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News Coverage of New Presidents in the *New York Times*, 1981-2009*

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ABSTRACT

Content analysis of front-page *New York Times* stories during the first year of the Barack Obama presidency revealed news coverage that was far more positive in tone than that received during the first year of the Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies. Overall, the Obama findings reveal a media honeymoon in that influential newspaper, a sharp contrast from first-year coverage of other presidents during the modern era of a more combative press. The positive policy coverage Obama received in the *Times* was also significantly more positive than on evening newscasts of network television and on Fox News' *Special Report*.

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New presidents once enjoyed a “honeymoon” in the mass media. Newspaper and television reporters, perhaps anxious to endear themselves to new White House staffers who could become regular sources, provided a new president and his team a brief settling-in period of relatively favorable news coverage. The more negative stories would come with increasing frequency as the months passed and as reporters eventually returned to the journalistic norm of casting a critical eye on the White House (Grossman and Kumar 1981).

But this pattern of generous news coverage in the months following Inauguration Day appeared to disappear with the end of the Cold War, if not before (Farnsworth and Lichter 2004, 2006; Hughes 1995). The highly partisan rancor that has marked the start of recent presidencies – including Bill Clinton’s rocky first months in 1993 and the controversies during the 2000 election recounts and court rulings that led to George W. Bush’s presidency, suggested that little remained of this traditional press-presidential “honeymoon” (cf., Cohen 2008; Farnsworth and Lichter 2004, 2006).

But has the previous honeymoon between the president and the press really disappeared for good? Barack Obama’s 2008 election as the first African-American president included a wave of public enthusiasm seldom seen in recent US presidential elections, creating what now appear to have been unrealistically high expectations for a transformational presidency (cf., Balz and Cohen 2010; Denton 2009; Edge 2010; Pew 2008c; Smith and King 2009). In addition, candidate Obama enjoyed a huge advantage in stories about the 2008 campaign in traditional media, with news reports of his campaign far more positive in tone than the reports on the McCain campaign (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011a; Owen 2009).

Given the candidate’s popularity, the potentially transformative nature of the nation’s first

African-American president, and the favorable news coverage of Obama identified during the 2008 campaign, this paper considers the possibility of the return of the presidential honeymoon in the nation's most influential newspaper – and a key source for shaping Washington coverage by other media outlets (Pew 2008a, 2008b, 2008c).

Obama's coverage in the nation's leading newspaper is particularly important for policy-making. In this era times of deep partisan divisions in policy-making on Capitol Hill, Obama needed every advantage he could get to push the congressional Democratic majorities in the direction of his agenda. While at least some Republicans might be tempted to dismiss the content of this newspaper, favorable coverage of the new president and his agenda in the nation's most influential newspaper – and a key force in shaping the news agenda of other media outlet – might push some reluctant Democrats in the direction of the new president's agenda.

This paper uses content analysis of front page news stories in the *New York Times* 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 media reports once electioneering gave way to governing? To take this analysis further, the Obama first year content analysis data will be assessed in light of comparable analyses of the first years of the newspaper's coverage of the presidencies of Ronald Reagan in 1981, Bill Clinton in 1993 and George W. Bush in 2001. These data, covering the four most recent partisan transfers of control of the White House [we exclude the first year of George H.W. Bush's presidency in 1989 as it did not fit the partisan transfer pattern], allow us to examine in a quantitative fashion claims by the president's critics that mainstream mass media outlets like the *New York Times* treated Obama much more positively

than previous presidents (cf., Kurtz 2010; Rutenburg 2009).

We also include a brief analysis involving comparable coverage of Obama's first year as reported on network television's evening newscasts and the comparable first half-hour of Fox News' *Special Report* to determine whether coverage in the nation's most influential newspaper differs from that of other highly visible news outlets (Neither CNN or MSNBC, two other leading cable outlets, have a signature newscast comparable to the networks and Fox News Channel.).

