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The Effects of Political Attack Discourse in Presidential News Reports:

The Interactions of Attack News Discourse, Public Attitude toward

the President and toward the Press, 1972-1996

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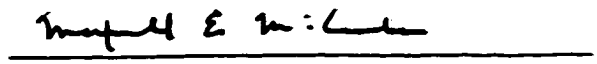

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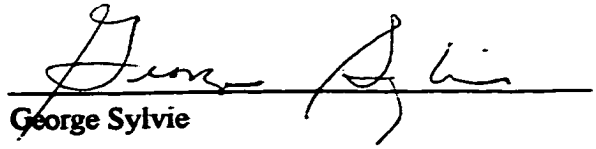

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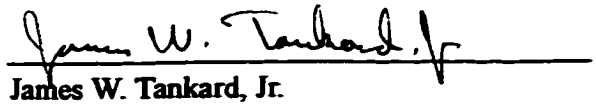

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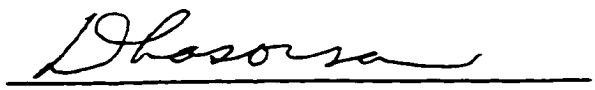

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The Effects of Political Attack Discourse in Presidential News Reports: The Interactions of Attack News Discourse, Public Attitude toward the President and toward the Press, 1972-1996

by

Yi-Ning Chen, B.S., M.S., M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my husband, Chia-Nan Liu, who without his understanding, love, and insistence for me to complete this task, I would not have been able to persevere.

I would also like to dedicate this work with love to my parents, Ken-Wei Chen and Mei-Chu Lee, who instilled in me the importance of education and provided a young child with a desire to pursue knowledge.

This work is also dedicated to Dr. Wei-Wen Chung and Dr. Kuo-Jen Tsang, who have led me to explore the wonderful experiences and opportunities. For this, I would like to express my deepest appreciation.

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There are many people who through out the course of my studies have provided invaluable support and encouragement.

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The Effects of Political Attack Discourse in Presidential News Reports: The Interactions of Attack News Discourse, Public Attitude toward the President and toward the Press, 1972-1996

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This study examined the interactions among political news attack discourse, public attitudes toward the president, and public attitudes toward the press from 1972 to 1996. According to polls, the American public has tended to view presidents as heroes. By adopting Heider's balance theory, this study hypothesized that while mass media increasingly portrayed heroes negatively, people might feel negatively toward mass media.

This is the first agenda setting study to explore the relationships between attack news about the president and its impact on the public evaluation of the president. The effects of political attack news discourse were based on the second level of agenda setting theory, incorporating ideas of framing, priming, and

impression formation. The content of attack news was categorized as issue attack vs. image attack and thematic frame vs. episodic frame. Both the data for job approval ratings and confidence in the press were drawn from public opinion polls.

The study's results offer some insights into the relationship among the president, the press and the public opinion. The amount of attack news directed at the president did not significantly increase in the major newspapers in the past seven election years, although from a descriptive perspective the percentage across these years did show a generally increasing trend. Attack news coverage of the president did have a negative effect on his job approval ratings. Although a negative association between the attack news about the president and the confidence level in the press was not found, the correlation coefficient was high. Taking closer look at the correlation of the sources of attack and the confidence level, the balance theory seems more applicable. When there is more attack news from the press, the level of confidence in the press decreases. However, the limited nature of the data (seven election years only) precluded a statistically significant relationship. The optimal time lags between attack news and the confidence polls were also examined in a secondary analysis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The bitter presidential races pictured during past elections in the mass media have been blamed for many ills. However, the news media may sustain the most damage if campaigns continue to be overwhelmingly negative (Hart, Smith-Howell, and Llewellyn, 1996). A May 1, 1992 article, "As political campaigns turn negative, the press is given a negative rating" in *The New York Times* claimed that several social scientists studying elections said voters were increasingly blaming the news media -- newspapers, magazines and, most powerfully, television -- for what they see as the degeneration of presidential politics (Kolbert, 1992). The evidence she provided from the 1988 presidential election showed 60 percent of the commentators assessing network news campaign coverage gave the press a negative rating, according to a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington. In 1992, the proportion of negative assessments jumped to 90 percent.

Voters increasingly seem to view the campaign as a function of what news organizations choose to report rather than the other way around. In a January 1992 poll by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press in Washington, 58 percent of the respondents said news organizations had "too much" influence on who became president, as against 51 percent who said as much at the start of 1988.

While the major newspapers and the network television news programs once set the agenda for campaign coverage, newspapers and networks in recent years

often seemed to be responding to supermarket tabloids and television talk shows. The notion that "bad news makes for good news" has long been a standard of American journalism, but the media have raised it to new heights in recent decades. Negativity in the news increased sharply during the 1970s, jumped again during the 1980s, and continues to rise. Since the 1960s, bad news has increased by a factor of three and is now the dominant tone of news coverage of national politics (Patterson, 1996).

Underlying the trend is a shift in the style of journalism. In the 1960s, reporters began to question their traditional approach to the news. Existing rules at that time emphasized newsmakers' words: To a large extent, their statements defined the coverage. Most of what they had to say about themselves and their programs was positive in tone; as a result, most of their news coverage was favorable.

However, a growing list of government failures and a heightened sense of their own power led many journalists to conclude that they should no longer merely cover top leaders, but also should critically examine their actions. Newsmakers' messages would no longer be taken at face value; the accuracy of the message and the credibility of the source would be as newsworthy as the message itself.

Into the early 1970s, this new attitude was tempered by a prudent regard for the facts. The press hounded Johnson and Nixon on Vietnam and Watergate, but only as credible allegations and damning evidence came increasingly to light. By

the late 1970s, however, critical journalism had degenerated into a form of reporting that exalted controversy rather than accuracy. Intent on exposing the failings of political leaders, but without the time or knowledge to do the job properly on a daily basis, journalists slipped into a quick and easy form of criticism: When a politician made a statement, they turned to adversaries to attack it. The critical element was supplied, not by a careful investigation of the claim or action, but by the insertion of a counterclaim (Westerstahl and Johansson, 1986).

This type of critical reporting, as Sabato (1991) observes, is best described as "attack journalism." It is rooted in controversy and superficial condemnation rather than careful analysis and inquiry. Strife and discord are the theme. This is not totally new; a good fight has nearly always attracted the media's attention. Only in recent years, however, have the journalists themselves staged the fights. The result has been a sharp increase in conflict as a news element. Before the 1980s, most political stories did not contain a clash of interests and opinions; now they do (Lichter and Amundson, 1994).

Although portrayed by the press as watchdog journalism, this type of reporting is actually ideological in its premise. Journalists are presumed to act out of personal rivalry and naked self-interest rather than from political conviction (Westerstahl and Johansson, 1986). Journalists routinely claim that politicians make promises they do not intend to keep or could not keep even if they tried. Most bad-press stories criticize politicians for shifting their positions, waffling on tough issues,

posturing, or pandering to whichever group they happen to be facing (Patterson, 1994). By the rules of attack journalism, the mere whiff of a controversy or scandal is grounds for a story. Although there is no persuasive evidence that official corruption has risen in Washington (Garment, 1991), scandals increasingly fill the headlines.

Patterson (1996) notes that the sharpest indicator of the effect of negative news, however, is the public's view of presidential candidates. Through the 1960s, as measured by the Gallup Poll, Barry Goldwater was the only major-party nominee who at campaign's end had a negative image with the electorate. Since then, most candidates have finished the campaign with a negative image; further, the more negative a nominee's coverage in recent decades, the more negative his image (Patterson, 1994). Attack journalism is not the only reason voters' impressions of presidential nominees have become so unfavorable, but it is undeniably a leading factor (Goldfarb, 1991).

The press's negativity has colored the views even of citizens with a high sense of political efficacy. In the 1960s, mistrust of government was concentrated among people who had little interest in and exposure to politics. Today, their view is shared by citizens who are politically interested, efficacious, and attentive. Unlike the situation in the 1960s, increased news exposure is now positively correlated with a heightened mistrust of government (Patterson, 1991).

Although the public may have psychological defenses against the news

media's claim of self-interested officials and dysfunctional institutions, the information provided by the mass media seems to be the main source they rely on most for judging the government. Unlike messages that attempt to change issue attitudes (such as editorials that take a position on abortion policy), the claim that an officeholder is devious or that an institution is malfunctioning does not contradict deeply held beliefs. Moreover, because the media speak with one voice, the message appears to be factual rather than what it often is -- mere opinion. The media, television in particular, present "news without ambiguity, equivocation, or uncertainty" (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). With the hostile press, which tends more to reporting the strategies and processes of winning support than arguments or reasons behind a presidential election, presidential authority could be undermined (Woodward, 1997). Therefore, from this perspective, the adversarial nature of presidential reporting suggests a mistrust of governing or unaccountable candidates.

Media's recent coverage patterns make it difficult for citizens to develop the knowledge base needed to assess the candidates. Media coverage left the average voter without convenient access to the most empowering kinds of information and analysis (Buchanan, 1996). Buchanan (1996) also notes that public confidence has eroded because media coverage does not provide the information that the public needs. This lack of confidence has eroded the credibility of the media as surrogate protector of the public interest. The public regards the news establishment as just another self-interested player rather than as a source of objective information, and

as long as media do not communicate the campaign as it is to voters, media products are unlikely either to actually meet needs or to be perceived as doing so.

The central question of this study is: Empirically, are there significant relationships among political attack news, public attitudes toward the president, and public attitudes toward the press? If so, what do they look like?

The Triangular Relationship: Public, Mass Media, and the President

To remain healthy, a democratic political system must focus and use its energy efficiently to solve its problems, and it must sustain the support of its people (Buchanan, 1996). Buchanan also noted that recent research and analysis support what common sense would suggest: Elections are much more likely to generate energy and support when they are "good" (i.e., straightforward, positive, and substantive) than when they are "bad" (i.e., manipulative, evasive, and negative). Buchanan proposes that the quality of any particular election is a function of the interplay between candidates, media, and voters.

In that sense, from a media-centered view, the first question we ask is: What contribution can the news media make to this interplay? To begin, we must return to the questions of media selectivity and media impact since the public forms and revises its collective evaluation of campaigns and presidents largely on daily reports. Since news is "the highlight of highlights" (Gans, 1979, p.141), and there is the unrelenting negativism of the press (Patterson, 1993), researchers will argue that

news media consistently favor only certain negative approaches and outcomes in campaigns. As to media impact, we will ask: What are the voter reactions to press behavior, as well as to the president?

A study on the effects of political attack discourse in the presidential election year is an opportunity to examine the second level of agenda setting, an opportunity to see what the relationships are between candidate (or presidential) media images and public attitudes toward the president. At the same time, because the press has increasingly portrayed presidential candidates negatively, the press also could be the victim of its own negative reporting. According to the Harris Poll, which has been tracking the confidence that the American people have in the nation's leading institutions for the last 30 years, the confidence level that the American people have in the White House and in the press has been generally decreasing (See Table 1). According to the Gallup Poll, confidence in the presidency has dropped from 72 percent (great deal/quite a lot combined) in 1991 to 39 percent in 1996 (McAneny, 1996). Also, in the Harris Poll, confidence in the White House shows a similar trend (See Table 1). As to the confidence level in the press, the Gallup and Harris Polls show a similar decreasing trend.

Table 1.1

Confidence in the Presidency and the Press

	Gallup (Presidency)	Harris (White House)	Gallup (Newspapers)	Harris (The Press)
1972	--	--	--	18
1973	--	18	39	30
1974	--	28	--	25
1975	--	--	--	26
1976	--	11	--	20
1977	--	31	--	18
1978	--	14	--	23
1979	--	15	51	28
1980	--	18	--	19
1981	--	28	35	16
1982	--	20	--	14
1983	--	23	38	19
1984	--	42	34	18
1985	--	30	35	16
1986	--	19	37	19
1987	--	23	31	19
1988	--	17	36	18
1989	--	20	--	18
1990	--	21	39	18
1991	72	21	32	14
1992	--	16	--	13
1993	43	23	31	15
1994	38	18	29	13
1995	45	13	30	11
1996	39	15	32	14
1997	--	15	--	11

*** Confidence in the presidency and the press are show negative trends.**

*** The Gallup Poll has confidence in television and newspaper data. This study only includes the later one because this study argues that the newspaper affects public more than television in terms of agenda setting effects.**

Therefore, in the broader framework of agenda setting theory (beyond the second level of agenda setting), this study asks if attack journalism has affected the president's popularity, and also if the negative reporting has decreased public confidence in the press.

Before the possible relationships between attack news and public attitudes are presented, we will begin our examination with the nature of public attitudes, why public opinions, which are summed together in this study, are called public attitudes.

Yeric and Todd (1989) defined an attitude as an affective response to a specific stimulus object. This response is derived from the individual's belief system. Presented with various choice situations, an individual may respond positively, negatively, or not at all -- depending upon that individual's evaluative beliefs. They considered the basic building block of mental processes to be beliefs. That is, beliefs make up an individual's mental picture of the world. Our examination of public opinion involves tracing the psychological processes that originate with beliefs and lead to expressed attitudes, or opinions (See Fig. 1.1).

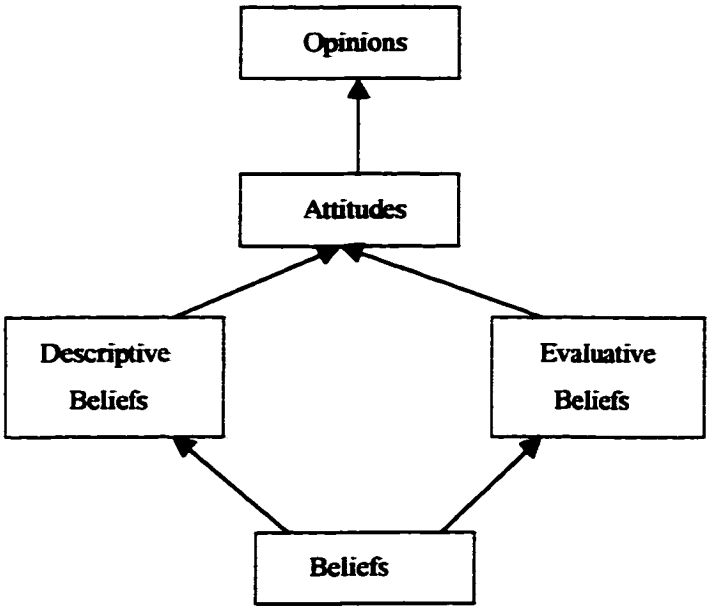


Fig. 1.1 The building blocks of opinions (Cited from Yeric & Todd, 1989, p. 27)

Given this definition of attitude, we now must relate it to the notion of public opinion. Yeric and Todd (1989) noted that if the public is defined as a collection of individuals who share a common attitude, an opinion can be defined as an expressed attitude. Public opinion is, therefore, a census of attitudes on some particular subject. Since the presence or absence of an attitude is dependent upon the belief structure of the individual, we can expect that on any given question some people would have no relevant attitude, and therefore, not be able to express an opinion. Thus, a better definition of public opinion is that it is a summary statement of the distribution of expressed attitudes on some particular subject at a particular

moment.

Therefore, in this study, when we present public opinion polling data to describe political phenomena, we are in fact examining public attitudes. The distinction between public opinion and public attitude is necessary because we have to use data to explore the inner mental world of the public.

I. Americans' Attitude Toward Their Presidents: A President's Popularity

Monroe (1975) in *Public Opinion in America* noted that some patterns of political attitudes in a society are so basic that they serve as a basis for the distribution of public opinion on specific issues. He noted that in American political culture, on the one hand, the presidential office is seen to have great prestige and corresponding power, but on the other hand it seems as if its occupants are always under attack and lack the authority to accomplish what is expected. He also noted that governmental officials ranked at the top of the prestige list in job title surveys, but other surveys indicated that "politicians" are regarded as "dishonest." He added that any president in the United States can look forward to appearing prominently on the annual list of "Most Admired Men," with a similar honor accorded to his wife, but he also must accept his performance in office receiving mixed ratings.

Monroe argued that in American political culture, support tends to be greatest for political institutions and ideals at the symbolic level, while appraisals of particular individuals and their actions tend to draw more negative reactions.

Americans seem to have always had an ambivalent orientation toward their political leadership. Individuals typically hold positive attitudes toward the political system as a symbolic ideal, while seeing their current leaders as somewhat destructive of that ideal.

Therefore, in researching public attitudes toward the president, this study argues that presidential popularity has two dimensions, a job approval rating and "most admired," both widely used items in polls for investigating the public attitude toward the president.

