

# The Virginia NEWS LETTER

## Media Coverage of the 2005 Governor's Race: A Comparison to Presidential Election News Coverage

by Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter

### Introduction

For decades growing numbers of scholarly studies have criticized mass media coverage of election campaigns as generally unhelpful to voters. Researchers have pointed to four key problems they see 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 how the candidates would address important issues if elected; (3) the coverage is not fairly allocated among the candidates; (4) the tone of news coverage is unfair, as reporters are perceived to treat some candidates more harshly than others.<sup>1</sup>

In the 2008 presidential election, for example, content analysis conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), a non-partisan media research organization affiliated with George Mason University, found that network news coverage of Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate, was 68 percent positive in tone, as compared to the 33 percent positive tone received by John McCain, the Republican nominee. In fact, the media's performance on this dimension may be getting worse. Obama's 2008 campaign news coverage was extraordinary, the most positive of any major party nominee over the past six presidential elections, according to CMPA.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of campaign news content in newspapers, on radio, on cable and online by the Pew Center's Project for Excellence



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in Journalism (PEJ) likewise found a strong positive coverage of Obama in news content during the 2008 campaign.<sup>3</sup>

Although it generally receives less attention than questions of alleged bias, scholars and others are also concerned about the subject matter of campaign news coverage. Too often, research has found that reporters focus primarily on the sport of politics: which candidate is ahead in the "horse race." Frequent public opinion polling has made it easy for journalists, particularly in these cash-strapped years for the media business, to write poll story after poll story rather than delving into more substantive issues like what a candidate would actually do if elected. While the amount of campaign news coverage on network television increased in 2008 as compared to four years earlier, the CMPA study found that more of the news focused on horse race matters than issues of substance. Forty-one percent of the campaign news coverage on network evening newscasts focused on polls, as compared to 35 percent that focused on any policy issue (the remaining stories focused on neither issue and generally involved personality profiles).<sup>4</sup> The analysis of presidential campaign news content in newspapers, on radio, on cable and online by the Pew Center's PEJ likewise found a heavy focus on horse race news at the expense of more substantive matters.<sup>5</sup>

This article asks a key question: do the reporters covering Virginia gubernatorial elections do a



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better job than their counterparts on the presidential election campaign trail? We examine this question with a content analysis of newspaper and television election stories on a Virginia gubernatorial contest: the 2005 campaign between Lieutenant Governor Tim Kaine, the Democratic nominee, Jerry Kilgore, the Republican nominee who had been serving as attorney general, and Virginia Senator H. Russell Potts Jr., a maverick Republican who campaigned as an independent. (The contest was to replace Governor Mark Warner, a Democrat, who could not run for reelection in 2005 because of term limits.) Kaine received 52 percent of the vote, Kilgore received 46 percent and Potts received less than 3 percent. (Funding limitations did not permit a replication of this study for the 2009 gubernatorial election).

Using the same content analysis system that CMPA employs to study presidential elections, specially trained coders analyzed each campaign news story appearing in the print editions of four daily newspapers circulating in Virginia, as well as every story appearing on the 6 p.m. evening newscasts of the Washington D.C. metro area local affiliates of ABC, CBS, and NBC and the 10 p.m. newscast on the Washington Fox affiliate, which did not have a 6 p.m. newscast. (The four newspapers analyzed here, selected for both influence and geographic diversity, are the *Washington Post*, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the *Virginian-Pilot* of Hampton Roads, and the *Roanoke Times and World News*.)

