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### Publication Date

1996

A1458  
no. 96-2

5/23/96

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Campaign News, Candidate Interviews and Political Advertising in the 1992  
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DISCORDANT DISCOURSE:

Campaign News, Candidate Interviews and Political Advertising  
In the 1992 Presidential Campaign

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Prepared for Delivery at the 1995 Annual Meeting of  
The American Political Science Association  
August 31-September 3 -- Chicago, IL



Many observers have criticized the information environment in which American voters choose their presidents. Some have argued that there is too much information (Graber, 1984) or that it is the wrong kind. Campaign communication has been criticized for having an overemphasis on the contest or the "game" and an insufficient amount of the information voters need to make democratic decisions. Patterson's (1980) rigorous study of the 1976 election demonstrated that election news emphasized the horse race -- who's ahead and who's behind -- and the "hoopla" of the campaign -- what the candidates did on the campaign trail. He concluded: "The political problems facing the country will tend not to be the subjects which prevail in election news. The messages which flow from the media will note the candidates' fates and maneuvers and not the values at stake. The press cannot be expected to organize political information in a meaningful way" (Patterson, 1980, p. 177).

More recently, critics such as Orren and Polsby (1987), Arterton (1984), Clancey and Robinson (1985), Jamieson (1992) and Patterson (1993) have criticized the news **focus on campaign techniques and candidate strategy**. Underlying these studies is the concern that "inside-baseball" stories tend to crowd out the kind of information the electorate needs to make a reasoned democratic choice. In particular, the electorate is deprived of policy information, i.e. which policies candidates would pursue if elected. For example, Jamieson in criticizing strategy coverage argues "the electorate can know who is ahead, why, and what strategies are necessary for each to win without knowing what problems face the country and which candidate can better address them in office" (1992, p. 186).

An equally serious charge is that the impact of news choices about what to cover in the campaign is not neutral. Critics argue that the way reporters talk about candidates, particularly the emphasis on strategy, produces snide, negative, and even cynical reporting. A barrage of negative news been seen as the source of rising public distrust and decreasing political participation. "A certain degree of skepticism on the part of the press is healthy for democracy. However, when skepticism turns into cynicism and becomes an everyday theme of the news, democracy is not well served. News that incessantly and unjustifiably labels political leaders as insincere and inept fosters mistrust on the part of the public, and makes it harder for those in authority to provide the leadership that is required if government is to work effectively" (Patterson, 1993, p. 246). Bennett agrees that the investigative reporting that goes behind the scene of the campaign to detail strategy may have an unhealthy impact on the process. He claims: "The ironic result of media attempts to 'deconstruct' candidate images and **expose the techniques of news control** may be to reinforce public cynicism about the whole process" (1992, p. 34).

Even the recent attempts by journalists to follow earlier calls for reform (Broder, 1990; Hume, 1991; Jamieson, 1992) by evaluating claims made in candidate advertising ("ad watches") have been shown to be highly cynical (Lichter, 1993; Milburn, 1995). Network television, in particular, has been accused of denigrating American campaigns and politics. In their study of the 1980 campaign, Robinson and Sheehan found: "Network news was more mediating, more political, more personal, more critical, and more thematic than old-style

print. Having sifted through several thousand campaign stories coming over the wire and on TV, we are convinced that changing the medium also tends to change the message about presidential campaigns" (Robinson and Sheehan, p. 9). A disturbing correlation has been noted between the increasing national dependence on television news and escalating political distrust.

While journalists are increasingly talking about candidate motives and strategies, the candidates themselves seem to be disappearing on TV news. Recent studies (Hallin, 1992; Adatto, 1990; Kendall, Ed. 1995, forthcoming) have expressed concern that the candidates hardly get to speak at all on television news, except in 9-second soundbites surrounded by journalist commentary. These researchers implicitly ask, how can people make enthusiastic electoral decisions, if the candidates speak only through the critical voice of journalist adversaries?

In a surprising reversal, several studies (Patterson and McClure, 1976; Joslyn, 1980; Kern, 1989) found that there is proportionately more policy information in candidates' ads than there is in the news. Some observers believe that giving the candidates more control over campaign communication would improve the level of discourse. Patterson maintains, for example: Candidate-controlled communication comes close to providing voters with useful information....The campaign would probably serve the voters' needs more fully if the candidates had additional opportunities to communicate directly with voters" (1980, pp. 176-177).

Praise for advertising, however, is hardly universal. Candidate ads are demeaned on the basis of length alone. Surely thirty-seconds is not long enough to develop a political argument or even explain what it is the candidate will do if elected. What is more, the evidence is overwhelming that some candidates, or all candidates in some elections, use their time merely to attack their opponents' probity or lineage, rather than engage in serious political debate (Kaid, 1994; Kern, 1989). Deception, threats, and outright lies are common when advertising "goes negative" (Jamieson, 1992; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon and Valentino, 1994).

This study takes as its thesis that journalists and the candidates are "co-constructors" of the campaign reality (Kendall, Ed., 1995, forthcoming, draft p. 51; Kurtz, 1995; Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, 1996, in press, Ch. 1). Some campaign communications, however, are controlled more by journalists and some by candidates, and some are clearly shared constructions (Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, forthcoming, Ch. 6). In this study, we examine various forms of campaign communication in the 1992 presidential campaign to see whether all communications are equally liable to the charges of distorting the campaign, exporting cynicism, and minimizing the candidates. Based on our analysis, we suggest what kind of campaign communications provide more of what voters could use in making informed decisions.

interview program, ten randomly selected question and answer pairs or the entire interview, whichever was shorter, were analyzed.

The sample was drawn so as to allow an intensive analysis of the messages in each story. Each news story, interview segment or advertisement was divided into message units. A message was defined as a simple sentence or clause of a complex sentence or idea (for thoughts not expressed in complete sentences). Complex messages that referred to more than one object were identified and coded separately for each object. The unit of analysis is the message, however, overall story characteristics were layered on the data so that messages could be grouped according to story type. The message analysis was conducted by teams of trained coders. Intercoder reliability tests were conducted on each variable. Intercoder reliability ranged from .80 to 1.0 using a simple correlation test.

Similar categories were used to examine the messages in each of the media formats: the sources, verbs, objects and topics of the messages and campaign frames (such as trust, change, family values). Each message was coded for up to two sources: the first source would be the person stating the message, the second source would be the person being paraphrased.<sup>1</sup> Each source was associated with a verb. The verb codes reflected the actions of each source. The object of each message was the person or group of people being discussed. Finally, each message was coded for two topics which were either issue or campaign related.<sup>2</sup> For example, on June 3, 1992, Susan Rook of CNN reported: "Clinton said the hiring of Ed Rollins and Hamilton Jordan shows Perot's image as an outsider is a sham." In this message, source 1 is the reporter, verb 1 is "paraphrase," source 2 is candidate Clinton and verb 2 is "expresses contempt," the object is Perot, and the topic is campaign staff.

In addition, coders assessed the overall political cynicism or idealism of each message on a five point scale. Idealistic messages expressed vitality, optimism, or excitement; whereas, cynical messages were pessimistic and loaded with jaded or self-interested motivations. For example, in a story about President Bush's response to the Los Angeles riots, CBS reporter Susan Spencer drew on the 1988 campaign, even including a video clip from the "Willie Horton" ad while she said:

Until now, Mr. Bush has made little headway convincing many black Americans that he cares about them. The ugly 1988 campaign, with its racial overtones and Willie Horton ad, was hardly a good beginning.

These two messages would be coded as cynical/pessimistic, a one on the five point scale.

For messages that referred to candidates, the positive or negative tone was coded for each candidate mentioned or appearing in the message, using a five-point scale. Verbal and visual tone were measured separately. Verbal tone refers to the audio channel of television

and the text of newspaper stories. Visual tone applies to television video as well as to the pictures or graphic material that accompany the text of newspaper stories.

### Discussion

Who controls the messages in campaign communication?

Observers of campaign media agree, not always happily, that most campaign communications are the products of shared construction by media professionals and candidates or consultants. The general news values of immediacy and objectivity give priority to recent events. In campaigns, the hard or breaking news is often what the candidate did that day on the campaign trail. Candidates are, therefore, in a position to stage-manage their activities, producing "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, 1994) that become the topics of daily news reports. Journalism practice also affects what candidates do. Coverage of candidate communication may encourage the production of "newsworthy" ads, i.e. spots that make particularly damaging or startling claims. News coverage may also discourage the production of ads that contain obviously deceptive or false claims (Royer, 1994,). Cook argues that news is routinely negotiated between reporters and political professionals (Cook in Crigler, Ed., 1996, forthcoming).

Not all campaign media, however, are equally susceptible to the mutual influence of reporters and candidates. Variation in structure means that some media are more permeable than others; conversely some should be more under the control of either the reporter or the candidate. Newspaper editorials, for example, exemplify media control, while ads represent candidate control.

Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern and West (1996, forthcoming) found that news media could be ordered along a continuum of journalist initiated stories, in which newspapers were the most reporter controlled, followed by network news, and then local television news. We find a similar order in our analysis of campaign media messages, with candidate interviews similar to ads in providing a platform for candidates. See Figure 1.

