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A Content analysis of coverage of presidential candidates' character, 1980-1996

Kung-Chung Lan
San Jose State University

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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF
COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES' CHARACTER,
1980-1996

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass
Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

by

Kung-Chung Lan

May 1998

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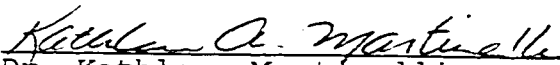
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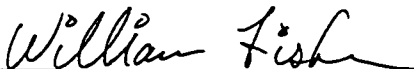


Dr. Kathleen Martinelli



Dr. Stephen Greene

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ABSTRACT

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES' CHARACTER, 1980-1996

by Kung-Chung Lan

A content analysis examined coverage of presidential candidates' character in *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* in the election years of 1980, 1984, 1992, and 1996 (there was no incumbent in 1988). The basic assumption behind this study was that the tone of coverage involving candidate character was inclined to be negative and that the treatment by the press of the incumbent and the challenger differed significantly. The results showed that the press gave a lot of attention to presidential candidates' character especially during the campaigns during the 1990s. Overall, the percentage of coverage of the character issue to all campaign news ranged from about 25% to 50% over time. The amount of coverage received by the incumbents was greater than that of the challengers by 8 percentage points. Competence of the candidates' character was emphasized more than their integrity. The difference in emphasis, however, was decreasing over time. Moreover, the neutral presentation of news and the op-ed pieces constituted almost 80% of the coverage, while the positive and negative aspects were about 20% of the total coverage received by the candidates.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The news media have been especially attentive to presidential candidates' character during the last two decades. Their emphasis on character appears to reflect voters' concerns, as exemplified by this one woman's statement on criteria for selecting a president (Weaver, et al., 1981).

It has to get down to the personalities--how they will react to various situations. Given the impossibility to know precisely what these situations will be in the future, the need to select a strong, trustworthy person becomes pressing. "I'll vote for the candidate I think is the better person, the better mind, the more honest." (p. 166)

The media offer information about presidential candidates' character, in which integrity and competence are the two most important attributes that voters rely on to assess a candidate. In other words, how journalists cover a candidate influences voters' perceptions of candidates. While news media have long attempted to be objective and neutral in candidate coverage, "news communicates much more than the facts" (McCombs, 1992, P. 817). Many studies have examined newspapers' treatment of presidential candidates' character on the basis of space (Buell, 1991; Robinson & Lichter, 1991; Stempel & Windhauser, 1989, 1984; Russonello &

Wolf, 1979), but how was the tone of that coverage? Was the tone neutral? Biased?

Second, if an candidate's character had been examined by the news media four years ago, would it still be newsworthy in terms of criteria of news selection when he became the incumbent? Furthermore, if for some reason the incumbent's character needs to be re-examined, should the treatment an incumbent receives in news coverage be the same as he/she received four years earlier? Consider President Bill Clinton, for example. An Arkansas woman's claim in 1992 that she was Governor Clinton's mistress was still not clarified by the 1996 campaign. "A majority of voters held the unflattering positions that Clinton was not honest and trustworthy" (Pomper, 1997, p. 193). How did the news coverage of this look? In 1996, did the media still place the emphasis on his character the way they did four years earlier or were they less likely to cover it due to other concerns, such as his performance as a president? Compared to the incumbent, the challenger might lack name recognition, past experience in office, and the like. Would the news media deem the challenger's character a more important issue than his policies and issue positions and therefore pay more attention to it?

The United States has gone through five presidential elections since 1980. Incumbents ran for re-election in four of the five elections, except in 1988. This offers researchers a good opportunity to compare and contrast treatment of incumbents and challengers through a content analysis. This content analysis focuses on newspaper coverage of the character of presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter in 1980, Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale in 1984, George Bush and Bill Clinton in 1992, and Bill Clinton and Bob Dole in 1996. The study will seek to determine to what extent the tone of coverage of candidate character was biased and whether coverage of the candidate as an incumbent and a challenger differed.

News stories concerning other third-party presidential candidates, such as John Anderson in 1980 and Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996, will not be included in this study since this study is limited to the coverage of presidential candidates nominated by the two major political parties.

Two daily newspapers have been selected for this study. *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* were chosen because they are prestige newspapers and have circulations of more than one million copies. All news and opinion-editorial pieces regarding the presidential candidates will be examined in both papers during the last four weeks of each campaign, a

period that Graber (1971) argued was "potentially the peak period in quality and quantity of campaign news" (p. 500).

The research will focus on the following questions:

1. Was the number and percentage of newspaper coverage regarding candidate's character in the 1980, 1984, 1992, and 1996 campaigns different?
2. Was the coverage of the incumbents' character equal to that of the challengers' in terms of number in any of the election years?
3. Was the coverage of the incumbents' character more favorable than that of the challengers' in tone in the four years combined?
4. As a whole, was there more unfavorable coverage of the character of candidates than favorable coverage in any of the election years?
5. Was the amount of coverage involving candidates' integrity equal to the amount of coverage involving candidates' competence overall?

These questions of how the newspapers covered the candidates' character will be answered using a content analysis of newspapers judged by coding news assessments containing mainly the candidates' competence and integrity, which will be presented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the character coverage in campaigns, the evolution of the character coverage, news coverage of incumbents and challengers, the media's role in elections, the characteristics of election coverage, and the constraints on newsmaking. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Character coverage in campaigns

"Horse race" coverage of the presidential election is one of the most commonly-used news formats. Studies of news media coverage of presidential campaigns draw the consistent conclusion that the news media emphasize the horse race aspect (Patterson, 1993; Ansolabehere, et al., 1993; Kaniss, 1991; Asher, 1988; Joslyn, 1984; Arterton, 1984). "The dominant perspective that news reporting takes is that of the horse race, with emphasis on who's winning and who's losing, who's closing fast and who's fading" (Asher, 1988, P. 284).

However, media coverage of candidate character during presidential campaigns has competed with the horse race in quantity. Stempel and Windhauser (1989) pointed out that issue coverage usually focuses on "what a candidate is, instead of what he says" (p. 918).

Stempel and Windhauser (1991) found in their research on newspaper coverage of the 1984 and 1988 campaigns that both horse race and character issues contributed to a majority of the coverage in 17 prestige newspapers. In addition, although politics was the most frequent category of coverage for almost every paper, candidate strength (the category was defined by Stempel and Windhauser as qualifications, virtues,

abilities, and experience and the chance of winning and endorsements) was the second most frequent category in 13 coding categories for most papers after the horse race aspect. Also, "public moral problems," which were defined as human relations problems--such as alcohol, divorce, sex, drugs, race relations, and personal or ethical standards--was the fifth most frequent category.

In a content analysis of news coverage in the 1968, 1972, and 1976 presidential campaigns, Graber (1980) found that the most prevalent type of information involved the personal qualifications of the candidates. These qualifications were of two types: personal capacities and professional capacities. The former dealt with personal traits--integrity, reliability, compassion, and so forth, personal style--forthrightness, folksiness, and personal image--ability to appear productive and fiscally responsible. The latter involved the capacity to conduct foreign and domestic affairs, one's political philosophy, and one's approach to government reorganization. On the basis of the data collected, 77% of the references to presidential qualities dealt with personal characteristics, in which personal attributes accounted for nearly half. She reported that typical personal attributes were integrity, reliability, compassion, and leadership traits.

