

The Road to the White House

Covering the Campaign Trail: Analyzing Press Coverage

Critical Engagement Question

How does press coverage of political campaigns differ across media platforms and outlets?

Overview

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

Covering the Campaign Trail Worksheet

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. Define/discuss buzzwords such as “liberal”, “conservative”, etc.
2. 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?
3. 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.
4. 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 Worksheet* 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 weigh 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 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 bites.)
 - 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?
 - How might the personal biases of media consumers color their perceptions of journalistic bias?
 - What roles do social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) play in informing voters about candidates and the central issues of the campaign?

Extensions

1. Ask students to create a scrapbook of campaign coverage in newspapers and/or magazines. Have them collect stories for each of the candidates seeking office, articles that address pertinent issues, and also examples of stories with positive, negative, and neutral tones.
2. Have students research voters’ consumption of campaign information across multiple media platforms. How does national television news stack up against radio, newspapers, online news sites, and social media channels as preferred sources. The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (www.journalism.org) is the leading repository for this information.

Covering the Campaign Trail

Analyzing Candidate Press Coverage

Name

Directions

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

	CANDIDATES COVERED:	SUBJECT: (check all that apply)	TYPE: (check one)	TONE: (check one)	NOTES
RADIO WBBM WBEZ WGN WLS OTHER:		<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	
NATIONAL TELEVISION NEWS CBS NBC ABC PBS		<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	
CABLE NEWS CNN Fox News 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	
PRINT (Also available online) Chicago Tribune Los Angeles Times New York Times Wall Street Journal USA Today		<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	
ONLINE-ONLY NEWS SITES Drudge Report Huffington Post Politico Real Clear Politics		<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	
SOCIAL MEDIA (Explore one of the following Twitter handles) @EWErickson @ezraklein @fivethirtyeight @TheFix @jaketapper					

Section 1 Complete the graphic organizer below. Due date:

Section 2 To be completed in class. Write your responses on the back of this sheet.

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