6

Differences of Degree

Issue Agendas in a Polarized Media Environment

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Barack Obama probably needed a Gatorade. Mitt Romney, too.

It was November 2, and the president and his Republican rival for the White House were in the last days of what had already been a bruising 2012 election campaign. The preceding months had been emotionally, mentally, and physically trying, as the two candidates had spent thousands of hours crisscrossing the country.

And now, four days before the election, they were making a final push. Obama, the Democrat trying to secure a second term, spent the day traipsing across the Midwest and West, from the battleground state of Wisconsin to the battleground state of Nevada to the (surprise!) battleground state of Colorado. Romney, for his part, was traveling hundreds of miles through the whole of Virginia, a state his campaign knew was critical to his chances of winning the presidency. Both gave speeches, rallied their supporters, and tried to win over that shrinking sliver of undecideds. Cold drinks were in order.

But for all their exhaustive and exhausting efforts, the news of the day wasn't on the campaign trail. Instead, it was emanating from a nondescript building on Constitution Avenue in Washington, DC, where the Department of Labor was releasing its monthly jobs report. That Friday's report indicated that the nation's employers had added 171,000 jobs in the month of October. Because more people had entered the job market, however, the unemployment rate ticked up one-tenth of a percentage point, to 7.9 percent. Good news, bad news.

But first and foremost, it was news. The report made the front pages across the country. *The Washington Post* noted that "the US jobs market in October sustained its slow trudge toward better times" in what was characterized as "the last major report card on the economy before the presidential election." A *Los Angeles Times* story said that the job growth foreshadowed a "smoother road" for whichever candidate became president. All the major media organizations, including the network news shows, followed suit.

It wasn't just the traditional media, however. The liberal blog Crooks and Liars devoted significant space to the story, one of three election-related dispatches it published that day. The jobs report also received prominent billing on the conservative blog Hot Air, in two separate posts. Not surprisingly, the sites had different takes on what the report meant. Crooks and Liars characterized the job growth as "more good news for President Obama." Hot Air, on the other hand, channeled a Tweet from conservative commentator James Pethokoukis: "Obama WH predicted unemployment rate would be 5.2% in October 2012, not 7.9%. Missed it by thismuch [*sic*]."

It is notable that news outlets across the political spectrum—from the mainstream media to the blogs of left and right—made identical judgments about what the big story of the day was. We have become accustomed to thinking of our media as irredeemably polarized, with different news audiences receiving wildly divergent portrayals of the political world. And to be sure, the tone of coverage of Obama and Romney was very different on Fox News and its conservative ilk than on MSNBC and its liberal media brethren.

But we know almost nothing about whether news organizations' campaign issue agendas—the collection of issues that receive the most attention—are as polarized as the tone or favorability of their coverage. Are consumers who get their news from mainstream, left-leaning, or right-leaning news sources encouraged to view the election as "about" wholly different political issues? Or do the shared news values and routines of journalistic organizations exert centripetal force that makes the issue agendas in campaign coverage more similar than the way those issues are covered?

In this chapter, I consider the extent to which the issue emphases of the Obama and Romney campaigns were reflected in different media outlets. I investigate whether left-wing news outlets were more likely to reflect the Obama campaign's portrayal of the campaign than were right-wing outlets, and whether the conservative outlets paid more attention than liberal ones to Romney's campaign messages. I also examine news judgments across the course of the election to determine whether outlets aligned with one party were more likely to react to campaign developments that benefited their favored candidate.

My findings show that these media outlets' issue agendas varied only slightly. Although the favorability of coverage toward Obama and Romney differed significantly among mainstream, left-wing, and right-wing media outlets, their emphasis on the campaign's major themes—the economy, budget deficits, Romney's tenure at Bain Capital, and Medicare—was very similar. In addition, as developments on the campaign trail led particular issues to become more or less prominent, news attention to those topics rose and fell in similar ways, regardless of whether the issue augured favorably for Obama or Romney. Ultimately, the data reveal that the media present a more homogenous portrayal of what elections are "about" than the oft-hyperbolic discourse about the current media environment would lead us to expect.

Agenda Setting, Priming, and Campaign Issue Emphases

A long line of research has shown that the media play a major role in shaping the public's perception of what political issues are important. Because citizens are inherently uncertain about what the most pressing political problems are, they look to media coverage for signals about which issues are most significant. As a result, there is a strong correlation between media coverage and public issue salience. When the media devote significant coverage to health care, for instance, more Americans are likely to say that health care is an important national problem. This is the agenda-setting effect, as the media establish the issue agenda that the public cares about.[1]

Agenda setting is particularly important during campaigns because salient issues are more likely to influence voting behavior than those that aren't on the public's radar. When the media devote sustained attention to an issue or candidate characteristic, such as integrity, that consideration becomes more cognitively accessible in voters' minds. As a result, evaluations of candidates are more likely to reflect assessments related to the particular consideration that has been "primed" by media attention (Druckman 2004; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; though see Lenz 2009). Priming can have electoral consequences if the criteria by which voters make their choices disproportionately put one candidate at an advantage.

For instance, George W. Bush during the 2004 campaign benefited from the fact that many Americans were concerned with the prospect of future

domestic terrorism, just three years removed from the 9/11 attacks. In the exit poll, nearly one in five voters said terrorism was the most important issue to their vote.[2] Because surveys consistently showed that the public trusted Bush more than Kerry to handle terrorism—for example a *Time* poll in October gave him a 56 to 37 percent advantage—this was an issue that was advantageous to the president.[3] The more voters that cast ballots on the basis of terrorism as an issue, the better Bush was likely to do. Had fewer voters cared about terrorism, Kerry might have won more votes.