Russonello and Wolf (1979) found that there was an increase of 7% in the proportion of articles on candidate's personal qualities by analyzing three newspapers' coverage of the 1968 and 1976 presidential campaigns. This analysis involved four major categories of news coverage including personal qualities. Articles concerning the conduct of the campaigns, which reflected on the candidates' characters and profiled their personality traits and professional styles, made up large portions of this category.

Buell (1991) found in five major newspapers' coverage of candidates during the 1988 election that all five papers carried the same amount of coverage of character although some candidates received more character coverage than others.

Robinson and Lichter (1991) analyzed the data collected by the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) and found that there was a heavy emphasis on character in the coverage of the 1988 campaign. Among the 312 campaign-issue stories that were categorized as two formats--one involved character issues and political issues were the other--"precisely half touched directly on the issue of candidate character" (p. 200). Therefore, Robinson and Lichter (1991) concluded that character issues had tended to increase. "Character journalism is becoming more and more prominent; and that coverage of substantive policy issues in

the future will have to compete not just with old-fashioned horse-racism but with the press's enhanced interest in character as well" (p. 200).

A similar percentage of character coverage in newspapers was also found in the 1990s. A content analysis conducted by King (1995) of how *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* covered the presidential candidates in 1992 determined that candidate character accounted for about 50% of every paper's campaign news and opinion-editorial pieces. In the three prestige papers, the percentage of the news items and the op-ed pieces that referred to candidate character were 50% and 54%, 51% and 51%, and 55% and 40% respectively.

As far as other news media are concerned, the conclusions are varied. In a study of *Time* and *Newsweek* during the 1988 campaign, Patterson (1989) pointed out that 7% of the election news reflected leadership ability and trustworthiness and 13% involved campaign issues, including facts and rumors of scandals, allegations of dirty to low-level campaigning.

Although character coverage in the magazines mentioned above was somewhat important, there was a different finding in a study of *UPI* and *CBS* coverage of the 1980 campaign. Robinson and Sheehan (1983) limited themselves to explicit

comments about candidate's leadership ability--competence, integrity, consistency--and electability, and found that few comments regarding these two categories were made. The main reason for this finding was that it was not compatible with the canons of objective reporting.

Among the elements of candidate character, some have been deemed more important than others. Anderson and Kibler (1978) tested eight dimensions of source valence--competence, extroversion, sociability, composure, social attraction, physical attraction, psychological traits--to determine their impact on voter preference in connection with a Democratic primary campaign in Florida. They found that attitude homophile was the most important indicator of voter preference. This finding was in accordance with a 1978 statement of Lane that "people seek in leaders that same qualities they seek in friends, that is, they simply generalize their demands from one case to the other" (p. 447).

Moreover, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) pointed out from their presidential character study that integrity and competence were two of the most important attributes on which voters depended to evaluate presidential candidates. They also added that competence can be represented best by traits

such as "experienced" and "knowledgeable," and integrity can be shown by traits as "moral" and "honest."

Brady and Johnson (1987) also believed that the traits of competence and integrity were the two most important elements of voters' images of candidates. In their study of the 1984 campaign, they found that more than 90% of voters could measure five major candidates on a series of traits involving competence and integrity.

In the order of importance mentioned by voters, Pomper (1997) found in his study of the 1996 presidential campaign that honest and trustworthy was ranked second in 13 categories of candidate's traits and issues.

News media are expected to be objective and neutral in coverage. Generally speaking, news has tone (McCombs, 1992), although Robinson and Sheehan (1983) examined all campaign stories covered by the *CBS* and the *UPI* and found that the vast majority were neutral. The tone of news coverage can be divided into three categories—favorable, unfavorable, and neutral (Budd, et al., 1967). Graber (1980) analyzed the coverage of the 1968, 1972, and 1976 campaigns and found that the proportion of unfavorable/negative content increased from 41% in 1968 to 57% in 1976.

In the study of presidential candidates from 1960 to 1992, Patterson (1993) also concluded that the proportion of

unfavorable coverage increased, while that of favorable coverage declined. "The press becomes increasingly hostile toward the candidates" (p. 149).

Candidates of the 1960s got more favorable coverage than those of the 1970s, who in turn received more positive coverage than those of the 1980s. ...Of all evaluative references to Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, 75 percent were positive. In 1992, only 40 percent of reporters' evaluative references to Clinton and Bush were favorable. (p. 20)

Patterson (1993) added that reporters provide the public with the real candidate behind the image by revealing gaffes, which are "blunders, misstatements, indiscretions, and other mistakes" (p. 152). Sabato (1991) believed that gaffes have replaced traditional scandal centering on financial impropriety, and the media "go after a wounded politician like sharks in a feeding frenzy" (p. 1).

King (1995) found that negative judgment overwhelmingly outnumbered positive and neutral judgments in three prestige newspapers in terms of character coverage.

Evolution of character coverage

Why do news media cover candidate character as an issue during campaigns? "Americans long ago realized that they were electing a man, not a philosophy, and that the character of the president, as he wrestled with the challenger of his time, shapes the quality of political life" (Barber, 1980, p. 187). As a matter of fact, the importance of the character of

a candidate in presidential voting decisions has been demonstrated in many studies. Lewis-Beck and Rice (1992) pointed out that factors affecting the voting most were issues, partisanship, and candidate attributes.

A study of the 1988 campaign conducted by Buchanan (1991), showed that people more frequently cited character traits as relevant qualifications for the presidency than issue positions. Miller, et al. (1986) noted that personality and character were the bases to evaluate candidates for most educated voters.

Arterton (1984) also believed that candidate personalities is one of the ways used to help voters compare candidates. "Particularly when asked to select a nominee from a large number of relatively unknown candidates, primary voters probably do examine individual attributes and heed campaign messages about attributes and personalities" (p. 117).

If the media are really a mirror of reality, emphasis of news coverage on candidate character could just be the reflection of the political practice. Sabato (1994) explains it as follows.

The issue of character has always been present in American politics--not for his policy positions was George Washington made our first president--but rarely, if ever, has character been such a pivotal concern in presidential elections, both primary and general, as it has since 1976. The 1976 Carter

campaign was characterized by considerable moral posturing; Edward Kennedy's 1980 candidacy was in part destroyed by lingering character questions; Walter Mondale finally overcame Gary Hart's 1984 challenge in the Democratic primaries by using character as a battering ram; and 1988 witnessed such a forceful explosion of concern about character that several candidates were eliminated and others badly scattered by it. (p. 193)

Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar (1993) pointed out that the evolution of coverage regarding candidate character was closely connected with more female reporters than ever before and with some political incidents such as the Watergate incident. News media paid little attention to a candidate's private life in the 1950s and 1960s since it was regarded as irrelevant matter. "Back in John F. Kennedy's time, reporters knew of his philandering but would have thought it wrong to say so in public" (Polsby & Wildavsky, 1988, p. 211).

