

# Media Coverage of the Presidential Horse Race & of Presidential Polls

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## Abstract

During presidential campaigns, the quest to analyze who is winning has become the foundation of what the media care about and report on, for better or for worse, but how this analysis works has been mostly unexamined. This study investigates the components that make up horse race journalism, with a particular emphasis on the reporting of presidential polls and how they influence media coverage. Examining seven different news organizations from three presidential election campaigns, this study looks into how the media present polls to the public, what polls are presented to the public, and what other possible components are considered by media to show where candidates stand in the presidential campaign. The study also looked into the narratives created by those components. The study finds that horse race coverage is seriously flawed. Poll reporting is often vague and does not mention aspects like margin of error. Certain polls are also given more weight than others, with polls crafted by these individual media organizations used more than other polls, and national polls given more attention than state polls. This results in coverage of a supposedly unstable race with twists and turns, even though state reporting constantly shows a much steadier campaign throughout. Along with polls, other factors contribute to this sensational coverage. Economic incentives may drive this type of coverage. This filtered and possibly inaccurate media view of the election not only defeats journalism's purpose of reporting news factually, but could also affect the vote of certain types of voters, and therefore could affect an election itself.

## Introduction

“The race is tightening.” “The race is too close to call.” “Romney is surging.” “Kerry is struggling.” We have all heard these phrases before, being consistent themes of the media's coverage of presidential races, or so-called “horse race journalism.” During the months leading up to the election, the media are consistently trying to analyze who is ahead and who is behind. Whether it is after a party convention or a presidential debate, the media always want to know what the state of the race is afterwards. This is mostly done, though not exclusively, by looking at polls. The media's extensive horse race coverage have been controversial, with some calling it a distraction from substantive issues. What has been little discussed, however, is the accuracy of the horse race coverage itself. When the media report a poll result, they have to choose how specific they are with what the poll says and how, or if, to mention the uncertainty inherent in

any individual poll. Media also have to decide what polls are given the most weight in news coverage, given how many polls are done for presidential races. Besides polls, the media could see other factors that suggest what the state of the race is as well. All of these determinations affect what to tell the public about how the candidates are doing.

Besides being such a large part of how the media view presidential campaigns, the horse race matters for two main reasons. First, the primary responsibility of journalists are to inform the public and report the news accurately. Second, most people get their information on presidential campaigns from the media, and what the media tells them could affect who they intend to vote for. If the media are manipulating their reporting on a candidate's standing, not only are they failing in their responsibility as journalists, but they could be affecting an election by giving the public incorrect and distorted information. For those reasons this paper, by looking at certain media organizations and their coverage of a few of our most recent presidential campaigns, tries to look at the specifics of horse race coverage and exactly how it is done. This includes how clear the media is when reporting polls, what polls are highlighted to the public, and what other factors the media use when determining the status of the candidates.

## Literature Review

### Quality of Polls

Before looking at what had been previously written about the quality of media horse race coverage, this report first examined what had been written on the quality of the polls themselves. It is difficult to individually judge the coverage of the horse race if the polls the media rely on for so much of their horse race coverage are faulty. Published literature has tended to come to the

conclusion that polls have done a good job overall predicting the outcome. Michael Traugott's *Assessing Poll Performance in the 2000 Campaign* (2001)<sup>1</sup> noted that the national polls from 1956 through 2000 have generally been decent at predicting the national vote. The number of polls have also increased, from just one pollster (Gallup) in 1956 to 19 pollsters by 2000.

Polls may be improving their accuracy as well. A similar study written for the 2008 election, Costas Panagopoulos' *Polls and Elections: Preelection Poll Accuracy in the 2008 General Elections* (2009)<sup>2</sup>, noticed that polls were generally more accurate than in past elections, and that state polling has become much more numerous. Jay DeSart and Thomas Holbrook's *Campaigns, Polls, and the States: Assessing the Accuracy of Statewide Presidential Trial-Heat Polls* (2003)<sup>3</sup> also noticed the increase of state polling and said it "complements the state-centered nature of our presidential selection process." Even more importantly, looking at states polls from the 1992, 1996 and 2000 presidential campaigns, the study found that state polls generally are accurate. These studies indicate that, on the whole, the media have good polling to rely on for their presidential coverage.

### Effect of polls on voting

Whether polls are accurate would have less practical meaning if they did not affect voting behavior. While the answer is not unanimous, some literature indicates that it can. Kurt and

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<sup>1</sup> Traugott, Michael W. "Trends: Assessing Poll Performance in the 2000 Campaign." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 65.3 (2001): 389-419.

<sup>2</sup> Panagopoulos, Costas. "Polls and Elections: Preelection Poll Accuracy in the 2008 General Elections." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39.4 (2009): 896-907.

<sup>3</sup> DeSart, Jay, and Thomas Holbrook. "Campaigns, polls, and the states: Assessing the accuracy of statewide presidential trial-heat polls." *Political Research Quarterly* 56.4 (2003): 431-439.

Gladys Lang's *The Impact of Polls on Public Opinion* (1984)<sup>4</sup> believed that any possibility of the polls creating a "bandwagon effect" (where people want to pick the likely winner) would be limited by having an impact long before an election and that a bandwagon effect could be hampered by ambiguous or dead-heat polling. On the other hand, they said that, "When people observe that a still controversial opinion they happen to hold appears to be gaining ground, they will public espouse this opinion more confidently...than those who see their own view losing out." As a result, "People first sense that the climate of opinion is changing," and "the new opinion becomes the dominant view, even if not everyone is convinced." Although not said, this line of thinking could apply to presidential polls, which could theoretically convince people that a candidate is gaining ground, giving them a reason to support that candidate.

Vincent Price and Natalie Jomini Stroud's *Public Attitudes toward Polls: Evidence from the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election* (2006)<sup>5</sup> added to the Langs' study. Their study, which examined how the public felt about the impact of the 2000 presidential election polls, found that most people paid attention to polls, but that there was a disconnect between what they thought polls did to others and what polls did to them. Nearly three quarters of people in the study said that polls did not affect their voting behavior, but most of them believed that the polls affected how other people voted. The study called the feeling that polls do not affect themselves but do affect others "third-person bias."

However, other studies have reached other conclusions, saying that polls truly do affect voting behavior as opposed to not affecting behavior or only creating a third-person bias. Andrew

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<sup>4</sup> Lang, Kurt, and Gladys Engel Lang. "The impact of polls on public opinion." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1984): 129-142.

<sup>5</sup> Price, Vincent, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. "Public attitudes toward polls: Evidence from the 2000 US presidential election." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18.4 (2006): 393-421.

Skalaban's *Do the Polls Affect Elections? Some 1980 Evidence* (1988)<sup>6</sup> looked at the 1980 National Election Study (NES), which surveys voters before and after presidential elections, and noted that there was a correlation between watching TV news and the polls and preferring Reagan over Carter. The study found that, for some voters, the chance of voting for Reagan increased by up to 30 percent from seeing the polls. Speculating that this could have an impact on close elections, Skalaban said that, "the effect of polls on vote choice may become an increasingly important phenomenon."

Vicki Morwitz and Carol Pluzinski's *Do Polls Reflect Opinions or Do Opinions Reflect Polls? The Impact of Political Polling on Voters' Expectations, Preferences, and Behavior* (1996)<sup>7</sup> agreed with Skalaban. Using graduate students during the 1992 presidential campaign (between George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton) and the 1993 New York City mayoral race, the study found that polls made an impact on voting behavior. Some Bush supporters said after the election that they had changed their vote to Clinton when shown national polls before the election showing Clinton leading. The study concluded that polls can indeed change people's votes. The study said that voters whose voting preference could change quite easily (the study called them "labile" voters) were particularly susceptible to changing their votes after looking at polls. "[I]n a close election," say Morwitz and Pluzinski, "where a significant portion of voters intending to vote for the trailing candidate expect the leading candidate to win, it may be possible to observe bandwagon effects at the aggregate level."

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<sup>6</sup> Skalaban, Andrew. "Do the polls affect elections? Some 1980 evidence." *Political Behavior* 10.2 (1988): 136-150.

<sup>7</sup> Morwitz, Vicki G., and Carol Pluzinski. "Do polls reflect opinions or do opinions reflect polls? The impact of political polling on voters' expectations, preferences, and behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research* (1996): 53-67.

More recent literature has found that not even a large lead has to exist for a bandwagon effect to possibly occur. Cheryl Boudreau and Mathew D. McCubbins' *The Blind Leading the Blind: Who Gets Polling Information and Does it Improve Decisions?* (2010)<sup>8</sup>, which did a controlled experiment with polls with college students, found that, "subjects are swayed by these polls even when the size of the majority picking one option over the other is not very large." This could mean that even close polls could affect voters.

### Media coverage of polls

Since literature indicates that polls themselves do a good job predicting election outcomes, that there are increasingly more polls for the media to use, and that polls can possibly be a determining factor for some people when they decide who to vote for, it matters how polls are reported to the public. It is one thing for polls to exist; it is another for the media to present them to the public in a fair way. Literature indicates that this has been an issue for at least the last few decades. C. Anthony Broh's *Horse-Race Journalism: Reporting the Polls in the 1976 Presidential Election* (1980)<sup>9</sup>, which looked at how *The New York Times* and television news reported polling during the 1976 presidential campaign, noticed how the media would do "selective emphasis in [its] reporting." The *Times*, said the study, usually reported different aspects of a poll, such as the percentages for a portion of the population, rather than the percentages of the candidates in a poll. Television news was slightly better showing the percentages of the candidates in a poll, but not by much. Both newspapers and TV usually did

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<sup>8</sup> Boudreau, Cheryl, and Mathew D. McCubbins. "The Blind Leading the Blind: Who Gets Polling Information and Does it Improve Decisions?" *Journal of Politics* 72.2 (2010): 513-527.

<sup>9</sup> Broh, C. Anthony. "Horse-race journalism: Reporting the polls in the 1976 presidential election." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44.4 (1980): 514-529.

not focus very much on margin of error. Broh also noticed that *The Times*, on at least one occasion, played up Gallup's tracking poll over their own poll because the paper's poll made the race look less competitive, and that television news had, at least on one occasion, blatantly disregarded the polls to say it was a close race. These decisions could have given the race the appearance of being closer than it truly was. Says Broh, "Polls are as credible as their users; the search for excitement carries within it the danger of distortion."

Another study released a few years later, James Glen Stovall and Jacqueline Solomon's *The Polls as a News Event in the 1980 Presidential Campaign* (1984)<sup>10</sup>, agreed with Broh. Besides noting that journalists often distort or misinterpret polling, Stovall and Solomon also criticized news organizations commissioning their own polls, given the possibility that their own individual polls could be overemphasized relative to other polls. It therefore seems that, even if the exact techniques noted in these studies are not quite the same techniques as today (such as not reporting the head-to-head numbers in a poll), the general problem of media selectively choosing what polls to present and not being specific when presenting polls to readers and viewers is not a new phenomenon.

Perhaps surprisingly, since Broh's and Stovall and Solomon's studies were published, there has not been much content analysis of media presidential horse race coverage. The few newer studies that have been published have focused on the media's coverage of tracking polls, which track changes in public opinion from one day to the next. Matthew Reavy's *USA Today Reports of Tracking Polls Sometime Ignore Sampling Error* (2004)<sup>11</sup> examined 50 articles from

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<sup>10</sup> Stovall, James Glen, and Jacqueline H. Solomon. "The poll as a news event in the 1980 presidential campaign." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 48.3 (1984): 615-623.

<sup>11</sup> Reavy, M. M. "USA Today Reports of Tracking Polls Sometimes Ignore Sampling Error." *NEWSPAPER RESEARCH JOURNAL* 25 (2004): 116-120.



that paper that reported the *USA Today*/Gallup daily tracking poll and how the articles characterized the poll during the 2000 campaign. Reavy found that in a little over a quarter of those articles changes were reported that were within the margin of error, and almost all the articles implied that a candidate was leading. Thomas E. Patterson noticed in *Of Polls, Mountains: U.S. Journalists and Their Use of Election Surveys* (2005)<sup>12</sup> that tracking polls caused similar problems in the 1992 campaign. Likely statistical noise causing tracking poll changes, noted Patterson, can be explained as a tightening of the race or a surge being stopped in media coverage.

Traugott (2001) had also looked at the importance of tracking polls in media coverage and shared Patterson's feelings. Although "shifting margins in the polls may be just as likely to suggest bad measurement," said Traugott, "journalists often reported [those] statistically insignificant leads or changes in the lead." He also noted Gallup's polling in particular, given their reputation and usage in media coverage. He said that Gallup's results in 2000 notably differed from the other tracking polls, as Gallup's swings between the candidates were huge, with an 18-point swing from Gore to Bush after the first presidential debate. Said Traugott, "Focusing on the distributions of the margins for Gore over Bush in the daily tracking polls highlights how different the Gallup estimates were from those of the other three organizations," and that, "that there should be more public scrutiny of [Gallup's] methodologies." It is notable that Gallup's possible problems were pointed out well over a decade ago and yet it continues to be a very important presidential tracking poll for the media to report on.

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<sup>12</sup> Patterson, Thomas E. "Of Polls, Mountains US Journalists and Their Use of Election Surveys." *Public opinion quarterly* 69.5 (2005): 716-724.

