

Media Bias in Presidential Elections: A Meta-Analysis

By Dave D'Alessio and Mike Allen

A meta-analysis considered 59 quantitative studies containing data concerned with partisan media bias in presidential election campaigns since 1948. Types of bias considered were gatekeeping bias, which is the preference for selecting stories from one party or the other; coverage bias, which considers the relative amounts of coverage each party receives; and statement bias, which focuses on the favorability of coverage toward one party or the other. On the whole, no significant biases were found for the newspaper industry. Biases in newsmagazines were virtually zero as well. However, meta-analysis of studies of television network news showed small, measurable, but probably insubstantial coverage and statement biases.

There is probably not an American today who has not heard charges that “the media” are “biased.” Many Americans believe that this is true (Schneider & Lewis, 1985), despite the fact that they do not necessarily agree on the nature of that bias.

In this article we examine the nature of partisan media bias within the specific realm of presidential election campaigns, considering specifically questions such as, Is there systematic partisan media bias in presidential campaigns? What is its magnitude and valence? Is one party covered more extensively than the other, or are the media more negative in tone about one party than the other? Does bias vary from campaign to campaign or from medium to medium?

The Nature of Bias

As Williams (1975) points out, the question of media bias is moot in the absence of certain properties of that bias: It must be volitional, or willful; it must be influential, or else it is irrelevant; it must be threatening to widely held conventions, lest it be dismissed as mere “crackpotism”; and it must be sustained rather than an isolated incident. Page and Shapiro (1992) have described a number of biases, most of which derive from the nature of America’s media as businesses operating in a competitive economic marketplace. These biases include a procapitalist, anti-communist bias, a minimal government bias, and nationalistic biases. Most of

Dave D'Alessio (PhD, Michigan State University) is an assistant professor of communication sciences at the University of Connecticut-Stamford. His research interests include political use of the World Wide Web. Mike Allen (PhD, Michigan State University) is a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His research centers on the transmission of social influence.

these are of little concern to most consumers and critics because, although they are usually sustained and arguably influential (see, for instance, Lippmann, 1922/1991; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1982), such positions do not represent threats to the political beliefs of large numbers of readers and viewers.

A set of special cases of media bias lies in the arena of electoral politics. Unlike opinions on the nature of the economy, where it would appear that there is a large preference among Americans for capitalism rather than communism, opinions on political matters are widely divergent. A medium demonstrating an ideological or partisan bias by unilaterally espousing any one particular viewpoint would draw the wrath of the holders of all the noncompatible viewpoints.

Ideological, or partisan, bias in the press meets all of Williams's criteria, and it is partisan bias in the news which has attracted the most public interest and attention. Fears in this regard are not completely unfounded; journalism as a whole is populated by people who identify themselves as being politically more liberal than average (Schneider & Lewis, 1985; Media Studies Center/Roper Center, 1996) and who are required by the nature of their industry to "gatekeep" or select specific news items from the universe of news items (for instance, see White, 1950; Bagdikian, 1971). As a result, it is assumed that decisions made by reporters and editors in choosing stories and covering candidates reflects in part the political beliefs of those reporters and editors (Levite, 1996). In fact, in White's (1950) study, which led to the creation of the gatekeeper metaphor, the editor in question specifically did reject certain stories based on ideology—terming an important human rights story of the day as "propaganda" and rejecting another as "too red."

The result of this confluence of findings is a set of charges (e.g., Agnew, 1969a, 1969b; Efron, 1971; Keely, 1971; Bozell & Baker, 1990; Bozell, 1992) that the media are biased, that they support liberal causes and thinking to the detriment of legitimate conservative positions and beliefs, and that the media thereby influence the populace to prefer liberal (i.e., Democratic) political candidates to conservative (i.e. Republican) candidates. An extremely brief search turns up statements to that effect not only by Vice President Agnew, but also by President Eisenhower (Lichter, 1992), Vice President Quayle (Debenport, 1992), and presidential candidate Dole (Seelye, 1996).

On the other hand, liberal critics (such as Liebling, 1964/1975; Cooper & Soley, 1990; Lee & Solomon, 1991) find a distinct conservative bias to the media based in part on the nature of the media as businesses. To the point of view of these critics, the business-oriented nature of American media is the key element in determining the media's biases. In particular, although writers and editors may hold liberal opinions, they are employed—and, by employment, controlled—by publishers and owners who are business people and thus generally show preferences for conservative viewpoints. Thus, the news must be biased conservatively by existing writers and editors; if they refuse, they can be replaced by writers and editors who will demonstrate such biases. Charges to this effect in the realm of electoral politics have been made by, among many others, Franklin Roosevelt's campaign manager (Farley, 1938) and presidential candidates Stevenson and Clinton (Dennis, 1996).

This contradictory set of findings suggests the subjective nature of bias, that it is a perception rather than a matter of objective agreement. This was demonstrated experimentally by Stevenson and Greene (1980).

The genesis of the perception of bias lies in one of two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, mechanisms. It might be a matter of selective perception (Bauer, 1964), an example of two people observing the same message or event, but interpreting it differently (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). Or it could be an example of instance confirmation, of people with various positions finding in the competing message environment specific examples of messages that offend them and then arguing that these messages are representative of the whole.

Assumptions about the nature and valence of bias are also complicated by the fact that reporters and editors are aware of such concerns. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) cite instances of both journalists who permit their biases to appear in their reporting and those who work so assiduously to prevent such from happening that they actually overcompensate and support viewpoints opposite their own. Shoemaker and Reese found their results so ambiguous that they were unable to draw firm conclusions from them, except to say that some journalists show some bias at some times.

Journalists are aware that it is impossible to be absolutely objective and unbiased at all times (Debenport, 1992) and so attempt to substitute specific journalistic goals such as “fairness” or “balance.” If we are to accept that bias must be volitional, however, it must legitimately be argued that the specific attempt to eliminate bias from reporting succeeds by definition: To be aware of bias and to work to avoid it implies that any remaining inequities are accidental in nature and not volitional. Thus, if we accept Williams’s (1975) requirement that one property of bias is volition, the existence of fair or balanced reporting can be taken as evidence that contraindicates the existence of bias.

