

The Effect of Campaign Visits on Local Newspaper Coverage: Evidence from the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election

1. Introduction

The allocation of candidate time represents one of the most valuable and scarce resources in modern political campaigns. Understanding whether physical campaign visits generate media coverage is essential for evaluating campaign strategy effectiveness and the role of earned media in democratic competition. This paper investigates whether campaign visits causally influence the amount of local newspaper coverage candidates receive.

This paper finds that while visits by presidential candidates are associated with large unconditional increases in coverage, these effects vanish after accounting for strategic timing. In contrast, vice-presidential visits robustly increase newspaper mentions, reflecting causal effects constrained by limited resources. These findings suggest distinct mechanisms underlying campaign effects and highlight the importance of timing in political communication.

2. Data and Empirical Strategy

2.1 Data Description

The dataset comprises daily observations for 91 counties across 22 states throughout 2000, yielding 33,306 county-day observations. Key variables include: (1) Campaign Visits: Binary indicators for candidate presence in county i on day t . (2) Newspaper Coverage: Count of candidate mentions in local newspapers (full text and headlines separately). (3) Candidates: Analysis focuses on major party candidates (Bush, Gore, Cheney, Lieberman), excluding primary candidates (Bradley, Buchanan).

2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarizes descriptive statistics. Bush and Gore conducted significantly more visits (37 and 41 respectively) than Cheney and Lieberman (5 each), reflecting the resourcing differences between presidential and vice-presidential campaigns. Average daily coverage differs substantially, with Bush and Gore receiving 3-4 mentions compared to Cheney and Lieberman's < 0.5 mentions.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Panel A: Campaign Visits			
Candidate	Total Visits	Counties Visited	Visits per County
Bush	37	23	1.61
Gore	41	14	2.93

Cheney	5	5	1.00
Lieberman	5	5	1.00

Panel B: Mean Newspaper Coverage by Visit Status

Candidate	No Visit Days	Visit Days	Difference	N (Visit)
Bush	3.92	8.49	+ 4.57 %	37
Gore	3.24	4.95	+ 1.71 %	41
Cheney	0.45	2.80	+ 2.35 %	5
Lieberman	0.32	1.40	+1.08 %	5

Panel C: Sample Characteristics

Total counties	91
Total states	22
Time period	January 1 - December 31, 2000
Total observations	33,306

2.3 Empirical Strategy

To identify causal effects, I employ three specifications with increasing controls:

Model 1 - Unconditional Comparison:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta \text{Visit}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

Model 2 - Controlled Specification:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta \text{Visit}_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \delta_m + \theta_d + \lambda f(t) + \epsilon_{it}$$

where α_i represents county fixed effects, X_{it} includes time-varying controls, δ_m and θ_d are month and day-of-week fixed effects, and $f(t)$ captures distance to election.

Model 3 - Within-County Variation:

$$Y_{it} = \beta \widetilde{\text{Visit}}_{it} + \gamma \tilde{t} + \tilde{\epsilon}_{it}$$

where variables are within-transformed and standard errors are clustered at the county level.

Model 1 establishes baseline effects, while Model 2 introduces time-varying controls and fixed effects to address potential confounding. Model 3 further isolates within-county variability to provide causal estimates of visits on newspaper coverage.

3. Results

3.1 Main Results

Unconditional comparisons (Model 1) suggest significant positive effects of candidate visits, with Bush visits increasing newspaper mentions by 116.6% and Gore by 52.8%. However, these effects disappear for presidential candidates once fixed effects are included, turning negative and statistically insignificant (Model 3). In contrast, vice-presidential visits maintain robust positive effects across all specifications, with Cheney visits increasing mentions by 1.23 ($p < 0.01$) and Lieberman by 0.94 ($p < 0.05$). This divergence reflects the impact of strategic timing for presidential candidates and resource limitations for vice-presidential ones.