Ansolabehere, et al. (1993) noted that:

The reluctance to probe into the closets and bedrooms of politicians was also due to the all-male composition of the national press corps and the resulting locker room view of male behavior. Beginning in the 1970s, more women became journalists, and more correspondents were assigned to cover political campaigns. Moreover, the events of the 1970s, including Watergate and several instances of congressional representatives and senators engaging in particularly bizarre and inappropriate behavior, suggested that personal weakness could have political relevance. The intense competition for readers and viewers also created pressure for more revealing and "juicy" news stories. (pp. 62-3)

In addition to the influence of Watergate, which increased emphasis placed on character of candidates by news

media, Sabato (1991) argued that the "new journalism" also contributed to popularizing this issue. "Contending that conventional journalism was sterile and stripped of color, Wolfe and others argued for a reporting style that expanded the definition of news and, novel-like, highlighted all the personal details of the newsmakers" (p. 64). As a result, it became a widely-accepted belief in journalistic practice that reporters should "look to character first when evaluating and choosing among presidential candidates" (p. 65). Finally, Sabato pointed out that the competition of news media also foster their focus on character of candidates. "Television has not only personalized campaigns but also conditioned its audience to thinking about the private 'lives of the rich and famous' " (p. 65). Fletcher (1981) found that journalistic competition among the press resulted in pressures to dramatize, simplify, or trivialize the news in a quest to increase circulation and advertising. In addition, competition from the broadcast media has been an important influence on newspapers because it forces them to alter the forms of news as provided by radio and television.

Similar to Robinson and Lichter's (1991) conclusions that coverage of policy issues compete with "old-fashioned" horse-racism and with the press's interest in character (p. 200), Germond and Witcover (1989) also believed that the

character issue is a new rule in news coverage of presidential campaigns. "If personal conduct didn't affect the candidate's performance on the stump and wasn't a detriment to his conduct of the office he was seeking, it was his business" (1989, p. 58).

Germond and Witcover (1989) went on to say:

The "spin patrol"—the dispatching of campaign operatives to put the most self-serving interpretation on a candidate's words and actions—had become a standard phenomenon on the campaign trail, especially after candidate debates. The desire of some reporters to cut through all this flak—and the "flacks" who sought to substitute it for direct access to the candidate and independent analysis—further encouraged the journalistic concentration on "character." (p. 51)

News coverage of incumbents and challengers

Due to his position as president, an incumbent has more advantages than other candidates when seeking re-election.

He is, to begin with, much better known than any challenger can hope to be. Everything the president does is news and is widely reported in all the media. The issues to which the president devotes his attention are likely to become the national issues because of his unique visibility and capacity to center public attention on matters he deems important. (Polsby & Wildavsky, 1996, p. 96)

Clarke and Evans (1983) found in their study of Congressional elections that incumbents received more news coverage than challengers did. Eighty-eight percent of incumbents who ran were re-elected.

The data in their 1978 study were in four categories: political attributes—experience in office, name recognition,

and constituent; issue, ideology, group ties; campaign organization; and personal characteristics. In the 14 competitive races, news coverage about incumbents focused largely on political attributes and issues, ideology and group ties. In these two categories, incumbents received five times as much coverage as challengers did. On the other hand, the personal characteristics of incumbents accounted for 10% of all coverage, but that of challengers accounted for up to 25%.

Clarke and Evans (1983) stated:

This sort of coverage probably occurs because personal stories are easy to produce and easy to balance. ...These stories do not make tremendous demands on a reporter's time; and background information is often readily available in political almanacs and the candidates' own press package. (p. 68)

Michael (1983) noted that during their term in office incumbents are newsworthy, while the challengers would be covered only during campaign periods. "The incumbents can make news by sponsoring 'newsy' legislation or by participation, as a public official, in public acts" (p. 46). Therefore, they get more coverage of their political views and more space than challengers. This is consistent with a 1976 study by Graber, who studied the effect of incumbency in the 1972 presidential campaign and found that emphasis of news coverage on personality attributes of presidential candidates decreased from 1968 to 1972 while emphasis on

professional qualifications increased. The data confirmed her hypotheses that there would be a shift in attention away from personality attributes of the candidates to professional qualifications since the character issue was not fresh anymore in 1972 in comparison with 1968 and a three-year record in office supplies performance data.

As for the tone of news coverage, in the 1978 Congressional elections, Goldenburg and Traugott (1980) found that the tone of campaign coverage was more favorable for incumbent candidates, who got three times as much positive treatment as challengers did. However, King's (1995) finding in the 1992 campaign was contrary to this result. As an incumbent, Bush received unfavorable mentions more than twice as often as his major opponent Clinton.

Media's role in elections

The media act as a bridge to connect both the campaign and voters. Voters depend on the media to know about the candidates during the election campaign. In other words, how the media portray the candidates supplies voters with the clues that affect voters' evaluation and selection of candidates. Graber (1971) wrote:

For those who seek data to make independent voting decisions or rationalize choices already made, the mass media generally are the most widely used information sources. Even for those who neither read, watch, nor listen themselves, the mass media are crucial because they furnish most of the opinion-shaping information

which is passed on through personal contacts. This then makes it important to know what candidate images the media furnish to the public as raw material for opinion formation. (p. 168)

According to Alger (1989), since the identification of political parties is getting weak, the role the media play in presidential elections has grown more and more important.

The media providing adequate information enables people to realize the intent of a democratic process is even more crucial in today's world. This is especially so in the United States since political parties have significantly declined as information network and cue-givers on political choice. (p. 9)

Furthermore, Alger (1989) pointed out that the elections have become increasingly media-centered.

Campaigns are fundamentally organized around the mass media, especially television. The schedule, the appearances, the themes, and so on are geared to the deadlines, need for visuals, and other factors characteristic of the making and presentation of TV news. ...The same applies, to a somewhat lesser extent, to the print media. (p. 188)

Due to the intensive participation of the media in presidential elections, "the campaign has little reality apart from its media version" (Patterson, 1980, p. 3).

Therefore, information gathered from the media coverage of the candidate becomes the major elements on which voters make their decisions.

From the voters' perspective, Arterton (1984) noted that they depend on "the simplification and interpretation inherent in news presentations to clarify candidates'

characteristics, issue positions, and prospects" (p. 3); from the campaign perspective, he added that the media are central to the campaign efforts of political parties.

In addition to making a connection, the media also set the agenda--candidate character in this case. Joslyn (1984) reported that the agenda-setting function of media was found in news coverage of candidate character during campaigns. As McCombs and Shaw (1977) noted, the media had the ability to influence the highlights of the events in people's minds. Over time, people will perceive the important issues as those emphasized in the news. Roberts (1992) pointed out that "the agenda-setting function may occur in a two-step process--from transfer of mass media salience to the public mind, then from public salience to behavioral outcome" (p. 878).

