

## Consumer Demand for Election News: The Horserace Sells\*

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\*Prepared for Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, August 30, 2002. We acknowledge the generous financial support of the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Hoover Institution, and the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society.

## Abstract

Reports on the state of the horserace and analysis of the candidates' strategies are pervasive themes in news coverage of campaigns. Various explanations have been suggested for the dominance of strategy-oriented over hard news. The most frequently identified factors are the length of the modern campaign, the built-in conflict between journalists and campaign operatives, and the pressures of the marketplace. This paper provides a test of the market hypothesis. Given access to a wide variety of news reports about the presidential campaign in the weeks immediately preceding the 2000 election, we find that voters were drawn to reports on the horserace and strategy. Strategy reports proved far more popular than reports about the issues. Although media organizations stand to profit, the overproduction of horserace news takes a toll on the political commons. Our results indicate that exposure to this genre of campaign news contributed to increased cynicism about the candidates and the electoral process itself.

It would come as no surprise to even the most casual follower of the news that media coverage of political campaigns focuses predominantly on “horserace” aspects and gives much less attention to coverage of substantive issues, policy platforms or the credentials of the candidates. Scholars who have analyzed the content and form of election news are in agreement: the evidence is consistent and unequivocal that the media invariably highlight the horserace and strategic aspects of campaigns at the expense of providing meaningful information about policy and governance. Reports on the latest polls or behind-the-scenes-efforts to improve the candidates’ electoral prospects far outnumber reports on the candidates’ worldviews, policy pledges, or previous records of decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

What may come as a surprise, however, even to the politically sophisticated, is that this was not always so. The emergence of the horserace as the dominant story in media campaign coverage is actually a fairly recent phenomenon, postdating the arrival of the television-based media regime. Thirty years ago, news reports concerning matters of policy and governance held their own with reports on the conduct of the campaign (Patterson, 1993, pp. 66-70; Anderson and Thorson, 1989). But by 1992, the ratio of “strategic” to policy-oriented news reports was 8 to 1 (Patterson, 1993, p.74). As Cappella and Jamieson point out, the Seventies and Eighties were a time of “fundamental change in the distribution of media coverage from issue-based stories to ones that emphasize who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of

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<sup>1</sup>The extensive literature on campaign news encompasses major national (although mainly presidential) campaigns since 1960 and represents a wide variety of news sources from wire services to network news. Major contributions would include Hofstetter, 1976; Clarke and Evans, 1983; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Hallin, 1983; Brady and Johnston, 1987; Andersen and Thorson, 1989; Patterson, 1993).

campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead” (1997, p. 33). Today, by any standard, reports on the state of the horserace and analysis of the candidates’ strategies are pervasive themes in news coverage of campaigns.

Various explanations have been suggested for the trend in the direction of strategy-oriented news. The most frequently identified factors are the length of the modern campaign, the built-in conflict between journalists and campaign operatives, and the pressures of the marketplace. This paper provides the first test of the market hypothesis. Given access to a wide variety of news reports about the presidential campaign in the weeks immediately preceding the 2000 election, we find that voters were drawn to reports on the horserace and strategy. Although media organizations stand to profit, the overproduction of horserace news takes a toll on the political commons. Our results indicate that exposure to this genre of campaign news contributed to increased cynicism about the candidates and the electoral process itself.

This paper will proceed by first summarizing the major explanations that have been offered for the rise of horserace-based journalism. Then we will single out the market explanation for analysis and describe our method for examining consumer demand. Second, we present evidence showing that people are attracted to news about the horserace. Third, we describe the audience profile for horserace and other genres of campaign news. Finally, we demonstrate that by catering to consumer preferences, the media are contributing to increased political cynicism. In closing, we consider the implications of these findings for the practice of campaign journalism.

## Rampaging “Horseracism”

The dominance of “horseracism” in election news is not just a question of broadcast minutes devoted to polling. Rather, the journalistic reliance on the “strategy frame” (Patterson, 1993) now encompasses an overarching theory of the candidates as strategic gamesmen, each trying to neutralize or overcome the opponent’s moves. The burning question for the media today is not merely “who’s ahead” but “why”?

In addressing the latter question, the tenor of campaign news has shifted away from its traditional, essentially descriptive mode toward a more interpretive and analytic approach. The older, descriptive mode consisted in significant part of reporting the events of the day, often including verbatim reports of significant amounts of candidate speech. The newer, analytic journalism also reports on daily events, but in a much different way. The focus is less on presenting the position or message that a candidate has staked out and more on using the event as a means of divining the candidates’ motives and tactics. The content of news reports has changed greatly: because the focus is no longer genuinely on the candidates’ positions, it is increasingly rare for reporting to include excerpts of the candidates in their own words. A corollary is that the major news sources are no longer the candidates themselves, but a coterie of “experts” who provide the necessary analysis of such questions as why Al Gore went to his opponent’s home state and appeared before a predominantly Hispanic audience. The disappearance of candidates’ voices from daily news coverage of the campaign is striking; in 1968, a viewer of network news could listen to the opposing candidates for a total of nearly two minutes minute each day. By 2000, the daily (total) sound bite was twelve seconds (Hess, 2000; Hallin, 1983; Media Monitor, 2000). In the case of network news, the time

devoted to analysts' voices outweighed time devoted to the candidates' voices by a factor of 7 to 1 (Lichter, 2001).

What accounts for the near-demise of descriptive journalism? Whose interests are being served by the shift in approach?

### Why Interpretive Journalism?

The rise of interpretive journalism has been attributed variously to the length of modern campaigns, in which "current" information is perceived as more interesting than reaffirmation of old policy stands; the logistical practicalities of publishing news; professional aspirations of journalists to serve the public better; and the pressures of a competitive marketplace (which is the focus of this paper).

