

PBS Ain't So Different Public Broadcasting, Election Frames, and Democratic Empowerment

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Critics often complain that network television election coverage is too short, too superficial, and too focused on "horse race" and strategy. As a result, television news viewers are believed to have an inadequate basis for making intelligent democratic electoral choices. Short, fast-moving, episodic stories and dramatic images convey news frames that fail to inform and empower citizens wishing to make the sort of thoughtful, issue-based choices valued by democratic theorists. Many of these critics laud Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) coverage for its greater story length, use of knowledgeable experts, focus on substantive issues, and lack of dramatic imagery. However, our research shows that despite many differences in the structure of PBS stories, its election news frames are surprisingly similar to those of the oft-criticized commercial networks. Our analysis of ten story frames appearing in PBS and ABC evening news coverage of the 1996 presidential election reveals that public and commercial stories were dominated by horse-race and strategy frames to the exclusion of frames that focus on the prospective and retrospective consequences of candidates' actions and proposals. Our analysis shows that PBS coverage is more comparable to network news coverage than is widely believed, and we suggest that, like network television, PBS frames election news in terms that are disempowering to democratic processes.

Viewers tuning in to ABC's *World News Tonight* on February 16, 1996, would have heard a refrain familiar to any close observer of network political coverage. The topic was a Republican candidate debate, and the coverage emphasized strategy, appearances, posturing, negative advertising, and personal attacks, replete with all the requisite military metaphors:

John Cochran: The morning after the bloodletting, and Bob Dole was looking for sympathy.

Bob Dole: We had a little meeting last night. I'm going to put in for another Purple Heart. [Laughter.]

Cochran: Dole took most of the arrows because he is or at least was the front-runner. Viewers had barely turned up the sound when [they heard]:

Dole: You ran the first negative ad in this state, and I guess maybe I thought it was all right since you did it, if I at least spelled out your record.

Cochran: Dole managed to complain about Steve Forbes's ads and make a pitch for the dog-lover's vote.

Dole: Steve, I brought some pictures. Next time you run one, use this picture. It's better of me and my wife, it's good of her, and that's my little dog Leader in this picture. He's the one on the right. So I know all about negative ads.

Cochran: Today they were still out there, bashing each other.

Viewers tired of this perspective on the campaign may have sought refuge in public broadcasting, with its reputation for substantive and diverse coverage concordant with its longer stories and serious, sometimes somber, tone. Surely *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* would eschew covering the horse-race maneuvering, strategic posturing, and personal hostility that are the hallmark of network political news. Unfortunately, anyone tuning in the *NewsHour* that winter evening would have been treated to this familiar-sounding account of the debate:

Margaret Warner: It was a rough-and-tumble event, good theater, some discussion of issues, but no one emerged a clear victor. Senator Robert Dole, considered the front-runner here, was the target of the other candidates last night.

Alexander: I've been so surprised to see that Senator Dole has begun negative advertising on television against Pat Buchanan and now against me. Senator Dole, you're better than your negative ads. Why don't you pull them off?

Dole [to Forbes]: I took negative, negative, negative, millions and millions of dollars' worth of negative ads, and they didn't even use a good picture of me, so, Steve, I brought some pictures. Next time you run one, use this picture. It's better of me and my wife, it's good of her, and that's my little dog Leader in this picture. He's the one on the right. So I know all about negative ads.

Warner: The jabs were even more intense from Buchanan, who, polls show, has a real shot at overtaking Dole here. . . . Forbes, in turn, who seems to be losing ground for third place to Lamar Alexander, took sharp aim at the former Tennessee governor. . . . [The next morning] Bob Dole was speaking to a breakfast crowd, members of the Chamber of Commerce:

Dole: Well, I appreciate it very much being here this morning, and we had a little meeting last night. I'm going to put in for another Purple Heart. [Laughter.]

The language may be less colorful—there were no references to Dole's seeking the dog-lover's vote—but the framework for presenting the event was so similar as to command the use of identical sound bites. The PBS piece may have alluded to "some discussion of issues," but, like the ABC story, it invited us

and strategy references, PBS framed the debate as a struggle for opinion poll advantage in a nasty, personal grudge match that played out in negative ads. In other words, it looked a lot like a commercial news story, a piece that leaves viewers uninformed about issues and ideas. This, we argue, is not the type of coverage that helps voters make intelligent electoral choices.

We find strategic horse-race frames to be remarkably pervasive in PBS coverage. This result may be surprising to those who believe that PBS is an antidote to the horse-race-obsessed political coverage that dominates network television. Without the commercial pressure typically felt by the networks, public broadcasting should be free to frame its election coverage in any manner that it chooses, no matter how dull it is. It stands to reason that such coverage might include a larger proportion of stories about the candidate's ideas, policy positions, ideological perspectives, and records. To a limited degree, it does. But the most pervasive differences between public and network television are matters of format and style rather than content. The stories are longer and the tone is much drier, but the content of messages about politics on public broadcasting is remarkably similar to that of the commercial networks.

Our objective is to document and understand the way public broadcasting overlaps with and reinforces the perspectives that dominate network election news. As the February 16 broadcasts suggest, decision makers at PBS experience the campaign in much the same way as their network counterparts, leading to coverage that portrays politics from a similar vantage point. To the extent that messages on public broadcasting converge with commercial election news, the public is left with one less alternative for finding necessary information with which to make sense of politics and elections. Elsewhere, we argue that the strategy-laden, process-heavy, self-referential, and personalized nature of network news encourages disaffection with politicians and the political process (Kerbel and Ross 1998b). In this article, we apply a similar analysis to PBS coverage and find similar results. We explain this in terms of the pervasiveness of the culture of contemporary American journalism, which PBS and ABC news workers share.¹

Adherence to the norm of objectivity is one widely recognized element of how reporters do their work, so it should not be surprising that "principled detachment," as Rosen calls it (Rosen and Taylor 1992), is a predominant aspect of their shared culture. However, objectivity is a thorny matter, given the wide range of information available to political reporters who must make decisions about what subjects and perspectives constitute dispassionate election coverage. Having mutually accepted standards for what constitutes appropriate election news reduces the risk of appearing biased. In the culture that PBS and network news workers share, covering the election from a strategic perspective serves

vote and campaign contribution totals, and by discussing the strategies employed to achieve electoral success. This may well be the safest way for journalists to cover an election and maintain balance and distance.

