

A QUESTION OF CHARACTER:

How the Media Have Handled the Issue And How the Public Has Reacted

If presidential elections are a battle for control of message through the media, George W. Bush has had the better of it on the question of character than Albert Gore Jr., according to a new study of media coverage leading up to the Republican convention.

But in age of skepticism and fragmented communications, the public may not be getting--or believing—the message.

There is also a hint that some of the worst of the press coverage of Gore's character may have come and gone, while coverage of Bush lately has become more skeptical.

These are some of the findings from an unusual study of the character issue in the 2000 presidential election, conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists, and twinned with a survey of public attitudes of the candidates conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.¹ The study examined five weeks of stories in newspapers, television, radio and the Internet that spanned the five months between February and June.

In general, the press has been far more likely to convey that Bush is a different kind of Republican—a “compassionate conservative,” a reformer, bipartisan--than to discuss Al Gore's experience, knowledge or readiness for the office, according to the study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

Fully 40% of the assertions about Bush were that he was a different kind of politician, one of Bush's key campaign themes.

Yet the public associates these bipartisan qualities more with the vice president than with the Texas governor.

In contrast, only 14% of the time did the press assert the message that Gore has wanted to convey, about his experience and competence. Despite that, the public has this impression of Gore anyway.

The media have not particularly pushed the idea that Bush has gotten where he is largely on family connections. Nonetheless, this is one of the most dominant impressions the public has about the likely GOP nominee.

In short, when it comes to character, what the press is saying about the candidates is hardly dictating what the public thinks. What is less clear is whether this is because the public is not paying attention, or because they bring their own independent judgments to the information the press is conveying.

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Early on journalists and political scientists argued that character, rather than issues or ideological questions, would be the decisive factor in the presidential campaign.

¹ Voters unmoved by Media Characterizations of Bush & Gore, July 27, 2000. All references to public attitudes in this report are based on the data in this survey.

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More recently surveys have suggested that voters do sense clear differences between the candidates over their approaches to such matters as health care, taxes, or the environment.

This study identified what we considered the six most common character themes in the race thus far, three for Bush and three for Gore, some of which also touched on their handling of issues.

- Bush is a different kind of Republican
- Bush lacks the intelligence or knowledge for the job.
- Bush has relied heavily on family connections to get where he is.
- Gore is experienced and knowledgeable.
- Gore is scandal tainted.
- Gore exaggerates or lies.

Gore themes (n=745)	
Scandal tainted	42%
Rebuttal	4
Liar	34
Rebuttal	2
Competent	14
Rebuttal	4
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Total	100

Bush Themes (n=545)	
Different Repub.	40%
Rebuttal	16
Unintelligent	26
Rebuttal	3
Coasts on family	10
Rebuttal	5
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Total	100

In addition, we also studied the degree to which each of these threads was repudiated.

The study then delved into how common each theme was in the press, what the basis for the theme was, and who tended to make it.

In part, such a study reveals what messages are getting through to the public, how well evidenced they are and which candidate seems to be controlling his message better.

When twinned with a companion study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press of public attitudes of the media, the two studies together allow us to also explore how much the press coverage thus far is shaping public opinion of the candidates.

The study examined a mixed media universe that included seven newspapers, 17 television news programs, one radio news program and two Internet sites over a period of five months—sampling one week from every month. In all, it examined a total of 1,786 newspaper stories (784 Gore & 1002 Bush), 218 Internet stories (104 Gore & 114 Bush) and 400 television and radio broadcasts or cablecasts (including news programs and talk shows).

Due to the nature of the probe, the content study didn't simply examine stories, but the themes within stories. A given story might actually contain more than one theme or set of assertions about character—perhaps even assertions about both candidates. Thus overall, the study includes 1,330 separate assertions. Drawn from this universe of more than 2,004 print or Internet stories and 400 television and radio programs, this suggests that character is a major focus of the coverage.