"Popularity" is said to be a political resource that can help a president achieve his program, keep challengers at bay, and guide his and other political leaders' expectations about the president's party's prospects in presidential and congressional elections (Brody, 1991). "Popularity" also is the most frequently used term for the public evaluation of the job performance of the incumbent president. However, it can be confusing because it connotes image rather than substance and surface rather then depth. The Gallup Poll results have shown that almost all American presidents are "popular" in its "Most Admired" poll. However, when the job approval rating is used, the popularity of the president seems unsteady. According to Newport (1998), the historical record of the public's ratings of recent presidents' job approval is volatile. Therefore, the two terms may represent two different evaluative concepts. For example, although President Carter's job approval stayed low during his administration, he still was the most admired man in 1977,

1978, and 1979. In 1980, during his worst crisis, he still was second to Pope John Paul II.

For another extreme example, during the most serious crisis of his administration -- the White House controversy over allegations of sexual misconduct and possible obstruction of justice -- in August 31, 1998, a *Time* magazine poll showed that while 61 percent of the American people showed their support for Clinton handling his job as President (35% showed their disapproval), 50 percent of American said they did not respect Clinton (48 percent said they respected him).

1. Most Admired Man

Despite the apparent shortage of dominant living heroes in American culture, the Gallup Poll has tracked America's choice of it's most admired men and women since 1946 and finds that in almost every year, the sitting president of the United States emerged as the "Most Admired Man." The few exceptions are:

- The post-World War II period when generals Dwight Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur surpassed Harry Truman on the list.
- The height of the controversy over the Vietnam War, from 1967-1968, when several political figures led President Lyndon Johnson.
- The Watergate period from 1973-74, when Henry Kissinger, Billy Graham and others outpaced President Richard Nixon.
- In 1980, when Pope John Paul II led the politically struggling President Jimmy

Carter.

Although several times the sitting president was not the "most admired," he was at least on the top part of the list. Therefore, the degree of admiration seems to reflect the president's image of being a hero in this society, instead of being a good indicator in discriminating the president's suitability for office.

2. Job Approval Rating

If the Gallup Poll is to be believed, all presidents are "admired" by the American people and are in that sense "popular." This admiration is relatively invariant over time and across administrations. By contrast, the public's evaluation of how the incumbent president handles "his job as a president" varies within and between administrations. Contrary to the findings of "Most Admired Man" polls, according to Newport (1998), the historical record of the public's ratings of recent presidents' job approval is notoriously volatile, subject to swift change and -- for at least two presidents, Nixon and Reagan -- in the last 25 years has been dramatically affected by scandals. Newport also proposes that -- unrelated to scandal -- real-world events often have a dramatic impact on presidential job approval ratings, underscoring the transient nature of the public's evaluation of presidents. For example, perhaps the most famous drop in job approval ratings in recent presidential history was suffered by George Bush, primarily as a result of public disenchantment with the country's sluggish economy.

Brody (1991) argues that "popularity" in the sense of "admiration" is not a

political resource. It responds to nothing that politicians and the public care deeply about. President Nixon still was widely admired on the eve of his resignation. But his administration and his capacity to lead the American polity were a shambles. His performance ratings reflected the shattered state of his presidency; his "admiration" score did not. However, "popularity" as a performance rating is a political resource; this evaluation is the subject of the effects of attack news. The thesis of this study is that the American public forms and revises its impressions of the quality of presidential performance on evidence contained in political news in the news media.

The purpose of discrimination between admiration and job approval ratings is to clarify that the president's popularity may have different meanings, depending on how we see the role of the president.

II. Americans' Attitudes toward Mass Media

Cudahy and Mitchell (1973) noted that in the United States, the typical 19th century newspaper publisher viewed the newspaper as nothing but a business venture owing nothing to the public. They cited William Peter Hamilton of the *Wall Street Journal,* who put forth this thesis: "A newspaper is a private enterprise owing nothing whatever to the public, which grants it no franchise. It is therefore affected with no public interest. It is emphatically the property of the owner, who is selling a manufactured product at his own risk." However, the 20th century has brought

with it a significant change not only in the attitudes of newspaper publishers but also in the attitudes of the general public toward the press, namely, that press freedom carries with it a strong burden of social responsibility (Blanchard, 1977). Generally speaking, the tradition of the newspaper as watchdog of the public interest has come a long way toward dealing with public interest.

However, while the majority of the public (60%) placed high value on the role of the press as watchdog, believing that press coverage of personal and ethical behavior of politicians helps weed out the kind of people who should not be in office, the general public was double-minded in its evaluation of the press and its performance (The People and the Press, 1989). Majorities continue to like and believe the press, but there also are ample signs in the survey that criticisms of press practices have substantially increased. A substantial majority believed that news organizations are driving the ethics and personal scandal stories (63%) rather than just reporting them (31%); and most described press coverage of these stories as excessive.

An overwhelming majority of the public (76%) saw political bias in the way the press covers the news. The percentage of the public feeling that news organizations tend to favor one side in dealing with a political or social issue has increased from 53% in 1985, 57% in 1986, 59% in 1988, to 68% in 1989.

In this 1989 survey the vast majority of the public gave news organizations (*The Wall Street Journal, CNN, NBC News, ABC News, CBS News, USA Today,*

Daily Newspaper Associated Press) positive believability ratings. But in comparison to the 1985 survey, the number of Americans who give virtually all news media a low believability rating has risen sharply over the past five years. The findings showed that while the 16 news organizations considered in this study received a negative rating from 17 percent of respondents in 1985, the respondents who rated news organizations not credible rose to 26 percent in 1989. That study also concluded that the percentage of Americans who rate most news organizations as not believable was statistically correlated with increasing views that news organizations do not get the facts right, are unfair in their coverage of political and social issues, and are not independent from other powerful institutions.

In other evidence, one 1993 poll showed that 65 percent believed "the press looks out mainly for powerful people" (Shaw, April 1, 1993; cited from Buchanan, 1996). A 1995 CNN poll found that 60 percent believed the news media are "out of touch with average Americans" (White House Bulletin, April 17, 1995; cited from Buchanan, 1996). The Gallup Poll "Confidence in Institutions" also has shown the trend of decreasing confidence in mass media. The public confidence in newspapers has dropped from 39 percent (great deal/quite a lot combined confidence) in 1973 to 32 percent in 1996, and in television news from 46 percent in 1993 (the first year for television news) to 36 percent in 1996 (McAneny, 1996).

So we can see there is a general trend that the confidence in mass media is decreasing. The next question is whether this trend is related to the contemporary

practice of journalism in dealing with campaign news. If so, what is the practice? What is the belief behind that practice?

III. Contemporary Practice and Voters' Response to Journalism

Wolfson (1985) stated that reporting on elections and politics may be journalists' greatest labor of love. Every two or four years newspeople vigorously thrust themselves into covering political campaigns. Contemporary belief in American journalism that the press can substitute for political institutions is increasingly widespread. According to Patterson (1993), many journalists, perhaps most of them, assume they can serve as a political institution effectively because they can organize the voters' alternatives in a coherent way.

The news media unquestionably shape elections, but there is an intense debate over the level of their influence (Wolfson 1985). Journalist Theodore White says they have "sweeping political power." Political scientists call journalists the new power broker, rivaling the parties in their ability to determine the candidates, how the public perceives them, and who ultimately wins. Wolfson (1985) says the old worry was that the politicians would dominate reporters, but the new worry is that reporters dominate politicians, ruling the rulers with their pens.

If press substitution for the political system exists, what kind of relationship will exist between the press and the political system, and furthermore, the presidential election?

Patterson (1993) suggests that journalists, instead of the political system, are the problem. Journalists can say what they want since the outcomes of candidates' promises are in the future. The press' antipolitics bias, and muckraking journalism, portrays politics as a struggle between decent citizens and self-serving parties and groups. Especially after the Vietnam War and Watergate, the rules of objective journalism changed because two presidents had lied; therefore no politician was to be trusted. And the effect of Vietnam and Watergate on the relationship between journalists and politicians has not dissipated. As a result, presidential candidates have been increasingly burdened with negative news. One study shows that 1960s candidates got more favorable coverage than those of the 1970s, who in turn received more favorable coverage than those of 1980s. In the eras of Kennedy and Nixon, 75 percent of the news stories were positive. In 1992, only 40 percent were favorable to Clinton and Bush (Patterson, 1993).

Patterson (1993) says that although U.S. presidential elections are legitimate, they still require the public's satisfaction with the process and their choices. However, recent opinion polls have revealed people disgruntled with the electoral process and discouraged with their choices. In 1992, Bush, Clinton, and Perot each had the support of 25 to 35 percent of the electorate. The polls also showed that most voters were unhappy with the candidates. In 1988, voters chose what they saw as the lesser of two evils: Bush and Dukakis were viewed more negatively than positively by the electorate as a whole. The Gallup organization first asked voters'

opinions of the presidential candidates in 1936, and through the 1960s only Goldwater got an overall negative rating in 1964. Since then, most candidates have had a negative rating (cited from Patterson, 1993, p.22).

Patterson (1993) argues that it would be a mistake to cite the press' bad-news tendency as the only reason for the voters' increasingly negative impressions of presidential candidates. However, there can be no doubt that the change in the tone of election coverage has contributed to the decline in the public confidence in those who seek the presidency.

Another indicator that election news is at least partly responsible for Americans' low opinion of the candidates is the change in voters' opinions when press involvement is absent. Nearly every presidential debate since 1960 has resulted in an improvement in people's views of the candidates. The debates give people a chance to view the candidates through something other than the lens of daily journalism. By these observations, Patterson (1993) argues that news coverage has become a barrier between the candidates and the voters rather than a bridge and that although a campaign is sometimes plagued by the candidates' deceit and pettiness, news has gone beyond mere reporting.

Pfau and colleagues' (1998) study on the influence of political talk radio on the confidence in institutions found that -- given political talk radio's decidedly negative depictions of most institutions, including the president, court system, Congress, news media, and the public schools -- listening to political talk radio had

a negative effect on confidence in the presidency, the public school, the court system, and the news media, except for the Congress. The researchers suggested that the less negative tone in portraying the Congress made the difference. This study implies that the media's contribution to the dissatisfaction toward democratic institutions is critical in communication and public opinion.

Investigating the effects of political attack discourse in presidential news reports, this study attempts to illustrate plausible interactions among attack news discourse, public attitudes toward the president and toward the press. Three propositions arise based on the discussion above:

1) Political attack news toward the president has increased in the recent past.

2) Political attack news may impact public attitudes toward the president's job approval ratings, but not degree of admiration.

3) Attack news also reduces public confidence in the press.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Approach

This study will examine the relationship among attack news, public attitudes toward the president, and public confidence in the press using balance theory and impression formation. Moreover, the effects of attack news will be tested in terms of the second level of agenda setting. The research will argue, in the framework of balance theory, that when the press covers more negative presidential news, the confidence level in the press will decrease. However, in the framework of impression formation and agenda setting, the effects of issue attack and image attack on presidents will be different.

I. Consequences of Attack Journalism for the Voters

Although political communication theories and psychology theories have not directly connected attack news or attack messages and job approval ratings, some suggest the possible effects of negative political messages on the audience. They are agenda setting, priming, framing, and impression formation.

1. Agenda setting

Agenda setting is a theory about the transfer of salience of the elements in the mass media's pictures of the world to the elements in the pictures in our heads. Initially, there were studies of agenda-setting effects focusing on issue salience, and the unit of analysis was an object, a public issue. Those studies, categorized by

McCombs as the first level of agenda setting, produced a vast array of empirical evidence supporting the agenda-setting proposition: McCombs and Shaw's (1972) study in 1968, which was the pioneer research of the tradition; Shaw and McCombs' (1977) study in 1972, using a three-wave panel design to find the causal impact of the media agenda on the public agenda; Funkhouser's (1973) examination across an entire decade of national data to compare the trends in public opinion about the most important problems facing the United States with the news coverage on these issues; Winter and Eyal's (1981) examination of the natural history of a single issue on the agenda, civil rights from 1954 to 1976; Eaton's (1989) study of the salience of 11 different individual issues over a period of 42 months during the 1980s. Altogether, Rogers, Dearing, and Bregman (1993) identified more than 200 articles on agenda setting since 1972.

McCombs (1995) addressed the notion that beyond the agenda of objects there also was another aspect to consider. Each of these objects has numerous attributes, those characteristics and properties that fill out the picture of each object. An important part of the news agenda and its set of objects are the perspectives and frames that journalists and the members of the public employ to think about each object. The second level of agenda setting is a new research frontier that broadens the perspective on the agenda-setting role of mass media: How news frames and agendas of attributes impact the public agenda. The first level is the transmission of object salience. The second level is the transmission of attribute salience.

Building candidate images through the mass media concerns the second level of agenda setting. King (1997) found agenda-setting influence by two major newspapers on voters' images of the three candidates for mayor of Taipei in 1994.

Lopez-Escobar, Esteban, McCombs, and Rey (1997), conducted a more detailed study of attribute agenda setting during the 1995 Spanish regional and municipal elections. The attributes forming the images of the Spanish candidates were analyzed in terms of a substantive dimension and an affective dimension. The substantive dimension was defined by three categories, the candidates' ideology and positions on public issues, their qualifications and experience, and their personal characteristics and personality. The affective dimension was described in positive, negative, or neutral terms. Lopez-Escobar et al. (1997) concluded that there was evidence of second-level of agenda setting effects on both dimensions of voters' image descriptions. Comparing the results for the substantive and affective dimensions, the significant correlations for the affective dimension were stronger.

Would attack news, serving as negative tone on the affective dimension, affect public attitudes toward the president? In addition, would any category, such as personal stands on public issues or personality, in the substantive dimension show a different agenda setting effect? That is, if personal stands on public issues is defined as issue-attack news, and personality attack is defined as image-attack, would the effect of issue-attack news be different from that of image-attack news?

2. Priming

Priming focuses on the standards or criteria that people use to make political evaluations. "By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, 63.) Iyengar and Kinder (1987) provide evidence of the priming effect, particularly with respect to presidential responsibility and voting in House and presidential elections.

Kenski's (1996) examination of television news on the three major networks reveals specific priming effects in lead stories on President Clinton in December 1993 and early January 1994. A heavy focus was placed on character traits and considerable air time was devoted to allegations of his possible misconduct as Arkansas governor, including allegations of possible financial misconduct in the Whitewater real estate deal. Despite this negative coverage and emphasis on character as a standard in political evaluations, the president's approval rating stood at 59 percent in the Washington Post-ABC Poll, showing no significant change from his 59 percent approval in early December (Morin, 1994). Kenski (1996) argued that citizen reservations about the president's character and honesty increased, but did not weigh heavily in their overall assessment of his job performance.

Similarly, Newport and Gallup (1998) explain why in January 1998, after Clinton's State of the Union address, the American public gave the president his

highest job approval ratings amid what some observers had called his most serious crisis. The authors cited that Clinton's State of the Union address focused exclusively on the country's business and avoided the Lewinsky allegations. Therefore, in light of a seeming inconsistency with the priming postulate, that a negative presidential message does not necessarily influence public's criteria for evaluating the president's responsibility, we may ask: Will negative issue-related (such as personal stands on public issues) reports, rather than negative image-related (such as personality or ethical issues in Clinton's case) ones have more impact on job approval ratings?

3. Framing

Framing has been incorporated as an idea for explication of the second-level of agenda setting. Tankard et al. (1991) describe a media frame as "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration." In terms of salience, Entman (1993) said:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

McCombs (1997) notes that framing is a key concept in the second level of agenda setting. Framing is the selection of a small number of attributes for

inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed.

Iyengar (1991) put forth a formulation of how a frame can be used to examine television news. First, he assumes all news stories can be classified as either episodic or thematic. Although news stories may have elements of both, there is a dominant thrust for every story. The episodic news frame takes the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts issues in terms of concrete instances. The impact of the recession on a particular community, for example, or the plight of an unemployed person or family are examples of episodic framing.

Thematic frames, by contrast, "place public issues in some more general or abstract context and take the form of a 'backgrounder' report directed at general outcomes or conditions" (Iyengar, 1991, p.14). Examples would include statistics or changes in the economy or an analysis of the causes of increasing health care costs. From a visual perspective, episodic stories make for good pictures, while thematic stories rely heavily on "talking heads."

