

A METHODOLOGY FOR COMPARING NEWS COVERAGE OF ELITE CUES DURING  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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## **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.

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

### **Introduction**

It could easily be argued that, in American society, nothing garners more attention by both the news media and the public than a presidential election (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012). It happens in nearly election cycle. It was particularly noticeable in 2020 as presidential candidates, party leaders, and political analysts entered November 3, 2020, very-well knowing they would not get definitive election results by the end of the night. A tight political race, coupled with a global pandemic, presented many uncertainties for the candidates. Those candidates' followers, subsequently, looked to the respective party leadership for answers of what to do next. The two major parties could not have varied more in responses.

Candidate turned victor, Joe Biden, and other prominent figures within the Democratic Party immediately took to social media to say phrases like “Keep the faith,” and “Count every vote” (Segers, 2020). While Biden assured his followers that early numbers were no indication for an outcome of the election, Trump took a vastly different approach. Even before the first ballot drop, the incumbent President tweeted phrases like, “Surprise ballot drops” and “Finding Biden votes” (Qiu, 2020). Trump posted more than 300 tweets attacking the integrity of the 2020 election in the two weeks following election night (Tamul, 2020). He also refused to accept the results of the 2020 election (Qiu, 2020). This put more attention than usual on the Electoral College since many of Trump's followers, including members of federal delegations, also refused to accept the election results. This is not the only time where Trump claimed an organization was

fraudulent, when clearly was not the case, thus signaling political cues to supporters (Tamul, 2020).

The amount of unrest that continued to follow Trump's tenure as U.S. President, due to his decisions and actions made while in office, was unsettling. The time prior to an election is unique in that election outcomes are expected to have serious ramifications on the country's economy, military, health regulations, education system, and so on, thus having a great effect on all citizens (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012). On January 6, 2021, a mob Trump supporters flocked to Washington D.C. for a "Save America" rally after Trump repeated the false claim the 2020 election was "stolen" from him (Kulper, Liu, & Bohne, 2021). Trump made these claims through televised interviews on Republican-leaning and conservative echo chambers, like Fox News (Thompson, 2021), thus inciting a crowd to temporarily derail the confirmation of President Joe Biden's Electoral College victory. The ability political elites have to give cues to their supporters, through news media coverage, is necessary to further research.

In the electoral arena, the criterion of objectivity, which includes detachment, nonpartisanship, and balance, has been of particular importance (Dunaway, Davis, Padgett, & Scholl, 2015). This applies in particular with regard to journalists and their story's content. However, the extent of which members of the public perceive the news media as unbiased must depend in part to perceptions of story balance (Rouner, Slater, & Buddenbaum, 1999). Reports discussing candidate traits or issue positions, or both, contain much more political information content and are more amenable to charges of bias, especially in coverage of opposing candidates (Dunaway, Davis, Padgett, & Scholl, 2015). People who have high levels of ideologically like-minded discussions tend to hold stronger media bias perceptions compared to individuals who have low

levels of ideologically like minded discussions; this is particular true among Republicans (Kelly, 2019). News media audiences are showing more signs of distrust each year (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019). Media critics on both sides of the ideological spectrum will almost certainly fail to be cautious in their accusations about media bias (Dunaway, Davis, Padgett, & Scholl, 2015).

Donald Trump's legacy as U.S. President continues to develop each year, as he made lasting impacts to the news media industry. Many factors contributed to Trump's rise to presidency including the news media, particularly cable and network television (Brady, Kelly, & Stein, 2017). Trump stood for both his populism-inflected campaign style and his success at attracting media attention (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017). Trump privileged conservative journalists and news outlets with praise and media appearances mentions on Twitter, while at the same time denigrating nonconservative and general media through attacks and bias frames (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017). The "fake news" expression became popularized and politicized during the 2016 U.S. elections (Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg, & Schatto-Eckrodt, 2019). Trump tweeted "fake news" at reporters and news outlets hundreds of times during his presidency (Tamul, 2020). Trump's attack and bias frames regarding "fake news" generated more retweets and favorites than other frames (Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg, & Schatto-Eckrodt, 2019). Given Trump's influence, such framing could strongly contribute to the public's polarized perceptions of the news media, especially those who view the news industry as having a liberal bias (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017).

The purpose of this research was to explore whether media bias perceptions observed in the 1980s and 1990s are still present today. It has been demonstrated that public perception of a

biased news media increased during the time period of 1980s to 1990s (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). In more recent years, since the turn of the Millennium, conservative critics of the media continued to argue biased news stems from liberal-leaning journalists, adding liberal journalists' attempts to slant the news to advance their favored political causes (Sutter, 2011). The original research from Watts et al. (1999) showed the increased claims of media bias came more often from conservative elites, and their claims of liberal bias encompassed the entire media industry level rather than one singular journalist. Recent findings also showed, despite being dominantly Democratic in voting patterns, journalists do not seem to be exhibiting liberal media bias in what they choose to cover; showing that, overall, journalists do not display political gatekeeping bias in what they choose to cover (Hassell, Holbein, & Miles, 2020). The increased claims of media bias came more often from conservative elites and their claims of liberal bias was viewed as the entire media industry (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999).

### **Literature Review**

Public perception of a biased news media, particularly in a liberal manner, increased from 1988 to 1996 (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). Since then, the research regarding public perceptions, along with content analysis, has not been updated. Such study seems warranted because President Donald Trump made a record number of claims of liberal media bias during the 2016 campaign and after the election alone (Tamul, 2020). It was necessary to reevaluate public perception of the news media as it may give insight into new political trends used both by candidates and journalists.

