

Media Bias: What Journalists and the Public Say About It

by Kenneth Dautrich and Jennifer Necci Dineen

A Media Studies Center/Roper Center survey of Washington-based political journalists, conducted in November and December 1995, showed that 89% of them had voted for Bill Clinton in the 1992 presidential election. This highly publicized finding has refueled a new debate over bias in news media coverage of politics. Here, we explore accusations of partisan and ideological bias in media reporting from three

About the Surveys: The surveys reported here were conducted by the Media Studies Center and the Roper Center For Public Opinion Research. That of Washington-based bureau chiefs and congressional reporters was conducted by mail in November-December 1995 (sample size = 139; sampling error—given a total population of 323—is $\pm 2.8\%$). The national survey of daily newspaper editors was conducted by mail November 1995-January 1996 (sample size = 100; sampling error—given a total population of 1,389 daily newspapers—is $\pm 7\%$). The survey of Members of Congress was conducted by mail November-December 1995 (sample size = 155; sampling error—given a total population of 535—is $\pm 3.7\%$). The survey of new journalists was conducted by telephone in May 1995 (sample size = 1,000; sampling error is $\pm 3.2\%$).

important perspectives—the news media themselves, voters, and Members of Congress.

To be sure, candidates of both political parties and on both sides of the ideological spectrum have expressed frustration over being treated unfairly by the media. The conventional wisdom, however, suggests that Republicans and conservatives are more likely to suffer from a press that tends to be sympathetic to the liberal point of view and the Democratic Party.

Reporters and Editors: More Liberal and Democratic Than the Public

Washington-based bureau chiefs and congressional reporters (referred to hereafter as “reporters”) claim to have voted for Clinton over Bush in 1992 by an overwhelming margin of 13 to 1 (89% to 7%). Only 2% said they voted for Ross Perot. Keeping in mind that the national vote in 1992 was 44% for Clinton, 37% for Bush, and 19% for Perot, it is clear that reporters were much more inclined to vote for Clinton, and much less inclined to vote for either Bush or Perot, than was the American voter.

Newspaper editors across the nation were also more likely than the electorate-at-large to have voted for the Democratic ticket in 1992. A Media Studies Center/Roper Center survey of 100 editors from the nation’s approximately 1,400 daily newspapers, conducted November 1995 to February 1996, shows a 60% to 22% margin for Clinton over Bush, with only 4% voting for Perot. While showing not quite as exaggerated a slant as reporters, the editors—those making decisions about what news is fit to print—were personally much more likely to support the Democratic candidate than either the

Republican or the independent, when compared to the American voting public.

In addition to their voting patterns in 1992, reporters and newspaper editors were found in the 1995-96 surveys to differ from the electorate in party identification as well. The data in Table 1, for example, show that reporters are 16 points more likely than the rest of America to identify with the Democratic Party, and 24 points less likely to identify with the Republican Party. This table also shows that while newspaper editors are not more likely to be Democrats than the public, they are 14 points less likely to be Republican. A 1995 Freedom Forum/Roper Center national survey of “New Journalists” (those who had been in the profession for no more than 11 years) also showed this group to strongly prefer the Democratic Party (40%) over the Republican Party (14%).

Ideologically there are also large differences between the electorate and the journalistic community (see Table 1). While 6 in 10 reporters and 3 in 10 newspaper editors claimed to be either ideologically “liberal” or “liberal to moderate,” only 2 in 10 voters are liberal or lean liberal.

The data provided fairly strong evidence that at least two important aspects of the American media establishment—Washington bureau chiefs/journalists and the nation’s newspaper editors—differed dramatically in their basic political orientations and in their 1992 voting behavior. Further, these differences run consistently in the liberal and Democratic direction. This evidence, however, should not be interpreted as an indictment of the media. Establishing a link between the personal political orientations of editors/reporters and their work as journalists is first necessary.

The Link Between Opinions and Coverage

Table 1
The Politics of Journalists and the Public Compared

	Washington-Based Reporters	Newspaper Editors (national)	New Journalists (1-10 years experience)	Public*
Party Identification				
Democrat	50%	31%	40%	34%
Republican	4%	14%	14%	28%
Independent	37%	39%	34%	25%
Other	9%	7%	9%	8%
Self-Described Ideology				
Liberal (incl. lean)	61%	32%	NA	20%
Moderate	30%	35%	NA	34%
Conservative (incl. lean)	9%	25%	NA	27%

*Note: Details of the journalists surveys are reported on p. 7. The comparison data for the general public are from a Media Studies Center/Roper Center survey of 1,200 persons, conducted in September 1995.

