The Impact of Media Bias: How Editorial Slant Affects Voters

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We investigate how editorial slant—defined as the quantity and tone of a newspaper's candidate coverage as influenced by its editorial position—shapes candidate evaluations and vote choice. We avoid various methodological pitfalls by focusing on a single Senate campaign in a single market with two competing, editorially distinct newspapers. Combining comprehensive content analyses of the papers with an Election Day exit poll, we assess the slant of campaign coverage and its effects on voters. We find compelling evidence that editorial slant influences voters' decisions. Our results raise serious questions about the media's place in democratic processes.

In covering a campaign, news outlets make many choices. They highlight certain issues, frame events in particular ways, and portray candidates in varying lights. These choices affect voters. For example, voters often base their candidate evaluations on the issues emphasized in the news (priming), and they form their opinions about events in ways that correspond with how the news frames those events (framing). In this paper, we expand research on how news coverage affects voters by exploring how editorial slant—defined as the quantity and tone of a media outlet's candidate coverage as influenced by its editorial position—shapes candidate evaluations and vote choice.

Our study is unique in two ways. First, while prior studies explore how media outlets slant electoral coverage, examining, for example, if outlets have a partisan "bias," very little of this work looks at the impact of slant on voters (Entman 1989, 36). Second, the few studies that examine slant effects do so indirectly by aggregating media outlets across markets and/or campaigns, and measuring voters' decisions on pre- or post-election surveys (e.g., Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Kahn and Kenney 2002). In contrast, we focus on a single campaign in a single market with two competing, editorially distinct newspapers. Combining comprehensive content analyses of the papers with an Election Day exit poll, we assess slant and its effects on voters. The exit poll allows us to capture voters' decisions as they were just made and enables us to explore candidate evaluations,

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vote choices, and the mediational processes underlying voting decisions. This is a powerful approach for assessing media effects more generally because, unlike most studies, it explores actual and not simulated rhetoric as well as real vote decisions rather than vote intentions or post-election vote reports/evaluations.

Measuring Editorial Slant and Its Effects

We begin by discussing how we document slant and measure its effects (see Page 1996, 112–16). Our focus is on how different newspapers cover a political campaign, looking at the amount of space they devote to the two major candidates, and the contrasting tones they use in describing the candidates (i.e., is a paper negative, neutral, or positive in its portrayal of candidates?). We specifically explore if an outlet's news coverage is relatively more extensive and positive toward the candidate who is endorsed on the paper's editorial page—hence the term "relative editorial slant." We chose this focus for three reasons.

First, the question of whether editorial slant occurs is inherently important. In theory, a paper's editorial positions should have no impact on news coverage due to the supposed separation between the editorial and news departments. However, some question the inviolability of this wall, suggesting that, intentionally or not, coverage might follow a paper's editorial stance (see, e.g., Page 1996, 50, 112; Rowse 1957). For example, Kahn and Kenney (2002) content analyzed campaign coverage in major newspapers for 67 incumbent Senate campaigns between 1988 and 1992, finding that the papers' editorial endorsements significantly affected both the tone (i.e. positive, neutral, negative) of incumbent coverage and the number of criticisms published about incumbents. Our investigation of tone follows Kahn and Kenney (2002).

Second, we build on the media bias literature by studying *relative* slant: comparing relative coverage of two candidates by a single outlet and relative coverage of the candidates by competing outlets. One of the prime lessons of research on media slant or bias concerns the futility of searching for an "objective" standard by which to assess bias. These studies suggest that the most effective strategy is to instead focus on relative comparisons of coverage. While this precludes reaching conclusions about a news organization's motivations/intentions and even if a given slant stems from conscious decisions (e.g., Graber 1993, 7), it allows for a straightforward examination of differences in coverage, and ultimately, if these differences affect voters (see, e.g., Gilens and Hertzman 2000; Hofstetter 1976, 189; Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992, 816–17; Niven 2002, 73–74).[1]

We explore how two competing newspapers—the *Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*—covered the 2000 Minnesota Senate campaign. As we will

[1] Some studies define a slant as occurring if candidates do not receive equal (50%-50%) coverage in terms of both quantity and tone (see, e.g., D'Allessio and Allen 2000). This approach is problematic since it ignores the possibility that candidates may take certain actions that lead to an increased need for coverage (see Entman 1989, 34; Niven 2002).

demonstrate, the two papers serve very similar Minneapolis/St. Paul Twin Cities markets, and they also made different editorial endorsements in the campaign. By holding the campaign/candidates and the market constant, we can conclude that any coverage differences between the two papers reflect relative editorial slant (assuming the differences are in line with the papers' editorial stances). This differs from other studies of editorial slant that aggregate across campaigns and/or markets (e.g., Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Kahn and Kenney 2002). While these studies include an impressive number of different media outlets, they cannot reject the possibility that evidence of editorial slant stems from variations in campaign behavior or market forces (e.g., a paper's endorsement and its coverage favor a given candidate because either the candidate is superior or the market of readers demand it; see Bovitz, Druckman, and Lupia 2002, 146–47; Hamilton 2004).

Finally, we expect that relative editorial slant influences voters. Newspaper coverage constitutes a primary source of information for voters during Senate campaigns (e.g., Mondak 1995). There is therefore good reason to expect that the type of coverage will impact voters' candidate perceptions and, ultimately, their vote choices. In the aforementioned study, Kahn and Kenney (2002) use National Election Study data to show that the papers' coverage significantly influenced voters' candidate evaluations, particularly among everyday readers.