Using percentage of journalist or candidate sources as an indicator of control, Figure 2 shows that newspapers are most under the control of journalists and ads are most controlled by candidates. As others have remarked, candidate "ink bites" are shorter than soundbites (Plissner, 1989). In our sample, only five percent of the newspaper messages are direct candidate quotations. Candidates are paraphrased by the reporter in another nineteen percent of the messages, and the reporter alone speaks in almost half the messages. Network and local news show a somewhat smaller percentage of reporter or anchor messages (thirty-seven to thirty-eight percent) and a much higher percentage of direct candidate quotes (sixteen to twenty percent). Given the purpose of candidate interview programs, they are clearly defined as candidate controlled, with three-quarters of the messages originating with the candidates. Ads are even more the province of candidates. While some have argued that candidates do not speak often enough in political spots, we find that forty-two percent of the



messages are candidate quotes, while an additional forty-five percent of messages are spoken on the candidate's behalf by an anonymous narrator.

The argument that candidates have the smallest voice in newspapers, as opposed to television with its notorious soundbites, is further evidenced by the ratio of candidate quotes to paraphrased messages. Newspapers paraphrase the candidates far more than television. Interestingly, networks are more likely to paraphrase the candidates than local news. Candidate interviews have the least reason to paraphrase the candidates, since the point of the program is to hear the candidates speak. See again Figure 2.

One could argue that reporters always have control over the selection of candidate quotes as well as over the paraphrases of candidate speeches. This argument appears to be more applicable to newspapers, however, than TV. Because television reporters see their mission as providing the audience with a direct view of breaking news, candidates almost always have a chance to speak in their stories. Candidates can take advantage of television's need for pithy soundbites by planting the "message of the day" in their speeches. Jamieson thinks, in fact, that the interaction in television communication has shifted too far in the direction of the candidates. She writes: "As the news media allow themselves to be *controlled* by candidates, they implicitly encourage candidates to do more of the same" (p. 10). Larry Sabato argues similarly that "broadcast journalists especially seem trapped by their need for good video and punchy soundbites and with regret find themselves falling into the snares set by campaign consultants -- airing verbatim the manufactured message and photo clip of the day" (Sabato, in Graber, p. 195).

While a candidate's pithy remarks are likely to make it into a news soundbite, TV reporters can still select *which* one will be emphasized or included in the story. As Bush consultant Mary Matalin complained in a post-campaign review, her candidate gave his economic speech every day on the campaign trail; but, she remarked to journalists: "... what you covered, not to be bashy, because it was partly our fault -- we were addicted to always putting in one stupid Clinton line -- he was wiggling or whatever the hell it was -- and the headlines would be 'Bush Goes Negative,' 'Bush Stays on the Attack.' It [the economic plan] just never got covered again [after the Michigan speech]" (Royer, ed., p. 225).

Some critics have argued that in selecting soundbites journalists are drawn to particular topics, especially those that clearly divide the candidates from each other. Patterson (1980) described "candidate issues" and "journalist issues," arguing that the news agenda dominated the narrative of the campaign. According to Patterson, candidates prefer to talk about their best topics, while journalists, in search of a good story, want candidates to address the issues that most divide them (see also Page, 1978). We find that by looking at the policy topic of messages in campaign communication, the more divisive issues are more prominent in news and less so in ads or interviews. For example, none of the candidate ads even mentioned the issue of abortion, yet the issue came up repeatedly in news (between two and three percent of all policy messages in the newspaper, network, and candidate interviews

samples). The results support Patterson's notion that candidates would like to avoid particularly divisive topics, and show that interview programs are not completely controlled by candidates. Interviewers' questions can channel the discussion into areas that candidates might prefer to avoid.

By its nature, television's need for good footage is even greater than its need for pithy quotes. The need for visuals gives candidates distinct opportunities to control their presentation on television. Often the candidates can arrange their speeches in front of positive backdrops which inevitably find their way into the television news clip. As Graber (1987) has pointed out, the result is that candidates are seen more positively on TV than they are heard.<sup>3</sup> See Figure 3. The mean verbal tone of messages in which the candidate was quoted is 3.1 on network television, but the mean visual tone is 3.5 on a five point scale. The verbal/visual tone difference is also apparent on local television (2.9 to 3.6) and candidate interview segments (3.1 to 3.4). In observing the production of television news during the campaign, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Tom Rosenstiel found that the production staff exercised much less control over the visuals than the verbal campaign messages: "This was the great irony of how television was put together. The words were poured over, at least at ABC. So were the soundbites, the snippets of the candidate speaking. But the pictures that were so powerful were seen ahead of time only by a few people in the field, an editor, and perhaps the correspondent. In the age of videotape, the people who actually ran the nightly news rarely saw their stories before they went live on the air. This was one of the facts that gave those who wanted to manipulate the press [presumably, the candidates] so much power" (1994, p. 11).

The results of the message analysis suggest that the expected continuum of control from newspapers on the journalist end to advertising on the candidate end is based on the structure of the medium. Newspaper stories are produced almost exclusively by a single reporter acting alone. Editors make minor and rare interventions, although their expectations help to shape the story. In writing their stories, newspaper reporters, like journalists in other media, interact with the people they are covering, their sources, and other news professionals (see Sigal, 1973). **Comparisons across media** (Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, 1996, in press), however, show that more newspaper stories in a campaign are initiated by journalists rather than responding to actions by candidates. Proportionately, newspapers contain more analysis, editorials, commentary, cartoons, etc. than other media. Newspaper reporters' control of campaign stories is illustrated by the propensity to paraphrase rather than to quote the candidates.

The structure of television, whether network or local news or interview programs, demands visuals of the campaign which usually feature candidates. While candidates are more seen than heard in the news, they have an opportunity to control the visual and sound "bites." The evidence both from observers of news production and comparison of our own tone of the messages, suggest that candidates have somewhat greater control over the visual than the verbal aspect of the message. Naturally the interview program provides candidates

with even greater opportunities for control, as they generate the overwhelming majority of messages in that medium. Ads, of course, offer candidates the greatest control over their own messages, whether or not they speak directly or through others. We have examined control in order to answer the question raised by other students of campaign media -- are campaign communications controlled by journalists potentially more useful to voters than communications by candidates -- and if so, which media are most useful? -- or, as Patterson suggests, would the electorate be better off if the candidates had more control over campaign communications? We will answer those questions by looking at the content and the tone of campaign communications.

Substance or "Where's the beef?"

The citizens' information environment is considered critical to democratic vote choice. The interest, knowledge, partisanship, and experience that citizens bring to the process are also crucial, but observers have focused on the media as the most important instrument of continuing citizen education. Previous scholars who have compared campaign media have tended to praise newspaper reporting at the expense of television. Here we will raise some questions about that conclusion and also examine the contributions of a recently more prominent form of campaign communication, the televised candidate interview.

The analysis of the messages in our cross-media sample, shows that in terms of emphasis on issues facing the nation, newspapers provide the most coverage. The newspaper stories are proportionately more likely to focus on issues and policies than on candidates and the campaign. See Figure 4. A majority of newspaper messages in our sample (excluding the small percentage of messages that had no topic at all), were about public policy. Newspapers are the only news medium about which that can be said. But, surprisingly, network television is only slightly less likely than newspapers to focus on policy (55 compared to 49 percent of messages). Local television, as has been reported elsewhere (Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, 1996, in press) carries much less campaign news altogether than network TV, but what there is, focused more on the "hoopla" of the campaign than the network news. Two thirds of the local news messages were about the campaign, while only a third dealt with policy topics. Comparing across the traditional news media, then, we find that the content of newspaper stories is only slightly more policy oriented than network news. If television has a bad "rap," it should adhere to local rather than network news. Recent studies have shown, however, that network news viewership is declining while the local news audience is growing.

As we have shown above, newspapers, network, and local television represent mostly journalist controlled media. What about those media more controlled by the candidates? Is it true that if candidates controlled the communication, the discourse would be more substantive? The answer to that question is clearly yes. As Figure 4 shows, the candidate ads spend a good deal of time talking about policy questions. Almost two-thirds of the messages in political spots are policy-related -- proportionately more even than newspapers.

The candidate interview programs represent shared control between the questioner, who is usually a professional media person, and the candidate. The distribution of policy vs. campaign messages reflects this shared control, with slightly less than half the messages dealing with policy and the other half with the campaign. Analysis of who was speaking in the message showed that the hosts were slightly less likely to talk about policy (40 percent of messages) than either candidates George Bush, Bill Clinton, or Ross Perot (51, 43 and 40 percent respectively).

The foregoing analysis looks at policy in the abstract. Recent research has shown, however, that information useful to the voting decision is best structured in a way that is relevant to the electoral choice. The discussion of policy alternatives may not be as practical as the relative position of the candidates on the issues, particularly about issues the electorate cares about (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, West, 1996, in press). If the news emphasis should be on the candidates' positions on the issues then the newspaper advantage as a source of voter information is not so clear. In Figure 5 we examine messages about the campaign to see what proportion of them deals with candidate positions on the issues. The results indicate that both newspapers and network news put about the same emphasis on candidate issue positions, with networks slightly leading newspapers (28 to 23 percent of messages in the sampled stories). Local TV news again makes a poor showing on this account, with only 15 percent of the messages referencing a candidate's position on an issue.

