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Political Research Quarterly 2010 63: 594 originally published online 20 February 2009

DOI: 10.1177/1065912909331426

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Political Research Quarterly
63(3) 594–611
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DOI: 10.1177/1065912909331426
http://prq.sagepub.com


Danny Hayes¹

Abstract

The mass media's representation of campaign discourse influences whether voters have the opportunity to scrutinize the candidates' issue priorities and policy proposals. But it is not clear whether candidate and media issue emphases are more or less similar at an election's most consequential moments—when it is competitive. In a study of the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns, the author finds that as the polls narrow, the media are less likely to reflect candidate discourse. Paradoxically, voters are deprived of an accurate representation of candidate dialogue when they need it most, with media behavior making it difficult for citizens to cast informed ballots in close contests. The results also show that whether the media serve as a conduit for, or filter of, candidate messages depends on a variety of factors, especially electoral context.

Keywords

campaign agendas, agenda convergence, mass media, elections

One of the central features of a functioning democracy is that citizens are afforded the opportunity to pass judgment on elected officials in regularly scheduled elections. Political campaigns enable voters to discharge this duty, giving them access to the raw materials necessary to reach a verdict. Candidates for public office put forth ideas to address the electorate's concerns, and voters render judgment, thereby influencing the composition of the government. For most observers, the representation of the public will is most effective when citizens make their choices on the basis of candidates' issue priorities and proposed policy solutions, the elements of campaign rhetoric most central to governing.

In modern campaigns, however, citizens rarely hear directly from the candidates. A tiny fraction of the electorate ever sees a stump speech in person, and only some people are exposed to campaign advertising. The vast majority of what the public encounters about candidates and their ideas emanates from the news. As a result, voters' ability to make informed choices depends in part on whether reporters and journalists faithfully represent discourse from the campaign trail. When the media reflect candidate issue agendas, citizens have an opportunity to evaluate aspirants for office on the basis of their chosen platforms. When campaign dialogue is distorted, the public's judgment cannot represent an assessment of the candidates' policy priorities and prescriptions.

The level of distortion arguably carries more weight at certain moments in a campaign than others. If the media tend to ignore campaign dialogue when an election is uncompetitive—with the outcome virtually settled and the differences between candidates unlikely to be consequential—then such a pattern may be innocuous. If, on the other hand, media coverage diverges from candidate discourse as a race tightens—when voters' assessments of the candidates' ideas could influence the outcome—then the media would clearly be undermining the public's ability to decide the election on the basis of policy considerations. The existing research on candidate–media agenda convergence has not addressed this issue, and the literature offers conflicting expectations about how the media will respond to increasingly competitive contests.

In this article, I explore candidate discourse and media coverage across the course of the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns to determine whether and how competitiveness influences the level of agenda convergence. Using an unusually rich content analysis of thousands of newspaper and television stories and hundreds of candidate speeches, I examine the dynamics

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of issue attention within the campaigns. I find considerable variation in the extent to which the media reflect campaign issue emphases and show that when an election grows more competitive, the media are less likely to report candidate discourse from the campaign trail; levels of convergence are highest when the gap in the polls is largest. In addition, several other features of the campaign also influence levels of convergence.

The findings have implications for both mass- and elite-level politics. Paradoxically, voters are deprived of an accurate representation of candidate dialogue when they need it most, suggesting that patterns of media behavior make it more difficult for citizens to cast informed ballots in close elections. Candidates, in turn, face a difficult task in using the media to influence the criteria by which voters make their choice since reporters are increasingly less likely to respond to their campaign messages when the polls narrow. More generally, the results improve our understanding of the circumstances under which the media serve as a conduit for, or filter of, candidate messages.

Candidates, the Media, and Agendas

Candidates and the media have a rancorous and symbiotic relationship. Candidates routinely complain about the difficulty of getting their message through the media filter (e.g., Hart 1994; Racicot 2004). Reporters, meanwhile, regularly grumble about the staged and repetitive nature of campaigns and the lack of access to candidates (Bruni 2002; Farhi 2004; Witcover 1999). The bitterness is borne of the two groups' divergent incentives (Arterton 1984; Zaller 1999), twinned with the uncomfortable reality that both are "locked in each other's embrace" (Fenno 1996, 226), needing one another to achieve their goals.

Candidates, interested in winning election, want to transmit a message that persuades skeptics and mobilizes supporters (Shaw 1999). Campaigns thus can be viewed as fights over the issue agenda. The strategies of "issue ownership" (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996) and "selective emphasis" (Budge and Farlie 1983), for example, suggest that when candidates train the public's attention on advantageous issues, they tend to do better at the polls (though see Sides 2007). And because a campaign's message may be more influential when amplified by news coverage (Hayes 2008a), candidates work hard to have their issue agendas reflected in the press and broadcast media.

News people, however, have little concern for the desires of candidates. Driven by the norms of their own trade, reporters try to fulfill their democratic responsibilities, play by the rules of professional journalism, and cover politics in a way that entertains

and retains their audience (Bennett 1996; Cook 2005). Transmitting the candidates' messages is less important than gaining prestige and adhering to professional standards of objective journalism (Zaller 1999). To be sure, journalists need candidates to make news for them, a symptom of the news media's heavy reliance on official sources in political reporting (Bennett 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007; Sigal 1973). But in their role as gatekeepers, reporters and editors exercise considerable discretion over which statements are worthy of publication and which are worthy of oblivion (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003).

Given the diverging incentives of the two groups, it is not surprising that much research shows that candidates have one agenda, the media have another, and never the twain shall meet. Vavreck's (2006) study of stump speeches, advertising, and *New York Times* coverage from 1952 through 2000, for instance, finds that the topics candidates talk about and what reporters write about are only rarely the same (also see Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003-2004). Similarly, in-depth investigations of recent elections show the media often pursue their own agendas at the expense of the candidates' (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Semetko et al. 1991), a theme resonant with Patterson's (1994) general treatment of press coverage of presidential campaigns.

Others, however, have argued that public opinion encourages convergence by exerting a centripetal force on candidate and media agendas. Because candidates and journalists may be unwilling to focus on issues that lack public salience, they alight on similar sets of topics—those that are of the greatest interest for voters. As a result, candidate and media agendas are unlikely to diverge much. The best evidence for this "transaction model" perspective comes from two studies of the 1992 presidential election (Dalton et al. 1998; Just et al. 1996) that find strong correlations between the issue content in candidate discourse and news coverage.

It remains unclear, however, why the media at times are more responsive to candidate agendas than at others. Ridout and Mellen (2007), for instance, show in a study of five 2002 U.S. Senate races that issue convergence was relatively high in some states but low in others. Other than noting that print coverage is much more likely than local TV news to reflect the content of candidate advertising, the authors offer no explanation for the variation across races. Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) provide evidence that media coverage in primary elections is more likely to respond to front-running candidates' attempts to set the campaign agenda. But their results are largely applicable only to the "invisible primary" period of presidential elections, when the media are engaged in a process of winnowing the field to a few select candidates.

The circumstances under which the media are more likely to reflect issue agendas are important for at least two reasons. First, citizens need an accurate portrayal of candidate discourse to make the most informed judgment. If news coverage is more likely to distort candidate discourse at certain times, then voters tuning into the campaign at those moments will be left with a less accurate portrayal of candidate dialogue than voters paying attention at other points in the campaign. As a result, the accuracy of the individual's view of the candidates' priorities and issue positions would vary depending on whether they began paying attention at the "right" time.

Second, candidates are engaged in a constant effort to convince the mass media to reflect their own campaign agendas in the hopes of influencing public opinion. If reporters are more responsive to candidate dialogue at certain points in the campaign than others, this means that the opportunities for candidates to use the media to "prime" the criteria by which voters make their judgments (e.g., Druckman 2004; Iyengar and Kinder 1987) will depend on the conditions under which those efforts are undertaken. Because media amplification is helpful in affecting the public's agenda, this has consequences for campaign strategy (Hayes 2008a).