Another important feature in Iyengar's formulation is his emphasis of the attribution of responsibility for national issues. Here he emphasized the need to examine "causal responsibilities" or the origin of a problem as well as "treatment responsibility" or who or what can alleviate or forestall a problem (Iyengar, 1991, p.8). The problem of a recession, for example, would involve causal responsibility if the news story focuses on the processes or causes of the recession taking place. A story would involve treatment responsibility by noting a particular president was

not proactive in dealing with the recession and suggesting that the president had the power to do so.

Iyengar contends that too much news coverage is episodic and reinforces the status quo. Episodic stories obscure important interconnections and prevent viewers from seeing the big picture Causal and treatment responsibilities are infrequently used in the episodic stories, and citizens do not get much information on the question of responsibility.

Bennett (1992) agrees, arguing that while people find short-term personal meaning in these episodic, dramatic framings, they derive little information or social understanding. Thematic coverage tends to promote political learning, but episodic framing dominates news coverage of issues.

Key questions at this point are: What are the consequences of framing for subsequent attitudes and behavior and whether a framed topic does more than influence the pictures in our heads? These questions return us to earlier (in the 1950s and 1950s) considerations of mass communication's attitudinal and behavioral effects. Communication research abandoned these questions, but could retrieve them by incorporating priming and framing research in political communication.

4. Impression formation: Negativity weighted heavier in voters' minds.

Every four years, the American public must choose a president. Through strategy and blunder, candidates project their personalities through mass media. In

turn, receivers of campaign messages must reconcile an abundance of mixed information about the candidates to form impressions in anticipation of their election decisions. In addition, in evaluating the president's capability, it is reasonable to base answers on the impression formed from those mixed mass media messages.

As the public is conscious of both positive and negative data on the candidates, which characteristics most color impressions? Much psychological research suggests the negative aspects of a candidate's character will have the greatest influence on final judgments. This negative effect or negative bias characterizes impressions formed from trait information (Anderson, 1965; Hamilton & Huffman, 1971; Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Van Der Plight & Eiser, 1980), as well as from behavior information (Briscoe, Woodyard, & Shaw, 1967; Richey, Bono, Lewis, & Richey, 1982). In fact, Richey, Koenigs, Richey, & Fortin (1975) demonstrated the power of negative information in their finding that one negative behavior could neutralize five positive behaviors. Communication scholars Kern (1989) and Jamieson (1992) also have found that negative information carries more weight than positive information and is thus better able to alter existing impressions and is easier to recall.

As to why negative information has such a strong influence on our impressions of others, correspondent inference theory suggests that any behavior that deviates from social norms will be seen as indicative of "true" personality

(Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & McGillils, 1976). Because social norms generally mandate and reward prosocial and positive behaviors, negative actions are thus perceived as more reflective of dispositional characteristics. Likewise, expectancy-contrast theory proposes that the negative effects occur because negative actions are contrasted against the generally positive expectations that we have of others (Sears, 1983).

These processes also help develop impressions of presidents as well. Presidents are generally expected to behave in a positive manner and to possess positive characteristics. Presidents are expected to engage in behaviors that reflect a positive image. Furthermore, as mentioned in the Most Admired polls, presidents might be expected to behave like heroes. Against this positive expectancy, negative portrayals might loom large in voters' minds.

Therefore, it is suggested that, when there is more attack news related to the portrayal of the presidents, the president's job approval ratings would be less favorable.

II. Consequences of Attack Journalism for the Press

Heider's balance theory provides a basis for predicting the interplay between attitudes and cognitive processes (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Balance theory is a model of cognitive and attitudinal organization, which focuses research on learning and retention as a function of consistency and provides a basis for predicting the

interplay between attitudes and cognitive processes. Heider (1958, p. 201) in his classic work, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, pointed out that a balanced state is "a situation in which the relations among the entities fit together harmoniously; there is no stress towards change." He also noted that balance tends to be preferred over disharmony.

To reach a state of being balanced, people will agree or disagree with their friends, learn and recall balanced sets of information more easily than unbalanced ones. According to the theory, two people and any single item on which they may interact are treated as a three-point structure (See Figure 2.1). Structures in the perceiver's mind represent the perceiver (P), another person (O), and the mutual object (X). To illustrate this theory, we could use the following example to understand relationships among the three. You (P) may have an attitude toward your roommate (O), and toward his car (X), and perceive him as having a certain attitude toward his car. The combination of relationships among these three elements may be either balanced or unbalanced (See Figure 2.1).

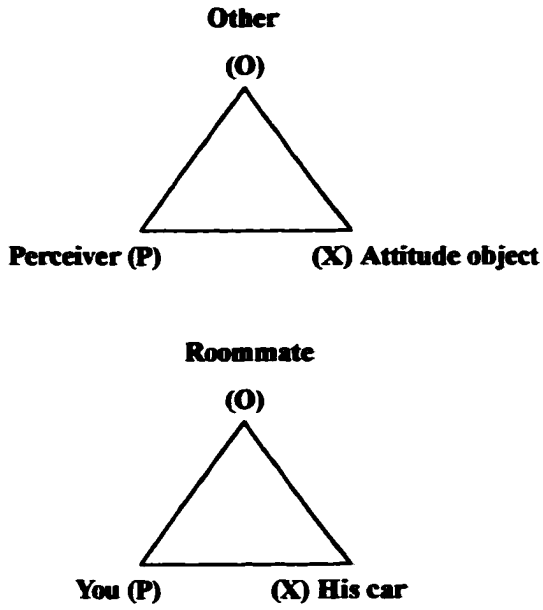


Fig. 2.1 Balance theory triads.

As described by Heider (1946, 1958), the structure's balance is determined by the combination of positive and negative relations among the three elements. If all of the relationships are positive or if two are negative and one is positive, the relationship is balanced. Any other combinations are unbalanced. The basic principle: If the positive and negative signs multiply to be positive, the structure is balanced. If it is negative, the structure is unbalanced.

For example, if you like your roommate (P-O is +), and he likes his car (O-X is +), then the three of you are a "balanced" trio if you develop an affection for the car (P-X is +). It also is balanced if your roommate likes his car (O-X is +), you dislike his car (P-X is -), and on reflection you decide he is not likable

either (P-O is -). Now consider the possibility that you like your roommate (+), he adores his car (+), and you cannot stand it (-). There is trouble for this unbalanced relationship. Unbalanced relationships are under some pressure to change toward balance, and that is how the theory predicts attitude change. In similar fashion, balance theory attempts to explain the relationships among the pubic attitude toward mass media, public attitude toward presidents, and mass media presidential attack news (See Fig. 2.2).

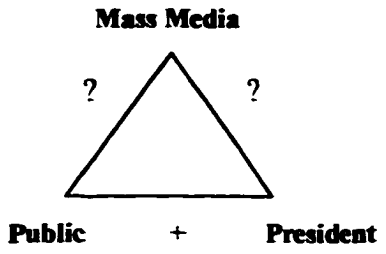


Fig. 2.2 Triangular relationship between mass media, president, and public

Since in the findings of the Gallup "Most Admired" Poll, presidents of the United States have been on the top almost each year from 1946 to 1997, we can assume that the American public has tended to view their presidents positively overall. According to political socialization literature, the average American citizen tends to follow politics somewhat, and is proud of his/her government (Riccards, 1973). An impression of the presidency is imbedded in the public mind by families,

schoolteachers, media, social interactions, and other elements of the political socialization process (Buchanan, 1987). American culture has nurtured the concept of presidential greatness to represent the nation's ability to deal successfully with an endless succession of system-threatening trials (Buchanan, 1987).

To see the presidency as a great institution is to believe that in worthy hands it can do momentous, exceptional, outstanding things. For most Americans, the presidency is larger than life, transcending normal human limitations. The idea of presidential greatness may be temporarily suppressed, but it has not been permanently altered by periods of presidential failure and abuse of power, such as Vietnam and Watergate. Those events surely planted some doubts and provoke some rethinking Scholars, who during the 1950s and 1960s had described the presidency as omnipotent and benevolent, for a time asserted that the office had exceeded its bounds and needed to be brought to heel (Polsby, 1977; Schlesinger, 1973; Cunliffe, 1968). Journalists covering the presidency developed an attitude of cynical skepticism (Grossman and Kumar, 1981). And citizens, in response to pollsters' questions, reported until recently a declining trust in national institutions. They continue to judge an incumbent president more stringently than before Vietnam and Watergate. One scholar, however, concludes that contemporary attitudes toward the presidency reflect an admiration and celebration of presidential strength: Scholars, journalists, citizens, members of Congress, and others still want and appreciate executive potency (Nelson, 1984). Despite a national tendency to

periodically reassess the presidency because of the perceived inadequacies of individual presidents, the greatness concept of a president lives (Buchanan, 1987).

Therefore, the relationship between the public and the president is more likely to be positive than to be negative. Furthermore, because the American public has tended to view presidents positively, is the increasing amount of negative news coverage of the president leading to the decrease of public confidence in the press?

It is important to point out that although there are other cognitive consistency theories, such as Newcomb's (1953) symmetry theory of cognitive change, Osgood's congruity theory (cited from Severin and Tankard, 1997), Festinger's (1957) dissonance theory, Heider's (1946) balance theory is the forerunner of a variety of theories of cognitive consistency. In addition to its historical significance, Heider's theory was chosen because of its parsimony. The theory is easily understood and intuitively appealing. Secondly, Newcomb's model incorporates the concept "symmetry," which refers to an attempt to influence another to bring about symmetry. In this study, attempt to influence is not discussed and is not a primary research interest. Third, Heider's theory was preferred over Osgood's congruity theory because the latter is only a special case of Heider's balance theory (Shoemaker & Tankard, 1997). In essence, they are identical. Fourth, Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory not only involves reducing the dissonance, but also involves "avoiding the situations and information which would increase the dissonance" (Festinger, 1957, p. 3). In this study, "avoiding" seems unlikely to

happen in the three-element model. Therefore, this study proposes that Heider's balance theory is a better model to explain the interrelationships between the president, the public, and the press.

III. Summary

The theories this study incorporated to explain the possible relationships among the public, the president, and the press are visually presented in Fig. 2.3. Agenda setting, framing, priming, and impression formation describe how the public may evaluate the presidential performance, operationally defined as his job approval ratings. Balance theory provides an explanation for studying shifts in public confidence in the press in concert with attack news coverage of the president.

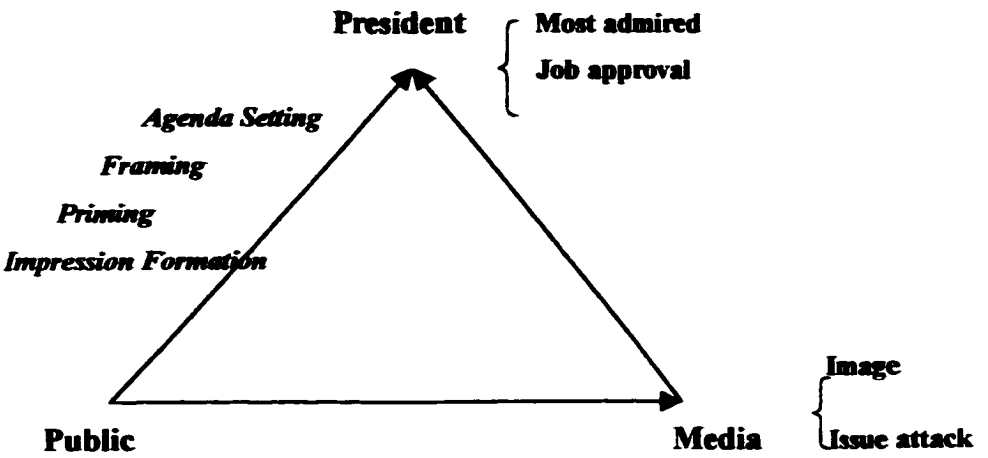


Fig. 2.3 The theoretical framework of the triangular relationship among attack news, public confidence in the press, and the job approval rating.

Chapter 3: Hypotheses

This study intends to examine how political attack news, the public confidence level toward the mass media, and the job approval rating of the president have interacted with each other over time from 1972 to 1996. The second level of agenda setting, framing and priming studies provide important theoretical foundations to examine the relationship between media content and public opinion. This study asks: Does attack news on a particular leader affect on public perception? The study attempts to investigate how the portrayal of political leaders in mass media may affect the public's attitudes. Furthermore, this study aims to suggest that there also is an interaction between attack news and the public confidence level in mass media. Are there relationships among attack news discourse, job approval ratings toward the president, and public confidence toward mass media from 1972 to 1996?

H1: Political attack discourse in presidential news reports in major newspapers has increased from 1972 through 1996.

Patterson (1993) found that news coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek*'s cover stories of presidential candidates during campaigns became progressively less favorable in the span of 1976 to 1992. This finding suggests that political attack news in many mass media might have increased during the past decades.

According to Salmore and Salmore (1985, p. 150), the messages that

candidates transmit through paid media consist of four general types: "positive messages about themselves, negative messages about their opponents, comparisons of the candidates, and responses to charges by opponents." Salmore and Salmore (1985) defined attack messages as negative in focus and designed to call attention to a candidate's weaknesses (character and/or issue positions). These messages are of two types. Negative messages concentrate entirely on the opponent, and only remind the voter of the alternative at the very end. Comparative messages are less distasteful to voters, move away from purely negative attacks on the opponent, and look instead at the record of the two candidates, to the advantage of one of them.

However, regarding news content, the phenomena of attack journalism is different than that of paid advertising. Sabato (1991) defines attack journalism as "the press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensively, often excessively, and sometimes, uncontrollably." Sabato (1991) also used the metaphor of a "shark attack" in his definition of attack journalism. Therefore, this study defines attack news as more aggressive and more adversarial than negative coverage of the president. And the attack items show unfriendly and hostile attitudes toward the president. For example, paragraphs about Bush's "shut up" remark to POW-MIA families, paragraphs about Bush's alleged adultery and stories about Bush's contradictory statements about Iran/Contra.

Because newspapers are considered to have more impact on the public, this

study attempts to apply Patterson's conclusion to major newspapers by investigating front-page news coverage during these election years. Furthermore, this study includes the latest, 1996 election.

Another major difference is that Patterson's study examined the news coverage of presidential candidates for the purpose of researching campaign news, where as this study aims to study presidential news coverage.

H2: Overall, the more political attack coverage in campaigns, the lower the ratings of presidential job approval (Agenda Setting).

Several studies of agenda setting suggested the tone of a single article might impact readers' perception of issues. Studies found that tones of campaign reports also affect candidates' image, which is the cognitive effect of mass media. This study goes beyond the cognitive level to the attitudinal one. That is, the evaluative nature of job approval ratings allows us to examine the possible relationship between attack news coverage and its attitudinal effect, the job approval ratings. Namely, the media adversarial role toward political leaders might be associated with readers' attitudes toward the president.

H2A: The more issue-attack coverage in campaigns, the lower the ratings of presidential job approval.

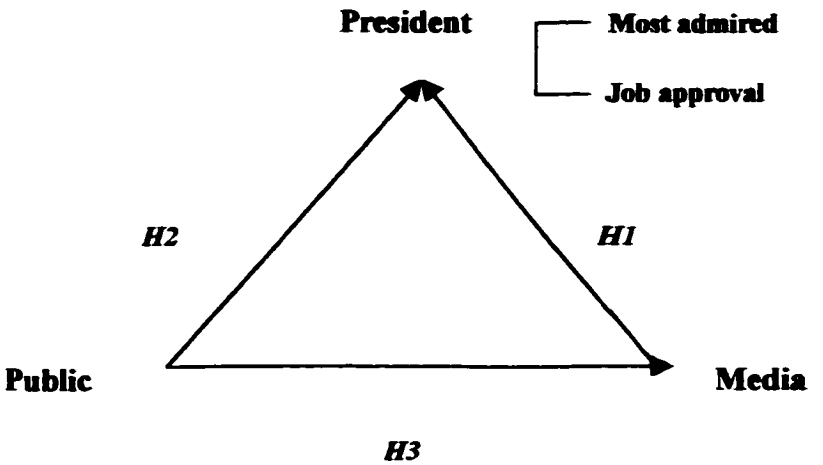
Clinton's high job approval rating phenomena suggests a further dissection of the political message. That is, there are two kinds of attack messages: issue-related and image-related attack. As to the Clinton phenomena, the issue-related

attack, instead of image-related attack, will have more impact on the decrease in job approval ratings. Therefore, we can infer that if the president is attacked by the press, the public may think about the president in a way that matches the portrayal in the media. Specifically, when the attack is issue-related instead of image (ethical)-related, the public will view the president as a political figure instead of a hero. Thus, the presidential job rating would be challenged.

