

# The Virginia NEWS LETTER

## Virginia's 2013 Gubernatorial Race and Presidential Elections: A Comparison of News Coverage

by Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter

### Introduction

Campaign news coverage brings out critics, both from within the campaigns and among scholars. Researchers have identified four key problems with mainstream news coverage of presidential campaigns and elections: (1) there is not enough coverage of the campaigns; (2) the coverage is misdirected, focusing on the horse race rather than candidates' positions on issues; (3) the coverage is not fairly allocated among the candidates; and (4) the tone of news coverage is unfair, when reporters treat some candidates more harshly than others.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the horse race-dominated coverage of presidential elections, content analysis of news coverage by the *Washington Post* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* during Virginia's 2013 gubernatorial campaign revealed significantly more substantive, issue-based coverage. This study, one of the few to examine state-level campaign news coverage, also found that gubernatorial candidates in Virginia receive far more positive coverage than do presidential candidates.

### Presidential Campaign Coverage

Scholars have found that unfair tone of presidential campaign coverage is a problem in many, but not all, elections. In the 2012 presidential election,



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for example, content analysis conducted by the Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) found that network news coverage of Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate, was 32 percent positive in tone, as compared to the 30 percent positive tone received by Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee.<sup>2</sup> Four years earlier, the coverage was far more one-sided. In the 2008 campaign, television reports on Obama were positive 68 percent of the time—a record for any major party nominee during the six presidential elections examined by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), a non-partisan media research organization affiliated with George Mason University. Republican nominee John McCain received network news reports that were only 33 percent positive. Analysis of 2008 campaign news content in newspapers, on radio and cable, and online by Pew's PEJ likewise found a strong pro-Obama tilt.<sup>3</sup>

Although the question of bias in campaign news coverage generally receives more attention than the subject matter, scholars are also concerned with the substantive issues of campaign news coverage. Too often, research has found that reporters focus primarily on the sport of politics—i.e., which candidate is ahead in the horse race. Frequent public opinion polling has made it easy for journalists,



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particularly in these cash-strapped years for the media business, to write poll story after poll story rather than delve into more substantive issues like what a candidate would actually do if elected. In the 2012 campaign, Pew found that the news focused more on horse race matters than issues of substance. Fifty-three percent of campaign news coverage on network evening newscasts focused on polls, as compared with 26 percent that focused on the candidate's policy record or any policy issue. (The remaining stories generally involved personality profiles.)<sup>4</sup> In 2008, the PEJ's analysis of presidential campaign news content in media outlets likewise found a heavy focus on horse race news at the expense of more substantive matters.<sup>5</sup>

## Our Methodology

This paper asks a key question: Did the reporters covering Virginia's 2013 gubernatorial elections do a better job than their counterparts on the 2012 presidential election campaign trail? We examine this question using a rare content analysis of newspaper election stories covering a Virginia gubernatorial contest: the 2013 campaign involving Terry McAuliffe, the Democratic nominee; Ken Cuccinelli, the Republican nominee who had been serving as Attorney General; and Robert Sarvis, a Libertarian. (This contest was held to replace Gov. Bob McDonnell, a Republican, who could not run for re-election in 2013 because of term limits.) McAuliffe was elected governor with 47.8 percent of the vote, while Cuccinelli received 45.2 percent and Sarvis received 6.5 percent.

Using the same content analysis system that the CMPA employs to study presidential elections, trained coders analyzed each campaign news story appearing in the print editions of two daily newspapers that dominate political reporting in Virginia politics: the *Washington Post* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

In order to provide an analysis as objective and as reliable as possible, the CMPA breaks each news story into segments that roughly correspond to individual sound bites, which can then be coded by such characteristics as length, topic, and tone. Most of the statements airing on television news or appearing in newspapers are relatively straightforward and can be classified reliably in terms of the CMPA's coding system. For example, Mark Kington, an Alexandria venture capitalist who gave \$83,000 to McDonnell's 2009 campaign, did not donate to Cuccinelli because "his position on climate change to me was a real non-starter, and I told him as much." This statement was coded as a negative statement aimed at Cuccinelli.<sup>6</sup> For all variables discussed in this paper, intercoder reliability—the extent to which one

coder independently agreed with a second coder looking at the same news segment—exceeded 90 percent.<sup>7</sup>

