CHARACTERISTICS OF PRESS COVERAGE: CANDIDATES AND BALLOT ISSUES IN CALIFORNIA

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A Thesis

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Abstract

of

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRESS COVERAGE: CANDIDATES AND BALLOT ISSUES IN CALIFORNIA

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Neil G. Amos

Scholars have found contrasts in media coverage for different types of candidate races (e.g. Senator and Governor). However, existing research has not assessed the coverage received by candidates and ballot measures in states such as California, which utilize the initiative process extensively. This thesis examines media coverage of both direct and indirect democracy to determine contrasts in such coverage.

I examined media coverage of five elections to determine the character of media content for statewide races featuring both candidates and ballot measures, using newspaper content from The Sacramento Bee and the San Francisco Chronicle. In addition to tabulating the quantity of coverage, I assessed the issue substance of the content to determine if issue based campaigns are more likely to receive issues-based coverage. Additionally, I considered the presence of elite endorsements for ballot measures, which have a demonstrable impact on voters. Additionally, I examined instances in which ballot measure issues permeate candidate contests by setting their issue agendas.

This study found that ballot measure contests are substantially more likely to be covered on issue terms than candidate contests. This is especially the case when candidates appear on the ballot alongside initiative contests. Many other characteristics of coverage are similar, however. Elite endorsements are very frequent, indicating that voters are also able to assess initiative contests heuristically. Issue agenda setting is less frequent, indicating that ballot issues are not necessarily driving the broader statewide issue conversation.

__________________________
Chair

Dr. Kimberly Nalder

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Political scientists study election campaigns to determine how information is presented, consumed, and translated into democratic decision-making. Usually, this involves the selection of candidates by constituents who have little interest in the details of policy. Ballot measures, however, have become an integral part of the political process in California, and in many ways have become the chief mechanism for altering the process itself. In this form of democracy, voters make the policy decisions that the candidate-as-trustee model assumes they cannot. In terms of political science and election campaigns, ballot measures often provide a separate area of study given their nature as mass policy elections rather than the selection of representative candidates. Examinations of public engagement and media coverage of politics during campaigns are legion, but usually focus on national races rather than on statewide races, and are almost exclusively devoted to candidate campaigns.

In the case of state and local races, the news media play a vital role in providing the voter with the information to make decisions; certainly to a greater degree than is required for nationwide races, due to the latter’s reliance on a far more rich and diverse information environment. Researchers have generally not undertaken examinations of media coverage of ballot measure campaigns that attempt to show how they differ from coverage of candidates. In this study, I will attempt to fill this void by directly assessing the character and substance of media coverage of campaigns that feature both types of races. By examining press coverage of these contests, I hope to discern aspects of
coverage, such as relative levels of substantive coverage, which provide insight into the
nature of the information environment and informational acquisition by the electorate.
Such data could potentially reveal a statewide media milieu considerably altered from
nationwide representative campaigns by the frequent presence of ballot measures.
Previous studies found significant contrasts in media coverage of various offices (e.g.
gubernatorial vs. Senate candidates). The larger fundamental gap between direct and
indirect democracy may elicit more stark contrasts in coverage that illuminate the ballot
measure as a distinct institution amid traditional candidate politics.
Chapter 2

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Literature Review

The Initiative and the Knowledge of Citizen Legislators

It has been a task of political science for many decades to discern how and why voters make choices, and whether these choices are rational. The extensive work focusing on how the citizen obtains and utilizes information about representative candidates is replete with a large number of factors. Researchers have studied how citizens acquire and maintain an ideology with which to derive candidate and party cues, how citizens take positions on various issues, and ultimately how they make voting choices. This tradition focuses on voters selecting representatives as trustees of their policy views, rather than the policy-based determinations that take place in ballot measure contests. While many of the factors that play into determining political decision making would apply to both types of campaigns, what is unclear is how the information environment responds to the task of presenting information on ballot measures. Often, voters are educated on both the issue (which is singular in contrast to candidate campaigns based on multiple issues) and the politics of the issue during the course of a relatively short campaign, and are highly malleable. Consequently, the sources of information take on increased importance when there are fewer cues and shortcuts for complex and often obscure policy questions.

Scholars frequently acknowledge that voters lack sufficient information and understanding to make adequate decisions on ballot measures. The consensus of social
scientists and historians evaluating the efficacy of the original Progressive vision has traditionally been that voters have failed miserably at utilizing the initiative process correctly. A proper use of the process would entail common citizens going around the legislative process to enact efficacious majoritarian policies where elected representatives have not been adequate trustees (Bowler and Donovan 1998, Broder 2000, Ellis 2002). Instead, these critics vociferously allege, factional, moneyed and special interests have manipulated citizens into voting on policies using only vague knowledge and raw emotion. These institutional considerations largely focus on ballot measure qualification, campaigns and interest groups, the judicial issues surrounding the process, and on the electorate itself. The parameters of informational acquisition, which is a requisite for voters to make rational decisions, is not explored in detail, specifically the different information environments that may surround ballot measures as distinct from candidate selection. The anti-initiative forces implicitly contend that sources of information are in some way illegitimate: voter information guides are dense and unintelligible, paid media content is manipulative, and news media fall into the same traps as voters, as slaves to a process that truly benefits minority and unrepresentative interests. If this were the case, there would be little reason to bother examining the poisoned well of media information in ballot measure contests. Despite this long-standing skepticism of the initiative process among many scholars, however, evidence has emerged that the process of direct democracy may in fact retain some of its advertised benefits.

Recently, a pro-initiative faction has developed which sees increasing use of ballot measures as a worthy addition to the democratic process especially given the
perceived corruption and ineffectiveness in government in the modern era, a situation analogous to Progressive times. Some conclude that ballot measures increase the knowledge of the citizenry as well as the efficacy of democracy by familiarizing the electorate with a broad range of issues (Tolbert and Smith 2001, 2005, and Smith 2002). By confronting voters with issues rather than the trusteeship model, the initiative process provides a political outlet more weighed towards substantive knowledge rather than the inexact and frequently personality-driven candidate system. Presumably, this conforms to some vague notion of democratic effectiveness; the more substantial the matters voted on by the electorate, the more information seeps in and the more efficacious the whole process, including subsequent selection of candidates, will become.

Additionally, these scholars find through comparisons of initiative and non-initiative states that the presence of ballot measures increases such factors as turnout, civic engagement, and social capital; the latter being a refutation of Robert Putnam’s contention that ballot measures decrease the quality of political community. These factors are a byproduct of the political environment created by the initiative process, rather than policy changes made through the process itself. In addition to these broad positive effects conferred by the initiative process to our democratic polity, citizen legislators may also be able to utilize campaign messages and information in a coherent fashion, even absent complete knowledge of the issues on the ballot. Thus, the policy end of the initiative process could possibly lead to correct voting decisions with sufficient frequency to add to the instrumental benefits.
Ballot Measure Campaigns and Elite Cues

Magleby (1984) recognized the most fundamental difference when voters considering direct legislation: the absence of the party cue. Lesser (i.e. state and local) candidate races see the exclusive reliance of the citizenry on the party cue, but in the case of ballot measures, this heuristic is often absent or difficult to discern. In fact, it was the specific intention of Progressive reformers to reduce the power of parties (McCuan 1998, Ellis 2002). Magleby finds that media are the primary filter through which citizens obtain the party cue in candidate elections. The assumption is that the absence of the party cue is the primary barrier between the citizenry and a correct vote choice. If the assumption is that the party cue is wholly absent in ballot measure contests [this is not always entirely true, particularly on high-profile measures endorsed by leading political figures; see Smith and Tolbert (2001), Branton (2003)], then elite cues of other types become vital. Voters can be cued by individual representatives, national figures, interest groups (excluding groups formed exclusively to promote or reject ballot legislation), and newspaper endorsements. Frequently, elites agree on major ballot measures (Magleby 1984, 152), so cues can be consistent across multiple sources. The sources of these cues are not direct and personal, however; rather, they filter through news media during the course of a campaign. Can voters receive elite cues in large-scale fashion in a direct legislation campaign focused on groups of single-issue measures?

