

**Public Cynicism and News Coverage  
in Campaigns and Policy Debates:  
Three Field Experiments**

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**Paper Presented to**

**American Political Science Association Conference**

**New York, NY**

**September 4, 1994**

**Do not cite without the written permission of the authors.**

[C]ynicism is epidemic right now," wrote nationally syndicated columnist David Broder in The Washington Post in early July [July 6, 1994, A 18]. "It saps people's confidence in politics and public officials, and it erodes both the standing and the standards of journalism. If the assumption is that nothing is on the level, nothing is what it seems, then citizenship becomes a game for fools and there is no point in trying to stay informed." A July Washington Post-ABC News Poll seemed to justify Broder's concern [Washington Post , July 3, 1994, A1/A8]. It found that:

--"Overwhelming majorities say they think that members of Congress care more about special interests than about 'people like you' and care more about keeping power than about the best interests of the nation."

--"Large numbers say most candidates for Congress make campaign promises they have no intention of fulfilling and quickly lose touch with the people after coming to Washington."

--"More than a third of those interviewed--37 percent--consistently offered the most negative evaluation when asked their perceptions of the work habits, honesty and integrity of Congress. Less than one-fifth expressed few reservations."

This poll was consistent with nineteen earlier ones done in the past half decade during the tenure of three congresses and two presidents. In these, "the average scores for Congress have been 33 percent approval and 62 percent disapproval." The July 1994 poll showed 34 percent approval and 61 percent disapproval.

Similarly, a poll for the Associated Press [July 27] showed more agreeing that the parties to the health care reform debate were "mostly trying to gain political advantage" than thought that they were trying to "do best for country."

None of this would be worrisome were it not that these figures represent a significant

drop from the not too distant past. A Time magazine survey reported that where 60% believed in 1964 that the government would generally try to do the right thing, in 1994, 10% do. "Distrust in government has increased over time," writes Eric Uslaner in The Decline of Comity in Congress [1993] "and the correlation is almost as impressive, despite the much smaller sample size, as that for trust in people."

A rich tradition of inquiry asks what such signals mean. In early work, Miller saw decline in "trust of government" indicators as a sign of erosion in the legitimacy of the political system [Miller, 1974]. But subsequent research showed that many who expressed low trust in institutions also expressed strong support for democratic norms [Barnes and Kaase et al, 1979]. A comprehensive survey, encompassing the jump in confidence during the early Reagan years, ultimately led Lipset and Schneider [1987] to conclude that "the confidence gap never amounted to a full-scale legitimacy crisis. Americans retained their faith in the country's basic institutional order. The polls always showed a deep-seated allegiance to the values of democracy and free enterprise."

How such indicators came to be, also aroused curiosity. Were they, as Schumpeter's work would suggest ((1950) 1975) a reflection of the delivery of services by the state, with over-promising undermining political support? Were voters dissatisfied with the policy alternatives set before them by the major parties [Miller, 1974], with, as Miller showed, the most cynical the ones who disapproved of the policy alternatives offered by both Humphrey in Nixon in 1968? Was it, as Citron argued, that cynicism was the byproduct of dissatisfaction with the incumbents not the policy alternatives they offered [Citron, 1974], a conclusion that seemed to be borne out by the correlation in 1972 data between approval of presidential performance, positive affect for the president and trust.

Since at least part of what we know of presidential performance and of policy alternatives is brought to us by the press, one might well ask, what effect if any does how

candidates and public policy debates are covered have on public cynicism about leaders and their performance? In The Confidence Gap [(1983) 1987], Lipset and Schneider argue that the news media are "primarily responsible for conveying to the public an impression of how the nation's institutions are performing." The media figure in Leone's account of confidence in government as well [Leone, 1994].

### **How Candidates and Policy Debates are Covered**

If media coverage is one of the possible reasons for cynicism and mistrust of politicians, then the nature of media coverage of campaigns and public policy debates must be understood. In the past twenty years, media critics of news have noted a fundamental change in the distribution of media coverage from issue-based stories to stories which emphasize who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or to stay ahead (Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993).

Clearly, there is a story to be told about the relative positions of candidates in an election. An election is after all a race whose outcome is the most important feature. The story of the race must be told and is. The problem occurs when strategy stories dominate the news hole, crowding out discussions more relevant to the issues of governance.

Take for example a hypothetical election for mayor. One of the candidates seeks to solve part of the city's financial problems by privatizing city services. This story can be covered by emphasizing the problems that the city faces and how privatization will help to solve these problems or make them worse. The same issue can be covered by emphasizing how privatization alienates certain voting constituencies and appeals to others, positioning candidate X favorably and candidate Y unfavorably with the electorate. When the privatization issue is told from the latter perspective, an issue is treated in a strategic style which we hypothesize increases cynicism.

Two authors recently have made the argument that media coverage of politics has taken on a strategic format more than a policy (or problem-solution) format in recent years. In Dirty Politics (1992), Kathleen Hall Jamieson vigorously pursues the distinction between "strategy" coverage and "problem-solution" coverage. Thomas Patterson in his 1993 book calls the distinction "game" or "horse race" coverage and policy coverage.

Jamieson argues that strategy coverage is marked by several features: (1) winning and losing as the central concern; (2) the language of wars, games, and competition; (3) a story with performers, critics, and audience (voters); (4) performance and style and perception of the candidate are central; (5) polls and position are weighed heavily in evaluating campaigns and candidates.

Patterson characterizes strategy in almost identical fashion emphasizing that (1) the game of the campaign provides the plot of a story; (2) that polls promote and support strategy coverage; (3) that the electorate is positioned as spectators of candidates who are performers. Patterson notes that because journalists are interested in stories and election campaigns evolve as the ebb and flow of position in the race, it is "natural" to the journalistic endeavor that the happening which is the race be one of the primary objects of coverage.

Patterson points out, however, that strategy coverage is not just an aspect of media coverage of politics but is becoming the dominant mode of coverage. From 1988 to 1992 horse race coverage of election events on the nightly news rose 8% from 27 % in 1988. Tracking polls accounted for another 33%. Policy coverage was down from 40 % in 88 to 33% in 92. Patterson's studies of the New York Times front page headlines from 1960 to 92 (see his figure 2.1, p. 74) show a stark contrast from 1972 forward with policy headlines taking a back seat to strategy coverage.

