

THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN  
AS COVERED BY NEWSWEEK  
PEOPLE, TIME AND  
U.S. NEWS AND  
WORLD REPORT

By

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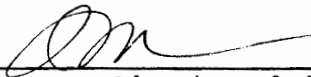
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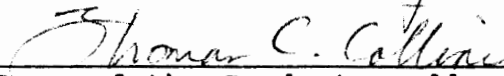
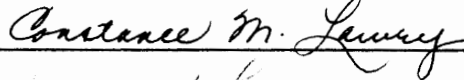
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of Problem

"Annoy the Media; reelect President Bush" was a Republican slogan during the last weeks of the 1992 election campaign. The slogan suggests widespread media bias against the president, as did Bush's statement that 1992 was "the most biased year in the history of presidential politics."<sup>1</sup> The two other presidential nominees, Gov. Bill Clinton and Ross Perot, also complained of media coverage -- Clinton for the focus on his draft status two decades before and Perot for questions about his integrity.

A study of media behavior in the 1992 campaign is useful not only because of alleged partisan bias, but also because of complaints about 1988 campaign coverage. News media during the previous presidential campaign were widely criticized for emphasizing polls, strategies and scandal over policy issues. A study of 1992 campaign coverage would test the candidates' allegations of bias and would explore whether the news media have improved over their behavior in the 1988 campaign.



## Objectives

This thesis consists of content analysis of four magazines -- Time, Newsweek, U.S. World News and World Report and People. The study analyzes news coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign during the general election period from Labor Day until the election. The purpose of the study is to examine to what extent, if any, partisan bias and agenda setting were reflected in the magazines' coverage. Partisan bias is defined in terms of the number of negative and positive stories, total number of stories and total number of photographs of a candidate or party. Agenda setting is looked at in terms of the amount of coverage to individual issues, as well as the amount of coverage of ongoing government issues versus amount of attention to campaign issues such as candidates' qualifications and standings in the polls.

## Significance of the Study

At the time this research began, no post-election studies of print media coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign had been published. The 1992 campaign provides a good opportunity to look at agenda setting because it follows an election that was widely criticized for "horserace" media coverage of polls and strategies and for coverage of candidates' personal lives. Analyzing coverage

of the 1992 campaign provides an opportunity to learn how the newsmagazines responded to that criticism.

This study is unusual among political communications research in that it examines People, a magazine that is widely circulated but not a mainstream news or political publication. Most researchers have looked at only traditional forms of political media, such as daily newspapers, newsmagazines and network evening newscasts. Few studies of presidential campaign coverage have looked at alternative media and none has included a content analysis of People magazine. One factor that distinguishes 1992 from previous election years is the candidates' ability and willingness to reach voters through nontraditional media: Perot made his critical announcements on CNN's Larry King Live; Clinton appeared on Arsenio Hall's syndicated talk show; Clinton and unsuccessful Democratic contender Jerry Brown conducted an unmoderated debate in an empty studio on Phil Donahue's daytime talk show. The 1992 campaign demonstrated that candidates' dependency on the media is narrowing. Candidates can circumvent the "media elite," with their analytic questioning and filtering, and promote their agendas in media as diverse as the Home television program, a conservative pundit's radio talk show, MTV and People magazine. Including People in the study allows a comparison of traditional political news media -- the three newsmagazines -- with a magazine that traditionally does not

focus on serious, political news. People could be considered a print equivalent of television and radio talk shows or entertainment programs.

This study, in examining bias, tests President Bush's complaint of slanted coverage and examines news media coverage of a race involving a 12-year incumbent president and a popular third-party candidate. Doris Graber wrote that media strive for balanced coverage in presidential campaign coverage, but that effort does not extend to anyone who is not a Democrat or Republican. Third-party candidates are "slighted or even ignored by the news profession."<sup>2</sup> This study examines whether coverage of Texas billionaire Perot was an exception to Graber's observation.

Finally, no studies of presidential campaign coverage have included spouses of candidates in their analyses. To include coverage of spouses as a part of coverage of parties and candidates is relevant in this study because during the 1992 campaign at least one spouse, Hillary Clinton, was the focus of considerable media attention and commentary.

### Background

Media critic Larry Sabato uses the term "feeding frenzy" to describe the behavior of political journalists who, in Sabato's opinion, excessively pursue a "character" story about a political figure. Sabato defines a frenzy as "the press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap (sic)

to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably."<sup>3</sup> The 1988 presidential campaign was marked by six feeding frenzies, Sabato writes.<sup>4</sup> Early in the primary race, Democratic candidates Gary Hart and Joseph Biden quit -- Hart over suspicions of an extramarital affair and Biden because of allegations that his speeches were marred by plagiarism. Reports circulated that Republican contender and televangelist Pat Robertson became a father only 10 weeks after he was married. Rumors that Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis had been treated for depression were published and broadcast after President Reagan made a flip remark about the Massachusetts governor being an "invalid." Republican vice-presidential hopeful Dan Quayle was the center of several "frenzies," including speculation that he used his family connections to escape service in Vietnam, that he made sexual advances to a lobbyist and that he had bought marijuana. Reporters investigated a rumor that Vice President Bush had a mistress, and the rumor was mentioned or alluded to in some media. Sabato said 1988 "witnessed an explosion of character concerns so forceful that several candidates were eliminated and others badly scarred by it."<sup>5</sup>

Sabato was not alone in his criticism of media coverage in 1988. During the primary period, Sen. Edward Kennedy blasted the press for being fixated with horserace mechanics of politics, with opinion polls and simplistic labels.<sup>6</sup> Similar criticism was expressed after the election: A

conference of journalists and politicians complained campaign coverage was "getting shallower" and that coverage worsened toward the end of the campaign. Some persons at the conference complained that "deep, analytical and serious pieces discussing the candidates, their views and their personalities" were mostly written more than a year before the election. By November 1987, coverage degenerated into almost nothing but "horserace" stories, conference members said.<sup>7</sup>

Surveys of the public supported the view that coverage worsened as the campaign progressed. A *Times Mirror* survey revealed that in May 1988, 71 percent of the public felt campaign coverage was excellent or good, and 22 percent believed it was fair or poor. By November, 60 percent said the coverage was excellent or good, and 39 percent believed it was fair or poor.<sup>8</sup> In a separate study, survey participants ranked the media at the bottom of a list of 1988 campaign participants -- below the candidates, parties, pollsters and campaign consultants -- and one in three persons gave the media a "C" for their coverage efforts.<sup>9</sup>

Jonathan Alter, in an article for Newsweek titled "How the Media Blew It," blasted newspeople for dull presentation of issues, rumormongering and concentrating on opinion polls. He also criticized 1988 political reporters for emphasizing campaign mechanics (such as telling viewers they were airing "sound bites"); misrepresenting candidate "mudslinging" by representing an equal amount of candidate

verbal attacks on each other, thereby making it look like both sides were equally at fault for the negative campaign; failing to report discrepancies between candidates' words and their voting records; refraining from analyzing misleading television advertisements because they weren't technically false; and failing to publish or broadcast in-depth profiles on the candidates during the months before the election.<sup>10</sup>

The 1988 campaign event that created the biggest stir among media watchers was the downfall of Democratic hopeful Hart; consequently much of the published criticism concerned coverage of candidates' personal lives and "character." Columnist Molly Ivins characterized 1988 campaign reporters as being obsessed with the "titillating blunder."<sup>11</sup> Often the blunders were merely unsubstantiated gossip, including the numerous rumors about Quayle. Journalists criticized the widespread use of allegations by Paula Parkinson, a former Washington lobbyist who posed nude for a men's magazine, who said Quayle once propositioned her, a charge Quayle denied. After the men's magazine published the allegations, the three networks aired the story on their evening newscasts, and the New York Times and the Washington Post published the story as well.<sup>12</sup> The media were also criticized for being invasive. Sen. Robert Dole, who had competed unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination, complained on the U.S. Senate floor that the New York Times

had asked for his drivers' license, marriage license, high school and college transcripts, military records, medical records, a list of his friends and a waiver of his privacy rights to write a profile as part of a series on presidential candidates.<sup>13</sup> Hart characterized American political culture as trivializing its leadership, a trend he blamed on media competition and the "blurring of the distinction between the serious and the sensationalist press."<sup>14</sup>

Media watchers also criticized 1988 campaign coverage for emphasizing "horserace" coverage of who was ahead in opinion polls. In one survey two in three citizens said the media had given too much play to horserace stories in 1988.<sup>15</sup> A post-election commentary in Broadcasting magazine said the election was marked by an "overabundance" of polls which "some said were self-fulfilling prophecies."<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Alter denounced ABC's evening news program for devoting "more than half of its October 12 broadcast to a poll that all but wrote Dukakis off." Alter said the proliferation of polls resulted in a horserace story almost every day:

Such stories are a lot easier to cover than, say, a candidate's remedy for America's trade deficit. Reporters simply go out and lazily round up quotes to fit the poll results -- like sportswriters after a baseball game. That both degrades the craft of political reporting and lends false authority to coverage.<sup>17</sup>

Like Alter, other media critics felt the voters would have been better served with more and better stories on issues like the trade deficit and fewer "conflict" stories that concentrated on polls or scandal. Molly Ivins early in 1988 wrote "The gang on the bus wants conflict, red meat, candidates turning on each other . . . Conflict is easy to cover; issues are not."<sup>18</sup> William Greider, a political reporter for Rolling Stone magazine who had reported for the Washington Post, complained, "Amid the customary campaign platitudes, some sophisticated, original ideas have emerged . . . But none of this seems to interest the news media."<sup>19</sup> Bob Kur, U.S. Capitol correspondent for NBC, said he was particularly disturbed by the emphasis on patriotic symbolism and crime at the expense of genuine debate on other pressing problems.<sup>20</sup>

Some critics felt the media in 1988 spent too much effort observing and analyzing campaign strategies and tactics, in particular how a candidate presented himself on television. William Boot characterized television networks as often looking in a fun house mirror at themselves: The networks turned away from tough scrutiny of candidates' conduct and toward "inside dope" stories on candidates' strategies for prevailing on television. After the two Bush-Dukakis debates, "the network correspondents dwelt heavily on the candidates' skills as television actors," Boot said. The correspondents seemed to be telling voters



what was really important was how well a would-be president could project qualities such as nonchalance, likability and understanding of television camera angles, Boot wryly observed.<sup>21</sup> Electronic media were not the only culprits. Kirk O'Donnell, president of the Center for National Policy in Washington, D.C., said print media were "driven by how the campaigns were being perceived on television every night and making judgments on the basis of how well managed" the campaigns appeared to be.<sup>22</sup>

#### Criticism of 1992 Campaign Coverage

The 1988 campaign coverage was the backdrop for the 1992 race. Like its predecessor, the 1992 contest featured mudslinging, attempts to focus on symbols over issues (Republicans replaced the patriotic symbolism of 1988 with "family values" rhetoric) and a sex scandal that spread from tabloid to mainstream media. Some critics have said the lessons of 1988 helped news organizations improve their campaign coverage in 1992. One month before the election, the director of Freedom Forum's Center for Media Studies at Columbia University said, "There is general agreement that both newspapers and (television) are doing well. They are very self-conscious about their shortcomings last time. The issues coverage this time is ahead of the candidates they cover."<sup>23</sup>

