NEWS MEDIA, CANDIDATES AND ISSUES, AND PUBLIC OPINION IN THE 1996 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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There are two primary goals with this research. First, we examine whether news media were biased in coverage of the candidates or issues during the 1996 U.S. presidential campaign, as Republican Party candidate Bob Dole and others claimed. Second, we use an ideodynamic model of media effects to examine whether the quantity of positive and negative news coverage of the candidates was related to the public's preference of either Bill Clinton or Dole. The model posits that a candidate's level of support at any time is a function of the level of previous support (as measured in recent polls) plus changes in voters' preferences due to media coverage in the interim. This model allows exploration of whether news media coverage, alone, could predict the public's presidential preference in 1996. Using a computer content analysis program, 12,215 randomly sampled newspaper stories and television transcripts were examined from forty-three major media outlets from 10 March to 6 November 1996. Findings reveal both remarkably balanced media coverage of the two principal candidates, Clinton and Dole, and a powerful relationship between media coverage and public opinion.

In the U.S. presidential campaign of 1996, Republican Party candidate Bob Dole blamed news media coverage as the reason for his inability to overcome Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton's sizable lead. Dole contended, for example, that the *New York Times* only included stories unfavorable to him and not to Clinton.[1] Dole and other critics of the media cited as evidence a Freedom Forum and Roper Center Poll which found that 89% of the 139 Washington, D.C., journalists had voted for Clinton in 1992.[2] This claim of media bias has been supported in some research by scholars,[3] including work by Lowry and Shidler, which found that soundbites *about* candidates were substantially more negative toward Republicans George Bush and Dan Quayle in 1992 than toward other candidates.[4] Even some members of the media, including prominent journalists such as *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter

and former ABC-TV correspondent Brit Hume, proclaimed a "liberal bias" in the 1992 presidential campaign.[5]

In addition to allegations of biased coverage, news media have been criticized – by scholars, journalists, and the broader public – for devoting insufficient election coverage to campaign issues.[6] For example, Buchanan's content analysis of eighteen major broadcast and print media outlets over the final two months of the 1988 presidential campaign found that 57 percent of coverage focused on the horse race, 18 percent on issues, and about 8 percent on the personal character of candidates.[7] And following the 1992 presidential contest, although research suggests that issue coverage increased,[8] several scholars criticized news media for still focusing too much on process, strategy, and gaffes, resulting in a citizenry dissatisfied with the electoral process.[9] Traditionally unexplored by scholars, however, is how media discussion of campaign issues intersects with positive and negative media coverage of presidential candidates. Research exploring this relationship – rather than simply documenting which campaign concerns are emphasized – would shed light on whether, and how, potential biases in media coverage become manifest in various types of electoral coverage.

This research explores the relationships among news media treatment of the two principal candidates, media coverage of campaign issues, and public opinion in the context of the 1996 presidential campaign. Did Clinton persistently receive positive media coverage while Dole primarily received negative coverage, as Dole and others claimed? Was there a link between coverage of particular campaign issues – for example, the horse race, pocketbook and social policy concerns, candidate character – and the valence of coverage of Clinton or Dole? Most important, does evidence suggest that media coverage of the candidates contributed significantly to Clinton's large and steady lead throughout the campaign and eventual victory?

In answering these questions, we test a theoretical model of media effects that attempts to predict the public's presidential preferences *based solely upon media coverage*. That is, in building upon research that links media coverage with voters' preferences in the 1988 and 1992 elections,[10] we argue that the quantity of positive and negative news coverage of the candidates was strongly related to the public's preference of either Clinton or Dole for U.S. president in 1996. Therefore, this research has two primary goals: first, to examine whether news media were biased in coverage of the candidates or issues during the 1996 presidential campaign; and second, to investigate whether news media coverage, *alone*, could predict the public's presidential preferences. In exploring these relationships, we draw upon two sets of data: (1) campaign newspaper stories and television transcripts from forty-three major media outlets, and (2) a time series of 173 public opinion polls conducted during the course of the campaign.

A Model of Media Effects on Public Opinion

In our model, media coverage of the campaign is posited to have persuasive information that is favorable or unfavorable to the candidates. For the two major candidates, Clinton and Dole, relevant information could be pro-Clinton, anti-Clinton, pro-Dole, or anti-Dole at any given time$_t$. In our formal *ideodynamic model*, persuasive information is treated as time-dependent persuasive force functions – $F_{ProClin,t}$, $F_{ConClin,t}$, $F_{ProDole,t}$, and $F_{ConDole,t}$. Each F function for time$_t$ is the sum of the number of paragraphs in news media coverage of the appropriate valence, each one given its maximal value on the story date followed by an exponential decay with a one-day half-life. Previ-

ous research indicates that the one-day decay rate provides a good fit for the relationship between media coverage and public opinion polls.[11] The results and figures reported here use this rate of decay.

The model is based on the simple premise that a candidate's current level of support is a function of the level of previous support, the recruitment of the opponent's previous supporters that is stimulated by the mix of media coverage in the interim, and the loss of the candidate's own previous supporters that is stimulated by the mix of media coverage in the interim. According to this model, then, during the 1996 campaign the level of support for Clinton at any time – as measured in public opinion polls – should be the result of Clinton's previous level of support modified by the recruitment of Dole supporters stimulated by ProClin and ConDole information and the loss of Clinton adherents due to ConClin and ProDole media coverage. It seems plausible that the news media should be the primary source of persuasive information convincing the public to support one or the other of the two candidates because much of the public has no other consistently good source of information on the election. Thus, while we recognize that other considerations certainly may influence the public's presidential preferences, the primary interest of our theoretical model is whether news media treatment of candidates can be used to predict the distribution of opinions measured in polls.

In mathematical terms, the model is

$$\text{OpinClin}_t = \text{OpinClin}_{t\text{-}1} + (k_{\text{ProClin}} \, F_{\text{ProClin},t} + k_{\text{ConDole}} \, F_{\text{ConDole},t}) \, \text{OpinDole}_{t\text{-}1} -$$
$$(k_{\text{ProDole}} \, F_{\text{ProDole},t} + k_{\text{ConClin}} \, F_{\text{ConClin},t}) \, \text{OpinClin}_{t\text{-}1}$$

where OpinClin and OpinDole are opinion favorable to the two candidates, respectively, and the k parameters are the persuasibility constants describing the percentage of the population recruited by the corresponding paragraphs translated into persuasive force functions. In the 1996 campaign, OpinClin_t and OpinDole_t added to 100% since all undecideds and Ross Perot supporters were removed and the numbers were renormalized to 100%.

This ideodynamic equation is different from standard time series models in multiplying the persuasive force by the percent of the opponent supporters, those who can be persuaded to change their minds. This multiplication gives the correct result that no more recruitment is possible regardless of the strength of the favorable information when there are no opponent supporters left. Besides being necessary for theoretical reasons, the multiplication also has the advantage that it is possible to predict the entire opinion time series without use of measured opinion from previous times as explanatory variables – after a starting opinion value to initialize the computation. In other words, the computation is made iteratively beginning with the use of OpinClin_0 to compute OpinClin_1. Then this calculated OpinClin_1 is used as $\text{OpinClin}_{t\text{-}1}$ to compute OpinClin_2, and so on in a recursive fashion.

