

The Tone of Local Presidential News Coverage

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There is little research on the tone of local news coverage of the presidency, despite the public's preference for local rather than national news. I use theories of media politics, based primarily on the profit-seeker model of news coverage, to explore the impact of newspaper characteristics, audience preferences, and story characteristics on local newspaper coverage of the presidency. Based on a sample of 288 stories taken from the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, I demonstrate that everyday local newspaper coverage of the presidency is slightly more negative than positive and that audience support for the president, newspaper resources, and corporate ownership affect the tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency.

Keywords local news, presidential politics, tone, newspapers

There is much to be said about news coverage of the presidency. Media, the Washington press corps especially, cover the president on a daily basis. They benefit from covering the presidency because, as the perceived focal point of American government, the president is typically newsworthy. Indeed, presidents receive substantially more network news coverage on average than either Congress or the Supreme Court (Graber, 2002, p. 273). News coverage is also favorable to presidents early in their administration (Grossman & Kumar, 1981), even though recent presidents do not enjoy the same kind of honeymoon with the media as their predecessors. And although news coverage of the presidency may be antagonistic throughout a president's term, the relationship between presidents and the media must be one of cooperation, even amid conflict (Grossman & Kumar, 1981). News coverage routines tend to project the "official line" (Bennett, 2007) as well, which provides presidents with opportunities to communicate their messages to the American people.

Studies of the tone of national news coverage reveal, nevertheless, that the news is not always good for the president. Network news coverage of incumbent presidents is decidedly negative. According to the Center for Press and Public Affairs, presidents typically receive less

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than 30% positive television coverage during their first years in office (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006). The Project for Excellence in Journalism reports similar numbers, with Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush receiving 22% and 27% positive news coverage during their first years in office. This is not surprising given the familiar and contentious relationships between presidents and the Washington press corps (Graber, 2002, p. 284; Grossman & Kumar, 1981) and changes in news coverage of the presidency in the age of 24-hour news (Cohen, 2008).

By analyzing only national news sources to the exclusion of local media, these studies paint only a partial picture of the tone of presidential news coverage. This is problematic because local news sources are more popular and viewed more favorably by Americans than national sources (Kumar, 2007, p. 98).¹ Yet despite its importance to readers, only a few articles examine local news coverage of the presidency.² One article shows that President George W. Bush enjoyed mostly positive coverage of his social security reform tour during the first half of 2005, and, what is more, national coverage of the same trips was more negative than local newspaper coverage (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006). In addition, local newspaper coverage of George W. Bush's domestic travel in 2001 was mostly positive, explained in part by local community support for the president (Barrett & Peake, 2007). Nevertheless, this research is limited to the president's local visits, so we do not yet know whether positive local coverage of the presidency extends to other types of local news stories.

To broaden our understanding of local news coverage of the presidency, it is important to move beyond coverage of the president's visits to everyday local news coverage—what the public reads irrespective of the president's travel schedule. Whereas the focus of previous research (Barrett & Peake, 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006) has been on stories that are local, or written by the local newspaper (and staff reporter) that covers the location that the president visits, this study examines each presidential news story in a newspaper for a given day regardless of the byline or source. These may include not only local staff reports, but also Associated Press (AP) wire reports or stories written by a newspaper's Washington, D.C., bureau reporters. Since presidential trips to one location are rare, these everyday news stories that permeate daily local newspaper coverage of the presidency are more representative of presidential news at the local level than local coverage of a president's visit. It may be that evidence of positive local presidential news applies only to local coverage of presidential visits, not all presidential stories found in local newspapers.

The tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency is vital to a comprehensive understanding of modern American and presidential politics. We know that presidents have much difficulty influencing national public opinion (Edwards, 2003), which may be explained in part by the difficulty presidents face influencing national media attention in the first place (Edwards & Wood 1999), which has a negative bias at any rate (Groeling & Kernell, 1998; see Cohen, 2004, p. 505). If local news coverage is more negative than positive, then this is another impediment to successful presidential leadership of public opinion and adds clarity to why leading the public is a difficult task. Simply, if readers of local newspapers find their coverage of the presidency to be more negative than positive, then it is no wonder that presidential leadership occurs, at best, at the margins (Edwards, 1989). What is more, if most of what the public reads about the presidency is negative, this might further undermine public trust in the federal government and increase cynicism among an already-disinterested public, two topics fundamental to American democracy.

I intend to answer the following questions in this article. Is everyday local newspaper coverage of the presidency mostly positive, like coverage of his trips, or more negative,

like national news coverage? What factors affect the tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency? That is, does tone vary by newspaper characteristics, such as available resources to cover the presidency or the political leaning of a newspaper, audience preferences for presidential news, or story characteristics, including whether or not the story covers the president's own speeches? To answer these questions, I have compiled a data set of 288 newspaper stories sampled from the third years of the Clinton (1995) and Bush (2003) administrations. Analysis of these data suggests that the local newspaper coverage of the presidency read by the public on an everyday basis is slightly more negative than positive, but also influenced strongly by the local audience.

Explaining the Tone of Coverage

No single model of news making (Graber, 2006, pp. 22–23) can explain media politics, in general, or the tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency, in particular. Clearly, newspapers want to inform, educate, and entertain their readers, just as newspapers hope to return a profit (see Compaine, 1980; Hamilton, 2004; Sigal, 1973). Because profit is the driving motivation behind my theory for a newspaper's tonal coverage of the presidency, local newspapers should frame presidential coverage to maximize profits and readership. If done so within the larger political environment, coverage will also vary across local newspapers because support for the president differs by a newspaper's readership.³ Yet, journalists also rely on professional standards to produce quality articles. This, in turn, may temper tonal attributes of local newspaper coverage of the presidency. Along with characteristics of newspapers and audience preferences, characteristics of the story itself should also explain the tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency.