Elite endorsements can be valuable where direct party cues and high-level information is not easily located. In elections with multiple complex ballot measures, heuristics take on greater importance, and voters are interested in who supports and
opposes a ballot measure (CGS 2008, 275). How effective is the process of acquiring and utilizing elite cues? Lupia (1994) found in a study of California’s insurance reform ballot measures that people with only minimal knowledge of the issues involved were able to use standing knowledge to gain adequate information to make decisions. Ballot measure campaigns lack both partisan cues and retrospective evaluations, and thus are far more reliant on elite cues to transfer information to voters. Citizen legislators used their connections to parties and individuals to receive messages about which way to vote on these initiatives. In this type of scenario, elite cues can be enough for citizen legislators to turn their latent preferences into useful opinions on complex policy issues. Lupia used exit polling data to find which interest groups were supported by voters, however interest group cues can ostensibly be picked up by voters either directly (e.g. mailers) or indirectly (e.g. news media). Karp (1998) found that voters in Washington State were able to use a cue from U.S. House Speaker Tom Foley to make correct decisions on a term limits measure, information acquired primarily through newspaper endorsements. The vagaries of news production are significantly at play here; voters who are in adequate information environments are likely to become better citizen legislators. Gerber and Lupia (1998) actually propose centralizing information to force ballot measure proponents to inform the public about their positions and supporters. Such control is highly unlikely in a free society, so the media filter likely remains a permanent fixture in the transfer of elite opinion to voters.

Bowler and Donovan (1994, 1998) conclude that through elite cues voters are able to crudely approximate the forms of deliberative democracy typically handled by
elite representatives (1998: 168). Bizarrely, this form of democracy often sees citizen legislators taking guidance from their elected representatives in a process that reverses republican democratic theory. Despite what survey numbers or previous academic studies may indicate, voters with little information are able to translate their middling knowledge into correct voting decisions. This is frequently and simply accomplished through a ‘no’ vote, thus preserving the status quo and demonstrating appropriate moderation in the face of overzealous initiative proponents. In low information environments regarding complex ballot questions, the dissemination of elite cues to voters becomes even more crucial. The conception that the electorate successfully receives elite cues is an extremely important notion, as it partially refutes the theses of Magelby and others who found that it was highly unlikely that voters would make coherent and correct decisions on direct legislation.

Since elite cues are crucial and one of the only chances a voter has to achieve a reasonably accurate policy position, the source of these heuristics is important and subject to considerable variation in intensity and quality. Voters use multiple information sources to varying degrees of attention (Magleby 1984, 178). Ballot pamphlets, discredited by many as too densely written for the majority of voters, lack a comprehensive listing of elite endorsers (e.g. Magleby 1984, CGS 2008). Direct campaign content can certainly be a legitimate source of cues (provided the cues are accurate), but the highly variable news media environment also presents information to voters, and the degree to which it includes elite cues in news content would determine its success at conveying appropriate information to cue-taking news consumers. Of course,
voters must retain some information about the issues themselves since the initiative process is not supposed to be a conveyance and response test for elite cues; the news media’s ability to provide substantive information rather than superfluous or manipulative content is paramount to determining citizen information levels.

The Media as Information Mediators and Agenda Setters

For many of the early years in media studies, the ‘minimal effects’ theory held that there was little of value in media messages and content that could be translated into knowledge for the democratic citizen. More recent analysis, however, have revealed a role for the media commensurate to its size and ability to inform a citizenry. The media, rather than being a static provider of new information from external sources, act in an ‘agenda setting’ capacity, reinforcing existing attitudes and framing issues and candidates in certain ways as they enter the information environment (Graber 2002). Through its function as a ‘gatekeeper’ of which stories make it into public view, a decision process influenced by diverse factors such as economic demands on private news industry and the nebulous concept of ‘newsworthiness,’ the news media are largely able to shape the subjects of the discourse. Studies have indicated that the media’s gatekeeping ability to set the agenda is so powerful, primarily because of its total monopoly on information, that issues presented in the news prime nearly all of the electorate (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). While these revelations may provide useful justification for explorations into how the media function in various political capacities, it raises questions about the ballot measure, one the major non-media based mass political information tools. If there were a
specific agenda-setting function for this institution, it would warrant a separate area of study as a potential priming device in campaigns.

In addition to the generic issue agenda supplied by the media, ballot measures also can act as a primer of a policy agenda for a given campaign, including candidate contests. Nicholson (2005) finds that ballot measures can have the effect of priming the electorate by raising policy issues that carry over into candidate contests, primarily by offering low-cost information that the electorate seeks when making numerous choices on complex ballots. Salience of issues increases with the presence of ballot measures, and higher level (i.e. more money, heightened media visibility) contests result in more successful priming of the agenda (2005, 136). While the benefits of such a ballot-measure primed electoral environment may be somewhat specious if interest groups are controlling which issues the electorate decides with (2005, 135), such findings show that ballot measures are not a separate area of political decision making, and should be contrasted and assessed in the context of candidate contests with which they have significant interplay. Media content, with its inherent importance to defining the agenda, can multiply the influence of ballot measure issues by applying them to candidate campaigns and establishing them as part of the general issue environment.

Press Coverage vs. New Media

At the current time, the decline of the printed newspaper has many looking elsewhere to find the sources that citizens use for their information, whether they are blogs, customized news aggregations, or communicating with their more politically astute friends via text message. However, there is still a strong role for print media, particularly
for lower level state and local contests, with the much smaller focus of national media and organizations on these issues (Kahn 1995). TV and newspapers are the most widely used source for information on ballot measures (Magleby 1984, 135), and the obscurity of these campaigns makes it likely that there has not been significant movement towards reliance on esoteric online forms of information dispersion. The processes of statewide non-gubernatorial constitutional offices and ballot measure qualification are so arcane that media generally do not have incentive to cover these institutions until late in the process, when managed information is readily available. Television maintains its traditional role as an inferior transmitter of hard information and intelligent discourse, as compared to print media (e.g. Westlye 1991, Graber 2002, Druckman 2005). With specific regard to statewide candidates, newspapers engender more knowledge about candidates than televised news (Clarke and Fredin 1978), which has itself suffered a decline in substantive relevance due to corporate consolidation and relentless focus on irrelevant and nonsensical matters.

Particularly when examining ballot measure contests, media that have at least some interest in providing substantial information on policy are necessary in order to formulate exactly the legitimate contrasts and comparisons with candidate campaigns. According to Magleby, “voters rely almost entirely on mass media for proposition information” (Magleby 1984, 133), so newspaper content is for reasons of substance and relevance to voters the superior choice of format for inquiry into the validity of information in statewide campaigns. Newspapers may additionally feature varying degrees of substantive content, with “newspaper editorials associated with higher
education levels” (Bowler and Donovan 1998, 57), and newspaper opinion content being a chief potential source for elite cues and intelligent issue-based discourse.

Issues and Non-Issues in Press Coverage

Some scholarly work deals specifically with the matter of the types of coverage that the media presents. Typically, there is a (frequently ill-defined) division between issues-based coverage and horse race coverage. Naturally, scholars have generally concluded that the horse race is excessively prevalent in campaign coverage at the expense of issues-based coverage, the presentation of which increases the quality of deliberation and decision making by the electorate. According to Ramsden (1996), there is a specific ordered typology that the media should approach when deciding what types of stories to present during a political campaign. Policy issues, character issues, the horse race, and event stories, ordered for magnitude and importance, should be covered with awareness of the relative importance of these story types. The importance of issues based coverage is that it is the surest way for a voter to turn their political preferences (which are ostensibly policy based), into votes for a candidate who will accurately represent them. The issue of character, which is what Ramsden discusses extensively in his review of the literature, is only useful in candidate elections.

Another typology was provided by Kahn (1995), whose content analysis of concurrent gubernatorial and Senate campaigns determined that statewide coverage is more issues-based because of the lack of state polling data for the press to scrutinize. Coverage consisted of issue coverage, horserace coverage, and coverage of personality traits. Substantive issue coverage, a highly subjective concept, was coded latently, by
taking into consideration context and implicit meaning. California has two major polling sources, the Field Poll and the Public Policy Institute of California, so the conclusion regarding statewide polling data may be inapplicable given the large amount of data generated by these institutions. Rozell (1991) observed in an analysis of local vs. national press assessments of a gubernatorial campaign that there was a dearth of data on campaign coverage outside of political party factors and Presidential campaigns. News coverage was assigned to categories and subcategories based on specific cases and data, again illustrating the subjectivness of determining types of coverage for a given race. An examination of non-candidate factors for state races is a lacuna in the literature.

These typological models, while useful in outlining the general factors involved in assessing press coverage, are not directly relevant to an environment that includes both ballot measures and candidates, requiring a reinterpretation of which factors are clearly relevant in a campaign regardless of whether the matters before voters are candidate or issues-based. The clearest demarcation in types of coverage is clearly between substantive issues and horse race/nonissue coverage, with variation beyond that to control for office and candidate-specific factors. In examining media coverage of ballot measure campaigns in addition to candidate campaigns, the most instructive place to begin would be to identify definitions of issue and nonissue coverage.