Candidates spend a lot of time trying to control a campaign's issue agenda for precisely this reason: They want voters to be thinking about things that give them an advantage and to ignore issues that put them at a disadvantage (e.g., Petrocik 1996). Bush certainly attempted to make his reelection bid a referendum on his handling of national security, emphasizing it in his speeches and television advertising. And in the 2008 election, Barack Obama spent much of his campaign emphasizing the struggling economy, knowing that the issue was a loser for Republican John McCain, whose party much of the public blamed for the deepening economic crisis. Obama did not, however, draw much attention to the two candidates' levels of experience, because this was an area that polling showed McCain had an advantage. In the end, Obama benefited from the fact that 63 percent of voters said in the exit poll that the economy was the issue most important to their vote (Holbrook 2009).

Through their campaign communications, candidates can try to place voters' focus on their preferred issue agenda. But they also need the news media to pass along their messages (Hayes 2008). Most voters never see a president give a speech, and many do their best to ignore political advertising when they can (click goes the remote).[4] Because the media are the public's primary source of political information, the issues that news organizations devote the most attention to are the ones most likely to influence voters' choices.

Issue Agendas in a Transformed Media Age

The proliferation of news outlets in the "post-broadcast" media environment (Prior 2007), however, has raised new questions about whether the agenda-setting process might play out differently in contemporary elections. For many decades, political coverage was largely homogenous—at any given time, what was news on one outlet was news on another, and there was relatively little variation in the issue content among media organizations (Graber 2009). In such an environment, discerning what voters would think was important was easy—all you had to do was look at the handful of issues being

covered by the country's major newspapers and three broadcast networks. Those were the issues that would become salient to Americans.

But with the dizzying expansion of the media environment, this dynamic appears more complicated (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010). Major newspapers, network broadcasts, and local television news still command large audiences, but Americans can also turn to hundreds, if not thousands, of other sources. These include twenty-four-hour cable news channels and the ever-expanding menu of political news sites and blogs on the Internet.

As a result, the information environment is now less homogenous. Anyone who's watched even five minutes of Fox News and MSNBC's prime-time lineups can tell you that the two cable stations have starkly different takes on virtually any political issue. Fox's conservative hosts lionize Republicans and champion right-wing causes, while MSNBC's commentators do just the opposite, cheerleading for the Democrats and liberal solutions to policy problems. MSNBC's Chris Matthews once famously described "this thrill going up my leg" when he heard Obama speak.[5] The same is true throughout the blogosphere, where most political sites trade in an ideologically slanted take on the news.

But it is unclear whether the issue agendas of news outlets during an election season are equally diverse. On one hand, we might expect right- and left-leaning news outlets to cover campaigns in a way that is most beneficial to their favored party's candidates. In practice, this would mean that conservative outlets would devote a disproportionate amount of attention to the Republican candidate's preferred issue agenda. Likewise, liberal outlets would be expected to spend most of their time covering the talking points and messages of the Democratic candidate. If this is true, audiences for these outlets would presumably come away with very different interpretations of what the election was "about," which could complicate the winning candidate's attempts to persuade the public at large that their victory signaled an endorsement of particular campaign themes.

On the other hand, because even partisan media outlets are still news organizations, they might cover campaigns in a way that reflects a shared understanding of what the most newsworthy issues are. First, just like traditional media, left- and right-wing outlets have an incentive to cater to audience tastes. What their respective audiences want in terms of the tone or favorability of coverage will differ, but consumers still come to these organizations for commentary on and analysis of the news of the day. This means that news outlets have an incentive to cover the issues that they believe are most

interesting and are at the center of political debate—lest viewers and readers turn elsewhere for information.

Second, similar news values may direct the attention of reporters, producers, and editors to the same kinds of stories. For instance, journalists seek novelty, because new developments draw in audiences far more than does the repetition of old information. That may lead media outlets to grow restless in their coverage (Bosso 1989) and seek new issues that emerge in the midst of campaigns, even if the resulting stories don't necessarily benefit their favored candidate. In addition, issues that highlight conflict between candidates are likely to draw the attention of reporters (Bruni 2003), regardless of which candidate appears to benefit from the exchange. In sum, these shared incentives and news values could produce more homogeneity in media issue agendas than we would see in the tone or favorability of coverage toward candidates.

Despite this emerging dynamic, there has been virtually no work examining the similarity or divergence in issue content in these new media outlets. Almost all of the election-related work on the new media has focused on the tone of coverage or favorability the candidates. But the 2012 campaign offers an opportunity to examine the convergence or divergence of issue agendas across different media outlets. The way that media outlets covered Obama's and Romney's preferred issues will shed light on how partisan news outlets cover campaigns and how candidate messages make their way to the public in the current media age.

The Romney and Obama Issue Agendas

In order to generate expectations for which messages might have been likely to appear in particular news outlets, we need to consider what the candidates' preferred issues in 2012 were. Let's start with Mitt Romney.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the US economy had struggled to recover. As the presidential election formally began with the Republican primaries and caucuses early in 2012, Romney had already mapped out his strategy: He would make the campaign a referendum on Barack Obama's stewardship of the economy. Even before he had vanquished his Republican rivals, the former governor of Massachusetts was talking about the administration's economic shortcomings.

"This president has failed the people of Florida," Romney said during a January 23 Republican debate in Tampa. "We have to have a president who understands how to get an economy going again. He does not. He plays 90 rounds of golf when you have 25 million people out of work."