This use of computed prior opinion in place of the empirically identified opinion found in standard autoregressive models is enabled by the multiplication of persuasive forces by opinion values, all necessarily less than 100%. Unlike the case with standard autoregressions, the errors stabilize to a constant size and do not increase without limit, even though they are accumulated from the start of the computation.[12] Omitting prior measured opinion from the prediction has the practical benefit that opinion predictions can be made at twenty-four-hour time intervals, even early in the campaign when polls are infrequent and unevenly spaced in time. Also, the model is

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much more sensitive to effects of persuasive information because the variance does not include any contributions from prior opinion after the initial value.

Two types of data were used for this research. First, daily media coverage of the presidential campaign was examined for (1) positive and negative appraisals of candidates, and (2) types of campaign concerns emphasized. Second, a time series of public opinion polls were used to estimate citizens' presidential preferences throughout the campaign.

News Media Data. Campaign coverage by news media was drawn from the NEXIS database beginning with 10 March 1996, which roughly corresponds with Dole's clear emergence as the likely Republican Party nominee, and concluding with 6 November, the day after the election.

News stories were drawn from CNN-TV and ABC-TV news transcripts, as well as articles published in the following newspapers: *Arizona Republic, Atlanta Journal & Constitution, Baltimore Sun, Boston Globe, Boston Herald, Buffalo News, Chicago Sun Times, Chicago Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Columbus Dispatch, Dallas Morning News, Denver Post, Detroit News, Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, Hartford Courant, Houston Chronicle, Houston Post, Indianapolis Star, Kansas City Star, Los Angeles Times, Louisville Courier-Journal, Minneapolis Star Tribune, New Orleans Times-Picayune, New York Daily News, New York Times, New York Newsday, Omaha World Herald, Orange County Register, Orlando Sentinel Tribune, Phoenix Gazette, Pittsburgh Gazette, Rocky Mountain News, Sacramento Bee, San Diego Union Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, Seattle Times, St. Petersburg Times, Tampa Tribune, USA Today,* and *Washington Post.*

Stories from these news organizations were identified as relevant if they contained both of the words "Clinton" and "Dole," or at least three occurrences of either "Clinton" or "Dole." The 70,116 identified stories were then randomly sampled to retrieve a total of 12,215 stories, which were the combined result of five download periods: 4,565 of 25,362 identified stories for 10 March to 29 June; 5,485 of 33,228 stories for 27 June to 8 October; 1,054 of 5,570 stories for 6 October to 23 October; 747 of 4,031 stories for 21 October to 3 November; and 364 of 1,925 stories for 1 November to 6 November. Between 17% and 19% of identified stories were sampled for all time periods. Prior to analysis, the stories were weighted to correct for differences in retrieval percentages between time periods.

Once the stories were retrieved, two steps were necessary before analysis could be performed. First, the stories were filtered to remove text not directly relevant to the election. This was accomplished using the InfoTrend computer content analysis program, which reads a computer program in the FiltScore language in which the analyst enters (a) idea categories, (b) words that tap or reveal those idea categories, and (c) rules for how pairs of ideas in the text can be combined to give more complex meaning. At this first filtration step, there was only one idea category – *Candidate* – under which were two subcategories of "Clinton" and "Dole." Thus, the program eliminated all paragraphs that did not include the Candidate idea flagged by the presence of one of these two words. As a second step, we eliminated all paragraphs about Hillary Rodham Clinton and Elizabeth Dole, as well as paragraphs on the resignation of Dole from the U.S. Senate.[13]

A total of 8,100 of the 12,215 retrieved stories still had at least one paragraph scored pro or con after these filtration steps were taken, thus

indicating that the scoring instructions had general applicability. The remaining paragraphs were then coded for (1) positive and/or negative coverage of the two candidates; and (2) the type of campaign issues emphasized in the text.

To examine the valence of coverage of the candidates, paragraphs were scored as *pro-Clinton, con-Clinton, pro-Dole,* and/or *con-Dole* based upon several rules established to address the syntactical structures of sentences. Notably, although rarely the case, each paragraph could be scored for up to all four of these categories depending on the ideas expressed in the text.[14]

An example of text that would have been scored pro-Clinton is this statement: "Clinton has been successful at attracting women voters." In this sentence, the word "Clinton" belonged to the idea of *ClintonWord* while "successful" was a member of the idea of *EitherPro*. A rule established that an EitherPro idea within 35 characters of text from a ClintonWord, either earlier or later in the text, would be scored as pro-Clinton. An example that would have been scored con-Clinton is this statement: "Clinton's inexperience in foreign affairs has become a rallying point for Republicans." In this sentence, as before, the word "Clinton" belonged to the idea of ClintonWord while "inexperience" was a member of the idea of *EitherCon*. A rule established that an EitherCon idea within thirty-five characters of text from a ClintonWord, either earlier or later in the text, would be scored as con-Clinton. Notably, rules also incorporated negation produced by words such as "not." For example, the statement "Clinton has not been successful at attracting women voters" would have been coded as con-Clinton.

Two people selected a sample of paragraphs and coded them as a check against the reliability of the computer coding. The two human coders and the machine agreed on 177 of 230 paragraphs, yielding an intercoder reliability coefficient of .77, which was determined to be 69% greater than by chance.[15] This level of computer-human agreement reflects the limitations inherent with any computer-based content analysis. Confidence in findings would be substantially diminished, however, only if systematic biases (e.g., over-scoring of con-Dole or under-scoring of con-Clinton paragraphs) existed in the coding; such biases were not apparent at any stage in the development of category ideas and coding rules or during the intercoder reliability checks. Due to the randomness of any coding errors, the large volume of paragraphs that could be analyzed made application of the computer content analysis a strength of the research.

The paragraphs also were coded for their coverage of the most prominent campaign concerns. Issue categories were developed, discussed, and finalized only after extensive reading, by several coders, of stories randomly selected from campaign coverage; such an approach increased confidence that the categories, and words used to tap the categories, closely represented the discourse surrounding the campaign and candidates. The categories were general and abstract to keep the number of issues to a manageable size.[16] Depending on the ideas expressed in the text, each paragraph could be scored for up to all of the issues. The following categories were developed:

Character was assigned using a list of approximately 100 words implying both positive traits (e.g., coding words included "courage," "integrity," "trust," "confidence," "leader") and negative ones (e.g., "arrogance," "slick," "waffle," "allegations," "soft"), as well as specific scandals linked to candidates (e.g., "whitewater," "lippo"). Notably, computer program rules also incorporated the negation produced by words such as "not" and scored

variations of the root words (such as both "confident" and "confidence").

Pocketbook contained all discussion of economic concerns related to the general society (e.g., coding words included "jobs," "inflation"), including the federal budget and deficits (e.g., "debt," "shutdown," "deficit"), minimum wage, taxes, financial interests (e.g., "federal reserve," "prime rate"), and trade agreements.