The Importance of Competitiveness

There are a variety of factors that could influence candidate–media agenda convergence, but my focus here is primarily on competitiveness. I offer two reasons for this. First, voters' evaluations of the candidates' ideas are most likely to have an impact on outcomes in close elections, making the representation of candidate dialogue more important as contests get closer. Voters most need a faithful portrayal of campaign dialogue when the outcome is in doubt. Second, more than any other single contextual factor, competitiveness is likely to influence the nature of campaign coverage. But the existing literature offers differing perspectives about the effective of competition on candidate–media agenda convergence.

On one hand, competition should induce higher levels of convergence: when the race is close, the media should be more likely to focus on the candidates and their ideas. Research has shown that the media appear generally responsive to themes emphasized by candidates (Dalton et al. 1998; Kahn and Kenney 1999), and it is possible that this pattern may be amplified when an election is close. Close contests are inherently more newsworthy than uncompetitive contests. Because voters are more likely to be interested in a toss-up race than a lopsided one, there is an economic incentive for news organizations to devote more resources to covering competitive

contests. Moreover, tight elections feature a greater potential for drama, more conflict, and more intense campaigning by the candidates (see Bennett 2009; Graber 2006), all of which make for "good" stories. It is clear that the media devote more space and airtime to competitive than uncompetitive races (Gilliam 1985; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Westlye 1991) and provide more coverage of issues (Kahn and Kenney 1999; Westlye 1991) in close races, among other differences.

If the media are more attentive and more issue focused in competitive elections and are generally responsive to candidate agendas, then it is natural to suspect that competitiveness should also produce greater candidate–media agenda convergence. The more interested the public is, the greater incentive for journalists to tell voters what is happening on the campaign trail. Thus, the amount of convergence between candidates and the media should wax as an election grows more competitive and wane as it becomes less competitive.

By contrast, the literature also offers reasons that an increasingly competitive race may encourage the media to ignore candidates' campaign trail discourse. As an election becomes more competitive, journalists have a greater incentive to focus on the "horse race" or "game" aspects of a campaign since these are now central matters to predicting the outcome of the election (Patterson 1994). Even if the content of news coverage remains focused on issues, as Kahn and Kenney's (1999) work suggests it can, those may not necessarily be the same issues candidates are emphasizing. Rather, journalists may instead focus on the issues they believe will be decisive on election day. In Zaller's (1999) formulation, reporters use a "rule of anticipated importance," focusing on the strategic maneuvering of candidates when those tactics are most likely to be consequential.

In every election cycle, for example, the mass media devote time to "wedge" and social issues they believe will divide a candidate or party's coalition, even as politicians focus much less intently on those topics (e.g., Kirkpatrick 2008). Reporters prefer "clear-cut" issues that produce campaign controversy, whereas candidates devote most of their time to "broad policy questions and narrow coalition appeals" (Patterson 1994, 147). But when an election is not close, journalists have less of an incentive to diverge from candidates' campaign trail dialogue; with the outcome a virtual certainty, electoral strategy is immaterial. The strategy and game stories focused on other issues simply take on less import, given that they are unlikely to affect the outcome of the election. Thus, the literature offers competing hypotheses about whether the media give the public an accurate portrayal of campaign discourse when they need it most. In the analysis that follows, I conduct an empirical test.

While the analysis is focused primarily on the role of competitiveness, an explanation of candidate–media agenda convergence cannot ignore other factors. Given that the dynamics of issue attention are likely a function of journalistic incentives, the electoral context, and candidate behavior, several other influences deserve attention. Moreover, these factors have received little attention in the literature and thus bear introduction as potential areas of future research.

First, candidate statements are much less likely to receive media attention if they have been reported on before. Much in the same way that new cars lose value the moment when they are driven off the dealer’s lot, candidate statements rapidly lose news value once they have been reported (e.g., Bruni 2002). And because candidates tend to repeat their core positions and ideas throughout the course of a campaign—staying “on message,” and only rarely offering new policy proposals—the likelihood of the media reporting their pronouncements should decline as election day approaches (Patterson 1994, 149).

Discourse between candidates could also affect agenda convergence. When candidates talk about issues, the media are likely to follow suit (Dalton et al. 1998; Kahn and Kenney 1999), but this seems even more likely when both candidates are focused on the same issues, engaged in “dialogue” (Simon 2002). In most cases, candidates who engage on the same issue will highlight their differences, criticizing and attacking one another. When candidates stake out diverging positions on the same issue, the resulting conflict lends itself to the narrative storytelling that is the cornerstone of political journalism (Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Schudson 1996). Being able to pit candidates’ statements against one another increases the news value of campaign discourse, making it more likely that a candidate’s message will be reported.

Finally, studies of agenda convergence cannot ignore structural features of news outlets—in particular, differences between print and television news. Newspapers can generally devote coverage to more issues than television, largely because newspapers have more space (Druckman 2005). And with just twenty-two minutes of airtime available for news on the nightly network news programs, TV coverage of politics often lacks frequency and depth. It is impossible to say whether this reflects only space limitations or, also, the demands of a visual medium—needing good pictures, issue coverage may be less attractive for broadcast outlets. But regardless of its source, structural differences are likely to affect the responsiveness of TV and print outlets to candidate discourse. In a comparison between newspaper and television coverage, print reporting should be more likely to reflect candidate agendas (Ridout and Mellen 2007).

In the analysis below, I begin by establishing that candidate and media attention to issues does indeed fluctuate across the course of campaigns. Almost all of the existing studies have considered campaigns as single, static entities rather than a dynamic process in which candidate and media issue attention changes over time. I then explore whether the relationship between what candidates say and what journalists report—agenda convergence—tightens and slackens across the course of the campaign. After demonstrating that it does, I consider whether competitiveness and other factors explain the variation. I turn now to describing the data I employ in the analysis.

Data and Measures

To compare candidate and media agendas, one needs independent measures of the attention each devotes to various issues. My media measure comes from a large-scale content analysis of newspaper and television coverage during the last two months of the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns. My measure of candidate attention to issues is drawn from a content analysis of Republican and Democratic candidates’ public speeches over the same period. The approach is similar to recent work that has married content analyses of news coverage and candidate speeches (Vavreck 2006), advertising (Ridout and Mellen 2007; Vavreck 2006), and press releases (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003).

A major difference between this and other work, however, is the scope of the content analysis. Although most studies of campaign news coverage typically rely on a single newspaper or news outlet or exclusively focus on the print or electronic media, the analysis I present here is based on data from dozens of national and regional newspapers and all three major broadcast networks across two campaigns. Because of the richness of the media data, the conclusions drawn at the end of the article are not subject to the oft-repeated caveats that apply to many similar studies, which must assume that single-outlet analyses are representative of news coverage writ large. In addition, the wedding of the media data with a comprehensive coding of candidate discourse means that I can make definitive statements about differences between candidate and media agendas. This approach is superior to using news reports of candidate statements as indicators of candidate issue attention (e.g., Dalton et al. 1998; Sigelman and Buell 2004) since those measures reflect not candidate agendas but the portion of the candidate agendas that journalists viewed as newsworthy. More to the point, if one is interested in the similarity or difference between candidate and media agendas, the two must be estimated separately. Ultimately, the data allow

for a more comprehensive study of this relationship than most others.