Not everyone applauded the media's campaign coverage efforts in 1992. Delegates at the Republican National Convention promoted slogans like "Liberal-Media Lynch Mob," "Rather Biased (referring to CBS's chief anchor)," and "Don't Believe the Liberal Media." Bush said in his nomination acceptance speech, "You don't hear much about this good news because the media also tends (sic) to focus only on the bad."<sup>24</sup> Former Washington Post correspondent Ward Just said the worst political coverage in his adult memory occurred during the 1992 campaign. "It is coverage wanting humanity, common sense and, not incidentally, news," he said. He identified horserace stories and "reporting the candidates as if they were actors in a soap opera" as the main coverage pitfalls. "What I know about this campaign is a thin bouillabaisse of William Clinton's girlfriends, pot smoking and draft status of 22 years ago, Jerry Brown's angry manner and existential approach to public policy, Paul Tsongas's low energy level and . . . the latest snicker over the president's alleged mistress." Just, who based his assessment only on print coverage because he lived in Europe, said the press behaved "like a gang of arrogant kids at an out-of-town saloon, where anything goes and no one prosecutes."<sup>25</sup>

A public opinion poll before the party conventions also expressed criticism, although less colorful than Just's, of 1992 campaign coverage. The Freedom Forum Center for Media

Studies found that many Americans believed character issues had received too much attention. The center's report criticized the media's "reactive posture" in breaking a sex scandal story after a source sold the story to the tabloids. The report said the media did little to tell readers and viewers how to "read" and understand tabloid stories from a standpoint of facts, balance and fairness. The report said in some cases mainstream media did not check facts reported by the tabloids.<sup>26</sup>

The report listed several recommendations for campaign media, including: openly articulate the rationale for coverage and the ground rules by which they operate; better explain the basis for "character issue" coverage; devote greater resources to investigating candidates and their backgrounds to avoid the appearance of ceding news judgment to supermarket tabloids; and identify sources of news often. The report also recommended that polling organizations de-emphasize the horserace aspect of public attitudes and integrate more issue-oriented assessments of what the public thinks.<sup>27</sup>

As the Freedom Forum Center for Media Studies report indicates, an event that prompted criticism of "character issue" coverage in 1992 was Gennifer Flowers's announcement early in the year that she had a longtime extramarital affair with Democratic hopeful Clinton. Flowers sold her story to a supermarket tabloid and mainstream media then

publicized the allegations. Clinton denied the allegations on CBS's 60 Minutes and, unlike Hart, remained in the primary race relatively unscathed by the scandal. Critics charged that the mainstream media should have ignored or de-emphasized Flowers's unproven allegations. John Tierney, writing from New Hampshire for the New York Times, complained that opinion polls indicated most people considered allegations of marital infidelity an unimportant issue, "But the extensive publicity guaranteed that these accusations were the only thing many voters knew about Mr. Clinton."<sup>28</sup> An even more long-term threat that the Flowers incident highlights is the trickle-up effect of tabloid copy. Decision-makers for the television networks in May 1992 echoed Gary Hart's warning: 80 percent of them agreed the "barriers between tabloid journalism and the traditional press have broken down."<sup>29</sup>

Another prominent "character issue" was Clinton's draft status during American military involvement in Vietnam. Clinton attended college during the war and did not serve in the military. At issue during the campaign was whether Clinton used influence to try to escape the draft by entering ROTC and whether there were discrepancies about what he said publicly during the campaign about his draft status. The issue was first reported during the primary period, and it was raised again during the convention and general election periods.

William Broyles Jr., writing in Columbia Journalism Review, said the first wave of reporting on the draft issue was resourceful but failed to place the issue in historical context. "The implication was that avoiding the draft during Vietnam was the moral equivalent of turning your back on America after Pearl Harbor, and not the accepted practice of an entire generation of college students," Broyles writes. He said Republicans kept the story alive "even as polls were showing that voters were much less interested in this issue than the press seemed to be."<sup>30</sup>

The media also were criticized for focusing on polls and campaign tactics in 1992. Phil Duncan, writing for Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, denounced the news media for simplifying the 1992 campaign into a mere "who's ahead" horse race. Duncan theorizes the reasons for the horserace emphasis were Perot's participation -- "the media were mesmerized by the prospect of a genuinely competitive three-way general election" -- and Clinton's climb and Bush's descent in the polls during the summer.<sup>31</sup> The polls fed a journalistic intrigue with campaign strategy and tactics, according to John Tierney: "By the time President Bush delivered the State of the Union message on Tuesday night, the chief question raised by analysts on television was not whether his proposals made any sense but how the Democrats and voters would respond to his staff's strategy."<sup>32</sup> Howard Kurtz, writing for the Washington Post,

said superficial stories, combined with poll data, kept the "horse race alive." He said networks and newspapers do a better job of covering themes than they did in the 1970s, but eventually they get "sidetracked into superficiality. Voters hear more about Hillary Clinton's aversion to cookie baking, or Pat Buchanan's Mercedes, or Paul Tsongas's swimming prowess, than about the nuts and bolts of saving bankrupt cities or a wounded health care system." By mid-February the substantive stories about which Democrats had the best health insurance plan were now overshadowed by more pressing concerns, Kurtz writes:

Would Clinton recover from the Gennifer Flowers episode? Could Tsongas sell his no Santa Claus routine outside New Hampshire? Did the hockey ad hurt Kerrey? Would Gephardt or Bentsen or Cuomo get in? The coverage became a blizzard of speculation, spin, sound bites, predictions, pundits, polls, plots and pontifications.<sup>33</sup>

#### Research Questions

This chapter has outlined criticisms of news media coverage of the 1988 and 1992 presidential campaigns. The opinions of journalists, politicians, media scholars and citizens that have been expressed here help form the basis for this thesis's research question. Was there media bias against the Republican ticket as Bush and the Republican delegates have alleged? How much serious attention did the media give the Perot campaign? Did the winner, Clinton,

receive the most favorable coverage? Did the incumbent, Bush, receive more coverage because he was president, or did the news media see Clinton as the probable victor and assign more coverage accordingly?

Critiques of 1988 campaign coverage raise the question of how the news media changed their coverage in 1992. Did the media respond to criticism by devoting more coverage to ongoing government issues and by providing in-depth candidate profiles during the general election period? Did the news media attempt to present fewer stories that were devoted to the horse race and to campaign strategies and tactics? Did coverage in 1992 provide voters information they needed to help reach or affirm their selections -- such as candidates' qualifications, records and policy plans -- to balance the entertainment aspects of campaign coverage, such as horserace stories and scandal?

This thesis explores the question: How did the newsmagazines and People cover the 1992 presidential campaign during the general election period?

More specifically, this thesis addresses the following:

1. Did the four magazines (Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and People), as a whole or individually, demonstrate bias toward any of the candidates? If so, what was the direction of that bias (positive or negative)?
2. Which individuals in the campaign received the most and the least coverage? Which parties received the most and the least coverage?

3. What was the campaign agenda -- as created by the media or the campaign or both -- that was presented to the readers of the four magazines?

4. How much attention did the media focus on campaign issues, such as candidates' character and standing in the polls, versus ongoing government issues, such as the economy and health care?

5. What were some of the most common themes in campaign coverage in the four magazines? A theme is an emphasis or a characterization about a candidate, spouse, party or the campaign as a whole.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Debra Gersh, "Press Bashing is for Naught," Editor and Publisher, 14 November 1992, 11.

<sup>2</sup>Doris A. Graber, Mass Media and American Politics, 3d. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1989), 212.

<sup>3</sup>Larry J. Sabato, Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism has Transformed American Politics (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas B. Rosenstiel, "Press Distorting Campaign, Sen. Kennedy Says," Los Angeles Times, 1 December 1987, sec. I, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>American Press Institute, The Press and the Presidential Campaign, 1988 (Reston, Virginia: API, 1988).

<sup>8</sup>"Campaign '88: Assessing the Media," Broadcasting, 21 November 1988, 58-60.

<sup>9</sup>Michael W. Traugott, "Public Attitudes About News Organizations, Campaign Coverage and Polls," in Polling and Presidential Election Coverage, ed. Paul J. Lavrakas and Jack K. Holley (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1991), 144.

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Alter, "How the Media Blew It," Newsweek, 21 November 1988, 24-26.

<sup>11</sup>Molly Ivins, "Numbers Game," Progressive, January 1988, 39.

<sup>12</sup>"'Quayle Hunt' Turns News Media into Target for Angry Public," Washington Post, 25 August 1988, sec. A, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>"Dole Accuses Press and TV of Failing to Focus on Campaign Issues," New York Times, 27 April 1988, sec. A, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>Gary Hart, "Why Our Media Miss the Message," Washington Post, 20 December 1987, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Paul J. Lavrakas, Jack K. Holley, and Peter V. Miller, "Public Reactions to Polling News During the 1988 Presidential Election Campaign," in Polling and Presidential Election Coverage, ed. Paul J. Lavrakas and Jack K. Holley (Newbury, California: Sage Publications, 1991), 160.

<sup>16</sup>"Campaign '88," 58.

<sup>17</sup>Alter, "How the Media Blew It," 26.

<sup>18</sup>Ivins, "Numbers Game."

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>American Press Institute, Press and the Presidential Campaign, 32.

<sup>21</sup>William Boot, "Campaign '88: TV Overdoses on the Inside Dope," Columbia Journalism Review, January/February 1989, 23-29.

<sup>22</sup>American Press Institute, Press and the Presidential Campaign, 22.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas Winship, "Campaign Coverage '92," Editor and Publisher, 5 September 1992, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Christopher Hanson, "Media Bashing," Columbia Journalism Review, November/December 1992, 52-55.

<sup>25</sup>Ward Just, "The Worst Political Coverage in My . . . Memory," Washington Post, 12 April 1992, sec. C, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup>Tony Case, "The Media and Campaign '92," Editor and Publisher, 25 July 1992.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>John Tierney, "Now, Journalists Renege on Election Promises," New York Times, 31 January 1992, sec. A, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup>Richard Harwood, "What is Campaign 'News'?" Washington Post, 23 July 1992, sec. A, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup>William Broyles Jr., "Draft," Columbia Journalism Review, November/December 1992, 42-43.

<sup>31</sup>Phil Duncan, "Campaign Coverage: Lacking Substance," Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report 50 (8 August 1992): 2418.

<sup>32</sup>Tierney, "Journalists Renege."

<sup>33</sup>Howard Kurtz, "Media Circus," Washington Post, 12 July 1992, sec. WMAG, p. 23.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis explores the questions of bias and agenda setting in newsmagazine coverage of the 1992 general election campaign. Bias, the extent to which content is slanted to favor one candidate over others, is not mutually exclusive of agenda setting, the presentation of certain news topics over other news topics. If during a primary campaign a prominent newspaper presents Candidate A more than Candidate B because the newspaper believes Candidate A has a better chance of winning, the newspaper is demonstrating both bias and agenda setting. In this literature review the concepts of bias and agenda setting will be explored separately.

