

Topics of New York Times Coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Campaigns

by

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Abstract

This study content analyzed topics of New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns. The functional theory of political campaign discourse, modified to examine political campaign coverage, was used as a theoretical framework. Analysis of data indicates horse race coverage was dominant in both campaigns, followed by policy and character coverage. 2008 exhibited large increases in the proportion of horse race coverage, particularly within campaign funding and expenditures coverage, at the expense of character coverage. A high, sustained presence of horse race coverage has been found in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2008. A dominance of horse race coverage fails to reflect the nature of actual campaign messages, has been shown to distort individual voting preferences and suppress voter turnout, and is profoundly antidemocratic. Conclusions are made to journalists for reframing news stories to include greater proportions of substantive coverage.

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I. INTRODUCTION

U.S. presidential elections provide many opportunities for analysis within the fields of political communication and political science. The stakes of any U.S. presidential election are enormous. The winner, inaugurated as President of the United States of America, arguably becomes the most powerful person in the Western World. Within the field of communication, scholars often investigate the various and plentiful communication both about and from the candidates in an effort to understand questions such as: “How does a candidate achieve the office of President?” and “How do members of the electorate make their voting decisions?”

This study examines through content analysis the topics of New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns. It seeks to understand the nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the two campaigns and the nature of the variation between them, the affect of the present study’s data on extant longitudinal trends, and the implications of these results on the electorate. In addition, recommendations are made to journalists regarding the content and focus of presidential campaign news coverage – not only expanding the literature investigating the topics of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns, but also demonstrating a pragmatic application of theory to journalism and news coverage of presidential campaigns.

Sigelman and Bullock (1991) explained that the 19th and 20th centuries contained three notable media epochs, the newspaper (examined in the 1888 and 1908 presidential elections), radio (examined in the 1928 and 1948 presidential elections), and television eras (examined in the 1968 and 1988 presidential elections). Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) explained that 1952 marked the beginning of the modern campaign era, as it was the first in which candidate television advertising played a role. Furthermore, Schudson (1978) has suggested that different reporting and presentation styles, as well as different standards of professionalism have defined each media era.

A number of studies examining the topics of newspaper coverage of modern presidential campaigns exist in communication literature. Previous research is rich and diverse in that it has examined every modern presidential campaign from a variety of theoretical perspectives. It is limited, however, in that a single study (cf. Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005) has advanced a consistent, longitudinal theoretical framework from which additional research can spring and provide meaningful comparison. Scholars who have not used this framework have often omitted or divergently defined common content categories in analysis, making meaningful longitudinal analysis ineffective or inappropriate.

Before additional research on the topics of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns can be justified, however, a growing uncertainty among scholars regarding the validity of the continued investigation of newspapers as a political information source – fueled by the job, circulation, advertising, and earnings declines within the newspaper industry – must be addressed.

Historically, newspapers have been an important source of information about presidential campaigns. Hollihan (2001) wrote:

For national political news coverage, the most thorough, comprehensive, and substantive information regarding political campaigns, political issues, and public policies is available to readers of comprehensive large city daily papers. (p. 79)

The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009) data indicated sustained losses in jobs, circulation, and advertising revenue have occurred within the newspaper industry throughout the past decade. In that time, The Project for Excellence in Journalism has reported a loss of more than 25 percent of newspaper newsroom jobs, 13.5 percent and 17.3 percent of circulation for daily and Sunday newspapers respectively, and 23 percent of advertising revenue has occurred. Influenced partly by the decreases observed in the newspaper industry and corresponding increases in the Internet as a campaign information source, some scholars have begun to shift their focus to the analysis of Internet news content rather than that of newspaper content (e.g., Eveland, Marton, & Seo, 2004; Eveland, Seo, & Marton, 2002; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000; Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001; Timiraos & Eveland, 2000). Implied within this shift is a concern for the continued validity of newspapers as a campaign information source.

The uncertain validity of newspapers as a campaign information source is addressed subsequently by examining whether newspapers cover presidential campaigns, whether the electorate reads newspapers during presidential campaigns, whether the electorate learns political information from newspapers during presidential campaigns, and whether those who read newspapers are more likely to vote in presidential elections.

Graber (1984) indicated that, during past presidential campaigns, newspapers devoted 13 percent of total news coverage to the campaigns. More recent data have suggested the percentage of news devoted to presidential elections has increased substantially. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009) data indicated newspapers devoted 23 percent of total print news coverage during 2008 to the presidential campaign. Of course, an availability of information implies neither consumption nor learning of that information.

American National Election Studies (NES) data from 1984 to 2008 indicated members of the electorate read a newspaper an average of 3.53 days per week during those presidential campaigns. Additionally, Hansen's (2004) analysis of NES data indicated 69 percent of the electorate reported using newspapers in an effort to learn about the candidates during presidential campaigns between 1952 and 2000. Analysis of NES data for 2004 and 2008 indicated, respectively, 69.7 and 54.9 percent of the electorate used newspapers to learn about the candidates. Data indicate the electorate has and continues to consume newspapers as an information source and as a means of learning political information during presidential campaigns.

Furthermore, Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's (2005) analysis of NES data has indicated those who have read newspapers have been more likely to vote in presidential elections than those who have not, an observation reinforced by the analysis of NES data from 2004 and 2008. Drew and Weaver's line of research has investigated the relationships of exposure and attention to learning from various media during presidential campaigns (cf. Drew & Weaver, 1991; Drew & Weaver, 1998; Drew & Weaver, 2006; Weaver & Drew, 1995; Weaver & Drew, 2001). The results of their most recent analysis

of Indiana residents indicated newspaper exposure and attention have remained significant predictors of voting in presidential elections (Drew & Weaver, 2006). Data from both national and local samples, then, have indicated members of the electorate who read a newspaper have been and continue to be more likely to vote in presidential elections.

Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) wrote, “the outcome of close elections can be altered by a relatively small group of voters” (p. 357). Benoit’s (1999) analysis of public opinion poll data throughout presidential campaigns designated close elections as those in which candidates participated in contested races with no clear leader. The analysis classified the 1960 (Kennedy won with margin of +112,817 (0.1%) popular votes), 1968 (Nixon won with a margin of +511,944 (0.7%) popular votes), 1976 (Carter won with a margin of +1,683,247 (2.1%) popular votes), 1980 (Reagan won with a margin of 8,423,115 (9.7%) popular votes), and 1988 (Bush won with a margin of +7,077,124 (7.8%) popular votes) elections as close. Hansen (2004), using the same method, labeled the 2000 presidential election (Bush won with a margin of -543,895 (-0.5%) popular votes) as close. Also using this method, the 2004 presidential election (Bush won with a margin of +3,012,166 (2.4%) popular votes) qualified as close.

Considering the number of close modern elections and NES data indicating those who read newspapers are more likely to vote in presidential contests, individuals who read newspapers remain a particularly important group to study as they have had, and continue to have, a disproportionate impact on the polls (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen).

The current study, using operational replication of Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005), extends the functional analysis of the topics of newspaper coverage of

presidential campaigns to include 2004 and 2008. The nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the two campaigns and the nature of the variation between them, the affect of the present study's data on extant longitudinal trends, the implications of these results on the electorate, and pragmatic recommendations to journalists regarding the content and focus of presidential campaign coverage contribute both to the literature investigating the topics of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns and the news industry.

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study, addresses the current debate about the topic and sample medium, and delineates the significance of the present research. Chapter 2 explicates the theoretical foundation for this study – the functional theory of political campaign discourse – and cynicism, a construct with implications for this research. Chapter 2 also includes a review of previous research examining the topics of newspaper coverage of modern presidential elections. Research questions derived from the literature complete Chapter 2. Chapter 3 comprises the methodology guiding the present study: the method of analysis, sample, unit of analysis, content categories, statistical analyses, reliability, and procedures used are fully explicated. Chapter 4 includes a full report of results regarding the nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the 2004 and 2008 campaigns, the nature of the variation between them, and the affect of the present study's data on extant longitudinal trends. Chapter 5 analyzes the implications of the results as they apply to the electorate, discusses contributions made to theory, makes pragmatic recommendations to journalists, delineates limitations of the study and suggestions for future research, and ends by drawing conclusions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study examines the topics of New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns. Using operational replication of Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005), it seeks to understand the nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the two campaigns and the nature of the variation between them, the affect of the present study's data on extant longitudinal trends, and the implications of these results on the electorate. This chapter fully explicates the theoretical foundation for the study – the functional theory of political campaign discourse – and cynicism, a construct with implications for this research. It also includes a review of previous research examining the topics of newspaper coverage of modern presidential elections. Research questions derived from the literature complete this chapter.

The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

Americans are inundated with political messages from various media during political campaigns. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009) indicated during 2008 cable news networks devoted 59 percent of coverage, radio news devoted 42 percent of coverage, network television news devoted 32 percent of coverage, online news websites devoted 25 percent of coverage, and newspapers devoted 23 percent of coverage to the presidential campaign.

Benoit, Blaney, and Pier (1998) have written that political campaign discourse is inherently instrumental, or functional, in that it serves as information with which candidates hope to win an election. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) have suggested that news coverage of political campaigns is also inherently functional in that it serves as information with which members of the electorate make voting decisions. The functional nature of political campaign discourse and political campaign news coverage is the primary assumption on which the functional theory of political campaign discourse is based.

Benoit and colleagues developed and first published the functional theory of political campaign discourse in the 1990s (cf. Benoit, 1999; Benoit, Blaney, and Pier, 1998). Despite the relative incipience of this theory compared with many in the field of communication, the functional theory of political campaign discourse has already been tested in a number of published studies (cf. Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Benoit & Hemmer, 2007; Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006; Benoit & Stein, 2005; Benoit & Stephenson, 2004; Benoit, & Airne, 2009; Benoit, 1999; Benoit, 2000; Benoit, 2001; Benoit, 2003; Benoit, 2007; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 2000; Benoit, Brazeal, & Airne, 2007; Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, & McGuire, 2003; Benoit, Pier, & Blaney, 1997; Benoit, Wen, & Yu, 2007; Benoit, Pier, McHale, Brazeal, Klyukovski, & Airne, 2002; Brazeal & Benoit, 2001; Brazeal, & Benoit, 2006; Lee & Benoit, 2004; Lee & Choi, 2003; Lee, & Benoit, 2005; Lim, 2006; Trammell, 2006). The functional theory of political campaign discourse has also been used to examine a substantial amount of longitudinal data, including presidential primary television advertisements from 1952 to 2000 (e.g., Benoit, 1999), presidential primary

debates from 1948 to 2000 (e.g., Benoit, Pier, McHale, Brazeal, Klyukovski, & Airne, 2002), presidential nominating convention acceptances from 1960 to 2000 (e.g., Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, & McGuire, 2003), presidential general election television advertisements from 1952 to 2000 (e.g., Benoit, 1999), and newspaper coverage of general election presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2000 (e.g., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005).

From the observation that political campaign discourse is inherently functional, Benoit and colleagues delineate five propositions on which the functional theory of political campaign discourse rests. The first proposition is that voting is a comparative act, meaning that voters choose to vote for candidates they judge as preferable based on whatever criteria are most salient to them (Benoit, 2003). The second proposition is that candidates must seek to distinguish themselves from their opponents, meaning that if candidates are indistinguishable they cannot be preferred. The third proposition is that political campaign messages are the means through which candidates seek distinction and preferability. The fourth proposition is that political campaign messages can take one of three forms: (1) acclaims, positive statements that enhance the candidate's electable attributes; (2) attacks, negative statements that diminish the opponent's electable attributes; and (3) defenses, responses and rebuttals of an opponent's attack. The fourth proposition of the functional theory of political campaign discourse also dictates that political campaign messages can occur on two potential topics: (1) policy, utterances that concern the candidate's past deeds, future plans, and goals with regard to governmental action and problems amenable to governmental action; and (2) character, utterances that

concern a candidate's personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals. The fifth proposition is that a candidate must win a majority of votes to win the election.

