

FRAMING DEMOCRACY: MEDIA POLITICS AND THE 2004 ALBERTA ELECTION

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Considering the importance of their role, media actors are positioned alongside politicians at the core of many liberal democracies, including Canada. During election campaigns newspaper and television coverage shapes far more than perceptions of individual candidates and parties. More fundamentally, as Fletcher notes, the media determine “the quality of the public debate [and] the information environment provided for voters.” Media politics, he argues, holds the potential to “promote constructive engagement of citizens, foster their interest and confidence in and understanding of the electoral process, and provide a stimulus to participation” (1991: 180). In this sense, the media help set the tone of democratic discourse, determine the scope of deliberation and dialogue between voters and their candidates for office, and, through this, affect citizens’ attitudes toward the political system and their role within it. To this extent, the health of a deliberative democracy is strongly linked to the calibre of its mass media.

Analyzing this relationship in the context of the 2004 Alberta General Election, the following article offers an alternative perspective on the influence of media coverage of Canadian political campaigns. By first comparing the role of television to print news and, second, media effects in the provincial context, the research design is unique in both approach and subject matter. Nonetheless, the findings are disappointingly familiar to proponents of deliberative democracy. Employing a three-dimensional measure of media effects, the case study reveals weaknesses in the *quantity*, *quality* and *content* of mass media coverage, each of which detracts from substantive political dialogue within the electorate. With the majority of Canadians reporting television as their major source of election news (Blais et al., 2002: 35), the negative implications of this analysis are further amplified; compared to newspapers, the study depicts TV coverage as particularly lacking in terms of volume, balance and substance. While adding to a growing literature on the negative effects of media on Canadian democracy, the article concludes by challenging critics to move beyond diagnosis and alarm; comprehensive solutions, taking into account the pervasiveness of the problem and the wide range of actors involved, are required to address the democratic deficit in newspapers and on television.

CONTEXT

The 2004 Alberta election featured a rather lackluster campaign. As has often been the case in Alberta, the opposition was fragmented, under-funded, and outmatched. Both the Liberals and New Democrats were expected to gain seats in the election, with the Alberta Alliance given a remote chance of winning a seat in one of the province’s rural constituencies. Beyond a minor decrease in its overwhelming legislative majority, however, the Conservative government was all-but-assured of its tenth consecutive election since 1971. The party's three-term Premier, Ralph Klein, had acknowledged that this would be his final election, and had remarked at the campaign launch that he would run on his record, rather than future promises or concrete plans for the future.

The Premier made no secret of his desire to run a “boring” campaign, and had chosen an ideal month in which to conduct it. The election writs had been dropped just one week after province-wide municipal elections had been held, and just four months following the federal election in June 2004, factors that likely contributed to a sense of ‘election fatigue’ in Alberta. In addition, several other pre-scheduled events, including the American Presidential Election, Remembrance Day, and Major League Baseball’s World Series, all fell within the twenty-nine

day campaign period. Combined with the eruption of a municipal voter fraud scandal in Calgary's Ward 10 and the untimely death of the Premier's mother just days after the election was called, this series of foreseen and unforeseeable events transpired to downplay the importance of the 2004 provincial campaign.

In short, there was no real race, little prospect for issue debate by the governing party, and little visible public interest. As a result, the campaign provided a true challenge to the media, and quickly earned the appropriate label "*Kleinfeld*: the election about nothing." Just as the cameras had peered inside the lives of *Seinfeld*'s various characters, so too did the media "frame" the events of the 2004 Alberta provincial election, attempting to supply a script, a setting, and, above all, entertainment value to an otherwise uneventful campaign. In essence, the media filled a void created by the virtual silence of a dominant party and its popular leader, and gave Albertan voters an answer to the question, "What is this election about?" The following sections examine precisely how the media responded, and the impact of their answer upon deliberative democracy in the province.

METHODOLOGY

The following study proceeds primarily in the *content analysis* tradition, analyzing how the Alberta media covered the 2004 Provincial Election as a case study in Canadian media politics. This is not to completely dismiss two alternative approaches. Indeed, 'game theory' literature has proven both extensive and persuasive, and the following arguments hold many of its findings as underlying assumptions. Yet, due largely to limits of time and space, the proposed analysis places less emphasis upon answering *who* framed the election – journalists or parties – and focuses, instead, on *how* the election was framed (Zaller, 1999; Gilsdorf & Bernier, 1991; Taras, 1990; Comber and Mayne, 1986; Fletcher, 1975). At the same time, a lack of reliable public opinion data prevented analysis of the 'electoral effects' of the media's campaign coverage (Blais et al., 2002; Nevitte et al., 2000; Johnston et al., 1992; Drummond & Fletcher, 1980; Clarke et al., 1979). While regrettable, similar resource constraints prevented its collection. In sum, the proposed study analyzes the *content* of the media's coverage, leaving the definition of its 'first movers' and specific electoral impacts for future research.

To trace the shape of media politics in Alberta, the following analysis applies one main explanatory variable, "media type", as defined by print or television coverage. Print data was retrieved from the province's three largest, non-national dailies: *The Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal*, and *Calgary Sun*.¹ Local, weeknight, six o'clock newscasts on CBC Television, Global Television, and A-Channel were also analyzed for content.² National media – such as the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Canada Now*, *The National*, *CTV News with Lloyd Robertson*, and *Global National with Kevin Newman* – were excluded from this analysis; it was believed that the local news affiliates would provide the most in-depth coverage of the provincial campaign, and would play a larger role in framing the election. Entire stories, including editorials, provided the unit of analysis, and were coded using a detailed code-sheet. Campaign advertisements were excluded from formal content analysis, although a book-length treatment of media politics in Alberta would certainly contain reference to party advertising. Analysis included all week-day election-related news stories collected from the day after the writ was dropped (October 25), up to but excluding Election Day (November 22).³

Three dependent variables were employed in the analysis – the quantity, quality and content of the media's coverage – with each element forming an axis of a three-dimensional

model of the media's effects on deliberative democracy. As illustrated in Figure 1, *quantity* of coverage is located on the 'x' axis. A higher number, greater length and more prominent placement of election-related stories provides voters with more information to engage in a substantive discussion of pertinent political issues, while supplying them with a broader knowledge base upon which to base their voting decisions (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). On this note, as Milner (2002) argues, an informed citizenry is more likely to become an engaged citizenry.

Second, the *quality* of coverage was measured along the 'y' axis of Figure 1, according to the balance and frame attributed to each story. Stories were analyzed – both individually and in the aggregate – according to the extent to which they offered a comparable quantity of coverage to the various parties and leaders competing in the election, and according to the “frame” it employed when describing the campaign. Two specific frames were considered: (1) issue (or “hard news”) and (2) non-issue (“soft news”). Using the first frame, journalists report the policy substance of the campaign, highlighting specific political issues like health care, education, the environment, or crime. Such issue framing may involve detailed description of the policy area, and often identifies where the various parties or candidates stand on the topic. By contrast, the remaining types of story are considered “soft news”. Whether covering the personal qualities of candidates or leaders, detailing the ‘horserace’ for office, or uncovering political scandal, soft news shifts the audience’s attention away from specific political issues and policy positions, and focuses instead upon the less substantive aspects of the campaign. The ‘harder’ the news coverage and the greater the diversity of opinion brought to bear on the main issues of the campaign, the greater the opportunity for media audiences to become exposed to all sides of a political debate. Conversely, prospects for deliberative democracy decrease as coverage becomes ‘softer’, or as reportage focuses only on a limited number of personalities and positions. As Trimble and Sampert (2004: 52) argue, ‘horserace’ coverage trivializes not only the issues involved in the election, but the democratic process, in general, and citizens’ place within it; potential voters are treated as outside spectators rather than engaged participants (Mendelsohn, 1996: 15). In addition, distrust of politicians, parties and politics often develops from purely negative or strategic coverage, discouraging active public engagement during the campaign.

In this sense, ‘quality’ is closely related to ‘content’, as measured along the ‘z’ axis. The more balanced the coverage – the more it offers an unbiased, well-rounded view of the issues and actors involved in the election – the more likely it is to foster an environment that is more conducive to willing, well-informed participation among media consumers (Hackett and Gruneau, 2000).⁴ Moreover, the higher the quantity, quality and content of media coverage, the more likely these positive effects are to ‘spill-over’ beyond television-news viewers and newspaper readers (Johnston et al., 1992). Thus, a higher calibre of media coverage may have a contagion effect that educates and engages the broader voting population in substantive debate.

According to the model, each of the three axes is measured in relative, not absolute, terms; so-called “ideal” levels of quality, quantity and content lie at the extreme end of each continuum, and particular media can be arrayed, theoretically, anywhere in the space bounded by the three dimensions.⁵ That is, a particular category of media coverage may be considered as contributing *more* or *less* toward democratic dialogue than another category of media, but none should be expected to reach the ideal point on any axis.