In our analysis of tone, we focus on how the newspapers cover the candidates' image traits (i.e., the negative, neutral, or positive slant of image coverage). Candidate image is a major determinant of evaluations and vote choice (Funk 1999; Rahn et al. 1990). As McGraw states, "traits are the central components of ordinary and political impressions . . . Trait inferences dominate impressions" (2003, 398). Moreover, even subtle variations in the tenor of image narratives can impact perceptions of candidates. When an individual receives new information about another person, he or she often forms image perceptions even without meaning to do so. The slant of candidate information in a newspaper thus might matter regardless of whether the readers consciously recognize the slant (see, e.g., Uleman and Bargh 1989). Cappella and Jamieson explain, "trait inferences from very simple texts are automatic . . . [Even when] people are not asked to make trait inferences, they seem to do so . . ." (1997, 68; also see McGraw 2003, 419; Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001, 219).

We explore the impact of slant on voters' candidate evaluations and vote choices by using an Election Day exit poll (also see Druckman 2004, n.d.). We asked voters to report which, if any, paper they read, how much they read it, their evaluations of the candidates, their vote choices, and a host of other questions (for control variables). As we will discuss, this method enables us to deal with a host of difficult issues involved in documenting media effects (see, e.g., Druckman 2004, n.d.; Iyengar and Simon 2000). We are able to assess the extent to which coverage affected voters' decisions, in a naturalistic setting, while controlling for variables such as party identification, issue positions, and image perceptions.

The 2000 Minnesota Senate Campaign

The 2000 Minnesota Senate campaign pitted Republican incumbent Rod Grams against Democratic challenger Mark Dayton. Grams had been a local broadcast news personality until 1992 when he was elected to the U.S. House. He won his Senate seat in 1994 and was known as a "doctrinaire conservative" (Salisbury 2000, 4H). During the campaign, *Congressional Quarterly* labeled Grams as the most vulnerable of incumbent Senators. Dayton, heir to the Target Corporation (formerly Dayton Hudson Corporation) family fortune, had held numerous state government posts, most notably State Auditor from 1991 to 1995, and was seen as an "equally doctrinaire liberal" (Salisbury 2000, 4H). The race received considerable national attention, given its closeness and the possibility of an incumbent defeat. Dayton pulled away in the final weeks, and won with 48.8% of the statewide vote, compared to 43.3% for Grams (also see Druckman 2004).[2]

The Newspapers: Markets and Endorsements

Two major papers serve the Twin Cities area and Minnesota in general—the *Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. While the *Star Tribune* enjoys a larger circulation and aims at a slightly larger target area, the bulk of both papers' markets is located in the Twin Cities metro area (see also Druckman 2004).[3] The two papers directly compete for readers; for example, on its website the *Pioneer Press* states that its market is the entire Twin Cities area and that it vies with the *Star Tribune*.

To establish the similarity of the papers' markets, we compare the demographic and political characteristics of their readers. We do this with data from our exit poll. The poll, which we describe in detail below, asked respondents from the Twin Cities area to state which paper they read as well as a variety of demographic and political questions. In Table 1, we report profiles of individuals who stated that they subscribe to or frequently read each of the papers. The table shows no statistically significant differences across a range of demographic and political variables (at the .05 level for two-tailed tests).[4] This suggests that the two papers do not cater to significantly distinct demographic or political readers.

[2] The ballot included five minor party candidates. The most successful of these was James Gibson of the Independence Party who received 5.8% of the vote. All other minor party candidates received less than 1%.

[3] The *Star Tribune* has a daily circulation of over 405,459 while the *Pioneer Press* has 190,939 daily readers. For more information on each paper, see http://www.startribune.com and http://www.knightridder.com/papers/profiles/saint_paul.html.

[4] For each newspaper, we include a respondent if he/she reported that he/she subscribed to or frequently read the paper (in general). This includes a small number of respondents who subsequently responded that during the campaign (over the last two months), they read the paper, on average, 0 days a week (as reported in the last row of Table 1). The second column of the table reports the overall distributions and total Ns for each variable. We discuss these below.

TABLE 1

Demographic and Political Profile of Newspaper Readers (From Exit Poll Data)

Variable	Scale (Overall Distribution)	*Star Tribune*	*Pioneer Press*
Average Education	1 = less than high school (2%) (total N: 399) 2 = high school (11%) 3 = some college (30%) 4 = year college degree (32%) 5 = advanced degree (25%)	3.78 (std. dev: .97; N: 236)	3.67 (1.08; 141)
Average Household Income	1 = <$30,000 (27%) (total N: 384) 2 = $30,000–$70,000 (43%) 3 = >$70,000 (31%)	2.09 (.76; 228)	2.09 (.75; 137)
Average Age	1 = 18–24 (18%) (total N: 403) 2 = 25–34 (23%) 3 = 35–44 (21%) 4 = 45–54 (20%) 5 = 55–64 (9%) 6 = 65–74 (7%) 7 = 75+ (3%)	3.09 (1.55; 240)	3.38 (1.58; 141)
Percentage Male	Male (50.5%) (total N: 406) Female (49.5%)	49% (241)	53% (142)
Percentage Minority	Minorities include all but White White (84%) (total N: 409) African Americans (3%) Asian Americans (3%) Hispanic (2%) Other (9%)	10% (241)	11% (143)
Average Party Identification	1 = strong Democrat (21%) (total N: 397) 2 (20%) 3 (13%) 4 = Independent (24%) 5 (7%) 6 (10%) 7 = strong Republican (6%)	3.18 (1.85; 236)	3.35 (1.81; 138)