The fourth proposition, regarding the forms and topics of political campaign messages, was the focus of modifications by Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) to extend the framework provided by the functional theory of political campaign discourse for analysis of news coverage of political campaigns. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen have proposed that news coverage of campaigns can address six basic topics: policy, character, horse race, voters' reactions, scandal, and election information. They have further proposed that horse race coverage can be subdivided into eight additional categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, vote choice, fund raising, and spending. Each of these categories receives additional attention and explanation in Chapter 3.

However, the present study seeks not only to understand the nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the two campaigns, the nature of the variation between them, and the affect of the present study's data on extant longitudinal trends, but also the implications of these results on the electorate. A more in-depth examination of the fifth proposition of the functional theory of political campaign discourse informs a subsequent discussion of cynicism, a construct with implications for this research.

The fifth proposition is that a candidate must win a majority of votes to win the election. Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, and McGuire (2003) write, "This proposition may sound so simple that it is not worth mentioning. However, several key tenets of campaigning are implicit within this proposition" (p. 10). This proposition deals with the notion of campaign strategy, or more specifically balancing the various campaign

messages to distinguish one's self as preferable to enough voters to win the election. Implicit within this proposition is the notion that statements on policy, issues, horse race, voters' reactions, scandal, and election information win and lose votes. Benoit and Hemmer (2007) explain that statements on these topics allow voters to perform a simple cost-benefit analysis on each candidate. In the election, they suggest, it is the campaign messages, and the balance of the various topics of campaign messages, on which voters often base their choices. Thus research indicates that both the topics and balance of topics in political campaigns have implications for voting decisions in presidential elections. The following discussion provides additional support for this concept through triangulation with cynicism research.

Cynicism, the Horse Race, and Vote Suppression

Scholars have noted large decreases in political participation throughout the last several decades (e.g., Putnam, 2000). The study of political participation often examines one or more of four variables: efficacy, alienation, trust, and cynicism. Lee and Wei (2008) explain efficacy refers to the idea that one's participation can make a difference in politics; alienation refers to a lack of desire to be engaged in politics; political trust is defined as trusting the government to do what is right; and cynicism is a lack of faith in the government or individual politicians to have the common people's best interests in mind.

Yoon, Pinkleton, and Ko (2005) suggest that cynicism is the most frequently studied concept of political participation because of empirical evidence linking cynicism to vote suppression (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere, Behr, & Iyengar, 1993; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991). Horse race coverage also has been

linked to vote suppression. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) have found that horse race coverage can suppress voter turnout and distort the formation of individual voting preferences by weighting the candidates' electoral prospects more heavily than their policy positions or character. Patterson argues horse race coverage, which necessarily emphasizes why a candidate took a particular action or stand over what the particular action or stand was, presents candidates as strategic players who position themselves in politically advantageous ways devoid of sincere identity with societal issues. Capella and Jamieson's results indicate this type of news presentation – regardless of the type of media – can activate cynicism among the audience. Their results indicate these effects are additive for different types of media. Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1995) results indicate the relationship between horse race coverage and cynicism is stronger among independent voters, who have been more likely to completely withdraw from the political process including voting.

Cynicism research has implications for the functional theory of political campaign discourse and the study of newspaper topics of presidential campaigns, particularly if it can be shown that horse race coverage dominates substantive campaign coverage. Voting is the most effective means through which members of the electorate can voice their opinion and select among candidates those whom most closely mirror their own policy positions and display appealing character traits. However, the research reviewed subsequently indicates horse race coverage – which the results of numerous scholarly studies have linked to cynicism, vote suppression and distortion – has been the most common form of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns. A dominance of horse race coverage poses a serious threat to democracy in that as voter participation declines,

winning candidates and their policy positions have the potential to become less representative of their publics. Ansolbehere and Iyengar (1995) do suggest, however, that reversing coverage trends and reducing the emphasis on horse race coverage can likewise reverse the growing cynicism regarding the American political system.

Review of Previous Research

After discussing the theoretical foundations of the study, it is now appropriate to review previous research examining the topics of newspaper coverage of modern presidential campaigns. As mentioned previously, this research is rich and diverse in that it has examined every modern presidential campaign from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Graber, 1971; Graber, 1976; Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999; Klein & Maccoby, 1954; Mantler & Whiteman, 1995; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Miller & Denham, 1994; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Russonello & Wolf, 1979; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Stempel & Windhauser, 1991; Stoval, 1982; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). It is limited, however, in that common content categories have sometimes been missing or, more frequently, divergently defined by various researchers. For example, Graber's (1971, 1976) analyses of newspaper coverage of the 1968 and 1972 campaigns used 63 categories: 34 concerned character, 28 concerned policy, and one concerned all social problems. The classification scheme used is typical in that many of the categories – such as Communism, nuclear weapons, and the Vietnam War – were period sensitive. Several other researchers have also used period-sensitive sub-categories rather than more transferable general categories like horse race, policy, and character. Graber's classification scheme was atypical, however, in that it and the one used by Klein and Maccoby (1954) were the only classification schemes that

did not include a measure of horse race coverage, a category that, overall, the other studies in this review agree has been the most prominent topic of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns. Similarly, Stoval's (1982) and McCombs and Shaw's (1972) analyses were the only studies that did not include a measure of character coverage. Comparisons among studies using all popular content categories and those omitting some are tenuous at best.

One study (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005), however, has advanced a consistent, longitudinal theoretical framework from which additional research may continue to spring and provide meaningful comparisons. Using the functional theory of political campaign discourse, modified for analyzing news coverage as detailed previously, Benoit, Stein, and Hansen examined New York Times coverage of presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2000. Topics of news coverage were designated as one of six general content categories: horse race, character, policy, voters, scandal, and election information. In addition, types of horse race coverage were further divided into eight sub categories: strategy, events, poll, prediction, endorsement, vote choice, fund raising, and spending.

The different coding schemes used by the authors of the previous research reviewed here necessitate comparing only the three most popular and consistently used content categories so that comparisons can be made appropriately. The three categories include horse race coverage, which provides a candidate's comparative standing among contenders, policy coverage, which provides a candidate's position on an issue, and character coverage, which comments on a candidate's personal qualities, leadership

ability, and ideas. Data has indicated, however, these three categories comprised 96 percent of all newspaper coverage from 1952 to 2000 (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005)

The subsequent review of previous research, organized chronologically, begins with studies that examined the first modern presidential campaign of 1952 and extends through 2004, the most recent campaign for which published analysis on the topics of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns was found. A discussion for each campaign year describes all pertinent studies, any methodological information that may have affected the outcome, the results, and any analysis appropriate for that year. A graphical representation of the results of all studies for years in which three or more studies exist accompanies each applicable discussion.

The 1952 presidential election between Eisenhower and Stevenson was the subject of two studies (i.e., Klein & Maccoby, 1954; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Klein and Maccoby examined 371 front-page stories appearing in eight major metropolitan daily newspapers, four of which supported the Republican candidate (Eisenhower) and four of which supported the Democratic candidate (Stevenson), in the one month preceding the 1952 presidential election. Their results indicated 60.4 percent of coverage concerned policy and 15.7 percent concerned character. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results for the 1952 presidential campaign indicated far different results: 58 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 5 percent concerned policy, and 34 percent concerned character. While Klein and Maccoby's classification scheme did not include a category for measuring horse race coverage, it is rare that two studies in a given year disagree so sharply on the remaining content categories in common. Further examination of Klein and Maccoby's methodology indicates that the actual names of newspapers used

in their study are not listed. A difference in the sources from which data were gathered, then, cannot be discounted. Another likely contributing factor in the divergent findings is Klein and Maccoby's categorization of 19.4 percent of all coverage as miscellaneous. Keyton (2006) has suggested that a miscellaneous or other category including more than 5 percent of all cases reflects a failure of the classification scheme. Analysis of the only study to include all three variables for this year indicated that coverage of the 1952 campaign focused far more horse race coverage, specifically predictions, campaign events, and poll data, than on the character and policy positions of either candidate (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen).

The 1956 presidential election between Eisenhower and Stevenson was the subject of only one study (i.e., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results indicated 38 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 29 percent concerned policy, and 31 percent concerned character. Compared with their results from 1952, the coverage of this rematch between Eisenhower and Stevenson was balanced in relatively similar proportions of all three topics were found. The 1952 campaign, then, saw a large increase in the coverage of candidate policy positions.

The 1960 presidential election between Kennedy and Nixon was the subject of only one study (i.e., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results indicated 40 percent of the coverage concerned horse race, 15 percent concerned policy, and 41 percent concerned character. Data indicated the New York Times focused nearly as much on strategy, campaign events, and endorsements as candidate policy positions. In comparison with previous campaigns, coverage of the 1960 presidential campaign more closely resembled that of the 1952 campaign.

The 1964 presidential election between Johnson and Goldwater was the subject of only one study (i.e., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results indicated 64 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 17 percent concerned policy, and 18 percent concerned character. Their results indicated coverage of the 1964 election included the highest proportion of horse race coverage of any modern presidential campaign. During this campaign, coverage of poll data was more prevalent than coverage of either the candidate's policy positions or character.

The 1968 presidential election between Nixon and Humphrey was the subject of five studies (i.e., Graber, 1971; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Russonello & Wolf, 1979; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Graber examined 3,163 stories appearing in 20 major metropolitan newspapers in the four weeks preceding the 1968 presidential election. Graber's analysis did not include a category for horse race coverage; however, they indicated 33.9 percent of coverage concerned policy and 66.1 percent concerned character. In addition, McCombs and Shaw examined two local, one regional, and one national newspaper (as well as two news magazines and two national evening television news programs) in the three weeks preceding the 1968 presidential election. Their analysis did not include a category for character; however, they indicated 63 percent of coverage concerned horse race and 37 percent concerned policy. Russonello and Wolf examined one national and two major metropolitan daily newspapers in the four weeks preceding the 1968 presidential election. Analogous to McCombs and Shaw, their results indicated 56 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 22 percent concerned policy, and 17 percent concerned character. Sigelman and Bullock examined all front-page stories appearing in five major metropolitan newspapers during a

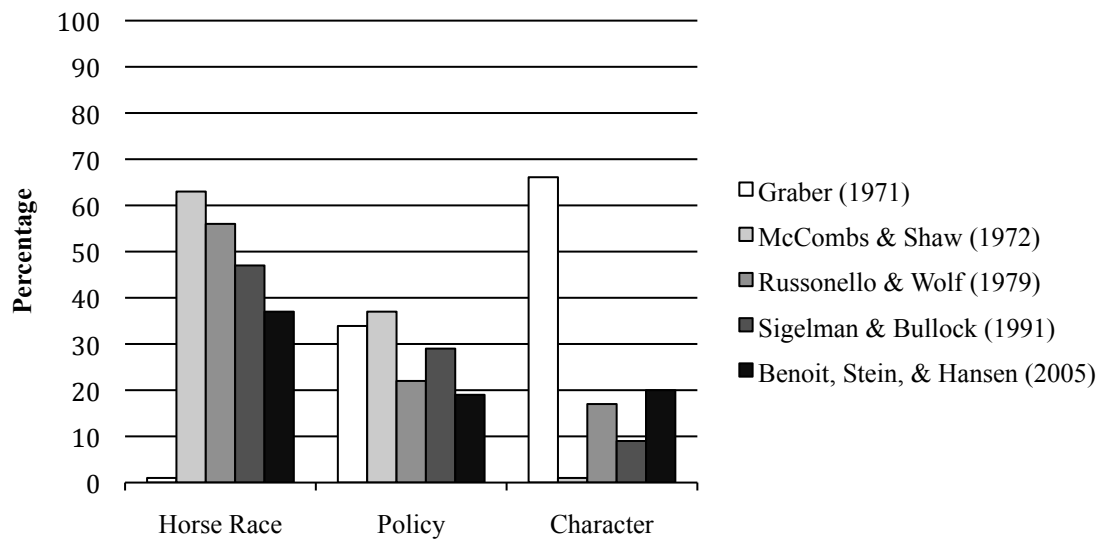
composite two-week period during the 1968 presidential election. In agreement with both of the preceding two studies, their results indicated 47 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 29 percent concerned policy, and 9 percent concerned character. Corroborating the results of other research for the 1968 presidential campaign, Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results for the 1968 presidential campaign indicated 56 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 17 percent concerned policy, and 20 percent concerned character, substantiating the other research for this election (see Figure 2.1 for a graphical representation of each study's results).