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Among the findings:

- Press assessments of Bush’s character tend to be based more on his campaign style and policy platforms—matters under his control. Gore’s character problems are tagged more firmly to his past record—something he can do little about.
- While the most common Bush theme studied was positive—he is a different kind of Republican—the most common Gore character themes in the press have been negative—that he is scandal tainted and that he lies and exaggerates. Fully 42% of statements asserted he was scandal tainted, and another 34% asserted he stretched the truth.
- There was a much better chance of an accusation making it into the news than a defense of that accusation. None of challenges to the four negative threads made up more than 5% of all the statements.
- The vast majority of assertions, 81%, had some kind of evidence to support them. Yet journalists, rather than outsiders or candidates, were the most common source for the assertions, suggesting the subjective and analytical nature of much of the campaign coverage.
- Even though the subject was hard to pin down, a good deal of press coverage did raise questions about Governor Bush’s intellectual capacity. From February through June, 26% of all statements about Bush suggested he was not that smart.
- Despite the vaunted reputation of the Clinton-Gore Administration for rapid response and press management, Gore was not that successful defending himself. As an example, even though some of the reports about Gore’s exaggerations have been based on misquotations and other faulty evidence,² only 2% of the character assertions about Gore refuted that he was liar.

Beyond the basic questions of which character themes were most common or most often refuted, we also examined when different assertions appeared and disappeared and the evidence behind them. In addition, we identified the source of each statement, the general context of the statement itself, in what type of story it appeared.

TIMING

Gore’s difficulties appeared early on. In all, 78% of the assertions about his ties to scandal, and 61% about his untruths came in February and March—during the heat of the primary battle, in part through the rhetoric of Bill Bradley.

² “He’s No Pinocchio,” By Robert Parry, Washington Monthly, April 2000

There is some evidence Gore's coverage began to improve over time relative to Bush. Nearly a quarter of the stories about Gore's competence, and nearly a quarter of those about Bush's intelligence, came in June, a time when only 16% of the total statements studied were produced.

Similarly, the notion that Bush is a different kind of Republican fell off steadily after April.

All of the assertions about Gore fell off dramatically after he vanquished Bill Bradley in March. There began to be a little more coverage of his character in June. And the theme that was strongest then was the notion of Gore's competence, the one that was the least prevalent earlier.

Timing of Bush Themes

	February	March	April	May	June	Total
Family Ties	44%	29	4	14	9	100%
Intellect	14%	32	15	15	24	100%
Different Republican	31%	20	29	10	10	100%

Timing of Gore Themes

	February	March	April	May	June	Total
Exaggerates	18%	43	14	9	16	100%
Scandal Ties	21%	57	7	0	15	100%
Competence	15%	31	17	14	23	100%

EVIDENCE

One big difference in the coverage was the evidence.

Gore is saddled with a long public record. Bush is not. Or, at the very least, Bush's record requires more original reporting to dig out.

Nearly half of all the assertions about Gore (46%) were based on his public record, including his campaign fundraising. In contrast, only one in ten of the statements about Bush's character studied here (11%) was tied to his record.

The assertions about Bush were usually based on something softer, or at least more under his control. More than a third (34%) had to do with how he ran his campaign or the policy stances he had put forward as part of it.

Another quarter of the assertions about Bush (25%) cited no evidence.

In contrast, only 15% of the Gore assertions were unsupported.

This suggests that Bush can still run as a persona of his own creation to a much greater extent than Gore.

SOURCES

There were also significant differences in the sources making the assertions. Journalists offering either their analysis or opinion were the most common source for

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every theme. Overall, 57% of the Bush threads originated with journalists, as did 44% of the Gore threads.

But journalists’ assertions about Bush’s character were more than twice as likely than Gore’s to be unsupported by any evidence. In other words, they were pure opinion, rather than journalistic analysis. In all, 15% of Bush themes were journalists’ opinion, compared with 6% of the Gore themes.

Statements about Gore were also more likely to come from a candidate than those about Bush, 30% versus 19%.

Perhaps the most useful way to examine the coverage of the character issue is to look at each of the six themes individually.

GORE AS SCANDAL TAINTED

Usually, the discussion of Gore as scandal tainted came in the form of reminders of Gore’s questionable fundraising. Often, the discussion was about how the Bush camp planned to make hay with it.

