TV News and Politics

To a vast audience, television in America presents its own version of reality. As a result, America's political processes have been altered in ways both obvious and obscure. Election campaigns are geared to the special needs of television news; millions of dollars are spent on political TV advertising. But the effects on voters remain a matter of scholarly dispute and speculation. Here, discussing the 1976 campaign, political scientists Thomas E. Patterson and Michael J. Robinson raise some of the issues of concern to academic TV researchers. Then, in a Wilson Center "evening dialogue," network news executives respond.

THE 1976 HORSERACE

by Thomas E. Patterson

The 1976 presidential campaign, as presented on the network evening news, was primarily a competition to be won or lost. Only secondarily did it seem to involve national policy and quality of leadership.

Most of the evening news coverage was given over to what can most aptly be called the "horserace"—the candidates' comings and goings on the campaign trail, their strategies for winning votes, and their prospects for victory or defeat. Such subjects accounted for 60 percent of the networks' presidential election news during 1976. By contrast, only 28 percent of the television coverage was devoted to the "substance" of the campaign—the issues, the candidates' policy positions, their characters and abilities, their public records and personal backgrounds.

These figures come from a content analysis of a randomly selected sample of 117 weeknight network newscasts made between January 1 and November 1, 1976, 39 newscasts being

analyzed for each network—ABC, CBS, NBC.

Network television news emphasized the "horserace" aspects from the beginning. Even before the New Hampshire primary on February 24, news coverage focused on the candidates' strategies and campaign efforts and the odds they faced in trying to win the party nominations. The early coverage of Ford and Reagan did touch on the ideological and other bases of their contest, but considerably more time was spent on the candidates' early personal appearances—mostly Reagan's—and the strategies and resources of each. On the Democratic side, except for one-shot biographical sketches of some of the candidates, almost no attention was given to substantive issues. The coverage revolved around such questions as who was gaining the early advantage, how effective did their organizations appear to be, and who was campaigning today—and where.

After the New Hampshire primary, the horserace type of coverage received even more emphasis. With 30 primaries to be covered in 100 days, election reporting was necessarily heavy on who was winning and by how much in each primary and where. This emphasis, however, was not limited to Tuesday's vote predictions and Wednesday's vote analyses. Nearly every day the lead report on both the Republican and Democratic races dealt with the candidates' progress toward the nominations. Each development was analyzed primarily for its effect on the race. Carter's "ethnic purity" statement, for instance, was mentioned much more often in terms of its possible effects on his chances than in terms of what, if anything, it revealed about his politics.

During the first five months of 1976, no more than 11 percent of network coverage of the primaries was concerned with the candidates' policies and political leanings and only 5 percent with such topics as their abilities, characters, and public records. These percentages are based on all news references, regardless of length or source, originating in an anchorman's lead, a correspondent's narrative, or some other format. In the period of the party conventions, the horserace coverage continued to dominate.

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NETWORK EVENING NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN (January 1 to November 1, 1976)

	ABC	CBS	NBC	network average
THE HORSERACE				
winning and losing	19%	21%	22%	21%
strategy, logistics, and support	22	21	27	23
appearances, crowds, hoopla	17	15	15	16
	58	**57**	**64**	**60**
THE SUBSTANCE				
candidates' policies	13	11	9	11
candidates' characteristics and backgrounds	6	8	7	7
issue-related subjects (e.g., party platforms)	11	12	8	10
	30	**31**	**24**	**28**
THE REST				
(e.g., campaign calendar, election procedures)	12	12	12	12
	100%	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Attention to the substance of the 1976 presidential campaign rose moderately from a three-network average low of 25 percent during the primary period to 35 percent during the post-convention period.

Once the campaign had been narrowed to Ford and Carter, "substance" did receive more attention, particularly on the evening newscasts of ABC and CBS, accounting for almost 40 percent of their coverage, as compared to 30 percent of NBC's. At every stage of the general election campaign, these network differences reflected a tendency on the part of NBC to pay consistently less attention to substance than the other two networks.

Television's emphasis on substance was greater during the 1976 general election than it had been in 1972. In our study of network reporting of the Nixon-McGovern race,* Robert McClure and I found that less than 30 percent of the post-convention

*Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, *The Unseeing Eye* (Putnam's, 1976).

coverage was given to issue and candidate assessments.

