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Party Reputations, Journalistic Expectations: How Issue Ownership Influences Election News

DANNY HAYES

I argue that the issue-handling reputations that underlie the theory of “issue ownership” affect the favorability of news coverage toward U.S. presidential candidates. A large-scale content analysis of newspaper coverage from the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections shows that candidates are covered more positively when the news focuses on issues their party “owns” than on “opposition” issues. Democrats benefit particularly from news about social welfare topics. Republicans, meanwhile, receive the most favorable coverage in defense and tax stories. The differences are modest, but consistent, across the 3 election years. The findings suggest that candidates have an additional incentive to focus on owned issues and that the news media play a role in perpetuating issue ownership.

Keywords issue ownership, mass media, media bias, elections

On January 20, 2004, President George W. Bush traveled from Washington, D.C., to New Hampshire, the site of the nation’s first presidential primaries. Though not facing a challenge from within his party, Bush made the trip to begin laying the groundwork for his reelection bid. In a speech in Manchester, the president held forth on a wide range of issues, making the case that his administration deserved another 4 years in the White House.

As presidential speeches do, the event attracted considerable media attention. The next day, an item appeared on page 6 of the *Boston Herald* under the headline “President lays the groundwork for his re-election.” In it, reporter David R. Guarino offered his analysis of Bush’s remarks. The story, which included an overview of the speech and a zinging retort from Democratic hopeful Howard Dean, was typical enough.

But one part of the dispatch stands out. Pointing out that much of the speech had focused on national security, terrorism, and the economy, Guarino (2004, p. 6) noted that Bush had also made mention of several “traditionally Democratic issues.” Their inclusion in the speech, Guarino suggested, had less to do with Bush’s interest in seeking policy solutions than in scoring political points in his bid to remain in the White House. Late in the story, Guarino (2004, p. 6) wrote: “In nodding to the race ahead, the Republican didn’t

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shy away from blue-collar, traditionally Democratic issues, trumpeting health care proposals, worker retraining plans and casting himself as a friend to immigrants.”

By emphasizing the president's (re)electoral ambitions in the introductory clause, Guarino's piece framed the “Democratic” portion of the president's speech as motivated by the campaign rather than sincere interest in the policies he mentioned. Health care and job training, the article implied, were unusual choices for a politician aligned with a party known more for cutting government services than expanding them. In a subtle way, and intentionally or not, Guarino managed to cast doubt on Bush's credibility in dealing with these issues.

While the story is but one of tens of thousands of items written during a presidential election season, the treatment of Bush's discussion of so-called Democratic issues raises intriguing questions. Do journalists treat candidates in systematically different ways when the news focuses on issues historically viewed as the province of one party or the other? More specifically, do GOP candidates, like Bush, receive more favorable coverage when “Republican” issues, such as defense, are in the news, as opposed to “Democratic” topics, on which journalists may treat them more skeptically? And is the same pattern evident for Democrats?

The argument of this article is that “issue ownership” (Petrocik, 1996)—the parties' reputational advantages in different policy domains—influences the favorability of news coverage toward candidates during a campaign. To be sure, other factors, such as journalists' efforts to remain objective and the occurrence of campaign events, also shape the news. But I suggest that party reputations exert an independent effect on coverage, benefiting candidates when the campaign focuses on “owned” issues but not when “opposition” issues are in the news. Expectations about partisan discourse and the parties' reputations serve as journalistic heuristics that affect how positively candidates are covered.

In a study of newspaper coverage of the 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential campaigns, I find that news for candidates was more favorable on “owned” than on “opposition” issues. In both descriptive and regression analyses, the differences are modest but consistent across the 3 election years. The effects appear concentrated in the media's coverage of defense, taxes and spending, and social welfare issues. The first two, typically regarded as Republican domains, benefit GOP candidates, while coverage of social welfare, traditionally the province of the Democratic party, helps Democratic candidates.

The findings suggest implications for both elite- and mass-level politics. For candidates, this provides one less incentive to engage in “dialogue” across a wide range of issues (Simon, 2002). In addition, just as recent research has shown media coverage to influence citizen evaluations of Senate candidates (Kahn & Kenney, 2002), the findings suggest that election news could shape voters' perceptions of candidate issue credibility. In the short term, such a phenomenon could affect election outcomes. And perhaps more importantly, media coverage may play a role in the longer term maintenance and perpetuation of issue ownership (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).

I begin by discussing the literature on media favorability and lay out the argument explaining how issue ownership can influence the news. I then discuss the data I use to measure key variables and test the hypothesis. Finally, I present results that support the hypothesis and conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

Extant Research on Media Favorability

While the issue content of campaign news is clearly important because of its role in shaping the public's perceptions of the importance of political problems (*e.g.*, Iyengar & Kinder,

1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the favorability of coverage has not always been seen as similarly influential. The early “minimal effects” studies (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954) revealed little in the way of media persuasion, tempering scholars’ interest in how positively or negatively candidates were treated in the news. With party identification and social networks serving as powerful influences on voting behavior, the favorability of news coverage appeared to have little relevance.

In recent years, however, questions of media bias and a revitalization of the study of media persuasion have reinvigorated scholarly interest in media favorability. The presumption underlying its study is that if news is slanted in a way that benefits one candidate or party over the other, public opinion could be affected. There is some evidence for such effects, though they are typically modest (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002).

Research on the level of media favorability toward candidates has focused primarily on four explanations: journalistic objectivity, ideological bias, editorial bias, and developments in the campaign itself. The vaunted objectivity norm—an even-handed treatment of issues or individuals in a news story (Tuchman, 1972)—has been the starting point for much research, since it serves as a powerful constraint on favorability. By crafting stories in ways that at least give the appearance of balance, reporters can insulate themselves from charges of bias and claim to be impassive transmitters of factual information (Bennett, 1996). For that reason, the baseline expectation is that campaign stories should not be slanted in favor of one candidate.

This expectation is at odds with the arguments of those who see bias in the news, and also runs headlong into empirical evidence revealing that candidates are frequently treated unevenly (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007, p. 122). But despite the overwhelming Democratic identification and liberal ideological positioning of most journalists (Dautrich & Hartley, 1999; Rothman & Lichter, 1987; Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, 1986; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996), there is very little evidence that the news systematically favors Democratic candidates (see D’Alessio & Allen, 2000). There is, however, more support for the argument that the editorial position of a newspaper affects the favorability of coverage. While journalists themselves vociferously maintain that a “wall of separation” insulates the news department from the opinions of a newspaper’s editorial staff, there is some doubt about that contention. Accounts of the business of journalism indicate that the business and editorial sides of newspapers can affect the content of news (*e.g.*, Auletta, 2005), and recent work has shown the favorability of news reporting to be related to a newspaper’s editorial endorsements and political orientation (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002).

The fourth explanation for media favorability has focused on campaign developments and events. A candidate’s standing in the polls can affect coverage. Popular candidates may receive more favorable treatment, as journalists seek to incorporate poll results into a coherent campaign narrative (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Patterson, 1994). Conventions can simultaneously improve the coverage for the sponsoring candidate and hurt his opponent, as one candidate’s supporters are given the opportunity to sing his praises and attack his opponent (Shaw, 1999; Shaw & Roberts, 2000). Debates can result in positive or negative coverage depending on a candidate’s performance: A good showing can bring a struggling candidate’s campaign to life, while a major gaffe or underwhelming performance can result in a torrent of negative press (*e.g.*, Fridkin *et al.*, 2006).