The campaign source that is richest on this dimension is neither the news nor the ads, but the new modality of candidate interview programs. Almost half (44 percent) of the sampled messages report the candidate's position on the issues -- double what we find in the candidate ads (at 20 percent) or the news. It seems that the enthusiasm with which the audience greeted the new format was matched by an emphasis on the kind of information that best supports democratic theory.

One might argue (see Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, West, 1996, in press), that in making a decision about whom to support for the presidency citizens do not exclusively need information about candidate issue positions, but about their leadership abilities, character, and experience. In fact, much of the communication of the campaign intertwines discussion of candidate character and positions on the issues. Notably, advertising is considered most effective where it dovetails messages (Kern, 1989) about issue and character (as Buchanan's and Clinton's attacks on Bush using his words: "read my lips!"). Analysis of the way citizens talk about the campaign reveals a similar linkage of issues and personal qualities (see Cook, Crigler, and Just, 1995; Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, West, 1996, in press).

Taking all of the information about a candidate together, the messages in both network television and newspaper stories put an identical emphasis on this aspect of the campaign (67 and 68 percent). Local TV news is only slightly lower at 60 percent. But



candidate interview programs and ads constitute an even richer source of candidate information (over 85 percent).

Figure 6 addresses the argument that news media put too much emphasis on horse race and strategy (Patterson, 1980; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983). How much is too much? Our data show that horse race and strategy messages make up only a minority of the story in any campaign medium. Journalists are clearly most interested in pursuing these topics. The campaign *is* a race after all, and who's ahead and who's behind is news. Horse race news is news that the public wants and, it could be argued, news that the public needs to make judgments about candidate viability in multicandidate races. Horse race stories have been criticized for taking up valuable space with a frivolous aspect of the campaign, but also for having the effect of what Colin Seymour-Ure calls "random partisanship." Losers get more negative press and front-runners get over-scrutinized (Robinson and Sheehan, 1983). One thing that is clear from the data is that candidates do not want to talk about the horse race in their ads or interviews. Perhaps they do not wish to appear over confident if they are winning or defensive if they are losing or it may be that they have more pressing business. It is also certain that the medium in which the horse race is most prominent is local TV. In other media there is about the same amount of attention to horse race and strategy, but on local TV, the horse race gets far more attention. The findings reinforce a picture of the campaign on local television in which the "game" of the campaign plays the largest role in coverage.

Much of the recent criticism of campaign news has treated the horse race and "hoopla" coverage as relatively harmless compared to news about strategy. The concern is that showing how the candidates are manipulating to win the election gets the voters to think as spectators rather than participants (Jamieson, 1992) and, more insidiously, demeans the candidates and the campaign process. By structuring stories around the desire of candidates to win, critics (Bennett, 1992; Patterson, 1993) argue that the media reinforce public cynicism about politics. Figure 6 shows that the media that are most involved in strategy stories are newspapers and network television. Local TV cannot afford strategy stories, which requires resource-hungry enterprise journalism. Newspapers and network news can cover both substance and strategy, with predictably negative consequences for the tone of coverage.

### Cynicism and Negativism in Campaign Media

Critics of American journalism have argued that there is a persistent bias towards bad news (see Diamond's, Good News, Bad News). Contrary to the old chestnut, if journalists have nothing good to say -- they publish it. In the muckraking tradition, journalists take it as their mission to reveal corruption, venality, and incompetence in government. Some believe that the climate of distrust fostered by the media's adversarial posture has gone too far and is damaging rather than strengthening the democratic process (Patterson, 1993). Others have

argued, however, that the objects of press criticism are too superficial, and that real criticism of policy is short-changed (Bennett, 1988).

We explored the cynicism of campaign media by looking at the way the messages were framed. The most prominent frames were political alienation on the negative end, followed by conflict, economics, human impact, change, and morality, and with American values and political efficacy on the positive end. Alienation frames which include powerlessness and political distrust were the most common in newspapers (12 percent of all messages). See Table 1. As expected, conflict, which includes the game frame, is important in structuring campaign messages in all the news media. In this election, economic frames were also very prominent not only in news but in ads. Other frames were associated with particular candidacies (change with the challengers to the incumbent president; morality with George Bush, American values with Ross Perot). Local news was notable for emphasizing the human impact frame, reinforcing its image as the medium most up-front and personal, and least given to abstract policy analysis. In one of the most striking findings, candidate ad messages contained the greatest proportion of politically efficacious frames. Political spots, in fact, are the only medium in which politically empowering messages outnumber alienated frames. The candidate's ad frames are upbeat and optimistic, which befits aspirants for public office.<sup>4</sup>

In a parallel finding about the verbs at the heart of messages, we found that almost all verbs in ads have either a positive or negative valence and more than half the messages in ads embody positive verbs ("if elected, I will ..."). The candidates' positive action orientation is reflected in the number of positive verbs in the interview programs as well. In the news media, however, the great majority of verbs are neutral, such as: "he said, she said." See Figure 7.

Our analysis of the messages in campaign media show that journalists in every medium we studied could be described as uniformly cynical. It is striking that messages in which the reporters, anchors, or talk show hosts are speaking for themselves, and not paraphrasing or quoting others, there is a slight but equally cynical tone to what they have to say. The range is so narrow as to be remarkable. On a five point scale the variation is from a mean of 2.7 to 2.9, for journalist messages in newspapers, network television, local television, and candidate interview programs.

In contrast, candidate messages in political advertising are clearly on the idealistic side, with means varying on the same five point scale from 3.4 to 3.8. Even the disembodied narrator in political ads scores in the same range. It is interesting, however, that candidates speaking in the news are more cynical than they are in ads. It could be that the ads represent exceptionally positive statements from candidates; but an equally defensible explanation is that candidate quotes, like the candidates' paraphrased remarks in news are chosen by reporters to carry the tone of the story.<sup>5</sup>

If the news is indeed cynical, what is it cynical about? Our analysis fails to find any difference in the tone of messages by issue. It is not as though the economy was getting cynical treatment while foreign policy was off the hook. But there was a difference among political objects and again the pattern is quite similar across all of the news media. Government institutions come in for the most cynical treatment, with public officials not far behind, while the public is presented least cynically. Messages both on talk shows and ads show an equally negative tone towards government institutions (presumably the incumbents of the other party); but in the messages dominated by candidates, their own class, public officials, is treated less negatively than in the news media, and the public receives a distinctly positive spin. See Figure 8. The results suggest that both journalists and candidates share the blame for the negativity surrounding political institutions, but while the candidates curry favor with the public, demeaning politicians is more the journalists game.

#### Candidate Treatment in News: Explaining Bad News

If the media foster a view of politicians as silly, selfish, and unscrupulous it cannot make the voter's choice very easy. The evidence is that the media talk this way not only about prospective candidates for office but for those who already have achieved it. As unhappy an outcome as that might be, there is a more serious complaint, especially from those who lose elections, that the journalist's bile is not even-handed but is meted out to one candidate more than another. This criticism comes both from those who believe that the news media are systematically biased (by political ideologies such as capitalism, liberalism, or ethnocentrism) or randomly biased by some news value, such as the pursuit of bad news, novelty, or running down front runners. One of the first studies of bias in television news (Hofstetter, 1976) found that there was no political bias, but various kinds of random bias have been observed. Our sample is no exception. In 1992, the news media which had estimated George Bush to be invincible a year prior to the 1992 election, produced a consistently negative view of the incumbent president throughout the election (see Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, West, 1996, in press; Kerbell, 1994; Lichter, 1993).

Analysis of the messages in our media sample illustrates a similar pattern in which the specific things that reporters said about George Bush were marginally more negative than what they had to say about Ross Perot or Bill Clinton. The front runner hypothesis does not appear to explain this differentiation, since Clinton was ahead a good portion of the campaign year. A liberal ideological bias hardly could explain the differential presentation of the candidates, given the coverage of other Democratic candidates in the nineteen-eighties, not to mention the negative press of the Clinton presidency.

The relative tone differences to the candidates were especially marked in the newspaper sample, while TV interviewers appear to be the most neutral and even-handed in relation to the candidates. See Figure 9. It is difficult to explain the negative tone toward Bush in the campaign coverage overall. One difference that was observable in the data was the proportion of messages paraphrasing, rather than quoting Bush.<sup>6</sup> Bush was the most

heavily paraphrased and also the least favored in the coverage. Paraphrasing was especially marked in newspapers, which were, in turn especially negative to Bush. The tendency of newspapers to paraphrase Bush was not more common in presidential action coverage.