An examination of the different methodologies employed by each study yielded differences in both sample source and coding schemes. Even considering these differences, however – Graber (1971) and McCombs and Shaw (1972) each omitted a major content category in their respective coding schemes – remarkable similarities exist within the data. McCombs and Shaw, Russonello and Wolfe (1979), Sigelman and Bullock (1991), and Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) all indicated agreement in the rank order of coding categories: horse race coverage was the most common topic of newspaper coverage during the 1968 presidential campaign, followed by that concerning policy and character.

The 1972 presidential election between Nixon and McGovern was the subject of two studies (i.e., Graber, 1976; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Graber examined 4,826 stories appearing in 20 major metropolitan newspapers in the four weeks preceding the 1972 presidential election. Graber's analysis, again, did not include a category for horse race coverage and results mirror those obtained in 1968. Results indicated in 1972, 35.5 percent of coverage concerned policy and 64.5 percent concerned character. Benoit,

Stein, and Hansen’s results for the 1972 campaign indicated 34 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 34 percent concerned policy, and 29 percent concerned character. Analysis of the only study to include all three variables for this year indicated coverage of the 1972 election was balanced in that – for the first time since the 1956 campaign – it focused nearly as much on candidate character and policy positions as the race itself.

Figure 2.1
Distribution of Major Topics of Newspaper Coverage in the 1968 Presidential Campaigns



The 1976 presidential election between Carter and Ford was the subject of two studies (i.e., Russonello & Wolf, 1979; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Russonello and Wolf examined the same newspapers used in their analysis of the 1968 election in the four weeks preceding the 1976 presidential election. Their results indicated 47 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 21 percent concerned policy, and 25 percent concerned character. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen’s results for the 1976 campaign indicated 45 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 21 percent concerned policy, and 33 percent concerned character. The similar distribution of topics and consistent rank order of topics

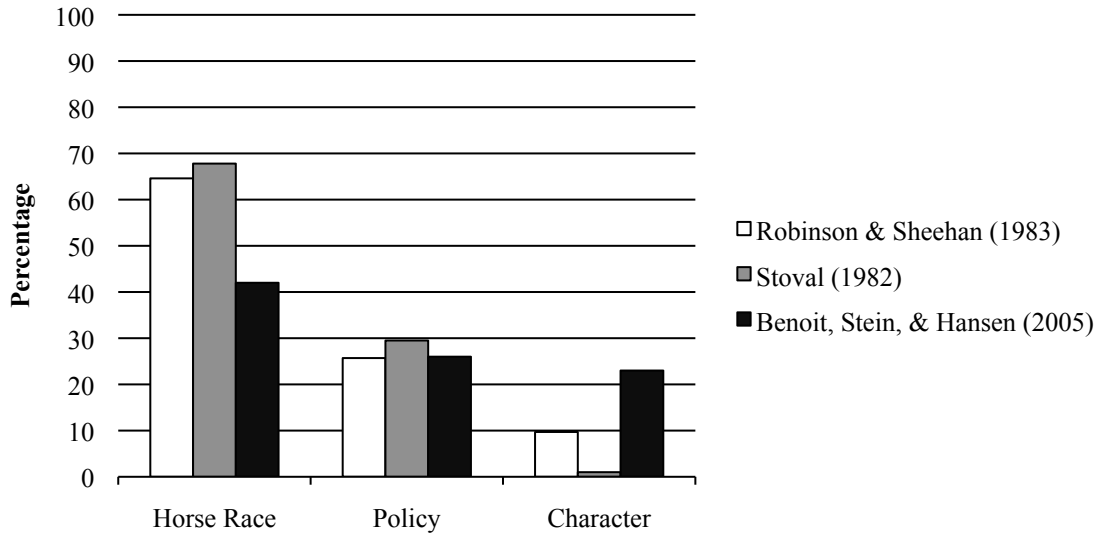
substantiated both studies' results for the 1976 campaign. Analysis of both studies' results indicated movement away from the balanced coverage of the 1972 election and an increased emphasis on horse race coverage – specifically that concerning campaign events and strategies – at the expense of policy coverage.

The 1980 presidential election between Reagan and Carter was the subject of three studies (i.e., Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Stoval; 1982; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Robinson and Sheehan examined United Press International wire stories in the 10 months preceding the 1980 presidential election. Their results indicated 64.6 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 25.7 percent concerned policy, and 9.7 percent concerned character. Stoval examined every issue of 49 daily newspapers of various sizes and locations throughout the entirety of the 1980 general campaign. Stoval's results did not include a category for character; however, they indicated 67.8 percent of coverage concerned horse race and 29.5 percent concerned policy. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results for the 1980 presidential campaign indicated 42 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 26 percent concerned policy, and 23 percent concerned character (see Figure 2.2. for a graphical representation of each study's results). Despite methodological differences among the studies – Stoval's analysis omitted a category for character coverage – remarkable similarities were found within the data. Robinson and Sheehan, Stoval, and Benoit, Stein, and Hansen all indicated agreement in the rank order of coding categories: horse race was the most common topic of newspaper coverage during the 1980 presidential campaign, followed by that concerning policy and character. Analysis of the two studies that include all three categories indicated results very similar to the

1976 election, only the proportion of policy coverage increased at the expense of coverage concerning character in 1980.

Figure 2.2

Distribution of Major Topics of Newspaper Coverage in the 1980 Presidential Campaigns



The 1984 presidential election between Reagan and Mondale was the subject of two studies (i.e., Stempel & Windhauser, 1991; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Stempel and Windhauser examined the topics of stories appearing in 17 major metropolitan newspapers in the 64 days preceding the 1984 presidential election. Their results indicate 5.8 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 59 percent concerned policy, and 21.9 percent concerned character. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results for the 1984 presidential campaign indicated 28 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 41 percent concerned policy, and 25 percent concerned character. The consistent rank order of topics substantiated both studies' results for the 1984 presidential campaign. Analysis of both studies' results suggested coverage of the 1984 campaign was atypical in that it

stressed policy much more, and horse race much less, than other modern presidential campaigns.

The 1988 presidential election between Bush and Dukakis was the subject of four studies (i.e., Miller & Denham, 1994; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Stempel & Windhauser, 1991; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Miller and Denham examined post-convention coverage of three national newspapers and, using computer-aided content analysis and word lists, calculated percentages of stories that contained terms specific to each category. Their results indicated 88.3 percent of coverage contained horse race terms, 95.3 percent contained policy terms, and 30.7 percent contained character terms. Sigelman and Bullock examined the same newspapers used in their analysis of the 1968 presidential campaign. Their results indicated 64 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 21 percent concerned policy, and 5 percent concerned character. Stempel and Windhauser also examined the same newspapers used in their analysis of the 1984 presidential election. Their results indicated 7.2 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 49.9 percent concerned policy, and 25.9 percent concerned character. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen's results for the 1988 presidential campaign indicated 31 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 22 percent concerned policy, and 42 percent concerned character. A graphical representation of each study's results appears in Figure 2.3.

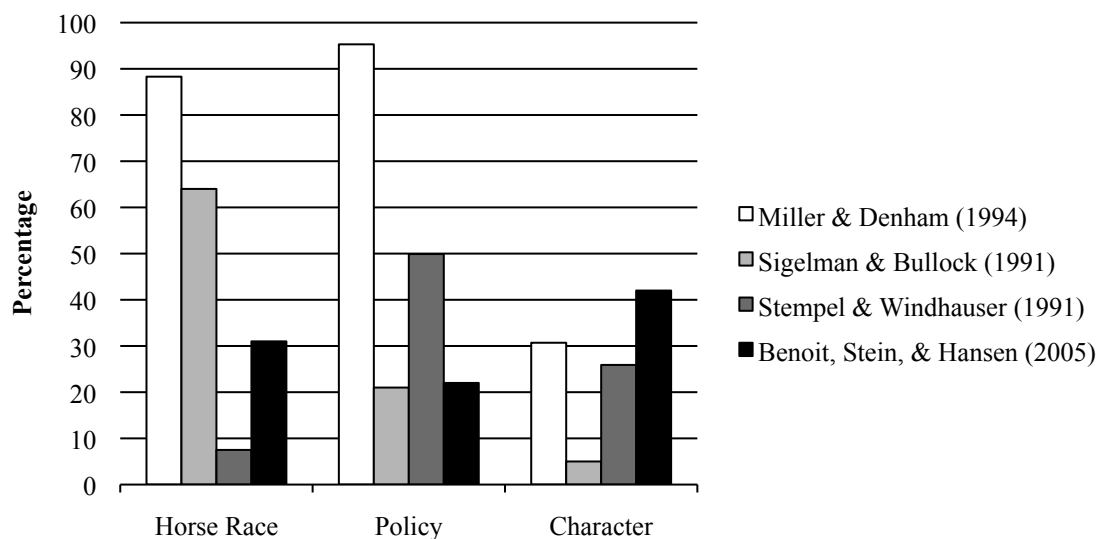
Despite using similar coding schemes, the results of the four investigations into the topics of newspaper coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign exhibited less agreement than those of any other modern presidential campaign. None of the four analyses from 1988 agree even on a rank order of the topics of newspaper coverage. Miller and Denham's choice of the story as the unit of analysis made valid comparison

with the other studies that used a smaller unit of analysis tenuous. Comparison of the remaining three studies suggested methodological differences noted among these authors in analyses of previous campaigns were exaggerated in the examination of the 1988 presidential campaign. For example, in their analyses of both the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns, Stempel and Windhauser (1991) found more policy coverage, but less horse race and less character coverage than Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005). In 1988, however, that difference was greatly exaggerated the two studies no longer agreed on a rank order of the topics. Also, in their analyses of both the 1968 and 1988 presidential campaigns, Sigelman & Bullock (1991) found more horse race coverage, more policy coverage, and less character coverage than Benoit, Stein, and Hansen. In 1988, however, differences are exaggerated in both horse race and character categories.

The 1992 presidential election between Clinton and Bush was the subject of four studies (i.e., Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999; Mantler & Whiteman, 1995; Miller & Denham, 1994; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Just, Crigler, and Buhr examined 80 randomly selected campaign stories appearing in local daily newspapers in four major markets during the eight months prior to the 1992 general election. Their results indicated 39 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 39 percent concerned policy, and 34 percent concerned character (note that coverage could sometimes be coded as multiple content categories). Mantler and Whiteman examined all first-section campaign stories in six major metropolitan daily newspapers for two constructed weeks prior to the 1992 general election. Their results indicated 41.4 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 49.5 percent concerned policy, and 9.1 percent concerned character. Miller and Denham examined the same newspapers used in their analysis of the 1988 presidential campaign.

Their results indicated 86.7 percent of coverage contained horse race terms, 80 percent of stories contained policy terms, and 5 percent of stories contained character terms. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen’s results for the 1992 presidential campaign indicated 33 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 28 percent concerned policy, and 35 percent concerned character (see Figure 2.4 for a graphical representation of each study’s results).