How Issue Ownership Can Influence the News

While the existing literature has identified these factors as sources of media favorability, unexplored is the possibility that coverage may vary depending on the issue topic in the

news—that, in other words, favorability toward a candidate might change depending simply on what a story is *about*. Certainly, there is good evidence that incumbent presidents benefit or are harmed by economic news when the economy is doing especially well or poorly (Hetherington, 1996). But other than studies of this one issue, little is known about variation in other policy areas. I suggest that one feature of campaigns that may influence variation in media favorability is the issue-handling reputations that parties develop (Budge & Farlie, 1983) and that serve as the cornerstone of Petrocik's (1996) "issue ownership" argument.

Petrocik argues that parties come to own issues by virtue of their centrality to one or more groups in the party coalition and the subsequent attention parties and their leaders devote to related policy areas. As a result of consistent attention and policy action, the public comes to view the party as adept at handling particular issues, creating long-term "ownership" (see also Holian, 2004; Iyengar & Valentino, 2000; Sides, 2007). For example, environmentalists have been an important element of the Democratic coalition, prompting the party to take strong stands in support of environmental protection, arguing for the expansion of rules to protect air and water quality. Through its performance on the issue, the party has developed a reputation among the public as trustworthy on environmental matters. The same process has occurred for the GOP on national security, taxes, and other issues on which it has produced "a history of attention, initiative, and innovation" (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826).

Why might partisan issue-handling reputations affect news coverage? For one, the public's beliefs about a political party's ability to deal with certain problems are well known to journalists, who, by all accounts, pay close attention to poll results. During the 2004 campaign, for example, reporters routinely made reference to established partisan stereotypes by noting the existence of "traditional Democratic issues" or "historically Republican issues" (see Drinkard, 2004; Guarino, 2004; Kurtz, 2004). The morning after John Kerry's convention speech, Katie Couric noted on NBC's *Today* that in discussing patriotism and religious faith, the Democratic nominee had touched on several "traditionally Republican issues, issues that the Republicans have . . . sort of taken as their own."

Journalistic awareness of issue ownership may be important because of the central role partisan stereotypes play in American politics, influencing the way people evaluate and perceive candidates and the parties themselves (Geer, 1992; Hayes, 2005; Rahn, 1993). Evidence suggests journalists are susceptible to the use of the same partisan heuristics that drive citizen information processing. Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003–2004) argue that party expectations influence journalists' choices of which candidate statements to report and which to ignore. In a study of campaign advertising, speechmaking, and news coverage, the authors noted that Democratic candidates since 1952 have focused a substantial proportion of their speeches and advertising on Republican issues. Yet because journalists appear to be highly attuned to the issue-handling reputations of the parties, news coverage has tended to emphasize Democratic issue campaigning, inaccurately representing Democrats' actual statements on the campaign trail. "Political reporters," write Petrocik et al. (2003–2004, p. 615), "generally subscribe to strong notions of what is typical of the parties, they are sensitive to issue differences between the candidates, and reports on campaigns are certainly conditioned by these images and expectations." In other words, in a search for a coherent narrative that fits with journalistic perceptions of the way political discourse typically plays out, campaigns are reported in ways that emphasize expected differences between the parties.

These same expectations could influence the favorability of the news. Not surprised when politicians talk about their own party's issues, journalists are apt to be skeptical

when candidates edge into opposition territory. With a demonstrated tendency to frame election news in terms of a strategic “game” between candidates (Bruni, 2002; Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1994), reporters may cast such attempts to “issue trespass” (Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992) as political gambits designed to score points with voters, injecting their own interpretation of the candidate’s motives in the story. The substance of what the candidate said on the issue might be relayed to the audience, but not without an emphasis on electoral strategy or consequences. This interpretive style of reporting often produces a negative tone that implicitly—or explicitly—questions the candidate’s credibility on the issue at hand (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Patterson, 1994).

So while the existing literature has identified objectivity, editorial bias, and campaign events as important influences on news favorability, the issue content of the news may also matter. I hypothesize that the issue-handling reputations associated with the theory of issue ownership can explain variations in favorability. When news coverage focuses on Democratic issues, Democratic candidates will be covered more favorably than when Republican issues are in the news. Likewise, Republican candidates will receive more favorable coverage when GOP topics, rather than Democratic topics, are the focus of news stories. To the extent this is borne out, it would suggest one possible reason for the long-term perpetuation of party issue-handling stereotypes. I turn now to describing the data I use to test the hypothesis.

Data and Coding

The data in this study were derived from content analyses of presidential campaign coverage from the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections. In each year, trained coders analyzed news coverage in a sample of U.S. national and regional newspapers. The coders recorded information about the placement of campaign news stories, their content, and a series of indicators that deal with the favorability of coverage toward candidates. The 1992 data were collected by the Washington, D.C.-based firm Computer-Aided Research and Media Analysis, International, which was contracted by the Republican National Committee to analyze the way journalists were treating candidates, learn which issues were receiving the most attention, and other aspects of the news.¹ In 1996 and 2000, the data were collected by teams at the University of Texas at Austin.

In 1992, 43 newspapers were chosen for analysis. The selected papers reflected the RNC’s desire to sample coverage from a relatively diverse group of papers. This sample thus has variance in the circulation size of the papers, the region in which they are published, and their status as national or regional publications. In 1996 and 2000, the content analysis was designed to create data sets comparable in content to the large 1992 compilation, though the number of full-time coders available was many fewer than in 1992. In 1996, eight papers were selected for inclusion in the coding project. In 2000, 12 papers were coded.² A list of papers and the number of campaign stories coded in each year are summarized in Appendix A.

Whereas in 1992 the coding was done for every issue of the paper—7 days a week—coders in 1996 and 2000 were assigned to code 3 days per week for each paper. The days of each week were randomly selected so that every day of the week had the same probability of being included in the analysis. This technique was used to yield a representative set of stories (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993).³ Critically, the coding procedures and guidelines for each year were the same. Following other studies of presidential campaigns, coding was conducted during the latter stages of the contests, from August 1 through election day.⁴ The analysis thus focuses on the period in which campaign activity, news coverage, and voter interest are most intense.

The empirical analysis hinges on the ability to measure media favorability, a task that is neither easy nor agreed upon in the literature. Many studies employ a subjective measure of “tone” (e.g., Dalton et al., 1998; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Patterson, 1994), while others rely on the mix of sources or statements in a story as a measure of media favorability (e.g., Stovall, 1985). Scholars occasionally employ measures of the favorability of images of a candidate, since visual content is powerful in shaping perceptions and influencing recall, in many cases more so than words or sounds (Graber, 2001).⁵

But using subjective measures of tone, counts of sources, or visual portrayals all have shortcomings if one is interested in overall favorability. Relying exclusively on one measure necessarily ignores other dimensions of coverage, which may contribute to how positively or negatively a reader perceives a candidate. For example, the tone of a reporter’s writing could cast a candidate in a negative light, but that might be leavened by positive quotes from a candidate’s supporters. A measure of tone might well pick up on the negativity of a reporter’s voice in reference to the candidate without taking into account the positive nature of a source’s quotes. In the same way, simply relying on source counts ignores the positivity or negativity of the tone of a story toward a candidate, which, for the reasons stated above, can be critical in shaping an individual’s perceptions of a candidate.

For these reasons, I use a measure that incorporates multiple components of news coverage. The measure attempts to capture favorability along several dimensions of news coverage. The measure, adapted from Shaw (1999), allows for consideration of the tone, sources, visual elements, and placement of a story. As such, it has the advantages of not limiting the favorability measure to a single element of news content.

