**The Ethics and Issues of Election Reporting: “Citizen’s Agenda” or the “Horse Race”?**

In this paper, I will acknowledge the need for a realignment in American political campaign coverage and discuss two election coverage models: the "Citizen's Agenda" (CA) and the traditional "Horse Race" (HR), particularly in the context of Trumpism since 2016, before adding some concluding thoughts on a more suitable middle ground solution. Finally, I aim to illustrate the challenges facing a news media gearing up to cover some of the most contentious elections in American history and analyze the merits of two models for effective reporting in the pressure cooker of today's political discourse.

The CA is a representative model of election coverage rooted in the ideals of public journalism. In 1991, David Broder, a 40-year veteran at the Washington Post, described his frustration at what he saw as the trivialization of coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign, suggesting journalists should cover campaigns less as a HR and more as a job application for governing. “That resonated with editors at The Charlotte Observer. It also drew interest from the Poynter Institute and from Jay Rosen, a media critic and associate professor at New York University,”[[1]](#footnote-1) wrote Jim Morrill, integrally involved in the project as a politics reporter for the Observer. "The CA is an attempt to reposition election coverage closer to the concerns of the average voter," Rosen says. Practically, this means identifying issues and stories that matter most to people and reporting on them. The Charlotte Observer helped pioneer the practice, most notably in partnership with other North Carolina news media in the 1996 presidential election.

Rosen believes that too much political coverage is obsessed with polls and what the "experts" are saying in a style that doesn’t respond to the voters. Examples of this over-reliance on polling abound: prominent on the New York Times website is its Needle Poll[[2]](#footnote-2) for races across the country, and the findings of companies like FiveThirtyEight[[3]](#footnote-3), which aggregate various polls into percentage ratings, are omnipresent throughout national election coverage. Rosen says the HR model is popular because it's easier: commission a poll, talk to some "experts," rinse, and repeat. But he argues that more reporting inspired by what matters to voters would enhance election coverage. In Twitter threads over the last few years, Rosen has discussed the CA model and its advantages over the traditional HR. The CA, he explains, revolves around a single question: "What do you want the candidates to be discussing as they compete for votes?" It is an exercise in listening, the product of which is a ranked list of priorities of what voters most want to hear. Rosen suggests that reporters should map all campaign coverage against these priorities, putting the press on the side of the voters' right to have their significant concerns addressed. He believes this would provide a well-needed mission to campaign coverage, making it more audience-focused.

He details this approach in ten steps:[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Identify the people you are trying to inform: your public.
2. Ask that community, "What do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes?" to find out what they need to hear from the candidates to cast an informed vote.
3. Repeat 2. Ask it in as many different ways and mediums as possible.
4. When confident in your grasp of what you're hearing, frame results into 6-10 ranked priorities: your CA. Then, ask participants to weigh in and allow them to add any item that should be on the list but isn't.
5. Validate through polling.
6. Publish the CA as a “live” product.
7. Now turn the CA into a template for campaign coverage, a master narrative.
8. Try to get the candidates to address it. Encourage serious discussion among the public, candidates and those involved in the campaign on the ranked list of issues.
9. Build voter guides around it.
10. Keep listening and revising the CA up to election day. The priorities must resonate with most voters and reflect what's on their minds. They must recognize themselves and their concerns in what you say is "their" agenda.

Rosen believes the CA model never took off after the 1990s because it differs from what political reporters want to do. The HR model has some impressive strengths, he concedes. It's repeatable, engages audience interest and informs newsrooms where to put resources. Rosen argues that the HR is difficult to displace because "it serves the news junkies, creates instant newsroom consensus on approach, makes for cheap drama, and spreads risk because everyone else is doing it." Part of the problem, Rosen admits, is CA's packaging as an alternative. Rosen fears most reporters on the election beat will hear calls for more "policy'' coverage and think, “No way, that's boring!”