By the time the general election rolled around, Romney's message was unmistakable. In the second debate at Hofstra University, he mentioned six

times the "twenty-three million" Americans—then down two million from January—who were unemployed or underemployed.[6] In drawing Americans' attention to the economy, Romney put himself in the role of the "clarifying candidate" (Vavreck 2009), encouraging voters to base their choices on economic conditions, which he believed were advantageous to him.

In reality, the economic conditions weren't as bad for Obama as Romney's campaign suggested. Given historical patterns, the economic growth rate was swift enough to give the president a reasonable chance to win reelection (Sides and Vavreck 2013). For instance, GDP growth in the first two quarters of 2012 was faster than in 1956, when Dwight D. Eisenhower won a second term easily. But the economic conditions were ambiguous enough that Romney's strategy seemed sensible, especially at the outset of 2012.

A second prong of Romney's strategy was focused on persistent budget deficits. Surveys showed that while Americans were primarily focused on the economy, they were also worried about rising levels of debt and the fiscal troubles of the United States. Romney made a point to link an economic recovery to the need to cut spending. This also was a reasonable strategy, as polling showed that Americans believed Romney would more effectively handle the issue than the president. A Pew Research Center poll in June found that 50 percent of Americans believed Romney would do a better job of reducing the federal deficit, while just 36 percent thought Obama would.

To be sure, Romney from time to time raised other matters on the campaign trail, including welfare spending and the attack on the US consulate and killing of the US ambassador in Benghazi, Libya. But for the most part, the economy and the deficit were his most prominent campaign messages.

Obama, meanwhile, took a different tack. The president did not ignore the economy, but unlike Romney, he argued that the economic recovery was under way and would continue to grow in the coming months. Unemployment was falling, he said. He also emphasized the success of the American auto manufacturers who had been propped up by the federal government in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

But with economic conditions not unequivocally in his favor, Obama also turned to messages that he hoped would portray him in a favorable light and cast a negative light on Romney. This is the imperative of the "insurgent candidate," in Vavreck's (2009) parlance, who needs to find an issue on which he is closer to voters than is his opponent, and make that salient to them.

Obama sought to exploit Romney's personal wealth and the fact that many voters didn't think the former Massachusetts governor understood their problems. The most clear and consistent attack focused on Bain Capital, the firm that Romney had run for many years. The Democrats attempted to use Bain

to paint Romney as out of touch and unable to empathize with Americans who were struggling to get by. At certain points in the campaign, they attached Bain to the issue of outsourcing, something expected to play well with voters in swing states such as manufacturing-heavy Ohio.

At the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Charlotte, North Carolina, in September, organizers brought to the stage Cindy Hewitt, who had worked at a Miami plant that had been acquired by Bain Capital. After describing how Bain had driven her plant into bankruptcy, Hewitt said Romney didn't understand the struggles of ordinary people. "So when Mitt Romney talks about his business experience, remember: It is not experience creating good-paying jobs," she said. "It is experience cutting jobs. It is experience shutting plants. It is experience making millions by making life tougher for hard-working Americans."

A second tactic followed Romney's August selection of House Budget Committee member Paul Ryan (R-WI) as his running mate. Ryan was the author of a controversial budget plan that included significant changes to Medicare, essentially turning it into a voucher program that would cap recipients' benefits. Ryan's nomination prompted Obama to focus heavy attention on the issue, especially late in the summer. Obama told voters that he would protect Medicare while the Republicans would threaten it.

At the DNC, former president Bill Clinton criticized Romney and Ryan for, as he put it, threatening the cherished program. If Romney was elected, Clinton said, "Medicare will now go broke in 2016. Think about that. That means, after all, we won't have to wait until their voucher program kicks in 2023 to see the end of Medicare as we know it. They're going to do it to us sooner than we thought."

Both campaigns hoped to enlist the media to disseminate these messages to voters. And the question is whether particular media outlets were more likely to disseminate the candidates' messages. Did conservative media pay more attention to the economy and deficits than other news organizations? And were liberal outlets disproportionately likely to pass along Obama's attacks on Romney over Bain and Medicare? Or did these partisan news outlets adhere to similar issue agendas, even as they tried to reframe those issues in ways that were favorable to their preferred candidate?

Tracking News Coverage of Campaign 2012

To gather data on media coverage of the 2012 campaign, I undertook a content analysis of news coverage from May—the first full month after Mitt Romney had secured the GOP nomination—through November 5, the day before the election.[7] This allowed me to examine not only the topics to which media outlets devoted the most attention, but also how attention to various issues rose and fell over this six-month period.

I examined coverage in six news outlets. I chose two mainstream news organizations, ABC News and the *New York Times*. On ABC, I analyzed presidential campaign coverage on its thirty-minute nightly news broadcast *World News Tonight*. In the *Times*, I analyzed all campaign coverage from the print edition. I did not include material posted on the *Times*'s website that did not also appear in the paper itself. The coverage in these mainstream news organizations will provide a baseline to which I can compare coverage in left- and right-wing outlets.

On the left of the political news spectrum, I analyzed the liberal blogs Daily Kos and Crooks and Liars. On the right, I chose the blogs Hot Air and Red State. These are four of the most popular online news sites. As such, they are likely to produce a representative sample of the coverage that appeared on other partisan outlets with large audiences.