Newspaper Characteristics

According to the profit-seeker or professional model (Graber, 2006; Leighley, 2003), news making is a business, so newspapers appeal to their readers, just as any other business appeals to its customers (see Bennett, 2007). Indeed, Hamilton (2004, p. 14) holds that news directors' (including newspaper editors') decisions about what to report as news depend on several factors, including audience interests, readers' expectations about the news, and the cost of producing a newscast or newspaper. At the same time, reporters have a motivation to be objective and maintain high professional standards of reporting (Bennett, 2007; Hamilton, 2004) while following regular media practices or routines designed to reduce the uncertainties associated with news production (Sparrow, 1999, p. 16). Other factors related to the production of news, such as editorial decisions and influence by ownership, should also affect the day-to-day newspaper operation.⁴ News organizations are not a monolith (see Downie & Kaiser, 2002; Shaw & Sparrow, 1999) but are similar enough to infer that factors that affect national news coverage will also affect local news coverage of the presidency.

Yet, there are differences in news organizations, including those in ownership. If profit and substantive coverage are both competing forces behind newspaper production, then corporately owned newspapers, presumably, would prioritize profit, not substantive or quality coverage (see Downie & Kaiser, 2002; Dunaway, 2008), soft and not hard news (Hamilton, 2004), and profit and not the public interest (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007, p. 184). According to Dunaway (2008), corporate news organizations prioritize profit given ownership–management structures. Whereas owners of independent newspapers have clearer influence over the newspaper's management and direction and may prioritize

goals other than profit (such as ideological slant [but see Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006] or quality journalism), corporate newspapers are owned by a diverse set of shareholders with divergent preferences. Lacking any consistency in preferences across corporate owners, they will prioritize profit (see also Branton & Dunaway, 2009; Hamilton, 2004; Page, 1996). Further exacerbating this is the impact that corporate ownership may have on reporting routines, such that newsroom habits and culture may also encourage corporate newspapers to print those stories that tend to be most profitable.⁵

Because most profit-oriented models of news coverage suggest that negative news is more profitable (and plentiful) than positive news, a corporately owned newspaper should encourage more negative news coverage of the presidency as well. Independently owned newspapers would prioritize more substantive or hard news coverage, which may be more balanced and less negative. This does not mean that profit is unimportant to independently owned newspapers, just that these newspapers may spend more of their bottom line to promote investigative stories that are costly to produce (Downie & Kaiser, 2002, p. 71). Hypothetically, *a corporate newspaper will encourage more negative coverage of the presidency than an independently owned newspaper.*

Available newspaper resources are important in explaining local newspaper coverage (Arnold, 2004). Newspaper resources matter because the costs of assembling and producing stories may influence news content. To maximize profit, local media will look for stories that require fewer resources to cover. This may involve covering the president extensively when he visits (see Barrett & Peake, 2007) or trying to find lower cost ways to print presidential news to satisfy readers' interest in the presidency (see Bogart, 1989).

That reporters do not have to hunt for a story but will rely on information provided by others is common practice (Kaniss, 1991). This may involve printing AP wire reports rather than paying a staff reporter to cover the presidency. After all, wire reports provide local and low-resource newspapers a relatively low-cost way to cover the presidency by allowing local newspapers to print others' words on the president. Kern, Levering, and Levering (1983) confirm that inadequate resources limit the ability of local newspapers to develop "independent positions" on foreign policy issues (p. 9). Limited resources simply encourage greater reliance on other newspapers' (or administration officials') perspectives. Since limited resources push local newspapers to rely on national sources—such as wire reports and bureau reporters (Sparrow, 1999, p. 20)—when a newspaper must cover the president from afar, these stories are likely to reflect attributes of national as opposed to local news coverage.⁶

Local newspapers clearly vary in the amount of resources available to cover the presidency and other political news. Newspapers that are resource thin will have fewer reporters to devote to covering the presidency. As such, the cost of covering the presidency is greater for smaller newspapers, especially because doing so may decrease their few reporters' abilities to report on city council meetings, school board elections, and local crime. Given this variation in resources across newspapers, resources should affect the tone of presidential news coverage, with fewer resources actually leading to more negative than positive coverage of the presidency. This should be so primarily because fewer resources may require additional reliance on others' words (e.g., AP wire reports).⁷ Even though local newspapers have discretion over what on the wires to report, the source of the information is national, and so local newspapers that publish AP stories with measurable tones should be more negative than positive. Hypothetically, *fewer resources encourage negative coverage of the presidency.*⁸ Alternatively, more resources for local newspapers will lead to more positive coverage of the presidency.⁹

A newspaper's political leaning or editorial endorsement may affect newspaper coverage of presidents (see Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). Some maintain that newspapers

have a clear bias in favor of the Democratic or Republican perspective in their news coverage, which tends to affect vote choice in presidential (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998) and senatorial election races (Kahn & Kenney, 2002), favoring incumbents especially (Ansolabehere, Lessem, & Snyder, 2006). Yet, others show that editorial pages are unrelated to tonal coverage of presidential candidates (Hamilton, 2004, p. 155) or the president himself (Barrett & Peake, 2007, p. 18). Of course, the slant of a newspaper is not limited to the newspaper's editorial pages but, if it exists, should affect coverage throughout the newspaper (Page, 1996). This set of results, nevertheless, is mixed and requires further investigation.

Audience Preferences

Profit is driven by audience interest, which may be a primary determinant of the tone of newspaper coverage. Local media appeal to audience interest in a few ways as they cover the president of the United States. First, they will take advantage of their audience's interest in news on the presidency. The president's routine activities are newsworthy, as he is the single most covered individual in the news (Gans, 1979, p. 9; see Graber, 2006). Indeed, 67% of readers of local newspapers have at least some interest in stories devoted to the United States government (Bogart, 1989, pp. 301–302),¹⁰ and according to the Pew Research Center (2008) 21% of Americans follow politics and Washington news "very closely" (p. 39).¹¹ Given that media cover the president more than any other national politician, these data imply that readers also prefer to read stories on the presidency.