In the context of a yearlong campaign, a candidate articulates his position on many important issues at the outset. Afterwards, unless the candidate undergoes a conversion, these positions lack newsworthiness on a daily basis. But there is a daily need for new material. The latest trial heat poll is *new* news, unlike the candidates' position papers on national defense or the environment. Analysis of the horserace provides reporters with the key ingredients of newsworthiness -- currency and novelty -- whereas analysis of the candidates' competing policy visions is stale and repetitive. Unlike most aspects of the campaign, which are stage-managed and predictable, the horserace story often strays from the script, thus providing additional daily news value.

Another practical incentive favoring interpretive news content is the proliferation of polling through telephone interviewing (Traugott and Lavrakas 2000). The networks and most other major news outlets either maintain an independent polling operation or work closely with an established polling organization. That allows them to cover the

state of the horserace quickly and efficiently. Journalists have become fluent in the use of survey data. They are also quite adept at using such data to analyze the strategic moves of candidates during the campaign. Plus, a poll-based story on the campaign has a more scientific touch than a story relying on self-serving observations of campaign operatives.

At a more lofty level, interpretive journalism is a direct outgrowth of the inherently adversarial relationship between reporters and campaigns (see Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, 1994; Zaller, 2002). More specifically, the horserace story -- and related analysis -- has evolved as a journalistic response to candidate manipulation of the news. In every election the candidates compete to present a compelling “story line,” with each campaign attempting to use news outlets for partisan gain. A reporter who accepts a candidate’s account at face value is probably being manipulated. A classic example is the Republican-sponsored “Willie Horton” ad, which became front-page news across the country in 1988, inextricably linking Michael Dukakis with prison furlough programs. Journalists have subsequently learned to resist candidates’ attempts at impression management by injecting their own accounts of candidate behavior into the news. Thus, they respond to campaign ads more combatively; scrutinizing the content for evidence of inaccuracy or exaggeration. In fact, the development of an entirely new genre of journalism -- the “ad-watch” (see Jamieson, 1992) -- is symptomatic of journalists’ drive for autonomy and objectivity in the face of the candidates’ efforts at media management.

Finally, market forces, which inexorably demand that news organizations view their product as just another means of obtaining advertising revenue, require that the news be presented in a format that has significant entertainment and interest value -- even

though these stories may have doubtful civic or educational relevance (Kalb, 1998). Although we know of no relevant evidence concerning consumer demand for campaign news in general or particular genres of campaign news, the conventional wisdom among industry insiders is that the uncertainty and suspense associated with the depiction of the candidates as strategic players attempting to manipulate voters is more likely to catch and hold the audience's attention than other, more "substantive" aspects of the campaign (see Patterson, 1993).<sup>2</sup> If sporting events attract huge audiences, why not frame elections as contests between political athletes? Given the intensely competitive marketplace, it is axiomatic that news organizations produce ever-increasing amounts of horserace news; nothing less than their survival is at stake.

Is the conventional wisdom valid? Given the choice between issue-based and strategy-based news, do people typically turn to the latter? In this paper we test the market-based explanation for the rise of horserace and strategy news by assessing voters' consumption of news during the 2000 presidential campaign. We compiled a broad selection of news reports about the campaign on a multimedia CD Rom, which was made available (free of cost) to a representative sample of voters shortly before the election. We then tracked these voters' actual use of the CD. Based on this behavioral evidence, we find that strategy stories do in fact elicit greater public attention than policy stories. Above and beyond standard attributes of news consumers (e.g. their education and level of interest in politics), the reputation of the news source, or the particular format of presentation (broadcast versus print), we find that campaign strategy sells.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this assumes a reasonably competitive race between the major candidates.



After documenting the demand for campaign news, we explore the question of how the satisfaction of that demand affects some key political attitudes. We merge the CD usage data with survey measures of political attitudes and find that higher rates of exposure to horserace and strategy news contribute to greater levels of political cynicism. While increased production of strategy-oriented news may strengthen a news organization's market share, it seems to diminish public confidence in the electoral process.

### Design and Layout of the Media CD

The 530 page CD was organized into four thematic chapters. Each chapter was preceded by a subject matter index, with clickable headings (e.g. "Gore Family Background" in the chapter on the candidates). The index page provided an overview and navigational guide to the entire chapter, enabling readers to proceed directly to news reports of interest without having to scroll through other material. CD users could also search for information on their own initiative, using a keyword-based search process.<sup>3</sup>

The 206 news reports included in the CD covered the period from the Iowa caucuses through mid-October. The great majority of reports (184) were drawn from newspapers ranging from high prestige sources including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, to the less prestigious *New York Post*. Twenty-two of the reports were

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<sup>3</sup> The CD reader software, which was designed by Nightkitchen.com, required no technical expertise to install (apart from the ability to place the CD in the appropriate drive). In addition to providing audio and video material, the software included several user-friendly "interactive" features. Users could highlight text, post sticky notes in the margins, and dog-ear pages of particular interest.

taken from broadcast outlets including CNN, Fox News, and CNBC.<sup>4</sup> These reports could be played directly from their location (by simply clicking the “play” button), or could be “detached” from the page so as to make it possible to scroll through other pages of the CD while listening to the audio or video.

The subject matter coverage provided by the news reports was organized into four chapters.<sup>5</sup> The opening chapter (pp. 5-97) introduced readers to the two major candidates, providing reports on their family background, career experience and, in the closing section, their contrasting personas. This “character” section featured reports on Gore’s efforts to inoculate himself from the Lewinsky scandal and Bush’s attempts to repudiate allegations of drug use.

Chapter 2 (pp. 99-245) was designed to represent “substantive” news coverage and consisted of reports on the candidates’ issue agendas and policy preferences. Beginning with a general comparison of the candidates on a left-right continuum, the chapter then proceeded on an issue-by-issue basis with most of the reports focusing on the economy, education, social security, healthcare, crime, and foreign policy.

