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The Return of the Honeymoon: Television News Coverage of New Presidents, 1981-2009

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ABSTRACT

Content analysis of network evening news coverage during the first year of the Barack Obama presidency revealed coverage that was far more positive in tone than comparable news reports from the first years of the Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies. Both domestic and international policy evaluations of the Obama presidency were more positive in tone than those of the last three presidents to take office during partisan transfers of power. The findings reveal a revival of the media honeymoon that scholars thought had disappeared during the modern era of a more combative press. An investigation of the “beat sweetening” hypothesis reveals mixed results, suggesting the need for further investigation.

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Barack Obama's 2008 election was an emotional moment for many Americans, generating joyful rallies in many US cities. The enthusiastic election night response in 2008 had more in common with the vigorous and highly partisan 19th century political victory rallies than with most presidential elections of the 20th century, though subsequent scholarly analysis of voting behavior suggests that Obama's election may be less transformational than some thought at the time (cf., Denton 2009; Edge 2010; Smith and King 2009). Candidate Obama's change agenda triggered highly optimistic impressions – what some might consider unrealistic visions -- among many citizens about what the youthful president could accomplish once he replaced George W. Bush (Campbell 2009; Conley 2009; Ceaser et al. 2009; Harris and Martin 2009; Pew 2008c). Those expansive early public perceptions gave way, as they often do, to increased public negativity about a new president's policies after he started to govern (Balz and Cohen 2010).

One key area where the Obama's 2008 election campaign was notably different from its predecessors (and from the campaign of his 2008 rival Sen. John McCain), was in the aggressive courting of reporters and extensive use of paid media. Partly as a result of these factors, Obama enjoyed a huge tonal advantage in stories about the campaign in traditional media, with news reports far more positive than reports on the McCain campaign or those of other Democratic and Republican nominees during the past several presidential election cycles (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011; Owen 2009). The less positive campaign coverage other successful presidential candidates received, including Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, translated into less-than-positive first year news reports once they took office (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2004, 2006).

This paper uses content analysis of network television evening news reports from Obama's first year to determine whether the relatively positive treatment Obama received during the campaign carried over to his first year in office. Did this unusually effective media campaigner continue to receive highly positive news reports once campaigning gave way to governing? Did Obama's first months in office suggest a revival of the traditional presidential "honeymoon" of favorable media treatment that presidents once enjoyed but had lost during the

recent decades of increased media negativity (cf., Cohen 2008; Farnsworth and Lichter 2004, 2006; Patterson 1994)?

To answer these questions, content analysis data on Obama's first year in office will be assessed in light of comparable analyses of the first years of the presidencies of Ronald Reagan (1981), Bill Clinton (1993) and George W. Bush (2001). These data, covering the four most recent partisan transfers of control of the White House, allow us to examine in a quantitative fashion claims by the president's critics that the mainstream media were treating Obama much more positively than previous presidents (cf., Kurtz 2010; Rutenburg 2009). Our comparison of presidential coverage with coverage of other White House actors also allows us to chart trends in "beat sweetening," a process where reporters are thought to curry favor with new administration officials and potential sources with unusually positive coverage (Calderone 2009; Noah 2009; Silverstein 2010).

Permanent Campaigns, Going Public and Honeymoons

Presidential administrations generally continue to campaign after moving into the White House, seeking to sell the president as the candidate had been sold previously (Farnsworth 2009; Tulis 1987). This practice of governing through a "permanent campaign" offers mixed results. While the mass media convey immense communication advantages to the White House, presidents do not always market their policies or themselves effectively (Brody 1991; Cook 2002; Entman 2004; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Gilbert 1989; Gregg 2004; Han 2001; Hertsgaard 1989; Kernell 2007; Kumar 2007; Tulis 1987). The presidential strategy of moving Congress by first persuading citizens is known as "going public," a common media campaign approach employed by recent presidential administrations (Kernell 2007). But presidents have appeared to have accomplished little by going public (cf., Edwards 2003, 2004, 2006).