It is not a conscious strategy, as Matthew R. Kerbel has documented (1998). Political reporters are typically unaware that they are doing it and are unable to imagine how an election could be covered if not as a horse race. This is why we argue that the horse-race approach is a product of the culture of journalism. However, it is important to recognize that covering the election as a horse race is a matter of choice, that there are other ways to characterize electoral politics, and that, as with any choice, it produces consequences. Covering the election as a competition may help reporters mute charges of bias and prevent them from consciously making judgments about what should be in the news, but, we will argue, it leaves viewers with an insufficient basis for making informed choices of their own. Although it is often difficult for reporters to believe, there is nothing automatic about the horse race as a basis for covering politics. It is but one of many conceptions of what happens in the United States every four years, one of many possible ways to frame an election.

Theoretical Perspective

Frame analysis provides the theoretical point of departure for our research. Frames are shared understandings about how politics works, themes that direct attention to or from particular political issues and personalities and provide viewers with a context for making sense of them. Following Erving Goffman's work on frame analysis and its application to news work (Goffman 1974; see also Fishman 1980; Gamson 1992; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978), we argue that news coverage is a socially constructed entity that reflects how journalists understand the political world. As a function of choices made by news workers, frames are neither arbitrary nor automatic, but a product of the systematic effort by producers, editors, and reporters to cover a campaign. To the degree that the decisions they make are influenced by standards common to the culture in which they work, the sixty-minute format of a program like the *NewsHour*—although different in form from the twenty-two minutes of news on a network broadcast—will contain a similar mix of frames if news workers in charge of production (often unconsciously) make similar choices about what constitutes politics.

As these messages converge, mainstream commercial communications about politics are reinforced. This affects the degree of choice available to viewers as they attempt to make sense of such matters as the motivation and behavior of political candidates, the viability and attractiveness of candidates, and the meaning and purpose of politics. Frames of politics, like the standards that govern

Table 1
Classification of frames used by PBS and ABC to portray the 1996 election

Classification	Specific Frame	Frame Content
Politics	Horse race/strategy	Election as contest; candidate actions as political maneuvers
Processes	Public opinion	Mass response to candidates and contest
	Media process	Self-referential experience of reporters
Personalities	Political process	Campaign organization; election mechanics
	Personal character	Candidate characteristics and behavior
Ideas	Nonevents	Candidate indiscretions
	Issues	Policy debate; need not be linked to broad agenda
	Ideology	Election as choice between distinct sets of ideas
	Retrospective evaluations	Candidate record as a basis for vote choice
	Prospective evaluations	Candidate promises as a basis for vote choice

dia process frame, it is not self-referential, emphasizing instead such things as the makeup of campaign organizations, the organization of the primary calendar, and how a caucus works. Although it shares with the media process frame an emphasis on how the political process works, it is less inherently cynical.

Two frames cast the election in terms of the personalities of the participants. *Personal character* coverage asks the viewer to think about the makeup of the people running for office, often dwelling on problematic aspects of candidate integrity. *Nonevents* are always about individuals rather than processes or politics. They are behavioral manifestations of character difficulties, episodic accounts of candidate indiscretions leading to what Larry Sabato calls "feeding frenzies" (1991), where reporters as a group direct the viewer to think about the campaign in terms of scandalous or improper candidate behavior.

Four frames engage the viewer in a discussion of ideas. *Issue* coverage invokes public policy matters and in its highest form emphasizes the substantive exchange of ideas among political actors, such as when the 1996 Republican presidential contenders debated the merits of a flat income tax. However, we find that often issue references do not offer a meaningful assessment of candidate agendas; sometimes reporters refer to issues without showing the viewer how specific positions relate to broad policy objectives.³ On the other hand, an *ideology* frame is always about ideas, presenting the election as a choice between at least two distinct, integrated sets of beliefs. It is more abstract than the issue frame, owing to the requirement that it present the exchange of ideas in the context of ideological positioning. Two other frames invite viewers to make substantive evaluations of the candidates. A *retrospective* frame emphasizes the

dards for evaluating politics (Iyengar 1987, 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Normatively, a broad range of frames would be desirable, inasmuch as they would stimulate different ways of thinking about campaigns, politics, and the political system.

Because framing is about the provision of a set of dimensions for interpreting the political process in general and the actions of politicians in particular, frame analysis is more far-reaching than a simple explanation of the themes or subjects of campaign stories. By examining network and public broadcasting frames, we want to explain similarities in how television news invites viewers to experience the political campaign. In this regard, political frames are akin to the publicly shared meaning systems described by cultural anthropologists: They provide accounts of, and guide, action (Geertz 1973; LeVine 1984). Frames, as elements of culture, offer models of reality and reflect journalists' implicit theories about how politics works.

Politics may be portrayed in a variety of plausible ways, so the absence of certain frames is as important to note as the prevalence of other ones. Coverage of the New Hampshire debate emphasized several frames familiar to those who watch network news, portraying politics as a horse race, candidates as strategic manipulators, and television advertising as a central objective of strategic behavior. Other frames could have cast the debate differently. It should not be too difficult to imagine debate coverage that emphasizes issues and policy agendas, the clash of ideological perspectives, or an evaluation of the candidates' records and platforms. This would entail the selection of different information to convey and the provision of a different context for understanding that information—precisely the sort of distinction that one might expect to find on public broadcasting.⁴

We examine ten distinct frames, classified into four groups according to similarities in the messages they communicate (Table 1). Two frames portray the election in terms of its competitive elements. The *horse race/strategy* frame, widely documented to be the paramount commercial television campaign theme (Lichter et al. 1988; Patterson 1980; Patterson and McClure 1976; Robinson and Sheehan 1983), asks viewers to experience the campaign as a contest with political winners and losers while detailing the actions they take in the pursuit of victory. The *public opinion* frame captures mass response to this contest and to politics in general, usually through the presentation of polling data, focus group participants, or person-in-the-street interviews.