Ideology was based on rhetoric stressing ideology and, hence, included discussion of such topics as capitalism, conservatives and liberals (e.g., coding words included "the left" and "the right"), and partisanship.

Social Policy concerned issues primarily discussed in terms of broader policy implications such as health care (e.g., coding words included "medicaid," "entitlement"), education (e.g., "school choice"), the environment, welfare, poverty, race relations (e.g., "affirmative action," "immigration"), and other topics relating to society as a whole (e.g., "crime," "drugs").

Civil Liberties included issues primarily discussed in terms of individual rights, morals, and ethics, including abortion (e.g., coding words included "pro-life," "pro-choice"), same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and gun control (e.g., "assault weapons," "guns"). While these issues certainly have social policy implications, they were coded as a separate category because campaign discourse focused primarily on the behavior of individual citizens.

Foreign Affairs included all topics concerning U.S. foreign interests, such as crises in the Middle East (e.g., coding words included "Netanyahu," "Peres," "Palestine"), the Balkans, and Bosnia, as well as relations with Haiti, Russia, and Iraq (e.g., "Hussein," "Kurds," "Kuwait").

Political Reform included discussions about political reforms in areas such as advertising (e.g., coding words included "negative advertising," "mudslinging"), fundraising, PAC money, and special interests.

Horse Race contained all discussions about the on-going travails of the campaign, including the primaries, conventions, polls (e.g., coding words included "registered voters," "margin," "survey"), electoral college, and pundits (e.g., "momentum," "popularity," "frontrunner," "landslide").

Two people selected a sample of paragraphs and coded the coverage of issues as a check against the reliability of the computer coding. The two human coders and the machine agreed on 172 of 199 paragraphs, yielding an intercoder reliability coefficient of .86, which was determined to be 83% greater than by chance.

Public Opinion Data. The dependent variable in the ideodynamic model is the proportion of poll respondents supporting Clinton out of the total respondents supporting Clinton or Dole. Data were developed from polls entered into the Roper Center's POLL database between 10 March and 6 November 1996, which paralleled the collection dates for news media coverage. Toward the end of the campaign, when there was more than one poll per day, only at most two polls were chosen per day using the criterion of high number of respondents and low number of days from the beginning to the end of the survey.

The basic question for the POLL database polls was, "If the 1996 election were being held today, and the candidates were Bill Clinton for President and Al Gore for Vice President, the Democrats, and Bob Dole for President and Jack Kemp for Vice President, the Republicans, would you vote for Clinton and Gore or for Dole and Kemp?"[17] Survey respondents were generally likely voters. After 26 August 1996, all polls included Ross Perot as a candidate. Perot's supporters favored Clinton and Dole in essentially the same ratios as the population at large in these polls. Therefore, all poll data
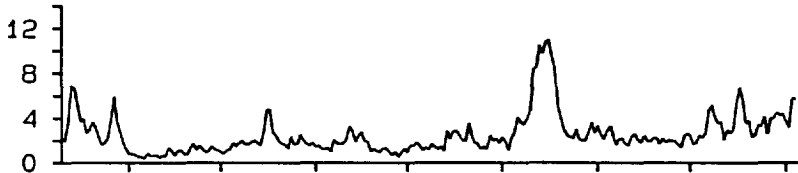
FIGURE 1
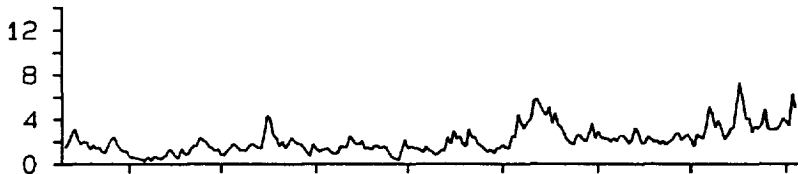### Pro and Con Paragraphs

Pro-Clinton Paragraphs
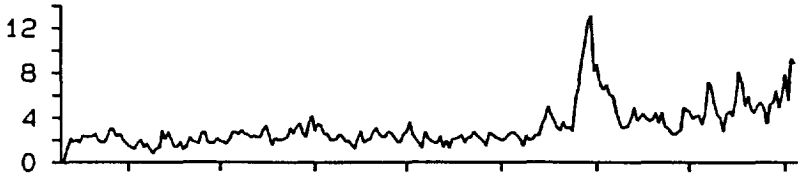
Con-Clinton Paragraphs
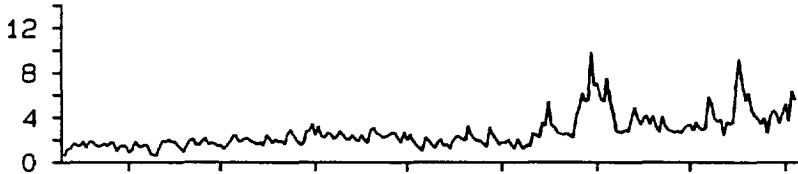
Pro-Dole Paragraphs

Con-Dole Paragraphs

Apr   Jun   Aug   Oct
Year 1996

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were renormalized to 100% after removing all those who were undecided or supported Perot.

Results

The analysis contains two central elements. First, we examined the relative amounts of positive and negative media coverage of the candidates as well as the linkage between such coverage and discussion of the eight issue categories. Second, using the ideodynamic model of media effects, we tested whether the positive and negative coverage of the candidates, *alone,* could predict the extent of public support for Clinton or Dole for president. Due to the large volume of data, in most cases our presentation of findings focuses on patterns of results rather than specific tests of statistical significance.