In order to make the process of analyzing news content as objective and as reliable as possible, we break each news story into segments roughly corresponding to individual sound bites, which can be coded on such dimensions as length, topic and tone. Most of the statements that air on television news or appear in newspapers are relatively straightforward comments that can be classified reliably in terms of our coding system. For example, a Fairfax County computer consultant told a *Washington Post* reporter during the 2005 campaign the following: “I’ve been disappointed with Warner’s spending, and I’m just afraid that Kaine is going to be more of the same.” That comment was coded as a negative statement aimed at Kaine. In that same story, a McLean health care worker said: “I had a visceral reaction to Kilgore’s ads. It’s the ads that he’s run. It’s the misleading. It’s the attacking.” That was coded as a negative statement aimed at Kilgore.<sup>6</sup> For all variables discussed in this paper, inter-coder 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 1, 2005 until November 7 (the night before Election Day) for television stations and from October 1 until the morning of November 8 for newspapers. The stories can be on the front page, elsewhere in the A-section, the metro news section or in local zoned editions. All opinion items—editorials, letters to the editor and opinion columns—are excluded from this analysis of news content.

Virginia is a particularly appealing state to study campaign news content because its gubernatorial elections take place in odd-numbered years, away from the presidential and U.S. Senate campaign cycles. As such, the state’s unusual election cycle allows for a purer test of gubernatorial 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 a handful of television stations and a group of newspapers in a single election year. Nonetheless, the results from this study of 2005 news content can tell us whether the problems inherent in presidential campaign coverage were found in the Old Dominion during that election cycle. Our findings here may also encourage others to study gubernatorial campaign news in other election years and in other states.

Previous studies of Virginia campaign news have likewise looked at individual election news cycles. These earlier studies have also 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 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 marks the contest as exceptional and limits the ability to generalize beyond that unusual year.

Horse race news dominated a study of campaign news content of the 1993 gubernatorial election, where George Allen, the Republican, handily defeated Mary Sue Terry, the Democratic nominee. Studies of the news content of the four papers examined in this study of the 2005 campaign – the *Washington Post*, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the *Virginian-Pilot*, and the *Roanoke Times and World News* found that all four papers (as well as the *Bristol Herald-Courier*) had

far more campaign coverage relating to candidate standings than to candidate issues. Allen received more positive coverage than did Terry in all five papers, with a double-digit tonal advantage in the *Washington Post*, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and the *Roanoke Times and World News*, perhaps as a result of a Terry campaign often viewed as lackluster.<sup>9</sup>

The 2005 campaign examined here took place in the context of two key factors that worked against any Republican candidate. First, the incumbent Democratic governor, Mark Warner, was highly popular. While he could not run for re-election because of term limits, he frequently campaigned alongside Kaine, then the lieutenant governor. Second, the escalating problems in Iraq during this period reduced the popularity of President George W. Bush and discouraged Republicans, both nationally and in Virginia. In addition, Bush's unpopularity limited the president's ability to campaign effectively on behalf of the Republican nominee. Kilgore's choice to campaign on a largely conservative platform, complete with highly combative campaign ads, likewise limited his appeal to moderate swing voters.<sup>10</sup>

### Amount and Tone of Coverage

The 2005 gubernatorial campaign was the subject of 344 news stories in the media outlets we examined during October and early November. The vast majority of them appeared in newspapers, led by 118 stories in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, whose location in the state capital makes it a key source for news on Virginia political matters. The *Washington Post*, the dominant paper in Northern Virginia (as well as in the rest of the Washington metro area), provided 96 stories on the campaign. The *Virginian-Pilot*, the dominant paper in the Tidewater region, published 45 campaign news

stories, and another 52 stories were published in the *Roanoke Times and World News*. The television news coverage of the campaign in the four Washington market stations totaled only 33 stories, representing less than 10 percent of the news reports in this study. WRC-TV, the NBC affiliate, provided 14 stories, WUSA-TV, the CBS affiliate, offered 7 stories, as did WTTG-TV, the Fox affiliate, while WJLA-TV, the ABC affiliate in the nation's capital, aired only 4 stories. (Some campaign news was provided via brief "voice-overs" of a sentence or two, which were too short to qualify as a news story about the campaign).

