

News Coverage of the Candidates in the 2006 Senate Race in Tennessee

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Abstract

This study examines the 2006 Senate race in the state of Tennessee and compares the coverage in the newspapers of Chattanooga and Memphis – the hometowns of Bob Corker and Harold Ford, Jr., the two candidates for the open U.S. Senate seat from the state of Tennessee. Direct and indirect quotes by each of the candidates are compared to see whether there was balance in this aspect of the coverage in the newspapers, and additionally, the tone of direct and indirect quotes by people other than the candidates are examined to see whether there is an indication of favoritism in the papers for the hometown candidate. Although the study does not find enough evidence to suggest that either newspaper lacked balance or showed favoritism, the findings may lead to further study.

Introduction

In the 2006 Senate race, Democrat Harold Ford, Jr. and Republican Bob Corker vied for an open U.S. Senate seat soon to be vacated by outgoing Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist representing the state of Tennessee. Since Frist did not seek re-election, the lack of an incumbent seeking re-election presented an opportunity to analyze a political race between two challengers without the factor of incumbency at play. Harold Ford, Jr., held a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives for five terms between 1996 and 2006, representing the Ninth District of Tennessee (<http://www.house.gov/ford/about/>). Bob Corker had government experience previously as the mayor of Chattanooga (<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/elections/keyraces/19/>) and in a state cabinet position. The race was widely followed by media outlets throughout the country due to the perceived tightness of the contest, as well as the result of the race potentially deciding the next Senate majority. The race became controversial and heated as the election drew to a close. Corker won the election over Ford 51% to 48%, with Corker receiving 929,835 votes compared to 879,494 for Ford (<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/elections/2006/TN.html>). When a political contest finishes so close, it is worth examining factors in the race that may have been influential in the outcome.

This study seeks to determine whether there is any evidence of newspapers giving preferential treatment to each candidate in his hometown – The Memphis *Commercial Appeal* for Ford and the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* for Corker.

Review of Literature

The influence of media coverage in political campaigns is certainly not a new basis of study. As recently as 2005, James N. Druckman studied the potential influences of television and newspapers in influencing elections by using content analysis and exit polls (p. 463). He concluded that the content of television and newspapers does not vary a great deal, other than there is a far greater amount of coverage given to campaigns in the print media. Druckman also concluded that newspaper coverage appears to be more somewhat more likely to influence the electorate than television news (Druckman, 2005, p. 476).

There has been a long history of agenda-setting studies that have demonstrated the potential effects of the media upon the public consciousness. And though this study will not include a study of the voters in the 2006 Senate election, and is not an agenda-setting study, background on other agenda-setting studies helps to demonstrate the potential importance of the media in political contests. The concept of agenda-setting was clarified by McCombs and Shaw in a study of the 1968 presidential campaign, in which they “compared the agenda of issues in nine news media used by voters...to follow [an] election...with the agenda of issues subsequently regarded as important by...voters” (eds. Overholser and Jamieson, p. 157). They found that there did appear to be a relationship between the issues the media devoted a lot of attention to and those issues deemed important by the public (p. 157). McCombs also notes that the direct influence of candidates was heightened in state and local elections, due to these elections receiving less intense press coverage than national elections typically receive. It is possible that

this was at play in the Tennessee race, but the Ford-Corker contest, being of national importance in this election cycle, likely could be considered to have been more of a “national race.” In national races, the candidates are thought to have a lesser degree of direct influence over the press due to increased scrutiny and attention given to them by the press (eds. Overholser and Jamieson, p. 165). McCombs’ study is the basis of much of the agenda-setting research that has been done in the years since 1968, and many of these subsequent studies “have found a high degree of correspondence between how issues are ranked on the press agenda and the agendas of the public and policy makers” (Overholser and Jamieson, p. 157).