Average Interest in Politics	1 = not interested (3%) (total N: 407) 2 (8%) 3 (11%) 4 = moderately interested (28%) 5 (20%) 6 (17%) 7 = extremely interested (14%)	4.72 (1.47; 240)	4.65 (1.66; 142)
Average Political Knowledge	0 correct (31%) (total N: 406) 1 correct (25%) 2 correct (44%)	1.23 (.84; 241)	1.17 (.82; 142)
Average Number of Days a Week Watch the Local News	0 days a week (10%) (total N: 394) 1 (6%) 2 (8%) 3 (11%) 4 (11%) 5 (19%) 6 (9%) 7 (26%)	4.63 (2.18; 232)	4.29 (2.26; 137)
Average Perceived Credibility of the Paper	1 = often inaccurate (9%) (total N: 342) 2 (10%) 3 (13%) 4 (24%) 5 (23%) 6 (14%) 7 = gets facts straight (7%)	4.21 (1.66; 225)	4.15 (1.70; 140)
Percentage Voting for Dayton	Reported Senate vote Dayton (Democrat) (55%) (total N: 403) Grams (Republican) (37%) Gibson (Independence Party) (6%) Other (2%)	57% (238)	57% (142)
Number of Days a Week Read Paper During Campaign (Last Two Months)	For subscribers and non-subscribers	0 days a week (45%) (total N: 405) 1 day a week (7%) 2 days a week (5%) 3 days a week (7%) 4 days a week (4%) 5 days a week (7%) 6 days a week (5%) 7 days a week(20%)	0 days a week (66%) (total N: 406) 1 day a week (2%) 2 days a week (3%) 3 days a week (4%) 4 days a week (4%) 5 days a week (4%) 6 days a week (3%) 7 days a week (16%)

We acknowledge, however, that the papers' markets may differ in ways that we have failed to detect. For example, we may have omitted a variable measuring a key difference, or our data presented in Table 1 may miss distinctions since it comes exclusively from the Twin Cities and not other parts of the papers' readerships.[5] Nonetheless, at the very least, the papers' markets substantially overlap, and we suspect they come as close to sharing a common market as any other two major newspapers.

The other critical point is that the two papers offered different endorsements. The *Star Tribune* endorsed Dayton (in an October 29th editorial), while the *Pioneer Press* made the unusual move of endorsing neither candidate (in an October 22nd editorial). The no-endorsement decision came in part from a conflict of interest, in that the *Press* was suing Grams for copyright infringement. However, the *Press* (see "Lawsuit" 2000) stated that they are "relieved that our legal issues have given us an excuse to be silent. . . . the choice voters have been given is a disappointment. It is, at best, a contest among mediocrities . . . it would be hard to muster enthusiasm for any of the [candidates]."[6] These editorials lead us to hypothesize that the *Star Tribune* will exhibit more extensive and more favorable coverage of Dayton relative to the *Press*'s Dayton coverage, and relative to the *Star Tribune*'s Grams coverage. The no-endorsement decision means that we do not expect to see a particular *Pioneer Press* slant in terms of its own coverage of Dayton and Grams. We emphasize, again, that our operationalization of slant is relative, and thus, even if we find relative pro-Dayton *Star Tribune* coverage, it does not mean the paper is "objectively biased"; rather, it would indicate relative slant.

Newspaper Campaign Coverage and Relative Editorial Slant

To measure slant, our team of content analyzers analyzed the two papers everyday from September 13th (the day after the primary election) through November 7th (Election Day), resulting in an analysis of 112 newspapers (56 days for each paper; see Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Kahn and Kenney 2002). All coders participated in a detailed training session that included practice coding. Then, for each day of coding, we randomly assigned one of the coders to analyze all the articles on the Senate campaign from one of the papers for that day. In exclusively focusing on Senate articles, we follow Kahn (1991) who highlights the importance of focusing on Senate campaign-specific coverage, rather than more general cross-campaign coverage.

Our coders coded each article for a number of characteristics including length, position, soundbites, and overall focus or frame. They coded an article as having

[5] In 2002, the Audit Bureau of Circulation conducted random sample surveys of subscribers to the two papers. While the surveys' populations did not include the entire areas where the papers are read, they did include readers outside the Twin Cities. The results from these surveys show that readers of the two papers are quite similar (e.g., not distinct in terms of gender or age). Details are available at http://www.accessabc.com/reader/ or from the authors.

[6] The *Star Tribune* endorsed Gore for President while the *Press* endorsed Bush.

TABLE 2

Newspaper Senate Campaign Coverage

	Star Tribune	*Pioneer Press*
Number of Senate Articles	122	91
Average Number of Senate Articles Per Day	2.18	1.63
Number of Paragraphs Coded	2,535	1,326
Number of Days with NO Senate Campaign Articles	5	9
Number of Lead Senate Campaign Articles	10	7
Percentage of Articles with an Issue Frame	30%	33%
Percentage of Articles with an Image Frame	20%	25%
Percentage of Articles with a Strategy Frame	50%	42%

an issue frame if a plurality of the article dealt with issues, an image frame if the article focused on candidates' characteristics and/or backgrounds, and a strategy frame if campaign tactics or polls were emphasized (see Just et al. 1996, 99; Kahn and Kenney 2002).

Coders also analyzed the content of each story by coding *each paragraph* as covering any of 28 issues (e.g., defense, social security), 11 candidate personal/image characteristics (e.g., leadership, integrity, empathy), and/or 13 strategic elements (e.g., poll results, ads, fundraising), noting, in each case, the candidate focus. A particular paragraph could receive multiple codes if, for example, it focused on multiple issues or an issue and an image. Also, for each image mention, the coder recorded if the tone of the portrayal was negative, neutral, or positive (or uncodable/mix). To assess the reliability of the coding, we randomly sampled approximately 35% of the articles for each paper (43 *Star Tribune* articles and 31 *Pioneer Press* articles) and had a single second coder, who did not do any of the primary coding, code these articles. We discuss specific reliability statistics for each measure in the footnotes below. Importantly, our reliability statistics range from .82 to .98 with an average of .90, thereby exceeding the .80 standard (see Neuendorf 2002, 143; Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998, 131).