We examined key concerns about news content in all news stories with at least two paragraphs relating to the gubernatorial campaign from October 4, 2013, until the morning of November 5, the day before Election Day. The stories appeared either on the front page, elsewhere in the A-section, in the metro news section or in local zoned editions. We excluded all opinion-oriented items—editorials, letters to the editor, and opinion columns—from this analysis of news content.

Virginia is a particularly appealing state for studying gubernatorial campaign news content because its gubernatorial elections take place in odd-numbered years, apart from the presidential and US Senate campaign cycles. As such, gubernatorial campaigns in the Old Dominion allow for a purer test of state-level campaign news content than do the even-year gubernatorial campaigns of most other states. Of course, we cannot reach a final verdict on the quality of state campaign news looking at only two newspapers covering only one gubernatorial election. Nonetheless, the results from our study can tell us whether the problems identified as inherent in presidential campaign coverage were also found in the Old Dominion during the 2013 gubernatorial election cycle. Our findings here may also encourage others to study gubernatorial campaign news in other election years and in other states.

## Previous Studies

This study is not the first to examine Virginia gubernatorial campaign news coverage. In fact, these earlier studies of state-election coverage, like analyses of presidential campaign coverage, have raised issues concerning the quality of news content. A study of L. Douglas Wilder's successful 1989 campaign for governor found that the *Washington Post* gave the two major-party candidates roughly equal amounts of coverage. But Wilder, the Democrat, received both more positive coverage (14.2 percent versus 10 percent) and more negative coverage (27 percent versus 13 percent) than Republican rival J. Marshall Coleman. More of Coleman's coverage was in the neutral category than was Wilder's.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the 1989 election of the state's first African-American governor marked the contest as exceptional.

Horse race news dominated campaign coverage of the 1993 gubernatorial election, when George Allen, the Republican, handily defeated Mary Sue Terry, the Democratic nominee. Studies of 1993 campaign coverage appearing in four

papers—the *Post*, *Times-Dispatch*, *Virginian-Pilot* and *Roanoke Times and World News*—found that they all contained far more content relating to candidate standings than to candidate issues. Allen received more positive coverage than did Terry in all four papers, with a double-digit tonal advantage in the *Post*, *Times-Dispatch*, and *Times and World News*, perhaps because the Terry campaign was viewed by many to be underperforming.<sup>9</sup>

A study of 2005 gubernatorial campaign news revealed that newspapers provided far more campaign coverage of major party candidates than their third-party rival, and that local television news provided very little campaign news. In a sharp contrast with news coverage of many recent presidential campaigns, both the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *Washington Post* provided relatively even-handed treatment of the two major party gubernatorial nominees.<sup>10</sup>

### Coverage of the 2013 Virginia Governor's Race

The 2013 gubernatorial campaign was the subject of 234 news stories in the two newspapers we examined during the month before the election. The *Washington Post*, the dominant paper in Northern Virginia, provided 135 stories, while the *Times-Dispatch* published 99.

Though some political scientists argue otherwise, the conventional scholarly view is that media coverage is most useful when it focuses on matters of substance rather than campaign hoopla, ephemeral campaign trail controversies and the horse race. Reporters frequently vow that they will improve future campaign coverage by making it more substantive next time, but research shows that they have rarely kept that promise.<sup>11</sup> With the release of daily presidential polls during the fall campaign, every day offers a poll-reporting opportunity for correspondents tempted to provide horse race journalism.<sup>12</sup>

With far fewer surveys conducted on gubernatorial campaigns, reporters covering these contests do not provide as heavy a diet of horse race coverage as do their colleagues on the presidential campaign beat. As shown in **Table 1**, stories focusing on policy issues were more common in the *Washington Post* than were stories about the horse race or campaign strategies and tactics. On the other hand, the *Times-Dispatch* paid equal attention to policy matters and campaign strategy.

