

## **The Presidential Primaries: Media Reporting and Candidate Qualities**

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### **Abstract**

In the growing field of literature on media reporting and politics, there is a vacancy of knowledge on the study of factors that lead to media reporting. That is, what variables negatively or positively relate to media reporting levels? In this paper, I study that question by looking at data from the presidential primary elections of 2016 and 2020. I look at reporting across over 300 media outlets, for 45 candidates. I analyze eight separate variables and their relationship to media reporting rates. I find strong relationships between reporting rates versus campaign contributions and party identification.

*Keywords:* Elections, media, primaries

## **The Presidential Primaries: Media Reporting and Candidate Qualities**

Modern politics is intertwined with media reporting on every level: local, national, and international. Media outlets act as gatekeepers, messengers, and agenda setters. Few would argue that the media does not have at least some importance on modern politics. There is already a growing field on the role and impact of media reporting in our political system.

In *The impact of media bias: how editorial slant affects voters*, James Druckman and Michael Parkin (2005) discuss the effect on media bias and voter preferences. The authors explore the relationship of media/editorial bias and voting behavior in a single Senatorial campaign. The authors find that competing editorial biases in said election resulted in distinct voting patterns on election day. Similarly, in *Messages received: the political impact of media exposure*, Bartels (1993) discusses the effects of media exposure on the individuals' political ideology. While Druckman and Parkman (2005) look at the effects of media reporting on single election voter outcome, Bartels (1993) analyzes the possible effects that media exposure may have on overall ideology shifting. Bartels finds that, in looking at 1980 elections, media exposure produces significant effects on the development of individuals' ideology.

There exist widely varying conclusions on the effect and nature of media and politics. Regardless, it is clear that there is a large, and growing field of study towards the effects of media reporting and politics. In this field, however, there is a vacancy of knowledge on the factors that relate to reporting to begin with. While many scholars have demonstrated differing relationships between media on politics, few have demonstrated relationships between politics on media. In this study, I aimed to explore the factors that may impact media reporting. That is, I

look at an array of different factors, such as experience, gender, contributions, and other variables, to see which, if any, had strong correlations with media reporting.

### **Methods**

For this study, I am looking at media reporting, as a number of times a candidate is mentioned, across a total of 45 candidates. To create my sample, I looked at a total of three elections in the past 10 years. I restricted this study to candidates in only the Democratic or Republican primaries. Aside from the logistically tedious method to obtain all the information about each candidate for each party, a third-party candidate has not appeared on any major debate forum, nor won Presidential office in the years I studied. For these reasons, I am comfortable only looking Democratic and Republican primaries. From there, I narrowed it down further to only candidates that appeared on at least one nationally televised party debate before the Iowa caucus. The reasoning for this was primarily logistical. Hundreds of individuals filed campaign forms for the 2020 Democratic primaries alone. I used appearance on a national debate stage as a universal and clear cutoff point. Similarly, I am comfortable with this decision, as I am assuming that only those who appeared on the national debate stage received meaningful coverage, and had a realistic chance at winning the nomination. Finally, I decided to exclude candidates that ran for office when the incumbent president was of their party. Similarly to the matter of third parties, in the time frame I am looking at, the incumbent candidate has not been unseated by a member of their own party. For this study, these types of candidates are irrelevant. This information is all publicly available. A full list of the candidates in this study can be found in Appendix A.

### **Campaign duration**

The measure of campaign length is a numeric value, based on the number of days of each candidate's campaign. The start date for each candidate was researched, and confirmed as either a formal announcement of a candidate's campaign or a formal announcement of the candidate's exploratory committee. In the event that the start date was unclear, I used the earliest start-date made available by the candidate's FEC filings. In this study, the length of the campaign is the number of days between the start date, and the date that the campaign was suspended/ended. If the candidate's campaign continued past the Iowa caucus, then the date before the Iowa caucus was the last day included in the study.

### **Republican**

This measure was used to identify whether the candidate ran for the Republican or Democratic nomination. In this binary measure, a 1 means that the candidate was Republican and a 0 means that the candidate was Democratic. In this study, I looked at a total of 17 Republican candidates, or 37.78% of the sample, and 28 Democratic candidates, or 62.22% of the sample.