**Horse Race vs. Issue Coverage**

One constant that is obviously present in all campaigns is the horse race. While in the case of candidate campaigns this type of coverage can provide cues to voters regarding the viability of candidates and their success at organizing and disseminating
messages, the value of these factors with regard to ballot measures is less clear. The viability of a ballot measure's campaign organization could potentially reveal itself, however the use of this information to voters who are making a binary choice on a matter of policy is questionable. Alternatively, it may be the case that a poorly run or manipulative ballot measure campaign will become exposed through this type of coverage and provide sufficient cues for voters to perceive malfeasance and reject the measure. However, the fundamental reality is that since voters are making a direct policy decision rather than deciding which representatives to filter their policy views through, knowing details of campaigns, polls and gossip is of even less importance in these contests. How then to determine how coverage can be judged as substantive?

Buchanan (1991) provided holistic definitions of what factors make up campaign coverage. Horse race coverage is that which emphasizes the ebbs and flows of the campaign, including such factors as momentum, polls, and candidate stump speeches. It also includes evaluations and comparisons of campaign strategy and assessments of the contributions and quality of campaign staff and organization. Horse race coverage was actually divided into two parts: general horse race coverage mostly generated by the press itself, and candidate conflict content, which came from candidates and campaigns and the conflictual statements made back and forth (Buchanan 1991, 5). Though a worthy division when breaking down candidate campaigns exclusively, it becomes convoluted when introducing the policy-based ballot measure campaign with its reduced focus on individual characteristics. Horse race information can potentially include issue information, however it is usually presented only when it has dramatic impact and
campaign officials are wont to massage it. In the case of ballot measures, however, the 
issues-based nature of the campaign makes it likely that a greater portion of horse race 
coverage would contain embedded issues-based coverage, blurring the distinctions 
traditionally made between these two types of coverage. As such, it may be that 
substantive issue coverage is the type more likely to be valid for the purposes of direct 
comparison with candidate campaigns.

Regarding substantive coverage, Graber (2002) and Buchanan (1991) devote 
significant attention to candidate trait and personality factors. Graber defines substantive 
coverage character and ‘professional factors’ like conduct and individual philosophy, 
while Buchanan terms these ‘candidate qualifications.’ The problem here is uncoupling 
relevant candidate-based evaluative criteria from the issues-based coverage of ballot 
measures; where citizens make policy-based choices, candidate information does not 
retain the same status as policy information. Buchanan defines policy issue coverage as 
stories whose principal emphasis is on the substance or the issues themselves rather than 
candidate positions, and which presents complex information in comprehensive, coherent 
language. Though candidate qualifications and traits are legitimate factors when selecting 
a candidate, it is much simpler and more coherent to countenance horse race and policy 
issues in a binary sense rather than introducing type-specific criteria into the mix. Under 
this rubric, substantive issues are those that directly address issues rather than candidate-
based filters.
News Media and Statewide Election Information

Examinations of media coverage of ballot measure campaigns and the ballot measure process are not frequently attempted, but there is some circumspect work in the area. Nicholson (2003), in attempting to determine the sources of awareness citizen legislators use to become knowledgeable about ballot measures and the process itself, examined media coverage as a potential source. This research found that media coverage was positively associated with greater awareness of ballot measures. The test was to tabulate the number of times a ballot measure appeared on the front page of the Los Angeles Times, an approach premised on the supposition that Times coverage was a barometer of opinion. Awareness, of course, does not equate to useful issue information or opinion, and this study does not address how this coverage may differ from awareness for candidates. Clearly, we need some more definitive work regarding how media cover the process in specific cases since ballot measures differ greatly and newspapers often bury their coverage of state government.

A specific examination of print media coverage of California’s smokefree bar law (Magzamen 2001) found that spending by tobacco corporations influenced media coverage by generating a large amount of attention to the messages they were trying to convey. In addition, opinion pieces ran counter to public opinion that indicated strong support for a restriction on smoking in bars and taverns. The content analysis process used was extremely detailed and well coded for a range of factors dealing with the issue, though the intense focus on the issues involved with this specific initiative drove the procedure. This research did suffer from having a well-defined (anti-big tobacco) bias.
However, it may be that in experiencing the campaign firsthand, these researchers were able to discern the appropriate information rather than relying on secondary data.

Watchdogs and academics frequently criticize the news media as inadequate, particularly for the purposes of conveying complex policy issues. Unfortunately, the alternatives to traditional media coverage are not attractive if one seeks an environment free of bias where people can make decision on facts. “Managed information dominates campaigns” (CGS 2008, 252), and sources such as slate mailers and interest group content, while occasionally providing useful information, are almost always biased in favor of select interests. Voter information guides provide valuable information (though they generally lack such necessary elements as interest group endorsements and contextual information for ballot measures), however expecting voters to pick up all the necessary information to make correct voting decisions with only this tool at their disposal is asking too much of the democratic citizen. The news media’s ability to provide usable information and describe the underlying political processes inherent in campaigns has a demonstrably positive effect on voter familiarity with issues and candidates. Of course, the private-sector news media environment can vary significantly, making its study more complex and more important in explicating its impact on the larger overall information environment.

Summary

Clearly, there is a large and disparate literature on media and politics in general, and on local newspaper coverage in particular. The broader initiative literature, whether lambasting the process as illigimate or, less commonly, conferring instrumental benefits
to it, indicates that the practice of direct democracy is vastly different from candidate politics. Traditional cues, such as party cues and candidate-based cues such as those relating to personality or temperament, are either absent or reduced in intensity for ballot measures. Still, the possibility exists for elite cues to influence the policy-based voting decisions made by the electorate in initiative contests. With regard to the print media content examined in this study, providing access to these elite cues may increase their influence and possibly change the nature of the coverage by introducing nonissue-based heuristics into otherwise policy-based ballot initiative elections. The agenda setting and information-mediating capacity of the media may also become a factor to the extent that it allows ballot measures to set the agenda of candidate contests. The media's willingness to utilize ballot issue information consistently could increase the agenda-setting potential of ballot measures.

With specific regard to issues-based coverage, the media literature defines issue information as the most optimal means of delivering information to the electorate. The literature on campaigns and media coverage focuses on issue and nonissue coverage, though the exact definitions of these are subject to reinterpretation for ballot measures given the lack of scholarly attention to the substance of these campaigns. The concept of issue coverage is sufficiently straightforward and objective enough as to allow for a direct comparison between candidates and ballot measures. This revelation suggests that for the purpose of my exploration into statewide campaigns that feature both types of races, evaluating the relative amount of issue information is the optimal way to assess coverage on a substantive level.
The most striking conclusion about the academic approach to ballot measures and candidates overall is the degree to which they are detached from each other. Studies normally do not address or foresee the integrated nature of these types of campaigns. Rather than operating as separate entities within the campaign and voter choice areas of study, the simultaneous presentation of information regarding these electoral institutions constitutes a single set of political decisions for most voters. Despite such perceptions, the strongly dissimilar effects and processes inherent in presenting information for issues-based and candidate-based contests warrants explanation in a state such as California that has come to rely so much on the initiative to shape its policy and define its values.
BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Methodology

This study intends to delineate the nature of print media coverage of statewide campaigns that feature both candidates and ballot measures, and specifically the degree to which the concurrent presence of these two forms of democracy may alter the information landscape. Employing a content analysis of newspaper articles, I draw on broadly utilized sources of information for statewide candidates and issues to explore how these contrasting forms of democracy have affected recent campaigns in California. Due to the lack of concrete information regarding ballot measures and the ways in which they interact with candidates, this research is exploratory and does not use the traditional scientific method. Rather than beginning with hypotheses and subsequently testing them, I intend to draw inferences from the substance of the data obtained by the methods that follow.