Types of Media Bias

In essence, there does not appear to be a major theorist of media bias. Examination of the literature, however, suggests that there seem to be three bodies of thought about its nature.

The first of the approaches to media bias deals specifically with the issue of gatekeeping: that writers and editors select from a body of potential stories those that will be presented to the public and, by extension, also “deselect” those stories of which the mass audience will hear nothing. We term this sort of bias *gatekeeping bias*. This is the level of analysis of White’s (1950) “Mr. Gates” study, in which the editor selected among stories provided to him by his wire service, sometimes on ideological grounds. Hofstetter and Buss (1978) referred to this as a “selectivity,” although we prefer not to use that term because of its use elsewhere in discussion of selective exposure and other phenomena. Gatekeeping is the sort of bias which most concerned Farley (1938), who stated “in some sections of the country the entire press was hostile to the Roosevelt administration. We received constant complaints from individuals in those areas who said it was impossible to get our side of the story” (p. 287).

In an important sense, however, gatekeeping bias by itself may be oftentimes

unknowable. If one considers the universe of all stories as a population and the list of those that are covered as a sample, the presumption is that, because the "sampling" procedure is carried out by individuals with opinions, the selection therefore will be biased. This is only a presumption, however, as the "population" is not only unknowable but unidentifiable. What would be "all the news in the world"? And, in the absence of population data, although it is safe to presume that gatekeeping bias occurs, it is impossible to know, or even estimate, its magnitude.¹ There do exist areas for which population data are available, for instance, major crime events in the U.S., but these are greatly outnumbered by those for which population data are unavailable.

The second type of bias considered in the literature might be called *coverage bias*. There is extensive literature that attempts to codify media bias by measuring the physical amount of coverage each side of some issue receives (e.g., Stempel, 1969; Stempel & Windhauser, 1989; Stovall, 1985). This is typically measured in column inches for newspapers and newsmagazines, although photographs (Batlin, 1954; Klein & Maccoby, 1954) and headlines (Stempel, 1965) have been counted (and measured) as well, whereas analyses of television include the amount of time devoted to sides of the issue (e.g., Doll & Bradley, 1974).

The vast majority of these studies deal with the political realm generally and the specific area of partisan politics. In a two-party electoral system, it is reasonable to assume that half the coverage should be accorded to one side and half to the other, and that deviations from this pattern are consistent with a coverage bias of some kind.

Reporting on issues on which there are more than two legitimate positions starts to render the notion that there is an a priori fair distribution of coverage untenable. Similarly, whereas two political parties roughly balanced in appeal to the electorate can be considered reasonably as being an "issue" with two sides that can be equitably reported by having equal coverage of both sides, many other social issues do not lend themselves to this sort of artificial balance. An example from outside the scope of this study is the issue of abortion: Although there are economic, social, and constitutional arguments in favor of the prochoice position, the prolife position boils down to the simple argument that abortion is immoral. What division of coverage space between these very different types of argument constitutes fair coverage? How far can the media deviate from this division and still be fair? As with gatekeeping bias, it seems impossible to measure coverage bias outside the electoral realm.

The third type of media bias to be considered herein is what is termed *statement bias*, that is, that members of the media can interject their own opinions into the text of the coverage of an issue. (Hofstetter, 1976, refers to this as "structural" bias, but of course all the types of bias that we are examining can be called structural.) Statement bias can take many forms, and is usually handled in a global manner by a researcher who focuses on whether media coverage is "favorable" or

¹ Year-to-year changes in selection bias might yield relative figures, but it would be unknown whether a year-to-year change would have been due to changes in the manner in which the sample was selected, that is, changes in bias, or changes in the underlying population.

“unfavorable” (e.g., Hofstetter, 1976), or “positive” or “negative” (e.g., Robinson & Sheehan, 1983).

Statement bias, unlike the other two forms, although equally subjective, is also measurable to a degree in that the unit of analysis is knowable: It is the simple, active, affirmative, declarative sentence. A given media event that contains equal numbers of statements biased in one direction as those biased in the opposite can reasonably be called “neutral” or “balanced” and one that contains no overtly biased statements can be called “unbiased,” whereas an event containing a preponderance of statements favorable to one side is overtly “biased.”

All these sorts of information are accessible via the methods of content analysis (see Krippendorff, 1980). To cope with the problem of subjectivity in estimates of media bias, many researchers have moved to the techniques of content analysis, thereby attempting to replace subjectivity with intersubjectivity (Babbie, 1995).

It is also important to recognize the nature of criticism of the media. Typically such criticisms are leveled at “the media” as a socioeconomic group or profession rather than at individuals practicing that profession, or even specific media outlets such as a single newspaper. Consider the simple question, as asked by the Media Studies Center/Roper Center (1996): “Overall, do you think news media coverage of the presidential campaign favors. . . .” This implies something important about the nature of the media: that they are perceived as a monolithic block. Critics discuss “the media” (and buttons say “I don’t believe the liberal media”) as a unitary whole and not as a set of not only different companies but even drastically different media. Examining “media bias” in the popular sense of the term, therefore, must be a gross-level examination.

Electoral Coverage

In many ways, the area of political processes, and particularly presidential election campaigns, provide a fertile ground for the analysis of media bias. A presidential campaign is small enough and short enough, and scrutinized thoroughly enough, to make it possible to determine the “population” of events and activities from which news material is drawn. Thus, it lends itself to the analysis of gatekeeping biases. Stovall (1985, 1988), for instance, has developed a technique for doing so that involves searching a sample set of media outlets for stories on an event. If any event achieves sufficient prominence to achieve mention in one outlet of the sample, the entire sample is searched again, and the total number of articles generated by that event is counted. Systematic biases would be apparent in the amount of “play” a story received; that is, whether one campaign’s events generated a greater or lesser number of stories than the opponent’s.