For each story, the Republican candidate and the Democratic candidate were given a favorability rating based on the coder’s assessment of the tone of coverage toward the candidate, the source balance (the balance of partisan sources quoted), any visual element (e.g., a photo) accompanying the story, and the placement of a story (e.g., front page). The rating ranges from 0 to 100, with 0 representing the least favorable rating and 100 being the most favorable. For each story, a candidate’s favorability rating begins at 50, which represents neutral coverage, and the coder’s assessment of the four elements moves the rating up or down the scale.⁶ A technical description of the measure is included in Appendix B (see also Shaw, 1999).

The second important component of the coding is the focus of the story. Because my central hypothesis turns on the identification of “owned” issues in the news, it is necessary to identify the key issue(s) in each story. In 1992, coders were asked to identify the primary focus of the story—that is, what the story is *primarily* about. The emphasis could be the latest poll result, a candidate’s decision to shake up his staff, a campaign event, a debate, or a policy issue. 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. In all, there were roughly 150 separate codes that were used to identify the focus of the stories.⁷ In 1996 and 2000, the same procedure was used to identify the primary focus, but coders were also asked to code the secondary and tertiary foci.⁸

Since the point of the analysis is to compare media favorability on Republican and Democratic issue stories, it is necessary to create a scheme for categorizing those issues. I rely for the most part on Petrocik and his colleagues’ (1996, 2003–2004) typology, which has guided the literature on “issue ownership” (e.g., Damore, 2004). GOP-owned issues fall into three categories: civil and social order (e.g., crime, traditional values), defense spending and policy (e.g., defense budget, military policy), and big government (e.g., taxes, economic regulation). The issues owned by Democrats are social welfare (e.g., entitlement programs,

education, environment), social class and group relationships, civil rights, civil liberties, women's issues, organized labor, and farmers/agriculture. A third category, "performance issues," is made up of the economy, foreign affairs, and government functioning (*e.g.*, corruption, bureaucratic workings). These are not owned by either party.⁹

I rely on the basic outline but modify Petrocik's scheme slightly. For stylistic purposes, I change "big government" to "taxes and spending"—those two topics comprise the bulk of the issue attention in that category—and change the defense category to "defense, security, and military" to reflect its breadth. I also reduce the number of Democratic issue categories to two: (a) social welfare and (b) race and social groups. Most of the Democratic categories—civil rights, civil liberties, and women's issues—receive very little attention, so it makes more sense to consolidate them into a larger category. The resulting category, race and social groups, includes enough stories to allow a comparison of coverage for Democratic and Republican candidates. Otherwise, the small number of observations in those more specific categories would have made for very tenuous comparisons. In addition, I recategorize labor unions and farmers/agriculture as economic issues rather than Democratic ones.¹⁰ The categorization scheme will allow me to compare coverage for Republican and Democratic candidates on different issues, which should reveal whether journalists favor a candidate when the news focuses on his party's policy areas.

Descriptive Results

If journalistic expectations about partisan credibility affect the way candidates are treated in the news, favorability ratings should be higher in stories about owned than about opposition issues. Democratic candidates should receive more favorable coverage on Democratic issue stories than on Republican issue stories, and vice versa. Figures 1 and 2 present the mean favorability scores on stories in which a party-owned issue was the primary focus, for Republican and Democratic candidates, respectively.¹¹

In each comparison of favorability on Republican (lighter bars) and Democratic (darker bars) issue stories, the basic issue ownership hypothesis is confirmed. Candidates receive more favorable coverage when the news focuses on their party's issues than when

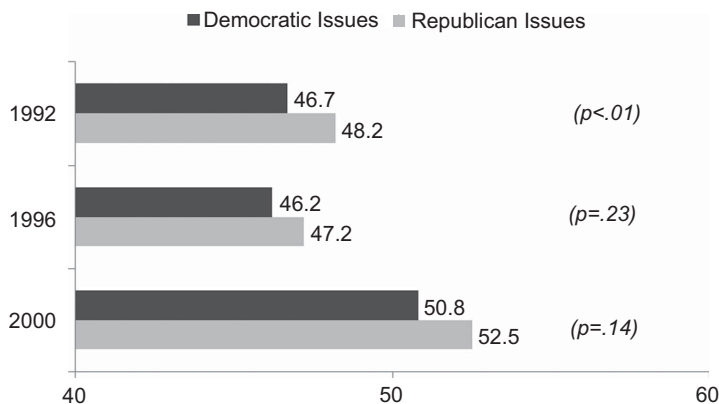


Figure 1. News favorability toward Republican candidates, by issue ownership. The number of stories in each issue category is as follows: 1992 (Democratic = 3,115; Republican = 5,819), 1996 (Democratic = 120; Republican = 255), and 2000 (Democratic = 159; Republican = 135).

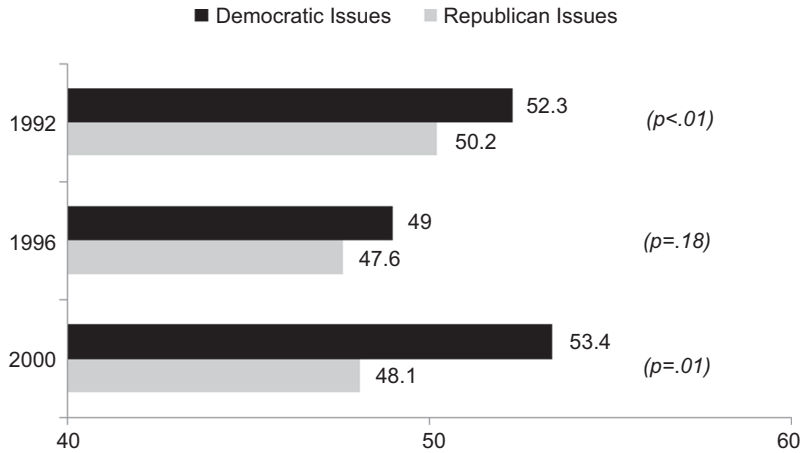


Figure 2. News favorability toward Democratic candidates, by issue ownership. The number of stories in each issue category is as follows: 1992 (Democratic = 3,115; Republican = 5,819), 1996 (Democratic = 120; Republican = 255), and 2000 (Democratic = 159; Republican = 135).

the topic is their opponent's issues. For example, Figure 1 shows that in 1992, George H. W. Bush's average favorability on Republican issue stories was 48.2, while the corresponding rating on Democratic issues was 46.7, a difference that is statistically significant, as indicated by the p value in parentheses. The same pattern is evident for 1996 and 2000. Though the differences are not statistically significant, the favorability ratings for Dole and Bush were higher on GOP stories than on Democratic stories.

Figure 2 reveals the same pattern for Democrats. In each year, Democrats were treated more positively when their issues were in the news than when GOP issues were. While the 1992 and 1996 differences are not large (and not significant in 1996), the gap in 2000 is substantial. Al Gore received, on average, more than 5 points more favorable treatment on Democratic issues than on Republican ones. Five points, considered in isolation, may not seem substantial. But in the context of the neutrality and balance of all coverage in each election year—the mean favorability for candidates across the 3 years ranges only from 47.1 to 51.5—the difference is notable. Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 indicate some differences, however small, in the way candidates are treated on stories about different issues. Setting statistical significance aside, candidates in every case received more positive coverage on their own issues than opposition ones.¹²

The story emerging from Figures 1 and 2 is that differences appear to exist in the way journalists treat candidates on stories about owned and opposition issues. When a candidate's owned issues are in the news, his favorability rating tends to be higher, and more stories tend to be positive, than when his opponent's issues are the focus of the news story. The consistency of the pattern across years and the fact that in no case do the data contradict the hypothesis suggest the existence of real differences in the way journalists treat candidates on party-owned issues. Moreover, the pattern of differences is notable in light of the overall balance of coverage induced by the objectivity norm.

