

Public Perceptions of Media Bias: A Meta-Analysis of American Media Outlets During the 2012 Presidential Election

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Abstract

There has been a considerable surge of scholastic inquiry in recent years into understanding the factors responsible for the fluctuating levels of public trust in the American news media. With every election year, the American public continues to perpetuate the stereotype that the American news media is ideologically biased, negatively shaping other citizens' views of the American political system and impacting their willingness to participate in the electoral process. This study asserts that the likely factors contributing to public perception of a liberal media bias are indicative of the ideological preferences of partisan individuals and customers, rather than any blatant compromises of professional integrity by American journalists. Furthermore, supported by a selection of existing media bias literature and a multi-tiered meta-analysis of 2012 electoral coverage patterns, this study found strong evidence to suggest an overwhelming conservative media bias within the 2012 election coverage by American media outlets.

Public opinion is formed and expressed by machinery. The newspapers do an immense amount of thinking for the average man and woman. In fact, they supply them with such a continuous stream of standardized opinion, borne along upon an equally inexhaustible flood of news and sensation, collected from every part of the world every hour of the day, that there is neither the need nor the leisure for personal reflection. All this is but part of a tremendous educating process. It is an education at once universal and superficial. It produces enormous numbers of standardized citizens, all equipped with regulation opinions, prejudices and sentiments, according to their class or party.

- Winston S. Churchill (*Mass Effects on Modern Men*, 1925)

I. Introduction

For over 30 years, there has been intense discussion and scholastic inquiry into the subject of media bias in the American media. Americans are repeatedly exposed to accusations that the mainstream media are inherently biased through their daily coverage of social, political and economic news to the American populace. Politicians from both sides of the spectrum have howled that an overwhelming majority of American mainstream media outlets, including CBS, NBC and CNN, and three major U.S. print outlets, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, routinely compromise their journalistic respectability

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through obvious liberal slants found in their reporting.

The subject of this blatant media bias, more commonly referred to as the “liberal media bias,” has become a central theme of political maneuvering since the 1980s, penetrating numerous socioeconomic and ideological demographics within our society, now arguably equated to the level of cultural gospel. Conservatives in particular often claim that media gatekeepers intentionally shut out conservative ideas and have an ingrained slant toward liberal perspectives, particularly within the context of presidential and legislative election years.

People are perpetually exposed to information about our world by America’s mainstream news media. While the information itself routinely reshapes our opinions about the world in which we live, consumers also routinely develop attitudes toward the media outlets themselves during the process of consuming news.

This paper will attempt to provide insight into the underlying societal factors that are responsible for the continued cultivation of the “liberal media bias” theory. The author will place particular emphasis on the role of consumer attitudes, which stand to affect public perception of the American media’s impartiality during the 2012 election.

Extant Theories of Media Bias

Researchers have attempted to examine the circumstances under which a “biased media” could logically exist in equilibrium, and what effects an inherent bias might have on public opinion in general, as well as the outcome of our nation’s electoral process. Previous empirical articles on the existence and effects of media bias suggest the presence of a palpable media bias. However, it is the assertion of this research that an individual whose ideological belief system is comprised of more extreme political views and who self-identifies as politically active will perceive media bias more often, no matter which end of the spectrum the bias is perceived to occur.

Existing research highlights three commonly referenced explanations as to how and why bias perceptions emerge. Excessive exposure to messages enforcing the validity of bias can create a false impression of a perceptible level of bias in the media. Unfortunately, this explanation neglects the distinction between the information itself and the media outlet publicizing it.

A second explanation concerns the extent to which measurable media bias exists. Previous studies suggest that claims of partisan biases in the media are unsubstantiated, and that media coverage is predominantly fair and unbiased.

The third and final explanation for bias perceptions, referred to in academic circles as the “hostile media phenomenon”, postulates that people who are highly involved politically, often referred to as partisans, will perceive media content as “hostile” and biased if it is incongruous with their personal ideological viewpoint.

Model Timeframe Selection (2012 Presidential Election)

Mainstream media outlets in the United States have long been subjected to waves of criticisms and accusations pertaining to the existence of a blatant liberal media bias. But perhaps the debate surrounding media partiality has never been more widely discussed or applicable than within the context of the recent 2012 presidential election. Citizens from every corner of the American political spectrum openly chastised American media outlets for vilifying the 2012 Republican candidates whilst forsaking their commitment to objectivity to coincide with their (supposed) private “pro-Bama” agendas.

In a press release drafted September 25, 2012, Brent Bozell, president and founder of the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog group, openly lambasted the (supposedly) corrupt American media in an open letter, asserting that the establishment media are “out of control with a deliberate and unmistakable leftist agenda”(Bozell, 2012), whilst urging discerning Americans to switch off the “biased news media.” The letter reads: “In the quarter century since the Media Research Center was established to document liberal media bias, there has never been a more brazen and complete attempt by the liberal so-called ‘news’ media to decide the outcome of an election,” wrote Bozell. He went on to present a litany of grievances on behalf of “millions of Americans” against the news media, some of the highlights of which include; “shamefully smearing” Mitt Romney over the course of the election; downplaying the “horrendous economic conditions” within the country; “pouncing” on missteps by conservatives while “suppressing” gaffes by Vice President (Joe) Biden; and “deliberately covering up embarrassing government failures and scandals, including the Solyndra debacle, Fast & Furious, and national security leaks”(Bozell, 2012).

And while some of the sentiments presented in the letter as can be dismissed as sensationalist in nature, a number of important questions remain: What is the media's responsibility with neutral, objective reporting? Which type of news outlet best serves the concerns of our democracy: an outlet which claims to uphold the tenets of "fair and balanced" reporting, yet is unmistakably aligned with a partisan ideology, or an outlet which makes claim to neither neutrality or bias? Furthermore, to what affect does bias (if existent) impact the coverage patterns of a general election by the mainstream media, as well as its subsequent outcome?†

Due to the prevalence of highly contentious ideological battles that dominated American airwaves and headlines from April to November 2012, it seemed entirely appropriate to select the 2012 presidential election as the dedicated analysis period within the context of this study. Through analysis of the pre-dominant political, social and economic issues and the media's subsequent coverage patterns of those issues, this author hopes to further the reader's understanding of the phenomena that drives public perception of the liberal media bias.

