
THE INFORMATION FLOW: THE MEDIA AND THE 1998 NEW
YORK SENATE RACE
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Due to the declining influence of political parties over the past half century, as well as the increasing pervasiveness of the press as a result of technological advances, the media has taken on a central role in disseminating and contextualizing information during a political campaign. Political scientist Colin Seymour-Ure writes in his book *The Political Impact of the Mass Media*, "It is no exaggeration to claim that 'the campaign' exists only as a construct of the media: they give to the disconnected ... a kind of scrap-book tidiness, laying out the pieces in patterns, with prominence to some while others are tucked away at the back" (Seymour-Ure 38). By giving a semblance of structure to a political campaign, the media plays an influential role in the American democratic process by providing the lens through which voters can view and ultimately decide which candidates to choose as their representatives. Consequently, the manner in which the press covers a campaign has dramatic implications on how a voter makes his/her decision, or even whether or not an individual makes a decision at all.

In my research, I have attempted to analyze the type of information disseminated by the press during a recent political campaign in order to comprehend the extent that the media succeeds in connecting voters with the officials that represent them. I have centered my study on the 1998 democratic senatorial primary race in New York between Charles Schumer, Geraldine Ferraro and Mark Green. This case study focuses strictly on the impact of print journalism in an attempt to detail the general patterns employed by the print media during the opening stages of a political campaign.

I chose to focus specifically on the primaries because this is the period in a race that is critically important in forming and shaping a voter's initial perceptions of a candidate, especially if this contestant is a challenger and/or a relative unknown. Prior studies documenting the effects of media coverage on a primary race have affirmed the notion that the press' influence on the public seems to be enhanced during this time frame (Graber 244). The amount of coverage that the media allots for a primary as well as the method in which newspapers present this coverage, can dramatically effect how a voter initially develops these perceptions of a contestant.

As a result of its potential to influence a voter's earliest opinions of a candidate, the manner in which the media chooses to present a contestant takes on added significance. Ironically, it is at this juncture in a political race that many social scientists and even journalists feel the media is most prone to fail the public. Political scientist Doris Graber notes, for instance, that

"the deficiencies of media coverage are most noticeable during the primary period, when a large slate of same-party candidates [are] competing in each primary" (Graber 256). Critics such as Graber feel that the press does not provide the amount or type of information necessary for voters to make an informed decision. Moreover, they believe that the media's coverage of a campaign often has the effect of making the public *more* rather than less alienated from the political process, which consequently may deter voters from going to the ballot box on election day.

These detractors point to several shortcomings to justify their disapproval. One common complaint stems from the media's emphasis on political strategy at the expense of substantive, issue-oriented coverage (Fallows 25). A primary race between members of the same party generally contains only subtle and often esoteric differences in policy-stances. Yet as journalist James Fallows points out, the media thrive on areas of conflict, whereas "areas of agreement are as uninteresting to journalists as exhibition games, prearranged not to count, are to sports reporters" (Fallows 63). Journalist Walter Lippman writes, "The function of news is to signalize events" (Patterson 21). Strategic activity, as the one truly tangible, "news-worthy" element of a political campaign, is therefore heavily emphasized by the press. Consequently, reporters shift much of their focus from substantive to strategic coverage during the primaries, where they can focus on discernible events and clearly delineated points of conflict regardless of the fact that the candidates at issue all hail from the same political party. Moreover, the media are also more likely to highlight a political horserace over substantive policy coverage, because a horserace is framed around conflict as well. Together, this emphasis on strategic politics and polls has often left voters uninformed about a candidate's stance on many relevant issues. As political scientist Thomas Patterson notes, "Issue material is just a rivulet in the news flow during the primaries, and what is there is almost completely diluted by information about the race" (Graber 256).

By emphasizing strategy over substantive coverage, many critics feel that the media are actually hindering the political dialogue during primary season rather than facilitating it. Former Senator Bill Bradley has gone so far as to call the political process "fundamentally disconnected" from the lives of most Americans (Rosen 4).