These reports suggest that the media's past coverage of the presidential horse race have been less than perfect. Rather than reporting the race as it is, there seems to be a goal of picking what type of race (usually one that looks close and volatile) to present to consumers. This possible urge to have a selective narrative could clash with the media's supposed goal to report the news correctly.

### Incentives of media industry

If the media have been actively manipulating how they present the horse race, then there has to be a reason why. The reason is probably not ideological. Dave D'Alessio and Mike Allen's *Media Bias in Presidential Election: A Meta-Analysis* (2000)<sup>13</sup> looked at the different types of bias media have shown when covering electoral politics and found three different types: (1) gatekeeping bias, focusing on which stories to report on, (2) coverage bias, the amount of coverage something receives, and (3) statement bias, the positivity and negativity of news coverage. Looking at previous studies of media bias and meta-analyzing them, the study concluded that any major ideological media bias did not exist.

Instead of ideology, it appears that commercial incentives could push media coverage in a certain direction. Calvin Exoo's *Elections & the Media* (1983)<sup>14</sup> noted that, "Journalists' norms decree that the news business will be about events, not values; about what is new, not what is constant; and about what is spectacular, not what is basic in politics." The news, said the

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<sup>13</sup> D'Alessio, Dave, and Mike Allen. "Media bias in presidential elections: a meta-analysis." *Journal of Communication* 50.4 (2000): 133-156.

<sup>14</sup> Exoo, Calvin. "Elections & The Media: The Pulse of Politics: Electing Presidents in the Media Age" by James David Barber; "Media-Power-Politics" by David L. Paletz; Robert M. Entman; "The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President" by Thomas E. Patterson; "Press, Party and Presidency" by Richard L. Rubin; "Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election" by David H. Weaver; Doris A. Graber; Maxwell E. McCombs; Chaim H. Eyal. *Polity*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1983), pp. 343-353.

analysis, is incentivized to report what helps its economic bottom line. Making an election go back and forth, with one candidate ahead and then behind, is an event that catches people's attention. This attention results in readers and viewers, creating profit for media companies.

Furthermore, media are also encouraged to not stray too far from the pack with their narrative. Sendhil Mullainathan and Andrei Shleifer's *Media Bias* (2002)<sup>15</sup>, using two case studies, noted what *Elections & the Media* said was the tendency to look for new, exciting angles in news coverage was an "attempt to [often] simply create a memorable story." Calling this tendency "spin," the two said it was the result of a competitive news industry. Articles, they said, could add or ignore information, ignore or undermine information sources, build up certain information sources, and use misleading language, all to help the "narrative imperative." Mullainathan and Shleifer added that the spin of news organizations encourages other news organizations to spin as well. It is not a stretch to extend the report's findings to the media having an incentive to increasingly spin certain polls and other factors into leading indicators of the race.

Another study, Tom Rosenstiel's *Political Polling and the New Media Culture: A Case of More Being Less* (2005)<sup>16</sup>, also noted that new industry developments have only further encouraged the media to report the horse race in a more melodramatic fashion. The explosion of news outlets have forced media organizations to repackage reporting done by other outlets, as has the development of the 24-hour news cycle. News organizations now have more competition and need more content, creating a difficult combination. Polls, say Rosenstiel, "[help] alleviate that problem." Tracking polls, for example, are a great way to have more content, given that they

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<sup>15</sup> Mullainathan, Sendhil, and Andrei Shleifer. "Media bias." *National Bureau of Economic Research*. 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenstiel, Tom. "Political polling and the new media culture: A case of more being less." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69.5 (2005): 698-715.

are done every day and thus supposedly have new information every day to report on. In addition, the Internet has increased the promotion of many polls, and the industry has had to deal with cutbacks. This has resulted in a fewer number of journalists, who are inexperienced with polls, and who need much content to fill up time, doing the horse race reporting.

Rosenstiel also agreed that Mullainathan and Shleifer's "spin" theory was an "inevitable tendency" among reporters to "[synthesize reporting] into a coherent and perhaps safe or reasonable consensus." Polls have become a part of that, he says. "The new media culture," says Rosenstiel, "has intensified the degree to which polls become the lens through which reporters see and order the news in a more interpretive news environment." Therefore, the media not only is given incentives to have a close and volatile horse race, but it is possibly disadvantageous for a journalist or media organization to not fall in line with what other media organizations are saying. This media groupthink could result in the media using the horse race for their own economic agenda and creating a narrative that may not be accurate.

This incentive for a close, "exciting" and unstable narrative could even involve more than only using polls. For example, James Campbell's *Do Swing Voters Swing Elections?* (2007)<sup>17</sup>, which focuses on the impact of swing voters in elections, noted that swing voters help with driving news traffic because just looking at them gives the sense of a closer race. While he found that most winning candidates only needed a handful of swing voters to win, Campbell believed that, "Journalists...also want to keep the election story alive (or to keep hope alive) and elevating the role of the swing voter is one way to do so."

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<sup>17</sup> Campbell, James E. "Do Swing Voters Swing Elections?." (2007): 118-132.

### Media effect on voters

Given this possible media incentive to report the horse race in a certain way, their coverage, like the polls themselves, could affect voting behavior. As the literature on polls and voting behavior indicate that voters who can change sides more easily, Morwitz and Pluzinski's (1996) "labile" voters, are most likely to be affected by polls, it is likely that media coverage would affect them the most as well. There has been some disagreement on this, but some studies have said this can be possible. Steven Chaffee and Sun Yuel Choe's *Time of Decision and Media Use During the Ford-Carter Campaign* (1980)<sup>18</sup>, which looked at samples of Wisconsin voters and at national media coverage during the 1976 campaign, found that voters who decided at the very end of the campaign who to vote for tended to care more about party identification than the news, while those who were influenced by the news decided earlier in the campaign on a candidate to support. Charles Whitney and Steven Goldman's *Media Use and Time of Voting Decision: A Study of the 1980 Presidential Election* (1985)<sup>19</sup> took the opposite view. They looked at Illinois college students during the 1980 campaign and concluded that voters who decided later tended to be more influenced by media coverage.

More recent studies seem to connect the level of political knowledge and interest with voting decision. J. David Gopoian and Sissie Hadjiharalambous' *Late-Deciding Voters in Presidential Elections* (1994)<sup>20</sup>, examining the makeup of late-decided voters based on NES data from 1972 to 1988 and the reasons they were undecided, found that late undecided voters were

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<sup>18</sup> Chaffee, Steven H., and Sun Yuel Choe. "Time of decision and media use during the Ford-Carter campaign." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44.1 (1980): 53-69.

<sup>19</sup> Whitney, D. Charles, and Steven B. Goldman. "MEDIA USE AND TIME OF VOTE DECISION A Study of the 1980 Presidential Election." *Communication research* 12.4 (1985): 511-529.

<sup>20</sup> Gopoian, J. David, and Sissie Hadjiharalambous. "Late-deciding voters in presidential elections." *Political Behavior* 16.1 (1994): 55-78.

significantly more likely to not follow politics regularly, care about politics, or care about the outcome of the election. Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier and David Kimball's *The Timing of Voting Decisions in Presidential Campaigns* (1999)<sup>21</sup>, which looked through NES data for 1988 as well, concluded that more knowledge correlated with being less ambivalent about picking a candidate.

Another study, Patrick Fournier, Richard Nadeau, Andre Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, and Neil Nevitte's *Time-of-voting decision and susceptibility to campaign effects* (2004)<sup>22</sup>, although not looking at American voters, agreed with previous findings. Looking at data from the 1997 Canadian federal election, they found that, besides being less partisan, people who decided later on "are slightly less interested in the election and in politics in general, slightly less attentive to media coverage, and slightly less knowledgeable about campaign-specific and general political facts." It also found that the media coverage these voters did pay attention to was significantly related to voting intention.

Even with the general link between political knowledge and voting commitment, some literature has shown that undecided voters are not a monolithic bloc. Brian Brox and Joseph Giammo's *Late Deciders in U.S. Presidential Elections* (2009)<sup>23</sup>, which looked at NES data from 1988 to 2004, noted that while undecided voters generally, "conform to the picture of those who put off their decision about which candidate to support as being relatively uninformed, uninvolved, and apathetic when compared to those coming to a decision sooner," they noted that

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<sup>21</sup> Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., and David Kimball. "The timing of voting decisions in presidential campaigns." *Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago*. 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Fournier, Patrick, et al. "Time-of-voting decision and susceptibility to campaign effects." *Electoral Studies* 23.4 (2004): 661-681.

<sup>23</sup> Brox, Brian, and Joseph Giammo. "Late Deciders in US Presidential Elections." (2009).

undecided voters could be divided into two groups. One group consisted of voters who did not pay attention until right before the election, and the other group was those who wanted all the information about the candidates before making a decision. It was the former group, called “low-interest late deciders,” that were less likely to pay attention to the news. The later group, “high-interest late deciders,” tended to pay even more attention to media coverage than early deciders; these voters were paying attention, but simply did not think they had enough information to pick a candidate until the end stages of a campaign.

Late deciders are generally less partisan and politically knowledgeable but are not all the same. Some of these late deciders will pay attention to the campaign, but others will not. It is possible that undecided voters with higher campaign interest, seeing horse race analysis as another factor that must be weighed when determining who to vote for, could be swayed by the media’s coverage. For undecided voters with lower campaign interest and less knowledge about the race, while they pay less attention to the media, any horse race media coverage they do see may have a larger affect on them than with other people. Either way, the media’s possible incentive to spin horse race coverage into a close, back-and-forth race could theoretically affect the voting behavior of these voters.

Overall, the literature has shown the possibility of voters, especially undecided voters, being affected by media election coverage and poll numbers. Since voters get almost all of their polling information and campaign analysis from the media, if the media are indeed covering the horse race in a manipulated way and slanted in a certain direction because of economic incentives, the warped narrative that could result from that coverage could affect an election.

This paper looks to see if the media's coverage of the horse race played out in this fashion in some of the more recent presidential election campaigns.

### Study & Methodology

To see exactly how the media have covered the horse race of presidential elections, I wanted to see how polls and other possible factors are presented to the public and if they are truly used in news coverage to present a certain type of narrative. I decided to look at a few media organizations and what their coverage was of the 2000, 2004, and 2012 presidential elections. I choose those three elections because I wanted to look at more recent elections, and these elections have not been examined as much in literature. These three elections were also not, relatively, blowout elections (as the 2008 election arguably was). I also had time constraints. I also interviewed Mark Blumenthal of *The Huffington Post* to discuss his perception of how the media use polling and other factors in horse race coverage.<sup>24</sup>

For the 2000 election I looked at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, NBC Nightly News, CNN, and CBS Evening News. For the 2004 election I looked at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, NBC Nightly News and CBS Evening News. For the 2012 election I looked at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News, and POLITICO, the later of which has become an increasingly important player in political journalism. These media organizations cover both newspapers and broadcast journalism, and give a good sample of how the “mainstream media” cover the horse race in the modern era.

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<sup>24</sup> Blumenthal, Mark. Interview with Mark Blumenthal. Personal interview. 8 Mar. 2013.



Within each of these campaigns I looked at a period of time, lasting from the day after the party conventions completely ended to Election Day. I choose that date range because the fall campaign is generally considered when the presidential campaign gets into high gear and when undecided voters are more likely to make a decision, given that they tend to decide towards the end of campaigns. Specifically, for the 2000 election I looked at the dates of August 18, 2000, to November 7, 2000, for the 2004 election I looked at the dates of September 3, 2004, to November 2, 2004, and for the 2012 election I looked at the dates of September 7, 2012, to November 6, 2012.

I used a few different databases to examine material from these media organizations. For *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and CBS Evening News, I used Factiva, a database that contains old newspaper articles and transcripts. For NBC Nightly News and CNN I used the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, which is run by Vanderbilt University and contains old television news clips. For POLITICO, at which I only looked at every fourth article due to time constraints, I used LexisNexis Academic. Within Factiva I looked for articles and transcripts that mentioned the presidential candidates (George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000, George W. Bush and John Kerry in 2004, and Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012) and “poll” to see where the media mention presidential polls. I also looked for articles that used the word “momentum,” a term that seems to be used in much political reporting. For LexisNexis Academic I used similar search criteria, except that I only looked at the 2012 election and did not search for “momentum.” For Vanderbilt’s News Archive, I looked for clips that were designated “Campaign 2000,” “Campaign 2004,” and “Campaign 2012.” Combined, I likely looked at well over 1,000 articles and news clips.

## Analysis

### No polling mentioned at all

One of this study's biggest observations is how superficial much poll reporting has been. Rather than telling the public that a specific poll or polls show Candidate A with a certain percentage of support and Candidate B with a certain percentage of support, a large portion of news reports would say where the race stood without any specific evidence to point to. For example, *The Washington Post* in late October 2000 said that Gore's campaign thought that West Virginia was a lock for them, but "polls there have tightened, causing Gore to resume his television ad campaign there and forcing him to devote precious time to the state in the campaign's closing days."<sup>25</sup> There is not much context here; the reader has no proof that West Virginia has actually gotten closer other than speculation on campaign tactics. No poll is cited to show that the state might be moving towards Bush. Even if the article is mainly focusing on something else, the supposed polling is still news to the reader.

This lack of specificity was a commonality among both the newspapers and the networks in 2000. NBC said in early September that Bush faced "slippage in the polls."<sup>26</sup> CBS said a few days later that national polls "show them swinging toward Al Gore."<sup>27</sup> *USA Today* said the next month that Bush was behind in polls in Michigan and Pennsylvania, but, "polls show Bush has a chance in both [Tennessee and Arkansas]."<sup>28</sup> No other information is provided.