Two frames characterize the election in terms of processes. *Media process* coverage, as defined by Kerbel (1998), is media coverage of itself. Stories framed in terms of how the press covers the election are by definition self-referential and invoke the reporter's cynical pose as a means for interpreting political in-

campaign platforms as they relate to likely future actions and asks the viewer to consider the viability and attractiveness of campaign promises as a standard for vote choice (Fiorina 1981; Kiewiet 1983; Page 1978).

Because frames are not mutually exclusive of one another, these classifications are meant to provide no more than a broad framework for understanding the various ways that the election story may be told. For instance, sometimes issue coverage provides cover for horse-race stories in which candidates take positions on issues as a form of posturing for electoral advantage.⁴ Nonevent frames are about personalities, although they may also have a bearing on electoral outcomes. By classifying frames, our wish is to illustrate the potential variety of perspectives available to reporters who cover elections, in order to support our premise that, in fact, PBS *could* be different.

We also wish to make an explicit case about the relative value of these frames. Stories that invite the viewer to experience the election in strategic or political terms, we feel, are among the least useful for providing a basis for principled voting. A citizen who goes to the voting booth armed only with the knowledge that Bob Dole had an ineffectual campaign staff or that reporters were regularly denied access to Bill Clinton has learned less of value for intelligent decision making than a voter who can assess what the candidates might do in office. Personality coverage, in our view, is equally problematic, although a case can be made for the importance of character evaluation in presidential selection. Frames communicating ideas, on the other hand, put the viewer in the strongest position vis-à-vis informed choice making. Portraying the election as a contest over approaches to policy, ideological differences, platforms, or past performances makes the election pertinent to the viewer who wishes to be an informed participant and, not inconsequentially, affirms the system by portraying the political process in its most relevant terms. This need not be the only approach a network takes to political news, or even the most prevalent, for frames are not mutually exclusive.⁵ We prefer instead to look at the distribution of frames appearing on a network during an election year to assess the complete picture of how viewers are invited to experience the campaign.

To this end, we are asking if PBS coverage is *different* from network coverage and if it is *more illuminating* than network coverage. For public broadcasting to provide a meaningful alternative to network news, we would expect to find a different distribution of frames than we find on commercial television, with a greater concentration of stories framed in terms of ideas.

Methodology

We selected the 1996 presidential election as the basis for our study, and *NewsHour with Tom Lesh*—the high-profile nightly news and public affairs

tion coverage on *NewsHour* with its counterpart on ABC's *World News Tonight*. Both programs run in the early evening, competing directly against each other in some markets, and are the flagship news programs for their respective networks. Over the last decade, ABC had the largest news audience of the three major commercial networks. We examined every *World News* story pertaining to the primary and general phases of the campaign⁶ and every story in a one-third random sample of *NewsHour* election coverage.⁷

The unit of analysis is the campaign story.⁸ However, appreciable differences in story length between the two programs posed a challenge in our effort to design a coding scheme that could be applied comparably and fairly to both structures. *NewsHour* stories are routinely ten minutes or longer, whereas *World News Tonight* pieces typically last from ninety seconds to two minutes. Our decision to use stories rather than story elements as the unit of analysis was predicated on the assumption that the longer PBS stories make possible a greater multiplicity of frames. Therefore, to the extent that our methodology introduces a systematic error into our analysis, it would work against our assumptions that PBS is similar to and no more diverse than ABC.

For each story, we determined whether each of the ten frames was present or absent and, if present, the degree to which it was featured in the story. A frame could be a primary, secondary, or peripheral presence, or it could be absent entirely. Coding judgments about the prominence of frames were derived from the natural construction of the news stories. Primary frames on each network had to encompass between 50 and 100 percent of story content. Peripheral frames were passing references of a sentence or two on ABC, a paragraph or two on PBS. Secondary frames fell between these two parameters. Constructing the variable this way enabled us to address the variation in story length between the networks, particularly as it pertains to primary and peripheral frames, which are comparably dominant and marginal, respectively, on the two networks. It also permits us flexibility in addressing the presence or absence of frames and allows us to speak of frames both in terms of their absolute presence in news reports and in terms of the extent to which they are featured.

For each story, we also determined which actors were being discussed (focus), which actors were speaking (voice), and whether the content of what was said was analytical, descriptive, or rhetorical in nature.⁹ To assess the relative prominence of actors in news stories, we distinguished each reference to focus and voice as either a primary, secondary, or marginal reference. Similarly, rhetorical, descriptive, and analytical voices were classified as high, medium, or low, depending on the pervasiveness of the rhetoric, description, or analysis.

Given the complexity of the data, it was particularly important to maintain the integrity of the coding effort. To assure validity, at least two of the principal investigators independently coded each story. We then compared the results of

through discussion among coders. A more detailed account of the coding scheme is available from the authors.¹⁰

Analysis and Discussion

A common complaint about commercial television is that it trivializes politics and makes informed political choice difficult by framing elections from a horse-race perspective, focusing too much on front-runners in the race, filtering candidates' words and actions through the prism of electoral strategy, and downplaying discussion of substantive policy matters (Just et al. 1996; Kerbel 1998; Patterson 1993). To offer viewers a more meaningful alternative to the commercial networks, public broadcasting could improve on this coverage in any number of ways. It could choose to frame more stories in terms of candidate policy positions or ideology and less in terms of horse race and strategic posturing. It could employ criteria in addition to horse-race competitiveness (such as the strength of a candidate's ideas) when deciding how much coverage to award a candidate. It could invite candidates to discuss their records and broadcast the results in the candidate's own words. It could downplay the often-cynical musings of reporters that are so pervasive when correspondents dominate the narratives.

All too often it does not. We found that, apart from a few exceptions and despite its reputation for being a substantive alternative to the ratings-driven commercial networks, PBS coverage looks a lot like what we find on ABC. Specifically, we will address similarities in coverage as they relate to the presentation of frames, the focus of coverage, the voices telling the campaign story, and the analytical, descriptive, and rhetorical content of those voices. Collectively, the evidence points with few exceptions to the similar fashion in which the two networks portray electoral politics.