#### Bias in Political Reporting

"Liberal bias" in the news media is a frequent complaint, often from conservative individuals who believe the mainstream mass media have ignored their perspectives on political and social events.<sup>1</sup> Sabato (1991) supports the notion of a liberal media bias and writes: "Journalists are fallible human beings who have values, preferences and

attitudes galore -- some conscious and others subconscious, all reflected at one time or another in the subjects or slants selected for coverage." Of more than 150 journalists Sabato interviewed for his 1991 book "a surprising number . . . from the ideological right, left and middle" acknowledged a liberal bias, Sabato writes.<sup>2</sup> Other critics attack the news media from the left. Lee and Solomon (1990) argue any political slant in news coverage comes from media owners and managers, not beat reporters. Accusations by conservatives that the media lean left have made many journalists compensate by tilting in the other direction, they write.<sup>3</sup> Bennett (1983) writes American news media practice "status quo bias" caused by objectivity, the very professional standard meant to prevent bias.<sup>4</sup> Objectivity can create a trap for journalists confronted with staged political events, Bennett writes, because only when the event is flawed or staging is revealed can reporters document "what they know otherwise to be the case: that the news event in question was staged for propaganda purposes."<sup>5</sup>

Other media critics detect no clear media bias or believe its effects are minimal. Graber (1989) estimates veiled criticism is part of only 1 to 4 percent of news stories,<sup>6</sup> and Owen (1991) points out there has been little consensus on whether news stories are biased in terms of liberal/conservative or candidate dimensions.<sup>7</sup> William

Henry, in a 1992 article for Time magazine, observes that many campaign reporters admitted they supported Clinton and disdained Bush. He suggests several reasons reporters might prefer Clinton: they had better access to him during the campaign than they had to the President; some hope to gain jobs on the White House press corps; and some desire a change in the administration to pump some excitement into their work.<sup>8</sup> Despite Democratic support from individual reporters, a collective conspiracy would be impossible:

Any veteran of a newspaper or a TV newscast knows it's a miracle the product gets out at all. Ideological conspiracy would be beyond the capacities of management -- not to mention temperamentally implausible for the fractious, jostling group of egos found in any newsroom.<sup>9</sup>

Hofstetter (1979) argues all news is biased in the sense that information is selected to be communicated or not communicated according to a set of implicit rules that define the newsworthiness of a story.<sup>10</sup> He outlines three types of bias: bias as lying, bias as distortion and bias as value assertion.<sup>11</sup> This thesis will be concerned only with the third type of bias. Value assertion bias exists, Hofstetter writes, because inevitably the reporter has a restricted view of reality and because the reporter observes a world compatible with his or her psychological and philosophic dispositions. "There is a constant invitation to seduce or cudgel the audience into accepting the newscaster's test of good and evil: approving his

judgments, bestowing praise, questioning acts and policies, viewing with alarm, and condemning others for shortsightedness, stupidity, weakness or wrongdoing."<sup>12</sup>

Despite critics' claims of pervasive bias in political reporting, most studies of political bias in presidential campaigns have failed to find widespread partiality among news media collectively. This is true regardless of which campaign and which news organizations were examined. Research has revealed instances of partiality or imbalance among individual publications or networks. Blumberg analyzed 35 newspapers' news coverage of the 1952 general election campaign and found evidence of partiality in only six.<sup>13</sup> Stempel analyzed 1960 general election campaign coverage in 15 daily newspapers that he believed to be the most influential. He found Democrats received slightly more news coverage than the Republicans but the margin was slight.<sup>14</sup> He replicated his study in 1964 and found Democrats received slightly more coverage overall but Republicans received more front-page space.<sup>15</sup> He repeated his study in 1968 and found for the first time Democrats had more front-page, as well as overall, coverage, but concluded "If there is partisanship in coverage, it is indeed very mild." Stempel said his three studies indicated that "equal space is the norm" in coverage of Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.<sup>16</sup> Stempel's "equal space norm" did

not apply to third-party candidates; that issue will be explored later in this literature review.

Stempel found some evidence of bias when he and Evarts included newsmagazines in their analysis of campaign coverage. They looked at coverage by television networks, the three newsmagazines and the 15 newspapers during the 1972 presidential campaign. They looked for bias by measuring imbalance, analyzing attributed and unattributed statements and comparing observed biases to presumed biases about publications or networks. When analyzing the percentage of sentences favorable to one party or candidate, the researchers found all three newsmagazines favored the Republicans, with Newsweek being the most pro-Republican, followed by U.S. News and World Report. The researchers speculated the newsmagazines appeared pro-Republican because they were assessing the campaign over the course of a week instead of examining day-to-day occurrences. The newsmagazines focused on trends and most trends were pro-Republican, according to Evarts and Stempel. Overall, they found imbalances among all news media were small and were not related to presumed political leaning or editorial endorsements.<sup>17</sup>

Westley, Higbie, Burke, et al., were among the first researchers to examine the three newsmagazines' coverage of a presidential campaign. They examined the main political stories in each issue just before, between and just after



the presidential nominating conventions in 1960. They found the three magazines, and particularly Time, gave a more favorable image of the conservative candidates of each party (Johnson in the Democratic race and Nixon and Goldwater among the Republicans). They also found that Time projected a more potent and active image of the Democrats than it did of the Republicans.<sup>18</sup>

In a study that was groundbreaking for its method, Merrill (1965) looked at stereotypes which Time promoted for Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy and the techniques the magazine used to create them. He concluded Time "used a whole series of tricks to bias the stories and to lead the reader's thinking." The magazine was clearly anti-Truman, strongly pro-Eisenhower and neutral or moderate toward Kennedy. Merrill outlined 12 techniques the magazine used to stereotype the three presidents.<sup>19</sup>

Fedler, Meeske and Hall (1979) replicated Merrill's study in an analysis of Time's coverage of Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter. They found Time "continues to use a series of devices that guide readers' opinions of the news and that enable Time to editorialize in its regular news columns." They also found the magazine continued to favor Republican presidents: stories were neutral and ambivalent toward Johnson, strongly favorable to Nixon before Watergate, reluctantly critical of Nixon after Watergate, moderately favorable of Ford and critical of

Carter. The news stories created and reinforced stereotypes of the presidents -- Johnson as an outgoing master politician; Nixon as a shrewd, serious leader before Watergate and a wounded leader besieged by his problems after the scandal; Ford as a down-to-earth person who was slow to exert leadership; and Carter as well-intentioned but politically inexperienced.<sup>20</sup>

Fedler, Smith and Meeske (1983) looked at coverage by Time and Newsweek of John, Robert and Edward Kennedy during their respective bids for president. They found no difference between the two magazines in degree or direction of slant. Both magazines treated John more favorably: 28 percent of statements about John were favorable, compared to 21 percent of those about Robert and 12 percent of those about the youngest brother. Favorable statements outnumbered unfavorable ones about John; the opposite was true of statements about Robert and Edward. Time projected an image of John as a charming and courageous leader, Robert as a shrewd but arrogant and vindictive senator, and Edward as a loser and a rogue, according to the researchers.<sup>21</sup>

Stempel and Windhauser's analysis of newsmagazine coverage of the 1984 election appears to concur with Stovall, whose examination of 49 daily newspapers reveals Reagan and Bush received better and more coverage than Mondale and Ferraro. Stempel and Windhauser analyzed coverage of the 1984 and 1988 general election presidential

campaigns in numerous news media, including the three newsmagazines. They classified each story as negative, positive or neutral. They found the three magazines as a group favored the Republicans in both campaigns. They favored the Republicans more in 1984 than in 1988, and Time gave the Democrats more favorable coverage than it gave the Republicans in 1988. In both campaigns, Newsweek gave the Republicans the most favorable coverage, followed by U.S. News and World Report. Stempel and Windhauser commented that in neither campaign did the order of the magazines in favorability to the Republicans match their hypotheses, indicating that the perceived political orientation of the three magazines was not reflected in their coverage of either campaign. Neutral and balanced stories dominated the coverage in all three magazines both years. Neither side had any appreciable advantage in either year and in 1988 there were almost equal numbers of Democratic, Republican and neutral stories, Stempel and Windhauser report.<sup>22</sup>

Another content analysis of 18 print and broadcast news organizations between Labor Day and Election Day in 1988 reveal Dukakis was slightly favored in news coverage. More than half of the stories about the vice president (55 percent) were negative, compared to 38 percent for Dukakis. Only 13 percent of the stories about Bush were positive, while 19 percent of those about Dukakis were. The researchers concluded Bush's front-runner status brought him

sterner scrutiny from the news media. Despite the clamor over Bush's choice of running mate, slightly more stories were mixed (45 percent) about Quayle than were negative (43 percent). Almost as many stories about Bentsen as about Quayle were negative (40 percent of Bentsen stories were negative). Bentsen received a greater proportion of positive stories (26 percent) than did Quayle (11 percent). Overall, 73 percent of campaign stories were classified as neutral. The researchers concluded there was little basis for a charge that in 1988 one candidate received strikingly better publicity than the other.<sup>23</sup>

#### Studies of Agenda Setting and Campaign Coverage Emphasis

One of the earliest studies of the media's role in a presidential campaign was conducted in 1940 by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet. One of many findings was that issues such as the war in Europe, the economy and relief programs, Roosevelt's third term, farm issues and labor provided the grounds upon which people formed their opinions, reached a decision concerning their vote and changed their support from one candidate to another. The researchers concluded that political communication during the campaign prompted people to vote, reinforced their decisions and even swayed a few voters to move from one side to the other.<sup>24</sup>

Later studies of political coverage led researchers to identify agenda setting as a media concept. The agenda-setting theory assumes the media tell their audience which political issues are most important by the amount of attention they pay to those issues and which issues they ignore. The public then adopts this media agenda as its own agenda.

Researchers today approach agenda-setting studies with two assumptions, Weaver writes. First, the press does not reflect reality but filters and shapes it. And, concentration by the media over time on relatively few issues leads to the public's perceiving these issues as more salient or more important than other issues.