The wide-ranging media sources present in today's multimedia environment make it even easier for government officials to play favorites with media outlets, taking care of pro-

government reporters by giving more information to their media “allies” (Mooney 2004). These new media outlets also represent ideal vehicles for attacking mainstream media outlets as reflexively critical and committed to preventing Americans from seeing the truth about a president (Rutenberg 2009). The financial problems many mass media companies face these days also increase competitive pressures in an already competitive environment, which could also discourage reporters from angering potential sources (Fenton 2005; Kaye and Quinn 2010).

New presidents were long thought to enjoy a honeymoon when they first entered the White House, a brief “settling in” period of relative harmony among White House officials and the reporters who cover them. In the aggressive political and media environments of recent years, new presidents are required to hit the ground running and do not enjoy such forgiving evaluations during their first months (Cohen 2008; Dickinson 2003; Fleisher and Bond 2000; Pfiffner 1988). Studies of the contentious first months of the Bill Clinton presidency in 1993 found little evidence of a honeymoon (cf., Hughes 1995). The highly partisan rancor that marked the opening months of George W. Bush’s presidency in 2001, which took place in the wake of an unprecedented legal challenge over the legitimacy of the vote count in Florida, also suggests that little remained of the traditional press-presidential honeymoon (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2004, 2006).

Studies looking at a range of Cold War era presidents found evidence of a honeymoon effect for most newly elected presidents serving during the television age before Clinton, with the clear exception of Jimmy Carter (Hughes 1995). Reviewing this earlier period of presidential honeymoons leading into the 1970s, Michael Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar (1981:1) wrote: “It would be a mistake to view the relationship as basically antagonistic. The adversary elements of the relationship tend to be its most highly visible aspects. Cooperation and continuity are at its core.”

Barack Obama, who enjoyed the most positive network news coverage of any presidential

candidate over the past 20 years (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2011), entered the Oval Office with a very different status from his two most recent predecessors. Obama did not come to office tainted by electoral controversy as George W. Bush did in 2001 (cf., Bugliosi 2001; Sunstein and Epstein 2001; Tapper 2001, 2002). Nor did Obama stumble in the early going the way that Bill Clinton did with his failed cabinet nominations of Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood and his controversial early focus on ending the ban on gays in the military (cf., O'Brien 1996). Obama also won a majority of the vote, something that Clinton did not accomplish in 1992. In 2000, of course, Bush failed to obtain even a plurality of the votes cast (cf., Ceaser et al. 2009).

The above factors, combined with his historic election as America's first African American president, make Obama a likely candidate for a media honeymoon. Even so, coverage honeymoons may not be equally positive across all issue areas. Presidents traditionally have had far more success in shaping foreign policy than domestic policy. The differences are stark enough that scholars often speak of "two presidencies" – one foreign and one domestic – with the president taking the leading role in international matters (cf., Oldfield and Wildavsky 1989; Sullivan 1991). Although this theory focuses on legislative success, the "two presidencies" idea is not without its relevance to presidential communication. Detailed study of news management strategies of the George W. Bush administration found that the White House has far greater ability to control the political and media discourse on international matters, where it has greater control over the information flow (cf., Entman 2004; Fisher 2004; Kumar 2003; Orkent 2004).

In addition, honeymoons once served an important purpose for reporters, who found it useful to cozy up to new sources in exchange for privileged access to policy makers and documents. Given the importance of first impressions upon longer-term working relationships,

positive profiles of new administration officials can help smooth the way to effective coverage of the White House beat through stories journalists have dubbed “beat sweeteners” (Calderone 2009; Noah 2009; Silverstein 2010).