Patterson (1980) found in the 1976 campaign that the impression of Democratic candidate Carter was in accordance with news coverage but that of the incumbent Ford was not. Another study of the 1976 campaign found a high correlation between voters' images of both candidates and the tone of news coverage (Weaver, et al., 1981). The *Chicago Tribune* played an important image agenda-setting role for Illinois voters in this study although Weaver, et al. still doubted if this finding could be generalized to other newspapers. At the least, these findings support the idea that:

media agenda-setting (at least newspaper agenda-setting) extends to candidate image as well as issues and that media emphasis or de-emphasis of certain image attributes contributes to voter evaluations of candidates as well as to overall voter images of those candidates. (p. 192)

Furthermore, a priming effect occurred regarding voters' perceptions of the personal traits of the candidates. Pfau, et al. (1993) found in a panel study that voters formed images of presidential candidates in two stages in the primaries. In the first stage, the voters measured the candidate's character by forming perceptions about the person's sincerity, honesty, and so forth. They then gauged the candidate's ability by how he dealt with the job and judged the competence and effectiveness by how the candidates would be on the basis of the candidates' mediated performance.

This is what Iyengar and Kinder (1987) reported--a "priming" effect, which means that the issues receiving heavy news coverage will shape the standard by which candidates will be evaluated. The media's focus on Carter's inability to handle the Iranian hostage issue in the last three days of the 1980 presidential campaign caused him to be defeated. Carey (1976) expressed almost the same point of view.

The media directly shape perceptions through the news transmitted about candidates' issue stands, ideological philosophies, and personal qualities. Information provided by the media also shapes voters' criteria of judgment--their standards. For example, when election

news focuses on the candidates' ability to administer their campaign organizations effectively, audiences are inclined to start judging the contestants' competence and leadership on this basis. (p. 241)

In addition, Ansolabehere, et al. (1993) noted that "viewers generally intended to vote for the candidate in whom they saw more positive personal characteristics" (p. 176).

Characteristics of election coverage

Because there is difficulty in dealing with the ambiguity and complexity of campaigns, journalists usually follow routines for news reporting. The news media routinize their methods for reporting the news by labeling, sorting, categorizing, classifying, etc. Fletcher (1981) pointed out that the news coverage is limited by the conventional definition of news, which "often values speed over completeness, brevity over explanations, sensation over sobriety, immediacy over perspective, conflict triviality over the difficult but important" (p. 80).

Besides that, Leonard (1986) postulated that journalists expect drama and conflict and want simplifications and pictures that are easy to grasp. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) believed that media content is based on real world events, but some elements are more likely to be highlighted and singled out than others. The media have their own logic through which reality operates. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) posited, "the media can impose their own logic on assembled

materials in a number of ways, including emphasizing certain behaviors and people and stereotyping" (p. 37). Gans (1980) observed that journalists often highlight an action or activity and omit whatever is not dramatic, important, distinctive, or novel.

News organizations and candidates' campaign organizations have mutual influences. King (1995) noted, "In the fall of 1992, the media were highly attentive to candidate character because the incumbent president made the issue of his Democratic opponent's character a centerpiece of his campaign" (pp. 94-5). Paletz and Entman (1981) believed that "Interaction between media and candidates involves both deliberate and unconscious manipulation of each side by the other as each seeks maximum advantage" (p. 30). Owen (1991) pointed out that "Officially, news reports about elections are controlled by mass media organizations. It appears, however, that candidates' campaign organizations have an increasingly strong hold over what makes and becomes election news" (p. 61).

For mutual advantage, candidates try their most to shape the interpretation and perspectives of journalists (Joslyn, 1984), even providing news that fits the given patterns. A similar notion is also introduced by Arterton (1984), who noted that "Politics in the mass media age involves

anticipating news reporting and then accommodating campaign plans to meet journalistic expectation" (p. 29). As a result, most stories from candidates' news release were printed verbatim or with only a few omissions (Kaid, 1976). However, candidates and journalists deviate from each other in some ways. Paletz and Entman (1981) noted:

Media-candidate relations are an ambiguous mixture of conflict and cooperation, support and destruction. The reason: the needs of the media and the objectives of candidates differ. The candidates strive to flood television and the press with selective information conducive to their election. Reporters and editors want news—defined as conflict, controversy, duplicity, scandal. (p. 32)

Owen (1991) suggested that Bennett's (1988) commentary regarding four basic information flaws in news routines can apply to election news coverage in the modern era. According to Bennett, these routines are personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and normalization. Personalization deals with news context that focuses on human interest and that interprets the events and issues from the point of view of individual actors. Dramatization involves the news stories that are selected in terms of their news value instead of importance. These are news mixed with fact and fiction. Fragmentation is news stories that lack connection with one another. When such stories are provided, the public hardly can understand the integration of information. And normalization is news stories that deal with

the difficulty, complexity, and ambiguity in familiar ways. In this case, news can be processed by way of traditional values and beliefs.

News coverage about the general elections is virtually a daily affair, as Owen (1991) noted. Journalists have to maintain the interest of audiences when covering campaigns and candidates. That is why newspaper formats have changed to emphasize dramatic elements in the news. In addition, newspaper coverage of elections has become more fragmented and personalized. Thus, there is an increase in feature stories about the race and candidate personalities.

Constraints on newsmaking

Joslyn (1984) pointed out that the approach in which journalists cover election campaigns is similar to the way they report any ongoing newsworthy event. In other words, it is newsworthiness that makes journalists pay attention to election campaigns. Therefore, Joslyn (1984) noted that "The general approach to covering the news will influence a reporter's coverage of an election campaign" (p. 102). Newsmaking is a process of selecting. The selection and presentation of news is influenced by factors at four levels: individual, organizational, interorganizational, and external.

Individual constraints

Ettema (1982) and Whitney (1982) noted that individuals' attitudes, beliefs, cognitions, experiences, demographic characteristics, and the like influence what they report and write. White (1950) concluded in his gatekeeper study that:

through studying his overt reasons for rejecting news stories from the press associations, we see how highly subjective, how based on the "gatekeeper's" own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations of the communication of "news" really is. (p. 390)

Organizational constraints

The news media certainly cannot function without using a variety of sources. They have to find ways of effectively gathering and evaluating their raw material. News routines provide a perspective that often explains what gets defined as news in the first place.

News routines. McLeod, Kosicki, and McLeod (1994) noted that media institutions and media workers have developed distinctive organizational procedures and values to facilitate their tasks of producing the news on a regular basis. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) contended that routines not only serve to control the message, but are beneficial because they can help prevent offending their audience and reporters. The routines of the news organization are to meet deadlines, to maintain the pros and cons of an issue, to depend on official sources, to use the beat system, and to cope with

unpredictable events in a regular manner. Kaniss (1991) noted that deadline pressures and limited time available to gather news each day force journalists to limit their search for news to reliable and easily accessible sources. Gans (1980) argued that availability and suitability are two major criteria that influence journalists in their news gathering.