This study utilized a content analysis of newspapers. The units of analysis are three types of news items: news articles/news analysis pieces, editorials, and columns/op-eds. The newspapers are The Sacramento Bee and The San Francisco Chronicle, with data taken from the online California NewsBank. Newspapers, which are associated with higher and more in-depth information levels, represent the richest source of information in the California news media, and are thus the best choice for this type of inquiry. Though internal validity is likely adequate given that all articles originated from these two papers, it may be more difficult to establish external validity. The size of the California information environment, even just looking at the print media, is so vast as to raise
questions about the ability to extrapolate significance from a small sample, however it is likely that elite newspapers provide the most extensive and influential coverage of state government. The Bee is located in the state capital and typically maintains a larger staff of reporters covering state government. Since government officials read it, it has a substantial impact, though other papers may have larger circulations. The state’s second largest daily, the Chronicle, devotes fewer resources to state government; however, its reputation and prestige indicate that it too can drive coverage of California government throughout the state and nation. Representation from a Southern California daily, specifically the Los Angeles Times would provide additional validity to a statewide news environment analysis, however Times coverage is not available through the NewsBank. A smaller newspaper would be an instructive addition to the study, in order to assess the types of coverage that may predominate in areas that are more rural; however, data was not attainable for smaller papers. It is likely, according to past research, that smaller papers would provide coverage more focused on managed information and driven by the content in elite papers (Kahn 1995, Vinson 2003).

I accessed the articles by using the online search functions of the NewsBank, with keyword searches as the primary method to capture the appropriate content. The races coded were, along with ballot measures, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, Insurance Commissioner, Controller and Treasurer. Though the position of Superintendent of Public Instruction is also a statewide constitutional office, it was not included due to its nonpartisan status and its completely noncompetitive nature in recent years. Regarding keywords, under a specified period, the term ‘governor’
could conceivably generate the totality of articles that could encompass the governor’s race. I employed similar strategies for other constitutional offices, with occasional additional searches by candidate name or by date where warranted (e.g. terms with multiple words such as “insurance commissioner” might create problems in the search, or to verify previous searches). For ballot measures they are typically identified by their ballot title and number (e.g. Proposition 13) so I performed searches for the term ‘proposition.’ The online searches can instantaneously review the entire text, not just headlines, for appropriate terms, so that it is a virtual certainty that the appropriate data surfaced using this methodology.

I assessed the primary aspects of news coverage under examination, issues based coverage, elite endorsements for ballot measures and ballot measure agenda setting for statewide candidate contests, through a content analysis of specified data. The content analysis was of the latent variety, wherein the researcher tries to discern the meanings behind words rather than quantitatively tabulating the words themselves (Wolfer 2003). While this process is highly subjective, the inherent subjectivity of the variables examined necessitates such an approach. Assessing coverage based on frames or types of content that qualify as issue journalism for multiple race types would be needlessly tedious and would distract from the acquisition of adequate data. The possibility of applying uniform standards that allow for maximum external validity in this case is also precluded by the general differences between ballot and candidate campaigns, which are relatively unknown but nonetheless clearly significant.
I obtained the newspaper content from a period of 30 days before five different elections; the 2004 primary election, the 2004 general election, the 2005 special election, the 2006 primary election and the 2006 general election. The selection of these cases was determined through an interest in discerning differences between various types of electoral environments; the 2004 primary election and general elections featured ballot measures in a presidential election environment, with no statewide candidates. The 2005 election featured a special election called by the Governor with only statewide ballot measures and no other statewide or national races, and the 2006 primary and general elections featured all statewide constitutional offices as well as ballot measures, with no presidential election. The 2004 and 2006 contests, of course, also featured legislative, congressional, and Senatorial primary and general elections as part of the information environment in California. In an effort to obtain data regarding comparable statewide candidate and ballot measure races, I will not directly consider these other races in my analysis. However, I will note instances where the presence of these races appears to have an impact on my core data.

Differences in coverage for candidate campaigns has been determined to be impacted by the candidate electoral environment (e.g. Kahn 1995), and it may be that introducing ballot issues into this equation may see further contrasts in coverage given the differentiation between the two types of races. The primary consideration under analysis for statewide elections regards the difference between contests that feature no statewide candidates and those that do, since virtually all statewide elections in California feature ballot measures. Additionally, the presence of a campaign with only ballot
measures (the infamous 2005 special election) may see an environment, for example, that differs from contests that include candidates by facilitating an issues-only environment. Conversely, these campaigns could be extensively covered but feature less issues based coverage overall due to the saturation effect on information in these campaigns which may carry over to initiative contests.

Defining Terms: Issues

Presentation of substantive policy information, assessed for both candidate races and ballot measures, obviously will see some difference given the inherent contrasts between ballot issues and the candidate filter. For candidates, I characterized issue coverage by either discussion of a candidate’s issue positions, past policies or positions, and future policy projections. The definition of issues largely includes only issues of statewide significance and excludes candidate-specific minutiae and trivial campaign attacks, which constitute nonissue coverage. Because of the inherent differences between candidates and ballot measures, I will not use traditionally defined typologies of coverage such as ‘personality traits’ and ‘candidate conflict’ in favor of a strict interpretation of issues-based coverage. The demonstrated effect of research into candidate selection suggests that such candidate-specific factors have a significant role in voters’ calculus and thus are worthy of media attention, however they cannot be translated to ballot measures for purposes of comparison. Typically studies indicate that substantive issue coverage is distinctly lacking in candidate contests (e.g. Graber 2002) in favor of what can be generally termed the ‘horse race,’ the coverage of which excludes directly useful information for voters to make policy-based calculations. Examining the substantive
issue basis for candidate coverage locates the space where neither candidate-specific evaluative information nor horse-race journalism is present. Additionally, for this study, the various statewide constitutional offices with their specific duties and agendas have an issues-based dimension that is not present in presidential, gubernatorial, or congressional races and thus warrants examination on coverage of issues independent of other factors.

I identified issue coverage for ballot measures as any instance where issues were approached in such a way as to present the information in coherent fashion. This would generally entail description beyond identifying labels designed only to evoke standing knowledge, including specific summary information that readers can independently utilize as valid information. According to Buchanan’s (1991) conception of issue coverage, it must summarize information comprehensively and coherently, a stipulation that takes on greater importance where matters voted on are complex pieces of legislation. Naturally, the reality that issues are the basis for the campaign and ballot selection by voters changes the underlying nature of the contest, however it is unclear the degree to which the personalities and extraneous issues such as funding and advertising decrease the focus of issues-based reporting. Essentially, the difference regarding the orientation of issues in these two types of contests comes down to a simple contrast. In candidate contests, the addition of issues to the candidates (which includes of course the presentation of candidate issue positions either long held or newly revealed) determines the substance of the contest. Conversely, in the case of ballot measures the inherent substance of the ballot question may see a decrease in quantity of substance depending
on the amount that the traditional political campaign environment affects the original issue-based measure.

Coding for this variable involved a paragraph-level analysis where I recorded the total percentage of issues-based paragraphs. For example, I tabulated a story with 20 total paragraphs and 10 issues based paragraphs as 50% issues-based coverage. I coded stories that contained information for multiple types of races once for each type of race, with content that is clearly irrelevant to the type under review not being included in the final count. I assessed journalistic styles such as narratives or anecdotal information independently to determine whether the content was a valid descriptor or aid to issues-based information or is simply superfluous verbiage. Such a subjective approach, while irksome for the empirically minded social scientist, is necessary for content that can potentially vary so widely and incorporate manifold stylistic and informational methods into coverage of multiple campaign types.

**Defining Terms: Elite Endorsements**

Elite endorsements, generally recognized in recent literature as a valid heuristic for knowledge-challenged voters on ballot measures, are an additional variable tabulated in this study. The conveyance of such cues can take place within the newspaper information environment simply by quoting or referencing elite figures and identifying their position, which citizen legislators then translate into a policy decision. Elites include state or federal elected officials, prominent interest groups, and the endorsements of newspapers themselves. Organizations, interest groups, and individuals whose purpose is specifically endorsing or opposing a measure are not included as elites, and neither are
Hollywood celebrities or out-of-state financiers, no matter their public profiles, as their views are not primarily political and identifiable along particular ideological lines. It was, however, left to my best judgment which organizations constituted legitimate elite sources, including those who may appeal to localized populations in a newspaper’s reading area. For the most part, I left out elite sources that were of questionable value to voters as elite endorsers. I coded the presence of elite endorsements on a yes/no basis.

**Defining Terms: Agenda Setting**

The other type-specific variable regards the agenda setting potential of ballot issues on candidate campaigns. Where ballot issues appear in the context of candidate races, the candidate issue agenda is partially set by issues generated by the initiative process. Where this occurred, candidate campaign articles were coded on a yes-no basis for the presence of agenda setting. In order to test the agenda setting of ballot initiatives on candidates in print media content, articles and opinion pieces that mention candidate positions on ballot measure issues, or demand of candidates their views absent candidate willingness to take positions, were coded as having the agenda setting effect. Where ballot measure issues are mentioned in the course of candidate reporting, issue positions and related information usually follows. Essentially, this test is for instances where ballot measures issues constitute a portion of the overall issues-based focus of a given candidate article.