“By autumn, you’ll be seeing the Temple Shot almost constantly on the tube at home. It is a fairly typical, if slightly goofy, political picture; it only apparently gathers power when you know that this was the place and the day that Gore, apparently unknowingly, collected more than \$50,000 in illegal campaign contributions,” wrote David Von Drehle in the Washington Post in late April.

In some venues, particularly TV talk shows, the assertions about Gore, even from media personalities, could be even more rhetorical than from rival candidates. Listen to talk show host Chris Matthews:

“Do you think the American people are so jaded by what they’ve seen over the years that they don’t care if a guy goes to Buddhist monasteries and has nuns rip off \$5,000 checks and hand ‘em to him and claim afterwards he was drinking iced tea and must have been in the bathroom and he didn’t know what—I mean, these are—these aren’t funny.”

Evidence For Gore & Scandal	
Voter Interaction	*%
Public Record	64
Recent Remarks	7
Camp. Platform	1
Tactics/Rhetoric	1
Opponent Attack	8
Friends’ Remarks	*
Past Personal Life	0
Poll	1
Other	8
<u>No Evidence</u>	<u>10</u>
Total	100

When you combine the statements that asserted Gore had scandal problems with the statements that refuted this, overall Gore and scandal made up nearly half of all the statements (46%) from the three themes we studied about the vice president.

As we said before, this scandal theme was established early on. Over half, 57%, of these assertions appeared in March and another 21% in February. Less than a quarter of the assertions of Gore’s problems with scandal came in the last three months, between April and June.

Television played a big role in conveying the scandal theme, especially TV talk shows. Fully 17% of the statements about Gore’s ties to scandal came from just one prime-time talk program, Hardball with Chris Matthews on CNBC.

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The scandal issue was also notable in that there was more evidence for it than any other. Fully 90% of the references offered some form of evidence. Usually--64% of the time--that evidence was interpreting Gore's public record.

The study also tried to get at the reason a particular point about a candidate's character was raised. Bill Bradley, for instance, argued that telling untruths during a campaign raised questions about whether you could trust someone once they were in office.

What was the point or significance of Gore's scandal problems as the press presented them? Usually they were tied to how he was running his campaign rather than how he might govern the country. Half of the statements about Gore and scandal were tied to his tactics and strategy. Not quite a third (31%) concerned his leadership and just 3% had to do with his relations with voters, or whether it would affect his chances of winning.

Another 10% of the time, Gore's scandal problems were raised so they could be refuted.

Despite the media's emphasis on the scandal theme and Gore, however, the subject does not dominate how the public views the vice president. Only a quarter of Americans attribute being "involved in scandals in the past" with Gore in particular. More people associate Gore with scandal than they do Bush, but only by eight percentage points. A slightly larger percentage attribute this to "neither" candidate.

In addition, nearly half of those surveyed, 47%, say it wouldn't affect their vote if they learned more about Gore being tainted by ethical problems.

BUSH AS A DIFFERENT KIND OF REPUBLICAN

The notion that Bush was a different kind of conservative often came in the form of reporters interpreting Bush's rhetoric. After airing a soundbite from Bush criticizing the both Republicans and Clinton-Gore Administration for partisanship, NBC News correspondent David Gregory added this one morning in late April on the Today Show.

"An unlikely jab at fellow Republicans during such a partisan event. Bush said 'Both parties are caught in a cycle of bitterness, an arms race of anger.' Bush's words are part of an ongoing effort to present himself as a more moderate Republican, less conservative than he was during the bitter primary battle."

The notion of Bush as different also often came from journalists interpreting his movements and motives. Listen to reporter Michael Kranish in the Boston Globe, also in late April. "In the weeks since George W. Bush won the bitter Republican primary race against Senator John McCain, he has been revamping his campaign, mellowing its tone and moving to the middle, gathering many positive reviews and slowly climbing in the polls..."

As noted earlier, such assertions that Bush was different made up 40% of all the Bush themes. Another 16% of the statements about Bush challenged this. In total, then, 56% of all the assertions about Bush related to whether he was a different kind of Republican.