Frames

Table 2 ranks primary and secondary references to the ten frames we examined, according to their prominence on PBS and ABC. On both networks, the frames cluster into three loose groupings: horse race/strategy, which receives by far the most attention; three idea frames (prospective, ideology, and retrospective), which hardly receive any attention; and a collection of six second-tier frames that, with the exception of personal character on PBS and nonevents on ABC, cluster within 17 percentage points of one another. Within this middle group, the ranking of frames between the networks differs because of small percentage variations among the frames. However, the overall rank order correlation of frame prominence between PBS and ABC is quite high (Spearman's rho =

Table 2

Prominence of primary and secondary frame references^a in PBS and ABC news coverage of the 1996 presidential election

Frame	PBS ^b		ABC ^c	
	Percentage	Rank	Percentage	Rank
Horse race/strategy	51.1%	1	63.8%	1
Public opinion	28.9%	4	29.8%	2
Media process	22.2%	5	26.4%	3
Political process	13.4%	7	20.9%	4
Personal character	36.6%	2	20.8%	5
Issues	30.0%	3	18.7%	6
Nonevents	21.1%	6	10.8%	7
Prospective evaluations	3.3%	9	2.8%	8
Ideology	2.2%	10	1.1%	9
Retrospective evaluations	4.4%	8	0.3%	10

^a Does not include marginal references.

^b N = 90.

^c N = 359.

Earlier we argued that frames provide viewers with a context for making sense of the political environment and help shape their opinion about the political process and about the actors within this process. Therefore, stories framed in terms of horse race or strategic posturing between the candidates are less useful than idea frames as a basis for making meaningful choices among candidates.

For example, consider the previously mentioned issue of the "flat tax" championed by Steve Forbes during the 1996 presidential election. An idea frame might talk about the advantages and disadvantages of such a policy and its effect on the economy. Perhaps the coverage would indicate the ideological leaning of the candidate, help voters understand why the candidate supports the policy, or discuss the consequences of the policy for the public and the economy. Thus voters would have a substantive basis for deciding among the candidates.

On the other hand, horse-race coverage of the type we frequently find on the commercial networks might frame the story in terms of strategic moves made by Forbes and his use of the "flat tax issue" to gain voter support. This frame would convey whether Forbes's message has been successful in reaching, say, targeted voters in a key primary state. It would not allow viewers to evaluate whether Forbes's flat tax has any merit.

Conventional wisdom about PBS is that its political coverage features in-depth issue stories of the sort not found on commercial networks, and our research bears this out. As Table 2 indicates, three in ten PBS pieces incorporate an idea frame and two thirds of that

stories, and only one-third of these stories are policy related.¹¹ This means that less than one-fifth of the stories on ABC deal with issues in an analytic or descriptive manner, a figure that is comparably higher on both networks during the primary campaign and lower during the general election.¹²

However, these figures tell only part of the story. Counter to expectations, issue references are also *less* likely to be central to PBS stories than to ABC stories, and neither network offers the viewer much in the way of ideological discussion or discussion of candidate policy records or promises. In addition, both PBS and ABC highlight political frames at the expense of idea frames.

When we examine the prominence of issue frames, we find that relative to public broadcasting, ABC's smaller complement of issue frames are more prominently featured within campaign stories. Table 3 demonstrates that, among stories with an issue frame, better than four in ten placed the discussion of issues in a primary role. In contrast, about half the issue frames on PBS were marginal in nature, appearing briefly in longer stories in a manner that subordinated them to other frames.

This difference is further captured by an examination of the mean prominence of issue frames on the two networks. Mean prominence is a measure of how much a frame is highlighted when it appears in a story, an average value on the scale that measures whether the placement of a frame in a story is primary, secondary, or marginal.¹³ Higher values indicate that a frame is more prominently placed. The mean prominence of the issue frame was 1.80 on PBS and 2.16 on ABC ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that ABC tends to make issue discussions more salient on those occasions when it frames the election in issue terms. Accordingly, we found that PBS tended to reference issues more frequently in a marginal fashion, such as by briefly inserting an issue discussion into a story about something else, as in the previous example of the New Hampshire debate.

In part, this is an artifact of the variation in story length between the two networks, whereby longer PBS stories permit frequent but brief issue references of the sort rarely found in the ABC story format. However, if long story segments make issue discussion appear secondary to other matters, they also give PBS producers a framework for addressing more complex material associ-

ated with the other idea frames. Long segments would appear to be ideal for discussing ideological distinctions among the candidates, for evaluating candidate past performance, or for connecting past performance with future promise. That this does not happen makes the paucity of prospective, ideological, and retrospective frames on PBS particularly noteworthy and is further evidence that PBS mirrors more than differs from its commercial counterpart in the presentation of idea frames. Prospective framing occurs in only 2.8 percent and 3.3 percent of the total number of stories on ABC and PBS, respectively. The ideology and retrospective frames occur just as infrequently.

As with issues, the networks take a similar approach to the treatment of horse-race and strategic coverage. As Table 2 indicates, fully 63.8 percent of ABC election coverage included either primary or secondary references to the horse race. On PBS, the comparable figure is 51.1 percent. Although this suggests that ABC is slightly more horse race driven than PBS, stories about horse race and strategy constitute the most dominant frame on each network. Furthermore, when the prominence of the horse race/strategy frame is considered, similarities between the two networks become more apparent. The mean prominence of this frame on PBS is 2.32; on ABC it is 2.44. There is no significant difference between these figures, and both are high, suggesting that public and commercial news reports are similarly inclined to play up horse race and strategic frames in their coverage.

The observation that PBS is as horse race driven as the commercial network is also evident when considering the linkage between horse race and issue frames. Stories invoking political rivalry or strategic posturing could address issue-related items in the course of presenting a horse-race message. In this regard, issue discussion may be embedded in the horse-race frame. PBS tends to do this more frequently than ABC, but the percentage of stories involved (20 percent of horse-race stories on PBS and 10.3 percent on ABC) is relatively low on both networks.¹⁴

Furthermore, issue and horse-race frames are negatively correlated on both networks ($r = -0.28$ on PBS, and -0.30 on ABC), which means that when stories are mostly about the horse race, issue frames are less likely to appear. This relationship suggests a common perspective held by public and commercial television news workers about the overall role, prominence, and relationship between horse-race and issue discussion. Public broadcasting may not feature horse-race frames to the same degree as commercial television, but—like its choice to deemphasize idea frames—PBS patterns its coverage similarly.