**Defining Additional Factors**

I made additional factors part of the coding scheme because of their possible impacts on the main variables being studied. In addition to basic newspaper-based factors
variables were included combining or simplifying the primary variables. I created a category combining all candidates together to create a binary candidate/ballot measure divide, and also created variables separating primary/general elections and elections featuring only ballot measures and mixed elections. These factors have obvious utility to the study, since the number of races and candidates has the potential to cloud clear conclusions in a haze of redundant data. Additionally, given the centrality of headline/front page coverage to studies of print media content, a variable was created dividing front-page coverage from coverage in the rest of the paper, simplifying the page number category to a more manageable and workable alternative. Since this study only examines coverage for one month prior to an election, the potential for deeply significant time series analysis is somewhat limited. However, a variable was created identifying coverage that occurred for the four weeks prior to each election, to determine whether coverage patterns for the various types of campaigns see differences in press routines leading up to the conclusion of a campaign.
Chapter 3

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

This study intends to show the ways in which print media coverage of various recent campaigns affects the structure of the statewide information environment in California. In examining this data, I draw conclusions about the differences in media coverage that may occur where different kinds of races disperse throughout different election types. The central question I will address regards the coverage brought about by candidate and ballot measure races and the parameters of the coverage conveyed by print media. I will begin by broadly discussing the relative quantity of statewide political coverage by election, race type, and by other variables associated with the substance of newspaper content. The general quantity of news content is an indicator of the relative attention paid by the media to various candidates and ballot measures. Following this, I will present data regarding the issue substance of coverage for a similar array of variables. I will then present the quantity and substance of coverage for elite endorsements and ballot issue agenda setting of candidate campaigns within their own sections.

Though there are many theories which can be applied to media analyses, this study employs an exploratory approach, where traditional hypotheses and theory-based expectations are not presented before analyzing the data. Because of the lack of scholarly research in this area generally, a less theoretically structured approach was necessary. The conclusions I will draw will not be based upon rigorously defined methodologies, but will rather be tentative assessments of the unique data set I will present.
Quantity of Statewide Political Coverage by Election

To begin, I will analyze the different elections to determine their share of the overall news coverage before getting into specific questions regarding candidates and ballot measures. The five elections examined represent all different types of elections, including those with Presidential, Senatorial and Gubernatorial contests alongside statewide races. Seeing how the degree to which the print media choose to fill the newshole with statewide political coverage can reveal the differing statewide news environments that these election types engender. For example, smaller amounts of statewide coverage might exist where Presidential elections command large amounts of coverage, whereas the 2005 special election might generate more coverage given its status as the only electoral event of esteem at the time.

Figure 1: Percentage of Newshole Devoted to Statewide Political Coverage, by Election
Examining the amount of news coverage given by the two newspapers to statewide candidate and ballot measure coverage in the five elections, some interesting trends are apparent. The presence of statewide candidates in a general election environment appears to cause the amount of news coverage of statewide politics to increase greatly, with 41.8% of general news and editorial content relating to candidates and issues on the statewide ballot. Such a large amount of coverage indicates the degree to which statewide Candidate races, specifically Governor, can dominate the news environment, especially given the lack of a Presidential race or a competitive Senate race. The 2006 primary election, also featuring statewide candidate races, saw just 15.2% of total coverage during the month prior to the election, an amount equal to that of the 2004 general election, which featured only ballot measures (though a substantial number) in an environment with a Presidential election. This again suggests the greater power held by candidates in a general election environment to dominate coverage. The 2005 special election, featuring only ballot measures and in an environment with little else of state or national consequence on the ballot, received 19.8% of coverage, larger than other elections without statewide candidates, but not to a substantial degree. This indicates that ballot measures do not get a greatly increased amount of coverage when candidates are not a part of the electoral environment.

Quantities of Coverage for Elections Featuring Both Statewide Candidates and Ballot Measures

The environments of the 2006 primary and general elections, which featured both candidates and ballot measures, place both types of races side by side allowing for
analysis and interpretation of media coverage where the newspapers cover both types of campaigns concurrently. While occurring only every four years, these elections provide perhaps the clearest evidence of coverage patterns, since multiple candidates and multiple ballot measures share the space of statewide political coverage. Among such elections, it seems that the presence of ballot measures in a general election, while substantially reducing the portion of statewide coverage devoted to the Governor’s race, has less impact on coverage of non-gubernatorial constitutional offices.

Figure 2: Percentage of Newshole Devoted to Specific Races in 2006 Elections
The increased coverage for general election contests is confined largely to ballot measures, with the nominal totals for down ballot candidate races unchanged as portions of overall statewide political coverage. This indicates that news editors see the gubernatorial contest and ballot measures as the prime areas of interest for the electorate, and that the presence of these races demands attention, at least where ballot measures are in greater abundance. The governor’s race dominates primary coverage with over 55% of coverage, since the number of ballot measures is smaller in these contests. Non-gubernatorial constitutional offices maintain similar portions of coverage no matter the election type, which indicates that news routines are such that these offices receive a relatively fixed amount of coverage no matter the circumstances of the race.
Other Trends in Quantity of Coverage: Candidates vs. Ballot Measures

Looking again at the 2006 statewide environment for a binary comparison of the two election types, we can see more generally how direct and indirect democracy fare when presented alongside each other. If candidates see more coverage in this instance, that would be an indication that despite the centrality of ballot measures in the statewide political environment, candidates are an informational priority. For clarity and simplicity, I have combined all statewide candidate races into a single variable.

*Figure 3: Percentage of Newshole Devoted to Candidates and Ballot Measures in Elections with Statewide Candidates: Comparing General and Primary Elections*

![Graph showing percentage of newshole devoted to candidates and ballot measures in 2006 General and Primary Elections.](image)

The overall dominance of candidate coverage is apparent in the two elections featuring both statewide candidates and ballot measures, the 2006 general and primary elections. The primary election, featuring just two propositions, allowed the percentage of candidate coverage to expand to 85%, whereas the 2006 general election, featuring 12 propositions, upped the coverage of ballot measures to 33.6% and reduced candidates to 66.4%. The addition of a large quantity of ballot measures into the news environment would seem to increase coverage of statewide government to a large degree; the strength of the gubernatorial contest indicates that its coverage, while being reduced in percentage
of the overall total, still commands a large amount of news content despite the initiative intrusion. This heightened focus on statewide political coverage in general elections allows the electorate access to more information than would an environment with solely candidate or ballot measure contests.

Placement of news stories has a demonstrable impact on the news environment. Headlines are more widely read and can dictate the importance of particular news stories, whereas audiences that are more specialized read information buried deeper in the paper. The placement of news stories on the front page can address the question of both the type and quantity afforded these the two kinds of races by the print media when covering statewide races. A more substantial amount of front page coverage would indicate coverage that is more prominent as well as coverage that is more likely to be recurrent over time and appear elsewhere in the newspaper.

Figure 4: Percentage of Total Coverage on Page A1 and in Interior of Paper for Statewide Candidates and Ballot Measures

Regarding placement of campaign news, there is virtually no difference between candidates and ballot measures. Both have approximately 15% of total coverage on the
front page and 85% in the interior of the paper. This equality in coverage is striking in that ballot measures have achieved parity with statewide candidates despite the traditional focus on candidate races and the presumed familiarity with these contests by both the media and the electorate. That ballot measures can command similar placement in newspapers indicates that there is not a second-tier status afforded to ballot measures in the statewide political environment; but rather that they are afforded their own space within the newshole. News routines appear consistent in coverage of statewide races, and newsworthiness is afforded to both candidates and ballot measures. That ballot measure issues are elevated to parity with candidate races furthers the advantage that initiative proponents command with regard to exposure; the issues on the ballot seem to command high and prominent levels of coverage by routine rather than by the perceived validity or importance of the issues.

General news articles are most likely to be the sole article type on the front page, however opinion content is also of great importance given its role in conveying endorsements and contextual issue information. The general quantities of coverage allotted to the three article types coded can indicate the level of attention that is devoted to opinion content rather than general news content. Levels of content in this area between candidates and ballot measures might indicate the degree to which respective race types have information conveyed in opinion form.
Consistent news routines are apparent for the types of articles devoted to the two types of campaigns. There is a slight increase in editorial content and commensurate decrease in news content for ballot measures. Given the increased focus on issues traditionally found in newspaper editorials versus news articles (given that positions are taken in editorials), this may indicate a greater focus on issues-based coverage for ballot measures. This is in contrast to candidate races that seem to be more lavishly covered in general news content. This could be due to the intensity of the horse race and other factors that are traditionally more prevalent in candidate campaigns, and are more easily covered by beat reporters in general news articles. There does not appear to be such a great difference in the distribution of article types as to indicate generally different coverage patterns.