Media Data

The media data come from two separate coding projects. In 1992, a team at the research firm Computer-Aided Research and Media Analysis collected and coded campaign news coverage from dozens of national and regional newspapers as well as the nightly news programs on ABC, CBS, and NBC. In 1996, a smaller set of national and regional newspapers and the three network news shows were coded by a team at the University of Texas at Austin, designed as a follow-up to the 1992 study. The data in this article are drawn from coverage published or broadcast between September 1 and election day. For 1992, I draw on a coding of 9,000 articles from forty-three newspapers and 604 network news stories. For 1996, my analysis includes 828 stories from six newspapers and 76 network news stories.¹ In both years, coders recorded a variety of information about each story, including the date of its publication or airing, assessments of the portrayal of the candidates, and its topical content. A full description of the coding project is described in Hayes (2008b).²

For my purposes here, the key variable is the focus of each story. Coders were asked after reading the headline and text (or transcript, in the case of TV news) to identify the story's primary emphasis.³ The emphasis could be the latest poll result, a candidate's decision to shake up his staff, a campaign event, a debate, a policy issue, or another topic. If the article was an issue story, coders then noted the specific topic with which it dealt—taxes, Medicare, social security, defense, and so forth.⁴ Following Ridout and Mellen (2007) and Vavreck (2006), I restrict my analysis to only stories that were coded as having a focus on an issue.⁵

To facilitate the comparison of media and candidate issue attention, I adopt a modified version of Petrocik's (1996) categorization scheme, placing each issue into one of eight categories: civil and social order; defense, security, and military; taxes and spending; social welfare; race and social groups; economy; foreign affairs; and government functioning. While Petrocik's scheme was developed as part of an examination of "issue ownership," it is also useful simply as a way to organize issues into a manageable typology. The drawback of the approach is that I cannot compare candidate and media attention on specific issue topics. For example, instead of comparing the amount of issue attention to "taxes and spending," it would be preferable to compare the focus on the budget, the estate tax, income tax, or deficit spending, for example. But such an analysis is prohibited because the

numbers of stories that fall into each of the many specific categories are very small, as is also sometimes the case with the candidate speech data. Moreover, some of the news story coding is done at a more general level, such as "taxes." The primary advantage of the broad categorization scheme, which captures the major topics at issue in the campaigns, is to make manageable comparisons between candidate and media agendas.⁶

The basic measure of media issue attention is the percentage of news coverage of all issues devoted to each of the eight categories. For example, if newspaper coverage included 1,500 issue stories across the course of the campaign and 500 of them dealt with defense and security, then the measure would show that 33 percent of media attention went to the defense, security, and military category. Newspaper and television issue attention measures were calculated separately.

Since the study is concerned with issue emphases across the course of the election, I repeated this same calculation for each week of the campaign. That is, I divided the campaign into 10 seven-day segments, beginning September 1 and ending the week of the election, and created a measure of issue attention for each week. This allows me to examine how attention to issues changes across the course of the campaign.

Candidate Data

I measured candidates' attention to issues with a content analysis of the full text of hundreds of public speeches given by the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates from September 1 through the day before the election. The speeches were compiled as the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Discourse and represent as close to a universe of candidate discourse as exists from these elections. In 1992, 197 speeches (122 by Bush, 75 by Clinton) were included, and in 1996, 185 speeches were coded (76 by Dole, 109 by Clinton).

With the help of a research assistant, I coded each sentence in each speech for "issue appeals" (Geer 1998), which I define as any substantive mention of a policy issue. Some sentences contained multiple issue appeals; many contained none. In all, 16,383 appeals were coded in 1992 (9,342 by Bush, 7,041 by Clinton) and 14,152 (5,055 by Dole, 9,097 by Clinton) in 1996. By summing together a candidate's issue appeals and aggregating them into the eight issue categories, I am able to determine how much time a candidate spent on each issue across the course of the campaign.⁷

Similar to the media measure, my measure of issue attention is the percentage of appeals on that issue of all the candidate's issue appeals. For example, if a candidate made 5,000 issue appeals throughout the course of a

campaign and 500 concerned social welfare, then 10 percent of his attention went to social welfare issues. The same calculations were made for each of eight issue categories. And as with the media data, I made separate calculations for each week.

The results of these two coding projects are independent measures of candidate attention to issues and newspaper and television coverage of issues. These data allow me to explore how attention to issues fluctuates across the course of a campaign and how candidate–media agenda convergence likewise responds to competitiveness.

The Dynamics of Issue Attention

My central question—whether agenda convergence fluctuates in response to campaign competitiveness—assumes that candidate and media attention to issues is dynamic, that issue emphases fluctuate across the course of the campaign. With little empirical work addressing this possibility, it deserves scrutiny. If issue attention is dynamic, then the proportion of attention devoted to an issue will change across the course of the campaign. If candidates' and the media's issue emphases are, on the other hand, static, then the level of attention to each topic will fluctuate very little.⁸

Figures 1 and 2 present the proportion of attention given to the eight issues for each week of the campaign.⁹ The dashed lines represent issue attention for the Republican and Democratic candidates and the solid line represents issue attention for newspaper and television coverage averaged together. I present the single “media” line to ease the interpretation of the graphs. For example, the panel in Figure 1 labeled “economy” shows that during the week of September 1, 51 percent of Bush's issue appeals and 36 percent of Clinton's were devoted to economic issues, while 32 percent of the media's coverage went to the economy.

While candidate and media attention did not fluctuate dramatically across the course of the 1992 campaign—the economy was consistently a prominent topic for all three—issue attention is not static. Clinton's emphasis on social welfare, for example, rose and fell over the campaign, from a low of 17 percent during the week of September 15 to a high just a week later of 35 percent. Bush's emphasis on taxes and spending changed similarly as his speech content varied somewhat week to week. Likewise, media attention to civil and social order stories began in the first week at less than 10 percent and climbed as high as 30 percent.¹⁰

The ebb and flow of issue attention is even more apparent in Figure 2. In 1996, there is considerable movement in the candidates' core issues—taxes and spending for Dole and social welfare for Clinton. And the

media's interest in government functioning stories—a category that includes political scandal, government appointments, campaign finance reform, and the like—was not constant throughout the campaign. In September, the topic was of little interest to anyone on the campaign trail, but around the time stories broke about illegal foreign donations to the Clinton–Gore campaign and questions about the vice president's visit to a Buddhist temple in Los Angeles (e.g., Dwyer and Borrus 1996), media attention to campaign finance reform and related issues skyrocketed. By October 27, government functioning accounted for 57 percent of the issue mentions in the news.

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that both candidates and the media have enduring interests across a campaign, but they do not crowd out all other issues. Especially in 1996, issue attention fluctuated substantially across the campaign. And even in 1992, when the economy dominated most of the election, attention to other topics, such as taxes and spending and social welfare, did move as Bush, Clinton, and the media gave them greater or lesser emphasis.

The Dynamics of Candidate–Media Agenda Convergence

Issue attention is dynamic. But does candidate–media agenda convergence also fluctuate? To measure the similarity of candidate and media agendas from week to week, I use an “issue convergence” formula designed by Sigelman and Buell (2004). This is not the only way to compare agendas, but the measure possesses two attractive properties.¹¹ First, it allows me to quantify the similarity among agendas and to compare those figures from week to week. Second, Sigelman and Buell's measure is intuitively appealing, showing the amount of overlap between candidate and media agendas and how much of an agenda would have to be changed to achieve total convergence. While originally designed to capture agenda similarity between candidates, the measure is easily adapted to compare candidate and media agendas, as Ridout and Mellen (2007) do. It is calculated this way:

Imagine a hypothetical campaign in which only three issues were discussed—taxes and spending, social welfare, and foreign affairs. Suppose Candidate X spent 40 percent of his time on taxes and spending, 30 percent of his time on social welfare, and the remaining 30 percent on foreign affairs. The media, meanwhile, spent 60 percent of their time on taxes and spending, 10 percent on social welfare, and 30 percent on foreign affairs. Thus, in an example similar to Sigelman and Buell's (2004, 653), the issue profiles look like this:

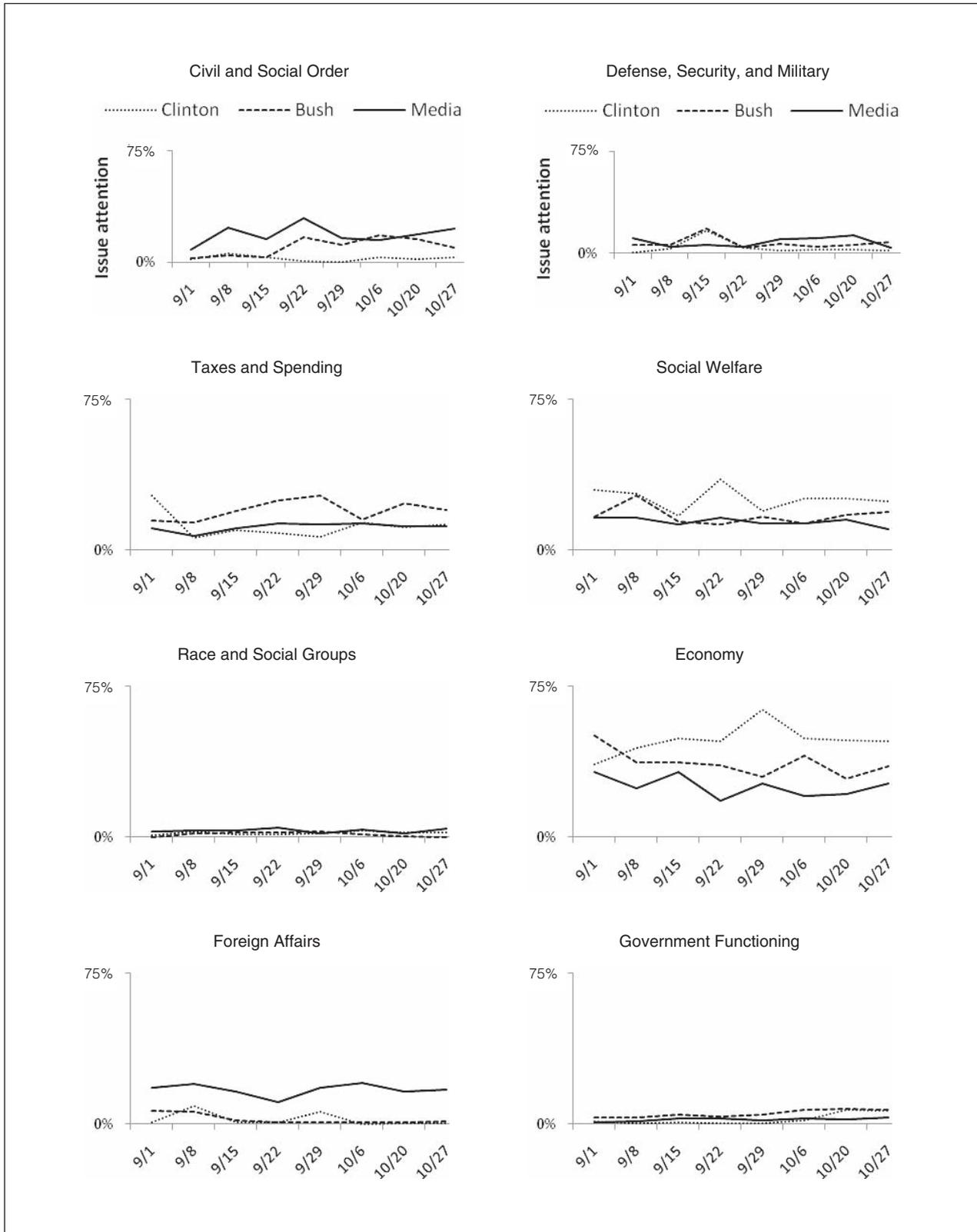


Figure I. The Dynamics of Issue Attention, by Week, September 1 to October 27, 1992
 Note: Figures show the percentage of news stories and candidate issue appeals in each issue category for each week of the campaign.

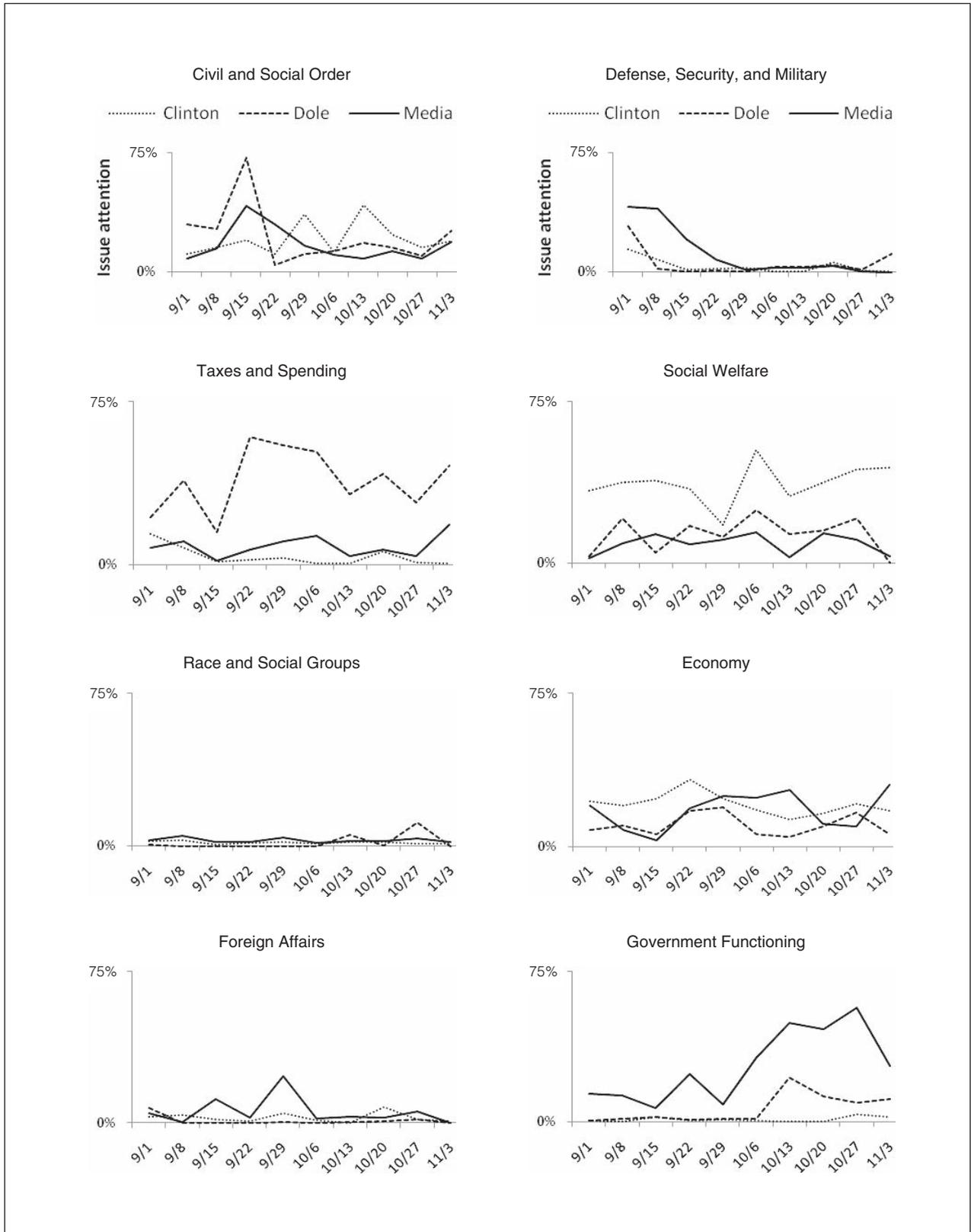


Figure 2. The Dynamics of Issue Attention, by Week, September 1 to November 3, 1996
 Note: Figures show the percentage of news stories and candidate issue appeals in each issue category for each week of the campaign.

	Taxes and Spending (%)	Social Welfare (%)	Foreign Affairs (%)
Candidate X	40	30	30
The media	60	10	30

To obtain a convergence score, I sum the absolute values of the differences between the percentage Candidate X and the media devoted to each issue, like this: $|40 - 60| + |30 - 10| + |30 - 30| = 40$. The sum can range from 0 to 200, with higher scores representing more agenda dissimilarity. To convert the score to a measure of similarity, it is divided by 2 (to take into account the double counting that occurs in the above equation) and subtracted from 100. The issue convergence score would be 80 on a scale from 0 (complete divergence) to 100 (perfect convergence). The result indicates an 80 percent overlap between Candidate X's and the media's agenda. To achieve total convergence, the media or candidate would have to change agendas by 20 percent.

Using this method, I calculated a convergence score for each week of the campaign, using the issue attention percentages for the eight categories presented in Figures 1 and 2. Scores were calculated separately between each medium (newspaper or TV) and the Republican and Democratic candidates. Figure 3 presents the weekly convergence scores between each candidate and news medium. For example, in the upper-left-hand panel, the convergence score between Clinton's issue emphases and newspaper coverage during the week of September 1 was 84, while the TV score was 47.