Jamieson has argued that the strategy frame is being generalized by journalists from campaigns to governance and discussions of public policy issues. In the Health Care

debate, our own content analyses of print and broadcast coverage in major media markets show that fully 54 percent of newspaper articles were strategic while 35 percent were primarily issue oriented or factual.

### **Strategy Coverage and Cynicism**

There is a simple theory of human behavior behind the strategy approach to coverage. The theory goes like this. People do things for reasons. Some reasons are simple, some complicated; some are self-interested, some are altruistic; some are aimed at controlling others, some at being controlled. So too for politics, and political actors.

In the eyes of the electorate, politics is not an abstract, rational process, it is people. As people, politicians can and should be understood in the same way that other people are understood-- by their motivations.

The central goal of campaigns, candidates and elections is winning. All actions are placed in this interpretive frame so that the motivation for action (of any sort whether a policy choice, personal style, and so on) is to be understood by a single, simple human motivation - the desire to win and to take the power which elected office provides. In such an interpretive frame all actions are tainted -- seen not as the desire to solve social ills, redirect national goals, or make a better future for our offspring but rather seen in terms of winning. Winning is equivalent to advancing one's own agenda, one's own self-interest, and so the actions stand not for themselves but for the motivational system which gave rise to them-- self-interest. In this way, actions are re-interpretable as serving the candidate's underlying motivations.

In the strategy structure, policy positions are interpreted as a means of gaining a voter block to advance the candidacy or retain a position in the polls. Candidate words and actions are seen as the outward signs of strategic intent and cast as maneuvers rather than the forms of self expression.

This analysis is not meant to suggest that journalists reason this way or that they believe that candidates are only driven by a single motivation, self-interest and the desire to win. However, if candidates are presented as if this were the case and if people's experience of the political process is only through the vicarious experience provided by the media, then people's experience of candidates, campaigns, and perhaps even governance may become dominated by this interpretive frame.

This frame encompasses the strategy typology because winning and losing is central, polls tell who is winning and losing, the story or plot line is always present through the conflict between the candidates whose self-interests are at odds, the language of war, competition and sports is the language of all self-interests which are in conflict in 0-sum events. In short, understanding politics as a human endeavor with simple human motivations (and the motivation is that of winning and pushing aside one's opponent), invites precisely the kind of stories that journalists want to write about.

Patterson, Jamieson and others have argued that one of the potential consequences of excessive strategy coverage is cynicism in the electorate. Both argue that this cynicism results from the spectatorship that the strategy format engenders. An alternative hypothesis is that cynicism is a likely outcome of strategy coverage but not because of spectatorship. On the contrary, strategy coverage may engender involvement with the story, the candidate and the campaign in part because the story is a human story, a conflict, a competition from which winners and losers emerge. There is tragedy, pathos, and joy. But the story being told is one with a particular set of motivations driving the characters. It is the story of men and women driven to win at all costs.

This consistent story line can have negative consequences for the audience. People use news coverage as a part of the basis of their decision-making about elections. Who shall I vote for? If I don't vote, who shall I back or lean toward? Decision-making involves choices

among alternatives and a weighing of costs and benefits in consequences to the individual (and perhaps the larger society).

If all candidates are described as motivated by self-interest, and all their actions as calculated to advance that self-interest, then all candidates could come to be seen to have negative attributes tainted fundamentally by self-interest rather than commitment to the greater good.

Three consequences follow from an analysis by the public of political actors seen as primarily self-interested: choose the lesser of two evils under the assumption that both actors are self-interested but one less so than the other. One solution is to choose to side with a candidate whose self-interests seem to be similar to one's own. This strategy fails in the extreme case because all fronts portrayed by the candidate are interpreted as mere artifice. Or choose not to vote because no candidate is any different from any other, all being driven to act only to advance their own self interest. Or in the worst case (which George Will [Newsweek, July 11, 1994] might call the realist case), reject the whole political process as fundamentally flawed since it requires candidates to act in ways that maximize the chances to win and hence lying, misrepresentation, and play-acting are endemic.

Strategic coverage may, in other words, invite the attribution of cynical motives to political actors in campaigns and in public policy debates, not because the electorate is distanced from the process but precisely because the electorate is drawn into the process and through a rational analysis of the politicians they have come to know through strategic coverage, begin to reject the actors and ultimately the process.

### **Hypotheses**

The research presented in this paper examines the effects of strategic and issue-based coverage of political campaigns and public policy debates on the electorate's cynicism about political actors and ultimately government. We expect that strategic coverage will tend



to activate cynical reactions over baseline levels of cynicism and over that of groups exposed to issue-oriented coverage. Both print and broadcast media should exhibit similar effects.

## **OVERVIEW**

To test the effects of various styles of news coverage on cynicism about political actors and institutions, three major studies were undertaken. The first, reported in part earlier (Jamieson & Cappella, 1993), studied the effects of print and broadcast news coverage of a political campaign on audience members' cynicism about the candidates. Two field experiments were conducted and are reported here. This research was sponsored by the Markle Foundation. The second research project, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, tried to extend the results of the campaign cynicism study to a public policy debate -- health care reform. Two studies are presented. The first is a field experiment of the effects of various styles of print news coverage on cynicism about the actors and groups involved in health care reform. The second is also a field experiment centered around the NBC Special "To Your Health." Because the results of three separate studies are covered, many of the details of the research will be glossed in this paper. These details will be made available in later publications.

## **POLITICAL NEWS, CAMPAIGNS, AND CYNICISM**

Two field experiments evaluating the effects of issue and strategy coverage on cynicism in the context of a political campaign were conducted during a week in March, 1993. One was done on-site in 7 US cities but only included exposure to Broadcast materials (Broadcast-only). The other was also on-site in the same 7 cities and included exposure to Broadcast and Print (Broadcast-Print) news.