With these factors in mind, we expected that coverage of Barack Obama’s first year in office would be significantly more positive than coverage of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton or George W. Bush during these same periods. The lack of a honeymoon for Clinton or George W. Bush may have been due to special factors, not to the end of the media-presidential honeymoon itself. We employed a stringent test of the honeymoon thesis by comparing Obama’s coverage with recent predecessors overall as well as within specific policy areas. Along these lines, we expected that the honeymoon effect would be strongest for news coverage of international matters, given the president’s communication advantages regarding international matters.

With respect to “beat-sweetening,” we expected it would be most pronounced for the Obama presidency, which takes place at a time of heightened multimedia competition with network news. Given the significant declines in the audience size and the fortunes of network television in recent years, the temptation seems greater than ever before for reporters to engage in this practice of endearing themselves to incoming administration officials in hopes of building relationships that can lead to improved access to information (cf., Calderone 2009; Fenton 2005; Kaye and Quinn 2010; Noah 2009; Pew 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Silverstein 2010).

The Data

In this study we use content analysis to examine the tone of coverage of network evening news stories about Barack Obama during his first year in office (January 20 through December 31, 2009). In this study, we look at the overall volume and tone of coverage of Obama on ABC,

CBS and NBC, as well as the amount and tone of news coverage of key issue areas, including the economy, health care and foreign policy. We also compare the tone of coverage of Obama with that of other White House and administration sources. Throughout this analysis we compare that news coverage of Obama with that of the last three presidents who came into office as a result of partisan transfers of power: Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. These data were generated by the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University, which has conducted a wide range of content analyses of political news over the past three decades.

Although the broadcast news audience is smaller than it once was, network news coverage is often reflected in cable news and the traditional news reports often inform online commentary (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2011; Pew 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). A Pew study of online, cable, and talk radio content during the 2008 election found little difference in topical focus or tone between those media segments and the coverage of the campaign on network television evening newscasts and in the nation's leading newspapers (cf., Pew 2008b, 2008c; Farnsworth and Lichter 2011).

In addition, any comparative analysis going back to 1981 must take note of the fact that the first year of Reagan's presidency took place before the Internet, before Fox News, and even before CNN (Goldberg and Goldberg 1995). The three decade time frame of this research project severely limits the range of influential media sources available for comparison.

Content analysis is a technique that allows researchers to classify statements objectively and systematically according to explicit rules and clear criteria. The goal is to produce valid measures of program content, and the hallmark of success lies in reliability. Other investigators who apply similar procedures to the same material should obtain similar results, although their

interpretations of those results may differ. Clear rules and standards are set for identifying, measuring, and classifying each news story.

Our analysis is based primarily on individual statements or sound bites within each story. Although time-consuming and labor intensive, this sentence by sentence analysis allowed us to analyze the building blocks of each story separately, rather than making summary judgments of entire stories. Instead of coding an entire story as “positive” or “negative” toward an individual or institution, we coded each evaluation within the story for its source, topic, object and tone. A single story might contain several evaluations of various actors; our system captured each one individually. This procedure produces a very detailed picture of the news media’s treatment of a president and his administration.

Evaluations were coded as positive or negative if they conveyed an unambiguous assessment or judgment about an individual, an institution, or an action. Only explicit evaluations were coded, in which both the target of the evaluation and its direction were clear. A description of events that reflected well or badly on some political actor was not coded for its tone unless it contained an evaluative comment. For example, an account of the passage of a bill supported by the White House would be coded as positive only if a source or reporter explicitly described it as a victory for the White House, a validation of the president’s views or efforts on its behalf, etc. (Intercoder reliability for all measures used here exceeds .80).

Results

(Table 1 about here)

As Table 1 shows, Obama’s overall news coverage was notably more positive than that of George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan. The tonal coverage gap favored Obama by at

least 12 percentage points over the last three presidents whose election involved a partisan transfer of power. Using chi-square tests, we observe that these are all statistically significant differences ($p < .01$). Obama's double-digit advantage in the overall tonal coverage was also present in coverage of his domestic policy ($p < .01$). The gaps were narrower for foreign policy, where Clinton trailed Obama by only seven percentage points, but the results still represent statistically significant differences between Obama and all three previous presidents ($p < .01$).