The figure reveals convergence levels to be dynamic; there is noticeable variation in the similarity of candidate and media agendas from week to week. The fluctuation in 1992 is not dramatic but changes enough to suggest meaningful variance. For example, the convergence scores for newspaper coverage and Clinton's issue appeals range from 84 to 58, a 26-point difference. By comparison, 1996 is considerably more volatile. Looking, for instance, at the relationship between Dole's issue emphases and newspaper coverage, convergence begins at a substantial 69 during the week of September 1 but drops to 25 by the last week of the campaign. The Clinton–newspaper convergence scores show a substantial decline as well, particularly from the week of September 29 on. In addition, the figure shows that print media are more hospitable outlets for candidate agendas than broadcast outlets, confirming prior research (Ridout and Mellen 2007).

The Paradox of Competitiveness

Having confirmed that issue attention and convergence fluctuate within each campaign, the central question is

whether the ebb and flow is related to the competitiveness of the election. As the polls widen and narrow, does the level of convergence respond?

Figure 4 plots the relationship between the competitiveness of the race—operationalized as the difference in polling support between the Democratic and Republican candidate—and the level of candidate–media agenda convergence. The competitiveness measure, polling gap, is the absolute value of the difference between the candidates' average poll standing for each week—a gauge of competitiveness indifferent to which candidate is ahead.¹² In 1992, the measure ranges from a 7-point to a 13-point advantage for Bill Clinton. In 1996, Clinton's lead runs from 13 to 20 points. The convergence score, plotted against the y-axis, shows the relationship between newspaper or TV coverage and each candidate's agenda. Each data point represents a week of the campaign, with a fitted line showing the strength of the relationship.

The figure reveals that the relationship between competitiveness and the media's responsiveness to the candidates' issue emphases is negative. The upward slope of the lines shows that as the race grows more one sided—as Clinton's advantage grows—the level of convergence increases. When the polling shows a tighter race, convergence tends to be lower. Only the newspaper convergence scores for Bush show a positive relationship. With so few observations, caution in interpreting the figure is imperative, but it would be difficult to conclude from these data that increasing competitiveness promotes agenda convergence. There is more evidence for the opposite interpretation.

Figure 5 slices the data differently, plotting the agenda convergence scores between newspaper and television and candidate agendas over time, along with the polling gap. To simplify the presentation of the graphs, I use a composite measure of both candidates' agendas to calculate the convergence score for each election year. Convergence is plotted on the left-hand axis, while polling gap is plotted on the right. As in Figure 4, the relationship is somewhat stronger for 1996 than 1992 and for TV coverage than newspapers. But again, the figure shows that as the race tightens, media content diverges from candidate discourse.

In 1996, the data suggest that the wearing on of the campaign may also help explain the lower convergence scores. If reporters are less interested in candidate agendas as the campaign approaches election day (Bruni 2002; Patterson 1994), then the apparent relationship between competitiveness and agenda convergence could be spurious. The variation could actually be accounted for by the fact that reporters simply are less likely to report the candidates' issue emphases in the latter stages of a campaign. Thus, a more stringent test of the competitiveness hypothesis is in order.

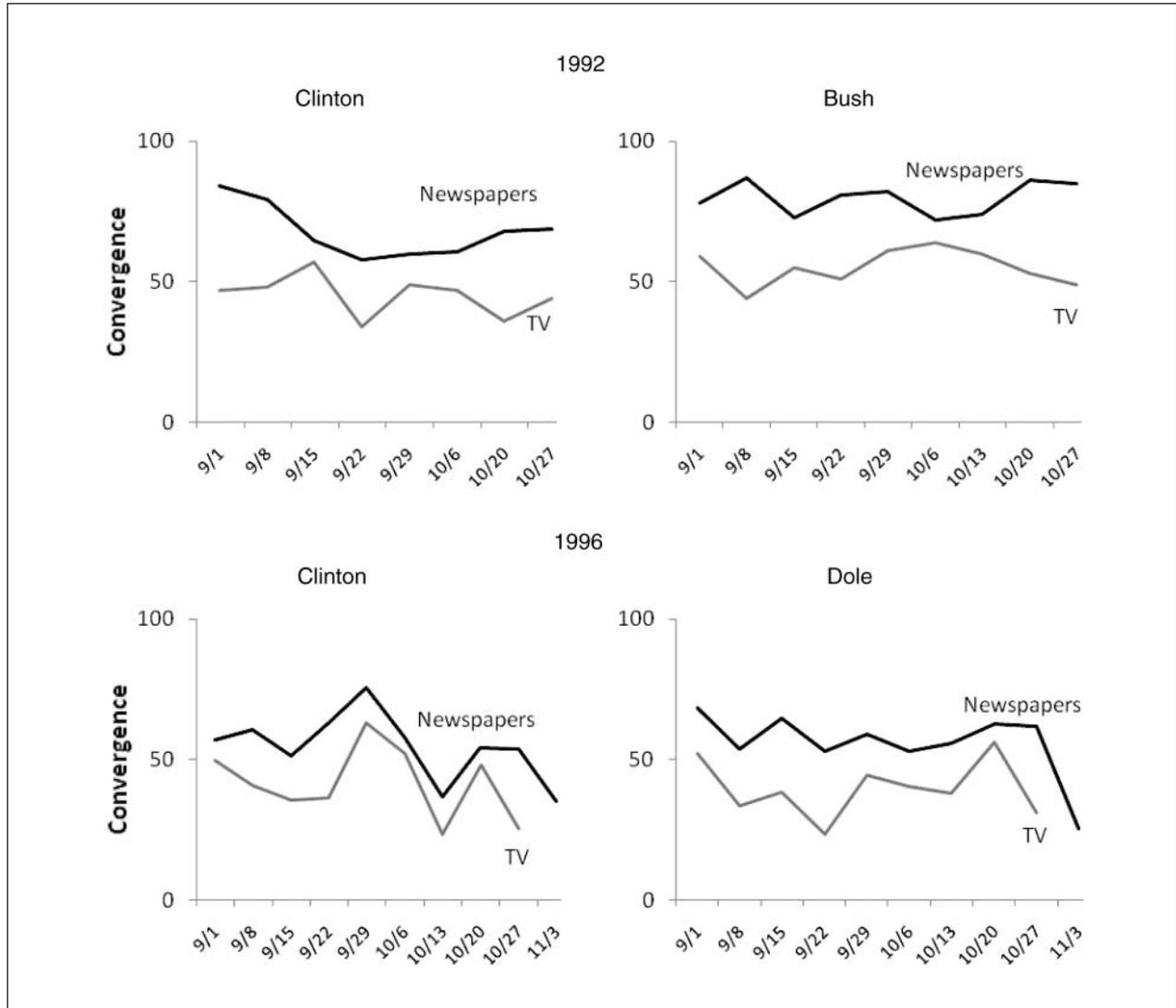


Figure 3. The Dynamics of Candidate–Media Agenda Convergence, by Week, 1992 and 1996

Note: Figures plot the level of agenda convergence for each medium and each candidate for each week of the campaign. Convergence measures the similarity of the candidate and media's issue agenda.

Table 1 displays the results of a regression model explaining the level of convergence in each week of the two campaigns. The dependent variable is the convergence score for a given week between a given medium (newspaper or TV) and a given candidate, the measures plotted in Figure 3. There are thirty-two observations for 1992 and thirty-eight for 1996.