## **METHODS**

Subjects. 276 participants were recruited in Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, Cleveland, Detroit, New York City, Portland, and Ft. Lauderdale, by posting notices in church

newsletters, community centers, and so on. Although the sample is not random, every effort was made to make the sample representative of the population of voters. Subjects were paid for volunteering.

**Stimuli.** Great attention was given to the creation of realistic print and broadcast stimuli. The topic of the stories was the Philadelphia mayoral election of 1991. With the cooperation of a local newspaper and a local TV station in Philadelphia, several news stories pertaining to the mayor's race were selected and evaluated for their issue or strategy orientation.

When the segments were clearly of one type or the other, they were left unchanged. The newspaper stories were rewritten by a national political reporter to the alternative structure; strategy became issue and vice versa. Every effort was made to retain as much continuity in content as possible. Six print news stories were selected for use in the studies.

The broadcast segments retained almost all of the original visual material but the introductions of the news segments and the voiceovers were changed to emphasize issue orientations, rather than the more typical strategy orientations. Five broadcast segments were used in the studies, simulating a week's programming.

The print segments were reset using the same font and column layout of the original stories. The broadcast segments were embedded in a typical 30 minute local newscast, with the story about the mayoral election always the lead story.

Stories for the control groups were of equivalent length, complexity, and tone to the election stories they replaced but the content was irrelevant to the mayoral election.

Finally, one of the televised debates among the four mayoral candidates was edited to 30 minutes. The debate was shown to all participants prior to completion of the final questionnaire.

**Design and Procedures.** Both test groups employed a posttest-only design with a

control group. A pretest questionnaire was administered which obtained demographic information, reports on political sophistication, and (with regard to the presidential election of 1992), measures of political cynicism and personal narratives about the election.

In the two field experiments, a researcher was dispatched to each of the seven sites. Participants first filled out the pretest questionnaire. They received news materials for 5 consecutive days which they watched and/or read in their own homes. On the sixth day, everyone in the research site came together as a group to watch the final debate and fill out the posttest forms.

A broadcast-only version was employed because most voters get the majority of their news about politics from television. To simulate this situation, it was necessary to require exposures solely to broadcast materials. Three experimental groups were formed via random assignment while trying to equalize distribution by race, sex, age, and education across groups. The groups received only broadcast news, one half hour segment a night for five nights, issue versions, strategy versions, or control versions.

A broadcast-print version exposed participants to print and broadcast materials over a five day period. Five groups were run: control (C); broadcast-issue, print-issue (II); broadcast-strategy, print-issue (SI); strategy-issue (SI); strategy-strategy (SS). Otherwise, this experiment was identical to the broadcast-only version.

## RESULTS

The only results presented here are those concerned with cynicism. Self reports of likelihood of voting were presented previously (Jamieson & Cappella, 1993). Findings related to learning, media consumption, political sophistication and so on will be the subject of future papers and a book under contract to Oxford University Press.

### Sample and Stimuli

Demographic characteristics of our non-random sample are presented elsewhere

(Jamieson & Cappella, 1993). Our participants mimic a national voting and census sample in age, race, and gender, but are more educated.

Random assignment to condition was successful as no differences across experimental groups were found in any demographic category or in political sophistication or cynicism about the presidential election of 1992.

The print and broadcast stimuli were carefully evaluated to determine whether they were functioning as we had intended them to. The data reported in our previous paper show that the issue and strategy styles were successfully manipulated without altering relevance or comprehensibility.

### **Measuring Cynicism**

Cynicism was measured using three different types of questions: 6-point strongly agree -- strongly disagree statements; forced choice among pairs of statements; and forced choice of three from a group of six statements. The statements focused on the motivations of candidates. More cynical responses were those which described the candidate as manipulative, self-interested, focused almost exclusively on winning, and seeking advantage in every substantive position taken. The non-cynical responses described the candidate as focused on solving problems, providing real alternatives for voters, honest in the messages sent, and taking positions because they are needed to solve problems.

The questions are summarized in Appendix 1 along with their reliabilities where appropriate. Four groups of responses emerged: a forced choice measure (labeled CYNFC), a selection measure (CYNSELECT), and two agree-disagree measures (6 items, CYNAD6, and 3 items, CYNAD3).

All these indicators of cynicism correlate with one another positively (range .21 to .52,  $p < .000$  in all cases) suggesting they are measuring a similar concept. Also, when these measures (or ones very similar in structure and content) are compared to NES measures of

cynicism about government, correlations range from .37 to .44,  $p < .000$  suggesting that the indices have a degree of construct validity in addition to their face validity. The proof, however, is in the predictions.

### **Cynicism and Issue-Strategy Coverage**

First consider the results from the broadcast-only study. Table 1 presents the mean cynicism scores at post-test for each of the four indices for each condition. Table 2 gives the significance levels for all t-test comparisons hypothesized.<sup>2</sup> Our hypotheses were that cynicism in the strategy condition would be elevated over that of the control and that the issue coverage would yield lower cynicism than the control.

Cynicism scores for those receiving strategy coverage in the broadcasts is greater than the control in 3 of 4 indices, 2 reaching normal levels of significance. None of the 4 indices show cynicism lowered in the issue condition. The six item agree-disagree measure of cynicism is insensitive to variations in the style of news coverage.

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Tables 1 & 2 here

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In the broadcast-print experiment, participants received both broadcast and print exposures to issue or strategy styles of coverage. The consequences of these exposures are presented in Tables 3 and 4 which present the mean cynicism scores over four indices and t-tests evaluating hypothesized effects.

We had hypothesized that cynicism would be elevated in the SS (Broadcast strategy and Print strategy) condition over II and that SS levels of cynicism would be greater than control levels of cynicism, while II would be less than control. We assumed further that broadcast strategy coverage alone would raise cynicism over that of the control while the same effect would be found with print strategy coverage alone. We had no clear

expectations about the mixed conditions of strategy and issue coverage across media.