Second, to create and maintain the interest of the reader, reporters may appeal to their audience's political preferences by reflecting the audience's liberal or conservative leaning in their reporting.¹² Good reporting naturally involves quality news stories that, in themselves, attract audience interest. But there may also be a political component to reporting of presidential news. In contrast with their coverage of soft news, moreover, local newspapers' coverage of hard news tends to be fairly responsive to audience demand (Hamilton, 2004, p. 150), suggesting that coverage of presidential news should be quite responsive to readers' political leanings. Reporters have another incentive to reflect the ideology of their readers: Reporters who frequently criticize a Republican president to a mostly conservative audience may lose credibility with their audience and see a decline in newspaper circulation. For these reasons, more community support should lead to more positive coverage. Alternatively, *areas that are more conservative will produce more negative (positive) stories of President Clinton (Bush) than localities that are less conservative.*

Story Characteristics

What a reporter writes in a story is instrumental to the message behind the story and, likely, its tone. Indeed, the limited research on local news coverage of the presidency, which focuses on the president's local speeches (those delivered outside of Washington, D.C.), is quite clear that coverage of these local speeches should be more positive than negative. After all, the White House goes to great lengths to promote a specific message in the president's speeches and provides resource-limited newspapers with opportunities to report the president's perspective that should also flatter the president's point of view. Hypothetically, *stories that cover a speech from a president's trip will be positive.*

Professionally, journalists have a responsibility to quote the president when they cover him. Typically then, coverage of the president's speeches will include many of his own words in the story. And since the president is unlikely to criticize himself in his own

speech, more coverage of the president's own words should increase the amount of positive coverage in a story. Thus, *more sentences attributed to the president will lead to more positive coverage.*

Journalists are also encouraged to present multiple perspectives in a story. A story on the presidency should include some variation in political perspective, including from both supporters and opponents of the president. Yet, if the story leans more on one perspective or another, this may have an impact on the tone of that story. One way to assess this is by the political party affiliation of government elites. Although some research indicates that network news will air more criticism than praise from members of the president's party in Congress (Groeling & Kernell, 2000, p. 85),¹³ other research shows that government officials not of the president's party are quite negative in their evaluation of the president. At least concerning foreign policy issues between 1979 and 2003, nonpresidential party members of Congress were much more negative than positive in their broadcast evaluations of the presidents, even though presidential party legislators were also more negative than positive (Groeling & Baum, 2008, p. 1074). In addition, the negative tone of local news coverage increases when a state's congressional delegation is composed of more opposition than same-party members (Barrett & Peake, 2007). Along these lines, newspaper stories should be filled with mostly negative comments from nonpresidential party governmental officials (e.g., members of Congress, governors, and elected state officials). That is, Republican officials should offer more criticism than praise of Democratic presidents. The opposite should hold true for Republican presidents. As such, *more nonpresidential party sources in a story should lead to a more negative story.* I also control for the possible impact of statements by members of the president's party on tone.

The substantive content of the story matters. When journalists interview local residents about the president and his visit or describe the president's parade route or audience list, these stories tend to be more positive than negative (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006). When reporters frame a story through an analytical lens, where they scrutinize the president's policy or political decision making by providing factual data or alternative perspectives to counter the president's own viewpoint, these stories may be more critical and, perhaps, negative. Thus, *a higher percentage of sentences that are analytical or substantive will lead to more negative coverage of the presidency.*¹⁴

Controls

Other variables that may have an impact on the tone of local presidential news coverage but for which we have minimal theoretical understanding are treated as controls in the quantitative analysis. First, stories written by local reporters should have more local flavor and more closely follow the expectation of positive local news coverage. These should have a positive impact on tone. Second, whether or not the story covered a protest of the president should affect tone for obvious reasons.

Newspaper Collection and Coding Framework

Selecting an appropriate unit of analysis is a necessary first step in analyzing local newspaper coverage of the presidency. Most studies of local newspaper coverage use the president's trip as the unit of analysis and examine the most local newspaper that covers that trip (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006). Yet, there is a potential endogeneity problem with examining trips because the president and his communications advisers may visit areas that are most likely to generate the positive news coverage the White House desires, which

may bias the results in favor of finding positive coverage. By limiting the analysis to newspaper coverage of the president's trips alone, other newspaper articles that concern presidential politics are probably excluded. Thus, an analysis of the trip alone paints only a partial picture of what a reader will discover about the president and his policies on any news day. For these reasons and to ensure a broad sample of local newspaper coverage, I selected a sample of newspapers and stories using the story, not the trip, as the unit of analysis.

It is also worth noting that local newspapers rather than television are an appropriate medium to examine local news coverage of the presidency for several reasons. First, local newspapers influence the news cycle and set local news agendas better and more frequently than television does (see Cook, 1998, p. 79; Downie & Kaiser, 2002, p. 64; Shaw & Sparrow, 1999). Second, there is simply not much local television coverage of the presidency available for scholars to examine. A search of Lexis-Nexis reveals very few daily stories on the presidency broadcast by local television stations. Arnold (2004, p. 4) reports a similar difficulty in locating an adequate sample of local television news transcripts.¹⁵ In addition, even though recent data illustrate that local television news is more popular than local newspaper coverage, the difference is not so large as to make studying newspapers irrelevant.¹⁶

Newspaper Collection

Compiling this data set of local newspaper coverage of the presidency required numerous decision rules. First, I selected 1995 and 2003 as years to code. I chose the third year for each president as a way to avoid reelection or midterm election years and the unique and potentially outlier coverage associated with post-9/11 coverage of the presidency. I chose two presidents—a Democrat and a Republican—as a way to broaden my findings beyond a single presidency and political party.

Second, I created a list of all presidential speeches or other public remarks, as catalogued in the *Public Papers of the Presidents* for 1995 and 2003, and then reduced this list of 943 speeches to the 542 days on which the presidents delivered a speech or made a public remark. I randomly selected 43 dates, or 8% of the sample, from this list, which includes speeches made in and outside of Washington, D.C. Excluding dates where presidents spoke in Washington, D.C., would paint a limited picture of local newspaper coverage of the presidency.¹⁷ Although having a larger sample of days from which to choose is ideal, selecting 8% of the sample produced a diversity of dates that included a national address delivered in Washington, D.C., remarks after signing legislation, and numerous speeches delivered throughout the nation.