The key independent variable is the competitiveness measure. If the findings in Figure 4 and 5 are robust, then the coefficient for polling gap should be positive—as the margin between the candidates grows, convergence should increase, indicating less convergence when the race is closer. If the patterns are accounted by some other factor, then there should be no significant effect.¹³

The model includes five other variables. I include a dummy coded 1 for newspaper coverage, 0 for TV coverage, given the differences apparent in Figure 3. I also include a variable indicating the week of the campaign. The week of September 1 (furthest from election day) is coded 1, and the last week of the campaign is coded 10 (or, for 1992, 9). If convergence declines as election day nears, the coefficient will be negative. Candidate convergence—a measure of the similarity of the two candidates' agendas in a particular week—tests whether, as both candidates engage in dialogue on the same topics, reporters are more likely to regard this as a newsworthy storyline.¹⁴ Finally, the model includes two additional dummy variables as controls. The first captures

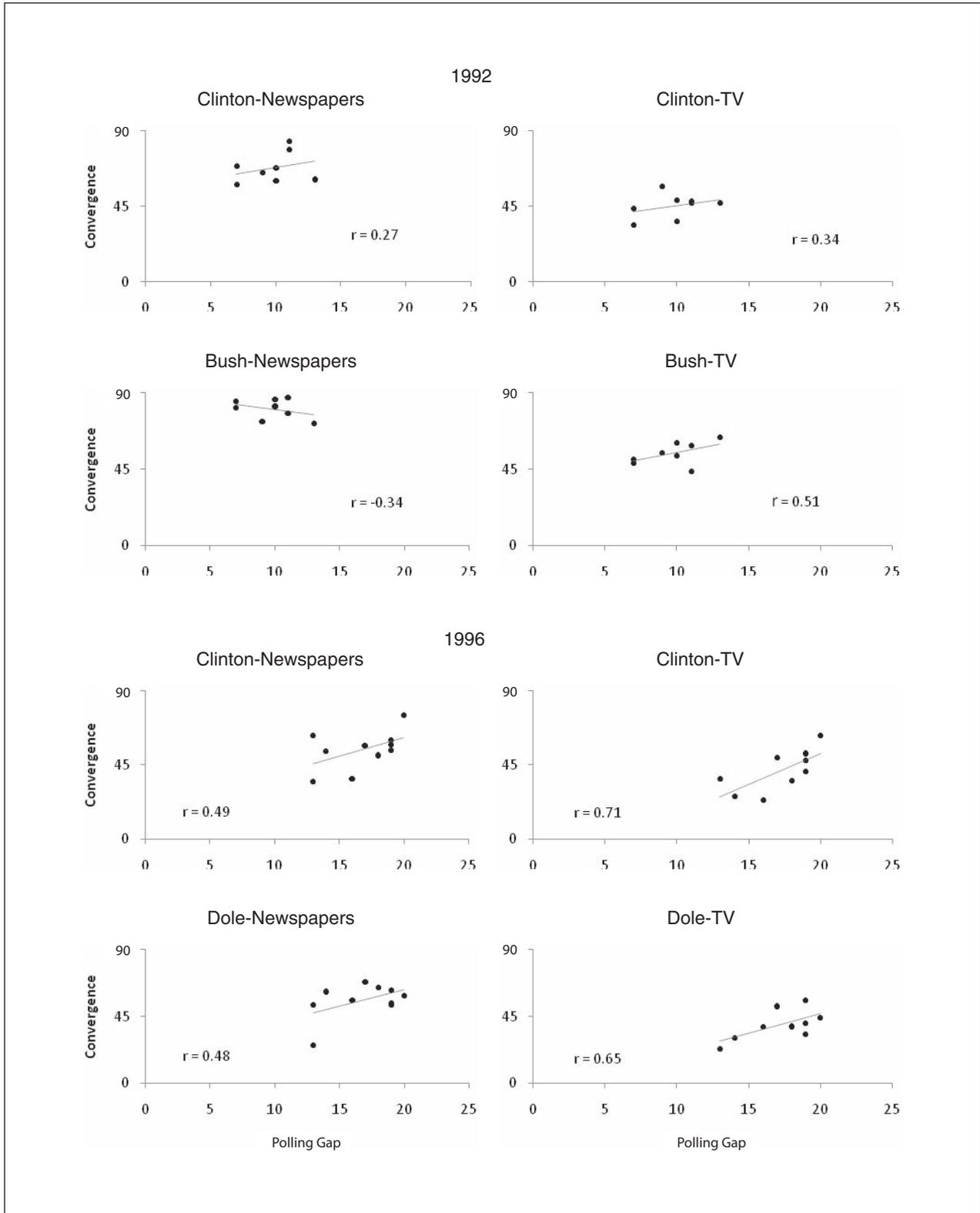


Figure 4. Candidate–Media Agenda Convergence and Competitiveness, 1992 and 1996

Note: Each observation represents a week of the campaign, with a fitted line estimating the strength of the relationship. Convergence measures the similarity of the candidate and media’s issue agenda. Polling Gap is the absolute value of the difference between the candidates’ average poll standing in a given week, based on tracking polls.

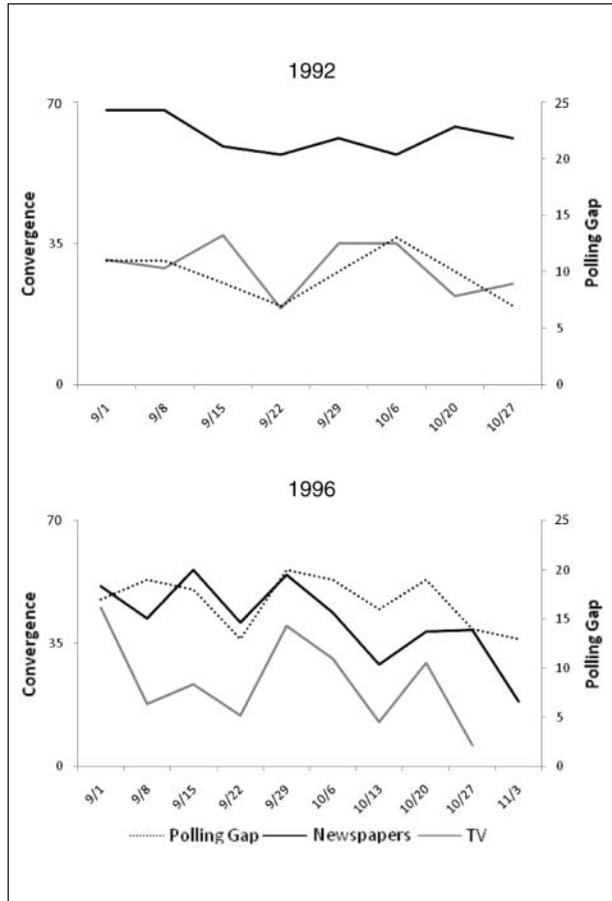


Figure 5. Candidate–Media Agenda Convergence and Competitiveness, by Week, 1992 and 1996

Note: Figures plot the agenda convergence score between media outlets and a composite measure of both candidates’ agenda alongside the difference in the polls between the Democratic and Republican candidates for each week of the campaign. Convergence measures the similarity of the candidates’ and media’s issue agenda. Polling Gap is the absolute value of the difference between the candidates’ average poll standing in a given week, based on tracking polls.

any advantage that could be held by an incumbent in having his message carried in the press.¹⁵ The second indicates the occurrence of a debate during the week. I have no strong expectations about whether debates will make convergence more or less likely.¹⁶

I estimate a linear regression model with heteroskedastic panel-corrected standard errors to account for the lack of independence among the observations (Beck and Katz 1995). Since these are essentially cross-sectional time-series data, it is possible that the levels of convergence are correlated across both space and time, and thus a simple ordinary least squares model violates the assumption of independence. The time-series model relaxes this assumption and estimates more accurate standard errors that help guard against the possibility of inferring statistically significant results where none exist.

Table 1. The Effect of Competitiveness on Candidate–Media Agenda Convergence, 1992 and 1996

	1992	1996
Polling gap	1.51* (0.92)	2.59** (0.64)
Newspaper	24.38** (2.30)	16.50** (2.81)
Week	0.01 (0.53)	−0.80* (0.54)
Candidate convergence	0.08 (0.13)	0.43** (0.22)
Incumbent	10.88** (2.30)	0.08 (2.76)
Debate	−7.18 (5.24)	−3.31 (4.89)
Constant	24.22 (14.60)	−23.14 (18.25)
<i>n</i>	32	38
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.81	.59
χ^2	159.60	55.41
<i>p</i>	.00	.00

Note: The dependent variable is agenda convergence, the similarity of the candidate and media’s issue agenda in a given week. Cell entries are linear regression coefficients, with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

p* < .10. *p* < .05, two-tailed test for polling gap and debate; one-tailed test for newspaper, week, candidate convergence, and incumbent.

Since there are obvious differences in the patterns of candidate–media convergence in 1992 and 1996, I run separate regressions for each year.