But 1976 was different. ABC and CBS gave more continuous coverage to what the candidates were saying on a variety of issues and placed more emphasis on analyses of their characters and qualifications. Although events, such as the televised debates, contributed to the networks' substantive coverage, it is my feeling that ABC and CBS made an effort in 1976 to cover substance more heavily than in previous elections. Nonetheless, the horse-race was clearly the central theme of television's post-convention coverage, accounting for about 50 percent of such reporting by ABC and CBS and nearly 60 percent by NBC.

One apparent reason for this emphasis is that television is a visual medium, which is more effective when it shows people in motion rather than "talking heads." A candidate disembarking from an airplane or wading through a crowd provides a better television picture than a candidate standing still and making a statement. But the "good picture" argument does not fully explain the 1976 election coverage, since less "action" film was displayed on the nightly news in 1976 than in 1972.

Explaining the "Why"

A more fundamental reason for the horserace emphasis in 1976 might be the interpretive form of most network news reporting. While a newspaper report is often simply a matter-of-fact description of a day's campaign events, a television report usually tries to explain a day's events and present them as a "story." A television report tends to answer why as much as what, which requires a context or perspective that will explain what happened. If the candidate is the focus of the report, as he usually is, his actions must be explained. The one thing that can be safely assumed about a major presidential candidate is that he is in the race to win, so his relative position in the race is the most obvious explanation for his actions and, in fact, the one most frequently used by network correspondents.

Although some reporters have suggested that network emphasis on the horserace merely reflects reality (the candidates *are* seeking office), the campaign actually offers the networks wide latitude in their coverage. Once in a while, a candidate will make a startling blunder or score a major triumph. Such banner stories must be broadcast, but they are not everyday occurrences, and on most days, the networks have free rein as to what they report. The typical campaign day will find candidates immersed in campaign hoopla. Nothing earthshaking may happen. Nevertheless,

the story possibilities are many.

Nightly newscasts, of course, are only one element of the networks' election coverage, but because they provide the daily news to millions of Americans, they are undoubtedly the most important. The evening news reaches an average of 28 million homes, according to the Nielsen ratings—11.2 million for CBS, 9.8 million for NBC, and 7 million for ABC. The other programming is more substantive, less so than is commonly assumed.

Whatever the explanation for network television's emphasis on the horserace, its effects are far-reaching. Television provides a window on the campaign for a vast number of American voters. Our research on the 1972 campaign revealed that regular viewers of the nightly news learned nothing more about the candidates' policies or qualifications than did non-viewers. During the entire period of the 1976 primaries, regular viewers learned almost nothing about what the candidates represented, although they were well informed about the candidates' chances of winning the party nominations. During the 1976 post-convention general election campaign, regular viewers did become better informed, but not nearly as well informed as regular newspaper readers.

Emphasis on the horserace also heightens the feeling of some voters that campaigns really are not very important and that candidates really are not very noble fellows. When asked to recall what they had seen on television in regard to the 1976 campaign, nearly 60 percent of the persons questioned in the course of this study cited a "horserace" story, which is almost exactly the percentage of such stories broadcast on the evening news during the campaign. When asked what "went through their minds" at the time, those recalling a horserace story were apt to say, "It was meaningless," or "Just more of the same old stuff." At the same time, however, particularly when the news report was about strategy or maneuvering, they tended to link a candidate's actions with negative stereotypes: "Politicians will do most anything to get votes" . . . "All politicians are the same."

People may vote differently when their votes are based on information of the horserace type rather than on substance. Our evidence on this subject has not yet been fully analyzed, but there is no reason to assume that knowledge of a candidate's strategies and campaign style—not to mention speculation on his chances of winning—provides a better basis for a voter's decision than knowledge of the candidate's policies and qualifications.

Horserace coverage may well affect the outcome of presidential elections in this country. At the very least, it affects the quality of the electorate's decision.

TV'S "HORSERACE" COVERAGE: A SAMPLE

On October 14, 1976, less than three weeks before election day, Jimmy Carter made a campaign swing through upstate New York, stopping in Rochester and Syracuse, where he spoke on taxes and economy, among other things. Professor Patterson saw it as a fairly typical campaign day; the following reports were aired that night on the three network evening news shows, as part of their election coverage.