Most agree that journalists don't cover elections with maximum utility. But few believe the profession needs to re-orient campaign coverage around what the citizenry finds important. WBUR engaged Rosen's CA to focus their 2020 presidential election coverage on the needs of the public they serve. WBUR aimed to reverse the traditional HR model, instead broadening its focus to bottom-up, not top-down, reporting on the issues that matter most to the public. According to Anthony Brooks, WBUR's senior political reporter, “Rather than just focusing on what the candidates are saying, on the pundits and the polls, WBUR, inspired by Rosen's concept, intends to frame its reporting around the question: What do you want the candidates to talk about as they compete for your votes?”[[5]](#footnote-5) WBUR started by commissioning a poll that probed voter concerns in two ways. First, it asked them to choose from a list of issues (health care, immigration, gun policy, etc.) Second, it posed an open-ended question: "What do you want the candidates to discuss as they compete for your votes?" They said, "We in the WBUR Newsroom want to make sure that much of our coverage of the 2020 presidential election is rooted in your concerns. That's why we've developed a survey to determine which issues matter to you the most, and what you want the candidates to discuss as they vie for your votes."[[6]](#footnote-6) They followed that up with a summary piece detailing the results of the survey: "By far the top issue [among Democrats] is health care," said Steve Koczela, president of The MassINC Polling Group[[7]](#footnote-7), which conducted the survey of some 600 voters within the region.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Opponents of the CA model argue that it is the idealistic project of a bygone age. The scripted and corporate nature of today’s political campaigns and the numerous amplification avenues available for pre-approved messages narrows the possibility candidates would participate in the debate CA requires. Morrill writes, “It would be hard to persuade most candidates for governor and senator to come to a college campus, as we did in 1996, and respond to questions on a CA from a battery of reporters.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Others say CA doesn’t produce the style of election coverage most likely to attract desperately needed eyeballs. Detailed policy takes aren't appealing to folks only superficially engaged. Morrill recalls, “The questions had to do with the issues important to them and their lives. But lost in all that was much of the color of campaigns. Even readers said the coverage often resembled those helpings of steamed broccoli.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Today's election coverage is dominated by the HR model and devoted to winning and losing. Campaign specifics like fundraising and infighting account for most HR electoral reporting, with more substantive concerns left last in coverage allocation, such as the candidates' policy positions or leadership characteristics.

Some argue that this system is wholly justified. While most people involved with election coverage say that campaigns would be better if only the press would report them differently, perhaps journalism is not set up to be a conveyor of what’s at stake and a candidate’s character and values, just a conveyor of impact and action. As Harvard Kennedy School’s Thomas Patterson writes, “The game is always moving as candidates adjust to the dynamics of the race and their position in it… it is a perpetually reliable source of fresh material.”[[11]](#footnote-11) He states, “Election news emphasizes what is controversial or different about events of the past day rather than what is stable and enduring.”[[12]](#footnote-12) And what if conditions force the HR model? “Journalists cannot be faulted for the system they are required to cover,”[[13]](#footnote-13) Patterson argues. Politics itself has become a horse race. Deep policy dives and extensive research are less appealing to folks filing all day on the campaign trail in a warp-speed media environment. Jack Shafer, the senior media writer at Politico, notes, “As a rule, the greatest opponents of HR coverage are the ones trailing in the polls.”[[14]](#footnote-14) He writes, “Like it or not, political campaigns are contestsin which the prize goes to the victor and the loser goes home.”*[[15]](#footnote-15)* As Rosen concedes, Shafer also disputes the value of predefined “policy” and “issues” based coverage: “Without the work of election handicappers, coverage would come to resemble an endless series of policy white papers that nobody reads.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Regardless, traditional HR election coverage can be seen as irresponsible in today's age of destabilizing misinformation and shaky election infrastructure. As Matt Glassman, a senior fellow at the Government Affairs Institute at Georgetown University wrote in the context of the 2022 midterm elections, “A reminder that there’s no HR aspect to counting votes. No one “pulls ahead” in the count or “makes up ground” or “loses their lead” in any real sense…You can’t win or lose in the count. It’s not a football game with an outcome yet to be determined.”[[17]](#footnote-17) HR reporting frames elections as a competitive game, relying heavily on public opinion polls and giving the most positive attention to frontrunners or underdogs gaining public support. Dan Kennedy, an esteemed professor at Northeastern University and former media reporter for the Boston Phoenix, observed, “Media coverage of the 2020 presidential campaign is shaping up to be the same depressing spectacle that it always is. With few exceptions, the press focuses on polls, fundraising, who’s up, who’s down, and who made a gaffe.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Kennedy argues, “the media need to stop covering politics as a sporting event and focus on what really matters,” citing Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren's emergence in 2020 as a leading candidate on the strength of her in-depth policy proposals. “A candidate’s background, experience, character, and leadership skills are at least as important as policy,” he explains. Some argue that HR coverage leads to a perception of politics dominated by a candidate's motivations for gaining power rather than their policy ideas to enact change if elected. This issues-less journalism is linked to an increased distrust in politicians and news outlets and an uninformed electorate.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Patterson argues that the media's propensity to allocate press coverage based on self-evaluated "electability" claims has a detrimental impact on voters' decisions and assigning coverage based on winning and losing has real-world consequences. Most don't truly engage in the presidential campaign until the primary election stage, at best. As a result, "they enter the campaign nearly at the point of decision, unarmed with anything approaching a clear understanding of their choices."[[20]](#footnote-20) However, when they do tune in, it is to election coverage tainted by an already settled assessment and framing of a race from which they must assess a candidate likely to have already been written off. As Shafer quips, “Not many voters will join a bandwagon that doesn’t have followers or wheels.”[[21]](#footnote-21) New research proposes that HR reporting, or “probabilistic forecasting,”[[22]](#footnote-22) influenced the 2016 presidential election in this way. The authors conclude that voters "expressed unusual confidence in a decisive 2016 election outcome and that same measure of confidence is associated with lower reported turnout."[[23]](#footnote-23) Probabilistic forecasting discourages voting when people perceive their candidate as having a high chance of winning or losing. Forecasts reported absurd win probabilities between 70% and 99% for Hillary Clinton. She ultimately lost, primarily due to close calls in states like Pennsylvania (0.7%) and Michigan (0.2%). Similarly, Clinton's 2016 primary victories were routinely presented with disclaimers and discounted, judged in the context of an inflated expectation of her success. For example, "Some Clinton voters approached the polls with resignation, viewing the former secretary of state and first lady as merely the best of bad options,"[[24]](#footnote-24) opined Rachel Weiner in The Washington Post*,* reporting on Clinton’s **victory** in the Virginia primary. Margaret Sullivan, the first female public editor of the New York Times and longtime media columnist at the Washington Post, wrote, “Since journalists across the board seemed to be convinced that Clinton would win handily, it made for a more exciting HR if the favorite was loaded with extra weight to slow her down.”