Though this analysis only coded news coverage for 30 days prior to a given election, time-series analysis of the quantity of news coverage in this period before the election may still be instructive. If there is a substantial increase or decrease in coverage,
it may indicate that a particular news routine is different for a particular type of race. Such a result would point towards a general difference in approaches to coverage over time leading up to an election.

*Figure 6: Percentage of Total Coverage Appearing in the Weeks Prior to an Election for Statewide Candidates and Ballot Measures*

![Graph showing coverage percentages for candidates and ballot measures over different weeks before the election.]

There is a tendency in coverage towards focusing on candidates in the final week before the election; this is an indication of the spotlight on the horse race and candidate viability leading up to the election, as issue content is certainly less likely to surface in the latter stages of a campaign. Additionally this may indicate that newspaper editors see more value in traditional candidate contests (specifically governor), as they are more prominently featured during periods where content is more likely to be consumed given the proximity to the election. Ballot measure content, alternatively, sees more coverage in the prior weeks leading up to the election, indicating the reduced horse-race value placed upon these issues; there is also certainly less managed information, such as staged campaign events and superfluous activity, as one would encounter in the waning days of
traditional candidate contests. This may also indicate the relative familiarity with candidates as opposed to ballot measures; during the period where public interest and intensity surrounding election issues is highest, and media attention follows the most consistent and predictable patterns, print media tend to cover candidates.

**Amount of Substantive Issue Coverage for Different Elections**

Turning from quantity of coverage to the substance of coverage, the ability of ballot measures to increase the amount of issues-based content is the open question. Given that news routines seem to treat candidates and ballot measures similarly in terms of the quantity of coverage, the possibility exists that the issue basis of coverage may not be as strong as would be intuitively assumed. The substance of coverage is the prime indicator in this study of the degree to which issues make up the statewide media landscape, and the degree to which ballot issues lead the discussion. In attempting to assess the intensity of issues-based reporting, I will first examine issue substance across all five of the election types. The amount of substantive issues-based coverage will be displayed as the mean percentages of such paragraphs for a given variable.
The difference in issue coverage of statewide campaigns is apparent when looking at the elections coded by their issue substance. The three elections consisting of ballot measures but not statewide candidates (the 2004 primary and general elections and the 2005 special election) featured substantive issue content within their paragraphs roughly 60% of the time. The two elections with statewide candidates had an approximate 40% issue percentage. This division occurs despite the presence of multiple ballot measures in the latter contests; it is apparent that candidates are driving issue coverage off the menus of readers and changing the nature of the information with which they evaluate the political environment. Of course, the complete lack of ballot measures in any election would drive down the level of issue content even further, though this does not occur in California given the plethora of ready and willing initiative proponents. The conclusion
regarding the ability of initiatives to drive up the portion of coverage devoted to issues is consistent with past studies (Smith and Tolbert 2004) conferring broad positive instrumental effects on the political environment where ballot measures are present.

Looking next to elections with statewide candidates, I can examine both types of statewide races to determine specific cases where issue content may be more or less prevalent. Other than an increased amount of issues-based coverage in ballot measure-only elections, consistencies in substance may materialize for particular constitutional offices, for example. Previous data indicated the different quantities of coverage given by print media to candidates and ballot measures; however, the relative amount of issues-based coverage presents a different question. The increased focus on ballot measure coverage in the general election may, for example, lead to more issues based coverage since there are simply more issues on the ballot.
Figure 8: Mean Percentage of Paragraphs with Substantive Issue Coverage in Elections with Statewide Candidates and Ballot Measures: Broken Down by Race

2006 General Election

2006 Primary Election
Examining the all race types separately reveals consistency in how print media cover ballot measures and the gubernatorial race in elections with statewide candidates, as previous data indicated. The newspapers coded conveyed issue information in roughly 75% of paragraphs for ballot measure contests and in 26-28% for gubernatorial races. It is possible that, for example, a more competitive gubernatorial election than the 2006 contest featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Phil Angelides could produce more coverage that is weighted towards the horse race and away from issues, though this may not be the case. Statewide polling firms produce data and campaigns hold controlled media events whether or not the race is competitive, so it is likely that the issue content of the election would remain relatively similar. While candidates and ballot measures may see similarities, the portions of issue coverage for down ballot constitutional officers is not as neatly distributed.

The randomness with which down ballot candidate races receive issues-based coverage is striking; the Secretary of State contest drops from 61% to 39% between the primary and general election, whereas the Attorney General’s race increases from 25% to 39%. This is despite two of the candidates being identical in both elections, with presumably similar records and messages in both contests. In this type of environment, news consumers cannot expect consistent issue information on these down ballot races; frequently the strength of candidate personalities can influence both the amount of coverage and the degree to which issues are a significant portion of the evaluative criteria supplied by print media. This is especially problematic given the specialized nature of these offices.
An office such as Insurance Commissioner, an office generally set apart from statewide politics with regulatory duties specifically entrusted to voters in order to counter malfeasance and failed oversight in the past, receives just 10% issue coverage in both contests. It is questionable how voters are to be able to evaluate a candidate’s ability to regulate the state’s insurance industry where such a pitiful amount of issue information combines with a distinct lack of coverage. Absent legitimate information, the increased focus on partisan cues may result in an occupation as exclusively issue-based as Insurance Commissioner reduced to mere partisanship and personality. Interestingly, the office of Lieutenant Governor, which has assumed few responsibilities other than stepping in for an incapacitated governor and running for further office, features issue percentages of 38% and 25% in the two elections. This issue coverage is entirely devoted to general candidate philosophies and evaluations of previous offices held; the position of Lieutenant Governor itself is a nonfactor and thus the content of campaign coverage is determined entirely by the candidates running for the post. This is likely partially true for other contests, but likely not to the same extent. The extreme fluctuation in coverage parameters, however, indicates that voters cannot count on anything in assessing these races and the kinds of information that may appear. The candidates themselves must find a way to generate issues-based coverage, though the reliance on partisanship and the need to create a scene to draw attention further compromise their ability to do so.

**Substance of Coverage: Focusing on Candidates vs. Ballot Measures**

Ballot measure coverage has been shown here to drastically increase the amount of issues-based coverage in all elections. Since non-issues based coverage dominates
candidate races, it may be that the presence of these candidate contests drives out some of the horse-race coverage given to ballot measures when they are the only statewide electoral matters. Such possibilities have implications for the initiative process given that a reduced focus on the issues on the ballot may lead to confusion and incorrect vote choices in certain elections.

Figure 9: Mean Percentage of Paragraphs with Substantive Issue Coverage of Ballot Measures in Different Elections

There is a significant contrast in how print media cover ballot measures between elections types. In the three elections featuring only ballot measures, the issue percentage hovered near 60%, however when combined with candidates as in the two 2006 election contests, the issue percentage jumps to near 75%. This different approach to covering ballot measures shows how statewide races that feature both types of contests have a substantially increased focus on issue coverage for ballot measures, thereby creating an
environment where ballot measures are less subject to the parameters of traditional politics; namely, the horse race and coverage of process. The print media appear to devote its non-issues based coverage to candidates and present more issue information for ballot measures. Interestingly, the amount of issue coverage for ballot measures does not seem affected by the presence of other candidate races; the only factor that seems to cause this change in the amount of issues-based coverage is the presence of statewide candidate races.

Where ballot measures are the only basis for statewide coverage, there is less focus on issues and more on traditional aspects of campaigning. Ballot measure proponents may find this useful if, for example, they wish to avoid non-issue factors in the presentation of information during a campaign; the chances of the electorate voting on the issues rather than extraneous factors increases. The 2005 special election is striking, since one might expect an increased focus on traditional politics given that its impetus came from the governor calling a high profile election that saw endorsements in some fashion by nearly every major politician and interest group in the state. This election saw no difference in substance of issue coverage, indicating consistency in coverage patterns by print media for given election types; the presence of candidates is the determinant of which of two levels of issue coverage ballot measures are afforded.
The 2006 campaign environments see nearly no difference between general and primary elections regarding the amount of issue coverage allotted to each type of campaign. This indicates again that news editors and journalists employ a certain intrinsic methodology that holds constant for both types of democracy in elections where candidates are present. Despite the drastically increased portion of statewide coverage devoted to ballot measures in the general election contest, coverage of these races maintained a high portion of issue coverage; this essentially means that print media consumers are exposed to both far more information, and far more issue information for ballot measures that are contested in general elections with candidates. This increased scrutiny in general election contests may increase the chance that a ballot measure will receive adequate scrutiny leading to a higher chance of the electorate voting correctly.

