

# THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA: A CAMPAIGN SAVED BY A HORSERACE

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Beginning a week before the election call, a McGill University team tracked campaign coverage in seven daily newspapers on a daily basis through June 28. Newspaper articles were coded as either issue-oriented or part of the “horserace,” and divided into reporting and opinion. The tone and bias of coverage was also measured, as were the “first mentions” of each of the leaders in the daily coverage, whether their coverage weights were positive, neutral or negative. After the first week, there was hardly any coverage of real issues such as health care, while the papers focused almost exclusively on the closeness of the race and the possibility of minority government of one stripe or another. The conclusions: “There are few shifts in coverage over the campaign that were not clearly precipitated by campaign events or public opinion. The predominant role of media in the 2004 campaign, accordingly, seems to have been reflecting rather than leading the campaign...The 2004 campaign was dominated by horserace over issue coverage focused on increasingly partisan attacks over substantive policy proposals.”

Une semaine avant le déclenchement des élections, une équipe de chercheurs de l'Université McGill a commencé à suivre la couverture de la campagne dans sept quotidiens canadiens, et ce jusqu'au 28 juin. Les articles étaient codés selon qu'ils portaient sur les grands thèmes de la campagne ou traitaient de son déroulement quotidien, et classés selon qu'ils rapportaient ou commentaient les événements. Les chercheurs ont également mesuré le ton et le biais des articles, ainsi que les « premières mentions » de chacun des chefs de parti. Enfin, ils ont évalué la couverture selon qu'elle était positive, neutre ou négative. Au bout d'une semaine, il n'y avait presque plus d'articles consacrés aux grandes questions politiques, l'accent étant mis à peu près exclusivement sur le caractère serré de la campagne et sur la possibilité d'un gouvernement minoritaire. En général, la couverture de la campagne a collé à l'actualité et à l'évolution de l'opinion publique. Le rôle prédominant des médias a donc été de refléter l'évolution de la campagne plutôt que d'en infléchir le cours concluent les auteurs.

**T**he news media are generally assumed to be an important factor in election campaigns. Journalists, academics, and politicians routinely cite coverage as influential in the rise and fall of leaders, the polling performance of parties, the emergence of particular issues during campaigns, even the outcomes on voting day. But media influence is more often presumed than demonstrated, and there is a relatively limited body of empirical work on the role of media in Canadian election campaigns.

To help fill this gap, McGill University's Observatory on Media and Public Policy analyzed the contents of seven

major Canadian dailies for the duration of the 2004 federal election campaign. Our goal was to track media coverage in real time and to examine more general trends in the triangular relationship between media, the public, and politics. This project gave us the opportunity to investigate one of the critical questions in electoral studies: who is leading the campaign — the public, parties and politicians, or the media?

The answer to this question can change on a daily basis. One day, party press releases will dominate the headlines; the next day, journalists may uncover a politician's questionable past. So an election inevitably involves

ongoing, multi-directional interactions between media, public and politicians — not unlike non-election periods, though usually at a much more heightened pace.

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The recognition that the press was primarily a follower also has important implications for what we identify as the failures or lacunae of the 2004 campaign. Foremost among these failures, we suggest, are (1) the predominance of horserace coverage during that campaign, and (2) the relative lack of issue-oriented stories in the 2004 campaign. The two are connected and both are clearly evidenced in our data on media coverage of the election.

Starting a week before the official election campaign kick-off, the Observatory's team of coders began to scrutinize the main news sections of seven major Canadian dailies: *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, *Calgary Herald*, *Vancouver Sun*, *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*. Each of the seven coders was responsible for a different newspaper each week so that we could

test for any coder effects or bias. Coders noted all articles relating to federal politics, including reportage, analysis, opinion, and editorials. This content was coded for mentions of issues, parties, and leaders, as well as positive, negative or neutral tone. The precedence of these mentions and

their prominence within the paper was also noted, along with other factors. Coding began on Monday, May 17, and continued until the day of the election, June 28. In total, 2,948 articles were analyzed — 1,839 news stories and 1,089 editorial and opinion pieces. (Detailed data are available at [ompp.mcgill.ca](http://ompp.mcgill.ca))

This method of coding indicated which parties or leaders received positive or negative treatment, and which issues dominated the campaign, for instance. It also showed which parties were associated (positively or negatively) with leading issues, and suggested which parties were driving coverage of the campaign or responding to the initiatives of their opponents. The coding also indicated how

treatment of parties, leaders and issues varied across newspapers, and across regions in Canada.