H3: A negative correlation exists between the amount of attack stories in the media and the public confidence level toward the press (Balance Theory).

Based on the findings of the Gallup "Most Admired" Poll, we can assume that the American public has tended to view their presidents positively, specifically, view them as heroes. Therefore, the relationship between the public and the president should be more likely to be positive than to be negative. In the triad of Heider's balance theory, the interrelationships between public attitudes toward mass media and attack news against the president in mass media (that is, mass media attitude toward the president) would be the research focus in this study. More specifically, the question is: Is the increasing amount of negative news coverage of the president associated with the decrease of public confidence in the press? In the context of Heider's notion that balance tends to be preferred over disharmony, the association between the amount of attack news and public confidence in the press should be negative. That is, the more attack news against the president, the less confidence the American public has in the press.

The three hypotheses which will be examined in this study are presented in Fig. 3.1.



* The arrows indicate directions of relationships.

Fig. 3.1 Media, President, and Public and Their Hypothetical Relationships.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This is the first agenda-setting study to simultaneously explore the interactions between political news attack discourse, job approval rating of the president, and public confidence in the press from 1972 to 1996. The study attempts to expand the second level of agenda setting by incorporating priming, framing, and impression formation theories. Using the longitudinal research framework of the content analysis of presidential news coverage of major newspapers, poll data of job approval ratings, and measures of confidence in the press over the two decades, this study examines the influence of negative presidential news content upon the shaping of public opinion. Furthermore, several contingent variables (i.e., issue attack vs. image attack, thematic frame vs. episodic frame), which strengthen or reduce media effects on job approval rating, are identified. This study bases its theoretical rationale on Heider's balance theory to explain triangular interrelationships between the president, the press, and the public.

I. Why newspapers?

Newspaper news frequently has greater influence on the public. According to many agenda setting studies, newspapers have more impact on the public's agenda than television. In a candidate image study done in Spain (Lopez-Escorbar, McCombs, & Rey, 1997), newspaper news better matched the voters' images of the

candidates as a whole in both the substantive and affective dimensions. For television news, only for the mayoral candidates were there significant matches between TV news and voters' images. In another study of this election, McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, and Rey (1996), researchers also found that for each individual candidate, newspapers matched the public agenda better than television (only one of 12 correlations of newspaper and the public agenda is not statistically significant, but four out of nine correlations of television and the public agenda are statistically significant).

So the researchers suggested that the medium of communication--television or newspapers--and not the genre of expression--news or advertising--makes a significant difference in the outcomes. Furthermore, the overall influence of the newspaper is greater than the influence of television.

From an inter-media agenda setting point of view, newspapers are an opinion leader among mass media. Although people may access television more than newspapers in everyday life, it still is the newspaper, which frequently guides the television's news reportage.

II. Characteristics of research design

A combination of primary and secondary data was used in this study to examine the interrelationships among political attack news, public attitudes toward presidents and the public confidence in the press from 1972 to 1996. The reason for

1972 as a starting point of the time frame was that the Harris Confidence in Institutions polls started at 1966, but there was a four-year gap and the poll began in 1971 again. To have continuous annual data, the starting point of this study was 1972.

The primary data were collected from content analyses of major newspapers. The secondary data were drawn from polls. They are the job approval rating polls (Gallup), Most Admired polls (Gallup), and Confidence in Institutions polls (Harris). Both polls have a long history in American polling.

III. Poll Data

The Harris Poll data on public confidence in the press from 1972 through 1996 were collected from the Institute for Research in Social Science Data Archive (URL: http://www.irss.unc.edu/data_archive/). The confidence in institutions question is: "As far as people in charge of running (READ EACH ITEM, such as military, press, government...) are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?"

The data on "Most Admired Man" from 1972 through 1996 were drawn from Gallup. The question in the poll was: "What person (man/woman) that you have heard or read about, living in any part of the world, do you admire most? And who is your second choice? "

The data on presidential job approval ratings from 1972 through 1996 also

were drawn from the Gallup polls. The question in the poll was: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way (the incumbent president's name) is handling his job as president?"

Time Frame

The time frames examined in this study are determined by the dates during which Gallup polls were conducted asking respondents, "*Do you approve or disapprove of the way (the incumbent president's name) is handling his job as president?* These polls usually are conducted 10 to 30 times a year.

Because of the limitation of available data for the Harris Confidence in Institutions polls, only the election years 1972, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996 were selected. The reasons for choosing only election years are: 1) Presidential reporting in terms of issue-attack and image-attack would exhibit greater quantity in election years than in other years; 2) Four significant events, the State Union of Address, the Democratic Convention, the Republican Convention, and the election occur in each election year so that the triangular relationship resulting from these years would be more representative. Job approval rating polls were selected after each of these four events. The State of the Union address, Republican convention, Democratic convention, and presidential election of each year are benchmark events, but the subsequent job approval rating polls were not taken regularly. Therefore, this study has to set the time frame in a compromising manner among these events and the polls.

As to the Confidence in Institutions polls, the polls selected were determined by the fact that although researchers may not know what may cause the increase or decrease of the confidence level of the public in the press, confidence level is the effect. Therefore, the confidence polls should be located at the last time point of a particular time period in order to examine the interrelationship between attack news, job approval rating of the president, and public confidence in the press. For example, the confidence poll selected for the election year of 1992 was the poll in January 1993, not the poll in February 1992 (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Dates of the approval rating polls, the public confidence poll, and news sample periods examined in this study.

	APPROVAL RATING DATES	PRESS CONFIDENCE LEVEL RATING DATES	NEWS SAMPLE PERIODS
Nixon Poll (1972)	1. 02/05 2. missing 3. missing 4. 12/09	March 1973	12/25/71-02/04/72 06/23-08/03 08/02-09/12 10/28-12/08
Ford Poll (1976)	1. 01/31 2. missing 3. missing 4. 12/11	January 1977	12/20/75-01/30/76 06/24-08/04 07/29-09/08 10/30-12/10
Carter Poll (1980)	1. 02/02 2. 08/16 3. 09/13 4. 11/22	November 1980	12/22/79-02/01/80 07/05-08/15 08/02-09/12 10/11-11/21
Reagan Poll (1984)	1. 02/11 2. 07/28 3. 09/08 4. 12/01	November 1984	12/31/83-02/10/84 06/16-07/27 07/28-09/07 10/20-11/30
Reagan Poll (1988)	1. 03/05 2. 08/20 3. 09/27 4. 11/12	November 1988	01/23-03/04 07/09-08/19 08/16-09/26 10/01-11/11
Bush Poll (1992)	1. 02/07 2. 08/01 3. 09/01 4. 11/21	January 1993	12/27/91-02/06/92 06/20-07/31 07/21-08/31 10/10-12/20
Clinton Poll (1996)	1. 02/14 2. 08/31 3. 09/08 4. 11/22	January 1997	01/03-02/13 07/20-08/30 07/28-09/07 10/11-11/21

* The dates of job approval rating polls in each election year were selected according to the dates of the four key events. Generally, they are at least 10 days after the event. In addition, those confidence poll dates must be after the job approval rating dates.

IV. Content Analysis

Data Source

The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune, and *The Dallas Morning News* were chosen for this study because they represented the most influential regional newspapers in the East Coast, West Coast, and the middle of the United States. This study has 28 time points for content analysis, resulting from the four events in each of the seven election years. Time points were first determined by the date of the four key events (See Table 4.2). In this study, events lead to the time periods researched. Six-weeks is the time frame for each time point's content analysis. Normally, a six-week period is a reasonable amount of time for investigating the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. Forty-two days will cover not only the event, but also other presidential news stories.

This study is restricted by the fact that the time interval between each major event and its "correspondent" poll is not fixed. As Winter and Eyal (1981) have noted, the temporal variable is crucial in detecting agenda setting effects. Some studies suggest that the optimal effect span is between two to five months (McCombs et al., 1975). However, other researchers have found agenda-setting effects using as little as one week's media content from immediately prior to the interview period (Mullins, 1977; Becker and McCombs, 1977). In a study comparing national television and Gallup Poll data over an eight-year period,

Zucker (1978) found that the media emphasis in the month immediately prior to the interview period was a better indicator of public opinion than was earlier media content.

Table 4.2.

Dates of Significant Political Events during Each Election Year

	STATE UNION OF ADDRESS	DEMOCRAT CONVENTION	REPUBLICAN CONVENTION	ELECTION
1972	01/20	07/10-07/13	08/21-08/23	11/07
1976	01/19	07/12-07/15	08/16-08/19	11/02
1980	01/23	08/11-08/14	07/14-07/17	11/04
1984	01/25	07/16-07/19	08/20-08/23	11/06
1988	01/25	07/18-07/21	08/15-08/18	11/08
1992	01/28	07/13-07/16	08/17-08/20	11/03
1996	01/23	08/26-08/29	08/12-08/15	11/03

After four events in an election year were identified, a decision had to be made about the best time interval for detecting the effect. Based on the previous agenda-setting studies, and the dates of events and the dates of the polls at hand, we selected a six-week interval between the first day of coding and its correspondent poll. Therefore, the interval between the event and the subsequent poll is at shortest one week but no longer than six weeks, with a single exception. In the general election of 1988, the poll is only four days after the event because the next poll, held 50 days after the election, was too far away from the event (See Figure 4.1).

1st Day of Content Analysis	Event	Date of Approval Rating Poll
	1972	
12/25/71	26 days 01/20 State of Union Address	16 days 02/05
06/23	21 days 07/13 Democrat Convention	21 days missing
08/02	21 days 08/23 Republican Convention	21 days missing
10/28	10 days 11/07 Election	32 days 12/09
	1976	
12/20/75	30 days 01/19 State of Union Address	12 days 01/31
06/24	21 days 07/15 Democrat Convention	21 days missing
07/29	21 days 08/19 Republican Convention	21 days missing
10/30	3 days 11/02 Election	39 days 12/11
	1980	
12/22/79	32 days 01/23 State of Union Address	10 days 02/02
08/02	12 days 08/14 Democrat Convention	30 days 09/13
07/05	12 days 07/17 Republican Convention	30 days 08/16
10/11	24 days 11/04 Election	18 days 11/22
	1984	
12/31/83	25 days 01/25 State of Union Address	17 days 02/11
06/16	33 days 07/19 Democrat Convention	9 days 07/28
07/28	26 days 08/23 Republican Convention	16 days 09/08
10/20	17 days 11/06 Election	25 days 12/01
	1988	
01/23	2 days 01/25 State of Union Address	40 days 03/05
07/09	12 days 07/21 Democrat Convention	30 days 08/20
08/16	2 days 08/18 Republican Convention	40 days 09/27
10/01	38 days 11/08 Election	4 days 11/12
	1992	
12/27/91	32 days 01/28 State of Union Address	10 days 02/07
06/20	26 days 07/16 Democrat Convention	16 days 08/01
07/21	30 days 08/20 Republican Convention	12 days 09/01
10/10	24 days 11/03 Election	18 days 11/21
	1996	
01/03	20 days 01/23 State of Union Address	22 days 02/14
07/28	32 days 08/29 Democrat Convention	10 days 09/08
07/20	26 days 08/15 Republican Convention	16 days 08/31
10/11	25 days 11/05 Election	17 days 11/22

Fig 4.1. Selected time periods for content analysis. There are six weeks in each period. The event is located between the first day of the six-week period and the date of the job approval rating poll. In the spirit of randomization and representativeness, each constructed week is obtained in a consecutive three-week period so we have two constructed weeks for each time period.

Presidential stories in the six-week period were coded for two constructed weeks in the four major newspapers. That is, the first constructed week was the days selected from the first three weeks, and the second week was selected from the other three weeks (See Appendix A).

All front-page stories dealing with presidents were collected from microfilm for content analysis. The newspaper stories consisted of straight news stories, news analysis, and columns, whether the newspapers' own stories or wire service. For these materials, coders were asked to code the headline and all the paragraphs on the front page in each story. The selection of news stories on the front pages was not only practical, but also appropriate in terms of their relationship with public opinion.

Selection of Items

To be included in the sample, a front-page news story had to be related to the president. The minimum threshold for an item was that key words appeared in the story: the president, name of the sitting president (Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton), the administration, the Washington administration. For a paragraph to be included in the sample, it had to at least mention the same key words. However, if there was a pronoun referring the president, this paragraph also was included in the sample.

Measurement: Coding and Variables

Coding

There were two different coding units in this study: One is the news story; the other is the paragraph. There are two reasons for choosing a paragraph as a coding unit instead of a story: 1) In certain cases of hypothesis testing, the paragraph was preferred to the whole news story as a coding unit for attitudinal variables because the latter was too broad for variables such as issue/image attack and thematic/episodic frame. Specifically, a news story could have mixed attitudes or mixed frames. A paragraph-by-paragraph analysis would yield a more accurate overall judgment than would have been obtained by using a whole story; 2) When testing the relationship between attack news and job approval ratings, which involves a shorter time period, use of the story could result in not enough attack news data being obtained, such as the State Union of address in an election year.

Each paragraph related to the president in the story was coded. Sentences that followed a semicolon or colon, but began on a new line, such as quotations, were counted as part of the paragraph, not as another paragraph.

Major Variables

Each news story was coded on the following variables:

1. Overall sense: This variable was aimed at measuring how one would feel about the president upon reading the article. The perception of the president being attacked or not in the article was based on a yes/no

response.

2. Sources of attack: This variable described who was attacking the president. If the attacking story was a news analysis or a commentary, then it was coded as the press. If the attacking news story had sources, such as a senator or another presidential candidate, then it was coded as the political figure.

Each news paragraph was coded on the following variables:

1. Tone: It referred to the president in terms of attack and/or non-attack tone. Negative (or unfavorable) coverage does not necessarily mean attack. The attack coverage referred to an adversarial portrayal of the president, or if stories or sources showed an unfriendly, disliking attitude toward the president. The rhetoric, including the newspaper writer or the campaigner, contradicts and challenges the president.

2. Type of Attack:

Issue Attack: It referred to the adversarial statements about the president's policy positions or issues of public policy or dealt with campaign problems, controversies, and gaffes such as the Iran-Contra affair.

Image Attack: It referred to character issues, presidential private matters, personalities. It was an adversarial statement of the president's personal qualities regarding their records,

qualifications, characters, personality traits, images and styles, and personal and family backgrounds.

3. Type of Frame: There were two types of frame in this study: One was episodic frame; the other was thematic frame.

Episodic frame: It took the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicted public issues in terms of concrete instances. For example: horse race, last standings in the poll, delegate counts, the size of the crowd at a public rally. Episodic frames also involved political frames instead of policy frames. For example, in the Iran-Contra events, episodic frames were paragraphs that contained rhetoric condemning the decision, described the turmoil and infighting within the inner circles of the Reagan administration, or provided an adversarial analysis of President Reagan's leadership style and his campaign.

Thematic frame: It placed public issues in a more general or abstract context and took the form of a "takeout" or "backgrounder" report directed at general outcomes or conditions. For example: ideological stances of the candidates and the policy platforms they advocate.

Unit of Analysis

While the coding unit was the news story and the paragraph, the unit of analysis was different for each hypothesis test. For the first hypothesis, the unit of analysis was the year during the study period for the attack news variables. For the second hypothesis, which dealt with the relationship between attack news and job approval ratings, the unit of analysis of the attack news was the percentage of paragraphs in a time point; for the public opinion variable, the job approval ratings, the unit of analysis was a poll taken at a time point in a year. For the third hypothesis, which dealt with the relationship between the attack news and the confidence in the press, the unit of analysis of the attack news was the percentage of paragraphs in a year; for the public opinion variable, the confidence level, was the poll taken in a year.

Instead of using the news story as a unit of analysis, the reason for adopting a different unit of analysis, the paragraph, for Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 was because the statistical analyses included Pearson correlation between type of attack and type of frame, which was coded paragraph by paragraph.

Reliability of Data

Krippendorff (1980) indicated that for the results of content analysis to be reliable, the data "should be at least be reproducible by independent researchers, at different locations, and at different times, using the same instructions for coding the same set of data." To test the data reliability, two trained extra coders independently

coded the material for the reliability test. A sample of 10 randomly selected stories were coded. The intercoder agreements among the principal coder and the two additional coders for the major variables under study, as well as the average, are reported in Table 4.3

Table 4.3

Test of Coding Reliability

Variables	Coder A-Coder B	Coder B-Coder C	Coder A-Coder C	Mean
Tone	.92	.91	.94	.92
Type of Attack	.89	.87	.91	.89
Type of Frame	.74	.77	.83	.78
Topic Under Attack	.90	.80	.90	.87
Overall Sense	.90	.90	1.00	.93
Source of Attack	.80	.90	.90	.87

* Number of coding decisions in each story was 41.