Campaign events and debates as well as candidate profiles were major themes in these news stories. (Of course, most stories covered a mix of topics, which further demonstrates the benefit of statement-level coding.) Articles often characterized both major party candidates as highly polarizing and partisan figures: McAuliffe was a former Democratic National Committee chair and Clinton family confidante, and Cuccinelli focused on a socially conservative political agenda.<sup>13</sup>

The two newspapers examined here provide enough campaign coverage to allow us to study their news content separately, using statement-level analysis. (see **Table 2**).

Overall, the news reports in both papers were similar in tone. McAuliffe received more positive coverage in both papers, with 71 percent positive assessments in the *Post* and 69 percent positive assessments in the *Times-Dispatch*. Although Cuccinelli received about as many assessments as his Democratic opponent in both papers, his coverage was 67 percent positive in the *Post* and 62 percent positive in the *Times-Dispatch*. The tonal gaps, in other words, were modest: four percentage points in the *Post* and seven percentage points in the *Times-Dispatch*. Taken together, these relatively positive assessments were markedly more positive than those usually given to presidential candidates on the nightly news.<sup>14</sup>

The most positive media treatment accorded any of the candidates in the 2013 gubernatorial campaign was that enjoyed by Robert Sarvis, the

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**Table 1: Leading News Topics in 2013 Virginia Gubernatorial Race**

	<i>Washington Post</i>	<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>
Policy Issues	28	22
Candidate Profiles & Controversies	15	10
Campaign Events & Debates	15	06
Horse race, Campaign Strategy & Tactics	13	22
Campaign Finance	04	05
Mixed/Other	60	34
<b>Total Number of Stories</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>99</b>

Source: Center for Media and Public Affairs, George Mason University. News stories from October 4 through November 5, 2013, were included in the study.

**Table 2: Evaluations of Candidates in Campaign News Stories by News Outlet**

	Number of Evaluations	Percent Positive
<b>Washington Post</b>		
McAuliffe	523	71
Cuccinelli	534	67
Sarvis	21	90
<b>Richmond Times-Dispatch</b>		
McAuliffe	354	69
Cuccinelli	359	62
Sarvis	55	80

Source: Center for Media and Public Affairs, George Mason University. News stories published in the Washington Post (135 stories with 1280 evaluations) and Richmond Times-Dispatch (99 stories with 869 evaluations) between October 4 and November 5, 2013, were included in the study. This table excludes of the horse race assessments from these data and is based on 1078 assessments in the Post and 768 assessments in the Times-Dispatch.

Libertarian. Although he received a tiny fraction of the number of assessments given to the major party nominees, Sarvis did receive, by far, the kindest treatment: 90 percent positive in the *Post* and 80 percent positive in Times-Dispatch. This pattern is not unlike the “triage” model of political news coverage during presidential nomination cycles, showing that candidates with no chance of

winning get little coverage; but the treatment they receive is quite kind.<sup>15</sup>

Assessments varied in tone according to their focus, as seen in **Table 3**. (Because some of these evaluation areas contain relatively few assessments, we no longer separate the two newspapers in the analysis.)

**Table 3: Evaluations of Candidates in Campaign News Stories**

	Number of Evaluations	Percent Positive
<b>McAuliffe</b>		
Ideology	426	81
Personal/Character	203	40
Horse race	164	97
Campaign Performance	57	30
Job Performance	21	38
<b>Cuccinelli</b>		
Ideology	501	72
Personal/Character	128	48
Horse race	119	27
Job Performance	92	45
Campaign Performance	62	13
<b>Sarvis</b>		
Ideology	52	100
Horse Race	20	65
Personal/Character	16	56
Job Performance	11	45

Note: Only evaluation areas with ten or more total evaluations for a particular candidate in a specific area are included here.

Source: Center for Media and Public Affairs, George Mason University. News stories published in the Washington Post (135 stories with 1280 evaluations) and Richmond Times-Dispatch (99 stories with 869 evaluations) between October 4 and November 5, 2013, were included in the study.