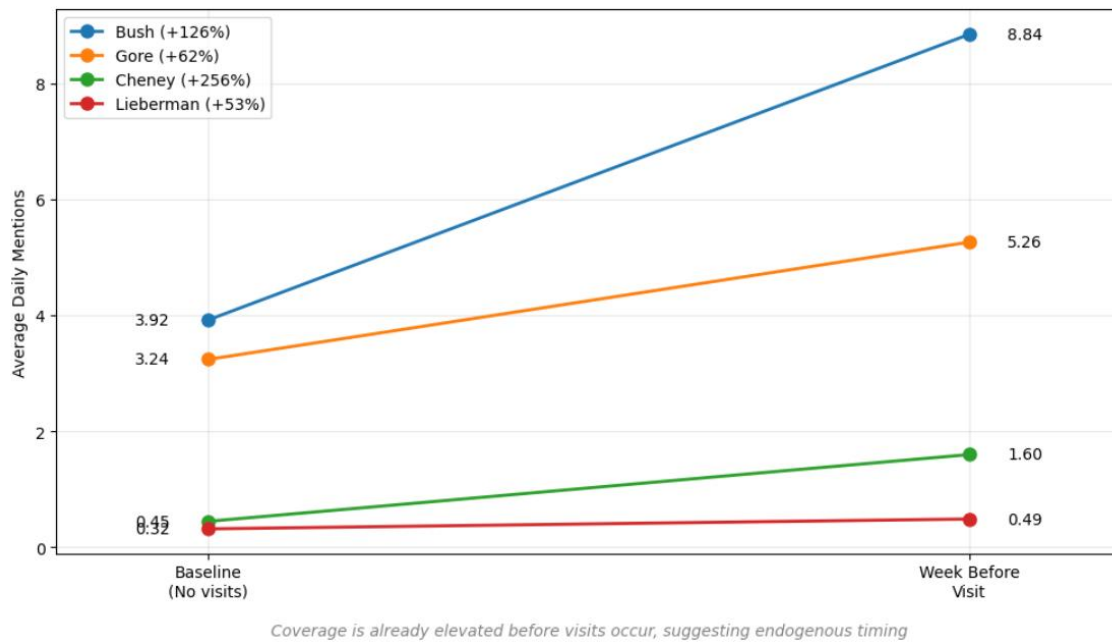
Table 2 Regression Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Simple Difference	Full Controls	Panel FE
Bush Visit	4.57***	-1.11	-1.33
Gore Visit	1.71	-0.32	-0.81
Cheney Visit	2.35***	1.10**	1.23***
Lieberman Visit	1.08**	0.68	0.94**

3.2 Pre-Visit Trends and Endogeneity

Analysis of coverage patterns before visits reveals substantial pre-existing elevation as shown in Figure 1. Bush counties average 8.84 mentions in the week preceding visits compared to 3.92 baseline (125% elevation). This pattern suggests endogenous timing where candidates visit during periods of heightened media attention.

Figure 1 Pre-Visit Coverage Patterns



4. Robustness Checks

Robustness checks validate the reliability of the results across multiple dimensions. Outlier analysis finds minimal extreme values in visit-day coverage, with no evidence that outliers heavily influence the results. For instance, Bush visits contain just 4 outliers, while Cheney has none.

Temporal analysis reveals stronger weekday effects for presidential visits compared to weekends (Bush: 9.03 vs. 4.00 mentions, Gore: 5.55 vs. 2.50 mentions), aligning with standard news cycles where weekday newsrooms produce more output. Geographic variation further illustrates the heterogeneity of visit outcomes: media-rich states like California produce the highest levels of coverage (e.g., Bush: 12.53 mentions per visit), while repeated visits to regions like DC (e.g., Gore's 13 visits) exhibit diminishing returns. These patterns reinforce the strategic nature of presidential visits and their reliance on favorable media environments.

5. Mechanisms

The mechanism analysis uncovers the processes underlying the observed effects of campaign visits. Presidential visits primarily operate through strategic timing and spillover effects (Figure 2), revealing different dynamics compared to vice-presidential visits.

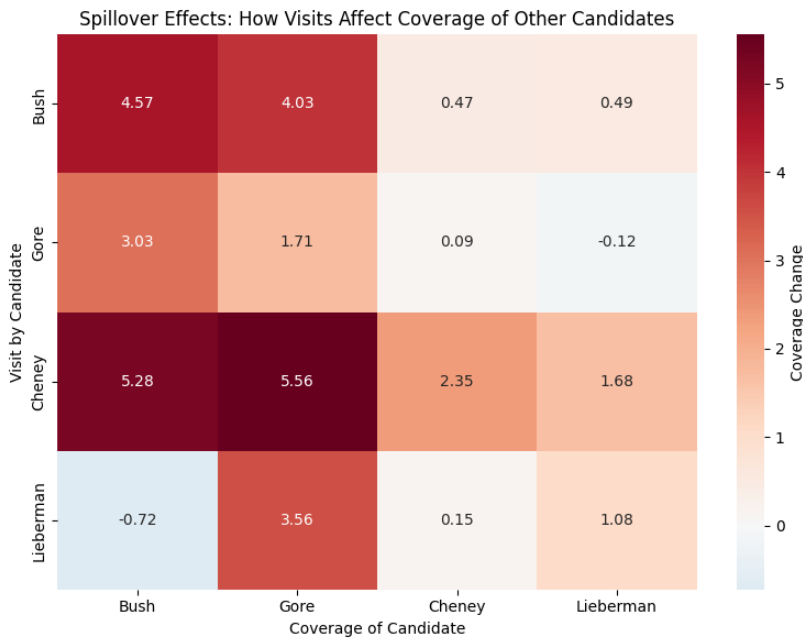
First, pre-visit elevation suggests strategic timing by presidential candidates. Coverage levels are already 62-125% above baseline in the week prior to visits, reflecting endogenous timing rather than causal generation of media attention. This indicates that