FIGURE 2
Net Clinton Advantage in News

Net Clinton Advantage in News Coverage
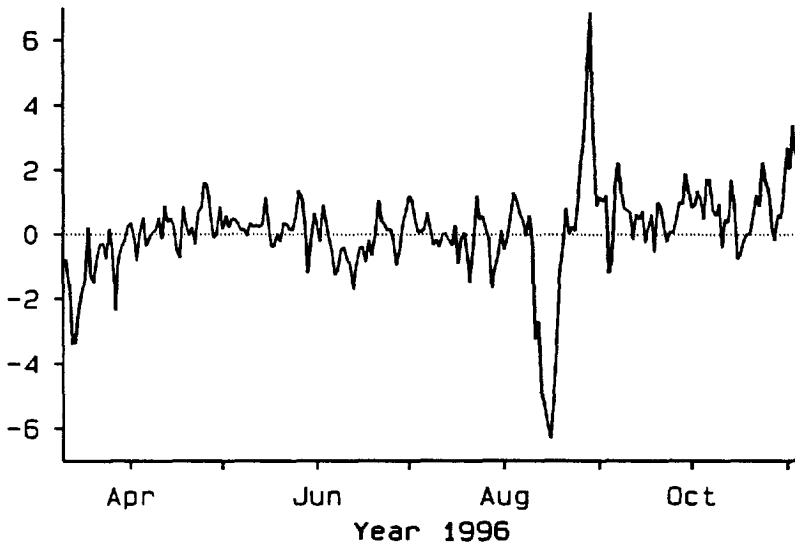
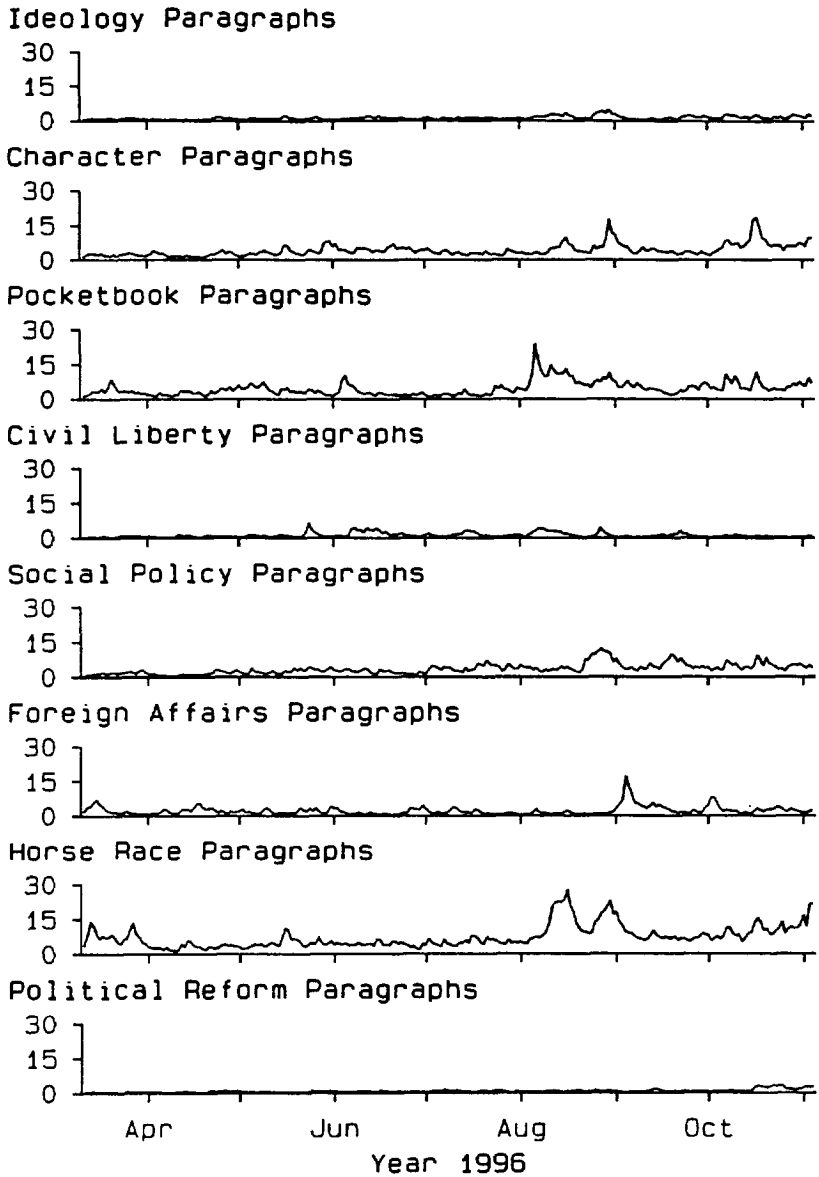*Media Coverage of Candidates and Issues.* For the entire time period from 10 March to 6 November, Clinton had 38,360 positive (pro) and 32,431 negative (con) paragraphs for a ratio of 1.18. The comparable numbers for Dole were 30,109 positive and 25,763 negative paragraphs for a ratio of 1.17. Therefore, the ratio of positive to negative coverage was *virtually identical* for the two candidates in the news media we analyzed. Clinton, however, did receive more total coverage than Dole in these media sources (56% of scored paragraphs were about Clinton, 44% were about Dole). The time trend for the four types of persuasive information is plotted in Figure 1.

In general, the four graphs in Figure 1 show that these media sources contained a fairly even number of positive and negative paragraphs for each candidate throughout the course of the campaign, with the notable exceptions being the political conventions. The highest and most positive amount of Dole coverage was in mid-August, corresponding to the Republican Party convention (bottom two graphs in Figure 1). Similarly, Clinton received his highest and most positive coverage during the Democratic Party convention toward the end of the same month (top two graphs in Figure 1). For both candidates at that time, the news was much more positive than negative. The positive media coverage surrounding the conventions, though, appeared relatively even for the two candidates.

To examine whether Clinton – with more total coverage than Dole – consistently received a "net advantage" in media coverage during the campaign, we constructed a variable based upon the following computation: the number of pro-Dole and con-Clinton paragraphs were subtracted from the number of pro-Clinton and con-Dole paragraphs for each data point in the time series. The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

FIGURE 3
Issue Category Paragraphs

Ideology Paragraphs

Character Paragraphs

Pocketbook Paragraphs

Civil Liberty Paragraphs

Social Policy Paragraphs

Foreign Affairs Paragraphs

Horse Race Paragraphs

Political Reform Paragraphs

Apr   Jun   Aug   Oct

Year 1996

The timeline showing the balance of stories in Figure 2 indicates that Clinton received, at best, only a very small "net advantage" during most of the campaign in the media outlets examined. Consistent with results in Figure 1, there was a large *decrease* in information favorable to Clinton during

the Republican convention followed by a large *increase* during the Demo-cratic convention. In the final stages of the campaign, media coverage did grow increasingly and more consistently favorable to Clinton, though there were still several data points that indicated coverage more favorable to Dole.

The results shown in Figures 1 and 2, then, indicate that the ratios of positive to negative coverage were virtually identical for both candidates and resulted, at best, in only a small overall "net advantage" for Clinton. None-theless, it may be that the issue content of the positive Dole coverage differed significantly from the other coverage of the candidates, and that these differences operated to the detriment of Dole's campaign. This is a testable proposition.

Consistent with previous research on presidential election coverage, concerns about the horse race aspects of the campaign were found in the most paragraphs – 88,989, which represented 29.4% of the total issue coverage between 10 March and 6 November in the news media examined (similar to the pro/con coding, a paragraph could be scored for as many issue categories as were mentioned). Three other types of issues also were prominent in media coverage: pocketbook concerns (in 54,299 paragraphs, 18.0%), candidate character (50,817 paragraphs, 16.7%), and social policies (41,603 paragraphs, 13.7%). Found in much fewer paragraphs, in decreasing order, were the categories of foreign affairs (26,462 paragraphs, 8.7%), ideology (16,551 paragraphs, 5.5%), civil liberties (14,663 paragraphs, 4.8%), and political reform (9,777 paragraphs, 3.2%).

The changing frequency of media mentions in each category of issue is illustrated in Figure 3.