The return of the media-presidential honeymoon during the Obama administration is also supported by analysis of the first few months of coverage, when the conditions for a honeymoon are most likely to be present. During the first 100 days in office [results not shown], Obama's coverage on network news was also the most positive of the four presidents being compared here. Overall, coverage of Obama was 50 percent positive, as compared to 45 percent positive for Reagan, 42 percent positive for G.W. Bush and 40 percent positive for Clinton. For the first seven months in office, Obama also held the advantage. Obama's 51 percent positive coverage suggests an extended honeymoon, particularly when compared to the 37 percent positive coverage of both Reagan and G.W. Bush and the 34 percent positive reports on Clinton during their first seven months in office. During the fourth quarter of 2009, however, Obama's honeymoon with network news appeared to be over. From October through December, Obama's coverage returned to levels comparable to that of the other three presidents finishing their first years in office. During that final period, Obama's coverage was 39 percent positive, compared to 40 percent positive for Bush, who received relatively positive treatment in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. Both Reagan and Clinton received negative coverage more than two-thirds of the time during the final months of their first years, worse than George W.

Bush and Obama.

The data shown in Table 1 do not support the idea that Obama's honeymoon was concentrated in the realm of international politics, as one might expect for a wartime president. In fact, the tone of domestic coverage was slightly higher than that of foreign policy news. Perhaps the severe economic downturn present at the end of the Bush years gave Obama more latitude on domestic matters; perhaps the greater deference that Congress usually offers a president in the international arena has evaporated during these more partisan times (cf., Ceaser et al. 2009; Conley 2009). The detailed focus on more specific domestic and international topics below sheds further light on this question.

(Table 2 about here)

Turning to news coverage of specific domestic policy matters, which saw larger differences between Obama and the other presidents, we see in Table 2 that coverage of health care was a major plus for Obama. Health care was the only major domestic area where the more positive coverage of Obama was statistically significant when compared to that of his predecessors. Obama's 53 percent positive coverage in that issue area was well above the 34 percent positive Clinton received in this area and the 28 percent positive coverage Bush received in this issue area. (Health care policy was not a major focus of news coverage of Reagan's first year in office.) Obama's health care bill did not pass until 2010, but the public debate in 2009 was divisive, including claims of "death panels" that helped give birth to the Tea Party movement (Kurtz 2009; Timpane 2009). But much of the harshest rhetoric was the focus of sustained attention on cable television, particularly on Fox News, and online. On network television, far more attention was devoted to economic matters during 2009 than anything else.

Obama fared slightly better in the general economic news category than did Clinton and Reagan but slightly worse in the budget category. Even so, the differences for these two economic news categories were not statistically significant. (Neither category ranked in the top five of Bush's domestic policy news). Coverage of Obama's mortgage bailout efforts during 2009 was relatively positive, with 56 percent positive mentions. News coverage of the Obama's team first significant legislative victory, the economic stimulus bill (cf., Fletcher 2009), was 41 percent positive in tone, roughly in line with the general coverage of Obama's economic policies.

(Table 3 about here)

Table 3 compares the coverage of recent presidents with respect to key foreign policy issues. Obama had a statistically significant proportion of positive coverage overall, but the wide range of subtopics for the different presidents allows for few comparisons across presidencies. In the general terrorism category, network news coverage of Bush during 2001 – the year of the 9/11 attacks – was more positive than terrorism news relating to Obama, but the difference was not statistically significant. News reports on Obama's Iraq policy were more positive than those on Bush's Iraq policy but less positive than those that addressed Clinton's Iraq policies. But these differences were not statistically significant either. Obama's policies with respect to Iran, which included aggressive outreach efforts to the Middle East, comprised his most positive area of coverage, while news reports were more negative when discussing Obama's anti-terrorism policies and his promise to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