One of the early studies that established the existence of agenda setting was completed by McCombs and Shaw after the 1968 presidential election. The researchers asked undecided voters in one city to list key issues in the campaign and compared that list to issues covered in the main media sources for that city. The study found most coverage involved not issues, but analysis of the campaign itself. But when issues were covered the media attention correlated highly with the issues the public identified. McCombs and Shaw concluded the media "exerted a considerable impact" on voters' judgments of what they considered the major issues of the campaign.<sup>26</sup>

Stone and McCombs (1981) explored how long it takes the public to adopt the media's agenda. They summarized three separate studies that used both surveys listing most important concerns and content analysis of Time and Newsweek. They pinned the lag time to an average of four months but warned the research finding is tentative.<sup>27</sup>

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) performed a series of experiments to study the agenda-setting effects of television. They found that participants who watched television newscasts emerged believing that a target problem was more important than they did when they began. They also found evidence of priming, an agenda-setting effect that results in changes in standards by which the public evaluates candidates. In an experiment that reconstructed network television the night before the 1980 presidential election, the researchers concluded that the networks' recapitulation of the Iranian crisis may have been a factor in Carter's defeat.<sup>28</sup>

While Iyengar and Kinder looked at the *effects* of news media choices, other researchers examined the actual product of those choices. Often these studies addressed the question of whether campaign coverage focuses too heavily on superficial aspects, such as which candidate is ahead in the polls (commonly referred to as "horserace" coverage), candidates' campaign strategies and candidates' personal style or other characteristics which have little

relationship to their professional qualifications. Graber, who analyzed content of media coverage in 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980, characterized campaign media as conforming to an incentive model: coverage is dictated by the needs of the media and the tastes of their audiences.<sup>29</sup> "Producing exciting stories means concentrating on conflicts, real or concocted, keeping score about who is ahead or behind in the race, and digging out tidbits about the personal and professional lives and foibles of the actors in the political drama," Graber writes. "Complex election stories . . . may be shunned."<sup>30</sup>

Graber concluded news media, in the four campaigns she studied, devoted the bulk of their stories to campaign hoopla and the horserace aspects of the contests, provided patchy information about issues because the candidates wanted to address only those issues which would not alienate the electorate, and focused selectively on controversial topics that lent themselves to appealing stories.<sup>31</sup>

Graber's results also show a trend toward a greater proportion of campaign events coverage, with only 14 percent of stories being on campaign events in 1968 and half (51 and 52 percent, respectively) focusing on campaign events in 1976 and 1980.

Graber also compared the effects of incumbency on content of coverage, theorizing that races with incumbents produce less emphasis on candidates' personalities than

aces without incumbents. She based her theory on a belief that media might wish to avoid redundancy by covering an incumbent's professional qualifications the second time he or she runs for office. She analyzed coverage of 20 newspaper news stories and editorials during the last months of the 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns. She found the newspapers in 1972, in which Nixon ran for reelection, mentioned candidates' professional capacities and professional philosophies more than they did in 1968, during which no incumbent ran for the office.<sup>33</sup> Under Graber's theory, races involving an incumbent president, including 1992, should see more media coverage of substantive issues about candidates than races without incumbent presidents, such as 1988.

Russonello and Wolf compared the proportion of three newspapers' stories in three categories -- horserace, issues and candidates' personal qualifications -- during the 1968 and 1976 presidential campaigns. Reporting on polls or campaign tactics was considered horserace coverage, while both issues and candidates' qualifications stories were lumped together as "substantive" coverage. They found substantive coverage increased between 1968 and 1976, but in both years the newspapers devoted approximately the same amount of space to horserace coverage as they did to substantive coverage.<sup>34</sup>



Stovall found stories about the campaign itself clearly dominated coverage of the 1980 general election presidential campaign, with twice as many campaign stories as issues stories appearing in 49 newspapers. When stories about the campaign itself were combined with stories about opinion polls (about 15 percent of all news stories), they outnumbered stories about policy issues three to one.<sup>35</sup> Stovall repeated the study in 1984 and found similar results, with 27 percent of stories dealing with issues.<sup>36</sup>

Riggs looked at horserace coverage in the three newsmagazines during the 1980 presidential primary season. Using the same criteria as Russonello and Wolf, he found significantly fewer substantive paragraphs than horserace paragraphs in all three magazines.<sup>37</sup>

Stempel and Windhauser classified newsmagazine stories on the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns into 13 categories, including horserace and strength of candidate. The strength of candidate category included references to the candidate's qualifications and character, as well as his or her chances of winning and endorsements. One of the categories, politics and government, was defined as all activities of government and political parties. This category, along with candidate strength, dominated -- 76 percent of stories in 1984 and 69 percent of stories in 1988 fell in one of the two categories. Stempel and Windhauser found a similar emphasis in their study of television and

newspaper coverage: News stories focused on the candidates and the political process, not issues. Another finding was a decrease in horserace coverage in 1988 compared to 1984.<sup>38</sup>

Several studies have examined horserace coverage in the 1988 presidential campaign. Major analyzed articles in 10 newspapers, the three newsmagazines and The Economist. She found newspaper coverage emphasized the contest in 21 percent of the stories, compared to 12 percent in the magazines.<sup>39</sup> Lichter, Amundson and Noyes analyzed all 735 general election stories on the evening news programs of ABC, CBS and NBC. They found 677 stories were devoted to either campaign issues -- such as a controversy over Quayle's National Guard service, negative advertisements or mudslinging -- or strategy and tactics. Only 282 stories were about policy issues and 168 emphasized the contest. The remaining 294 stories were about the electorate, the debates, vice presidential choices, media coverage, past campaigns and Reagan's role in the campaign.<sup>40</sup> Buchanan examined news stories from 18 print and broadcast news organizations and found a majority of stories compared features of the Bush and Dukakis campaigns or the appeal of the two candidates. Only 10 percent of stories were about policy issues independent of the candidates.<sup>41</sup> Buchanan stresses that the danger of too much horserace coverage is that news organizations may "convey a repetitious subliminal message that the horse race generates information that bears

on who ought to be president."<sup>42</sup> The study also found that 21 percent of stories concerned what candidates said about each other.<sup>43</sup> Buchanan denounced his observation of "the type of conflict coverage which is not relevant to voters' task and is newsworthy only for its ability to attract an audience."<sup>44</sup>

### Effects of Poll Reporting

Studies cited in the previous section indicate that coverage of opinion polls does not dominate presidential campaign reporting, but it does tend to comprise about 20 percent of coverage. Stovall said journalists have a "natural tendency" to cover the "horserace" aspects of a campaign and to ignore the more substantive issues.<sup>45</sup> Buchanan attributes the newsworthiness of the political contest to its ability to fulfill journalists' values of originality and immediacy. "Unlike the budget deficit or the qualifications of candidates, the campaign story unfolds anew each day, providing something fresh to put in the paper or on TV."<sup>46</sup>

Several researchers have attempted to assess the effects published or broadcast public opinion polls have on public opinion. Owen (1991) found mixed evidence for bandwagon (the tendency to support the candidate ahead in the polls) and underdog (the tendency to support a candidate who trails in the polls) effects among undecided voters.

She also found that although few voters said they would change their candidate preference based on opinion polls, a large number believed others would.<sup>47</sup> Owen and others have found opinion polls late in an election can have some effect on voter turnout. Owen found 5 percent of persons questioned said they would not vote if their candidate was trailing in the polls.<sup>48</sup> A survey conducted by Lavrakas, Holley and Miller found that 11 percent of persons who did not vote in 1988 said expectations of a Republican victory influenced their decision not to vote and another 9 percent said they thought this expectation "may have contributed" to their not voting.<sup>49</sup> The same individuals who did not vote because they believed Bush would win also had high daily exposure to news media and said they found poll stories to be "very informative."<sup>50</sup>

Lang and Lang (1984) write that published poll results can be a tool of citizens who practice "tactical" voting: "An increasing number of voters, intent on registering a protest or having some influence on the nominating process, are oriented to the polls in deciding for whom to cast their vote." For protest voters, polls "allow them to estimate the cost of such self-indulgence."<sup>51</sup>

Coverage of the Strong  
Third-Party Candidate

The 1992 presidential campaign was marked by an Independent candidate who had widespread support. Before 1992, the last time a third-party candidate had significant support on a national level was 1980. According to Stovall, the 1980 race was the first since 1968 to include a major third-party candidate.<sup>52</sup>

Several researchers have concurred with Graber's assertion that Independent candidates, even those who are particularly newsworthy, received much less coverage than the Democratic and Republican nominees. Stempel found four "prestige press" newspapers that gave Independent candidate George Wallace about as much space as they did the other two candidates in 1968. The other 11 newspapers in the study "indicated he was, from a news standpoint, not being considered as a major candidate."<sup>53</sup> Stovall found in 1980 that Independent candidate John Anderson received much less coverage than Carter and Reagan and that much of the coverage of Anderson's candidacy consisted of his statements about the campaign itself. "Journalists value third parties for what they contribute to the debate on the campaign itself, not the issues raised in the campaign," Stovall wrote.<sup>54</sup> West also found the media paid much less attention to Anderson than his opponents. He compared candidates'

itineraries with the amount of coverage in the New York Times. During the general election period, only 32 percent of Anderson's campaign events were covered, compared to 69 percent of Reagan's and 80 percent of President Carter's. "Anderson's coverage represented a major barrier to the presidency," West concluded.<sup>55</sup>

Ross Perot in 1992 may have had an advantage that Anderson and Wallace did not enjoy. Perot was able to present himself as a candidate and his ideas through alternative broadcast media, particularly a series of 30-minute commercials. Graber may have been predicting the importance of the broadcast media as a vehicle for Perot's candidacy when she wrote on the electronic media's role in the decline of political parties:

When voters can see and hear candidates in their own living rooms, they can make choices that differ from those made by the party. . . . Candidates can also defy and thereby weaken party control because radio and television give them direct access to voters. More candidates can enter the race and campaign on their own strengths, raising their own money and building their own organizations. New candidates with the aid of the media can gain a wide following rapidly.<sup>56</sup>

#### Summary

Critics have charged the media with liberal or conservative bias or with favoring one candidate or party over another, but research has failed to support these

complaints. Studies of the newsmagazines have revealed a slant toward conservative or Republican leaders.

The theory that the media tell their audience what is important by covering some issues and individuals and ignoring others is known as the agenda-setting function of the mass media. Researchers who have analyzed the content, by categories, of presidential campaign coverage have found that campaign occurrences are emphasized to the expense of in-depth stories on policy issues.

The media tend to devote nearly equal amounts of coverage to Democratic and Republican candidates, but third-party candidates tend to receive relatively little coverage.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, William A. Rusher, The Coming Battle for the Media: Curbing the Power of the Media Elite (New York: William Morrow, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Larry J. Sabato, Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism has Transformed American Politics (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 86-87.

<sup>3</sup>Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon, Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in the News Media (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), 143.

<sup>4</sup>Lance Bennett, News: The Politics of Illusion, 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 1988), 117-139.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>6</sup>Doris A. Graber, Mass Media and American Politics, 3d. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1989), 211.

<sup>7</sup>Diana Marie Owen, Media Messages in American Presidential Elections (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 66.

<sup>8</sup>William A. Henry III, "Are the Media Too Liberal?" Time, 19 October 1992, 46-47.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>10</sup>C. Richard Hofstetter, "Perception of News Bias in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," Journalism Quarterly 56 (Summer 1979): 370.

<sup>11</sup>C. Richard Hofstetter, Bias in the News (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1976), 4-11.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>13</sup>Nathan Blumberg, One Party Press? (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1954).

<sup>14</sup>Guido H. Stempel III, "The Prestige Press Covers the 1960 Presidential Campaign," Journalism Quarterly 38 (Spring 1961): 157-163.