Several patterns become apparent in the graphs presented in Figure 3. First, in six of the eight categories, discussion of the issues increased notice-ably in media coverage in the final months of the campaign, beginning with the party conventions in August. In particular, media coverage rose consid-erably for the horse race, pocketbook concerns, character (particularly during the final month), and social policy. Second, two of the issue categories – foreign affairs and ideology – received consistently minor coverage except for sporadic media attention. Coverage of foreign affairs increased sharply only when events erupted in Israel and Palestine, while ideology coverage was highest at the time of both party conventions. Third, the categories of civil liberties and political reform represented only small fractions of media discussion throughout the entire campaign. Finally, the coverage exhibited substantial variation during the campaign. At one time or another, pocket-book concerns, character, foreign affairs, and social policy each joined horse race coverage as the dominant concerns emphasized in media coverage.

These findings undermine Dole's claim that little media coverage was devoted to personal character and ethics. While discussion of the horse race was a consistent presence throughout the campaign, it certainly did not dominate all of the issue coverage. Pocketbook concerns and character also received plenty of discussion; indeed, these two categories each experienced fairly long periods of emphasis in the news media. In particular, during the latter stages of the campaign, character became the most prominent issue in the media coverage analyzed. Thus, these findings suggest that personal character became prominent in news coverage at roughly the same time as Dole and others decided to emphasize it.

It may be, though, that the issue content of the positive Dole coverage differed significantly – and in a politically damaging way – from the other coverage of the candidates. For example, positive treatments of Dole may

TABLE 1

TABLE 1

Crosstabs between Candidates' Pro/Con Coverage and Issue Categories

Issue Category	BILL CLINTON		BOB DOLE		
	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	TOTALS
Character	7,631	9,816	5,659	4,234	27,340
Row %	(27.9)	(35.9)	(20.7)	(15.5)	(100)
Column %	(16.0)	(25.7)	(16.4)	(13.8)	(18.1)
Pocketbook	5,500	4,807	5,032	4,575	19,914
Row %	(27.6)	(24.1)	(25.3)	(23.0)	(100)
Column %	(11.5)	(12.6)	(14.5)	(14.9)	(13.1)
Ideology	2,629	2,435	2,423	1,817	9,304
Row %	(28.2)	(26.2)	(26.0)	(19.5)	(100)
Column %	(5.5)	(6.4)	(7.0)	(5.9)	(6.1)
Social Policy	5,341	5,570	2,979	2,995	16,885
Row %	(31.6)	(33.0)	(17.6)	(17.7)	(100)
Column %	(11.2)	(14.6)	(8.6)	(9.8)	(11.2)
Civil Liberties	1,630	1,399	1,860	1,692	6,581
Row %	(24.8)	(21.2)	(28.3)	(25.7)	(100)
Column %	(3.4)	(3.7)	(5.4)	(5.5)	(4.4)
Foreign Affairs	3,471	3,462	1,045	799	8,777
Row %	(39.6)	(39.4)	(11.9)	(9.1)	(100)
Column %	(7.3)	(9.1)	(3.0)	(2.6)	(5.8)
Political Reform	1,347	1,542	1,033	1,443	5,365
Row %	(25.1)	(28.7)	(19.3)	(26.9)	(100)
Column %	(2.8)	(4.0)	(3.0)	(4.7)	(3.6)
HorseRace	20,102	9,093	14,545	13,151	56,891
Row %	(35.3)	(16.0)	(25.6)	(23.1)	(100)
Column %	(42.2)	(23.9)	(42.1)	(42.8)	(37.7)
TOTALS	47,651	38,124	34,576	30,706	N=151,057
Row %	(31.6)	(25.2)	(22.9)	(20.3)	(100)
Column %	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)

The numbers in each table cell represent (1) the total number of paragraphs that discussed one of the eight campaign issues in either pro or con terms (top line); (2) the corresponding row percentage of the paragraphs (second line); (3) the corresponding column percentage of the paragraphs (third line).

have been present primarily in news stories about issues (e.g., political reform or foreign affairs) that appeared only minimally or sporadically rather than consistently in media coverage. Or, in contrast, negative treatments of Clinton might *not* have been in news stories about character, the category in which Clinton was perceived as most vulnerable by Dole and others.

A cross-tabulation of issue categories and the valence of news coverage does not support the proposition that Dole suffered differences in the

issue content of his coverage. Paragraphs that discussed a candidate in positive or negative terms but did not include an issue mention, or discussed at least one issue but did not treat a candidate in pro or con terms, were excluded from this analysis. What remained, then, were paragraphs that shed light on the linkage between positive and negative media coverage of the candidates *within each of the issue categories*. See Table 1 for these results.

Several points are noteworthy about the relationships revealed in Table 1. First, the positive coverage received by Clinton and Dole appeared in stories with remarkably similar issue content in the news media analyzed. As indicated by the column percentages, for both candidates 42% of positive coverage appeared in horse race content and 16% accompanied discussion of character. Further, the remainder of the candidates' positive coverage decreased in a fairly similar manner through the other issue categories. Clearly, the issue content of pro-Dole coverage did not differ much from the issue content of pro-Clinton in these media outlets.

Second, the highest amount of con-Clinton treatment (26%) appeared in coverage of his character, as would be expected when considering the criticisms of Dole and others. In addition, as indicated by the row percentages, coverage of Clinton's character was considerably more negative than positive (.77 positive-to-negative ratio) while an *inverse relationship* was found for coverage of Dole's character – it was given considerably more positive than negative coverage (1.34 positive-to-negative ratio). Contrary to claims that media gave insufficient consideration to the topic, then, it appears that the news media did cover candidate character *and* did so in a manner critical of Clinton and praiseworthy of Dole.

Third, far and away the highest amount of con-Dole coverage (43%, shown in the column percentages) was present in paragraphs about horse-race dynamics of the campaign. This finding is suggestive of the difficulty faced by candidates when they must compete against an incumbent president with substantial public support. It seems inevitable that a presidential candidate consistently trailing in the polls would receive continued unfavorable appraisals in horse race coverage. Interestingly, though, the row percentages indicate that although he trailed Clinton in the polls throughout the campaign, Dole received slightly more *positive* (26%) than negative (23%) treatment in horse race coverage. It may be, then, that news media intentionally took steps to offset the unfavorable horse race coverage of Dole resulting from poll reporting, perhaps due to a desire by journalists to inject competition and conflict into campaign coverage.

Finally, it should be noted that Clinton received a predominance of coverage on certain issues. As indicated by the row percentages, Clinton accounted for nearly 80% of foreign affairs coverage and 65% of social policy coverage; in contrast, candidates received fairly even amounts of coverage in the pocketbook, civil liberties, and political reform categories. These differences may be related to a number of factors: (1) Clinton, as the incumbent, was able to discuss matters of state and arrange social policy issues from the White House, where his presidential role guaranteed they would draw media attention; (2) Dole, in resigning from the Senate, damaged his ability to speak convincingly on foreign affairs or social policy issues, since he no longer directly affected decisions on these topics; or (3) the candidates' campaigns decided to focus on issues that they believed would provide a competitive advantage. It is notable, though, that these differences in foreign affairs and social policy coverage did *not* reflect a pro-con bias; rather, the valence of coverage was closely balanced for the candidates.