When looking at the distribution of leading foreign policy topics, a consistent pattern emerges: each president had mainly positive coverage of some policy initiatives and mainly negative coverage of others. Obama's major areas did not contain the harshest judgments. None

of his leading topics were reported negatively two-thirds of the time, while Bush and Clinton each had two leading international topics where the reviews were overwhelmingly negative and Reagan had one. This variation between Obama's leading international news areas and those of his predecessors is consistent with the notion that Obama had a something of a "two presidencies" honeymoon when compared to his predecessors. With the absence of statistically significant differences, the idea that this wartime president would get gentler media treatment on international matters is not supported.

(Table 4 about here)

In Table 4, we turn to the issue of whether presidents or their staffs are treated more positively in network news reports. We were looking here for evidence of "beat sweetening," reporters' efforts to treat Obama administration officials positively, perhaps even more positively than the president himself. Comparing the coverage of Obama – by far the most positively treated president in this study – with that of the staff is a demanding standard. Perhaps as a result of this challenge, we find at best modest evidence of this pattern. Coverage of the White House and Cabinet, not counting Obama, was nine percentage points more positive on CBS and seven percentage points more positive on NBC than coverage of the president. These differences are in the expected direction, but they are not statistically significant. On ABC the difference in tone between presidential and sub-presidential news was negligible -- only one percentage point.

CBS, which often endured criticism from conservatives during the years that Dan Rather sat in the anchor's chair, seemed to engage in "beat sweetening" during the first year of George W. Bush's administration. The statistically significant gap between presidential and sub-presidential news was eleven percentage points, slightly larger than that during Obama's first

year. There was also a five point gap for CBS in 1993, during Bill Clinton's first year, but that gap was not statistically significant.

But there is more compelling evidence that, if reporters are trying to soften up an administration, they do so by praising the boss. Of the seven statistically significant comparisons between presidential and sub-presidential news that achieved statistical significance, six favor the president over the "other executive" category. This is the opposite direction predicted by the "beat sweetening" hypothesis. Only the comparison of presidential versus other White House and cabinet coverage in 2001 – a period before the most intense financial troubles for the media business emerged -- was statistically significant in the expected direction.

Conclusion

The first and perhaps most important finding is that the presidential honeymoon, so frequently thought to have been a thing of the past, returned with the arrival of the Obama administration. His coverage was significantly more positive than that of the last three presidents who entered the White House during a partisan transfer of power. The differences previously identified in the positive campaign coverage Obama received during his presidential run continued during his first year as president. However, the tone of his coverage became more comparable with that of previous presidents during the final months of 2009, which is also consistent with the notion of a relatively brief honeymoon. The differences favoring Obama were found for both domestic and foreign policy issues.

When we looked at specific issue areas, our expectation of distinctly more positive treatment for the new commander-in-chief in the international arena was less noticeable. Many citizens of other nations enthusiastically supported Obama's presidency (cf., Pew 2010), but the

consequences of more positive international feelings apparently did not have a major impact on the tone of Obama's international coverage in the US. In part because these four presidents dealt with very different international environments, specific comparisons by issue area were difficult to make. The overall numbers favored Obama and his leading foreign policy issues were treated less negatively than those of previous presidents, but the findings suggest a general presidential honeymoon rather than the "two presidencies" suggestion of a honeymoon concentrated in the foreign policy arena.

On the key issue of Obama's first year – trying to fix the declining economy – the tone of coverage of the new president was not very different from his predecessors, all three of whom made economic matters a key part of their first year agenda – a stimulus bill for Clinton and tax cuts measures for both Bush and Reagan. Obama's coverage was more negative than his predecessors on taxes, but he did receive relatively high marks for his handling of the mortgage bailout, an issue that arose during the final months of the George W. Bush presidency and during the first months of Obama's tenure.