Regression Analysis

Since the differences presented so far are modest, it is necessary to explore whether the results persist in a multivariate analysis. That is, I need to rule out the possibility that other

factors, such as the competitiveness of the race, campaign events, or the editorial position of the newspapers in my sample, are responsible for the differences I have attributed to journalists' differential treatment of owned and opposition issues. To do so, I specified a series of ordinary least squares regression analyses that control for factors other than a story's issue topic.

The unit of analysis is the news story. The dependent variable is the favorability rating for a candidate, which runs from 0 to 100. The independent variables of interest are the primary topic of each story. Each story is coded as having one of four foci: Republican, Democratic, performance, or other topics. The Republican, Democratic, and performance categories are represented in the regression by dummy variables, coded 1 if the story fell into that issue category and 0 if not. Stories coded "other topics" are the reference category. Since each story is coded only for a primary issue focus, no story can receive more than one issue code. The model also includes controls for the editorial endorsement of the newspaper, poll standing at the time of the publication of a story, the number of days until the election, and whether the story was published during a convention or following a presidential or vice presidential debate. Details about the control variables are shown in Appendix C.

The results of the models are presented in Table 1. For space and clarity, only the issue content coefficients are shown.¹³ Just as with the descriptive data, there are modest differences in coverage depending on the issue content of the news story, even controlling for other factors. Eight of the 12 owned-issue variables are confirmatory, statistically significant, and signed in the expected direction. The size of the effect ranges from about 1 to 2.8 points. For example, George W. Bush's coverage in 2000 in news stories that dealt with a Republican issue was 2.2 points higher than in stories about other topics. Al Gore saw a similar boost of 2.6 points in Democratic issue stories.¹⁴ None of the coefficients run counter to my hypotheses (i.e., significant and signed in the opposite direction).

To get a better sense of which partisan issues influenced the favorability ratings, I ran the same regression analysis with dummy variables for each of the eight specific issue categories: civil and social order; defense, security, and military; taxes and spending; social welfare; race and social groups; economy; foreign affairs; and government functioning. The baseline category again is stories about other topics. The control variables are the same as in Table 1.

Table 2 presents the results. Overall, 23 of the 30 coefficients for the five owned-issue categories are signed in the expected direction, and only one coefficient runs contradictory to the hypothesis. (Dole received significantly more negative coverage on civil and social order.) Fourteen of the "correctly" signed coefficients reach statistical significance. Again, the effects are modest.

Three issue categories had a significant impact on at least one candidate's favorability ratings in each election: taxes and spending; defense, security, and military; and social welfare. Taxes and spending hurt Clinton in both of his campaigns and boosted Bush in 2000, while defense news hurt Clinton in 1992 and helped Dole and Bush (2000). Social welfare helped Clinton and Gore in 1992 and 2000, respectively, and hurt Dole. Notably, civil and social order seems to have been more damaging than beneficial for most candidates regardless of their party affiliation. Race and social groups had the anticipated effects in 1992 and 2000, but no influence in 1996. In general, Table 2 shows that the effects of the party-ownership status of an issue were not limited to just one category of issues. Each of the five partisan issue categories had effects on media favorability in at least one year, and three—taxes and spending; defense, security, and military; and social welfare—were significant in all three.

Table 1
Effect on candidate favorability of the primary issue focus in a story, 1992–2000

| | 1992 | | | 1996 | | | 2000 | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Bush | Clinton | Dole | Clinton | Dole | Bush | Clinton | Bush | Gore |
| Republican issue | -0.388 (0.403) | -0.802*** (0.345) | -1.017 (0.929) | -3.228*** (1.007) | -1.017 (0.929) | 2.153** (1.197) | -3.228*** (1.007) | 2.153** (1.197) | -2.364** (1.168) |
| Democratic issue | -1.110** (0.523) | 0.892** (0.448) | -2.762** (1.285) | -1.961 (1.392) | -2.762** (1.285) | 1.105 (1.046) | -1.961 (1.392) | 1.105 (1.046) | 2.597*** (1.021) |
| Performance issue | -1.305*** (0.458) | 0.471 (0.392) | -3.487*** (0.908) | -9.549*** (0.984) | -3.487*** (0.908) | 1.233 (1.534) | -9.549*** (0.984) | 1.233 (1.534) | -0.132 (1.497) |
| Control variables omitted | | | | | | | | | |
| Constant | 43.742*** (0.399) | 50.436*** (0.342) | 42.980*** (1.645) | 39.752*** (1.783) | 42.980*** (1.645) | 51.750*** (0.631) | 39.752*** (1.783) | 51.750*** (0.631) | 48.768*** (0.616) |
| Observations | 37,467 | 37,467 | 2,052 | 2,052 | 2,052 | 1,757 | 2,052 | 1,757 | 1,757 |
| Adjusted R^2 | .04 | .03 | .11 | .09 | .11 | .02 | .09 | .02 | .06 |

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed tests, except performance issue variable).

Table 2
Effect on candidate favorability of the specific focus of a story, primary issue only, 1992–2000

| | 1992 | | | 1996 | | | 2000 | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------|------|--|
| | Bush | Clinton | Dole | Clinton | Dole | Clinton | Bush | Gore | |
| Republican issues | | | | | | | | | |
| Civil and social order | -0.329 (0.673) | 0.320 (0.577) | -2.994*** (1.146) | -3.666*** (1.236) | -2.376 (1.904) | -2.531* (1.862) | | | |
| Taxes and spending | -0.621 (0.563) | -1.424*** (0.483) | 2.014 (1.933) | -4.389** (2.085) | 4.054** (1.802) | -2.051 (1.762) | | | |
| Defense, security, and military | 0.035 (0.819) | -1.114* (0.702) | 2.244* (1.700) | -0.340 (2.044) | 6.516*** (2.526) | -2.747 (2.471) | | | |
| Democratic issues | | | | | | | | | |
| Social welfare | -0.682 (0.564) | 0.702* (0.483) | -3.486*** (1.490) | -2.311 (1.608) | 1.733 (1.154) | 2.245** (1.129) | | | |
| Race and social groups | -3.516*** (1.289) | 1.965** (1.105) | -0.805 (2.316) | -0.556 (2.498) | -1.310 (2.242) | 3.969** (2.193) | | | |
| Performance issues | | | | | | | | | |
| Economy | -2.161*** (0.553) | 0.873* (0.474) | -9.117*** (1.474) | -8.510*** (1.590) | 1.527 (2.235) | 2.807 (2.186) | | | |
| Foreign affairs | 1.140 (0.873) | 0.724 (0.748) | -1.419 (1.714) | -0.055 (1.849) | 2.895 (3.267) | -1.271 (3.195) | | | |
| Government functioning | -1.855 (1.436) | -3.157** (1.231) | -0.130 (1.338) | -16.053*** (1.443) | -0.229 (2.641) | -3.519 (2.583) | | | |
| Control variables omitted | | | | | | | | | |
| Constant | 43.817*** (0.400) | 50.465*** (0.343) | 43.590*** (1.639) | 39.903*** (1.768) | 51.759*** (0.630) | 48.735*** (0.616) | | | |
| Observations | 37,467 | 37,467 | 2,052 | 2,052 | 1,757 | 1,757 | | | |
| Adjusted R ² | .04 | .03 | .12 | .11 | .02 | .06 | | | |

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed except performance issue variables).