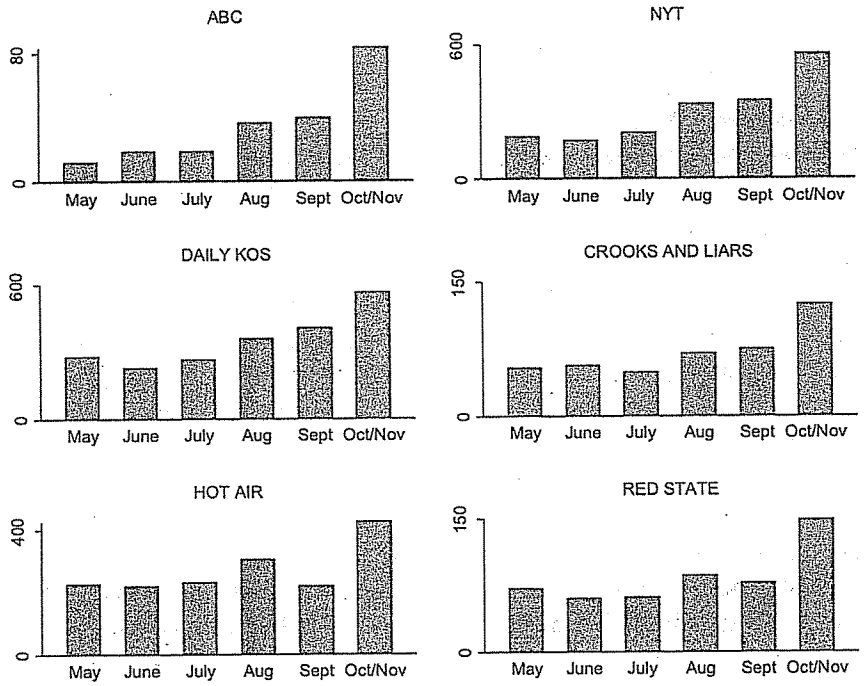
I first gathered the universe of stories that each outlet published about the election. To search ABC and the *Times*, I used the Lexis news database. For the four blogs, I employed the search functions on their websites to identify relevant articles.[8] For each outlet, I gathered all of the stories that mentioned both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.[9]

The first evidence of similarity in the way these very different media outlets treated the election emerges in Figure 6.1. The graph displays the number of campaign stories in each news source for every month after Romney wrapped up the Republican nomination in April. For instance, the left-hand panel in the middle row shows that Daily Kos in May published 283 campaign dispatches. In October and the first five days of November, that number climbed to 565.

The pattern is virtually identical across the board. Mainstream, liberal, or conservative, every news source devoted more attention to the campaign as Election Day approached. The number of stories varied substantially (note that the scale for each graph is different), a reflection of difference in space and time constraints for each outlet (which exist for the traditional media, but not for the Internet outlets), as well as reporting resources.

While these patterns aren't especially surprising, the data demonstrate a commonality in how each of the outlets responded to the campaign, likely driven by news values and norms. Because people tend to be more interested in a campaign as its finish nears, all news organizations have an incentive to cater to that particular market demand. And from the perspective of news

FIGURE 6.1 2012 Presidential Campaign Coverage, by News Outlet



Source: Data come from a content analysis of campaign news coverage from May 1 through November 5, 2012.

Note: Chart shows the number of stories each month.

values, the election becomes more newsworthy as it gets closer. Just as a horse race is most interesting at the finish line—especially a close one—so the public and journalists view an election.

At the same time, the small differences that exist are illuminating. The increase in coverage tended to be steeper for mainstream outlets. For instance, there were seven times as many stories on ABC in October and November than in May, and about three times as many in the *Times*. In the liberal and conservative outlets, however, the corresponding increase was smaller, only about twofold.

This likely stems from the fact that ABC and the *Times* are general-purpose news organizations, covering not only politics and public affairs, but arts, entertainment, sports, and a host of other topics. As a result, the increasing salience of a presidential campaign—especially one whose outcome was

uncertain even in its latter stages—likely made political events relatively more newsworthy and had a bigger effect on the amount of space allocated to campaign coverage in the mainstream outlets. Because the four blogs are interested in almost nothing but politics, their overall attention levels to the campaign were consistently high and less subject to a steep spike as Election Day neared.

One additional substantive difference is worth mentioning. From July onward, the amount of coverage in the mainstream and liberal outlets increased, consistent with an argument about the election becoming more newsworthy. But on the conservative blogs, coverage increased in August, declined slightly in September, and rose sharply the following month. A full investigation of this pattern is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one possibility is that coverage declined in the conservative media in the wake of the September 17 leaking of the Romney "47 percent" speech videotape. Unlike some other issues, such as the economy or Medicare, it might have proven more difficult for those outlets to frame coverage about the videotape in a way that was favorable to the GOP nominee.

Nonetheless, the homogeneity in media attention to the campaign is more apparent than any differences. All of the news outlets devoted more space to the campaign as it wore on, revealing similar news judgments. But what about the content of that coverage? How similar were the issue agendas across the various news sources?

Once Again, It's the Economy, Stupid

Figure 6.2 displays the amount of attention each news outlet devoted to the two "Romney" issues (the economy and the deficit) and the two "Obama" issues (Bain and Medicare). The bars represent the percentage of campaign stories that mentioned each issue. Multiple issues could appear in each story, and often did.

Because Romney and Obama both devoted significant time to the economy, we would expect the economy to receive top billing among all of the news outlets. But if the news organizations are principally devoted to promoting their own candidates' messages, we might expect the conservative outlets to spend relatively more time on the deficit than the liberal outlets, while the liberal outlets would devote relatively more attention to Bain and Medicare. Without partisan expectation for the mainstream news sources, we might expect their issue emphases to fall somewhere between those of the partisan media.