All of the newspaper articles were coded as either “issue” or “horserace/campaign” focused, and the results are presented by week in figure 1. The volume of horserace coverage is striking: after a brief period of policy discussion in week two of the campaign, horserace coverage increased gradually to over 60 percent of all election articles. The space left for substantive policy discussion was, accordingly, relatively limited.

Figure 2 nonetheless illustrates those issues that were discussed most in the campaign. Government accountability, including the sponsorship scandal, was the clear winner in the early days of campaign. Leadership and accountability were obviously important concerns to voters, but we noted at the time the need for a discussion of actual policies. Accountability is important, but is not exactly a policy mandate.

We accordingly noted the emerging salience of health care and taxes in the second week of the campaign. The trend began with Liberal leader

FIGURE 1. HORSERACE VERSUS ISSUE COVERAGE BY WEEK (%)

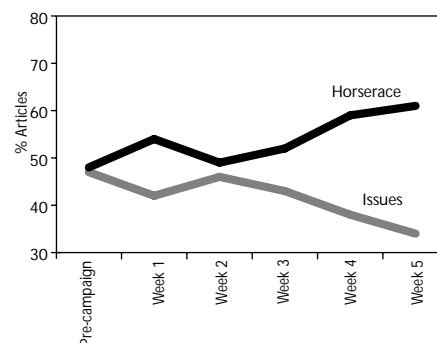


FIGURE 2. ISSUE COVERAGE BY WEEK (%)