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Tables 3 & 4 & 5 here

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The most consistent patterns are found once again with strategy coverage. Strategy coverage tends to elevate cynicism of readers or watchers over that of the control on three of the four indices used (again the 6 item agree-disagree measure is not sensitive). Issue coverage depresses cynicism relative to the control on one index but not on the others. This effect is not consistent however. Cynicism in the SS conditions is greater than cynicism in the II conditions on all four indices with 2 of these 4 differences statistically significant. In two-way ANOVAs no significant interactions between print and broadcast coverage were found.

Overall, strategic coverage of campaigns tends to elevate people's cynical responses to the political actors in the campaign. This is especially true of the broadcast news coverage in our study and less true of print coverage. Issue coverage in either medium does not consistently produce reductions in cynicism relative to the control, although the cynicism of those exposed to issue coverage seems more likely to be lower than those exposed to strategy coverage.

### **PRINT NEWS, PUBLIC POLICY, AND CYNICISM**

The hypotheses about cynicism and news coverage were also tested in the context of a public policy debate -- the health care reform debate which has raged for the past year. In March, 1994, a field experiment testing the effects of various styles of news coverage on people's cynicism (among other outcomes) about the health reform debate was carried out. In June, 1994, a second field experiment was conducted assessing the effects of broadcast coverage of health care reform on cynicism through the vehicle of NBC's special, "To Your

Health." The results of both of these studies are reported here.

## **EFFECTS OF PRINT NEWS**

### **METHODS**

**Subjects.** Approximately 350 people from six media markets (NYC; Philadelphia; Washington, DC; Dallas; LA and Chicago) were recruited to participate in the field experiment through notices posted in fraternal, social, and religious groups, work and other settings. The sample was not random and participants were recruited for pay.

**Stimuli.** The types of news coverage tested were chosen to reflect our reading of the kinds of coverage which journalists had been giving to health care reform from September 1993 through March 1994. These included:

- ISSUE: articles focusing on problems facing the country's health care system and their solution.
- GROUPS: articles focusing on which social and institutional groups would be harmed and benefitted by various health care reform proposals.
- STRATEGY: articles focusing on winning and losing the health care reform debate; strategic maneuvering for advantage in advancing one's own program or undermining that of an opponent.
- PROCESS: articles focusing narrowly on specific legislative tactics by various congressional committees as health care reform moves forward.
- GSP: a combination of group, strategy and process articles.
- IGSP: a combination of all 4 types of news articles.
- CONTROL: news articles on current affairs other than health care reform.

Fourteen articles were selected for use in the Issue, Groups, Strategy, and Process categories. The GSP and IGSP groups were created from the other four groups of articles. The articles were recent contributions from major newspapers and news magazines

circulating in each of the six media markets studied. Some op-ed pieces were included as well. The articles in each category were chosen to provide a balanced treatment of the various plans for health care reform. When an op-ed piece attacked the need for reform, an article with the opposing position was also included. The study was not interested in changing people's attitudes so balanced treatment was important.

Design and procedures. A research assistant was on-site for a full week in each of the media markets. He or she administered a pre-test questionnaire to each of the participants before any news articles were read. Everyone received 15 news articles, 3 per day, to read. One factual article on the basic issues in health care reform was common to all groups including the control. The control received 14 other news articles on current affairs but not on the health care debate.

At the end of the week, all participants meet together to watch an edited, 20 minute debate on health care which had previously appeared on C-Span. They filled out the final questionnaire, and were debriefed.

Seven experimental groups were formed in each location. The various conditions were determined by type of news articles read. The types were chosen to reflect our reading of the kinds of coverage which journalists had been giving to health care reform from September 1993 through March 1994. These are described above and labeled ISSUE, GROUPS, STRATEGY, PROCESS, GSP (a combination of group, strategy and process), IGSP (a combination of all 4 types of articles), and CONTROL.

The final questionnaire was designed to elicit information on learning, attitudes, political sophistication, media consumption, and cynicism as they related to health care reform. Only the cynicism data are reported here.



## RESULTS

### Sample and Stimuli

Space limitations prohibit a detailed discussion of the demographic characteristics of the sample but the chief characteristics may be summarized as follows. Our participants were more highly educated (58 percent college degree or higher), more female (60 percent), and more Democratic (47 percent) than national samples. With regard to age and race they were roughly comparable to national norms.

Random assignment to condition was successful for various demographic variables, as well as media consumption, attitude, political sophistication, and cynicism variables. The participants reported following instructions about reading news articles (or were dropped from analysis). They also found the news articles realistic, like the ones they normally find in newspapers, but they reported reading them somewhat more closely than they normally would have.

The news articles themselves were carefully evaluated before taking them into the field. Evaluation took two forms: a structural and syntactic analysis of the stories and a student sample's judgments of the stories. Again space limitations only allow us to present the conclusions from these tests. Readability, long sentences, and average word length of the articles do differ between experimental and control conditions, but experimental groups are more readable than the control. Lowered readability of the control is due to longer words used and more passives. The differences across conditions works against hypothesis since the less readable texts in the control group could make it more difficult to learn, frustrating the reader and increasing the cynical response of the controls. The opposite is true of these news stories: those related to health are more readable and so should be less frustrating.

Ratings of news stories by judges found them to be generally consistent with what the experimenters had assumed about the articles. Process stories told the most about "tactics"

while issue stories told the least. Issue stories gave the most information about which plan to support, process stories least. Strategy and process stories made people feel most cynical, issue stories least. Issue and group stories gave the most information about how groups were affected, process stories least. Issue stories were read most closely, process stories least.

Overall the sample's characteristics, the random assignment to condition and the selection of news stories were sufficiently effective to carry out a fair test of the hypotheses.

### **Cynicism Measures**

Measures of cynicism used here were similar in format and content to those used in the previous study. Obviously they were adjusted to the context of the health care debate. The three formats -- agree-disagree, forced choice, and selection -- clustered into four groups once again but the clusterings were slightly different. Eight agree-disagree measures clustered to yield an index labeled CYNAD. The selection question yielded CYNSELECT. The forced choice options produced two forced choice groupings CYNFC1 and CYNFC2.