ABC NEWS

Barbara Walters: New York State has 41 electoral votes—that's 15 percent of the total the winner needs, and that's not peanuts. So it's no wonder that Jimmy Carter followed the President into New York State by one day for a round of campaigning today. Sam Donaldson also made the trip which began in upstate New York.

Sam Donaldson: There were the old familiar lines today in upstate New York: "unemployment too high . . . home ownership too difficult . . . an income tax system that is a disgrace to the human race." Jimmy Carter returning to his tested routine—proof, if any was needed, that last week's heady mood of attack on a President then clearly on the run had given way to a more cautious thrust. More proof at airport news conferences—where Carter endorsed the special prosecutor's favorable report on the President. Smart politics perhaps—but putting Carter slightly on the defensive.

Jimmy Carter: I never have accused Mr. Ford of doing anything wrong—I just want to make sure that he lets the people have access to him, and has press conferences now and then.

Unidentified Reporter: There have been charges that you are waging a nasty little campaign. How do you react to that?

Jimmy Carter: Well, I never have done that—and don't intend to. If I did, it would be very damaging to me, and I certainly wouldn't deliberately permit it.

Sam Donaldson: Throughout the day, the crowds were large and enthusiastic, adding to Carter's belief that he's ahead and can stay ahead. Carter and his aides expect more difficulties. A heckler in Syracuse, for instance, upset the beginning of a rally before he was carried off. But the strategy for handling difficulties in the two and one-half weeks remaining seems to be—ignore them, if possible.

CBS NEWS

Walter Cronkite: With just two and a half weeks until the voting, Carter appears to be making an adjustment in his campaign style, and Ed Bradley has that story.

Ed Bradley: Carter's campaign winged toward New York State with a sharply reduced schedule that will keep the candidate on the road less often, just two or three days at a time. Carter senses he now has the momentum and President Ford the problems, so he sharply reduced the acidity of his attacks, but still reminds vot-

ers of the President's statements on Eastern Europe and the Arab boycott. As for attacks against him, Jimmy Carter delights in telling his audiences he knows what the Republicans have to say.

Jimmy Carter: Don't believe all the stories that you hear from our Republican administration, from my Republican opposition. If I believed everything I heard said about me, I wouldn't vote for myself. You help me, I help you, and we'll have a great country once again. Thank you very much, and God bless all of you.

Ed Bradley: A number of polls both public and private show Carter with a comfortable and growing lead in several key states as well as nationwide. Carter's strategists feel the cutback in the schedule will reduce the possibility their candidate will make a serious mistake that could reverse the trend in the polls. Still, it will keep him on the road often enough to provide a contrast with the Ford campaign. Ed Bradley, CBS News, with the Carter campaign in Syracuse.

NBC NEWS

John Chancellor: Jimmy Carter was on the road in New York State while all of this was going on. He was talking about economic issues and on stopping the build-up of nuclear arms by the United States and the Soviet Union. Don Oliver reports from the Carter campaign.

Don Oliver: Carter has been criticized of late for running a somewhat mean campaign, with personal jabs at President Ford. There were no sharp attacks by the Democratic nominee today and he warned the Rochester crowd about believing charges against him.

Jimmy Carter: Don't believe all the stories that you hear from our Republican administration, my Republican opposition. If I believed everything I heard said about me, I wouldn't vote for myself.

Don Oliver: In Syracuse Carter was asked about the clean bill of health the Special Prosecutor has given President Ford on allegations of misuse of campaign funds in Michigan.

Jimmy Carter: I've never used his . . . ah . . . his ah . . . violating or not violating the law as a campaign issue. The only campaign issue I've raised is that he ought to have a press conference, reveal all his records and let the public or the investigators decide. And I think that to the extent that the investigators or the news media can have access to Mr. Ford, then that way you can keep these questions from being carried on from one day to another.

Don Oliver: Carter says he is happy that President Ford is going to hold a news conference tonight, but he is not happy that it will be carried live on nationwide TV. Carter says that puts him at a disadvantage, and he may ask for equal time. Don Oliver, NBC News, with the Carter campaign in Syracuse.