To a degree, however, the subject has faded. It was

Voter Interaction	5%
Public Record	17
Recent Remarks	9
Camp. Platform	17
Tactics/Rhetoric	28
Opponent Attack	3
Friends' Remarks	2
Past Personal Life	1
Poll	1
Other	3
No Evidence	14
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Total	100

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strongest from February to April when 80% of the assertions appeared. It was especially prevalent in February, when he was campaigning in New Hampshire, and in April, after he had closed the nomination. The idea of Bush's compassion disappeared somewhat in March, when he was battling John McCain in the conservative South.

But for some reason, perhaps because the Bush camp decided its message had been heard, it was worried about keeping hard-line Republican support or perhaps because the Gore camp stopped fighting it, it lost its momentum. In June, only 10% of the assertions related to Bush being different, a month that saw 16% of all the assertions made.

The idea that Bush is a different kind of Republican also stands out because of the nature of evidence it is based on. Bush's key campaign theme was only about half as likely as average (17% versus 31%) to be based on his public record.

Instead, nearly half the evidence came from his campaign rhetoric or policy platform, more than double the average. In short, Bush's main campaign idea is one that is easier for him to manage and control than most of the themes we have seen.

It was also, however, the character theme that was most often challenged of any of the themes, 16% versus less than 5% for any other rebuttal.

That level of rebuttal, or perhaps the softness of the evidence, may have made a difference with the American public. Bush's desire to implant the notion that he is a different kind of Republican has not set in with the American people.

A greater percentage of Americans at this point attribute the characteristic of being different and reaching across party lines to Al Gore than George Bush. That margin is small, 32% to 28%, but it certainly suggests that this theme, so central to Bush's early campaign, was not the basis of his success and will not carry him far against his Democratic rival.

In addition, when voters were asked specifically if George Bush has different views than traditional Republican leaders, only two in ten thought so.

GORE AS A LIAR

The second most prevalent theme of those studied about the Vice President was the idea that Gore has problems sticking to the truth. Often it came in the form of soundbites from his rivals, who did verbal calisthenics to turn a subject from whatever to Gore's truth problem. Here CBS News' Early Show has a segment from correspondent Bill Plante with this quote from Bush:

Governor Bush: "When Vice President Gore stands up and says he's a-all of a sudden he's a campaign funding reform advocate, after having gone to a Buddhist temple a couple of years ago, I just—I'm not going to let that pass by. I'm going to remind people what the truth is, and what reality is."

Often Gore's "Pinocchio problem" was raised in the context of how his rivals would exploit it. "Well Antonio," ABC correspondent Dean Reynolds told anchor Antonio Mora on Good Morning America one day in mid-March, "the governor (Bush) is going to continue to hammer away at what they believe is a credibility gap the vice president suffers from. The governor repeatedly refers to Al Gore as a man who will say anything to get elected."

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As mentioned earlier, more than third of the Gore assertions studied (34%) were about his tendency to lie or exaggerate. What stood out, as well, was that Gore and his supporters were so incapable of responding. Only 2% of all the assertions about Gore studied argued against this charge.

This is especially notable given that even some reporters during the campaign had suggested the charges against Gore were overstated. Robert Parry, writing in the *Washington Monthly*, for instance, found that one of the biggest accusations against Gore—that he discovered the Love Canal toxic waste site—was a misquotation. Another, that he was a prototype for the character in the book *Love Story*, was actually true.

Much of the reporting captured in the study had to do with Gore’s claim that he had been absent in the men’s room during a crucial discussion about campaign money in 1996.

More than any other thread, a popular source for the idea of Gore’s truth problems was another candidate, primarily Bush or Bradley. Candidates accounted for a full 35% of the assertions. Journalists, on the other hand, were less likely than to be the source for this assertion than they were for other themes (39% versus 50%).

Once again, Gore’s record was often what did him in. More than third of the statements about Gore’s tendency to stretch the truth referred to his public record, slightly higher than for all other themes. Another two-in-ten (18%) cited an opponent’s attack as the evidence.

Voter Interaction	1%
Public Record	35
Recent Remarks	10
Camp. Platform	8
Tactics/Rhetoric	6
Opponent Attack	18
Friends’ Remarks	0
Past Personal Life	*
Poll	1
Other	5
No Evidence	16
Total	100

What was the upshot? Again, the press was less likely to explore the implications of this problem on a Gore Administration than to tie the issue to some more immediate concern, such as Gore’s campaign. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the time the assertion was related to how it would affect Gore’s tactics and strategy. The press put Gore’s exaggerations into the context of his potential leadership just 23% of the time.