While there have been many advancements in the news cycle since the 1980s, many parallels are still present in today's political climate. So far, throughout the 2000s, political candi-

dates still criticized the press for coverage they do not agree with (Tamul, 2020). Claims of liberal bias among the press took place during the 1992 election when the slogan, “Annoy the Media, Re-elect George Bush” became commonplace (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). In today’s culture, most noticeable since the 2016 election, conservative politicians tend to label news they do not agree with as “fake” in an attempt to discredit that news organization or journalist (Tamul, 2020). Trump tweeted the phrase “Fake news” at reporters or news organizations before Twitter would ultimately ban Trump from the platform entirely (Waldman, 2021).

### **Defining Media Bias**

Unrestricted access to unbiased information is crucial for forming a well-balanced understanding of current events. Scholars tend to be uniform in that belief (Hamborg, Donnay, & Gipp 2019). However, what constitutes as media bias is unclear within academics as media bias has varying definitions, even within the media industry. Measuring ‘bias’ in news coverage is especially difficult due to the lack of agreement on what constitutes ‘unbiased’ news (Kelly, 2019).

Media bias is not limited to a single component of news gathering or news coverage but is the overall result of the entirety of news-collection and production processes (Covert & Wasburn, 2007). There are several categories of media bias. At the broadest level, partisan bias refers to a general tendency for journalists to think or act in ways that unwittingly favor their own political group or cast their own ideologically based beliefs in a favorable light (Ditto, 2019). Distortion bias happens when news is purportedly distorted or falsifies reality (Entman, 2007). Content bias happens when news favors one side rather than giving equivalent treatment to both sides in a political situation and decision-making bias happens when journalists’ mindsets and motivations produce one-sided or politically leaning content (Entman, 2007). Content bias can also be called

coverage bias, as it looks at unbalance in news stories by the physical amount of coverage each side of issues receive (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000).

For this research, a combination of content/coverage bias and distortion bias was used for the definition of media bias. This research defined media bias as news that favors one side, either because both sides of an issue do not receive equal treatment or the news is purposely false. Distortion bias can also occur when news content is purposely inaccurate, in an attempt to sway audiences to a different viewpoint (Entman, 2007). The part of the definition that included, "Because both sides of an issue do not receive equal treatment" is the coverage bias part of the definition. Coverage biases are also easily codified in a presidential campaign since the system is dominated by two major parties, which produces two qualified candidates, each campaigning at roughly the same level, should produce events, activities, and discussion in two roughly equal amounts: thus, coverage should be roughly equal for each side, and any departure from a "50-50" split could be considered a consequence of some kind of bias (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). The remaining part of the definition, "...Or the news is purposely false," is the distortion bias section of the definition. This is necessary to include since distortion bias is commonly used as a phrase against various news actors, also known as journalists, who various political elites do not like (Entman, 2007). Distortion bias was necessary to combine into this research's definition since decades of elite opinion leadership demonizing the 'liberal news media' may help explain the stronger negative response among Republicans asked to evaluate news coverage, reflecting greater news skepticism in general (Kelly, 2019).

News choice can be driven by the commendable desire for unbiased and credible information. However, a considerable number of news consumers will unavoidably sort themselves

into partisan audiences for partisan news if they are given the option (Kim & Kim, 2021). People also typically have access to pro-attitude information, or news that is consistent with their own views, without sacrificing contact with other opinions (Garrett, 2009). While a majority of news outlets in the U.S. claim unbiased reporting, there are situations where biased news can be more valuable to audiences. In an attempt to appear objective, news organizations may create a false balance in the news by presenting opposing viewpoints in a more evenhanded manner than the evidence warranted (Burke, 2009). An example included journalists who portrayed scientific discourses as uncertain by providing different perspectives on the same scientific issue in order to achieve the goal of balance, with a result of increased public perception of scientists' credibility (Zhuang, Cox, Chung, Hamm, Zwickle, & Upham, 2019). Unbiased news outlets withhold information to not appear ideologically motivated, whereas biased news organizations can impact consumers' decisions in multiple ways: by providing false information or inducing unbiased firms to withhold information (Burke, 2009).

### **Perceptions of Media Bias**

There are a few plausible explanations for various perceptions of media biases, one of which is the hostile media effect (HME). It was first described and documented more than 30 years ago (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). HME is the tendency for people to perceive news content as biased when it differs from their own viewpoints (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). In more recent years, an alarming number of people consider news coverage as harmful to their own political preferences and partisan views (Soontjens & Van Erkel, 2022). Furthermore, part of politicians' unease with the media can be explained by the hostile media effect, as the theory makes politicians less likely to contact journalists and more likely to use conflict and drama to gain pub-

lic attention (Weeks, Kim, Hahn, Diehl, & Kwak, 2019). HME, however, does not explain the substantial increase in U.S. public perception regarding the news media as liberally biased from the 1980s to 1990s (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999).

More often, in present day, individuals have deliberately exposed themselves to news coverage slanted in favor of their beliefs; the effect minimizes perceptions of bias while enhancing perceptions of credibility and informativeness (Kelly, 2019). Conservative-leaning critics of the media argued biased news stems from liberal-leaning journalists (Sutter, 2011). Another explanation of alleged bias could be that liberals have a greater demand for news than moderates or conservatives, so journalists and news organizations create content for its primary audiences (Sutter, 2011). The number of conservative watchdog groups make it more likely for Republican leaders to speak out about the alleged bias, particularly when compared to their counterparts on the Democratic side of the political aisle (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999).