- <sup>15</sup>Guido H. Stempel III, "The Prestige Press in Two Presidential Elections," Journalism Quarterly 42 (Winter 1965): 15-21.
- <sup>16</sup>Guido H. Stempel III, "The Prestige Press Meets the Third-Party Challenge," Journalism Quarterly 46 (Winter 1969): 699-706.
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- <sup>19</sup>J.C. Merrill, "How Time Stereotyped Three U.S. Presidents," Journalism Quarterly 42 (Autumn 1965): 563-570.
- <sup>20</sup>Fred Fedler, Mike Meeske, and Joe Hall, "Time Magazine Revisited: Presidential Stereotypes Persist," Journalism Quarterly 56 (Spring 1979): 353-359.
- <sup>21</sup>Fred Fedler, Ron Smith, and Mike Meeske, "Time and Newsweek Favor John F. Kennedy, Criticize Robert and Edward Kennedy," Journalism Quarterly 60 (Summer 1983): 489-496.
- <sup>22</sup>Guido H. Stempel III and John W. Windhauser, The Media in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential Campaigns (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 103-113.
- <sup>23</sup>Bruce Buchanan, Electing a President: The Markle Commission Research on Campaign '88 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 1-64.
- <sup>24</sup>Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).
- <sup>25</sup>David Weaver, "Media Agenda-Setting and Public Opinion: Is There a Link?" Communications Yearbook 8: 680-691.
- <sup>26</sup>M.E. McCombs and D.L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly 36 (1972): 176-187.
- <sup>27</sup>Gerald Stone and Maxwell E. McCombs, "Tracing the Time Lag in Agenda-Setting," Journalism Quarterly 58 (Winter 1981): 51-55.

- <sup>28</sup>Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, News That Matters: Television and American Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 19-108.
- <sup>29</sup>Graber, Mass Media and American Politics, 209.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid, 215-216.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid, 217.
- <sup>33</sup>Doris A. Graber, "Effect of Incumbency on Coverage Patterns in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," Journalism Quarterly 53 (Autumn 1976): 499-508.
- <sup>34</sup>John M. Russonello and Frank Wolf, "Newspaper Coverage of the 1976 and 1968 Presidential Campaigns," Journalism Quarterly 56 (Summer 1979): 360.
- <sup>35</sup>James Glen Stovall, "The Third-Party Challenge of 1980: News Coverage of the Presidential Candidates," Journalism Quarterly 62 (Summer 1985): 266-271.
- <sup>36</sup>James Glen Stovall, "Coverage of the 1984 Presidential Campaign," Journalism Quarterly 65 (Summer 1988): 443-449.
- <sup>37</sup>Steven J. Riggs, "A Content Analysis of Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and Time's Coverage of the 1980 Presidential Primaries" (M.A. thesis, Ball State University, 1980).
- <sup>38</sup>Stempel and Windhauser, Media in the Presidential Campaigns, 103-113.
- <sup>39</sup>Ann Marie Major, "'Problematic' Situations in Press Coverage of the 1988 U.S. and French Elections," Journalism Quarterly 69 (Fall 1992): 606.
- <sup>40</sup>Robert S. Lichter, Daniel Amundson, and Richard E. Noyes, "Election '88 Media Coverage," Public Opinion 11 (January/February 1987): 18-19, 52.
- <sup>41</sup>Buchanan, Markle Commission Research, 3-7.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid., 11.
- <sup>43</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>45</sup>James Glen Stovall and Jacqueline H. Solomon, "The Poll as a News Event in the 1980 Presidential Campaign," Public Opinion Quarterly 48 (Spring 1984): 615.

<sup>46</sup>Buchanan, Markle Commission Research, 9.

<sup>47</sup>Owen, Media Messages, 109.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>49</sup>Paul J. Lavrakas, Jack K. Holley, and Peter V. Miller, "Public Reactions to Polling News During the 1988 Presidential Election Campaign," in Polling and Presidential Election Coverage, ed. Paul J. Lavrakas and Jack K. Holley (Newbury, California: Sage Publications, 1991), 173.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>51</sup>Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, "The Impact of Polls on Public Opinion," in The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Polling and the Democratic Consensus 472 (March 1984): 136-137.

<sup>52</sup>Stovall, "The Third-Party Challenge."

<sup>53</sup>Stempel, "Prestige Press Meets the Third-Party Challenge."

<sup>54</sup>Stovall, "The Third-Party Challenge," 271.

<sup>55</sup>Darrell M. West, "Press Coverage in the 1980 Presidential Campaign," Social Science Quarterly 64 (September 1983): 624-633.

<sup>56</sup>Graber, Mass Media and American Politics, 197.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This thesis reports on a content analysis of Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, and People. The methodology is based on that of Stempel and Windhauser in their study of bias and topics in 1984 and 1988 presidential campaign coverage.

#### Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication, according to Berelson (1952).<sup>1</sup> The definition places several demands on the content analyst. The researcher must define the categories of analysis so precisely that other analysts can apply them to the same body of content with the same results.<sup>2</sup> The researcher also must analyze content in terms of all relevant categories, not merely select those elements in the content that fit the analyst's thesis. The content analysis should address some general problem or hypothesis. Finally, content analysis requires quantification: What is important

is not just that something occurs in content, but also how often it occurs.<sup>3</sup>

Berelson outlines a variety of content analysis uses, some of which are relevant to this study. The researcher can track communication trends by classifying into the same set of categories similar content samples taken at different times.<sup>4</sup> Content analysis may include a comparative dimension that allows researchers to observe differences among media units.<sup>5</sup> Content analysis has been used to detect propaganda, Berelson notes.<sup>6</sup> Lasswell (1949) described several tests of propaganda, including the balance of favorable and unfavorable treatment given to each symbol and statement in controversy.<sup>7</sup> This technique often is used to characterize bias in media content.

#### Selection of the Media for Analysis

This thesis analyzes four magazines: Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and People. The first three are the only general newsmagazines of national circulation in the United States. All four magazines have circulations of more than 2 million. Circulation figures for the magazines in 1992 were: Time, 4 million; Newsweek, 3,057,081; U.S. News and World Report, 2,351,313; People, 3,150,000.<sup>8</sup> Magazines were chosen for this study because, unlike most newspapers, they attract wide readership from all regions.

### Scope of the Study

This study analyzes all news and feature stories about the presidential campaign in the four magazines between Labor Day and Election Day 1992. Stories about the candidates that do not mention campaign events, issues or activities are not considered campaign stories unless they are accompanied by the magazine's campaign logo. Stories about President Bush and Bill Clinton performing their regular duties as heads of state would not be considered campaign stories unless the author presents the information in the context of the campaign. The analysis will include all issues of the magazine published from Labor Day (September 7, 1992) until Election Day (November 3, 1992). This is a nine-week period, and a total of 36 issues of the four magazines was published. Other media scholars have also explored campaign coverage during the general election campaign between Labor Day and Election Day (Stempel and Windhauser, 1991; Clancey and Robinson, 1985; Stovall, 1982 and 1985; Buchanan, 1991; Semetko, et. al, 1991; Broh, 1980; Stempel, 1961 and 1965).

### Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the story and its headline. In sections which present news briefs, such as Newsweek's "Periscope" or Time's Grapevine, each brief is considered an individual story. The analysis does not include paid

advertisements, opinion columns, editorial cartoons, letters to the editor, graphics, photographs, captions or copy in the table of contents that merely previews a story later in the issue.

#### Coding Procedures and Definitions

Each unit was coded for the following variables: magazine, actor, slant, topic, length and theme.

Actor is the person the story is about. The categories of actors are: George Bush, Bill Clinton, Ross Perot, Dan Quayle, Al Gore, James Stockdale, Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, Margot Perot, Marilyn Quayle, Tipper Gore, Sybil Stockdale, the Democrats, the Republicans, the Independents, and no particular candidate or candidates. The party categories include stories about the party or platform, the candidates, and campaign workers. The last category, no particular candidate, includes stories about none of the candidates or about candidates (or spouses) from two or all three parties.

Each unit was determined to be positive, negative or neutral by analyzing each paragraph for value direction and adding the number of paragraphs for each of the three evaluative categories. The headline was included and counted as a paragraph. A story was judged positive if it had more positive paragraphs than negative or neutral ones. In case of a tie, the unit was judged neutral.

Positive paragraphs and stories are those which reflect positively on the actor. An example of a positive sentence about Clinton: "Having survived the tests of a challenger -- he didn't blow his cool and he was in command of his facts, or at least his rhetoric -- Clinton is now in the comfortable position of running out the clock." This sentence is positive because it presents Clinton as a competent challenger who can be assured of winning.

Negative paragraphs and stories are those which reflect in a negative way on the actor. An example of a negative sentence about Bush: "He has nothing of interest to say on the one issue that counts, the economy."

Paragraphs that do not cast the actors in a positive or negative light (generally statements of fact), which are mixed or which offer descriptions that are not clearly positive or negative were categorized as neutral. A mixed paragraph includes both positive and negative statements about a person but does not give a positive or negative impression overall. Some statements that contain opinion are not clearly positive or negative. The statement "Bill Clinton is young" may be considered positive by some readers but may be associated with inexperience by others; a similar paragraph would be considered neutral.

Each unit was coded for its dominant topic. Twenty-four topic categories were used at first and were later collapsed for statistical analysis. This differs from Stempel and Windhauser's study, in which stories were



categorized into 13 topics. This author felt using a larger number of categories might reveal more insight into which subjects were most important during the campaign. For example, Stempel and Windhauser lumped the race relations issue in the category "public moral problems." Considering racially motivated riots that occurred in Los Angeles before the party conventions, it might be useful to determine the amount of coverage devoted to the race relations issue in the magazines.

The topic categories are:

1. Campaign. Campaign strategies, campaign occurrences, endorsements, contributors, funding, media coverage, debate performance.
2. Horse race. Polls, projections.
3. Character. Anything that reflects on the candidates' integrity, personality, decisiveness, morality, sense of fairness, sense of duty, general competence.
4. Professional qualifications. Age, years of government experience, education, professional background.
5. Non-character, but personal. Stories emphasizing personal taste, style, personal and family background, family income, ethnicity and family of candidates or their spouses.
6. Technology. Stories about science and technology that are not about the environment, health, energy or defense.

7. Health. This includes public safety matters but not crime.

8. Environment, energy and natural resources.

9. Education.

10. Infrastructure and transportation.

11. Trade and foreign competition.

12. Employment and labor.

13. Taxes, entitlements and national debt.

14. Inflation.

15. Racial issues and immigration.

16. Gender issues and abortion.

17. Family issues. Child care, family leave, elder care, the elderly. Does not include strictly health or education issues. Does not include child abuse or other crimes.

18. Defense. Stories about U.S. military activities and defense spending and strength.

19. Foreign relations. Includes stories about diplomacy, the United States' relations with other countries and the United Nations, and stories about American involvement or potential involvement in foreign wars.

20. Crime, homelessness and poverty, substance abuse and child abuse.

21. Arts, culture, religion and ethics stories that are inappropriate for category 22 or other categories.

22. Civil rights. Includes gay rights, freedom of speech, treatment of hate speech, gun control, censorship and separation of church and state.