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<sup>25</sup> Balz, Dan. "Gore Says Economy's Future Is At Stake; Lieberman Appeals To Nader's Backers." *The Washington Post*. 28 Oct. 2000.

<sup>26</sup> NBC Nightly News. 8 Sep. 2000.

<sup>27</sup> CBS Evening News. 11 Sep. 2000.

<sup>28</sup> McQuillan, Laurence, and Judy Keen. "Last month down to state-to-state combat." *USA Today*. 10 Oct. 2000.

This pattern carried over into 2004. The *Times* said in late October that, “several polls show voters deeply divided,”<sup>29</sup> to prove how close Iowa was between Bush and Kerry. The *Post* said after the first presidential debate that, “post-debate polls [were] showing gains for Kerry.”<sup>30</sup> *USA Today* said in September that Bush’s support took a “rise in most national polls in recent weeks.”<sup>31</sup> NBC said later that month that the presidential debate was more important for Kerry because he was “behind in the polls.”<sup>32</sup> CBS also claimed in late October that Ohio polls “are dead even in a state that went to President Bush [in] 2000.”<sup>33</sup> The reader or viewer is not presented with any of the supposed polls being cited.

It is possible that these media reports are correct and that polls actually do show what the media say they show. But with no evidence before him or her, the reader or viewer has to take these reports at their word. During my interview with Mark Blumenthal, he said this tendency in the media could be “a little lazy” and not acceptable if “you’re cherry-picking a result and saying, ‘polls show.’” Given possible media incentives to “cherry-pick” what “the polls” are saying to create a certain narrative and therefore mislead the reader or viewer, and Broh’s (1980) past observations that this has actually occurred, it is possible that it could happen in these elections.

However, during the 2012 campaign “polls show” did become slightly less frequent. Sometimes an article would make a claim about what polls show and then give some evidence.

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<sup>29</sup> Wilgoren, Jodi. “Kerry Turns To Iowans To Save Him A 2nd Time.” *The New York Times*. 28 Oct. 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Milbank, Dana. “As Debate Nears, Kerry Focuses on Economy.” *The Washington Post*. 4 Oct. 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Nichols, Bill. “Bush criticizes Kerry for ‘mixed signals’ on Iraq; Voters, troops in combat need clear decisions, he says.” *USA Today*. 21 Sep. 2004.

<sup>32</sup> NBC Nightly News. 27 Sept. 2004.

<sup>33</sup> CBS Evening News. 21 Oct. 2004.

A typical case was *The Times* in mid-September, which said that, “a Gallup daily tracking poll that had shown Mr. Obama with a growing edge after the Democratic convention effectively had the race as a tie on Tuesday, though an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll released Tuesday night showed the president with more of an edge and with his approval rating reaching the 50 percent mark.”<sup>34</sup> *The Post* said a week after the first debate that, “national public polls show movement toward Romney since Denver,” and then subsequently pointed out that, “a Pew Research Center poll released Monday highlighted a big gain for Romney. Gallup began posting a sample of likely voters from its tracking poll and Tuesday's showed Romney leading 49 percent to 47 percent.”<sup>35</sup> *USA Today* would also give proof in its articles, such as, “Three national surveys released Sunday show President Obama getting a noticeable bounce in the wake of the Republican and Democratic conventions,” and then naming those three polls and what they showed.<sup>36</sup> Another way articles would give proof for their claims would be to cite a polling aggregator. For example, when *USA Today* said that Obama was leading in Ohio in late October 2012, it cited RealClearPolitics, a site that aggregates recent surveys.<sup>37</sup>

That said, there were still plenty of articles and segments during the 2012 campaign from these media organizations that lacked this increased specificity. For example, *The Times* said in late September that, “New polls showed [Romney] trailing President Obama by significant

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<sup>34</sup> Rutenberg, Jim, and Ashley Parker. “Romney Says Remarks on Voters Help Clarify Position.” *The New York Times*. 18 Sep. 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Balz, Dan. “For two No. 2s, a debate that adds up to more.” *The Washington Post*. 10 Oct. 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Page, Susan. “Obama gets a slight bounce from convention; Surveys show president opening lead over Romney in close race.” *USA Today*. 10 Sep. 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Kucinich, Jackie, and David Jackson. “Campaigns chase early voters and each other's tails in Ohio.” *USA Today*. 26 Oct. 2012.

margins in Ohio, a state considered critical for Republicans,”<sup>38</sup> and NBC said in late October that, “most polls still [show] the race nearly deadlocked.”<sup>39</sup> Saying “polls show” has decreased in media coverage, which decreases the possibility of polls being incorrectly presented to the public, but it is still widely prevalent.

### Margin of Error & details of poll reporting

Although the media is improving in even providing proof of certain polls existing, they still have problems when they do cite specific polls. For example, The *Times* said in October 2000 that Bush was leading by “two percentage points in a New York Times/CBS News poll published today.”<sup>40</sup> There is no mentioning of margin of error, the possibility that the margin could be different from what the poll says. Another article, towards the end of the 2004 race, said that, “Bush aides exulted over a new Newsweek poll that showed the president leading Mr. Kerry by six percentage points.”<sup>41</sup> The article gives the reader no clue if Bush’s lead is statistically significant, which is especially problematic when only one poll is cited to extract a conclusion from. Other media organizations also shared these problems, especially the broadcast networks, given their tendency to heavily rely on their in-house polling and day-to-day tracking polls.

However, these reporting patterns usually attributed more to polls not done by these media organizations. When these organizations would write about their own polls, the level of

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<sup>38</sup> Oppel, Richard, and Ashley Parker. “A G.O.P. Reunion, With Plans for More Togetherness.” *The New York Times*. 25 Sep. 2012.

<sup>39</sup> NBC Nightly News. 23 Oct. 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Perez-Pena, Richard. “Lieberman Appeals for Help From Florida Ethnic Groups.” *The New York Times*. 24 Oct. 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Bumiller, Elisabeth, and David Halbfinger. “Bush and Kerry Camps Clash on bin Laden Tape.” *The New York Times*. 31 Oct. 2004.

reporting detail would almost consistently improve. For example, when *The Post* cited a new poll it had done, it would describe the poll like this:

A total of 1,202 randomly selected adults, including 952 self-described registered voters and 788 likely voters were interviewed by telephone Sept. 6-8. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus three percentage points for the results based on the sample of likely voters and slightly smaller for results based on the entire sample.<sup>42</sup>

Besides margin of error, other articles would often not mention the number of people surveyed, when the survey was done, and the difference between likely and registered voters. The disparity for *The Times* between when it wrote its articles about its new in-house polls and its other articles that mentioned polls is particularly large. When reporting *The Times*' own poll the article would generally include this at the end:

The latest New York Times/CBS News Poll is based on telephone interviews conducted Wednesday through Saturday with 1,279 adults throughout the United States. Of these, 1,010 said they were registered to vote.

The sample of telephone exchanges called was randomly selected by a computer from a complete list of more than 42,000 active residential exchanges across the country.

Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. Within each household, one adult was designated by a random procedure to be the respondent for the survey.

The results have been weighted to take account of household size and number of telephone lines into the residence and to adjust for variations in the sample relating to geographic region, sex, race, age and education.

Some findings regarding voting are additionally weighted in terms of an overall "probable electorate," which uses responses to questions dealing with voting history, attention to the campaign, and likelihood of voting in 2000 as a measure of the probability of respondents' turning out in November. The method assumes approximately 50 percent turnout in November.

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<sup>42</sup> Morin, Richard, and Dan Balz. "Bush Support Strong After Convention; Kerry Favorability Rating Plunges in New Survey." *The Washington Post*. 10 Sep. 2004.

In theory, in 19 cases out of 20 the results based on such samples will differ by no more than three percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by seeking out all American adults.

For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll. Variations in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, other *Times* articles that mentioned a poll would often look like this: “The Romney campaign has been focusing on Iowa as one of its more promising states, but an NBC News/Wall Street Journal/Marist College poll released Thursday evening showed Mr. Obama with an 8-point advantage there.”<sup>44</sup> No other details are given, let alone margin of error. The media could be lowering the amount of detail given the amount of space provided for an article and because the poll is not the main aspect of the article, but, nonetheless, a poll is being reported without much context provided to the public. However, as mentioned before, more recently the papers are mentioning multiple polls or polling aggregators, somewhat compensating for the limited amount of detail reported on these polls.

Besides not mentioning the margin of error even existing, the media have had a tendency to focus on or emphasize leads that are within the margin of error, particularly within article headlines. The possible incentives for an exciting and unstable narrative could help instigate this. For example, *USA Today* in late August 2000 reported on a new Gallup poll showing Gore ahead by one point, completely within the margin of error, yet the article gave the definite headline

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<sup>43</sup> Berke, Richard, and Janet Elder. “In Final Days, Voters Still Wrestle With Doubts on Bush and Gore.” *The New York Times*. 23 Oct. 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Zeleny, Jeff, and Jim Rutenberg. “Before Debates, Romney Faces a Daunting Path.” *The New York Times*. 20 Sep. 2012.

“Gore rebounds, inches ahead of Bush.”<sup>45</sup> The *Times* declared in late 2004, “TIE SHOWN IN NEW JERSEY” because of a poll that moved to a tie from Kerry leading by four the week before, which could be within the margin of error.<sup>46</sup> The *Post* also declared in mid-October 2004 that, “The latest Washington Post-ABC News tracking poll, completed before the debate, showed Kerry at 49 percent and Bush at 48 percent among likely voters -- the first time Kerry has been ahead in that poll since early August,” as if a one-point lead, which is usually statistically insignificant, meant an actual lead for Kerry.<sup>47</sup>

This trend was somewhat improved in 2012 because of the tendency to report multiple polls in a single article, but sometimes poll leads would still be emphasized. For example, *USA Today* said after the first 2012 presidential debate that a new American Research Group poll showing Romney ahead by one point in Ohio “[shows] Romney moving up.”<sup>48</sup> The broadcast networks also had this issue, not mentioning the very small margin of error graphic at the bottom of the screen. For example, NBC in early October reported on a poll that had Romney up by four nationally, but said nothing about the margin of error of plus or minus 3.4 percent on the screen.<sup>49</sup> What seems to matter much of the time is not the margin of error, but the movement between one poll and the next, no matter how small. Mark Blumenthal told me in our interview that, “We focus on margins...I think it is the way that people think about the numbers...[We] care about whether you’re ahead or behind.” Even if it is within or close to the margin of error,

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<sup>45</sup> Benedetto, Richard. “Gore rebounds, inches ahead of Bush.” *USA Today*. 21 Aug. 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Benson, Josh. “TIE SHOWN IN NEW JERSEY.” *The New York Times*. 28 Oct. 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Balz, Dan, and Jim VandeHei. “A Deep Divide on Domestic Front; Bush, Kerry Spar Over Economy, Health Care, Gay Marriage in Last Debate.” *The Washington Post*. 14 Oct. 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Jackson, David. “Obama back in Ohio after hard week; President offers voters ride to polls.” *USA Today*. 10 Oct. 2012.

<sup>49</sup> NBC Nightly News. 8 Oct. 2012.



changing numbers could allow for a changing and volatile race, and it fits with Broh's (1980) and Reavy's (2004) claim that this had been a problem. As Boudreau and McCubbins (2010) noted, giving the appearance of candidates having small, but real, leads in these polls by ignoring margin of error and other types of error may be all it takes to convince a voter on who is ahead and to sway them on who to vote for.

### Emphasizing certain polls over others: The Two Narratives

The lack of reporting by the media sometimes of any specific polls and lack of reporting of possible error in polls can be problematic with providing accuracy to the public, yet they do not clearly establish intent for a certain narrative. Rather, it is the usage and emphasis of certain polls over others that seem to confirm the suspicion of the media wanting an unstable narrative. During the 2000, 2004 and 2012 elections, all six (with Bush in two elections) presidential candidates at some point or another received more favorable media coverage than their opponent because of the emphasis on national polls. However, using the polls, there seems to be not one, but two narratives in presidential races: a back-and-forth national narrative and a steady Electoral College narrative, where the former was consistently emphasized over the later.

The national narrative seems to follow three stages, with the first stage lasting for typically a month, the second stage about a week or two (and is generally the shortest stage), and the last stage the final weeks until Election Day. However, sometimes the second and third stages (such as in 2004) can run close to concurrently. This pattern almost completely fits the three elections examined, and allows for an unstable campaign in media coverage.

Stage one begins after the last party convention, when the candidate of that party's convention is perceived as leading in the polls. After the 2000 Democratic National Convention in mid-August, Gore appeared to be riding high. The *Times* said that Gore had been gaining support and "is hewing to a front-runner's strategy that relies on discipline, stagecraft and control,"<sup>50</sup> and that because, "he has watched the country and the polls respond approvingly to his selection of a running mate, to his separation from President Clinton, to his speech to the Democratic National Convention, and to a picturesque postconvention cruise down the Mississippi, Mr. Gore is finally in a political groove."<sup>51</sup> *USA Today* in September said that, "Gore, who just six weeks ago was the one who seemed to be floundering, is riding a wave of good news,"<sup>52</sup> and The *Post* said that Gore's resurgence "bears a striking resemblance to the 1988 comeback of Bush's father in his successful campaign against Michael S. Dukakis."<sup>53</sup> NBC claimed that, "Gore is surging,"<sup>54</sup> and CBS claimed later that month that Gore "is pursuing a front-runner's strategy: stick to the script, stay on message, and run out the clock."<sup>55</sup>

At the same time as Gore was supposedly surging, the media also stressed Bush's struggles. The *Times* said after the Democratic Convention in an article titled *Bush Stumbles, and Questions Are Raised Anew*, that, "In recent days on the trail, [Bush] instead found himself reaching for big numbers and defending his proposed tax cut in a manner that came across as

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<sup>50</sup> Seelye, Katharine, and Kevin Sack. "For Gore, a Page From the Reagan Playbook." *The New York Times*. 19 Sep. 2000.