* Using the Holsti's formula, coding reliability is computed as follows: CR= 2M/(N1+N2) in which M is the number of coding decisions on which two independent coders agree, and N1 and N2 represent the total number of coding decisions made by each coder respectively.

* The coding decisions for "type of attack" and "type of frame" excluded those paragraphs which first were not categorized by the coder as attacking because the coder did not have to make any decision for these paragraphs.

V. Statistical Considerations

Any statistical technique, as Blalock (1960) pointed out, always involves

some "underlying assumptions that the procedure requires. These assumptions generally concern the nature of data, such as level of measurement, random sampling, and normal population distribution. Most of the higher-level statistical techniques, such as correlation and regression, require more subtle assumptions. They assume, for example, a linear relationship between variables.

This study employed correlation to examine the relationship between variables and to test hypotheses. While some assumptions are met -- the job approval rating variable, the confidence level variable, and the amount of attack news are all ratio -- other assumptions, e.g., linear relationships between variables, were less clear or even questionable. Since the sample was not random, and particularly the statistics involved correlation between the attack news and the confidence poll includes only seven cases, the use of these statistical techniques and levels of significance was therefore largely exploratory, rather than a strong test with essential control of the hypotheses. The emphasis was on the identification or description of a correlation and the strength of association between variables, not the inference from a sample to the population.

Our research design may have the danger of yeilding an inflated correlation coefficient because of autocorrelation. That is, neither the articles for the content analysis nor the presidential job approval ratings in different time points were obtained independently so that one observation would affect the subsequent observation. For example, a president may be attacked by the press so that he is not

popular at the beginning of his term. However, because of being not that popular, he is attacked by the press again, and attack news would also affect his next job approval rating.

Chapter 5: Results

This chapter examines coverage of the president on the front pages of four newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Dallas Morning News* in election years from 1972 through 1996.

As the sample was not a random selection from all U.S. daily newspapers, the following content analysis of the four newspapers, both qualitatively and quantitatively, was essentially descriptive.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS OF CONTENT ANALYSIS

The total of articles in the four newspapers related to the sitting president in seven election years was 1,459 based on the sampling scheme. The breakdown of the number of stories related to the president per year and per newspaper is shown in Table 5.1. It shows the number of front-page articles related to the president has generally increased during the past seven election years.

Table 5.1

Number of coded newspaper articles related to the president

TIME PERIOD	NEW YORK TIMES	LOS ANGELES TIMES	CHICAGO TRIBUNE	DALLAS MORNING NEWS	TOTAL
1972 Nixon	66	32	20	32	150
1976 Ford	55	43	18	24	140
1980 Carter	68	59	42	39	208
1984 Reagan	71	77	42	41	231
1988 Reagan	71	54	41	24	190
1992 Bush	80	82	55	59	276
1996 Clinton	87	65	60	52	264
TOTAL	498	412	218	271	1459

It is interesting by just looking at the number of news stories related to the president that the four newspapers showed more interest in Carter than they did in Nixon and Ford. Reagan in his second term seemed less newsworthy than in his first term. There was an obvious drop from 1984 to 1988. The reason may be that he was not running for the president, so the press divided its attention among the presidential candidates. The frequency of President Bush's appearance on the front page was higher than for any other president. The amount of coverage of Bush in terms of frequency is almost twice as much as that of Ford, although they both suffered from "character issues" when running for a second term.

The New York Times had more coverage on the president than the other three newspapers, followed in order by *The Los Angeles Times, The Dallas Morning News,* and *The Chicago Tribune,* and. It also is interesting to see that *The Tribune* became increasingly "presidential" through the years, closing the gap

with *The Los Angeles Times*.

Attack and Non-attack Stories

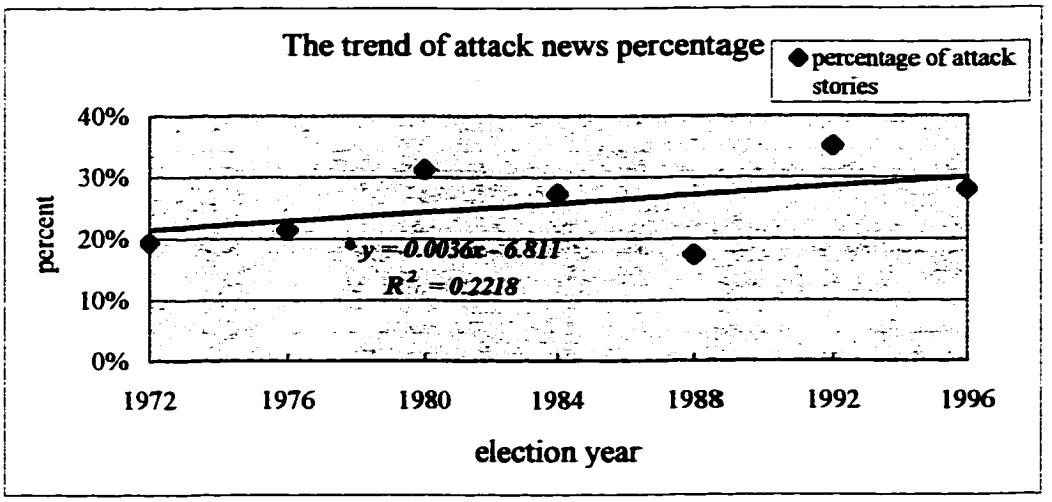
The number and percentage of attack stories per year is shown in Table 5.2. Generally, the number of attack news stories and the percentage of attack news stories increased during the past seven election years, except in 1988, when there was a drastic drop. The amount of attack news, in terms of numbers of stories, was smaller in the '70s, and steadily increased in the '80s, until in 1988 there was a drop, but four years later reached its high peak in 1992.

Table 5.2
Number and percentage of attack and non-attack stories in each year in the four newspapers

TIME PERIOD	NO. OF ATTACK STORIES	NO. OF NON-ATTACK STORIES
Nixon 1972	29 (19.3%)	121 (80.7%)
Ford 1976	30 (21.4%)	110 (78.6%)
Carter1980	65 (31.3%)	143 (68.7%)
Reagan 1984	63 (27.3%)	168 (72.7%)
Reagan 1988	33 (17.4%)	157 (82.6%)
Bush 1992	97 (35.1%)	179 (64.9%)
Clinton 1996	74 (28.1%)	189 (71.9%)
TOTAL	392 (26.9%)	1,066 (73.1%)

Although the percentage of attack news stories did not always increase, the decline usually was not much lower than the level in previous years (Fig. 5.1). For example, there was a drop in 1984, but the percentage still was higher than those in 1972 and 1976. A drop occurred again in 1996, but it was higher than those in all the previous years, except in 1992. In 1988 the attack coverage reached its lowest point in the seven election years.

Fig 5.1. The trend of attack news in the four newspapers in the past seven election years



*** By using the correlation function in Excel, the trend line could show the regression and R**

Tone, Type of Attack, and Type of Frame

The numbers and percentages of paragraphs categorized as attack/non-attack, issue attack/image attack, and thematic frames/episodic frames in each year are

summarized in Table 5.3. To see more clear, the trend across the seven election years for each category, Spearman correlation was used. (Each category was ranked according to the percentage, and then was correlated with the order of election years, i.e. 1972=1, 1976=2, 1980=3, 1984=4, 1988=5, 1992=6, 1996=7). The percentage of attack news paragraphs and the percentage of episodic frames generally increased across the years, but image attack increased. The findings are summarized in Table 5.4.

Table 5.3

Number and percentage of attack, non-attack, issue attack, image attack, thematic frame attacking and episodic frame attacking paragraphs in each year in the four newspapers

TIME PERIOD	ATTACK PARAGRAPH		NON-ATTACK		ISSUE ATTACK		IMAGE ATTACK		THEMATIC FRAME		EPISODIC FRAME	
Nixon 1972	92	10.9%	751	89.1%	57	62.0%	35	38.0%	12	13.0%	80	87.0%
Ford 1976	95	11.8%	708	88.2%	41	43.2%	54	56.8%	5	5.3%	90	94.7%
Carter 1980	207	18.2%	932	81.8%	94	45.4%	113	54.6%	28	13.5%	179	86.5%
Reagan 1984	170	17.1%	827	82.9%	103	63.6%	59	36.4%	30	17.6%	140	82.4%
Reagan 1988	76	13.7%	477	86.3%	59	41.5%	83	58.5%	5	6.6%	71	93.4%
Bush 1992	263	22.1%	929	77.9%	83	60.1%	55	39.9%	26	9.9%	237	90.1%
Clinton 1996	141	13.6%	894	86.4%	55	39.0%	86	61.0%	13	9.2%	128	90.8%

Table 5.4

Correlations between percentage of attack paragraphs, image attack, and episodic frames with election years.

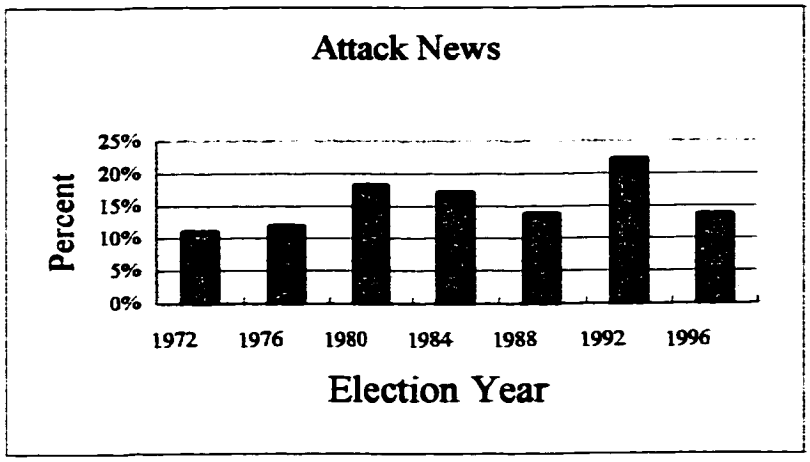
	SPEARMAN'S RHO
ATTACK PARAGRAPH	.50
IMAGE ATTACK	-.18
EPISODIC FRAME	.25

N=7

Fig 5.2. shows the trend of attack news paragraphs, a clearly increasing phenomenon. The percentages of paragraphs of each category in each time period are summarized in Table 5.5, and Fig 5.3 (using all twenty-eight time points) plots the trend, which is a clearly increasing, though inconsistent, pattern.

Fig. 5.2

The percentage of attack paragraphs each year in the four newspapers



Examining the trend by year/president

In terms of the percentage of the attack news paragraphs (See Table 5.3), Nixon was the least attacked president among the six presidents (10.9%). The most attacked president was Bush (22.1%), almost twice as much as Ford (11.8%), although they were both not re-elected and both had been negatively emphasized on their "character issues" by the press. From this, we can infer that the press became more aggressively negative toward the national leader.

As to the issue-attack category, Nixon, Reagan (in his first term), and Bush received more than 60% in issue attacks. Clinton obviously received the least. Once again, recall that the issue/image attack categorization is a dichotomy: If the president receives fewer issue attacks, then he receives more image attacks. Clinton, Reagan (in his second term), Ford, and Carter received more image attacks then issue attacks.

Table 5.3 also points out that the frames of most stories are episodic. Although the trend is not that clear, after 1988 more than 90 percent of the stories are episodic, while in early years, (1972, 1980, and 1984), the episodic frames were fewer than 90 percent.

Examining the trend by the four key events

Table 5.5 shows the percentage of attack news paragraphs in the 28 time periods across seven election years. These time periods match the four key events in an election year: the State of the Union Address, the Democrat Convention, the Republican Convention, and the general election. It was assumed that the amount of news about the president at those times would be more than at other times, in that year so that this study could obtain more president-related stories.

One thing is especially worth noticing: Although the attack news in the time period of the election is not always necessarily the highest in a year, across the seven election years, the presidential stories were increasingly an attack on the image of the president. Usually, issue attacks appeared most frequently in the time period of the State of the Union Address, given in the beginning of a year. At the end of the election year image attacks appeared more. That may also tell us that the nearer to the election, the more image attack stories appear.

As to the news frames, except in 1984 and 1996, stories in each year were more episodic starting at the State of the Union Address and continuing to the

election. It seems that generally when there are more image attacks, there are more episodic frames.

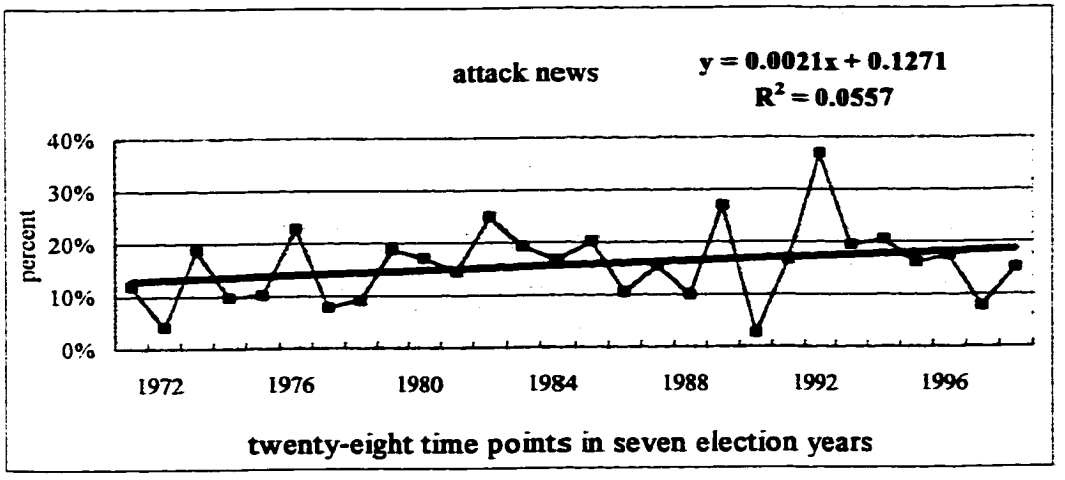
Table 5.5

Percentage of attack, non-attack, issue attack, image attack, thematic frame attacking and episodic frame attacking paragraphs in four key events of each year in the four newspapers

TIME PERIOD	ATTACK	NON-ATTACK	ISSUE ATTACK	IMAGE ATTACK	THEMATIC FRAME	EPISODIC FRAME
Time 1: Nixon Address	11.9%	88.1%	68.8%	31.3%	18.8%	81.3%
Time 2:Democrat	4.0%	96.0%	66.7%	33.3%	33.3%	66.7%
Time 3: Republican	18.8%	81.2%	65.6%	34.4%	12.5%	87.5%
Time 4: Election	9.7%	90.3%	55.3%	44.7%	7.9%	92.1%
Time 5:Ford Address	10.1%	89.9%	68.8%	31.3%	12.5%	87.5%
Time 6: Democrat	22.8%	77.2%	29.3%	70.7%	7.3%	92.7%
Time 7: Republican	7.8%	92.2%	44.4%	55.6%	0.0%	100.0%
Time 8: Election	9.1%	90.9%	54.5%	45.5%	0.0%	100.0%
Time 9: Carter Address	18.8%	81.2%	88.5%	11.5%	21.2%	78.8%
Time 10: Democrat	17.1%	82.9%	28.6%	71.4%	11.9%	88.1%
Time 11: Republican	14.4%	85.6%	23.2%	76.8%	8.9%	91.1%
Time 12: Election	25.0%	75.0%	40.4%	59.6%	12.3%	87.7%
Time 13: Reagan Address	19.2%	80.8%	78.1%	21.9%	23.4%	76.6%
Time 14: Democrat	16.7%	83.3%	38.7%	61.3%	12.9%	87.1%
Time 15: Republican	20.2%	79.8%	42.3%	57.7%	7.7%	92.3%
Time 16: Election	10.5%	89.5%	82.6%	17.4%	30.4%	69.6%
Time 17: Reagan Address	15.5%	84.5%	75.0%	25.0%	3.1%	96.9%
Time 18: Democrat	9.9%	90.1%	77.8%	22.2%	0.0%	100.0%
Time 19: Republican	27.0%	73.0%	79.2%	20.8%	16.7%	83.3%
Time 20: Election	2.6%	97.4%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Time 21: Bush Address	16.6%	83.4%	78.6%	21.4%	23.8%	76.2%
Time 22: Democrat	36.8%	63.2%	18.4%	81.6%	1.3%	98.7%
Time 23: Republican	19.4%	80.6%	26.5%	73.5%	13.3%	86.7%
Time 24: Election	20.5%	79.5%	22.2%	77.8%	6.3%	93.7%
Time 25: Clinton Address	16.1%	83.9%	48.6%	51.4%	5.7%	94.3%
Time 26: Democrat	17.4%	82.6%	52.8%	47.2%	5.6%	94.4%
Time 27: Republican	7.7%	92.3%	21.7%	78.3%	21.7%	78.3%
Time 28: Election	15.1%	84.9%	29.8%	70.2%	8.5%	91.5%

Figure 5.3

Percentage of attack paragraphs in four key events of each year



Sources of Attack

The coding unit for sources of attack was the news story. If the attack story identified a news source as a political figure, then it was coded as an attack from a political figure. If the attack was embedded in a genre of news analysis, it was coded as an attack from the press. If the attack was not attributed, even in a straight news, it still was coded as an attack from the press. Besides these two categories, any other news sources were coded as "others."