On health care – a major issue for Clinton and to a lesser extent for George W. Bush – Obama's coverage was significantly more positive than that of his predecessors. Leaving the details of the legislation to Congress may have helped Obama's coverage in this issue area. Since his position was flexible during the 2009 portion of the health care debate, it was much harder to criticize. The failed Clinton health care plan, developed in closed door meetings with Hillary Clinton and eventually documented in more than 1,300 pages of text, offered many specific targets for attack that helped doom the measure (Skocpol 1997).

Our reliance on network television, which is essential for a project comparing presidential

news coverage in both 1981 and 2009, likely understates the amount of anti-Obama content aired during the 2009 health care debate. Fox News, in particular, has demonstrated its willingness to provide far more extensive anti-Obama news content than other more mainstream media outlets (cf., Farnsworth et al. 2010).

There has been a good deal of talk in the popular press during the past few years about the willingness of reporters to write positive stories of members of the incoming administration in hopes of building positive relationships that can be used to the reporters' advantage in subsequent encounters. Our research – the first we know of to examine this claim empirically – finds at best mixed evidence for this claim.

Obama's coverage was more positive than that of the three previous presidents examined here and coverage of his top staff (that is, White House and Cabinet officials) was even more positive on two of the three leading broadcast networks. But the differences between presidential and sub-presidential news in 2009 failed to achieve statistical significance for any of the three networks, perhaps because Obama's first-year coverage was far more positive than that of many recent presidents. Although there was some evidence of the expected pattern (CBS's treatment of George W. Bush during 2001), more statistically significant findings point in the opposite direction of that suggested by the "beat sweetening" hypothesis. (Indeed, this one case from 2001 undermines the idea that the greater financial and audience pressures on the mass media in 2009 would call for greater use of this technique during the Obama years.)

Given these inconsistent findings, the "beat sweetening" idea may be worth future exploration and perhaps redefinition. Since one of the key tasks of presidential aides is to deflect criticism that would otherwise be directed at the president – the so-called "spear catching"

function – perhaps the beat sweetening tendency of reporters is effectively cancelled out by the powerful incentives White House staffers themselves have for making a president look good. After all, their jobs depend on maximizing presidential popularity. Along these same lines, perhaps the reporters engaging in “beat sweetening” may offer positive coverage of the president in hopes of securing greater assistance from his underlings.

Clearly further conceptual refinement of this idea is warranted. Perhaps this alleged beat sweetening pattern can be measured more effectively with a comparison of first year sub-presidential news coverage with that of subsequent years, a line of inquiry beyond the reach of our data. Or researchers might look to other media to search for this pattern. Perhaps this alleged journalistic temptation is more attractive to reporters at newer, less established media outlets that do not command the White House’s attention in the way that network television still does. These issues suggest subsequent areas of inquiry for researchers interested in further exploring the beat sweetening hypothesis.

Table 1

**Amount and Tone of News Evaluations by Policy Area
During Presidential First Years**

(percent positive)						
	<i>All Evaluations</i>		<i>Foreign Policy</i>		<i>Domestic Policy</i>	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Barack Obama (2009)	47%	1,365	45%	445	47%	834
George W. Bush (2001)	35%**	2,197	35%**	732	35%**	1,348
Bill Clinton (1993)	34%**	3,567	38%**	740	32%**	2,680
Ronald Reagan (1981)	33%**	1,093	28%**	330	33%**	653

Source: Content analysis of evening newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31).

Notes: N refers to numbers of evaluations for a given subject area.

Not all evaluations could be classified as relating to either foreign or domestic policy.