In Table 2, we present descriptive statistics of each paper's coverage. While the *Star Tribune* included significantly more coverage—averaging 2.18 (std. dev. = 1.44; n = 56) Senate articles a day compared to 1.63 (1.18; 56) *Press* articles (t_{110} = 2.22; $p \leq .05$ for a two-tailed *t*-test), it is noteworthy that both papers offered a substantial amount of coverage, exceeding the 1.5 average found by Kahn (1991, 352) for the 1984 and 1986 Senate campaigns. Across the two papers, there was at least some coverage 88% of the time (98/112).[7] In terms of sub-

[7] The papers are not significantly different in terms of the number of days where they had no coverage (for the *Star Tribune*, 5/56 = 8.9%; for the *Pioneer Press*, 9/56 = 16%; $z = 1.45$; $p \leq .15$ for a two-tailed differences of proportions test), or of the number of lead Senate campaign articles (for the *Star Tribune*, 10/122 = 8.2%; for the *Pioneer Press*, 7/91 = 7.7; $z = .13$; $p \leq .90$ for a two-tailed differences of proportions test).

stance, we report the percentage of articles that used an overall issue, image, or strategy frame. We find that the two papers were similar in their division of coverage (i.e., there are no statistically significant distinctions), with a plurality focusing on strategy, followed by issues and then image.[8]

As explained, we test for relative slant in two ways: space and tone. We begin with the former by analyzing the amount of attention and soundbites given to each candidate (see D'Alessio and Allen 2000, 136; Graber 1993, 265; Lowry and Shidler 1995). We expect that, relative to the *Press* and relative to its own coverage of Grams, the *Star Tribune* will devote more space to Dayton and offer him more opportunities to state things in his own words. In these analyses, we need not include control variables since the campaign and the market remain constant.

We first report the amount of space (by mentions in each paragraph) devoted to each candidate or both candidates simultaneously, out of the total amount of space covering the two candidates.[9] We find that the *Star Tribune* devoted 23% of its space to Grams, 22% to Dayton, and 55% to both simultaneously (n = 2,791). Similarly, the *Pioneer Press* allocated 24% to Grams, 25% to Dayton, and 51% to both (n = 1,353).[10] Thus, there is no evidence of relative slant; the *Star Tribune* did not devote substantially more space to Dayton when compared to either the *Press*'s coverage of Dayton or the *Star Tribune*'s own coverage of Grams. The *Press* itself also covered Dayton and Grams in similar quantities. Most notably, the two papers exhibited extremely similar patterns in their coverage with a majority going to both candidates simultaneously. We do not report statistical significance here (or in the next analysis) because Ns this large mean that statistical significance may not indicate substantive importance.

[8] To assess the reliability of the frame classifications, we calculate the percentage of agreement between coders as well as Cohen's Kappa which accounts for chance agreement (see, e.g., Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998, 127–133). We find 91% agreement and a Kappa value of .85 (std. error = .10; z = 8.28, $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed test) for the *Star Tribune*, and 94% agreement and a Kappa value of .90 (.12; z = 7.32, $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed test) for the *Pioneer Press*. These statistics suggest a high degree of reliability. Details are available from the authors; also, for all content analysis results, a variety of related analyses are available from the authors.

[9] We measure candidate space by counting the number of mentions by paragraph devoted to the given candidate. To evaluate the reliability of such an interval level variable, Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998, 133) recommend using Pearson's product-moment correlation, and suggest that correlations that exceed .80 indicate sufficient reliability. Overall, we find correlations ranging from .83 to .97. We also calculate the average differences between the coders in their counts, as an indicator of agreement. Our differences range from 1.32 to 3.00; the range of mentions by paragraph across articles is 0 to 81. The specific correlations and averages, respectively, for each measure are as follows (note that all correlations are significant at the .01 level): *Star Tribune* (n = 43) Grams: .83, 1.37 (std. dev. = 2.52); *Star Tribune* Dayton: .86, 1.35 (2.86); *Star Tribune* both: .97, 2.49 (3.88); *Pioneer Press* (n = 31) Grams: .95, 1.32 (2.04); *Pioneer Press* Dayton: .89, 1.36 (1.96); and *Pioneer Press* both: .83, 3.00 (4.68).

[10] The number of observations exceeds the number of coded paragraphs because a paragraph could be coded as dealing with multiple issues, images, or strategies.

The picture of no relative slant is reinforced by examining the percentage of soundbite space (counting each word) given to each candidate or their representatives out of the amount of space given to the two candidates. Specifically, the *Star Tribune* devoted 51% of soundbite space to Grams or his representatives, and 49% to Dayton or his representatives (n = 8,790). The analogous percentages for the *Pioneer Press* are 53% and 47%, respectively (n = 5,285). Again, there is no clear evidence of relative slant by the *Star Tribune* towards Dayton.

Perhaps these null findings are not surprising since we have yet to account for the tone of the coverage (e.g., D'Alessio and Allen 2000, 136–37; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Page 1996, 115). As mentioned, we measured tone by recording the candidate(s) on whom each image statement focused and if the statement took on a negative, neutral, or positive tone.[11] We expect that, compared to the *Press*, the *Star Tribune* will offer a more positive portrayal of Dayton. We also expect that the *Star Tribune* will offer a more positive portrayal of Dayton than Grams.[12] We do not expect this latter difference for the *Press*. The unit of analysis is candidate image mentions, and thus the reduced number of observations makes statistical significance tests more relevant.[13]

We present the results in Table 3. In contrast to the space analyses, we find striking evidence of relative slant, with the *Star Tribune* offering a more positive slant towards Dayton. Compared to the *Press*, the *Star Tribune* is significantly more positive towards Dayton (47% versus 33%; $z = 3.08$; $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed differences of proportions test). They also are significantly less negative of Dayton (23% versus 36%; $z = 3.10$; $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed differences of pro-