Critics of the media's campaign coverage most often point to the press' emphasis on political strategy and polls at the expense of more substantive issue-based coverage as the one factor that most profoundly contributes to a disconnect between public officials and voters. Patterson characterizes this type of coverage as "game coverage," which he defines as the press' heavy emphasis on the "simple mechanics of campaigning—the candidates' travels here and there, their organizational efforts, their strategies, as well as voting projections and returns, likely convention scenarios, and so on" (Patterson 21). The framework of these articles, according to Patterson, is based on the

struggle of two or more candidates for competitive advantage (Patterson 57). Rather than highlighting the more far-reaching and often esoteric policy initiatives a candidate stands for, the reporter's emphasis is on a candidates' maneuvers, and any substantive information is seen only in reference to this schema.

Patterson gives three reasons why journalists stress the game schema: to serve as a watchdog to the public, to help support their increased prestige and to help hold the attention of their readers.

As political campaigns gradually became more centered around specific candidates as opposed to political parties, the need for politicians to distinguish themselves became an essential component of a race (Patterson 77). However, the images that these candidates put forth of themselves are sometimes meant specifically to manipulate or misrepresent themselves to the public (Patterson 78). With this threat of manipulation always at hand, it is the responsibility of the press to keep the public informed about the legitimacy of a politician's actions and statements. As Patterson notes, "There are times when strategic calculations are so obviously the basis for a candidates actions that the press would be irresponsible not to say so" (Patterson 78).

A second reason for the increased amount of strategic coverage stems from journalists' increasing love for conflict, and subsequently, an increase in personal prestige. As author Theodore H. White stated, "The way of advancement in journalism is to attack" (Patterson 79). Patterson adds that, "The game schema [is] a potent weapon. It offer[s], within the rules of journalism, a ready means of undermining what candidates [are] saying. The candidates' promises can be exposed as little more than vote-getting ploys" (Patterson 80).

A final reason for the added emphasis on the game schema stems from increasing pressure on journalists to create widely read and marketable articles. There is a greater emphasis on creating a tight, easy story, complete with a plot, conflict and action that can hold the reader's attention (Patterson 80). The game schema provides all of this because it is able to focus on the "how" and "why" of a campaign as opposed to the "what" (Patterson 80). As James Fallows writes, "It is sexier and easier to write about Bill Clinton 'positioning' on the Vietnam issue, or how Newt Gingrich is 'handling' the need to cut Medicare, than to look into the issues themselves" (Fallows 27).

For these reasons, I hypothesized that the New York press would organize its coverage around the strategic *game* of politics to a greater extent than the political issues. In performing my analysis, I broke down my measurements into three general categories. First, I examined the amount of "horserace" coverage produced by the four New York newspapers by counting and distinguishing between the number of articles solely devoted to detailing the results of a primary poll, the number of articles that mention the results of a poll but are not framed around it, and the number of articles that do not refer to polls at all. Second, I measured the number of articles

framed around the *game* schema, as defined by Patterson, against the number of articles framed around a policy issue. In my compilation, I also designated two other categories for articles that I felt did not fit under the rubric of strategy of issue-based coverage: one category for articles recounting a candidate's record and previous history and another more general "other" section. Third, I counted the number of lines devoted to either the *game*, the issues, or "other," as well as the total number of lines per article.

After compiling my data, I concluded that my research heavily supports my hypothesis that the media often over-emphasize political strategy at the expense of the issues behind a campaign. Of the 62 articles analyzed, I found that 57 percent of them were framed around the *game* of politics. Meanwhile, only 13 percent were framed around a specific issue such as health care or farm subsidies. Interestingly, very little of the four newspaper's *game* coverage stemmed from accounts of the political horserace: only 9.5 percent were framed around the results of a poll and more startlingly, only 19 percent mentioned a poll at all.