The negative tone to Bush was related, however, to messages about the economy, as indicated by regression analysis. See Table 2. Another factor that appeared to have a role to play was the use of quotes of other candidates referring to Bush. While reporters were somewhat negative to Bush, the quotes from other candidates that they used in their stories were decidedly more negative, ranging on television from 1.3 to 1.9 on a 5-point scale. When reporters paraphrased the other candidates talking about Bush, the tone was only slightly less negative, ranging from 2.3 to 2.8 on TV.<sup>7</sup> Even quotes from the public about George Bush were mostly negative (1.7 to 2.8). It appears that while the television reporters were not directly critical of George Bush, they selected particularly nasty barbs from the other candidates and the public to include in their stories.

One of the reasons that George Bush appeared to have so much more negative press was that there were so many other candidates in the race whose business it was to attack him. Given the prevalence of the conflict frame in the news, candidate attacks are an especially attractive subject for quotation. While reporters may resist denigrating the candidates directly, attacks by others get center-stage. Previous studies of campaign coverage have argued that the front-runner is the one to get the most negative coverage. Our analysis suggests a variation on that theme. The candidate with the greatest number of opponents gets the most negative coverage, because all of the opponents attacks end up in the news. While Clinton had more primary opponents than Bush, they shared similar ideological positions and they all tended to attack the Republican Administration. Bush's own primary opponent, Buchanan attacked him personally and ideologically. Later, in the general election campaign, Bush and Clinton both had to contend with Perot, but the independent candidate concentrated his attention on Bush rather than Clinton until the last weeks of the campaign.

### Conclusion

By examining the messages in random samples of campaign communications, this study concludes that there are significant and consistent differences among media on all four dimensions that we set out to explore -- control, substance, cynicism, and bias. First we find that most communications represent some form of shared control between journalists and candidates, but that there is a continuum of control in which journalists get to shape the message most in newspapers, and candidates in their ads. Because of the structure of various media, such as the reliance on visuals and on the candidate's in-person appearances, television news and candidate interview programs arrange themselves along this continuum of shared voices.

While we do find, as others have, that newspapers provide the most analysis of public policy, issue discussion is least associated with candidate information in newspapers, and therefore, may not be as useful to voters as they weigh their vote. Candidates get to speak



the least in newspapers and the most in any television form: network and local news as well as interview programs. We found the newspapers' "ink-bites" remarkably small compared to the much maligned TV soundbites. Generally candidates are paraphrased in newspapers, when they get to speak at all.

If we think of useful substantive information adhering to candidate qualifications and positions then newspapers and network television provide similar rations of that kind of information in their campaign coverage. Local television is notably weaker in this regard and suffers from the complaint, often leveled at the media in general, that coverage overemphasizes the horse race.

Both horse race and strategy are an important part of the news and ads, but strategy, like issue positions, is the particular province of newspapers and network television, again in similar fashion. Candidates apparently have little interest in these "game" themes, and therefore devote proportionately more attention to issue positions in their ads than do the news media. Candidate interview programs are also full of issue information, without the strategy emphasis found in news media or the heavy packaging of ads.

The interview program, by its nature, gives the candidates a generous platform. Candidates speaking constitute the great majority of messages in interview programs -- a proportion exceeded only by their own ads. Contrary to concerns raised by critics, we found that the candidates speak more in their ads than anyone else. While particular non-speaking ads may attract attention in a campaign, most candidates seem to adhere to the principal that their ads are a vehicle of direct connection to the voters.

While negative political advertisements have also received the most press, we did not find in our sample that ads are the primary source of negative or cynical messages in the campaign. In fact, ads are noticeably more upbeat and positive than news stories. Newspapers and network television appear to share a common cultural approach to campaign news which is illustrated in the use of negative language about government, public officials and the candidates. If we were to arrange campaign media along a cynicism scale, the newspapers and network television would be down at the negative end, while the local television news and candidate interview programs would be in the middle, and advertisements would be at the most positive end. Interestingly, the continuum of cynicism exactly parallels the continuum of control. The greater the journalist control, the more cynical and negative the message, while the greater the candidate control, the more positive and efficacious the message.

Finally, this analysis of campaign media suggests a reason for the uneven tone of messages about the candidates, namely, the number of competitors who attack a particular candidate. Attacks are news, especially when they come from prominent sources and are an irresistible source of conflict and game stories. When there are only two candidates in the race it is more likely that the attacks will be about even, but when there is a large field of

opposing contenders in the primaries and more than two candidates in the general election, the most heavily attacked candidate is likely to get the lion's share of the negative news. This suggests that President Clinton may suffer a similar fate in 1996 if, as expected, the Republican field is large and is united in attacking his record, and, even more so if an independent candidate piles on with the Republican opponent in the general election.

While this news may not be heartening for uncomfortable incumbents, our findings have some optimistic things to say about what is available to citizens in their information environment. Most calls for reform in the past have centered on newspaper reading. Even television reporters use this line to reply to critics. The few previous cross-media studies show that newspapers pay more attention to policy than television and provide a more thorough and even-handed treatment of the candidates (Patterson, 1980; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, 1996, in press). While there is no evidence that exhortation has any effect on the rates of newspaper reading, newspapers have remained the undisputed gold standard for campaign coverage. Our data confirm the preeminence of newspapers for policy analysis, but find that television more than holds its own on other electorally relevant dimensions.

Our data show that if the standard of usefulness is presentation of the candidates so that voters can make a direct assessment of their personal qualities, experience and issue positions, then television, especially network news turns out to be about as useful as the more literary medium of newspapers. Local news, which is gaining in popularity, has less to recommend it on the substance side, but then has less of a downside as well. The cynicism about politics and politicians which accompanies the candidate focus in newspapers and network news is emphasized a good deal less in local news coverage of the campaign.

Candidate interview programs, which employ an involving and entertaining format also offer plenty of candidate information, including lots of messages about issue positions, with almost none of the horse race frippery and very little of the negativism that characterizes any of the news formats. Candidates have the opportunity to speak at length in TV interviews, although what they get to talk about is partially controlled by their interview hosts. The evidence suggests that media formats with some shared control, provide the most substance and the least opportunity to duck divisive issues (such as abortion in the 1992 race).

Given the range of control in campaign information resources and the media habits of citizens, most people are exposed to a mix of messages during the campaign. The campaign media can actually be complementary in terms of message control. Heavy newspaper readers also tend to follow other campaign media, and TV news viewers are likely to watch other kinds of TV, including interviews and ads. The survey evidence (Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, 1996, in press; Times Mirror, 1992) suggests that people enjoy interview formats that expose them to the candidates and are relevant to the task of arriving at a voting decision. It is no secret that people are increasingly attracted to television for campaign

coverage, and that people were especially pleased with the offerings of the candidate interview programs in 1992. People are less happy, however, with formats that give them little opportunity to see and hear the candidates, or formats that are highly partisan, or which inject the most negative and cynical views of the political process (Lichter, 1993; Just, 1995, forthcoming). If we are looking for ways to improve the information environment it seems that mixed resources and shared control are key elements in balancing the structural biases of both news and advertising.

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Coding Appendix

Political Frames in Ads:

Political Efficacy

Emotion = acceptance, comfort, satisfaction, admiration, respect, pride, security, feeling safe, feeling certain, trust, confidence

American Values

Topic = community, unity, democracy, equality, fairness, freedom, liberty, individualism, patriotism, religion

Morality

Topic = morality, values

Change

Emotion = hope, optimism, enthusiasm, anticipation, expectation, interest, excitement

Topic = change, progress AND Tone = positive, extremely positive

Economics

Topic = banks, savings and loans, business, budget, deficit, capital gains, competitiveness, productivity, consumer savings v. credit, economy general, enterprize zones, homeownership, mortgages, industrial policy, inflation, interest rates, jobs, unemployment, local economy, minimum wage, recession, taxes

Conflict

Emotion = anger, rage, irritation, contempt, scorn, fear, terror, scared, hate, disgust, loathing, dislike, revenge, uncertainty, insecurity

Topic = conflict, us v. them AND Tone = negative, extremely negative

Alienation

Emotion = alienation, antagonism, despair, pessimism, distrust, frustration, doubt, wonder

Topic = powerlessness, control AND Tone = negative, extremely negative

Verbs:

Negative Verbs

- criticizes
- denies
- makes negative moral judgment
- misspeaks, lies
- threatens
- expresses irony, sarcasm
- expresses bigotry
- attacks
- disagrees
- loses
- expresses anger
- expresses guilt
- expresses boredom
- expresses contempt
- expresses jealousy
- expresses frustration
- expresses sadness
- expresses shame
- expresses alienation

Neutral Verbs

- analyzes
- defends
- describes
- doesn't know
- expresses surprise
- makes analogy
- no comment
- predicts
- questions
- requests
- tells story
- worries
- introduces, lead-in or out
- states, says
- quotes
- paraphrases
- expresses interest
- interprets strategy or motivation
- addresses, speaks
- campaign action
- motion

Positive Verbs

expresses pleasure  
expresses affection  
expresses affection  
expresses security  
expresses humility  
expresses pride  
calls for moral action  
expresses faith, belief  
hopes  
invokes religion  
makes positive moral judgment  
orders  
praises, supports  
promises, states position  
proposes  
recommends  
states opinion  
takes credit  
uses humor  
forgives, expresses generosity  
thanks  
expresses tolerance  
reassures  
agrees  
wins

Endnotes

1. Some allowance was made to accommodate the different formats of each medium. Because ads are in essence candidate communications, only one source was necessary. The speaker -- including the disembodied voice of the narrator -- was coded as the source of the message.
2. The ads were coded for only one message. The ad messages were assigned either an issue or campaign topic, whereas the messages in the other media were assigned an issue and campaign topic if both were mentioned.
3. A similar visual/verbal advantage was found at the story level for the full set of campaign stories. See Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, 1996, in press.
4. The ad coding did not include a campaign frame variable. We created a frame variable from a combination of the topic variable, an emotion code, and the tone of the message. See the Appendix for more details on the creation of this variable.
5. If we compare the overall tone for each of the news media: newspapers, network and local TV, with the mean reporter's message tone in that medium, the mean difference in each case is .05.
6. Analysis of the stories as a whole suggested that the more candidates had an opportunity to be heard directly in the news, the more favorable the tone of the story to the candidate. (See Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, and West, 1996, in press).
7. Newspapers were excluded because the number of quotes overall was so small.