II. Literature Review

The issue of mainstream media's credibility and commitment to "fair and neutral reporting" has been a subject of scholastic interest for many years, the most notable resurgence of which occurred following the re-election of President Barack Obama during the 2012 presidential campaign. However, existing empirical literature on this subject is already limited because bias is, by its very nature, a subjective entity, thus making it difficult to discernibly analyze in a quantitative manner.

Existing research on this subject typically assert their conclusions through utilization of two common methodologies: either addressing the issue of subjectivity vs. objectivity and empirically analyzing whether the news media does indeed possess political bias (be it liberal or conservative) (Alterman, 2003; Dennis, 1997), or having already discerned the existence of discernible bias to analyze the potential effects and/or consequences of said bias on society.

Despite the perpetually increasing collection of empirical research indicating the presence or absence of a perceptible media bias, there is a discernible lack of studies examining the relationship between factors that influence public trust in federally regulated institutions and subsequently, their relationship to public perception of the American news media. This research attempts to fill this gap by examining the interdependent relationship between the fluctuating level of public trust in government and individuals' behavior in regards to general perceptions of media bias.

Definition of Media Bias

The perception of media bias has been a subject of considerable debate amongst scholars for years, due in no small part to cultural disambiguation of the term itself. It is, therefore, imperative to first define what constitutes bias.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the term media refers to "a means or agency for communicating, transmitting or diffusing information to the public." Meanwhile, the dictionary defines bias as "a preference or an inclination that inhibits impartial judgment or an act of policy stemming from prejudice" (Pickett et. al., 2002). In the interests of comprehension, let us assimilate the words "media" and "bias" into one collective term from this point forward. According to Black's Law Dictionary, America's most widely cited legal compendium, the term "media bias" refers to "a political bias in journalistic reporting, in programming selection, or otherwise in mass communications media" (Garner and Black, 2009).

The Nature of Media Bias

The question as to whether or not a measurable bias can be found within the mainstream media is completely irrelevant if one does not first understand the implications and indicators of bias, regardless of its context. Bias must exhibit certain characteristics or properties in order to accurately reflect a blatant compromise of objectivity. As coined and used by Williams (1975), in order to meet the criteria of a bias, the behavior or rhetoric in question must represent a willful and blatant challenge to widely upheld public ideals and con-

† For future reference, the term "general" election refers to the period of time between the two major parties' nominating conventions and Election Day.

ventions, one that is continuously demonstrated and not merely an isolated incident.

In the context of this research, however, the author will be primarily focused in examining media bias as perceived by the public. Since the bias is defined “as any form of preferential and unbalanced treatment, or favoritism, toward a political or social issue or political party (Democratic or Republican),” its notion in the context of news coverage directly counteracts the time-honored journalistic standards of accuracy, balance, and fairness (Fico & Soffin, 1995; Lacy, Fico, & Simon, 1991; Streckfuss, 1990).

In the Public Sector: Theoretical Models of Media Bias

As previously discussed, prior scholastic inquiries into the field of media bias tend to indicate a number of reasons as to why bias perceptions emerge. The first is commonly referred to as “meta-coverage,” or the media’s portrayal of its own news reporting (Bennett, 1992; T. J. Johnson, Boudreau, & Glowaki, 1996). In essence, with the advent of information-sharing and social media, the general public has become exposed to an overabundance of conflicting messages about bias on a daily basis. These messages, if unchecked, can trigger a widespread false impression of a high degree of bias within the media (Watts et al., 1999). Unfortunately, this explanation fails to offer credible distinction between the information itself and the media outlet providing it.

The second explanation examines the extent to which palpable media bias can exist. References made in regards to the “liberal media” postulate that there is indeed an authentic, measurable media bias that directly opposes any and all conservative ideologies or perspectives (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000). However, most research suggests that the majority of claims inferring partisan biases at the hands of the media are unsubstantiated, and that media coverage is overwhelmingly fair and unbiased (Dennis, 1997; Domke et al., 1997).

The third common explanation for the emergence of bias perceptions is scholastically referred to as the “hostile media phenomenon” (Vallone et al., 1985). This theory suggests that individuals who are actively involved within the political spectrum (referred to as “partisans”), are predisposed to perceive the news media’s reporting as inflammatory (and therefore, inherently biased) if the given news outlet’s coverage directly conflicts with the viewers ideological viewpoint.

In the Private Sector: Theoretical Models of Media Bias

It is a widely held assumption that the majority of consumers value and actively seek out objective news coverage. However, the continued perception of media bias within the media has also been attributed to the personal and professional standards and practices of media outlet owners (publishers), employees (reporters, producers and editors) and customers (readers and viewers).

Anand, Di Tella and Galetovic (2007) sought to analyze the potential impact of owner preferences in relation to public perceptions of media bias. In their study, results indicated that inherently biased reporting that is endorsed at the corporate level can prove to be financially disastrous as well as reputedly detrimental, as some consumers demand news that is unbiased and refuse to patronize outlets whose coverage does not coincide with their consumer preferences. They found that the degree to which owner preferences affect public trust in the media only matter in the context in which a given outlet’s target demographics of consumers share the owners’ ideological preferences and do not openly espouse a desire or preference for objectivity in their news.

Perceptions of bias may also exist because the consumers demand it. This demand for bias may come from either advertisers or readers. The news media, like any other industry, represents an extremely powerful constituency of advertiser-supported business. As such, they must consistently proffer a quality product to their consumers to make a profit. Modern market researchers and public relations analysts have made considerable progress in examining the possibility that consumers may demand bias in favor of business interests generally or themselves, specifically.

Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) and Sutter (2002) each took to analyzing the perceived impact of readers demanding bias in their news content. Their research indicated that particular demographics of consumers prefer media outlets that validate their own private belief systems over those that are unwilling to compromise journalistic objectivity.