Most attacks were from political figures (Table 5.6). In the '70s, the majority of attacks (83.3% in 1972 and 69.4% in 1976) were from political figures. However, in the '80s, the amount varied. The percentage of attacks Carter received from the press was near 40%. In 1984, the percentage of attacks Reagan received from the press only 16.9%. Four years later, the percentage of attacks Reagan received

from the press rose to 52.6%. In the 90's, Bush was attacked more than all the former presidents (40.2%). In Fig. 5.4 the gap between the two lines, representing attacks from the political figures and from the press, showed the press and the political figures shared a more negative perspective on Carter and Bush. However, for Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton, the press was less active than political figures in attacking the president.

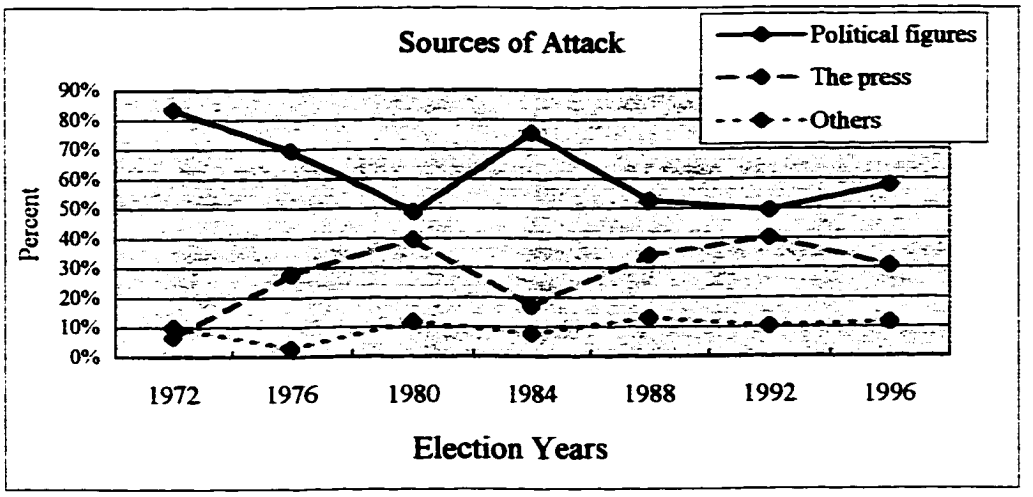
Table 5.6

Sources of attack in news stories in each election year in the four newspapers

TIME PERIOD	POLITICAL FIGURES	THE PRESS	OTHERS
Nixon 1972	83.3%	6.7%	10.0%
Ford 1976	69.4%	27.8%	2.8%
Carter 1980	48.7%	39.5%	11.8%
Reagan 1984	75.4%	16.9%	7.7%
Reagan 1988	52.6%	34.2%	13.2%
Bush 1992	49.5%	40.2%	10.3%
Clinton 1996	57.7%	30.8%	11.5%

Fig 5.4

The trend of sources of attack in election years



Topic under Attack

The coding unit for the topic under attack was the news story. The topic under attack was coded according to how the average reader would feel what topic was directly related to the president on reading over the story. For example, if a story attacked the presidential role in the context of foreign policy, then the coder would code it as foreign affairs. The percentage of each topic under attack in each election year is summarized in Table 5.7.

Table 5.7

Topic under attack in the attacking news stories in each election year in the four newspapers

	ECONOMY	FOREIGN AFFAIR	SOCIAL PROBLEMS	TECHNOLOGY	GOVERNMENT/ POLITICAL	CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES	PRESIDENTIAL ROLES	PERSONALITIES
Nixon 1972	25.8%	19.4%	0.0%	0.0%	12.9%	12.9%	29.0%	0.0%
Ford 1976	25.0%	5.6%	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	30.6%	19.4%	8.3%
Carter 1980	14.7%	18.7%	0.0%	0.0%	8.0%	14.7%	36.0%	8.0%
Reagan 1984	32.8%	14.9%	3.0%	3.0%	14.9%	0.0%	26.9%	4.5%
Reagan 1988	46.7%	24.4%	8.9%	0.0%	6.7%	0.0%	13.3%	0.0%
Bush 1992	15.9%	6.5%	4.7%	0.0%	3.7%	20.6%	29.0%	19.6%
Clinton 1996	25.6%	6.4%	3.8%	0.0%	11.5%	3.8%	37.2%	11.5%

Looking vertically at this table, no matter what the election year, the economy always was an important topic -- except for Carter, whose most attacked topic was presidential role. In terms of foreign policy, Nixon, Carter, and Reagan's policy attracted attacks more than those of the other presidents. Governmental/political problems are a moderate target while social problems and technology were least attacked. Campaign strategies were greatly emphasized in 1976 and in 1992, while the presidential role (except in 1976 and 1988) was a significant topic for a negative portrait. Personality showed an increasing trend for a topic under attack, except in Reagan's second term.

Examining Table 5.7 horizontally, Nixon's most attacked topic was presidential roles, which involves the scandal of Watergate. Economy also was

one of his major attacked issues. Ford received attacks most for his campaign strategies, trailed closely by the economy. Carter was severely attacked for his presidential role, which related to how he dealt with the Iran hostage issue. Reagan's first term was criticized a great deal for his economic policy. He also was attacked about his presidential roles. Although our impression was that President Bush was hurt greatly by his performance in regard to the economy, this study found that the most attacked topic was presidential roles.

This could raise another interesting question -- whether some issues are separable from the president. Every topic under attack involves an evaluation of the performance of the president. The economy was Reagan's most attacked topic in his first term and the second term as well. The presidential roles in his first term and foreign policy also were frequently mentioned. Bush was famous for his performance in dealing with international issues, so it was expected that foreign policy would not be an attacked topic for him. However, he was greatly attacked about his presidential role, which mostly involved accusation of false statements about his role in Iran-Contra case when he was vice president in 1987. Another case was the attack against his personal stands on abortion. Bush also was severely attacked by the press regarding his personality. In his presidential campaign, for example, several times he was described as agitated. The presidential role was President Clinton's most attacked topic, mostly related to the Whitewater case; the economy was second.

If the topics under attack are further categorized as issue-oriented (economy, foreign affairs, social problems, and technology) and image-oriented (government/political, campaign strategies, presidential roles, and personalities), the picture is more clear. Except for Clinton, the other presidents recognized as popular presidents (Nixon, Reagan) at their time were less attacked in image-oriented topics. Ford, Carter, and Bush were attacked severely for their image-related topics, especially presidential roles and personalities.

HYPOTHESES

The three purposes of the analysis are 1) to examine if attack news has increased; 2) to investigate if there are relationships between amount and types of attack news and the presidential job approval rating; 3) to examine the relationship between the amount and type of attack news and public confidence in the press.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis examined the amount of attack news toward the president in the major newspapers in the past seven elections. The coding unit for the amount of attack is a news story. When a story mentioned the president and expressed an adversarial stance toward the president, the paragraph was coded as attacking. The unit of analysis for this hypothesis was the year. In operational terms, the hypothesis stated: *The percentage of attack news stories in*

presidential news reports in the four newspapers has increased from 1972 to 1996.

Hypothesis 1 is not supported. When the percentage of news stories in each year were correlated with the order of the election (i.e. 1972 = 1, 1976 = 2, 1980 = 3, 1984 = 4, 1988 = 5, 1992 = 6, 1996 = 7), Pearson correlation showed no significant change across seven years (r= .4814, p>. 05, based on the percentage of attacking stories; r=. 4694, p>. 05, based on the percentage of attacking paragraphs). However, by a descriptive perspective the percentage across these years does show a slightly increasing trend (See Fig. 5.1). Although there are several rises and falls, the trend line in Fig. 5.1 does show a direction, which is toward more intensive attacks on the president.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 dealt with the relationship between attack news and presidential job approval ratings. It stated: *The more political attack coverage in campaigns, the lower the ratings of presidential job approval.* To test the hypothesis, Pearson correlation was used to test if there was a relationship between the amount of attack and the job approval ratings. The coding unit is the news paragraph and the unit of analysis was the percentage of attack news paragraph in time points around the four key events. The unit of analysis of the job approval ratings was a poll taken at each time point in a year.

Some 24 public opinion polls for presidential job approval ratings were

included in the analysis (See Table 5.8). The sample of attacking news was obtained from 56 constructed weeks according to the four major key events in an election year from 1972 through 1996.

Table 5.8

Presidential job approval ratings in four key events of each year from Gallup Poll Organization.

TIME PERIOD	JOB APPROVAL RATINGS
Time 1:Nixon Address	52
Time 2:Democrat	–
Time 3: Republican	–
Time 4: Election	59
Time 5: Ford Address	46
Time 6: Democrat	–
Time 7: Republican	–
Time 8: Election	53
Time 9: Carter Address	55
Time 10: Democrat	37
Time 11: Republican	32
Time 12: Election	31
Time 13: Reagan Address	55
Time 14: Democrat	52
Time 15: Republican	57
Time 16: Election	62
Time 17: Reagan Address	50
Time 18: Democrat	53
Time 19: Republican	54
Time 20: Election	57
Time 21: Bush Address	44
Time 22: Democrat	29
Time 23: Republican	39
Time 24: Election	43
Time 25: Clinton Address	53
Time 26: Democrat	60
Time 27: Republican	60
Time 28: Election	58

The results of Pearson correlation between the percentage of attack news paragraphs and the job approval rating showed this hypothesis was supported

(Table 5.9). The ratings of presidential approval were significantly and negatively related to the amount of attack toward the president. The coefficient is -. 5470 (p<. 05).

Hypothesis 2A

Hypothesis 2A specifically dealt with issue attack news. It stated: *The more issue-attack coverage in campaigns, the lower the ratings of presidential job approval.* The results also are in Table 5.9. However, the Pearson correlation showed the opposite. The job approval rating was positively correlated with the amount of issue attack.

Table 5.9

Correlations between presidential job approval ratings and amount of attacking/non-attacking, issue/image attack, and thematic/episodic frame

	PEARSON CORRELATION
Attacking	-.5470*
Issue Attack	.4870*
Episodic Frame	-.1811

N=24

*p<. 05

It is worth noting that it would not be reasonable to suggest that the more issue attack, the higher the job approval ratings. The reasons are: 1) this issue/image attack percentage is a dichotomy so if one is negatively correlated with the job approval ratings, the other one is positively correlated with the rating; 2) Based on the result of hypothesis 2 -- the more the image attack news, the lower the job approval rating is. This correlation is - .4870.

Hypothesis 2B

Hypothesis 2B dealt with the source of attack news. It stated: *The more attack from the press, the higher the ratings of presidential job approval.* Based on balance theory, if the president is attacked by the press, the public may have less confidence in the press. We may infer that if the source of attack is the press, the job approval ratings may be higher. Recall the Clinton phenomenon: Although he was attacked by the press in 1996, the job approval ratings were still high.

However, the Pearson correlation did not show a statistically significant result. The correlation coefficient is - .3250 ($p > .05$). This negative association tells us that attacks from the press may still hurt presidential job approval ratings.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 examined the relationship between the amount of attack news and the public confidence in the press. It stated: *A negative correlation*

exists between the number of attack stories in the media and the public confidence level toward the press. To test the hypothesis, the coding unit was the news paragraph and the unit of analysis was the percentage of attack news paragraphs in a year. The percentages of attack news paragraphs were correlated with the percentage of respondents who replied that they had a great deal of confidence in the press.

The Pearson correlation statistics did not show any significant results although some high coefficients were obtained (See Table 5.10). The correlation between the percentage of attack news paragraphs each election year and the confidence level was - .4208, while the correlation between type of attack and the confidence level was - .5001. The correlation between types of frame and confidence level was .3672. Part of the reason may be that there were only seven cases (seven years) in this study.

We noted that the correlations between types of attack and the confidence level (- .5001) in the four newspapers were stronger than the correlations of the overall tone and the confidence level (- .4208).

Table 5.10

Correlation between attacking/non-attacking, issue/image attack and thematic/episodic frame and confidence in the press

	Tone	Type of Attack	Type of Frame
	Attack	Image	Episodic
Four Newspapers	-.4208	-.5001	-.3672

N=7

When more specifically categorizing the source of attack, we found that although the correlations were not significant, the coefficient of the correlation between attack from the press and the confidence in the press was very strong (r = -.7378), and stronger than the coefficient of the correlation between the attack from political figures and the confidence level (Table 5.11). This may further strengthen the explanatory power of balance theory among the public attitudes toward the press, the press attacking against the president, and the public attitudes toward the president. While the press itself attacks the president, it would be easier for the public to identify the press' attitudes toward the president. That could help explain a stronger relationship found between the press attacks and the confidence in the press.

Table 5.11

Correlation between sources of attack in the four newspapers and confidence in the press

SOURCE OF ATTACK	PEARSON CORRELATION
Percent of Attack from Political Figures	.6907
Percent of Attack from the Press	-.7378

N=7

The source of attack was transformed to how many percentages of articles were attack from political figures, the press, or others in an election year, and only very a few articles were from others, so that if the correlation between the attack from the political figures and the confidence level is positive, the correlation between attack from the press with the confidence level is negative. That is why these two correlations showed almost the same strength, but went to the opposite direction.

Secondary Analysis of Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 examined the relationship between the amount of attack news and the public confidence in the press. Because the time lag of the effects of attack news on the confidence in the press has not been discussed as much as the time lag of agenda setting, it is necessary to empirically explore further to possibilities of a correlation between the attack news and the confidence level at different time intervals. Therefore, this study included a secondary analysis for Hypothesis 3.

Because of the availability of the confidence data (Table 5.12), there were two options to consider in regard to the time intervals: One was to test the effects by year; the other was to choose the time interval by event, just as was done in testing the hypothesis about attack news and the job approval ratings. In doing so, we used three kinds of time-interval confidence poll data: "right-after-election," "one-year-after," and "two-years-after" to test the effect in a yearly manner. To test the effect by the event -- because there were only a small number of confidence polls conducted during the four events and most of them were done after the State of Union Address -- the only option was to test the impact of attack news around the State of Union Address on public confidence after the address. To test the effect on confidence by year, the coding unit was the news story, and the unit of analysis was the year. To test the effect on confidence by event, the coding unit was the news paragraph, and the unit of analysis was the event. The attack news is transformed to percentages, i.e., the percentage of attack news paragraphs or the percentage of attack news stories.

Table 5.12
Confidence polls related to the elections

	CONFIDENCE POLLS			
Year	**State of Union Address**	**Right after election**	**One-year after**	**Two-years after**
1972	None	03/73 (30.80%)	09/73 (30.20%)*a* 12/73 (27.80%)*b*	09/74 (30.90%)
1976	02/76 (20.10%)*a* 03/76 (21.30%)*b*	01/77 (17.80%)	None	02/79 (27.40%)
1980	02/80 (23.00%)	11/80 (20.40%)	09/81 (15.80%)	10/82 (14.60%)
1984	None	11/84 (17.10%)	11/85 (15.20%)	11/86 (19.00%)
1988	04/88 (17.70%)	11/88 (11.50%)	06/89 (17.20%)	11/90 (17.50%)
1992	02/92 (13.00%)	01/93 (13.40%)	02/94 (12.60%)	02/95 (10.60%)
1996	01/97 (11.10%)	01/98 (13.80%)	None	None

*** The percentage shown after the date of confidence poll was the percentage of the respondents who replied "a great deal" of confidence in the press.**

*** The notes of "*a*" and "*b*" shows the different correlations for the time interval between attack news and confidence in the press.**

Because there were two confidence polls after the address in 1976, there were two correlations between the event and public confidence. In the same manner, in 1972 there were two confidence polls for one-year-after and two-years-after, so there also were two correlations for effects on one-year-after and two-years-after confidence. There are several missing cases because there are no data available for that time point.

