

News Coverage of Politics

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News media coverage of politics is highly varied, depending on the medium, the outlet and the country, though several generalizations can be made. First, media coverage of elections tends to focus on the horse race, neglecting discussion of issues and policy, and not all candidates and parties receive equal coverage. Second, coverage of government tends to focus on executives at the expense of legislatures and courts. Third, local media organizations have struggled, resulting in diminished coverage of politics, though what exists tends to be more positive than national-level coverage. Fourth, international coverage is infrequent and focused on conflict and violence. In addition, media coverage focuses on political elites, as portrayals of ordinary citizens are fairly rare and focus on the most politically involved. Finally, ownership of media has an influence on the content of political coverage.

News media; Elections; Politics; Local news; International news; Media ownership

News coverage of politics is an extremely broad topic. Indeed, entire books have been written on the subject. Thus, this entry by necessity must provide a high-level overview. We divide our discussion of politics into four areas: coverage of elections, coverage of national government, coverage of politics at the local level, and coverage of international affairs. We then discuss how media cover ordinary citizens and consider variation in coverage that depends on a country's media system, the type of medium and an outlet's ownership. In describing this scholarship, we attempt to draw conclusions that are broadly true for most democratic countries, but we acknowledge that some of the regularities we note do not apply in all places at all times.

Election Coverage

When elections are covered in news, the focus is more likely to be on the horserace than on substantive policy issues. Horserace reporting has been defined as media coverage that focuses on “who is winning and who is losing, and by what margin and why” (Patterson, 2016) or “the candidates’ comings and goings on the campaign trail, their strategies for winning votes, and their prospects for victory or defeat,” which can be contrasted with reporting that focuses on “the issues, the candidates’ policy positions, their characters and abilities, their public records and personal backgrounds” (Patterson, 1977, p.73).

Public opinion polls are heavily used in horserace reporting. Both the title (e.g., “Biden Holds Steady Lead Over Trump in Arizona, Latest Poll Finds”) and content (e.g., “The results are essentially unchanged from a Times-Siena poll of the state last month, which found Mr. Biden leading 49 percent to 40 percent”) of a New York Times article provide good examples of horserace coverage. Of course, horserace coverage is found worldwide. Strömbäck & Kaid (2008) show that horserace journalism was prominent or dominant in all of the countries they examined, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Japan, Poland, and South Africa.

When journalists talk about competing candidates by using polling data, they can claim that their reporting is objective and fair. Covering substantive policy issues in an objective and fair way, however, is not easy. Horserace reporting may serve some members of the public by making politics more understandable and thus increasing their interest in politics. However, Zoizner's

(2021) meta-analysis concludes that exposure to strategy and horserace coverage lowers one's level of substantive knowledge about policy issues. Moreover, the same study shows that citizens become more cynical about politics and the media when journalists focus heavily on the strategies and tactics used by political campaigns.

Another important aspect of election coverage is the imbalance in free media or how often journalists cover each political candidate in their reporting. Practically, news organizations in most countries, including countries as varied as Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, and the U.S. (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008), are not required to spend equal time on covering candidates running for the same political office (not to mention covering them in a fair way). As a result, some candidates (e.g., Donald Trump) receive more media coverage than others. A study comparing candidates from 89 countries suggests that candidates who go negative and heavily rely on emotional appeals tend to receive more media coverage (Maier & Nai, 2020). Of course, there is no guarantee that candidates perform better as a result of receiving more media coverage because candidates cannot control the tone or content of the coverage. However, due to such imbalances, voters have unequal opportunities to learn about candidates running for the same political office.

Coverage of Government

Coverage of government tends to focus on executives. The U.S. president, for instance, garners more media coverage than the Congress or Supreme Court (Dunaway & Graber, 2022), and media coverage of government in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain focuses more on the executive branch than the legislative (Van Dalen, 2012). This executive-focused coverage stems from the increasing efforts by executives to shape coverage, a pattern of increasing personalization of news coverage, the intrinsic importance of a country's leader and the relative ease of covering one story from one office versus the multiple stories emerging from legislative bodies. Coverage of national high courts is relatively rare, in part because they do not do "newsworthy" things on a daily basis. Thus, only "important" decisions, such as those that upend the status quo, may be covered (Collins & Cooper, 2015). In addition, many courts do not seek coverage, as having a fairly low profile may help to enhance their legitimacy.