Effects of an Increase in Partisan Content

While these data are useful for showing the variations in coverage as a result of the primary focus of a news story, they do not tell us much in the way of the cumulative effect of the changing agenda of a campaign. In other words, it would be interesting to know if coverage for a candidate becomes more favorable if a news story includes a larger number of partisan issues. Does a story that discusses three GOP issues, for example, produce a higher Republican favorability score than a story that deals with one? Fortunately, the data from 1996 and 2000 allow me to examine this possibility.

Each story in those years was coded for up to three issue mentions—a primary, secondary, and tertiary focus. (In the previous analyses, only the primary issue code was used.) For example, a story could include a discussion of Social Security, prescription drugs, and education, in which case it would be coded as having three Democratic issues. If there is a cumulative effect of issue ownership on media favorability, then stories with a heavier focus on one party's issue agenda should generate a higher favorability rating for that party's candidate. To test for this possibility, I ran the same regression analysis as in Table 1, but the issue content variables now range from 0 to 3, instead of being dummies. That is, the variables now represent *how many* Democratic, Republican, or performance issues were included in a particular story.

Table 3 presents the results of the model. In every case, the coefficients point in the expected direction: News coverage is more favorable as the number of owned issues in a story increases, and less favorable the more opposition issues appear in a story. Six of the eight coefficients are statistically significant, and every coefficient representing the effect of a candidate's party's owned issue in a story is significant. As the number of a candidate's owned issues in a story increases, so does the story's favorability toward him.

For Clinton in 1996, the inclusion of three Democratic issues in a story produced a 7-point increase in favorability. For Gore, the increase associated with the appearance of

Table 3
Effect on candidate favorability of the number of issues in a story, 1996–2000

| | 1996 | | 2000 | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Dole | Clinton | Bush | Gore |
| No. of Republican issues | 1.074** (0.517) | -0.353 (0.566) | 0.807* (0.598) | -1.345** (0.582) |
| No. of Democratic issues | -0.278 (0.705) | 2.333*** (0.772) | -0.897* (0.595) | 1.822*** (0.579) |
| No. of Performance issues | -2.166*** (0.492) | -3.757*** (0.539) | 0.172 (0.657) | -1.423** (0.639) |
| Control variables omitted | | | | |
| Constant | 43.951*** (1.691) | 40.629*** (1.850) | 52.143*** (0.644) | 48.809*** (0.627) |
| Observations | 2,052 | 2,052 | 1,757 | 1,757 |
| Adjusted R ² | .11 | .08 | .02 | .07 |

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed tests, except performance issue variable).

three Democratic issues in a story was slightly more than 5 points.¹⁵ The corresponding increases for the Republican candidates are smaller—3.6 points for Dole and 2.2 for Bush. One possibility is that the smaller shifts for GOP issues are a product of the differences in the baseline favorability for the candidates. Dole and Bush's coverage on other topics was more favorable than Clinton and Gore's, so "changing the subject" to owned issues would have proved more beneficial to the Democrats than the Republicans.

Just as with the analysis relying on the primary focus of each news story, I also ran the models to gauge the cumulative effects of an increase in specific issues in a story. Again, the issue variables range from 0 to 3, depending on how many issues in each category were coded for each story. Table 4 shows that, just as with the primary issue focus in Table 2, taxes and spending, defense, and social welfare had significant effects on media favorability. An increase in the number of issues related to taxes and spending boosted the favorability of news coverage for Dole and Bush, and decreased Gore's favorability. The same is true for defense, security, and military. On the Democratic side, the model shows significant increases in favorability for Clinton and Gore when social welfare was in the news, and a decrease in favorability for Bush. In all, 17 of the 20 partisan-issue coefficients are signed in the expected direction, and none are contradictory.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data presented in this article have offered a number of ways to explore the argument I set forth about the relationship between issue ownership and news media favorability. In several different analyses, modest but measurable effects emerged. Candidates receive more positive coverage when the story is about an issue their party is conventionally considered to own. The evidence of a kind of partisan reputational bias in the news is subtle, but it is also consistent.

Still, the data are not unequivocal. For technical reasons, there may be reason to be skeptical of the results. Most obviously, the fit of the regression models is not good, with adjusted R^2 statistics ranging from .02 to .13. The models leave unexplained much of the variance in the favorability scale measure. Were the effects of the issue content variables large, this might be of lesser concern. But since the effects are modest at best, it is possible that a more fully specified model might erase their effects. At the very least, the unexplained variance suggests future research should try to identify factors that could add to the explanatory power of similar favorability models.

The second methodological issue is the differences in the newspaper samples for the 3 election years. On one hand, the consistency of the findings is comforting: Even with samples of differing size and different publications, the results of the analysis in three distinct elections are similar. But it does raise the question of whether the results would persist if the sample were held constant across the years. To probe this possibility, I ran the main analyses presented above with the four newspapers common to all 3 years' samples: the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times*. To the extent that the results are similar, I can be more confident in the findings presented above.

In broad strokes, the results of the reduced-sample analysis support the initial findings, though they are not universally confirmatory. I began by comparing the mean favorability ratings for Republican candidates on Republican and Democratic issues, and then did likewise for Democratic candidates (analogous to the data presented in Figures 1 and 2). In five of the six cases, candidates received significantly higher ratings on owned than on opposition issues. In fact, while only three of the differences in Figure 1 and 2

Table 4
Effect on candidate favorability of the number of specific issues in a story, 1996–2000

| | 1996 | | | 2000 | | |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Dole | Clinton | Bush | Bush | Gore | Gore |
| Republican issues | | | | | | |
| No. of civil and social order issues | -0.338 (0.708) | -1.021* (0.772) | -1.058 (0.898) | -1.058 (0.898) | -0.297 (0.876) | -0.297 (0.876) |
| No. of taxes and spending issues | 3.217*** (0.856) | -0.340 (0.934) | 1.917** (0.985) | 1.917** (0.985) | -2.233*** (0.960) | -2.233*** (0.960) |
| No. of defense, security, and military issues | 2.366** (1.025) | -0.297 (1.118) | 2.378** (1.192) | 2.378** (1.192) | -2.090** (1.162) | -2.090** (1.162) |
| Democratic issues | | | | | | |
| No. of social welfare issues | -0.525 (0.843) | 2.716*** (0.919) | -1.068* (0.675) | -1.068* (0.675) | 2.037*** (0.658) | 2.037*** (0.658) |
| No. of race and social groups issues | 1.760 (1.234) | 0.460 (1.347) | -0.578 (1.229) | -0.578 (1.229) | 1.090 (1.198) | 1.090 (1.198) |
| Performance issues | | | | | | |
| No. of economy issues | -5.159*** (0.664) | -1.930*** (0.724) | 1.368 (1.001) | 1.368 (1.001) | -0.778 (0.975) | -0.778 (0.975) |
| No. of foreign affairs issues | 0.421 (1.113) | 1.193 (1.215) | -0.164 (1.752) | -0.164 (1.752) | 0.104 (1.708) | 0.104 (1.708) |
| No. of government functioning issues | 0.182 (0.708) | -8.029*** (0.772) | -1.046 (0.989) | -1.046 (0.989) | -2.443** (0.964) | -2.443** (0.964) |
| Control variables omitted | | | | | | |
| Constant | 43.441*** (1.683) | 41.942*** (1.836) | 52.089*** (0.644) | 52.089*** (0.644) | 48.808*** (0.627) | 48.808*** (0.627) |
| Observations | 2,052 | 2,052 | 1,757 | 1,757 | 1,757 | 1,757 |
| Adjusted R^2 | .13 | .11 | .02 | .02 | .07 | .07 |

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed except performance issue variables).

reach conventional levels of significance, all of the differences in the reduced-sample analysis do. (Only with Clinton in 1996, whose Republican-issue coverage was very favorable, were the findings contradictory.)