Analysis of news media coverage of the candidates and issues from several different perspectives, then, suggests that Dole's characterization of a strong liberal or anti-Dole bias in media coverage during the 1996 campaign was not accurate. If anything, Clinton's advantage in news coverage is substantially less than what reasonably might be expected for an incumbent.

Using Media Coverage to Predict Public Opinion. To this point, our analysis has focused solely on news media coverage. We now turn to the ideodynamic model to gain greater insight into the linkage between media coverage and public opinion in the 1996 presidential campaign. Specifically, this analysis investigates whether the overall quantity of positive and negative coverage of the candidates was strongly related to the public's preference of either Clinton or Dole for president. In other words, did media treatment of the candidates contribute significantly to Clinton's large and steady lead throughout the campaign and eventual victory?

The four k parameters of the estimated model show very different effects for coverage about Clinton and coverage about Dole. The parameter estimates (times 0.000001) for the period of analysis, along with the 95% confidence limits in parentheses, are as follows:

- $k_{ProClin}$ = 0.25 (0.24, 0.26)

- $k_{ConClin}$ = 0.16 (0.15, 0.17)

- $k_{ProDole}$ = 0.039 (0.031, 0.048)

- $k_{ConDole}$ = 0.00023 (0, 0.015)

The model explained 54% of variance in the public's presidential preferences, with root mean squared residuals of 2.7%. Based upon the model, we plotted the level of public support for Clinton as predicted *solely from news media coverage* and modeled this prediction against actual poll results (see Figure 4).

Although the polls indicated strong stability in public opinion about the candidates – support for Clinton ranged from 56.8% to 61.6% between 10 March and 6 November – the timeline in Figure 4 shows that the small amount of change that did occur during the election season could be explained by media coverage. Indeed, the time trend of public support for Clinton predicted from news media coverage fell within the 95% poll uncertainty limits for almost all polls for the entire time period of the analysis.

In particular, as indicated by the persuasibility constants, the ideodynamic model suggests that media coverage of Clinton was the greatest influence upon voters' electoral judgments. Predictions based upon media coverage matched both the small "bounce" received by Clinton following the Democratic convention and the lack of a bounce received by Dole following the Republican convention. As soon as both conventions ended, however, news coverage faded as did Clinton's slight bounce in the polls. The stability of candidate preferences in the public opinion polls, then, matches well with the lack of advantage for either candidate in the valence of media coverage (shown in earlier analysis). In sum, these parallel results indicate that media coverage is powerfully related to the public's preferences among presidential candidates.

The most remarkable findings suggested by the modeling is that, although the two candidates received relatively even ratios of positive and negative media coverage, Dole's coverage had considerably less influence on

Clinton Support Predicted from News Media

Predicted and Measured Clinton Support

Year 1996
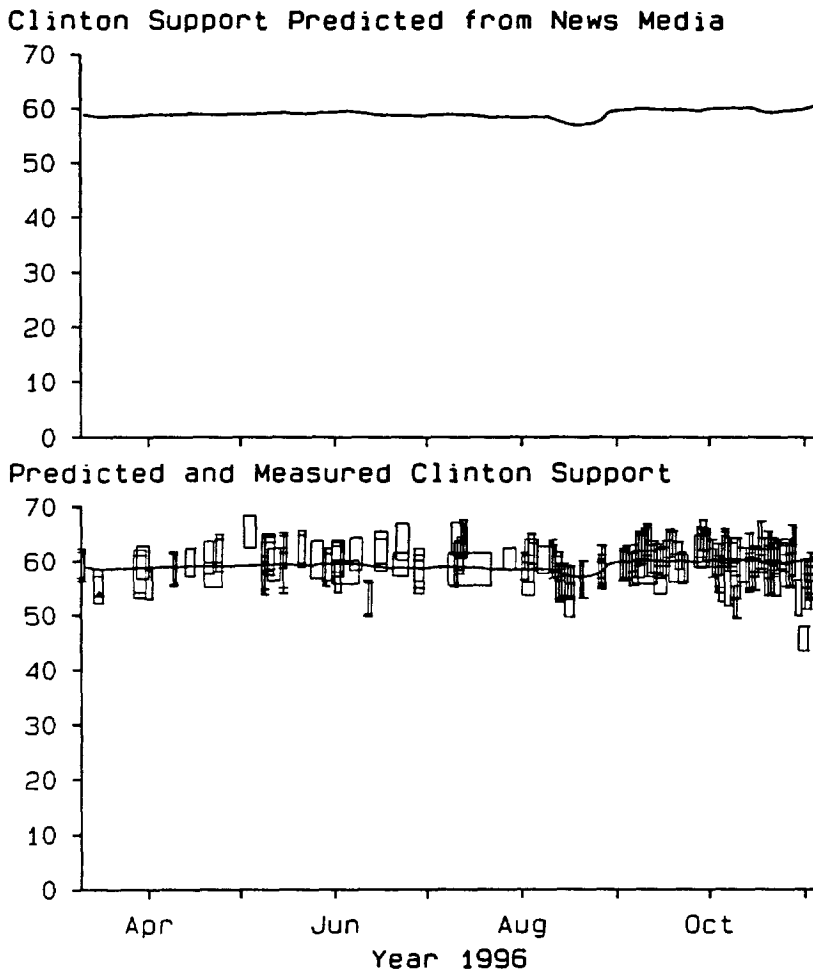
the polls than coverage of Clinton. The persuasibility constants estimated that paragraphs containing the pro-Clinton and con-Clinton coverage exerted the primary influence on the poll results, with the pro-Clinton material particularly powerful. In contrast, the pro-Dole paragraphs had only a marginally significant impact on public opinion, about *one-sixth as influential* as comparable pro-Clinton coverage. Further, the con-Dole coverage was found to have *no influence* on the polls. We consider potential reasons for these apparent differences in the impact of candidate coverage in the following section. Clearly, though not all coverage appeared to contribute equally, this analysis suggests that news media coverage played an important role in the public's preference for president in 1996.

This research examines the linkages among candidate treatment, issue coverage, and public opinion during the 1996 campaign to gain insight into the role of news media in presidential elections. In examining content in forty-three major news media outlets, we did not find evidence indicative of the liberal bias that Dole asserted and that some scholars have noted in previous studies.[18] Our findings demonstrate that positive and negative media coverage, though slightly more positive for Clinton toward the end of the election, was roughly equal for both candidates throughout the 1996 campaign. If anything, the meager advantage to Clinton is much less than might be expected considering his consistently high public support. Even "horse race" coverage was not biased against Dole; in fact, he received slightly more positive than negative coverage in this category, which is surprising given that he regularly trailed Clinton in the polls by a fairly wide margin. It seems possible, then, that Dole's modestly positive horse race coverage may have resulted from attempts by journalists to foster a closer race – at least in news stories.

Dole's claims of a liberal media bias also were not supported when we considered coverage of the candidates' personal character. The media devoted a substantial amount of negative coverage to Clinton's character – thereby focusing attention on what Dole believed to be a major Clinton weakness. Further, character coverage of Dole, in contrast, was slightly more positive than negative. As stated earlier, these findings indicate that news media did cover candidate character in the 1996 presidential campaign *and* did so in a manner critical of Clinton and praiseworthy of Dole.

