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THE PREVALENCE OF CANDIDATE BRANDS IN MEDIA CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Political Science and International Affairs
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Jonathan Cooper Polson

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Jonathan Polson
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04/29/15

The Prevalence of Candidate Brands in Media Campaign Coverage

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Abstract

Candidate branding in political campaigns acts to convey the ideal image of a candidate molded to represent the specific characteristics important to that candidate's constituency. Campaigns craft a brand around a variety of political and personal qualities and issues that define the candidate as the ideal representative, and simultaneously cast the opponent as the clear antithesis, of the constituency's interests. Conveying the candidate's brand through the media is an integral aspect to bringing the message to voters and driving turn out. However, in a media environment increasingly subservient to economic pressures to produce new, exciting, dramatic, and profitable coverage, a focus on issues and experience is lost in campaign coverage. This study seeks to identify what aspects of candidate brands are more likely to be conveyed through media coverage and what narratives posited by campaigns will be reflected in the news. In this case study of the 2014 U.S. senatorial race in Virginia between incumbent Democratic Senator Mark Warner and Republican challenger Ed Gillespie, media content analysis is used to detect how much and what aspects of each candidate's brand is portrayed in media descriptions of the candidates and the campaign.

INTRODUCTION

During a campaign, candidates for political office seek to accomplish a single goal: convince the majority of their constituents to vote for them on Election Day. A number of tactics have been implemented, tested, and applied over time, yet the broadest and clearest explanation of campaign strategy remains the same: selling a candidate to voters as the person who will best represent and advocate for their interests while in office. A wide variety of methods are employed to explain to voters why a certain candidate meets this standard, but it must all begin with a coherent and carefully crafted brand that defines the candidate. A candidate's brand consists of all the qualities upon which voters evaluate candidates: likability, professional ability, policy stances, and more come together to make up who and what the campaign wants the candidate to symbolize in the minds of voters.

While campaigns implement strategies to promote this and spread the message to voters, the media act as both an integral channel for and the largest obstacle to disseminating the brand. Most citizens obtain political information through the media, and the media does not portray candidates or promote brands verbatim from campaign messaging. This study shows that, in the case of the 2014 U.S. senatorial campaign in Virginia, the media's portrayal of candidates does not match up perfectly with the brand created and disseminated by the campaigns. Through a media content analysis, the findings in this paper reveal that aspects of candidate brands that play into the media's biases toward dramatic, antagonistic coverage and avoidance of in-depth policy coverage are likely to show up in media reports, but the media will not discuss candidates in the exact brand terms that campaigns posit. This study concludes that candidates who seek to project greater control over how campaign coverage is framed or what issues are discussed in coverage must manipulate their message to match media behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Literature on branding in politics and media campaign coverage posit a number of ideas about how and why candidates craft brands, as well as how and why media cover campaigns. This literature review begins with a discussion of branding in politics, explaining the ways branding has been implemented in the political sphere. The leading ideas state that political branding grew alongside the permanent campaign, in that every move a politician makes must be understood as being crucial to their next election. Brands set the standards of a politician's personal and professional qualities and the issues he or she advocates for in office. This brand is emphasized with every legislative vote, every floor speech, and every other political action that can be used to promote and expand a politician's image.

The literature review then discusses political brands in the context where they are most useful: a campaign. Candidates use brands to define themselves and simultaneously set themselves in contrast to their opponent, a contrast that is often shown through partisan differentiations. The goal is to create an image of the ideal candidate for a certain constituency, while also creating the image of the opponent as the worst possible candidate for voters. However, literature of media campaign coverage then explains how the promotion of candidate brands often face a roadblock because media and candidates have diverging goals during a campaign. Candidates seek to sell themselves, while media seek to sell content. The former is done through carefully crafted messaging that posits an image of a capable representative focused on the constituency's interests, and the latter is done through game frame coverage of dramatic battles between partisan opponents and campaign missteps.

The literature shows that political branding and campaign coverage both play a role in

heightening the partisan nature of campaigns. Candidates that wish to show a clear contrast between themselves and their opponent must often draw that contrast along partisan lines. Economic pressures force the media to create stories that sell, which are often partisan fights over divisive issues. The result is that the political information voters obtain is inundated with partisan divide.