Table 5.13 summarizes the results of the secondary analysis of attack news effects on the confidence level. The correlation coefficients of the attack news and the confidence by event were close to zero (r= .0023, p= .998 and r= -.1237, p=.876). However, the one-year-after correlation coefficients (r= -.7006, p= .121 and r= -.6776, p= .139) were stronger than the "right-after-election" coefficient (r= -.3542, p= .436). The two-years-after coefficient was the highest (r= -.7577, p= .081), showing the strongest association between the attack news and the confidence in the press.

Table 5.13
Correlation between percentage of attack news stories in different time intervals in the four newspapers and confidence in the press

	PEARSON CORRELATION	N
After State of Union of Address *a*	.0023 (NS)	4
After State of Union of Address *b*	-.1237(NS)	4
Right-after-election	-.3542(NS)	7
One-year-after *a*	-.7006(NS)	6
One-year-after *b*	-.6776(NS)	6
Two-years-after	-.7577(NS)	6

The results of the secondary analysis of Hypothesis 3, based on the time-lag differences, showed that the strongest negative association of attack news and the confidence level were located in the "two-years-after" elections, and the least were those after the address. However, one needs to be careful in making any conclusions because the p values were larger than .05 (the p values of "after the

address" were very high). We can only conclude that the coefficients imply that the undermining effect of attack news on the public confidence in the press seemed to be a delayed effect.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Discussion

This study attempted to address areas that were unexplored in previous presidential news studies. They will be summarized in terms of theory and methods.

Theory

First, this study identified and analyzed three major political communication theories critical to research on how media portray a national political figure. Those theories are agenda setting, framing, and priming. Some researchers noted that agenda setting may encompass some aspects of framing and priming, which are major manifestations of the second level of agenda setting, the effects of attributes of an issue or a political figure portrayed in the media. By using framing and priming, this agenda setting study expanded its horizon in studying attitudinal effects of the agenda setting. Second, while many agenda setting studies examine the relationships between objects and attributes of an issue in the media and objects and attributes of an issue in the public's minds, this is the first agenda setting study to simultaneously investigate the attributes of a president in the media and his job approval ratings, which is linked with the concept of attitudinal effects of mass communication. Third, this study applied balance theory to explain the inverse relationship between the amount of attack news and the confidence level in the press. Balance theory is a social cognition theory, which attempts to explain the strains of interpersonal dynamics. This study adopted it to explain the

interrelationships among the public, the president, and the press, whose tension has been addressed by political communication scholars.

Methods

First, this study goes beyond the conventional "neutral, negative, and positive" categorization of tone of presidential news coverage to include a more aggressive attitude: attack. Attack not only means negative coverage or bad news but it also means a weakening force on the support of the president. Second, this study focused on the trend of the attack news related to the president not only studied election years, but also examined the four key events in each election year, and the link with the presidential job approval ratings. Third, while many agenda setting studies mainly use *The New York Times* as the data source of the media agenda, this study collected news stories from four newspapers, *The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune,* and *The Dallas Mornings News,* to more closely gauge national tendencies. Fourth, a content analysis scheme was presented to provide researchers with a methodology for the study of negative media portrayals of a president. Major factors for media portrayals were identified and explained. They are: (1) amount of coverage, (2) tones of the coverage, (3) types of attack, (4) frames of attack, (5) topics under attack, (6) overall sense, and (7) sources of attack. Through the use of this and related content-analytical schemes, advances can be made in the theory and practice of political communication research.

Summary of the Major Findings

The results from this study offer some insights into the relationships among the president, the press and public opinion. The first hypothesis examined whether the amount of attack news about the president had increased in the major newspapers in the past seven election years. Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Pearson correlation showed no significant change in seven years. However, using a descriptive perspective the percentage across these years does show a generally increasing trend. Hypothesis 2 dealt with the relationship between attack news and presidential job approval ratings. Pearson correlations supported this hypothesis. The ratings of presidential approval are significantly related to the amount of attack on the president. The more attack news about the president, the lower the job approval ratings. When attack news was categorized as issue attack and image attack, only the latter had an inverse relationship with the job approval ratings. The more image-attack news, the lower ratings the president had, which contradicts Hypothesis 2A.

According to the Hypothesis 3, the increased amount of attack news should be correlated with a drop in the confidence level. The correlation coefficient was high, but the correlation was not significant. Therefore, we can only claim that in this study, we found a negative association, in a descriptive sense, between the attack news and the confidence level in the press.

In terms of type of attack, image attack with confidence level was negatively

associated, although the p value was not significant. As to the type of frame, the correlation still was not significant. The correlation coefficient of the episodic frame with the confidence was negative, but the p value was not statistically significant.

A closer look at the correlation of the sources of attack and at the confidence level shows that balance theory seems more applicable. When there is more attack news from the press, the level of confidence in the press decreases. However, the limited nature of the data (seven election years only) precluded a statistically significant relationship.

To further pursue the possible relationships in terms of the time lag between the attack news and the confidence in the press, the secondary analysis of Hypothesis 3 showed the correlation coefficients of the attack news and the confidence by event were close to zero, which implies no effects of attack news on confidence in a short period of time. However, the one-year-after correlation coefficients were stronger than the "right-after-election" coefficients. The two-years-after coefficients were the highest, suggesting the strongest association occurs when the time interval was larger.

All the findings for Hypothesis 3 were tentative rather than conclusive because the correlation coefficients were high, but not statistically significant. However, the results should not be ignored because of statistical limitations. At least, the findings yield some interesting trends.

Implications of the Findings

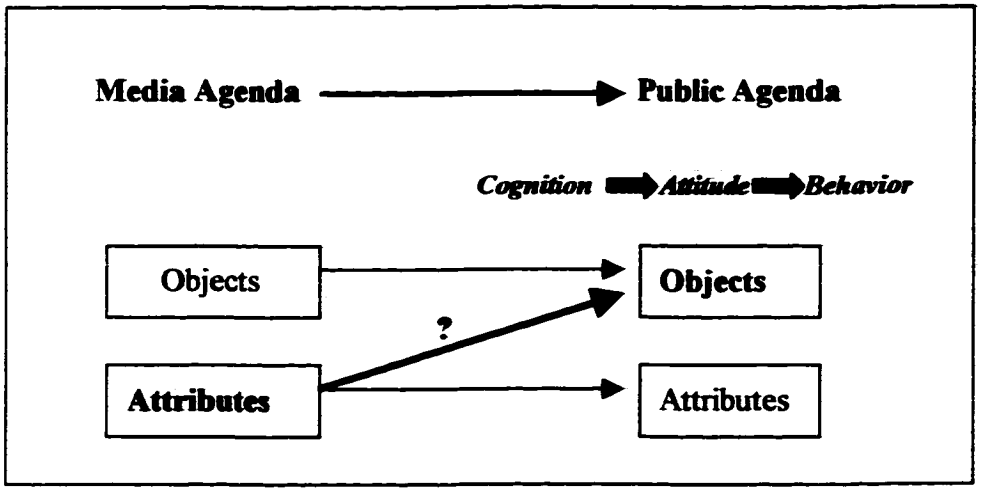
Theoretical Implications

This study found a negative association between the attack news coverage of the president and presidential job approval ratings. And image attacks were more strongly associated with the job approval ratings than issue attacks.

Our understanding of the impact of attack presidential coverage concerns the job approval rating, which is an attitudinal effect rather than a cognitive one. The study is under the umbrella of agenda setting theory, but extends its horizon to the attitudinal dimension. The second level of agenda setting theory focuses on the salience of various attributes of topics, issues, persons, or whatever is reported in the media and the salience in terms of recognition of the attributes of topics, issues, persons, or whatever is in the public's mind. Putting this study in the second level of agenda setting, the results showed that the attributes (attack vs. non-attack, issue attack v. image attack) of the media agenda correlated with the evaluation of the president. One may wonder conceptually what the effect of that path is within the public, from the cognition to the attitude in the context of the second level of agenda setting. But that is an unanswered question in this study. For example, while the focal point in the second level of agenda setting is the match between the attributes of the media agenda and those of the public agenda, would any attributes of the media agenda not only help the public's recognition of the object and its attributes, but also help the *evaluation* of the object and its attributes (See Fig. 6.1)?

This study went directly to the attitudinal effect of the attributes of the media agenda (the diagonal arrow in Fig 6.1). The cognitive effects were not researched. If this study were a cognitive study, it would examine the public's recognition of the attributes of the president to see if there is any relationship between the attributes of the president in the newspapers and the attributes of the president as perceived by the public. If this study were a behavioral study, then we would ask if the attributes of the media agenda would affect the voting behavior. Many aspects of agenda setting theory were not examined in this study, in which the central concern was how the public *evaluates* the president based on the news reports, and accompanying this research interest, mapping this study into the second level of agenda setting theory. Therefore, we may argue that this study added an attitudinal dimension in the map of the second level of agenda setting theory, which used to be more cognitive-oriented.

Fig. 6.1 An illustration of the location of this study and the contribution of it in the framework of agenda setting theory.



*** The shadow areas indicate the data sources of this study**

*** The question mark indicates the attempt of this study to correlate the media agenda and the public agenda.**

Priming studies have claimed that the exposure to a certain issue would affect the criteria that the audience adopts to judge the performance of political leaders. However, this study found that image attacks, instead of issue attacks, have more impact on job approval ratings. It may not be correct to claim that priming is wrong because this study is not replicating any priming research. However, this study potentially points out that the audience is not as rational as priming theory implicitly noted. People do not make the judgment only on the president's performance based on the "issue" that the mass media provide. If the press frequently attacks the president's image, the president's image would become an issue, so people may use the "image" issue to evaluate how the president is doing

his job.

In explaining the relationship between attack news about the president and the public confidence in the press, Heider's balance theory, which was borrowed from interpersonal communication seems to help us understand this mass communication phenomenon. That is, when the other (O, the press) attacks the attitude object (X, the president), the perceiver (P, the public) would have a more negative attitude toward the other (O, the press).

This theory was more applicable in explaining the nullifying effects on confidence when the press was identified as the source of attack. This may suggest another research question: When the president is seen as an attitude object (X), would this interpersonal communication theory apply even better if the press is personified in the news reports, such as when the journalists speak for themselves on issues about the president, the most admired man in the nation?

In addition, image attacks on the president were associated more strongly than issue attacks with the confidence level. Therefore, it seems that Heider's balance theory may have more explanatory power when the image of the most admired man -- rather than the presidential policy performance -- was attacked. Balance theory seems more applicable in a public-presidential image situation rather than a public-policy situation.

Practical Implications

From the analyses in the preceding chapters we can draw a composite

picture of the influences of attack news in society.

Consequences of Attack News for the Public

Americans ordinarily do not pay close attention to the actions of their government, but this lack of attention does not preclude the formation of impressions of how the president is handling his jobs based on news reports (Brody, 1991). The present study does not provide a direct test of this statement, but the results showed attack news coverage of the presidents was associated with the decrease in public job approval ratings. It may imply that the press provides substantive information inputs that work within the public's mind to create images of the president. It is not the central claim in this study that the press manipulated the public by its negative coverage. However, the public should be aware that the negative, or the attack, is a trend in news coverage of the president. It may not be the case that the president does not do a good job; it may be the contemporary practice of the press makes it appear so.

Consequences of Attack News for the Election Process

Because many of the interpretations of political figures, events, and issues are produced by journalists, it is believed that the press is primarily responsible for establishing the perceptual environment for public action in the election. The tradition of the effects research paradigm has categorized effects as cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral. Therefore, after an association between attack news and public support for the president was found, the concern regarding this attack news

research is for voting behavior. Although we cannot extend this finding to the election itself -- such as attack news effects on the evaluation of the candidates, we still ask: How much of an impact does an attack have on a candidate's chances of winning? Table 6.1 shows the comparison between the amount of attack news of the election year and the election outcome.

Table 6.1
A comparison between the amount of attack news and election outcomes

	PERCENTAGE OF ATTACK NEWS STORIES	ELECTION OUTCOME
Nixon 1972	19.3%	Win
Ford 1976	21.4%	Lose
Carter 1980	31.3%	Lose
Reagan 1984	27.3%	Win
Reagan 1988	17.4%	--
Bush 1992	35.1%	Lose
Clinton 1996	28.1%	Win

It seems that the increase and decrease of attack news, instead of the amount itself, affect the election outcome. If the amount of attack news against the president increases, the president loses, and the vise versa. For example, the amount of attack increased from 1972 to 1976, and Ford lost in the election; The same occurred in

the elections in 1980 and 1992. However, in the 1984 and 1996 elections, where the amount decreased, the presidents won the election. Therefore, instead of counting how much is percentage of the attack news, the trend of attack news may predict the election outcome.

Consequences of Attack News for the Press

During the seven elections from 1972 through 1996, the four newspapers have shown an increasingly unhappy story about life in the White House. These trends are not inconsistent with public perceptions of the president. More and more, citizens decry how their presidents have failed to get things done. However, an important issue from this attack news study is the linkage of the attack news with its negative reactions of the American public to the press. While the press may have been driven by the market toward more sensational coverage of politics, it may need to pay more attention to the decline of its credibility, which seems to have been associated with increasing attack news of the "most admired man" to a certain degree. Specifically, if the source of the attack message is the press itself, rather than the political figures (who were mostly used as news sources in presidential coverage) the results of this study showed it is likely more harmful to public confidence in the press. This study showed that the effect on the decrease of confidence in the press was a long-term one, which can be traced to attack news one or even two years earlier. The press may easily neglect the potential harm to the whole image of the business when it gets involved with negative coverage of the

election. Although some researchers may argue negative coverage keeps candidates honest (Haynes and Rhine, 1998), the press still should be aware of the price it eventually may pay when the target of the attack is the president. If negative news coverage is a necessary evil in our society, it would be better to focus more on issues rather than images of the president.

Limitations of the Present Study

As is the case with many other studies, this dissertation raises as many new questions as it answers. The present study, constrained by its research design, has the following limitations:

1) Because poll data were limited by the starting years of the poll, the content analysis in this study cannot go back beyond the year of 1972. Therefore, there are only seven election years available to test the relationship between the amount of attack news and the confidence in the press. The consequence was a high -- but insignificant -- correlation between the two variables. The only hypothesis showing significance in terms of inferential statistics was Hypothesis 2, which contained 24 time points.
2) Although the relationship between attack news and the confidence in the press empirically was strongest when the time interval was two years, it still is unknown as to why it took one or two years to show the effects of attack news on the confidence in the press while it was obviously a short-term effect for attack

news to affect the presidential job approval ratings. This study at the beginning was constrained by the availability of data so the time intervals were designed differently between the attack news and job approval ratings polls (by four key events) and the attack news and the confidence in the press (by year). However, secondary analysis of the correlation between attack news and the confidence poll right after the State of the Union Address showed an opposite result as to the effect of attack news on the job approval ratings. One may wonder if the effect of attack news for the president happens faster than the effect of the attack news on the press. The latter effect needs some time to develop a balanced relationship among the three elements, while the former was more direct, where the target of attack was clearly identified.

3) The present study measures the attack paragraph only at a yes/no direction level. However, the intensity of the attack was not considered. A scale for measuring the degree of attack for each paragraph would detect more dynamics in the news and its relationships with public opinion.

4) The purpose of choosing stories according to the four major events in an election year was to obtain more president-related stories because this exploratory study was not very confident in collecting enough qualified data in the beginning. While it is assumed that more data would be obtained around these events, (especially if there is no relationship between attack news and either job approval ratings or the confidence level), it would be less probable to find significant

results by using a random sampling.

However, the representativeness and some of its explanatory power in results interpretation could have been lost as well. After all, what the image of the press and the president exactly is in the public's mind might be related more to daily reportage. Therefore, content analysis of future presidential studies should try to expand the time frame in each election year to pursue this representativeness.

5) Attack news in different media may have different effects. Becker and McCombs (1975) argued that the effects of agenda setting in the determination of the priority of issue importance were major, but gradual. However, there was a distinction between the effects of the press and that of television. With newspaper influence there was a delayed reaction. They stated that the newspaper agenda of political issues in June is a predictor of voters' agenda in October. With television, the effect was last-minute, but immediate. Therefore, future studies should distinguish the effects of attack news between the newspaper and the television. In addition, television's coverage of politics has now penetrated sections of the electorate who previously were little affected by political communication because they were uninterested. Consequently, agenda setting by the media seems to be becoming more significant in a larger portion of the electorate.