These findings also suggest that in 1996 news media devoted less attention to the horse race and more attention to candidate character than in previous elections. Although the horse race still represented a substantial portion of candidate coverage in 1996 – roughly 30% – this percentage is just over half of what Buchanan found in his analysis of the 1988 election. One reason for this shift may be that the 1996 campaign simply lacked a compelling race among candidates. A second possible reason is that the character of the candidates, especially Clinton's character, was considered to be a more relevant issue in 1996 (when it accounted for about 17% of campaign coverage) than it was for either George Bush or Michael Dukakis in 1988 (when character represented 8% of coverage, according to Buchanan's research). It seems likely, then, that a rise in character coverage for the 1996 election came in place of coverage of the less dynamic horse race.[19]

Therefore, the differing "biases" in media coverage suggested or previously identified by politicians, journalists, and scholars – ones that favor liberal candidates and the horse race elements of the campaign – were not found, or were much less than expected, in this study of the 1996 presidential election. It seems appropriate, then, to offer a few possible explanations as to why media coverage of Dole, though apparently fair and often positive, had such limited impact on public opinion, as estimated by the modeling in Figure 4.

One possibility is that these findings shed light on the difficulty faced by candidates when they must compete against an incumbent president buttressed by a strong economy and substantial public support. While Clinton's positive and negative media coverage both were strongly related to public opinion polls, a substantial portion of Dole's coverage seemed, if anything, to have been more or less ignored by the electorate. Indeed, the persuasibility constants suggest that voters approached the election as one

in which they decided to either vote for or against Clinton with little interest in Dole. As a result, positive or negative media coverage about Clinton was closely linked to citizens' evaluations, while comparable coverage about Dole was not.

A related possibility, consistent with considerable commentary about Dole, is that our analysis may not tap enough of the emotional impact of media coverage because we examined only the spoken and written texts of media coverage. The visual impact of Dole on television and in newspaper photos may have left a very different impression of Dole – in which citizens were more indifferent perhaps than either highly positive or negative – than the analyzed news coverage would suggest.

A third possibility is that the coverage of Dole was more repetitive because Dole had little new to say after the convention. Commentators observed that Dole was unable to articulate a central message in his campaign and that he suffered because he was unable to explain what he would do if elected as president. Almost all of the new initiatives Dole proposed during 1996 – such as the 15 percent tax cut – were announced before the Republican convention. If the majority of news about Dole usually was "old news," it may have lacked the impact on the public of Clinton's announcements about a variety of policy proposals.

Regardless of the reasons for the diminished strength of the Dole coverage, the evidence strongly indicates that news media coverage, *alone,* explained a substantial portion of the variance in the public's preference for either Clinton or Dole in 1996. These findings are suggestive of a powerful relationship between news media and public opinion in presidential elections. At the same time, our research suggests some avenues for future research into ways that media coverage may affect citizens' preferences among presidential candidates, and more generally citizens' processing of all election coverage.

First, there may be important differences among candidates in the volume of news coverage focusing on social and foreign policies, which an incumbent president has a hand in making. Our findings indicate that Clinton received substantially more coverage on such issues than Dole. This may have influenced voters, particularly those concerned with these issues, to focus on Clinton when evaluating the candidates. In the 1996 campaign, after winning the nomination contests, Dole made a crucial decision in late spring to leave the U.S. Senate – and his role as majority leader – to devote greater time to the election and to show his commitment in running for the presidency. While Dole's resignation gave him some brief favorable press coverage, it also subsequently provided Clinton, as president, a substantial edge in coverage of policy. Dole's decision to leave Congress removed him from a platform where he would have had greater influence and voice – and thus media coverage – regarding issues of public policy. Interestingly, the increased coverage received from being closely connected with policy decisions may not always be good for an incumbent if the social, economic, or foreign policy is not going well. This may have been the case in 1992 for George Bush. Future research, then, may wish to examine how candidates challenging incumbents attempt to generate media attention to their present social and foreign policy goals while also convincing voters of their devotion to their future office.

Second, this research suggests that voters differ substantially in how they are affected by news media information. Our findings suggest that in 1996 coverage of the standing president was persuasive, while coverage of

the challenger was not. This is consistent with the retrospective-voting perspective on candidate preferences, which posits that voters may be more persuaded by information that tells them how a sitting president has performed than by assurances of how a nominee will perform if he reaches office.[20] Thus, positive evaluations of Clinton generated from favorable conditions in economic and world affairs may have made the public less susceptible to persuasion from positive or negative media coverage of Dole. Perhaps only if news media coverage of Clinton had grown increasingly negative would the public have given serious consideration to information about Dole in forming a decision about whom to support. Future research, then, may examine potential linkages between how media cover campaigns and the decision-making styles of voters. Such research might be done either in an experimental setting or in a longitudinal fashion during an actual election, or through some combination of the two.

NOTES

1. Howard Kurtz, "Media Notes: Taking on the Times," *Washington Post*, 28 October 1996, sec. D, p. 1; Cable News Network, "Reliable Sources," 7 July 1996 broadcast; John Corry, "None Dare Call It Bias," *The American Spectator*, December 1996; Tiffany Danitz, "Does the National Press Undermine Conservatives?" *Washington Times*, 25 November 1996, sec. Nation, p. 11.

2. "How the Public Uses the Media," *Public Perspectives*, October/ November 1996, 14.

3. See, for example, Keith Kenney and Chris Simpson, "Was Coverage of the 1988 Presidential Race by Washington's Two Major Dailies Biased?" *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (summer 1993): 345-55; C. Richard Hofstetter, *Bias in the News: Network Television News Coverage of the 1972 Election Campaign* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1976); Michael J. Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, *Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80* (NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983); James Stovall, "Coverage of 1984 Presidential Campaign," *Journalism Quarterly* 65 (summer 1988): 443-49; Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); James H. Kuklinski and Lee Sigelman, "When Objectivity is Not Objective: Network Television News Coverage of U.S. Senators and the 'Paradox of Objectivity,'" *The Journal of Politics* 54 (August 1992): 810-33; Sandra H. Dickson, "Understanding Media Bias: The Press and the U.S. Invasion of Panama," *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (winter 1994): 809-819.

4. Dennis T. Lowry and Jon A. Shidler, "The Sound Bites, the Biters, and the Bitten: An Analysis of Network TV News Bias in Campaign '92," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 72 (spring 1995): 33-44.

5. Jonathan Alter, "The Manic-Depressive Media," *Newsweek*, 8 February 1993; Brit Hume, "The Bush Crack-Up," *The American Spectator*, January 1993.