Third, I randomly selected 7 newspapers (or 15% of the sample) from a list of 44 newspapers taken from Arnold's (2004) list of full-service, everyday newspapers available on Lexis-Nexis. I excluded a newspaper from Arnold's master list if it was not available for both 1995 and 2003, the sample years. From here, I simply searched the date after the speech for either "Clinton" or "Bush" in the "Headline, Lead Paragraph(s), Terms" feature of the Lexis-Nexis search engine. The story had to pertain to the president, his administration, or his policies. This produced 288 general stories on the presidency.¹⁸ These newspapers, along with their characteristics (ownership, circulation, and endorsements) and measures of audience support, are provided in Appendix A. Selecting 15% of the available newspapers produced a set that is fairly diverse geographically and reasonably mirrors the distribution of American newspapers.¹⁹ Nevertheless, I acknowledge that a larger sample of newspapers and stories is preferable, one that can ensure greater generalizability across the indicators tested in this article.²⁰

Coding Framework and Independent Variables

Coding tone requires collecting data on the number of sentences in a story and the number of sentences that reveal either a positive or negative slant. To begin, I count the number of sentences for the amount of coverage devoted to the president because sentences are easily identifiable and require no subjective interpretation by coders.²¹ If a statement begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, it is a sentence. Other scholars have coded paragraphs in a similar fashion (Druckman & Parkin, 2005).²²

Next, I code the tone of the story according to the number of positive or negative sentences.²³ Positive sentences include descriptions of an applauding or enthusiastic audience or statements in support of the president by political allies, experts, or other politicians. Negative sentences include descriptions of protests surrounding a speech, negative analysis of the president's remarks or policies by a group representative or a political opponent, or statements that place the story in a context that reminds readers of something negative related to the White House. Some sentences may contain more than one idea, so I code the overall tenor of a sentence. In the quantitative analyses, tone equals positive sentences minus negative sentences divided by total sentences, multiplied by 100 for cleaner presentation.²⁴ I provide examples of these and other sentence types in Appendix B.

The following independent variables help explain the tone of newspaper coverage. First, to account for any political leaning of a newspaper, I use each newspaper's editorial pages to determine whether or not a newspaper endorsed the president for election. At base, if a newspaper endorses the president for election or reelection, then that newspaper should offer more positive coverage than it would otherwise (see Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002). This measure, for the 1992 and 2000 elections, is 1 if the newspaper supported the president, 0 if the newspaper did not endorse either candidate, or -1 if it endorsed the president's opponent.²⁵

Second, I approximate a newspaper's resources using its size as measured by its Sunday circulation numbers published in the most relevant edition of *Editor & Publisher International Year Book*²⁶ (see Arnold, 2004, p. 40, who uses the same basic measure in his study). This measure is divided by 100 for cleaner presentation. The idea here is that with more readers come advertising dollars, which leads to more money for staff and other resources needed to run a newspaper.²⁷ As corporately owned newspapers should have a negative impact on the amount of presidential news coverage, I code corporate ownership as 1 if a newspaper is owned by a parent company or 0 if it is independently owned.²⁸

Third, community support for the president is the percentage of the voting public that supported the president in the previous election at the congressional district level. Because newspaper circulation may extend beyond one district, I average the level of the popular vote for the president in the previous election by each district that indicates the newspaper to be its primary source of daily print news.²⁹ *Editor & Publisher International Year Book* provides maps of each state's newspapers, which were matched up with a state's congressional districts, similar to Arnold's (2004, p. 20) technique.

Fourth, several story characteristics are coded in the following manner. Sentences that are more analytical or substantive in nature detail the president's or others' policy positions, supplement the story with real data (such as economic indicators or presidential approval levels), and discuss the political costs or benefits of the president's actions. These are coded as a percentage of all sentences. The number of sentences that are attributable to the president is also relevant. These are sentences in which the president is quoted or paraphrased. Presidential and nonpresidential party perspectives consist of the number of sentences attributed to a Democrat or Republican, with presidential party

sentences attributable to Democrats (Republicans) for Democratic (Republican) presidents and nonpresidential party sentences attributable to Republicans (Democrats) for Democratic (Republican) presidents.³⁰ This measure is coded as a percentage as well.³¹ I also model whether or not the story references a presidential speech from a visit, coded 1 or 0.

Finally, I control for reporter type and content of a story using two variables. First, a story written by a local staff reporter, coded as 1 or 0 otherwise, should be positively related to the tone of presidential news coverage.³² Second, a story that covers a protest of the president or his policies, coded 1 or 0, should negatively affect tone. The protest variable is not contingent upon location and so could be coded 1 if the protest was in Washington, D.C., or elsewhere throughout the United States.

Findings

I begin this section by describing general characteristics of local newspaper coverage of the presidency, including some modest differences across the Bush and Clinton administrations. Next, I attempt to explain what shapes the tone of newspaper coverage according to a subset of theoretically important independent variables.

Descriptive Characteristics of Key Variables

Everyday local newspaper coverage of the presidency is more negative than positive, in contrast with what research finds concerning local coverage of presidential trips. Table 1 shows this, with an average tone of -4.25 across all newspaper stories in the sample. This varies from a low of -55.6 (negative) to 33.3 (positive) of all sentences. The distribution of tone, revealed in Figure 1, indicates that journalists are fairly balanced in their coverage of the presidency overall, as most stories are without discernible tonal differences. Nevertheless, there is much variation in the 40% of stories that measured a positive or negative tone. Table 1 also illustrates that tone varies substantially by newspaper size in that small newspapers are more negative than larger local newspapers,³³ providing preliminary support for my resources hypothesis. In addition, the total number of

Table 1
Average characteristics of local news coverage of the president

Variable	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Sentences	23.1	2	65	10.03
Bush/Clinton	25.7/19.9	3/2	65/62	10.97/10.3
Local support (%)	46.9	19	69	10.51
Bush/Clinton	42.6/52.1	19/31	67/69	10.1/8.5
Tone	-4.25	-55.6	33.3	11.9
Bush/Clinton	-5.9/-2.2	-55.6/-53.1	25/33.3	12.3/11.1
Circulation	367,077	22,096	789,137	167,681
Tone: Small paper (<i>n</i> = 107)	-7.51	-55.6	11.9	12.9
Tone: Large paper (<i>n</i> = 181)	-2.32	-41.7	33.3	10.8

Note. Tone equals positive sentences minus negative sentences divided by total sentences, multiplied by 100. Small newspapers include the *Austin American-Statesmen*, *Providence Journal*, and *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, with an average circulation of 215,594.