Our analysis, though, focuses on individual statements within news stories, which provides a more nuanced portrait of news content than characterizing entire stories as a whole. This approach also provides greater inter-coder reliability, as discussed above. In addition, statement-level coding is frequently employed in content analysis studies of this nature, and this approach is used in the CMPA studies that will be used to assess the Virginia gubernatorial campaign coverage in light of the shortcomings identified in news reports of presidential elections.<sup>11</sup>

Those 344 gubernatorial news stories contained 740 positive or negative tonal evaluations of Kaine, 668 evaluations of Kilgore and 104 evaluations of Potts, the independent candidate. **Table 1** contains the number of evaluations per candidate for each of the four newspapers and four television stations examined in this project. Evaluations that do not contain a clear positive or negative assessment are not included in the calculation of tone.

In the *Washington Post*, the tone of coverage was quite even-handed, and both major party candidates received roughly equal amounts of media attention. Coverage of Kaine was 51 percent

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**Table 1: News Outlet Evaluations of Candidates, Percentage of Positive Responses**

News Outlet	Tim Kaine		Jerry Kilgore		Russell Potts	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
<i>Washington Post</i>	51	223	48	200	74	27
<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	49	89	44	82	73	11
<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>	54	266	49	276	83	52
<i>Roanoke Times and World News</i>	54	139	56	91	86	14
WJLA-TV (ABC)	—	1	—	1	—	0
WUSA-TV (CBS)	—	3	—	0	—	0
WTTG-TV (FOX)	—	5	17	12	—	0
WRC-TV (NBC)	36	14	—	6	—	0
Total	52	740	49	668	80	104

Notes: These evaluations are from all news stories with at least two paragraphs relating to the gubernatorial campaign from October 1 until November 7, the night before Election Day, for television stations and from October 1 up to and including November 8, Election Day, for newspapers.

Not all evaluations could be classified as either positive or negative in tone.

Only categories with ten or more tonal evaluations are reported here.

*“With fewer surveys conducted at the state level, reporters covering gubernatorial contests do not provide as heavy a diet of horse race coverage as do their colleagues on the presidential campaign beat.”*

positive (and 49 percent negative in tone), as compared to 48 percent positive (and 52 percent negative) for Kilgore. Differences of a few percentage points are not sufficiently large to be apparent to an ordinary news consumer. Such differences emerge only through a statement-by-statement content analysis assessment of these news reports. Although Potts received far less coverage than the other two, his coverage was far more positive in tone—nearly three out of every four evaluations were positive for the maverick senator from Winchester.

The two major party candidates also received largely even-handed treatment in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Kaine’s coverage in the paper was 54 percent positive, only slightly better than the 49 percent positive coverage of Kilgore. Again Potts received the most positive treatment, with 83 percent positive coverage in Virginia’s capital city newspaper. Kaine also had a modest tonal advantage in the *Virginian-Pilot*, while Kilgore, who was from Southwest Virginia, had a 2-percentage point advantage in the Roanoke paper.

There were too few tonal evaluations of the candidates for a useful comparison in any of the four television stations examined here. The two cases where one could calculate tone in TV news, Kaine on WRC-TV and Kilgore on WTTG-TV, were both quite negative. The paucity of gubernatorial campaign news on television is a result of the relatively small news hole in a 30 minute broadcast before accounting for advertising, weather, sports and lifestyle reports, as well as the fact that Washington-area TV stations must provide news for residents of three distinct jurisdictions—the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia. Newspapers, of course, contain far more material than a local television news program.

Taken together, the media results show a very even-handed treatment of the two major-party candidates. Positive evaluations were 52 percent

of the total number of assessments of Kaine and 49 percent of the assessments of Kilgore. While Potts received less than 7 percent of the tonal evaluations during the 2005 campaign, coverage of the independent candidate was 80 percent positive in tone.

### Campaign Coverage Patterns

Though some political scientists argue otherwise, the conventional scholarly view of media coverage is that its usefulness depends on whether it focuses on matters of substance or ignores public policy in favor of 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, but research into presidential elections shows that they have rarely kept that promise.<sup>12</sup> With presidential polls being released daily during the fall campaign, every day can be a poll-reporting day for correspondents who are tempted to provide horse race journalism in presidential nomination and general election campaigns.<sup>13</sup>

With fewer surveys conducted at the state level, reporters covering gubernatorial contests do not provide as heavy a diet of horse race coverage as do their colleagues on the presidential campaign beat. The most frequently addressed area of candidate evaluations, as shown in **Table 2**, deals with their ideology. Questions of how conservative Kilgore was and how liberal Kaine was were key topics raised frequently by both campaigns.<sup>14</sup> (Because of the relatively small number of evaluations for the candidates in most media outlets, the data in Table 2 represent combined results for all the media in this analysis.)