[11] We took the set of image mentions, which were 697 for the *Star Tribune* and 457 for the *Press*. We then selected out the subset that dealt exclusively with either Grams or Dayton and could be coded as positive, negative, or neutral. We report, over the entire set of image characteristics for a given candidate, the percentage of those that were negative, neutral, or positive. Thus our unit of analysis is the number of image mentions for each candidate that could be coded for tone. As was the case with our candidate space analysis, we assess reliability with correlations and differences, finding correlations ranging from .82 to .98 and differences ranging from .02 to .94. (The range of mentions by paragraph across articles is 0 to 31.) The specific correlations and averages, respectively, for each measure are as follows (note that all correlations are significant at the .01 level): *Star Tribune* (n = 43) Grams positive: .95, .02 (.15); *Star Tribune* Grams neutral: .84, .07 (.03); *Star Tribune* Grams negative: .86, .28 (.70); *Star Tribune* Dayton positive: .82, .09 (.37); *Star Tribune* Dayton neutral: .86, .23 (.75); *Star Tribune* Dayton negative: .97, .16 (.43); *Pioneer Press* (n = 31) Grams positive: .91, .13 (.56); *Pioneer Press* Grams neutral: .95, .23 (.67); *Pioneer Press* Grams negative: .97, .16 (.45); *Pioneer Press* Dayton positive: .98, .32 (1.05); *Pioneer Press* Dayton neutral: .93, .94 (4.67); and *Pioneer Press* Dayton negative: .91, .32 (.83).

[12] While both papers devoted a majority of their space to covering both candidates simultaneously, when it came to image this was not the case (i.e., that result mostly reflects issue and strategy coverage). Specifically, across both papers, of the image coverage that dealt with one or both candidates, only 8% dealt with both simultaneously.

[13] Our coding of image tone differs from Kahn and Kenney (2002). Whereas Kahn and Kenney (2002) record the proportion of negative traits (e.g., words such as "dishonest") out of all traits, we code the tone of the discussion around each image mention of a candidate (as being negative, neutral or positive). We compare our results with Kahn and Kenney (2002) in a footnote below.

TABLE 3

Tone of Image Coverage in Competing Newspapers

	Grams		Dayton	
	Star Tribune (n = 155)	*Pioneer Press* (n = 152)	*Star Tribune* (n = 262)	*Pioneer Press* (n = 211)
Percentage of Negative Mentions	36%	44%	23%	36%
Percentage of Neutral Mentions	50%	30%	30%	31%
Percentage of Positive Mentions	14%	26%	47%	33%

portions test). Moreover, the *Star Tribune* offered overwhelmingly more positive coverage of Dayton than of Grams (47% versus 14%; $z = 6.84$; $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed differences of proportions test; they also are significantly less negative and neutral), and much more positive than negative or neutral coverage of Dayton (and this is the only case of that; $z = 5.76$; $p \leq .01$, and $z = 4.0$; $p \leq .01$, respectively, for a two-tailed differences of proportions test).

Beyond what was just discussed, there is no other clear evidence of a relative slant. The *Press*'s coverage of Grams is significantly less neutral than the *Star Tribune*'s (30% versus 50%; $z = 3.58$; $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed differences of proportions test), and as a result, both more negative and more positive, but only significantly different in terms of being more positive (26% versus 14%; $z = 2.63$; $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed differences of proportions test). This is not a substantial finding since the *Press* is significantly more negative than positive towards Grams (44% versus 26%; $z = 3.29$; $p \leq .01$ for a two-tailed differences of proportions test), and its tone towards Grams does not significantly differ from its tone towards Dayton. The *Press* does not differ in its treatment of the two candidates and is not more positive towards Grams.

In sum, we find evidence of a relative editorial slant, with the *Star Tribune* offering more positive coverage of Dayton relative to the *Press* and relative to its own coverage of Grams.[14] Before turning to the next question of whether relative slant affected voters, we reemphasize our caution in attributing overt bias to the *Star Tribune*. Our evidence shows neither conscious slant nor slant from some

[14] We focus exclusively on image coverage for the aforementioned reasons, and also because we found image tone to be the most straightforward to code on the paragraph level. However, using a sample of approximately 30% of the articles, we follow Kahn and Kenney's (2002) scheme and code the overall tone of the articles, the tone of issue focused articles, and the tone of the headlines. The only significant result is that, on issue articles, the *Pioneer Press*'s coverage was more positive towards Grams relative to the *Star Tribune*'s coverage of Grams. While small sample sizes make these results exploratory, the difference with Kahn and Kenney (2002) who find no significant results on image tone, but significant results in these other areas, is intriguing. We suspect the differences may be campaign driven; image played a particularly salient role in the 2000 Minnesota campaign (Druckman 2004). (Alternatively, the contrasting image results could stem from the aforementioned differences in coding schemes.) Details are available from the authors.

mythical objective standard on the part of the *Star Tribune*. Slant is a relative term, and our results reveal that relative to its own coverage of Grams and to the *Press*'s coverage, the *Star Tribune* is more positive towards Dayton.[15] Our results show neither objectively biased coverage nor any conscious bias on the part of either paper. The inference that can be made is that of relative differences in line with editorial endorsements that are not driven by variations in the campaign or market.

The Effects of Editorial Slant on Voters

Does relative slant affect voters and if so, how? Many studies of slant or bias fail to explore its effect, and those that do face a number of obstacles. The typical approach (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 2002) measures voters' decisions either on a pre- or post-election survey, or in the context of a laboratory experiment. If the goal is to gauge the impact of over-time media coverage on voters as they make their decisions, these approaches can be problematic. They may capture short-term responses to particular media reports or artificial experimental stimuli (see, e.g., Druckman and Nelson 2003, 741) or include respondents who do not vote. Ideally, to evaluate the impact of the media's campaign coverage on voters' decisions, we would measure voters' decisions at the polls, just after they made those decisions.