Coverage biases are also easily codified in a presidential campaign. As mentioned above, a two-party system, which produces two essentially qualified candidates, each campaigning at roughly the same level, should produce events, activities, and discussion in two roughly equal amounts. Thus, coverage should be roughly equal for each side, and any departure from a “50-50” split could be considered a consequence of some kind of bias. The presence of consequential third-party candidates (as happened in 1968, 1980, 1992, and 1996, among other

campaigns) can be dealt simply with on the basis of measuring only the coverage afforded the two major parties—which are generally associated with the “left-right” axis of political thought.

Similarly, statement bias should break out 50-50 as well, that is, there should be as many overtly opinionated statements about one side as the other if media reports are to be considered to be balanced or unbiased. Although no one expects there to be no biased statements in 100% of reports, a 50-50 breakdown of them would be indicative of a deliberate attempt to achieve balance, and thus deviations from the 50-50 pattern would arguably be an indication of bias of some kind.

Some writers, including Kobre (1953), Stempel (1991), and Debenport (1992), point out that 50-50 coverage may not necessarily be appropriate to a given campaign, and that one campaign might genuinely be more newsworthy than the other. However, as Myers (1993) points out, presidential campaigns make every effort to respond to every action of an opponent, which implies a sort of parity to campaign activities. Further, Patterson (1993) has shown that the emphasis on news rather than issues is one of the prime failings of campaign coverage. The conclusion is inescapable that equitable campaign coverage can be considered unbiased coverage, and vice versa.

The area of presidential politics, therefore, is uniquely simplified in terms of the study of media bias. An unbiased medium should cover both sides equally. More importantly, presidential campaigns are also uniquely consequential to the nation. The winners achieve enormous power for themselves and their parties: The winner becomes the “most powerful person in the Western world.” The loser, on the other hand, usually disappears into elder statesmanhood. The potential consequences of media bias, particularly if it can be shown to have influenced the campaign (as is so often the claim), are therefore similarly enormous.

As Stempel (1991) shows, the study of media coverage of presidential campaigns dates largely to the 1952 race between Eisenhower and Stevenson, the first race that evoked Stevenson’s charges of media bias by what he termed a “one-party press” (see Dennis, 1996, among many others). Since then, campaign coverage has been approached in a number of ways, including analysis of the coverage of a single newspaper across a series of campaigns (Nollet, 1968), analysis of a sample of newspapers for a single campaign (e.g., Stempel, 1961; Stovall, 1985; Graber, 1971), or cross-media comparisons of coverage of a single campaign such as that done by Hofstetter (1978). The majority of studies consider only one medium and one campaign, which necessitates the use of meta-analysis if conclusions of broader applicability are to be made.

Method

Meta-analysis is a form of literature review developed to permit the combination of the results of numerous studies in order to make knowledge claims. In meta-analysis, quantitative findings of a variety of studies on the same topic are converted to a common metric and aggregated. This permits formal statistical tests of the findings that are replicable (Hunter, Schmidt & Jackson, 1982).

The advantage of meta-analytic claims is that they are based on larger sample sizes than are contained in any single one of the studies on which they are based and therefore are less susceptible to confounding by simple sampling error (Hunter & Schmidt, 1990; Rosenthal, 1991). In particular, the substantive increase in sample size leads to a reduction in Type II error, which, as Dindia and Allen (1992) have shown, can have a confounding effect on the conclusions of other forms of literature review. As a result, Cook and Leviton (1980) have concluded that meta-analysis is superior to other methods of aggregating the literature, including the narrative review.

Meta-analysis is a particularly useful approach to the subject of media bias in that it allows the combination of a large number of studies of a relatively small number of media outlets. For instance, researchers have studied the *Boston Globe's* approach to campaign coverage (Nollet, 1968), that of the two daily Washington, D.C., papers (Kenney & Simpson, 1993), and that of two San Francisco newspapers (Batlin, 1954). Each of these studies is valuable in its way, but if charges that "the media" as a monolithic entity is biased are to be examined, it is necessary to examine more than a small number of outlets. Meta-analysis provides the opportunity to aggregate findings across all these studies, thereby providing knowledge of a more broadly based nature.

Although Hunter and Schmidt (1990) recommend the use of the correlation coefficient (r) as the most useful statistic for meta-analytic purposes, the nature of the data in this study suggests instead the use of the d' statistic (Rosenthal, 1991).² Hunter, Schmidt, and Jackson (1982) point out that the advantages of r are that its magnitude is not a function of sample size (unlike t or Cohen's d) and that r is a familiar statistic that is easily interpreted. As a result, r has become the preferred meta-analytic statistic of the communication literature (e.g., Allen, D'Alessio, & Brezgel, 1995; Emmers-Sommer & Allen, 1999; Kim & Hunter, 1993).

On the other hand, d' is a measure of difference between data listed in the form of proportions, and is in fact calculated as the simple difference between two proportions. Like r , d' is not a function of sample size, and, because it is calculated as a difference of two proportions, also can be interpreted readily. For instance, if 60% of a newspaper's campaign coverage was of the Democratic candidate and 40% of the Republican, d' would simply be $.60 - .40 = +.20$.³

d' is transformable to r (Wolf, 1986). However, the method of converting d' to r requires the assumption that media bias is normally distributed. What little data exists (D'Alessio, 1997), however, suggests that bias in the media is not normally distributed, but instead is highly leptokurtic. The d' to r transformation is not robust to the violation of the assumption of normality, as demonstrated by Wolf (1986), and the r s resulting from this transformation would thus be biased. Therefore, for this particular study, d' is preferred as the effect size statistic.

² The d' statistic is nonparametric and should not be confused with Cohen's d , a more commonly used but parametric statistic closely related conceptually to t .

³ The Democratic side was arbitrarily coded as positive. This has no bearing on the outcome, but does permit an estimation of the valence (i.e., pro-Democratic or pro-Republican) of the outcome.

Meta-analysis Using d'

According to Rosenthal (1991), an averaged d' can be calculated using the formula:

$$d' = \sum w_i d'_i / \sum w_i$$

where w is a weighting factor calculated $w_i = n_i / (1 - d_i^2)$. (n is the number of cases in the sample.) The purpose of this weighting factor is to give greater influence on the final d' to those studies that are based on larger samples and hence are less susceptible to sampling error.