Fifty-eight percent of the comments quoted in the eight media outlets regarding Kilgore’s ideology were favorable, as compared to 45 percent of the evaluations of Kaine. Once again, Potts’ coverage was much lower in volume but much

**Table 2: News Coverage of Candidate Evaluation Areas, Percentage of Positive Responses**

Evaluation Areas	Tim Kaine		Jerry Kilgore		Russell Potts	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Ideology	45	390	58	266	85	46
Campaign performance	30	132	18	226	47	19
Job performance	87	104	77	56	91	21
General personal evaluation	58	38	70	30	—	9
Character	17	12	41	27	—	0
Other	92	64	87	63	—	9
Total	52	740	49	668	80	104

Notes: These evaluations are from all news stories with at least two paragraphs relating to the gubernatorial campaign from October 1 until November 7, the night before Election Day, for television stations and from October 1 up to and including November 8, Election Day, for newspapers.

Not all evaluations could be classified as either positive or negative in tone.

Only categories with ten or more tonal evaluations are reported here

more positive in tone—85 percent positive. These differing assessments of ideology in these news stories relate to the fact that conservatives quoted in the news stories on the campaign were often quite pleased with the Kilgore’s conservative campaign agenda, while voters quoted in those same news stories had greater uncertainty about exactly where Kaine stood on the ideological continuum.

Questions of campaign performance, the measure that best approximates horse race coverage in presidential elections, were the second most frequently addressed topic. For both major party candidates roughly one-third or fewer of the assessments were in this category. Both candidates received largely negative notices. Coverage in this area was 30 percent positive in tone for Kaine and only 18 percent positive in tone for Kilgore. Coverage of Potts in this area was more negative than in many other categories, but still notably more positive than his two major party rivals.

Highly positive assessments were the norm when discussing the candidates’ job performance, another major area of candidate evaluation. Reviews of Kaine’s performance as lieutenant governor, and before that as mayor of Richmond, were 87 percent positive in tone, as compared to 77 percent positive in tone for the reviews of Kilgore’s time as attorney general. Once again, though, Potts enjoyed the most positive evaluations in this category, with a 91 percent positive

assessment in these media stories. But there were far fewer of those evaluations for Potts, as was the case for the independent candidate in all the evaluation categories.

Two media outlets examined here—the *Washington Post* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*—provided enough coverage of the campaign to allow us to examine their news content in isolation. The results for each of these influential papers are found in **Table 3**.

Overall the news reports in the two papers were quite similar. Kaine received slightly more positive coverage in both papers, but the tonal gaps between the two candidates were relatively small, too small in magnitude to have registered with ordinary news consumers. The papers tended, as well, to emphasize the same topics; ideology and campaign performance were the top two issues in terms of emphasis for both candidates in both papers.

While many of the tonal assessments were quite similar across the two papers, there were a few differences worth noting. Evaluations of Kilgore’s ideology were far more positive in the Richmond paper, probably because voters and news sources from relatively liberal Northern Virginia were more prominent in the *Washington Post*. On the other hand, the *Washington Post* was more positive in tone regarding Kilgore’s job performance (81 percent positive) than was the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (63 percent positive).

**Table 3: *Washington Post* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* Coverage of Candidate Evaluation Areas, Percentage of Positive Responses**

Newspaper/Evaluation Areas	Tim Kaine		Jerry Kilgore	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
<i>Washington Post</i>				
Ideology	47	123	53	72
Campaign performance	38	50	15	66
Job performance	67	15	81	21
General personal evaluation	60	15	—	8
Character	—	4	—	9
Other	100	16	83	24
Total	51	223	48	200
<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>				
Ideology	46	125	63	113
Campaign performance	27	52	18	91
Job performance	89	46	63	19
General personal evaluation	58	12	60	15
Character	—	5	39	13
Other	92	26	88	25
Total	54	266	49	276

Notes: These evaluations are from all news stories with at least two paragraphs relating to the gubernatorial campaign from October 1 up to and including November 8, Election Day.