The reliabilities for these four groups are reported in Appendix 2. The four indices intercorrelated positively at least at  $p < .01$  for all pairs except CYNSELECT and CYNFC2 which correlated only at .09. The measures have some construct validity as well. Three of the four indices correlate positively and significantly with the NES measure of government efficacy ("government can't do anything right") and correlate with the hypothetical "I wouldn't vote for any of the plans" when faced with four other alternatives. Only the CYNSELECT scale fails both tests. The scale was retained anyway because of its successful performance in the previous study on both construct and predictive validity.

### **Cynicism and Newspaper Coverage**

Table 6 presents the means on four indicators of cynicism across the seven experimental conditions. Our hypotheses were that strategy, group, process, and GSP

coverages would all elevate cynicism relative to the control group and that issue and IGSP coverage would at worst yield cynicism equal to that of the control and at best lower it.

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Table 6 & 7 here

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The levels of statistical significance for t-tests comparing each experimental group to the control are presented in Table 7. The results confirm our assumptions about the continued negative effects of strategy and strategy-based coverage but flatly contradict our assumptions about the workings of issue-oriented coverage. In effect, all forms of coverage elevated cynicism above that expressed by the control group.

When the strategy-based exposures are combined into a single group and the issue-based coverages are combined into a single group, the results are clearer still. Issue coverage was as "effective" in increasing cynical responding as was strategy coverage.

The above results are unaffected by considering subgroups which are more politically involved, more educated, more exposed to news, closer followers of health care debate, more politically sophisticated, and so on. The effects are robust across the various types of participants.

These conclusions must be considered surprising at least and perhaps even disturbing. They are consistent with our earlier findings about the role of strategy coverage in activating cynical response but also suggest that, at least in the context of the health care reform debate, issue coverage, too, may be an activator of cynical response.

## EFFECTS OF BROADCAST NARRATIVE NEWS ON CYNICISM

In this section, the effects on the audience's cynical responses to health care of the NBC special "To Your Health" are presented.

### Methodology

Subjects. Participants were solicited from the pool of participants in the health care reform field study conducted in March and described in the previous section. Interviewers attempted to contact all the original participants to request their participation in exchange for a pay (\$20 -\$40 depending on condition). As a result of vacations, relocation, and changed telephone numbers, interviewers could not contact the entire original group. Of the original 352 participants, 248 participated in this study.

Design. The participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Interviewers telephoned participants in the first condition (PWP) the week before the NBC Special (Pre-test), asked them to watch the program (Watch), and then telephoned between 2 and 3 days after the program (Post-test). In the second condition (WP), interviewers asked participants to watch the NBC Special (Watch) and then interviewed them between 2 and 3 days after the program (Post-test). Participants in the final condition (P) were only telephoned between 2 and 3 days after the program. There were 63 participants in the PWP condition, 67 participants in the WP condition, and 118 participants in the P condition.

The NBC special. "To Your Health" was a two hour special produced by NBC's news division and aired without commercial interruption. The format was a mix of personal stories, interviews with panels of politicians, experts, and business leaders, questions from audience members, and about 30 minutes of Hillary Clinton. The NBC special cannot be considered a standardized news format. It was long, a mix of personalized stories, talking heads, town meeting and factual information. It averaged approximately a 5.8 percent rating at 923,000 households per rating point.

Our expectations about the effects of the special on cynicism depend in part on the nature of the medium of television and in part on the content of coverage. We hypothesized that the special would have the effect of reducing audience cynicism about health care reform, at least in the short run, if the special meet certain criteria. It must avoid focusing on political strategizing; it should emphasize personal narratives with real people in involving situations; it should avoid confrontative debates between health care policy wonks<sup>3</sup>; the political actors should present themselves as sincere individuals of good intention (a natural consequence of the television medium if Hart's (1994) analysis can be believed). In our judgement the special, whatever its other weaknesses, did all of these things.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample Characteristics**

The participants, as before, were not a random sample but a recruited sample. They were more educated (60 percent college educated or higher), more female (62 percent), and more Democratic (52 percent) than the population as a whole. 76 percent were Caucasian, 17 percent African American, and 5 percent Hispanic, Asian-American or other. The average age was 36-45, ranging from 18-26 to over 75. About 48 percent said they had been following the health care debate fairly or very closely while 52 percent said they had been following it not too closely or not at all.

The participants were randomly assigned to the three groups described above (PWP, WP, and P). No significant demographic differences across groups in age, gender, political party, race, or education resulted. A marginal difference between watchers and non-watchers was found in reports of how closely the debate was being followed. Watchers were more likely to say they were following more closely. These reports may have been the result of the watchers being asked to watch the special and heightening their sensitivity to following the debate.

Ninety three percent of those who watched the program (120 recruited to watch and 15 watched on their own) reported that they watched an hour or more with 76 percent watching the entire program. Of the watchers, 85 percent said that they did not channel surf and of those who did, only 5 percent switched channels more than usual. The vast majority (92 percent) correctly identified the format of the special as a combination of interviews, panels, and personal stories and only a very small minority (9 percent) incorrectly said that Ross Perot personally had an opportunity to present his views on health care.

### **Cynicism and Narrative News**

The telephone interviews necessitated using fewer questions to assess audience cynicism. Seven questions were selected from previous measures: 3 forced choice and 4 agree-disagree. These are summarized in appendix 3 under the names CYNFC and CYNAD. A third index which was the average of the two was also calculated -- CYNTOT.

To determine whether or not general levels of cynicism decreased after watching the NBC special, paired t-tests were done. The results are presented in the Table 8 below and show reliable decreases in cynicism on all three measures.

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Table 8 here

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Despite these clear decreases from pre to post-testing, one might argue that pre-testing sensitized the audience members to cynicism and they lowered their cynicism upon second testing to provide the socially desirable response. Given the increasing tendency for the American public to state their political cynicism on polls, it is a little disingenuous to suppose that the part of the public making up our sample has suddenly become reluctant to express its cynicism. In fact, an alternative argument might be made that the socially acceptable response is the cynical one.

Nevertheless, in order to draw a strong conclusion about real as opposed to artifactual effects of the special on cynicism, it is necessary to look at differences between those pre-tested and those not pre-tested on their post-test scores on cynicism.