A NOTE ON CODING

The following analysis proceeds very cautiously. The entire process involved in coding media content is an extremely delicate one. Much of the following discussion of the quantity, quality and content of coverage aims to avoid many of the pitfalls associated with the subjectivity of media analysis, relying as it does upon an examination of ‘manifest’ content. That is, much of the material discussed below has been drawn directly from the text or script of a particular campaign story. Inter-subjectivity is much easier to achieve under these circumstances, as the presence of a particular party or leader can be perceived and noted in the same way by various researchers. ‘Latent’ content, on the other hand, requires the analyst to infer meaning, significance and/or tone from a particular story. Some of this type of analysis has been undertaken in assigning a specific ‘frame’ or ‘tone’ to a particular story, for instance, or in determining which party or leader was ‘dominant’. As Klinkhammer notes, this type of material is more difficult to assess objectively, “because two coders can review the same piece of text and arrive at different interpretations” (1999: 12). To avoid the problems of reliability and validity inherent in analysis of latent media content, most researchers approach their task with a distinctly conservative method. They apply a high threshold for determining, for instance, whether the tone of a particular story is “negative” or “positive” versus “neutral” or “mixed”; they adopt a rigorous set of coding rules to allow for the replication of their findings; and they employ an independent coder to test the validity of their results. Due to financial constraints, the present analysis is only able to apply the first two of these procedures; a complete list of coding rules is available from the authors. In addition to these traditional safeguards, and although the data appears to have significant face and external validity relative to comparable media studies in Canada and the United States, tests for inter-investigator reliability will be performed as soon as time permits, prior to presentation and publication. A complete list of coding rules is available from the authors.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

QUANTITY OF COVERAGE

The following analysis employs three distinct measures of coverage quantity: the average number of stories per day, the average length of each election story, and the median placement of each story within the overall news coverage provided by the outlet. Three categories of media outlet emerge from this statistical comparison, cutting across the division between print and electronic media. As illustrated in Table 1, CBC and the *Calgary Herald* allotted the most airtime and newsprint to the provincial election; following Fletcher’s terminology, these outlets may be considered “elite” or “prestige” sources when it comes to campaign coverage (1991: 191). Global Television and the *Edmonton Journal* are depicted in the “intermediate” category, while A-Channel and the *Calgary Sun* may be labelled “non-elite” outlets. This three-fold classification holds true when examining the relative placement of election stories within each outlet’s newscast or printed edition, as well. During the campaign period, A-Channel and Global allocated roughly 38 percent of their lead stories to the provincial election, while CBC devoted almost double that amount, or 75 per cent of its lead stories, toward the campaign.⁶ Moreover, 55 per cent of CBC’s election coverage fell within the first three stories of its newscast; in contrast, the median story for Global was its fourth, and A-Channel its fifth. Similar trends existed for print media, as well. Of the twenty-one weekday editions of the *Herald*, eighteen featured a front-page story focused on the campaign; this compared with ten front pages of the *Journal* and

two inside covers of the *Sun*.⁷ Thus, even before comparing the quantity of coverage provided by print and television media, significant distinctions appear *within* each of these broad categories, as well.

Creating a measure to compare print to television coverage involves even more difficulty, however, considering the inherent differences between typewritten and audio-visual media. In light of format alone, newspapers permit their audiences a more detailed examination of a particular political issue. Estimates based on the data from this study suggest the entire script of a thirty-minute TV newscast would barely occupy the front page of the average daily newspaper. This has prompted some analysts to consider television news as little more than a “headline service” that “does not provide the thorough and detailed discussions of public issues that are common in the print media” (Hollihan, 2001: 82). In this sense, even when offering the same number of stories per day, print journalists are able to delve more deeply into a given subject matter than their counterparts in television. Thus, while complex on the surface, comparing the quantity of print and television coverage appears to be a rather trivial exercise. By virtue of their access to more ‘content space’, and in light of the fact that newspapers provided more election stories and front-loaded more of their campaign coverage than their TV counterparts at the elite, intermediate and non-elite levels, the print media ranks substantially higher on the ‘quantity’ axis of the media effects model.

This is not to say that newspapers provided an ideal quantity of political coverage during the 2004 provincial election. Indeed, at times neither television producers nor print editors devoted undivided attention to the campaign. Their alternative focus could be attributed to the salience of series of other events, including most notably the U.S. Presidential Election; a lack of faith in the marketability of the campaign, itself; a dearth of saleable campaign material provided by the parties and leaders; a simple lack of interest among newsmakers; or other factors. Whatever its cause, however, the periodic invisibility of the campaign was apparent both in print and on television. There were noticeable lulls in the quantity of newspaper coverage, particularly during Weeks 2 and 3 of the campaign.⁸ In terms of *absolute* invisibility of the campaign, however, television definitely ranked lower than newspapers in terms of quantity of election coverage. Each of the three TV networks in the study took at least one weekday ‘off’ from its coverage of the election – failing to include a single election story in its newscast – and on numerous occasions featured only a single, brief report on the campaign.⁹ Granted, all print media outlets featured at least one story per day, and seldom provided fewer than three articles per edition. Yet, even the *Herald* – the paper that offered the most coverage of the provincial campaign – provided an average two fewer, daily stories during the Alberta election compared to its coverage of the 2004 federal campaign; that amounts to one-third less attention to the provincial contest.¹⁰ Such a disparity between national and sub-national election coverage is well-documented and well-understood in the American context, where, in Presidential election years, local and state-level elections are overshadowed by the more prominent race for the White House (Hollihan, 2001: 81). Why this is so in the Canadian / Albertan context is not immediately clear, and requires more detailed analysis beyond the present study.

Thus, considering the volume, length, placement, and consistency of print versus TV coverage, Alberta newspapers provided a *relatively* higher quantity of election information than did local television outlets. Whether this quantity is enough to sustain a healthy, deliberative democracy in the province remains a topic for debate in the concluding, ‘discussion’ section of this article.

QUALITY

The three Alberta newspapers analyzed in this study also outperformed their TV counterparts in terms of ‘quality’. With roughly 16 per cent more “hard news” coverage than the television networks, this distinction was clear and predictable, considering the “light, tight and bright” format commonly-associated with TV news (Trimble & Sampert, 2004: 55). Non-issue frames persisted in 64.1, 71.2, and 66.7 per cent of their stories, respectively, helping CBC, Global and A-Channel reinforce the common perception that style, not substance, is considered more marketable and prominent in television news (Hollihan, 2001; 81-82). Indeed, as illustrated in Figure 2a, the level of TV hard news coverage never approached that of soft news, staying below 40 per cent throughout the entire campaign. While unfortunately no Canadian data exist with which to compare the level of ‘horserace’ coverage by the Alberta television media, these statistics are remarkably consistent with those reported in studies of recent United States Presidential elections.¹¹

More significant, however, was the finding that each of the three print outlets under study – the *Herald, Journal*, and *Sun* – published a higher level of issue-based coverage in 2004 than is historically associated with the Canadian and especially Albertan print media.¹² While low compared to the standards of most media critics, 49 per cent of print coverage in the 2004 Alberta Election was considered “hard news”; that is, nearly half of all newspaper articles focused primarily on elucidating the main issues and party policies involved in the campaign, rather than commenting on the “softer” aspects of the contest (see Table 2).¹³ Moreover, as displayed in Figure 2b, the proportion of hard news coverage in newspapers increased in the closing week of the campaign, at precisely the time when many would-be informed voters would be turning to the media for information (Hershey, 2001: 69). These figures, although disappointingly low according to our model of media effects, compare favourably with previous content analyses of media politics in Canada. For instance, Frizzell and Westell (1994: 94) reported that issues received primary attention in only 21 per cent of national newspaper coverage of the 1984 federal election, 37 per cent in 1988, and 31 per cent in 1993. Trimble and Sampert’s study of headlines during the 2000 federal election reveals only 19 per cent of *Globe and Mail* and 34 per cent of *National Post* stories were framed in terms of issues (2004: 55). Meanwhile, preliminary data from the 2004 federal election suggests only 40 per cent of print stories could be considered hard news, and that the level of soft news tended to increase as the campaign entered its final week (Goodyear-Grant et al., 2004: 87). These previous figures more closely resemble those associated with the television networks in our study, rather than the *Herald, Journal* and *Sun*. How all three Alberta newspapers could outperform “elite”-calibre dailies like the *National Post* and *Globe and Mail* in terms of issue-based election coverage requires substantial explanation.

On the surface, one might perceive a problem with the reliability or validity of our measures of “hard” and “soft” news. Without the assistance of an independent coder, this possibility cannot be discounted entirely. However, there are several reasons to believe that the *Herald, Journal* and *Calgary Sun* provided more ‘hard’ news during the 2004 provincial campaign than is generally assumed of Canadian print media. First and foremost, a significant element of the disparity between our findings and those of analysts like Trimble and Sampert lies in the difference between our units of analysis. In their study of the “Framing of the Canadian Election 2000”, the University of Alberta researchers analyzed the *headlines* present in the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*. Conversely, our study and others like it have examined *entire articles*, with the result that more substantive content was available for measurement. Using a similar research design, for instance, Dornan and Pyman (2001) reported that “issue framing”

was present in over half (51 per cent) of all campaign stories during the 2000 federal election; this figure is nearly double that reported by Trimble and Sampert, and more closely resembles the findings of our study. It is not within the scope of the present article to debate whether headlines or articles ought to be used as the objects of analysis when studying media content. For their purposes, Trimble and Sampert saw value in examining headlines to uncover the biases conveyed by various media outlets. The present study is more akin to that of Dornan and Pyman, however, in that it seeks to explain the broader ‘nature, range and content’ of the media’s election coverage. By following this research design, analyzing campaign stories in their entirety, our findings suggest that the Alberta television and print media – perhaps Canadian media, in general – provide more substantive, issue-based coverage of elections than is widely assumed. This level of quality must be kept in context, of course; over half of all press articles and two-thirds of television stories remained ‘soft’ in nature.¹⁴

A second series of explanations for the relatively high level of hard news coverage by the media in the 2004 Alberta election centres on the nature of the contest, itself. One obvious factor was the lack of a true ‘horserace’ to cover. With a very limited number of seats ‘in play’, the Conservatives entered the election well-poised to win a tenth consecutive majority government. Not even the Leaders’ Debate, the Senate Election, or the unofficial race to succeed Premier Klein (upon his retirement in 2005) drew much attention from the media.¹⁵ Thus, just as Trimble and Sampert described the 2000 federal campaign, “with the quintessential horserace question settled,” the 2004 Alberta election “did not promise much excitement for the press” (2004: 57). Under these circumstances, the Alberta media’s use of the hard news frame may have been its only option at certain points in the campaign. This was particularly apparent in the *Edmonton Journal’s* coverage, making it the only media outlet in the study to place a (slim) majority of its stories within an issue frame.¹⁶

When periodically departing from the horserace, journalists turned overwhelmingly toward the Leaders’ Tours as the principal source of their coverage. Over 67.0 per cent of television and 65.4 per cent of print reports were filed directly from party-orchestrated, campaign-related events, including routine stump speeches and photo-op appearances (see Figure 3). This number increased to 90.9 per cent of all Liberal and 87.9 per cent of all NDP coverage, as the two parties were covered almost exclusively in terms of their position on the campaign trail, not in the polls (not shown). In doing so, television and newspaper reporters, alike, overwhelmingly featured the Liberals and New Democrats in a hard news frame, effectively offering each party a free, at times completely unmediated “daily 30 second commercial” (Taras, 1990: 156).¹⁷ As Fletcher (1991: 195) suggests, this is likely due to the fact that most media outlets collect sound-bites from orchestrated minor party events as the most efficient way of meeting their informal ‘coverage quota’ for each party.