The results confirm the finding in Figures 4 and 5: competitiveness has a negative effect on agenda convergence. In 1992, a 1-point increase in Clinton’s lead raised the agenda convergence score by 1.5 points. In 1996, the effect is even stronger, with a 1-point increase in Clinton’s lead yielding a 2.6-point increase in convergence. This is a substantial effect. For example, in 1996, the widening of the gap between Clinton and Dole by 5 points would amount to a 13-point increase in convergence. When the race is close, journalists have a powerful incentive to report on topics that the candidates are not talking about in pursuit of stories focused on the strategic “game.” When the margin widens, however, strategy news is less newsworthy, and, by default, journalists are likely more inclined to report on the candidates’ ideas and policy statements.

The effects of the remaining independent variables also deserve mention, in part as a point of departure for more work on the factors that influence agenda convergence. It is not surprising that the newspaper dummy shows the most substantial result—an enormous difference in the levels of convergence between newspaper and television coverage. The effects of the week of the

campaign conform to expectations in 1996, but not in 1992. For each week the 1996 campaign progressed, convergence declined by about a point. By the arrival of election day, the media were less likely to report the candidates' messages than they had been in early September. The absence of effects in 1992 suggests that this is not necessarily always the case, however. And it is possible that the breaking campaign finance news late in the 1996 campaign, a unique feature of the election, is solely responsible for the growing divergence. With so little work on the dynamics of candidate and media issue attention, the generalizability of the pattern is not clear.

Likewise, the media were more responsive in 1996 when the candidates converged on the same issues, but not in 1992. Even in 1996, though, the effect is modest. For about half of a point increase in the level of candidate convergence, media-candidate convergence increased by one point, controlling for other factors. This is not an especially impressive result, but it does suggest the possibility that media coverage may be somewhat more likely to respond when the candidates engage in one another on the issues.¹⁷

Discussion and Conclusion

The question of whether the media do or do not serve as a conduit for candidate messages has occupied a prominent place in both political and academic discourse. Observers such as Robert Shogan, who covered American politics for *Newsweek* and the *Los Angeles Times* over the course of seven presidencies, have argued that the mass media have become tools of politicians, serving merely as a megaphone for their manipulative messages. Having been taken captive by slick political flacks, Shogan (2001, 7) asserts, news coverage now serves to "abet the abuse of the political process by the candidates and their handlers." While forceful, Shogan's view is at odds with the perspective of those such as Farnsworth and Lichter (2007, 78), who argue that reporters, and particularly television correspondents, suffer from a pernicious case of "media narcissism," letting parochial preoccupations and interests "trump the issues raised by the candidates who are actually running for office and who will end up shaping the country's future."

The findings presented here, however, argue that conceptualizing the media as either conduits for or obstacles to the dissemination of candidates' issue emphases creates a false dichotomy. Responsiveness to candidate agendas is not a fixed attribute of the media. Instead, the press's and television's willingness to report candidate discourse depends on a variety of factors, particularly the competitiveness of a campaign.

Electoral competition produces many benefits for the political system (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007; Hill and McKee 2005; Lipsitz, forthcoming; though see Wolak 2006). But the accurate representation of candidate discourse by the mass media is not one of them. At the very moment citizens' knowledge of candidate issue positions and policy proposals could be most consequential—when an election is close—the media are least likely to relay to citizens the substance of campaign discourse. Competition draws the media's attention (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 1999), but the content of the ensuing coverage is not likely to help voters make informed judgments.

In journalists' defense, one might argue that the mass media are simply responding to the market. Voters are not interested in issue news even when it is available (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004), and this is probably more true when a campaign is competitive. In addition, the media's responsibility is not merely to parrot the candidates' talking points. Indeed, one of an independent press's most important functions is to force public officials to talk about important policy issues they may otherwise prefer to ignore.

In the end, however, it is difficult to argue that the patterns of coverage I find here do the voting public a service. Even if people are, on the whole, more interested in the horse race than the issues, that does not absolve the media of the responsibility to provide an accurate portrayal of the arguments and ideas the candidates put forth on the campaign trail. Moreover, the reality is that when journalists ignore campaign discourse, it is almost never because they have turned their attention to important policy issues receiving inadequate attention from the candidates. Instead, the media take up issues with strategic relevance but a dubious connection to public policy or government activity. Obscuring the content of campaign discourse during the more competitive phases of an election limits the public's ability, such as it is, to consider the substance of candidates' policy platforms when the stakes are highest.

The public's tendency to tune in to election news at its most competitive moments amplifies the importance of this pattern. According to survey data from the Pew Research Center, citizen attention to the election spikes in the last month of a presidential campaign.¹⁸ At the same time, the polls typically narrow in a contest's latter stages (Gelman and King 1993; Wlezien and Erikson 2002). As the growing competitiveness of a campaign encourages the media to ignore candidate discourse, the large numbers of voters tuning in at this very moment are likely to get a less accurate portrayal than earlier in the race.

In addition to the consequences for mass attitudes and behavior, the findings have strategic implications for

candidates. A central part of campaign strategy is attempting to set the terms by which voters make their judgments, and the media play a role in that process (Druckman 2004; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). The mass media are perceived by many citizens as more credible sources than candidates (Miller and Krosnick 2000), which means media reinforcement of candidate messages may make them more influential. The patterns identified here may make it difficult for candidates to prime voters' decision criteria at precisely the moment they need to. Candidate communications appear to be most effective when the media converge on their issue emphases (Hayes 2008a), but journalists' response to increasing competition means the media are unlikely to be helpful when it really matters to candidates.

Competition is not the only factor that can influence agenda convergence. As evidenced by the results in Table 1, candidates are surely more likely to succeed in having their messages transmitted in the print media, and there is some inconsistent evidence that candidate behavior, the particular stage of a campaign, and incumbency might influence the media's responsiveness to candidate issue emphases. Future research could consider whether a more precise measure of candidate dialogue—perhaps measuring the extent to which the candidates attack one another (e.g., Ridout and Smith 2008)—can clarify the relationship between candidate behavior and news coverage. It would also be valuable to determine whether tactics such as John Kerry's "issue week" efforts in 2004 (Benedetto 2004; Nagourney 2004)—in which he sought to compartmentalize the campaign's issue focus in the hopes of keeping reporters from viewing policy pronouncements as old news—can hold journalists' interest. Such an effect could prove beneficial to both candidates and the public.

Broadly speaking, a more careful consideration of the role of candidate strategy and electoral context is necessary to understand media behavior and draw conclusions about how well journalists serve the public interest. The findings presented here are not salutary—the media do not seem to provide the public with an accurate portrayal of candidate discourse when they most need it—but more research might help determine whether that pattern can be altered under differing circumstances.

Author's Note

I thank Michael Makara for excellent research assistance. I am grateful to Daron Shaw, John Sides, Sharon Jarvis, Bruce Buchanan, Brian Arbour, Jon Hanson, and the anonymous reviewers for feedback and to Shaw for access to the media data described in the study. All errors are mine.

Notes

1. The firm was hired by the Republican National Committee to learn which issues were getting attention and analyze

candidate coverage, but the research was conducted scientifically, using rigorous content analysis procedures. In 1992, some forty newspapers were coded every day of the campaign, as were the nightly news programs. In 1996, because fewer coders were available, coders were assigned to code a half-dozen newspapers and the nightly news shows three randomly sampled days a week. Both coding projects produce a reasonably representative sample of campaign coverage, but the 1992 data set is considerably larger. While the scope of the projects differed, similar content analysis procedures were used. Moreover, I have conducted a series of analyses designed to determine whether the larger size of the 1992 sample produces substantively different results. As described elsewhere (Hayes 2008b), I have found that restricting the 1992 analysis only to the same newspapers that were coded in 1996 produces nearly identical patterns of findings. Thus, the differences in the samples in the two years are worth noting but do not appear to threaten the validity of the findings.