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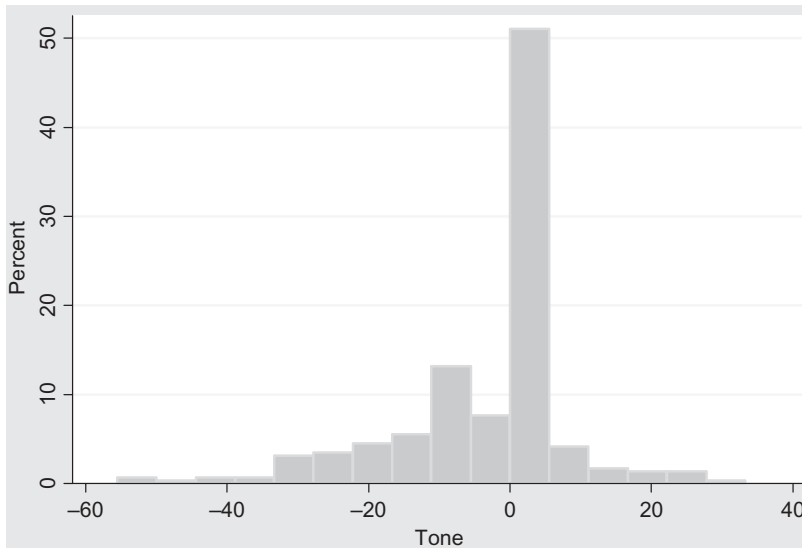


Figure 1. The distribution of tone.

stories written by a local reporter is 121 (42% of my sample), suggesting a slight bias toward the national perspective in everyday local news coverage.³⁴ The mean number of sentences per story is 21, with President Bush receiving about 6 sentences more, per story, than President Clinton.

Differences in articles across years are minor, with 129 stories in 1995 for President Clinton and 159 stories in 2003 for President Bush. Part of this difference can be explained by the random selection of stories, which produced coverage of a nationally televised address for President Bush in 2003 but not in 1995. It is also worth noting that out of 288 articles spanning 44 days of presidential speeches, only 56 articles pertained to the president's own speech, with 18 of these articles covering one national address. Without these articles related to Bush's national address in 2003, the differences between Presidents Clinton and Bush in terms of the number of articles that pertained to the president's speeches are slight, with 18 and 20 articles for Presidents Clinton and Bush, respectively. Overall, newspapers made mention of the president's speeches on only 15 other occasions, or 36% of the time.³⁵ Although presidents can set the local media's agenda with a visit (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006), these data indicate that presidents are much less likely to affect the everyday agenda of local newspapers, consistent with research that shows the limited agenda-setting impact of presidential speeches on national news media (Edwards & Wood, 1999).

Although there appears to be no pattern by newspaper as to which speeches are likely to generate local news and which ones are not, top administrative priorities tend to drive news coverage. Indeed, digging into the policy content of each article reveals some stark differences in coverage of Presidents Clinton and Bush, which would be expected given the distinct political and policy climates of their respective administrations. Articles related to President Clinton were quite varied, ranging from top issues of the budget and Bosnia (15 and 12 articles related to each, respectively) to one article each related to juvenile drunk drivers, anti-drug programs, and police effectiveness, among others. Of the 63 policy areas identified in the sample of newspaper articles, Clinton had stories related to

all but 20, or a total of 43 policy areas. President Bush's set of articles included articles pertaining to only 35 out of 63 policy areas. Much of his coverage focused on two top issue areas: Iraq and tax cuts. What is more, a plurality of headlines during 1995 focused on the partisan conflict between President Clinton and Republicans in Congress, given disagreements between the two on spending cuts and, eventually, the government shutdown. Other differences across administrations, such as those between tone and community support, are not substantial either and are detailed more systematically in Table 2.³⁶

Table 2
Determinants of the tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency

	Model 1	Model 2
Newspaper characteristics		
Corporate ownership	-4.410*	-4.390*
	(1.350)	(1.360)
Circulation	0.010*	0.010*
	(0.005)	(0.005)
Endorsement	-0.620	-0.430
	(0.720)	(0.720)
Audience preferences		
Community support	0.140*	0.120*
	(0.080)	(0.070)
Story characteristics		
Story relates to local speech		2.770
		(2.380)
Attribution (President)		0.220
		(0.230)
Presidential party sources		12.460
		(7.510)
Nonpresidential party sources		-23.480*
		(7.100)
Substantive coverage		-3.660
		(2.730)
Controls		
Local reporter		0.730
		(1.560)
Protest		-9.740
		(6.770)
Constant	-1.220*	-7.320
	(5.070)	(4.810)
R^2	0.110	0.190
F statistic	5.880*	3.750*
N	288	288

Note. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) were used to account for heteroskedasticity.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

Explaining Tone

The tone of everyday local newspaper coverage is not positive, in contrast with research on the president's trips,³⁷ with several variables explaining the tone of everyday local newspaper coverage. As Model 1 illustrates, newspaper characteristics explain much of the variation in the tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency. First, corporate ownership has a sizeable impact on the tone of coverage, as corporately owned newspapers contribute to a 4-point decline in tone and are thus more negative than independently owned newspapers in their coverage of the presidency. This translates to about a 4.4% change across the range of tone in my sample. Second, resources matter, as a larger circulation leads to more positive coverage of the presidency. Again, a smaller newspaper is more likely to rely on national reporting in its coverage of the presidency, creating an inverse relationship between resources and increased negative tone of coverage. For every 100,000 additional readers, the tone of newspaper coverage increases by about 1%. Yet, endorsements do not correlate with more positive coverage of the presidency. Instead, an election-year endorsement is statistically insignificant and in the negative direction. This tends to support Hamilton's (2004) claim that there should not be a positive relationship between editorial endorsements and everyday news coverage. It also seems to counter research by Kahn and Kenny (1992) and Druckman and Parkin (2004) and suggests that endorsement effects are relegated to newspaper coverage of election campaigns.

Audience preferences have a statistically significant and positive impact on the tone of presidential coverage given the profit incentive of most newspapers. Simply, communities that supported the president in the previous election contribute to more positive coverage of that president. For every 10% of support the president received in the previous election, he gains about 1 point or 1.3% in tone. Not only does this finding indicate where presidents should receive more positive than negative local news coverage, it also implies that supportive audiences should be more receptive to the president's message in the first place, increasing his prospects for using public support to influence legislators from these congressional districts. Of course, these results cannot speak to what, if anything, might push generally supportive newspapers to publish more negative stories on the presidency.