Policy and socialization. Journalists internalize the culture of an organization to which they belong. However, conformity is completed by an invisible hand, which Breed (1955) termed as social control in the news room. By way of observation, a member internalizes the rights and responsibilities of his position. Organizational constraints are most evident in the story selection process, which begins by reporters' interaction with peers, organization superiors, and news sources (Whitney, 1982).

Ownership. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) noted that news content is subject in part to the ideologies of people who finance the media. They believed that the personal attitudes and values of news media owners may be reflected in news and in features. Media owners can contribute to bias in coverage as long as the newswriters in these organizations try to predict what the owners desire. Kenny and Simpson (1993) found that the *Washington Post*, which is publicly owned, was fairly objective in covering the 1988 presidential campaign,

while the *Washington Times*, owned by a conglomerate, was biased toward one candidate and party.

Interorganizational constraints

Fletcher (1981) found that journalistic competition among the press resulted in pressures to dramatize, simplify, or trivialize the news in a quest to increase circulation and advertising. Ettema (1982) deemed that such interorganizational influence can be considered as journalistic constraints. News then tends to support or reflect the positions of these powerful interests.

External constraints

External constraints would include political, economic, geographic, technological and ideological factors.

Turow (1992) implied that the external environment has some influence on news organizations. He believed that organizations must try to get resources from outside their boundaries because none of them can be self-sufficient in all the areas.

Technology. Vivian (1995) emphasized that the news void no longer will be limited by the space available in an edition because of the new technologies. Shoemaker & Reese (1996) noted media content can be affected by technologies. The computer has been successful in facilitating the collection, analysis, and processing of data. Dizard (1997)

argued that newspapers are forced to alter their editorial styles to fit the computer-based competition.

Interest groups. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) noted that interest groups influence news coverage by "providing guidelines for covering topics of interest to the group" (p.184). Interest groups seek to dominate discourse by utilizing their own experts on particular issues, as Gandy (1982) noted, providing "background" information, and attempting to influence the news media to adopt their "frames" on controversial issues (p. 108).

Official sources. Gans (1980) noted that government officials could manipulate news coverage by providing reporters with "suitable" information. Fletcher (1981) noted that direct control of the media by powerful, partisan figures is a thing of the past, but that journalists continue to remain heavily dependent on official sources.

Advertising and audience. Park (1967) noted that the reader's level of education is a constraint for news agencies. The media need a large audience for survival since the media's advertisers depend on certain demographic audiences. Kaniss (1991) argued that the news media give greater prominence to stories that elicit emotion than to those that inform in order to sell more newspapers or increase ratings.

Geographic factor. Gans (1979) believed that small town reporting is more desirable to the media because small towns are usually more orderly, cohesive, friendly, and slow paced. Kaniss (1991) noted that city officials are geographically closer to newspaper offices than are suburban government officials, and thus are easier to target for a story.

Ideology. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) believed that U.S. ideology is:

a belief in the value of the capitalist economic system, private ownership, pursuit of profit by self-interested entrepreneurs, and free markets. This system is intertwined with the Protestant ethic and the value of individual achievement. The companion political values center around liberal democracy, a system in which all people are presumed to have equal worth and a right to share in their own governance, making decisions based on rational self-interest. (p. 222)

As for the ideology of a newspaper, Gans (1979) believed that not all newspapers are neutral in news.

All the major news media approve the moderate core, which includes liberals, moderates, and conservatives; adherents to other positions are treated less favorably, but generally, those on the Right are labeled more politely than those on the Left. Ultraliberals may be called left-wingers, but ultraconservatives are rarely described as right-wingers, and never as reactionaries. (pp. 30-1)

Altschull (1984) pointed out that the vast majority of newspapers in the United States are in favor of the GOP.

Summary

News coverage of presidential elections has tended to place emphasis on candidate character. Of all the attributes

of character, a candidate's integrity and competence are more important than others. The media paid more attention to the incumbents than the challengers and were inclined to favor the former. However, studies of coverage of candidates' character have not drawn consistent conclusions as to the tone.

Hypotheses

Based upon the above literature, the hypotheses for this study are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: News coverage of the character of presidential candidates will increase each election year.

Hypothesis 2: The amount of news coverage of the incumbent's character will not differ from the amount of news coverage of the challenger's character in any of the four elections.

Hypothesis 3: Coverage of the incumbent's character will be more favorable than coverage of the challenger's character in each of the four elections.

Hypothesis 4: Unfavorable coverage of the character of both the incumbent and the challenger will increase in each election year and will be greater than favorable coverage.

Hypothesis 5: Coverage of the integrity of both the incumbent and the challenger will not differ from coverage of

the competence of the two candidates in any of the four elections.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The following sample data refers to the election years selected for this study and the major presidential candidates in that year.

Election year	Major candidates
	<u>Incumbent / Challenger</u>
1980	Jimmy Carter (D) / Ronald Reagan (R)
1984	Ronald Reagan (R) / Walter Mondale (D)
1992	George Bush (R) / Bill Clinton (D)
1996	Bill Clinton (D) / Bob Dole (R)

A content analysis will be conducted using *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* to examine coverage of the candidates' character.

Four years will be selected for analysis--1980, 1984, 1992, and 1996 (there was no incumbent in 1988)--for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the amount and tone of coverage. The years selected are based on whether a challenger competed with an incumbent for the presidency. Candidates are limited to those from the two major parties. The time frame for each election year will be the last four weeks before election day. News stories and editorials in the two newspapers will be collected from October 7 to November 3 in 1980, from October 8 to November 4 in 1984, from October 6

to November 2 in 1992, and from October 8 to November 4 in 1996. News stories concerning other third-party presidential candidates, such as John Anderson in 1980 and Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 will be excluded from this study, while all news and op-ed pieces regarding Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in 1980, Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale in 1984, George Bush and Bill Clinton in 1992, and Bill Clinton and Bob Dole in 1996 will be read, coded, and analyzed.

A review of the relevant literature revealed several studies (King, 1995; Patterson, 1993, 1989, & 1980; Stemple & Windsauser, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Graber, 1980, 1976, & 1971) that have examined coverage of presidential candidates' character, but the work of King (1995) had the clearest operational definition of character. King's measurement techniques will be adapted for this study. He pointed out that the conceptualization of character deals primarily with the candidates' competence and integrity.

Terms such as experience, knowledge, leadership ability, strength, consistency, trustworthiness, honesty, morality, compassion, folksiness, virtue, and psychological fitness can be coded as character. In the first step, each news and op-ed piece will be coded for presence or absence of candidate character. In the second step, the character mentions will be

counted for the challenger and the incumbent in each given year. In the third step, according to King (1995), the presentation of the candidate's character will be distinguished as either integrity (consistency, trustworthiness, honesty, morality, virtue) or competence (experience, knowledge, leadership ability, strength, compassion).

In the last step, news and op-ed will be categorized by tone, favorable, unfavorable, or neutral, for each candidate in each election year. Since most news stories could contain all the three statements, it is not ideal to take the entire story as a unit of analysis. Budd, et al. (1967) believed that the paragraph is one of the most prevalent coding units of analysis. Following Budd, et al., the tone of coverage will be presented more clearly. On the other hand, the unit of analysis for op-ed will be the entire article, since they usually argue for or against a given issue.

