

Note. Dependent variable is daily sum of claims of liberal media bias. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .

1988 Total  $R^2 = .19$ ,  $N = 188$ . 1992 Total  $R^2 = .26$ ,  $N = 253$ . 1996 Total  $R^2 = .21$ ,  $N = 250$ .

perceived as unfair; and, second, to persuade citizens that coverage is not accurately representing the candidate or his message. Therefore, valence coverage was given its maximum value on the story date followed by an exponential decay with a 1-day half-life. This was done to capture patterns in candidate coverage. Research suggests that the 1-day decay rate provides a good fit for the relationship between media coverage and public opinion polls (Fan, 1988, 1996; Shah, Watts, Domke, Fan, & Fibison, in press). For the public opinion variable (GOP candidate support), we used the opinion value from the most recent previous poll until the day before the next poll. Results from this time-series equation, run separately for each of the three presidential elections, are shown in Table 3.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For the 1988 campaign, this time-series analysis was performed beginning May 1 rather than in early March, which is when the analyses for the other campaigns began. This was done because in late April

Several points are noteworthy about the data in Table 3. First, across all three elections, conservative elites' claims of liberal media bias appeared in campaign news coverage when the Republican candidate was receiving relatively favorable valence coverage. The Republican candidate's news advantage was a statistically significant predictor of bias allegations in 1988 and 1992, and the pattern continued in 1996. These results suggest that conservatives' claims of liberal bias may be most likely to be reported in campaign news stories when the Republican candidates are receiving positive coverage, perhaps because they and allied individuals are able to exert a fair degree of control over their message.

Second, in each election the Republican candidate's standing in the polls was a significant predictor of allegations of media bias in campaign news stories. For 1988, the data show a positive relationship between Bush's poll position and claims of bias. This indicates that conservative criticisms of news media occurred as Bush was moving up in the polls—an ascension that began roughly at convention time in mid-August. In contrast, the data show negative relationships between the Republican candidate's poll standing and claims of bias in both 1992 and 1996. This indicates that the allegations of news media bias in these elections were related to drops in the polls by Bush and Dole, respectively. Although the finding for 1988 is unexpected, the relationship between the opinion polls and claims of bias in the latter two campaigns seems, on the surface, to fit an easy interpretation: As the Republican candidate drops in the polls, leading political conservatives blame the media. We will return to these findings in the discussion.

Third, across these presidential campaigns, the data show no clear relationship between valence coverage of the Democratic candidate and conservatives' claims of media bias. In 1988, conservative elites' allegations of media bias appeared in news content when Michael Dukakis was receiving relatively positive valence coverage, which intuitively seems to make sense. In 1992, however, conservative elites' allegations of media bias occurred when Bill Clinton was receiving relatively negative (or at least less positive) news coverage. Further, in 1996, Clinton's valence coverage was essentially unrelated to claims of media bias. At a minimum, these data suggest that valence coverage of the Democratic candidate is not a consistent factor related to conservative elites' claims of liberal bias in news coverage.

One way to gain further insight is to plot the claims of liberal media bias over time in each election. If, as we have interpreted the Table 3 results, claims of media bias are particularly likely to be in news reports when conservatives are able to control the dissemination of their messages effectively, then we might expect to see a large number of liberal bias allegations during the Republican Party convention periods, and, conversely, very few during the Democratic Party

1988, Bob Dole, who had dropped out of the Republican Party race in late March, was quoted in several media outlets as criticizing news media's liberal bias for his failed candidacy. These allegations were captured in our coding of media bias claims, but we recognized that no predictor variable was related to the actions of Dole, who was not the principal Republican presidential candidate. To eliminate this potential confound from our analysis, we moved this campaign's time-series starting date to May 1.



Figure 1.  
1988 Presidential  
Campaign

(Bottom numbers  
in each figure  
represent dates.)