Even a quick glance at the profiles of the graphs reveals that the news outlets made very similar judgments about the relative importance of the four issues. The economy, as expected, was the top for all. Just as news outlets across the political spectrum all devoted significant coverage to the November 2 jobs report in the closing days of the campaign, economic news dominated throughout the election year.

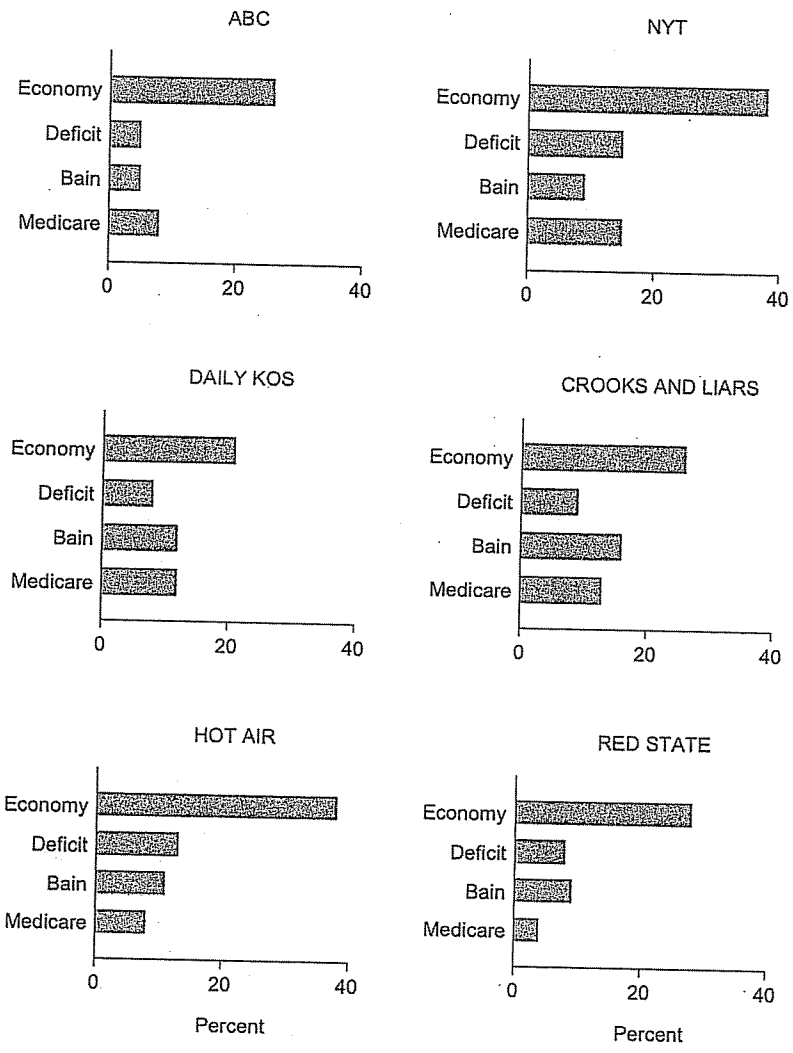
To be sure, there was variation in the percentage of campaign stories that mentioned the economy. For instance, 38 percent of *Times* stories talked about the economy, while just 26 percent of ABC reports did. On the left, 21 percent of Daily Kos and 26 percent of Crooks and Liars stories mentioned the economy, while the figures for the conservative Hot Air and Red State were 38 and 28 percent, respectively. In some ways, this suggests a bit of ideological divergence—Daily Kos came in with the lowest amount of attention to this "Romney" issue, while Hot Air was the highest. But the share of economic coverage in Hot Air was identical to that in the *Times*, a mainstream outlet whose coverage would not be expected to favor Romney. Furthermore, Red State's lower level of attention seems to undercut any argument that conservative outlets, generally speaking, spent more time on the economy because the issue would help Romney. And the fact that the economy was the number one issue for every news outlet, regardless of partisan stripe, reveals a largely shared news judgment about which issue was most important.

Not surprisingly, the substance and thrust of economic news was rather different in the partisan media. On September 27, for instance, Daniel Horowitz of Red State reacted to the news that the nation's gross domestic product growth rate—a key economic indicator—had been revised downward in the second quarter from 1.7 to 1.3 percent. "Folks," he wrote, "this is not endemic of a recession. It's worse than that. This is a sickly recovery." By contrast, Jed Lewison at Daily Kos hardly saw an infirm patient when he considered the economic numbers just a week later. "Things are getting better," he wrote, "but all [Romney] wants to do is convince you that they're getting worse."

Because both Romney and Obama talked regularly about the economy, the issue may not offer the best test of a partisan issue agenda argument. The remaining three issues—the deficit, Bain, and Medicare—are more one-sided, which should allow for a "cleaner" test of the argument that partisan outlets prefer to cover issues perceived as advantageous to their favored candidate.

Even still, the data reveal only differences of degree, not kind. Consider the deficit, an issue that Romney sought to exploit but that Obama largely chose not to talk about. The conservative outlet Hot Air mentioned the deficit more often (15 percent) than either Daily Kos (8 percent) or Crooks and Liars (9

FIGURE 6.2 Attention to Issues in 2012 Presidential Campaign Coverage, by Outlet



Source: Data come from a content analysis of campaign news coverage from May 1 through November 5, 2012.

Note: Chart shows the percentage of campaign stories that mentioned various issues.

percent). But Red State mentioned the deficit in only 8 percent of its stories, giving it the same amount of attention as the liberal media. And no outlet mentioned the deficit in its campaign coverage more than the *Times* (15 percent).