The tone for news and op-ed pieces can be divided into three categories:

1. Favorable: a paragraph (story) that included favorable or positive assessments of any of the candidates' competence or integrity will be coded as favorable. For example, a paragraph (story) containing words in reference to character, such as honest, strong, experienced, trustworthy,

consistent, moral, compassionate, folksy, and so on, will be coded as favorable.

2. Unfavorable: a paragraph (story) that included unfavorable evaluation of any of the candidates' competence or integrity will be coded as unfavorable. For instance, a paragraph (story) containing words in reference to character, such as weak traits, obfuscation, reluctant, evaded, vague, passive, inconsistency, faulty, and the like, will be coded as unfavorable.

3. Neutral: those paragraphs (or stories) which reflected neither favorable nor unfavorable tone, or cannot be clearly defined as either favorable or unfavorable will be coded as neutral. When a paragraph (story) contained the same number of favorable and unfavorable statements, it will fall into this category. If the number of favorable statements toward one candidate equals that of unfavorable statements toward the other in one story, it is not neutral, however. In this case, each will be coded as favorable and unfavorable, respectively.

If a paragraph (story) contains several favorable and unfavorable statements, it will be classified as either favorable or unfavorable. To be specific, when a paragraph (story) contains more unfavorable statements than favorable ones, it will be classified as unfavorable, and vice versa.

For example, if a paragraph (story) contains two favorable and three unfavorable statements, it will be classified as unfavorable. If a paragraph (story) contains three favorable and two unfavorable statements, it will be considered a favorable one.

Coder reliability

To calculate intercoder reliability for the actual study, two coders looked at 10% of the presidential campaign news stories and op-ed pieces chosen at random from the 1,773 stories and op-ed pieces. News stories and op-ed pieces were coded

1. for coverage involving the candidate/candidates,
2. for presence or absence of character mentioned in that coverage,
3. for incumbent or challenger in that piece,
4. for integrity or competence of candidate referring to, and
5. for the tone of coverage (positive, neutral, or negative).

Holsti's formula (Budd, et al., 1967) was used to calculate the agreement. The intercoder reliability was 95%, 88%, 85%, 96%, and 91% respectively for each of the five items mentioned above. The average agreement was 91%.

CHAPTER 4

Results

This study examined the newspaper coverage of the character of presidential candidates during the last four weeks before election day in 1980, 1984, 1992, and 1996. The occurrence and tone of candidates' character in articles covered by *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* were analyzed and compared. A chi-square analysis was used to examine news coverage on presidential candidates' character. The purpose of this study was to determine whether the overall coverage of presidential candidates' character actually increased over time, whether the incumbent and the challenger received equal treatment by the selected newspapers on the character issue, whether the newspapers paid equal attention to the candidates' integrity and competence, and whether the tone of this coverage had changed significantly from 1980 to 1996.

In all, a total of 1,773 news items and op-ed pieces involving Republican and Democratic presidential candidates in 224 issues of newspapers (28 issues in each newspaper in each election year) were coded for presence of character, integrity/competence of candidate's character, and the tone. *The New York Times* had more campaign news stories than the *Los Angeles Times* by 277 pieces. Of coverage dealing with

either or both candidates, 35% of the coverage involving the character of presidential candidates was found in the two newspapers combined.

Of all the years compared for the study, more coverage involving candidates' character appeared in 1992, with 185 stories and op-ed pieces. The amount of coverage coded remained relatively constant in other election years, with 143 in 1980, 143 in 1984, and 150 in 1996. On the other hand, *The New York Times* (325 news stories and op-ed pieces) had slightly more coverage than the *Los Angeles Times* (296 news stories and op-ed pieces) overall.

The two newspapers showed relatively the same percentage of coverage involving candidates' character to all campaign news in the first two election years. In 1992 and 1996, however, the percentage rose significantly, with 38% and 42% in *The New York Times*, and 42% and 53% in the *Los Angeles Times*. The two newspapers paid more attention to the incumbents than the challengers as a whole. In addition, both newspapers placed more emphasis on competence of candidates' character than on integrity. As for the tone of coverage, neutral coverage overwhelmingly outnumbered either positive or negative coverage.

Hypothesis 1 was supported. A chi-square test showed a significant difference in coverage of candidate's character

in both *The New York Times* ($p < .001$) and the *Los Angeles Times* ($p < .02$). The proportion of coverage of candidate character to campaign news increased over time although the amount of coverage actually decreased (see Table 1, p. 41). Both newspapers showed the lowest proportion (24% in *The New York Times* and 33% in the *Los Angeles Times*) of character to campaign news in 1984 and the highest percentage (42% in *The New York Times* and 53% in the *Los Angeles Times*) in 1996. It is worth noting that the coverage of candidates' character in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1996 exceeded half of all presidential news stories and op-ed pieces. At the same time, the amount (125) of coverage in 1996 dealing with candidates' character was the lowest among the four analysis years (see Table 1, p. 41).

Table 1

Comparison of Coverage of Candidates' Character in Each
Newspaper in Each Election

	1980	1984	1992	1996
<i>The New York Times</i>	n = 299	n = 280	n = 247	n = 199
Presence of character	26%	24%	38%	42%
Absence of character	74%	76%	62%	58%

Note. n represents the number of campaign news articles.

$\chi^2(3) = 25.29, p < .001.$

	1980	1984	1992	1996
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	n = 182	n = 225	n = 216	n = 125
Presence of character	36%	33%	42%	53%
Absence of character	64%	67%	58%	47%

Note. n represents the number of campaign news articles.

$\chi^2(3) = 8.09, p < .02.$

Hypothesis 2 was supported. This hypothesis stated that the amount of news coverage of the incumbent's character will not differ from the amount of news coverage of the challenger's character in any of the four elections. A chi-square test did not show any significant difference in coverage of the incumbents and the challengers between *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* ($p > .05$), nor among the four election years compared ($p > .05$). However, the results showed that coverage of the incumbents' character was more than that of the challengers' character, with the exception of 1992 when the challenger received slightly more attention than the incumbent by 2 percentage points. The difference between the incumbent and the challenger was more than 10 percentage points in the other three election years.

Hypothesis 3 was not supported. This hypothesis was that coverage of the incumbent's character will be more favorable than coverage of the challenger's character in each of the four elections. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between the incumbents and the challengers in the tone of coverage but there was a tendency for coverage to favor the challengers.

It is not surprising to learn that the neutral coverage (1,244 paragraphs) outnumbered both positive (119 paragraphs) and negative coverage (195 paragraphs) for the four sets of

candidates. The results also found that the negative coverage exceeded the positive. In addition, the incumbents received nearly twice as much negative (13%) treatment as positive (7%). The difference between positive and negative coverage was not so evident for challengers.