This holds true for the other political frame we examined, public opinion, which appears in 28.9 percent of PBS stories and a comparable 29.8 percent of ABC stories. On both networks, the public opinion frame is among the most prevalent of several second-tier frames that are

Table 3
Marginal, secondary, and primary placement of issue frames in PBS and ABC news coverage of the 1996 presidential election

Placement	PBS ^a	ABC ^b
Marginal	47.1%	26.4%
Secondary	25.5%	30.8%
Primary	27.5%	42.9%

prospective, and retrospective frames. This is to be expected given the heavy concentration of horse-race news on PBS and ABC, because public opinion, as it appears in these stories, services the horse race through the presentation of opinion or focus group data about the election.

Essentially, public opinion as framed by the networks is the horse race, in as much as it serves to legitimate horse-race maneuvering through what appears to be objective data on public response. The only thing missing from the exercise is the public, which appears in the form of aggregate responses to pollsters' horse-race questions. Journalists looking for a "safe" way to cover the election without appearing to make choices can take cover in the apparent objectivity of poll data.

PBS also outdistances ABC in the attention it devotes to personal character. This frame encompasses coverage that emphasizes individual characteristics, both negative and positive. At their most informative, character frames permit viewers to evaluate personal qualities of the individuals who would be president; at their most superficial, they present the election through the rhetoric of name-calling. In this regard, they may be contrasted with frames that emphasize the political process, which address the mechanics and particulars of the political system rather than the personalities of those in it. Normatively, it is problematic to express a preference for one frame over the other, given the potentially useful information that character frames could convey. However, we were struck by the observation that PBS is more personality oriented than process oriented, whereas ABC devotes equal attention to the two frames, because we expected the long story format to lend itself to more discussion of the abstractions of process than to readily communicated matters of personality. Together with its tendency to emphasize the horse race almost as much as ABC and to deemphasize most idea frames, PBS presents the election much as it is depicted on ABC, as a politicized, personalized, nonideological exercise in political strategy and competition.

Focus

For effective democratic decision making, voters need enough information about candidates to make intelligent choices. Meaningful coverage might allocate media attention through factors other than a candidate's horse-race standing. Certainly, commercial network news tends to focus on those candidates whom the media consider "viable." This skews voter choice of the candidates because front-runners get more television coverage than the other candidates, increasing the appearance of their viability. As resources flow to candidates who appear viable, by extension this enhances their actual viability as well. So the choice of whom to cover influences the choice of who competes, and voters are left to select among candidates based on their success in the horse race rather than on the effectiveness of their ideas.

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ings show that PBS makes similar choices as the commercial networks regarding the amount of attention given to the "viable" candidates. As on network news, this comes at the expense of those who trail in the horse race.

Table 4 shows that both networks focus on the front-runners more frequently than on the other candidates. Even during the campaign's primary

Table 4

Frequency and mean prominence^a of candidate, expert, and reporter focus in PBS and ABC news coverage of the 1996 presidential election

Focus	PBS		ABC	
	Percentage	Mean	Percentage	Mean
CANDIDATES				
Dole	84.4% (76) ^a	2.61	67.4% (242)	2.49 ^b
Clinton	91.1% (82)	2.41	52.1% (187)	2.56
Buchanan	18.9% (17)	2.24	25.1% (90)	2.22
Forbes	16.7% (15)	2.20	23.7% (85)	2.06
Alexander	13.3% (12)	2.18	13.1% (47)	1.89
Gramm	7.8% (7)		8.4% (30)	
Perot	15.6% (14)	1.93	12.3% (44)	2.11
Kemp	4.4% (4)		5.3% (19)	
Gore	4.4% (4)		3.6% (13)	
Other	7.8% (7)		7.2% (26)	
EXPERTS				
Pundits/academics	0.0%		1.7% (6)	
National/regional journalists	2.2% (2)		2.2% (8)	
Shields and Gigot	0.0%		—	
REPORTERS				
Reporters/anchors	3.3% (7)		2.2% (8)	

^a Mean prominence measures primary, secondary, and marginal references.

phase, when the crowded Republican field reduced coverage of the unchallenged incumbent Democrat to 15.6 percent of ABC stories, better than six in ten PBS stories featured President Clinton.¹⁵ If anything, PBS is far more centered on front-runners and incumbents than ABC.¹⁶

Essentially, PBS and ABC handicapped the election the same way and clearly used horse-race judgments to decide coverage in the primary season. Buchanan led the team of also-rans by virtue of his telegenic manner and his strong showing in the New Hampshire primary. Forbes placed second, on the strength of his challenge to Buchanan and Dole in Arizona. Alexander, perpetually the also-ran in the early primaries, held the same position on television's coverage list. Gramm failed early and left the race. Indeed, if second-, third-, fourth-, and fifth-place awards were granted to contestants in the presidential horse race, the placement would match the amount of television attention the candidates received—and PBS would look no different than ABC.

Voice

The networks may agree on which candidates to cover, but they hardly let the candidates speak for themselves. The more prominent the voice of the candidates, the more the story is told from the candidates' point of view rather than mediated by reporters. Conversely, when viewers hear the reporter's voice, they experience an account of the campaign that reflects the reporter's perspective. The context this creates is similar to what Kiku Adatto claims happens as candidate sound bites on network news shrink in size at the expense of reporter commentary, giving journalists greater rein to frame the news (1990). This leaves candidates—and viewers—at the mercy of the way reporters perceive the political process and the candidates' campaign intentions.

In another work, we discuss this phenomenon through the example of Lamar Alexander and his plaid shirt (Kerbel and Ross 1998a). When reporters referred to the flannel shirt Alexander wore during his 1996 presidential campaign, they invariably framed it as a strategy designed by the candidate to convince voters that the former Bush cabinet member was a "Washington outsider." Without the benefit of a different perspective, viewers were not given an opportunity to judge for themselves whether the shirt was a gimmick or whether, as Alexander and his campaign operatives argued, the shirt was a symbol of his covenant with the people of his home state of Tennessee.