In contrast – whether due to their refusal to include substantive policy positions as part of their campaign strategy, or their lack of a consistent, daily Leader’s Tour – the Progressive Conservative Party and Premier Klein were framed in much ‘softer’ terms. According to Zaller (1999: 111-133), this lack of ‘material’ for journalists to report results in a form of “product substitution”: in the absence of substance from a particular party or leader, newspaper and television reporters tend to seek out their own stories, which tend to be unrelated to policy issues and more negative in tone. Data from the present study lend credence to Zaller’s theory of media politics: only 34.4 of PC coverage was issue-based in nature, with the party receiving 63.5 and 69.6 per cent of its print and television coverage, respectively, in the form of soft news. As will be shown in our discussion of ‘content’, much of the Premier’s soft coverage was focused on

his inflammatory statements regarding AISH recipients early in the campaign, but the lack of issue-framing persisted throughout the contest even in the absence of the scandal. The province's smallest parties – the Alliance, Greens, and other minor parties – also received overwhelmingly soft coverage (see Table 3). This was due largely to the tendency among journalists to portray the minor parties, particularly the Alberta Alliance, as anomalies in the campaign.¹⁸

In short, if there was a surprisingly high quality of hard news coverage during the 2004 Alberta provincial election, particularly among print outlets, this was primarily the result of the media's distinctive, issue-based treatment of the province's two chief opposition parties, the Liberals and New Democrats, *not* the governing Conservatives or minor parties. One must avoid over-interpreting these results, however. Simply because opposition parties received *differential* coverage compared to the governing Conservatives does not necessarily mean they were given *deferential* treatment. An examination of the second dimension of media quality – the level of balance in its coverage of the various actors in an election campaign – reveals otherwise.

The Progressive Conservatives and Premier Klein received the vast majority of media attention during the 2004 campaign. Fully 58 per cent of all election stories made mention of the PC's, compared with figures of just 16 per cent for the Liberals and 12 per cent for the New Democrats. As shown in Figure 4, the Conservatives were the *dominant* party in 36.4 per cent of all newspaper articles on the campaign, and 31.3 per cent of all television stories. Conversely, the Liberals were featured as the dominant party in only 8.0 and 11.7 per cent of print and TV coverage, respectively, while NDP numbers reached 5.6 and 9.5 per cent. Parallel patterns describe the level of coverage for each major party leader, although, of note, Premier Klein dominated an overwhelming 40.8 per cent of all television stories.

Considering the anomalous, one-party nature of Alberta's political system (Stewart and Archer, 2000; Carty and Stewart, 1996), these figures are surprisingly consistent with those of other studies across Canada. According to traditional media conventions, parties tend to receive a level of coverage comparable to their standing in the legislative assembly (Fletcher, 1991: 193).¹⁹ With 8 per cent and 2 per cent of seats at dissolution, respectively, the Liberals and New Democrats received roughly the amount of coverage one would expect according the informal rules of political journalism. At 89 per cent of seats, the Conservatives were actually *under*-reported according to the unwritten formula. As discussed in the following section, however, few PC strategists would lament this fact, given the overwhelmingly negative coverage the party received during the 2004 campaign. Nonetheless, many advocates of deliberative democracy would question the value of this particular definition of 'proportional representation' in the media. If a party's level of election coverage is based, even informally or subconsciously, on the party's seat share at dissolution, this has substantial implications for the quality of democratic debate and potential for electoral change in a one-party dominant system like Alberta (Carty and Stewart, 1996). Regardless of the quality or content of opposition coverage, which the preceding and following analysis suggests was far more neutral than unfavourable to the Liberals and New Democrats during the 2004 election, a lack of *presence* on newsprint and television can be crippling for a party trying to make inroads in an era of mass-media campaigning. This was a point reinforced by the federal Broadcasting Arbitrator, Peter Grant, in his 1997 report to Parliament. In his view, such disproportionate allocation of attention to various parties not in democracy's best interest, as it "unduly fetters the ability of emerging parties to... make a meaningful case to the public" (Carty et al., 2000: 144). "Balanced coverage", in this sense, is a relative term. While opposition parties received exposure that was roughly proportional to their legislative standing at the outset of the election, even when combined, the quantity of their

coverage still failed to equal that of the governing Conservatives. Such disparity is scarcely conducive to well-balanced democratic dialogue.

While the quality of coverage between television and print media was relatively similar in terms of their attention toward opposition parties, the means by which TV and newspapers achieved this relative balance was strikingly dissimilar. By way of illustration, Figure 4 demonstrates the proportion of print and television stories in which each party and leader is mentioned. As shown, both types of media devoted a vast amount of attention toward covering the Conservative Party and Ralph Klein exclusively, placing secondary emphasis upon the Liberals and Kevin Taft, followed by the NDP and Brian Mason, and the remaining minor parties and their leaders. Worthy of note, however, is the extent to which print media made use of ‘mixed’ coverage *within* each story to provide balance to its reporting. Over 35 per cent of newspaper stories featured more than one party, while roughly 33 per cent of articles offered a mixture of leaders.²⁰ Compare these figures to those of the television media, where ‘balance’ was achieved not within stories, but *between* them. Rather than offering a place for inter-party or inter-leader dialogue within a given story, as was done in over one-third of all newspaper articles, television stories featured a more truncated version of political discourse. More than in print, parties and leaders were given their own, separate television segments, with far less direct or indirect dialogue between them. Typically, the Conservatives were given the lead story of most newscasts, the Liberals the second story, the New Democrats third, and so on. This meant that, quite often in fact, depending on the ‘topic of the day’ in each Leader’s Tour, the issues being discussed by each leader differed from story to story. The result was a ‘quilted’ approach to campaign coverage among by the television media. Whereas newspapers tended to ‘weave’ many of their stories together by mixing commentary from a variety of parties and leaders, TV newscasts were more like a ‘patchwork’ of different issues and voices. Without a closer analysis of how viewers interpret campaign news, it remains debatable whether this ‘quilted’ approach was conducive to a well-rounded treatment of a variety of different issues, or whether it contributed to a disjointed, often incoherent election campaign in the eyes of many citizens. On the surface, at least, the ‘weaving’ approach employed by the print media would appear more amenable to the creation of a well-structured, inter-party dialogue on the important issues of the campaign.

Remarking on the quality of media coverage of modern Canadian elections, Matthew Mendelsohn (1993) noted the two options that most journalists, editors and producers face when covering the campaign. Media actors “can either view an election campaign as a competition between competing interests and values, as a dialogue between citizens engaged in collective deliberation about the future, or as a partisan game played for personal advantage and power.” The preceding discussion suggests that both print and television media opted for the latter approach in their treatment of the 2004 Alberta election. Combined, 57.2 per cent of media coverage remained ‘soft’ (see Table 2), and there was an extreme imbalance in terms of the proportion of coverage devoted to the incumbent Conservatives relative to those parties in opposition. The *Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal* and *Calgary Sun* performed better than the television networks in both respects – even achieving a higher quality of coverage than is traditionally associated with the Canadian media. Nonetheless, the situation was rather like that described by Dornan and Pyman following the 2000 federal election (2001: 211): the media may have spent more time on hard news than they had in the past, but, when combined with the general ‘horserace’ and leader-focused²¹ frames they applied throughout the campaign, this added attention to issues may have “shed more heat than light” on the main topics of debate. As will be

discussed in the conclusion to this article, the overall quality of election coverage remains far from ideal in terms of its contribution to a fully-functioning deliberative democracy.

CONTENT

The third and final dimension of the media effects model concerns the ‘content’ of election coverage. Measured along the ‘z’ axis of Figure 1, the concept entails a slightly different version of ‘balance’ than was outlined in the previous section. In the present context, the term involves two distinct elements. First, in terms of the depth and breadth of issue coverage, the premise holds that the more issues that are covered, and the more consistently they are covered, the more likely media viewers will be to adopt a well-rounded view of the landscape for debate. In other words, for an issue to become salient in the minds of prospective participants in the democratic process, its importance must endure several days during the campaign (Mendelsohn, 1993); it must be understood, interpreted and internalized by the individual; and linked to a particular candidate or party (Clarke et al., 1979). Among other political actors, each of these steps requires an active role on the part of the print and television media to promote an issue-based campaign.