Not all evaluations could be classified as either positive or negative in tone.

Only categories with ten or more tonal evaluations are reported here.

*“Overall the news reports in [the *Washington Post* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*] were quite similar. Kaine received slightly more positive coverage in both papers, but the tonal gaps between the two candidates were relatively small...”*

One other major distinction between the two papers includes news reports on Kaine in the job performance category. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* produced a much higher volume—46 evaluations versus 15 for Kaine. The difference in volume likely stemmed from the greater attention the Richmond paper devoted to the relatively low-profile job of lieutenant governor, as well as the fact that many evaluations involved Kaine’s previous job as Richmond’s mayor, a matter of great interest to readers of the *Richmond*

*“...the death penalty debate dominated the news discourse relating to both of the major-party candidates.”*

*Times-Dispatch*. The tone of this issue area was also more positive in the Richmond paper, by a margin of 89 percent positive to 67 percent positive in the *Washington Post*. But such distinctions tended to be relatively minor. When considering the overall treatment of these two candidates and the evaluations areas emphasized, the two papers offered a very similar news diet.

### Reporting on Campaign Issues

Turning now to an analysis of which policy matters were most prominent in the campaign news, and the tone of coverage of these issues, we observe in **Table 4** that the death penalty debate dominated the news discourse relating to both of the major-party candidates. (The table shows the issue-oriented news content of all media sources examined here collectively). Capital punishment was a major emphasis of the Kilgore campaign, which alleged that Kaine’s personal opposition to the death penalty was out of step with mainstream Virginia values on that issue.<sup>15</sup> Kaine replied that he would carry out death sentences as governor despite his personal opposition to capital punishment.

Nearly one-quarter of tonal evaluations of Kaine in these news outlets focused on the death penalty issue, and the coverage was only 36 percent positive in tone. While there were more tonal evaluations of the death penalty issue than any

other topic in the coverage of Kilgore, they represented a smaller percentage of the one-time attorney general’s tonal evaluations. But coverage of the topic was even more negative, with only 27 percent positive treatment. Much of the critical nature of the debate focused on the potential backlash that seemed to emerge in the wake of Kilgore’s attack ads on Kaine’s views regarding capital punishment.<sup>16</sup> There was only one tonal evaluation of Potts’ stance on this issue.

Taxes were the second most common topic of discussion for both campaigns, and the results were also quite negative for both. Many Virginia Republicans were upset with the willingness of some Republicans to support tax increases for public improvements. On the other hand, opponents of tax increases, like Kilgore, were sometimes charged with turning a blind eye to the state’s needs. Kaine, of course, endured attacks from Kilgore and other critics who portrayed the Democrat as a traditional “tax and spend” liberal whose campaign promises would force state residents to pay more to Richmond.<sup>17</sup> Evaluations involving this issue were negative, only 28 percent positive for Kaine and 39 percent positive for Kilgore. Once again, Potts had only a handful of evaluations on this topic.

The third most frequently addressed issue for Kilgore, crime, demonstrated a campaign’s

**Table 4: News Coverage of Major Policy Areas, Percentage of Positive Responses**

Policy Area	Tim Kaine		Jerry Kilgore		Russell Potts	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Death penalty	36	176	27	77	—	1
Tax issues	28	64	39	64	—	9
Transportation	48	44	55	38	92	13
Crime	—	9	83	53	—	1
Record (Kaine as lieutenant governor)	73	30	—	4	—	0
Record (Kilgore as attorney general)	—	0	58	12	—	0
Education	86	26	68	19	87	15
Budget	87	23	12	17	—	1
Record (Kaine as mayor of Richmond)	60	20	—	0	—	0
Gun control	44	18	71	17	—	3
Environment	41	17	—	6	—	3
Immigration	35	17	73	15	—	0
Stand on referendum	—	1	40	20	—	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>740</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>668</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>104</b>

Notes: These evaluations are from all news stories with at least two paragraphs relating to the gubernatorial campaign from October 1 until November 7, the night before Election Day, for television stations and from October 1 up to and including November 8, Election Day, for newspapers.