### **Gender**

A measure used to identify whether the sex of the candidate (Disclaimer: The only genders in this study are male and female and does not represent other genders). Another binary measure, a 1 means that the candidate was female and a 0 means that the candidate was male. In this study, I looked at a total of 8 female candidates, or 17.78% of the sample, and 37 male candidates, or 82.22% of the sample.

### **Experience**

In this study, I measure experience using four variables: experience in non-congressional federal office, experience in congressional office, gubernatorial experience, and the sum of all

the candidate's political experience. I decided to exclude any political offices that don't fit into any of the three categories (i.e. mayoral positions, state assembly office, etc.). The rationale behind this variable is that more experience visible on the national level may influence national reporting. I do not expect political positions, such as those named earlier, to be largely visible on the national level.

Federal experience is a binary variable. If the candidate held any form of federal office, such as cabinet positions, congressional appointment, or other offices, then they received a score of 1. In this study, 7 candidates, or 15.56% of the sample, had prior experience in federal office.

Congressional experience is also a binary variable. If the candidate held any form of congressional office, in the Senate or House of Representatives, then they received a score of 1. In this study, 25 candidates, or 55.56% of the sample, had prior experience in congressional office.

Gubernatorial experience is, again, a binary variable. If at any point before running, the candidate was the governor of a state, they received a score of 1. In this study, 14 candidates, or 31.11% of the sample, were previously governors before running for president.

Finally, I used the sum of all these values to create a better picture of the candidate's experience. This measure was a 0-3 scale, where I totaled the scores of each candidate's federal, congressional, and gubernatorial experience.

### **Campaign Contributions**

Another variable I explored is the amount of support each candidate's campaign received in monetary contributions. This data is publicly available and sourced through the FEC, as campaigns are required to file quarterly finance reports. In this study, I looked at the last quarter

reported for each campaign before the Iowa caucus. I measured this data logarithmically, as the data is varying and large in nature.

### **Article Mentions**

My dependent variable, I looked at the number of times a candidate was mentioned in articles, published during the time period of each candidate's campaign. I used Media Cloud, an open-source platform tracking online news article content. Media Cloud tracks thousands of media organizations, but I specifically looked at US based/focused media outlets using the "United States - National" collection, the "TV News Channels" collection, as well as the "U.S. Top Newspapers 2018" collection. In total, I searched across over 300 media organizations. The list of the media organizations included can be found in Appendix B. To find the number of article counts, I searched the candidate's last name into Media Cloud, during the aforementioned time period. There were two instances where this search resulted in a significantly large number of false-positives: Rand Paul and Tim Ryan. In response, using Boolean logic, I searched for these candidates in the following fashion: "Candidate last name" AND "candidate party." This meant that I only picked up articles that mentioned both the candidate and the party. While I may have lost some articles that mentioned the candidate, I am confident that this method will still provide an overall accurate measure of reporting. Like campaign contributions, I measured this data logarithmically.

### **Results**

A select few of the variables were strongly correlated with media reporting rates. Perhaps surprisingly, there was nearly no correlation between the campaign length and media reporting. This variable acted as a 'baseline' measurement in this study. It's a constant, fair measure that

each candidate has control over. However, there appears to be little relationship between the duration of the campaign and overall media mentions.

At the 0.01 significance level, I found a correlation of 0.425 between campaign contributions and media reporting. As campaign contributions increased across candidates, so too did the overall number of mentions in the media.

Similarly, at the 0.01 significance level, there was a 0.882 correlation between media reporting and the candidate being Republican. There appears to be a significant relationship between the candidate being Republican, and that candidate receiving media attention.

The rest of the variables failed to result in statistically significant relationships with media reporting. While more research can and should be done, I conclude that in this study there is little effect between those variables and overall media reporting.

## **Discussion**

As stated before, I found weak relationships between media reporting and gender, prior experience, and campaign duration. However, there do appear to be significant relationships between media reporting and campaign contributions, as well as media reporting and the candidate being Republican.