Another explanation for the issue of media bias may relate to reporters and editors may taking upon themselves to actively abuse the resources of their workplace (referred to by scholars as a “visual” or “nar-

rative bias”), using the media as a podium (or in some instances, “bully pulpit”) to espouse their own political views whilst diminishing the legitimacy of viewpoints contradictory to their own. As the fundamental purveyors of social, economic, political and international news, editors and reporters entrusted with accurately conveying objectivity may choose to forsake their commitment to said objectivity by polluting the objective facts with subjective, sensationalized or disparaging comments about the information being presented.

Discerning Bias: Practical Models of Media Bias

In addition to their work analyzing the influence of partisan consumers on media coverage, Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) were also able to determine two distinct styles, or forms, of measuring media bias.

Proponents and believers of an inherent media bias also point to several practices or behaviors as proof of the media’s partiality to liberal causes. The first method is referred to as the “gatekeeper” bias. This particular method of bias refers to the purposeful selection and aggrandizement of certain stories by American journalists to over-emphasize the relative importance or correctness of one side of the issue. This form of bias is especially relevant to the context of this study, as the proverbial “gatekeeper” (which in this context may either be a sole journalist or a representative of a larger institution) is directly regulating and manipulating the scope and flow of information into American society.

The second pattern of behavior associated with biased reporting is known as “bias by placement.” This pattern reflects the practice of journalists intentionally depicting news stories in either a prominent or negligible way so as to magnify or downplay the information; this pattern is often, but not always, attributed to the issue’s coincidence with the journalist’s personal political or social belief system. This pattern can often be observed through analysis of nightly broadcast rundowns or newspaper design mock-ups (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000).

Due to the American public’s notoriously short attention span in response to being presented new information, journalists are now expected to accommodate this behavior by relaying the most contextually relevant information to consumers by the most prominent and obvious means available to them. Traditionally, print stories that receive the biggest headlines and/or “above the fold,” front page placement are perceived by readers as the most timely and appealing stories in the entire paper, thus garnering reader attention. Meanwhile, within the format of television broadcasts, produced segments and packages that are scheduled for the “A” or “B” blocks are typically placed there for the immediacy of their relevant facts and their simultaneous ability to draw in (more) prospective viewers, as well as their ability to retain existing viewers (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000).

This particular form of bias is directly linked to the third type of bias, known as “coverage” bias. In this context, coverage bias reflects the amount of calculable time or physical space each issue (as well as its subsequent sides) is allotted. Similar to the prominence and relative weight that reporters purposefully or negligibly assign to each story, coverage bias is also meant to expose the ideological balance that should technically exist if the journalist is claiming to uphold the tenets of fair and neutral reporting. In other words, there should be an obvious, equal partisan representation of the various sides during an outlet’s coverage of a specific issue (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000).

The next two styles of biased reporting will be discussed in tandem with one another, given their inter-relatedness. The forms in question are referred to as “statement” (or narrative) bias, and “bias by omission.” These two practices entail journalists purposely interjecting their personal opinions or anecdotal knowledge about the legitimacy of objective facts (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000). The objective for the journalist in this case is to promote one ideological perspective (likely one that coincides with their own) whilst decrying the intellectual or factual foundations of another. In some cases, the journalist will intentionally conceal or ignore pertinent facts that may contradict or delegitimize the basis of their arguments (hence bias by omission).

The final practice that can be commonly attributed to biased presentation or reporting is known as “bias by source selection” (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000). This practice aligns itself considerably with the aforementioned coverage and omission biases in that they reflect a journalists conscious efforts to curtail the presentation and public knowledge of relevant facts by choosing to obtain or feature information provided by sources who will either a) willingly espouse subjective comments that aligns with the journalist’s ideological identity, or b) purposefully relay only facts that will reaffirm the journalist’s (or network’s) partisan-influenced depiction of a relevant news story.

Each of the above manipulative patterns of partisan reporting is critical to furthering our understand-

ing of the arguments legitimizing the existence of a palpable liberal bias by American media outlets. However, while there are plenty of documented examples of biased reporting throughout the entire expanse of American news media, there simultaneously exists a number of relevant counter-arguments that attempt to contextualize the myth of a liberal reporting bias within the realm of journalist's (in this case, excusable) incapacity to consistently emulate objectivity in the eyes of an increasingly polarized, partisan consumer base.

Arguments Against the Liberal Media Bias

One of the most devastating elements to the foundational argument of the existence of a perceptible bias by the news media is that many journalists actively seek to avoid implicit displays of partisanship or non-objectivity in their work. It can be argued that since it is near impossible to maintain complete and total objectivity at all times, journalists across the spectrum actively strive to uphold more realistic and attainable standards of conduct within the context of their jobs, such as "fairness" and "neutrality." Instead, a journalist attempts to be objective by two methods: 1) fairness to those concerned with the news, and 2) a professional process of information gathering that seeks fairness, completeness, and accuracy.

In an excerpt from "21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook", Andrew Cline explains his theory that journalists are (by their human nature and intellectual basis) predisposed to be unable to remain completely neutral in their reporting. "No matter how much we may try to ignore it, human communication always takes place in a context, through a medium, and among individuals" (Cline, 2008).

Cline asserts that journalists exist on a similar plane with elected officials in which they are, by the nature of their industry, expected to vocally espouse political positions, but not as overtly. The Society of Professional Journalists harnesses journalists with its code of ethics, but they are not always as pristine as they claim to be. Cline postulates that journalists attempt to compensate for said inability to forego partisan leanings by employing two methods to reflect objectivity: fairness concerned with the news, and a professional process of information gathering focusing on fairness and accuracy (Cline, 2008).

"Language is associated with a conceptual system. To use the language of a moral or political conceptual system is to use and to reinforce that conceptual system." He further argues, "We share the same English language, we often do not share dialects of the denotations and connotations of concepts, lived experiences, and ideologies" (Cline, 2008).