While the data mentioned above show that reporters and newspaper editors are more Democratic and liberal than the nation's electorate, they do not necessarily suggest that their work as journalists is influenced by personal political orientations. In fact, the journalistic credo of "objectivity" would, in theory, suggest that a journalist's own predispositions can be and ought to be set aside in reporting the news.

There are two basic approaches to establishing a linkage between journalistic attitudes and journalistic outputs. One approach is to content-analyze news stories to evaluate the frequency and positive/negative nature of campaign coverage of Democratic and Republican candidates (such as the work currently being done by Ted J. Smith of Virginia Commonwealth University, and S. Robert Lichter of the Center For Media and Public Affairs). A second approach—and an approach we apply here—is to explore reporters' self-assessments of coverage, voters' perceptions of bias, and elite perceptions of bias.

The data from our survey of reporters suggests that the journalistic goal of objectivity is more of an ideal than a practice. Evidence from our survey shows that the liberal and Democratic leanings of Washington reporters may, consciously or unconsciously, influence coverage of politics.

For example, in retrospectively assessing their own reporting on the 1994 "Contract with America," 59% of reporters said they treated this topic *only* as an election year campaign ploy, compared to 3% who treated it as a serious reform proposal. Slightly over one-third of reporters said they covered the Contract story in both ways (see Figure 1). That 6 in 10 reporters did not even *in part* consider the Contract story as a policy proposal in covering the issue suggests that the political orientations of journalists—orientations which we know to lean in the direction of the Democratic Party and liberal point of view—may have influenced their work.

The link between a reporter's own political attitudes and political reporting is perhaps more directly captured in the following finding: When asked to provide a self-assessment of how often their own opinions affect their work, 78% said at least occasionally. Virtually no one said their opinions never affected their coverage.

Reporters and newspaper editors feel that in addition to providing the more traditional "watchdog" and "objective" reporting roles, they should also be "suggesting potential solutions to social problems" (62% of reporters agreed with this, as did fully 79% of newspaper editors). The strong "civic journalism" inclination of reporters and editors to provide suggestions for solving social problems is not in and of itself problematic. The rather strong partisan and ideological leanings of reporters and editors do seem problematic, though, considering the difficulty (if not impossibility) of suggesting solutions to social problems outside the framework of partisan and ideological positions.

These findings further suggest that the political orientations of those in the journalistic community may, in fact, result in bias in the news.

Voters Perceive Bias in Campaign Coverage

For voters, the news media are the main source of information about campaigns. A September 1996 Media Studies Center/Roper Center survey showed that 78% of voters depend mostly on the media for information about the 1996 campaign. Hence, the electorate's ob-

subgroups feel a media bias is apparent, Republicans (75%) and conservatives (70%) are most critical of a general media bias.

When specifically asked about ideological biases in campaign reporting, about half of all voters claim coverage is about evenly balanced. Among those who perceive an ideological slant, the

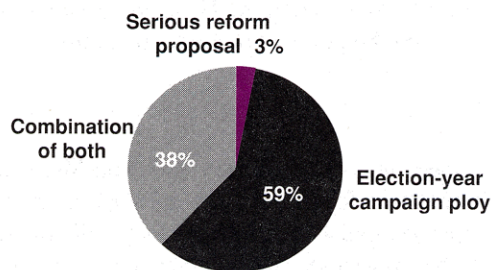
15% of Democrats say there is a media bias favoring Republicans. Further, the partisan-neutral "independent" voters are 17 percentage points more likely to feel that news coverage of this campaign favors the Democratic Party.

Congress's Perspective

In addition to our examinations of

Figure 1
Journalists' Skepticism About the "Contract"

Question: When House Republicans unveiled their "Contract with America" in the fall of 1994, did you treat it primarily as a serious reform proposal, primarily an election-year campaign ploy, or a combination of both?



Source: Media Studies Center/Roper Center survey of Washington-based reporters, conducted November/December 1995.

servations regarding ideological and partisan bias in reporting present a critical perspective. As the news media provide an important filter for what voters come to learn, know and feel about political candidates, the journalistic goal of balance, if not objectivity, becomes paramount.