### **Elite Cues**

Political elites started to pay attention to perceived media biases in the 1980s, and there is no indication this trend will stop anytime soon. Political elites have been effective in getting a person to ruminate on a perceived bias, more so than if that person was given valid information or expressed interest in the topic (Petersen, 2013). This concept can also be thought of as political sorting or when people have sorted into the “correct” combination of party and ideology (Mason, 2015). Oftentimes, political elites’ cues signal group membership to a political party and heighten the importance of maintaining that various political belief (Sønderskov, 2015). The cues from political elites could be, in part, why Democrats are now more liberal than they were 50 years ago and Republicans are more conservative than 50 years ago (Mason, 2015).

There is mounting evidence that revealed a conservative bias influenced voters more often than a liberal bias. Fox News is one reason for this, as the cable network produces conservative programming and has made significant impacts on the political information distributed nationwide (DellaVigna, 2007). Fox News is more effective at converting viewers, compared to left-leaning programming such as MSNBC (Martin, 2017). Fox News may have been the first cable news channel to widely accept and utilize biased programming, but it is certainly not the last. Newsmax and One American News Network, both right-leaning media groups, saw increased audiences in 2020 (Mitchell, 2021). Both networks are seen as competitors to Fox News (Mitchell et al., 2021), even months after the election OAN continued to broadcast questions about the validity of the 2020 elections and promoted the debunked theory that the rioters, who stormed Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, were left-wing agitators (Abrams, 2021). The existence of biased news programming creates a polarizing loop, where political elites can reinforce and strengthen their initial biases (DellaVigna, 2007).

In this research, elite cues means news coverage of presidential candidates and party officials. Political elites use party cues to sway voters; these cues clarify key positions within a party and are necessary for political parties to survive (Sønderskov, 2015). Since the 1970s, Republican elites have made a deliberate strategy out of criticizing the media for its alleged liberal biases (Watts et al., 1999). During presidential elections, these elites prominently include Republican Party candidates and leading Republican Party officials (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999).

For decades, political elites have provided cues to their supporters and audiences that suggest media bias happened within various news outlets. At times, these political elites may drive media coverage of bias (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). In this thesis, there are many

similarities between elite cues and party cues, since both terms deal with political elites. Party cues often included explicit information about which political party supports or opposes a various policy. The cues commonly helped voters with their ability to make sense of a sometimes complex surrounding political landscape. Party cues helped citizens form opinions regarding public policy, even if party cues have little grasp of the substance of the issue (Slothuus, 2016). It is largely thought this is due to citizens' cognitive limitations, so most people instantly relied on these external sources of information to make reasoned judgments, and these party cues often come from top politicians (Sønderskov, 2015).

Elections and campaigns evolve over time. That is why this thesis focused on the 2016 and 2020 elections, as Donald Trump was a nontraditional candidate turned president. A great amount of research has already been done surrounding his campaign tactics. In fact, Trump's winning strategy focused on demonizing his opponent and delegitimizing his critics, including fact-checking journalists (Kloor, 2017). Trump also attempted to foster distrust in national news organizations (Tamul, 2020). He did this through the usage and deployment of tactics that are commonplace in populist discourse, including labeling the media of being "enemies of the people," as well as questioning the veracity of mainstream media content through the phrase "fake news" (Thompson, 2021). It is likely Trump claimed a liberal bias of these journalists as a way to erode faith in the various news outlets the journalists works for, or to diminish trust that audience's have for the journalists (Tamul, 2020). In a way, Trump's claims of liberal bias can be thought of as cues as he disparages outlets such as the New York Times, CNN, and MSNBC by accusing them of being purveyors of "fake news" (Thompson, 2021). This is a strategy to attempt to increase levels distrust of journalists and news organizations within various audiences.

While Trump was known for his Twitter rampages throughout his presidency, the news media coverage of those Twitter attacks also caused concern because of infrequent fact checking. A rising number of news programs and media outlets primarily devoted to covering the media have developed since the 1980s. In addition, there are more conservative talk-show hosts and media watchdog organizations. These untraditional news media organizations tend to practice “process-coverage,” “meta-coverage,” or “coverage-of-coverage” (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). All are similar in definition, meaning the various media platform covers other media forms. In the 1980s through 1990s, researchers found evidence that press reported claims of media bias contributed to the belief that news media are tilted in a particular ideological direction, despite those claims being unfounded (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). In fact, partisan news programming has drastically increased since 2000, with a majority of that contributed to the growth of Fox News (DellaVigna, 2007). This report expected to see an increased number of news coverage segments that claim other news media has a liberal bias.

### **Hypotheses**

*H1 - The rise in news coverage of elite cues also leads to a rise in public perception that political news media coverage has a liberal bias.*

This prediction is similar to previous research to model changes in public opinion concerning media biases. Instead of conducting the review of 1988, 1992, and 1996, this report looked at 2016 and 2020. Valence coverage of presidential candidates and party officials is something news consumers can experience directly (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). It is possible that the public, when forming opinions of the fairness of campaign coverage, may be influenced by claims of media bias that are reported in news coverage. Previous research stated people regu-

larly form opinions whether news content is positive, negative, or neutral about candidate in conjunction with their own political leanings. The presence of party cues also should be considered during these situations, as those cues lend support for people having motivated reasoning to agree with a policy rather than relying on heuristic processing (Petersen, 2013). People can be influenced by claims of media bias that are reported in news content if it comes from a source they already trust (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999).