Statistically significant differences from the tone of news coverage of Obama are identified using chi-square tests. * Significant at $p < .05$; ** Significant at $p < .01$

Table 2
Amount and Tone of News Evaluations by Major Domestic Policy Area during Presidential First Years

(percent positive)								
	<i>Obama 2009</i>		<i>G.W. Bush 2001</i>		<i>Clinton 1993</i>		<i>Reagan 1981</i>	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Health Care	53%	147	28%**	99	34%**	253	---	---
Economy General	47%	66	--	--	41%	205	35%	92
Budget	26%	52	--	--	30%	259	31%	237
Economic Stimulus	41%	198	---	---	---	---	---	---
Mortgage bailout	56%	33	---	---	---	---	---	---
Taxes	--	--	41%	280	20%	147	45%	51
Environment	--	--	26%	193	--	--	9%	34
Energy policy	--	--	25%	147	--	--	--	--
Education	--	--	65%	52	--	--	--	--
Gays in the military	--	--	--	--	24%	197	--	--
Labor/PATCO Strike	---	---	---	---	---	---	17%	59

Source: Content analysis of evening newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31).

Notes: N refers to numbers of evaluations for a given subject area.

Only the top five most-frequently discussed topics for each president are listed.

Statistically significant differences from the tone of news coverage of Obama are identified using chi-square tests. * Significant at $p < .05$; ** Significant at $p < .01$

Table 3
Amount and Tone of News Evaluations by Major International Policy Area during Presidential First Years

(percent positive)								
	<i>Obama 2009</i>		<i>G.W. Bush 2001</i>		<i>Clinton 1993</i>		<i>Reagan 1981</i>	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Afghanistan	42%	96	--	--	--	--	--	--
Guantanamo	36%	56	--	--	--	--	--	--
Terrorism	36%	39	43%	175	--	--	--	--
Iran	58%	24	--	--	--	--	--	--
Iraq	44%	16	29%	21	63%	86	--	--
China spy plane	--	--	34%	202	--	--	--	--
Missile defense	--	--	35%	95	--	--	--	--
Israel/Palestinians	--	--	25%	32	--	--	--	--
Yugoslavia	--	--	--	--	28%	168	--	--
Bosnia	--	--	--	--	28%	159	--	--
Somalia	--	--	--	--	34%	113	--	--
USSR/Russia					52%	56	29%	31
AWACs	--	--	--	--	--	--	37%	101
Middle East	--	--	--	--	--	--	38%	86
Arms Control	--	--	--	--	--	--	41%	37
General Foreign Policy	--	--	--	--	--	--	40%	30

Source: Content analysis of evening newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31).

Notes: N refers to numbers of evaluations for a given subject area.

Only the top five most-frequently discussed topics for each president are listed.

Statistically significant differences from the tone of news coverage of Obama are identified using chi-square tests. * Significant at $p < .05$; ** Significant at $p < .01$

Table 4
Tone of Executive Branch Coverage during Presidential First Years

(percent positive)	<i>Obama 2009</i>	<i>G.W. Bush 2001</i>	<i>Clinton 1993</i>	<i>Reagan 1981</i>
ABC				
Executive Total	55% (639)	33% (884)	36% (1117)	40% (364)
President	55% (392)	37% (480)	40% (730)	41% (183)
White House & Cabinet	56% (94)	38% (139)	42% (117)	40% (117)
Other Executive	54% (153)	25%* (265)	25%* (270)	37% (64)
CBS				
Executive Total	44% (568)	34% (769)	34% (1207)	32% (566)
President	43% (393)	34% (495)	35% (780)	35% (251)
White House & Cabinet	52% (66)	45%* (128)	40% (153)	28% (191)
Other Executive	42% (109)	24%* (146)	28%* (274)	34% (124)
NBC				
Executive Total	52% (478)	38% (736)	38% (1207)	31% (590)
President	50% (281)	44% (384)	39% (825)	32% (260)
White House & Cabinet	57% (76)	43% (110)	41% (130)	28% (263)
Other Executive	52% (121)	26%** (242)	31%* (252)	34% (67)

Source: Content analysis of evening newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31).

Notes: Numbers of discussions are in parentheses.

Statistically significant differences from the tone of presidential news coverage when compared to that of other executive branch coverage are identified using chi-square tests.

* Significant at $p < .05$; ** Significant at $p < .01$

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