Permanent Campaigns, Going Public and Honeymoons

Presidential administrations generally continue to campaign after moving into the White House, seeking to sell the president as it previously sold the candidate (Farnsworth 2009; Tulis 1987). This practice of governing through a permanent campaign offers mixed results. While the modern mass media convey immense communication advantages to the White House, presidents have not always been as effective as they might have been in marketing their policies or themselves (Brody 1991; Cook 2002; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Gregg 2004; Han 2001; Hertsgaard 1989; Kurtz 1998). Although presidents may not always convince Congress, the citizenry, or the governments of other nations to view a White House policy proposal as they do, chief executives can do far more to shape public discourse than can any other political actor (Entman 2004; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Kernell 2007; Tulis 1987).

The presidential strategy of moving Congress by first persuading citizens is known as "going public," a common media campaign strategy employed by all recent presidential administrations (Kernell 2007). The modern media environment forces presidents to promote their policies publicly, if for no other reason than to counter opponents that use media strategies

to undermine support for White House initiatives.

Some scholars, most notably political scientist George Edwards (2003, 2004, 2006), believe that presidents accomplish little by going public, and in fact may even make things worse by trying to legislate through the mass media. He notes that President Bush's key second term domestic priority—partial privatization of Social Security—failed to generate enthusiasm among the general public or even among the Republicans who controlled the 109th Congress (Edwards 2006). Even Bush's efforts to retain public support for his invasion of Iraq and his efforts to market himself as competent and visionary leader also fell short as public approval of his policies and his presidency sank throughout most of his second term (Balz and Cohen 2006; Nagourney and Elder 2006a, 2006b).

The wide-ranging media sources present in today's multimedia, online environment make it even easier for government officials to play favorites with media outlets, taking care of the most 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 anti-conservative and committed to preventing Americans from seeing the truth about a president (Rutenberg 2009). The financial problems many mass media companies face these days (including the *New York Times*) 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. Or at least they did before the ugliness of the Watergate era and the

public cynicism left in the wake of the 1960s and 1970s. In the aggressive political and media environments of more recent decades, new presidents must “hit the ground running” and do not enjoy many forgiving evaluations during their first months (Cohen 2008; Dickinson 2003; Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Fleisher and Bond 2000; Hughes 1995; Pfiffner 1988). Studies of the first year of Bill Clinton’s presidency found little evidence of a honeymoon (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2004, 2006; 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 showed little remained of the traditional press-presidential honeymoon (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2004, 2006).

The first-year coverage of both recent new presidents in the *New York Times* – as well as Ronald Reagan, the only other president to come to office as part of a partisan change of power during the past 30 years -- likewise showed little evidence of a honeymoon. Even the assassination attempt and Reagan’s graceful recovery did not lead to coverage that was all that positive over the first year or even the first seven months of the Reagan presidency (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006). All three presidents had coverage that was less than 40 percent positive in that newspaper (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006). Coverage of presidential first years for George W. Bush, Clinton and Reagan on network television showed a similar pattern of roughly equally critical news during what was once the honeymoon period (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006).

Although the *New York Times* tended to be slightly more negative than network television in its treatment of new presidents, coverage on ABC, CBS and NBC was also positive less than half the time (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006:160). Of the nine possible comparisons between the

tone of presidential coverage in the *New York Times* and on ABC, CBS and NBC for the first year of the George W. Bush, Clinton and Reagan presidencies, the newspaper was more critical than all three networks in eight cases: all three comparisons during Bush and Reagan's first years and more critical than two of the networks during Clinton's first year. Only CBS in 1993 was more critical than the *New York Times* of a president's first year (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006).

Studies looking at earlier presidents found evidence of a honeymoon effect for most new presidents serving before the more contentious media that emerged in the wake of the twin presidential deceits of Vietnam and Watergate (Sabato 2000). Reviewing this earlier period of presidential honeymoons, 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."

Honeymoons, then and now, can serve an important purpose for reporters, who find 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 (Calderone 2009; Noah 2009; Silverstein 2010).