It is important to factor in a term called “oppositional media hostility” in this report. The term implies, in the modern-day media environment, partisan news outlets will intentionally report political news from ideological perspectives simply to raise suspicion that the concept is biased (Arceneaux, 2012). In the process, oppositional media hostility also grows audience concern about the news outlet publishing news content. It is plausible to infer oppositional media hostility directly increased with the growing number of cable news channels. According to Nielsen, the average American has 40 times as many channels to choose in present day compared the 1980s. With a wide array of channels, more cable news will take a pointed approach toward politics. Fox News is just one example as the channel caters to those who identify as part of the Republican Party. Cable channels, including Fox News, have no issue calling out other news media outlets as bias without any proof. Oftentimes, Fox News and other conservative-leaning media, will cite elite cues without additional sources (DellaVigna, 2007). This trend added to this report’s belief that the rise in public perception that political news media has liberal bias is due to the rise in news coverage of elite cues.

*H2A - Within the last two campaigns, presidential candidates and party officials were more likely to claim a liberal than conservative news media bias.*

In support of H2A, as previously stated, Republican candidates and party officials were more likely to criticize the news for perceived bias rather than Democratic political elites. This is partially due to the rising number of conservative media outlets, conservative talk shows, and conservative watch dog groups which create an environment where Republicans feel comfortable talking about the alleged bias (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). Radio news exposure has actually encouraged misperceptions, but only among Republicans (Meirick, 2013). The creation of Fox News Media in 1996 also added to the trend (Martin, 2017).

Rhetoric in campaigns must also be addressed in H2. The role of the media often becomes a topic while on the campaign trail, and at times, criticism of the press becomes a safe target for political elites on both sides of the political aisle (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). For nearly two decades, news consumers have reported declining impressions of credibility for news organizations (Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). In 2016 and 2020, Republican campaign strategies included claims of liberal biases among journalists (Kloor, 2017). Conservative critics continued to accuse the American news media of liberal bias (Tamul, 2020). Most often, critics charge that liberal journalists attempted to slant the news to advance their favored political causes (Sutter, 2011). This is part of an effort to delegitimize critics of the Republican Party, including journalists. Therefore, it seemed plausible there will be evidence in support of H2A.

*H2B- Within the last two campaigns, 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.*

There was evidence in support of a similar hypothesis taken place in the 1990s. It looked at the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections. A similar result was predicted for the 2016 and 2020 elec-

tions. It is necessary to update this data given a growing news cycle and the current political climate in the U.S.

Perceived biases in journalism can happen at three levels. The individual level includes a particular journalist, like NBC Nightly News Anchor Lester Holt, the institutional level includes the various news outlet, like “The Washington Post,” and the industry level includes all mainstream media (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). Journalists do not seem to be exhibiting liberal media bias, or conservative media bias, in what they choose to cover, showing that journalists do not display political gatekeeping bias in what they choose to cover (Hassell, Holbein, & Miles, 2020). Despite changes in technology and the addition of news programming since the 1990s, it still seemed likely that claims of an industry-wide bias would have more of an impact on the public because the perceived effects are more substantial compared to the individual level.

As previous hypotheses have alluded to, claims of liberal bias were more common than claims of conservative bias. This also happened at the industry level. Conservative elites have used phrases like “the liberal media” and “the media elites” for decades (Watts et al., 1999). In more recent elections, conservative elites have added phrases like “lame-stream media” and “fake news,” which have the same ultimate goal; de-legitimizing the press (Tamul, 2020). Liberal elites, in comparison, do not have a phrase to attack the news media. This suggests Democratic elites were less likely to claim a media bias as happening industry wide (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). In short, decades of elite opinion leadership demonizing the ‘liberal news media’ may help explain the stronger negative response among Republicans asked to evaluate news coverage (Kelly, 2019).

## **Method**

A similar method to Watts et al. (1999) original research, including data selection, utilized in this research since this study explored if media bias perceptions observed in the 1980s and 1990s were still present in the 2016 and 2020 elections. The first set included positive and negative daily news coverage of the main Democratic and Republican candidates in both campaigns. The second data set included news coverage of alleged media bias during those same elections. Finally, the third set of data consisted of aggregated public responses to poll questions on perceptions of media bias during those campaigns.

### **Media Coverage Data**

News content was randomly drawn from Nexis Uni electronic data base. News stories were identified as relevant if the content mentioned both major candidates or one candidate three times. For each election, once the news content was retrieved, each was filtered to remove text that is irrelevant to the election. The filtering was accomplished through the content analysis program, Delve. Content analysis quantifies media bias by identifying and characterizing its instances within news texts (Hamborg, Donnay, & Gipp, 2019). The analyst uses computer language to enter (a) idea categories, (b) words that reveal those categories, and (c) rules that allow pairs of ideas in the text to be combined to give more complex meaning. Computer rules were written to remove irrelevant paragraphs, such as those focused solely on the candidates' spouses or someone with the same last name. The remaining stories were coded for two things: (a) valence, meaning positive, negative, or both, coverage of the presidential candidate in each election; and (b) coverage of alleged bias in news coverage for or against those candidates, their parties, or their ideologies.

To create a sample, this research used articles published in major U.S. newspapers from the day after the last political convention to election day. In 2016 the time frame was July 29, 2016, to November 8, 2016. The timeframe in 2020 ran from August 28, 2020, to November 3, 2020. As expected, there were thousands of articles that mentioned candidates during the election season. In 2016, according to Nexis Uni, 30,116 news articles were published during the necessary time frame. That number increased even more in 2020 with 38,248 eligible news articles. Both years presented too many articles possible to code for this research. Instead, this research compiled two constructed weeks to code for both 2016 and 2020. Articles from two random Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays were gathered for 2016 and 2020 to create constructed weeks. In total, the content analysis coded 75 articles for 2016 and 90 articles in 2020.