Again, PBS resembles ABC more than it differs. Despite the pervasive presence of candidates—particularly front-runners—as the focus of both networks' coverage, their voices are heard far less frequently. Contrast the amount of discussion about Bob Dole (who was the subject of 84.4 percent of PBS and 67.4 percent of ABC stories) with the paltry percentage of stories in which the Re-

The same is true of Bill Clinton. As Table 5 shows, Clinton's voice is heard on 13.3 percent of PBS and 12.8 percent of ABC stories. Only among the second-tier candidates like Buchanan and Forbes do we see an appreciable differ-

Table 5

Frequency and mean prominence^a of candidate, expert, and reporter voices in PBS and ABC news coverage of the 1996 presidential election

Voice	PBS		ABC	
	Percentage	Mean	Percentage	Mean ^b
CANDIDATES				
Dole	27.8% (25) ^c	2.36	28.4% (102)	1.69***
Clinton	13.3% (12)	2.25	12.8% (46)	1.50*
Buchanan	2.2% (2)		12.5% (45)	1.51
Forbes	2.2% (2)		7.0% (25)	
Alexander	3.3% (3)		5.8% (21)	
Gramm	1.1% (1)		2.8% (10)	
Perot	5.6% (5)		3.6% (13)	
Kemp	0.0% (0)		2.5% (9)	
Gore	3.3% (3)		1.1% (4)	
Other	5.6% (5)		3.9% (14)	
EXPERTS				
Pundits/academics	16.7% (15)	2.73	12.5% (45)	1.44***
National/regional journalists	23.3% (21)	3.00	7.5% (27)	2.56*
Shields and Gigot	24.4% (22)	2.76	---	---
REPORTERS				
Reporters/anchors	87.5% (79)	1.61	99.7% (358)	2.88***

^a Mean prominence measures primary, secondary, and marginal references.

^b Significance values compare candidate, expert, and reporter means between networks.

ence between the networks. The voices of these candidates are heard more on ABC; however, apart from Buchanan, the differences are marginal.

With candidate voices muted, the story is left for others to tell. Not surprisingly, reporters are heard the most on both networks—appearing on 87.5 percent of PBS pieces and in almost every ABC story. On ABC, where the mean prominence for reporters is 2.88, they are also the dominant voices. On a scale of three, this indicates that reporter voices are almost always the primary ones.

On PBS, the structure of coverage is a bit different but no less expert driven. With a mean prominence score of 1.61, PBS reporters are significantly less likely to dominate the news than their ABC counterparts. Instead, pundits and assorted experts perform this function. Between academic experts, national and regional journalists appearing in roundtable discussions, and regular appearances by nationally syndicated columnists Mark Shields and Paul Gigot—who by themselves appear in 24.4 percent of PBS election stories—public broadcasting is replete with commentary by elite observers. When you also consider that these voices appear prominently on PBS stories, the overall picture suggests that expert voices on PBS serve the same storytelling function that correspondents play on network television.

As with differences in the prominence of the issue frame, we attribute public broadcasting's tendency to rely on pundits rather than reporters to structural variations in the presentation of the news on the two networks. Because PBS presents long stories, they engage frequently in panel discussions that would be a luxury on a commercial broadcast. In turn, reporters are secondary components of these segments, serving primarily to arbitrate discussions framed by the participants. Therefore, we should not be surprised that experts appearing on PBS play an equivalent mediating function to reporters on ABC. This is evident in similarities in the analytical nature of their comments. Any individual appearing on the news may speak in an analytical, rhetorical, or descriptive manner. Analytical comments are mediating comments—those ideas that explain why something is happening. Descriptive comments are factual and do not offer a point of view. Rhetorical comments are persuasive devices, an appeal to passion more than to reason.

Analytical, Descriptive, and Rhetorical Voices When reporters offer a theory for why something is happening, they are speaking in an analytical rather than descriptive or rhetorical manner (Robinson and Sheehan 1983). For instance, in this ABC piece of October 4, 1996, rather than simply explaining that Dole was trailing in the horse race, Jim Wooten provided a clear context for understanding *why* Dole was in political trouble:

Senator Dole's campaign strategists have had some difficulty deciding just

tail politics of the primary season than the larger wholesale enterprise of a presidential race. . . . And all too often, Senator Dole seems all alone in his pursuit. . . . No one of stature regularly travels with him, only staff members who isolate him from reporters even when he seems to want to talk. Too risky; he might say something wrong. It's been seven months now since his last press conference, but he keeps on doggedly believing that if he promises tax cuts often enough and comes out reasonably well in the debates, he can still turn the race around.

Table 6

Mean prominence^a of candidate, expert, and reporter analytical, descriptive, and rhetorical references in PBS and ABC news coverage of the 1996 presidential election

	PBS			ABC		
	Analytical	Descriptive	Rhetorical	Analytical	Descriptive	Rhetorical
CANDIDATES						
Dole	(b)	1.31 (13) ^d	2.94 (17)	(b)	1.20 (5)	2.71 ^c (65)
Clinton	(b)	(b)	3.00 (7)	(b)	(b)	2.83 (23)
Buchanan	---	---	(b)	(b)	(b)	2.86 (22)
Forbes	---	---	(b)	(b)	(b)	2.67 (9)
Alexander	(b)	(b)	(b)	(b)	(b)	2.60 (5)
EXPERTS						
Pundits/academics	2.83 (12)	2.36 (14)	(b)	2.65 (17)	1.20 ^{***} (5)	(b)
National/regional journalists	2.86 (21)	1.75 (20)	---	2.90 (21)	1.56 (9)	(b)
Shields and Gigot	2.92 (25)	1.67 (24)	(b)	---	---	---
REPORTERS						
Reporters/anchors	1.55 (29)	1.72 (36)	---	2.38 ^{***} (306)	1.97 [*] (34+)	(b)

^a Mean prominence measures high, medium, and low references.

^b Fewer than five references.

^c Significance values compare analytical, descriptive, and rhetorical means by actor across networks.

^d All Ns appear in parentheses.

Over the course of the election, as Table 6 demonstrates, ABC reporters were significantly more analytical than PBS reporters, as measured by differences in the mean prominence of their analytical references.¹⁷ On the broadcast network, with its short news stories, reporters actively provided viewers with a context for interpreting the election.