Not all evaluations could be classified as either positive or negative in tone.

Only categories with ten or more tonal evaluations are reported here.

The totals include some less significant issues not reported individually.

ability to draw media attention to a topic a candidate wishes to emphasize. Republicans often seek to emphasize crime issues, and no candidate is better able to do so than one who served as an attorney general. There were 53 tonal evaluations of Kilgore on this topic, and the coverage was 83 percent positive. This policy issue also shows the limitations of what a candidate's emphasis on a theme can accomplish. There were only nine evaluations of Kaine on this topic, demonstrating that a positive issue for Kilgore was not necessarily a negative issue for his opponent. (The nine evaluations were too few to allow for a valid calculation of tone.)

The third-ranked issue for Kaine (and the number four issue for Kilgore) was transportation, a matter of great concern in the state's leading metropolitan areas, particularly Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. During the campaign, both Kaine and Kilgore supported plans to increase the number of lanes on Interstate 66 inside the Beltway, one of the Washington area's most traffic-clogged stretches of highway. But they dueled as well over whether spending for mass transit should be increased and whether the differing I-66 projects could be funded without additional taxes.<sup>18</sup> Coverage of this issue area was neutral to positive for both candidates: 48 percent positive in tone for Kaine and 55 percent positive in tone for Kilgore. Potts received very positive treatment in this area, with a relatively small amount of coverage but reports that were 92 percent positive in tone.

Once again, comparisons of the campaign coverage in the *Washington Post* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, as shown in **Table 5**, revealed more similarities than differences. As he did in the overall media coverage regarding the death penalty, Kaine fared a bit better than Kilgore in both newspapers' treatment of this issue. In fact, the margin between the two candidates in both papers was 6 percentage points, a bit narrower than the 9 percentage point gap shown in the overall media coverage results. Neither candidate, of course, did all that well in the coverage of this leading topic in both newspapers. Kilgore was able to convince both papers to focus on his plans and background regarding criminal matters, and he was treated very positively in that issue area in both papers (92 percent positive tone in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and 77 percent positive tone in the *Washington Post*). In neither case, though, was the candidate able to convince the papers to draw much attention to Kaine's views on criminal matters.

One area of difference between the two papers was in transportation, which (not surprisingly) received more attention in the paper serving traffic-snarled Northern Virginia than the one offering the news to the Richmond region. Promises by the two candidates to focus on the region's transit woes if elected were well received just outside the nation's capital. Coverage of this topic in the *Washington Post* was 52 percent positive for Kaine and 56 percent positive for Kilgore. Transportation ranked second among the issues on which Kaine was evaluated in the *Washington Post* and third for Kilgore.

Because Kilgore fought hard to win votes in the "swing-county" suburbs of Northern Virginia, transportation would play a key role in the news coverage of the candidate in that region's newspaper.<sup>19</sup> The *Times-Dispatch* provided little more than half as much coverage of transportation as the *Washington Post* did, and that coverage was more one-sided in tone: Kilgore received 54 percent positive notices in the Richmond paper, as compared to only 40 percent positive coverage for Kaine.

*"...comparisons of the campaign coverage of the Washington Post and the Richmond Times-Dispatch...revealed more similarities than differences"*

**Table 5: *Washington Post* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* Coverage of Major Policy Areas, Percentage of Positive Responses**

Newspaper/Policy Areas	Tim Kaine		Jerry Kilgore	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
<i>Washington Post</i>				
Death penalty	35	54	29	24
Tax issues	46	13	36	14
Transportation	52	23	56	18
Crime	—	5	77	26
Total	51	223	48	200
<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>				
Death penalty	33	52	27	22
Tax issues	28	25	43	28
Transportation	40	10	54	13
Crime	—	2	92	12
Total	54	266	49	276

Notes: These evaluations are from all news stories with at least two paragraphs relating to the gubernatorial campaign from October 1 up to and including November 8, Election Day.