Based on the coding book constructed by the author, based on Watt et al.'s (1999) study, two coders coded 50 newspaper articles that were sampled beyond the constructed two-weeks sample generated for this study. They coded for four variables. For V1, coverage of candidate, they agreed 86% of all coding decisions. V2, coverage of perceived bias, they agreed at 83%. V4, claims of bias, was 100% agreement. Finally, V5, views Of perceived bias, was at 63%.

### **Valence Coverage**

Based on previous extensive rules established to address the syntactical structures of sentences (Watts et al., 1999), the valence coverage of candidates was coded using virtually identical rules for the 2016 and 2020 elections as was done in 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections. The rules were only adjusted to account for shifts in candidates, idiosyncratic phrases, and events specific to each election. For each election, paragraphs that contained positive or negative state-

ments about the candidate were coded as favorable or unfavorable to the candidates. Each paragraph could also be scored as positive or negative to both candidates within a campaign, depending on the ideas expressed in the text (Watts et al., 1999).

Several rationale guided the decision to analyze potential news biases by focusing on the valence of coverage of candidates. First was the norm of objectivity. Similar to news bias, objectivity presents difficulty to define in academia, as scholars also vary in opinions if the term should be reassessed or taken out of the field of journalism entirely (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). At a broad level, to be objective is to say that one's content is not affected by one's own assessments (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). The second rationale for focusing on the valence of coverage of candidates included the increase of media watchdog groups, claiming that news organization have an unfair abundance of negative stories about one candidate or positive stories about an opponent (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). The final rationale included the link between news media and public opinion. The amount of favorable and unfavorable coverage of principle candidates has been found to exert substantial influence on peoples' preferences for candidates (Muñoz-Torres, 2012).

### **Media Bias Coverage**

The content analysis computer program was used to analyze stories about alleged media bias in the coverage of elections. Each paragraph was then manually read by human coders who discarded all non-biased stories. This method was used in for the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections (Watts et al., 1999) and in this research for the 2016 and 2020 elections.

Manual coding identified claims of liberal bias, conservative bias, or both (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). For the analysis, the claims were put into two categories: (a) claims

of bias favoring liberals, or (b) claims of bias favoring conservatives. The coding identified the characterization of the level of bias in each claim, whether that bias was seen as that of the individual reporter, the media institution, or the industry as a whole.

This research used also used Nexis Uni for articles regarding media bias. There were fewer articles regarding claims of alleged media bias compared to articles about candidates. Using the same time frames for 2016 and 2020; the day after the last political convention to election day, a total of 1,020 articles were published in major U.S. newspapers in 2016 and 1,271 articles in 2020. For consistency, two constructed weeks also were used in this section of research. In total, 60 articles were coded for alleged media bias in 2016 and 65 articles were coded in 2020.

### **Public Opinion Data**

Earlier researchers were able to conduct thousands of their own surveys to get data regarding public perception of news media during the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). It was not possible to replicate that exact process for this research since there would be no way to survey people in real time for the 2016 and 2020 elections. Instead, data from the Pew Research Center was used to aid this research as it offered many parallels, including a similar number of people surveyed and the participants' perceptions of news coverage during election years.

Pew Research Center surveyed 10,606 participants about trust in national news organizations, local news organizations, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These surveys happened roughly every 12 to 15 months from January 2016 to June 2021. The Pew Research Center's survey asked about participant's political affiliation and their trust in news on a scale of one through four: one equating to a lot of trust, two is some trust, three is not too much

trust and four is no trust. A similar number of participants and scale regarding trust in news was used by Watts et al. (1999). A takeaway from Pew Research's survey included major changes to Republican trust of news organizations. In 2016, Republicans hovered around 70% trust, that number dropped to 35% after the 2020 election, whereas Democrats remained more consistent in both elections, ranging from 78% in 2016 to 86% in 2020 (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021).

## **Results**

The analysis focused on exploring factors that contributed to the rise in public perception that news media coverage in presidential elections exhibits a liberal bias in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections (Watts et al., 1999) to see if those same factors influenced the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The analyst looked at whether (a) there were identifiable biases in valence of news coverage, and (b) news coverage of alleged media has increased and how coverage was framed (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). Updated hypothesis were tested to explore the nature of media content and media bias coverage.

### **Valence Candidate Coverage and Claims of Media Bias**

Potential biases in valence news coverage in each presidential election, 2016 and 2020, were determined by computing the percent of total candidate coverage that favors each candidate. This followed earlier research guidelines (Watts et al., 1999) and was calculated in two steps. First, the number of positive paragraphs about the Democratic candidate and the number of negative paragraphs about the Republican candidate were added, producing a total amount of coverage favorite the Democratic candidate. Next, the amount of coverage favoring the Democratic candidate was divided by all favorable and unfavorable coverage for both Democratic and

Republican candidates. The result made a measure of the percent of valence coverage that favors the Democratic candidate.

The amount of favorable coverage for each candidate in the 2016 and 2020 elections is shown in the table below both in percentages and in total paragraphs that favor each candidate. In 2016, the valence coverage was fairly split between the Republican and Democratic candidates. That is not the case in 2020, as coverage seemingly favored the Republican candidate. N represents the number of favorable paragraphs that correspond which each percentage.

<b>Paragraphs</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Favorable to Republican Candidate</b>	52.7% n= 481	62.2% n= 673
<b>Favorable to Democratic Candidate</b>	47.3% n= 431	37.8% n= 409
<b>Total</b>	100% n=913	100% n= 1,082

H1 predicted the rise in news media coverage of elite cues is directly related to a rise in public perception that political news media has a liberal bias. To test H1, this study focused on news coverage during the 2020 presidential election and a Pew Research Study regarding the public trust of American news media. This research aimed to give reasoning to the relation between campaign news coverage and public opinion of news media.