The number of propositions, substantially increased in a general election, does not increase the portion of issue coverage; it is likely that analysis of individual propositions would see similar consistent patterns. The news routines seem established for how ballot
measures will be covered in terms of levels of substantive coverage in elections with statewide candidates. That the election type determines differences in coverage for ballot measures is an interesting result that suggests that the political environment has the ability to exert significant sway over the type of news coverage the electorate will consume.

*Figure 11: Mean Percentage of Paragraphs with Substantive Issue Coverage in Elections With and Without Statewide Candidates*

In the environment with both ballot measure and statewide candidate contests, there is little distinction between primary and general elections as far as the presence of issue coverage. This indicates that print media outlets consistently cover ballot measures and statewide candidates in different fashion, employing different criteria to their patterns of coverage that likely in turn affect the ways in which voters process and utilize
information when making electoral decisions. Statewide political coverage is far more
issues-based during contests which do not feature statewide candidates. However,
initiative proponents, rather than the traditional representative process and organic public
opinion, define the issues. Cognitive political processes regarding the processing of issue
information and other such instrumental factors likely substantially increase as statewide
political coverage features such increased amounts of substantive issues based coverage.

Trends in the Substance of Coverage: Candidates vs. Ballot Measures

Turning to other factors that may reveal differences in coverage patterns between
candidates and ballot measures, we may discover other ways in which media coverage
can influence the information environment. Of course, broad conclusions about the print
media environment are less valid if different newspapers are employing different
strategies that result in different coverage types. For example, if The Sacramento Bee is
more of an ‘insider’ publication and features more horse-race information for the
consumption of the political class, then generalized conclusions about the news
environment are harder to reach.
The two major regional papers coded achieved near parity in issue coverage; with a very slight increase in percentage of issue coverage for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. This is consistent with other data in this study indicating that increases in coverage are associated with a decrease in coverage allotted to issues; the *Sacramento Bee* featured larger amounts of coverage. Therefore, an increase in horse-race coverage for the newspaper of the state capital may be a reality. However, the small overall difference in the amount of substantive issue coverage suggests generally similar coverage patterns. This is further significant for the statewide news environment since the chances of this coverage being replicated by lesser papers are high and means that statewide news consumers are likely to receive the same general substance of coverage, if not the same quantity.

As demonstrated previously, the quantity of news coverage increases as the election approaches. Considering the heightened interest by print media gatekeepers leading up to an election, and presumably also among news consumers, the issue
substance of this content is of great importance since it is liable to make up a significant portion of the recent information voters draw from when making their ultimate decisions.

Figure 13: Mean Percentage of Paragraphs Substantive Issue Coverage in the Weeks Prior to Election for Statewide Candidates and Ballot Measures

![Graphs showing issue coverage for candidates and ballot measures](image)

This amount of issues-based coverage for candidates declines steadily, whereas for ballot measures the decline is less precipitous and may be determined by the necessity of editorial endorsements, which occur in the weeks leading up to an election and may increase the percentage of issue coverage due to their reliance on issues-based analysis. These data indicate that ballot measure coverage generally contains some issue content even immediately preceding an election; however, voters acquiring information for candidate contests are lucky to obtain any issue information in the final week before voting.

Coverage that appears on the front page is important to evaluate for issue substance because of the greater influence that headlines have on large segments of the population that are unable or unwilling to open a newspaper and actually read its contents. Substantive levels of coverage on the front page, consequently, drastically
increase the chances that average people will consume issue-based information in some fashion. An important question regarding front page content is the degree to which ballot measures have increased quantities of issue coverage in the interior of the paper rather than the front page; increased issues-based coverage is less significant if it is located inside the paper.

Figure 14: Mean Percentage of Paragraphs with Substantive Issue Coverage by Headline vs. Interior of Paper for Statewide Candidates and Ballot Measures

For both candidates and ballot measures, unfortunately, there is a notably reduced amount of substantive issues-based coverage on the front page. This indicates that the kinds of coverage that would present more issue information are not as likely to be read or distributed throughout the mindset of the electorate. This also indicates that more educated and discerning readers are more likely to encounter issues-based coverage and vote on issues rather than cues. The chances of reading issue-based news are much stronger for ballot measures, and again the risk for front-page readers is that they will fail to consume any issues-based coverage at all when reading about candidates.
Types of articles read are an important factor in educating the electorate on issues. While news articles naturally contain a larger amount of horse-race coverage, opinion pieces that establish both issue positions and the elite endorsements of editorial boards are extremely valid contributors to both informing the electorate about issues and providing cues. Increased issues based coverage in opinion content indicates the degree to which elites and more upscale readers utilize issue information and the disparity that may exist with general news consumers.

*Figure 15: Mean Percentage of Paragraphs with Substantive Issue Coverage by Article Types for Statewide Candidates and Ballot Measures*

The data show that the article type read has a significant effect on the amount of issues-based coverage consumed. Editorials have a much higher percentage of issues-based coverage for both candidates and ballot measures, however for candidates the op-ed content actually decreases in substantive coverage from news articles. For both types of races, issue information is more prevalent on editorial pages, however. Editorial reading is associated with greater educational levels (Bowler and Donovan 1994), so news editors confining so much of their issues-based information to editorials likely reduces the dispersal of issue information to the less-educated readers and those who rely
on entirely on cues. More prominent placement of this content (e.g. on the front page, at least in limited cases) would greatly increase the reader's access to issue information.

**Elite Endorsements for Ballot Measures**

As discussed previously, the electorate's utilization of elite cues is an important aspect of voting on direct legislation. The general presence of such cues increases the chance that nonissue information can still convey useful material to the voting populace. Considering that issue information is dispersed differently over time and in different areas of the paper, the consistent presence of elite endorsements has the potential to heighten the usefulness of ballot measure coverage overall.

*Figure 16: Percentage of Ballot Measure Articles with Elite Endorsements of Ballot Measures*

Elite endorsements, essentially position taking by elite figures in this case conveyed through news articles, occur with great consistency in newspaper content, with over 85% of stories and opinion pieces containing some form of elite endorsements. This
certainly increases the likelihood of the electorate’s exposure to cues that can be utilized in some form, despite the difficulty of finding these endorsements in ballot pamphlets and the manipulative use of endorsements in managed information.

Figure 17: Percentage of Articles with Elite Endorsements: Headlines v. Interior of Paper

Given the generally lower amount of issue coverage presented on the front page shown earlier, elite endorsements might be expected to be in greater abundance in headline coverage since elite endorsements provide a heuristic for issue information. The data shows that this is in fact the case, implying that casual news consumers may be more subject to cues-based information whereas the more discerning reader would have greater chance of synthesizing information on the actual issues.
The presence of candidates on a ballot does not seem to increase the frequency with which elite endorsements are present. One would infer that numerous candidates running for office would increase the frequency with which elite political opinion was rendered and dispersed to the electorate, however the nearly even numbers of elite endorsements for elections featuring candidates and elections featuring candidate only elections suggests that this is not occurring. Relevant political actors seem to be getting their respective messages across even where candidate campaigns are not present with their attendant focus on the political opinions of individuals.
News items with no endorsements at all, a small percentage, are more concentrated in editorial content, where the focus is presumably on issues rather than conveying elite cues. The number of elite endorsements is impacted by which article type is being read. The less educated readers who do not read editorials and are more susceptible to elite cues are much more likely to encounter them in general news content, an indication that the theory of effective conveyance of elite cues through newspaper content may be a reality for knowledge challenged voters.

**Substance of Coverage: Elite Endorsements**

Turning to the substance of news content featuring elite endorsements, the assumption based on previous data is that elite endorsements, acting as a different type of information based on cues rather than issue information, would drive down the substance of articles featuring them. Though the conveyance of elite cues does not necessitate issue content to increase the efficacy of coverage, differences in issue substance for articles with and without elite endorsements can indicate a differentiation between heuristics-based and issues-based news coverage.
Figure 20: Mean Percentage of Paragraphs with Substantive Issue Coverage in Articles With/Without Elite Endorsements

Elite endorsements appear to have a slight impact upon the issue substance of coverage; the presence of elite endorsements drives issue substance down slightly, but not significantly. This indicates that elite cues are acting as a heuristic for issue information; the identification of elites is meant to provide a different type of information to the reader, and consequently the focus moves slightly from issue education and information to shortcuts and elite opinion. Elite endorsements are an example of issue information removed from the ballot measure environment and replaced with more traditionally candidate-based criteria. The relatively meager degree to which this is the case, however, does not make the issue neatly applicable to all circumstances. News consumers are likely to consume issue information even with the presence of elite endorsements.
Quantity of Coverage: Agenda Setting

The agenda setting of candidate campaigns with ballot measure issues is a possible outcome of an interdependent statewide political environment that sees the ballot measures legitimated by a presence in the agenda of statewide candidates. Direct legislation issues are important on their own terms; however, their ability to influence the broader political process would increase their democratic legitimacy. Since this can only be tested in the contests featuring statewide candidates, the 2006 general and primary elections will be assessed for the presence of agenda setting in candidate news coverage.