These conscious efforts to emulate standards that reflect inclusivity and balance in reporting, by their very nature, directly contradict the very standards by which bias can logically be determined. If we are willing to accept Williams' (1975) pre-requisites of definitive bias as an acceptable measuring tool for evaluating partisanship in this context, it must be noted that in order for a pattern of behavior or statement to be considered inherently biased, it must reflect an intentional disruption or challenge of pre-existing social customs or beliefs. If a given media outlet is already actively seeking to avoid conflict by over-compensating and consciously curtailing their coverage to uphold their responsibility to objective reporting, it can be logically inferred that any remaining discrepancies between the format and presentation of coverage and the public's perception of its neutrality are accidental by nature and therefore not intentional.

The researcher, throughout the course of this study, will endeavor to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: Is the perception that media outlets have an outstanding liberal bias consumer driven and based on political affiliation within society, or is there an actual bias in the manner in which information is presented?
 - RQ2: If a liberal media bias does indeed exist, to what degree does the media bias affect political outcomes?
 - RQ3: Is there a systematic partisan media bias in presidential campaigns?
 - RQ4: Is one political party the subject of overwhelming praiseworthy or negative coverage by the media?
 - RQ5: If a bias does indeed exist, does it vary from campaign to campaign or from medium to medium?
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III. Methodology

The author's research has expanded upon the initial assertions proffered by Mullainathan and Shleifer to include six specific manifestations or patterns indicating bias within outlet-presented information.

Within the context of this study, the most logical approach to understanding public perceptions of media bias would be to thoroughly review and analyze the outlets being perceived as such. If American citizens believe the media to be inherently biased, the operative question is: Is there a means of proving that the mainstream media are in fact biased in favor of a particular candidate, political party or ideology?

Using this rhetorical inquiry as a guideline, this meta-study sought to gather a variety of quantitative secondary research relating to public opinion polls regarding overall public sentiment toward media-related institutions. This study analyzed a number of informative and aesthetically discernible info-graphics, each of which depicts a multi-tried evaluation system for analyzing major media outlet coverage of issues relevant to the 2012 presidential election. Each of the depicted graphics represents a small portion of a much larger, comprehensive meta-analysis conducted by 4thestate.net, a liberal media watchdog consortium, which processed a total of 717 articles and 15,357 quotes collected from news stories, broadcast and radio transcripts between the period of May 1 and July 15, 2012. Furthermore, each graphic provides considerable insight into a specific statistical or cognitive aspect relating to the mainstream media's coverage patterns of the election.

Drawing any definitive conclusions in a scholastic field of study like media bias is difficult when existing research suggests it to be a largely subjective issue. In an effort to correctly and concisely analyze this enormous field of study, the author has attempted to curtail the amount of reliance on subjective-related findings to help support the conclusions offered in this paper. Rather, the author of this meta-analysis will attempt to legitimize his argument by utilizing objective, numerical data to test the original hypotheses.

IV. Results

Impact of Public Opinion on Media Bias Perceptions

Statistically speaking, the 2012 presidential election happened to occur during an era of American history that has been definitively characterized by the American public's mistrust in their elected government for the better part of a decade.

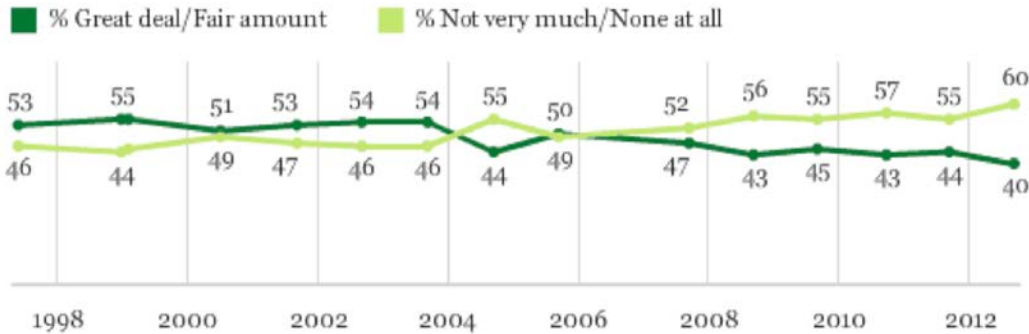
Through a Gallup poll conducted September 6-9, 2011, public distrust toward all federally regulated institutions has progressively escalated to a new record high; sadly, American media outlets are no exception to this phenomenon. Survey figures from a 2011 poll released by Gallup indicate that public distrust of media is quickly reaching a new plateau.

As depicted above in *Figure 1*, when polled "how much trust and confidence" they held toward mass media outlets, 55% of respondents reported "not very much" or "none at all" (Gallup Politics, 2012). This figure marks a 9 percentage increase from the reported 46% calculated in 1998 at the inception of the survey, as well as a 5 percentage increase from a reported 50% in 2005. Meanwhile, when polled about their perceptions of the potential existence of a liberal bias within the media, 47% stated their belief that the media is decidedly "too liberal," marking a considerable ideological disparity when compared to the 13% of respondents who identified the news media as being "too conservative." Meanwhile, 36% of respondents reported feeling that the media is "just about right" in terms of its ideological orientation.

These can be further corroborated through analysis of the findings of a 2012 Pew Research Center survey, which calculates public distrust in media to have reached a historic level ("Pew, 2011"). Opposition to the mass media has reached the pinnacle of a 26-year growth spurt. The survey's findings indicated that 66% of survey respondents perceived news stories as "often inaccurate," marking a 32 percentage jump from a reported 34% in 1985. Meanwhile, 77% of respondents perceived the media to "tend to favor one side," marking a 24 percentage increase from a calculated 53% in 1985. Finally, 80% asserted their beliefs that the media is "often influenced by powerful people and organizations," illustrating a drastic 27 percentage increase from the previous 53% in 1985.

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV, and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?

Gallup trend since 1997



GALLUP®

Figure 1. Respondents were asked to convey their relative trust and/or approval of American media outlets (“Gallup Politics”)

And yet, despite previous documented claims of liberal media bias, contemporary research profiling electoral coverage patterns does not coincide with popular belief.