As mentioned, we did this by implementing an exit poll on Election Day. The exit poll allows us to probe the role of coverage over the entire campaign in shaping final evaluations and vote choices. We conducted the poll by assembling 17 teams of two-student pollsters. We randomly selected polling locations throughout the Twin Cities' metro area (the polling places included both city and suburban locales). Each polling team spent a randomly determined two-to-three-hour daytime period at its polling place. A pollster asked every third voter to complete a brief, self-administered questionnaire in exchange for $3 (total n = 409).

In the second column of Table 1 (see above), we report descriptive statistics of the entire sample. Impressively, the vote totals of 55% for Dayton and 37% for Grams almost perfectly match the actual totals that the candidates received in the metro area (where Dayton received 54% and Grams received 36%). The table also shows that the respondents come from diverse backgrounds in terms of education, age, gender, and party identification. In contrast to many experimental and even some survey samples, this sample includes a set of actual, heterogeneous voters.

We begin by following a sizable literature, including Kahn and Kenney (2002), by exploring the impact of slant on voters' candidate evaluations (see, e.g., Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998, 121; Funk 1999; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Rahn et al. 1990). Candidate evaluations mimic approval ratings that

[15] For example, it could be that Dayton was simply a better candidate, which would suggest that the *Press* was more "slanted."

serve as a politician's critical resource, and, as we will show, also are proximate to vote choice.

To gauge candidate evaluations, we use a standard measure of a comparative feeling thermometer. Specifically, we asked respondents: "Using a scale from 0 to 10—where "0" means you feel very *cold* towards the candidate, "5" means you are *neutral*, and "10" means you feel very *warm*—please rate the following candidates [Grams, Dayton]." We then subtracted Grams' score from Dayton's so that the scale ranges from −10 through 10, with higher scores representing more positive evaluations of Dayton (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 2002). The average score, across respondents, is 2.23 (std. dev. = 6.06, n = 394), indicating a pro-Dayton stance.

To measure exposure and attention to each newspaper—our key independent variables—we asked respondents if they subscribed to or frequently read either the *Star Tribune* or the *Press* and how many days over the last two months, on average, they read the front-page and/or metro sections of the paper. The variables thus measure how many days a respondent read one or both of these two sections from each of the papers. We focus on the front-page and metro sections because virtually all Senate coverage in both papers appeared exclusively in these sections. We use the number of days of reading since we expect more reading indicates increased exposure and attention to the paper's coverage. Kahn and Kenney (2002, 390–91) find that a paper's slant tends to only impact frequent readers.

These exposure measures have the advantage of not asking for a self-assessment of a subjective state such as interest in the campaign or for recall of a unique event such as remembering a campaign advertisement. People presumably know if they subscribe to a local newspaper since they pay the bill and receive the paper daily and have some reliable sense of how often they read the paper since it typically reflects a habitual behavior.[16] In the final row of Table 1 (see above), we display the distribution of reading for each paper for the entire sample. As expected, given subscription figures, the *Star Tribune* has substantially more readers. Otherwise, the distribution across days are fairly similar, although more *Press* than *Star Tribune* readers read the paper every day if we base the computations only on individuals who read the respective papers at least once a week (46% and 36%, respectively).

Our exit poll included an exhaustive set of measures for other factors that influence candidate evaluations (e.g., Funk 1999; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Rahn et al. 1990). We measured voters' evaluations of the candidates' issue positions on the main campaign issues—including health care, social security, taxes, and education—and voters' perceptions of the key candidate images—including leadership effectiveness, integrity, and empathy.[17] For all of these variables, higher scores indicate movements toward Dayton. We also measured party identification with

[16] The main drawbacks of the measures are the possible inaccuracies in measuring attention and the equating of attention with processing.

[17] To measure issue positions, voters rated themselves and each candidate on 7-point scales for positions on each of the four issues. From these, we construct items such that higher scores mean rela-

higher values indicating more Republican, interest in politics, exposure to local television news (the number of days a week the respondent typically watches local news), income, gender (0 = male, 1 = female), minority status, age, education, and general political knowledge.[18] The second column of Table 1 (see above) offers descriptive statistics on these variables.

We expect a positive and significant relationship between the candidate evaluation measure and the amount a respondent reads the *Star Tribune*, all else constant. That is, the *Star Tribune*'s relative slant will cause its readers to offer more positive appraisals of Dayton. We do not expect a significant relationship between reading the *Press* and candidate evaluations.[19] We recode all independent variables 0–1, and using ordinary least-squares regression, we regress the comparative thermometer measure on the newspaper variables and the control variables. (The results are the same if we instead use an ordered probit model.) Our analysis includes all respondents, regardless of whether they ever read a paper, but the results are robust if we include only respondents who read at least one of the papers one or more days a week.[20]

We report the results in Table 4. The results in the first two columns—concerning issue positions, image perceptions, and demographic/political variables—are sensible insofar as the major determinants found in prior work play a large role here.[21] Those closer to Dayton on social security, the campaign's most prominent issue (Druckman 2004), reported significantly higher Dayton evaluations. All of the image variables are significant with voters who offered higher evaluations of Dayton's leadership effectiveness, integrity, and empathy reporting significantly higher overall evaluations.[22] Party identification plays a substantial role, with Republican voters reporting significantly more negative

tively closer issue positions to Dayton. We gauge image perceptions by asking voters to report—on 7-point scales—which candidate they thought was a stronger leader, more honest, and more compassionate, with higher scores indicating a movement towards Dayton (see Funk 1999).

[18] We code self-identified African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics as minorities. We measure political knowledge with two questions: one asking about the length of a Senator's term, and another asking about who determines if a law is constitutional. Other details on the measures are available from the authors.