Figure 21: Percentage of Articles with Agenda Setting in Elections With Statewide Candidates

The data show that initiative agenda setting of candidate elections is not frequent, but occurs more regularly in the general election environment. This indicates that the presence of multiple issues on the ballot, as in a statewide general election increases the frequency with which candidate races have their issue agendas set via initiatives. This fact confers much greater power upon initiative proponents; rather than submitting to the electorate specific ballot issues voted upon separately from candidate elections, these
issues could potentially drive the issue agenda of candidates and possibly represent issues the public evaluates candidates upon most strongly. Additionally, voters can call on the more significant ballot measures in future elections and reference them as cues or recognizable manifestations of certain issue areas that the electorate is familiar with due to their appearance on previous ballots.

*Figure 22: Percentage of Articles with Agenda Setting Appearing in Front Page Coverage and in the Interior of the Paper*

As with elite endorsements, agenda setting might be expected to occur more frequently in front-page coverage since such articles intrinsically represent multiple parts of the statewide electoral environment. Agenda setting is in fact more prevalent on the front page, which may have the result of increasing the amount of issues-based coverage that occurs in headline coverage since issues are being added into the mix from direct democracy. This study indicates a low amount of issues-based coverage for candidate races overall, so even small numbers of candidate articles imbued with ballot issue information can affect the issue environment in these races.
Figure 23: Mean Percentage of Substantive Issue Coverage: Articles With/Without Agenda Setting

When ballot issues are used to set candidate agendas, the issue content of candidate coverage is indeed substantially increased. The instrumental effect initiative agenda setting is positive for the general democratic theory that issues should be the basis of electoral decision-making. Where agenda setting is present, not only may ballot issues be defining the space of the issue agenda for candidates, but also they actually increase the space in candidate races devoted to issues. Since candidate campaigns by themselves frequently do not address issues with great frequency, the agenda setting effect can have an impact on the portion of candidate politics that is devoted to issues, as well as the ways in which the electorate processes candidate issue positions and evaluates candidates through an issue filter rather than indirect candidate-based criteria.
Where specific races are examined, we see a general trend where all candidate types see issue coverage increased where initiative agenda setting is present. The generally schizophrenic nature of down-ballot candidate races is apparent here as in previous instances, as certain races (e.g. Controller) inexplicably see a decrease in the percentage of issues-based paragraphs, illustrating once again the inherent instability and unreliability of coverage of these offices. Where certain initiatives are successful or prominent (as in criminal law with Three Strikes, Megan’s Law etc.) they may have a greater impact on office-specific issues (e.g. the Attorney General contest which spiked
to 90% issue coverage with agenda setting). Such evidence likely means that certain offices are more so defined by past initiatives than others and that candidate positions on the issues of these initiatives take on greater importance.

**Conclusions to the Data**

Some striking conclusions emerge from my data analysis. One is that the print media, despite the American democratic system’s overwhelming focus on republican democracy, cover ballot measure contests with a frequency and intensity that underlines their importance to statewide politics in California. The amount of coverage on the front page, the amount of editorial and opinion coverage, and the quantity of coverage in general election contests indicates a strong and sustained focus on direct democracy despite the presence of the traditional candidate environment. Another substantial conclusion is that coverage of ballot measures is based on issues more than is coverage of statewide candidates. This fact hold true for all of the aspects of news coverage assessed in this content analysis. Essentially, there is a similar focus on ballot measures in terms of quantity but a wholly different approach in terms of issue substance. Elite endorsements and candidate agenda setting of ballot measure issues are a frequent presence in coverage; however in this study it is difficult to assess the exact degree to which these factors imply a deeper connection between statewide candidates and ballot measures in statewide politics.
Chapter 4

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest that print media coverage of ballot measures and statewide candidates differs in fundamental ways. The number of measures on the ballot can impact election environments and influence these differences. The number of measures is particularly significant to determining the character of the statewide agenda, as ballot measures feature far more issues-based coverage, particularly where they share ballot space with statewide candidates. Direct democracy largely determines the issue basis of statewide elections since issues are only a small part of what makes up the discussion of candidate races, often leaving issue definition to initiative proponents. Agenda setting of candidate races with ballot issues is not frequent, though the substantive issues-based coverage of candidates is more robust where it occurs. Overall, the current statewide information environment is heavily reliant on ballot measures to determine the level of issues-based discourse, a determination that places a great deal of democratic pressure on the initiative process to correctly and responsibly establish issue priorities in accordance with the state’s policy needs and public opinion.

States such as California, which feature a robustly utilized initiative process, have issue agendas that are much less reliant on traditional legislative politics and more on the views and abilities of organized plebiscites. The extent to which the media cover issues generated by direct democracy is central to the relative level of import the ballot measure has in political culture. Voters may, for example, simply ignore or treat with ambivalence ballot questions if they do not find the process legitimate or are simply more comfortable
with the representative model of politics. Studies of public opinion show that voters are in strong support of the initiative processes overall (PPIC 2008), however the degree to which they find its use consistently vital or simply an option with potential to affect the process in extreme circumstances is unclear. The news media’s role as agenda setter and gatekeeper of information changes in these cases and becomes slightly different. Rather than setting the agenda, ballot issues predetermine the parameters of the agenda and the media’s task becomes accurately shaping information on the issues to allow for reasonably correct voting decisions. The media can define the types of issues and evaluative criteria that voters utilize when selecting candidates, however, the media’s role is even more crucial to legitimize the initiative process. Not only must the media render issues salient to justify their place in the discourse, but also it must convey information that is sufficient for voters to make policy decisions, or at least to approximate the process of making such decisions using heuristics. This study has outlined the parameters of how print media cover the initiative process, and thus its relative effectiveness in meeting these informational obligations.

This study generally indicates that a properly utilized ballot measure process can have positive impacts on the media’s willingness to cover issues in greater depth and frequency. This is particularly true in those years where statewide elections do not feature statewide candidates at all, where absent an initiative process voters would not directly consider specific statewide issues, though it seems traditional politics can exert some downward pressure on the issue substance of these campaigns. The print media give serious and extensive treatment to ballot issues, as evidenced by the similar proportions
of coverage presented on the front page as well as the time devoted by editorial writers to covering ballot measures, which occurs at a higher rate than for statewide candidates. Coverage patterns are well defined and the process of direct democracy proves itself a large part of the statewide political conversation. Ballot measures do not suffer from a lack of coverage; however, their coverage is so different from that of statewide candidates as to raise questions about the ability of voters to translate knowledge gained from issue-based ballot measure campaigns to candidate-based campaigns.

The divide that is apparent between the coverage of candidates and ballot measures in print media content indicates that different news routines are established and carried out with regularity, with different resources utilized by news professionals. This tends to suggest separate routines and expectations for coverage of these two forms of democracy by the media. Unfortunately, if coverage of ballot measure campaigns does not equate to expanded coverage of issues other than those raised by initiative proponents, the excessive and disproportionate agenda setting power of initiatives is an impediment to a broader issues-based discourse. If the increased coverage of issues in ballot measure contests does not alter the coverage of candidates (a conclusion not specifically reached in this study), then the value of the increased issue coverage reduces substantially. It may be that candidate coverage increases with the presence of ballot measures; however, that is not apparent in this study and is not possible to discern given that no statewide race occurs absent any qualified ballot measures.

This study shows that initiatives do not set issue agendas for candidates with enough regularity to call the two forms of democracy interdependent, and the challenge
for establishing a more issues-based discourse in statewide candidate campaigns remains, particularly for constitutional offices other than governor, which seem to feature little consistency or substance in how they are covered. The media would have to make a conscious effort to increase the degree to which it allows issues to enter into the candidate campaign lexicon. At present, ballot measures seem set apart from candidates in terms of the attention devoted to issues in their respective contests.
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