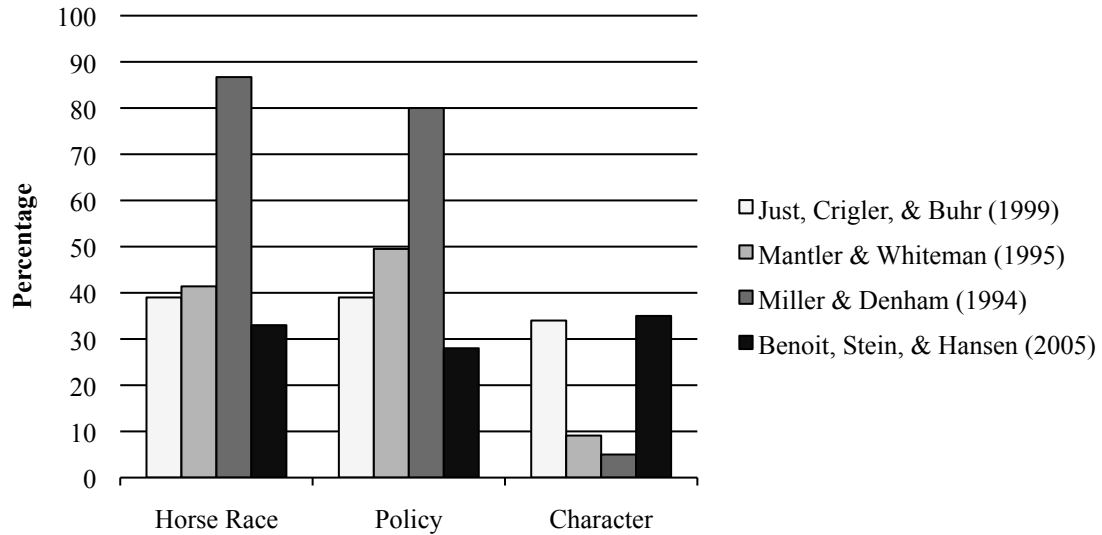
Figure 2.3
Distribution of Major Topics of Newspaper Coverage in the 1988 Presidential Campaigns



Miller and Dunham’s (1994) use of the story as the unit of analysis again decreased the strength of comparisons with the other studies. Just, Crigler, and Buhr (1999), Mantler and Whiteman (1995), and Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) all indicated agreement in that horse race coverage, policy coverage, and character coverage were all found in relative equivalence – for the first time in 20 years – during the 1992 presidential campaign.

Figure 2.4

Distribution of Major Topics of Newspaper Coverage in the 1992 Presidential Campaigns



The 1996 presidential election between Clinton and Dole was the subject of only one study (i.e., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Benoit, Stein, and Hansen’s results indicated 46 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 14 percent concerned policy, and 30 percent concerned character. Data indicated the New York Times focused more on strategy and campaign events than the policy positions of either candidate. The coverage of the 1996 campaign was a dramatic shift away from the relatively balanced coverage of the 1992 campaign.

The 2000 presidential election between Bush and Gore was the subject of only one study (i.e., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Benoit, Stein and Hansen’s results indicated 31 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 37 percent concerned policy, and 29 percent concerned character. Data indicated the New York Times coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign was balanced similarly to the 1992 campaign, emphasizing

policy positions over horse race coverage for only the second time in a modern presidential campaign.

Finally, The 2004 presidential election between Bush and Kerry was the subject of only one study (i.e. Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). Strömbäck and Dimitrova examined the front-page stories appearing in three national daily newspapers in the three weeks preceding the 2004 presidential election. Their results indicated 66.7 percent of coverage concerned horse race, 33.7 percent concerned policy, and 20.5 percent character (note that coverage could sometimes be coded as multiple content categories. Data indicated a shift away from the relative balance of the coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign, then, and a return to emphasizing the horse race over the policy positions and character of the candidates.

Several modest observations can be made from this review. First, 18 of the 30 preceding results indicate horse race coverage has been the most common topic of modern presidential campaigns. Additionally 18 of 30 results indicate issue coverage has been more popular than character coverage. In comparison, only 8 of 30 results have found issue coverage and only 4 of 30 have found character coverage to be the most common topics.

Another observation that can be made from this review is that Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) have provided the sole consistent and longitudinal perspective within this literature. Their results have generally corroborated those observed overall within the literature in that horse race coverage has been the most common topic of newspaper coverage over all presidential campaigns. A review of their overall findings is in order. They reported horse race coverage (40.1 percent) has been the most popular category of

news coverage overall from 1952 to 2000 followed by character (30.8 percent), policy (25.2 percent), voters (4 percent), scandal (.1 percent) and election information (.01 percent). Within the category of horse race coverage, Benoit Stein, and Hansen reported that strategy (34 percent) was the most common form followed by events (24 percent), poll (22 percent), predictions (13 percent), endorsements (4 percent), vote choice (2 percent), fund raising (1 percent), and spending (.3 percent).

Additionally, using correlation to determine longitudinal trends within each category, Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) reported two significant shifts in topics of coverage occurred from 1952 to 2000. First, they found a decline in the proportion of horse race coverage in modern presidential campaigns. Second, they found a significant increase in the proportion of strategy coverage – a type of horse race coverage – in modern presidential campaigns. That only two significant shifts in topics occurred among 14 different categories throughout 48 years suggests that the distribution of topics of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns exhibit few discernable linear trends from which predictions of future coverage may be made.

Research Questions

This study seeks to investigate the topics of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns by extending previous research. The first research question proposed for this research seeks to understand the nature of the topics of newspaper coverage of the 2004 and 2008 presidential election. The first research question is:

RQ1: What is the distribution of different topics of New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns?

The second research question seeks to understand the differences in the nature of topics between the 2004 and 2008 campaigns. The second research question is:

RQ2: Does the distribution of different topics of New York Times coverage of presidential campaigns vary significantly between 2004 and 2008?

Finally, data from this study for 2004 and 2008 will be added to extant longitudinal from 1952 to 2000 to examine longitudinal trends of the topics of newspaper coverage of presidential elections from 1952 to 2000. The third research question is:

RQ3: How does data from the present study affect longitudinal trends when correlated with extant longitudinal data from 1952 to 2000?

III. METHODOLOGY

This study examines the topics of New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns. Using operational replication of Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005), it seeks to understand the nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the two campaigns and the nature of the variation between them, and the affect of the present study's data on extant longitudinal trends. This chapter fully explicates the methodology that guides the present study including the method of analysis, sample, unit of analysis, content categories, statistical analyses, reliability, and procedures.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is variously defined and developed as a method of analysis by Berelson (1952); Berger (1991); Carney (1971); Krippendorff (1980); Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998); Stone, Dunphy, Smith, and Ogilvie (1966); and Weber (1990) among others. Neuendorf (2002) synthesized existing definitions of content analysis to create the following thorough and detailed explanation:

Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented. (p. 10)

Neuendorf (2002) suggested that not only should content analysis attempt to conform to the scientific method, but all aspects of scientific research when possible.

One of the goals of scientific research is establishing causal relationships by observing a relationship, a time ordering, and the elimination of all alternative explanations.

Neuendorf indicates that while establishing a causal relationship is a difficult if not unattainable goal, communication scholars should still attempt to eliminate as many extraneous variables as possible. One method of increasing the validity of research is through triangulation, that is, approaching a single hypothesis from a variety of different methods. Neuendorf writes, “The various methods’ strengths and weaknesses tend to balance out, and if all the various methods reveal similar findings, the support for the hypothesis is particularly strong” (p. 49). Neuendorf proposed an integrative model of content analysis that seeks more robust validation through triangulation, or linkages. Neuendorf explained several orders of linkages, including third-order linkages, which require external validation through a logical link between the variables tested in the content analysis and other studies on similar and related variables.

As this study seeks not only to understand the nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns, the nature of the variation between them, and the affect of the present study’s data on extant longitudinal trends, but also the implications of these topics on voting decisions in presidential elections, Neuendorf’s (2002) integrative method of content analysis is appropriate for establishing more robust validation through triangulation with other established constructs.

Therefore, the integrative method of content analysis will be used.

Among the decisions necessary before conducting content analysis are those regarding sample, unit of analysis, content categories, statistical analyses, and reliability, each of which are explained subsequently.

Sample

The New York Times, considered a newspaper of record in the United States because of its large circulation and reputable newsgathering functions, is the population from which the sample for this study is taken. Hollihan (2001) explains:

The nation's leading papers, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times, assign several reporters to cover political campaigns and the volume and quality of this coverage is impressive. Most of the work product of these reporters is shared with other media outlets through the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times/Washington Post news service. (p. 79)

While New York Times coverage should not be considered typical of newspaper coverage, Hollihan and Benoit, Stein and Hansen (2005) indicate it does have influence beyond the readers of the New York Times. McCombs (2004) adds additional support to this argument by noting that the agenda-setting influence of the New York Times is greater than that of other smaller newspapers. Data indicate, then, the New York Times may be an important newspaper to examine.

Generalizability is a measure of how accurate conclusions drawn from a sample are when applied to a population (Keyton, 2006). Neuendorf (2002) suggests that a random selection of messages – meaning every element within the population has an equal chance of being selected – must preface generalizing results of content analysis from a subset to the larger population of messages. Researchers began investigating the appropriateness of different sampling techniques for content analysis of news coverage in the late 1940s and early 1950s (cf. Davis & Turner, 1951; Jones & Carter, 1959; Mintz, 1949; and Stempel, 1952). Riffe, Lacy, and colleagues, who picked up the line of research in the 1990s, have published a number of articles on the effectiveness of sampling techniques for monthly consumer magazines (Lacy, Riffe, & Randle, 1998),

weekly news magazines (Riffe & Lacy, 1996), broadcast news (Riffe, Lacy, Nagoyan, & Kurkum, 1996), daily newspapers (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993), weekly newspapers (Riffe, Lacy, & Robinson, 1995), and daily newspapers in multi-year studies (Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin, & Chang, 2001). Their research indicates constructed weeks, a variation of stratified random sampling, is the most efficient and appropriate method of sampling daily newspaper coverage for analysis. Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin, and Chang explain the use of constructed weeks, created by selecting dates representing each day of the week from different and consecutive calendar weeks, eliminates concerns regarding the cyclical nature of media content that render simple random sampling inefficient. Their results indicate two constructed weeks of content is a reliable and valid means of sampling daily newspaper content for analysis of up to a year (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy). A number of recent content analyses of newspaper coverage use constructed weeks as a sampling method (cf. Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Bridges & Bridges, 1997; Carpenter, 2007; Cole & Hamilton, 2007; Coleman & Wasike, 2004; Hayes, 2008; Hoffman & Slater, 2007; Kim, 2007; Pasadeos & Renfro, 1997; Spiro, 2002). The present study uses a sample of two constructed weeks each for the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns.

As the present study investigates the topics of New York Times coverage of the Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns from 2004 and 2008, each sample of two constructed weeks begins the day after the end of the second national party convention and extends to the day before each election to reflect the coverage leading up to each election. The day after the second national party convention represents the pragmatic beginning of the general campaign in that it is the first full day after which

both the Democratic and Republican candidates are selected. In both 2004 and 2008, the Republican National Convention convened after the Democratic National Convention. In 2004, the Republican National Convention ended on September 2 and in 2008 the Republican National Convention ended on September 4. The day before the national election represents the pragmatic end of the general campaign in that it is the last full day in which both the Democratic and Republican candidates may campaign. In 2004, the national election was on November 2 and in 2008 the national election was on November 3. Sample dates are provided in Table 3.1.

| | 2004 | 2008 |
|----|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Friday, September 3 | Friday, September 5 |
| 2 | Tuesday, September 7 | Monday, September 8 |
| 3 | Saturday, September 11 | Friday, September 12 |
| 4 | Wednesday, September 15 | Tuesday, September 16 |
| 5 | Sunday, September 26 | Saturday, September 20 |
| 6 | Thursday, September 30 | Wednesday, September 24 |
| 7 | Monday, October 4 | Sunday, October 5 |
| 8 | Friday, October 8 | Thursday, October 9 |
| 9 | Tuesday, October 12 | Monday, October 13 |
| 10 | Saturday, October 16 | Friday, October 17 |
| 11 | Wednesday, October 20 | Tuesday, October 21 |
| 12 | Sunday, October 24 | Saturday, October 25 |
| 13 | Thursday, October 28 | Wednesday, October 29 |
| 14 | Monday, November 1 | Sunday, November 2 |

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is a standard, observable, and measurable unit that provides a consistent way of dissecting and analyzing texts (Keyton, 2006). Berger (1998) argues that without a standard unit of analysis, comparisons are either impossible or meaningless. One unit of analysis common in content analysis in communication

research is the theme (Keyton). Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) write that a theme is the smallest unit of discourse capable of expressing an idea. A review of literature examining topics of political campaign discourse and topics of news coverage of political campaigns indicates the theme is also a common unit of analysis in research using the functional theory of political campaign discourse. The unit of analysis for the present study, then – adhering to operation replication – is the theme.

Content Categories

Content categories are the useful distinctions a researcher makes and are often based on previously reported research (Keyton, 2006). Scholars often agree that categories must be exhaustive, equivalent, and mutually exclusive (Keyton; Neuendorf, 2002). Adhering to operational replication, content categories derived from decades of research on the topics of political campaign discourse and news coverage inform this study. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) suggest that news coverage of campaigns can address six general topics: policy, character, horse race, voter reactions, scandal, and election information. In addition, they suggest that horse race coverage can be divided into eight sub-categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, vote choice, fund raising, and campaign spending (Benoit, Stein, and Hansen).