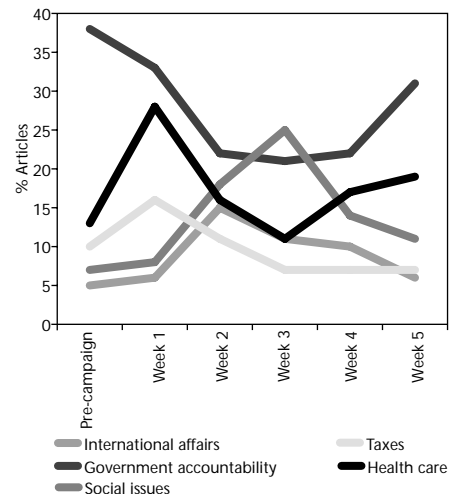
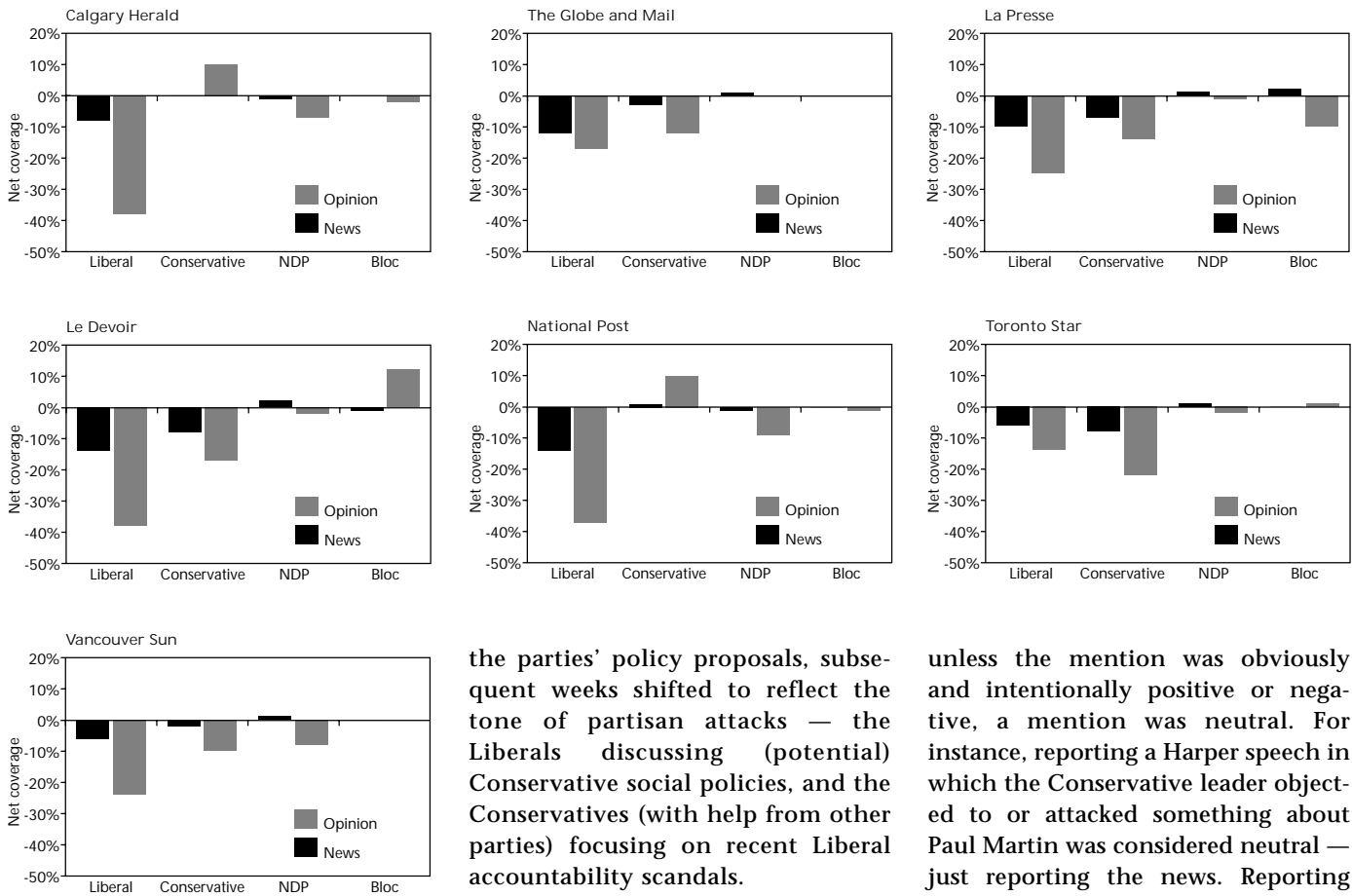


FIGURE 3. NET COVERAGE BY NEWSPAPER



Paul Martin's introduction of the Liberal party's health care package and continued with all of the parties' positions on taxes. The result was what appeared at the time to be a classic and important competition between taxes and spending. It was a debate similar to and perhaps foreshadowed by the recent provincial election in Ontario in the fall of 2003.

Health care and taxes played a more limited role for the rest of the campaign, however. By week three, press coverage was dominated by Liberal criticism of Conservative social policies. Same sex marriage and abortion policy dominated headlines during this week; the following week saw the re-emergence of accountability. So while weeks one and two focused primarily on

the parties' policy proposals, subsequent weeks shifted to reflect the tone of partisan attacks — the Liberals discussing (potential) Conservative social policies, and the Conservatives (with help from other parties) focusing on recent Liberal accountability scandals.

This is apparent if we look at the relative salience of issues in isolation. Note that figure 1 shows declining issue coverage in the latter half of the campaign, so that the issues tracked in figure 2 actually make up a declining share of total election coverage. Overall, then, the issues gap in the campaign was the product of the replacement of party proposals with party attacks, and the more general decline in both forms of issue coverage in the final weeks of the campaign. Policy issues did play a role in the campaign, but that role was limited to start with, and increasingly limited over time.