Chapter 3 (pp. 247-355) provided a brief history of each candidate’s “road to the nomination.” It included reports on the Bradley and McCain primary challenges and their eventual withdrawal from the race. Other stories identified the key policy and campaign advisors (e.g. “the cult of Condi,” “Daley to lead Gore campaign”) on either side. Finally, the modal report in this chapter described events at the nominating conventions (e.g. “Bush taps Cheney to join ticket,” “When a kiss isn’t just a kiss”).

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<sup>4</sup> Of these, six were taken from televised reports and 16 from radio news programs. In the case of these reports, CD users were also provided with the transcript of the soundtrack.

<sup>5</sup> The CD is available online at <http://pcl.stanford.edu/>

The fourth and final chapter (pp. 357-534) represented the mix of strategy and horserace stories that has come to so dominate campaign news. The principal themes included the campaigns' efforts to raise funds and win endorsements, analysis of each candidate's strategy including the selection of advertising material (e.g. "RATS Trap Snags Bush"), advertising tone (who would "go negative" and why), and efforts to target particular states or blocs of voters. The chapter ended with a series of reports on "Who's leading in the polls" including recent trial heats, public evaluations of the candidates' personal qualities (e.g. "Voters Rate Bush, Gore Even on Honesty") and their positions on the issues (e.g. "Education Voters Pose a Tough Test").

All told, the horserace and strategy chapter accounted for 27 percent of the compilation, as did the chapter covering the issues. Reports about the conventions and earlier campaign events represented 20 percent of the material, and the candidate-oriented opening chapter provided the remaining 16 percent. This distribution of news content, which features parity between "substantive" (issue-oriented) and strategy-oriented coverage, clearly underestimates the prominence of the latter in most news outlets. In the case of network news coverage of the 2000 campaign, for example, viewers would have encountered more reports featuring the horserace than the issues by a margin of nearly 2:1 (Lichter, 2001, p. 11). On the other hand, our CD was not nearly as substantive in focus as PBS' Newshour, which airs issue-oriented reports over horserace reports by a factor of more than 2:1 (Lichter, 2001, p. 24). Thus, placed in the context of mainstream news sources, the media CD offered a modestly substantive menu of news about the 2000 campaign.

The relative equality of coverage across the candidates, issues, road to the nomination, and horserace/strategy chapters was accomplished by design. In order to gauge consumer preference accurately, it was important to create an “equal opportunity” information environment in which CD users could just as easily encounter news about different aspects of the campaign. Thus, we attempted to equalize (at least roughly) the probability that someone opening a page of the CD at random would encounter news about the horserace, the candidates, or the issues.

It is important to note also that the sequence of chapters and particular reports within each chapter was fixed for all respondents, raising the possibility of placement effects. The fact that the candidate chapter was placed at the beginning of the CD, for instance, may have substantially boosted user attention to this subject matter while topics featured later on may have been overlooked. The analysis described below controls for effects arising from the order of presentation.

### Research Design

Our study was designed to assess consumers’ news preferences in the context of the 2000 presidential campaign. Using a multimedia CD as the medium, we provided a probability sample of “online” American voters with large quantities of news reports about the campaign two weeks before the election. The CD was programmed to enable “usage tracking;” that is, the specific pages that participants accessed, the number of times they used the CD, as well as the length of their CD sessions was recorded on the

user's PC. Participants returned this data to the researchers immediately following the election, along with their responses to a survey of political attitudes.<sup>6</sup>

The CD usage data provide behavioral measures of news consumption. The advantages of behavioral indicators over standard survey self-reports are well known. Errors of memory and self-presentation biases tend to inflate recall of exposure to news sources or particular news stories (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1996 for illustrative evidence). Not only are usage indicators more accurate, their inclusion imposed no methodological tradeoffs. The recording process was non-reactive as respondents used the CD at their own discretion, when they chose to, and in the privacy of their home or office. Of course, the design also featured a high level of mundane realism; the stimulus materials were real news reports and exposure occurred at a time when participants would find the information useful -- during the closing stages of the campaign.

### The Sample

The research firm of Knowledge Networks delivered the CD to a randomly chosen sample of adult Americans with home Internet access. Knowledge Networks has solved the thorny problem of selection bias inherent to conventional online surveys (which reach only that proportion of the population that is online) by recruiting a nationwide panel through random-digit telephone sampling. Each member of this panel, which comprises over 150,000 Americans between the ages of 16 and 85, is provided free access to WebTV. In exchange, panelists agree to participate (on a rotation basis) in market and research studies (for further details concerning their sampling framework and

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, we obtained informed consent from the participants concerning our access to the tracking data. We also requested that they not share the CD with other members of the family.

survey methodology see Krosnick & Chang, 2001; Dennis, 2001). Because our study required a greater time commitment than a typical consumer survey, we offered participants an additional incentive of \$10.00.

We drew the sample for the CD study from the Knowledge Networks panel after first screening panelists for home Internet access. We sampled from “online” adults for two reasons. First, we wished to approximate the group of voters who consume news online. Second, Internet access was necessary for electronic transmission of the CD usage data back to Knowledge Networks.

466 members of the Knowledge Networks panel with Internet access, selected at random, were mailed the media CD on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, approximately two weeks before the election. Respondents were informed that the CD was an educational initiative of Stanford University, that they were free to use the CD as they saw fit, and that their usage was to be recorded. They then read and signed the informed consent form.

Over the next two weeks participants used the CD. Immediately following the election, Knowledge Networks administered our posttest survey and provided instructions concerning the return of the CD usage data. We received 207 completed surveys, but a few respondents were either unable to locate their CD usage data, or mistakenly transmitted some other file. Our analysis is limited to the 187 participants who returned the tracking data.