Barack Obama seems a particularly strong candidate for a presidential honeymoon in the nation's leading newspaper. During the 2008 presidential campaign, he enjoyed the most positive network news coverage of any presidential candidate over the past 20 years (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2011a). Obama's election was transformational, marking the first election of an African-American to the presidency. In addition, 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 in 1993 with his failed cabinet appointments 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 won a majority of the vote, something that Clinton did not accomplish in 1992. Bush failed in 2000 to obtain even a plurality of the votes cast (cf., Ceaser et al. 2009).

A previous study of evening news reports on network television regarding Obama's first year as president found statistically significant coverage advantages for Obama when compared to George W. Bush, Clinton and Reagan (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011b), raising the question of whether the *New York Times* joined ABC, CBS and NBC in treating the 44th president relatively kindly as he took office. An examination of coverage in the nation's arguably most influential newspaper is particularly important in an era when fewer people are watching network television's evening newscasts and much of the news commentary online stems from reporting conducted by traditional, mainstream news outlets like *The Times* (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2011a).

By examining a full year of news about a new president, we hope to minimize the impact that specific events would play in a study only of shorter time periods. Every presidential administration is different and has its dramatic moments, of course. Reagan was shot during his first few months in office and America watched his graceful and rapid recovery. George W. Bush faced 9/11 during his first year and the public rallied around the new president during the crisis. Obama faced a deep financial crisis when he took office. An analysis of a full year of news hopefully allows for a more effective overall assessment of presidential news coverage. (While more of Obama's first year evaluations focused on the economy than any other single matter,

evaluation of Obama on the four leading economic matters -- the economic stimulus, the economy generally, taxes, and the budget -- together represent less than 20 percent of all of Obama's evaluations during the eventful first year.)

Of course, a presidential honeymoon might not be equally present across all issue areas. Presidents traditionally have had far more success in shaping defense and 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 internationally (Oldfield and Wildavsky 1989; Sullivan 1991). 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).

Hypotheses

H1: *New York Times* coverage of Barack Obama's first year in office will be significantly more positive than coverage of Bill Clinton or George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan during these same periods.

This prediction is consistent with the revived honeymoon thesis. Past studies have revealed that the honeymoon tradition ended in the post-Watergate period. We expect to find that tradition revived, at least in 2009, by the special circumstances of Obama's historic victory. It is also consistent with studies of network news coverage of the new president during 2009.

H2: The Obama honeymoon effect will be strongest for news coverage of international matters.

This prediction is consistent with the "two presidencies" literature discussed above.

H3: The Obama honeymoon effect will be weaker in the *New York Times* than on network television.

The prediction is consistent with previous content analyses that found that network news (in eight out of nine comparisons involving Reagan, Clinton, or George W. Bush) was less critical of a new president during his first year than was the *New York Times* (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006). This hypothesis is also consistent with the very television-oriented public relations efforts of modern presidents (cf., Entman 2004; Farnsworth 2009; Gregg 2004; Han 2001).

In addition, the print press seems less vulnerable than television reporters to the framing efforts by presidents seeking to emphasize matters of character and to present themselves publicly in video-friendly activities.

The Data

In this study we use content analysis to examine the tone of coverage of front page *New York Times* news stories that cover Barack Obama during his first calendar year in office (January 20 through December 31, 2009). The *Times* remains one of the most influential news sources in contemporary politics, and its content plays a key role in framing the discourse in Washington and in other media outlets, including online commentary (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2011a; Pew 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). These front page news stories (and the continuation of those stories on inside pages) are content analyzed by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a research center at George Mason University. The CMPA data utilized here are part of a CMPA database of more than 30,000 content analyzed newspaper and television news stories reporting on presidencies going back 30 years. Although an analysis of the entire newspaper – and perhaps even adding other newspapers -- would be optimal, financial limitations forced us to focus our

analysis on the most visible and most influential stories in the *Times*. Even so, this approach enabled us to examine more than 900 evaluations of the new president in this influential newspaper during 2009 (and more than 1,800 evaluations of three recent predecessors in the paper).