As befits campaigns in which the leading candidates were seen as relatively polarizing, ideological matters were the subject of more assessments than any other topic for these candidates. The tonal coverage of the candidates' ideology statements was largely positive, based on their supporters' remarks during interviews. Ideology was also a major area of emphasis for Libertarian Robert Sarvis, though, again, his coverage was a fraction of that afforded the major party candidates.

Personality/character was the second most commonly addressed issue for the two major party candidates, and here the news was notably more negative. Cuccinelli had the edge in this category over his Democratic opponent, with reports that were 48 percent positive in tone, as compared with 40 percent positive for McAuliffe. Although fewer assessments focused on Sarvis, the tone of these assessments, once again, was more positive than those of his major party rivals.

Horse race coverage made up a significant portion of the gubernatorial campaign news.

Given McAuliffe's frequent advantage in pre-election polls, discussions relating to his horse race standings were 97 percent positive. For Cuccinelli, who trailed in those surveys—often by significant margins—the tone was only 27 percent positive.

Both candidates received largely negative reviews in the campaign performance category, with 30 percent positive for McAuliffe and 13 percent positive for Cuccinelli.

**Table 4** considers the issue-oriented content of media sources examined here collectively. The economy and health/welfare matters dominated the discourse relating to both major party candidates. These topics are often the perennial mainstays of political campaigns, although capital punishment dominated the news coverage of the 2005 gubernatorial race.<sup>16</sup>

The tone of coverage of Cuccinelli's policy positions varied widely. Coverage of his views relating to roads and transportation was 95 percent positive and health/welfare reports were 90 percent positive. However, coverage of his positions on crime (47 percent positive) and the federal

**Table 4: Coverage of Leading Issues in Campaign News Stories**

	Number of Evaluations	Percent Positive
<b>McAuliffe</b>		
Economy	107	71
Health/Welfare	76	71
Education	72	94
Abortion	47	77
Roads/Transportation	44	91
Gun Issues	24	71
<b>Cuccinelli</b>		
Health/Welfare	99	90
Economy	92	85
Education	60	88
Abortion	45	53
Roads/Transportation	37	95
Federal Government Shutdown	28	21
Gun Issues	18	77
Crime	15	47
Environment	10	50
<b>Sarvis</b>		
Economy	18	100

Note: Only topics with ten or more total evaluations for a particular candidate in a specific issue area are included here.

Source: Center for Media and Public Affairs, George Mason University. News stories published in the Washington Post (135 stories with 1280 evaluations) and Richmond Times-Dispatch (99 stories with 869 evaluations) between October 4 and November 5, 2013, were included in the study

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government shutdown (21 percent positive) was sharply negative in tone. Because the Republican candidate was serving as attorney general, crime was a major focus of media attention. In addition, Republicans in Washington that fall who closed the government temporarily undermined the chances of a Republican gubernatorial candidate in Virginia, a state highly dependent on federal revenue.<sup>17</sup>

McAuliffe routinely received positive treatment on leading policy issues debated during the fall campaign, with at least 71 percent positive assessments on all topics. On two issues he had very positive coverage: 94 percent on education and 91 percent on roads and transportation. A significant bipartisan tax increase for transportation secured earlier in 2013 by outgoing Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell buoyed the often-grim news reports relating to gridlock on key Virginia highways, including roads in traffic-clogged Northern Virginia.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

While we hesitate to generalize too much from news coverage of one campaign, based on our findings, we can make some important observations regarding coverage of the 2013 Virginia gubernatorial election. When we compare campaign coverage by the state press corps with that of the national press corps, we find more effective reporting at the state level.