The data presented in *Figure 2* indicates the Romney campaign boasted a greater percentage of electoral coverage than the Obama campaign across the print, radio and television mediums. On average, the Romney campaign was allotted 3% more statements in election coverage than the Obama campaign. The largest disparity in this trend can be observed through analysis of electoral print coverage, where Romney or members of his campaign staff held 6% more statements than Obama and his campaign officials did.

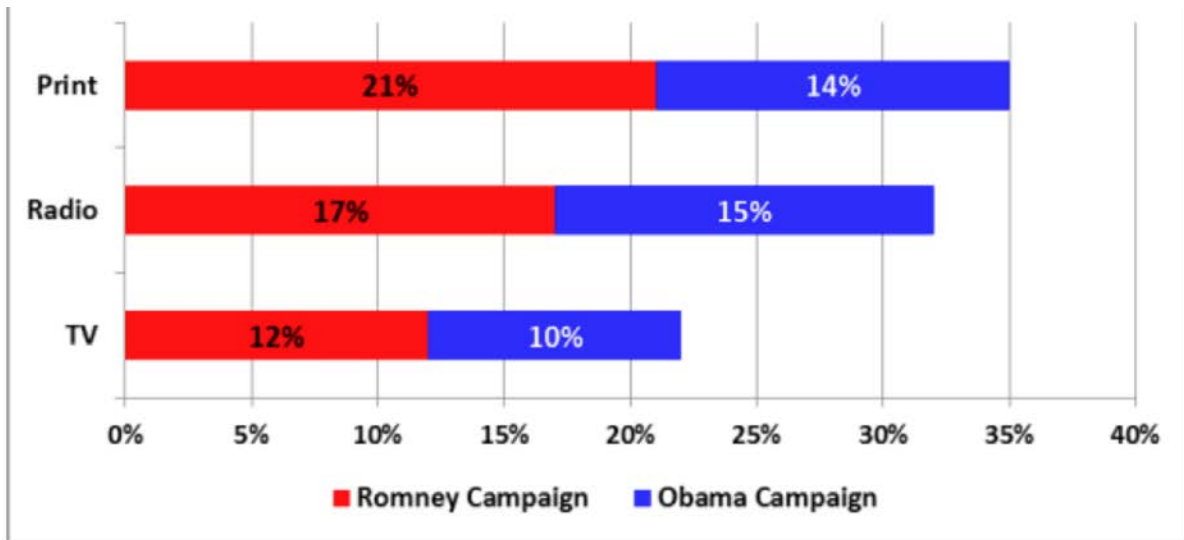


Figure 2: This figure illustrates what percent of total campaign statements are offered from the Romney and Obama campaign officials through the print, television and radio mediums (“Romney Campaign Gets More Coverage Across Media Space”, 2012).

Content Analysis: Major Print News outlets

Analysis of electoral print coverage points to a number of revelatory statistics regarding the perceptible ideological imbalance of partisan sentiments exemplified throughout the course of the election.

Figure 3 suggests that amongst the top four syndicated print outlets depicted above, candidate Mitt Romney received a noticeably larger portion of total electoral coverage than President Barack Obama throughout the course of the campaign. Analysis of electoral coverage patterns exhibited by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* shows a 4:3 ratio in terms of overall space dedicated to Romney over Obama, thereby espousing almost double the number of campaign or issued-related statements coming from Mitt Romney than from Barack Obama.

When it comes to *Boston Globe* electoral coverage, however, the pro-Romney coverage ratio drops to 2:1, a noticeable departure from the coverage patterns of the three aforementioned publications. The four print outlets depicted in Figure 3 represent the largest constituency of print consumers within the United States, thus offering the most encompassing representation available.

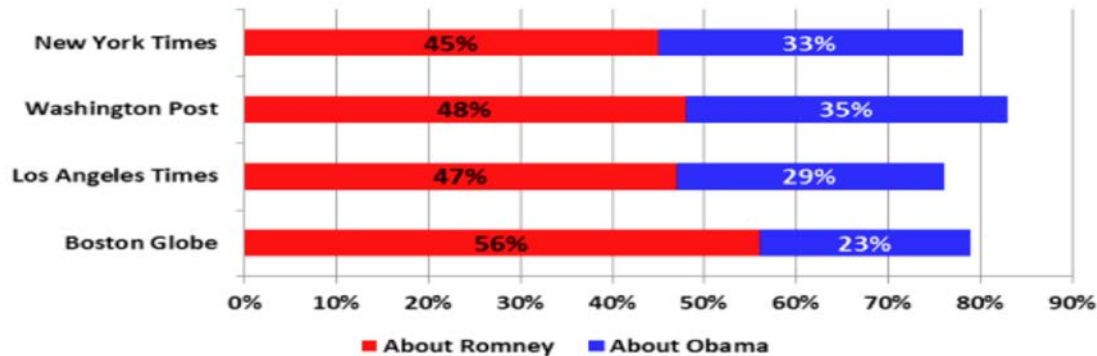


Figure 3: This graph profiles the total percentage of electoral coverage dedicated to each candidate. All of the data here represents the collective assortment of news articles for these four publications within the sample timeline (“Candidate Coverage Among Top Print Outlets,” 2012).

To get a conclusion from the print medium in general, other prominent American print outlets should be included in the study.

Figure 4 illustrates the amount of positive coverage amplified by the 10 most patronized print outlets in the United States during the course of the election. Collectively, the 10 outlets referenced above allocated 22% of their overall electoral coverage to reflect negative sentiments about the candidates. These results also indicate showed that an average of 13% of statements in election coverage among four major print outlets could be viewed as positive in context. Amongst the 10 outlets rendered above, only 14% of their total dedicated election coverage was perceived to reflect a positive context and tone; this value highlights an 8% gap compared to the amount of negative coverage.

As depicted in Figure 4, only 3 out of 10 newspapers printed less percentage of negative statements against Obama than Romney.

