Online appendix for


**Media Outlets Selected:**

I content-analyzed the two political blogs ranked as most widely read by the MBA Knowledge Base: Huffington Post (with an estimated 54 million unique monthly visitors), a left-leaning blog, and The Drudge Report (with 14 million). The next most frequently read political blog had 5 million visitors, so the choice of these two blogs on the basis of reach seemed easily justified.  
I chose to compare these with a content analysis of the Associated Press (AP) news feed (“News from Washington”) because it is so widely used by newspapers and local and national network news programs.

**Sample Coded:**

I coded the first 10 political/campaign stories (defined as any stories that mentioned Obama or Romney) listed on their “front pages” (the “Politics” front page of Huffington Post) as well as the front page of the Associated Press-News from Washington site on the Wednesday of each week beginning with July 4, 2012.  I selected stories mentioning either of the presidential candidates, whether or not it referred to the campaign, because it seems unlikely that stories or posts referring to a candidate would fail to contribute to individuals’ impressions of the race simply because there was no mention in the story of the campaign *per se*. I took a screen capture of all three sources between 5 and 6 p.m. and then did the coding. Note that it is possible that other research might overestimate the amount of “horse race” coverage if it sampled only stories referring explicitly to the campaign, rather than all stories mentioning one or more candidates.

**Measurement of the Tone of Coverage:**

The tone of media coverage has been operationalized in several ways by other researchers.  I coded “tone” in two ways. First, I determined whether the *reporter* used colored or biased terms (as opposed to the presence of such terms in the story because they were contained in quotes from the reporter’s sources). I term this as bias in the *language* of the story or post.

Second, I measured, as did the Pew Research Center’s reports cited in the chapter, whether the overall tone of the story was positive or negative in the sense of whether it would be regarded as favorable or unfavorable news about the candidate’s campaign. This, following Pew, is termed the *tone* of the story or post. Note that a positive or negative tone for a story may be either a media effect or a campaign effect; in other words, a story may have a negative tone because the actual events of the campaign at the time are unfavorable to the candidate, such as a decline in his poll standing or fund-raising (which would be considered a “campaign effect”), or the story
may have a negative tone because the journalist has chosen to report negative content, such as criticism of the candidate by some sources rather than praise of the candidate by other sources (which would be a “media effect”).

As a result, a negative tone should not necessarily be used as evidence of media bias for or against a candidate or party. If a candidate’s poll numbers have dropped at a given time, then even a supporter of that candidate might post or report information that carries a negative tone about that candidate. In the case of this study, however, I am comparing three national news sources covering the same campaigns at precisely the same time. So presumably, the main reason for differences among them in tone would be differences among journalists, or among the news outlets themselves, in their choice as to what to cover and what sources to use.

In the case of the Drudge Report, all posts were re-posts from other news outlets. Any biased language or tone, then, stems from the blog’s choice as to what to re-post.

**Examples of Coding Decisions:**

I coded the main theme and, if present, a secondary frame for each article or post.

With respect to the *language* of a post or story, I looked for words and phrases that would be regarded as judgmental about the candidate. Here is an example of *negative language*:

> “Romney's rash condemnation of the president, released after it was known that there had been U.S. fatalities, calls to mind Sen. John McCain's snap decision in 2008 to suspend his presidential campaign to deal with the financial crisis. The move was judged deeply unpresidential and contributed to his defeat.”

In this case, the term “rash” carried a negative connotation. In contrast, here is an example of *neutral language*:

> “Twitter says it has developed a way to measure how its users feel about the presidential candidates, drawing on the nearly 2 million weekly posts on the micro-blogging site about President Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney.”

This excerpt is a good example of the difference between language and tone. The language of the above statement carried no bias for or against either candidate. But because the story went on to report that the Twitter measure showed more positive results for Obama than for Romney, the overall tone of the story was classified as positive for Obama and negative for Romney.

To demonstrate again this distinction between language and tone, this excerpt:

> “Female employees of Obama for America earned less on average than male employees during the months of May and June, according to a *Washington Free Beacon* analysis of the campaign’s public filings with the Federal Election Commission (FEC).”
contains no colored or biased words in its reportage, so the language is classified as neutral. To be classified as negative for Obama, the statement would have to include terms such as, “It is shocking that female employees...” or, “To the consternation of many, female employees...” But because of the fact that the story’s content would be considered unfavorable for Obama, the overall tone is classified as negative toward Obama.

With respect to the tone of a post or story, the possible categories for references to each candidate were: positive, neutral (neither favorable nor unfavorable in tone), negative, and mixed (containing both positive and negative information about the candidate). Here is an example of a post that was classified as mixed on Romney, in the sense that there are both positive and negative pieces of information regarding the Romney campaign. Because the biased words are contained only in quotations from other sources, the language was coded as neutral:

“The study said that Romney's plan would shift at least $86 billion away from higher-income earners onto lower- and middle-income earners. But the Romney campaign said that by ignoring the Republican's intent to lower the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 25 percent, the study ‘discredits the TPC immediately’ because the study is ‘based on flawed assumptions.’”\(^6\)

For further information about the coding or the study more generally, please contact Margie Hershey at hershey@indiana.edu.

\(^1\) Figures are derived from the eBizMBA Rank, which is a constantly updated average of each website’s Alexa Global Traffic Rank, and U.S. Traffic Rank from both Compete and Quantcast. See “Top 15 Most Popular Political Websites,” May 2012 at http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/political-websites (accessed May 5, 2012).