### Analysis and Results

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, we test the market hypothesis, which predicts that horserace or strategy new stories elicit greater interest than issue, event, or candidate-centered reports, using aggregate, time-series methods. Our indicator of

interest is the total number of clicks aimed at particular pages, i.e. page visits. After detrending the page visit series and correcting for serial dependence (using a logarithmic function with first-order autoregression), we examine page visits in relation to news content. Each page was coded according to chapter topic, subchapter topic, and a variety of other attributes (type of source, multimedia vs. text, etc.) After accounting for the trend, we find that horserace and strategy reports received much higher levels of attention than reports on other aspects of the election.

The next phase of the analysis considers the demand for campaign news at the individual level. We identify specific audiences in terms of their socio-economic background,<sup>7</sup> self-reported use of conventional and online news sources,<sup>8</sup> political affiliation and engagement,<sup>9</sup> and finally, their enthusiasm for media-based campaigns. In

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<sup>7</sup> These include gender, ethnicity, education, income, urban-rural residence, region, and religion.

<sup>8</sup> We constructed indices of exposure to print (daily newspapers and weekly news magazines) and broadcast (local and network) news. Frequency of exposure ranged from “almost every day” to “hardly ever.” In addition, we asked respondents whether they had encountered campaign information on the Web, their frequency of exposure to news organizations’ websites, and their general use of the WWW. These three responses were combined into an index of Web access. We also assessed perceptions of the news media as credible by asking participants to rate news reports they had encountered about the 2000 election as “informative,” “trustworthy,” “irrelevant,” and “trivial.” After reflecting the negatively valenced items, responses were summed to form an index of credibility (Coefficient Alpha = .566).

<sup>9</sup> We asked participants about their party identification (Did they generally consider themselves Democrats, Republicans, Independents, or something else?) and ideology (Generally speaking, do you describe yourself as a liberal or conservative on political issues?) As a measure of participation, we counted the number of affirmative responses to questions asking whether they had displayed a campaign sticker/button, talked to someone about registering to vote, attended a political meeting or rally, or worked for one of the parties/candidates. We also asked if they belonged to any civic or social organizations. Last, we created an index of interest in the campaign reflecting how often respondents followed public affairs, how often they discussed politics, and how much

particular, we consider political cynicism (trust in politicians) and both facets of political efficacy -- assessments of the self as capable of wielding electoral influence (“internal” efficacy) and evaluations of the responsiveness of electoral institutions to popular will (“external” efficacy) -- as key attitudinal antecedents of the demand for campaign news.<sup>10</sup> In essence, we anticipate greater interest in campaign news among those who see media politics as a game worth playing. In addition to these generic or process-oriented attitudes, we considered respondents’ evaluations of the two major candidates as a potential motive for news consumption. Perhaps voters with particularly strong feelings about Al Gore and George W. Bush -- either pro or con -- found the news more engaging.<sup>11</sup>

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they cared about the outcome of the election. This index ranged from 0 to 3 (Coefficient Alpha = .691).

<sup>10</sup> The component items for the index of political cynicism were as follows: (1) In your opinion, how many of the people running the government are crooked (quite a few-hardly any)? (2) How much tax money do you think the people in government waste (a lot-don’t waste very much)? (3) How often would you say candidates running for Congress and the presidency make promises they have no intention of keeping (always-never)? Responses were summed and the resulting scale ranged from 0 to 5 (Coefficient Alpha = .539). In the case of external efficacy, we used four items. (1) Some people say it makes a difference who is in power. Others say that it doesn’t make a difference who is in power. What do you think (makes a difference-doesn’t make a difference)? (2) Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won’t make any difference to what happens. What do you think (won’t make a difference-can make a difference)? (3) Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly. What do you think (agree-disagree)? (4) Parties are only interested in people’s votes but not their opinions (agree-disagree). Index scores (the sum of the individual responses) ranged from 0 to 2 and Coefficient Alpha was .601. Finally, three items were used to measure internal efficacy. (1) People like me don’t have any say about what the government does (agree-disagree). (2) Public officials don’t care much what people like me think (agree-disagree). (3) Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on (agree-disagree). The index ranged from 0 to 4 with an Alpha value of .664.

<sup>11</sup> We asked participants to rate the applicability of the terms “sincere,” “strong leader,” and “likable” to each candidate. After summing the three ratings, we then created a



It is worth noting that our analysis of audience characteristics controls for the number of discrete CD sessions. Most participants used the CD only once or twice, but some were sufficiently motivated to use it on six different days.<sup>12</sup> By taking into account the number of sessions, our analysis identifies differences in per session patterns of usage. Finally, we also controlled for subjective evaluations of the CD; participants who rated the CD as personally useful were generally more active users.

In the next step of the individual-level analysis, we disaggregated overall CD use into individual chapter constituents in order to compare the composition of the news audience across content categories. Naturally, we are especially interested in the make-up of the audience for horserace and strategy-oriented news. We find that the audiences for substantive and horserace news are dissimilar. Of particular interest, whereas horserace news draws the more cynical quarters of the public, news about the candidates is more appealing to the less cynical minded.

Finally, we attempt to tease out the effects of exposure to horserace and strategy-oriented news on public evaluations of campaigns. Because horserace news sells well among the cynical, we treat use of the horserace chapter as endogenous to political cynicism. The results of this two-stage analysis confirm that greater exposure to strategy

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measure of opinion extremity or intensity by collapsing respondents with extreme ratings (respondents with scores of 0 or 3 were assigned a score of 1, all others were scored as 0). This dichotomy was then summed across the candidates. A score of 0 would indicate ambivalence toward both candidates, while a score of two would indicate the opposite.

<sup>12</sup> The relationship between the number of sessions and page visits was weakly positive ( $r = .3$ ), reflecting considerable variation in the length and extent of individual sessions. We suspect that the session variable reflects differences in participants' time availability or opportunity costs of CD use.

and horserace news boosts political cynicism and weakens confidence in the electoral process.