Like his ties to scandal, Gore’s honesty problem was hammered at during the key primary battle. In all, 43% of the assertions came in March.

And, as with the scandal theme, the Chris Matthews show was a popular place to discuss his tendency to exaggerate. Twelve percent of these statements appeared on this show alone, compared with 9% overall and 5% of all the Bush threads combined.

Gore’s veracity did seem to penetrate to some degree with the public, though not overwhelmingly. The public was noticeably more likely to attribute saying anything to get elected to Gore than to Bush, by a margin of 36% to 25%.

And it seems to matter to people. About half of Americans said that Gore’s tendency to lie or exaggerate would make them “less likely” to vote for him, compared with 40% who said it wouldn’t make much difference.

BUSH’S INTELLIGENCE

While difficult to find evidence to support the accusation, the press was hardly shy about suggesting that George Bush may lack the mental capacity for the Oval Office.

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Make no bones about it. When the press raised the issue, it was not questioning Bush's experience or knowledge. The issue was whether Bush was smart enough.

In all, charges of Bush lacking intelligence accounted for a quarter (26%) of the Bush assertions studied. Another 3% argued that his intelligence is fine. In short, 29% of all the assertions about Bush studied were about his smarts.

Usually, this ticklish subject would come in a thinly veiled but unmistakable form. "The unhappy fact is that George W. has shown himself to be weak in debate, ambivalent in spirit and tentative in his grasp of the issues," Charles Krauthammer wrote in mid February in the Washington Post.

Or journalists would write about Bush's intellect by talking about how a rival candidate would exploit it. Often, the route was amazingly circuitous. "By invoking the name of Dan Quayle, who as vice president was not known for his experience or substance, and linking it with the presidency of Governor Bush's father, Mr. Gore is trying to conjure up the image of a candidate who is neither ready for the presidency nor capable of sound economic decisions," wrote Katherine Q. Seelye in the New York Times in mid March.

Like Seelye, often when people spoke of Bush's lack of intelligence, it tended to be in the framework of his leadership ability. Nearly half, 45%, of all the statements about this subject related to his leadership, compared to 29% for themes on average. A large percentage also connected it to his electability, 11% versus 6% for all themes.

With so soft an issue as intelligence, candidates were not usually the one raising doubts. In fact, they made only 15% of the assertions about Bush's intellect, compared with 25% on average. The doubts were more likely than usual to come from journalists themselves (57% versus 50% overall).

Journalists were also more likely than average to simply express an opinion that

Sources for Bush's Intellect		
	Intellect	All Themes
Journalist	57%	50%
Analysis	41	40
Opinion	16	10
Voter	4	3
Expert	6	5
Surrogate	10	12
Candidate	15	25
Other Media	7	3
Other	1	2
Total	100	100

Bush lacked intelligence rather than cite evidence (16% versus 10%). Indeed, nearly a third of all the statements about Bush's intellect were unsupported.

This suggests that a major question mark about the Texas governor is one that is particularly hard to pin down, especially in an age of doubting IQ tests and looking for alternatives measurements, such as emotional intelligence (EQ). In addition, there is a potential for backlash. The accuser can look egotistical or self-righteous. Or the charge may invite the press to probe the accuser for any signs of faltering judgment.

When evidence was offered, the most common form was to point to Bush's tactics and rhetoric (14%) or his current policy positions (12%). There was also a fair amount of evidence in the form of an opponent's attack (9%) and in Bush's interactions with voters (7%). Only 6% of all these statements referenced Bush's public record.

A good deal of the time, 38%, the press questioned Bush's intelligence in analytical stories and another 15% in newspaper op-eds. But, interestingly, there were only two mentions of this character thread in editorials and one in a one-on-one interview with the candidate himself. Some of this analysis came from the Sunday talk shows where the percentage of mentions was twice as great as the average.