Despite the fact that the four New York newspapers framed the majority of their articles around game coverage, I assumed that these articles may still contain a significant amount of substantive coverage within them. Yet, I found that 72.6 percent of all lines in the *New York Times*' campaign coverage centered around strategy, whereas only 25.5 percent focused on a specific issue. Similarly, in the *New York Post*, the ratio was 71.7 percent to 25.4 percent, strategy coverage to issue coverage. In the *Albany Times-Union*'s articles, this ratio was even larger, 83.5 percent to 16.5 percent. The *Buffalo News* gave the most attention of the four papers to issue-based coverage, however, this was still a rather minimal 34.9 percent of all lines. It correspondingly devoted 61.1 percent of its lines to strategic coverage.

The fact that the *game* schema is so heavily employed by these four publications does not at first seem all that troubling. This form of coverage, after all, does provide a certain level of policy analysis and, as noted earlier, it serves as a watchdog against political manipulation. The problem, however, lies in the extreme use of this schema, which has the effect of distancing rather than connecting the voter from political life.

The press and the public view politics in a very different light. As Fallows notes, "The citizens ask overwhelmingly about the *what* of politics ...The reporters ask almost exclusively about the *how*" (Fallows 21). As a result, voters feel quite detached from these types of stories. "When voters encounter game-centered stories," Patterson writes, "they behave more like spectators than participants in the election, responding, if at all, to the status of the race, not to what the candidates represent" (Patterson 89).

This ultimately fosters a sense of alienation by the public, which keeps voters away from the ballot box on election day. As Fallows notes, "People are unhappy with the political system—which is to say with the structure of democracy—because they feel they have no control over it and that it has no connection to their lives" (Fallows 241).

On top of this, the game schema also cultivates cynicism by the public of political candidates and of politics in general. According to authors Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson, "a cynic's first response is one of distrust" (Capella 84). Since game coverage, by highlighting a politician's motivations, focuses on the candidate's self-interest, he/she often comes across as deceitful and self-centered. Cappella and Jamieson write:

With the focus of strategic coverage squarely on winning and losing and the self-interest implied by this orientation, the traits activated are likely to be negative ones indicative of artifice, pandering, deceit, staging, and positioning for advance—in general, mistrustfulness (Capella 85).

With only minimal exposure, this most likely does not affect the public. However, as Cappella and Jamieson note, "Over the long haul, as patterns of association are activated and reactivated...cynicism about a candidate will be cultivated to become cynicism about candidates and campaigns generally..." (Capella 85).

Despite such pervasive cynicism, the question remains whether this mistrust is always warranted. Just because, for instance, Representative Schumer proposed an anticrime measure meant to stem illegal interstate gun sales does not necessarily mean that the Democrat emphasized this in order to "seek the safe ground," as a *New York Times* September 2 article implied. Perhaps he views crime as a worthwhile issue. Moreover, even if Schumer used this issue as a tactical maneuver to further his own campaign, that does not necessarily mean it was his primary motivation, and it certainly does not have to be perceived as a means of undermining the public.

Yet through *game* coverage, it is generally assumed that a politician's motives are selfish, and this notion silently trickles down to voters. Much like alienation, this growing cynicism leads to low voter turnout at the polls, which can ultimately undermine our political system. Patterson protests:

By emphasizing the game dimension day after day the press forces it to the forefront, strengthening the voters' mistrust of the candidates and reducing their sense of involvement. The press has this effect because the game schema drives its analysis, and its capacity to see the campaign in other ways is limited (Patterson 93).

A final concern about strategic coverage is that it does not educate the public adequately enough for them to make an informed, rational decision in the voting booth. While there generally is some policy information available within most articles, this information is often shallow and incomplete. For instance, in the September 7 article in the *Albany Times-Union* entitled, "Ferraro Stumps on Capitol Steps," journalist Brendan Lyons opens his article by writing, "Reforming health care and raising the minimum

wage may be the foremost issues in the mind of U.S. Senate hopeful Geraldine Ferraro, but reporters wanted her opinion on the fallout of President Clinton's sexual activities..." While the Clinton impeachment trial was clearly an important issue and Ferraro's reaction to it warranted some coverage, there is not another single reference to either reforming health care or raising the minimum wage. This is despite the fact that Ferraro emphasized these issues in her speech that day. "By looking behind the scenes," Patterson points out, "reporters expose the candidates' plans and foil their attempts to communicate with the voters" (Patterson 89).