Public broadcasting engaged in the same exercise using a different device—expert panels and pundit commentary. Through its long pieces, PBS was as mediating as its network cousins, with Shields, Gigot, and their compatriots leading the way. The following passage, for instance, which on ABC would have been recounted by a reporter, appeared on public broadcasting on October 25, 1996, in the context of a discussion about the Dole campaign. Note how Paul Gigot used issues in the service of an analysis of Dole's strategic shortcomings:

I tend to think that the Dole campaign has made a fundamental misjudgment right from the start and that they have tried to outmaneuver tactically the greatest tactical politician that I've ever seen in Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton is all about tactics; he's all about maneuvering and slicing and making distinctions and finessing things. Dole is trying to do—so it's one week it's taxes—well, that doesn't seem to be working, let's get off it—the next week it's drugs. Well, you can't beat Bill Clinton that way.

Segments like this explain why experts of every stripe appearing on PBS averaged high mean analytical scores. In the long-story format, they supplied the context by which viewers were invited to understand the election.

Direct comparison of the frames addressed by pundits on PBS¹⁸ and reporters on ABC indicates that they had a strikingly similar set of priorities, independently selecting the same set of topics to highlight and in most cases devoting a comparable share of attention to them. The relevant comparisons can be found in Table 7. Both emphasized the horse race above all other matters and to roughly the same extent: 38.5 percent of reporter discussion on ABC and 37.2 percent of pundit discussion on PBS was about competitive and strategic matters. Issues of public opinion, which typically amounted to an analysis of polling data, constituted, respectively, 13.3 percent and 11.5 percent of ABC reporter and PBS pundit discourse. In contrast, both groups virtually ignored prospective, ideological, and retrospective matters.

Interestingly, the less frequently heard voices of PBS reporters carried a different—one could say more informative—mix of messages. Reporters were less likely than pundits to frame the election in terms of the horse race (28.1 percent to 37.2 percent), far less likely to discuss public opinion (3.5 percent to 11.5 percent), and far more likely to discuss issues (24.6 percent to 10.6

Table 7

Distribution of 1996 presidential election frames voiced by experts* on PBS and reporters on ABC

Frame	PBS Experts	ABC Reporters
Horse race/strategy	37.2%	38.5%
Public opinion	11.5	13.3
Media process	10.6	11.9
Political process	4.4	8.6
Personal character	9.7	8.9
Issues	10.6	11.4
Nonevents	15.0	5.2
Prospective evaluations	---	1.5
Ideology	0.9	0.5
Retrospective evaluations	---	0.2
	(N = 113)	(N = 615)

* Experts include pundits and academics, national and regional journalists, and the regularly featured team of Mark Shields and Paul Gigot.

the journalists and academic experts whose view of the election mirrored the partisan, political, personalized perspective of ABC reporters.

Rhetorical voices on both networks belonged to the candidates, which we see as further evidence of their secondary place as storytellers behind reporters on ABC and analysts on PBS. On both networks, Dole and Clinton were far more rhetorical than descriptive or analytical, spouting campaign oratory rather than, say, probing or explaining their views. The minute length of network sound bites leaves little room for much else. However, PBS coverage is often no better, despite a format that at times allowed the candidates to speak in their own words for much longer stretches.¹⁹ Typically, these lengthy segments presented undigested rhetoric from stump speeches, offering little of value to the viewer, despite a format that permits depth and exploration. If PBS were to provide us with an alternative method of news coverage, we might expect the candidate's sound bites to be instructive—perhaps to clearly define or explain a policy position.

Conclusion

Our analysis should not suggest that PBS is entirely without merit or that it is a cookie-cutter copy of its commercial counterparts. PBS coverage does include some discussion of issues that you won't find on ABC. Its stories are longer and far more detailed. However, these are differences of structure rather than con-

by differences of structure. As far as framing is concerned, *NewsHour* offers little variety regarding how the story is told. Viewers are invited to experience the election as they would if they were watching commercial television, as a political contest told by elite observers of the process rather than a battle of ideas involving politically viable candidates.

If PBS election content were as ponderous as it is commonly assumed to be, different voices might tell a different tale. Even without relinquishing the political frame, PBS could offer more variety. Public broadcasting could offer a different mixture of frames, perhaps a combination that would invite viewers to appreciate the contest's power stakes and the process by which politicians vie for advantage while simultaneously illuminating the ideas they hold and the policy proposals that hang in the balance. Elections, after all, are great theater, but they are not *only* great theater. Viewers could be invited to experience the election as a political race *and* as a time for evaluating ideas.

The idea frame has the added benefit of inviting the viewer to be a participant in the election rather than a spectator to an elite-centered competition. With its emphasis on winners and losers narrated by reporters and experts, political and process frames invite viewers to sit on the sidelines. We are told about the self-interested machinations of those who seek our votes and about the interplay between reporters and candidates, but these are the observations of insiders, of interest to those who report them and to political junkies, but not beneficial or necessarily of interest to everyone else. These frames speak past the concerns and interests of ordinary viewers, keeping them at arm's length from the process. Personality frames may work the same way, to the extent that they delve into dubious candidate characteristics and actions and invite viewers to think about candidates from a lowest-common-denominator perspective. Surely, they could be beneficial by illuminating characteristics of candidates relevant to leadership, but they rarely are.

Idea frames engage the viewer because they are *about* the viewer, covering topics that viewers find pertinent to their lives (Rosen and Taylor 1992).²⁰ Retrospective and prospective frames invite the audience to join the journalist or pundit in evaluating the candidate. Ideological frames offer the viewer a workable framework for making sense of issue positions, as do issue stories linked to policy agendas. As they offer viewers a meaningful way to appreciate the election, they facilitate democratic choice and they affirm democratic processes.

One might think that the lack of commercial pressure would permit public broadcasting to frame the election in this manner. That it does not speaks to the overriding influence of the culture of journalism to which both public and commercial journalists belong. In the coverage patterns documented here, we find additional evidence for what Kerbel calls the influence of life in the cam-

is distinguished more for its inbred tendencies than for the commercial pressures of producing television news. Journalists traveling with the campaigns are immersed in the strategic concerns of the candidates; they report the horse race because they live the horse race. News executives in New York and Washington share their perspective, as they have the same training and share professional groups that see politics the same way. No one is left to argue for a different or more varied version of the campaign (Kerbel 1998).