visits coincided with periods of high natural media interest, further reducing the marginal impact of the visit itself.

Second, spillover effects reveal that campaign visits generate a broader "campaign news" environment, increasing coverage of other candidates. Bush visits increase coverage for Gore by 4.03 articles, Cheney by 0.47, and Lieberman by 0.49, while Cheney visits generate the largest spillovers, increasing coverage for Gore (+5.56) and Bush (+5.28). This highlights how major campaign events amplify election-related news beyond the visiting candidate.

In contrast, Gore and Lieberman visits show more limited or asymmetric spillovers, with Gore visits increasing Bush's coverage by 3.03 but having negligible or negative effects on Cheney and Lieberman (-0.12). These patterns suggest that presidential visits often create general media waves, while vice-presidential visits are more localized, reflecting the constraints of their smaller-scale campaigns.

Figure 2: Spillover Effects



6. Heterogeneity Analysis

The heterogeneous effects of campaign visits across baseline county media coverage reveal distinct patterns for presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

6.1 Presidential Candidates: Bush and Gore

For Bush, visit effects display a U-shaped pattern. The largest absolute effect occurs in high-coverage counties (Q4: +5.61 articles), while the largest percentage gain is observed in low-coverage counties (Q1: +75.1%). However, visits to moderately covered counties

(Q3) result in negative effects (-12.3%), underscoring the complexity of presidential campaign strategies.

Gore demonstrates a monotonic decline in percentage effects as baseline media coverage increases (Q1: +150.6%, Q4: +14.2%), though absolute effects remain stable. His focus on higher-coverage counties contributes to reporting volatility, complicating causal attribution.

6.2 Vice-Presidential Candidates: Cheney and Lieberman

Cheney generates large and consistent effects across all media environments (low: +348.8%, high: +389.8%), while Lieberman's effects are highly skewed, with dramatic increases in low-coverage counties (+796.8%) but minimal effects in high-coverage ones (+23.3%).

These patterns emphasize the limited strategic flexibility of vice-presidential candidates compared to their presidential counterparts, whose visits concentrate in high-volatility counties. This difference explains why fixed effects eliminate presidential visit effects while preserving vice-presidential ones, highlighting the impact of resource constraints and timing strategies.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores whether campaign visits causally increase newspaper coverage, finding a stark divergence between presidential and vice-presidential candidates. The analysis demonstrates that presidential visits do not causally generate additional newspaper coverage. Instead, pre-visit elevation and spillover effects indicate that campaigns strategically time visits to align with periods of already-elevated media interest. When county fixed effects and time trends are included, the apparent visit effects disappear entirely. These findings suggest that presidential visits primarily serve as tools for exploiting existing media cycles rather than creating new attention.

In contrast, vice-presidential visits causally increase coverage, with effects robust across all specifications. Cheney and Lieberman visits generate increases, highlighting the consistency of their effects under more constrained strategic conditions. With only 5 visits each, vice-presidential candidates cannot systematically exploit media timing and therefore provide clearer evidence of genuine visit effects.

Mechanism analysis adds further insight, demonstrating how spillover effects and strategic timing mediate the relationship between visits and coverage. Presidential visits increase coverage for all candidates by creating general campaign news cycles rather than solely benefiting the visiting candidate. In addition, substantial geographic and temporal heterogeneity emphasizes the importance of media market characteristics and the news cycle in shaping visit outcomes.

These findings contribute to the broader literature on campaign dynamics, suggesting that campaign influence over media operates through agenda-anticipation rather than agenda-setting. Future research should explore these dynamics in contemporary digital media environments, where campaign timing strategies may have further evolved. By distinguishing selection from causation, this work highlights the sophistication of modern campaigns and the methodological challenges inherent in isolating true campaign effects.