In table 9, means for post-test cynicism are presented for those who were pretested and watched the special and those who were not pre-tested and also watched. Overall cynicism and forced choice cynicism exhibit no differences. The implication is that the two groups can be combined into a group of watchers but, more importantly, that test sensitization cannot be used as the reason to account for post-test changes from pre-test scores on these indices. The same is not true for CYNAD where there are significant differences such that those who were pre-tested had significantly lower cynicism scores than those who were not pre-tested.

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Table 9 here

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Whether the PWP and WP groups are equivalent or not, watchers may have lower cynicism than non-watchers. Indeed, if they do not, then the case for the effect of watching on cynicism is undermined. Table 10 tests for differences in cynicism between those who watched and those who did not watch. Those who watched always have lower levels of cynicism than those who do not watch with the effects at or very near to standard levels of statistical significance. These results in combination with pre-post differences and the results for watchers in the WP and PWP groups indicate that CYNTOT and CYNFC are real decreases rather than artifactual effects of watching the NBC special.

But what about the CYNAD measure? Is the pre to post drop in CYNAD scores and the significant difference between watchers and non-watchers all an artifact of pretest sensitization? The array of means across the three important groups for CYNAD are

instructive on this question, if not definitive: for pre-tested watchers  $M1 = .654$ , for watchers not pre-tested,  $M2 = .701$ , and for non-watchers,  $M3 = .716$ . The order of the means is as it should be for a combined sensitization and a media effect that is  $M3 > M2$  but the difference is not reliable and so we cannot reject the hypothesis that the drop in CYNAD is due to test sensitization, even though it is difficult to see how sensitization would work in this context with these questions and difficult to understand why sensitization would operate in one case and not the other.

In sum, there is a real possibility that the NBC special reduced cynicism (perhaps only temporarily) about health care reform and the motivations of its chief architects and critics. The results must be considered highly suggestive if not completely definitive.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The three field experiments reported in this paper support several conclusions. (1) Strategic campaign coverage activates audience cynicism in both print and broadcast media. (2) Issue coverage in political campaigns does not consistently depress cynicism, although neither does it elevate cynicism. (3) Strategy styles in print coverage of complex public policy debates (such as health care reform) activates cynicism. (4) Issue styles in print coverage of complex policy debates also activates cynicism. (5) Narrative news, such as the NBC special, de-emphasizing strategy, and emphasizing simple, personalized, and involving aspects of a complex controversy can buffer or reduce cynicism.

The consequences of strategic coverage for increasing cynicism confirm our initial expectations about this approach to reporting. Perhaps strategic coverage does induce a distancing in the audience inviting it to accept the role of spectator rather than participant. Spectatorship of a process whose outcomes fundamentally affect the spectator's daily life may indeed be the basis of cynicism.

An alternative account holds that strategic coverage constantly reminds the audience



of the self-interest of actors in winning the campaign or the public policy debate. When the motivations of all sides in a campaign or debate are tainted by accusations of self-interested action aimed solely at winning, a rational response in the long run is to dismiss both sides, and eventually dismiss the process itself. In short, cynicism may be a rational response to the flow of strategic messages.

But what about issue coverage? While it sometimes yielded less cynical reactions than strategy coverage in the campaign context, these results were not consistent. Worse, it had the same effects as strategic coverage in the health care context. Why should issue coverage increase cynicism in the health care debate?

One possible account takes into consideration the complexity of the health care debate and its "oppositional" character in print news articles. Health care reform is a complex issue, beyond the understanding of most citizens, who after almost a year of intense media coverage, still show low levels of accuracy about the President's plan and those of his competitors. Even when knowledge about health care reform is fairly good, people do not feel comfortable reaching a decision about what approach would be best. We are all somewhat confused about this monumentally important issue. At the same time, much ordinary news coverage and the kinds of articles we gave our participants is oppositional in the sense that every position taken is immediately countered by a critical rejoinder. Even the issue-based op-ed pieces we gave our participants were balanced by contrary op-eds.

As a result of all this oppositional commentary, readers may be increasingly confused or, worse, increasingly frustrated by all the contrary voices picking apart every solution put forward to the problem of health reform. Just as strategic coverage paints the motives of each actor in negative colors, and leads to the rejection of all alternatives, so issue coverage of a health care from an oppositional point of view may lead to the rejection of all alternatives in the debate. Just as cynicism may be the result of the rejection of all candidates as self-

interested manipulators in campaigns, so cynicism may be the result of the criticism and apparent rejection of all solutions to the problem of health care as ineffective.

Campaigns are usually about people rather than about policies. The electorate may feel quite comfortable in making up its mind about the personal qualities of a candidate to take a leadership role. Strategy coverage undermines judgments of persons, impugning their motives as self interested. Public policy debates involve persons and groups but are fundamentally about issues. Strategy coverage in public policy debates can increase cynicism by undermining the public's evaluations of the motives of the various political actors. But issue coverage may do the same by undermining all available solutions leaving the public frustrated, confused and ultimately cynical about the debate itself, no matter how substantive it may appear to be.

The NBC special was condemned by some critics and opponents as simplistic, insufficiently substantive, excessively emotional, and biased. At the same time, it seems to have reduced our participants' levels of cynicism. Perhaps, the public needed a personalized and simplified introduction to the issues of the health care debate. After all, one of the recognized functions of television news has been to provide frameworks for later learning and the motivation, through emotional activation, to learn more (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). By failing to provide an in-depth analysis of the pros and cons of various plans, the NBC special may have had the side benefit of decreasing cynicism.

What our research does not suggest is a viable and effective alternative to issue-based coverage. In campaigns, issue coverage is at worst neutral in its effects on voter cynicism; in complex policy debates, it may be counterproductive. Usable alternatives remain to be discovered.

Table 1

Means of four indices of cynicism and overall p values across Issue, strategy and control conditions: Broadcast-only study.

	I (N=36 to 39)*	S (N=32-37)	CB (N=25-30)	OVERALL p
<b>CYNFC</b>	2.67	4.00	2.47	.004
<b>CYNSELECT</b>	.216	.365	.304	.12
<b>CYNAD6</b>	23.75	25.50	25.60	.29
<b>CYNAD3</b>	10.58	11.40	10.00	.25

\* Range of N's due to missing data.