A lot of the criticism of the HR election coverage model can be seen through the lens of the failures in the press coverage of the 2016 presidential election. Trump's candidacy was propelled by the press, more so than any candidate in recent memory. Patterson explains, "Every candidate has strengths and weaknesses but the ones that come to the forefront in news coverage are the ones that fit reporters' HR-driven storylines."[[25]](#footnote-25) He suggests, “Reporters are attracted to the new, the unusual, the sensational, the outrageous – the type of story material that can catch and hold an audience’s attention.”[[26]](#footnote-26) According to Media Tenor,[[27]](#footnote-27) Trump was the "headliner" throughout the presidential primary season, receiving more coverage than either Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders in the last five weeks of the primary campaign (63 percent to 37 percent.)[[28]](#footnote-28) As this was when Donald Trump no longer had any active Republican opposition, Patterson suggests it has “no possible explanation other than journalistic bias.”[[29]](#footnote-29) He notes: “Cruz finished first in six states during the Super Tuesday period but was eclipsed by the media shadow cast by Trump, getting only half as much press attention.”[[30]](#footnote-30) These unique circumstances exaggerated the flaws of the HR election coverage model. Contemporary commercial imperatives for news organizations create strong incentives to make political news more entertaining. Trump is valuable for a beleaguered new media in the digital age (he has described himself as “the ratings machine”[[31]](#footnote-31)) and therefore gets its attention, boosting cable television viewership so much that its advertising revenue rose by hundreds of millions of dollars. As a result, during the primary campaign, Trump received an estimated $2 billion in "free media." Patterson writes, "Trump is to reporters as honey is to bears. Journalists prize conflict, and Trump delivers it in abundance. It's why he dominated news coverage nearly every week of his 2016 presidential run; why he got three times as much news coverage during his first 100 days as president as did his immediate predecessors; and why he has remained in the news since leaving the White House."[[32]](#footnote-32) As CBS CEO Les Moonves infamously boasted, a Trump presidency “may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

The press experienced a significant conundrum about whether to treat Trump seriously as a politician or as a joke celebrity ill-fitted for the presidential stage. As Alec MacGillis, politics reporter for ProPublica, put it, "What the press wasn't able to do, and what it was almost not set up to do, was to get across the sheer ridiculousness or surreality of Donald Trump running for president."[[34]](#footnote-34) Boydstun and Lawrence researched how entertainment-infused politics interacted with traditional journalism practices to shape how the press covered Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, arguing that the industry responded to this dilemma by giving Trump more clown-like and serious coverage.[[35]](#footnote-35) Salena Zito of The Atlantic recognized this dynamic: “The press takes Trump literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Sullivan added, “In every way, Trump was a deeply abnormal candidate, but the news media couldn’t seem to communicate that effectively or even grasp the problem.”[[37]](#footnote-37) As Patterson notes, "Trump's dominant presence in the news stemmed from the fact that his words and actions were ideally suited to journalists' story needs. The news is not about what's ordinary or expected. It's about what's new and different, better yet when laced with conflict and outrage. Trump delivered that type of material by the cart load."[[38]](#footnote-38)