The Observatory's coding grid included the first three political parties and the first three party leaders' names mentioned in each article. In addition, each party and name was coded for tone — positive, negative or neutral. The decision rule was that

unless the mention was obviously and intentionally positive or negative, a mention was neutral. For instance, reporting a Harper speech in which the Conservative leader objected to or attacked something about Paul Martin was considered neutral — just reporting the news. Reporting that speech and using it to further discuss Martin's failings was considered negative, however.

The overall result was that mentions in news stories were predominantly neutral, and mentions in editorial and opinion pieces were mainly negative or positive. To the extent that there was bias in news coverage, it remained relatively slight. Not unsurprisingly, opinions were more frequently expressed in the editorial pages.

Figure 3 shows results for "net coverage" (percent positive mentions minus percent negative mentions) across newspapers. The general trend is evident — in every paper, the proportion of positive or negative coverage was much greater in opinion pieces than in news stories. There are significant differences across newspapers, however — and

in several cases the bias evident in opinion pieces seemed to seep into news coverage. This was noted in the coding of the *Calgary Herald*, and to some extent of the *Toronto Star*. The *National Post* published a number of pro-Conservative editorials, but news coverage appeared relatively neutral. However, it is not insignificant that of the seven dailies tracked by the Observatory, the *Post* is the only newspaper that printed more opinion pieces about the election (212) than news stories (151). This ratio of news to opinion was the inverse of what we noted in the remaining six newspapers in our sample. Each of the other papers ran substantially more news articles than opinion pieces. Given the dominance of opinion in its pages, the contents of the *Post* were consequently relatively pro-Conservative.

The issue of media bias is seldom hotter than during an election campaign, although the data we collected speak to this issue only in part. The trends identified here reflect the volume of negative or positive coverage of parties during the campaign — whether they reflect *bias* is another matter, however. While the word “bias” has negative connotations, partisan differences across newspapers can be seen to represent a healthy diversity of opinion among media outlets. (Though note that this diversity argument is dependent on there being a plurality of newspapers within each regional market.) In any case, we make no claims of bias here. We do note, however, that differences in the tone of news coverage do exist across newspapers, and — where trends in tone are evident — these trends do tend to match the partisanship reflected in editorial and opinion pieces.

More important still is the evolution in the tone of coverage over

the course of the campaign. Figures 4 and 5 show “net coverage” measures for each of the major parties and leaders throughout the campaign. Most notable in figure 5 are the punctuations in the series around the time of the leaders’ debates. Following the French language debate on June 14, Gilles Duceppe’s “net coverage” (percent positive mentions minus percent

sake of visual clarity, figures 4 and 5 show five-day averages rather than daily figures; these punctuations are consequently smoothed somewhat.)

These trends continued in the press coverage of the June 15 English-language debate, enhanced by an increase in horserace coverage from 50 percent to 60 percent of all election articles during the same week. Duceppe’s coverage remained positive;

How were other parties reacting to the Martin campaign? These were the questions that dominated coverage — coverage of a campaign that was essentially about Martin winning or losing. That changed with the release of the Ipsos poll at the beginning of the second week, a poll suggesting that the Conservatives were making considerable gains in Ontario. Media discussion of minority governments consequently increased, as did coverage of Harper. The focus of campaign coverage widened somewhat, primarily in reaction to public opinion polls.

negative mentions) increased from 0 to +15. The Bloc Québécois leader was clearly the winner, at least where tone of news coverage is the measure. The other beneficiary of the French-language debate was Liberal leader Paul Martin, whose net tone moved up almost as much, albeit starting at a much lower point (-12 to 0). Conservative leader Stephen Harper’s coverage was essentially unchanged while NDP leader Jack Layton’s net tone slid from -8 to -10. (Note that, for the

Harper’s coverage was generally neutral; Layton’s coverage was slightly more negative; and Martin’s net tone continued to rise. In fact, the Wednesday following the debates was the first time since the campaign began that Martin’s coverage was positive rather than negative. As far as media were concerned, the Liberal leader was in ascendancy while Harper and Layton were falling.