Table 2

Probability level of t-tests comparing I, S, and C conditions: Broadcast-only study.

	I vs S	I vs CB	S vs CB
<b>CYNFC</b>	.008 (S > I)	.69	.001 (S > CB)
<b>CYNSELECT</b>	.025 (S > I)	.26	.47
<b>CYNAD6</b>	.21	.18	.94
<b>CYNAD3</b>	.32	.50	.046 (S > CB)

Table 3

Means of four indices of cynicism and overall p values across II, IS, SI, SS, and C conditions: Broadcast-Print study.

	II N=35-38*	IS N=37-38	SI N=38	SS N=35-36	C(BP) N=19	OVERALL p
<b>CYNFC</b>	3.79	3.42	4.03	4.69	3.63	.169
<b>CYNSELECT</b>	.17	.31	.42	.57	.39	.000
<b>CYNAD6</b>	26.6	26.7	26.7	28.0	27.37	.653
<b>CYNAD3</b>	10.87	10.18	10.95	11.40	9.58	.325

\* Range of Ns due to missing data.

Table 4

Probability level of t-tests on cynicism comparing II, IS, SI, and SS conditions to control and II to SS: Broadcast-Print study.

	II vs CBP	IS vs CBP	SI vs CBP	SS vs CBP	II vs SS
<b>CYNFC</b>	.80	.74	.52	.040 (SS > CBP)	.046 (SS > II)
<b>CYNSELECT</b>	.005 (CBP > II)	.38	.78	.035 (SS > CBP)	.000 (SS > II)
<b>CYNAD6</b>	.29	.54	.61	.29	.23
<b>CYNAD3</b>	.16	.51	.16	.035 (SS > CPB)	.51

Table 5

Probability level of t-tests comparing issue broadcast and print and strategy broadcast and print groups to control: Broadcast-Print Study.

	I-BROADCAST vs CBP	S-BROADCAST vs CBP	I-PRINT vs CBP	S-PRINT vs CBP
<b>CYNFC</b>	.97	.10 (S > CBP)	.64	.24
<b>CYNSELECT</b>	.038 (CBP > I-B)	.13	.12	.32
<b>CYNAD6</b>	.27	.99	.28	.97
<b>CYNAD3</b>	.26	.04 (S > CBP)	.13	.09 (S > CBP)

Table 6

Means for 4 indices of cynicism across experimental and control conditions: Print effects in Health Care debate.

	<b>I</b> (n=51)	<b>IGSP</b> (n=47)	<b>G</b> (n=49)	<b>S</b> (n=47)	<b>P</b> (n=49)	<b>GSP</b> (n=51)	<b>C</b> (n=51)
<b>CYNAD</b>	4.05	3.98	3.87	3.97	3.94	3.96	3.69
<b>CYNFC1</b>	1.57	1.49	1.45	1.52	1.60	1.52	1.45
<b>CYNSELECT</b>	1.25	1.36	1.33	1.38	1.26	1.38	1.20
<b>CYNFC2</b>	1.31	1.32	1.27	1.31	1.32	1.32	1.31

Table 7

Probability values for t-tests of experimental versus control group means on cynicism:  
Print effects in Health Care debate

	CYNAD P	CYNFC1 P	CYNSELECT P	CYNFC2 P
I v C	.032	.090	.248	.871
G v C	.313	.933	.003	.402
S v C	.119	.327	.000	.910
P v C	.135	.028	.000	.773
GSP v C	.097	.318	.000	.761
IGSP v C	.123	.632	.002	.820

Table 8

Means and t-tests comparing pre and post cynicism for watchers of  
NBC Special.

Comparison of Mean Cynicism Scores Pre versus Post: PWP group Only				
Cynicism Index	Mean Cynicism		Differ ence	P-Value 1-tailed
	Pre- test	Post- test		
CYNFC (N=58)	.655	.603	-.052	p=.050
CYNAD (N=57)	.695	.659	-.036	p=.015
CYNTOT (N=57)	.681	.634	-.047	p=.005

Table 9

Means and p value for t-tests on Post-test cynicism for Watchers in PWP and WP Groups: NBC Special.

	PWP N=58-59	WP N=59-61	p Value 2-tailed
CYNFC	.605	.596	.89
CYNAD	.654	.709	.044
CYNTOT	.632	.651	.643

Table 10

Means on cynicism and p values for t-tests of difference between watchers and non-watchers: NBC special.

	Watchers N=132-135	Non- Watchers N=108-110	p Value 1-tailed
CYNFC	.598	.651	.055
CYNAD	.680	.716	.034
CYNTOT	.639	.685	.055

## Appendix 1

### **MARKLE STUDY: DESCRIPTION OF CYNICISM INDICES**

A. **CYNFC** is based on 7 pairs of statements about the 1992 Philadelphia mayoral race. Respondents were asked to choose the one statement from each pair that most closely represented their own views. The 7 pairs of statements are as follows:

1. The campaign was concerned with policies to meet the city's needs. OR The campaign was concerned with standing in the polls.
2. The candidates were grandstanding. OR The candidates were focused on problems.
3. The candidates' concerns were getting elected. OR The candidate's concerns were the city's problems.
4. The candidates told the voters what they needed to hear. OR The candidates told the voters what they wanted to hear.
5. The candidates were lying about their goals. OR The candidates were telling the truth about their goals.
6. The candidates were being manipulative in their campaigning. OR The candidates were being direct and straight forward in their campaigning.
7. One candidate proposed that he would establish 10 little city halls around the city, mostly because ... he thought this would appeal to voters. OR he wanted to make city government more responsive to neighborhoods.

The standardized item alpha of this 7-item scale is .80. A factor analysis revealed the presence of one factor, eigenvalue equal to 3.22, explaining 46% of the variance.

B. **CYNAD6** is based on 6 statements about the Philadelphia mayoral race with which the respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a scale of 1 to 6. The six statements are as follows:

1. What they said depended on who was listening.
2. They only took chances when they were behind in the polls.
3. Nobody would talk about the hard issues, such as taxes, because that would lose voters.
4. Money bought the best advisers and advisers won the election.
5. The candidates were willing to do whatever it took to win.
6. Who is elected won't make much difference because the major candidates' positions were determined by the interests of those who gave them campaign funds.