In preparation to exploring the newspaper coverage of the 2006 Tennessee Senate race in selected print and television outlets across the state, analyzing what issues were covered, and who was introducing the issues into the debate, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of whether the issues are even the most important factor voters explore in deciding who to vote for in an election. Previous research by Braher (2003) has confirmed that issues are important to likely voters in congressional races, while Drew and Weaver (2006) determined that those who read newspapers tend to be more likely to vote in presidential contests. It is also important to consider that many agenda-setting studies have been carried out over the years since the influential McCombs and Shaw study of the 1968 elections, and recent research has even tried to evaluate the many agenda-setting studies that have been done, which, according to Walgrave & Van Aelst (2006), have generally come to contradictory conclusions (p. 88).

According to Walgrave and Van Aelst, the prior agenda-setting studies have failed to “answer the basic question whether the mass media determine the political

agenda or, put more precisely, under what specific circumstances the mass media are able to boost political attention for issues” (p. 89). Walgrave and Van Aelst compared 19 different agenda-setting studies which resulted in varied conclusions, with “almost half establish[ing] a strong media impact on the political agenda, four result[ing] in considerable impact conclusions, three [finding] only weak impact, and four record[ing] hardly any impact” (p. 91). Walgrave and Van Aelst attribute the varied results of these studies to the research design (p. 91).

Holly Brasher’s (2003) article, “Capitalizing on Contention: Issue Agendas in U.S. Senate Campaigns” explains that in scholarly circles, it has widely been believed that the candidates stances on issues may not be as important in a successful campaign as “[c]onstituent service, local ties, trustworthiness and character, and parochial issues,” which these scholars believe “form the basis of support between members of Congress and their constituents” (p. 454). Brasher notes that another “familiar assumption in the scholarly community” is that such races are therefore unlike presidential contests, where issues are typically given more emphasis (p. 454). Brasher conducted a study in order to determine if this was a flawed form of reasoning, and determined that in fact issues are given a great deal of emphasis by congressional candidates (p. 467). More specifically, “[t]hey use the issues that their party owns, the major policy accomplishments from the current Congress, and the unresolved or contentious issues from the election year” (Brasher, 2003, p. 467).

In order for voters to be susceptible to agenda setting in the media, the citizens must be utilizing or consuming the media in some capacity. Drew and Weaver (2006) examined the use of media by voters during the 2004 presidential election and measured

the potential voters “knowledge of the issue positions of candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry, [their] level of interest in the campaign, and intention to vote” (p. 28). Drew and Weaver’s study focused on media across the spectrum, from readership of newspapers, to getting campaign news on the internet or from the radio. The findings most relevant to agenda setting in the Tennessee Senate race in my study regards newspaper readership. Drew and Weaver’s findings indicated “a suggestion that paying attention to newspaper reporting of presidential campaigns is associated with a greater intention to vote, although that relationship was weaker in 2004 than in the previous two elections, suggesting...a decline in the importance of newspaper campaign coverage as a predictor of voting, and also as a predictor of interest in the campaign” (p. 38).

Other research with some degree of relevance includes articles by Cohen (2005) and Weaver and Elliot (1985). Cohen (2005), discusses the use of quotes by scholars and pundits in “The Quote Machines.” The article serves as a reminder that journalists are working with a deadline, and occasionally may turn to the same people over and over again for quotes pertaining to politics, or if they do not have sources near the story, or if a government official is not providing answers to the reporter’s questions (p. 3). Cohen’s article is not a research-based article, yet it providing insight into how quotes in articles may occasionally emanate from somewhat dubious sources, due to some reporters having close ties to someone who can readily provide them with a quote for almost any topic.

Weaver and Elliot (1985), in an article titled “Who Sets the Agenda for the Media? A Study of Local Agenda-Building,” explore the relationship between the Bloomington, Indiana, City Council and the local newspaper “to provide some systematic evidence on the source-media relationship in a non-election agenda-setting context (p.

88). They explored whether the local paper was more of a “filter” or “transmitter” of the City Council’s agenda based on whether the paper covered the issues the Council dealt with (p. 88). They determined that the newspaper was largely a “transmitter” of the Council’s agenda, although not exclusively, and some filtering was found due to “the selective processes and news judgements of journalists” (Weaver and Elliot, 1985, p. 94).