This changed dramatically the next day. Coverage of leaders on

FIGURE 4. NET COVERAGE FOR PARTIES OVER THE CAMPAIGN

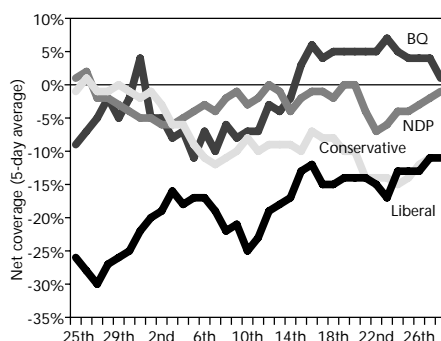
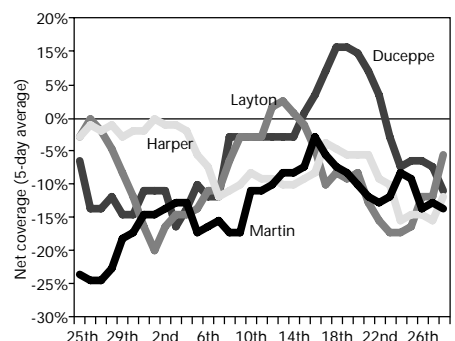


FIGURE 5. NET COVERAGE FOR LEADERS OVER THE CAMPAIGN



Thursday, June 17 returned almost to the way it was before the debates. In particular, this meant a sharp drop in the tone of Martin's mentions while his adversaries improved substantially.

Why did this happen? We suggest that the Ipsos poll, released 24 hours

Paul Martin first. In the second and third weeks, the proportion of Martin's first mentions in election articles dropped to 44 and then 32 percent. Over the same period, Harper's portion of first mentions moved from 19 percent in week one,

challenging for Harper and the Conservatives. The Conservatives appeared to stall in the polls, and the party made several missteps. First, the release of strongly worded statements linking Martin with lax child pornography laws caused a stir, and second, the Conservatives' controversial plans for Air Canada became public. Harper's decline in first mentions and tone of coverage (see figure 5) reflected these mis-steps.

In short, and contrary to what many observers and pundits have charged, the relative absence of policy issues was not primarily the fault of the media. If the campaign lacked in substance, it appears here as though the parties should take a good share of the responsibility. After a first week of substantive issues, attention turned away from the policies that parties stood for, and toward the issues that made other parties look bad. There was little policy discussion late in campaign. These trends were the consequence of party strategies.

The picture that emerges from coverage of leaders, parties and issues is one in which media were following much

after the English-language debate, was critical. The poll showed that voters did not share media assessments of leader performance — voters were relatively less impressed with Martin, and more approving of Harper. Journalists appear to have corrected their initial impressions in light of public opinion.

to 37 percent in week two, to 49 percent in week three.

The trend reflects a change in the way in which the election was being framed. For the first week, the campaign was essentially about Paul Martin and the Liberal Party. Would Martin be able to deal with the sponsorship scandal? What were his major policies? How were other parties reacting to the Martin campaign? These were the questions that dominated coverage — coverage of a campaign that was essentially about Martin winning or losing.

more than leading. Most of the dynamics in figures 1 through 6 can be explained by a combination of party-driven campaign events and shifts in public opinion that in each case preceded shifts in media coverage.

Trends in issue coverage can be explained in large part by party press conferences and releases. The prominence of health care in week three followed the Liberal Party's health policy statements the preceding Friday. The rise in coverage on taxes similarly followed the Conservative Party's policy statements on the same day. Social housing rose in prominence due to an angry attack by the NDP's Jack Layton. And the salience of government accountability was directly linked to Conservative, NDP and BQ press releases in the first part, and the latter half, of the campaign. Indeed, there were almost no trends in issue coverage that were not the product of party communications.