One goal of meta-analysis is to discover subgroups within the data that are homogeneous in nature, that is, that differences between the results of the various studies that compose the group can be attributed to sampling error (Hunter & Schmidt, 1990). The test statistic commonly used for this purpose is the χ^2 statistic, which, in the case of d' is calculated by the formula (also provided by Rosenthal, 1991):

$$\chi^2 = \sum w_i (d'_i - d')^2$$

The degrees of freedom for the analysis of homogeneity is the number of studies in the analysis (k) minus one.

A nonsignificant χ^2 indicates that the effect sizes reported in the studies in a given analysis vary within the limits of sampling error, that is, that they form a single, homogeneous set of studies, and therefore the observed difference in effect size between them are attributable to statistical noise. Significant χ^2 statistics in meta-analytic tests of homogeneity suggest the existence of subgroups among the studies.

Hedges and Olkin (1985) have pointed out the necessity of distinguishing fixed and random effects models. As Hunter and Schmidt (1990) point out, the methodology followed herein assumes a fixed effects model.

Although both models yield identical effect size estimates, the consequential distinction between effects models lies in the area of homogeneity testing. Specifically, random effects can add a source of heterogeneity. Because this source of heterogeneity is generally negligible and can be explicitly tested using moderator analysis (Hunter & Hamilton, 1994), and because random effects models yield knowledge claims of less strength than fixed effects models, Shadish and Had-dock (1994) recommend commencing analysis using a fixed effects approach and considering random effects models in the face of heterogeneity that is resistant to other moderator analyses.

Literature Search

To conduct the meta-analysis, studies were gathered from: electronic search of *PsychLit* and *Dissertations Abstracts Online* using the terms "media bias," "newspaper coverage," and "political coverage"; manual inspection of *Journalism Quarterly*, *Public Opinion*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*; search of *Index to Journals in Communication*; and visual inspection of the reference lists of each of the

articles, chapters, books, and dissertations identified. In addition, we searched the World Wide Web repeatedly using several search engines for the terms “media bias” and “newspaper coverage” as well as programs for recent ICA and NCA/SCA conventions.

To be included in the meta-analysis, a study had to meet numerous criteria. It had to (a) provide quantitative estimates of (b) news coverage in television, newspapers, newsmagazines, or radio (c) of a presidential campaign (d) covering a substantial part of the election campaign period (defined as the period between the party conventions and election day) and be (e) separated by party or candidate. We located no studies examining radio news.

As a result, we eliminated a number of studies from review because they failed to meet one or more criteria. These included studies that covered only congressional (e.g., Wells & King, 1994; Coffey, 1975; Kelley, 1958) or gubernatorial (e.g., Ostroff & Sardell, 1989; Bishop & Brown, 1967) races; that examined structural elements of the campaign coverage without making a party-by-party breakdown (e.g., Noyes, Lichter, & Amundson, 1993; Russonello & Wolf, 1979; Patterson, 1989); or that considered only one candidate (e.g., Johnson, 1997; Merron & Gaddy, 1986). One omitted study (Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, & West, 1996) yielded only aggregate data from February through November (creating a proincumbent skew). Others considered only the debates (e.g., Lowry, Bridges, & Barefield, 1990), editorials (Emery, 1964), or solely the Associated Press wire (Fan & Tims, 1989). Efron (1971) was also dropped because her findings had failed in replication (Stevenson, Eisinger, Feinberg, & Kotok, 1973).

We located 59 studies that fit the criteria. We broke these down by the form of bias toward which the data were oriented and calculated d' and w for each. We also separated them by medium (TV, newspapers, and newsmagazines) and the campaign year to which they referred. For each subcategory of study we calculated an average d' , as well as a χ^2 test of homogeneity. The latter was a critical test in considering several of the research questions above, such as how inconsistency in biases from campaign to campaign would manifest themselves as a source of heterogeneity among the various studies.

The unit of analysis was defined as the total coverage by one media outlet of one presidential campaign. This is consistent with the discussion presented above, specifically, that it is important to consider media bias from the standpoint of an aggregated whole. Alternative units, such as the single column inch of newsprint or the single second of televised coverage, are too minute to be of use in examining a unitary “media.”

Results

The 59 studies yielded 132 measurements of the extent of media bias. Some, such as Hofstetter (1978), considered more than one medium in a single election; some, including Nollet (1968), the same medium across multiple elections; and others, such as Stempel (1965), measured bias in a single medium in multiple ways. Although using multiple results from the same study violates the assumption of