Definitions of each category are drawn from a codebook (Appendix) developed by Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005). Character coverage comments on a candidate's personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideas. Election information provides dates of elections, financing laws, costs of advertising, information regarding registering to vote, Electoral College, or polling machines. Horse race coverage provides a candidate's comparative standing among contenders. Policy coverage provides a candidate's position

on an issue. Scandal coverage comments on accusations of wrongdoing by a candidate or a candidate's campaign. Voter coverage comments on groups of voters (other than polls and vote outcomes).

Horse race coverage is further divided into eight sub-categories: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, vote choice, fund raising, and spending. Strategy coverage comments on matters of strategy, including which states to contest, changes in campaign personnel, which issues to stress, or whether to participate in a primary debate. Campaign event coverage comments on campaign rallies, debates (who, when, and where, but not what candidates said), spots (not including what candidates say in spots), and other appearances. Poll coverage reports the outcome of poll data. Prediction coverage is that which makes speculation as to the outcome of the election. Endorsement coverage comments on or advocates support of a candidate in the election. Vote choice coverage comments on individuals or groups of voters and their preferred candidate. Fund-raising coverage comments on donations obtained to finance campaign expenses. Spending coverage comments on the expenditures of campaign funds. Each theme in every article in the sample, then, is coded into one of the six preceding general topic categories. In addition, every theme classified as horse race is also classified into one of the eight preceding sub-topics of horse race coverage.

Statistical Analysis

Keyton (2006) indicates chi-square (χ^2) is the appropriate statistical analysis for testing differences among categories when one or more variables are nominal. Keyton writes:

In principle, a chi-square examines the data to see if the categorical differences that occurred are the same as would occur by chance. Researchers compare the

observed frequency, or the number of times the category actually appears, with the expected frequency, or the number of times the category was expected to appear. (pp. 198-199)

Nominal variables, of course, do not have a numerical value. In the case of χ^2 , however, each number represents the frequency a category appears in the data. Keyton suggests that one-way χ^2 is the appropriate statistical test for determining whether differences in the distribution of cases across the categories of one nominal variable are significant. In their investigation of the topics of New York Times coverage of the 1952 to 2000 presidential campaigns, Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) use one-way χ^2 to test differences in the frequencies of the categories. One-way χ^2 is an appropriate statistic for determining whether variations in the distributions of topics in the New York Times within the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns are real or due to chance. Keyton suggests that two-way χ^2 is an appropriate statistical test for determining whether differences in the distribution of cases across the categories of two nominal variables are significant. Two-way χ^2 is an appropriate statistic for determining whether variations in the distributions of topics in the New York Times between the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns are real or due to chance.

Keyton (2006) indicates correlation, also known as the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r), is the appropriate statistical analysis for testing the linear relationship between two ratio level variables. r indicates the degree to which two variables are related. Relationships can be either positive (values on both variables increase or decrease together) or negative (the value of one variable increases while the value of the other variable decreases). The value of r determines the strength of the correlation – r can range from -1.0 (a perfect negative relationship) to 0 (no relationship)

to 1.0 (a perfect positive relationship) – and the greater the absolute value of r the stronger the relationship (Keyton). While Keyton indicates the strength of correlations is subjective, Guilford (1956) and Williams (1968) suggest guidelines for the relative strength of r (see Table 3.2). After converting frequency data to ratio data (percentages), Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) use correlation to test for longitudinal trends within each content category. Correlation is the appropriate statistic for determining whether data from the present study affect trends observed in extant longitudinal data from 1952 and 2000.

Table 3.2
Guidelines for the relative strength of r

| <i>Value of r</i> | Strength of correlation |
|--------------------------------|---|
| < .20 | Slight, almost negligible relationship |
| .20 – .40 | Low correlation; definite but small relationship |
| .40 – .70 | Moderate correlation; substantial relationship |
| .70 – .90 | High correlation; marked relationship |
| .90 < | Very high correlation; very dependable relationship |

Reliability

A measurement’s reliability is its degree of stability, trustworthiness, and dependability (Keyton, 2006). Neuendorf (2002) writes, “reliability is the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials” (p. 112). Intercoder reliability, or the consistency among different researchers when coding elements into nominal categories as during content analysis, is important (Keyton). Tinsley & Weiss (1975) note that intercoder reliability is crucial to evaluating the results of a study. They indicate that not only is intercoder reliability crucial to ensuring multiple coders understand and agree on the content categories, but even when a sole

researcher codes all elements of a study intercoder reliability should be used to show that the results are replicable, and not simply idiosyncratic judgments.

Keyton (2006) indicates reliability is expressed as a matter of degree. Keyton writes, “researchers use the reliability coefficient, a number between zero and one, to express how reliable their measures are. The closer the reliability coefficient is to 1.00, the greater the degree of reliability” (pp. 110-111). Both Keyton and Neuendorf (2002) agree that Cohen’s kappa (κ) is an appropriate statistic for measuring intercoder reliability for nominal data. Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) indicate κ is the appropriate statistic for measuring intercoder reliability in their content analysis of the topics of New York Times coverage of presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2000. Banerjee (1999) suggests that, for κ , .75+ indicates excellent agreement beyond chance. The formula for calculating κ is as follows:

$$\frac{PA_O - PA_E}{1 - PA_E}$$

where PA_O stands for proportion agreement observed and PA_E stands for proportion agreement expected by chance (Neuendorf). κ , then, will allow the present study to adhere to operational replication as well as adequately assess intercoder reliability.

Procedure

Articles published in the New York Times on one of the sample dates (see Table 3.1) were located using LexisNexis academic databases and included for analysis so long as: (1) they included the name of either or both the Democratic or Republican candidate, (2) the subject of the article was primarily about the campaign(s) or candidate(s); and (3) the articles originated from a news desk (editorials, letters to the editor, and political cartoons were excluded from analysis).

Additional articles meeting the above criteria but published in the New York Times on dates adjacent to sample dates were also located using LexisNexis academic databases and collected for coder training. Both the author and a second coder with a Ph.D in mass communication read and discussed the codebook to achieve a mutual and full understanding of each content category.

The author of the study read each article in the sample in its entirety and, using the guidelines detailed by Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, and McGuire (2003), subdivided each story by the unit of analysis – the theme. Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, and McGuire write that naturally occurring discourse is enthymematic –arguments are often implied or unexpressed – and consequently themes vary in length from a phrase to several sentences. They write, “The rule we followed was to break each part of a passage into a separate theme whenever we would have considered that part to be a theme if that part of the utterance had appeared alone” (p. 26).

Once themes were clearly delineated within each article, each theme was coded to fit one of the 14 content categories detailed previously: policy, character, horse race (subcategories include: strategy, campaign events, polls, predictions, endorsements, or vote choice), voters’ reactions, scandal, or election information (see Appendix).

After each theme was designated to a content category, the author entered data for each article and theme into an SPSS dataset, coding each theme for source, date, unique article identifier, and topic. Intercoder reliability was calculated on a subset of 10 percent of the texts within the sample using κ .

Content categories across each single year were analyzed using χ^2 to test for differences found in the distribution of topics of coverage within each year. Frequency

data for each category was then converted to ratio data (percentages) and added to extant and equivalent longitudinal data from 1952 to 2000. Finally, correlation (r) was used to test for longitudinal shifts within each category.

IV. RESULTS

This study examined the topics of New York Times coverage of the Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns from 2004 and 2008. This chapter includes the results of statistical analyses that aim to provide answers to the research questions delineated in Chapter 2 regarding the distribution of topics within each campaign, the variation of topics between campaigns, and the affect of the present study's data on extant longitudinal trends. The sampling techniques outlined in Chapter 3 yielded a total sample of 121 articles for analysis (67 for 2004 and 54 for 2008). Within the sample, coders identified 2375 separate themes (1366 for 2004 and 1009 for 2008). Intercoder reliability was calculated on a subset of 10 percent of the themes within the sample using Chohen's κ . Reliability for topic of coverage was .94 and for the type of horse race coverage κ was .83. Banerjee (1999) suggests that for κ , .75+ indicates excellent agreement beyond chance.

The first research question asked, "What is the distribution of different topics of New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns?" The question sought to understand the nature of how the New York Times portrayed each campaign to its readers. Both descriptive statistics and chi-square were used to analyze this question. In 2004 and 2008, the most common topic was horse race. This was followed by discussions of candidate policy positions, candidate character, and coverage of voting

groups. Coverage of scandal and election information was rare. Those topics made up less than 3 percent of themes in the sample.

Of the 1366 themes identified in coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign, 647 (47.4 percent) were horse race, 326 (23.9 percent) were policy, 233 (17.1 percent) were character, 125 (9.1 percent) were voters, 6 (0.4 percent) were scandal, and 29 (2.1 percent) were election information (see Table 4.1). A one-way chi-square indicates a significant difference ($\chi^2 (5, N=1366) = 1250.44, p < .001$). Limiting analysis to only the categories comprising at least 5 percent of the total (categories fitting this criteria account for more than 97 percent of all coded themes for 2004) indicated the differences between categories remained significant ($\chi^2 (3, n=1331) = 456.53, p < .001$)

Table 4.1
Topics of New York Times Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Campaign

| Topic | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Horse Race | 647 | 47.4 |
| Policy | 326 | 23.9 |
| Character | 233 | 17.1 |
| Voters | 125 | 9.1 |
| Scandal | 6 | 0.4 |
| Election Information | 29 | 2.1 |
| Total | 1366 | 100 |

Of the 647 horse race themes identified in coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign, 343 (52.9 percent) were strategy, 124 (19.2 percent) were campaign events, 82 (12.7 percent) were poll, 19 (2.9 percent) were prediction, 12 (1.9 percent) were endorsements, 12 (1.9 percent) were vote choice, 27 (4.2 percent) were fund raising, and 28 (4.3 percent) were campaign expenditures (see Table 4.2). A one-way chi-square indicates a significant difference ($\chi^2 (7, n=647) = 1107.70, p < .001$). Limiting analysis

to only the horse race categories comprising at least 5 percent of the total (categories that fit this criteria account for nearly 85 percent of total coded horse race themes for 2004) indicated the differences between categories remained significant ($\chi^2 (2, n=549) = 214.66, p < .001$).

Table 4.2
Types of Horse Race Coverage in New York Times Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Campaign

| Topic | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Strategy | 343 | 52.9 |
| Campaign Events | 124 | 19.2 |
| Poll | 82 | 12.7 |
| Prediction | 19 | 2.9 |
| Endorsements | 12 | 1.9 |
| Vote Choice | 12 | 1.9 |
| Fund Raising | 27 | 4.2 |
| Campaign Expenditures | 28 | 4.3 |
| Total | 647 | 100 |

Of the 1009 themes identified in coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign, 593 (58.8 percent) were horse race, 203 (20.1 percent) were policy, 130 (12.9 percent) were character, 75 (7.4 percent) were voters, 2 (0.2 percent) were scandal, and 6 (0.6 percent) were election information (see Table 4.3). A one-way chi-square indicates a significant difference ($\chi^2 (5, N=1009) = 11461.31, p < .001$). Limiting analysis to only the categories comprising at least 5 percent of the total (categories fitting this criteria account for more than 99 percent of all coded themes for 2008) indicated the differences between categories remained significant ($\chi^2 (3, n=1001) = 658.87, p < .001$).

Table 4.3
Topics of New York Times Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Campaign

| Topic | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-------------|------------|
| Horse Race | 593 | 58.8 |
| Policy | 203 | 20.1 |
| Character | 130 | 12.9 |
| Voters | 75 | 7.4 |
| Scandal | 2 | 0.2 |
| Election Information | 6 | 0.6 |
| Total | 1009 | 100 |

Of the 593 horse race themes identified in coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign, 249 (42.0 percent) were strategy, 135 (22.8 percent) were campaign events, 60 (10.1 percent) were fund raising, 59 (9.9 percent) were poll, 45 (7.6 percent) were prediction, 29 (4.9 percent) were campaign expenditures, 16 (2.7 percent) were vote choice, , and 0 (0 percent) were endorsements (see Table 4.4). A one-way chi-square confirmed that the topics occurred with significantly different frequencies ($\chi^2 (7, N=647) = 1107.70, p < .001$). Limiting analysis to only the horse race categories comprising at least 5 percent of the total (categories that fit this criteria account for more than 92 percent of total coded horse race themes for 2008) indicated the differences between categories remained significant ($\chi^2 (4, N=548) = 267.07, p < .001$).