Even if reporters could see beyond the limitations of the "bubble," incorporating more idea frames into coverage would require journalists to accept that news is the product of judgment and choice. Idea frames give reporters little opportunity to hide from the decisions they make about what is newsworthy because they would have to make assessments about such things as the merits and implications of political agendas and the legislative records of candidates. Reporters typically recoil from this sort of decision-making. Indeed, some of the loudest criticism of the public journalism movement, which sought to make news coverage relevant to matters of public choice, came from journalists who complained that public journalism would put reporters in an advocacy role. In fact, it would simply put reporters in a *different* advocacy role, asking them to make the sorts of decisions about covering ideas that they presently make about covering politics and processes, and it asks them to do this without the comfort of seemingly objective political standards that make reporters appear to be dispassionate observers of the horse race.

Unless and until there is a challenge to reporters' prevailing assumptions about what constitutes political coverage, television news is not likely to offer a diversity of perspectives on elections. Academics and pundits interested in advocating meaningful alternatives to commercial news reporting are ill-advised to look to public broadcasting for an alternative. Whatever potential PBS offers for greater diversity of coverage, and no matter how substantive their coverage may be of other subjects, the content of their campaign news is largely similar to commercial broadcasts, leaving an audience interested in purposeful political news with one less place to turn.

Notes

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1. Shared cultural experiences are a function of occurrences held in common by reporters on both networks, including common training, shared reference groups, and in some cases personnel who have worked for political parties or candidates in the past.
2. Furthermore, if candidates know that coverage might differ, they might offer remarks amenable to other frames as well.
3. For example, the coverage of the 2000 election on PBS was more critical of the candidates than on commercial television.

Although the environment is mentioned, the viewer learns nothing about the substance of the candidate's policy position.

4. For example, a story that follows a structure like this: "Bob Dole continues to talk about tax cuts in an effort to motivate his core supporters." Although tax cuts are mentioned, they're addressed as a strategic rather than a policy tool.
5. And, as any political reporter will tell you, horse-race news is often the most interesting and enjoyable to watch—and to report.
6. The primary phase of the campaign included the competitive portion of the primary schedule, from January 1 through March 26, the date when Dole had enough delegates to win the Republican nomination. The general election phase covered the period from Labor Day to Election Day.
7. We opted to sample *NewsHour* stories because of their length—often eight times longer than typical commercial broadcast reports. The universe of stories was constructed from all stories about the presidential campaign appearing on *NewsHour* between January 1 and Election Day. Stories were included if they were exclusively about the election or if they discussed another topic (such as the Middle East peace process) in the context of the election.
8. There were 90 stories in the PBS sample and 359 in the ABC data set.
9. Only primary and secondary voice references were coded for their analytical, descriptive, or rhetorical characteristics.
10. See Kerbel (1998) and Ross (1992).
11. These figures refer to the percentage of stories featuring primary or secondary references to a particular frame.
12. During the primaries, 26.1 percent of PBS stories and 20.1 percent of ABC stories contained a primary or secondary issue reference. During the general election phase of the campaign, the figures were lower: 16.6 percent on PBS and 16.9 percent on ABC. We take this to be an indication of similar producer decision-rules in effect at both networks regarding the value of issues at different points in the political process.
13. Unlike mean prominence values, the frequency measures we report do not include marginal frame references.
14. Only primary and secondary references to the horse-race frame were evaluated.
15. Furthermore, the networks agree on the frequency and magnitude of the coverage allocated to the unsuccessful Republican candidates. Of these candidates, Buchanan received the most coverage on both networks, followed by Forbes, Alexander, and Gramm. The most frequently covered candidates are also the most prominently discussed candidates. For all second-level candidates, mean prominence scores are statistically identical between the two networks.
16. Percentages include primary and secondary references only; means include marginal references.
17. Mean prominence measures high, medium, and low references.
18. Data on pundits presented in this section aggregates references to national and regional journalists, academic experts, and Shields and Grogan.
19. Both networks selected sound bites that reinforced the frames favored by reporters and pundits, with horse-race discussion on ABC and horse-race and character discussion on PBS constituting the most frequently presented frames. Issue frames lagged far behind; ideology, prospective, and retrospective frames were virtually nonexistent.
20. The evidence for this point is interesting, albeit anecdotal. For instance, Paul Taylor documents the difference between the horse-race, strategy, and process questions asked of candidates by professional journalists and the issue questions asked by viewers to call in

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American Campaign Techniques Worldwide

Fritz Plasser

The ongoing process of professionalization and internationalization of electioneering and campaign practices in media-centered democracies is the central topic of this comparative study. Only recently have scholars in the United States begun to study the professional norms and standards of a new power elite: the professional political consultants. Prominent figures of the U.S. political consultancy business have worked as overseas consultants since the 1970s. In the 1980s, they concentrated on Latin America and Western Europe. Since 1989, Russia and the former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as newly democratized countries in Asia and Africa, have become competitive marketplaces for American overseas consultants. Between 1998 and 1999, a sample of 502 political consultants and leading party managers in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Latin America, Western Europe, Russia, and Eastern Europe were interviewed about their professional experience and their concepts of campaigning, with the main focus on their professional evaluation of various campaign techniques and communication strategies. This article deals with the market-driven proliferation of American campaign techniques from a global perspective.¹

Since the 1980s, observers of West European and Latin American election campaigns have detected a universal process of "Americanization"—a term defined in many different ways. Can we speak of an Americanization of election communications based only on the fact that German, Italian, British, Brazilian, and Argentine election campaigns are run primarily on television? Is the advanced degree of professionalization in election campaign planning, enlisting the services of external communications and advertising experts, sufficient proof of Americanization? Do the dramaturgy of media coverage and the tendency of journalists to define election campaigns as sporting events and to speculate about the chances of winning or success of individual parties justify warnings against Americanization of the media coverage of election campaigns? Obviously, these indicators of Americanized international election communications are *singular* observations that at best reflect the continuing modernization and professionalization of political communicators but that do not furnish any proof for a *directional convergence and diffusion process*, which the concept of Americanization claims to include.