Table 1. Framing of Messages by Medium (%)

Frame	Newspapers	Network TV	Local TV	Interviews	Political Ads
Political Efficacy	5.3	3.4	2.2	6.9	23.8
American Values	10.2	11.2	17.4	12.5	3.3
Morality	8.8	3.1	9.3	12.9	1.6
Change	4.4	6.1	6.4	12.8	21.2
Human Impact	5.8	16.1	23.6	8.9	na
Economics	25.8	30.4	16.7	34.1	29.2
Conflict	28.0	27.5	18.5	8.2	11.0
Political Alienation	11.7	2.2	5.9	3.7	9.9

Table 2a. Determinants of Verbal Tone of Message towards George Bush (OLS)

Variables	Newspapers	Network TV	Local TV
Reporter or Anchor	-.62 (.22)	-.75 (.12)	-.46 (.15)
Bush Paraphrased	-.21 (.21)	-.49 (.11)	-.29 (.16)
Public Quoted or Paraphrased	-.84 (.39)	-.95 (.14)	-1.17 (.27)
Bush Opposition	-.99 (.25)	-1.41 (.16)	-1.23 (.17)
Economy as Issue	.10 (.16)	-.21 (.09)	-.18 (.22)
Intercept (Bush Quoted)	3.08 (.19)	3.53 (.09)	3.39 (.12)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.20	.23
SEE	.96	.74	.75
Number of Cases	357	372	191

Table 2b. Determinants of Verbal Tone of Message towards Bill Clinton (OLS)

Variables	Newspapers	Network TV	Local TV
Reporter or Anchor	-0.16 (.36)	-0.12 (.09)	.34 (.14)
Clinton Paraphrased	-0.23 (.36)	-0.14 (.08)	.33 (.15)
Public Quoted or Paraphrased	-1.64 (.66)	-0.29 (.15)	.49 (.20)
Clinton Opposition	-1.01 (.39)	-0.81 (.12)	-0.83 (.17)
Economy as Issue	.11 (.16)	.10 (.11)	-0.22 (.20)
Intercept (Clinton Quoted)	3.31 (.35)	3.23 (.06)	2.99 (.11)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.10	.28
SEE	.96	.62	.63
Number of Cases	260	355	157



Table 2c. Determinants of Verbal Tone of Message towards Ross Perot (OLS)

Variables	Newspapers	Network TV	Local TV
Reporter	-1.19 (.34)	-.19 (.13)	.01 (.21)
Perot Paraphrased	-1.12 (.31)	.23 (.14)	.01 (.21)
Public Quoted or Paraphrased	na	-.72 (.16)	-1.08 (.35)
Perot Opposition	-1.61 (.35)	-.89 (.17)	-.58 (.23)
Economy as Issue	-.01 (.40)	-.25 (.25)	.16 (.30)
Intercept (Perot Quoted)	4.14 (.29)	3.27 (.10)	3.08 (.19)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.21	.15	.17
SEE	.76	.67	.59
Number of Cases	80	199	98