Table 1. Effect Sizes Reported by Studies Included in the Analysis

Study	Medium	Type of bias	N	d'	Campaign year
Millspaugh (1949)	NP	Cov/Amt	4	-.302	1948
Berelson et al. (1954)	NP	Stat/Num	3	-.167	1948
Klein & Maccoby (1954)	NP	Cov/Photo	8	-.078	1952
Klein & Maccoby (1954)	NP	Cov/Num	8	-.084	1952
Klein & Maccoby (1954)	NP	Stat/Amt	8	-.568	1952
Batlin (1954)	NP	Stat/Amt	3	-.195	1952
Higbie (1954)	NP	Cov/Photo	14	-.304	1952
Higbie (1954)	NP	Cov/Num	14	-.006	1952
Blumberg (1954)	NP	Cov/Photo	33	-.066	1952
Blumberg (1954)	NP	Cov/Num	33	+.048	1952
Blumberg (1954)	NP	Cov/Amt	33	+.018	1952
Kobre (1953)	NP	Cov/Photo	34	+.070	1952
Kobre (1953)	NP	Cov/Num	34	+.022	1952
Kobre (1953)	NP	Cov/Amt	34	+.016	1952
Nollet (1968)	NP	Cov/Amt	1	+.052	1952
Price (1954)	NP	Cov/Amt	8	-.072	1952
Price (1954)	NP	Selection	8	-.015	1952
Price (1954)	NP	Stat/Amt	8	-.096	1952
Repass & Chaffee (1968)	NP	Cov/Amt	8	-.128	1956
Nollet (1968)	NP	Cov/Amt	1	+.094	1956
Westley et al. (1963)	NM	Coverage	3	+.130	1960
Westley et al. (1963)	NM	Statement	3	-.074	1960
Stempel (1961)	NP	Cov/Num	15	+.022	1960
Stempel (1961)	NP	Cov/Amt	15	+.004	1960
Nollet (1968)	NP	Cov/Amt	1	+.184	1960
Danielson & Adams (1961)	NP	Selection	69	-.064	1960
Repass & Chaffee (1968)	NP	Cov/Amt	9	+.018	1964
Stempel (1965)	NP	Cov/Num	15	+.038	1964
Stempel (1965)	NP	Cov/Amt	15	+.038	1964
Nollet (1968)	NP	Cov/Amt	1	+.008	1964
Stempel (1969)	NP	Cov/Num	15	+.050	1968
Stempel (1969)	NP	Cov/Amt	15	+.060	1968
Graber (1971)	NP	Cov/Num	20	-.229	1968
Stevenson et al. (1973)	TV	Cov/Amt	1	+.134	1968
Evarts & Stempel (1974)	NM	Statement	3	-.110	1972
Stevenson et al. (1973)	TV	Statement	1	+.044	1972
Doll & Bradley (1974)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+.022	1972
Doll & Bradley (1974)	TV	Cov/Amt	3	.000	1972
Malaney & Buss (1979)	TV	Cov/Num	1	+.058	1972
Malaney & Buss (1979)	TV	Cov/Amt	1	+.098	1972
Malaney & Buss (1979)	TV	Statement	1	-.250	1972
Lowry (1974)	TV	Cov/Num	3	-.190	1972
Lowry (1974)	TV	Cov/Amt	3	-.078	1972
Lowry (1974)	TV	Statement	3	+.500	1972
Frank (1973)	TV	Cov/Amt	3	+.341	1972
Hofstetter & Zukin (1979)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+.078	1972
Hofstetter & Zukin (1979)	TV	Statement	3	-.299	1972
Hofstetter (1978)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+.156	1972
Hofstetter (1978)	TV	Cov/Amt	3	+.180	1972

Table 1. Effect Sizes Reported by Studies Included in the Analysis, continued

Study	Medium	Type of bias	N	d'	Campaign year
Hofstetter (1978)	TV	Statement	3	-.205	1972
Meadow (1973)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+.226	1972
Woodard (1994)	TV	Cov/Num	3	-.046	1972
Evarts & Stempel (1974)	TV	Statement	3	+.097	1972
Hofstetter (1978)	NP	Cov/Num	2	-.036	1972
Hofstetter (1978)	NP	Cov/Amt	2	-.184	1972
Hofstetter (1978)	NP	Stat/Num	2	-.066	1972
Meadow (1973)	NP	Cov/Num	3	+.226	1972
Graber (1976)	NP	Cov/Num	20	-.328	1972
Evarts & Stempel (1974)	NP	Stat/Amt	6	+.124	1972
Einsiedel & Bibbee (1979)	NM	Coverage	3	+.052	1976
Woodard (1994)	TV	Cov/Num	3	-.233	1976
Friedman, et al. (1980)	TV	Statement	3	+.006	1976
Woodard (1994)	TV	Cov/Num	3	-.182	1980
Robinson (1983)	TV	Cov/Num	1	-.012	1980
Robinson (1983)	TV	Cov/Amt	1	-.012	1980
Robinson & Sheehan (1983)	TV	Statement	1	-.106	1980
Stempel & Windhauser (1984)	NP	Cov/Num	14	+.002	1980
Stempel & Windhauser (1984)	NP	Cov/Amt	14	-.028	1980
Stovall (1985)	NP	Cov/Photo	50	-.078	1980
Stovall (1985)	NP	Cov/Num	50	-.048	1980
Stovall (1985)	NP	Cov/Amt	50	-.036	1980
Stovall (1985)	NP	Selection	50	+.034	1980
Moriarty & Garramone (1987)	NM	Coverage	3	-.024	1984
Moriarty & Garramone (1987)	NM	Statement	3	-.014	1984
Stempel (1991b)	NM	Coverage	3	-.314	1984
Stempel (1991b)	NM	Statement	3	-.302	1984
Windhauser & Evarts (1991)	TV	Cov/Num	3	-.078	1984
Windhauser & Evarts (1991)	TV	Statement	3	-.001	1984
Woodard (1994)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+.013	1984
Robinson (1985)	TV	Cov/Amt	3	+.028	1984
Mullin et al. (1986)	TV	Statement	3	-.318	1984
Clancey & Robinson (1985)	TV	Statement	3	+.666	1984
Stovall (1988)	NP	Cov/Photo	49	-.014	1984
Stovall (1988)	NP	Cov/Num	49	-.014	1984
Stovall (1988)	NP	Selection	49	-.053	1984
Stempel & Windhauser (1991)	NP	Cov/Num	17	+.080	1984
Stempel & Windhauser (1991)	NP	Stat/Num	17	+.082	1984
Stempel (1991b)	NM	Coverage	3	-.058	1988
Stempel (1991b)	NM	Statement	3	-.058	1988
Popovich et al. (1993)	NM	Coverage	3	+.126	1988
Popovich et al. (1993)	NM	Statement	3	-.084	1988
Moriarty & Popovich (1991)	NM	Coverage	3	-.154	1988
Moriarty & Popovich (1991)	NM	Statement	3	-.162	1988
Windhauser & Evarts (1991)	TV	Cov/Num	3	-.082	1988
Windhauser & Evarts (1991)	TV	Statement	3	+.056	1988
CMPA (1988)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+.018	1988
CMPA (1988)	TV	Statement	3	-.036	1988
Woodard (1994)	TV	Cov/Num	3	-.078	1988
Buchanan (1991)	TV	Cov/Num	5 ^a	-.047	1988
Buchanan (1991)	TV	Statement	5	-.385	1988