I also reran the models in Tables 1 and 3 with the four-paper sample. Again, the results look similar to the full-sample models. Because of the reduction in the number of stories—from thousands to hundreds—there are fewer statistically significant coefficients, but the effects of the issue-content variables run in the expected direction. In the primary-issue model, 9 of the 12 owned-issue coefficients point in the expected direction. And in the cumulative-issue model, 5 of the 8 coefficients are signed correctly.¹⁶ Overall, the reduced-sample analysis supports the earlier findings, indicating the results were not affected by differences in the samples.

Given the consistency of the results, the question is whether or not they are substantively important. The effects range from 1 to 7 points on a 100-point scale, a magnitude that some might describe as minimal and others might argue is substantively meaningless. To be sure, it is unclear at this point how important these differences may be in determining electoral outcomes or shaping public opinion.

What is notable, however, is the appearance of a pattern across the 3 election years. Journalists tend to be assiduous in their pursuit of objectivity, seeking to insulate their coverage from charges of bias by giving time to “all” sides of a story. But the evidence here suggests that reporters do not treat candidates equally across all issues. On matters where parties have established credibility, their candidates tend to receive more favorable coverage than on issues that are the domain of the opposition party. While social science has found little evidence of systematic partisan media bias (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000), these data indicate that party reputations are instrumental in shaping news coverage during presidential campaigns.

The existence of identifiable effects on media favorability is important because of the potential influence on candidate strategy and public opinion. Candidates already have powerful incentives to try to shape the campaign agenda in ways that highlight the issues on which they have an advantage. The data here suggest the media may give them one more reason to pursue a strategy of issue ownership. If candidates consistently receive more favorable coverage on owned issues, then candidates have an additional incentive to stick to their turf, eschewing dialogue for monologue (Simon, 2002).

The potential implications for public opinion are also intriguing. The magnitude of the effects uncovered here is not huge, and I do not suggest that unfavorable news coverage on partisan issues could rapidly turn voters against a candidate. But a steady drumbeat of positive or negative coverage over the course of a lengthy campaign could create a credibility gap for candidates on certain issues, just as the tone of coverage has been shown to influence voters’ evaluations of candidates (Kahn & Kenney, 2002). To the extent that those issues become central to voter decision making, news coverage could have important electoral implications. In the longer term, the findings here also hint that the media play a role in the perpetuation of issue ownership. Issue-handling reputations are derived from the groups that form the parties’ base of support (Petrocik, 1996), but such coalitional inertia and party performance might not be all that maintains those advantages (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). By offering a flow of information that reminds the public of party stereotypes, news coverage could serve to solidify issue-handling reputations.

One sure result of the present investigation is to underscore that political parties remain relevant in American politics. After the near sounding of the death knell in the 1970s and 1980s (*e.g.*, Broder, 1972), recent research has argued for the revival of parties, focusing on the way they influence voting behavior (Bartels, 2000) and policy-making

(Cox & McCubbins, 1993). The findings here suggest a different way that parties “matter,” separate from their direct effects on political behavior or their influence over the legislative process. Because the parties’ reputations are deeply imbedded in the American political system, issue-handling advantages structure the way reporters respond to, and report on, developments from the campaign trail. Just as parties serve as important cues in voter decision making (*e.g.*, Rahn, 1993), they also act as powerful journalistic heuristics that aid reporters in crafting coherent stories about political conflict. In doing so, the news is not only influenced by party reputations, but also helps to perpetuate them.

Notes

1. While the data were collected as part of a partisan campaign, there is little reason to be suspicious of their scientific validity. The RNC was not using the data to promote George H. W. Bush or attack Bill Clinton, but rather to get an accurate picture of the nature of news coverage in the campaign. Moreover, CARMA used rigorous content analysis procedures to collect and code the data.

2. Seventeen papers were initially included in the 2000 coding project but, for various reasons, did not result in a usable sample of stories. I subsequently eliminated those five papers from my analysis, leaving the dozen newspapers listed in Appendix A.

3. To be sure, the lack of consistency among the 3 years—with respect to sample size and frequency of coding—raises legitimate questions about the comparability of the data. In 1992, the sample population numbers more than 45,000 stories, whereas in 1996 and 2000 those figures are roughly 2,100 and 1,900, respectively. Given these discrepancies, one may wonder if it makes sense to compare media coverage across the 3 years. As reported in the Discussion, I have run some of the analyses with a subset of papers as a way of gauging the amount of bias induced by having a different number of papers and different news outlets in the 3 years. For the most part, they do not run counter to the conclusions based upon the larger collection.

4. In 1992 and 2000, the coding project was conducted across the entire campaign, from the spring through the fall. But to create a comparable time period of study for all three elections, I focus only on the coding of news coverage for the last 3 months.

5. For example, in 1996, Bob Dole fell off the stage at a campaign rally in Chico, California. The resulting photograph, which appeared in newspapers across the country—and four columns wide on the front page of the *Washington Post*—made it appear as if Dole was gravely injured (Canellos & Scales, 1996). The visual may have had an impact beyond the words, whatever their tone or source, that accompanied the photo.

6. As described in Appendix B, there are slight differences between the 1992 and 1996 favorability measures, on one hand, and the 2000 measure, on the other.

7. A list is available from the author upon request.

8. In 1992 and 1996, a randomly selected 5% of all stories were double coded each week. In 2000, one round of reliability tests was conducted during the project. Cohen’s *kappa* for inter-coder reliability for the focus of the stories was .85 in 1992, .90 in 1996, and .81 in 2000. The *kappa* statistics for the favorability measures were also within acceptable ranges of reliability (Banerjee *et al.*, 1999). In 1992, reliability for Bush favorability was .75, and .73 for Clinton. In 1996, the *kappa* statistic for Dole favorability was .79, and .77 for Clinton. In 2000, *kappa* was .74 for Bush and .75 for Gore. This is consistent with other studies analyzing media favorability (Neuendorf, 2002).

9. Some recent work has challenged the durability of these reputations. Sides (2006) shows that the party advantages on some issues, rather than remaining stable, have fluctuated considerably over the last two decades. Holian (2004) demonstrates that Clinton’s efforts to reframe the debate over crime succeeded in eroding the historic Republican advantage on law and order topics. Still, I choose to rely, in large measure, on Petrocik’s definitions of Republican and Democratic issues on the assumption that journalists’ orientations to the parties’ credibility on issues are based on tradition—the conventional wisdom reflected in Petrocik’s categorizations—rather than recent

fluctuations in public opinion. The categorization scheme reflects long-held beliefs about the issue-handling abilities of the political parties, which are the same reputations I argue serve as journalistic shortcuts in reporting on political issues. Even if public opinion waxes and wanes, the general reputation of the parties is likely to remain static among elites, which includes journalists. My assumption is that these traditional perceptions of the parties, not the short-term fluctuations in public opinion, guide coverage.

10. To be sure, labor unions are a traditional Democratic constituency, and farmers have also historically supported Democrats. But a reading of the relative handful of news stories in my data set that dealt with either group revealed that rarely are these groups mentioned aside from economic issues. Stories that included reference to labor unions typically had more to do with unemployment, economic recession, or trade rather than anything substantive about the unions or labor rights themselves. Similarly, news mentioning farmers usually was framed in terms of broader economic trends, not with regard to subsidies or their position as a Democratic constituency. As such, it seemed appropriate to code these as economic, rather than partisan, issues. Ultimately, any effects of my tweaking of the categories are likely minimal: Just one-half of 1% of campaign stories in the sample focused on farmers, and about 1% of stories dealt with labor unions. The results are substantively unchanged when labor and farmers are coded as Democratic issues, though the labor stories—most of which came in 1992—do benefit Clinton and hurt Bush, as my hypothesis predicts. Since Clinton received better coverage on economic issues more generally, it is impossible to say whether this is a reflection of labor being an economic or Democratic topic.