Local Coverage

Coverage of national politics also tends to be different than coverage of more local politics. One difference is that local news tends to give little attention to politics. Studies from the U.S. show that local television news is focused on traffic, weather, and sports—and that is true even when an election is forthcoming (Fowler et al., 2007). Another difference is that while national media outlets provide coverage that is often negative and cynical, there tends to be more positive coverage at the local level (Kumar, 2007). Thus, some national politicians have adopted a strategy of “going local” to try to garner more favorable coverage (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2008). As the boundaries of media markets do not perfectly align with political boundaries, it is difficult for a local television station to cover local politics in a way satisfactory for all of its viewers who live in various cities, regions, states or provinces. Local newspapers once covered political units smaller than media markets, such as city or metropolitan area, more comprehensively, but newspapers are in steep decline. As a result, there is now much less local government news coverage than in the past (Jennings & Rubado, 2019). The upshot is that many politicians at sub-national levels are subject to less media scrutiny than in pre-Internet days. Because local news organizations lack the staff to provide large amounts of news about local politics, they may turn to additional coverage of national politics obtained from wire service reports, such as those provided by the Associated Press or Reuters. Recognizing the gap in political coverage at the sub-national level, some non-profit organizations, such as States Newsroom in the U.S., have launched Internet-based news sites that focus on providing additional coverage of politics at the local or regional level.

International Coverage

Coverage of international news is often limited due to the lack of audience interest and high production cost. That said, there are several regularities observed in coverage of international politics and events. One is that such coverage relies on official sources, such as high-ranking officials or government press officers, rather than individuals who are on the ground in the country in which the event is taking place. Thus, indexing theory (Bennett, 1990) suggests that

the range of voices heard in international coverage will be relatively narrow and not reflective of public opinion. The substance of international coverage is also lopsided, tending to focus on violence, conflict and bloodshed (Dunaway & Graber, 2022). Indeed, some have hypothesized a so-called “CNN Effect” by which the media’s coverage of events in far-off lands—replete with videos of humanitarian disaster—forces governments and policy-makers to react, sometimes hastily, to the crisis abroad (Robinson, 1999). The upshot is that the news media now have increased capacity to drive foreign policy decision-making. A study of media in eleven countries found that commercial media are less likely to cover international affairs than are publicly owned media such as the BBC in the United Kingdom or the CBC in Canada (Aalberg et al., 2013).

In addition, rather than try to mirror what happens in the world in a representative way, the media cover certain countries and stories more frequently because of their organizational processes and routines. For example, there is a bias toward coverage of news that is closer to home. Events in neighboring countries are much more likely to be covered than events halfway around the globe (Jones et al., 2013), in part, because such events are more accessible to reporters and, in part, because of the assumption that audiences are more interested in events that are more geographically proximate. While proximity is an important factor, it is not the only one. News organizations allocate more resources, such as foreign bureaus and correspondents, to countries and regions they deem more important because of their economic and political power or language and cultural ties.

Ordinary Citizens Ignored

Another regularity in coverage is media’s tendency to ignore the voices of ordinary citizens in favor of the voices of political elites, who provide expertise on the topic and can help maintain political balance. There is, however, some evidence from the Netherlands that *vox populi* have increased in relative importance in recent years (Kleemans et al., 2017). Potential reasons for this are numerous, including the growth of technology-enabled citizen journalism, and journalists taking cues from citizen posts on social media. When journalists do cover the voices of members of the public, they pay more attention to those who are deeply involved in politics or those who identify strongly with a party as they are more likely, or eager, to tell newsworthy

stories (Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022). As a result, what is presented as the voices of ordinary citizens overrepresents the voices of politically involved partisans, which may lead audiences to an inaccurate understanding of what ordinary citizens think.

Mediums and Ownership

News coverage of politics varies also depending on the types of media and media ownership. For instance, horserace journalism is more common in television news than in newspapers in Sweden and Japan (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). It remains to be seen whether Internet news better informs the public and how it affects local journalism. As for media ownership, Dunaway and Lawrence (2015) find that in the U.S., large-chain-owned newspapers and corporately owned newspapers were more likely to cover elections as a competitive game than privately owned independents and small local chains. Compared to public media, commercially driven news outlets tend to focus more heavily on horserace journalism. Based on evidence from many countries such as Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Japan, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, and the U.S., Strömbäck & Kaid (2008) suggest that horserace journalism is more common in countries where commercial media dominate.

Conclusion

There are many regularities to news coverage of politics, such as a focus on the horserace in election coverage, the privileging of events close to home, a focus on conflict and violence overseas and a relative neglect of ordinary citizens. At the same time, there remains much variation across countries and across news outlets because of differences in audiences and ownership, among other factors. Quality coverage of politics and government is also threatened due to developments over the past couple of decades, as many major news organizations have lost considerable revenue and shed thousands of reporters, resulting in further consolidation in the media industry and the pursuit of sensationalism and human-interest stories to attract audiences. Some organizations have successfully made the shift to digital, but many have not, and this is especially true when it comes to more local and regional news organizations. Perhaps even more threatening is that citizens' trust in the news has declined, fueled by politicians who

strategically attack news organizations and rampant misinformation on social media. Few would argue that citizens are well-served by the way the news media report on politics today.

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