2. The specific newspapers and TV networks included in the coding for the two years and details on the speech coding are presented in the supplemental materials in the electronic version of this article at <http://prq.sagepub.com>.
3. In both years, 5 percent of the stories were double coded each week. Cohen's kappa for the reliability of the coding of the story focus was .85 in 1992 and .90 in 1996. These figures are within the acceptable range (Banerjee et al. 1999).
4. In 1992, only the primary focus of the story was recorded, while in 1996, coders identified up to three possible issues in each story. As a result, the data presented here reflect only the primary focus for 1992 but include all three foci for 1996. While this would seem to present comparability problems, I have run additional analyses comparing issue attention for 1996 measured using only the primary focus, with the issue attention measured using all three codes. The average correlation across the ten weeks is .86, meaning the more comprehensive measure yields nearly identical results. Because the three-issue coding produces more cases from which to make inferences, I rely on the more comprehensive measure for 1996. Details about the supplementary analyses are contained in the online appendix.
5. A list of the 149 separate issue codes is available from the author on request. By not analyzing stories that were coded as exclusively "horse race" or strategy items, I am setting aside a substantial amount of media content during presidential campaigns. In 1996, 27 percent of newspaper articles and 45 percent of television stories were coded as having no issue mentions and thus are omitted from the analysis here. In 1992, 60 percent of newspaper and 71 percent television stories did not have an issue code as the primary focus. While that eliminates a large portion of coverage in 1992, the figure actually underestimates the amount of issue news in the campaign. Because the 1992 coding procedure captured only the primary focus of each story, the data set does not allow me to analyze stories with issue content that appeared

as a subsidiary portion of the story. As noted above, while this does eliminate a substantial number of stories, it does not seem to distort the overall distribution of issue content in the news. And ultimately, because the focus here—and in related work—is on whether the media’s attention to issues converges with the candidates’ focus on issues, issue news is the relevant concept.

6. Using the broad categorization scheme likely overstates the absolute amount of agenda convergence between candidates and the media. For example, imagine a week in which the candidates are focused on health care while the media are focused on education. While these are obviously very different topics—and represent a high degree of agenda divergence—my issue categorization would actually show a high degree of convergence because both are “social welfare” issues. To the extent that this happens with regularity, my measurement strategy would lead to incorrect conclusions about the media’s fealty to candidate discourse. While certainly a concern worth attending to, there are several reasons to suspect that even a more fine-grained analysis would not lead to substantively different conclusions. First, the scenario I described—in which the mass media are focused entirely on subject entirely different than the candidates but within the same issue category—is likely to occur only rarely. As noted, considerable research has shown that the media’s agenda is typically influenced by the candidates’. When candidates focus on health care, the economy, foreign policy, and so forth, there is at least some positive effect on media content (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 1999, chap. 5-6). So it is unlikely that I would find myself concluding that some convergence occurred when in reality none actually had. Second, I have conducted analyses in which I restrict the measure of agenda convergence only to those issue topics where substantively meaningful misleading inferences are not likely to occur. In this analysis, I restrict the measure of convergence to the categories that include the fewest specific issue topics (civil and social order, defense, taxes and spending, and race and social groups)—that is, the issue categories where “within category” divergence is least likely to occur. When I calculate the agenda convergence scores using only these topics, the results are very similar to the results using all eight categories of issues. This does not eliminate the possibility of inferential errors but does provide some evidence that its occurrence is not likely to be pronounced. Third, because the focus in the article is the circumstances under which convergence is most likely, the absolute level of convergence is less important than variation over time and context. As long as the level of overestimation of agenda convergence is not correlated with one of the key explanatory factors—such as competitiveness—then the general conclusions about the conditions under which convergence is more or less likely are not threatened. I cannot imagine a reason that any of the independent variables would be related to the level of over- or underestimation of convergence because of the broad issue categories.

As a result, while the results probably do overestimate to some degree the level of convergence, I do not believe that this threatens the validity of the conclusions.

7. Detailed coding instructions and two examples are shown in the online supplemental materials. A random 5 percent of paragraphs from the speeches was selected for double coding. The reliability testing showed 79 percent agreement in the number of issue appeals and 84 percent agreement on the topic of the coded appeals.
8. Newspaper coverage was lagged one day to account for differences in print and broadcast outlets’ news cycles. For example, while week 1 for the candidates and TV coverage runs from September 1 through September 7, week 1 for newspaper coverage ranges from September 2 through September 8. This accounts for the fact that a newspaper reporting a candidate’s comments on, say, September 3 would have been published one day later, on September 4.
9. Tables displaying the aggregate distribution of issue emphases of candidates and the media are available from the author.
10. The Annenberg/Pew data include no speeches for Clinton for the week of October 13. So in all of the analyses, I have omitted that week in the calculation of the Democrat’s issue attention and in comparisons with the media. Similarly, election day in 1992 fell on November 3, which means there are no observations for that week, unlike in 1996. In 1996, however, only newspaper data are presented for the last week of the campaign because there are too few TV news stories from which to make firm inferences about the levels of convergence.
11. One could also compare correlation coefficients between media and candidate agendas from week to week. But because the coefficient varies not only with the strength of the X–Y relationship but also with the variance of X and the variance of Y, it is not appropriate to use in such a comparative fashion. Bivariate regressions between the candidate and media agendas are another alternative. But with an *N* of 8 (issue categories), there is far too much fluctuation in the size of the coefficients and standard errors to make useful comparisons. For those reasons, the Sigelman and Buell measure is the best choice.
12. My competitiveness measure for 1992 comes from the results of tracking polls reported in Goldman et al. (1994). For 1996, I use the CNN/USA Today/Gallup tracking poll that was conducted over the last ten weeks of the campaign, which I retrieved from CNN’s Web site. Because I rely on weekly data, the measure is somewhat tricky. To create a measure of competitiveness, I first took the average poll support (the percentage of respondents in a trial ballot saying they would vote for a candidate) for each candidate over a seven-day period, beginning one day before the start of each week in my data set. For example, the measure for Clinton’s poll standing for the week of September 8 is an average of his poll support from September 7 (one day before the start of the week) through September 13 (one day before the end

- of the week). I do this to capture the lag between a change in a candidate's electoral support and the time when such a shift might affect news coverage—in this case, affecting the likelihood that the media will report on a candidate's messages. It should be noted that using an average across this period makes it impossible to capture very abrupt or specific within week changes, but it does give a general sense of the poll standing of each candidate during the week in which coverage is being analyzed. After calculating each candidate's average support for a week, I take the absolute value of the difference between their average poll standings. The variable increases as the race becomes less competitive.
13. I have also run models with a variety of different specifications. I find no evidence that the effects of competitiveness are specific to which candidate is leading—in other words, I find no evidence that the media are more responsive to the candidate who is ahead. I also have interacted the independent variables with the newspaper dummy and find little evidence that their effects differ by medium. One exception is that in 1996 the effect of competitiveness is stronger for television coverage than for newspaper coverage. The decrease in convergence in television coverage as the race gets closer is about twice as large as in newspaper coverage. But because this same effect does not emerge in 1992, it is not clear whether this is a generalizable pattern or peculiar to 1996. The results of these alternative specifications are available from the author on request.
 14. To create the candidate convergence score, I use the same formula I used to create the candidate–media convergence measure. But instead of comparing the issue attention of a candidate and the media, I compare the issue emphases of the two candidates. The resulting score runs from 0 to 100.
 15. The variable also can capture any partisan dynamic that may be at work in this process. Despite the absence of systematic evidence (D'Alessio and Allen 2000), critics who argue the media exhibit a liberal bias would expect reporters to be more receptive to Democratic issue appeals and be less likely to devote attention to Republican messages. If such “gatekeeping bias” does benefit Democrats, then the variable should be negative in 1992 and positive in 1996.
 16. On one hand, it may be that debates decrease convergence since candidates do not necessarily focus in their public speeches on the same issues they talk about in debates, which often occupy the media's attention in the days following a debate. On the other hand, debates may cause candidates to emphasize certain issues in their subsequent public appearances as they attempt to capitalize on an advantageous issue or repair damage from a mistake. In such a dynamic, the media would likely take notice and respond. The variable will allow me to account for any debate effects, one way or the other.
 17. There is no consistent evidence that incumbents have an easier time getting their messages out than challengers. Bush's convergence scores were significantly higher than Clinton's, but incumbency made no difference in 1996. Bush's higher scores could have been the product of something other than his status as a sitting president. The statistically insignificant coefficient also indicates no Democratic bias in the media's gatekeeping process. The debate dummy also shows no effects in either year.
 18. See http://www.pollster.com/blogs/pres08_is_anyone_paying_attent.php.

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