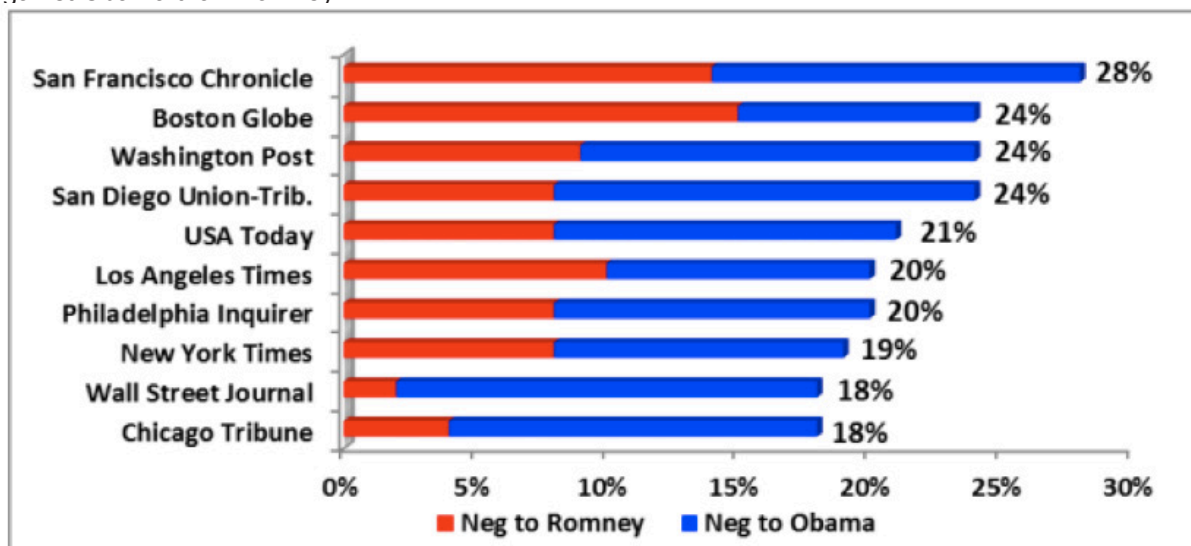


Figure 4: shows percent of negative statements out of total coverage among the top ten print outlets in the United States (“Negative Coverage Among Top Print Outlets” 2012).

Content Analysis: Major Television News Outlets

This part will feature a coordinated meta-analysis of the issue-specific coverage patterns of American broadcasting networks (namely, in this instance, network and cable television).

The evaluation system this paper relies on is created by 4thEstate.net (whose data the author will also feature) as “Voiceshare.” It encapsulates each candidate’s respective share of the total dedicated electoral coverage across all major news mediums. Any statement is said by a candidate or campaign officials, about them, one point is assigned to the candidate, raising his or her total Voiceshare percentage.

Print and television outlets covered the 2012 election differently. While the former predominantly tailored their electoral coverage to reporting on candidates policy initiatives and advocacy of relevant social issues, the latter seemed to consciously downplay the candidates’ respective policy stances in favor of placing added emphasis on campaign strategy and professional decorum.

Figure 5 illustrates that electoral television coverage lacks considerable policy-related discussion in comparison to its print counterpart. About 45% of all broadcast sentiments were oriented around discussions of each candidates respective campaign strategies. By comparison, the most heavily discussed policy issue featured in electoral television coverage related to the ongoing universal healthcare debate (more popularly known as Obamacare), representing a mere 15% of analyst statements. This pattern reflects a conscious effort by American broadcast outlets to place particular emphasis on critiquing candidate image and campaign developments over policy initiatives.

In addition, 30% of statements made by featured analysts and commentators throughout all television election coverage on campaign strategy have been partisan-influenced, whilst the remaining 70% majority had been viewed as non-partisan or neutral toward Romney and Obama. This final statistic is particularly unexpected within the context of televised electoral coverage, as the broadcast format is more commonly associating with several of the previously discussed forms of biased reporting from which the public identifies bias. For the overwhelming majority of statistics pertaining to broadcast statements to indicate a minority of partisan sentiments (especially in regard to such subjective facets of a presidential campaign like campaign strategy and perceptions of professional decorum) helps concretize the author’s previous assertion that modern journalists strive to uphold the tenets of objectivity and fair, neutral reporting in spite of the public stigmatization of their profession.

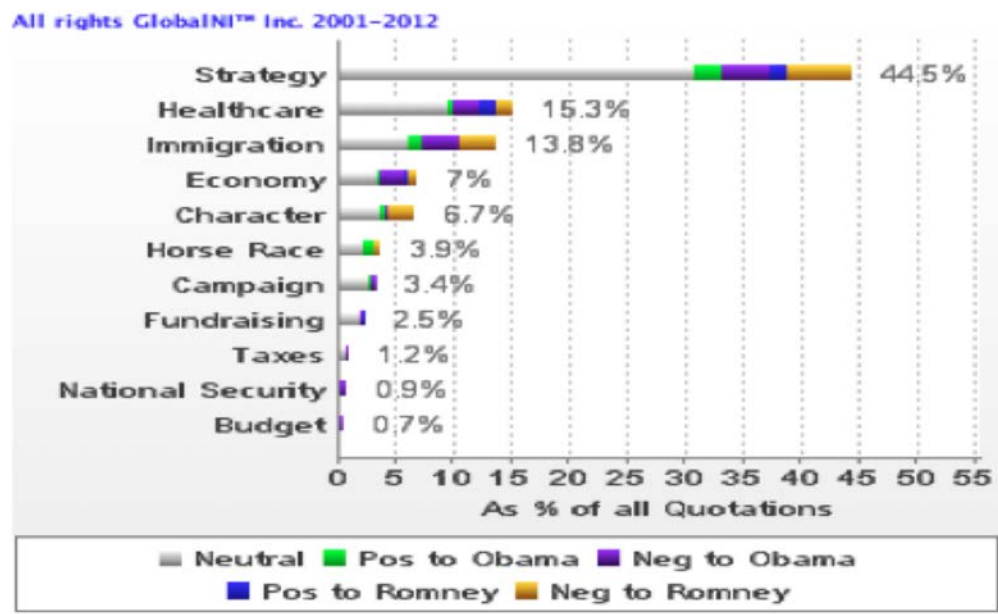


Figure 5: This chart illustrates the percentage of statements from analysts and commentators in television coverage of the election, categorized by topic (“Election Coverage on TV Lacks Substance,” 2012).