11. All of the results presented here are restricted to stories about the campaign, defined as those that include a favorability rating for both candidates. Stories about the activities of the Bush presidency in 1992, for example, are not included. If, however, that story included a mention of Clinton that resulted in a favorability score, then it would be included in the analysis. The strategy has the effect of not allowing for an investigation of incumbent-only coverage during the election years, but also reduces the chances that the analysis will include stories that were not focused on the presidential campaign.

12. I ran two additional analyses to test the hypothesis. First, I calculated the percentage of each candidate's coverage on partisan issues that was negative (below 50), neutral, and positive (above 50). I expected that Democratic candidates would have a larger proportion of positive ratings in Democratic issue stories than in Republican ones, and a larger proportion of negative ratings in Republican stories compared to Democratic stories. The converse should be true for Republicans. Among the 12 relevant comparisons, 11 were in the expected direction, and 8 were statistically significant. In no case did the data contradict the hypothesis. Second, I examined the mean favorability ratings on the five partisan issues shown in Table 2. In general, the data on the specific issues fit the patterns described when Republican and Democratic issue stories are aggregated together.

13. The full results are available from the author upon request. For the most part, the control variables reveal no major surprises. Other than in 1992, a newspaper's endorsement does not seem to do much for the favored candidate, but it does produce negative coverage for his opponent on the order of 3 points. The effect of the poll standing variable, which indicates the Republican candidate's lead on the Democrat, suggests variations in public support during the last few months of the campaign may not be as influential as is commonly supposed, at least when controlling for other factors. While four of the six coefficients are significant, only two are pointed in the expected direction. In 1992, Bush's favorability scores declined as he approached Clinton in the polls, and in 2000, Gore received better coverage as Bush's lead grew. A candidate's coverage improves considerably during his party convention. For example, Bush in 1992 received a 16.5-point boost in favorability during the Republican convention. The role of debates in shaping favorability is minimal, as only 2 of the 12 debate coefficients are statistically significant. Interestingly, in two of the three elections, coverage becomes more favorable to the winning candidate and less favorable to the loser as election day nears.

14. The sample of stories in the models presents some estimation concerns. While the sample was drawn with a goal of maximizing generalizability—especially with regard to geography and political orientation—the stories in the analysis are ultimately the result of a convenience sample. This is a potential problem if the stories from any single newspaper share characteristics—perhaps

because of the paper's editorial orientation or simply because the same reporter is writing many of the campaign stories. If there are high levels of intraclass correlation on the favorability measures—that is, correlation within stories from individual news outlets—then the models in Tables 1–4 may be underestimating the standard errors, which could result in a too generous interpretation of statistical significance. In fact, the levels of intraclass correlation within the news outlets are quite low, ranging from .03 to .12 on Republican and Democratic candidate favorability for all 3 years. Still, to be sure the regression models are not biased, I reran them, clustering the standard errors by the newspaper. In large measure, the results are the same as in the original tables, though in two cases the statistical significance of the issue-content variables drops out. The coefficient for Republican issues (primary focus) in the Gore model, significant in Table 1, narrowly misses statistical significance when the standard errors are clustered, as does the performance issue variable for Dole. Overall, however, the models do nothing to undermine the substantive conclusions drawn from the original analyses. Even when estimating the models with robust standard errors, the owned-issue content of a story affects favorability in the hypothesized ways. The results of the supplemental analyses are available from the author upon request.

15. These numbers assume the stories appear in a newspaper that did not endorse either candidate. When a newspaper gives a candidate its endorsement, the effects grow larger, from one-half of a point to about 3 points. The effects decrease, though less sharply, when a newspaper endorses the candidate's opponent.

16. Across the two sets of models—one primary issue content, and one for the cumulative issue content—there are 20 coefficients that test the effects of owned-issue content on favorability. Of those, 14 were signed in the expected direction, and only one—a negative effect for Clinton of Democratic issue news in 1996—was contradictory.

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Appendix A: Newspapers and Story Counts, August 1–Election Day, 1992–2000

| Year | National papers | Regional papers | Total N of Stories |
|------|--|--|-----------------------|
| 1992 | <i>Washington Post</i> , <i>New York Times</i> , <i>Los Angeles Times</i> | <i>Birmingham News</i> , <i>Orange County Register</i> , <i>Sacramento Bee</i> , <i>Hartford Courant</i> , <i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i> , <i>Chicago Tribune</i> , <i>Peoria Journal Star</i> , <i>Lexington Herald Ledger</i> , <i>Louisville Courier Journal</i> , <i>New Orleans Times-Picayune</i> , <i>Baton Rouge Advocate</i> , <i>Portland Herald</i> , <i>Detroit Free Press</i> , <i>Detroit News</i> , <i>Grand Rapids Press</i> , <i>Jackson Clarion-Ledger</i> , <i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i> , <i>Bergen Record</i> , <i>Newark Star-Ledger</i> , <i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i> , <i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i> , <i>Columbus Dispatch</i> , <i>Columbia State</i> , <i>Rock Hill Evening Herald</i> , <i>Austin American-Statesman</i> , <i>Dallas Morning News</i> , <i>Ft. Worth Star-Telegram</i> , <i>Houston Chronicle</i> , <i>San Antonio Light</i> , <i>Burlington Free Press</i> , <i>Seattle Post-Intelligencer</i> , <i>Seattle Times</i> , <i>Wisconsin State Journal</i> , <i>Milwaukee Journal</i> , <i>San Francisco Chronicle</i> , <i>Wilmington Journal</i> , <i>Kansas City Star</i> , <i>Charlotte Observer</i> , <i>Raleigh News & Observer</i> , <i>Dayton Daily News</i> , <i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i> | 45,402 |
| 1996 | <i>Wall St. Journal</i> , <i>USA Today</i> , <i>New York Times</i> , <i>Los Angeles Times</i> | <i>Boston Globe</i> , <i>Chicago Tribune</i> , <i>Dallas Morning News</i> , <i>San Francisco Chronicle</i> | 2,114 |

| Year | National papers | Regional papers | Total N of Stories |
|------|---|--|-----------------------|
| 2000 | <i>Wall St. Journal,</i> <i>Washington Post,</i> <i>New York Times,</i> <i>Los Angeles Times</i> | <i>Boston Globe, Atlanta Journal-Constitution,</i> <i>Chicago Tribune, Louisville Courier</i> <i>Journal, Detroit Free Press, St. Louis</i> <i>Post-Dispatch, Cleveland Plain Dealer,</i> <i>Dallas Morning News</i> | 1,913 |

Appendix B: Coding

Issue Topic

Coders were instructed to identify the primary focus of each news story. (In 1996 and 2000, coders also recorded the secondary and tertiary focus of the stories, which I draw on in Tables 3 and 4.) These codes ranged from “horse race” focus, such as poll results, to domestic events, such as a Florida hurricane, to policy issues, such as taxes or Medicare. A list of the approximately 150 codes is available from the author upon request.

Favorability Rating

For each of the 3 years, the favorability ratings were created from a combination of four components: tone, source balance, placement, and visual element (which was included as part of the “placement” coding). The favorability rating began at 50 (neutral), and the values of the components could push it as low as 0 or as high as 100. Coders assigned values for each of the three components in the following way.

Tone of the story toward the candidate: The measure could run from –20 (very unfavorable) to 20 (very favorable), with 0 representing neutral tone.