Table 1. Effect Sizes Reported by Studies Included in the Analysis, continued

Study	Medium	Type of bias	N	d'	Campaign year
Stempel & Windhauser (1989)	NP	Cov/Amt	14	-.028	1988
Kenney & Simpson (1993)	NP	Cov/Photo	2	-.378	1988
Kenney & Simpson (1993)	NP	Cov/Num	2	+4.18	1988
Kenney & Simpson (1993)	NP	Selection	2	-.780	1988
Kenney & Simpson (1993)	NP	Stat/Num	2	-.334	1988
Stempel & Windhauser (1991)	NP	Cov/Num	17	+0.10	1988
Stempel & Windhauser (1991)	NP	Stat/Num	17	+0.002	1988
Buchanan (1991)	NP ^b	Cov/Num	13	-.053	1988
Buchanan (1991)	NP	State/Num	13	+4.57	1988
McCord & Weaver (1996)	NM	Coverage	3	+0.16	1992
McCord & Weaver (1996)	NM	Statement	3	+5.32	1992
Lowry & Shidler (1995)	TV	Cov/Amt	4 ^c	+0.36	1992
Lowry & Shidler (1995)	TV	Statement	4	+2.20	1992
Cavanaugh (1995)	TV	Cov/Amt	3	-.146	1992
Cavanaugh (1995)	TV	Statement	3	+0.18	1992
CMPA (1992)	TV	Statement	3	+1.10	1992
Staten & Sloss (1993)	NP	Cov/Num	1	-.034	1992
Staten & Sloss (1993)	NP	Stat/Num	1	+0.006	1992
Mantler & Whitman (1995)	NP	Cov/Amt	6	-.064	1992
Fan (1996)	NP	Cov/Amt	16	-.034	1992
Fan (1996)	NP	Stat/Amt	16	+0.048	1992
Cavanaugh (1995)	NP	Cov/Amt	1	-.234	1992
Cavanaugh (1995)	NP	Stat/Num	1	-.170	1992
King (1995)	NP	Stat/Num	3	-.030	1992
Murphy (1998)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+0.16	1996
Murphy (1998)	TV	Statement	3	+1.24	1996
CMPA (1996)	TV	Cov/Num	3	+1.82	1996
CMPA (1996)	TV	Statement	3	+1.46	1996
Waldman & DeVitt (1998)	NP	Cov/Photo	5	-.034	1996
Waldman & DeVitt (1998)	NP	Stat/Photo	5	+0.068	1996
Domke et al. (1997)	NP	Cov/Amt	41	+1.18	1996
Domke et al. (1997)	NP	Stat/Amt	41	+0.12	1996

Notes. For medium: NP = newspapers; TV = television; NM = newsmagazines. For type of bias: Cov = coverage; Stat = statement; Num = number of stories; Amt = amount of coverage; Photo = photographs.

^aIncludes PBS and CNN

^bIncludes newsmagazines

^cIncludes CNN

independence of estimates, Tracz (1985) has demonstrated that the techniques are robust to this violation. All 132 of the tests appear in Table 1.

Although the ability to correct for measurement error is one of the values of meta-analysis (Hunter & Schmidt, 1990), the estimates of reliability necessary to such correction were only published for 12 of the 132 tests. (Nineteen more included the percentage of agreement between coders, a known overestimate of reliability; see Wimmer & Dominick, 1994.) Given the paucity of reliability data,

correction for attenuation was impossible, and effect sizes are somewhat underestimated (Hunter, Schmidt & Jackson, 1982).

Gatekeeping Bias

Five of the studies used some method of determining the number of events in a campaign. The results of these studies were restated as proportions by using this construction:

$$p = (\text{Stories} / n) / \text{Events}$$

where stories is the total number of stories generated, events is the number of campaign events isolated, and n is the number of media outlets (in each of these cases, newspapers) in the sample. From these ps d' could be calculated. The average d' for this and all subsequent analyses appear in Table 2.

For this analysis, the average d' was -.052, which did not differ significantly from zero. The results were homogeneous indicating that the differences observed could be attributable to sampling error.

The net amount of gatekeeping bias uncovered by these studies is essentially zero, although it is premature to claim that there is no gatekeeping bias in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns based on only five studies. There were no studies that considered the question of gatekeeping bias in network television news.

Coverage Bias

Many studies have considered the question of coverage bias in the newspapers, newsmagazines, and network television news, possibly because of the relative ease in measuring coverage bias. Approaches include measures of both the numbers of stories and pictures, and also the amount of coverage, measured in column inches for newspapers and either on-screen time or lines of text for network television news.

Reports were separated by medium and then aggregated. On the whole, coverage bias in newspapers amounted to $d' = -.020$, which did not differ significantly from zero and which was homogeneous.

Despite the homogeneity of the overall finding, based on Blumberg (1954) and Stempel (1961), a moderator analysis considered whether there were substantial differences in partisan bias based on the amount of coverage measured in column inches compared the amount of coverage measured in number of stories and photographs used. For instance, we located 17 studies that included 21 measures of coverage each party got in column inches. The average d' for this set of studies is +.003, which is again not different than zero. These data are homogeneous.

Nineteen studies considered whether more stories about Democratic or Republican candidates were published in newspapers during various campaigns. d' for this group of studies averaged -.027, representing, again, a statistically nonsignificant amount of bias. This group also proved to be homogeneous.

Finally, we assembled a set of 8 studies that considered the number of photographs of the candidates across the campaign. Again, the weighted average d' was essentially zero, $d' = -.055$. These results were also homogeneous.

Table 2. Results of Meta-Analytic Summaries

Type of bias	Measure of bias	Medium	k	n	d'	s.e.	χ^2
Gatekeeping	All	NP	5	178	-.052	.065	3.09
Coverage	All	NP	48	825	-.020	.030	8.44
Coverage	Column inches	NP	21	288	+.003	.051	1.55
Coverage	Number of stories	NP	19	342	-.027	.046	4.32
Coverage	Number of photos	NP	8	195	-.055	.062	1.85
Coverage	All	TV	28	77	+.009		1.42
Coverage	Amount of time	TV	10	25	+.054		0.53
Coverage	Number of stories	TV	18	52	-.014		0.80
Coverage	All	NM	8	24	-.032		0.50
Statement	All	NP	16	146	+.009	.072	7.83
Statement	Sentences	NP	6	82	-.072	.096	3.71
Statement	Number of stories	NP	9	59	+.116	.113	1.41
Statement	All	TV	19	54	+.047		5.37
Statement	All	NM	8	24	-.012		1.65

Note. For medium: NP = newspapers; TV = television; NM = newsmagazines. For all χ^2 , $df = k - 1$.