Discussion

In the interests of coherency and organization, the discussion of the study's findings will be subsequently divided into five distinct portions; each portion will center on revisiting one of the author's original five research questions.

The findings of the study offer a multi-faceted answer to the issues raised in RQ1. Through our analysis of existing bias literature, multiple studies pointed to the "hostile media phenomenon" (Vallone et al., 1985) as one of the primary underlying factors that has allowed for continued social perpetuation of the liberal media bias myth. This theorem provided an expository glimpse into the tendency for citizens to view media coverage of controversial events as unfairly biased and hostile if it does not coincide with the position they advocate. Furthermore, it can be ascertained that individuals who self-identify as being actively involved within the political spectrum (textually referred to as "partisans"), are thus more inclined to perceive the news media's reporting on a specific issue as inflammatory (and therefore, inherently biased) if the given news outlet's coverage directly conflicts with the viewers ideological viewpoint. This innate desire by American consumers for ideological self-validation, if challenged, tends to strengthen their convictions that they and those who identify with their respective ideologies have been (and will continue to be) slandered and manipulated by the so-called "liberal media."

However, it must also be acknowledged that the myth surrounding the existence of perceptible media bias is not without some small modicum of truth. Advocates of the existence of said bias commonly cite a number of professional patterns and standards of conduct historically employed by journalists (though are not exclusive to "liberal" journalists) in an effort to manipulate the depiction and depth of information presented each day to the American public. Such techniques discussed included six main types or styles of biases, including; gatekeeping information (i.e. purposefully selecting ideologically reaffirming stories for syndication), employing partisan source selection, omission of (potentially contradictory) facts, manipulating the degree of attention and calculable time devoted to a given issue, and finally, openly displaying narrative, subjective contempt for objective facts.

Unfortunately, while the results also indicated a considerable pro-conservative bias amidst the media's collective coverage of the 2012 election, it seems that the degree to which bias can be perceived within the coverage itself remains a subjective entity; however, numerous examples of existing literature indicate that an overwhelming majority of claims inferring partisan biases by the news media remain unsubstantiated, and that mainstream outlet media coverage is predominantly fair and unbiased.

Through RQ2, the study aimed to determine to what degree a liberal bias on the part of the news media would affect the political outcome of the electoral process. If one is to proffer a conclusion for this question, one must address the issues raised in this question empirically. As previously stated, the degree and manner to which perceptible bias on the part of the news media can be ascertained remains an overwhelmingly subjective phenomenon, rendering the author unable to offer definitive answer on the subject, even in consideration of strongly supportive data.

However, if the author is to examine this question within the parameters of a scientific cause and effect relationship, he is then capable of proffering a more definitive conclusion. In accordance with the patterns gained by analyzing the featured data profiling media outlet's coverage and public opinion polls indicating popular sentiment to be in support of the liberal bias theory (the "cause"), the subsequent effect would hold for the study's defined sample period, namely the 2012 presidential election.

In this case, despite existing popular opinion endorsing the existence of the liberal bias theory, the results of this study effectively counteract and (partially) delegitimize these claims. Despite a documented conservative tilt in favor of Mitt Romney and partisan Republican ideology observed in the media's coverage of the election, history shows that President Barack Obama was re-elected for a second term, garnering a 51.1 majority percentage of the popular vote. Even amidst an unfavorable 6:1 ratio of negative to positive coverage and an established pro-conservative tone displayed across all major news media, President Obama was still able to achieve victory.

These findings lead to a dual-layered conclusion: That a liberal bias by the American news media stands to affect electoral outcomes can only be ascertained on a select case-by-case basis; and the calculated conservative bias exemplified by the American media did not successfully manipulate the ultimate outcome of the electoral process governing the 2012 presidential election.

RQ3 and RQ4 both endeavored to explore whether a systematic partisan media bias could be mea-

sured during the span of presidential election campaigns, and whether one political party exists as the subject of overwhelming praiseworthy or negative coverage by the media in comparison to the other. In order to present an accurate and documented conclusion to this question, it seems appropriate to consult the featured info-graphic, which serves as a cumulative representation of the overall coverage patterns exhibited by national media outlets regarding timely campaign issues (see Figure 6).