Measured in these terms, the media’s portrayal of the 2004 Alberta election lived up to its dubious billing as “Kleinfeld: the show about nothing.” Illustrated in Figure 5, the ‘horserace’ emerged as the dominant issue of over one-third of all election stories, in print and television. Among the substantive issues covered by the media, healthcare emerged as the dominant topic in 15.0 per cent of all print articles and 10.6 per cent of all television stories. Next in terms of frequency was the province’s programme to provide Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH). The issue was at the centre of a campaign-period scandal, prompted by Premier Klein’s remark that certain vocal critics of his government’s policy toward AISH, “didn’t appear severely handicapped” to him. Although the issue received scant media attention in the final three weeks of the campaign, the volume of early coverage was enough to make AISH the second-most-discussed issue in the media. This said, only 5.6 per cent of print coverage was devoted to discussing the issue of government assistance to the severely handicapped, while television stations contributed 6.7 percent of their newscasts to the topic. With the exception of post-secondary education, no other issue occupied more than 5 per cent of campaign airtime or newsprint. At 7.3 per cent, university and college funding was the second-most prevalent issue on television, behind only healthcare. Infrastructure and primary/secondary education, each with 3.4 percent of coverage, were also among the top five issues on TV. Conversely, alongside healthcare, infrastructure (3.8 per cent) and AISH, newspapers featured energy (3.5 per cent) and the provincial budget (3.1 per cent) as its most prominent issues.

The fact that only a single issue was mentioned as dominant in at least 10 per cent of election coverage suggests a largely issue-less campaign. Moreover, even the perennial topic of healthcare lacked significant salience. Granted, the issue received roughly as much media attention in the provincial campaign as it did in the federal campaign of the same year. However, a rival issue – the subject of government ethics and the Sponsorship Scandal – had dominated the federal election, receiving close to 25 per cent of media coverage (Goodyear-Grant et al., 2004: 87). The Alberta campaign lacked a comparable theme. Thus, if the incumbents’ strategy was to

keep substantive issues off the campaign agenda, the Conservatives and Premier Klein were aided in their attempt by a complicit media.

The resulting impact on the quality of deliberative democracy in the province was noticeably negative. If citizens were looking to discover a main issue of the campaign upon which to base their vote (or decision to visit the polls, at all); if they were seeking to understand each party's stance on a particular topic or range of subjects; or if they were looking to engage in some form of debate over the issues, tuning into a newscast or reading a newspaper would have been of limited value. No issue achieved the salience required for substantive democratic deliberation, a fact that has crucial democratic consequences. For, as McCombs (1976: 3) notes, "If the media tell us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our personal agenda or in our life space." This would appear to be true not only of individual issues in the 2004 campaign, but the very election 'event', itself. The consequences are far from trivial. According to our findings, neither television nor print media performed well in this measure of content, nor was either noticeably more successful than the other.

The second principal indicator of sound media content – a lack of substantial "bias" – entails the absence of consistently negative or positive tone attributed to a particular party or leader. As Nevitte et al. (2000: 24) note, the tone of election coverage has become increasingly negative over the past four decades, systematically detracting from the level of esteem in which Canadians hold politics. Numerous studies suggest some media outlets are particularly jaded in their portrayal of certain parties and leaders (Miljan and Cooper, 2003; Goodyear et al., 2004; Trimble and Sampert, 2004; Wagenberg and Soderlund, 1976; Taras, 1990). In this sense, "content balance" appears to be a rare commodity in Canadian media politics.

Analysis of the 2004 Alberta election reinforces these perceptions. As displayed in Figures 6 to 9, every media outlet provided a somewhat slanted view of various parties and leaders.²² As Figures 6 and 7 suggest, Premier Klein and the Conservative Party received the largest proportion of negative coverage from every outlet, with the exception of the *Calgary Sun*. It should be noted that the negativity of this coverage persisted throughout the campaign, and was not necessarily linked in a prolonged fashion to any particular event, like the AISH scandal. By the same token, NDP leader Brian Mason also received consistent, uniformly negative coverage from all media sources, although the extent of this negativity was significantly less than that associated with the Premier. Mason's party generally fared better than its leader, particularly on the CBC. Conversely, Liberal leader Kevin Taft received positive coverage from all but the "non-elite" media. His party was also framed negatively by A-Channel and the *Sun*, but positively by Global and CBC, particularly in the days immediately following the Leaders' Debate. Lastly, Randy Thorsteinson and the Alberta Alliance received relatively mixed coverage, with the leader rated negatively only in the *Herald* and *Sun*, and the party portrayed unfavourably by Global and A-Channel.

Overall, as illustrated in Figure 8, television media was significantly less balanced in reporting its opinions of the leaders. On TV, negative coverage outweighed positive coverage by over 50 percentage points for both Klein and Mason, while Kevin Taft emerged as the only leader on the positive side of this ledger. However, it is interesting to note how much more balanced both print and television media were in terms of their portrayal of the opposition and minor parties (see Figure 9). Only the Conservatives received substantially biased coverage in both media formats, although, once again, television was noticeably less balanced than print.

If offering an overly jaded view of certain party or leader is detrimental to the quality of deliberative democracy in a given society, as our media effects model suggests, Albertans have reason for concern over the way most provincial media outlets covered the 2004 election. In particular, the chastisement of the Conservatives, New Democrats, and their leaders suggests that neither party was given a neutral lens with which to convey their message to the public. The Liberals and Alliance received somewhat better treatment, although each party and its leader was portrayed negatively by more than one source. Nonetheless, measuring along the ‘z’ axis of the media effects model, print media did perform significantly better than television with regard to balanced tone (see Figures 8 and 9).

CONCLUSION

As Figure 10 illustrates, the Alberta print media provided a higher level of quantity, quality and content in its coverage of the 2004 provincial election. Of course, neither newspapers nor television offered Albertans a particularly high volume of campaign coverage, limiting the number and length of election stories while downplaying the importance of the campaign through their placement of election articles and TV segments. Nor did either medium offer a particularly high level of hard news coverage, preferring instead to focus on the softer, more process- and strategy-oriented aspects of the campaign. Overall, the content of media coverage was also lacking, considering the absence of major issues and the often-slanted portrayals of certain parties and leaders. Thus, while print media did perform better than television, neither media type approached the “ideal” (rear, upper, right) quadrant of the model, leaving significant room for improvement when it comes to fostering deliberative democratic dialogue in the province.

MEDIA POLITICS AND THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Ultimately, the correlations between a lacklustre campaign, poor calibre of media coverage and the miniscule 44.7 per cent²³ voter turnout in the 2004 Alberta election have considerable intuitive strength (Fletcher, 1991: 214). Yet, if the preceding analysis has helped further our understanding of the media’s negative effects on democracy – by offering a new diagnostic tool, and identifying additional areas of concern – it has served only half of its purpose.

The observation that television news provides a poor foundation for deliberative democracy in the provincial context is hardly a radical one; analysts have been diagnosing similar problems associated with national media politics for decades. That the Alberta print media performed only marginally better in terms of quantity, quality and content of media coverage is also of little surprise and small consolation. Considering that the majority of Canadians continue to gain their election news from television, not newspapers, and that the most disengaged segment of the Canadian population – the youth – might be considered the most TV-minded of any generation, the future does not appear promising when it comes to the relationship between media and our democratic society (Blais et al., 2002). Thus, like so many analyses before it, the present study paints a rather gloomy portrait of the prospects for vibrant, participatory democracy in the age of media politics. What is missing is a prescription for change.

The purpose of this brief concluding discussion is not to provide, once and for all, the proper means of improving the quantity, quality and content of the media’s coverage of election campaigns. Instead, the objective – indeed, the goal of this entire article – is to put an end debate over whether we should engage in reform, at all. The academic community is well-versed in the

pervasiveness and consequences of poor media coverage of elections. Nonetheless, the issue of how to improve the situation remains an area of unfortunate hand-wringing and contention.

Throughout the literature, there is a sense that the media should ‘do better’ and ‘do more’ to address the democratic deficit in countries like Canada. Taras (1990: 176), for one, notes that the media’s campaign coverage often lacks “any sense that elections are meaningful, even sacred events, that must not be taken for granted.” By covering the ‘horserace,’ Trimble and Sampert (2004: 69) argue that journalists effectively “de-politicize electoral democracy by telling stories about the most superficial, episodic and tactical elements of the campaign.” This, in turn, contributes to the perception that politics is more of a public spectacle than a matter of defining a community’s course for the future. Wagenberg et al. (1988: 126) concur, adding that the dominance of soft news reporting lends itself to the emergence of a “mechanistic form of democracy,” based on an unhealthy obsession with the procedural, horserace elements of the campaign at the expense of quality content. Noting a similar issue in the American media, Kerbel (2002: 206) argues that “something more than a political soap opera is at stake when journalists cover [elections]... [I]f vast majorities know parties only from what they read and see in their homes, it is especially important that reporters communicate what parties are about. They could be for a broader audience and the centres of debate and agenda setting that make politics meaningful and possible... That would be newsworthy indeed.”

Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) take this argument one step further, however, arguing that the fate of *democracy*, itself, may be at stake in today’s media politics. For one, the media is diluting the substance of political debate. “TV networks that reduce the quality and quantity of election coverage,” they argue, “shortchange not only the candidates but also the voters who choose each successive [government]” (6). In a very real sense, the media disadvantage candidates who are trying to talk about “the issues”, and frustrate voters who are seeking to make an informed decision. Second, the negativity spouted by the media has an impact beyond parties and politicians. “Citizens exposed to the cynicism found in media portrayals of political candidates and of government are thought to become increasingly negatively disposed toward government,” in general. “Voter turnout,” they claim, “has been falling during the years of increased media negativity, and many scholars think the media’s performance is one of the reasons why half of the nation’s eligible adults have chosen not to vote in recent [federal] elections” (14). “As network television cuts back on coverage and devotes less time to matters of substance and to the candidates themselves, the voters may be learning an important lesson, one that is not particularly appealing for a democracy. The embedded message contained in these network news trends is simple: [political] campaigns are not worth much of our attention, and the candidates themselves are worth only a tiny fraction of that concern” (145).

Moreover, research has established a substantial link between high-calibre, publicly-focused media and the sense of community within a society. Long before Putnam (2000) and Milner (2002), Tocqueville (1956: 203) described the connection as early as the nineteenth century:

The effect of a newspaper is... to furnish a means for executing in common the designs which they may have singly conceived... It frequently happens... in democratic countries that a great number of men who wish or who want to combine cannot accomplish it because, as they are insignificant and lost amidst the crowd, they cannot see, and know not where to find, one another. A newspaper takes up the notion or the feeling which had occurred

simultaneously, but singly to each of them. All are then immediately guided towards this beacon; and these wandering minds, which had long sought each other in the darkness, at length meet and unite.

In this context, according to Holihan, media play a pivotal role in the formation of common experiences required to sustain healthy societies. To him, “news... gives us a sense of ourselves and our world” (2001: 73). In a well-functioning democracy, the media provides a shared setting where our “conversations give us a sense of where we have been and where we seem to be going, and ‘by marking and legitimizing the conversational commons, journalism contributes to communication links among people, groups, and places that were previously disconnected’” (Holihan 2001: 74). Thus, without a high level of quantity, quality and content in media coverage of elections, in particular, the very bonds of society may be at stake.

Unfortunately, whereas diagnoses have been prevalent, suggestions for change have been far less frequent and often contradictory. Some studies suggest that the electorate is turned off by the media’s superficial, often negative portrayal of politics, and craves, instead, a more substantive brand of election coverage (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2003). Advocates of this approach have proposed strengthening the newspaper industry at the expense of television, noting that the latter medium has little potential to improve democratic dialogue (Milner 2002); or have called upon legislators to demand more from broadcasters in return for their use of the public airwaves. Suggestions in this area have included enforcing strict public affairs programming guidelines, including hour-long nightly newscasts, or the introduction of weekly, primetime political shows to allow for more direct-candidate commentary (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2003).

Others contend that, despite the many concerns, the democratic stakes, and even the best efforts of the media, “Canadian Election – Primetime” is not likely to be Emmy, Gemini or Pulitzer material.²⁴ Convincing the media to increase the volume of its coverage, while, at the same time, imploring that it focus less upon soft news and entertainment may defy long-standing, conventional wisdom about the media market (Zaller, 1999; Hershey, 2001). One answer has been to increase the use of so-called “alternative media” – outside the mainstream press and television – to connect politicians to their constituents. The Internet has been offered as one solution with two particular advantages: (1) websites may permit candidates and parties to reach their target audiences directly, without passing through the lens of the media; while (2) allowing mainstream media outlets to place more substantive coverage on-line, freeing their journalists to pursue more marketable stories for mass consumption. The same has been said about cable television news programs. There are limitations to the use of Internet and cable TV media, however. Namely, the increased use of “alternative media” may push politics out of the public eye, altogether. Those people tuning into websites and all-news television are already in the minority of engaged voters, and the accessibility of the “alternative” media is often limited by income.

Nonetheless, the media has already undertaken reforms on its own accord. Each television and newspaper outlet in this study maintained its own website, for instance. These sites were used, at times, to provide more detailed, up-to-the-minute coverage of particular election stories, allowing the papers and networks to provide more marketable material in their traditional formats. In this way, the Internet provided a resource not commonly-available to local television networks, whose coverage of provincial campaigns lacked the added content-space provided by 24-hour news networks during federal elections (Pammet and Dornan: 2001: 218). Of course, websites were also used as a venue to conduct web-polling – a means of tapping into

the horserace underlying the campaign, without incurring the costs (or necessary scientific rigor) associated with expensive professional polls. Nonetheless, the added connectivity between the media and its audience has the potential to increase the level of quantity and content associated with the campaign.

Other debates surround the role of non-media actors in improving the calibre of election campaigns. Many argue that politicians and political parties are just as much to blame for the lack of substance in election campaigns (Goodyear-Grant et al., 2004: 91). After all, “reporters do not have the freedom to ‘make up’ these frames out of whole cloth... to suit either their own political leanings, or, more likely, their desire for a good story. The candidates and the campaigns provide the raw material that sets boundaries on media framing” (Hershey, 2001: 61). Changes to the calibre of media coverage must also, then, focus on the source of their news: the parties and politicians, themselves (Zaller, 1999). Of course, politicians face challenges in this vein, as well: they must develop their own campaign strategies and messages to be saleable – not only to the public, but – to the media, itself. Baum and Kernell (1999) point out the paradox, speaking in the context of presidential elections. “How will presidents promote themselves and their policies to a citizenry that depends almost entirely on television for its news and information yet is increasingly unwilling to allow them into their home?” This vicious circle results in a ‘ratcheting down’ of the quality of public debate during elections, with both politicians and journalists tailoring their messages in terms of marketability, rather than substance. Solving the paradox may be the most pressing need in media politics research.

In the end, despite all of the criticism laid upon their shoulders, television producers and newspaper editors, alone, cannot address the challenges facing media politics. In the end, without academic research into the needs, wants, and abilities of media consumers, and without thought as to the role of non-media actors in the reform process, the debate over whether or how to improve Canadian media politics will continue *ad infinitum*. Having diagnosed the problems associated with the media’s role in deliberative democracy, a new, reform-based research program demands the increased attention of those who study Canadian politics. Addressing a key component of the country’s democratic deficit depends upon it.

Endnotes

¹ Stories were also collected and coded from the Edmonton Sun, but were not incorporated into this analysis. For information on the Edmonton Sun data, please contact the authors.

² Due to time and resource constraints, all television coverage was drawn from Calgary affiliate stations. The authors attempted to collect data from CFCN, Calgary's CTV affiliate station. Unfortunately, as a result of technical difficulties, only one week's worth of CTV coverage was recorded. Station managers had recycled their election tapes by the time of analysis, making it impossible to retrieve the necessary footage for incorporation into this study. While regrettable in terms of offering a comprehensive view of media politics in Alberta, preliminary analysis of the available CTV coverage suggests that the content of the network's campaign coverage was not substantively different from that of Global Television or CBC. As the vast majority of the analysis involved in this paper aggregates data from all television sources, the absence of CTV will have a negligible effect on the major conclusions reached by the authors. In the absence of CTV footage, moreover, the analysis still includes one major outlet from each of the three major 'levels' of television coverage: "elite" (CBC), "intermediate" (Global) and "non-elite" (A-Channel).

³ As the entire population of weekday stories has been incorporated into this analysis, no measures of probability have been calculated.

⁴ The use of the term "media bias" is used more liberally than some analysts recommend. Goodyear-Grant et al. (2004: 89) make a convincing argument when they note, "While the word 'bias' has negative connotations, partisan differences across newspapers can be seen to represent a healthy diversity of opinion among media outlets." As the findings of this study suggest, however, a systematically-negative tone – among all regional outlets – can have a negative impact on the ability of certain parties and candidates to express themselves to the public. Caution from Nevitte et al. (2000) is heeded, however: "The tone of coverage, of course may simply be due to the parties' own campaigns... [C]ampaign gaffes will naturally elicit negative stories," for instance.

⁵ Robert Dahl offered a similar explanation of democratic regimes in his two-dimensional model of *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1971. pp. 5-7).

⁶ Whereas Global and A-Channel each aired twenty-one week-day newscasts during the campaign period, CBC aired a total of twenty. On November 5, 2004, CBC aired a Canadian Football League game as part of its weekly *Friday Night Football* series. To account for this difference, average telecast numbers for CBC have been calculated using a denominator of 20, while Global and A-Channel figures are based on a denominator of 21.

⁷ The *Calgary Sun* features only headlines, not full-length articles, on its front page. The inside-cover was considered a functional equivalent to the Sun's front page.

⁸ During the second week, each print source devoted, on average, one fewer story per day compared to the opening week; the trend continued into the third week of the campaign, with the average number of total print stories declining from 15.4 per day in the first week of the campaign to an average of 11.2 in Week 3. The number of print stories rose to an average of 15.8 in the final five days of the campaign, further distinguishing the lack of attention devoted to the election during the middle two weeks. A similar trend was evident on television, as well, with the average number of total TV stories declining from 9.6 per day in Week 1, to 6.6 and 6.4 in Weeks 2 and 3, respectively, before rising to 10.4 in Week 4.

⁹ Global News did not feature election coverage on either November 3 or November 12; A-Channel failed to cover the campaign on November 17; and CBC aired a Canadian Football League game in lieu of its November 5 newscast.

¹⁰ According to figures calculated from Observatory on Media and Public Policy (OMPP) data, the *Herald* published a total of 264 stories over the 31 week-days of the 2004 federal election. This amounts to roughly 8.5 articles per day, compared to an average of 6.1 during the provincial campaign.