There is a bit more evidence of divergence along ideological lines for Bain and Medicare. Daily Kos (12 percent) and Crooks and Liars (16 percent) devoted more attention to Bain than the other outlets did. In the conservative media, Hot Air mentioned Bain in 11 percent of its stories, while Red State did in 9 percent. Bain appears to have been an issue that conservative outlets preferred to discuss less than their liberal counterparts, as might be expected for an issue that favored Obama. Likewise, Daily Kos and Crooks and Liars mentioned Medicare in 13 percent and 12 percent of campaign stories, respectively, while Hot Air and Red State covered the issue less frequently, at 8 percent and 4 percent.

But it is important not to make too much of these differences. The largest divergence in issue coverage between any two of the ideological outlets comes on Medicare, between the Daily Kos and Red State. But this nine-point gap is small in absolute terms. It is clearly not the case that conservative media were ignoring issues that were bad for Romney, while liberal outlets were doing the same for issues that did not advantage Obama. All of the news outlets agreed that the economy was the most important issue in the election, and they made similar, albeit not identical, determinations about how much attention various other topics should receive. The small differences are most likely driven by the particular tastes of reporters or editors at these outlets rather than a broader strategic plan to ignore certain issues because they were disadvantageous to a favored candidate.

All Together Now: The Dynamics of Issue Attention

Another way to determine whether outlets are responding to the campaign in a partisan way is to see whether they react similarly to events on the campaign trail—that is, to examine whether the changes in coverage over the course of the election differ across news sources. One way to do that is to look at monthly correlations between news outlets in the amount of coverage they devoted to a particular issue. For instance, we can examine whether the percentage of stories that mentioned Medicare rose and fell from month to month in a similar fashion for various media outlets. If the correlation between two outlets is positive and large, then that would indicate that their attention to Medicare moved in similar ways during the campaign. Negative or low correlations (those close to zero) would suggest little relationship in how important Medicare was in two outlets from month to month. Correlations can range from −1 to +1.

TABLE 6.1 Monthly Correlations for Issue Attention, by Issue

	ABC	NYT	Daily Kos	Crooks and Liars	Hot Air
ECONOMY					
NYT	0.52	--			
Daily Kos	0.89	0.62	--		
Crooks and Liars	0.47	0.98	0.66	--	
Hot Air	0.82	0.76	0.91	0.79	--
Red State	0.43	0.22	0.19	0.10	0.15
DEFICIT					
NYT	0.41	--			
Daily Kos	−0.07	0.63	--		
Crooks and Liars	0.29	−0.28	−0.04	--	
Hot Air	0.21	−0.52	−0.89	0.40	--
Red State	0.72	−0.11	−0.13	0.80	0.42
BAIN					
NYT	0.86	--			
Daily Kos	0.78	0.97	--		
Crooks and Liars	0.72	0.89	0.96	--	
Hot Air	0.38	0.78	0.87	0.86	--
Red State	0.54	0.88	0.87	0.77	0.89
MEDICARE					
NYT	0.63	--			
Daily Kos	0.78	0.97	--		
Crooks and Liars	0.75	0.75	0.82	--	
Hot Air	0.73	0.97	0.98	0.87	--
Red State	0.01	0.77	0.60	0.33	0.65

Source: Data come from a content analysis of campaign news coverage from May 1 through November 5, 2012.

Note: Table shows Pearson correlation coefficients for monthly attention to issues.

Table 6.1 presents a correlation matrix for all six news outlets, split by issue. For instance, the top panel of the table presents the correlations among the six news outlets on the economy. The first column shows the correlations between

ABC and each of the other five outlets. The upper-left-most figure of 0.52 shows a fairly strong correlation in attention to the economy over the course of the campaign between ABC and the *New York Times*. As coverage of the economy in one month rose (or fell) on ABC, it also rose (or fell) in the *Times*. The second column shows correlations between the *Times* and all the other outlets (with the exception of ABC, which appeared in the first column). And so on.

What is important about the table is that almost all of the correlations are positive. In fact, for every issue but the deficit, every correlation is positive. With varying degrees of strength, the increases and decreases in coverage month to month were positively correlated across media outlets. For example, as coverage of Bain increased one month in Daily Kos, it also rose in Hot Air ($r = 0.87$). For Bain and Medicare especially—perhaps the two issues most obviously favorable to one side—the correlations are very strong.