Not all evaluations could be classified as either positive or negative in tone.

Only categories with ten or more tonal evaluations are reported here.

The totals include some less significant issues not reported individually.

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Another area of difference between the two papers was found in their coverage of taxes. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* provided twice as many tonal evaluations in this issue area as did the *Washington Post*, and once again the results were notably more positive for Kilgore than Kaine. Kilgore received 43 percent positive treatment on the tax issue in the Richmond paper, as compared to 28 percent positive treatment for Kaine. However, Kaine had the advantage in the *Washington Post*, with 46 percent positive coverage, compared to 36 percent positive treatment of Kilgore’s tax policies. (The issue ranked second in importance in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and third in the *Washington Post*.)

### Conclusions

While we hesitate to generalize too much from news coverage of a single gubernatorial campaign, our findings do suggest certain important observations regarding news coverage of the Virginia gubernatorial election of 2005. Above all, when we compare the results of the state newspaper press corps’ to the national press corps’ treatment of presidential elections, we find much more effective journalism at the state level.

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, in particular, provided extensive campaign coverage, with 118 news stories on the gubernatorial contest during the final 39 days of the campaign. The *Washington Post*, with 96 stories during the same period, also did an effective job in terms of campaign news volume, particularly when one considers that the paper must also cover politics in Maryland and the District of Columbia. The other two papers in the study—the *Virginian-Pilot* of Hampton Roads and the *Roanoke Times and World News*—provided somewhat less coverage, but both publications still averaged more than a story per day on the election campaign. One might expect that many readers farther from the national and state capitals would demand less political coverage than residents of those cities where politics is a major avocation, if not a vocation, for many readers. (Because our study considers only content on the news pages, it underestimates the total amount of campaign discourse contained in each paper. But any study testing for ideological bias in reporting should not consider editorials, opinion columns and letters to the editor alongside the content of the paper’s news pages.)

The findings regarding a healthy volume of campaign news in the print media are less positive with respect to the amount of television news content, which was quite scarce. Only 33 of the 344 stories in this study, or less than 10 percent, were aired on the four Washington, D.C. television

stations that were part of this study. While our study did not include all television news content—we looked at only a half-hour of the early evening newscasts (or the first half-hour of the 10 p.m. newscast in the case of the District of Columbia Fox affiliate, which did not and still does not have an early evening newscast)—we did focus on highly rated programming periods. As studies of the media content at the national level have observed, print can and does provide far more political news than television.<sup>20</sup>

It does seem that the local television programs in the Washington metropolitan area did not provide enough news to inform their viewers about the candidates for governor that year. Although limited financial resources prevented a comparable study of the 2009 governor’s race, the financial pressures faced by media companies make it unlikely that news organizations will increase the resources devoted to the expensive business of covering gubernatorial campaigns that take place around the state.<sup>21</sup>

Of course the Potts campaign might object to the conclusion here that print coverage, at least, did provide adequate information. During the campaign season, more than 90 percent of the news went to the two major party nominees, the candidates seen as having the most viable chance of winning. News reports, in other words, can do little to reverse a painful reality of American politics; if a candidate does not possess a major party nomination, his or her electoral and media prospects are extremely limited. Candidates who do well in fund-raising and the early polls receive the bulk of media and public attention, and independent candidates rarely do well in either category. While also-rans often get relatively positive coverage, they don’t get much of it. It’s a form of media “triage,” where the weak campaigns make little progress because of lack of attention.<sup>22</sup>