¹¹ Mendelsohn (1993) conducted an excellent analysis of the effect of CBC coverage on the 1988 Canadian federal election. His research design specifically eschewed quantitative analysis, however; in taking a more qualitative approach, Mendelsohn's findings do not allow us to compare his results to ours in any direct fashion. The Brookings Institution reports that nightly network newscasts during the 2000 American Presidential Election contained roughly 67 per cent horserace coverage (Wayne, 2004: 229). Hershey (2001: 66) estimates that "strategy-based" coverage of the 2000 US Presidential Election ranged between 75 and 79 per cent. A more comprehensive study by Farnsworth and Lichter (2003: 51) estimates the percentage of horserace coverage to range near 71 per cent.

¹² See Klinkhammer (1999) for discussions of findings from the 1993 and 1997 Alberta provincial elections.

¹³ The associated figures ranged from 43.7 per cent 'hard' coverage by the *Sun*, to 45.3 per cent by the *Herald* and 58.6 per cent by the *Journal*.

¹⁴ By the same token, this analysis revealed a higher level of 'hard news' coverage than was found by Klinkhammer (1999) in her analysis of the 1997 Alberta provincial election. Klinkhammer's study was also methodologically distinct from our own, in that she analyzed only the first two weeks of the campaign. As Goodyear-Grant et al. (2004) point out, the first half of an election campaign tends to be less issue-driven, whereas the middling weeks feature more substantive (hard) news coverage. Had Klinkhammer extended her analysis to include the entire campaign, we are confident that her findings would more closely resemble that of the present study.

¹⁵ The Leaders' Debate – a ninety-minute event shown only on Global Television, due to stipulations set by the Premier – failed to generate any abnormal quantity of coverage by any of the other media outlets. Brief recapitulations of the debate were offered in print and on television, many of which primarily referred to the lack a 'knockout blow' and the dearth of public interest in the event. Meanwhile, only 11.1 per cent of print stories featured commentary on Klein's possible successors, and a total of six (or 2.1 per cent) discussed the Senate race. These numbers were even lower on television, where only 3 stories (or 1.7 per cent) discussed the unofficial leadership race, and not a single mention was made of the province's Senatorial election.

¹⁶ This raises the question, "Why was there more issue coverage in Edmonton, but not Calgary?" By all accounts, the race was much closer in Edmonton, with a three-way race in several constituencies, and nearly all of the city's Conservative seats in play. While a closer race might prompt one to expect *more* horserace coverage, we argue that this competitiveness was due largely to Edmontonians' concerns over infrastructure funding and the relative lack of influence of Edmonton Conservative MLAs within the governing caucus and Cabinet; in addition, the two major opposition party leaders hailed from Edmonton. With the *Edmonton Journal* being the major newspaper in such a competitive city, and a newspaper traditionally more supportive of opposition parties, it should come as little surprise that its coverage was more issue-based than other media outlets.

¹⁷ Of all Liberal Party coverage, for instance, 68.2 per cent was issue-based; this figure rises to 78.3 per cent in the print media (see Table 3). Similarly, 72.7 per cent of NDP coverage was of the hard news variety, with three-quarters of the party's newspaper exposure framed in light of its issue stances.

¹⁸ The Alliance's use of American-style campaign strategies, including a series of negative advertisements condemning the Klein government's health care record, gained them added soft-news exposure, as many outlets made such tactics the main focus of their coverage of the party.

¹⁹ According to Fletcher (1991: 194), "This pattern of proportional coverage is a response not only to pressure from the major parties but also to the balance requirements imposed upon broadcasters [by] Section 3(d) of the 1968 *Broadcasting Act* [which] specifies that programming presented by Canadian broadcasters 'should provide reasonable balanced opportunities for expression of differing views on matters of public concern... The Commission [CRTC] emphasizes that 'equitable' does not mean 'equal,' but that 'all candidates and parties are entitled to some coverage that will give them the opportunity to expose their ideas to the public.'"

²⁰ Over 52.2 per cent of these 'mixed' print stories contain some exclusive combination of Conservatives, Liberals and New Democrats, while 66.1 per cent contain some exclusive combination of Klein, Taft and Mason.

²¹ At least one leader was present in 88.8 per cent of all print articles, and 78.2 per cent of television stories.

²² The vertical axis in each figure measures the percentage point difference between the proportion of stories offering a positive view of the given political actor minus the proportion of stories offering a negative view that actor. The apparent absence of a bar above or below the zero axis indicates an equally balanced view of that particular party or leader.

²³ According to Elections Alberta, turnout in the 2004 General Election was 44.7 per cent of registered voters.

²⁴ This analogy is drawn eloquently by Hershey (2001: 70) in her discussion of U.S. Presidential Elections.