The second research question asked, “Does the distribution of topics of New York Times coverage of presidential campaigns vary significantly from 2004 to 2008?” The question sought to understand whether the New York Times portrayed the two campaigns differently to its readers. Both descriptive statistics and chi-square were used to answer this question. As indicated previously, analysis of the frequency with which the topics of coverage appeared in both 2004 and 2008 yielded a consistent rank order: horse race

coverage was most common, followed by discussions of candidate policy positions, candidate character, and voting groups, election information, and coverage of scandals (see Tables 4.1 and 4.3). Two-way chi-square indicates the topics of New York Times coverage occurred in significantly different proportions in 2004 and 2008 ($\chi^2 (5, N=2375) = 36.96, p < .001, V=.13$) (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.4
Types of Horse Race Coverage in New York Times Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Campaign

| Topic | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|
| Strategy | 249 | 42.0 |
| Campaign Events | 135 | 22.8 |
| Poll | 59 | 9.9 |
| Prediction | 45 | 7.6 |
| Endorsements | 0 | 0 |
| Vote Choice | 16 | 2.7 |
| Fund Raising | 60 | 10.1 |
| Campaign Expenditures | 29 | 4.9 |
| Total | 646 | 100 |

Table 4.5
Topics of New York Times Coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Campaigns

| | Horse race | Policy | Character | Voter | Scandal | Election Information |
|---------------------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|----------------------|
| 2004 (<i>n</i> =1366) | 647 | 326 | 233 | 125 | 6 | 29 |
| 2008 (<i>n</i> =1009) | 593 | 203 | 130 | 75 | 2 | 6 |
| Total | 1240 | 529 | 363 | 200 | 8 | 35 |

The frequency with which the types of horse race coverage appeared yielded less consistency (see Tables 4.2 and 4.4). The data indicate only the two most prominent

types of horse race coverage – discussions of strategy and campaign events – were consistent in rank order in both 2004 and 2008. A chi-square confirmed the types of horse race coverage in New York Times presidential campaign coverage occurred in significantly different proportions in 2004 and 2008 ($\chi^2 (7, N=1240) = 52.56, p < .001, V=.21$) (see Tables 4.6a, 4.6b).

Table 4.6
Types of Horse Race Coverage in the New York Times Coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Campaigns

| | Strategy | Event | Poll | Predi | Endor | Vote | Fundr | Expen |
|-----------------|----------|-------|------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| 2004 (n=647) | 343 | 124 | 82 | 19 | 12 | 12 | 27 | 28 |
| 2008 (n=593) | 249 | 135 | 59 | 34 | 0 | 16 | 60 | 29 |
| Total | 592 | 259 | 141 | 53 | 12 | 28 | 87 | 57 |

Note: Event is campaign event coverage, predi is prediction coverage, endor is endorsement coverage, fundr is fundraising coverage, and expen is campaign expenditure coverage.

The third research question asked, “How does data from the present study affect longitudinal trends when correlated with extant longitudinal data from 1952 to 2000?” The question sought to understand whether trends exist in the ways in which the New York Times portrays modern presidential campaigns to its readers. Correlations between the year and the percentage of a topic of coverage were used to answer this question. Converting frequency data for each category to percentages as detailed in Chapter 3, and appending the present study’s data to extant longitudinal data allowed the analysis of New York Times coverage of presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2008. Correlation confirmed only one significant relationship in the topics coverage of modern presidential campaigns: the coverage of voting groups increased over time ($r=.641, p < .01$). While

no other category exhibited a significant relationship, there were nonsignificant increases in policy ($r=.324$), scandal ($r=.366$), and election information coverage ($r=.318$), and nonsignificant decreases in horse race ($r=-.198$) and character coverage ($r=-.339$) (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7
Longitudinal Analysis of Topics of New York Times Coverage of Presidential Campaigns $n(\%)$

| | Horse Race | Character | Policy | Voters | Scandal | Election Information |
|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------|----------------------|
| 1952 | 197 (57.6) | 116 (33.9) | 18 (5.3) | 10 (2.9) | 0 (0) | 1 (0.3) |
| 1956 | 95 (38.0) | 78 (31.2) | 73 (29.2) | 4 (1.6) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1960 | 57 (39.9) | 58 (40.6) | 22 (15.4) | 5 (3.5) | 0 (0) | 1 (0.7) |
| 1964 | 60 (63.8) | 17 (18.1) | 16 (17.0) | 1 (1.1) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1968 | 103 (56.3) | 37 (20.2) | 35 (19.1) | 8 (4.4) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1972 | 50 (34.0) | 42 (28.6) | 50 (34) | 5 (3.4) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1976 | 82 (44.6) | 61 (33.2) | 38 (20.7) | 3 (1.6) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1980 | 92 (41.8) | 51 (23.2) | 58 (26.4) | 18 (8.2) | 0 (0) | 1 (0.5) |
| 1984 | 116 (28.2) | 105 (25.5) | 170 (41.3) | 20 (4.9) | 1 (0.2) | 0 (0) |
| 1988 | 98 (31.3) | 131 (41.9) | 70 (22.4) | 14 (4.5) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1992 | 173 (33) | 181 (34.5) | 149 (28.4) | 21 (4.0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1996 | 107 (45.9) | 70 (30.0) | 32 (13.7) | 19 (8.2) | 5 (2.1) | 0 (0) |
| 2000 | 102 (31.5) | 94 (29.0) | 120 (37.0) | 8 (2.5) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 2004 | 647 (47.4) | 326 (17.1) | 233 (23.9) | 125 (9.2) | 6 (0.4) | 29 (2.1) |
| 2008 | 593 (58.8) | 203 (12.9) | 130 (20.1) | 75 (7.4) | 2 (0.2) | 6 (0.6) |
| Total | 2572 (44.8) | 1570 (27.3) | 1214 (21.1) | 336 (5.8) | 14 (0.2) | 38 (0.7) |
| <i>r</i> | -.198 | -.339 | .324 | .641 | .366 | .318 |
| <i>p</i> | .480 | .216 | .238 | .01 | .179 | .248 |

Note: The correlations are between the year and the percentage of a topic of coverage. Data from 1952 to 2000 obtained from Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005).

Correlation confirmed four significant relationships in types of horse race coverage of modern presidential campaigns: the amount of strategy ($r=.641, p < .01$) and campaign expenditure coverage ($r=.548, p < .05$) increased over time and the amount of prediction ($r=-.544, p < .05$) and endorsement coverage ($r=-.565, p < .05$) decreased over time. Additionally, there were nonsignificant increases in vote choice ($r=.376$) and fund

raising coverage ($r=.382$), and nonsignificant decreases in campaign events coverage ($r=-.315$). Poll coverage did not exhibit a strong linear trend ($r=.098$) (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.8
Longitudinal Analysis of Type of Horse Race Coverage in New York Times Coverage of Presidential Campaigns $n(\%)$

| | Strat | Event | Poll | Predi | Endorse | Vote | Fundr | Spend |
|-------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|-----------|----------|---------|----------|
| 1952 | 19 (9.2) | 30 (19.3) | 29 (14) | 111 (53.6) | 7 (3.4) | 1 (0.5) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1956 | 23 (24.2) | 61 (64.2) | 1 (1.1) | 4 (4.2) | 4 (4.2) | 0 (0) | 2 (2.1) | 0 (0) |
| 1960 | 18 (31.6) | 18 (31.6) | 1 (1.8) | 5 (8.8) | 15 (26.3) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1964 | 10 (16.7) | 3 (5) | 24 (40) | 12 (20) | 11 (18.3) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1968 | | | 15 | | | | | |
| | 34 (33) | 37 (35.9) | (14.6) | 6 (5.8) | 6 (5.8) | 0 (0) | 4 (3.9) | 1 (1) |
| 1972 | 14 (28) | 12 (24) | 18 (36) | 2 (4) | 2 (4) | 0 (0) | 2 (4) | 0 (0) |
| 1976 | | | 13 | | | | | |
| | 18 (22) | 41 (50) | (15.9) | 6 (7.3) | 2 (2.4) | 0 (0) | 4 (4) | 2 (2.4) |
| 1980 | 19 (20.7) | 13 (14.1) | 46 (50) | 4 (4.3) | 5 (5.4) | 4 (4.3) | 1 (1.1) | 0 (0) |
| 1984 | | | 55 | | | | | |
| | 45 (38.8) | 6 (5.2) | (47.4) | 7 (6) | 3 (2.6) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1988 | 74 (75.5) | 12 (12.2) | 8 (8.2) | 8 (3.1) | 3 (1) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 1992 | | | 25 | | | | | |
| | 107 (62) | 33 (19.1) | (14.5) | 25 (2.3) | 1 (1.7) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (0.6) |
| 1996 | | | 21 | | | | | |
| | 35 (32.7) | 30 (28) | (19.6) | 21(3.7) | 4 (0) | 16 (15) | 1 (0.9) | 0 (0) |
| 2000 | | | 35 | | | | | |
| | 41 (40.2) | 24 (23.5) | (34.3) | 35 (1) | 1 (0) | 1 (1) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| 2004 | 343 (53) | 124 (19) | 82 (12) | 19 (2.9) | 12 (1.9) | 12 (2) | 27 (4) | 28 (4) |
| 2008 | 249 (42) | 135 (23) | 59 (10) | 45 (7.6) | 0 (0) | 16 (3) | 60 (10) | 29 (5) |
| Total | 1049(36) | 579 (22) | 432 (16) | 310 (12) | 76 (2.9) | 50 (1.9) | 101 (4) | 61 (2.3) |
| r | .641 | -.315 | .098 | -.544 | -.565 | .376 | .382 | .548 |
| p | .01 | .254 | .728 | .036 | .028 | .167 | .160 | .035 |

Note: The correlations are between the year and the frequency of use of a form of horse race coverage. Data from 1952 to 2000 obtained from Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study expands the literature on the study of topics of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns. Using operational replication of Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005), it provides additional support for the results of studies examining the topics of newspaper coverage of the 2004 campaign and is among the first scholarly investigations into the nature of topics of the 2008 presidential campaign. This chapter analyzes the implications of the results presented in Chapter 4 as they apply to the research questions, discusses contributions made to theory, makes pragmatic recommendations to journalists, delineates limitations of the study and suggestions for future research, and ends by drawing conclusions.

Discussion

This study investigated the topics of coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns. Specifically, it examined the nature of the distribution of topics of coverage of the two campaigns, the nature of the variation between them, and the affect of the present study's data on extant longitudinal trends. As discussed in Chapter 3, while a dominance of horse race coverage was found in coverage of both the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns, followed by substantive coverage of candidate policy positions and character, there were significant differences in the ways in which the media portrayed both campaigns. Still, the results of this study add to evidence

indicating horse race coverage remains the dominant focus of newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns.

As discussed in Chapter 2 scholars have linked horse race coverage to cynicism – a lack of faith in the government to have society’s best interests in mind – vote distortion – by weighting the candidates’ electoral prospects more heavily than their policy positions or character - and vote suppression – a reduction in the number of people who cast a vote in the election. The dominance of horse race coverage in New York Times coverage of both the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns demonstrated by this study, then, could have had deleterious effects on the electorate by heightening cynicism, distorting the formation of individual voting preferences, and suppressing voter turnout. Vote suppression is profoundly antidemocratic and poses a serious threat to democracy in that as voter participation declines, winning candidates and their policy positions become increasingly less representative of their publics. Recall, also, that research indicates the relationship between horse race coverage and cynicism is stronger among independent voters, who are more likely to completely withdraw from the political process. NES data indicates the proportion of registered voters who identified themselves as independent has increased over time. The dominance of horse race coverage in New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 campaigns, then, potentially activated heightened levels of cynicism, distorted voter preference, and ultimately suppressed a higher proportion of votes than in previous presidential elections, further exacerbating the potential that elected candidates policy positions do not accurately represent those of their publics.