### **Campaign Contributions**

At the 0.01 significance level, between campaign contributions and media reporting, there existed a correlation of 0.425. In this study, I measured media reporting as the dependent variable, and contributions as the independent. It could be the case that more popular candidates receive more contributions, and the media has an interest in reporting on candidates that are more popular. However, while this could be the case, it could also be the case that as candidates

receive more media attention, they also receive more supporters that then contribute to their campaign. Furthermore, perhaps there is a lurking variable that increases both media reporting and campaign contributions, such as ideological positioning or campaign novelty. All this to say that it is unclear what full causal direction is at play between media reporting and contributions. I can confidently say, however, that the two are strongly correlated.

### **Republican**

The second significantly significant relationship was that between a candidate being Republican and their respective media reporting rate. At the 0.01 significance level, there was a 0.882 correlation between media reporting and the candidate being Republican. Gallup (2021) polling indicates that, in every year between 2010 and 2021, the plurality of Americans identified as Democrat. It may be the case that Republicans stand for ideas that most Americans find surprising, or polarizing, all of which the media may have an interest in reporting. Again, the causal mechanism behind this is not immediately clear. It is clear, however, that a relationship exists between a candidate being Republican and that candidate receiving more reporting.

### **Campaign Duration**

There appears to be a weak, if not absent, relationship between campaign duration and reporting rates. If we believe that reporting is equal among all candidates, then there should exist a proportional relationship between campaign length and reporting rates. However, this is not the case. While this does not prove any conclusions, it does support the idea that there are other factors that impact media reporting rates. That is, something about the candidate's - be it their

party, their gender, their platform, or anything else - leads to more reporting. As I explain in the next section, there is much more work that can be done in this field of research.

### **Future Steps**

There are several steps that future researchers can and should take to further the field of research. First, exploring specifically the relationship between campaign contributions and reporting. Analyzing changes of both over time may better illustrate the true relationship between the two variables. Another measure that may be explored is the ideological nature of each candidate. In this study this was done, in part, with the Republican/Democrat variable. However, there is much more ideological diversity within both major parties, as well as in our elections as a whole. Donald Trump's 'Republicanism' varied greatly from Jeb Bush's. Likewise, Bernie Sanders was much more liberal than, say, Michael Bloomberg. A robust analysis of ideological placement and reporting levels could further this field. Finally, future researchers can perform content analyses of media reporting. In this study I explored simply the number of times a candidate was mentioned, regardless of context. Content analyses may allow the researcher to see the level of 'positive' versus 'negative' reporting for each candidate.

### **Conclusions**

There is further work to be done on the study of media reporting and elections. However, this study indicates that there are particular patterns in media reporting and elections. That is, not all candidates receive equal reporting simply on account of them running for office. As explained previously, there is more work to be done to reach more robust conclusions on the factors that determine media attention. Similarly, further work can be done to better understand the utility of reporting candidates. Researchers can work to better understand whether-or-not it matters that

some candidates receive more reporting than others. This study recognizes that there are inherent differences in how candidates receive media attention - future research can work to understand what that means in an electoral democracy.

## References

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**Table 1**

## Candidate qualities and article mentions

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Article mentions
Campaign duration	0.001 (0.001)
Republican	0.882*** (0.225)
Female	0.281 (0.272)
Federal experience	0.415 (0.271)
Congressional experience	0.196 (0.216)
Gubernatorial experience	-0.267 (0.284)
Sum experience	-0.141 (0.241)
Campaign contributions	0.425*** (0.062)
Constant	1.263 (1.061)
Observations	44
R <sup>2</sup>	0.726
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.672
Residual Std. Error	0.646 (df = 36)
F Statistic	13.596*** (df = 7; 36)

