

## Covering the Campaign Trail: Analyzing Press Coverage of Presidential Candidates

### Critical Engagement Question

Does media coverage of presidential campaigns help shape the outcome of elections?

### Overview

The media plays a significant role in disseminating political information to American citizens, particularly during the presidential campaign season. This campaign coverage can have a tremendous impact in shaping public opinion of the presidential candidates.

Although there is an wealth of available information from an array of sources, we as media consumers must be aware of journalistic bias, and assume an active role in examining, evaluating, and interpreting campaign coverage. This lesson is intended to help students develop the media analysis skills required to become effective and informed voters.

### Objectives

- To promote an understanding of the role that media plays not only in disseminating political information during the presidential campaign season, but also the extent to which it can shape the election outcome.
- To familiarize students with the wide array of media outlets that provide presidential campaign coverage.
- To help students develop the skills to assess the credibility of information provided by different media outlets.
- To enable students to differentiate between different types of coverage, assess tone, and identify bias.

### Standards

NCHS: Era 10, Standard 1B; Era 10, Standard 2D

NCSS: Strands 5, 6, and 10

Illinois: Goal 14, Standard C and D

### Student Materials

Item G: *Covering the Campaign Trail*

Access to print and television media outside of class

Internet access (optional)

### Time and Grade Level

One 45-minute high school class period with pre-activity homework over the course of one week. Recommended for grades 9-12.

### Warm-Up:

1. Inquire about your students' media consumption. Where, if anywhere, do they get their news? How credible is each of these sources? Why is it important to consult multiple sources?
2. Show a brief news clip of recent campaign coverage or distribute a related news article. Discuss the different subjects typically covered during the campaign season: candidate qualifications, positioning on issues, and campaign strategy.
3. Compare front-page coverage of an election-related story with an editorial article from the same paper. Discuss the distinction between types of journalism: reporting (presenting 'just the facts') versus editorializing (opinion-based commentary). Also, address the concept of tone, and how both types of journalism can reveal a positive, negative or neutral tone.

### Homework

Distribute one copy of *Covering the Campaign Trail: Analyzing Press Coverage of Presidential Candidates* (Item G) to each student. Give students a due date by which they must complete the graphic organizer in Section 1.

### Activity

1. In small groups, students should discuss their Section 1 findings, and then respond to the questions posed in Section 2.
2. As a class, consider the following questions:
  - To what degree did monitoring campaign coverage inform student opinions about particular candidates? About the most prominent issues in this election? Based on their responses, ask students to extrapolate on the impact such influence could have on voters across the country, and ultimately on the election itself.
  - What impact does the tone of coverage have on voter perceptions of individual candidates?
  - How is journalistic bias revealed?
  - Does there seem to be more coverage of the candidates, the issues, or on the 'horse race' aspect of the campaign season. What type of coverage is most important and why?
  - How do television and print journalists differ in the type of presidential campaign coverage they offer? What accounts for these differences? (Consider the broader audiences reached by television, the nature of a medium that relies on strong visual images, and time constraints that explain, in part, the prevalence of provocative sound bytes.)
  - What sort of reputations for conservative or liberal biases do different media outlets have? Do journalists who work for these outlets have a responsibility to avoid bias at all costs? Is some degree of bias unavoidable, or even desirable?

### Extensions

1. Visit [www.FreedomMuseum.US/TimelyNews](http://www.FreedomMuseum.US/TimelyNews) to view an aggregation of campaign-related news stories from dozens of newspaper sources.
2. Ask students to create a scrapbook of campaign coverage in newspapers and/or magazines. Have them collect stories for each of the candidates seeking the presidency, articles that address pertinent issues, and also examples of stories with positive, negative, and neutral tones.

# Covering the Campaign Trail

## Analyzing Press Coverage of Presidential Candidates

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### Directions

The following exercise will require you to monitor media coverage of presidential campaigns. Section 1 is assigned as homework. Section 2 will be completed in class.

### Section 1

Complete the graphic organizer. Due Date: \_\_\_\_\_

	CANDIDATES COVERED:	SUBJECT: (check all that apply)	TYPE: (check one)	TOPE: (check one)	NOTES:
<b>NATIONAL TELEVISION NEWS</b> CBS NBC <small>circle one</small> ABC PBS Univision		<input type="checkbox"/> Qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Position on Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Campaign Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Editorializing	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Negative	
<b>LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS</b> CBS NBC <small>circle one</small> ABC FOX WGN		<input type="checkbox"/> Qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Position on Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Campaign Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Editorializing	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Negative	
<b>CABLE TELEVISION NEWS</b> <small>circle one</small> CNN FOXNEWS MSNBC		<input type="checkbox"/> Qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Position on Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Campaign Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Editorializing	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Negative	
<b>NATIONAL NEWSPAPER</b> Chicago Tribune New York Times <small>circle one</small> USA Today Wall Street Journal Washington Post		<input type="checkbox"/> Qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Position on Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Campaign Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Editorializing	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Negative	
<b>ONLINE BLOG</b> Salon.com Slate.com <small>circle one</small> TownHall.com ReverseSpin.com DrudgeReport.com		<input type="checkbox"/> Qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Position on Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Campaign Strategy	<input type="checkbox"/> Reporting <input type="checkbox"/> Editorializing	<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> Negative	

### Section 2

To be completed in class. Write your responses on the back of this sheet.

1. What difference in tone did you find between the various media sources?
2. What might account for the differences you found?
3. Consider how differences in presidential campaign coverage might influence those who are watching or reading it. What impact, if any, do you think this will have on the November election?