The suppression of votes and potential for inaccurate representation of an elected official has enormous implications for society. Politicians who do not accurately

represent the policy positions of their electorate are more likely to make decisions that are not in the best interest of their constituency. With regards to the election of legislative positions, members of society risk the creation of laws, government programs, and tax levies that do not represent their own policy positions. With regards to the election of judicial positions, members of society risk the interpretation and enforcement of laws that do not represent their own policy positions. And with regards to the election of executive positions, members of society risk the execution of laws that and appointment of other government officials who do not represent their own policy positions. The implications of inaccurate representation are particularly enormous in a presidential election. The President of the United States serves as commander-in-chief of the armed forces with executive control over troop deployments up to 60 days in length, is charged with diplomacy with foreign nations, is responsible for the appointment of the heads of all major departments of government, appoints or nominates federal judges including Supreme Court Justices, and acts as a legislative facilitator by influencing legislation. The election of a president whose policy positions are not an accurate representation of the electorate, then, has far reaching consequences, increasing the likelihood that actions taken regarding military deployment, foreign relations, executive policies of every department of government, appointment of individuals who interpret and enforce the law, and even influence on legislation will not reflect the wishes of the constituency for the President was elected to lead and represent.

At least two possible explanations for a continued dominance of horse race coverage are explained subsequently. First, the decision to emphasize the horse race may be a business strategy. As a business entity, the New York Times' objective to sell

newspapers may at least partially rely on a dominance of the frequently updated and often contentious information during presidential campaigns regarding campaign strategies, events, poll data, predictions of outcome, endorsements, voter choice, fund raising, and campaign expenditures. Many researchers have described newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns using the metaphor of an athletic contest. Considering the success and popularity of the sports page among readers, the presentation of political contests, including presidential campaigns, as an athletic contest may be a business decision to entice additional interest in the election and sell more newspapers.

Furthermore, the success of the New York Times and its 15 community and metropolitan newspapers located around the country and the availability of the New York Times work product to other newspapers and news entities through its news service have resulted in a larger agenda-setting influence than that of other smaller newspapers. Considering the success, prestige, and influence of the New York Times and the declining circulation and revenues of many other newspapers, the trickle-down effect of the prevalence and influence of New York Times content continues to grow as smaller newspapers close bureaus, layoff reporters, and obtain an increasing proportion of news through services like that of the New York Times. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 consistently indicate the portrayal of political contests as athletic contests is detrimental to society, however, heightening cynicism, distorting individual voting preferences, and ultimately suppressing votes. Also, rather than increasing interest and selling more newspapers by portraying political contests as athletic contests, research indicates the New York Times coverage of presidential campaigns – and other newspapers through a trickle-down effect – cause increased levels of complete political disengagement. As

discussed previously, vote suppression, especially with regards to the election of the President of the United States, has enormous consequences for society.

Second, a dominance of horse race coverage may be an accurate reflection of campaign messages themselves. Robinson and Sheehan (1983) recount, regarding an address by Reagan, “we came away a bit sympathetic to the usual defense offered by campaign reporters who dwell on the ‘horse race.’ Some days there are just no issue statements out there to cover” (p. 150). And while this is undoubtedly true in specific situations, Benoit and colleagues offer longitudinal evidence to the contrary. Their analyses of nomination acceptance addresses (Benoit, Wells, Pier, & Blaney, 1999; Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, & McGuire, 2003), television spots (Benoit, 1999; Benoit, McHale, Hansen, Pier, & McGuire, 2003), debates (Benoit, Pier, McHale, Brazeal, Klyukovski, & Airne, 2002), and direct mail advertising (Benoit & Stein, 2005) indicate candidate messages emphasize policy over any other topic. Additional anecdotal evidence can be found within news stories in which campaign aids commented on campaign strategy often only under conditions of anonymity because, in one aid’s words, “the campaign discourages discussions about strategy” (Stevenson & Arhibold, 2004, p. A22).

Campaign news coverage that does not accurately reflect the messages of the campaign has important consequences for society. The vast majority of the information used by members of the electorate to make a voting decision comes through a mediated context – often the mass media. Comparatively few individuals acquire select political knowledge directly from the candidates during a campaign event. Even fewer individuals acquire substantial political knowledge directly from the candidates over the course of

multiple campaign events. Therefore, the vast majority of members of the electorate rely on the mass media's portrayal of campaigns to inform their opinions and make their voting decisions. That coverage of presidential campaigns does not accurately reflect the messages of those campaigns violates societal trust. That coverage of presidential campaigns does not accurately reflect the messages of those campaigns because of an emphasis on the horse race rather than candidate policy positions contributes to heightened levels of cynicism, the distortion of the formation of individual voting preferences by weighting the candidate's electoral prospects more heavily than their policy positions, and ultimately the suppression of votes.

Given the deleterious effect of horse race coverage on the formation of individual voting preferences and voter turnout, and considering that news coverage is not an accurate representation of campaign messages overall, it seems likely that journalists use a separate criteria for determining newsworthiness. CBS journalist Richard Roth explains why horse race often eclipses substantive news from a journalist's perspective:

I think there is a feeling that once the issues have been explained or explored they become a reference point. And rather than be repeated ... they [issues] are used ... to introduce some other aspect of the story, in which case, the biggest aspect would be the horse race. (Robinson & Sheehan, 1983, p. 150)

This perspective suggests an incongruity between the very definition of news and the publication of substantive issue information. How, then, do news editors define newsworthiness? A survey of newspaper and television editors found that conflict, proximity, and timeliness were the three most important factors in choosing whether to publish a story (Graber, 1989). Graber writes, "Conspicuously absent from their choice criteria was the story's overall significance" (p. 86). Other scholars agree that the incongruity is largely definitional. Patterson (1984), for example, writes, "Policy

problems lack the novelty that the journalist seeks [...] the first time that a candidate takes a position on a key issue, the press is almost certain to report it. Further statements on the same issue become progressively less newsworthy, unless a new wrinkle is added” (p. 61). The sustained dominance of the horse race in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2008 supports this perspective. Data indicate once the policy positions of candidates have been explored, the press uses the issues to introduce the majority of campaign coverage: the events, the news, the horse race.

Despite an agreement on the rank order of the four most common topics of coverage, this study also found significant differences in how the New York Times presented the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns to its readers. This indicates that while certain similarities exist in how individual presidential campaigns are covered, each campaign contains unique characteristics that shape the news coverage of that campaign. While coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign was relatively typical of past presidential campaigns, coverage of the 2008 campaign exhibited notable differences. Coverage of the 2008 campaign contained a dramatic increase in the proportion of horse race coverage and corresponding decreases among all other general topics of news coverage, most pronounced in the decreased proportion of character coverage. Within the types of horse race coverage the proportion of strategy coverage dropped substantially. This decrease was almost entirely offset by increases in coverage concerning fund raising and campaign expenditures. The subsequent discussion examines unique attributes of the 2008 presidential campaign that may have caused the changes in coverage between 2004 and 2008.

A first notable difference observed during the 2008 campaign that may have caused the atypical decrease in the amount of character coverage was the presence of the first African-American candidate to obtain a major party nomination. The nomination of Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention in August of 2008 shattered previously insurmountable race barriers for the nation's highest election position. The nomination of the first African-American major party candidate initiated prolific discussions about race relations and race as a factor in the 2008 election. Within the context of the topics of news coverage of the 2008 campaign, a decrease in character coverage may have been indicative of increased racial sensitivities among members of the press. For example, while Obama, who had served seven years as an Illinois state senator and three years as a U.S. senator, was unquestionably less experienced in legislation than McCain, who had served five years in the U.S. House of Representatives and 22 years as a U.S. Senator, editors and journalists may have feared statements legitimately questioning Obama's leadership ability – one potential topic of character coverage – might have been misinterpreted by readers as evidence of racial bias. Editors may simply have chosen to not publish some coverage of candidate character, then, to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation among readers.

A second notable difference in the 2008 campaign that may have caused the atypical increases in coverage concerning fund raising and campaign expenditures was the choice by Obama to refuse federal financing in lieu of private campaign financing for the general election campaign. The decision to refuse federal campaign financing – \$84.1 million in 2008 – made Obama the first presidential candidate to finance a general election campaign solely with private contributions since the public financing program

began in 1976. This surprise decision initiated intense discussion between the Republican and Democratic campaigns and made what ordinarily would have been a non-issue into an intensely covered horse race. Obama's choice to eschew public funding during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression caught many pundits off guard. However, reports of continual record-breaking fund raising months and corresponding record-breaking campaign expenditures quickly dispelled most strategic uncertainty over the decision. Data from the Federal Election Commission indicates Obama raised \$745.7 million to McCain's \$130.5 million (the Federal Election Commission allows candidates who accept federal financing to accept contributions for legal and accounting expenses), a difference of more than \$615 million. While these numbers do not tell the whole story – individuals, groups, and national and state parties also raised and spent money on behalf of the candidates – they do suggest why coverage of campaign funding and expenditures may have experienced an atypical increase.

Finally, this study investigated the longitudinal trends of topics of coverage in modern presidential campaigns. Data from the 2004 and 2008 campaigns were appended to extant longitudinal data and the influence of the present study's data was analyzed. Analysis of the data from 1952 to 2000 indicated few significant longitudinal trends – namely that horse race coverage decreased but strategy coverage – a type of horse race coverage – increased. The addition of the current study's results dramatically altered both the direction and strength of the extant significant and many of the nonsignificant trends. That extant trends are so readily changed both in strength and direction may indicate they are dependent upon atypical coverage distributions. Further investigation of extant longitudinal data suggests coverage of the 1952 election in particular was atypical.

For example, the coverage distribution of the 1952 campaign contains the second highest proportion of horse race coverage of modern elections. However, more than half of that horse race coverage – 111 of 197 horse race themes for the campaign– comprises coverage of predictions. Only one other campaign year comprises even 10 percent prediction coverage and most are composed of less than 5 percent. Furthermore, the placement of an atypical distribution year as the first election in the longitudinal correlation may have dramatically skewed results. While Benoit, Stein, and Hansen’s (2005) results indicate horse race coverage experienced a significant decline from 1952 to 2000, excluding only the results of the 1952 campaign, reduces the correlation to be both negligible and nonsignificant.

Rather than Benoit, Stein, and Hansen’s conclusion that the proportion of horse race coverage has slowly and steadily decreased in newspaper coverage of modern presidential campaigns, the removal of 1952’s atypical coverage distribution indicates a high and sustained presence of horse race coverage continues to exist. As discussed in Chapter 2, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) suggest reversing coverage trends can likewise reverse the growing cynicism regarding the American political system. However, as the proportion of horse race coverage has not actually decreased, and, in fact, existed at nearly record high levels in coverage of the 2008 campaign, it is likely that cynicism continues to exist in high and sustained levels among the electorate, distorting the formation of individual voting preferences and ultimately suppressing votes, and posing a serious threat to democracy by decreasing the representativeness of elected officials as previously explained.

This study supports the functional theory of political campaign discourse as a useful and valid framework for examining political campaign news coverage in the context of the medium of newspapers. Using operational replication of Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005), the functional theory of political campaign discourse was used to analyze the New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 Democratic and Republican general presidential campaigns, adding two additional years of data and analysis to this line of research. Despite the number of published studies that have used the functional theory of political campaign discourse for a theoretical framework, this study is among a very few in which Benoit, the creator of the theory, was not involved. Thus, the present study adds to a small body of independent research, which supports the functional theory of political campaign discourse as a useful framework for examining news coverage. This study also contributes to future research using this framework by providing a comprehensive review of published literature using the theory, modifications made to the theory to support the examination of political campaign news coverage, and increased replicability with a comprehensive chapter on methodology. Finally, this study contributes to the functional theory of political campaign discourse by making logical nexuses between the theory and research on political engagement, particularly within the research on the construct of cynicism. A contribution to society and the news industry is delineated subsequently.