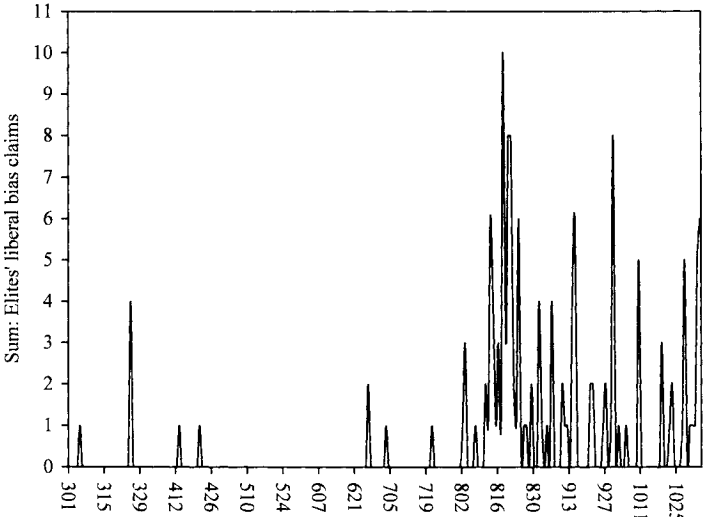
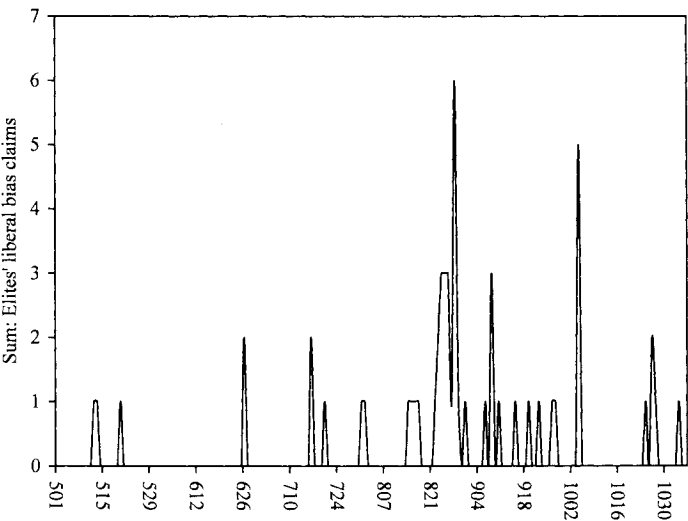


Figure 2.  
1992 Presidential  
Campaign

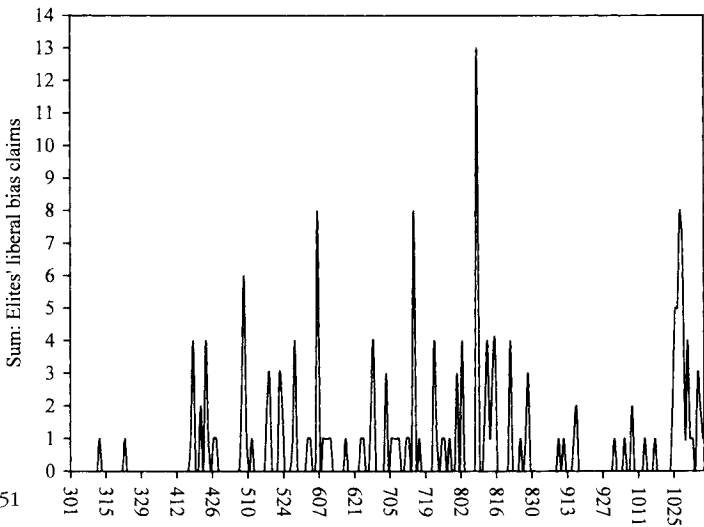


Figure 3.  
1996 Presidential  
Campaign

convention dates. In addition, closer observation of when the claims of bias occur during the campaigns may offer insight into the differing links of the bias allegations to the polls in 1988 compared to 1992 and 1996. These time-trend plots of conservatives' claims of liberal media bias are shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

These figures show several things. First, there were substantial spikes in claims of liberal media bias in news coverage during the dates surrounding the Republican Party conventions in 1992 (August 17–20) and 1996 (August 12–15), but not in 1988 (August 15–18). In marked contrast, there were virtually no claims of media bias in news coverage during the dates surrounding the Democratic Party conventions in 1988 (July 18–21) and 1992 (July 13–16), and very few in 1996 (August 26–29). Second, in 1988 and 1992, the vast majority of conservatives' allegations of liberal media bias began to appear just after or during the Republican convention in mid-August. Conversely, in 1996, claims of liberal bias were fairly common from April 10 to August 30, then dropped off almost entirely before surging back upward at the end of the campaign. Third, the distribution of the claims of bias do shed some light on their relation to the Republican candidate's standing in the polls. In particular, in 1988 the claims of bias roughly paralleled the dates of Bush's ascension in the polls, beginning in mid-August when he trailed Dukakis by 15–18 points and lasting through late September, when his lead over Dukakis stabilized at roughly 8–10 points.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, in 1992 the claims of liberal bias did not begin to appear in news coverage until Bush fell behind Clinton in mid-July; shortly thereafter, they showed up in earnest. In 1996, Dole trailed Clinton throughout the campaign.