### Aggregate Time Series Analysis of CD Use

We begin by presenting the aggregate-level popularity of individual pages. Figure 1 plots the number of visits to each page. The most popular pages were those at the very beginning of the CD. From the initial peak, the trend moved sharply downward. The level of visits leveled off towards the end of Chapter 1, remained more-or less consistent through Chapters 2 and 3 and then reversed direction by moving upward at Chapter 4.

(Figure 1 here)

The pattern in Figure 1 suggests strong similarities between CD and web browsing behavior. Studies of web browsing also demonstrate sharply diminishing trends (Huberman and Adamic, 2000; Huberman et al. 1998, Montgomery and Faloutsos 2000); the frequency of visits to websites exhibits a power law,  $y=x^a$ , with a slope of close to  $-1.0$ . In other words, small values of X vary with extremely high occurrences of Y, and vice-versa. Few browsers visit the great majority of websites, most of them congregating at relatively few sites.

The CD visits fit the web browsing model in the sense that the first few pages attracted the most visits. The layout of the CD, with its chronological chapter structure and page numbering, encouraged users to commence browsing at the beginning, just if they were reading a book. They continued until they lost interest or became fatigued. Given their general disinterest in politics, many stopped sooner rather than later. Very few read all the way to the final page. Hence the order of placement within the CD

biases the raw popularity of subject matter material. Topics encountered early appear more popular only because virtually everybody stumbled across them at the outset. Topics positioned later appear less popular because most of the uninterested, “short distance” users never encountered them. In sum, Figure 1 clearly confirms the existence of a placement-induced trend. An unbiased estimate of the popularity of CD topics must correct for it. What is its shape?

(Figure 2 here)

Figure 2 applies a logarithmic trend function to the aggregate page visit series. As in the case of the power law, attention declines in systematic non-linear fashion, but the logarithmic trend (where only page number is logged) provides a closer fit ( $R^2 = .820$ ) than the power law ( $R^2 = .751$ ). There can be no doubt but that what appears early in the CD commands more attention just because it catches more users’ attention, not because it is intrinsically more popular. Topics featured later are disadvantaged because many users quit before they have a chance to peruse them. As one might expect, this trend was most pronounced during users’ first session with the CD. In the case of users with multiple sessions, who, presumably, have gained greater familiarity with the navigational features of the CD, the trend abated.<sup>13</sup>

(Figure 3 here)

The adjustment for the trend produces a markedly different distribution of page visits. As shown in Figure 3, which charts the deviations from the trend line, some topics now register relatively low levels of popularity despite their appearance early in the CD.

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<sup>13</sup> We applied the logarithmic function to two sets of page visits: those generated from single session users and those produced from multiple sessions.

Conversely, others, which happened to be placed later, have an elevated status. The last chapter of the CD -- dealing with the strategy and horserace -- is now near the top in usage, while the chapter on the issues (Chapter 2) has dropped to the bottom. The opening chapter on the candidates retains its popularity, but with a high degree of variance that was masked in the raw count.

We turn next to a multivariate analysis of the trend-adjusted page visits. Our analysis, presented in Table 1, enters the various chapters as binary variables in a regression that also captures whatever page-visit dynamic remains after the removal of the logarithmic trend. Since all but one of the four binary variables can be entered into an estimation of this sort, we exclude the “issues” chapter. An estimate for its popularity can be derived from the constant term in the equation. The coefficients for the other three chapters included in the equation represent deviations from that baseline.

(Table 1 here)

The results in Table 1 show that the strategy-horserace chapter was the most popular with an adjusted count of about 19 visits, which is significant beyond any doubt. The candidates chapter was a close second with an adjusted count that was subject to a slightly larger standard error. Chapter 3 registered a sufficiently low adjusted page visit score to be indistinguishable from zero, but was nevertheless surpassed in its invisibility by Chapter 2. As indicated by the constant term, exposure to Chapter 2 was not merely low, but in the negative range! How can a count of visits to this chapter yield a negative result? However unappealing news coverage of issues might be, some users of the CD did visit Chapter 2. The constant tells us that whatever that number was, it was far below the number of visits to the other chapters once the placement-induced trend in visits was

removed. In effect, the popularity of both the horserace-strategy and candidate chapters vastly exceeded the popularity of the issues chapter.

The estimates in Table 1 adjusted not only for the declining trend of page visits, but also for the serial pattern of visits. When dealing with a sequentially organized document, a visit to any particular page is not an independent event. Instead, the chances are high that exposure to any given page depends on exposure to the previous page. This is a classic case of autocorrelation, which should not be confused with the downward trend of visits, which merely indicates that users stop reading quite soon after beginning, with fewer and fewer going all the way. The adjustment for trend does not eliminate the serial behavior of those who keep at it. The specific form of such behavior follows a first-order autoregressive process with a weight of around .7. The parameters for chapter popularity were estimated with that behavior held constant.

We also controlled for the credibility of the news source and the format of the news report. Users may be attracted to news reports from more prestigious sources or to reports that feature audio or video.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the salience of the strategy-horserace and candidate chapters owes more to greater credibility of the sources from which that material was taken than the subject matter. Similarly, it may be the case that these chapters employed jazzier and livelier designs. The second column of results addresses those points. The control for source credibility and multimedia presentation leaves the parameter estimates for chapter popularity practically unchanged. The popularity of the strategy and candidate chapters was unaffected. By itself, the effects of source credibility

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<sup>14</sup> We scored credibility as a binary variable with high credibility sources consisting of the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, the three major networks, and *USA Today*.

proved negligible. That may be less surprising than it seems. After all, users of the CD did not have advance notice of the credibility of a particular news report before visiting it.