Placement of the story: This score could increase/decrease up to 20 points based on the headline, placement of article (front page, A2, A3, etc.), and presence and quality of photograph. For example, a front-page *New York Times* article featuring a positive headline with an accompanying photo/graphic would increase an article’s favorability by 20 points. If the same story appeared on page A14, the rating would increase by only 10 points. If the same headline appeared over a “news brief,” the rating would increase by 5 points. A negative headline in a prominent position would decrease the placement rating. (In 2000, this measure was modified slightly so that the value ranged between 15 and –15.)

Source balance: Each story was coded for the number of sources sympathetic to the candidate, with the source balance measure ranging between 10 and –10. In 2000, the source balance ranged from –15 to 15 to reflect that fact that more sources were included in the coding.

Instructions for Coding News Stories for Favorability for 1992 and 1996 (Adapted From Shaw 1999)

1. Start at 50 points on the 0–100-point scale.
2. Using a 9-point scale and moving in increments of 5, increase/decrease up to 20 points based on whether the candidate was on the offensive or defensive. This evaluation takes into account the nature of the main topic, whether the candidate is being questioned or is doing the questioning, and the tone taken toward the topic by the reporter. For example,

an article about Clinton and the Vietnam draft would qualify as a defensive (unfavorable) article for Clinton. It would be more negative if Clinton were answering allegations. It would be even more negative if the report questioned the veracity of Clinton's comments. More generically, if the article features only favorable impressions of a candidate's event, the rating could rise by as much as 20 points. If opposing views are presented, the rating would be diminished according to the extent of the unfavorable comments.

3. Using a 9-point scale and moving again in increments (or decrements) of 5, increase/decrease up to 20 points based on the headline, placement of article (front page, A2, A3, etc.), and presence and quality of photograph. For example, a front-page *New York Times* article featuring a positive headline with an accompanying photo/graphic would increase an article's favorability by 20 points. If the same story appeared on page A14, conversely, the rating would increase by only 10 points. If the same headline appeared over a "news brief," the rating would increase by 5 points.
4. Using a 5-point scale and moving in increments (or decrements) of 5, increase/decrease up to 10 points based on the inclusion of favorable/unfavorable sources (number of favorable and unfavorable comments and the extent of favorable/unfavorable comments). In other words, if George Bush was quoted and no sources from the other campaigns were included, the rating would rise by 10 points. If Bush was quoted and an unfavorable source from Bill Clinton's campaign was quoted with countering comments, the rating would remain unchanged. The rating would rise 5 points if Bush's comments were more extensive or decrease 5 points if the comments of Clinton's source were more extensive. Sources were not weighted, but "man-in-the-street" quotes were not included in the analysis. Ross Perot was treated as an independent source, and the nature of his comments was reflected by the tone component of the overall favorability score.

The resultant favorability scores are thus the composite of three scales—tone (–20 to 20), placement (–20 to 20), and source balance (–10 to 10)—and are constrained to fall between 0 and 100.

Instructions for Coding News Stories for Favorability for 2000

In 2000, the study was designed in a similar way, with slight modifications.

1. Placement—Built from two codes, one for the photo/visual accompanying the story and one for placement within the newspaper.
 - a. Photo/visual: +5 for positive visual, 0 for neutral/no visual, –5 for negative photo/visual.
 - b. Placement: +10 for front-page, above the fold (positive); +5 for front-page, below the fold (positive); –5 for front-page, below the fold (negative); –10 for front-page, above the fold (negative); 0 for all others.
2. Source balance—Built from a single measure that simply counts the pro and con source quotes.
 - a. Source: +15 for a +3 balance, +10 for a +2 balance, +5 for a +1 balance, 0 for a 0 net source balance, –5 for a –1 balance, . . . , –15 for a –3 balance.
3. Tone—Built from a 5-point scale ranging from strongly favorable to strongly unfavorable.
 - a. Tone: +20 for strongly favorable, +10 for somewhat favorable, 0 for neutral, –10 for somewhat unfavorable, –20 for strongly unfavorable.

As in 1992 and 1996, the composite favorability measure begins at 50 and allows these factors to push it to 100 or 0. The minor differences in the years under analysis should not pose any major problems. The end result is the same: a favorability measure that takes into account not only the tone of the story but also its placement in the newspaper and the partisan balance of the sources quoted. In that sense, there is consistency in the data across election years.

Appendix C: Control Variables in Regression Models

Editorial Endorsement

Coded 1 for a Republican endorsement, -1 for a Democratic endorsement, and 0 for no endorsement. Endorsement data were collected from a variety of online sources, primarily the list of self-reported endorsements published during the campaign in the trade publication *Editor & Publisher*. Some endorsements from 2000 that were not included in the *Editor & Publisher* list were gathered from a Web site maintained at George Washington University (<http://www.gwu.edu/~action/natendorse5.html>) and from the Web archives of several of the newspapers themselves. A full list of newspaper endorsements is available from the author on request. Newspapers for which an endorsement decision could not be determined were not included in the analysis, with one exception. The editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* as a matter of policy does not customarily make endorsements, but its editorial page is known as a forum for conservative political views. Since the purpose of the endorsement variable was to determine whether a paper's editorial stance affected the favorability of its coverage, I coded the paper as having made a Republican endorsement. The alternatives were to eliminate the paper from the analysis or code it as nonpartisan, one of which would have been undesirable and the other of which would have been inaccurate. For that reason, including it in the category of papers supporting Republican candidates seems to be the best choice.

Polling Gap

Measures the difference in support for the Republican and Democratic candidates, with the variable increasing in value as the Republican lead grows. The measure for each day represents a 3-day average—using the results from 3 days prior to the publication of the story—in order to smooth out day-to-day fluctuations in the polls. The data from 1992 are drawn from the Battleground Tracking Poll, while the 1996 and 2000 data come from the CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup polls. The variable is created by taking the difference in the poll standing between the two major party candidates (Republican minus Democrat). The polling data come primarily from three sources. For 1992, tracking poll data come from results published in Goldman *et al.* (1994). In 1996 and 2000, data are drawn from the CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup tracking poll, available at <http://www.cnn.com>. For measures from the month of August, during which I could find no daily tracking poll data, I estimated daily poll standing by averaging the results of multiple polls culled from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, accessed through Lexis-Nexis. (A full list of these polls and the question wording is available from the author.) While not ideal, the averaging strategy provides a reasonable measure of each candidate's relative standing in the race. For each date in the analysis, I computed a 3-day average by taking data from the 3 days prior to the publication of the story and averaging them together. For example, the 3-day average for September 16 is an

average of the poll result from September 13, 14, and 15. Where values are missing, the average of the available day(s) is taken. For example, if there were no polling data from September 14, the September 16 average would be taken from the results on September 13 and 15.

Days Until Election

Accounts for the possibility that news coverage of a candidate may change as the campaign wears on. If the race is a landslide, such as in 1996, news favorability toward the trailing candidate may deteriorate as his defeat grows imminent. At the same time, reporters might be more likely to treat more favorably the leading candidate, even if his lead in the polls (as captured by the poll standing variable) does not grow. The measure is scaled from high to low—for example, August 10, 1996, is coded as 85 days from election day, while November 4 is coded 1.

Convention, Debate, and VP Debate

Capture the potential influence of campaign events. Conventions are expected to benefit the candidate whose party is holding the event, while perhaps also hurting the other party's candidate through a stream of attacks by convention participants. Each story published the day before, during, or the day after a convention is coded 1, while all others are coded 0. The debate variables are coded 1 if the story is published the day after the debate to account for the possibility of positive or negative coverage for one candidate, perhaps due to a gaffe or other notable event.