\*p &lt; 0.1; \*\*p &lt; 0.05; \*\*\*p &lt; 0.01

## Appendices

### Appendix A - List of Candidates

Candidate	Candidate Last Name	Election Year
Michael Bennet	Bennet	2020
Joe Biden	Biden	2020
Michael Bloomberg	Bloomberg	2020
Cory Booker	Booker	2020
Steve Bullock	Bullock	2020
Jeb Bush	Bush	2016
Pete Buttigieg	Buttigieg	2020
Ben Carson	Carson	2016
Julián Castro	Castro	2020
Lincoln Chafee	Chafee	2016
Chris Christie	Christie	2016
Hillary Clinton	Clinton	2016
Ted Cruz	Cruz	2016
Bill de Blasio	de Blasio	2020
John Delaney	Delaney	2020
Carly Fiorina	Fiorina	2016
Tulsi Gabbard	Gabbard	2020
Kirsten Gillibrand	Gillibrand	2020
Jim Gilmore	Gilmore	2016
Lindsey Graham	Graham	2016
Kamala Harris	Harris	2020
John Hickenlooper	Hickenlooper	2020
Mike Huckabee	Huckabee	2016
Jay Inslee	Inslee	2020

Bobby Jindal	Jindal	2016
John Kasich	Kasich	2016
Amy Klobuchar	Klobuchar	2020
Martin O'Malley	O'Malley	2016
Beto O'Rourke	O'Rourke	2020
George Pataki	Pataki	2016
Rand Paul	Paul	2016
Rick Perry	Perry	2016
Marco Rubio	Rubio	2016
Tim Ryan	Ryan	2020
Bernie Sanders	Sanders	2016
Bernie Sanders	Sanders	2020
Rick Santorum	Santorum	2016
Tom Steyer	Steyer	2020
Eric Swalwell	Swalwell	2020
Donald Trump	Trump	2016
Scott Walker	Walker	2016
Elizabeth Warren	Warren	2020
Jim Webb	Webb	2016
Marianne Williamson	Williamson	2020
Andrew Yang	Yang	2020

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## Appendix B - List of Media Organizations

Name

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247sports.com

ABC News

Access Hollywood

AirforceTimes

Alternet

America RU

American Free Press

American Spectator

amp.freep.com

antena305.com

AOL News

aol.sportingnews.com

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

ArmyTimes

arstechnica.com

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Atlantic

augustachronicle.com

AxcessNews

axs.com

AZCentral

Baltimore Sun

Benzinga

berkshireeagle.com

Billboard

bizjournals.com

Blaze

Bleacher Report

blogs.barrons.com

[blogs.indystar.com](http://blogs.indystar.com)

[blogs.philly.com](http://blogs.philly.com)

[blogs.wsj.com](http://blogs.wsj.com)

Bloomberg

Breitbart

Bulgaria Sega

Business Insider

[BusinessWeek.com](http://BusinessWeek.com)

Bustle

Buzzfeed

CBS News

[cbssports.com](http://cbssports.com)

Central Maine News

[cherokeephoenix.org](http://cherokeephoenix.org)

Chicago Tribune

Christian Science Monitor

[cincinnati.com](http://cincinnati.com)

[cleveland.com](http://cleveland.com)

[cn.nytimes.com](http://cn.nytimes.com)

CNBC

CNET

CNN

CNN Money

CNN U.S. Edition

CNS News

[colorlines.com](http://colorlines.com)

Columbus Dispatch

Contacto

Conversation

creators.com

CSPAN

Daily Beast

Daily Caller

Daily Dot

Daily Kos

Daily News

Daily Signal

Daily Source

Dallas Morning News

Deadspin

E! Online

eater.com

El Nuevo Dia

elitedaily.com

engadget

Entertainment Weekly

ESPN

eurweb

FactCheck

Fansided

fark.com

fayobserver.com

FiveThirtyEight

Forbes

Fortune

Fox News

Fox Sports

foxbusiness.com

freep.com

Fusion

Gawker

gazettenet.com

GigaOM

Gizmodo

globalpost.com

gq.com

Grist

Guardian

Guardian US

Harper's Magazine

Hartford Courant

Hollywood Reporter

hollywoodlife.com

hollywoodweekly

HonoluluAdvertiser

Hot Air

houstonchronicle

Hoy Chicago

HudsonValley360

Huffington Post - United  
States

Huffington Post Black Voices

HuffPost

HuffPost Latino Voices

IBTimes

ign.com

ihavenet.com

Indian Country News

Indian Country Today

Indiewire

Inquirer

Inquisitr

Intercept

Investors

Jezebel

Kansas City Star

Kapitall Wire

LA Times

Latest news, sports, weather  
from Denver and Colorado |  
The Denver Post

ledger-enquirer.com

LexisNexis® Legal  
Newsroom

livescience.com

marinetimes.com

Marketwatch

Mashable!