In a similar manner, we collected studies of coverage bias in television network news. Analysis of these studies proceeded in roughly the same manner as those of newspaper coverage, with one prominent exception. Each of the newspaper studies drew a sample of between 1 and 50 newspapers from the pool of all daily newspapers. Studies of network television coverage, the three major networks during most campaigns (the exceptions added PBS, CNN, or both). Hence, the d' calculated is based on population data, and so no standard errors were calculated for it.

Twenty-eight studies considered some form of partisan coverage bias in the television coverage of presidential campaigns since 1972. They yielded an average d' of only +.009 (see Table 2). Again, this group of studies was homogeneous, but the comparison of subgroups based on structural elements proceeded. Ten studies considered relative amounts of coverage, although for television it was measured in airtime or lines of text rather than in column inches. This yielded an average d' of +.054, and the totals were homogeneous. Eighteen studies considered the number of stories about each party's candidates. The mean d' was -.014, and the results were homogeneous.

Finally, eight studies considered some approach to measuring coverage of Presidential campaigns in the three major newsmagazines: *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. All eight of the studies examined the content of all three magazines. The overall d' was -.032, and, once again, the data were homogeneous. There were an insufficient number of studies to permit subgroup comparisons.

On the whole, all the measures of coverage bias were homogeneous. More importantly, those for the newspaper studies were so small as to be statistically insignificant. Because the TV studies frequently used population data, there were no significance tests, but they, too, were very small. The largest effect, for television news time, was +.054, indicating a ratio of about 47.3 Republican minutes for

every 52.7 Democratic ones—a preponderance almost certainly undetectable by the audience. Studies of newsmagazine coverage also used population data and, on the whole, yielded a small effect; however, this effect was reversed in valence: For every 51.6 Republican stories there were 48.4 Democratic stories.

Statement Bias

Whereas the measurement of statement bias requires less of the sort of in-depth analysis needed to determine selection bias, it is still complicated by the use of content-analysis methods. More importantly, statement bias is by its very nature less “objectifiable” than simple measures of the amount of space allocated one party or the other.

Given the complexities of measurement, but also given that statement bias is the sort of bias to which media critics originally pointed, it is not surprising that it has been studied more frequently than selection bias but less frequently than coverage bias.

To reduce the results of each study to a single d' , the final proportion was constructed as Number Democratic/Total Number, regardless of what was being counted. In all cases, the number of Democratic statements included both statements that were pro-Democratic and those that were anti-Republican. Neutral statements were omitted.

Sixteen studies have considered the question of statement bias in newspapers. This data yields an average d' of +.009. Once again this result does not differ significantly from zero; these results are also homogeneous.

Again, structural differences between studies made possible the examination of subgroups. Six of the studies examined statement bias on a story-by-story basis, and nine examined statement bias at the level of individual paragraphs or statements. (The 16th study was the only one that considered photographs, and it by itself cannot form a subgroup.)

The groups of studies examining bias at the paragraph level yielded an average effect size of -.072, whereas the group examining it at the level of the story yielded a d' of +.116. As can be seen in Table 2, each subgroup is homogeneous and neither differed significantly from zero.

The question of statement bias on television has been studied from a far broader perspective than any of the other forms of bias. For instance, one study, that of Friedman, Mertz, and DiMatteo (1980), considered the expression on the anchors' faces as they said the candidates' names. In all, we located 19 studies of some form of statement bias in television network news. This overall mean d' is +.047, and, again, as this is not based on a sample, a standard error was not calculated. These data were also homogeneous. We found no separate coherent subgroups of useful size ($k > 2$), so we could not exam structural subgroups.

Eight studies examined the third major news medium, newsmagazines. Seven totals negative in valence, but the overall d' for statement bias in newsmagazines was only -.012. The results were again homogeneous, due in large part to the small weight of each study.

Clearly, there are greater differences between parties in terms of statement bias than there was in terms of coverage bias. It is also worth noting that, whereas the

statement bias uncovered in newsmagazines was pro-Republican, that detected on television network news was pro-Democrat.

Overall Analysis

The premises of this study discussed earlier clearly imply the need for some form of overall test crossing all types of bias and all media for all elections. Aggregating the individual studies across media is at least moderately problematic: Continuing with the process of weighting studies means the coverage provided by the *Fargo Forum* in 1952 was functionally identical to that provided by NBC in 1992. Failing to weight, however, makes studies of very small samples count the same as studies with very large samples.

The obvious solution is to calculate grand means using both methodologies. The failure of the two findings to differ substantially would indicate an overall result that is robust to methodology.

This indeed proved to be the case, yielding overall means of $d' = -.018$ using weighted studies and $d' = -.021$ unweighted. The results were homogeneous, $\chi^2(131) = 28.86$, $p > .05$, and neither differed significantly from zero ($s.e. = .024$). In short, the results indicate an aggregate, across all media and all elections, of zero overall bias.

Discussion

Considering newspapers, television, and newsmagazines separately, it is simplest to begin with a discussion of bias detected in newspaper reporting of presidential campaigns. As we have seen, neither the overall analysis, nor any of the differences between proportions of coverage, statement, or gatekeeping bias favoring Democrats or Republicans, was statistically significant. All were homogeneous; all were insubstantial in magnitude. In fact, five of the eight measurements were negative in sign (i.e., favoring the Republicans), albeit nonsignificantly. In short, there is no evidence whatsoever of a monolithic liberal bias in the newspaper industry, at least as manifest in presidential campaign coverage. The same can be said of a conservative bias: There is no significant evidence of it.

This is not to say that every reporter and every newspaper is unbiased. Quite the opposite: A wide variety of data (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; White, 1950; Millspaugh, 1949) indicates that specific newspapers or specific reporters and editors can show substantial (and substantive) ideological bias. Some examples: Kenney and Simpson (1993) document enormous gatekeeping biases on the part of the *Washington Times*; Blumberg (1954) found the *Indianapolis Star* devoting 77.2% of its campaign coverage to Republicans in the 1952 election, almost offset by the favoritism of the Great Falls (MN) *Tribune*, which favored the Democrats with 72.2% of its space.