We first look at the overall volume and tone of the *New York Times*' front page coverage of Obama, 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. (We use the newspaper's text and videotapes of the evening newscasts to conduct our analysis.)

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; the hallmark of success in this venture 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 government, and also allows us to separate coverage from a president from that of other administration officials.

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. Neutral or mixed tonal observations, in other words, were dropped from the calculations of tone, an approach often employed in content analysis of news. So too were descriptions of events that reflected well or badly on some political actor that failed to contain 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, or some similarly explicit comment. Most individual assessments are quite clear in their tonal direction, as reporters tend to quote strong statements and avoid uncertain or equivocal commentary.

The content analyses included in this paper were conducted with between three and eight coders working on each of the various presidencies. The same coding scheme was used for all presidencies, with changes in variables to accommodate the changes in relevant individuals, issues, etc. occurring over time. After four to six weeks of initial training, coders were tested on 50 stories. The minimum reliability level for coders to continue was .80 for each variable, calculated from Krippendorff's alpha. Spot checks were also conducted of each coder's work throughout the project to guard against any development of systematic error.

Results

(Table 1 about here)

Turning first to the comparison of overall news content, we see in Table 1 the extent to which the tone of Obama's news coverage was notably more positive than that of George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan. Among the statements that conveyed a positive or negative assessment, Obama's coverage was 50 percent positive during his first year (and therefore 50 percent negative as well). The tonal coverage gap favored Obama by at least 17 percentage points over the last three presidents who came to power as part of a partisan transfer of power. Using chi-square tests, we observe that there are statistically significant differences ($p < .01$) between the coverage of Obama and his three predecessors in all cases. Obama's double-digit advantage over his rivals in the overall tonal coverage was also reflected in his coverage of foreign policy, where the coverage gap favored Obama over these three predecessors by at least 14 percentage points. The coverage gaps were likewise massive for domestic policy, where Obama's coverage was more positive than that of these three predecessors by at least 18 percentage points. In two cases – George W. Bush and Reagan – Obama's coverage was more than twice as positive. The results still represent a statistically significant difference when comparing Obama to these three previous presidents ($p < .01$).

During the first 100 days in office [results not shown], Obama's coverage in the *New York Times* was also the most positive of these four presidents. Overall, coverage of Obama was 61 percent positive during those first 100 days, as compared to 19 percent positive for Reagan, 36 percent positive for G.W. Bush and 32 percent positive for Clinton. For the first seven months in office, Obama also held the advantage. Obama's 60 percent positive coverage suggests an

extended honeymoon, particularly when compared to the 26 percent positive for Reagan, the 31 percent positive coverage of G.W. Bush and the 30 percent positive reports on Clinton during their first seven months in office. During the fourth quarter of 2009, though, the honeymoon appeared to be over. During the final quarter, Obama's coverage in the newspaper returned to levels more comparable to that of the other three presidents finishing their first years in office.

(Table 2 about here)

Turning to news coverage of domestic policy matters, which saw larger differences between Obama and the three previous presidents, Table 2 shows that Obama's honeymoon did not extend across all domestic issue areas. Coverage of tax policy, though not a major focus of news during Obama's first year, was only 40 percent positive, roughly in line with the overall tone the other three presidents in this study received during their first year. It was the least positive media treatment among the five top Obama domestic policy issue areas. Even so, the tone of Obama's tax policy was more positive than tax policy reports for Reagan in 1981 (22 percent positive), Clinton in 1993 (17 percent positive) and G.W. Bush in 2001 (29 percent positive). The differences were not statistically significant, a high hurdle given the relatively small volume of coverage on this topic.

Coverage of health care was a major plus for Obama, and the only major domestic area in which where his coverage consistently differed from that of his predecessors to a statistically significant degree. Obama's 47 percent positive coverage in that issue area notably was above the 32 percent positive Clinton received in this area and the 14 percent positive coverage Bush received in this issue area. (Health care policy was not a major focus of news coverage during Reagan's first year in office.) Obama's health care bill did not pass until 2010, but it made

significant legislative progress during 2009. The health care debate in 2009 was divisive, particularly on cable news, which focused on contentious town meetings and claims of “death panels” that helped give birth to the anti-Obama Tea Party movement (Kurtz 2009; Timpane 2009). Fortunately for Obama, much of the public disaffection in the health care debate was directed at Congress, which was debating many of the specifics of the bill throughout 2009. Much of the mainstream media coverage focused on the policy advantages of the measure, as well as its relatively positive prospects for passage during 2009.