Building upon the insights suggested from these time trends, we conducted one final set of time-series equations for claims of liberal media bias in each election. This time we included dummy variables that marked the dates of the Democratic and Republican conventions. The convention variables began 2 days before the conventions (to capture the preview news articles), and ended 2 days afterward (to capture the news wrap-up pieces). The variables were coded as follows: for each convention: 1 = *convention dates* and 0 = *rest of campaign*. These were included in the time-series equations along with the three previous parameters. The results are shown in Table 4.

The Republican Party convention variable has a powerful relationship with claims of liberal media bias for 1992 and a parallel, albeit not as strong, relationship to claims of liberal bias for 1996. This indicates that conservatives' criticisms of news media were likely to appear in news coverage during these convention dates. In combination with the results that continue to show a positive link between the favorability of the Republican candidate's valence coverage and media bias claims in both 1988 and 1992, these data lend considerable support to the interpretation that, as conservatives are in position to exert greater control over

<sup>7</sup> In the 1988 campaign, the first and biggest spike in the claims of liberal bias occurred in late August (August 25–28). During these dates a public opinion poll was released. The poll showed that over half of randomly sampled U.S. respondents believed the news media were being unfair to Dan Quayle in news coverage. This poll received heavy coverage in several news outlets, and the high number of claims of bias by elites largely reflects their comments in relation to this poll.

**Table 4. Time-Series Regression of Elite Claims of Liberal Media Bias on Candidate Valence News Coverage, Republican Candidate Standing in the Polls, and Convention Dates**

1988 Election	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic
Democratic candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.007	.004	1.94
Republican candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.017	.006	2.69**
Republican poll standing	.077	.030	2.55*
Republican Party convention	-.532	.568	-0.94
Democratic Party convention	-.293	.532	-0.55
<hr/>			
1992 Election	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic
Democratic candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	-.002	.002	-1.06
Republican candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.007	.003	2.58*
Republican poll standing	-.044	.013	-3.53**
Republican Party convention	4.29	.637	6.74**
Democratic Party convention	-.016	.679	-0.02
<hr/>			
1996 Election	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic
Democratic candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.002	.002	1.03
Republican candidate news advantage (pro minus con)	.000	.002	0.02
Republican poll standing	-.118	.050	-2.35*
Republican Party convention	1.318	.813	1.62
Democratic Party convention	-.080	.685	-0.12

Note. Dependent variable is daily sum of claims of liberal media bias. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .

1988 Total  $R^2 = .19$ ,  $N = 188$ . 1992 Total  $R^2 = .42$ ,  $N = 253$ . 1996 Total  $R^2 = .22$ ,  $N = 250$ .

their messages, allegations of liberal media bias become a greater part of the news discourse. Ironically, then, it is in the context of relatively favorable coverage of the Republican candidate that these claims of liberal bias are being reported. At the same time, these equations indicate that the relation between the Republican candidate's standing in the polls and the media bias claims remains robust even after including the convention dates, suggesting that control of news coverage is not the sole factor contributing to claims of liberal bias. Finally, the relative favorability of the valence coverage of the Democratic candidate is not statistically significant in any of these equations, further suggesting that such coverage is not linked to conservatives' allegations of media bias.

## **Discussion**

At least in the short term, these aggregate-level data suggest that claims of liberal media bias by political conservatives during presidential campaigns, at least when reported in the media, are *not* driven primarily by patterns of overly negative coverage of the Republican Party candidate or overly positive coverage of the Democratic Party candidate. Rather, criticisms of news media by conservative elites have been most likely to show up in news coverage following periods when journalists are treating the Republican candidate relatively positively. Upon first glance, this seems counterintuitive.

However, we posit that claims of media bias reported in campaign news stories should be conceptualized as a product of the complex interactions of candidates and their handlers with journalists during the course of a presidential campaign. From this perspective, it makes sense that criticisms of the news media would likely be reported by the news media when conservatives are able to exert substantial, favorable control over their message. The fact that claims of liberal bias in campaign news coverage were particularly present during the Republican Party conventions in 1992 and 1996 supports this perspective. These findings, therefore, may have considerable implications for understanding the “transactional” nature of the interactions among political elites and news media (Becker & Kosicki, 1995; Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998) and the relatively new and increasing “coverage of coverage” that explores the role, influence, and use by candidates of news media in contemporary political campaigns (e.g., Bennett, 1992; Jamieson, 1992; Johnson et al., 1996).