Both the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *Washington Post* did an effective job in terms of campaign news volume, particularly when one considers that the *Post* also covers politics in Maryland and the District of Columbia. These findings reflect the same pattern revealed in a CMPA study of print news coverage of the 2005 campaign for governor.<sup>19</sup>

The Sarvis campaign might object to the conclusion here that print coverage provides adequate information. During the campaign season, more than 90 percent of the news was devoted to the two major party nominees—the candidates seen as having the most viable chances of winning. News reports, in other words, reflect a painful reality of American politics: if a candidate does not possess a major party nomination, that individual's prospects of receiving media coverage and being elected are extremely limited. Candidates who do well in fund raising and in early polls receive the bulk of media and public attention; however, independent and third-party candidates rarely do well in either category. While also-rans often receive positive coverage, they don't get much of it. They are victims of media "triage," where the

weakest campaigns make little progress because of lack of attention.<sup>20</sup>

With respect to the amount of substance provided by the state press corps covering the 2013 gubernatorial campaign, we again find a relatively positive performance. While some might view the horse race coverage of the state campaign excessive, the numbers compare quite favorably with those of network television's presidential election coverage. Over the six presidential election cycles between 1988 and 2008 studied by the CMPA, horse race journalism always exceeded 40 percent of network television's campaign news content, and in the case of the razor-close finish in 2000, more than 70 percent.<sup>21</sup>

Some media scholars might not favor the intense focus on ideology in Virginia coverage of the 2013 campaign. However, the journalistic focus on ideological matters arguably reflected the dynamics of the campaigns.<sup>22</sup> In this election, ideology was emphasized given that the nominees served as highly visible partisan warriors throughout their careers, and ideological coverage often related to the candidates' policies on specific issues. In addition, content analysis revealed a significant amount of coverage devoted to the leading issue areas: perennial state government concerns about the economy, transportation and education, along with concerns over the federal government shutdown that occurred during the campaign.

In fairness to reporters, there are far more polls conducted on the race for the White House, making it much easier—and perhaps more tempting—to emphasize horse race news at the national level. Gubernatorial campaign horse race coverage might increase if more gubernatorial election surveys were conducted.

For many news consumers and candidates, allegations of partisan bias are the most important issue. Are the media guilty of favoritism towards one party or the other? And if so, how bad is it? Apart from the relatively even-handed treatment of the 2012 presidential candidates, news coverage of presidential campaigns is usually biased. Network news coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign featured a 35 percentage point gap favoring the Democratic candidate (68 percent positive for Barack Obama versus 33 percent for John McCain). Network news coverage of the 2004 contest favored Democratic nominee John Kerry by 22 percentage points over George W. Bush (59 percent positive versus 37 percent positive). Indeed, one has to go back to the 2000 presidential contest to find roughly even-handed coverage on network television. Al Gore's coverage that year was 40 percent positive in tone, as compared to 37 percent positive for Bush.<sup>23</sup>

Once again, the state media in 2013 did a better job than television networks did on average in recent presidential election cycles. Modest single-digit advantages for the Democratic nominee in both of the state's leading newspapers may not have been noticeable to readers.

News coverage in the *Washington Post*, which is frequently criticized by Republicans as too favorable to Democratic candidates, gave McAuliffe roughly the same tonal advantage seen in the *Times-Dispatch*, which is editorially more conservative (a four percentage point tonal gap in the *Post* versus a seven point gap in the *Times-Dispatch*).

Our findings suggest that network television journalists could learn a thing or two from the print reporters covering the 2013 gubernatorial campaign in Virginia. But one should not push the point too far. These findings relate to one contest for governor in one state. Future studies along these same lines may help determine whether the relatively positive performance by the statehouse press corps in the McAuliffe-Cuccinelli race was the norm—or the exception—for Virginia campaign reporting. Studies in other states could help determine whether these findings are state specific as well.

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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dan Amundson for his assistance with this project and to the University of Mary Washington's Center for Leadership and Media Studies for its financial support. Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the 2016 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting and the 2016 Virginia Association of Communication Arts and Sciences Conference. All errors remain the authors' responsibility.

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VOL. 92 NO. 3 AUGUST 2016

Editors: Bob Gibson and Billie Easton

*The Virginia NEWS LETTER* (ISSN 0042-0271) is published by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206; (434) 982-5704, TDD: (434) 982-HEAR.

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