Of the several story characteristics that may affect the tone of local newspaper coverage, only one—the percentage of sentences attributable to nonpresidential party sources—is statistically significant at conventional levels. A 1-percentage-point increase in the percentage of sentences attributable to nonpresidential party sources leads to a decrease of about 2 in the tone of the story. In other words, when newspapers offer an alternative perspective to the president's policy position, such as Republican opposition to President Clinton's veto threats on spending bills or Democratic opposition to the war in Iraq, presidents appear less favorable as a consequence. The other story variables are, nevertheless, in the expected directions. One control—stories written by local reporters—has no impact on tone. Another control, protest, is in the expected direction and statistically significant at $p < .1$ for a one-tailed test. It goes without saying that protests of presidential policy, whether Iraq, Bosnia, or spending cuts, would be perceived as negative.

Conclusion

Understanding media coverage of the presidency is central to explaining effective presidential leadership. Yet, political scientists know little about local news coverage of the presidency, despite its importance to the public and presidents alike. This article gives scholars a first look into the tone of everyday local newspaper coverage of the president.

Primarily, newspaper resources, corporate ownership, and local support for the president are important to explaining the tone of local everyday newspaper coverage of the president, which tends to be slightly more negative than positive. That my finding concerning local support is consistent with previous research suggests that an examination of a broader sample of newspapers, stories, and presidencies will support the results presented here.

Because this is one of the first studies to move beyond examination of only those local newspapers that cover the president's visits, additional research is needed to ensure that these findings are generalizable to a broader range of newspapers and news stories. In particular, I remind the reader of two limitations of the current data set. First, the absence of a small, independently owned newspaper in my sample may be problematic. After all, corporate ownership and newspaper size lead to more negative and positive coverage, respectively. Systematically examining newspapers that imply the opposite result is needed to ensure the validity of my findings along these dimensions. Second, I sampled on days after the president had given a speech and did not explicitly consider news coverage of nonpresidential speech days. It is possible that a systematic analysis that includes news coverage following days that the president does not deliver a speech will reveal even more negative coverage of the presidency. If presidents are more likely to speak about issues that will generate favorable coverage, then media have more flexibility to frame a story about the presidency in the absence of a speech, perhaps leading to a more negative story.

Overall, this study provides conflicting assessments of the benefits of local newspaper coverage for presidential leadership. On the one hand, local community support and its impact on presidential news coverage may serve to benefit the president. That community support for the president contributes to positive coverage means that despite corporate ownership and reliance on national sources, local papers have much discretion over which stories to print. Presidents can seemingly count on positive coverage from supportive areas, meaning that they may wish to use their limited time and resources to target areas that are less supportive of their presidency, since coverage of local visits tends to be more positive than negative.

On the other hand, the results show that everyday local newspaper coverage of the presidency is slightly more negative than positive. This suggests that unless presidents exclusively target supportive areas, they cannot count on mostly positive local news, despite the resources recent White Houses have spent on cultivating it (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2008; Kumar, 2007). Although the White House may still generate positive local coverage for a small subset of presidential news coverage—the president's trips—its political impact may be limited given restrictions on the number of times presidents can travel to a location and the limited reach of that local newspaper's coverage.

Although only future research can provide a more definitive answer, these results have larger implications, too. As newspapers and other media become more corporate, profit increases in priority, and with it coverage of the presidency may become even more negative. If this trend toward corporate ownership continues—which is likely given rule changes in media ownership considered by the Federal Communications Commission—then, according to the results in this article, everyday local newspaper coverage of the presidency should become even more negative for future presidencies. This underscores the importance of resources and the independent lens that resources afford local media. More resources lead to less negative coverage in part because larger local newspapers can rely on their own—not the national and negative—perspective of presidential politics. A diversity of perspectives and an independent media may not only benefit the presidency but may also be necessary for an optimally functioning American democracy. Yet because media have a clear impact on what the public thinks about and how they use those issues

to evaluate the president and his policies, additional research with a larger sample of newspaper stories and presidencies is needed to provide a definitive statement as to the impact of the content of local newspaper coverage on the presidency. Even though we may expect the content and tone of local news stories to affect aspects of the presidency, this remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Kumar (2007, p. 98) reports a December 2004 Gallup Poll that shows 51% and 44% of Americans use local television or local area newspapers for news every day, respectively. This contrasts with a high of 39% for cable news.

2. Only a small but growing body of literature has even analyzed the processes of local political news coverage in general (Kaniss, 1991; see also Hamilton, 2004, pp. 149–155), local newspaper coverage of legislators (Arnold, 2004; Vinson, 2003), or coverage of presidential (Shaw & Sparrow, 1999) or other local or statewide campaigns (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Schiffer, 2006; Stevens et al., 2006).

3. Kern, Levering, and Levering (1983, p. 9) note three primary ways that local newspapers differ from other local media and from national media: readers' intellectual sophistication, their interest in news, and newspaper location.

4. The firing of James O'Shea, editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, by the newspaper's publisher, David D. Hiller, for failing to cut \$4 million from the newspaper's production budget speaks to the dominance of profit in driving some newspaper decisions (John Rogers, "LA Times Editor Fired in Budget Dispute," Associated Press, January 21, 2008).

5. Thanks to a reviewer for raising this point.

6. A 2007 study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism provides some evidence that small local newspapers do indeed rely extensively on nonlocal sources for national news. This study finds that "about three-quarters of the stories in (small) papers that dealt with Iraq were not written by staffs of these papers, but instead were either from wire stories or other news outlets."

7. My data provide modest support for this contention, at least in reference to presidential coverage. Larger newspapers in my sample, including the *Rocky Mountain News* and *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, rely on wire reports about 18% of the time. Smaller newspapers (*Lewiston Morning Tribune* and *Providence Journal*) average about 25%–30% reliance on wire reports. Additional evidence gathered out of sample is needed to confirm this general tendency.

8. It is possible that newspapers with a middle range of resources may be more positive than either small or large newspapers. The argument is that middle-range newspapers may be large enough to hire their own reporters to cover the president but because they may be less experienced than reporters at a larger newspaper, they may be less critical and, thus, more positive in their reporting than large newspapers (which have experienced and critical reporters) and small newspapers (which rely more on wire reports). Although worthy of further exploration, my data do not support this claim, with an average tone of -3.07 for newspapers between 250,000 and 450,000 in circulation.