The model by Watts et al. (1999) was based on the premise that public perception of the news media was unfair to Democratic candidates as a function of (a) the level of previous public perceptions of the news media as unfair and (b) the loss of those who had perceived the news media as unfair, caused by increased information favorable to conservative candidates. While the

news media remained a primary source of persuasive information, the developers of this model (Watts et al., 1999) recognized that there are additional influences regarding public perception.

For consistency, the model used in this research is the same used in an earlier study (Watts et al., 1999) completed in the 1990s. Two types of news content are posited to have persuasive information that leads to an increase or decrease in the perception of ideological bias in media bias (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). Instead of using data from 1992, this research used data from a Pew Research Center completed over the series of the 2016 and 2020 elections (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021). In the model below, “opinion unfair” and “opinion fair” represent public perceptions that the media coverage is unfair or fair, according to the survey data from Pew Research Center. The two public opinion variables add up to 100% because like earlier researchers (Watts et al., 1999), this study excluded undecided poll numbers. The model also combined pro-Clinton paragraphs with con-Trump paragraphs to create a pro-liberal coverage parameter. It also added pro-Trump paragraphs with con-Clinton paragraphs to create a pro conservative coverage parameter. For the coverage of media bias, there are two types of information: claims of liberal bias and claims of conservative bias, at time  $t$ . Each  $F$  function for the time is the sum of the number of paragraphs in news media coverage of the appropriate valence or bias claims. The  $k$  parameters include the percentage of the population translated into persuasive force function.

In mathematical terms, the model is:

$$\text{Opinion Unfair}_t = \text{Opinion Unfair}_{t-1} + [(k_{\text{ProBiden}} F_{\text{ProBident}} + k_{\text{ConTrump}} F_{\text{ConTrump}_t}) + k_{\text{LibBias}} F_{\text{LibBias}_t}] \text{Opinion Fair}_{t-1} - [(k_{\text{ProTrump}} F_{\text{ProTrump}_t} + k_{\text{ConBiden}} F_{\text{ConBident}}) + k_{\text{ConsvBias}} F_{\text{ConsvBias}_t}] \text{Opinion Unfair}_{t-1}$$

The purpose of testing the above model was to assess the relative predictive power of the parameters (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). Paragraphs suggesting a liberal media bias have an estimate  $k$  value of 0.22 for the population breakdown that thinks news is unfair, overall. The parameter for a conservative media bias is much smaller; less than 0.0002. The  $k$  value for the conservative parameter is nearly incomputable, indicating it has practically no predictive power. With more numbers filled in, an updated calculation is shown below:

$$\text{Opinion Unfair}_t = \text{Opinion Unfair}_{t-1} + [.22(211) + .0002(198) + .22(587)] \text{Opinion Fair}_{t-1} - [(.0002(501) + .22(171) + .0002(74))] \text{Opinion Unfair}_{t-1}$$

Given the percentage of population translated to persuasive force function, calculations then show more than 80% of public perception believed a liberal media bias was shown. The analysis for H1, while referencing the first table in this research, suggests that public perception of a liberal media bias is not shaped by biases in valence treatment of political candidates. Republican candidates in 2016 and 2020 received higher valence treatment in news coverage, yet public perception of a liberal media bias continued to hold strong.

Renewed evidence showed news coverage of claims of media bias influenced public perception on the topic, this is in addition to previous research from the 1980s to 1990s. Therefore, like earlier researchers (Watts et al, 1999), a closer examination of media self coverage was necessary to complete H2. This research predicted the coverage of media bias was driven by political elites making the claims, and that the claims were more likely to be of liberal bias instead of conservative bias.

H2 made a two-part prediction that (A) within the last two elections presidential candidates in party officials were more likely to claim a liberal than conservative news bias, and (B)

within the last two campaigns, claims of liberal bias in news coverage were more likely to suggest that media bias exists across the entire media industry, rather than claims of conservative bias. Similar to earlier research (Watts et al, 1999), H2A and H2B were tested by looking at the coverage of claims of bias and documenting what source was associated with the allegations.

Paragraphs are represented by n in the following tables.

<b>2016</b>	<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Party Official</b>
<b>Liberal Bias Claim</b>	94.2% n=134	83.1% n=82
<b>Conservative Bias Claim</b>	5.8% n=8	16.9% n=17
<b>Total</b> n= 241	100% n= 142	100% n=99

<b>2020</b>	<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Party Official</b>
<b>Liberal Bias Claim</b>	85.7% n= 102	95.6% n=142
<b>Conservative Bias Claim</b>	14.3% n=17	4.4% n=7
<b>Total</b> n= 268	100% n=119	100% n=149

In the tables above, claims of liberal and conservative media bias are broken into two categories for the 2016 and 2020 elections: (a) candidates and (b) party officials. As predicted, candidates and party officials were more likely to claim a liberal media bias compared to a conservative one. This data yielded the same results from research decades ago (Watts et al, 1999), suggesting that when political elites were sources in news coverage about potential media bias they overwhelmingly accuse of liberal bias instead of conservative bias.