Interestingly, questions about Bush's intelligence spiked at two moments in the campaign thus far, one during his primary fight in March with John McCain and again in June, a quiet time during the coverage, after he had won the nomination.

Perhaps because the evidence is so soft, the idea that Bush may lack intellectual firepower has not been embraced by the public. Indeed, a slightly greater percentage of Americans actually attribute not being a serious person to Gore than to Bush.

What's more, a greater percentage of Americans said that Bush "not knowing enough about the issues" would make no difference in their vote than said it would bother them, 47% versus 42%.

Voter Interaction	7%
Public Record	6
Recent Remarks	6
Camp. Platform	12
Tactics/Rhetoric	14
Opponent Attack	9
Friends' Remarks	2
Past Personal Life	7
Poll	1
Other	5
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No Evidence	31
Total	100

GORE'S COMPETENCE

Gore's competence was a central message being promoted by his campaign. Sometimes this thread came up in the form of reporters simply summarizing Gore's mindset. "The vice president has great faith in his own national security experience and instincts....The vice president has participated in every major national security debate over the past decade and has access to intelligence and foreign policy expertise throughout the government," noted reporter John Broder in the New York Times.

Often the praise of Gore came through the coverage of Clinton. Here is Salon's Jesse Drucker quoting the president.

" 'He (Gore) wanted to be the first administration to take on Big Tobacco and give our children their lives back,' said Clinton. He complimented Gore for his roles in Kosovo, Haiti, health care and more. 'He was there, everytime, in private, getting no credit,' said Clinton, waving his finger in that all-too-familiar way. 'He has had more responsibility than any person who ever held this job....'"

Yet if Gore wanted to promote that message in the press, he failed to do so. Only 14% of all the Gore assertions spoke of his long experience and presumed ability. Another 4% questioned it, for a total of 18% of all the statements studied about Gore.

Voter Interaction	5%
Public Record	21
Recent Remarks	1
Camp. Platform	12
Tactics/Rhetoric	19
Opponent Attack	2
Friends' Remarks	2
Past Personal Life	1
Poll	8
Other	5
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No Evidence	24
Total	100

Interestingly, journalists were less likely than usual to appraise Gore's abilities. Campaign surrogates, on the other hand, were almost twice as likely as usual to speak to Gore's competence.

When comparing key positive concepts about the characters of the two candidates, however, Bush clearly prevailed in the media. Overall, there were less than half as many statements about Gore's competence than there were of Bush's main argument that he is a different kind of Republican.

In addition, though this message would seem to stem from Gore's public record as much as any thread, it was not as well evidenced as the other Gore threads. A quarter of these statements (24%) offered no evidence, higher than

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the norm (19%). One-in-five statements referred to Gore’s public record and another 19% cited his campaign tactics and rhetoric.

Again however, the public seems to be taking its cues from other sources than the press. While journalists have made scarce mention of it, the public is more likely to attribute experience and knowledge to Gore than any other quality surveyed, and noticeably more than for Bush, 38% versus 25%.

The lack of coverage about this issue also stands out because it appears to matter to people. More than half of Americans (51%) said Gore’s experience would make them more likely to vote for him. At the same time, 47% said Bush’s lack of experience wouldn’t matter.

BUSH COASTS

While Bush’s family connections are easily cited, this theme hardly dominated the press coverage of the Texas governor through months leading up to the convention.

In all, they made up 15% of all the Bush statements (10% suggesting he does coast and another 5% arguing that he does not).

In the end, it was the least common thread of those we examined.

This started out as a strong theme but then quickly dropped off. Nearly three quarters of the assertions, 73%, about his reliance on family occurred in February and early March, when he was struggling, while only 9% occurred in June.

When this assertion did come, it was often the fruit of reporters synthesizing Bush’s background and drawing conclusions. “It does seem that from the very beginning, Mr. Bush got a crucial helping hand in life because of his name and family connections. Otherwise, he would probably not have been admitted to Andover and then to Yale,” reporter Nicholas Kristof wrote in the New York Times in mid June.

Sometimes the aspersions about Bush came from voters. “All he’s got is the name recognition,” the Washington Post quoted South Carolina voter Eileen Rodriguez Harding in mid-February as saying, “He’s got the money, but it’s his daddy’s coattails.”