Hypothesis 4 was supported. The hypothesis stated that unfavorable coverage of the character of both the incumbent and the challenger will increase in each election year and will be greater than favorable coverage (see Table 2, p. 44). The study found that the tone of coverage of the two newspapers deviated significantly in different election years ($p < .001$). The single-digit positive coverage was scattered in the four elections. On the other hand, neutral coverage decreased from 83% in 1992 to 70% in 1996, while unfavorable treatment reached more than 20% for the first time in 1996. As far as the amount of coverage is concerned, the results revealed the greatest number of paragraphs (612) occurred in 1992. The number of paragraphs describing candidates' character was fairly constant in the other three years, with 268 in 1980, 350 in 1984, and 328 in 1996 (see Table 2, p. 44).

Table 2

Comparison of The Tone in Each Election

	1980 n = 268	1984 n = 350	1992 n = 612	1996 n = 328
Favorable	9%	9%	6%	8%
Neutral	81%	82%	83%	70%
Unfavor- able	11%	9%	11%	22%

Note. n represents the number of paragraphs concerning presidential candidates' character.

$\chi^2(6) = 38.14, p < .001.$

Hypothesis 5 was rejected. This hypothesis stated that the amount of coverage of the integrity of both the incumbent and the challenger will not differ from coverage of the competence of the two candidates in any of the four elections. The results represented that there was a significant difference between the two on their integrity and competence of character.

Both candidates received much more treatment by the newspapers on competence than on integrity. However, the distribution of integrity and competence changed significantly over time. Especially in 1992 and 1996 the two newspapers paid more attention to the candidates' integrity of character compared to the first two election years. The biggest difference among the four years was approximately 30%. Nonetheless, most coverage on candidates' competence predominated over integrity (see Table 3, p. 46).

Table 3

Distribution of Integrity and Competence in Each Election

	1980 n = 201	1984 n = 218	1992 n = 419	1996 n = 243
Integrity	23%	15%	45%	55%
Competence	77%	85%	55%	45%

Note. n represents the number of articles involving either the candidates' integrity or their competence, or both. The total number (1,081) differs from the amount (621) of coverage of presidential candidates' character because some articles talked about both of the attributes.

$\chi^2(3) = 105.51, p < .001.$

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Conclusions

This study found that character became more of an issue between 1980 and 1996. Although only 26% of *The New York Times* coverage and 36% of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage in 1980 were concerned with the character issue, the percentage increased to 42% of *The New York Times* in 1996 and 53% of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage.

In addition, this study found no difference between the coverage of the incumbent's and the challenger's character but did find that the amount of unfavorable coverage was greater than favorable coverage and that it also increased over time. Overall, the percentage of coverage of the character issue to all campaign news ranged from about 25% to 50% over time. The amount of coverage received by the incumbents was greater than that of the challengers by 8 percentage points.

Comparing the emphasis the press placed on candidate characteristics, competence of the candidates' character was emphasized more than their integrity. The difference in emphasis, however, is decreasing over time. Moreover, the neutral presentation of news and the op-ed pieces occupied almost 80% of the coverage, while the positive and negative

aspects were about 20% of the total coverage received by the candidates.

The results indicate that of all the campaign news, the amount of coverage involving candidates' character decreased to the lowest level in both the newspapers in 1996. It could have been caused by the nominee of the third party, who attracted attention of the press at the same time. Although independent candidates were also part of the 1980 campaign (John Anderson) and the 1992 election (Ross Perot--for the first time), little or no variations in the amount of coverage of candidates' character were noted during those years.

Based on being neutral and objective in newsmaking, it is not surprising to find that neutral coverage outnumbered both positive and negative coverage. If the op-ed pieces were removed from the results, the percentage of neutral coverage would be nearly 8% higher. In other words, both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* were mostly neutral. This finding is important because it suggests that the press was unbiased in its portrayal of candidates' character after 1980. While the overall coverage of the four years combined had slightly more negative evaluations than positive ones, the 1996 coverage of candidate's character had a significantly higher percentage of negative paragraphs than

positive ones. What can be inferred from this analysis is that the newspapers tended to provide more unfavorable information in their coverage of presidential candidates' character during these campaigns than favorable ones. This finding is consistent with the findings of King's 1995 and Patterson's 1993 studies.

The results showed that the press had increased substantially attention paid to a candidate's character since the first reported year. Coverage on the character issue increased sharply to roughly half of all campaign news in 1992 and 1996. It was supposed to have a positive connection with the candidate of the Democratic Party, Bill Clinton, especially in his integrity. This is not a surprising finding because of his past history regarding the use of marijuana, the extra-marital affair with Gennifer Flowers, and the draft record in the Vietnamese war which were campaign issues of Bush. As King (1995) noted, "The incumbent president made the issue of his Democratic opponent's character a centerpiece of his campaign" (pp. 94-5).

The results of this study verified the findings of many previous studies (Polsby & Wildavsky, 1996; Michael, 1983; Graber, 1976) that the press paid more attention to the incumbents. The incumbents had more advantages than other candidates when seeking re-election even though their

challengers did not necessarily lack experience in office. Ronald Reagan was governor of California for eight years; Walter Mondale was vice president in the Carter presidency; Bill Clinton was governor of Arkansas for eight years; Bob Dole had a 46-year political record before participating in the 1996 presidential election. It is worth noting, however, that the incumbent did not necessarily receive more coverage in the press than the challenger. In 1992, as a challenger, Clinton received more coverage than the incumbent, Bush. In 1996, the difference between the incumbent and the challenger was smaller than that in 1980 and 1984, with 16% for both. Reagan received a 16% increase in coverage compared to the time he was a challenger to the incumbent, but Clinton got only a 10% increase in coverage from 1992 to 1996.

Most of the newspaper coverage of presidential candidates' character placed an emphasis on their competence over integrity. This was likely subject to the design for this research that the presentation of candidate character dealing with consistency, trustworthiness, honesty, morality, and virtue was distinguished as integrity; experience, knowledge, leadership ability, strength, and compassion fell into the category of competence. A chi-square analysis did not show any significant difference between incumbents and challengers for their integrity and competence. According to

the results, however, it can be inferred that the press tended to cover competence of candidates' character over integrity in presidential campaigns. An alternative analysis indicated that the coverage by the press on candidates' character deviated largely from one another. The percentage difference between integrity and competence of candidate was 54% in 1980 increasing to 70% in 1984, while the difference was only 10% in both 1992 and 1996. The coverage gap between integrity and competence was not constant over time. It is worth further examination to see if future press coverage matches this trend in which the gap between the two elements of candidate's character narrows.

Another finding is that the *Los Angeles Times* showed a slight tendency to be more neutral on coverage of candidates' character than *The New York Times*. While the overall coverage of candidates' character had no significant difference on favorable evaluation in tone of coverage, the neutral coverage was less, but unfavorable coverage was slightly higher in *The New York Times* than the *Los Angeles Times*. Still, there was no sufficient evidence to apply this finding to the overall campaign presentations.

Presidential candidates' character has always occupied a portion of media attention. This trend found in this study was that it became more and more conspicuous than ever before

in the past two campaigns. Overall, the percentage of campaign news involving candidates' character has reached nearly 50%. Coverage of the incumbents' character led the way. In addition, competence of the candidates' character was emphasized over integrity, although the difference between the two was decreasing over the years examined. Furthermore, the neutral coverage outnumbered both positive and negative coverage. This indicated that the press tried to maintain the objectivity in its news selection and presentation.