6. See, for example, Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976); Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election* (NY: Praeger, 1980); Michael J. Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, "How the networks learned to love the issues," *Washington Journalism Review*, February 1980, 15-17; Robinson and Sheehan, *Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80;* Christopher F. Arterton, *Media Politics* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1984); Emmett H. Buell Jr., "'Locals' and 'cosmopolitans': National, regional,

and state newspaper coverage of the New Hampshire primary," in *Media and Momentum*, ed. G. R. Orren and N. W. Polsby (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1987), 60-103; Thomas E. Patterson, "The press and its missed assignment," in *The Elections of 1988*, ed. M. Nelson (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989), 93-109; Marjorie R. Hershey, "The campaign and the media," in *The Election of 1988*, ed. G. M. Pomper (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1989), 73-102; Thomas J. Johnson, "Filling Out the Racing Form: How the Media Covered the Horse Race in the 1988 Primaries," *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (summer 1993): 300-310; Doris Graber, *Mass media and American politics*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993).

7. Bruce Buchanan, *Electing a President: The Markle Commission Report on Campaign '88* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 39-73. See also Guido H. Stempel III and John Windhauser, "Coverage by the Prestige Press of the 1988 Presidential Campaign," *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (winter 1989): 894-96, 919; Scott C. Ratzan, "The real agenda setters," *American Behavioral Scientist* 32 (March/April 1989): 451-63.

8. See, for example, E. E. Dennis, W. Z. Adler, M. FitzSimon, J. Pavlik, E. C. Pease, D. Rogers, D. Smillie, and M. Thalhimer, *The Finish Line: Covering the Campaign's Final Days* (NY: The Freedom Forum, 1993); Edward D. Miller, *The Charlotte Project: Helping citizens take back democracy* (St. Petersburg: Poynter Institute, 1994); Philip Meyer, "The Media Reformation: Giving the Agenda Back to the People," in *The Elections of 1992*, ed. M. Nelson (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993), 89-108; Gordon Mantler and David Whiteman, "Attention to Candidates and Issues in Newspaper Coverage of 1992 Presidential Campaign," *Newspaper Research Journal* 16 (summer 1995): 14-28.

9. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992); Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (NY: Vintage Books, 1993); Marion R. Just, Ann N. Crigler, Dean E. Alger, Timothy E. Cook, Montague Kern, and Darrell M. West, *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates, and the Media in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); June Woong Rhee, "How Polls Drive Campaign Coverage: The Gallup/CNN/USA *Today* Tracking Poll and USA *Today's* Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Campaign," *Political Communication* 13 (1, 1996): 213-29. For a more positive assessment of the 1992 campaign, see James B. Lemert, William R. Elliott, William L. Rosenberg, and James M. Bernstein, *The Politics of Disenchantment: Bush, Clinton, Perot, and the Press* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996). Notably, while it is not necessarily the primary focus of their research, these scholars also shed light on "media bias." For example, Patterson argues that there is a media bias but it is not based on ideology or partisanship; rather, he claims, media tend to cover elections in four set narratives: bandwagon, losing ground, likely loser, and front-runner. Only candidates fulfilling the bandwagon narrative receive positive coverage by media. George Bush in 1992 was given negative coverage, Patterson concludes, because he suffered declining public support.

10. David P. Fan and Albert R. Tims, "The Impact of the News Media on Public Opinion: American Presidential Elections 1987-1988," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 1 (2, 1989): 151-63; David P. Fan, "Predictions of the Bush-Clinton-Perot Presidential Race from the Press," *Political Analysis* 6 (1996): 67-105.

11. For a general discussion of the model, see David P. Fan, *Predictions of Public Opinion from the Mass Media* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988).

All figures derived from the model and subsequently plotted in the "Results" section include the assumption of a one-day decay rate for persuasive information contained in news media. The one-day decay rate is most important when using news media coverage to predict public opinion, which is the primary focus of the analysis in Figure 4. The analysis presented in the other figures could have been plotted either with or without the decay rate, but the decay rate was included so as to make all analysis readily comparable; plotting without the decay rate would have resulted in an identical pattern of results.

12. For a discussion of the statistics involved in the modeling, see Fan, *Predictions of Public Opinion from the Mass Media;* James K. Hertog and David P. Fan, "The Impact of Press Coverage on Social Beliefs: The Case of HIV Transmission," *Communication Research* 22 (October 1995): 545-74.

13. Paragraphs that contained the word "resignation" in close proximity to the word "Senate" were eliminated because, through a combination of program rules, they often would have been coded as con-Dole coverage because "resignation" was included as a negative coding term. Related paragraphs that included reaction to Dole's resignation were not eliminated, however, so the analysis still allowed coding for either pro or con coverage of the reaction to the resignation. The effect of this coding procedure, then, was to focus the analysis on news *reaction* to Dole's resignation from the U.S. Senate rather than on simply the *reporting* of his resignation.

14. Allowing each paragraph to be scored in several categories is a coding strategy advocated by several scholars. For example, Buchanan said that such an approach "provides a much more accurate reflection of the nature of news coverage than arbitrarily classifying each story"– paragraph in our case – "into one and only one category, as political content analysis has occasionally done" (Buchanan, *Electing a President*, 180). As mentioned in the method section, we allowed paragraphs to be scored for multiple categories in both the pro/con coding and the issue category coding.

15. See William A. Scott, "Reliability of content analysis: The case of nominal scale coding," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 19 (fall 1955): 321-25.

16. There was some overlap between words used to tap the pro/con coverage and words used to score some of the issue categories. In examining the relation between candidate appraisals and types of issue coverage (shown in Table 1), such overlap is not a concern because the primary focus of the crosstabs is to compare potential media bias in pro/con coverage of Clinton vs. pro/con coverage of Dole *within each issue category.*

17. Polls including questions about potential vice-presidential candidates were omitted, even if they asked if Jack Kemp was designated by Dole as his running mate.

18. See Kenney and Simpson, "Was Coverage of the 1988 Presidential Race by Washington's Two Major Dailies Biased?"; Hofstetter, *Bias in the News;* Robinson and Sheehan, *Over the Wire and on TV;* Stovall, "Coverage of 1984 Presidential Campaign"; Kuklinski and Sigelman, "When Objectivity is Not Objective"; Lowry and Shidler, "The Sound Bites, the Biters, and the Bitten."

19. While differences between media coverage of the 1996 and 1988 campaigns may be due to differences in the two elections – as we contend in the "Discussion" section of the article – we recognize that these divergent research results also may be explained, in some part, by differences in the designs of ours and Buchanan's studies. First, Buchanan analyzed fewer media sources (eighteen media outlets compared to our forty-three), which

allows for any abnormal practice by any one of the media sources to exert greater influence upon his results. Second, Buchanan looked at a much briefer time period (the final two months of the campaign compared to our eight months lasting from March to election day). Our findings indicate that horse race coverage increased at a greater rate than policy coverage in the last two months of the 1996 election (see Figure 3). If we had limited our study to the last two months of the election, our findings would have been more similar to Buchanan's, though differences would have remained. Finally, Buchanan's unit of analysis was the story, while ours was the paragraph. If the typical reporting practice for most stories about presidential campaigns is to include one paragraph on how the candidates are doing in the polls, then the percentage of horse race coverage found is much higher if one is coding by the story than it is if one is coding by the paragraph.

20. Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).