Journalists—rather than other candidates--were the central carriers of this theme. A full 64% of these assertions came from journalists and half of those, 34%, were pure opinion rather than analysis that cited some evidence.

Voters were also more likely than usual to remark on Bush’s family ties. Voters were the source for one-in-ten of the statements about Bush’s family ties compared to only one-in-thirty-three overall.

Candidates, on the other hand, didn’t seem to want to touch the subject of Bush’s family connections. They were three times less likely than average to be the source for this theme, 7% versus 25% overall. One possible reason: Al Gore has a few family connections of his own.

In the end, more than half of all the statements about Bush’s reliance on family offered no supporting evidence. Maybe the Bush family connections are so well known

Voter Interaction	5%
Public Record	0
Recent Remarks	2
Camp. Platform	2
Tactics/Rhetoric	8
Opponent Attack	1
Friends’ Remarks	8
Past Personal Life	15
Poll	2
Other	5
No Evidence	52
Total	100

they required no explanation. Or maybe, as we suggested earlier, the reporting on Bush during the pre-convention era involved surprisingly little digging into his record and background.

Whatever the reason, the press did little to establish through any reporting of his life that Bush's accomplishments were the result of nepotism. In fact, anecdotal evidence upon reading the stories suggests that the background pieces about Bush's upbringing often refuted claims of elitism and reliance on family.

Half the time assertions about Bush's family ties related to the Bush camp's tactical moves or to attempts to connect better with voters. Less than 10% of the statements raised Bush's background in the context of his leadership ability.

Once again, however, the choices the press was making in terms of coverage of character did not match public attitudes about the subject. More Americans attributed the idea of "relying on family connections to get ahead" than they did any of the six character traits to either of the candidates, even though the same thing might easily be said of Al Gore, himself the son of a prominent Senator.

It is less clear how much this matters to people, at least in a race between the sons of two prominent men. Americans were equally divided as to whether or not nepotism would make them less likely or make no difference in voting for Bush.

REBUTTALS

Looking closer at the nature of the rebuttals, we find them nearly twice as likely as the average to appear on op-ed pages, 17% versus 9% overall.

The network evening newscasts were also unusually likely to refute prevalent character themes about the candidates. Nearly 20% of all the rebuttals came on the evening news, even though the newscasts made up only slightly more than 10% of all character statements. One possibility is that the nightly newscasts, given their limited time, now often see their role as responding to or deflating the conventional wisdom that has built up during the news day.

Who were the sources of the rebuttals? One might have thought candidates or their surrogates would have carried the weight. Not so. The sources were similar to those for all the themes, about a half from journalists, a quarter from candidates, 10% from surrogates, 9% from outside experts and 6% from voters.

One might have also expected that a rebuttal would have to carry more evidence than the charge it was refuting. Again, not so. Rebuttals were a little less likely than the average theme, to offer some form of evidence (73% versus 81%) and less of it tended to be the candidate's public record, 19% versus 26%.

SOURCE & EVIDENCE

Usually, different news sources came with different kinds of evidence. Outside experts were more likely to offer some proof for the claims (92% versus 81% overall) and to base their proof on the candidate's public record (43% versus 31% overall).

Journalists on the other hand, referred to the public record just 28% of the time and offered no evidence 22% of time.

The candidates were the next most likely source to offer evidence (83%) and in doing so, referred to the public record (36%).

Evidence Used by the Various Sources

	<u>Journalist</u> (n=661)	<u>Candidate</u> (n=329)	<u>Surrogate</u> (n=160)	<u>Expert</u> (n=73)	<u>Voter</u> (n=45)	<u>Other Media</u> (n=38)	<u>Other</u> (n=24)
Voter interaction	3%	1%	6%	2	16%	0%	17%
Public record	28	36	28	43	20	16	29
Recent remarks	7	9	3	1	2	13	4
Camp. platform	8	13	9	8	5	0	0
Tactics/rhetoric	14	10	8	23	13	3	17
Opponent attack	6	10	16	4	2	3	0
Friends' remarks	2	0	3	0	0	3	4
Past personal life	3	1	2	0	2	13	13
Poll	2	0	1	3	2	6	8
Other media	2	*	1	0	0	0	0
Other	3	3	6	8	2	6	4
No evidence	22	17	17	8	36	37	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