The September 1996 Media Studies Center/Roper Center Survey on "Voters and the Media" provides insights into the electorate's perception of media biases in 1996 presidential campaign coverage. The picture painted by these data tends to validate the hypothesis that news coverage favors the liberal point of view and the Democratic Party [See pp. 11-14 for further data from this survey].

Two-thirds of voters disagree (41% strongly and 24% mildly) that "News media stories about the campaign provide unbiased accounts of what is happening in the campaign." While majorities of all major partisan and ideological

bias runs 4 to 1 in favor of the Democratic Party.

Perhaps even more striking is the perception of bias within ideological voter groups. While two-thirds of liberals say there is a balance to coverage, only one-third of conservatives feel that way. And while liberals who see an ideological bias are almost as likely to say it moves in a conservative direction as a liberal direction (12% to 15%, respectively), conservatives—by a 55% to 4% margin—feel news about the campaign is biased in the liberal direction. Even among those who describe themselves as "moderate," 23% sense a liberal media bias compared to 9% who say there is a conservative bias.

Overall, voters are also more likely to say there is a bias in campaign coverage that favors the Democratic Party (32%) rather than the GOP (9%). And while 61% of Republican voters feel the news media favor the Democrats, only

perceptions of partisan and ideological bias from information suppliers (news media) and information receivers (voters), a third perspective is provided by data from a November-December 1995 Media Studies Center/Roper Center survey of Members of Congress.

When asked to assess the political orientation of the Washington-based national media, fully three-quarters of Members characterized this group as either "liberal" (42%) or "liberal to moderate" (34%). Twenty percent said this group is best described as moderate; only 5% of the Members of the 104th Congress described the Washington press corps as "moderate to conservative," and zero percent believed the term "conservative" described their political views.

Further, a majority (63%) of Members who described themselves as liberal felt that characterizing the national press as "liberal" or "liberal to moder-

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ate” is accurate. Similarly, 44% of Democratic members perceived this portion of the press as “liberal” or “liberal to moderate.” Conversely, not one of the conservative Members described the Washington press corps as “moderate to conservative” or “conservative,” and 94% described the national press as “liberal” (57%) or “moderate to liberal” (37%).

Reporters covering Congress for regional and local news organizations are perceived by Members of Congress as being more moderate than their national press corps colleagues. Only 17% of Members surveyed characterized regional and local reporters

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as liberal, compared with 42% seeing the national press as liberal, and 37%, “liberal to moderate.” And while only 5% of Congress believes the national press to be “moderate to conservative,” 18% believed this to be true about the regional and local press.

Political elites scaling both ends of the ideological and partisan spectrum agree that, politically, much of the press, especially the national press

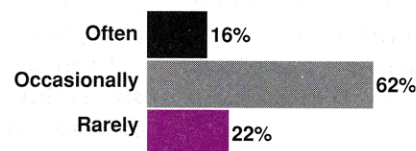
corps, can be described as being on the liberal end of that spectrum. This congressional perspective, along with the data described above, reinforces the possible connection between the political orientations of the media and bias in coverage.

The Media’s Large “Constitutional” Role

Our data, drawn from three unique perspectives—journalists, voters, and Members of Congress—suggest two important findings. First, the political orientations of media professionals (such as Washington bureau chiefs and journalists, newspaper editors, and a national cross section of newer journalists) are slanted in the liberal and Democratic direction, at least when compared to the political orientations of the American public. Second, there is compelling evidence—from reporters themselves—to suspect that the political orientations of the media do influence news coverage.

Figure 2
The View Of Congress

Question: How often do journalists in Washington let their personal or professional opinion of a member of Congress affect the tone of their coverage?



Source: Media Studies Center/Roper Center survey of Washington-based reporters, conducted November/December 1995.

Because the news media this election year continue to be the main source of voter information on the campaign and the candidates, the often-ignored cries of a liberal, Democratic bias should be attended to. The news media play an integral role in the workings of American democracy by setting the campaign agenda for voters. Without a free flow of information—information that is characterized, at a minimum, by objectivity and balance—it becomes difficult for voters to see a clear picture of the options offered in a campaign. Our data point to serious questions of both balance and objectivity in campaign coverage, and suggest the need for future research on the implications of this. If political coverage is, in fact, significantly biased in a liberal direction, to what extent has this affected the American voter and the course of the nation’s politics?



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