[19] The *Press* may not have a significant effect because, despite being almost as negative about Grams as the *Tribune* is positive about Dayton (see Table 3), the differences in their relative coverage are small. For example, Table 3 shows that the *Tribune* is far more positive about Dayton than it is negative (47% versus 23%) and far more negative about Grams than positive (36% versus 14%). More importantly, its positive coverage of Dayton is 47% compared to 14% for Grams (a difference of 33%). The analogous differences for the *Press* are quite small. Thus, the *Tribune* but not the *Press* offers very contrasting portraits of the candidates.

[20] Approximately 12% of the respondents read both newspapers. The results are robust if we exclude these respondents.

[21] The number of cases drops mostly due to non-responses on the income and news questions.

[22] As with all studies of candidate evaluation, there is the possibility that the relationships between evaluations and issue positions/image perceptions reflect post-hoc rationalizations (or projections) from on-line processing. This is not a problem given our focus since candidate evaluations presumably do not cause general newspaper readership habits.

TABLE 4

Candidate Evaluations

Dependent Variable: Comparative Candidate Evaluation, ranging from −10 (maximum Grams score) to 10 (maximum Dayton score).

Issue Positions and Image Variables (and constant)		*Demographic/Political Variables*		*Newspaper Reading Variables*	
Health Care	.76	Party Id.	−4.71***	*Star Tribune* Reading	.98**
	(1.11)		(.74)		(.44)
Social Security	1.76*	Interest in Pol.	−.08	*Pioneer Press* Reading	.18
	(.99)		(.65)		(.43)
Taxes	.65	Political Know.	.09		
	(1.05)		(.42)		
Education	1.08	Local News	.21		
	(.89)		(.53)		
Leadership	4.80***	Education	−.03		
	(.92)		(.70)		
Integrity	5.07***	Income	−.40		
	(1.13)		(.48)		
Empathy	3.00***	Age	−.08		
	(1.11)		(.69)		
		Gender	−.71**		
			(.34)		
Constant	−5.66***	Minority	.61		
	(1.04)		(.60)		

Note: Entries are ordinary least squares coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ***$p \leq .01$; **$p \leq .05$; *$p \leq .10$ for two-tailed tests. There are 361 observations and the adjusted R^2 is .76.

evaluations. Finally, males offered significantly lower evaluations, perhaps reflecting a gender gap. The insignificance of the other control variables is not surprising as they do not reliably affect evaluations (e.g., they are often excluded from the model; Rahn et al. 1990).

The final column of Table 4 offers strong support for our hypothesis that increased reading of the *Star Tribune* leads to significantly higher evaluations of Dayton. Also, as expected, reading the *Press* is not significantly related to evaluations. While the substantive impact of reading the *Star Tribune* is smaller than the effects of party identification and image perceptions (although it is by no means trivial), it is important to note that reading the paper also might influence evaluations of the candidates' images, which in turn shape overall evaluations. (We will explore this possibility momentarily.) In other words, we have isolated only the direct effect of the *Star Tribune* coverage.

The next question is whether editorial slant affects vote choice. We investigate this by building on Rahn et al.'s (1990, 192) path model of candidate appraisal and vote choice. Rahn et al. (1990) offer evidence for a unidirectional path model where political information—particularly partisanship and issue positions—shapes candidate image perceptions (i.e., leadership, integrity, and empathy).

Then, both information and image perceptions affect a construct akin to our thermometer, and the thermometer along with partisanship directly influences vote choice.[23]

We test their model, adding the newspaper variables as a source of information. To avoid presenting an overly complicated path, we simplify the model in the following ways. First, we sum the four issue position variables into one "issues" variable, where higher values indicate a movement towards Dayton. If we instead include each separate issue variable, the results are the same (i.e., the significance or nonsignificance of the "issues" variable reflects the significance or non-significance of a selection of the specific issues). Second, we exclude the *Pioneer Press* reading variable as it is never significant and does not affect the other results. Third, aside from including partisanship and our *Star Tribune* reading variable, we exclude all other demographics. The inclusion of other demographics does not change the results, and very few of them have a significant impact themselves (see, e.g., Table 4). Fourth, with one exception, as shown in the figure, we do not report paths that proved insignificant (and we report all significant paths). Finally, while we imply causal relationships in our description of the path, we recognize that, as is always the case, caution needs be taken in concluding causation based on the correlations presented in the path.

We present the path model results (in line with Rahn et al.'s 1990 presentation) in Figure 1.[24] We code vote choice as a vote for Dayton; all of the other variables are coded as described above. There is strong support for Rahn et al.'s (1990) path model—the information variables shape image perceptions, which in turn affect the thermometer rating, and the thermometer along with party identification impacts vote choice. More importantly, we find that reading the *Star Tribune* does not shape vote choice directly, but has an indirect impact through its effect on both integrity and empathy, and the thermometer. Reading the paper has a mediated impact on vote choice, which itself is directly determined only by the thermometer and party identification (as in Rahn et al. 1990).

The figure shows that, as reported in Table 4, reading the *Star Tribune* has a direct impact on candidate evaluation (i.e., the thermometer). However, it also has an indirect impact via integrity and empathy perceptions. This reveals a sensible mediational process through which reading the newspaper works: it influences image perceptions that in turn affect evaluations. The mediational process corresponds with the relatively slanted image-related coverage.[25]