THE INTERNET

While the Internet universe consisted only of Salon and Slate and made up just 10% of the total assertions studied, a strong pattern emerged. Six-in-ten Internet statements came from journalists, slightly higher than the norm. But more interestingly, the Internet statements were almost twice as likely as the average to be pure opinion, 19% versus 10% overall. (Only 8% of newspapers statements were pure opinion.) This medium was also less likely to carry statements made by one of the candidates, 16% versus 25% overall, or by a campaign surrogate, 6% versus 12% overall.

Even though the Internet by its nature has unlimited space, it was the least likely of the mediums to find room to offer evidence with the statements. A full 28% offered no evidence compared to 19% overall.

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Methodology

Sample Design

Twenty-six media outlets—7 newspapers, 18 broadcasts and 2 internet sites—were monitored for five weeks of coverage between February 2000 and June 2000. The first period began on February 7 and continued through February 13. The second period began March 13 and continued through March 19. The third period began April 24 and ran through April 30. The fourth period began May 15 and continued through May 21. The final monitoring period began June 5 and continued through June 11. This monitoring period provided a steady sampling of coverage from the heat of the primaries up through the eve of the convention kickoffs.

Newspapers were selected to develop a sampling of coverage by both national and regional publications. We studied a total of 7 newspapers: Washington Post, New York Times, Atlanta Journal & Constitution, Boston Globe, Indianapolis Star, San Francisco Chronicle and Seattle Times.

Television and radio programs, selected to provide the widest range of coverage, included the following:

- 6 evening news programs: ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, CNN the World Today, PBS Newshour, NPR All Things Considered.
- 3 morning news shows: ABC Good morning America, CBS This Morning, NBC Today Show.
- 6 Sunday news shows: This Week with Sam and Cokie (ABC), Face the Nation (CBS), Meet the Press (NBC), Capital Gang (CNN), McLaughlin Group (NBC), Fox News Sunday (FOX).
- 3 evening talk programs: Larry King (CNN), MSNBC Hardball with Chris Matthew (MSNBC), Nightline (NBC).

We also monitored two of the most popular Internet sites for political news: Salon and Slate.

Inclusion and Screening

The selected outlets were monitored first through the use of Lexis-Nexis. The search criteria was designed to cast the widest possible net so that we could capture all news stories having to do with George Bush or Al Gore and the presidential campaign. This provided a total of 2,004 news stories and 400 television and radio broadcasts or cablecasts.

Next we read each story individually to search for mentions of the six themes in our study: Bush coasts on family connections, Bush lacks intelligence, Bush is a different kind of Republican, Gore is scandal tainted, Gore exaggerates and Gore is competent and experienced. Rather than code the story as a whole, we wanted to examine each individual assertion of a theme. Therefore, every time a relevant statement was made, it was highlighted for inclusion.

To be included, a statement needed to assert or refute one the six character themes. There was a wide range of acceptable language for each theme. For example the wording of a statement about Bush coasting on family connections

could be that he “has relied on his Dad’s name to get him where he is” or “Without his family ties, Bush would not be never make it in national politics” or something else. In general, the statement needed to somehow convey or refute one of the six themes.

Some stories had five or six assertions while other had just one. Stories with no assertions were discarded. The resulting project sample consisted of 1330 specific statements—344 about Gore and scandal, 320 about Bush as a different Republican, 269 about Gore’s exaggerations, 176 about Bush’s intelligence, 132 about Gore’s competence and 89 about Bush’s family ties.

Coding Process

Each of the 1330 assertions was coded individually. Researchers worked with a detailed, standardized coding scheme. All assertions were first coded for basic inventory variables: date, outlet and story type. Next assertions were coded for content variables: source, evidence, context and whether it was a rebuttal of the theme.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability measures the extent to which individual coders, operations independently of one another, reach the same coding decision. Tests were performed throughout the project: no systematic errors were found. When necessary, the coding supervisor reviewed decisions on content variables to be sure coders were in agreement.