Figure 1: A Three-Dimensional Model of Media Effects

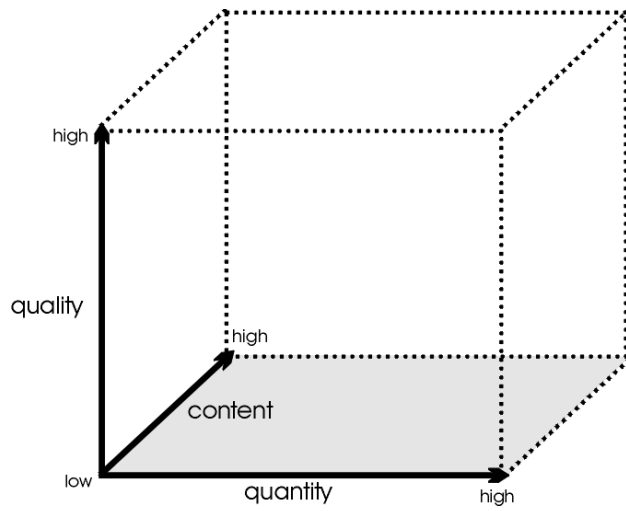


Figure 2a: Hard vs. Soft News Coverage, Television News

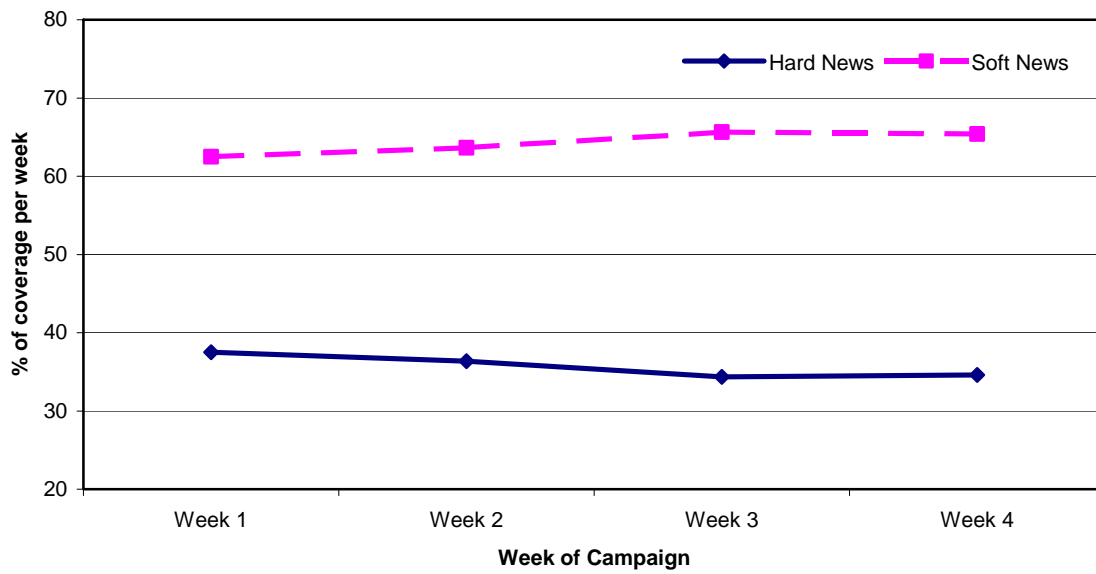


Figure 2b: Hard vs. Soft News Coverage, Print Media

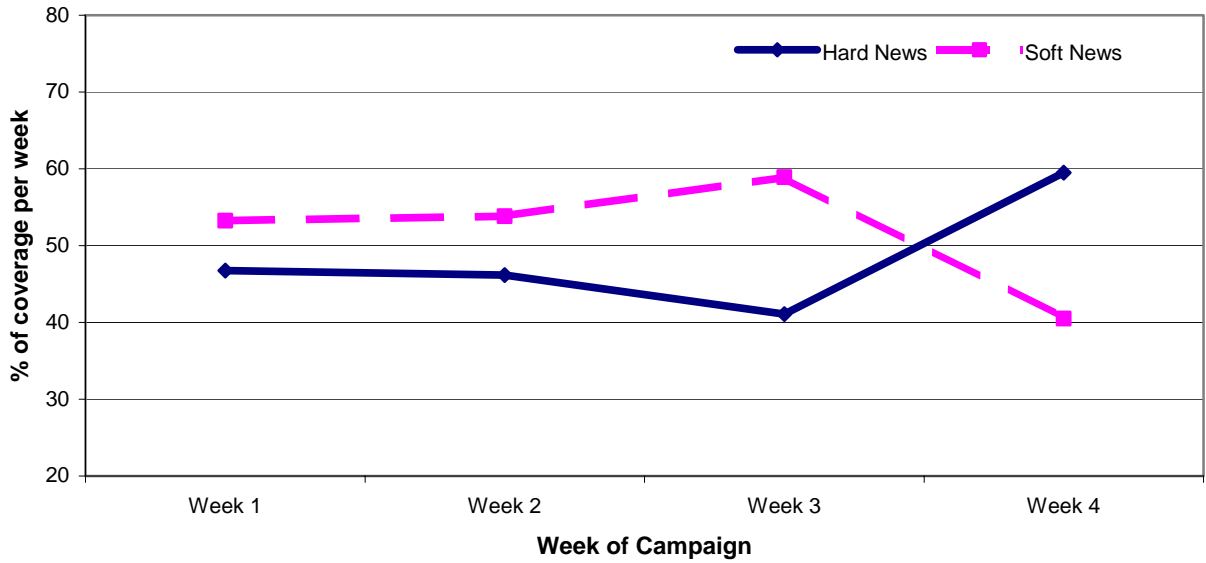


Figure 3: Genre of Coverage, Print Media vs. Television

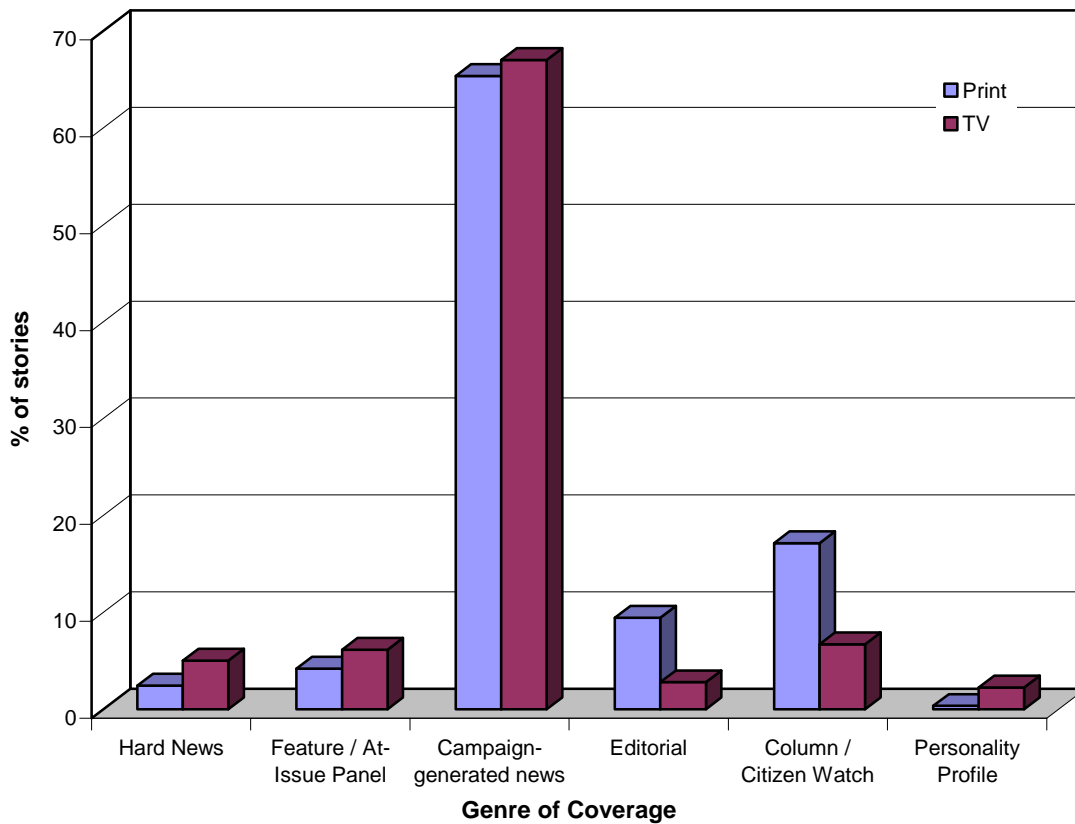


Figure 4: Balance of Coverage, Print Media vs. Television

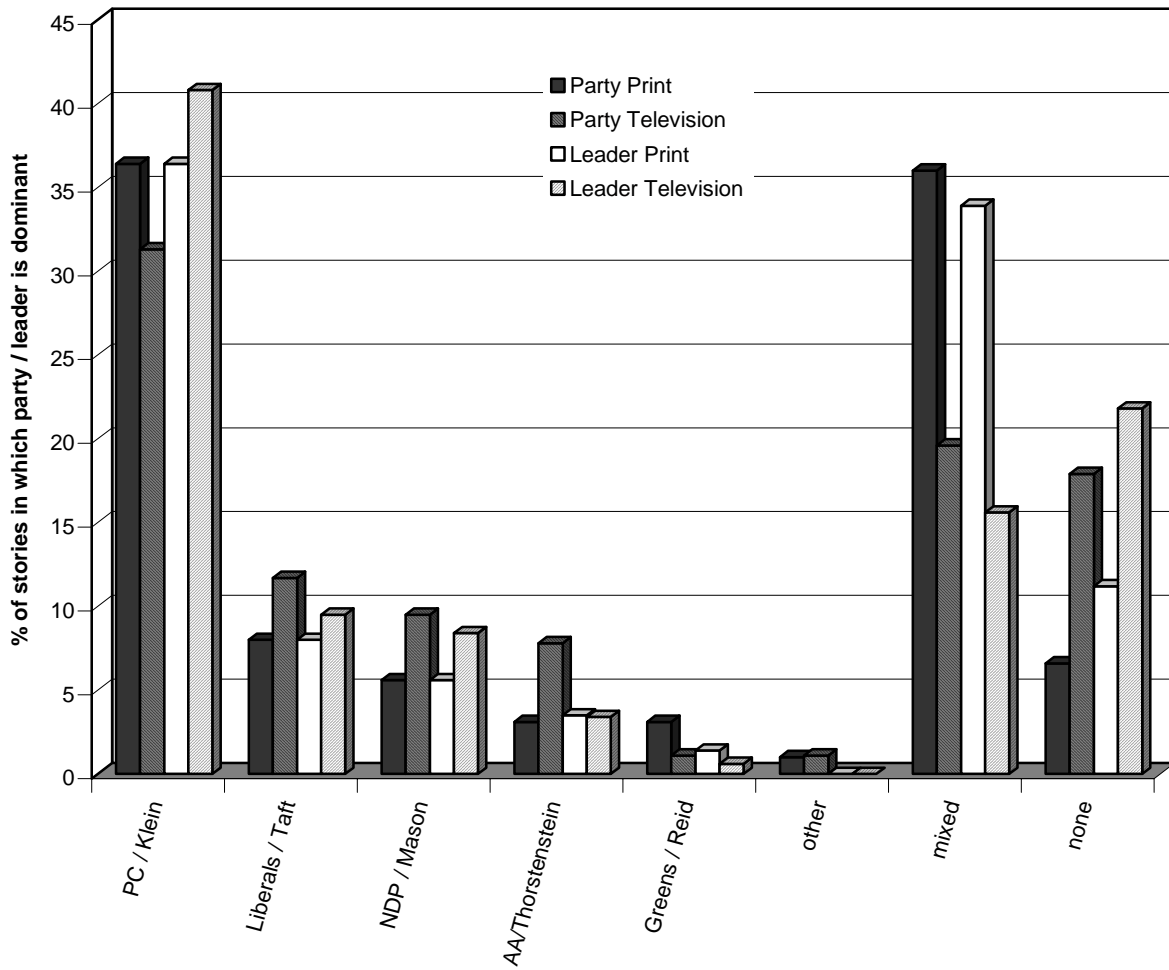


Figure 5: Dominant Issues by Media Type

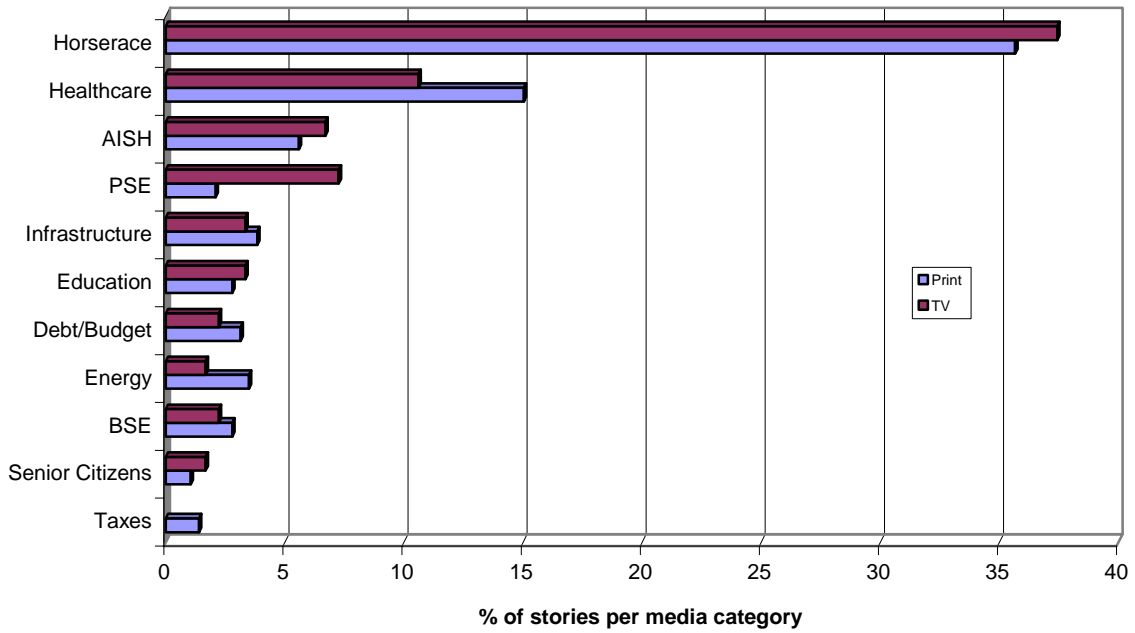


Figure 6: Tone of Leader Coverage by Media Outlet

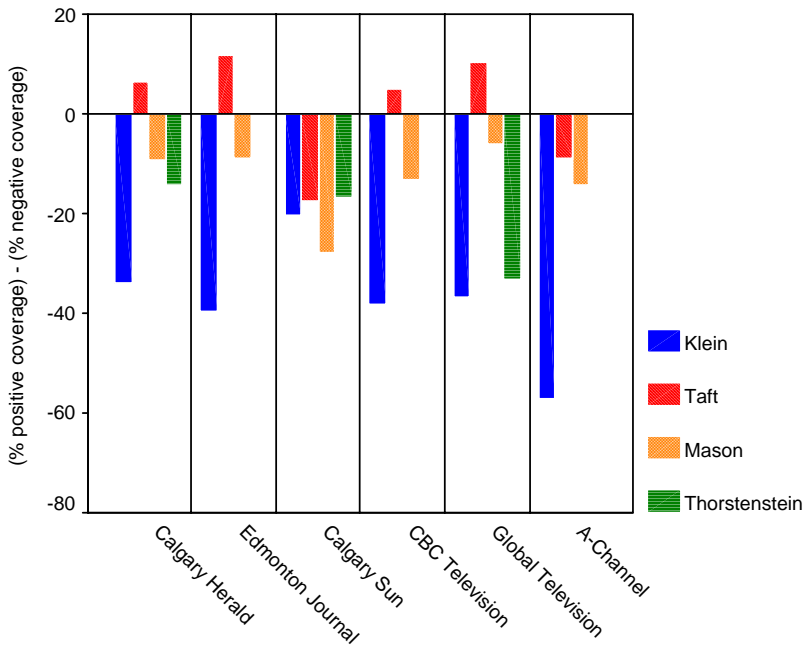


Figure 7: Tone of Party Coverage by Media Outlet

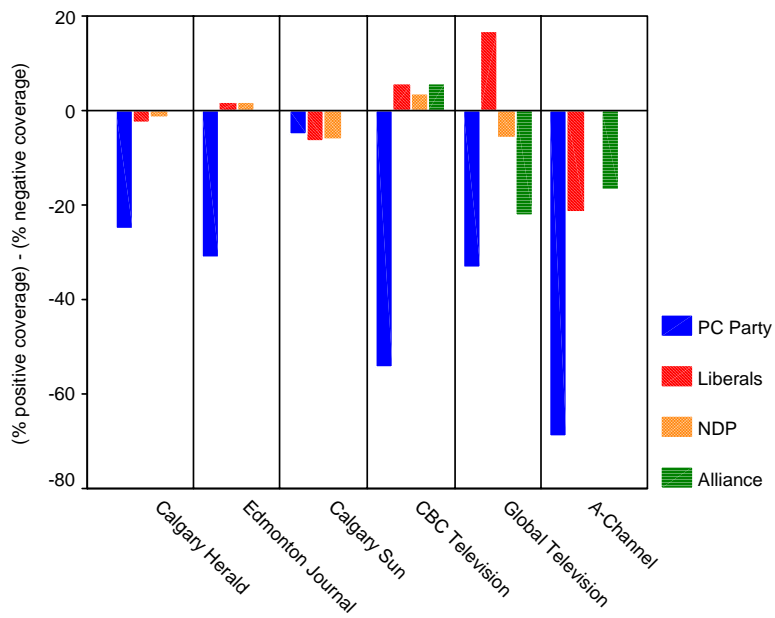


Figure 8: Tone of Leader Coverage by Media Type

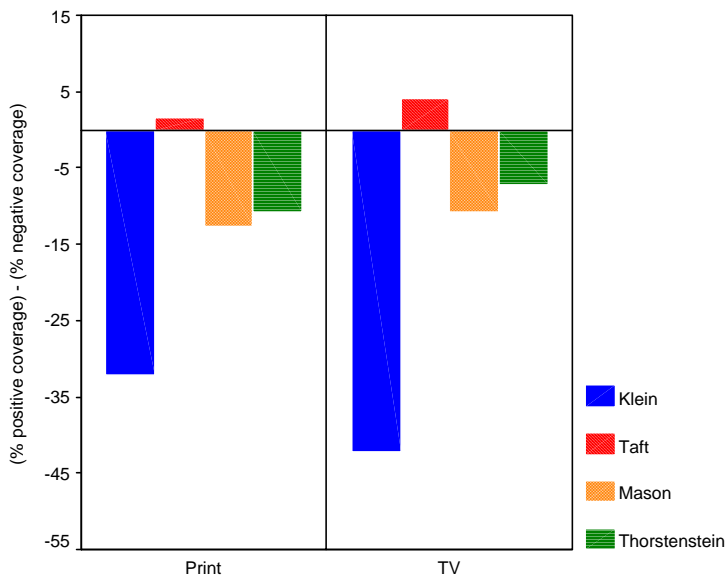


Figure 9: Tone of Party Coverage by Media Type

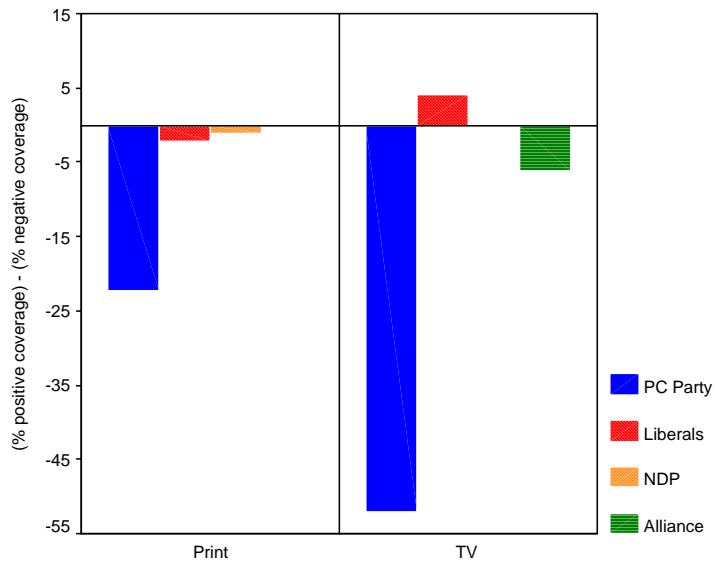


Figure 10: The Effects of Media on Deliberative Democracy in Alberta

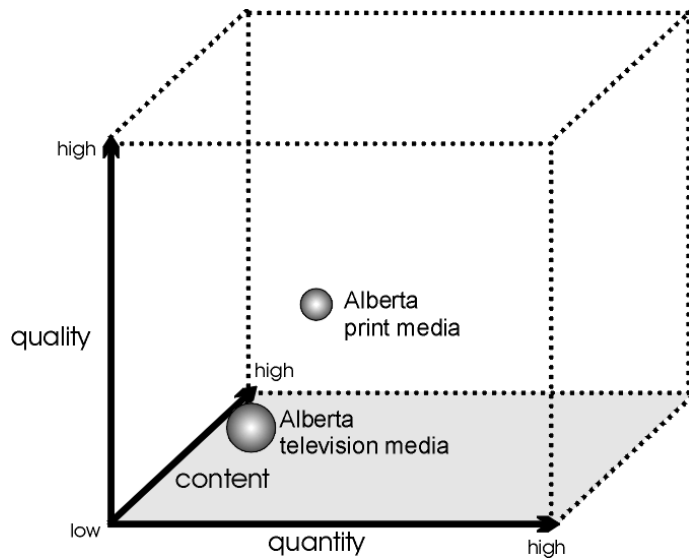


Table 1: Quantity of Campaign Coverage, Print Media and Television

	AVERAGE STORIES PER TELECAST	AVERAGE MINUTES PER STORY	AVERAGE MINUTES PER TELECAST
CBC	3.8	2.4	9.5