23. Government. Involves the day-to-day business of government. Includes tort reform, Congress, federal agency structure and organization.

24. Other.

The categories were collapsed into broader categories for statistical analysis. Categories 1 and 2 are the Contest categories. Categories 3, 4 and 5 are the Candidate categories. Categories 1 through 5 are the Campaign categories (these issues would not likely be newsworthy except during a campaign). Categories 6 through 23 are policy issues.

The stories were coded for length, as measured in square inches. Unlike the "column inches" method of measurement, this type of measurement makes adjustments for variations in column width. The stories were measured from the top of the headline to the bottom of the last line on the page, as described in Li (1988).<sup>9</sup> Measurements were taken of each square or rectangle of copy that was not broken up by a graphic, inset quotation or photograph. Each measurement, if necessary, was rounded to the nearest one-fourth of an inch, with measurements on the eighth of an inch rounded to the next highest fourth. This rounding to

one-fourth of an inch was done to simplify the coding procedure. After measuring each block of copy, the dimensions of the blocks were added to obtain a total story length in square inches.

Finally, units were coded for themes. Data collected from this part of the coding are qualitative: They are not used in the quantitative analysis but are used to describe characteristics of coverage in the sample.

In identifying themes, the procedures and definitions of Li (1988) were followed. One major theme was coded for each positive and each negative story. Stories that were neutral or did not appear to emphasize an overall theme were coded "No theme." Li writes themes "are designed to pick up the conceptual framework that may not emerge clearly from the topic's classification. Mostly they are conceived as aspects of coverage that cut across the topic classifications."<sup>10</sup> In this study, one major theme pertaining to the most important aspect of a story in light of its negativism or positivism was coded.

Because of time and money constraints, the author coded all materials. The author acknowledges that use of multiple coders would have strengthened the study, but the author also believes use of one coder was adequate for two reasons. First, of the five variables included in the quantitative analysis -- magazine, actor, topic, length and slant -- only slant is subjective. Coders should always agree on the

other four variables as long as they follow coding directions correctly. Secondly, Stempel demonstrated that coders tend to agree on the direction of slant. Ten journalism students, all graduate or undergraduate students with little coding experience, agreed 80 percent of the time when asked to evaluate printed material as favorable, unfavorable or neutral.<sup>11</sup>

### Statistical Analysis

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is a statistical test that is used to analyze differences among two or more groups. Unlike the Chi Square test, which is often used to analyze categorical content analysis data, ANOVA tests can be used when working with ordered variables, such as length as measured in square inches. The ANOVA test allows the researcher to determine whether differences among sets of data are significant.

In this study, ANOVA tests were used and significance of difference was determined at the 95 percent confidence level.

ANOVA tests were performed to test the following:

1. Are there differences among presidential candidates and among parties in amount of favorable and unfavorable coverage?

2. Are there differences among individuals in two actor groups -- presidential candidates and parties -- in the amount of coverage they received overall?

3. Are there differences among the magazines in the slant of coverage of each candidate and party?

4. Are there differences among the magazines in total coverage they gave each party? Each presidential candidate? Each vice presidential candidate?

5. Is there a difference overall between attention to campaign issues (as measured in square inches) and attention to policy issues? Among contest versus character versus policy issues?

6. Are there differences among the magazines in their attention to campaign issues versus policy issues? Are there differences among the magazines in their attention to contest versus character versus policy issues?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Bernard Berelson, Content Analysis in Communication Research, (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1952), 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 39-43.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 80-83.

<sup>7</sup>Harold Lasswell, "Detection: Propaganda Detection and the Courts," in Language of Politics, ed. Lasswell and Leites (Stewart, 1949), 173-232, quoted in Berelson, Content Analysis, 82.

<sup>8</sup>Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory, 30th ed., 1991-92 (New Providence, New Jersey: R.R. Bowker, 1991).

<sup>9</sup>Tszesun Li, "A Comparative Study of Reciprocal Coverage of the People's Republic of China in the Washington Post and the United States in the People's Daily in 1986," (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 1988), 65.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>11</sup>Guido H. Stempel III, "Increasing Reliability in Content Analysis," Journalism Quarterly 32 (1955): 455.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter reports the findings of content analysis of presidential campaign coverage in Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and People magazines from September 7 through November 3, 1992. To address the research questions posed in this study, length sums for various independent variable categories were obtained and the sums were compared using analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests.

#### Analysis of Slant

The four magazines examined in this study devoted a total 9,593.25 square inches of their issues during the general election to news stories about the campaign. A page from a newsmagazine contains approximately 70.75 square inches of copy and photographs, so the four magazines devoted space equal to 135.5 pages, without photographs, to campaign coverage.

This section addresses the research question:

1. Did the four magazines (Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and People), as a whole or individually, demonstrate bias toward any of the candidates? If so, what was the direction of that bias (positive or negative)?



As Table 1 indicates, all the presidential candidates received less positive coverage than negative or neutral coverage. But no stories about one of the candidates, Ross Perot, were positive. Therefore coverage of all three candidates on all three values (positive, negative and neutral) cannot be compared statistically because the lack of positive stories about Perot creates an empty cell.

**TABLE 1**  
**SLANT OF STORIES ABOUT THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES**  
(in square inches)

	Bush	Clinton	Perot	Total
Positive	15.75	112.25	0	128
Negative	570.75	162.5	172.5	905.75
Neutral	271.5	826.75	687	1,785.25
Total	858	1,101.5	859.5	

When favorable, unfavorable and neutral stories about the two other candidates, George Bush and Bill Clinton, were compared, Bush received less positive coverage and more negative coverage than Clinton. But the differences were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 2).

TABLE 2  
ANOVA RESULTS: CANDIDATES (CLINTON AND BUSH) AND SLANT

	F-Ratio	P
Candidate	0.2	0.65
Slant	0.69	0.51
Interaction	1.46	0.24

Negative and neutral stories about the three presidential candidates were compared. Overall, Bush received the most negative coverage, followed by Perot. Clinton received the least negative coverage. But when the amounts of negative and neutral stories about the three presidential candidates were compared, no significant

difference was found at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 3).

TABLE 3  
ANOVA RESULTS: PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES AND SLANT  
(NEGATIVE AND NEUTRAL)

	F-Ratio	P
Candidate	0.09	0.92
Slant	0.39	0.54
Interaction	1.93	0.15

All the parties received more neutral coverage than positive or negative coverage, but there were no positive stories about the Independents (Table 4). Again, this lack of positive stories about the Independents creates an empty cell that prevents statistical analysis of all three parties on all three values.

**TABLE 4**  
**SLANT OF STORIES ABOUT THE PARTIES**  
**(in square inches)**

	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Total
Positive	195	7	0	202
Negative	11.25	133.25	9.25	153.75
Neutral	315.5	184	46.25	545.75
Total	521.75	324.25	55.5	

Favorable, unfavorable and neutral coverage of the Democrats and Republicans were compared. The Democrats received more positive coverage and less negative coverage than the Republicans. The differences, though, were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 5).

TABLE 5  
ANOVA RESULTS: PARTY (DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS) AND  
SLANT

	F-Ratio	P
Party	0.61	0.44
Slant	0.56	0.58
Interaction	0.6	0.55

Unfavorable and neutral coverage of all three parties was compared. Republicans received the most negative coverage and the Independents received the least, but the differences were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 6).

TABLE 6  
ANOVA RESULTS: PARTY AND SLANT (NEGATIVE AND NEUTRAL)

	F-Ratio	P
Party	0.08	0.93
Slant	1.45	0.24
Interaction	0.24	0.79

The magazines did not publish enough stories on the vice presidential candidates and spouses of presidential and vice presidential candidates to allow them to be considered in an analysis of variance test. The sums of coverage for these individuals are presented in Tables 7 and 8. Although each of the three vice presidential candidates received between 88 and 128 square inches of coverage, Quayle received no positive coverage and Gore and Stockdale received no negative coverage. A comparison of value coverage of the vice presidential candidates is not possible. With the spouses, Hillary Clinton received the most coverage (216 square inches) but the other spouses did not receive enough coverage to allow comparisons of slant.

TABLE 7  
SLANT OF STORIES ABOUT THE VICE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES  
(in square inches)

	Gore	Quayle	Stockdale	Total
Positive	41.5	0	68	109.5
Negative	0	5	0	5
Neutral	85.75	83.25	22.75	191.75
Total	127.25	88.25	90.75	

TABLE 8  
SLANT OF STORIES ABOUT THE CANDIDATES' SPOUSES  
(in square inches)

	B. Bush	H. Clinton	M. Quayle	Total
Positive	0	216	90	306
Negative	6.5	0	0	6.5
Neutral	0	0	0	0
Total	6.5	216	90	

Slant was looked at in combination with magazine to determine if there were differences among the magazines in their favorable and unfavorable coverage of presidential candidates (Tables 9 and 10). Again, the analysis was limited because of empty cells. People magazine published no neutral stories on Bush, no negative stories on Clinton and no stories at all on Perot. It was excluded from statistical analysis. Also, none of the magazines published positive stories on Perot, Newsweek published no positive stories on any of the presidential candidates and U.S. News and World Report published no positive stories on Bush. Therefore, positive stories had to be excluded from statistical analysis.

**TABLE 9**  
**FAVORABLE COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN ACTORS BY MAGAZINE**  
**(in square inches)**

	Newsweek	People	Time	US News	Total
Bush	0	8.5	7.25	0	15.75
Clinton	0	6	68.75	37.5	112.25
Perot	0	0	0	0	0
Quayle	0	0	0	0	0
Gore	41.5	0	0	0	41.5
Stockdale	0	68	0	0	68
B. Bush	0	0	0	0	0
H. Clinton	33.5	5.75	176.75	0	216
M. Quayle	0	90	0	0	90
Dem.	0	104.5	90.5	0	195
Rep.	0	0	0	7	7
Ind.	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>282.75</b>	<b>343.25</b>	<b>44.5</b>	



**TABLE 10**  
**UNFAVORABLE COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN ACTORS BY MAGAZINE**  
 (in square inches)

	Newsweek	People	Time	US News	Total
Bush	108	8.25	289.5	165	570.75
Clinton	16.75	0	24.25	121.5	162.5
Perot	142.75	0	14	15.75	172.5
Quayle	0	0	5	0	5
Gore	0	0	0	0	0
Stockdale	0	0	0	0	0
B. Bush	6.5	0	0	0	6.5
H. Clinton	0	0	0	0	0
M. Quayle	0	0	0	0	0
Dem.	5.25	0	0	6	11.25
Rep.	17.75	0	102	13.5	133.25
Ind.	0	9.25	0	0	9.25
<b>Total</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>434.75</b>	<b>321.75</b>	

An ANOVA test was performed to determine whether the three newsmagazines differed in unfavorable and neutral coverage of the three presidential candidates. The test revealed no significant difference among the three newsmagazines in amount of negative and neutral coverage of the three presidential candidates (Table 11).