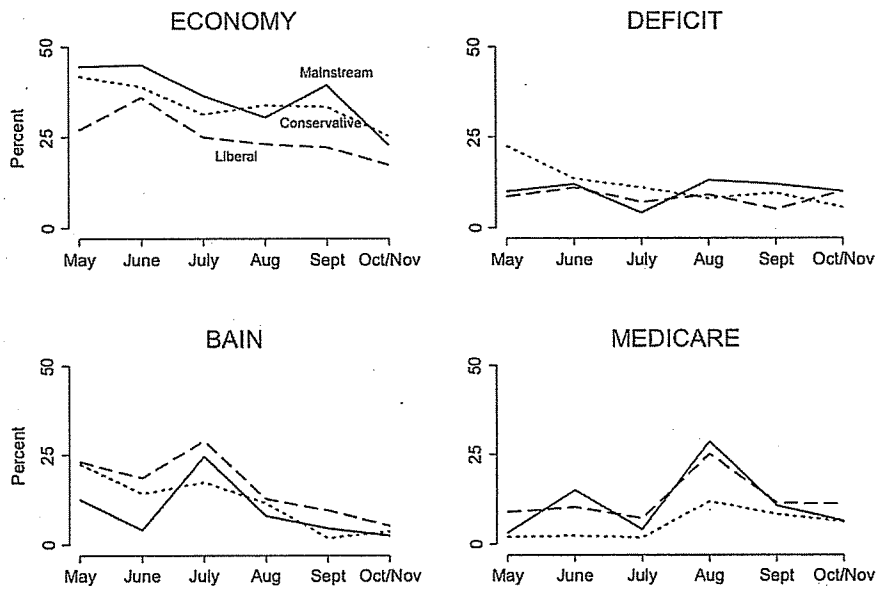
Negative correlations, which indicate divergent patterns of attention between news outlets, appeared only on the deficit. For instance, there are several negative correlations between the *New York Times* and other news outlets, as well as between Daily Kos and other sources. Deficit stories appear not to be driven by the same political or campaign-trail developments across the various news outlets. This may be because deficit stories were not tied to events in the same way as were articles about the economy—such as those about the jobs report mentioned in the introduction of the chapter—or Bain and Medicare.

Of course, the correlations cannot tell us *when* attention to different issues increased or decreased during the campaign. To facilitate a longitudinal analysis, I grouped the outlets into their broad categories: mainstream, liberal, and conservative. I averaged together the amount of attention each outlet in the category gave to each issue for each month. These data are summarized in Figure 6.3. This presentation offers a way to see the patterns responsible for the correlations in Table 6.1.

Take the economy. In May, there were clear differences in the amount of economic news reported in mainstream and conservative outlets on one hand, and the liberal outlets on the other. On average, about 40 percent of stories in the mainstream and conservative media mentioned the economy, while the average was just 27 percent for liberal outlets. But although the economy drew somewhat less attention every month in Daily Kos and Crooks and Liars than it did in the other outlets, the general trend is very similar. As the campaign wore on, all the news outlets spent less time on economic issues.

One explanation for the downward trend is that as Election Day nears, news outlets typically devote less attention to the candidates' issue emphases

FIGURE 6.3 Attention to Issues in 2012 Presidential Campaign Coverage, by Month



Source: Data come from a content analysis of campaign news coverage from May 1 through November 5, 2012.

Note: Chart shows the percentage of campaign stories that mentioned various issues. Mainstream outlets are ABC and the *New York Times*, liberal outlets are Daily Kos and Crooks and Liars, and conservative outlets are Hot Air and Red State.

(Hayes 2010). By the time October rolled around, Obama's and Romney's economic talking points had been reported so many times that they were probably stale for many journalists, regardless of their partisan orientation. Instead, as they often do, the media turned for news to the candidates' evolving campaign strategies and the horse race. Much of the October and early November coverage centered on Romney's late decision to put resources into Pennsylvania and the debate over the accuracy of the polls and forecasting models, such as that of statistician Nate Silver. This may have contributed to the downturn in the share of economic news. The trend suggests that the attention of all of the outlets was drawn to other topics in a similar fashion, indicating that the behavior of these news sources is borne of similar tendencies.

The trend lines for Bain and Medicare add a bit more to the story. It's important to note, first of all, that news coverage of Bain was actually relatively high early in the time series, with about 24 percent of coverage in both liberal and conservative outlets in May. Again, this seems to undermine the idea that

conservative outlets might have ignored an issue because it was detrimental to the GOP nominee.

The Obama campaign's attacks on Romney's tenure at Bain Capital emerged in full force in July. It is easy to see the effect that had on media attention. Coverage of Bain spiked to 29 percent in liberal outlets and 25 percent in mainstream outlets in July. A Crooks and Liars story was representative of the way liberal outlets portrayed the issue. Correspondent Jon Perr wrote that Romney had "reaped whirlwind profits" at Bain even as companies the firm had acquired were shut down.

The conservative outlets were somewhat less responsive to the Obama attacks on average, but they did not ignore the issue. In July, 17 percent of conservative media stories mentioned Bain. But those outlets tried to reframe Bain as either a nonissue or an asset to Romney. For instance, Hot Air in August emphasized that Romney's "work in launching Staples," the office supply company, demonstrated that his time at Bain would actually help him turn the economy around as president. After July, coverage of the issue receded in a similar fashion in all outlets. Once the Bain attack had been launched, it was less newsworthy for all of the outlets and gave way to fresh issues.

One of those newer topics was Medicare, which peaked in coverage—in all three types of outlets—in August. This was largely due to the nomination to the GOP ticket of Ryan, the architect of a Republican budget plan that included significant alterations to Medicare. The bottom-right panel of Figure 6.3 shows that, not surprisingly, liberal and mainstream outlets responded most strongly to the Democratic attacks on the Medicare portion of Ryan's budget. Medicare was mentioned in 29 percent of August campaign stories in mainstream outlets and 25 percent of stories in liberal outlets. Just as with Bain, conservative outlets gave less attention to Medicare, consistent with a story of media seeking to protect the interests of their favored candidate. But as the attacks on the Ryan budget mounted, coverage of Medicare did increase in the conservative outlets—from 2 percent in July to 11 percent in August. Even on an issue that was not especially advantageous to their candidate, Hot Air and Red State could not completely ignore such a major part of the political debate.