9. It is important to keep in mind that this hypothesis does not apply to national or prestige newspapers. Clearly, more resources for these newspapers should lead to more negative news coverage given that these resources may be used to provide a more analytical and detailed story about the presidency, most likely raising questions and concerns about the president's positions rather than supporting them outright.

10. These numbers are dated (1977), but there is nothing from recent surveys to suggest there have been any major changes in readers' story preferences.

11. This percentage falls behind only weather (48%), crime (28%), education (23%), and local community news (22%). These are very similar to data that Hamilton (2004, p. 77) reports. Like Bogart's numbers, these do not reveal reader preferences specifically for the president, but one can infer, given the news dominance of presidents vis-à-vis other national institutions, that most mean the president.

12. There is a potential problem here, in that the newspaper editors do not always know (and perhaps readers do not always indicate) what stories readers prefer. Indeed, several studies have shown that editors do not know their readers as well as they think they do and readers do not perceive the newspaper's stands on issues well (see Bogart, 1989, p. 312).

13. In addition, Republicans who criticized the war in Iraq between 2004 and 2007 were more newsworthy than Republicans who supported the president's position on the war (Baum & Groeling, 2007).

14. An alternative hypothesis is that AP stories drive this relationship. Although possible, other research that does not look at AP stories finds a similar impact that analytical sentences tend to increase negativity (Barrett & Peake, 2007).

15. Even so, future research should delve into local television coverage of the presidency, which could reveal a clearer benefit to presidents in contrast to this article's findings concerning local newspaper coverage. Howell and Pevehouse's (2007) examination of Congress and local television news provides a potential blueprint for a similar study on the presidency.

16. A December 11–14, 2006, Gallup Poll reveals that 55% watch local television news every day; only 44% read local newspapers every day. This gap has been widening since 1998 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/26053/Local-No-Source-News-Americans.aspx>).

17. An alternative selection process would be to sample randomly from all days in 1995 and 2003. After all, one might argue that coverage of nonspeech days could display different tonal characteristics. This seems to not be a problem for two reasons. First, the findings below illustrate that 80% of the stories in my sample are not related to the president's speeches, meaning that my findings are not driven by coverage of presidential speeches. Second, an out-of-sample selection of 22 stories across 4 news days after the president did not deliver a speech produces a tone of -6.1 , very similar to that presented in Table 1.

18. The number of stories does not equal 301 ($43 \text{ days} \times 7 \text{ newspapers}$) because there is not always a story for each newspaper on each day. There are also several days on which there are multiple stories for one newspaper, with an average of about 6.7 stories per day in the sample. This sampling might also raise an issue of story independence. If each newspaper covers the same story on a given day, then the observations would not be independent. Yet, this is not a problem with my sample as no two stories are identical. This might be a surprise to the reader, but it underscores the variation of local newspaper coverage of the presidency. It is also consistent with the very few times that my sample of everyday local newspapers actually covers the president's primary public speech the previous day. Even for the national address in the sample (March 17, 2003), the text was substantially different across stories, with most bylines attributed to local staff or the newspaper's Washington bureau reporters. Nevertheless, I also ran the numbers using a random effects cross-sectional time series (the panel is the newspaper), which produced results substantively similar to those presented in Table 1.

19. Following Arnold's (2004, p. 19) lead, I broke down this sample of newspapers into quartiles. There are (a) 7 sample newspapers (16%) with over 500,000 circulation, (b) 14 sample newspapers (32%) with between 250,000 and 499,999 circulation, (c) 16 sample newspapers (36%) with between 100,000 and 249,999 circulation, and (d) 6 sample newspapers (13%) with less than 99,999 circulation. My sample matches up well, such that 14% of my sample falls in the first quartile, 42% falls in the second quartile, 30% falls in the third quartile, and 14% falls in the fourth quartile.

20. A reviewer points out that the absence of a small, independent newspaper in my sample could affect the results. Clearly, future research is needed to explore this question. Even so, Downie and Kaiser (2002), who examine the *Greensboro News-Record*, provide motivation for this hypothesis. Their research, while not definitive, suggests that my hypothesis about independent newspapers would extend to small and independently owned newspapers. An out-of-sample coding of newspapers shows that small, independent newspapers are more positive ($+2.98$) in their coverage even though all small newspapers tend to be more negative in their coverage.

21. Counting the number of sentences produced near perfect agreement between the coders.

22. In coding tone, sentences are not the most precise unit to examine in part because one sentence could have two or more tonal attributes. That is, the words between a capital letter and a period

could convey multiple, even conflicting, positive or negative messages. Although future research should examine a more refined measure of tone for maximum variation, the limited body of research on tone suggests we would find a high correlation between coding tone across an entire article (Shaw & Sparrow, 1999), paragraphs (Druckman & Parkin, 2005), and statements (Barrett & Peake, 2007).

23. A random sample reveals high agreement between coders. Spearman's rho equals .89, while rejecting the null of independence. Other statistics produce similar results. I also recoded tone into whether a story on balance was positive (1), neutral (0), or negative (-1). This produced near perfect agreement between the coders. Modeling this ordered dependent variable (-1,0,1) also produced nearly identical results to those reported in Table 2, additional evidence that coders' decisions are not driving the results.

24. Others have coded tone as positive minus negative sentences divided by the sum of these sentences (Barrett & Peake, 2007, p. 18). Although plausible, this does not account for the total amount of the story. As such, a long story (say 30 sentences) with 2 positive and 0 negative sentences would be treated equally in tone to a short story (10 sentences) with the same number. The former approach, though, underestimates the overall neutral quality of the story. What is more, there may be a stronger perception in the shorter story of positive coverage since each tonal sentence should hold more weight, counting for 20% of the total story (and only 7% of the longer story). That said, the correlation (Pearson's *R*) between these two measures in my sample is .75.

25. Alternatively, one could code newspaper endorsements based on the 1996 and 2004 presidential elections. All newspapers were consistent across the years except the *Times-Picayune*, which endorsed the Republican candidates in 1992 and 2000 but did not make an endorsement in 1996 and 2004. Another option is to combine the endorsements into a -2,-1,0,1,2 variable, indicative of the number of times the newspaper endorsed the president or his opponent. Neither option alters the results presented in Table 1.