The second part of H2 looked at the level of the perceived bias suggested by the claims. Research decades before (Watts et al, 1999), found labels of bias were largely viewed as happen-

ing industry wide. Therefore it was necessary to look at a similar hypothesis. This research posits within the last two campaigns, 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. The claims of liberal and conservative media bias were placed put into three categories (a) journalist, (b) institution, and (c) industry for both the 2016 and 2020 elections. Results are revealed in the following table:

<b>Perceived Level of Bias (2016)</b>	<b>Liberal Bias</b>	<b>Conservative Bias</b>
<b>Journalist</b>	12.3% 26	25% n=6
<b>Institution</b>	14.6% 32	50% n=13
<b>Industry</b>	73.1% 158	25% n=6
<b>Total n=241</b>	100% n=216	100% n=25

<b>Perceived Level of Bias (2020)</b>	<b>Liberal Bias</b>	<b>Conservative Bias</b>
<b>Journalist</b>	3.9% n=9	33.3% n=8
<b>Institution</b>	11.1% n=27	0.0%
<b>Industry</b>	85.1% n=208	66.6% n=16
<b>Total n=268</b>	100% n=244	100% n=24

A perceived liberal bias overwhelming happened at the industry level in both elections. In fact, the perceived level increased by more than 10 points from 2016 to 2020: 73.1% to 85.1%. This followed suite from earlier research (Watts et al, 1999), the perceived liberal media bias happened 70.6% in 1988, 89.9% in 1992, and 96.2% in 1996.

## Discussion

There was evidence in support of all hypothesis in this study. This offered a few parallels to earlier (Watts et al., 1999), as expected. The analysis provided further insight into public perceptions of media bias. Results from this study validated previous evidence that criticisms of news media are typically spearheaded by conservative elites, and those elites were the driving force behind the rising public perception of liberal media bias. This study's analysis revealed political elites used claims of media bias as a campaign strategy, which was a similar strategy used in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections. In all decades, the views of liberal bias happened across the entire media industry.

Perhaps the most striking result from this research included the valence treatment of candidates in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Donald Trump, received a higher valence treatment compared to the Democratic candidates, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. Trump received roughly 53% of favorable coverage in 2016 and 62% in 2020. This is truly remarkable, considering the opposite trend occurred in earlier research. According to Watts et al. (1999), valence coverage was much more evenly split in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections. Republican candidates received 49.7% of favorable coverage in 1988, 45.8% in 1992, and 49.4% in 1996; Democratic candidates received 50.3% in 1988, 54.2% in 1992, and 50.6% in 1996, respectively (Watts et al., 1999).

Those following quotes are two examples of valence coverage. Both were published in *Chicago Tribune* during the necessary time frame leading up to the 2016 election. The first is negative against Hillary Clinton. The second is against Donald Trump.

Jenkins (2016) wrote:

In fact, the overlooked bombshell of the report is the inspector general's confirmation that classified information contained in Clinton's emails was in fact compromised by foreign intelligence services, and that Clinton had recklessly emailed President Barack Obama using her unsecured personal email from the territory of a hostile foreign adversary. (p.1.)

Thiessen (2016) wrote:

But what exactly constitutes "locker room talk," anyway? What are the parameters of this secret dog whistle of conversation? The fact is, it doesn't exist.

But whether it's uttered by a trader, lawyer, doctor, football player, or a political candidate, "locker room talk" is a creepy cliché. It's the talk of someone trying to assert that they belong. (p.1.)

The above quotes serve as good discussion topics regarding the type of coverage candidates received during the 2016 election. As an overall theme, coverage regarding Clinton was harsh. Her email history was a popular news story in 2016, so was her health. Overall, according to this thesis, she received negative coverage from U.S. newspapers if she was fit to be president. Trump, however, had other types of news coverage. The above example showed that even when negative news centered with Trump, the news article rarely mentioned his name. It is possible that this trend made it easier for Trump to distance himself from negative news coverage throughout the campaign.

Over the decades, the news media industry has learned to perceive and respond to changes in viewership caused by discrepancies between what is covered and what the public finds interesting (Reuning & Dietrich, 2019). This tendency from news outlets could add to the reasoning for the push for more positive coverage of Republican candidates in recent years. Due

to decades of conservative elites criticizing journalists and news organizations for an alleged liberal bias (Kelly, 2019), the news media industry may be covering Republican agendas, including candidates, in a more positive manner so as to seem unbiased to conservative elites.

It is possible that the scales have tilted in favor of Republican candidates for some time. This thesis can be added to that increasing body of academic literature. While the 2000 and 2004 elections were more balanced in coverage, similar to 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections, there is evidence that revealed the 2008 election slightly favored Republican candidate, John McCain (Didi, Fico, & Alunit, 2014). In 2016, multiple studies showed Trump's success was due, at least in part, to an abundance of media coverage for his candidacy (Reuning & Dietrich, 2019).

While valence coverage results were a bit more drastic in this study compared to other research, there were other parallels to earlier research (Watts et al., 1999). Data revealed candidates and party officials were more likely to make claims of liberal bias compared to conservative news bias; the same trend happened from 1988 to 1996. The percentage of party officials claiming a liberal bias jumped more than 10% from 2016 to 2020: 83.1% to 95.6%. Nearly the opposite trend happened for candidates, with 94.2% claiming a liberal bias in 2016 compared to 85.7% in 2020. However, it should be noted both results were shockingly higher than similar results from the 1980s and 1990s. Earlier research (Watts et al, 1999) showed a smaller, yet increasing, percentage of candidates claimed the media was liberal in the 1980s to 1990s: 14.7% in 1988, 24.7% 1992, and 56.6% in 1996. Conservative political elites continued to dominate news coverage that discusses media bias. If the public continues to take cues from these political elites, the evidence indicates the political cues overwhelmingly will continue to suggest there is a liberal bias in news content.