Despite the failings of the HR model in 2016, more recent evidence suggests the news media hasn’t learnt its lesson. Heading into November 2022’s midterm elections, the dominant narrative in the press was that a “red wave” would sweep elections up and down the ballot across the country, leading to a strong showing for Republicans. Oliver Darcy, writing for CNN Business, said, “Focusing largely on the fragile state of the economy, coupled with the fact that the incumbent party historically doesn’t perform well in such elections, the press had all but declared that Democrats would get trounced.”[[39]](#footnote-39) But this was not the case. Democrats did remarkably well, given the circumstances. Norman Ornstein, an emeritus scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, suggested the number one error in election coverage was a heavy reliance on bad polls. Adherence to unpredictable and inaccurate results led to a herd mentality across the news media, which obscured the facts and drove the coverage further away from reality, he suggested.[[40]](#footnote-40) Dana Milbank, a columnist at the Washington Post, named the media as the worst performer in the midterms: "Political journalists were suckered by a wave of Republican junk polls in the closing weeks of the campaign. They were also swayed by some reputable polling organizations that, burned by past failures to capture MAGA voters, overweighted their polls to account for that in ways that simply didn’t make sense.”[[41]](#footnote-41) As Cook Political Report’s David Wasserman said, “There's a tendency for forecasters to get caught up in the doom/momentum narrative that takes hold late in a cycle when one party is ahead, and turn predicting gains into an arms race.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Patterson suggests, “Journalists’ fondness for polls is no great mystery,” explaining, “Polls are a snap to report and provide a constant source of fresh material.”[[43]](#footnote-43) This fondness comes at the detriment of the more policy and issues-focused coverage promoted by Rosen. Patterson argues, "Policy issues – what the nominees would do if elected – rarely attract a high level of press coverage. Policies lack the novelty that journalists seek in their stories."[[44]](#footnote-44)

Michael Kelly’s article “Media Culpa,” published in The New Yorker in 1996[[45]](#footnote-45) is often regarded as having sounded the death knell for public journalism. Through the lens of a day on the campaign trail with Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, Kelly lays bare the failures of the Charlotte Observer's CA election coverage attempt. While Kelly concedes that the Observer's approach "forced reporters to explain the candidates' records in a more thorough and balanced fashion, and to use more of the candidates' own words," he levels significant criticism at the way the poll was conducted, saying it "manipulated both the presentation of the issues and the results of the survey." Respondents could only identify issues pre-selected by the consortium, and even on the topics selected, the Observer chose only 4 of 8 – a decision superficially based on the ranked list, even though the issue of "Families and Values" was considered "very important" by 79% of those polled, and unselected. Kelly cites the evident undemocratic nature of this approach and proffers that it was "an attempt to increase the power of a journalistic upper class to dictate what are and are not fit subjects for public debate, and what are the proper reasons for choosing one candidate over another." He argues, "It is an exercise in group-think. It is dishonest, in its attempt to pretend that the press' will represents merely the will of the people," accusing the consortium of playing the role of an "Election God." When CA has come under criticism in the past, therefore, the predominant reason given was that candidates and the general public mostly found it impossible to inject issues into the race that they thought were important because the media had all gotten together and decided to focus only on a set of predetermined topics, albeit based on a survey, but still selected by journalists. This opens the industry to charges of putting their thumbs on the scale and news organizations influencing election coverage to their own end by eliminating competition and excluding any other type of coverage.

In conclusion, the answer to which model of election coverage, CA or HR, is more compelling is that both are when utilized in equal measure. Morrill suggests, "So, in covering elections, we shouldn't forget about the broccoli. But we also need the meat and potatoes."[[46]](#footnote-46) The shortcomings of the Charlotte Observer example provide a roadmap to a potentially successful model for the future. The Boston Globe led a public journalism project with this idea of equal measure in the New Hampshire Republican presidential primary in 1996. They used polling and focus groups, like Rosen's CA approach, to craft their coverage. In their reporting, the Globe found much more economic anxiety in the electorate than any other outlet had unearthed. Come election day, Pat Buchanan won the primary[[47]](#footnote-47) - a candidate who had made the dinner table economic issues the Globe had identified as the voters’ priority a central point in his campaigning - against the more highly favored Dole, who had “far more money, a far better organization and the backing of this state's popular Governor, Stephen Merrill.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Crucially, the Globe also ran traditional HR coverage alongside the survey-ranked list template focused approach. By balancing the two, a news organization could incorporate the best ideals of CA without its overstatement, therefore protecting it from weakness without supplementation. Reporters should keep the HR model of election coverage but do much less of it, focusing more on what the public wants to read about. The things that matter, like leadership, experience and character. Their prerogative is more critical than ever. The current political atmosphere of polarization presents an unprecedented set of ethical challenges for a news industry reporting on elections riddled with division. In this post-truth era, journalists covering American elections play a more important role than ever but most are not rising to the challenge. Journalism must improve to best report accurately and informatively on the candidates and issues essential for a democratic tradition under siege, and fast.

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