TABLE 11  
ANOVA RESULTS: NEWSMAGAZINES, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES  
AND SLANT (NEGATIVE AND NEUTRAL)

	F-Ratio	P
Magazine	0.75	0.48
Candidate	0.18	0.84
Slant	0.64	0.43
Magazine-Candidate Interaction	0.51	0.73
Magazine-Slant Interaction	0.5	0.61
Candidate-Slant Interaction	2.5	0.09
Magazine-Candidate -Slant Interaction	0.88	0.49

An ANOVA test examining the effects of magazine and slant on amount of coverage of the three parties was not

possible because there was not enough coverage of the parties in each of the magazines to prevent empty cells.

#### Analysis of Attention to Actors

This section addresses the research question:

2. Which individuals in the campaign received the most and the least coverage? Which parties received the most and the least coverage?

TABLE 12  
TOTAL COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES  
(in square inches)

Bush	858
Clinton	1,101.5
Perot	859.5

The amount of coverage overall for the three presidential candidates was examined (Table 12). Clinton received the most coverage. Bush and Perot received almost the same amount of coverage overall. The difference between the total amount of Clinton coverage and the totals for the other two candidates was not significant at the 95 percent confidence level. The F-ratio was 0.32 and P=0.73.

**TABLE 13**  
**TOTAL COVERAGE OF VICE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES**  
**(in square inches)**

Gore	127.25
Quayle	88.25
Stockdale	90.75

Among the vice presidential candidates, Gore received the most coverage and Quayle received the least (Table 13). An ANOVA test revealed the differences in total amount of coverage were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level. The F-ratio was 0.4 and  $P=0.69$ .

**TABLE 14**  
**TOTAL COVERAGE OF PARTIES**  
**(in square inches)**

Democrats	521.75
Republicans	324.25
Independents	55.5

Among the parties, the Democrats received the most coverage and the Independents received the least (Table 14), but the differences were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level. The F-ratio was 0.65 and  $P=0.53$ .

More attention was focused on Hillary Clinton than on the Independent party, the vice presidential candidates and the other spouses. Three stories, comprising a total 216 square inches, were published about Mrs. Clinton. The only other candidate spouse who received a fair amount of attention was Marilyn Quayle, and that attention is entirely attributable to a 90-inch profile in People. Barbara Bush received only a 6.5-inch mention, and no stories were published on Mrs. Perot, Mrs. Stockdale or Mrs. Gore.

TABLE 15  
TOTAL COVERAGE OF ACTORS BY MAGAZINE  
(in square inches)

	Newsweek	People	Time	US News	Total
Bush	181.25	16.75	322.5	337.5	858
Clinton	319.5	43.75	420.75	317.5	1,101.5
Perot	501.75	0	280.75	77	859.5
Quayle	0	0	59.25	29	88.25
Gore	41.5	0	85.75	0	127.25
Stock- dale	0	68	22.75	0	90.75
B. Bush	6.5	0	0	0	6.5
H. Clinton	33.5	5.75	176.75	0	216
M.Quayle	0	90	0	0	90
Dem.	203.5	129.75	100.5	88	521.75
Rep.	17.75	0	203.75	102.75	324.25
Ind.	0	9.25	46.25	0	55.5
Total	1,305.25	234.75	1,719	951.75	

Analysis of variance tests were completed to determine differences among the magazines in total coverage of the actors. People magazine was excluded from the analyses

because it published no stories on Perot, Quayle, Gore or the Republicans. To include People in the analyses would create empty cells and the ANOVA tests would not be possible.

The total amount of coverage given the three presidential candidates by Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report was examined. The magazines varied with respect to whom they gave the most and least coverage. Time and U.S. News gave Perot the least amount of coverage of the three candidates, but Newsweek gave Perot more coverage than it gave Bush or Clinton. Newsweek gave Bush the least amount of coverage, while U.S. News gave him the most. Time devoted more of its coverage to Clinton than to Bush or Perot. An ANOVA test revealed these differences were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 16).

TABLE 16  
ANOVA RESULTS: NEWSMAGAZINE AND PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

	F-Ratio	P
Magazine	1.76	0.18
Candidate	0.22	0.81
Interaction	0.37	0.83

When the newsmagazines were compared to determine differences in attention to the parties, the Independent party was excluded from statistical analysis because Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report published no stories that focused on the Independent party. Time and U.S. News published more stories on the Republicans than they did on the Democrats. Newsweek published more stories on the Democrats than it did on the Republicans. But the differences were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 17).

TABLE 17  
ANOVA RESULTS: NEWSMAGAZINE AND PARTY (DEMOCRATS AND  
REPUBLICANS)

	F-Ratio	P
Magazine	0.46	0.64
Party	1.25	0.27
Interaction	0.82	0.45

A statistical analysis of total coverage of vice presidential candidates among the three newsmagazines was not possible because only Time published stories on all three vice presidential candidates. A similar dilemma



prevented statistical analysis on coverage of the candidates' spouses.

#### Analysis of Campaign Coverage Emphasis

This section addresses the following research questions:

3. What was the campaign agenda -- as created by the media or the campaign or both -- that was presented to readers of the four magazines?

4. How much attention did the magazines focus on campaign issues, such as candidates' character and standing in the polls, versus ongoing government issues, such as the economy and health care?

As explained in Chapter III, each story was coded on one of 24 topics. The topics were grouped two ways. First, campaign stories -- those that focused on the campaign or the candidates themselves -- were compared to stories that focused on government policy issues. Second, three groups of topics were compared: contest, character and issues stories. Contest stories focused on campaign tactics or the polls, while character stories were about the candidates themselves.

When campaign coverage was compared with issues coverage overall, the analysis of variance test revealed no significant difference at the 95 percent confidence level (F-ratio=0.27; P=0.76). In other words, the magazines as a group devoted about the same amount of space to campaign

coverage as they did to policy issues. The magazines devoted 138 stories and 5,847.25 square inches to the campaign itself and 84 stories and 3,291.5 inches to coverage of policy issues.

TABLE 18  
CAMPAIGN AND ISSUES COVERAGE BY MAGAZINE  
(in square inches)

	Campaign	Issues
Newsweek	1,464.25	683.5
People	628.75	0
Time	2,176.25	923.25
US News	1,578	1,684.75
Total	5,847.25	3,291.5

When the magazines were compared for coverage of campaign versus issues, People magazine had to be excluded because it provided no issues coverage (Table 18). The three newsmagazines were compared on campaign versus issues coverage. Time published the most campaign coverage and Newsweek published the least. U.S. News and World Report published the most stories on the issues and Newsweek

published the least. In comparing the coverage within the individual magazines, the results are similar: Time and Newsweek devoted more space to campaign coverage than issues coverage, and U.S. News devoted more space to issues coverage than campaign coverage. None of these differences was significant at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 19).

TABLE 19  
ANOVA RESULTS: NEWSMAGAZINE AND TYPE OF COVERAGE  
(CAMPAIGN OR ISSUES)

	F-Ratio	P
Magazine	0.06	0.95
Coverage	0.03	0.97
Interaction	0.58	0.68

The amount of contest versus character versus issues coverage was compared for the four magazines overall. Most of the coverage (4,276.5 square inches) was about the contest itself -- the polls and campaign tactics. The magazines' second focus was on the issues (3,291.5 square inches). The least amount of coverage was devoted to the candidates' qualifications and character (1,570.75 square

inches). An ANOVA test reveals these differences are not significant at the 95 percent confidence level. The F-ratio was 0.18 and P=0.91.

TABLE 20  
CONTEST, CHARACTER AND ISSUES COVERAGE BY  
MAGAZINE  
(in square inches)

	Contest	Character	Issues
Newsweek	1,049.5	414.75	683.5
People	207.25	421.5	0
Time	1,718.25	458	923.25
US News	1,301.5	276.5	1,684.75
Total	4,276.5	1,570.75	3,291.5

The three newsmagazines were compared on their attention to contest versus character versus policy issues (Table 20). Again, People magazine was excluded from the statistical analysis because it provided no issues coverage.

Time published the most contest coverage of the three newsmagazines. Newsweek focused least on the contest. On personal profiles and stories reflecting on the character of candidates or their spouses, Time published slightly more

than Newsweek, which published more than U.S. News and World Report. Among the individual magazines, Time and Newsweek both published more contest coverage than issues coverage and more issues coverage than character coverage. U.S. News published more issues coverage than contest coverage and more contest coverage than character coverage. An ANOVA test revealed none of these differences was significant at the 95 percent confidence level (Table 21).

TABLE 21  
ANOVA RESULTS: NEWSMAGAZINES AND TYPE OF COVERAGE  
(CONTEST, CHARACTER OR ISSUES)

	F-Ratio	P
Magazine	0.29	0.75
Coverage	0.53	0.66
Interaction	0.85	0.47

Table 22 reveals more specifically the magazines' campaign agenda during the general election campaign. The sizable "other" category consists mostly of stories about the characteristics of the electorate, about how the media are covering the election in general and about the hurricane in Florida.

TABLE 22  
CAMPAIGN COVERAGE BY TOPIC  
(in square inches)

---

Campaign	3,511
Character	1,197.5
Employment and labor	890.75
Horse race	765.5
Other	660.5
Taxes and national debt	468.25
Crime, poverty and drugs	356
Professional qualifications	233.5
Culture and ethics	231.25
Foreign relations	204.25
Family issues	172.25
Defense	152.25
Environment and energy	141.25
Non-character, but personal	139.75
Education	126
Government	119.5
Health (tie)	75.5
Civil rights (tie)	75.5
Trade	36
Inflation	15.75

TABLE 22 (continued)

Infrastructure	13.5
Gender issues/abortion	7.5
Racial issues	0
Technology/science	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9,593.25</b>

#### Negative and Positive Themes

This section addresses the research question:

5. What were some of the most common themes in campaign coverage in the four magazines? A theme is an emphasis or a characterization about a candidate, spouse, party or the campaign as a whole.

For each story that was coded as positive or negative, a theme addressing the essential negative or positive nature of the story was listed. The purpose of this task was not for statistical analysis but to characterize the campaign and the media coverage.

Positive themes tended to focus on candidates' electability, energy and support. Fewer positive than negative themes were listed, and most of the positive themes were about the Democrats. Clinton's favorable coverage characterized him as a likely winner with an economic plan.

Some of the favorable coverage of Clinton and most of that about Hillary Clinton defended them from criticism they received during the Republican National Convention: the magazines defended Bill Clinton on his draft status and trip to Moscow during the Vietnam era and Hillary Clinton about her position on family law and her professional role. The Democratic party and campaign were also portrayed as probable winners, and themes emphasized teamwork and competence within the campaign organization and the ticket.

While the Democrats received most of the favorable coverage, Bush and the Republicans received the brunt of the criticism from the magazines. Bush was portrayed as lacking passion, boldness and an economic plan. Much of the negative coverage was about his re-electability: one magazine stated only a "miracle" could save Bush's presidency. With respect to the Republican campaign and administration, much of the negative coverage concerned sluggish fundraising, low morale and expectations of defeat.