What the results of this meta-analysis do say is that on the whole, across all newspapers and all reporters, there is only negligible, if any, net bias in the coverage of presidential campaigns. To the extent that there are newspapers whose coverage is biased in favor of Democrats, they are offset by newspapers whose

coverage is biased in favor of Republicans. In the newspaper business, there is no evidence of a unilateral, monolithic bias, at least in presidential election news coverage.

This latter, of course, is an important caveat. The elements that make bias in electoral campaigns easy to measure—most importantly, the assumption of a 50-50 split as being unbiased—also makes it easy for a medium to police itself. For years the broadcast media were governed by an “equal time” requirement; although not a requirement for the newspaper industry (and no longer so for broadcasters), the ideal of equal time is a fairly simple goal to achieve and consistent with the journalist principle of balance (Debenport, 1992).

These same journalistic principles may work to be the genesis of a liberally oriented bias in stories in which conflict between advocates of opposing positions is less well clearly defined. Stories of extant policies that are ineffective or counterproductive are more dramatic and hence “better” stories than reports of policies that do work—and hence, as reporters advocate (by implication) changes in the status quo, their stories are often inherently anticonservative. The tendency of newspaper reporters to see themselves as critics of the entrenched powers can have the same effect (e.g., Donaldson, 1987). This is the subject for other studies; however, no data on this is presented herein.

Interpreting the results of studies of network television news coverage of presidential campaigns is somewhat more complex, if for no other reason than for most of the time period covered by this analysis there were only three television networks in the United States. If a study such as Lowry’s (1974) finds that there are 1,243 fewer minutes of coverage afforded to Democratic candidates than Republican candidates during the three networks’ newscasts for the 1972 campaign, then this is an absolute (at least to the limits of the measurement error created by his measurement technique).

That said, analyses of coverage bias and statement bias in TV network news coverage of presidential campaigns reveal a very small, and not completely consistent, liberal (or at least pro-Democratic) bias. The largest of them, in coverage bias, indicates that roughly 52.7% of airtime went to Democrats, leaving 47.3% for Republicans. This is not a large difference, although it is larger than some would like. Statement biases were lesser in magnitude.

More importantly, these results are homogeneous, indicating that they transcend the individual campaign, the specific network, and even the individual research methodology. Put simply, study-by-study differences are simply attributable to random error. Similarly, the homogeneity of results shows that there are no campaign-by-campaign changes: The identity of the players changed many times, but the rules of the game, as least as the television networks were concerned, did not.

Data for the major newsmagazines are in the same interpretive “boat” as the data for TV, but the interpretation itself is easier: There was a slight pro-Republican coverage bias and an even slighter pro-Republican statement bias. The magnitude of these biases is slightly over half the magnitude of coverage bias in television discussed above, and can easily be dismissed as insubstantial.

This meta-analysis also reveals two pieces of information about the nature of existing research concerning media bias. The first is that research into the extent

of media bias tends to go through phases: 15 of the tests in Table 1 consider the 1952 election, but only 2 the 1956 election; bias in network television news was more extensively studied for the 1972 campaign than for any other election. These findings are certainly no accident: The first peak follows Stevenson's charges, the second, Agnew's.

In an important sense peaks and valleys in the frequency of study do not appear to matter: The homogeneity of results suggests that the results are independent of campaign. As long as media bias is contentious, however, it is worthy of scientific study, if only to monitor whether the pattern of no substantive differences found herein is maintained.

The second piece of information about existing research is revealed by examining the *ns* in the various tables of the results of analyses of newspaper coverage: Samples are often extremely small. Hofstetter (1978), for instance, did a cross-media comparison of coverage, examining all three television networks but a sample of only two newspapers. A sample so small can not claim to be representative of any population.

It is one of the functions of meta-analysis, though, to aggregate studies of small samples to yield results that are more generally useful. Cost and time constraints would preclude the analysis of the campaign coverage of a total of 1,149 newspapers (albeit with a number of repeats) in 12 different presidential campaigns—a total of over 60,000 articles—as are represented in Table 1. However, meta-analysis permits us to use this as an aggregate, albeit at some loss in detail.

This meta-analysis, like any review, is limited to the literature that precedes it. It is not difficult to conceive of ways other than those examined herein in which media may be biased. For instance, the procedures for examining selection bias start with stories that were picked up by media outlets in the first place. What of stories that remained unreported? Is there bias, not in the selection of stories, but in the rejection of stories?

Being a review, a meta-analysis is also limited temporally. It can make statements about what has passed, but cannot predict the future (unless the previous data are trended), and it is clear that the media will be changing in the near future. Will new media, possibly less fettered by notions of balance, change the way presidential campaigns are reported?

Barring the emergence of new information, it is safe to conclude that there was no consistent partisan bias in newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns. The data do suggest, however, a tiny but consistent pro-Democratic (and hence assumedly liberal) statement bias in television network news, arguably made problematic by the facts that the majority of American report getting their campaign news from television (Media Studies Center/Roper Center, 1996) and that the proportion of Americans who get most of their news from television has been increasing since the 1960s (Bower, 1985). Newsmagazines show an even tinier pro-Republican bias.

It is clear that the major source of bias charges is the individual perceptions of media consumers and, in particular, media consumers of a particularly ideological bent. Cynicism aside, campaigners and their campaign workers are involved in the political process at least in part because they are convinced that their positions

are right. From the perspective of a presidential candidate, under the enormous stress of campaigning in the U.S., convinced of one's message, and with the added pressure of a winner-takes-all result, it is all too easy to see the failure of others, including the media, to agree with one's message as being willful, deliberate, and possibly malicious.

A. J. Lieblich commented on a number of elements of the relationship between politicians and the press in *The Press* (1964/1975). "When the State Department says 'Yip!'" he pointed out, "it wants the newspapers to say 'Yip!' and not 'Yip! Yip! Yip!'" (p. 268). The same appears to be true of political candidates as well.

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(* indicates studies that contributed data to the analyses)

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