The ideas presented in this literature raise the question of how these ideas of political branding and media coverage affected Virginia's 2014 U.S. senatorial race. Senator Mark Warner's brand of bipartisanship did not result in an easy victory, although that was expected and predicted by most polls. Literature on Virginia politics shows an increasing partisan divide in the state, begging the question of whether highly partisan-based brands are more likely to see media coverage reflect the ideas that brand posits and whether that plays a role in driving more voters to the polls on Election Day.

Political Branding

Candidate branding in politics proliferated rapidly in the past two decades, infiltrating the operations and ultimate missions of political parties, representatives, and candidates. The expansion of media capabilities and reach and the subsequent dissemination of information on a wider and more continuous basis elicited a reaction from political actors to craft strategic "messages" that build support and promote their image. The evolution of political branding grew parallel to that of the "permanent campaign," in which politicians constantly seek to strengthen their public image and gain greater support from their constituents, as well as the greater public if said politician's trajectory includes higher office. Branding emerged as a necessity to maintain the "transitory opinions of voters whose support must be cultivated continuously through

communication.”¹ Every political action must be considered a contribution to a politician’s image and must be communicated as an example of constituent loyalty, political success, and issue identification, making branding “a critical part of what are considered the primary functions of government.”²

Branding is incorporated into every politician’s communication strategy. The job of a politician’s communications office is to develop and execute initiatives that support, enhance, and disseminate the politician’s brand to the public. This is done mainly through media channels, considering media act as the main and most commonly used link between the public and the political world. The goal of branding is to create an image in the mind of citizens that can be accepted and reinforced with every political maneuver. “A brand, therefore, does not constitute what a product *is* but what the consumers *perceive it to be*... However, at the end of the day, the brand is the projection of a product in consumers’ minds. It is there where it can be cultivated but also contaminate.”³ Branding is a definition of a politician’s abilities and achievements intended to convince the voting public of the representative’s successful tenure of advocating for and helping the citizens.

A political brand represents a strict framework that defines the politician’s leadership, demeanor, and beliefs, and all messaging falls in line with and helps enhance the brand.⁴

Branding remains most imperative and useful during campaigns, in which it sets a strict standard

¹ David Swanson, “Transnational Trends in Political Communication: Conventional Views and New Realities,” in *Comparing Political Communication: Theories, Cases, and Challenges*, Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50.

² *Ibid.*, 50

³ Manuel Adolphsen, “Branding in Election Campaigns: Just a Buzzword or a New Quality of Political Communication” (MSc dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009), 5. Emphasis in original.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

of “external presentation” that the campaign can continue to emphasize and essentially “sell” the candidate to the public in order to gain votes.⁵ In the same way branding is used in the marketing of consumer products, political campaigns strategically build and promote brands in order to convince the voting public to vote for their candidate.

Therefore, in a political campaign, the main goal of branding is to define the candidate positively, and, in turn, attempt to define the opponent negatively. Messaging and branding exist as “the communication of value-laden, emotional narratives tailored to specific groups with the aim of differentiating identical products.”⁶ A political brand is made up of a variety of factors that define the politician, differentiates him or her from the opponent, and thus acts to define the opponent as well. Candidate brands perpetually serve a dual purpose: to “construct their image, and deconstruct their opponents.”⁷

Candidate brands break down into two main categories: brand differentiators and boundary conditions.⁸ Brand differentiators are “the emotional wrapping and personality traits” that encompass a candidate’s brand.⁹ These aspects of a candidate’s brand focus on ability, experience, and qualities of leadership, amongst other personal and professional descriptors. The role of brand differentiators is to paint a clear contrast between the candidate promoting these qualities and his or her opponent. Brand differentiators are the main characteristics of a brand that simultaneously define the candidate and opponent. For example, when a brand describes the

⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Jennifer Stromer-Galley, *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

candidate as experienced, trustworthy, or knowledgeable, it draws a contrast, either implicitly or explicitly, against the opponent and labels the opponent as inexperienced, untrustworthy, and unknowledgeable. Boundary conditions consist of policy areas and issues that the candidate promotes in a brand. A policy can be emphasized in a brand or simply mentioned as an “umbrella topic;” either way, both make up the boundary conditions and contribute to the brand the candidate is selling to constituents.¹⁰ Candidates attach boundary conditions to their name in order to convey what policies they have experience working with and what issues they will advocate for in elected office. If candidates discuss plans for addressing economic issues, or if candidates promote the work they have done in furthering LGBT issues, these qualify as boundary conditions. In political brands, boundary conditions are emphasized so that voters associate certain values with the candidates in their mind.