News coverage of presidential elections has tended to place emphasis on candidate character since the Watergate incident. Who a candidate is has become a more important element to voters' evaluation of an ideal president than ever before, especially his integrity and competence. News is not only the product of an organization, but also a combination of internal and external environments of an organization. Both internal and external constraints impact the selection and presentation of news content and serve as influential guidelines when making news. This can offer some explanation of how *The New York Times* differed from the *Los Angeles Times*.

Contributions

In the past, many studies focused on a single election year to examine news coverage dealing with presidential candidates' character. This study examined four presidential campaigns to compare and contrast newspapers' treatment of the incumbent and the challenger on their integrity and competence. This cross-year study, unlike the previous ones, determined the tendency of news coverage involving candidates' character, and offered a more systematic observation on the campaign news.

Limitations

The biggest limitation for this study could be that the candidates were limited to those from the two major parties. In fact, the two newspapers chosen for this study paid relatively high attention to the nominees of the third party, such as John Anderson in 1980, Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996. The press offered reasonable amount of space to cover these contenders. What is more evident is that some of the coverage was placed in prominent locations. To compare the candidates from the two major political parties, the candidates of the third party had been excluded at the very beginning. If this study would have included all candidates from the GOP, the Democratic party, and the independent party, it might have

shown different results about coverage of presidential candidates' character.

Suggestions for future research

This study focused on two metropolitan newspapers with circulation of more than one million copies in opposite regions of the United States of America. However, the present study could be extended to determine how a national newspaper, such as *USA Today*, or local ones, such as the *San Jose Mercury News*, covered the character issue during presidential campaigns. On the other hand, it could take a new approach by comparing some national or local newspapers, or contrasting the difference between the national newspaper and the local counterpart. In addition, comparing coverage of newspapers that endorse editorially distinct political parties could be another way in which some more significant differences might be expected.

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APPENDIX

Number__

CODING SHEET

Coverage of presidential candidates' character

General information

A. Newspaper

1-*The New York Times* 2-*The Los Angeles Times*

B. Year

1-1980 2-1984 3-1992 4-1996

C. Resource

1-news item 2-op-ed piece

Coverage involving the incumbent and/or the challenger

A. Presidential candidate's character

1-presence of presentation 2-absence of
presentation

B. Candidate

1-the incumbent 2-the challenger

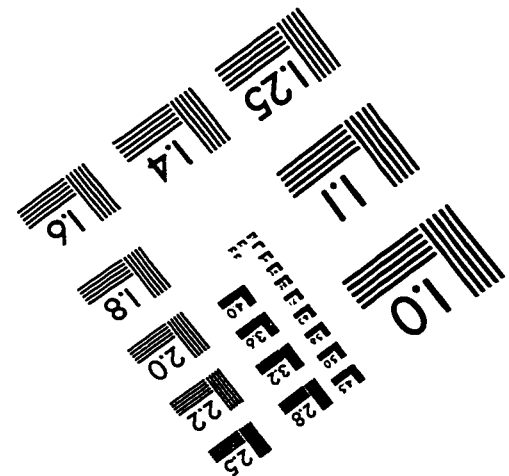
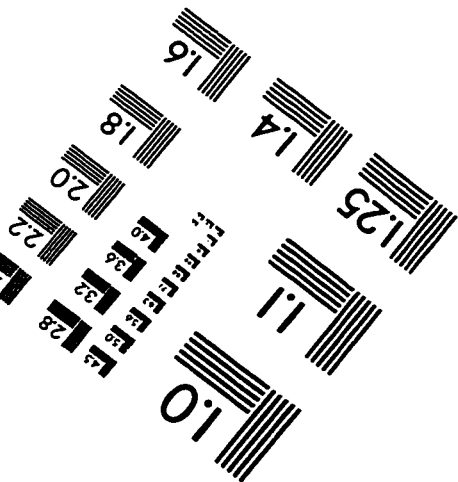
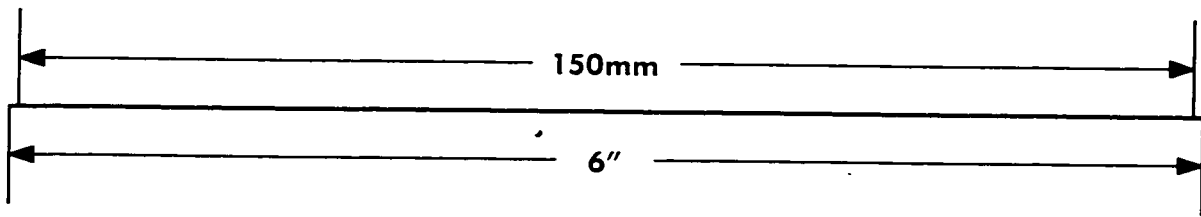
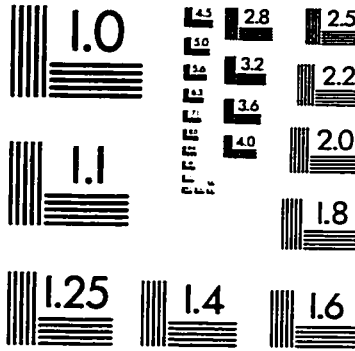
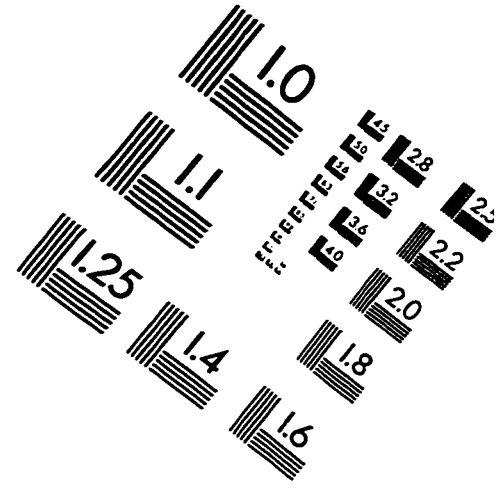
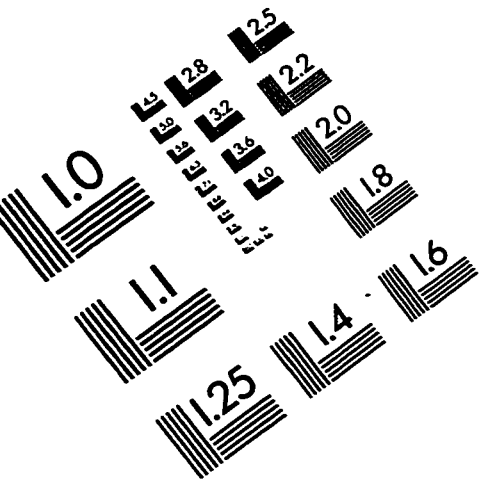
C. Character

1-integrity 2-competence

D. Tone

1-positive 2-neutral 3-negative

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APPLIED IMAGE, Inc
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