<sup>51</sup> Sack, Kevin. "Gore Finds His Groove On Postconvention Roll." *The New York Times*. 25 Aug. 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Page, Susan. "Gore's morale continues to build." *USA Today*. 8 Sep. 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Edsall, Thomas. "Populism 'Working' For Gore; Themes Securing Base, Analysts Say." *The Washington Post*. 15 Sep. 2000.

<sup>54</sup> NBC Nightly News. 7 Sep. 2000.

<sup>55</sup> CBS Evening News. 21 Sep. 2000.

reactive and not entirely coherent. In that, and other ways, the brief period after the Democratic National Convention has not been entirely flattering to the Republican nominee.”<sup>56</sup> By mid-September, *The Post* said that since the Democratic Convention, “this year’s campaign has been a lopsided contest, with Vice President Gore on the offensive and Bush on the defensive,” and that, “the fundamentals now looked stacked against [Bush].”<sup>57</sup> “Reeling from plummeting polls,” argued CBS, “Republican George Bush is quickly road testing a new image and message makeover.”<sup>58</sup> *USA Today* said during September that Bush “acknowledged he was behind.”<sup>59</sup>

This media perception generally lasted until the presidential debates in early October. After these debates the positions of the two candidates switched, which would initiate the second stage of the national narrative. Bush was back on his game, and Gore was in trouble. *USA Today* claimed after the second debate that, “George W. Bush’s campaign was flying high...in more ways than one,”<sup>60</sup> and CBS said that, “with polls tilting toward George Bush, the Democrats, desperate for a breakout, have called in their big gun [Bill Clinton].”<sup>61</sup> CNN said that Gore was trying “to close the gap with his opponent,”<sup>62</sup> and *The Post* said that, “Bush’s October surge caught the Gore campaign by surprise and has unnerved many Democrats, who say the vice

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<sup>56</sup> Bruni, Frank. “Bush Stumbles, and Questions Are Raised Anew.” *The New York Times*. 24 Aug. 2000.

<sup>57</sup> Balz, Dan. “Can Bush Prevent an '88 Repeat?; Father’s Lead Then Similar to Gore’s Now.” *The Washington Post*. 17 Sep. 2000.

<sup>58</sup> CBS Evening News. 19 Sep. 2000.

<sup>59</sup> Benedetto, Richard, and Judy Keen. “Bush draws a plan for resurgence in ‘contest of ideas’.” *USA Today*. 18 Sep. 2000.

<sup>60</sup> Keen, Judy. “Bush camp soaring after candidate’s showing in debate.” *USA Today*. 13 Oct. 2000.

<sup>61</sup> CBS Evening News. 20 Oct. 2000.

<sup>62</sup> CNN. 22 Oct. 2000.

president must use [the third debate] to put Bush on the defensive and regain the initiative in the race.”<sup>63</sup>

However, this feeling faded relatively quickly, and by the end of October and the last week of the campaign, the national narrative entered its third and final stage: being too-close-to-call. Although Bush was narrowly leading nationally, said *The Post* in November, “Bush and Gore appear headed for...the closest popular vote margin since 1968.”<sup>64</sup> *USA Today* concurred, writing the week before that, “It has been 40 years since a presidential campaign has headed into Election Day with the White House so completely up for grabs. No one can predict with any confidence who is going to win.”<sup>65</sup> NBC on the night before the election perhaps generally summed up the national narrative of the fall campaign: “The polls way up for Bush [before the conventions], then way up for Gore...[now] a race to the wire, with polls so close they tell us only that neither man is breaking away.”<sup>66</sup>

If someone followed only the media’s national narrative of the 2000 race, that person would see a volatile and eventually close campaign, and since national polls were the ones pointed to more in news coverage, this is probably what most people saw. However, lurking beneath this coverage lays a second, more hidden narrative, one which, despite a slight spillover from some of the national narrative, does not change much throughout the campaign: the view of the Electoral College. Throughout the fall campaign, while looking at where the race stands

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<sup>63</sup> Balz, Dan, and Richard Morin. “Bush Has Slim Lead On Eve of 3rd Debate; Gore's Credibility Rating Down in Poll.” *The Washington Post*. 17 Oct. 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Broder, David, and Dan Balz. “Two Days to Go, Burden Is on Gore.” *The Washington Post*. 5 Nov. 2000.

<sup>65</sup> Parker, Laura. “Vote is up in the air -- still dead heat paralyzes investors, publishers, lobbyists.” *USA Today*. 31 Oct. 2000.

<sup>66</sup> NBC Nightly News. 6 Nov. 2000.

nationally, the media will also look at who is getting closer to reaching the 270 electoral votes needed to win. Generally, from the conventions to Election Day, the view of who gets to 270 is close, with the states never clearly swinging much one way or the other.

During the 2000 campaign, the state narrative pattern played out in this fashion. In September, during Gore's supposed national surge, *The Times* said that while Gore was closer to 270, "enough states are either tossups or held so narrowly that the race remains fiercely competitive."<sup>67</sup> During this period, *The Times*, citing polls, called Wisconsin a toss-up<sup>68</sup>, said New Hampshire was too close to call<sup>69</sup>, and reported that Gore was even in trouble in his home state of Tennessee.<sup>70</sup> Even after the debates, with Bush's supposed surge, and then a supposed dead heat to the finish, *The Times* never wavered much in its state coverage, saying in late October that, even with Bush's "slight edge" to reaching 270, "polls in so many states [are] within the margin of sampling error [that] the Bush and Gore operations are pumping resources and campaign time into states that they never expected to be in play."<sup>71</sup>

This general consistency was not limited to *The Times*. For example, *USA Today* said in late September that Bush was behind in Pennsylvania but near Gore in Oregon and Washington.<sup>72</sup> *The Post* said in early October, around the beginning of Bush's supposed surge, that,

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<sup>67</sup> Clymer, Adam. "Ground Shifts In Fight to Gain Electoral Edge." *The New York Times*. 17 Sep. 2000.

<sup>68</sup> Apple, R.W. "With Its Independent Streak, Wisconsin Remains a Tossup." *The New York Times*. 25 Sep. 2000.

<sup>69</sup> Flaherty, Julie. "A G.O.P. Opportunity In New Hampshire." *The New York Times*. 17 Sep. 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Reuters. "Bush Catches Gore In Poll in Tennessee." *The New York Times*. 2 Oct. 2000.

<sup>71</sup> Berke, Richard. "Bucking History, Tossup States Increase, Forcing Candidates to Rethink Strategies." *The New York Times*. 27 Oct. 2000.

<sup>72</sup> Keen, Judy, and Laurence McQuillan. "Pa. may be avenue to White House State is perhaps the keystone in electoral contest." *USA Today*. 29 Sep. 2000.

Vice President Gore and Texas Gov. George W. Bush are looking at one of the most fluid and unusual electoral maps in recent memory. Plenty of big states remain up for grabs, with Florida currently the most contested battleground of all. But what is equally significant is the number of small or medium-sized states that are not behaving normally, and they have begun to draw increasing attention from strategists calculating different winning combinations in an ongoing series of ‘what if’ scenarios of the presidential race.<sup>73</sup>

The broadcast news created a close state view as well. For example, CBS said in mid-September that, “Gore’s ahead in 16 states, Bush in 21. The electoral vote count is 224 to 175, with the remaining 14 contests narrow enough that the election could turn either way,”<sup>74</sup> and NBC in late October said that, “poll numbers in swing states [like Missouri] are changing constantly.”<sup>75</sup> This state narrative contradicts either candidate as ever really surging or struggling.

The split between the two narratives carried over into the 2004 campaign. This time, after the Republican Convention in early September, the media, pointing to national polls, characterized Bush as surging. In an article a week after the Republican Convention, titled *On a Bounce or On a Roll, Bush Leads as a Critical Stage Begins*, *The Times* said that, “President Bush enters the fall campaign with a modest lead over Senator John Kerry after fortifying his standing as the better candidate to fight terrorism and turning many Americans against Mr. Kerry,” and that, “Mr. Bush appears to be in a much better position than Mr. Kerry was after his convention.”<sup>76</sup> *The Post* said at the end of the month that, “President Bush heads into the first

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<sup>73</sup> Balz, Dan. “Smaller States Play a Big Role; Result Is an ‘Unusual Map’.” *The Washington Post*. 9 Oct. 2000.

<sup>74</sup> CBS Evening News. 15 Sep. 2000.

<sup>75</sup> NBC Nightly News. 28 Oct. 2000.

<sup>76</sup> Nagourney, Adam. “On a Bounce or On a Roll, Bush Leads as a Critical Stage Begins.” *The New York Times*. 10 Sep. 2004.

presidential debate with a solid lead over John F. Kerry.”<sup>77</sup> *USA Today* said during mid-September that, “President Bush and his campaign advisers are feeling pretty good these days about his chances...At a rally in a baseball stadium in St. Cloud, [Bush] told the crowd, ‘I want to win. And I know we are going to win.’” Gallup’s polling, said the paper, shows, “That’s not just happy talk.”<sup>78</sup> Broadcasters concurred, with NBC saying by the end of September that Bush was doing so well that the debates could very well “seal the deal for [him].”<sup>79</sup>

By contrast, the coverage of Kerry during this time was quite harsh, with *The Times* saying,

Democratic professionals have begun to criticize Mr. Kerry's efforts -- privately and, in a few cases, publicly. Gerald Austin of Cleveland, a leading Ohio campaign consultant for more than 30 years, said that former President Bill Clinton could run a better campaign than Mr. Kerry's 'even when he was under ether.' Mr. Austin said that Mr. Kerry had been too slow to respond to Republican attacks on his military record.<sup>80</sup>

*USA Today* suggested in late September that, “Few, if any, Democrats believe that John Kerry's campaign has been consistently on the right track to victory.”<sup>81</sup> NBC said that Kerry “[is] now facing the serious prospect of watching the race slip through [his] hands.”<sup>82</sup> *The Post* suggested that Kerry was in so much trouble that, “[the] debates offer [him] his best and perhaps only

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<sup>77</sup> Balz, Dan, and Vanessa Williams. “Poll Shows Bush With Solid Lead; Despite Worries, Voters Cite Lack of Clarity From Kerry.” *The Washington Post*. 28 Sep. 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Keen, Judy. “Buoyed by polls, Bush shows new confidence; Support grows amid Kerry attacks, Guard controversy.” *USA Today*. 17 Sep. 2004.

<sup>79</sup> NBC Nightly News. 26 Sep. 2004.

<sup>80</sup> Apple, R.W. “In Ohio, Unexpected Stumble from Kerry.” *The New York Times*. 12 Sep. 2004.

<sup>81</sup> Shapiro, Walter. “All political tracks run through Iraq.” *USA Today*. 24 Sep. 2004.

<sup>82</sup> NBC Nightly News. 18 Sep. 2004.

opportunity to change the race decisively.”<sup>83</sup> But, just like in 2000, this coverage would move into a second stage.

The presidential debates would become a turning point in the media’s 2004 national narrative. No longer was Bush portrayed as running away with the race. Kerry’s supposedly strong performance in late September’s debate and his new perceived strength in certain national polls, said *The Times*, gave “Kerry aides...new confidence as their candidate turned to domestic issues, while among Republicans outside the Bush campaign there was deepening concern about the president's performance on Thursday and how it will affect his standing.”<sup>84</sup> *USA Today* said for the vice presidential debate that, “Democrats hope that Edwards...can use his youth, camera-friendly looks and background as a successful trial lawyer to present an appealing persona that will continue the Kerry campaign's apparent resurgence,” and that Cheney...[is] determined to calm jittery nerves among Bush supporters with a steady performance.”<sup>85</sup>

However, the movement into the last stage of the national narrative took less time than in 2000. The *Post* said in mid-October that the debates and their perception of the national polls showed that, “For all practical purposes, the contest going into this final debate was a tossup.”<sup>86</sup> NBC said a couple of weeks after the first debate that Republicans close to the Bush Administration know that Bush “needs to regain an edge in the race,”<sup>87</sup> and by the end of

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<sup>83</sup> Balz, Dan. “Some Democrats See a Turning Point; Kerry Displaying New Aggressiveness.” *The Washington Post*. 12 Sep. 2004.

<sup>84</sup> Rutenberg, Jim. “The Post-Debate Contest: Swaying Perceptions.” *The New York Times*. 4 Oct. 2004.

<sup>85</sup> Nichols, Bill. “The VP debate matters this time; Cheney, Edwards meet as race tightens.” *USA Today*. 5 Oct. 2004.

<sup>86</sup> Broder, David. “Standing Tall in Their Respective Corners.” *The Washington Post*. 14 Oct. 2004.

<sup>87</sup> NBC Nightly News. 13 Oct. 2004.