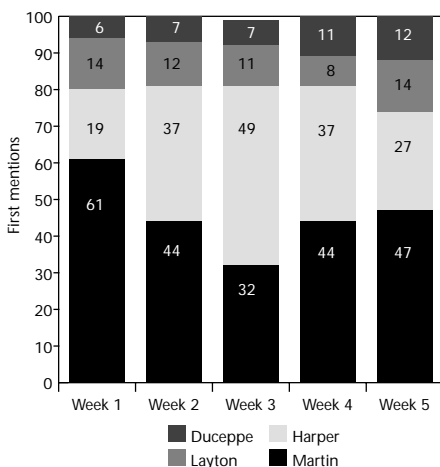
Another opinion-driven shift in media content is apparent in the series tracking the order of party and leader mentions in articles. In the first week of the campaign, 61 percent of these articles mentioned

That changed with the release of the Ipsos poll at the beginning of the second week, a poll suggesting that the Conservatives were making considerable gains in Ontario. Media discussion of minority governments consequently increased, as did coverage of Harper. The focus of campaign coverage widened somewhat, primarily in reaction to public opinion polls.

Trends in story first mentions reversed in the second half of the 2004 campaign. Martin's share of first mentions increased by 12 percent from week three to week four and a further 4 percent going into week five. Harper's first mentions tapered off by about the same amounts. These final two weeks were

Coverage of leaders and parties was not very different. We have already outlined the way in which coverage appears to have adjusted to opinion following the debate — again, a story of following rather than leading. And this was the only really serious shift in tone during the cam-

FIGURE 6. FIRST MENTIONS FOR LEADERS (%)



paign. Where first mentions are concerned, the shift from Martin- to Harper-focused coverage was largely the consequence of public opinion

about an election, however, and the saving grace in 2004 was the tight race between the Liberals and Conservatives. This was the first

munications accordingly — *expectations* about media performance may therefore affect campaigns. These data cannot reveal how parties adjusted strategy to appeal to media. The relative culpability of parties and media for the 2004 campaign is consequently perhaps not easy to attribute.

The saving grace in 2004 was the tight race between the Liberals and Conservatives. This was the first election since 1988 for which the outcome was uncertain, and one of the few that could reasonably fuel speculation about the intricacies of a minority government. The horserace, it turned out, was one of the very few elements of this campaign that was interesting. It is no wonder that the media seized on this.

Our data are clear where prominence, tone and temporal precedence are concerned, however. The 2004 campaign was

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dominated by horserace over issue coverage, and even issue coverage focused increasingly on partisan attacks over substantive policy proposals. Negative coverage dominated positive coverage, particularly for Martin and the Liberal party. And when shifts in coverage occurred, these appear to have been driven by parties and public opinion rather than proactive journalists. This is important for future discussions about the role of media in election communication, the possible func-

There are, then, relatively few shifts in coverage over the campaign that were not relatively clearly precipitated by campaign events or public opinion. The predominant role of media in the 2004 campaign, accordingly, seems to have been reflecting rather than leading the campaign. We do not suggest here that this is either good or bad. We do suggest that it has important implications for why there was a lack of substantive issue content in the 2004 campaign.

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In short, and contrary to what many observers and pundits have charged, the relative absence of policy issues was not primarily the fault of the media. If the campaign lacked in substance, it appears here as though the parties should take a good share of the responsibility. After a first week of substantive issues, attention turned away from the policies that parties stood for, and toward the issues that made other parties look bad. There was little policy discussion late in campaign. These trends were the consequence of party strategies.

Admittedly, conclusions about responsibility for the relative lack of issue coverage must also consider the parties' expectations of media going into the campaign. Who is winning and who is losing; which leaders deal "knockout punches" in debates; and who can be expected to win the big prize on election night are all straightforward, entertaining, and easy to package in three hundred words or less. Party strategists likely adjust com-

tions of a more proactive "public journalism," and the behaviour of parties in Canadian elections.

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Newspapers do have to write