Finally, it is vital to have more in-depth discussions regarding news media self-coverage. This study provided support for the argument that news content focused on claims of liberal media bias compared to claims of conservative media bias during the past two presidential elections. Even when valence coverage was more evenly split in 2016, claims of liberal media bias dominated conversation surrounding news media bias. Valence coverage was not evenly split in 2020, with a 20 point difference in coverage that favored the Republican candidate. If anything, this data implied news media tended to have a conservative bias rather than a liberal one in 2020 as liberal media bias claims continued to have a stronghold regarding news self coverage. This analysis continues to suggest the rising perception of liberal news media has more to do with news self coverage of media rather than biases in valence of news content.

The phenomena of “coverage of coverage” started to take hold in the 1980s. Conservative watchdog groups provided a platform to political elites, and at times journalists themselves, to discuss media actions and accountability (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). These watchdog groups have only grown in size and number since the 1980s. Extremist outlets like OAN and Newsmax broadcast conspiracy theories as fact and promote other falsehoods in order to provide political cues to its audiences (Abrams, 2021). These actions should be startling to journalists, politicians, party officials, and members of the public. Yet, media self-reporting has an inevitable cyclical effect (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). Self-reporting within the media industry is shaped by sources, including both candidates and political officials, who claimed there is a liberal media bias. The news industry has long thought itself to be vital to the political process, however there should be concern that its strength in society is dwindling, due to public perception surrounding the industry. As the news industry grapples to stay relevant to its audiences, jour-

nalists may seek to get attention by political elites and be part of the political process. As a result, similar to what was shown in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections (Watts et al., 1999), news media outlets are less likely to cover news and are moving closer to becoming the news.

### **Limitations**

This style of research cannot account for any biases manifested in terms of which issues do or do not receive coverage, also known as “news agenda biases” (Watts, Domke, Shaw, & Fan, 1999). This research used the same model as earlier researchers (Watts et al., 1999) to see if the same results were yielded for more recent presidential elections. More research is needed regarding news agenda biases, particularly due to the fact valence coverage was not as evenly split in 2016 and 2020 compared to the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections.

Another limitation with this research is the reliance of outside data for information regarding public perception of news media. While the Pew Research Center is a reliable source for polls and information, it would be useful to rerun this study after obtaining results from a research team’s own polling regarding public perception of news media. This study was not able to do its own polling due to time and financial restraints.

The final limitation deals with intercoder reliability. A person outside of this research project coded a section of articles to give the validity to results. Intercoder reliability numbers were strong in all aspects of this research except one; the test at what level the media bias occurred. In hindsight, the definitions could be written better for future research as there was confusion of what the difference is between institution and industry. If this research is replicated perhaps news outlet could be swapped for institution to give the outside coder more clarity.

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## Appendix:

### **Content Analysis Codebook:**

#### *Procedure and Story Eligibility for Study*

1. The story must mention both major candidates or one candidate three times.
2. The story is political in nature (does not focus entirely on spouses, extended family, someone with same name, etc.)
3. The story must focus on either the 2016 or 2020 election. The story must have been published/ aired/printed between the day after of the last political convention to election day, so from July 29, 2016, to November 8, 2016, or August 28, 2020, to November 3, 2020.

Read the story before coding. If an analyst believes a story is NOT eligible for the study because it deals with excluded material noted above, go on to next story.

#### *Variable Operation Definitions*

VI: Item Number (assigned)

V2: Item Date: month/day/year (two digits: e.g. September 1, 2020, is 090120)

V3: Coverage of candidate

- A. This research defines a paragraph as a distinct section of the writing dealing with a single theme.
- B. The number of positive paragraphs about the Democratic candidate and the number of negative paragraphs about the Republican candidate are to be added, producing a total amount of coverage favorite the Democratic candidate. Next, the amount of coverage favoring the Democratic candidate was divided by all favorable and unfavorable coverage for both Democratic and Republican candidates. The result made a measure of the percent of valence coverage that favors the Democratic candidate.

It is represented in the following equation:

$$\text{Bias in favor of the Democrat} = \frac{(\text{Pro-Democrat} + \text{Con-Republican})}{(\text{Pro-Democrat} + \text{Con-Republican} + \text{Pro-Republican} + \text{Con-Democrat})}$$

The same equation method can produce results for Republicans. The equation is:

Bias in favor of the Republican = (Pro-Republican + Con-Democrat) /  
(Pro-Republican + Con- Democrat + Pro-Democrat + Con- Republican).

These equations follow earlier research guidelines (Watts et al., 1999).

C. After tabulating the results, code for valence:

- 1 = positive Republican
- 2 = negative Republican
- 3 = positive and negative Republican
- 4 = positive Democrat
- 5 = negative Democrat
- 6 = positive and negative Democrat

V4: Coverage of perceived media bias

- A. This research previously stated that perceived media happens due to a rise in public perception of a liberal press includes biases in news treatment towards candidates (Watts, 1999), the tendency for people to perceive news content as biased when it differs from their own viewpoints (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004), or people may also perceive bias in news coverage because political elites and journalists are giving more attention to the subject, also known as “self-reporting” (Watts, 1999).
- B. In V4, coverage refers to the platform which is discusses media bias. This research looks at newspaper articles and if the “coverage” deals with conservative or liberal bias.
- C. 1 = conservative bias 2 = liberal bias

V5: Claims of perceived media bias

- A. Within the newspaper article, the claims refer to the person or people saying the media is bias.
- B. 1 = candidate 2 = party official

V6: Views of perceived media bias

A. After the claims are discovered, the views refers to what level is the perceived media bias happening.

- 1 = Journalist
- 2 = Institution
- 3 = Industry