With respect to the amount of substance provided by the state press corps covering the 2005 gubernatorial campaign, we again find a relatively positive performance, particularly on the part of the print outlets. Assessments of campaign matters during this contest represented only about one-quarter of the assessments of the three candidates during 2005. While some might view this as a high level of horse race journalism, the numbers compare quite favorably to those of network television in its treatment of presidential elections. Over the past six presidential election cycles studied by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, horse race journalism has always exceeded 40 percent of campaign news content on network television, and in the case of the razor-close finish of 2000, more than 70 percent of news

stories contained a significant amount of horse race content.<sup>23</sup>

While there may be more focus on ideology in the Virginia reporting than some media scholars might favor, the fact remains that that media focus on ideological matters reflected the dynamics of the campaigns about which the media were reporting.<sup>24</sup> Of course, that ideological coverage often related to the candidates' policies regarding specific issues. In addition, the content analysis revealed a significant amount of coverage of the leading issue areas during the 2005 campaign: the perennial Virginia issues of taxation, transportation and crime, along with the death penalty. There was also a significant component of the coverage that related to the job performance in elected office of the two major party rivals, one having served as lieutenant governor and the other as attorney general.

In fairness to the national reporters who cover presidential campaigns, there are far more polls conducted in the race for the White House, making it much easier—and perhaps more tempting—to emphasize horse race news at the national level. Perhaps at least part of the difference between presidential and gubernatorial horse race coverage, at least in Virginia in 2005, stems from the abundance of national voter surveys.

Of course the most important issue for many voters and candidates relates to allegations of partisan bias. Are the media guilty of favoritism towards one party or the other? And if so, how bad is it? News coverage of presidential campaigns gives one little reason for hope. 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 positive 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 in tone for Bush.<sup>25</sup>

Once again, the state media did a better job than the television networks. Overall the coverage favored Kaine by a tiny 52 percent to 49 percent margin. All four newspapers were far more even-handed in their news pages than were the networks in their coverage of the 2004 and the 2008 presidential elections. Of the four print outlets analyzed here, the difference in tone in reporting about the candidates for governor varied by outlet from only 2 to 5 percentage points.

News coverage in the *Washington Post*, which is frequently criticized by Republicans as too favorable to Democratic candidates, gave Kaine coverage that was only 3 percentage points more positive than what Kilgore received. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, which is editorially more conservative than the *Washington Post*, gave Kaine more positive treatment in its news pages, and did so by a slightly larger margin (5 percentage points) than did the *Washington Post*. Perhaps Kaine's treatment by the Richmond paper may have been influenced by his former role as mayor of Richmond. Perhaps the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* will not treat as favorably Democratic candidates for governor who do not have such strong Richmond connections. Future studies can consider that possibility.

Of the four newspapers, only the *Roanoke Times and World News*, from Kilgore's home region of Southwest Virginia, gave Kilgore more positive treatment than did Kaine. But once again the difference was modest: only 2 percentage points.

The even-handedness seen here is particularly notable when the data are broken down further to examine the tone of coverage for specific areas of evaluation, including ideology, previous job performance, and campaign performance or by leading issue area, including capital punishment, taxes, and transportation. Even the head-to-head comparisons of the *Washington Post* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* failed to reveal differences in the coverage that might point to editorial favoritism in the news pages. The relatively small differences we did find—such as more coverage of transportation in the *Washington Post* and more coverage of taxes in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*—seem likely to reflect the different preferences of readers in different parts of the state, rather than any large-scale effort to distort the news.

Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that network television journalists could learn a thing or two from the print reporters who covered the 2005 gubernatorial campaign in Virginia. But one cannot push the point too far. These findings relate to only one contest for governor in one state. Future studies along these same lines may help determine whether the relatively positive performance of the statehouse press corps in the Kaine-Kilgore campaign was the norm or the exception for Virginia election reporting. Studies in other states could help determine whether coverage of their statewide campaigns differs from national election coverage.

Reporters covering election campaigns at all levels have a difficult job, made worse in these times of economic problems and rapid change for mass media. The news media could perhaps serve voters best by focusing more resources on

*“Reporters covering election campaigns at all levels have a difficult job, made worse in these times of economic problems and rapid change for mass media.”*

important issues and examining in-depth what candidates' proposals would mean.

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