October claimed that, “[it] appears...to be a dead even race for president.”<sup>88</sup> Both *The Times* and *The Post* said right before the election that the race was a “dead heat”<sup>89</sup> and “deadlocked,”<sup>90</sup> respectively. Like in 2000, the media narrative at the national level went from one candidate leading to (very briefly) the other candidate leading and then to a near-tie.

The Electoral College narrative again told a slightly different and consistent story, and was less important than the national narrative. Even as Bush was supposedly leading nationally, media organizations constantly wrote about the tightness of many states, even if Bush was slightly closer to 270. For example, *The Times*, using polls, said that Colorado was very close<sup>91</sup>, and that Wisconsin was very tight.<sup>92</sup> *The Post* said in September that, “The presidential race looks closer in many battleground states than some national polls suggest,” although this apparently was only “a morale boost” for Democrats “after Kerry's worst month of the general election.”<sup>93</sup> According to *USA Today* at the end of that month, “Independent analysts say that although the polls show a Bush advantage [in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida], however slight, the three states remain too close to call.”<sup>94</sup> Even as the national media narrative moved into its second and third stages in October with Kerry’s supposed surge and then the election being very close, the state narrative was generally the same. NBC said around mid-October that, “The

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<sup>88</sup> NBC Nightly News. 30 Oct. 2004.

<sup>89</sup> Wilgoren, Jodi. “A Looser, More Jovial Kerry Prepares for Voters' Choice.” *The New York Times*. 1 Nov. 2004.

<sup>90</sup> Balz, Dan, and David Broder. “Election Day Dawns With Unpredictability; Polls Show Tie; Both Sides Have Lawyers Ready.” *The Washington Post*. 2 Nov. 2004.

<sup>91</sup> Johnson, Kirk. “Coloradans to Consider Splitting Electoral College Votes.” *The New York Times*. 19 Sep. 2004.

<sup>92</sup> Apple, R.W. “Despite a Razor-Thin Loss in 2000, G.O.P. Again Forecasts a Victory in Wisconsin.” *The New York Times*. 16 Oct. 2004.

<sup>93</sup> Balz, Dan. “Size of Battleground May Be Smaller Than Expected.” *The Washington Post*. 12 Sep. 2004.

<sup>94</sup> Nichols, Bill. “Kerry gains on Bush in Ohio, Pa., but further behind in Fla.” *USA Today*. 30 Sep. 2004.

electoral map reveals a tight race, with both sides defending key sections of their party's turf, beyond the high profile battlegrounds of Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida," like in Nevada, Colorado, New Hampshire, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and New Mexico.<sup>95</sup> CBS said right before Election Day that Florida was "too close to call," Michigan had "tightened," Pennsylvania and Ohio were a "big question mark," and maybe even New Jersey was close.<sup>96</sup> Looking at the Electoral College, the media always perceived a close race, and the volatility at the national level nearly vanished; yet the state narrative still mattered less than the national narrative (or, as *The Post* called it, state polling was just a "morale boost" compared to national polls).

During the final campaign examined, the 2012 campaign, the state narrative did not quite follow its trajectory during the 2000 and 2004 campaigns, and because of that the 2012 campaign best shows the dominance of the volatile national narrative in media coverage. The national narrative during the campaign still followed its volatile, three-stage pattern. After the Democratic Convention in early September, the media perceived Romney as being in huge trouble and clearly losing. The *Times*, towards the end of September, said that, "by many indicators," the election "is tilting against [Romney]," and that, "anxiety among Republicans about the presidential race, the seeming lurching nature of Mr. Romney's campaign and his own miscues have spread far beyond Washington."<sup>97</sup> The *Post*, at around the same time, said that Romney was dealing with, "eroding poll numbers and growing anxiety among some activists about the party's prospects."<sup>98</sup> *USA Today* said on the day of the first debate that, "The trajectory

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<sup>95</sup> NBC Nightly News. 12 Oct. 2004.

<sup>96</sup> CBS Evening News. 1 Nov. 2004.

<sup>97</sup> See *Supra* note 44.

<sup>98</sup> Helderman, Rosalind, and Ed O'Keefe. "Ryan urges GOP House colleagues to be optimistic." *The Washington Post*. 21 Sep. 2012.

of a close race...is bending in President Obama's direction."<sup>99</sup> NBC said on September 19 that, "These are tough days for the Romney campaign,"<sup>100</sup> and by the very end of the month said that, "[Romney] is behind. You can argue by how much he's behind....But the bottom line is he's behind."<sup>101</sup> POLITICO was particularly harsh on Romney during September, saying that, "Romney associates are baffled that such a successful corporate leader has created a team with so few lines of authority or accountability,"<sup>102</sup> and that Romney was doing so badly that he "may well be a drag on Republican candidates in some states that could determine Senate control."<sup>103</sup>

The second stage again began around the first presidential debate. However, the national narrative that allows for an unstable campaign seems by 2012 to have become so entrenched in the media that POLITICO started the second stage of the narrative hours before the debate even started. In an October 3rd article titled *A Mitt Romney Rebound?*, the publication said that,

Maybe there are second chances in presidential campaigns.

And Mitt Romney's could just be on the horizon, but any potential comeback will be triggered largely by whether he can turn the first debate tonight in his favor.

According to Mike Allen's Playbook, after weeks of less-than-positive media coverage of Romney, the race could break his way after tonight -- if.

"Mitt Romney is finally catching some breaks and is poised for a surge in more positive coverage IF he exceeds expectations tonight," Allen wrote.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Page, Susan. "What voters want in tonight's debate; More specifics, less rhetoric, fewer attacks." *USA Today*. 3 Oct. 2012.

<sup>100</sup> NBC Nightly News. 19 Sep. 2012.

<sup>101</sup> NBC Nightly News. 30 Sep. 2012.

<sup>102</sup> Allen, Mike, and Jim VandeHei. "Inside the campaign: How Mitt Romney stumbled." *POLITICO*. 16 Sep. 2012.

<sup>103</sup> Burns, Alexander, and Maggie Haberman. "Romney coattails not reaching Senate GOP." *POLITICO*. 20 Sep. 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Cervantes, Bobby. "A Mitt Romney rebound?" *POLITICO*. 3 Oct. 2012.

This is precisely what happened, following Romney's supposedly strong performance in the debate and his perceived rising national poll numbers afterwards. The *Times* said a few days after the debate that there was "a new dynamic in the presidential race," and "[the race]...takes on a new air of volatility after Obama's off-kilter debate performance last week."<sup>105</sup> The *Post* said around the same time that the "two presidential campaigns [were] dealing with sudden reversals of fortune."<sup>106</sup> In particular, a national poll from PEW Research Center a few days after the debate that gave Romney a lead seemed to solidify the narrative's second stage, with NBC essentially saying it confirmed how badly Obama did in the debate.<sup>107</sup> Using the PEW poll, CBS on the same day declared that, "Today, Mitt Romney found himself in an unfamiliar place -- the lead."<sup>108</sup> (Mark Blumenthal in my interview criticized the intense focus on the PEW poll after the debate, saying it was dangerous to focus too much on any individual poll.) POLITICO, after declaring Obama's performance in the second debate as much improved, said it was, "a considerable relief for [Obama], since another weak showing would have turned growing unease among Democrats about a tightening race into genuine panic."<sup>109</sup>

After the second debate in mid-October, and until the end of the campaign, the media turned to the national narrative's last stage, with The *Times* calling it, "a neck-and-neck race with

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<sup>105</sup> Zeleny, Jeff, and Jim Rutenberg. "With New Vigor, Romney Resets Ohio Campaign." *The New York Times*. 8 Oct. 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Turque, Bill, and Jerry Markon. "Obama, Romney running hard in Ohio." *The Washington Post*. 10 Oct. 2012.

<sup>107</sup> See *Supra* note 49.

<sup>108</sup> CBS Evening News. 8 Oct. 2012.

<sup>109</sup> Harris, John, and Jonathan Martin. "Debate gets to the guts of the race." *POLITICO*. 17 Oct. 2012.

a challenger gaining ground when it matters most,”<sup>110</sup> and *The Post* saying the same day that, “the race could not be closer.”<sup>111</sup> POLITICO said the day before the election that, “While 11th-hour polls gave Obama a slight edge, the race was perceived as so close that neither campaign was ceding any ground anywhere.”<sup>112</sup> NBC said the race was looking like it could be as close as it was in 2004<sup>113</sup>, and CBS said that political analysts told it that, “for the first time that either of them can remember this deep in a campaign, they have no idea who is going to win.”<sup>114</sup>

If the national narrative had not changed from previous elections, the Electoral College narrative did. Unlike in 2000 and 2004, the media were generally, with perhaps the slight exception of some of October, willing to consistently claim that a candidate, Obama, was the leader in the march to 270, even if it was not a large lead. *The Times* said right before the first debate that, “Mr. Obama...has been pulling consistently ahead of Mr. Romney in key states.”<sup>115</sup> *The Post*, citing their own polling, said that the swing states showed a much larger Obama lead than nationally.<sup>116</sup> POLITICO said that, “The state-level data...gives Obama a slight edge in more than enough states to block his challenger from amassing 270 Electoral College votes. Because of the makeup of the electoral map, Romney has to win nearly all the swing states on the table, while Obama only has to win a handful,” and that, “right now, Romney is not leading in many of

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<sup>110</sup> Rutenberg, Jim, and Jeff Zeleny. “Campaign Moods Shift as Contest Tightens.” *The New York Times*. 22 Oct. 2012.

<sup>111</sup> Gearan, Anne, and David Fahrenthold. “Suddenly, close race on foreign policy.” *The Washington Post*. 22 Oct. 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Hohmann, James, and Jonathan Allen. “Election Season: The final hours.” *POLITICO*. 5 Nov. 2012.

<sup>113</sup> NBC Nightly News. 4 Nov. 2012.

<sup>114</sup> CBS Evening News. 26 Oct. 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Bronner, Ethan. “Voter ID Rules Fail Court Tests Across Country.” *The New York Times*. 2 Oct. 2012.

<sup>116</sup> McCrummen, Stephanie, and Ed O’Keefe. “Door-to-door combat in an Ohio town.” *The Washington Post*. 1 Oct 2012.

[the swing] states, leaving him well short of the threshold he needs to clear and under urgent pressure to reshuffle the race's dynamics."<sup>117</sup> NBC also said toward the end of September that, "In several key swing states, Mitt Romney is starting to fall behind."<sup>118</sup>

After the "Romney surge" national narrative began in early October, it did have some effect on the state narrative for a couple of weeks. The media claimed that the electoral map had tightened; *USA Today* said a week after the first debate that Ohio and Michigan were getting closer.<sup>119</sup> Even so, the media generally agreed that crucial Ohio was leaning in Obama's column. While *The Post* said after the VP debate that, "A number of key states have moved in Romney's direction," it conceded that Obama might still be leading in a very close Ohio contest.<sup>120</sup> NBC also pointed out that Obama had a "narrow lead" in the state<sup>121</sup>, and *POLITICO* said days later that, "if Romney can't put Ohio in his column -- the Buckeye State has so far proved stubbornly immune to the Republican's gains elsewhere -- he'll need to win most of the remaining swing states to capture the presidency."<sup>122</sup> As CBS reminded its viewers that same day, "it's not the popular vote that elects a president, but the electoral vote. And in that state-by-state battle for 270 electors, the president is ahead."<sup>123</sup> However, CBS's reminder to its audience was the exception to the rule as to which media narrative gets preference for stressing to the public.

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<sup>117</sup> Burns, Alexander, and Emily Schultheis. "Mitt Romney needs poll vault to win." *POLITICO*. 19 Sep. 2012.

<sup>118</sup> NBC Nightly News. 23 Sep. 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Kucinich, Jackie, and Gregory Korte. "With finish line in sight, race tightens; Romney rides debate win into battlegrounds." *USA Today*. 10 Oct. 2012.

<sup>120</sup> Balz, Dan, and Philip Rucker. "Biden, Ryan trade sharp words on foreign policy, economy during vice-presidential debate; Both men have now spent weeks preparing for these 90 minutes." *The Washington Post*. 12 Oct. 2012.

<sup>121</sup> NBC Nightly News. 14 Oct. 2012.

<sup>122</sup> Martin, Jonathan. "Tiny New Hampshire could punch above weight." *POLITICO*. 18 Oct. 2012.

<sup>123</sup> CBS Evening News. 18 Oct. 2012.

By the time the media declared the contest “too close to call” in late October and early November, they were still saying Obama was ahead in the Electoral College. The *Times* said that, “Mr. Obama...[is] holding the slightest of edges in Ohio and other swing states,”<sup>124</sup> and the next day reported that, “battleground-state polls...have given Mr. Obama a slim but consistent edge where it matters most.” Said the paper, “Mr. Romney was going into Election Day without any of the top competitive states definitively in his column. A senior party strategist lamented that for all the optimistic signs, there was a preponderance of evidence ‘cutting against us.’”<sup>125</sup> The *Post* in late October said that while “conventional wisdom” held that Romney would likely win Virginia and Florida, looking at polls resulted in a conclusion that he might not win them after all.<sup>126</sup> POLITICO pointed out that Romney’s supposed lead with seniors, “may not be enough to tip the election to Romney -- most polls show Obama with a slight but stable edge in many battleground states.”<sup>127</sup> NBC said on Halloween that polling showed that Obama “is clinging to a tight lead in those crucial battlegrounds of Ohio, Florida, and Virginia,”<sup>128</sup> and CBS said before Election Day that while, “national polls show that it’s dead even...in the few swing states that could tip the balance tomorrow night President Obama has a slight advantage over Mitt Romney.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Zeleny, Jeff, and Jim Rutenberg. “With Time as Tight as Race, Romney and Obama Zero In.” *The New York Times*. 3 Nov. 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Rutenberg, Jim, and Jeff Zeleny. “Clues Could Come Early in State-by-State Battle.” *The New York Times*. 5 Nov. 2012.