The top domestic policy topic in the *New York Times* during Obama’s first year was the economic stimulus package, which received coverage that was 58 percent positive in tone – even higher than his overall coverage. General economic coverage was 55 percent positive for Obama, slightly less than the 57 percent positive coverage Obama received for budget matters. (When compared with Reagan in those two issue areas, the coverage differences were statistically significant.) Coverage of tax news was more positive for Obama than for Clinton and Bush as well, but the differences do not reach the level of statistical significance.

Looking at domestic news coverage of the top five issue areas reveals the depth of Obama’s coverage advantage. Only Obama had tonal coverage that was at least 40 percent positive for any one of his top issue areas – and the new president had that relatively positive coverage for *all five* top domestic issue areas. The closest competition was the 38 percent positive treatment Clinton received in budget news in 1993. The least negative treatment of a Republican president in any issue area was the 30 percent positive treatment Bush received in the 2001 debate over whether to create a cabinet department to handle homeland security matters.

(Table 3 about here)

Table 3 compares the newspaper's coverage of recent presidents with respect to key foreign policy issues. In this category overall, Obama was covered significantly more positive than were his predecessors, but the wide range of leading topics for the four different presidents allows for relatively few comparisons by leading issue area. Obama's policies with respect to general defense matters were his most positive area (52 percent positive), followed closely by coverage of terrorism matters (50 percent positive). Discussions relating to his failed promise to close the terrorist prison at Guantanamo Bay during his first year in office were more negative (32 positive). In the general terrorism category, network news coverage of Bush during 2001 – the year of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – were less positive than Obama's to a statistically significant degree.

Table 3 also shows that presidents face very different foreign policy environments during their first years. When comparing key issue areas, Obama is a bit less distinctive here. The most positive tone for a major foreign policy matter during a president's first year is Clinton's handling of Iraq (67 percent positive, though only involving nine tonal assessments). Tonal evaluations of Clinton's handling of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were 51 percent positive. Only five of the 21 assessments of presidents on key foreign policy matters in the *New York Times* were at least as positive as negative: three for Clinton and two for Obama. The most positive assessment of a Republican president's handling of a foreign policy matter was the 40 percent positive coverage of George W. Bush for his handling of general defense matters in 2001, the year of the terrorist attacks.

(Table 4 about here)

In Table 4, we ask whether Obama's advantage in the *New York Times* can also be

detected at the sub-presidential level. Here we compare coverage of the executive branch as a whole for these four presidents, as well as breaking down the executive branch coverage into stories focusing on the president, the White House and cabinet, and other parts of the executive branch. In a now familiar pattern, we observe that news reports on Obama and his team were markedly more positive than that of previous administrations. Out of the twelve possible comparisons involving the newspaper's coverage of the Obama administration with those of George W. Bush, Clinton and Reagan, the differences favor Obama and his administration to a statistically significant degree *in every case* ($p < .01$).

(Table 5 about here)

In Table 5, we test to see whether the findings for the *New York Times* vary significantly from those of leading television evening news programs. Previous research has already identified statistically significant advantages for Obama when his first year coverage on network television's evening newscasts is compared to that of Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011b).

Overall Obama's treatment in the *Times* was exceptional. In this table we evaluate comments made by nonpartisan sources, observers who are more likely to be taken seriously by readers than those with an explicit partisan identification. (Although anyone not identified by partisan affiliation with official links to a presidential administration would qualify as nonpartisan in our coding system, primarily this category refers to comments made by ordinary citizens, professors, scholars at think tanks, and international observers.) Obama's 54 percent positive coverage by these sources in the newspaper was significantly more positive than similar sources evaluating the new president on the broadcast network evening newscasts or on the

evening news show (*Special Report*) at the conservative-leaning Fox News Channel.