A reliability test revealed the standardized item alpha of this 6-item scale to be .78. A factor analysis revealed the presence of one factor, eigenvalue equal to 2.85, explaining 47.5% of the variance.

C. **CYNAD3** is based on 3 statements about the Philadelphia mayoral race with which the respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a scale of 1 to 6. The three statements are as follows:

1. The campaign gave voters a real choice among candidates with different positions.
2. The candidates seriously discussed the major problems facing the city and offered detailed solutions to those problems.
3. The candidates explained what is was about their backgrounds that qualified them for mayor.

A reliability test revealed the standardized item alpha of this 3-item scale to be .68. A factor analysis revealed the presence of one factor, eigenvalue equal to 1.82, explaining 60.8% of the variance.



D. CYNSELECT is based on the 3 of 6 possible statements chosen by the respondents regarding what they learned about the Philadelphia mayoral race. The six statements are as follows:

1. I learned which candidates looked most mayoral in the debate.
2. I learned how the candidates differ on at least one important issue.
3. I learned of one area in which Egan and Rendell hold the same position.
4. I learned who acted like the person who was ahead in the polls.
5. I learned the strategy used by the front runner to appeal to Blacks.
6. I learned who was ahead and behind in the polls.

## Appendix 2

### RWJ FIELD STUDY: DESCRIPTION OF POST-TEST CYNICISM MEASURES

A. CYNAD is based on 8 statements about health care debate with which the respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a scale of 1 to 6. The eight statements included in this index are as follows:

1. What the advocates of various plans say depends on who is listening.
2. Fear tactics by advocates rather than reasoned discussion drive the debate.
3. Nobody will talk honestly about the hard issues, such as taxes and costs, because that would lose support.
4. Money will buy the votes that will win the debate on health care.
5. The campaign gives people an important choice among different health care plans.
6. Advocates of various health care plans are willing to do whatever it takes to look good even if it means deceiving the public.
7. Advocates of various health care plans explain in detail why their plan offers the best solutions to the country's problems.
8. The advocates of various plans are attacking each other without offering clear solutions to the country's health care problems.

Of these 8 statements, 2 are positively worded. In checking scale reliability, the overall alpha = .72. The alpha of the negatively worded statements is .77, and the alpha for the positively worded statements is .40.

B. CYNFC1 is based on the 5 pairs of statements about the health care debate. The respondents were asked to choose the one from each pair that most closely represented their own views. The 5 pairs of statements are as follow:

1. Health care advocates are concerned with policies that meet the country's needs. OR Health care advocates are concerned with approval ratings.
2. Advocates are focused on winning. OR Advocates are focused on problems.
3. The advocates tell the people what people need to hear. OR The advocates tell the people what they want to hear.
4. The advocates are lying about their goals. OR The advocates are telling the truth about their goals.
5. The advocates are being manipulative in their campaigning. OR The advocates are being direct and straight forward in their campaigning.

Scale reliability revealed an alpha = .77.

C. CYNSELECT is based on the 3 of 6 possible statements chosen by the respondents regarding what they learned about the health care debate. The six statements are as follows:

1. I learned how lobbying takes place.
2. I learned how the health care plans differ on at least one important issue.
3. I learned which plan was ahead and behind in the polls.
4. I learned at least one reason why Clinton's health care plan should pass or not pass.
5. I learned the strategy used by advocates to appeal to the middle class.
6. I learned at least one possible solution to this country's health care problems.

D. CYNFC2 is based on the 4 pairs of statements of which the respondents were asked to pick the statement that best completes the sentence given. The four pairs of statements are as follows:

1. The health reform plans that don't require that businesses pay for the employee's health benefits, take this position because 1) they think this appeals to voters. OR 2) they think that requiring businesses to pay for health will hurt the economy and jobs.
2. The health reform plans that would insure all Americans do so because 1) people have a right to have their health needs met. OR 2) This is popular with the voters who don't have health coverage.
3. Some insurers have attacked Clinton's health reform plan because 1) they would be harmed economically by the plan. OR 2) they believe that the quality of health delivery will be hurt by the plan.

### Appendix 3

#### NBC STUDY: DESCRIPTION OF CYNICISM INDICES

A. CYNFC is based on 3 pairs of statements about the health care debate. The respondents were asked to pick the one statement of each pair that comes closest to their own views. The statements were as follows:

1. The participants in the debate are focused on gaining political advantage. OR The participants in the debate are focused on solving problems.
2. The participants in the debate tell the people what they need to hear. OR The participants in the debate tell the people what they want to hear.
3. The participants in the debate are manipulating the public. OR The participants in the debate are being direct and straight forward with the public.

The standardized item alpha of this 3-item scale is .59.

B. CYNAD is based on 4 statements about the health care debate with which the respondents were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The 4 statements are as follows:

1. The health care debate gives people an important choice among different health care plans.
2. Money will buy the votes that will win the debate on health care.
3. Participants in the debate will take positions that are best for everyone, not just their supporters.
4. None of the participants in the debate will talk honestly about the hard issues, such as taxes and costs, because that would lose support.

The standardized item alpha of this 4-item scale is .38.

C. CYNTOT is a combination of CYN1 and CYN2. The standardized item alpha for this 7-item scale .63.

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**END NOTES**

1. The authors wish to thank the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Markle Foundation for support in making this research possible. The views expressed here are those of the authors alone. The authors also wish to acknowledge the significant contributions of graduate students June Rhee, Robin Nabi, Fawn Johnson, and Emory Woodard to the analyses reported here.

2. P values reported in the tables are two-tailed for all tests where a direction was not hypothesized and one-tailed for all directional hypotheses.

3. This assumption is based on our interpretations of our findings from the previous study. If oppositional issue coverage can raise cynicism in a complex policy debate, then perhaps such a structure of information transmission ought to be avoided in televised news as well, unless directed at a highly informed audience.