Suggestions for Journalists

The preceding discussion of the implications of a sustained dominance of horse race coverage on the electorate provides an opportunity to discuss ways in which the definition of news can reconcile with the distribution of topics of news coverage to frame

fewer news stories around the horse race, reducing cynicism, enabling the formation of individual voting preferences, and encouraging – rather than suppressing – voter turnout.

While it is, of course, recommended that news editors publish a higher proportion of substantive news coverage of presidential campaigns – namely policy positions and character coverage – the recommendation as it stands remains at odds with the very definition of news as journalists have understood it for going on two centuries. Far more practical than redefining the very concept of news, then, is the idea of reframing the news. Implied by a unit of analysis smaller than an individual story is the idea that individual stories contain multiple topics of coverage. This observation is implied by nearly every study investigating the topics of news coverage of modern presidential campaigns. The present study, for example, analyzed 121 news articles and identified 2375 independent themes, indicating New York Times stories of the 2004 and 2008 campaigns contained an average of 20 independent themes each.

As discussed previously in this chapter, CBS journalist Richard Roth explained that once policy positions are fully covered by the press they are used to introduce more eventful (horse race) aspects of the campaign. Roth's observation however, is predicated on the assumption that the media has thoroughly discussed the issues of the campaign. Research, corroborated by the data investigated by this study, indicates this is not an accurate assumption, however. Agenda setting research indicates the media stress only the few most important issues, often leaving by the wayside those of less importance. Data investigated by this study lends support to this consensus, indicating only two to three issues in each campaign were thoroughly discussed by the press. Policy positions that were outside of this top few issues were largely left uncovered.

Yet many additional and important issues exist. Rosenbaum's (2004) article investigating the candidates' records on stem cell research provides an example of an issue largely unaddressed by the press. Thus, the major recommendation of this study, evolved from the observation of a journalist, is to cover a wider range of issues and corresponding candidate policy positions. But rather than cover simply the additional policy positions, which – in and of itself – is still largely at odds with the criteria used to determine newsworthiness, journalists should use the horse race to frame stories about these additional issues and policy positions.

In this scenario, while horse race coverage provides the context in which issues and policy positions are framed, it effectively reverses the emphasis on the article from horse race to policy. This structure also has the advantage of framing stories in a context that already meets the criteria of newsworthiness, using the latest event (horse race) data to introduce a discussion about any of a wide range of largely undiscussed issues and policy positions.

Limitations

Before drawing conclusions from the results in Chapter 4 and the preceding discussion, it is appropriate to discuss the limitations of this study. First, the population from which a sample was drawn was limited to a single newspaper – the New York Times. Conclusions regarding newspaper coverage of presidential elections from data gathered from a single source are necessarily more tenuous than those gathered from a variety of sources. A pilot study tested the feasibility of including additional levels of newspaper coverage – specifically the coverage of a metropolitan and community daily newspapers. From this pilot study it became apparent that Hollihan's (2001) observation

that most of the work product of the New York Times is shared via news wire services with other media outlets was, in fact, correct. Specifically in the case of the metropolitan daily newspaper, while that paper often created editorial content, the vast majority of news content regarding presidential campaigns was obtained via wire service, and often duplicated information in the New York Times. The content of the community daily newspaper was split similarly to that of the metropolitan daily newspaper in that any locally created content was often limited only to articles from the editorial desk while news content was nearly always obtained via wire service. Another complicating factor for examining community newspapers was a dearth of stories covering presidential campaigns. Locally and nationally owned community papers alike published so few news stories about presidential campaigns that any results gleaned would have been extremely tenuous. The presentation of replicated content by metropolitan and community newspapers would do little to increase the generalizability of the findings reported here. Also, as discussed in Chapter 3, the use of the New York Times was appropriate both because it facilitated operational replication and greater longitudinal trend analysis as well as its greater than average influence on the public agenda and prominence among even national newspapers.

A second limitation of the present study is the sample frame of investigating only the general election. While the practice of analyzing coverage of only the general election is extremely well documented in literature, it still represents only a portion of the entire presidential campaign process. Conclusions regarding newspaper coverage of presidential elections from data gathered only from the general election are necessarily more tenuous than those from data gathered over the course of the entire campaign

process. A pilot study tested the feasibility of including both the primary and general presidential campaigns in the sample frame. Differences in the number of candidates involved, direction of attacks, focus of issues, and campaign finance sources, however, resulted in both methodological and analytical problems solved most easily by separating the two parts of the campaign process into two separate studies as other researchers have done (cf. Benoit, 1999).

A final limitation of the present study is the investigation of a single medium – newspapers. While the practice of examining presidential campaigns using a single medium is, in fact, more common in the literature than the practice of examining two or more media, newspapers represent only one of the many media in which information is presented, consumed, learned, and used to make voting decisions by members of the electorate. Studies examining voter learning across various media are clear in that members of the electorate do indeed learn and make voting decisions based upon the information contained in various media (cf. Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). Additionally, Drew and Weaver’s line of research (cf. Drew & Weaver, 1988; Weaver & Drew, 1991; Weaver & Drew, 1995; Drew & Weaver, 1998; Drew & Weaver, 1998; Drew & Weaver, 2006) indicates a significant shift in the landscape may have begun as early as the 2000 presidential election – the first in which discussions of the use of the Internet as a campaign information source appeared. Although the Internet was not a significant predictor of issue knowledge, campaign interest, or voting intention in 2000, by 2004, Drew and Weaver (2006) indicate the Internet was a significant predictor of both issue knowledge and campaign interest. Although results of a scholarly investigation into the nature of voter learning for the 2008 presidential campaign have not yet been published,

anecdotal evidence included in New York Times coverage of the 2008 campaign suggests 2008 saw an unprecedented increase in the use of the Internet as a campaign information source, especially with regards to social media.

That taken into consideration, data from the 2004 campaign indicate newspaper exposure and attention remain significant predictors of voting in presidential elections (Drew & Weaver, 2006). Additionally, analysis of NES data from 2000 indicates those who read newspapers are more likely to vote in presidential elections than those who do not (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). Analysis of NES data from 2004 and 2008 suggest this observation continues to be true. Considering this as well as the number of close modern presidential elections, the examination of newspapers as a campaign information source continues to be important.

Suggestions for Future Research

Two suggestions for future research accompany the previous discussion of limitations. First, future research should examine primary presidential campaign coverage in newspapers to provide more empirical evidence regarding the ways in which primary and general election coverage differ. This research should use a methodology consistent with that demonstrated both in the present study and in Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) whenever possible, and could examine the topics of coverage of any number of modern presidential campaigns as extant research on the subject is scarce.

Second, future research should examine coverage of the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns among other media. This research should also use a methodology consistent with that delineated both in the present study and in Benoit, Stein, and Hansen

(2005) whenever possible, and could examine any segment of the Internet, especially those that are a part of the social media sector.

Conclusion

This study corroborated an increasing amount of scholarly data indicating horse race coverage has been the dominant topic of coverage in the majority of modern presidential campaigns. This continued dominance of horse race coverage has been shown to activate increased levels of cynicism, distort the formation of individual voting preferences, and suppress voter turnout. The relationship between horse race coverage and cynicism is stronger among independent voters, who are more likely to completely withdraw from the political process. As the proportion of independent voters continues to climb, political disengagement caused by a dominance of horse race coverage disproportionately increases the potential that elected candidate policy positions do not accurately represent those of their publics. In the case of a presidential campaign, the election of the President of the United States who does not accurately reflect the policy positions of society has far reaching consequences, increasing the likelihood that actions taken regarding military deployment, foreign relations, executive policies of every department of government, appointment of individuals who interpret and enforce the law, and even influence on legislation will not reflect the wishes of the constituency for the President was elected to lead and represent.

The dominance of horse race coverage found in the New York Times coverage of the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns is consistent with research indicating campaign coverage does not accurately reflect the messages of the campaign. Newspapers, the self-professed “watch dogs” of our government, violate societal trust by

inaccurately portraying presidential campaigns and emphasizing the horse race rather than candidate policy positions and contribute to heightened levels of cynicism, the distortion of the formation of individual voting preferences by weighting the candidate's electoral prospects more heavily than their policy positions, and ultimately the suppression of votes.

Additionally, this study's results refutes prior evidence that suggested the proportion of horse race coverage has decreased throughout modern presidential campaigns, instead providing support that horse race coverage has existed and continues to exist at high and sustained levels in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns. Thus, it is likely that cynicism continues to exist in high and sustained levels among the electorate, distorting the formation of individual voting preferences, suppressing votes, and ultimately posing a serious threat to democracy by decreasing the representativeness of elected officials as previously explained. And while vote suppression resulting from a dominance of horse race coverage is profoundly antidemocratic, as discussed in Chapter 2, reversing coverage trends can result in a decrease in cynicism and, over time, faith and participation in the American political system can be restored.

This study added to a small body of independent research supporting the functional theory of political campaign discourse as a useful and valid framework for examining political campaign news coverage in newspapers, contributed to future research with a comprehensive review of published literature and methodology, and made logical nexuses between the functional theory of political campaign discourse and political engagement. Finally, this study contributed to society and the news industry with a recommendation to journalists based on the results of this study and those of

extant research: Reframe campaign coverage so that horse race coverage provides the context in which issues and policy positions are framed, effectively reversing the emphasis on the article from horse race to policy. The recommendation has the advantage of framing stories in a context that already meets the criteria of newsworthiness, using the frequently updated and often contentious information regarding campaign strategies, events, poll data, predictions of outcome, endorsements, voter choice, fund raising, and campaign expenditures to introduce a discussion about any of the wide range of largely undiscussed issues and policy positions.

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APPENDIX

General Categories

1. **Horse race** coverage provides a candidate's comparative standing among contenders
2. **Policy** coverage provides a candidate's position on an issue.
Kucinich expressed a "desire to end the North American Free Trade Agreement, which he says costs U.S. jobs." Kucinich expressed "support for a national health care system."
3. **Character** coverage comments on a candidate's personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideas.
Kerry's new TV ad "touts his foreign-policy credentials as a military veteran and member of the Foreign Relations and Intelligence committees."
4. **Voter** coverage comments on groups of voters (other than polls and vote outcomes).
Experts in both parties say swing voters are a shrinking breed.
The television viewing audience for the highest-rated debate this fall – the October 9 forum in Phoenix on CNN – was smaller than the audience for the lowest-rated prime-time entertainment show on network television.
5. **Scandal** coverage comments on accusations of wrongdoing by a candidate or a candidate's campaign.
A sex scandal in the administration of democratic Gov. Paul Patton.
6. **Election information** provides dates of elections, financing laws, costs of advertising, information regarding registering to vote, Electoral College, or polling machines.
One in eight will be using the same type of punch card voting machines [in November's general election] blamed for many of Florida's problems.

Sub Categories

1. **Strategy** coverage comments on matters of strategy, including which states to contest, changes in campaign personnel, which issues to stress, or whether to participate in a primary debate.
Sen. John Kerry fired his campaign manager Monday.
Strategists for retired general Wesley Clark say they plan to take part in nationally televised debates in Iowa.
2. **Campaign event** coverage comments on campaign rallies, debates (who, when, and where, but not what candidates said), spots (not including what candidates say in spots), and other appearances.
The first debate among the nine Democratic presidential candidates will air 11:35pm Saturday.
3. **Poll** coverage reports the outcome of poll data.

Polls show [Edwards] in single digits in the two states that in January kick off the national delegate selection.

4. **Prediction** coverage is that which makes speculation as to the outcome of the election.

Clark, Edwards, and Lieberman appear to be in a tight battle for third place and momentum.

5. **Endorsement** coverage comments on or advocates support of a candidate in the election.

The two largest unions in the AFL-CIO bypassed Gephardt, a longtime labor ally, and will endorse Howard Dean on Wednesday.

6. **Vote choice** coverage comments on individuals or groups of voters and their preferred candidate.

7. **Fund raising** coverage comments on donations obtained to finance campaign expenses.

President Bush has raised nearly \$84 million since beginning his re-election campaign in May, and he has \$70 million of that left to spend.

8. **Campaign expenditure** coverage comments on the expenditures of campaign funds.

The North Carolina senator [Edwards] has spent more than \$1.5 million in Iowa and New Hampshire combined.