Figure 1. Continuum of Media Control

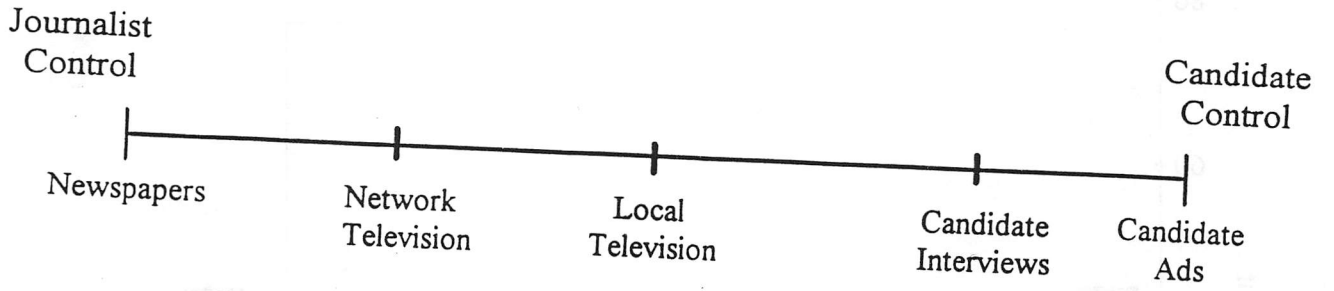


Figure 2. Sources of Messages

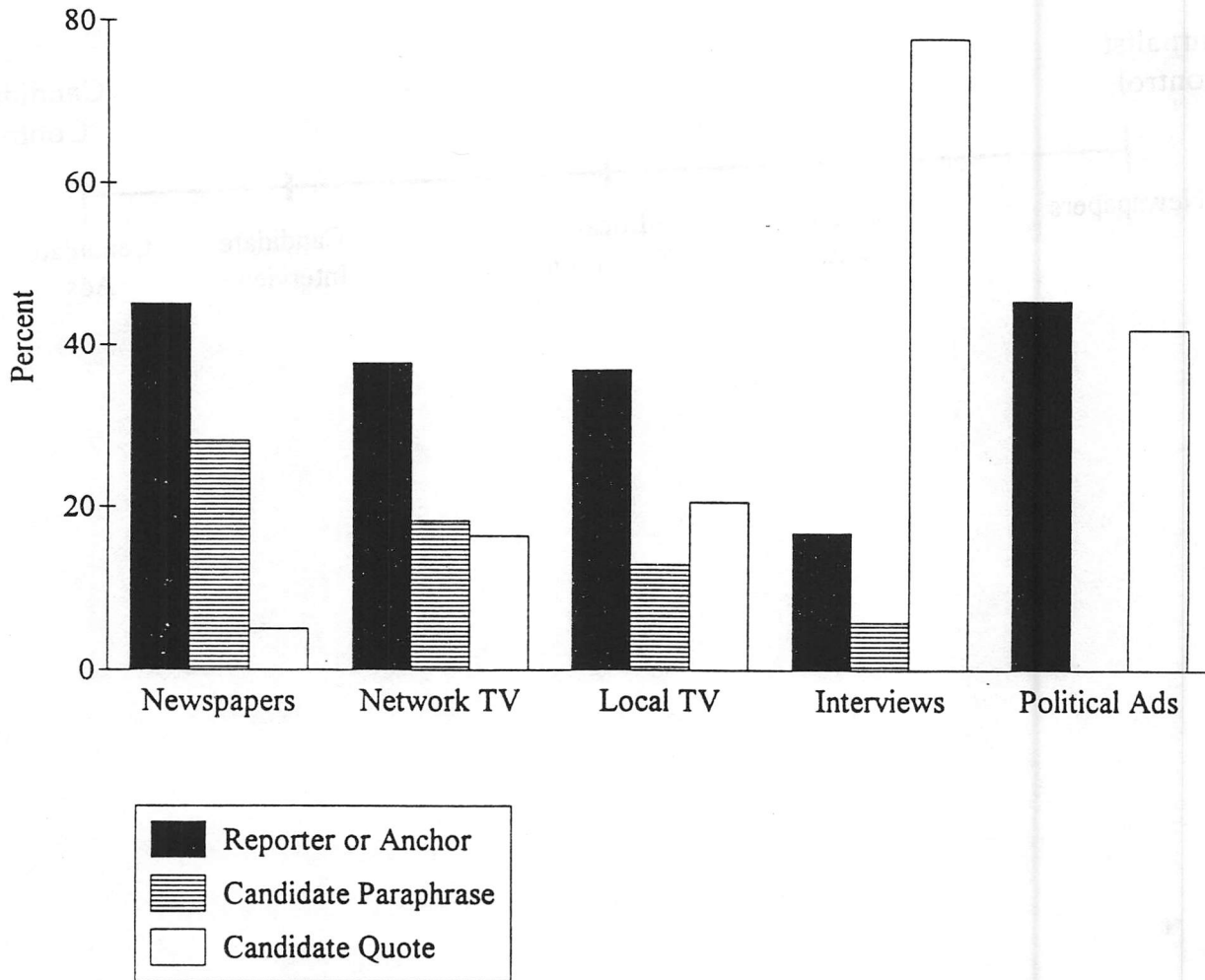
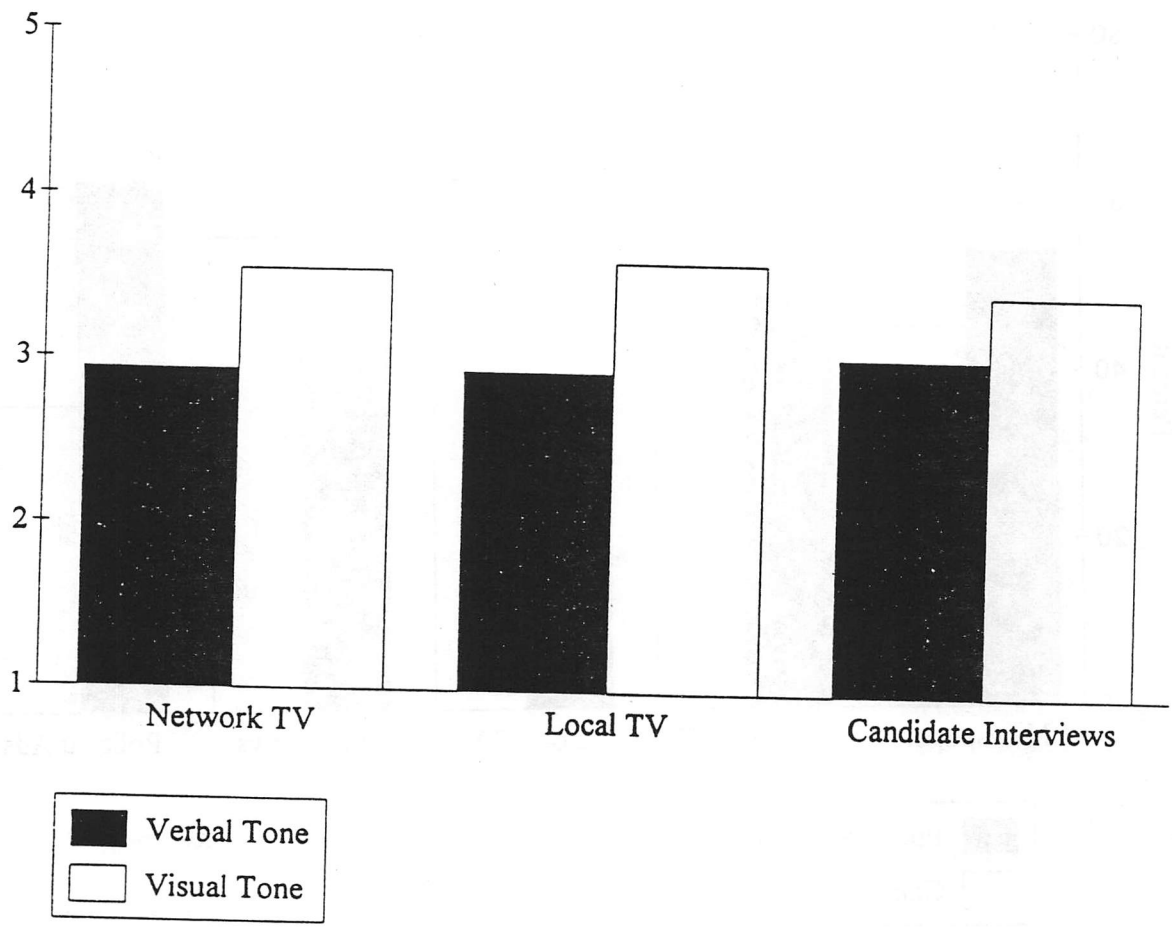


Figure 3. Average Verbal and Visual Tone in Messages



5-point scale. 1 is very negative and 5 is very positive.