Recommendations for Future Studies

1) Agenda setting research has pointed out that the newspaper has more impact than television in setting the public's agenda. However, this study, which also could be called a presidential image study, may have a different approach in data collecting. The president's image could be built either from the verbal representation or the imaginary system. The most illustrative example is the televised debate between Nixon and Kennedy. Regarding attack news, how a presidential candidate was presented or whether he was portrayed negatively in a non-verbal communication mode -- or by a political commentator in a television commentary genre such as in "Meet the Press" -- would be another research aspect of attack news.

2) This study explored the effects of attack news in the press on the presidential performance evaluations, but it has other ramifications. In this study, we found that the economy was an important topic under attack. The heavy coverage of the economy should make the public more pessimistic about the economy, and further weaken their support of the president. This would be a particularly interesting test in 1992, when economic conditions objectively are improving, so the effect of negative press coverage of the president's economic performance would specifically show its effect on the public evaluation based on the press coverage. Theoretically, this kind of research could link to priming studies, which noted that the exposure of a certain issue would affect the criteria for evaluating

the president.

3) While this study added an attitudinal dimension to the second level of agenda setting (from attributes of the president in the press to public attitudes toward the president), the path from attribute recognition to public attitude toward the president still is unknown. That is, is public recognition of the president consistent with the portrait of the president in the press? If so, will the public use the presidential attributes to judge the president's job performance, as priming research has noted? Therefore, searching presidential issues in the press and in the public may be an important role in future studies.

4) Research on the agenda-setting role of mass media has been guided by the conception of how media content affects the public. However, different degrees of audience's sensitivity to different issues can not be ignored. That is, every issue has different weight in the public minds. The economy has been one of the most important problems, so if the press criticizes the economic performance of the president, the nullifying effect of attack news on his job approval ratings may be different from when the president is criticized for his technology policy or other minor issues. Therefore, the nature of the issue should further be considered.

5) One may wonder if this study is applicable in other societies. For example, in an eastern society, such as Taiwan, where the president may enjoy even more admiration than in the American society, but at the same time, the press

has been increasingly expressed their negative opinions about political institutions. If the president is aggressively portrayed by the press in a negative way, would the public accept these media's portraits? Would his job approval ratings be affected? Would attack journalism hurt the public confidence in the press in the same way as it is in the United States? A comparative study between these two societies may tell us more about the generalizability of the theoretical construction.

With its longitudinal research design, the present study found supportive evidence for attitudinal effects of media agenda setting for evaluating the president. However, we worry that the increased trend of attack news will not help citizens to develop the knowledge needed to assess their president's job performance. By highlighting negativity, media may leave the average citizens without access to substantial information about their presidents. If public opinion were overwhelmingly led by the aggressively negative coverage, American political leaders may be forced to strategically deal with the press. The game-playing occurring between the politicians and journalists may complicate the process of searching for political realities.

Finally, the press should consider what it is doing when it engages in attack journalism. Since we are not likely to see many saints running for presidency, the consensus among media scholars is the press should improve campaign coverage.

For the press' own sake, this study found some evidence that engaging in attack journalism might damage their own credibility with the public. This is at a time when the decline in newspaper credibility and readership is one of the biggest problems that newspapers face.

Appendix A
Table of Constructed Weeks

	Sun.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.
1972Week 1	12/26	12/27	12/28	1/12	1/13	1/7	1/15
Week 2	1/16	1/17	2/01	1/19	1/28	1/21	1/29
Week 3	7/2	7/10	7/4	7/5	6/29	6/30	6/24
Week 4	7/16	7/31	8/1	7/26	7/27	7/14	7/15
Week 5	8/6	8/7	8/15	8/9	8/17	8/4	8/5
Week 6	8/27	9/11	9/12	9/6	8/24	9/1	9/9
Week 7	11/5	10/30	11/7	11/1	11/2	11/10	11/4
Week 8	11/19	12/20	11/28	11/22	11/23	12/1	11/25
1976Week 1	12/21	12/29	12/30	12/24	12/25	1/2	1/10
Week 2	1/11	1/19	1/13	1/28	1/22	1/16	1/24
Week 3	6/27	7/5	6/29	7/7	7/15	7/2	7/10
Week 4	7/25	7/19	8/3	7/21	7/22	7/16	7/24
Week 5	8/1	8/2	8/17	8/18	8/19	8/6	7/31
Week 6	9/5	8/30	9/7	8/25	8/26	8/20	8/28
Week 7	11/7	11/15	11/2	11/3	11/4	11/12	11/20
Week 8	11/21	11/29	11/23	12/1	11/25	11/26	12/4
1980Week 1	12/23	12/31	1/1	1/9	1/3	12/28	1/12
Week 2	1/13	1/21	1/29	1/16	1/17	1/25	1/26
Week 3	8/17	8/18	8/5	8/13	8/7	8/15	8/23
Week 4	8/24	9/1	9/9	9/3	8/28	8/29	9/6
Week 5	7/6	7/14	7/22	7/9	7/10	7/25	7/19
Week 6	7/27	8/4	8/5	7/30	8/7	8/15	8/2
Week 7	10/26	10/27	10/14	10/15	10/16	10/24	11/1
Week 8	11/9	11/10	11/4	11/19	11/6	11/21	11/15
1984Week 1	1/1	1/9	1/10	1/18	1/5	1/20	1/14
Week 2	2/5	2/6	1/24	1/25	1/26	2/3	2/4
Week 3	6/24	6/18	7/3	6/20	6/21	7/6	6/30
Week 4	7/8	7/23	7/10	7/18	7/12	7/27	7/21
Week 5	8/5	8/13	7/31	8/1	8/2	8/17	8/18
Week 6	8/19	8/27	8/28	9/5	8/30	9/7	8/25
Week 7	10/21	10/29	11/6	11/7	10/25	10/26	11/3
Week 8	11/18	11/26	11/20	11/14	11/29	11/23	11/17

	Sun.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.
1988Week 1	1/31	2/1	1/26	1/27	1/28	2/12	2/13
Week 2	12/26	12/27	12/28	1/12	1/13	1/7	1/15
Week 3	7/17	7/18	7/12	7/13	7/14	7/29	7/30
Week 4	7/31	8/15	8/9	8/3	8/18	8/5	8/6
Week 5	8/21	8/29	8/23	8/24	8/25	8/26	8/20
Week 6	9/11	9/19	9/20	9/7	9/22	9/9	9/10
Week 7	10/2	10/10	10/4	10/12	10/6	10/7	10/22
Week 8	10/23	10/31	11/1	10/26	11/10	11/3	10/29
1992Week 1	1/15	12/30	1/14	1/15	1/9	1/17	12/28
Week 2	1/19	1/27	1/21	2/5	1/30	1/24	2/1
Week 3	6/28	6/22	7/7	7/8	7/2	6/26	7/4
Week 4	7/19	7/13	7/14	7/22	7/30	7/24	7/25
Week 5	7/26	8/3	8/4	7/29	8/6	7/31	8/1
Week 6	8/30	8/24	8/18	8/12	8/20	8/28	8/15
Week 7	10/18	10/19	10/13	10/14	10/15	10/30	10/31
Week 8	11/1	11/16	11/3	11/4	11/5	11/13	11/14
1996Week 1	1/7	1/22	1/16	1/10	1/4	1/5	1/13
Week 2	2/4	2/5	2/6	2/7	2/1	1/26	1/27
Week 3	8/11	7/29	8/6	7/31	8/15	8/9	8/3
Week 4	8/18	8/19	9/3	8/28	9/5	8/23	9/7
Week 5	8/4	7/22	7/30	7/24	8/8	8/2	7/27
Week 6	8/25	8/26	8/13	8/21	8/29	8/30	8/24
Week 7	10/20	10/14	10/29	10/23	10/31	10/25	10/19
Week 8	11/3	11/11	11/5	11/20	11/7	11/22	11/16

Appendix B

Coding Instructions

The Effects of Political Attack Discourse in Presidential News Reports:

The Interactions of Attack News Discourse, Public Attitude toward the President and toward the Press, 1972- 1996

The coding instructions apply to newspaper articles from 56 constructed weeks in each election year from 1972 to 1996. Each paragraph in the newspaper items is the coding unit with the whole item as the context unit. A paragraph is a group of sentences or a sentence, which has a physical beginning usually indicated by indentation and ending and expresses a complete thought. Sentences that follow a semicolon or colon, but begin on a new line, such as quotations, are counted as part of the paragraph, not as another paragraph. To be included for recording, a paragraph has to be related to the sitting president. A president-related paragraph must have one of the following key words: the administration, the Washington administration, the president, the name of the president. Otherwise, the paragraph is not considered. Also excluded are paragraphs that deal with events or issues only about the opponent in the campaign. The coding procedure identifies and records the following elements:

1. Coder: K (1), V (2), C (3)

2. Story Number (ID):

3. Article Date: (MM / DD / YY)

4. Name of Newspapers: Four newspapers are included: the *New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune,* and *the Dallas Morning News.*

5. Presidency: The study period includes the following administrations:

Richard M. Nixon(1969-74); Gerald R. Ford (1974-77); James Earl Carter (1977-81); Ronald W. Reagan (1981-89), George Bush (1989-1993), William Clinton (1993-)

6. Tones, Types of attack, and Frames in this News Article (Mark "X" for headlines and paragraphs, and then sum them up)

Tone: It refers that the president was described in attack and non-attack tone. Coders should be aware that negative (or unfavorable) coverage does not necessarily mean attack. The attack coverage refers to an adversarial portray of the president, or stories or sources show an unfriendly, unliking attitude toward the president. The rhetor, including the newspaper writer or the campaigner, contradicts

and challenges the president.

Type of Attack:

Issue Attack: It refers to the adversarial coverage of the issue related to the president.

Image Attack: It refers to the adversarial coverage of character issues, presidential private matters and personalities.

Type of Frame:

Episodic frame: It takes the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances. Episodic frames also involve policy frames instead of political frames. Such as in the Iran-Contra events, episodic framing are news stories that showed rhetors condemning the decision, describes the turmoil and infighting within the inner researchers of the Reagan administration, or provides adversarial analysis of President Reagan's leadership style and his campaign. Example: horse race, last standings in the poll, delegate counts, the size of the crowd at a public rally.

Thematic frame: It places public issues in the more general or abstract context and takes the form of a "takeout" or "backgrounder," report directed at general outcomes or conditions. Example: ideological stances of the candidates and the policy platforms they advocate.

❑ 7. General Topic under Attack:

1) Job:

unemployment, unemployment/depression, unemployment/recession, recession, recovery, labor/union/strike, labor problems, labor management, Taft Hartley, strikes, imports/loss of American jobs balance of payment, trade deficit, demobilization, teens' need for employment

2) Money

inflation, cost of living, tax, food price, gasoline price, housing cost, wages, interest rates, savings and loans, gold standard problem, housing shortage

3) Spending

Budget/deficit/national debt, government spending, military spending, social spending, government spending too much for space, Reagan budget cuts, military budget cuts

4) Welfare

adequate relief, old age pensions, shortages of welfare, social security/welfare, too much welfare, fairness issue: government policies favor rich

5) General economic

Reconversion, general economic, Reaganomics, farms, industrial competitiveness declining, spending more for industry, other economy, small business

6) General international issues

general war/peace/arms race/arms talks, World War II, foreign aid, defense/military/national security, disarmament/nuclear disarmament, atomic bomb, hydrogen bomb, future of United Nations, preparedness of navy and army, general

international problems/foreign relations, foreign policy, getting along with other nations/helping Europe, failure of summit conference, SDI/space spending, imprisoned flyers, peace/war/nuclear war/China/Russia, second rate nation prestige, nuclear testing/arm race, fear of war

7) Soviet/Europe

Afghanistan war, Russian invasion, Soviet, relations/communications with Russia, U-2 incident, Berlin Crisis

8) Asia

Vietnam, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, Quemoy, Formosa, China, Communist blockade of offshore islands, Far East, Communist Red China, Laos, Indonesia, Korean Settlement

9) Mideast

Gulf, Saddam Hussein, Middle East/Persian Gulf crisis, Suez Canal, Egypt, situation in Algeria, Iranian situation

10) Latin America/Africa

South-Central/Latin America, Cuban problem, fear of communism in Cuba, Central America, Africa/Congo, Dominican Republican, Somalia, Iran/Contra, Haiti

11) Law and Order

crime/juvenile delinquency, terrorism/hijacking, amnesty, spying/espionage, CIA/FBI, crime/law and order/riots, lenient judiciary system, Supreme Court, drugs, gun control

12) Health

health care for the elderly, health care, number of people without health care, rehabilitation returning veterans, Salk vaccine, polio, AIDS, alcoholism

13) Environment

environment, water shortages, water pollution, litter and garbage, air pollution, nuclear power plant accidents, nuclear test/wastes

14) Education

education, education costs (quality, tuition, credits), youth

15) Government/Political

communism in U.S.A., federal control/socialism, government leadership, political corruption, Watergate, Nixon, distrust in government, domestic politics, presidential elections, McCarthyism, apathy, moral, American public-the desire to get something for nothing, religion, religion and politics, school prayer, racial/civil rights, protest/demonstrations, draft, college demonstrations; draft card burning, campus unrest/riots, national unity, general unrest, dissatisfaction with government, Communism/socialism, big government

16) Social relations

slums/urban renewal, poverty/homeless, food shortages, population explosion, immigration, refugee problems, aliens, senior citizens, communication/lack of/generation gap, family problems/child rearing, parental discipline/alcoholism, housing/slums/urban renewals/cities are dying, busing, teens' problems:

employment/need for recreation, racial strife

17) Technology

energy, energy crisis, space, technology, transportation, mass transportation, automation, traffic/accidents in traveling

18) Campaign Strategies: Any statements refer to the criticisms of the president's campaign strategies, such as if he is using attack ads for the campaign.

19) Presidential Roles Any statements refer to the criticisms of the president's role playing, such as if he is doing good job in dealing with subordinate's resign..

20) Personality Any statements refer to the criticisms of the president's personality, such as if he is honest about the Iran-Contra event.

21) Others:

8. What is the overall sense one would feel about the president upon reading the article?

He is attacked.

→The news item gives a sense that the president or his policy is not liked, or a sense of adversarity.

He is not attacked.

→The news item gives a sense that the president is fairly treated, or gets a favorable coverage.

9. Who is attacking the president?

If the attacking story is a news analysis or a commentary, then it is coded as *the press*. If the attacking news story has sources, such as a senator, then it is coded as *the political figure*. Other than these, such as demonstrators, it should be coded as *others*.

Appendix C
Newspaper Content Analysis Code Book

The Effects of Political Attack Discourse in Presidential News Reports: The Interactions of Attack News Discourse, Public Attitude toward the President and toward the Press, 1972- 1996

❑ **1. Coder:**

2. Story Number (ID): ❑❑❑❑❑

3. Article Date: ❑❑❑❑❑❑ **(MM / DD / YY)**

❑ **4. Newspapers:**

1) New York Times
2) Los Angeles Times
3) Chicago Tribune
4) Dallas Morning News

❑ **5. Presidency:**

1) Nixon 2) Ford 3) Carter
4) Reagan (81-84) 5) Reagan (85-88) 6) Bush 7) Clinton

6. Tones, Types of attack, and Frames in this News Article (Mark "X" for headlines and paragraphs, and then **sum them up**)

	Tone		**Type of Attack**		**Frame**	
	attack	non-attack	issue	Image	thematic	episodic
Headline						
Paragraph 1						
Paragraph 2						
Paragraph 3						
Paragraph 4						
Paragraph 5						
Paragraph 6						
Paragraph 7						
Paragraph 8						
Paragraph 9						
Paragraph 10						
Total	____	____	____	____	____	____

☐☐ **7. General Topic under Attack:**

01) Job	08) Asia	15) Government/Political
02) Money	09) Mideast	16) Social Relations
03) Spending	10) Latin America/ Africa	17) Technology
04) Welfare	11) Law and Order	18) Campaign Strategies
05) General Economic	12) Health	19) Presidential Roles
06)General International Issues	13) Environment	20) Personality
07) Soviet/ Europe	14) Education	21) Others

☐ **8. What is the overall sense one would feel about the president upon reading the article?**

1) He is attacked.

2) He is not attacked.

☐ **9. Who is attacking the president?**

1) Political figures (such as campaigners or the Congress)

2) The press (such as reporters or commentators)

3) Others (such as scholars)

CODER'S COMMENTS/NOTES: (IF ANY)

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Vita

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