The manner in which the media connected candidates with voters during the 1998 New York senatorial primary race is not necessarily the best means of facilitating a healthy, functioning democracy. Clearly, there are several advantages to their form of coverage. By detailing a politician's campaign strategy, for instance, the press helped serve as a monitor against political abuses aimed at the public. Moreover, by not relying solely on a candidate's agenda, the media provided a novel perspective through which voters could obtain and process political information. Also, the press did provide enough issue-based information through recounting of a candidate's speech or an emphasis on his/her prior political record, for voters to get a vague semblance of how each contestant stood on a certain issue.

Still, there are limitations to the media's effectiveness in aiding a voter. While the New York press provided some substantive coverage, it was usually sporadic and shallow, providing voters with only an elementary level of information about a candidate's proposals. Moreover, by focusing on a politician's tactics and maneuvers, the public could potentially have become more alienated and cynical about the state of politics as a whole. This could have consequently induced individuals not to vote at all—a basic and vital tenet behind the United States republican system of government. For those who did go to the polls on election day, the New York media's emphasis on major candidates and their lack of a public agenda limited the total amount of political information voters had at their disposal. While the media's present form of coverage, therefore, is not completely debunked, by no means is it ideal either. Journalists have a responsibility to continue questioning and improving these methods of coverage—not only to the public, but to themselves. As Fallows notes, "in the long run, the success of the press and the success of a democracy depend on each other. Democratic government could not exist without a functioning press, but journalism (as opposed to pure celebrity-based entertainment) could not survive if 'public life is not going well'" (Fallows 250). <D

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW

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Since its establishment in 1905, Fordham University School of Law has prepared 25,000 men and women for legal careers. Its beginnings were quite humble, consisting of only thirteen students and a faculty of six as a branch of Fordham University. Little did the founders know that the law school would serve thousands of students and acquire a reputation for being a fine school with distinguished alumni. Fordham has grown to encompass a student body of over 1,400, with faculty of more than 200 scholars and teachers, sixty of whom are full-time professors. Fordham Law's graduates practice in every state in the union and in European and other foreign countries. Among its 12,000 living alumni are partners and associates of leading law firms, executives of major corporations and a multitude of attorneys engaged in public service.

A preeminent regional law school, Fordham University School of Law is now trying to gain a national reputation. Fordham is well respected within the New York regional community, and many partners of major Big Apple firms are Fordham graduates. The school's dean was even appointed head of the *City BAR Association* in 1992. There is good reason to believe that the rest of the nation will hold Fordham in equally high regard if and when more Fordham graduates disperse themselves geographically.

The faculty is generally of high quality and includes a number of eminent and nationally-recognized authorities. Benefiting from its access to the New York legal community, Fordham has made excellent use of adjunct professorships and forums featuring outside speakers. When students seek a faculty member outside of the classroom, they are frequently surprised to find professors who are quite affable and willing to discuss law, professional goals, or the previous night's Yankee game. Students do sometimes complain, however, that the faculty council wields the real power, while the *Student BAR Association* is relegated to running orientation programs and organizing parties.

Fordham Law students are very involved in clinical "externship" programs that place them with federal and state judges, U.S. Attorney and District Attorney offices, and government agencies throughout New York City. The New York location also gives second and third-year students many firms from which to choose part-time jobs.

There is the usual assortment of law school activities and organizations at Fordham Law. The *Fordham Law Review* is a prestigious journal, and positions are coveted. The selection process involves grade evaluation and a writing competition. One especially interesting organization that exists at