Figure 4. Percentage of Messages Mentioning a Public Policy or Campaign Topic

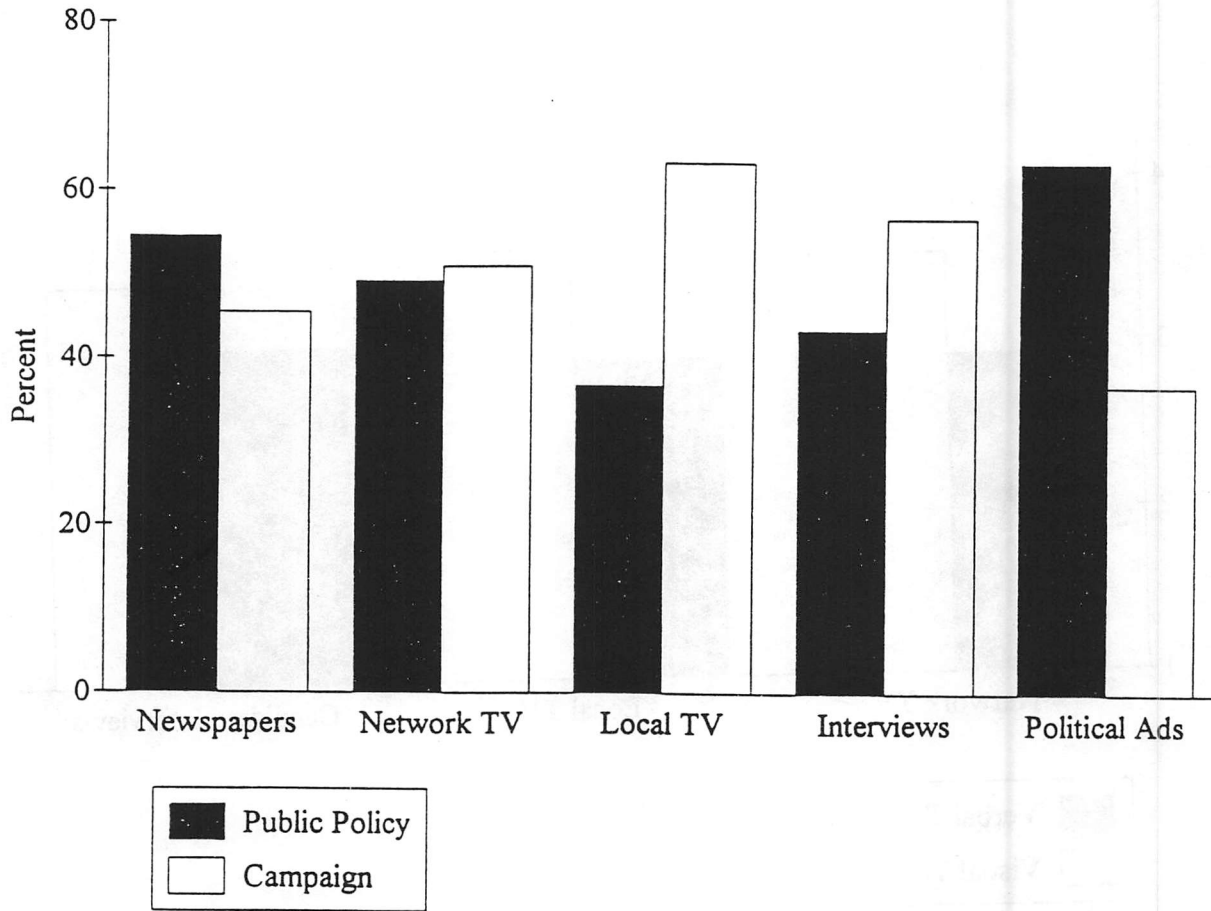


Figure 5. Candidate Information in Campaign Topic Messages

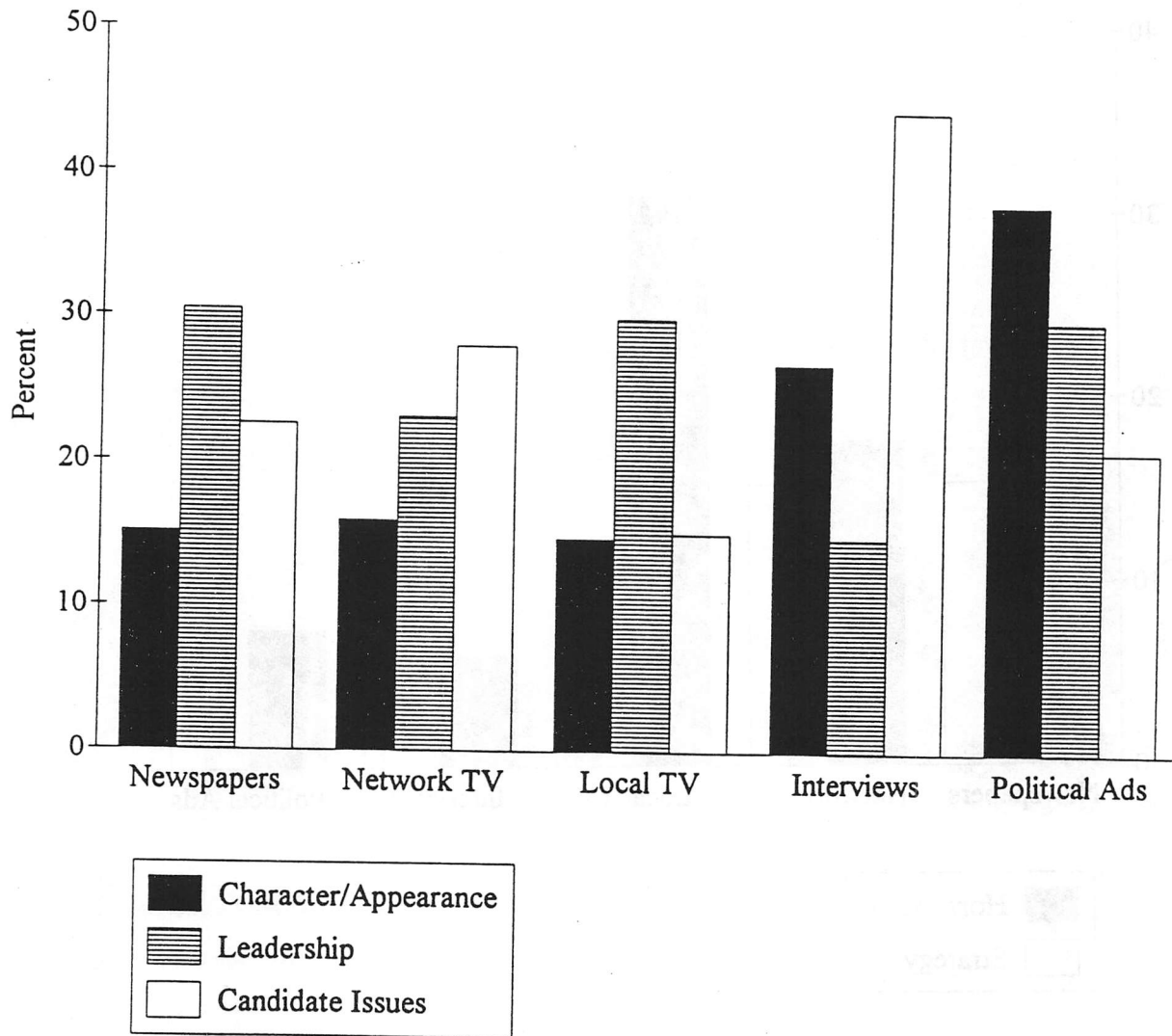


Figure 6. Percentage of Horse Race or Strategy Messages

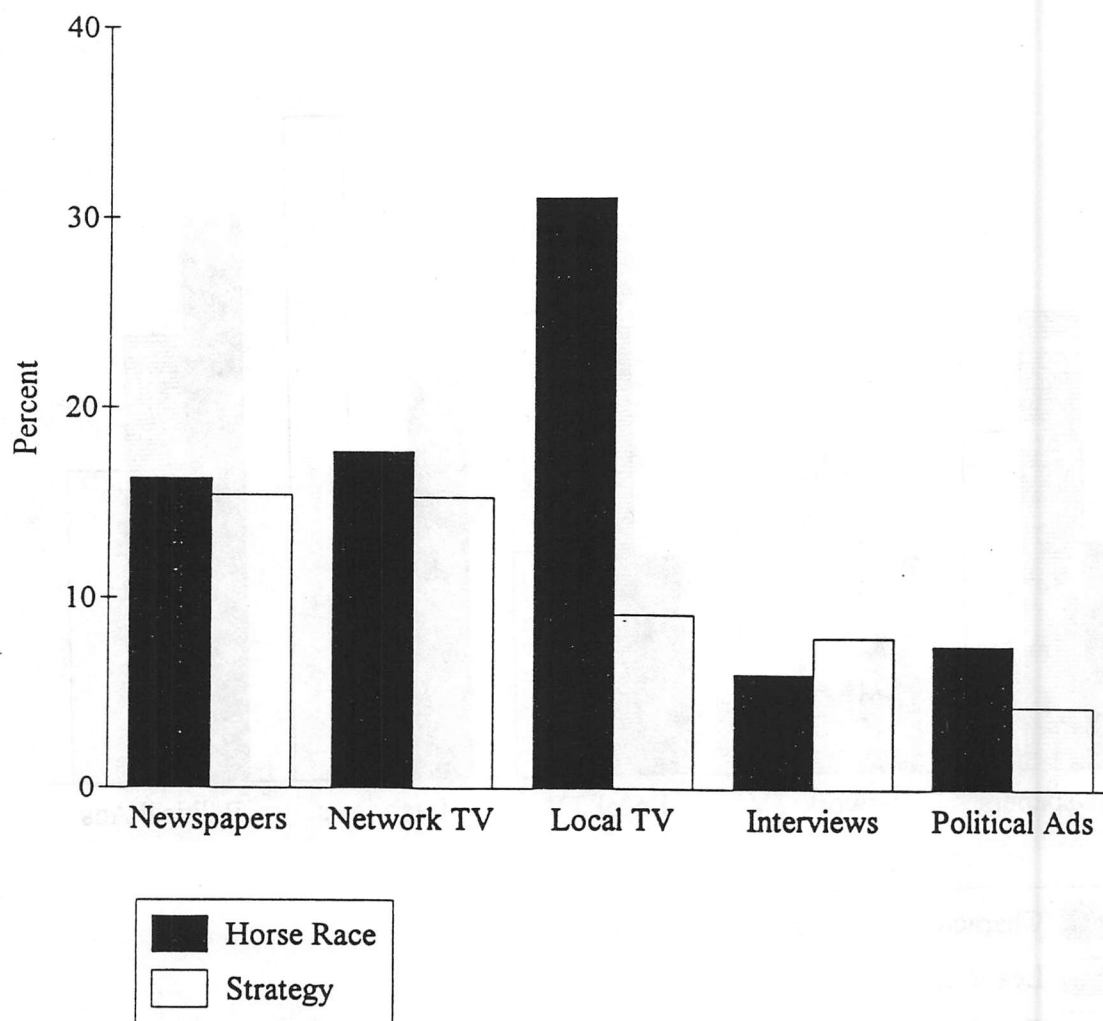


Figure 7. Verbs in Messages

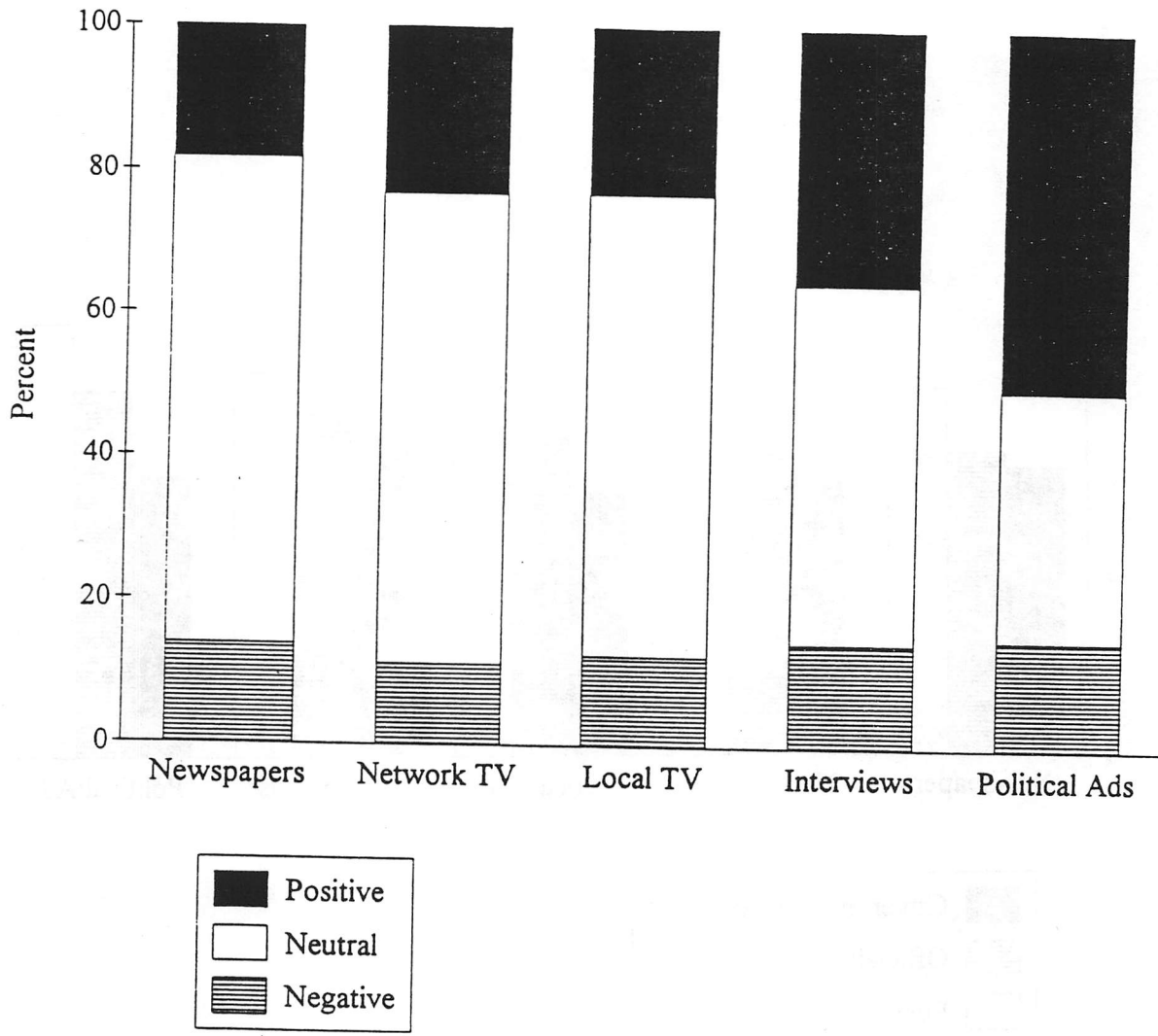