<sup>126</sup> Cillizza, Chris. “Still a race in Florida, Virginia.” *The Washington Post*. 31 Oct. 2012.

<sup>127</sup> Tau, Byron. “Seniors still out of Obama’s reach.” *POLITICO*. 4 Nov. 2012.

<sup>128</sup> NBC Nightly News. 31 Oct. 2012.

<sup>129</sup> CBS Evening News. 5 Nov. 2012.

Why the state narrative changed from 2000 and 2004 to 2012 might at least partially have to do with the increase in state polling. In my interview with Mark Blumenthal, he said that there had been an “explosion” of robo-polls and state polls for the 2008 and 2012 elections that had not previously existed. Their existence might have had some effect on coverage, given that more state polls existing made looking at specific states easier.

Whatever the case, even with the change in the Electoral College narrative from previous elections the media consistently called the race dead-even and super close by the end of the campaign. As usual, the national narrative held sway over the state narrative, but this time there seemed to have been tension, a kind of cognitive dissonance between these two narratives; unlike 2000 and 2004, by the end of the campaign the national and state narratives were not the same. The national narrative was too-close-to-call, but the state narrative had a candidate leading. Most reports handled this narrative clash in one of two ways. The minority solution was by combining the narratives. *USA Today* believed in the end of October that, “If the election were held today, national and statewide polls indicate there might well be a split decision: President Obama winning the Electoral College and Republican Mitt Romney carrying the popular vote.”<sup>130</sup> *POLITICO* quoted a Democratic pollster in late October speculating the same thing<sup>131</sup>, and CBS said political analysts told it that, “The race is so close, there is a real possibility now that Romney could win the popular vote and the president the electoral college vote.”<sup>132</sup>

The majority solution to the narrative clash, and the solution that fits Broh’s (1980) findings on selective emphasis, was to dismiss the state narrative altogether. Obama’s lead in the

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<sup>130</sup> Page, Susan. “Will this election be a replay of 2000?; A split decision, recounts and voting problems could reopen old wounds.” *USA Today*. 30 Oct. 2012.

<sup>131</sup> Hohmann, James. “Battleground Tracking Poll: Mitt Romney takes lead.” *POLITICO*. 22 Oct. 2012.

<sup>132</sup> See *Supra* note 114.



Electoral College was irrelevant, this solution went; the race nationally was just too close to call. Perhaps this was best illustrated by some of the attacks on Nate Silver, a writer and statistical analyst whose *New York Times* blog FiveThirtyEight consistently projected that Obama would likely achieve victory in the Electoral College and thus be reelected. Silver was criticized for his model, with some arguing that it was based on possibly flawed state polling (as if national polls were the only truly reliable polls). POLITICO, under the sub-headline “*What if the public polls are wrong?*,” took up this theme on Election Day:

Democrats and many of the mainstream pollsters believe that demographic trends from 2004 and 2008 -- increased participation by minority voters and a continued surge in self-described independents chief among them -- will carry through to this year.

The standard-bearer is Nate Silver of The New York Times's FiveThirtyEight blog, who feeds other people's polls into a self-designed formula that has concluded -- to the consternation of critics -- that Obama stands a 92.2 percent chance of winning on Tuesday.

The Romney campaign and some GOP-leaning pollsters think those models skew the results toward Obama -- they weigh Democratic voters too heavily, these critics say -- resulting in a massive, systemic over-estimation of the incumbent's chances at the expense of Romney.<sup>133</sup>

Silver was also criticized for his insistence that there indeed was a clear leader in the race. The idea that a candidate was evidently winning was preposterous, these reports said. Dana Milbank of *The Post* voiced this view a couple of days before the election:

There's Nate Silver, a statistician-blogger at the New York Times, who predicts with scientific precision that President Obama will win 303 electoral votes and beat Romney by 2 percentage points in the popular vote. He gives Obama an 81 percent likelihood of winning.

I give Silver a 50 percent likelihood of being correct.

The truth is anybody who claims to know what is going to happen on Election Day is making it up and counting on being lucky. For that reason, this has been a humbling

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<sup>133</sup> Thrush, Glenn. “5 things to watch on election night.” *POLITICO*. 6 Nov. 2012.

election for people who follow politics. We have filled countless hours of airtime and gone through untold gallons of ink over the past six months, but we are essentially where we were when we started: It's a dead heat, with the likeliest voters appearing to favor the challenger but the battleground states appearing to give a narrow edge to the incumbent.<sup>134</sup>

Milbank did not even disagree with Silver's conclusions over the electoral map. The problem was that Silver believed it mattered more than national polling. Silver seemed to be criticized because he believed that Obama's apparent Electoral College lead, the same narrative that the media had essentially been reporting, should triumph over the "dead-heat" national narrative. As Silver opposed the media consensus on the race in quite a high-profile fashion, and was criticized for it by much of the media, it fits with what Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002) and Rosenstiel (2005) suggested about how the media generally reach consensus on a narrative. This media consensus, by shrugging off the consistent Obama-leading state narrative for the close and volatile national narrative, seems to confirm Broh's (1980) findings of "selective emphasis in [the media's] reporting," of horse race coverage. Mark Blumenthal, during my interview with him, found that this selective emphasis hurt reporting accuracy: "It doesn't make sense to worry about the fact that the national polls were close when you have a lot of data in the three or four most important battleground states, and they're very consistent. And even at the low end [Obama] was basically ahead [in the battlegrounds]."

### Media reporting its own polling

Much of the media's preference for focusing on the race nationally might have to do with the reporting of their own polling. Over the three elections examined, all of these media

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<sup>134</sup> Milbank, Dana. "A timid race leaves no mandates." *The Washington Post*. 4 Nov. 2012.

organizations heavily relied on the polls either they did or another pollster did for them, and often made conclusions about the race based on those numbers. Most of the time these polls have been national polls, and they have usually resulted in or reinforced the general media narrative during a specific time during a campaign. These media organizations also reported their polling in much more depth than other polls referenced in their coverage. A good example is the *The Times* in the 2004 election. The paper, which heavily relied on their New York Times/CBS News poll, in mid-September, during Bush's supposed surge, gave a detailed report of their new poll which showed Bush leading Kerry outside of the margin of error nationally. The paper discussed how the poll's respondents disapproved of how Kerry was running his campaign, their slipping belief in Kerry's leadership skills, and their rising dislike of Kerry. The poll, suggested *The Times*, showed that Kerry, "faces substantial obstacles in his bid to unseat President Bush."<sup>135</sup> However, after the first debate *The Times* said their poll seemed to confirm that Kerry could have changed the race with the debate,<sup>136</sup> and by the very end of the campaign said its poll showed an extremely close race<sup>137</sup> (this was how the national narrative played out in the general media that year).

In particular, broadcasters seemed to give even less attention than newspapers to other polling (including state polls) besides their own, perhaps based on the amount of time they have to report the news (only a half-hour). A major example of this tendency was an interview NBC *Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams had in late October 2002 with Obama, in which they

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<sup>135</sup> Nagourney, Adam, and Janet Elder. "Bush Opens Lead Despite Unease Voiced in Survey." *The New York Times*. 18 Sep. 2004.

<sup>136</sup> Stevenson, Richard, and Janet Elder. "Poll Finds Kerry Assured Voters in Initial Debate." *The New York Times*. 5 Oct. 2004.

<sup>137</sup> Nagourney, Adam, and Janet Elder. "In Final Days, Divided Electorate Expresses Anxiety." *The New York Times*. 1 Nov. 2004.

discussed the state of the race. Only a few days before the interview aired NBC had released its new national poll, which had both Obama and Romney at 47 percent, and Williams explicitly used it in his interview. He asked Obama, “How is it, that with, what, 13 days to go, you’re fighting for your life in a 47-47 race?” Williams then followed up with questions wondering how Obama could be in such a tight spot given his accomplishments, and that if Obama realized how much in peril his reelection campaign was in.<sup>138</sup> Other polls were ignored; only NBC’s new national poll apparently showed where the race was. Williams’ remarks epitomize the media’s dependence on its own polling and the national narrative it creates (and reinforces).

Besides the possible economic incentives for media to report in-house polling because it tends to confirm the volatile national narrative, it is also not difficult to perceive emphasis on in-house polling as a way to help a media organization’s economic bottom line; showing its own polling can help the company’s brand. Instead of promoting a poll done by CBS and helping to promote CBS, a media organization like NBC can do a poll themselves, report extensively on it, and effectively promote themselves. Said Mark Blumenthal in my interview, “Media outlets do their own polls and pay for them for a reason. They want to make news with them. They want their brand to be the best brand.” Stovall and Solomon (1984) appear to have been correct in their concern about the influence of in-house polling on media horse race coverage, as both of those possible reasons for in-house polling damage the media’s ability to accurately report the news. As Blumenthal said, “There’s this kind of unwritten rule that says [media organizations] shouldn’t ever mention anybody else’s poll, which I think is taken too [extremely].”

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<sup>138</sup> NBC Nightly News. 24 Oct. 2012.

### Media focus on Gallup & tracking polls

Besides extensively reporting their own polling, media have also often reported the findings of the most famous pollster in the country, Gallup. Their national tracking polls, which have shown large swings over time, were sometimes used by media to show large changes in the race, even if it was just from methodological issues. The *Times*, for instance, used Gallup to show that Gore surged after the 2000 Democratic Convention by a huge 17 points.<sup>139</sup> Gallup's possible methodological problems, as mentioned by Traugott (2001), help to create the appearance of a volatile national horse race.

*USA Today*, which used Gallup for its in-house polling during all three elections examined, was particularly guilty of this problem. Gallup's wild swings in its polling were often reflected in the paper's coverage of the race. Furthermore, among the newspapers examined, *USA Today* seemed to rely the most on its own polling. As a result, the paper seemed to have an even more volatile narrative than some other media organizations did (who also relied on Gallup, but to a lesser extent). In late October 2000, while the media were generally saying the race was too close to call nationally, the paper claimed that Bush was winning by his biggest margin in over a month because of his 10-point lead in its Gallup poll.<sup>140</sup> But, only a few days later, the paper, based on the Gallup poll now showing Bush up by just two points, said Gore was, "regaining some ground lost to Bush since the first presidential debate [October 3]."<sup>141</sup> *USA*

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<sup>139</sup> Bruni, Frank. "Campaign Aides Set Tone For Next Big Test in Race." *The New York Times*. 21 Aug. 2000.

<sup>140</sup> Leavitt, Paul, Jessica Lee, and Jim Drinkard. "Bush takes 1st double-digit lead in poll since last month." *USA Today*. 20 Oct. 2000.

<sup>141</sup> Benedetto, Richard. "Opponent hiding behind polls, Gore says Vice president accuses Bush of dodging issues and trying to 'run out the clock'." *USA Today*. 24 Oct. 2000.

*Today* believed that Gore was truly gaining much strength in the race, rather than issues with the poll itself. Mark Blumenthal in my interview echoed Traugott's thoughts on the Gallup tracking poll, saying it is often just the fundamentals in the poll's structure creating changes in the numbers. Said Blumenthal, "Ninety-nine percent of the commentary around the Gallup daily tracking [poll]...[is noise.]" *USA Today*'s volatility continued into the 2012 election, as Gallup's erratic tracking poll resulted in the paper reporting in mid-October that the usual gender gap between the Democratic and Republican candidates was gone<sup>142</sup>, that Obama's generally agreed-on Electoral College lead was nonexistent the day before the election<sup>143</sup>, and in late October that Romney had a large national lead.<sup>144</sup>

A particularly noteworthy example of the paper's volatile view of the race by relying on Gallup was an article it wrote in late October 2000 describing how certain events apparently had a major impact on the 2000 campaign, given the changes in Gallup's numbers afterwards:

In a close contest, even small gaffes and minor events can make a difference in determining which candidate, Vice President Gore or Texas Gov. George W. Bush, seems to be up or down. Below are some of the noteworthy events in the presidential race so far. They're matched with the findings of the USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Tracking Poll immediately before and after the events, although other factors also might have affected the survey results.

A kiss

Gore's buss of wife Tipper before he delivered his Democratic National Convention acceptance speech Aug. 17 made voters see him more human. His ratings before and after:

Aug. 11-12 39% Aug. 18-19 47%

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<sup>142</sup> Page, Susan. "Three weeks left, women push Romney into lead." *USA Today*. 16 Oct. 2012.

<sup>143</sup> Page, Susan. "In swing states: 48%-48%; With minds made up, vote 'comes down to turnout'." *USA Today*. 5 Nov. 2012.

<sup>144</sup> Page, Susan. "Obama casts Romney as outdated; Finale veers off course -- to economy." *USA Today*. 23 Oct. 2012.