These varied studies seem to confirm Walgrave and Van Aelst’s (2006) contention that there had been a wide array of agenda-setting studies done, with differing conclusions reached by the researchers (p. 89). Subsequently, Walgrave and Van Aelst attempted to pool such studies together in order to “analytically confront and compare the available studies, and [to]...sketch the broad lines of a preliminary theory” (p. 89). Walgrave and Van Aelst point out four specific elements of the design of agenda-setting studies that may explain the wide spectrum of results from the different studies: which specific *media* and *issues* are being analyzed, the “*political agenda* choice and measurement since not all political agendas may react the same way on media coverage,” and finally, the particular *time period* of the study, such as if the study pertains to “electoral or nonelectoral times” (p. 91).

Research questions

RQ1: Were the candidates given more coverage than their opponent in their hometown newspapers?

Q2: Was the tone of coverage of the candidate in his hometown newspaper more favorable than the coverage given to the candidate from the other city?

Method

The data for the research consists of news articles, editorials and letters to the editor pertaining to the 2006 U.S. Senate race from newspapers and television stations from around the state of Tennessee. News stories relevant to the campaign were collected from the cities of Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga, as well as the Associated Press state wire. These cities were selected in order to have stories from the west, middle, and east regions of Tennessee. Additionally, Harold Ford, Jr. is from Memphis and Bob Corker is from Chattanooga, so the study will consist of the papers from Memphis and Chattanooga, representing each candidate's hometown. However, Nashville news stories were collected as well, but not used in the study. The newspaper stories from each city were collected from online databases. *The Tennessean* from Nashville was pulled from NewsBank inc.'s "America's Newspapers" database, while *The Memphis Commercial Appeal* and the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* were collected from LexisNexis.

One important note about the data collected for this study is that the article collection from *The Tennessean* is incomplete. 74 articles were collected, coded, and analyzed, although NewsBank Inc.' "America's Newspapers" database indicates that there were 122 relevant articles. The reason for this discrepancy is that the articles were loaded onto this database later than anticipated. However, this research paper concerns only the papers from Memphis and Chattanooga, and, therefore, the incomplete data set from Nashville will not influence the findings.

One television station from each city was selected as a news source. These stories were collected from each station's website. The station representing Nashville was News Channel 5, a CBS affiliate, with the articles retrieved from newschannel5.com. For Memphis, News Channel 3, another CBS affiliate was used, with stories pulled from the station's website wreg.com. For Chattanooga, News Channel 9, an ABC affiliate was selected (newschannel9.com). Articles from these sources were collected every day between September 7, 2006 and November 7, 2006.

After the articles were collected, a team of coders determined the primary subject covered in each article, whether the main subject was a political issue in the campaign. Additional interest was given to quotes in each article, and the coding sheet for each article included a section titled "use of direct quotations in articles, editorials, letters," as well as another section, "use of indirect quotations in articles, editorials, letters." Coders read each article, and determined whether the articles contained either direct or indirect quotes from either of the candidates, either of the campaign staffs, or "someone else."

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The coding sheet also included sections with descriptions of the direct and indirect quotes in the articles. Here, coders identified whether the tone of the direct quotations by the candidates was a personal attack on the opponent's character, an attack of the opponent on issues, a combined issue/character attack, an instance where the candidate acclaimed himself, and instance where the candidate defended himself. In the tone of direct quotations by the candidates, there was an option of the candidate comparing himself to his opponent, which was not included in the "tone of indirect

quotations by candidates” section of the coding sheet. Another section on the coding sheet allowed the coder to identify the tone of either direct or indirect quotes by people other than the candidates.

Results

For research question 1, “Were the candidates given more coverage than their opponent in their hometown newspapers?,” the number of direct and indirect quotes by each of the candidates was compared. As Table A, below shows, Corker had 40 direct quotes in the Chattanooga paper and 21 direct quotes in the Memphis paper. Meanwhile, Ford had 39 direct quotes in the Chattanooga paper and 25 in the Memphis paper.