Most of the negative coverage about Clinton concerned his Vietnam draft status and his remarks about that status during the campaign. These stories tended to portray Clinton as untrustworthy. Some negative coverage was devoted to missing information from Clinton's FBI file.

Most of the negative coverage about Perot concerned his electability. Magazine stories frequently stated that Perot had no chance of winning the presidency. One story, which focused on his reorganized campaign and reentry into the



race in October, portrayed him as manipulative, deceptive, autocratic and controlling. He was also characterized as a "spoiler" who reentered the race merely to hurt Bush's chance at victory.

Some of the negative stories were about all presidential candidates. Those stories emphasized the inadequacies of all candidates' economic plans or stressed that none of the candidates could spur a quick economic turnaround.

Some negative themes about "none of the candidates" were listed; these themes reflected a cynicism about the political system in general. These stories were about dishonesty in general and among the candidates in particular, on the absurdity of post-debate "spin doctors" and on the electorate, which one magazine said was motivated by fear.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Coverage of Candidates and Parties:

##### Bias and Attention

President Bush alleged 1992 was the most biased year in the history of political campaign journalism. A glance at the newsmagazines and People provides some support for his complaint of bias in 1992. Bush and the Republicans received more negative than positive coverage and more negative coverage than Clinton and the Democrats. The Arkansas governor and the Democrats enjoyed more favorable coverage than their opponents.

These differences do not stand the test of statistics, though. None of the statistical tests performed in this study revealed a significant difference in slant among the candidates or parties: Whatever differences exist in coverage of the candidates and parties are small and could have been caused by chance.

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of campaign coverage in the four magazines was neutral or mixed. Stempel and Windhauser also found a majority of neutral coverage in their studies of the 1984 and 1988 campaigns. This

proliferation of coverage that is either mostly factual or that is balanced in value assertions would seem to contradict any allegation of political bias -- at least among the magazines examined in this study.

Perhaps the most damaging type of bias observed in this study is that which all but announced the winners and losers before voters went to the polls. As Owen (1991) and Lavrakas, Holley and Miller (1991) found, some voters avoid going to the polls if they think they know who will win. All the newsmagazines in 1992 were guilty to some extent of "fortunetelling," and some were more blatant about it than others. One month before the election, Newsweek declared Bush had hit a "glass ceiling" in opinion polls.<sup>1</sup> By the week of October 19, Time characterized the election as "Clinton's to lose," and wrote, "Only a miracle can save George Bush."<sup>2</sup> The week before the election, Newsweek suggested Bush's days as President were numbered, and Time again asserted Bush needed a "miracle" to win. In the same issue of Time, the magazine portrayed the Bush administration as in disarray, with aides "preparing to flee like rats from a sinking ship."<sup>3</sup> In describing one of the debates, Time wrote of Bush's glance at his watch: "Trickle-down doom is inevitable when the candidate is physically present at the debates but is already mentally off at the Bush Library in Texas or on the links in Kennebunkport."<sup>4</sup>

The magazines examined in this study appeared to be slightly pro-Democrat. Past studies of the weekly newsmagazines indicated a pro-Republican slant (Westley, Higbie, Burke, et al., 1960; Merrill, 1965; Stempel and Evarts, 1972; Fedler, Meeske and Hall, 1979; and Stempel and Windhauser, 1984 and 1988). Stempel and Evarts speculated that because weeklies assess a campaign over a week instead of examining day-to-day occurrences they are more likely to report on trends. Under this theory, the weekly magazines may have responded to a perceived pro-Democrat movement.

An examination of negative and positive themes indicates criticism of the incumbent tended to focus on his perceived failure to revive the economy and on his lack of popular support. The magazines portrayed Bush as lacking passion and fearful of change. The negative publicity about the Democrats focused almost exclusively on Bill Clinton's life years before he ran for public office. Perot was dismissed as unelectable, but the amount of publicity he received (individually he received as much coverage as Bush) indicates the magazines treated his message seriously or at least believed he could have a significant impact on the election's outcome.

The amount of attention given the third-party candidate in 1992 was unusual and perhaps unprecedented. The attention to Perot is particularly impressive considering he was not an official candidate during the first month of this study. Perot's coverage in the magazines provides an

exception to Graber's generalization that the news media ignore third-party candidates. At the same time, Democrats and Republicans were covered more than Independents, indicating Perot's personality and ideas may have brought him more attention than his chances of winning. The magazines covered Clinton and the Democrats more than the Republicans and the Independents, but the differences were not statistically significant.

Another unusual aspect of 1992 campaign coverage was the considerable attention to Hillary Clinton. Mrs. Clinton was the subject of more coverage than the vice presidential candidates, the other spouses and the Independent party. All coverage of Mrs. Clinton in the magazines was positive, and much of it appeared to defend her from critics. The newsmagazines probably would not have paid Mrs. Clinton as much attention if speakers had not criticized her at the Republican National Convention in August 1992. In contrast, Al and Tipper Gore each has written a book on controversial subjects; yet Al Gore received less coverage than Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Gore received none.

Vice presidential candidates in 1992 received little coverage, despite the long Senate records of Quayle and Gore and the human interest appeal of Stockdale's ordeal as a prisoner of war. The magazines in this study seem to agree with Quayle's remark that people don't vote for vice presidents; they vote for presidents. One exception is

Time, which published a story on all three vice presidential candidates. The magazines did little blasting of Quayle; this in part could have been a reaction to criticism that the news media were unfair to him in 1988.

#### Scope of Campaign Coverage

Campaign coverage in 1988 was widely criticized for invading privacy, rumormongering and focusing too much on scandal. None of these criticisms apply to 1992 general election coverage in the magazines included in this study. Coverage did not appear intrusive and included few unsubstantiated rumors. The magazines did not mention sex or drug scandals. The only "character" subjects that emerged often were Clinton's FBI file, Vietnam draft status and Moscow trip. Not all stories on these subjects were smears: Some defended Clinton or at least were objective.

While the magazines did not emphasize negative character issues, they did not publish many serious candidate profiles, either. The newsmagazines in particular appear to avoid repeating information they may have published earlier in the campaign. The dearth of candidate profiles in 1992 supports Graber's hypothesis that character will be emphasized less in races involving an incumbent.

The newsmagazines still highly emphasize campaign strategies and the horse race. Statistically, the newsmagazines devoted the same amount of space to the campaign itself as they did to policy issues. Of the three

newsmagazines, U.S. News and World Report did the best job of emphasizing policy issues over the campaign.

People magazine attended moderately to the campaign but published no stories that focused on or mentioned policy issues. As one might expect from its name, the magazine published mostly favorable personality profiles, celebrity endorsements, non-character but personal tidbits about candidates' style and blurbs on campaign occurrences. (One story was about an Elvis impersonator who greeted the Clinton campaign bus toting a Bush-Quayle campaign sign.) People in 1992 exposed its readers to much about the campaign, but it offered little information that could form the basis of a responsible voter's decision. People readers are probably less politically aware, and therefore more likely to be undecided during a general election campaign, than newsmagazine readers. Considering its tremendous circulation, People could provide a service to readers by adding policy issues to its campaign coverage. Instead of merely stating which celebrities are supporting whom, People could explain *why*: What are the issues that unite the politically active in the entertainment industry?

Several observations may be made about the issues the magazines chose to emphasize during the general election campaign. The most salient issue by far was the economy, and stories on the economy focused more on jobs than any other aspect of economics. The policy issue ranking second in salience was taxes, entitlements and national debt.

Perot's platform to reduce the federal budget deficit spurred this issue. The two economic categories -- employment and national debt -- each received more attention than foreign relations and defense combined. The newsmagazines apparently saw the economy as the most important policy issue in the campaign. Foreign relations and defense were perceived as less important, perhaps because the Cold War finally had ended.

Hillary Clinton, Dan Quayle and Al Gore's positions on some domestic issues helped bring the issues to the forefront in the newsmagazines. Family issues ranked sixth among policy issues: Such attention may have been prompted by Mrs. Clinton's history of child advocacy, Quayle's remarks about "family values," and a highly publicized case about a 12-year-old boy who wanted a court to release him from his mother's parental custody. Gore's advocacy on behalf of environmental concerns may have prompted an emphasis on the environment and energy. Although it ranked ninth among policy issues, environment and energy received more attention than education or health.

The lackluster attention to health is interesting, especially since health care reform was a staple of Clinton's policy platform. The magazines combined devoted slightly more than one page to coverage of health issues during the nine weeks of the general election campaign. Coverage of this issue tied with coverage of civil rights, most of which concerned homosexual rights. Education also



received minimal attention: Less than two pages of copy in all the magazines focused on schools.

Two issues the magazines virtually ignored were racial problems and abortion. This indicates the candidates, and perhaps the magazines as well, wanted to avoid the most controversial and emotional issues. No stories focused on racial issues, which is surprising considering the racially motivated violence in Los Angeles the previous spring. Other social problems -- such as crime, poverty and substance abuse -- did receive much coverage, ranking below only jobs and the deficit. These issues were usually presented in the context of urban decline. During the "Year of the Woman" and one year after Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas was accused of sexual harassment, less than 10 square inches in the magazines focused on gender issues.

#### Limitations of Study

This study describes the scope and characteristics of coverage and examines the slant of stories in the three newsmagazines and People during the 1992 presidential campaign. An examination of political coverage in these four magazines is useful because the magazines have large circulations and are read across regional boundaries. But because this study was limited to magazines, its findings should not be the basis of inference about all news media during the campaign. Newsmagazines by their nature contain more editorial comment, colorful descriptions and analysis

than most newspapers and television news broadcasts. Magazines are able to devote more space to individual stories than newspapers or network evening news programs. Magazine audiences may differ demographically from persons who attend only to other media. All these factors could cause magazines to cover an event differently than other media.

This study also is limited because it examined only the general election campaign. By the time an election occurs, voters have been reading and hearing about the presidential campaign for at least one year. News media coverage is as important during presidential primaries and conventions as it is during the general election campaign. Several factors could cause general election campaign coverage to differ from earlier coverage: Many stories about the candidates and their ideas (including most scandals and rumors) have already been published or broadcast and are therefore less newsworthy; fewer candidates are campaigning than during the primaries; running mates have been selected; and the nominating conventions have helped define the party agendas and the issues.

#### Further Research

A study of magazine content can describe only one facet of presidential campaign coverage. To characterize coverage more completely, the research questions addressed in this study also could be addressed with other types of news

media, including television network news, prestige newspapers and public radio. A similar study of primary campaign coverage also would be useful.

The 1992 presidential campaign demonstrated that candidates can use mass media that traditionally are not considered public affairs or news media to convey their messages to the electorate. Studies of political communication in television talk shows, situation comedies, ethnic newspapers, special interest publications, cable television networks and general interest magazines could add to the body of knowledge.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>"Hitting the Glass Ceiling," Newsweek, 5 October 1992, 42.

<sup>2</sup>"It's Clinton's to Lose," Time, 19 October 1992, 26-30.

<sup>3</sup>"While the Getting's Good," Time, 26 October 1992, 28-30.

<sup>4</sup>ibid.

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