26. I selected circulation numbers for 1995 and 2003 based on the 1996 and 2004 versions of the *Year Book*. Circulation numbers are divided by 1,000 for ease of presentation. Barrett and Peake (2007) use average daily number of pages in a newspaper. Using the number of pages does not differ from what I present in the tables.

27. As a reviewer astutely pointed out, a relative measure of resources may be more appropriate. To use the reviewer's example, a newspaper covering a geographic area of 100,000 people with 5 reporters may have more resources than a newspaper that covers a geographic area of 1 million people with 25 reporters. Circulation numbers alone do not consider this. Lacking data on the number of reporters for each newspaper makes computing this measure problematic. Nevertheless, future research should explore relative measures of resources and any impact this may have on news coverage of politics.

28. These data are available at <http://www.cjr.org/resources>.

29. Some have used "normed" data, modeling the difference between the county vote and national vote in the previous election. Using this measure produces no substantive differences in my reported findings. What is more, a measure akin to presidential approval ratings is more conceptually similar to how I conceive community support in this analysis. As such, an absolute measure of support more approximates my conception of community support than a relative, normed measure. County- and district-level support are also highly correlated, at about .92.

30. This measure is similar to Barrett and Peake's (2007) measure of available adversarial sources, which is "the difference between the number of Democrats and Republicans [by state] in both chambers of Congress" (p. 14). Since my unit of analysis is the story, not the trip, and because I code more than just those stories written by local staff reporters, I operationalized this concept differently.

31. These measures could alternatively be coded as the number of sentences. Using this measure instead of a percentage measure does not change the results presented in Table 2.

32. Whether or not a story was written by a local staff reporter is determined by the story's byline. But as Downie and Kaiser (2002, p. 73) point out, a byline does not always account for the entire production of the story given editorial, and even other reporters', influence over the final product.

33. One may be concerned with a story that has only two sentences. Yet, this only happened twice in the sample. Excluding these from the analysis has no substantive impact on the results. Only 22 stories (about 7% of the sample) have sentences in the single digits.

34. Smaller newspapers are also more likely to rely on national sources, with about 60% of small newspaper stories not written by local reporters.

35. For comparison purposes, I also collected a sample of front-page stories from a range of local newspapers that covered a presidential visit and corresponding stories from one national newspaper, the *Washington Post*. Those local newspaper stories that cover a presidential visit were positive, with a tone of 2.9, and slightly longer than the stories in my sample, with 583.3 words on average. The findings may actually understate the positive nature of local coverage as some articles pertained to local traffic tie-ups due to the president's visit. These sentences were coded as negative since they framed the president's visit as a hassle to drivers. National coverage is also more negative and longer than local coverage of the same presidential visit. Overall, though, everyday local newspaper coverage is more negative than either of these other two types of newspapers and stories.

36. Indeed, controlling for year or president in the quantitative analysis produces no substantively different results than those presented.

37. Since there are several days on which a newspaper does not cover the presidency, it is possible that these results are biased such that a newspaper's likelihood to cover the presidency—not the story itself—may be affected by the factors I identify. To account for this possibility, I ran a Heckman two-step selection model (Heckman, 1979). The statistically insignificant Mills ratio ($\lambda = 0.153, p = .38$) indicates that there is no selection bias due to the absence of a story on the presidency for a day. Also, because this selection model required changing the unit of analysis from the story to the day, one cannot readily compare the coefficient results presented in Table 2 with a selection model. Because Heckman models are very sensitive to specification, one typically also compares a Heckman selection model with a straight regression model to confirm that selection bias is not present. In other words, if the results are the same, then any sensitivity of the selection model is irrelevant. Although the results of a regression model and selection model are roughly identical, these results would not compare with those presented in Table 2, given the different unit of analysis. What is more, changing the unit of analysis forces me to average all story characteristics for each day on which there are multiple stories. This amounts to a loss of 129 stories, or nearly 45% of the variation in my sample.

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Appendix A: Newspaper-Related Variables

Newspaper	Circulation (1995/2003)	Support (1992/2000)	Ownership	Endorse (1992/2000)
<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	399,815/372,474	38/51.5	Independent	Bush/Bush
<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	449,667/406,930	52.3/44	Independent	Clinton/Kerry
<i>Providence Journal</i>	268,576/234,681	45/33	Corporate	Bush/Bush
<i>Times-Picayune</i>	322,823/285,602	69/19	Corporate	Bush/Bush
<i>Austin American-Statesman</i>	235,281/233,608	48/46	Corporate	None/Bush
<i>Lewiston Morning Tribune</i>	24,215/22,096	31/67	Corporate	None/none
<i>Rocky Mountain News</i>	446,866/789,137	56/32	Corporate	Bush/Bush
Average	347,802/382,715	52.1/42.6		
Min/max	22,096/789,137	19/69		

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Appendix B: Example Sentences

Sentence type	Example	Newspaper
Positive	“In an unusual irony, the campaign finance reform law, which was fought by many Republicans, has proved to be a boon to President Bush’s fund-raising efforts.”	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i> (September 9, 2003, p. A8), “Reform Law So Far Has Aided GOP”
Negative	“The recent request by L. Paul Bremer, which is being fiercely debated by the president’s aides, underscores growing alarm in some sectors of the government that Bush’s exit strategy for Iraq is in trouble.”	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i> (December 18, 2003, p. A8), “Exit Plan Reported Lagging”
Presidential party	“‘The president’s tariffs on foreign steel have played an important role in helping stabilize our domestic steel industry,’ Voinovich said.”	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i> (November 11, 2003, p. D1), “Ohio Lawmakers Want President to Keep Fighting”
Nonpresidential party	“Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich, a Cleveland Democrat running for president, issued a statement saying that ‘rather than acknowledging the failures of his policies, and the fact that Iraq had nothing to do with September 11, and that there were no weapons of mass destruction, the president this evening attempted to compound his blunders by deepening America’s involvement.’”	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i> (September 8, 2003, p. A1), “Bush Preaches Patience”
Substantive	“And it could anger potential national GOP figures who favor abortion rights and are moderate when it comes to social issues, such as Gov. Pete Wilson of California and Gov. Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, Deardourff said during a visit to Columbus this week.”	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i> (May 5, 1995, p. A9), “GOP Right May Help Clinton”