As for specific coverage areas, we see that the selling of the president through personal matters is slightly more effective on network television than on the front page of the *New York Times*. Coverage of personal matters involving the new president, which includes assessments of character, was 71 percent positive on ABC, CBS and NBC. But the newspaper was not far behind in this category, with 66 percent positive coverage in this issue area (a difference that was not statistically significant from the results for network news). Fox News *Special Report* lagged behind, but coverage in this area was still quite positive, at 56 percent (that is more than twice the proportion of positive tone Obama received from Fox for coverage of job performance and policy matters).

Policy matters, though, represent the main area of evaluation. Here we see, once again, that the *New York Times* reports on Obama were far more positive than comparable policy-oriented news coverage on network television and on Fox News. The differences were in double digits and were statistically significant.

Conclusion

The first and perhaps most important finding is that the *New York Times* provided Obama with a presidential honeymoon. Comparisons involving coverage of Obama and the last three presidents who entered the White House during a partisan transfer of power routinely favored the 44th president. The first year differences favoring Obama were found across issue areas, with tone of coverage for both domestic and international matters more positive in tone than the three other presidents examined here. And the findings for the *New York Times* consistently offered stronger evidence of a presidential-press honeymoon than other prominent media outlets, like network

television of Fox News. The more positive coverage certainly did not hurt Obama with his ambitious and largely successful legislative agenda of the early part of his first term, which including a massive stimulus package and a health care bill that passed a Congress that refused to even schedule a floor vote on a health care bill offered by Bill Clinton more than a dozen years earlier.

When we looked at specific issue areas, our expectation that Obama would be treated more favorably on foreign affairs than on domestic issues was not borne out. Although the coverage of new US presidents relating to foreign policy matters favored the new president by double-digit margins, so too did domestic coverage. Moreover, because these four presidents dealt with very different international environments, specific comparisons by issue area were difficult to make. The one statistically significant difference in this category favored Obama (coverage of his terrorism policies versus those of Bush), but Clinton had a number of relatively positive assessments of key foreign news topics as well.

On the most pressing issue that occupied Obama's first year – trying to fix the declining economy – the tone of coverage of the new president was very positive. While all three predecessors made economic matters a key part of their first year agendas – a stimulus bill for Clinton and tax cuts for both George W. Bush and Reagan – economic matters only ranked in the top five domestic issues for Obama and Reagan. The coverage differences between those two presidents favored Obama in both cases [the economy generally and budget matters]. Obama also prevailed in health care coverage, with a more positive tone than that of his two predecessors. Leaving the legislative details to Congress in the early going may have helped Obama. Since his position was flexible, it was much harder to criticize than, for example, the book-length Clinton

plan released at the start of congressional debate on reform. (In addition, during 2009 the *New York Times* gave less attention to the Tea Party movement and the contentious town halls than did cable news). Even so, one must note that the favorable coverage in this newspaper did not lead to rapid approval of the president's health care preferences by the large Democratic majorities in Congress during 2009 (cf., Edwards 2003, 2006; Kernell 2007).

While we might expect Obama's honeymoon coverage to be restricted to the new president himself, our results show that the pattern was found throughout coverage of the executive branch during Obama's first year. Wherever we looked, 2009 proved to be a much more positive year for presidential and administration coverage in the *New York Times* than 2001, 1993 and 1981. One might see this as a halo effect in which Obama's favorable portrayal burnished the image of his entire administration. Future researchers interested in an executive's relationship with Congress might examine via interviews the extent to which this unusually positive presidential coverage encouraged lawmakers to support presidential initiatives, particularly during this presidential first year. Did Obama achieve more legislative successes than did other presidents with less positive press notices? Our impression is that Obama's presidency benefitted from positive press where his fellow Democrats were concerned, but that the highly partisan nature of contemporary US politics limited the influence of both Obama's appeals and the newspaper's coverage of the new president within the Republican caucus (cf., Campbell 2009; Ceaser et al. 2009; Cohen 2008; Denton 2009; Edge 2010; Kurtz 2010; Rutenberg 2009; Shear 2010; Timpane 2009). We also suspect that this influential paper's coverage helped shape the coverage of the new administration by other news outlets, particularly in these times of tight media budgets. Media outlets with reduced resources might be more inclined to shape their news

budget – and news perspective – around the latest reports in the *New York Times*. Future researchers might look at this possibility as well.