The issue that produced several negative correlations in Table 6.1—the deficit—shows few clear patterns. The biggest divergence comes early in the campaign, when conservative outlets devoted significantly more attention (23 percent) to the deficit than the mainstream or liberal outlets did. The negative correlations in Table 6.1 likely stem from that, as well as from the fact that liberal coverage rose in September and then ticked up in October and early November, whereas the opposite was true for conservative outlets. There is no clear explanation for this pattern, but it's also the case that this was the issue that was clearly the least chronically salient for all of the news outlets.

In sum, there is clear evidence the ideologically slanted news outlets have not adopted a strategy of ignoring issues that are harmful to their side. Like more traditional news outlets, they respond to the campaign as it develops, covering whatever happens to be at the center of debate at a given moment. The coverage of these issues is framed very differently, of course, but audiences for these outlets are told a similar story of what the campaign is about through the issue agendas of these otherwise polarized news sources.

Conclusion

When Americans went to the polls on November 6, 2012, most of them had one thing on their minds. In the National Election Pool exit poll, 59 percent said the economy was the issue that mattered most to their vote, more important than foreign policy, health care, or the federal budget deficit. This wasn't just a response that reflected a pro-Romney or pro-Obama bias. Among voters who identified the economy as the top issue, 51 percent chose Romney and 47 percent cast ballots for Obama.[10]

That so many people on opposites sides of the political divide agreed about the election's central issue owes much to media coverage of the presidential campaign. News outlets across the political spectrum in 2012 spent more time covering the economy than any other issue, helping establish the public's agenda in the months before Election Day. Left, right, or mainstream, the media converged on the same message—the election was all about the economy.

In addition, news outlets devoted similar amounts of attention to other issues that were being emphasized by one campaign or the other. The federal budget deficit, an issue on which Romney hoped to focus voters' attention, received little sustained attention, even from right-leaning news outlets. And the amount of coverage devoted to Bain Capital and Medicare—both issues that the Obama campaign sought to play up—was nearly identical on both liberal and conservative blogs, as well as in the mainstream media. Furthermore, attention to the economy, Bain, and Medicare also rose and fell in nearly identical ways throughout the general election campaign, as both the partisan and mainstream outlets responded to political developments in a similar fashion.

The substance of coverage was very different, of course. Conservative outlets emphasized high unemployment and anemic growth, while liberal news

sites focused on the slow but steady improvement in Americans' economic fortunes. The treatment of Bain and Medicare also reflected the news outlets' political loyalties.

But the similarity in the issue agendas of these highly partisan news outlets is striking. Partisan media certainly seek to promote their favored candidate's fortunes, but they do not do so by ignoring issues that appear to be disadvantageous to his campaign. Americans, regardless of where they turned for news in 2012, were likely to come away from campaign coverage with a similar sense about which issues were most important. Partisan news outlets are now a fact of life in American politics. But even the ideologically motivated media appear to possess a traditional definition of "news" that creates more homogeneity in the coverage of campaigns than one might expect.

Notes

1. The academic literature on agenda setting is vast, to put it mildly. For a review, see McCombs (2004).

2. CNN, "Election Results," 2004, accessed February 20, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html.

3. "Time Poll: Bush Opens 5 Point Lead Against Kerry," *Time,* October 22, 2004, http://www.time.com/time/election2004/article/0,18471,733715,00.html.

4. Even changing channels is increasingly unnecessary. With the rise of digital video recorders, voters find it even easier to skip the barrage of ads that hit the battleground states every election year.

5. Huffington Post, "Christ Matthews: 'I Felt This Thrill Going up My Leg' as Obama Spoke," March 28, 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/02/13/chris-matthews-i-felt-thi_n_86449.html.

6. Romney often cast this as the number of people out of work. But it is more accurate to say that twenty-three million Americans were looking for work or held jobs that put them in the category of "underemployed." See Don Lee, "Fact Check: Romney Overstates the Number of Americans out of Work," October 3, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/2012/oct/03/news/la-pn-fact-check-debate-romney-unemployment-20121003.

7. Romney's last serious challenger, Rick Santorum, dropped out of the GOP race in April, clearing the way for Romney's nomination.

8. For Daily Kos, I restricted the analysis to "frontpaged" diaries.

9. By restricting the search only to articles that mentioned both candidates, I am likely missing campaign-related articles that mention just one of the candidates. But I chose this strategy for two reasons. First, the search strategy prevents me from including articles that are not about the campaign—and this is especially true for stories about Obama, which could be about his presidential responsibilities not connected to the election. Second, my strategy probably leaves me missing only a handful of articles. Rare is the campaign story that doesn't at least mention both candidates.

10. Fox News, "2012 Fox News Exit Polls," accessed February 20, 2013, http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2012-exit-poll.

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7

How the Media Covered the 2012 Election

The Role of Earned Media

DOTTY LYNCH

We aim to supply news.
—Ivy Ledbetter Lee, public relations maestro, 1906

"Earned media" is a public relations term that refers to positive news media coverage of an event, issue, or person that is initiated by a campaign. According to *Texas Politics*, an online textbook from the University of Texas, "one of the most efficient and cost-effective ways to reach a large audience is through earned media. Earned media is positive news coverage that you actively work to get. By creating newsworthy stories or events and offering the stories to news outlets in your area, you can generate effective media coverage that targets specific audiences with your specific message."[1]

In this chapter we will look at the history of earned media and its evolution in political communications theory. We will then examine the news environment of 2012, which formed the backdrop for presidential campaign communications. Finally, we will examine how attempts at earning positive media, controlling the message, and setting the news agenda were executed, how successful they were, and what lessons candidates and political professionals can learn for the future.

The History of Earned Media

The concept of communicating information to positively influence opinions and behavior has been a staple of public relations since antiquity. Examples