

## **ABSTRACT**

**THESIS:** A Methodology for Comparing News Coverage of Elite Cues During Presidential Elections

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Throughout the last two presidential elections, Donald Trump weaponized the news media in various ways; either by appearing on conservative programming to gain more popularity with a right-wing base or by attacking journalists or news outlets with claims of liberal bias in an attempt to discredit the industry. Trump is not the first politician to utilize such a strategy, earlier research revealed evidence that public perception of a biased news media increased from 1988 to 1996. This study aimed to update that initial research by providing a content analysis of political news coverage leading up to the 2016 and 2020 elections while also analyzing public opinion regarding news biases during this time period. Results from this study showed evidence for all hypotheses; a rise in news coverage of elite cues also led to a rise in public perception that political news media coverage has a liberal bias, presidential candidates and party officials were more likely to claim a liberal than conservative news media bias, and finally, claims of liberal bias in news coverage were more likely to suggest that media bias exists across the entire media industry than claims of conservative bias. While conservative politicians and party officials are quick to charge a liberal media bias, the opposite scenario seems to be happening in U.S. media; news outlets are reporting Republican candidates and messaging with more favorable coverage compared to Democrats on the other side of the political aisle.