The “sound and light” associated with the presentation did make a substantial difference to page popularity. Multimedia pages dominated text-only pages in attention. However, controlling for the number of multimedia pages did little to affect the high standing of the horserace-strategy and candidate chapters.

To this point we have examined use of the CD in relation to the general themes of each chapter. Analysis at the chapter level, however, may mask important differences in attention within each chapter. Which sections of the horserace chapter proved especially appealing? Perhaps news coverage of some particular issue did attract users, who then ignored everything else in that chapter. We focused our attention on the fourteen subchapters, entering them as binary variables into an equation predicting page visits.<sup>15</sup> These results are presented in Table 2.

(Table 2 here)

Once again, we have adjusted the tally of visits for both the logarithmic trend and the serial dynamic in CD browsing. The first column in Table 2 confirms the hypothesis that the horserace aspect of media coverage commanded the highest attention. The trend-adjusted popularity score for this subchapter (41.5) vastly surpassed all others. Next highest was “character” (25.0), followed by another aspect of the candidate chapter, namely, “career highlights” (20.3). The two remaining subchapters in Chapter 4 -- dealing with campaign strategy (16.0) and money (10.7) -- also attracted significant attention.

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<sup>15</sup> The excluded subchapter was from Chapter 2 and focused on “other domestic issues”.

Except for the horserace, campaign strategy, and the candidates' personal and career resumes, little else caught the eye. The remaining subchapters were generally ignored. Issue-oriented coverage consistently failed to capture viewer interest, whether it addressed the economy, education, or foreign policy. The solitary issues subchapter to register a borderline significant response consisted of news reports that contrasted the general ideological posture of the two candidates. None of the elements of Chapter 3, whether they pertained to the campaign teams, the vice presidential nominees, or the national conventions elicited more than a smattering of clicks. Adding the control for source credibility and audiovisual presentation, as can be seen in the second column of results in Table 2, left these findings practically unchanged. All told, the popularity of horserace and candidate-oriented news proved independent of either the credibility of the news source or the liveliness of the presentation.

To summarize the analysis of page visits, once we corrected the page visit data for the appearance of the page within the CD, the most highly rated news reports were those focusing on the strategy-horserace aspects of the campaign, followed by biographical reports on the candidates. News reports on the issues and the nomination process were altogether ignored.

#### Individual-Level Analysis of CD Use

We turn next to identifying the most active users of the CD. Table 3 provides results based on two separate indicators of CD use -- the number of subchapters visited and the logarithm of total page visits.<sup>16</sup> The former measures breadth rather than quantity

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<sup>16</sup> The average number of subchapters visited was 6 with a range of 0 to 14. Total page visits ranged from 0 to 865. We opted for the logarithmic transformation of page visits [ $\ln(1+\text{page visits})$ ] because the distribution exhibited considerable positive skewness

of exposure (as in the case of a respondent who looked at one page in all fourteen subchapters), while the latter taps the sheer number of news reports accessed by the CD user.

(Table 3 here)

Except for involvement in the campaign, CD use was generally uniform across the indicators of socio-economic and political background. Breadth of exposure and the total number of page visits increased significantly among voters with polarized views about Gore and Bush. Political participation and Web activity further encouraged use of the CD. Finally, younger CD users sampled from a greater variety of topical areas and registered greater overall CD use. Greater exposure to the news reports among the young suggests that technological “literacy” provides a sufficient impetus to overcome their distaste for political affairs.

The evidence suggests two patterns in CD use. First, those more engaged by the campaign were more apt to use the CD. In this respect at least, “new” and “old” media converge. Second, new media use is contingent on technological proficiency. In the case of younger voters, new media may entice them to pay attention to the political world.

We turn next to a chapter-by-chapter analysis. The fact that overall exposure to the CD was generally unconstrained by attributes of the audience suggests that the demand for campaign news may be more topical or subject matter-specific. Rather than attempting to read the CD from beginning to end, respondents may have followed their interests to news reports about particular aspects of the campaign. Perhaps people who

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(median=101, mean=166) and heteroskedasticity. Logging the page visits improved the fit of the linear prediction model substantially.



were especially interested in the candidates' personal background spent more time with the news reports in Chapter 1, while others with a more policy bent were drawn instead to Chapter 2. The suspicion that the demand for news is domain-specific was generally confirmed.

We examined the total number of pages visited within each chapter, after first controlling for the total number of page visits in the remaining chapters. In the case of news reports focusing on the personal side of the candidates, for instance, we identified people who looked at these reports more or less extensively, given their exposure to the material presented in the remaining chapters. In considering use of Chapter 1, for example, exposure to Chapters 2-4 provides the baseline. Our analytic strategy was to begin with a 'saturated' equation consisting of the full set of demographic, political, and attitudinal predictors from which we eliminated those that did not meet an inclusion criterion of  $p < .15$ .<sup>17</sup> The resulting best-fitting prediction models for each chapter are shown in Table 4.

(Table 4 here)

The results in Table 4 suggest considerable variability in exposure to Chapter 1. Men and residents of metropolitan areas used Chapter 1 to a lesser degree, as did infrequent Web users. Surprisingly, the effects of partisanship and ideology diverged: while those who identified as liberals or conservatives visited Chapter 1 less frequently, partisans did exactly the opposite. We can only speculate that ideologues found the information about the candidates redundant, whereas partisans, even though they found

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<sup>17</sup> We used the "backwards elimination" stepwise regression procedure in SPSS.

the information just as old, may have scanned the reports nevertheless because of their affect for the candidates.

Enthusiasm for the electoral process provided a further basis for self-selection into the Chapter 1 audience. Attention to candidate-oriented news decreased significantly among those expressing more cynical views about politicians. Apparently, information about the candidates' personas, family background and prior experience turned off the more cynical.