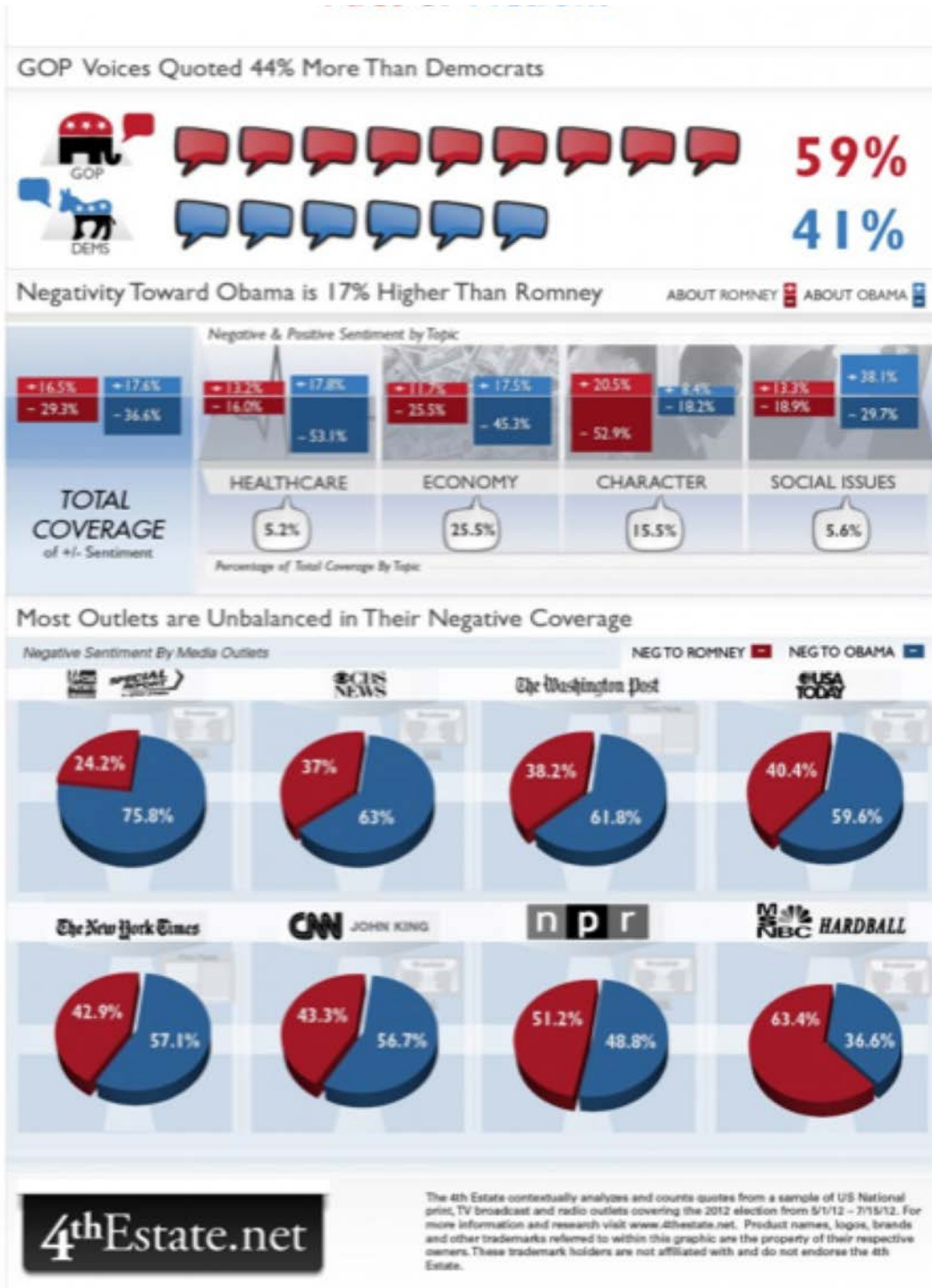


Figure 6. “Liberal Media Bias: Fact or Fiction”, 2012

As evidenced by the numerical collage of results offered in Figure 6, throughout the course of the election, the news media curtailed their overall depth of electoral coverage so as to feature statements origi-

nating from partisan Republican officials at a 44% higher rate than those from partisan Democratic officials. Additionally, the overall calculated ratio of positive to negative coverage indicates that outlets across all three major mediums were 17.1% more critical of Obama than Romney. These results indicate overwhelmingly that the existence of a discernible liberal bias cannot be logically associated with the overall electoral coverage patterns and images displayed by the mainstream media during the course of the 2012 presidential election, thus affirming another of the researcher's original hypotheses offered at the onset of this study.

The author's fifth and final research question sought to explore as to whether the existence of a discernible bias would vary from campaign to campaign or medium to medium. While previously discussed in the research and findings portion of this thesis, it seems that the most logical foundation of bias can be found in the analysis of medium vs. medium electoral coverage. The data presented in *Figures 2, 3, 4* and *6* indicated the Romney campaign boasted a greater percentage of electoral coverage, averaging an increase 44% more media attention than the Obama campaign across all major news information mediums. And while the possibility for the existence of campaign-based bias may exist, it has not been thoroughly examined enough within the research implications of this study for the author to offer a substantiated conclusion.

Research Limitations

The author acknowledges that the considerably limited scope of the accumulated results and the consistent reliance on selected sources to provide the bulk of the study's statistical basis does not permit him to speak indisputably about either the source or the depth of the perceptual bias this paper has sought to document.

Meta-analyses are by nature somewhat subjective, and are typically limited in their academic scope to primarily reviewing and analyzing quantitative studies, even though qualitative research stands to provide measurable insight into the research issue being studied. Furthermore, the conclusions garnered by meta-analyses often conflict if different studies are sampled or excluded for different reasons (in essence, researchers who craft meta-analyses can base the entirety of their argument off an unrepresentative sample of the topic being examined).

Despite the prevalence of American consumers obtaining a veritable portion of their news via aggregate content sites, many scholars now attribute the overwhelming functionality of the American political blogosphere to be that of an open avenue for the exchange of partisan-influenced ideas and opinions that primarily stand to reaffirm existing conservative or liberal belief systems and ideological self-validation. This means that print and online editorials, opinion columns, letters to the editor and other subjective-based content sites (including content featured on popular political news aggregate blogs and websites like the Huffington Post, Drudge Report or Christian Science Monitor), which do not reflect an open and unwavering commitment to objectivity in their news reporting, were thus excluded from the analysis. Therefore, the conclusions drawn through analysis of the accumulated data are limited to the coverage of traditional news media, including television, print and radio.

Throughout the discussion of the empirical results below, aggregated results from analyzed newspapers, television and radio broadcasts are presented in order to give the reader a more concise understanding of the profiled outlets and issues presented.

V. Conclusion

In summation, the extant data and research presented in this paper does not support the existence of a liberal media bias as it relates to mainstream 2012 election coverage. If anything, analysis of the discussed content contradicts ongoing public assumption, indicating a measurable ideological imbalance in typically required non-partisan coverage, one that tips overwhelmingly in favor of then Republican candidate Mitt Romney. If anything else, the statistics presented in this paper clearly suggest a considerable conservative bias by the mainstream media during the course of the 2012 election, exemplified through their calculated dominant coverage of partisan Republican officials across all major news mediums.

This analysis has sought to demonstrate that the stigmatization of the American media and its perceived liberal partiality stems from a series of interrelated factors that include the roles of partisan identification and need for self-validation of political ideology.

As to whether the news media actually contains a discernible liberal or conservative bias; if this study's findings are any indication, it is likely this subject will remain a topic of debate among scholars for decades to come.

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