Returning to the content of the paper's coverage, we might note that an argument that the findings here are as much a *New York Times* effect as an Obama effect has considerable support. Comparisons of first year coverage in that paper with reports on network television evening newscasts, and on Fox News' *Special Report*, show that Obama was treated distinctly more positively, particularly with respect to policy coverage, the key area of print and television news coverage of the news president. Even where we expected (H3) to find more positive coverage of Obama elsewhere, in that case on network television, the coverage patterns in the newspaper were more positive.

One particularly interesting finding relating to H3 concerns the pervasive effect that personality coverage of Obama can have in boosting the overall tone of presidential coverage. Even on Fox News, a news outlet particularly hostile to the new president generally, we see that Obama's personality coverage was largely positive. In fact, the tone of personality coverage on Fox was more than twice as positive as that of the president's job performance and policy coverage. (This category was also the most positive of the three on network news and on the front page of the *New York Times*, but the tonal differences among these presidential coverage areas were smaller for those news outlets.) Given these findings, future research into the shaping of presidential spin through the White House's emphasis on personal character seems worthwhile.

The advantages obtained from personality coverage suggest that presidents are wise to emphasize personality and character in the early going, when opinions about a new president may

be most fluid (cf., Farnsworth 2009). Our results indicate that the more reporters focus on who the president is – not so much how he is doing or what he wants to do – the better the news coverage. Even Fox seemed to fall under the new president’s media-friendly personal charm offensive, at least in the early going. The impact did not extend beyond personality coverage on Fox, however. Future researchers might be interested in taking this analysis beyond the media outlets examined here and see if the presidential honeymoon also reappeared in 2009 in news reports of CNN, newspapers around the country, and on Internet news sites. (One would expect the liberal-leaning MSNBC to portray Obama relatively favorably in much of its prime time programming; unfortunately CNN and MSNBC currently lack the kind of general interest evening newscast that Fox alone among cable news outlets shares with the broadcast networks.)

Along these same lines, one might wonder whether the favorable coverage of Obama in this newspaper amounted to a product-differentiation effort on the part of the *New York Times*. Did the *Times*, perhaps in response to the aggressive efforts by Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal* to seize market share, decide to tilt more to the left than it had in the past? Interviews with journalists and editors might shed light on this question, though those comments might not be all that revealing given journalistic norms of promoting a sense of objectivity in news coverage.

Obama’s second year has been quite different from his first (Balz and Cohen 2010; Shear 2010). Although the president passed a major health care initiative, public opinion throughout the year showed growing frustration over the continued troubles with the economy. Future researchers might look into the apparent sharp decline in public opinion and the rocky press-presidential relations of Obama’s second year (cf., Balz and Cohen 2010; Shear 2010) to plot a more extensive trajectory of White House news coverage once the honeymoon is over.

In addition, future researchers will have to wait for the next partisan transfer of power to see whether Obama's favorable *New York Times* coverage was the start of a revived honeymoon trend over the longer-term or a one-time suspension of the decades-long norm of highly critical coverage of new presidents in the nation's most influential newspaper, a suspension that might be explained by the depth of the fiscal crisis in 2009 or the transformational nature of Obama's election.

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	50%	929	49%	330	51%	595
George W. Bush 2001	30%**	613	28%**	194	23%**	315
Bill Clinton 1993	33%**	587	35%**	104	33%**	427
Ronald Reagan 1981	22%**	678	20%**	206	22%**	463

Source: Content analysis of front page stories in the *New York Times* during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31). Not all evaluations could be classified as relating to either foreign or domestic policy. N represents the total number of positive and negative evaluations.