Chapter 2 consisted of news reports detailing the candidates' policy positions. Naturally, we expected that attention to these reports would be heightened among the politically engaged. Several of the observed differences did fit this gradient. The audience for Chapter 2 was disproportionately male, older, partisan and more affluent. On the other hand, issue-oriented news also attracted readers not known for their political zest -- moderates, city dwellers, and people who rely on print media less frequently. Finally, "techies" were conspicuously absent from the audience for issue-oriented news.

Chapter 3, devoted to the earlier stages of the campaign, was accessed least frequently. Perhaps this material was redundant because most respondents had already encountered sufficient information about the nominating conventions and the vice-presidential candidates. The only individuals who deviated from this general indifference were less frequent Web users and those who evaluated news media credibility unfavorably.

Finally, who were the most avid followers of the horserace? As we have already seen, Chapter 4 elicited considerable attention despite its adverse location, especially the very last subchapter on the candidates' standing in the polls. We had expected that the

horserace would attract a mix of sophisticated and naïve voters. Voters with the most at stake in the race -- strong partisans, ideologues, and the politically active -- would be especially drawn to this genre of news with its “insider” accounts of each campaign’s tactics and the candidates’ prospects. But for the typical disengaged voter, news about the state of the race and each candidate’s attempts to outdo the other is akin to the sports section: it satisfies basic curiosity about the eventual outcome and is easily understood without any prior familiarity with the candidates or their positions on the issues. In fact, one of the explanations for the dominance of horserace news may be that it cuts across the spectrum in appeal.

We identified five groups whose use of Chapter 4 exceeded their general CD use. Three represented the more engaged strata of the electorate -- political activists, those who self-identified as liberals or conservatives, and regular users of the print media. Note that these same groups were “underachievers” in the case of Chapters 1 and 2. The effects of cynicism were also reversed; while Chapter 1 attracted the more trusting, Chapter 4 was substantially more popular among the cynics. Clearly, the consumption of strategy-oriented news is endogenous to political cynicism. Finally, urban residents were particularly attentive to the horserace. We are hard pressed to account for this effect, but note once again, that the advantage of urban residents in the case of Chapter 4 corresponds to a significant disadvantage in the consumption of candidate and issue-oriented news.

In general, the analysis of the individual chapters points to distinct audiences for horserace and non-horserace news. Symptomatic of the fluctuating audience for different areas of news coverage is the fact that gender, print media use, Web access, ideology,

partisanship, age and political trust all exerted *opposite* effects across chapters.

Horserace news, while attracting widespread interest from most quarters, proved especially appealing to a mix of political enthusiasts and cynics.

### Does Horserace News Contribute to Voter Cynicism?

A growing body of research (see Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2000; Valentino et al., 2001) attributes widespread public cynicism about governmental and electoral institutions to the explosive growth in news reports that depict the candidates as strategic actors, whose every action “is reduced to a single, simple human motivation -- the desire to win and to take the power that elected office provides” (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, p. 34). Although it is plausible that repeated exposure to this message has the effect of encouraging cynicism, estimation of any such effects must adjust for the reciprocal effects of cynicism on attention to horserace and non-horserace news.

We examined the effects of exposure to the strategy-horserace reports contained in Chapter 4 on our measures of electoral enthusiasm after controlling for exposure to hard news (combined page visits to Chapters 1-3). Exposure to hard news was treated as exogenous to cynicism and efficacy,<sup>18</sup> but exposure to the horserace was considered endogenous. Not only was the index of cynicism a significant predictor of visits to Chapter 4, both measures of efficacy also affected exposure to Chapter 4 inversely, even though their contributions proved statistically non-significant.<sup>19</sup> The results of the two-

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<sup>18</sup> The Hausman test for endogeneity (see Wooldridge, 2000, pp. 483-84) indicated that the sum of page visits to Chapters 1, 2 and 3 could be treated as exogenous to all three attitude measures.

<sup>19</sup> We also computed the Hausman test comparing the ols and 2sls estimates of visits to Chapter 4 on the indices of cynicism, internal efficacy and external efficacy. The p values of the test statistics were sufficiently low ( $p < .25$ ) to warrant the use of two-stage methods.

stage analyses are given in Table 5. For purposes of comparison, we provide both the ordinary least squares and two-stage least squares estimates of the effects of exposure to the horserace chapter.<sup>20</sup>

(Table 5 here)

In all three instances, the effects of exposure to horserace and non-horserace news on electoral attitudes diverged. More frequent use of hard news bolstered confidence in the motives of public officials, the responsiveness of electoral institutions, and even one's own capacity to make a difference. Greater consumption of horserace and strategy news exerted precisely the opposite effect encouraging respondents to malign the motives of public officials, question the value of elections, and deny their own political competence. Note that in all three cases, the effects of exposure to Chapter 4 survived the more stringent specification, in which we took into account the reciprocal influence of cynicism and efficacy. In fact, the two-stage coefficients were only marginally weaker than the ols versions. Overall, these results indicate unequivocally that the content of horserace-strategy news is unflattering to the process; for every additional 50 page visits to Chapter 4, cynicism scores increased by one quarter of a point (representing five percent of the scale width). The magnitude of the effect proved just as large for ratings of internal efficacy, but was weaker in the case of the index of external efficacy.

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<sup>20</sup> As instrumental variables for use of Chapter 4, we took advantage of the layout of the CD. Given the sequential nature of CD use, people who visited the last section of Chapter 3 were also especially likely to use Chapter 4. Our first stage equation for Chapter 4 page visits, accordingly, used visits to Subchapter 3.3, the number of CD sessions and urban residence as predictors. These instruments accounted for 48 percent of the variance in exposure to Chapter 4, but less than one percent of the variance in the cynicism, internal and external efficacy indices.