### A rat?

The brief appearance of the word "RATS" in a Republican National Committee TV ad for Bush, widely reported on Sept. 13, raised questions about dirty politics and subliminal messages. His ratings before and after:

Sept. 11-13 42% Sept. 14-16 41%

### A TV gig

Bush's appearance on The Oprah Winfrey Show one week later helped him recover his footing and reach out to key women voters. His ratings before and after:

Sept. 18-20 41% Sept. 21-23 47%

### A sigh

Gore's loud sighing during the candidate's debate Oct. 3 reinforced criticism that he was overbearing. His ratings before and after:

Oct. 1-3 49% Oct. 4-6 41%<sup>145</sup>

The sometime dramatic shifts in Gallup's poll were considered by the paper major events that shifted the public back and forth. While the article gives the caveat that other factors could affect the results, the article clearly insinuates that the events and the poll changes are related. The message is clear: the public changes its mind in big ways after seemingly tiny events, because of one day in the tracking poll being different (sometimes very different) from the next.

Tracking polls in general have been particularly influential in broadcast news, particularly towards the end of campaigns, during the "too close to call" stage of the national narrative. Unlike the newspapers, broadcast news, due to its short length every night and the need to discuss other stories, rarely report more than a single poll, making that poll even more meaningful for the broadcast news' campaign analysis. A major example was NBC during the end of the 2000 campaign, when its in-house tracking poll would be used to show the supposed

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<sup>145</sup> Page, Susan. "Bush, Gore maneuver last lap in race of their lives." *USA Today*. 19 Oct. 2000.

daily fluctuations of public opinion every day. On October 20th, they reported their tracking poll showing a tie at 44 percent<sup>146</sup>, then on the 21st it “still [showed]...a statistical dead heat”<sup>147</sup>, but on the 22nd it changed with “Bush leading...by four points and looking for more”<sup>148</sup>, but by the 23rd “[the race] tightened back to a two point lead for [Bush] today,” and that the lead clearly “is liable to change in the slightest breeze.”<sup>149</sup> However, by the 24th Gore apparently had “a bounce, as they call it in the political business,” because of a “small three point lead over Bush.”<sup>150</sup> Sadly for Gore, NBC said the next day that his lead was narrowing from three points to two<sup>151</sup>, but the next day he was able to hang onto that lead. While this time NBC did emphasize the margin of error<sup>152</sup>, the organization still went out of its way to describe these changes in the tracking poll from day to day, and the next day again reported on the poll, now saying that Bush had regained the lead.<sup>153</sup> A viewer would have perceived a very volatile end to the campaign.

This broadcast media tendency to use tracking polls to create the sense of a constant back-and-forth at the end of a campaign has not disappeared since 2000. CBS did the same thing in 2012, this time with Gallup’s tracking poll. They reported on October 9th that Romney had a two point lead<sup>154</sup>, then a tie on the 10th<sup>155</sup>, then Romney’s “slender” one-point lead on the

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<sup>146</sup> NBC Nightly News. 20 Oct. 2000.

<sup>147</sup> NBC Nightly News. 21 Oct. 2000.

<sup>148</sup> NBC Nightly News. 22 Oct. 2000.

<sup>149</sup> NBC Nightly News. 23 Oct. 2000.

<sup>150</sup> NBC Nightly News. 24 Oct. 2000.

<sup>151</sup> NBC Nightly News. 25 Oct. 2000.

<sup>152</sup> NBC Nightly News. 26 Oct. 2000.

<sup>153</sup> NBC Nightly News. 27 Oct. 2000.

<sup>154</sup> CBS Evening News. 9 Oct. 2012.

<sup>155</sup> CBS Evening News. 10 Oct. 2012.



11th<sup>156</sup>, then Romney's two point lead on the 12th<sup>157</sup>, then Romney maintaining that lead on the 13th<sup>158</sup> and 15th<sup>159</sup>, and then Romney's "small but genuine and growing" four point lead on the 16th.<sup>160</sup> CBS reported Gallup's changes for many of the remaining days of the campaign after that. While it did mention that these results were within the margin of error more than NBC had, the organization still took the time to discuss the poll's changes every day.

Even if NBC and CBS thought that they were just trying to show that these were close races (at least supposedly on the national level), showing daily changes in tracking polls gives the audience the likely incorrect feeling of a very volatile race. These cases confirm the findings from Reavy (2004) and Patterson (2005) on the possible media abuse of these types of polls. These tracking polls also give the media more "news" to report on, as Rosenstiel (2005) noted, even if this "news" probably means something else: nothing. As Mark Blumenthal said in my interview, "It's almost always noise. It's almost always meaningless." Yet daily changes in tracking polls have become an important aspect of the media portrayal of an unstable national narrative, especially towards the end of these campaigns.

### The focus on "Momentum"

An extremely important aspect of the volatile national media narrative in presidential races is who has the "momentum." According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of the word is

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<sup>156</sup> CBS Evening News. 11 Oct. 2012.

<sup>157</sup> CBS Evening News. 12 Oct. 2012.

<sup>158</sup> CBS Evening News. 13 Oct. 2012.

<sup>159</sup> CBS Evening News. 15 Oct. 2012.

<sup>160</sup> CBS Evening News. 16 Oct. 2012.

“the strength or force that allows something to continue or to grow stronger or faster as time passes.”<sup>161</sup> However, in the media it generally seems to indicate which candidate is doing well at a particular time in the campaign. Frank Bruni of *The Times* called it in 2000 an, “ineffable political commodity,”<sup>162</sup> and Dana Milbank of *The Post* said that same year that,

In the real world, presidential campaigns progress slowly and steadily over many months. But this is considered boring in the alternate reality occupied by campaign staffs, party hacks and, particularly, journalists. Instead, they occupy themselves by hunting for subtle (and sometimes overnight) mood swings. They call this stuff "momentum."<sup>163</sup>

Rather than simply focusing on whether a campaign is literally gaining more ground each day, there have been multiple aspects to the term’s importance when used in media coverage, all of which contribute to the those supposed “mood swings” in the race.

One major aspect is that candidates are usually claiming it for themselves to portray their campaigns as being on the right track. In late October 2000 *USA Today* reported that Karl Rove, Bush’s chief strategist, argued that momentum favored Bush.<sup>164</sup> A week later, perhaps to signal the media’s perception of a tossup narrative, *The Post* reported that, Joe Lieberman, Gore’s running mate, also claimed that, “We’ve got the momentum in our direction.”<sup>165</sup> In early October 2004 Kerry’s pollster said that, “We see very strong momentum to John Kerry nationally, particularly in the battleground states,”<sup>166</sup> at a time when the media generally perceived the race

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<sup>161</sup> Merriam-Webster. “Momentum.” *Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary*. Web.

<sup>162</sup> Bruni, Frank. “Swaggering Bush Camp Chases the Momentum.” *The New York Times*. 6 Nov. 2000.

<sup>163</sup> Milbank, Dana. “Follow the Bouncing Candidates; This Just In: What Goes Up Must Go Down.” *The Washington Post*. 21 Sep. 2000.

<sup>164</sup> See *Supra* note 145.

<sup>165</sup> Harris, John. “Scrambling on 'Friendly' Turf; In Full Roar, Gore Tries To Rally Tennessee Again.” *The Washington Post*. 26 Oct. 2000.

<sup>166</sup> Page, Susan. “Bush's approval rating slipping; Poll: It's lowest since July, but race still tied.” *USA Today*. 12 Oct. 2004.

to be heading in Kerry's direction. Usually these momentum claims fit the narrative of the race, but late in the 2012 campaign, when the Romney campaign was claiming momentum, there was some media skepticism to that claim. The *Post* said in late October that a Romney advisor told them that, "We're riding a wave and it hasn't hit the beach yet...All the trendlines are positive," in response to the suggestion by the paper that, "the Republican had peaked too early and his momentum has stalled."<sup>167</sup> In all these cases a changing and close race appeared to be at hand.

On the flip side, the media will often report on candidates dismissing the sense that the other campaign has momentum. A good example is the Romney campaign in 2012, which had quite a different tune on momentum before the first presidential debate. In early September the campaign said that, "We're very comfortable with the reality of what this race is about, and we're not in the momentum business,"<sup>168</sup> and later that month claimed that, "if you don't like a poll coming out of a state, wait five minutes and you'll see one that you do like."<sup>169</sup> These counterclaims on momentum usually seem to fit the media's sense on the state of the race.

Besides presidential debates, the conventions, and polls, the media really like to use campaign rallies as a possible barometer of measuring momentum. In early October 2004, to show that Kerry had momentum, The *Post* said that, "This [Kerry rally is] one of those impeccably advanced rallies of a late presidential campaign, a spectacle to convey a sense of Almighty Momentum."<sup>170</sup> After the first debate in 2012, The *Times* said that Romney could use "the enthusiasm of large crowds during a three-day visit to Florida" to create "momentum to

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<sup>167</sup> Rucker, Philip. "With electoral end zone in view, candidates blitz swing states." *The Washington Post*. 27 Oct. 2012.

<sup>168</sup> Balz, Dan, and Philip Rucker. "Pivotal time for Obama, Romney." *The Washington Post*. 9 Sep. 2012.

<sup>169</sup> See *Supra* note 38.

<sup>170</sup> Leibovich, Mark. "John Kerry, Stumping as Fast as He Can." *The Washington Post*. 11 Oct. 2004.

carry a state that, by all accounts, is crucial to his path to the White House.”<sup>171</sup> POLITICO concurred on the meaning of Romney’s rallies, saying right before the election that a 25,000 person rally near Philadelphia, “[according to the Romney campaign,] illustrates [Romney’s] momentum” in the state.<sup>172</sup> It appears that the media believe that campaign rallies can be a legitimate way to describe the state of, and supposed changes in, a campaign.

Another aspect of the media’s momentum focus is that once the media think a candidate has momentum, it is important for that candidate to sustain it and for the other campaign to block it and regain it for their side. For example, after the 2004 Republican Convention, *USA Today* said that, “President Bush tried to sustain the momentum from last week’s Republican National Convention with a weekend of campaigning focused on his defense of the war with Iraq and his pledge to reform the tax code.”<sup>173</sup> When Kerry was supposedly surging, *The Times* said that, “Mr. Cheney was under pressure [for the vice presidential debate] to halt any momentum the Democratic ticket had picked up.”<sup>174</sup> This continued into 2012, with Romney, “having rallied his supporters with his performance in Denver, was seeking to keep that momentum going [in the second debate],” according to *The Post*,<sup>175</sup> and *The Times* said that, “[the second debate] was Mr. Obama’s opportunity to try to restore his campaign’s momentum.”<sup>176</sup> This portrayal of

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<sup>171</sup> Gabriel, Trip. “Romney Works to Build Momentum in Florida, a State Critical to Victory.” *The New York Times*. 7 Oct. 2012.

<sup>172</sup> Cirilli, Kevin. “Cutter: Pennsylvania has 'tightened'.” *POLITICO*. 6 Nov. 2012.

<sup>173</sup> Benedetto, Richard, and Judy Keen. “Upbeat Bush campaign rides convention 'bounce'; President knocks his opponent for 'yet another new position' on Iraq.” *USA Today*. 7 Sep. 2004.

<sup>174</sup> Stevenson, Richard, and Robin Toner. “For Cheney and Edwards, a Night of Sharp Exchanges.” *The New York Times*. 6 Oct. 2004.

<sup>175</sup> Tumulty, Karen, and Philip Rucker. “With stakes high, Obama hits back at Romney in a fiery second debate; The stakes are high for both candidates in the second presidential debate of the campaign.” *The Washington Post*. 18 Oct. 2012.

<sup>176</sup> Rutenberg, Jim, and Jeff Zeleny. “Rivals Bring Bare Fists to Rematch.” *The New York Times*. 16 Oct. 2012.

momentum as a type of object that has to be held on to and goes back and forth between candidates fits with a volatile view of the race. The *Post* in late September 2012 seemed to sum up this view, saying, “The sequence goes something like this: Romney hits the ground trying to build momentum, then Obama does the same, counter-messaging and counter-punching to block any Romney gains.”<sup>177</sup>

At the same time, momentum almost seems to be like a kind of currency, similar to the idea of political capital. The *Post* said that the Kerry campaign after the first debate believed that they now had “much-needed momentum,” meaning that they did not have it before. Now that they had some, it would allow Kerry to “shift the focus onto Bush in an effort to capitalize on what polls show is continuing public disapproval of his policies in Iraq and at home.”<sup>178</sup> When the media agreed on Romney’s boost from the first debate, NBC said that Romney “is aiming to harness momentum after a successful first debate,”<sup>179</sup> and The *Times* claimed that, “a gathering sense of momentum is also keeping several options [states] alive for Mr. Romney,” even if he was not leading in any of those states.<sup>180</sup> As momentum can apparently create new opportunities for campaigns, according to the media, it fits with the idea that the horse race is unstable and liable to change.

Given the media’s apparent belief that momentum can portray a changing race in the national narrative, it is not surprising that it is such a major component of horse race coverage.

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<sup>177</sup> Gardner, Amy, and Philip Rucker. “Obama, Romney court veterans in Virginia.” *The Washington Post*. 28 Sep. 2012.

<sup>178</sup> Balz, Dan. “Debate Leads to Shifts in Strategy; Advisers Predict Tightening Race.” *The Washington Post*. 3 Oct. 2004.

<sup>179</sup> See *Supra* note 121.

<sup>180</sup> Zeleny, Jeff. “Cash Flood Fuels Fight to the End in Leaning States.” *The New York Times*. 20 Oct. 2012.