Note: 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 coverage by Major Domestic Policy Areas 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	47%	88	14%*	22	32%*	82	---	---
Taxes	40%	15	29%	38	17%	30	22%	37
Economy General	55%	42	--	--	---	---	29%*	24
Economic Stimulus	58%	95	---	---	---	---	---	---
Budget	57%	21	---	---	38%	37	29%*	92
Homeland Security	---	---	30%	20	---	---	---	---
Energy Policy	---	---	25%	20	---	---	---	---
Environment	---	---	29%	17	29%	24	---	---
Gays in the Military	---	---	---	---	19%	16	---	---
Crime	---	---	---	---	13%	16	---	---
Labor/PATCO Strike	---	---	---	---	---	---	25%	20
Social Security	---	---	---	---	---	---	17%	24

Source: Content analysis of front-page stories in the *New York Times* during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31). Only the top five topics are listed for each president. N represents the total number of positive and negative evaluations.

Note: 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 Areas during Presidential First Years

PERCENT POSITIVE	<i>Obama</i> 2009		<i>G.W. Bush</i> 2001		<i>Clinton</i> 1993		<i>Reagan</i> 1981	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Afghanistan	46%	87	---	---	---	---	---	---
Guantanamo	32%	41	---	---	---	---	---	---
Terrorism	50%	30	26%**	114	---	---	---	---
Missile Defense	44%	16	---	---	---	---	---	---
China spy plane	---	---	34%	202	---	---	---	---
General defense	52%	25	40%	15	30%	10	---	---
Foreign aid	---	---	33%	9	---	---	---	---
Arms Control	---	---	22%	9	---	---	---	---
NAFTA	---	---	---	---	51%	82	---	---
Somalia	---	---	---	---	13%	15	---	---
Trade	---	---	---	---	50%	12	---	---
Iraq	---	---	---	---	67%	9	---	---
Russia	---	---	---	---	---	---	9%	23
Mideast general	---	---	---	---	---	---	36%	22
Israel	---	---	9%	11	---	---	9%	22
General Foreign Policy	---	---	---	---	---	---	35%	17
Central America	---	---	---	---	---	---	7%	15

Source: Content analysis of front-page stories in the *New York Times* during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31). Only the top five topics are listed for each president. N represents the total number of positive and negative evaluations.

Note: 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 in the *New York Times*
During Presidential First Years

PERCENT POSITIVE	Obama 2009		G.W. Bush 2001		Clinton 1993		Reagan 1981	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Executive Total	54%	1168	28%**	472	34%**	544	23%**	602
President	57%	529	33%**	170	40%**	185	24%**	180
White House & Cabinet	60%	174	31%**	176	35%**	245	21%**	336
Other Executive	47%	465	21%**	126	21%**	114	24%**	86

Source: Content analysis of front-page stories in the New York Times during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31).

N represents the number of evaluations in the category which had a positive or negative tone.

Note: Statistically significant differences from the tone of Obama administration coverage when compared to previous administrations are identified using chi-square tests. * Significant at $p < .05$; ** Significant at $p < .01$

Table 5
Evaluating President Obama by Performance Area:
Comparing Media Outlets

PERCENT POSITIVE	<i>Networks</i>		<i>New York Times</i>		<i>Fox News</i>	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Overall	46%*	459	54%	260	22%**	289
Personal	71%	96	66%	50	56%	32
Job	64%	59	54%	65	21%**	47
Policies	35%**	267	48%	138	16%**	186

Source: Content analysis of evening news stories on Fox News and network television (ABC, CBS, and NBC) with front-page stories in the *New York Times* during presidential first years (from January 20 through December 31). This table is based on non-partisan sources and reporter evaluations only. N represents the total number of positive and negative evaluations.

Notes:

Evaluations that cannot be classified into one of the three categories above are dropped from this table.

Statistically significant differences from the tone of presidential news coverage when compared to the *New York Times* are identified using chi-square tests.

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

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