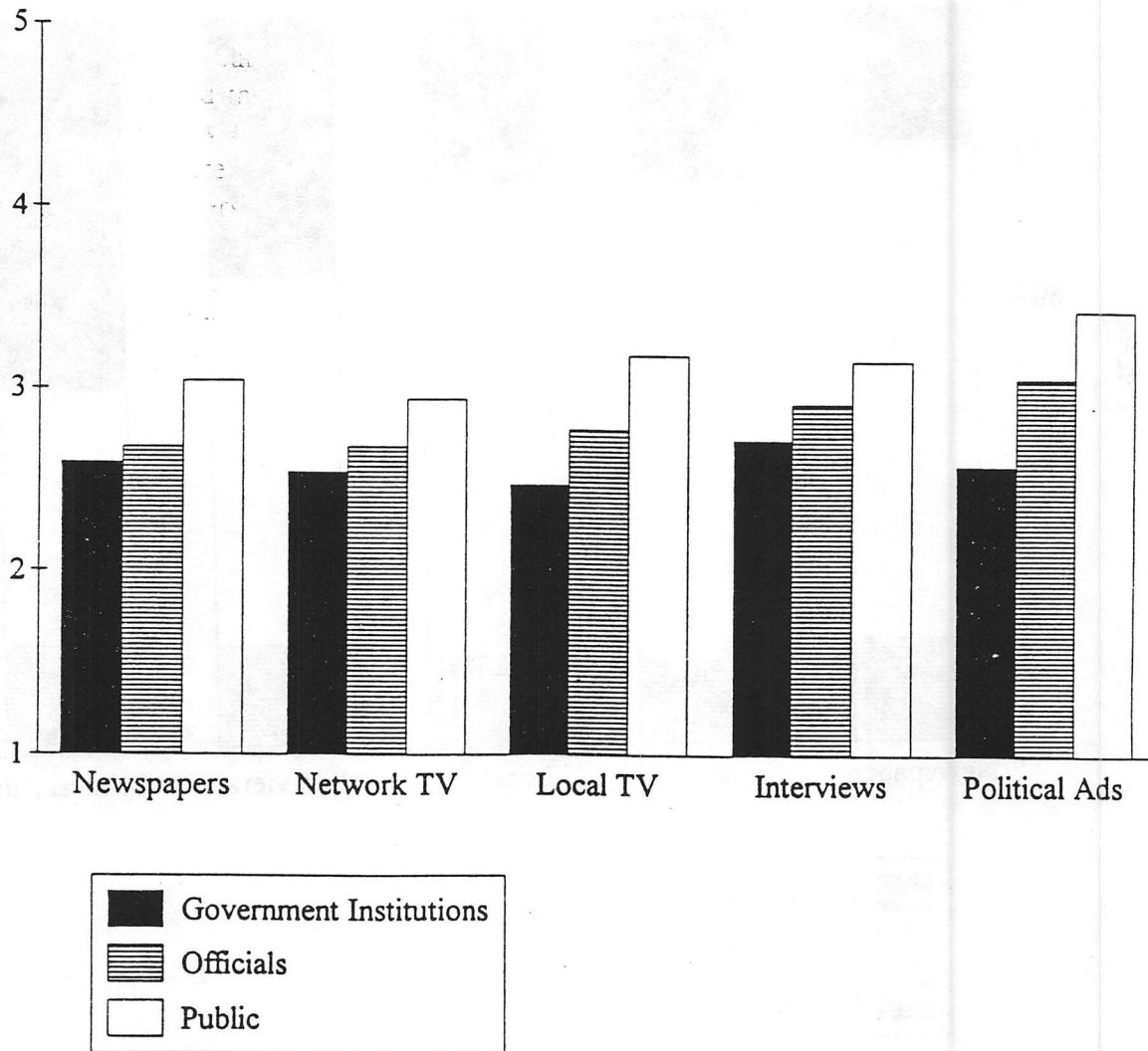


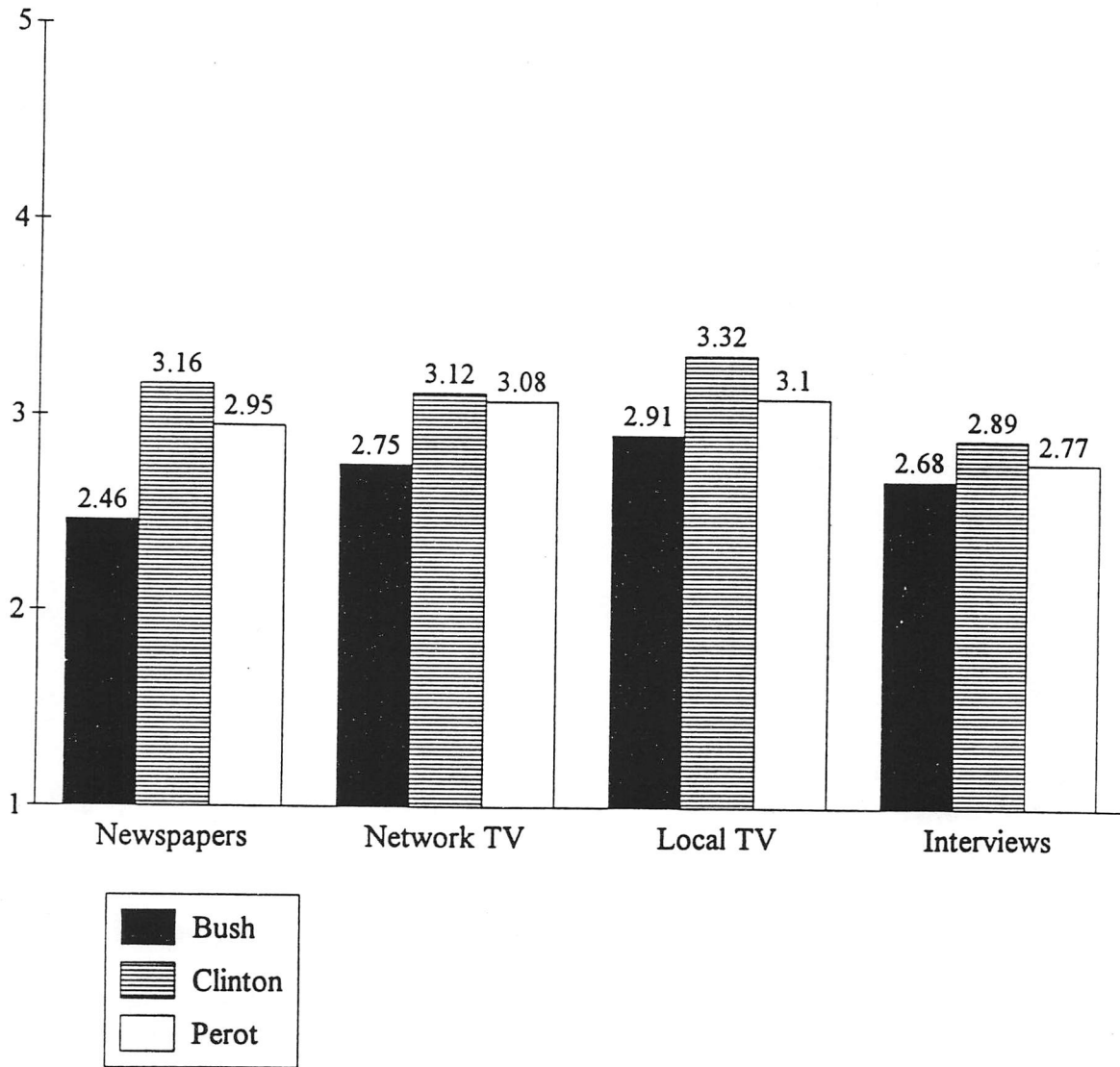


Figure 8. Idealism/Cynicism of Messages with Political Objects



5-point scale. 1 is most negative/cynical and 5 is most positive/idealistic.

Figure 9. Reporters' Mean Message Tone to Candidates



5-point scale. 1 is very negative and 5 is very positive.

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