Table A.: Direct quotes by candidates

	Chattanooga	Memphis	Total
Corker	40	21	61
Ford	39	25	64

These numbers were compared using a chi-square calculator (http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/webtools/web_chi.html), and the distribution was not considered to be significant. It is here worth noting that Chattanooga had a greater number of articles concerning the race overall than Memphis. Even though Chattanooga had more articles about the campaign than the Memphis paper, the articles in the Chattanooga paper did not have a disproportionate amount of direct quotes by either candidate.

Table B, below, shows the tallies of indirect quotes by Ford and Corker in the Chattanooga and Memphis papers. Corker had 26 indirect quotes in the Chattanooga paper and 13 indirect quotes in the Memphis paper, while Ford had 29 indirect quotes in the Chattanooga paper and 14 indirect quotes in the Memphis paper.

Table B: Indirect quotes by candidates

	Chattanooga	Memphis	Total
Corker	26	13	39
Ford	29	14	43

With these numbers, another chi-square test was run using a chi-square calculator. The chi-square had one column designated for the Chattanooga paper and for the Memphis paper. Additionally, it had one row each designated for Corker and Ford. The chi-square test concluded that there was not a statistically significant difference in the quotes each candidate received. So again, there did not appear to be any sort of favoritism by the hometown papers in giving their hometown candidate more coverage than the other through indirect quotes.

In short, the number of quotes by the candidates in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* and the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* appear to have been fairly balanced. Therefore, in response to research question 1, the hometown candidate does not appear to have received more coverage in his hometown paper than his opponent received.

For research question 2, “Was the tone of coverage of the candidate in his hometown newspaper more favorable than the coverage given to the candidate from the other city?” the tone of direct or indirect quotes by someone other than the candidate results was examined. Further analysis can be done on the tone of direct or indirect quotes by the candidates attacking his opponent, but at this stage of the research, this analysis is yet to be accomplished.

The sum of attacks on Corker’s character, issues, and combined character/issue attacks were 30 instances in Chattanooga and 20 in Memphis, as shown below in Table C.

Table C: Quotes by someone else attacking candidates

	Chattanooga	Memphis	Total
Attack Corker	30	20	48
Attack Ford	38	12	50

The sum of these same attacks on Ford was 38 in the Chattanooga paper and 12 in the Memphis paper. A chi-square test found that the distribution was not significant, with 1 degree of freedom. Therefore, there does not appear to have been a disproportionate amount of attacks against the candidate from the other city in the hometown papers.

Additionally, as Table D, below illustrates, there were 34 instances of direct or indirect quotes by people other than the candidate acclaiming Corker in the Chattanooga paper and 11 in the Memphis paper, while there were 24 instances of quotes by people other than the candidate acclaiming Ford in the Chattanooga paper and 14 in the Memphis paper.

Table D: Quote by someone else acclaiming candidates

	Chattanooga	Memphis	Total
Acclaim Corker	34	11	45
Acclaim Ford	24	14	38

The chi-square test again found these differences in coverage to be statistically insignificant, with one degree of freedom. This test again found not sign of favoritism in a disproportionate amount of acclaim being given to the candidates in their hometown newspaper.

Conclusion

Through calculations comparing the coverage of quotes by the candidates in the Memphis and Chattanooga papers, there does not seem to be evidence that there was more coverage given to the hometown candidate, nor does the coverage seem to have been biased in favor of the hometown candidate based on the amount of quotes each candidate had in the papers. Both Ford and Corker appear to have received roughly equal coverage in both the Memphis and Chattanooga papers in regard to their quotes.

The possible significance of indirect and direct quotes by people other than the candidate, and the possible affect these had on voters in determining whom they would cast their votes posits a cause and effect situation that cannot be explored with certainty. Often even individual voters cannot articulate why they voted for a particular candidate. But regarding hometown newspaper coverage, this research shows no evidence of bias in favor of the hometown candidate through inclusion of a disproportional amount of quotes by the hometown candidate. Additionally, there does not appear to be evidence of favoritism for the hometown candidate based on the quantity or tone of quotes by people other than the candidate.

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