Global	2.8	1.5	4.2
A-Channel	2.0	1.5	3.0
	AVERAGE STORIES PER EDITION	AVERAGE COLUMN INCHES PER STORY	AVERAGE COLUMN INCHES PER EDITION
Calgary Herald	6.1	15.0	91.7
Edmonton Journal	4.1	15.1	62.9
Calgary Sun	3.4	9.7	32.9

Table 2: Hard and Soft News, Print Media vs. Television

	PRINT MEDIA	TELEVISION	TOTAL
HARD NEWS	49.0%	33.0% (59)	42.8% (199)
SOFT NEWS	51.0%	67.0% (120)	57.2% (266)
	<i>N</i> = 286	<i>N</i> = 179	<i>N</i> = 465

Table 3: Hard vs. Soft News Coverage of Parties

	PC PARTY	LIBERALS	NDP	ALLIANCE	GREENS	OTHER
ALL MEDIA						
HARD NEWS	34.4%	68.2%	72.7%	13.0%	27.3%	20.0%
SOFT NEWS	65.6%	31.8%	27.3%	87.0%	72.7%	80.0%
	<i>N</i> = 160	<i>N</i> = 44	<i>N</i> = 33	<i>N</i> = 23	<i>N</i> = 11	<i>N</i> = 5
PRINT MEDIA						
HARD NEWS	36.5%	78.3%	75.0%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%
SOFT NEWS	63.5%	21.7%	25.0%	66.7%	66.7%	100.0%
	<i>N</i> = 104	<i>N</i> = 23	<i>N</i> = 16	<i>N</i> = 9	<i>N</i> = 9	<i>N</i> = 3
TELEVISION						
HARD NEWS	30.4%	57.1%	70.6%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%
SOFT NEWS	69.6%	42.9%	29.4%	100.0%	100.0%	50.0%
	<i>N</i> = 56	<i>N</i> = 21	<i>N</i> = 17	<i>N</i> = 14	<i>N</i> = 2	<i>N</i> = 2

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