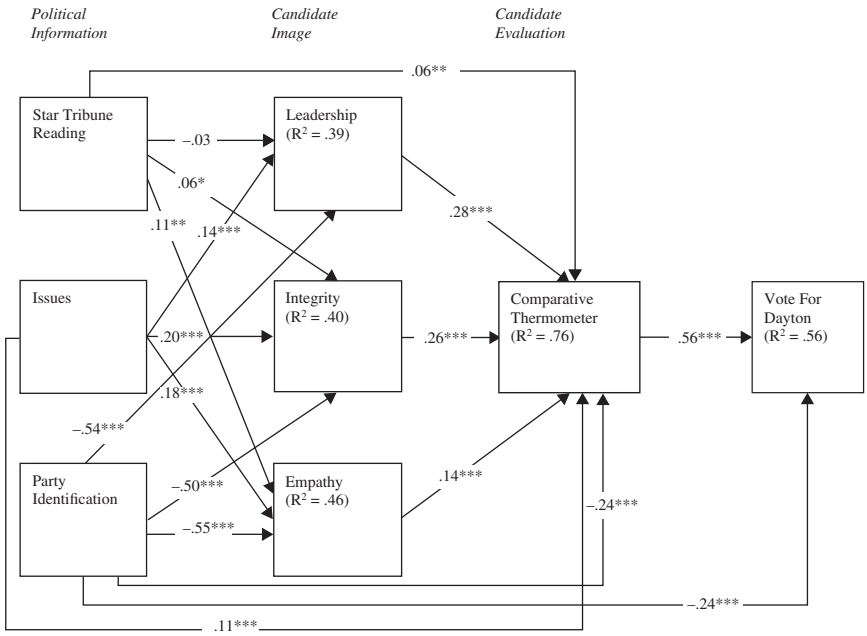
[23] Druckman (2004) analyzes how the Senate campaign, as reported on television and in the newspapers, affected the specific issues and images on which voters based their vote choices (also see Druckman n.d.).

[24] The figure reports standardized ordinary least-squares (beta) coefficients. The results are the same if we use ordered probits (and probit for the vote choice). The n for the figure is 380.

[25] We are most interested in the impact of reading the *Star Tribune*, and we are fairly confident about the exogeneity and causal direction of this variable. However, as mentioned, other components of the path model may reflect rationalizations (however, see Rahn et al. 1990).

FIGURE 1

Path Diagram of Vote Choice



Note: Coefficients are standardized ordinary least-squares (beta) coefficients. *** $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .05$, * $p \leq .12$ for two tailed tests. Coding of the variables is described in the text.

The continuing direct effect of reading the *Star Tribune* on candidate evaluation suggests that we have not captured the full complement of mediational forces. Along these lines, an important area of future research concerns pinpointing psychological processes. We suggested above that editorial slant may exercise its effect through subconscious processes in which the readers do not knowingly recognize the tone. This would explain why the voters did not reinterpret the information to match their predispositions (see Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998, 119 for discussion). If voters had reinterpreted the information, the *Star Tribune* would not have systematically led voters towards Dayton, but, at most, would have reinforced the direction of individuals' prior preferences (e.g., as predicted by party identification). A subconscious process also would explain that lack of a hostile media effect where individuals believed that the media were biased against their own predilections (e.g., Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998, 120–21), which would have led them to reject the media messages. Our approach of using an exit poll limits the extent to which we can explore psychological processes. Clearly, more work is needed on how newspaper tone influ-

ences processing, and how information integration and evaluation work more generally (see Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001).

Conclusion

Studies of editorial slant and its effects face a variety of difficulties, including the need to control for the news event and the market as well the various challenges of measuring voter response. We overcame these hurdles by focusing on *relative* editorial slant concerning a single event, in a fairly common market, and the effect of slant on voters at the polls. We find concrete evidence that relative editorial slant can influence voters.

Our approach means that the generalizability of the results to other campaigns and media is unclear. We see our methodology as one that can and should be replicated in different markets with different campaigns at different times. The consistency of our results with Kahn and Kenney's (2002) gives us confidence that the patterns we uncover may be widespread in Senate campaigns. However, in their analysis of the 1992 presidential campaign, Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt (1998) find no relationship between editorial stance and news coverage, thereby suggesting that the effects may differ by campaign type (see Graber 1993, 265), or other aspects of the times (see Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992).[26]

The potential difference in campaigns is intriguing insofar as Senate campaign coverage tends to rely on local sources rather than wire services (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 2002, 382). A fruitful avenue for future research would be a study like ours that analyzed both Senatorial and Presidential campaign coverage simultaneously (between competing papers). Also, we expect that there could be differences even within types of campaigns, depending on systematic campaign dynamics (e.g., if the candidates themselves focus more on issues or image).

Another question concerns the relative influence of a newspaper's news coverage and its editorial page content. An alternative explanation for our exit poll results is that the voters were affected by the *Star Tribune*'s editorial endorsement and not by its news coverage per se.[27] While we cannot definitively rule this out, our path analysis suggests a process in line with the image news coverage. Moreover, the aforementioned hostile media phenomenon may be more manifest when it comes to editorial influence due to more conscious recognition, which would, as discussed, limit the effect (see Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998, 120–21). These possibilities highlight the importance of complementing our exit poll

[26] Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt's (1998) finding echoes other work on presidential campaigns that generally find little evidence of "bias" (see Niven 2002, 6265).

[27] We thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point. The reviewer also points out that it could be the case that the news coverage itself impacted the editors as they made their endorsements. Another alternative explanation is that our results stem from variations in the content of television news. While this is possible, it turns out that the local news programs offered an extremely small amount of campaign coverage (Druckman 2004, n.d.).

approach with more dynamic over-time data (e.g., Hillygus and Jackman 2003), as well as with studies that include larger samples of different media outlets (as in Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998 and Kahn and Kenney 2002).

Overall, even if a paper's editorial position creeps into news reporting and influences public opinion only under certain conditions, it still raises serious questions about the media. For example, are media outlets themselves consciously slanting their stories, or does the slant reflect unconscious practices such as hiring and/or promoting like-minded editors and reporters (Kahn and Kenney 2002, 391–92; Page 1996, 50–51)? The analogous question concerning the processes by which the news influences voters is of equal importance—for example, are voters unconscious victims of deliberately slanted reports, or do they knowingly incorporate a news outlet's tone even if the news outlet itself is unaware? How media actors make choices and how these choices affect voters has profound implications for the meaning of public opinion, and ultimately, democratic governance.

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