Given the number of articles and the variety of topics included in Chapter 4, we cannot precisely specify the message underlying these effects. We can say, however, that exposure to reports about the horserace (Subchapter 4-3) accounted for most of the effects noted above. In fact, when we examined trust and efficacy in relation to visits to the individual subchapters, the effects of Chapter 4 were almost entirely attributable to the last subchapter (“Who’s leading in the polls?”).<sup>21</sup> Exposure to poll-related news coverage weakens confidence in the process, but exposure to strategy-related coverage does not.

### Conclusion

Horserace news is widely available for the simple reason that it attracts readers and viewers. Our evidence shows that substantial numbers of readers sought out the news reports on the horserace, even though these reports were located at the end of the CD. After taking into account the longitudinal trend in page visits, horserace stories attracted the most traffic within the CD, even more than “scandal” stories.

The public’s fascination with the horserace aspects of the election does not necessarily mean that people are also taken by media accounts of the latest twists and turns in campaign strategies. Our time series results show that demand for horserace news was more than double that for news reports on campaign strategy. Voters are interested in the question of who will win, but they are much less curious about journalists’ analyses of the fundraising, advertising, and other elements of campaign

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<sup>21</sup> The ols and two-stage coefficients estimating the effects of the “Who’s Leading in the Polls?” subchapter on political cynicism, for example, were  $-.016$  (.006) and  $-.026$  (.014) respectively.

tactics. Nonetheless, voters find news reports on any aspect of campaign strategy more interesting than news coverage of the issues.

Our analysis also indicates that it is news about the horserace *per se* rather than interpretive accounts of candidate strategies that generates cynicism about the electoral process. This result was surprising since the news reports in the horserace section were primarily descriptive: they provided information about public support or opposition to different elements of the two candidacies and did not reflect in any way on the candidates' motives. One might have expected that interpretive accounts, which tend to insinuate or suggest insincerity, would be more likely to fuel voter cynicism. The examples below illustrate the distinction between reports that are primarily descriptive and those that are primarily interpretive:

*Primarily descriptive:* (*L.A. Times*) “Bush's opposition to abortion appeared more likely to help his candidacy than Gore's support of abortion rights will help his. When told that Bush opposes abortion, 27% of respondents say that makes them more likely to vote for him. But only 18% of respondents say Gore's support for legal abortion would make them more likely to vote for him.”

*Primarily interpretive:* (*Washington Post*) “The sudden escalation in rhetoric, both on and off the airwaves, signaled a harsh new phase as the campaign heads into Labor Day weekend. The GOP ad indicates that the Bush campaign has grown sufficiently concerned about Gore pulling even or ahead in the polls to risk criticism with a frontal attack -- despite the obvious contrast to Bush's repeated call for a gentler tone in politics. Just yesterday, Bush said in Louisville that he wanted "to remind the young of America that politics doesn't have to be ugly and mean. It doesn't have to be a system that downgrades people to bring somebody up,” Bush said.

As these examples indicate, the report that we have categorized as “primarily descriptive” was written not in an attempt to debunk or question the official pronouncements of the two campaigns, but rather, to provide some context for the poll results. In contrast, the “primarily interpretive” report (most of which were in the strategy subchapter) explicitly cited poll results as the causes of each candidate's

behavior. Thus, the *Washington Post* attributed the willingness of Governor Bush to break his pledge of a positive campaign to Gore's rising poll numbers. Our point here is that in both manifest content and implication, the reports in the strategy section were much more critical of the candidates than reports on the state of the horserace. Yet, our results show that exposure to horserace news was more apt to generate cynicism than exposure to strategy news.

We are in no position to specify the psychological processing of these different news reports, but will speculate that the often-dismissive tone of the strategy frame invites readers to perceive the news as biased, thus weakening the credibility of the message. On the other hand, the "objectivity" of the horserace reports, coupled with some "chronic" or built-in association between opinion polls and images of politicians and political parties as insincere and self-interested actors, triggers the release of cynicism in the audience for horserace news.

In closing, we consider the implications of our results for the practice of journalism. Horserace news sells, but leaves voters unsold on the campaign and the electoral process. Horserace news also prevents the candidates from promoting their credentials and platforms. Hard news, on the other hand, is more relevant and informative to voters, provides candidates greater "quality time" with the voters, and also provides ample opportunities for journalists to inject their own interpretations and analyses into the news. In addition to serving the instrumental needs of voters, journalists and candidates, hard news bolsters public confidence in the process.

On purely civic grounds, the choice between hard news and horserace news is obvious. On purely commercial grounds, the choice is equally obvious. Or is it? We



leave for another day consideration of arguments that a civic obligation arises from commercial benefits (e.g., “subsidies” conferred on the broadcast media in the form of free use of the airwaves) and focus instead on the prospect of actual economic returns from circulation or viewership. Perhaps surprisingly, our results suggest that there should be a market for one particular genre of hard news. News reports that focused on the candidates’ personalities and their track records as public officials performed quite well as attention-getters. Therefore, it should be possible to increase the share of news that focuses on the candidates without substantially diminishing market share.

The “candidates as people” theme does attract readers, but news reports on the issues furnish no equivalent “hook.” The general disutility of issue-oriented news thus presents a profound disconnect between the theory and practice of election journalism. Few scholars would disagree that issue-oriented news is an essential ingredient of serious journalism. However, our results suggest that an “all issues” news outlet is unlikely to survive past the first issue. Even allowing for the fact that the 2000 campaign lacked a signature issue, CD users showed considerable aversion for issue-oriented news. What can journalists do to make stories about the issues more relevant or marketable? One approach might be to piggyback information about issue positions onto stories dealing with the personal side of the candidates. Alternatively, polling on the issues allows reporters to file policy-oriented horserace stories. The page visit data also suggest that painting the candidates’ issue agendas in broad, ideological strokes is more likely to attract attention than reporting on specific issues. Although these suggestions may strike purists as a dilution of journalistic standards, some innovation seems essential if issue reporting is to survive at all.

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# Figure 1: Frequency of Page Visits

