However, it does not appear to always exactly match the media's national narrative of the race. This was particularly the case in late October 2012, with disagreement about whether Romney's "momentum" existed, even when there was consensus that the race nationally was very tight. The *Post* said in late October that, "As is the case nationally, the available data in both Virginia and Florida suggest that Romney's rapid upward movement has slowed (or stopped entirely) over the past week to 10 days."<sup>181</sup> However, the paper did not even itself agree on if Romney had momentum, saying only two days earlier that, "Mitt Romney kept his momentum. Despite a debate that polls show he lost, some unhelpful comments from GOP Senate candidate Richard Mourdock and some Democratic suggestions that his momentum wasn't real, Romney showed that it is, in fact, real."<sup>182</sup> Nonetheless, the term still implies a changing race, and it appears to be another way of the national narrative being selectively emphasized more than the state narrative. POLITICO, which believed that Romney did indeed have momentum, wrote in late October that Romney did not yet have an Electoral College path to victory, yet had "Big Mo," as if that was more important than state polling. The organization said it was, "momentum vs. the map."<sup>183</sup> National "momentum" apparently matters more than state "momentum" (or lack of in Romney's case).

It thus appears from press coverage that "momentum" is a crucial type of substance that can alter the race and can change hands between the candidates, even if real movement for a certain candidate was not increasing day to day. As such, its usage in presidential horse race coverage inherently indicates volatility. Mark Blumenthal in my interview disapproved of the use

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<sup>181</sup> See *Supra* note 126.

<sup>182</sup> The Washington Post. "Well, I think when you have somebody of your own race that you're proud of being president of the United States, I applaud Colin for standing with him." *The Washington Post*. 29 Oct. 2012.

<sup>183</sup> Thrush, Glenn, and Jonathan Martin. "Obama vs. Romney: How they plan to win." *POLITICO*. 22 Oct. 2012.

of the term because its literal meaning was not how it was applied in media coverage. Said Blumenthal, “Except for [during presidential primaries], there isn’t momentum. Just because you just gained five points doesn’t mean you’re going to gain another five [points]. [It] doesn’t mean that there’s some tangible momentum like the way we talk about football.”

### Other Noticeable Trends

Along with how the polls themselves are described, the emphasis on certain polls, and the focus on “momentum,” there have been other ways that media coverage measures the presidential horse race that can help create the media narrative. One of these ways has been that the media usually like to get the perspective of the campaigns into their news stories. This is done in two ways.

First, after a poll or polls are mentioned, the media organization asks for the view of the campaign about what it thinks the current state of the race is. The campaign can be used in an article to confirm the media organization's perception of the polls, such as “aides to Mr. Romney acknowledge that they are not leading in either [Ohio or Florida]” in late September 2012 in *The Times*.<sup>184</sup> What is interesting is that if the campaign instead disputes the media organization’s conclusion about where the polls are, possibly by pointing to other polls that look better for them, there can be pushback. In mid-September 2012, the Romney campaign disputed the description from *The Post* of Romney flailing by “[noting] that the Gallup tracking poll that showed the president with a six-point lead last week now shows the rivals separated by three points,” and that therefore Romney was doing better than was being characterized; after noting

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<sup>184</sup> Rutenberg, Jim, and Jeff Zeleny. “Polls Show Obama Is Widening His Lead in Ohio and Florida.” *The New York Times*. 26 Sep. 2012.

the supposed tightening in the Gallup poll, *The Post* dismissed the Romney campaign's point because, "Obama's three-point margin is still significant, given how stable the race was for so many months."<sup>185</sup> It appears that the media will push back on a campaign's claims if it doesn't fit the consensus narrative. Once the narrative consensus has been set, it seems to seep into even discussing quotes by campaign staff.

Second, a campaign is also sometimes asked to comment on a specific poll, often an in-house poll, which can provide legitimacy to that poll and that portrayal of the race. A major example was right before the 2012 election, when *USA Today* asked both the Obama and Romney campaigns to comment on their Gallup poll of swing states showing them both at 48 percent. The Obama campaign said it meant that Obama was leading in the swing states, and the Romney campaign said it meant it was a very close race where Romney voters are more excited than Obama voters. Besides the campaign responses giving the in-house poll a type of credibility, the article seemed to be sympathetic to the Romney campaign's response, saying that Romney's pollster "notes the closeness of the race;"<sup>186</sup> this likely stems from the fact that the response fit the paper's reporting and the too-close-to-call media narrative of that time.

Another focus in media coverage of the horse race is the importance of voters considered undecided, independent, and could swing between either candidate. In newspapers, many articles like to include small anecdotes that are supposed to exemplify a candidate's success or problems, helping to confirm the media's narrative at that moment. For example, during Gore's national surge narrative after the Democratic Convention, *The Post* gave a couple of small stories of white workers in the Midwest who said they liked Gore more than before,

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<sup>185</sup> Balz, Dan. "Romney's real test: The first presidential debate." *The Washington Post*. 18 Sep. 2012.

<sup>186</sup> See *Supra* note 143.



supposedly giving proof that Gore gained ground.<sup>187</sup> The broadcast news likes to focus on these types of voters by creating focus groups, especially for their reactions to presidential debates. This can also confirm the media's narrative at that specific time. After the first debate in 2004, for example, NBC looked at a group of undecided Ohio voters, and the "Democrats [were] heartened by scenes like this in battleground Ohio, where six undecided voters thought Kerry won."<sup>188</sup> These voters could show that the Kerry rebound was real. Undecided voters can also be used to portray a closer race, as Campbell (2007) had noted. In late October 2004, for example, The *Times* had an entire article focused on a Philadelphia suburb showing many undecided voters and their feelings about the candidates, which would show how Pennsylvania could go for Bush or Kerry;<sup>189</sup> this also fits the close national media narrative at that point during the 2004 campaign.

An interesting possible exception to the playing up of the media narrative is the reporting on campaigns citing internal polls. Usually internal polls are cited by the campaign on the wrong side of the media narrative. For example, when Bush was perceived as leading nationally in media coverage in September 2004, the Kerry campaign disputed that belief because, "The campaign's internal polling shows that the head-to-head race nationally is closer than some of the more recent public polls have indicated and that many states remain competitive."<sup>190</sup> Campaigns almost never report the details of their own polling to the media; this generally leaves the

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<sup>187</sup> Edsall, Thomas. "Wooing Working Men; Gore Makes Inroads in Key Constituency." *The Washington Post*. 11 Sep. 2000.

<sup>188</sup> NBC Nightly News. 1 Oct. 2004.

<sup>189</sup> Dwyer, Jim. "Still a Puzzle for the Undecided, A Pivotal Few Among Voters." *The New York Times*. 25 Oct. 2004.

<sup>190</sup> Allen, Mike, and Lois Romano. "Pinpointing Battlegrounds Amid Debate Preparations." *The Washington Post*. 26 Sep. 2004.

campaign's polls as simply a question mark, and creates uncertainty, over the publicly available polls.

The media also appear to have a mixed view on state polls that appear out of the norm. The *Post* in 2004 dismissed a couple of polls that had Bush very close to Kerry in staunchly Democratic Maryland. The *Post* said that, "questions about the methodology" made the polls hard to take seriously, and that, "recent polls using more conventional methodology" had the state being its normal self with Kerry leading.<sup>191</sup> On the other hand, when a few polls indicated a surprisingly close race in Democratic New Jersey that year, the media took it very seriously. Both *The Times*<sup>192</sup> and *The Post*<sup>193</sup> investigated what was happening in the state, finding anecdotes and talking to political leaders in the state, and this seemed to confirm the finding of those polls. It appears that in order for the media to take seriously abnormal state behavior, more proof than a couple of polls are necessary.

### Conclusion

The debate over whether horse race coverage is appropriate will likely continue well into the future. What is not debatable is that horse race coverage is not going to go away. Given that, the media should cover the horse race as effectively as possible. They are not. While it is good that increasing numbers of polls and polling aggregators like RealClearPolitics are being cited by articles, too much of the time media coverage still gives no proof as to where the race

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<sup>191</sup> Wagner, John. "Kane Touts Local State Polls Showing Gains by Bush." *The Washington Post*. 7 Oct. 2004.

<sup>192</sup> Kocieniewski, David. "New Jersey, a Blue State, May Be Trying On Shades of Purple." *The New York Times*. 26 Sep. 2004.

<sup>193</sup> Powell, Michael. "Terrorism Threat Narrows Race; Bush Gains When That Issue Comes Up." *The Washington Post*. 14 Oct. 2004.

stands. This increases the chance for inaccuracy. The mentioning of margin of error and other types of error is also still too inconsistent, which can create the false impression of real leads in polls when there may not be and can create the false impression of erratic public opinion.

The basic problem in horse race coverage, however, is that the focus on getting the story right just does not seem to be the main priority for the media. Exoo's (1983) speculation that what matters more is having a new story, not a constant story, appears to be accurate. Gore and Bush may have been constantly very close in the Electoral College in 2000, Kerry and Bush may have constantly been very close in the Electoral College in 2004, and Obama may have constantly lead in the Electoral College in 2012, but a casual look at news coverage would have made this hard to notice. Perhaps the problem is that these Electoral College stories are, literally, not new. Watching the same story every day does not create interesting news. As Broh (1980) noted, there is a "search for excitement" in presidential campaign coverage; there is a bias for "news" that show changes in the race after a certain period of time. Since no real drastic changes happened in the states during the fall campaign in these elections, the media will not find "excitement" there. To find it, certain other factors in campaigns are emphasized. Instead of repeatedly noticing how close or how one candidate is leading in the states, the media can discuss a different national narrative after every month or few weeks, a bigger-than-usual rally that a candidate has that conveys his "momentum" that he can use to change the race, an undecided voter in a suburb who cannot make up his mind who to vote for, and a national tracking poll (perhaps Gallup's) showing an election that is so back-and-forth that election night will have to be suspenseful and exhilarating. It all creates a great story, but it is not great journalism.

This media urge for excitement seems to have taken over all aspects of campaign coverage, whether it is with discussing poll results with campaigns or discussing who needs to gain “momentum” back and how. It is difficult to explain otherwise how an organization like POLITICO preemptively changed the narrative before anything had even happened, or why media organizations actively cared more about close national polls in the face of state polls showing a candidate leading in the closing days of the 2012 election. As Exoo and Rosenstiel (2005) noted, even if this all conveys an incorrect narrative, it could get these media organizations more money by supposedly getting more people to watch or read since there is more uncertainty in the race; this allows them to compete with other media organizations doing the same thing. Every media organization reporting its own poll could help its profits as well, since it gets to create its own “news” and essentially gets to talk about its own brand. The potential to not be accurate matters because, as Mark Blumenthal told me, the public will always care about the presidential horse race. They want to know who is going to win, and when people watch or read the news, they believe that what is being told to them about the state of the race is accurate.

It should also be noted that there is a reason why the state narrative and general state polling were the most unchanging factor in these elections: as a whole, it was the most accurate. Bush’s 2000 and 2004 Electoral College victories were very narrow, and Obama wound up winning the Electoral College in 2012 by a sizable margin. The extensive focus on the national narrative and other factors not only creates volatility, but it also downplays how a president is elected. A winning candidate needs 270 electoral votes, not 50.1 percent of the popular vote.

Neither the Bush campaign in 2004<sup>194</sup> nor the Obama campaign in 2012<sup>195</sup> conducted national polls precisely for this reason.

If there was not an incentive for a back-and-forth race in the media, it might be understandable to think that media believe that the entire country should matter when reporting to a national audience. Mainly reporting to viewers all over the country what happens in Ohio and Florida is probably not very interesting to viewers who are not from those states; yet, under the rules of the Electoral College, that is what matters. If the media perceive a candidate to be leading in the Electoral College, as they did with Obama in 2012, then that should probably take priority over national polling and other factors. This is not to say that national polling should be ignored. It still has a role to play in horse race coverage, but in order for the media to be more accurate and avoid the type of criticism they received<sup>196 197</sup> over the accuracy of their horse race coverage in the final weeks of the 2012 campaign, the importance of the national narrative and other factors should be downplayed for future presidential elections. This is only going to get more problematic for the media in future elections if this change is not made, as state polling possibly becomes even more numerous and if only a handful of states continue to determine who gets elected.

The media needs to start caring more about accuracy in its presidential horse race coverage, even if it takes the “excitement” out of the race; however, the economic incentives for the media probably make this unlikely. This is a serious concern, given that accuracy is supposed

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<sup>194</sup> Cook, Charlie. “As The Nation Goes, So Do Swing States.” *The Cook Political Report*. 31 Aug. 2004.

<sup>195</sup> Blumenthal, Mark. “Obama Campaign Polls: How The Internal Data Got It Right.” *The Huffington Post*. 21 Nov. 2012.

<sup>196</sup> Nyhan, Brendan. “The momentum behind a misleading narrative.” *Columbia Journalism Review*. 26 Oct. 2012.

<sup>197</sup> MacGillis, Alec. “The Liberal Media, in Love With Our Narrative.” *The New Republic*. 23 Oct. 2012.

to be a principle of journalism, and that, since people also generally believe news coverage, it is possible that horse race coverage can affect the votes of certain people and thus election results.

Said Blumenthal to me, “[It’s] our obligation to get [the horse race] right...[If] we’re characterizing [the race], we should get it right...We should get the whole narrative right throughout, [to] the extent that we can.” The media can, and should, do better.

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