Our data also suggest, however, that control of news coverage may not be the sole factor contributing to conservative elites’ claims of liberal media bias. Across all three elections, the Republican candidate’s standing in public opinion polls was significantly related to the appearance of news media criticisms. In 1988, we found a positive relationship between the polls and claims of liberal media bias. This indicates that, at roughly the same time as Bush rose in popularity, the criticisms of news media became more common. In 1992 and 1996, in contrast, we observed a negative relationship between poll standing and claims of media bias. This indicates that, as Bush and Dole dropped in the polls, the criticisms of news media became more common.

There are three potential explanations of these results. First, conservatives’ criticisms of the news media in 1988—with critiques often directed toward coverage of vice presidential nominee Dan Quayle—may have resonated with some members of the public and contributed in some way (or at least conservatives thought they contributed) to the Republican victory, and, in 1992 and 1996, conservatives tried to replicate this strategy, but it did not work. Second, Bush’s rise in the polls in 1988 simply may have coincided with the period in which conservatives criticized news media, particularly in regard to coverage of Quayle, and, therefore, this finding is an artifact. Third, claiming the media are liberally biased perhaps has become a core rhetorical strategy by conservative elites in recent years, and the observed relationships between opinion polls and media bias claims may be due merely to the fact that the Republican candidate won in 1988, but lost in 1992 and 1996.

Only further research can answer this question. However, these results do suggest that complaints about news coverage are at least partly strategic. There might be several strategies prompting such claims of liberal bias, but one that seems likely is that the criticisms represent an attempt by conservative elites to cast doubt about the credibility of news media in the minds of voters. Research linking claims of liberal bias during presidential campaigns to shifts in public opinion about the ideological leaning of the press suggests such efforts are successful among some citizens (Watts et al., 1999). When considering campaign coverage from this perspective, citizens, particularly those with a conservative ideological inclination, well may become more skeptical of future news coverage that is critical of the Republican candidate or approving of the Democratic candidate. Such an outcome by itself may be sufficient motivation for these claims of media bias.

Further, these claims may have a consequential, direct effect on the relationship between politicians and the press. Republican candidates, officials, and their strategists may criticize the press with the goal of influencing campaign coverage by journalists, who are dependent on party organizations and other elites for information subsidies. Such efforts by political elites to shape news content may be linked to increasingly interpretive and analytical styles of campaign news coverage (Baughman, 1997; Rosenstiel & Kovach, 1999), which may be viewed with particular suspicion by conservatives aware of studies showing that journalists tend to lean to the political left ("Public Perspectives," 1996; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991). If so, conservative elites may consider such claims of liberal bias as a necessary mechanism for moving (or keeping) analytical coverage in line with their interests. It seems important, therefore, to examine what effects these liberal bias claims may produce upon subsequent news coverage. At the same time, the reporting of political elites' criticisms of the media seem, by their very nature, to represent a form of strategy- or process-focused news coverage of politics that scholarship suggests is contributing to public cynicism and declining confidence in political matters (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1993). Clearly, further research is needed on whether interpretive and strategic forms of news coverage are antecedents or consequences of the claims of liberal media bias that this study examines.

Finally, on a methodological note, one important feature of our regression analysis was that our lag structure was based on actual measurements. Part of the rationale for the lag structure was derived from research that has found news media stories lose their ability to persuade the public with a half-life of 1 day (Domke et al., 1997; Fan, 1996). A second part of the rationale came from our coding of bias claims, shown in Table 2, which indicated that once a claim was made, it often showed up in press content within a day or two. With the half-life decay being very short, the combined effective lag is still less than a week. The shortness of the lag is supported by Figures 1, 2, and 3, which show that the peaks of liberal bias coverage largely overlapped the times of the Republican Party conventions in 1992 and 1996. Therefore, had we used a lag as long as 1 week from event to press coverage, we would have missed the phenomena discussed above. This study highlights the need to understand the lags between the explanatory and dependent variables in terms of real time, and not times of data

collection, because time-lagged regressions will give artifactual results when they are based on data collected at time intervals that are longer than the delays in the system.

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