maxpreps.com

media.oregonlive.com

Miami Herald

Mic

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

MintPress News

mlive.com

Mongabay

monstersandcritics

Mother Jones

mysanantonio.com

National Catholic Register

National Memo

National Review

nationalenquirer.com

NavyTimes

NBC Breaking News

NBC Sports

ncronline.org

New York Post

New York Times

New Yorker

newsblaze.com

NewsBusters

Newsday

Newsmax

newsone.com

Newsweek

newsy

nhgazette.com

nj.com

norwichbulletin.com

NPR

Oan

observer.com

Omaha World-Herald

opednews.com

OpenSecrets

opposingviews.com

Orange County Register

Orlando Sentinel

Parade

patriot post

PBS NewsHour

PEOPLE.com

pilotonline.com

pitchfork.com

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

PJ Media

Polish American Journal

Politico

polygon.com

popmatters

Post and Courier

Press-Republican

ProPublica

providencejournal.com

Quartz

radaronline.com

Raw Story

Re/code

RealClearPolitics

Reason.com

recorder.com

Red Herring

RedState

Refinery29

Reuters

Roll Call

Rolling Stone

rtnnews

rutlandherald.com

Sac Bee

Salon

San Antonio Express News

San Diego Union Tribune

San Jose Mercury News

Saturday Evening Post

SB Nation

Schwartzreport

Scientific American

Scout

Seattle Times

Seattle Times

sentinelsource.com

SF Chronicle

SF Chronicle

Slate.com

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

St. Louis Post Dispatch

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

St.Paul Pioneer-Press

St.Paul Pioneer-Press

Star Tribune

Star Tribune

Stars and Stripes

Stateline - News about state  
government and politics from  
The Pew Center on the States

suntimes.com

Superglue: BBC America

Superglue: Bloomberg

Superglue: Bravo TV

Superglue: C-SPAN

Superglue: C-SPAN2

Superglue: CNBC

Superglue: CNBC World

Superglue: CNN

Superglue: Comedy Central

Superglue: Cooking Channel  
TV

Superglue: Discovery

Superglue: ESPN

Superglue: Food Network

Superglue: Fox 25 Boston  
(WFXT)

Superglue: Fox News

Superglue: HGTV

Superglue: HLN

Superglue: Link TV

Superglue: MSNBC

Superglue: MSNBC

Superglue: National  
Geographic Channel

Superglue: NewsX

Superglue: Science Channel

Superglue: Syfy TV

Superglue: USA Network

Superglue: WGBH (PBS)

Syracuse.com

Syracuse.com

Taegan Goddard's Political  
Wire

Talk Media News

Talking Points Memo

talkingnewmedia.com

Tampa Bay Times

Tampa Bay Times

TechCrunch

tehradar.com

The Atlanta Journal  
Constitution

The Boston Globe

The Boston Globe

The Buffalo News

The Buffalo News

The Denver Post

The Insider -

The Nation

The New Republic

The Onion

The PostGame

The Street

The Week

The Wrap

TheRealNews.com

theroot.com

thrillist.com

Time

time

TMZ

townhall.com

Truthout

univision.com

UPI

uproxx.com

Upworthy

US News & World Report

US Weekly

USA Today

USA Today

Vanity Fair

variety.com

Verge

VICE

Vox

Wall Street Journal

Wall Street Journal

Washington Post

Washington Post

Weekly Standard

wired

x17online.com

Yale Global

yardbarker

zdnet

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Note: This data is sourced directly from Media Cloud.