If a brand stands as the conglomerate of qualities and ideals that formulate the image of a politician, then the strategy of messaging can best be understood as the means of disseminating this brand to constituents. In the modern environment of permanent campaigns, “a politician’s life in US politics, then, is a lengthy sequence of communicative extravaganzas made up of events in long, long chains punctuated by elections.”¹¹ The permanent campaign forces politicians to supplement their brand continually with actions that support the image they create. This is accomplished through continued messaging of a politician’s policy agenda, votes, speeches, and actions in Washington. When the candidate is elected and becomes the incumbent, the permanent campaign urges said politician to continue promoting, emphasizing, and contributing to the brand crafted during their time as the candidate, as re-election is never far

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ Michael Silverstein, “The ‘message’ in the (political) battle,” *Language and Communication* 31 (2011): 204.

away.

During an initial campaign, the crafted brand is simply “the characterological aura of a person...who has not only said and done things, but who has the potential...to be imaginable as acting in certain ways in situations still unrealized.”¹² In a brand’s early stages, most often during the candidate’s first campaign, the candidate is creating the idea of how he or she may act in office based of certain positions and applicable experience or knowledge. For this reason, it is more challenging for an incumbent to maintain the brand over time, as the imagined scenarios become reality.¹³

As messaging proliferates in campaigns, the focus becomes more dedicated to developing “one’s own positive message and/or to develop one’s opponent’s negative message.”¹⁴ Candidates compete for ownership over specific issues as a part of their brand, and in campaigning, ownership is most successful when a candidate frames the issue as something they are “better able to ‘handle’ than their opponent.”¹⁵ In turn, positive branding for oneself and negative branding for one’s opponent is a major contributor to the strong partisan polarization of modern campaigns because candidates often define one another by tapping into party differentiations through rhetoric that “stands in sharp contrast to that of the other party.”¹⁶

Whether intentional or not, voters rely on party affiliation as a main evaluator of candidates, “regardless of whether individual candidates draw attention to their partisan

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 205.

¹⁵ J.R. Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study,” *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3 (1996), 826.

¹⁶ Ibid.

affiliation on the campaign trail.”¹⁷ Additionally, “party labels also function as filters to the information contained in candidates’ communications to voters.”¹⁸ As a symbol, political parties offer easily accessible and continually reinforced images in the minds of voters that are emphasized and reaffirmed constantly by both elite political actors and media. For this reason, an understanding of a political party, whether as direct messaging from the party or as information filtered through media, is engrained in the minds of most citizens and therefore citizens easily and automatically conflate the qualities of the party with the affiliated politicians and candidates. When voters, especially those who tend to vote straight ticket, evaluate candidates, party is often used as a proxy for the candidate as the main source of information acquisition.

It is difficult, therefore, for voters to differentiate between candidates and their affiliated party in regard to issues and policy, even if a candidate’s brand emphasizes areas of disagreement with his or her party’s brand. Voters, often unconsciously, use party labels to predict “legislative behavior”¹⁹ because political parties have built their brands over years and have had more time to solidify and spread their brand than a new candidate does.²⁰ As discussed earlier, campaigns focus on ideas and predictions of how a candidate will act or vote once in office and faced with a specific issue. Therefore, in terms of issue ownership, it is easier to convince a voter of how a candidate will act by invoking the hardened schemata of party position and issue beliefs.²¹ When candidates break from party-owned issues, it is harder to sell to the

¹⁷ Jacob R. Neiheisel and Sarah Niebler, “The Use of Party Brand Labels in Congressional Election Campaigns,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (2013), 378.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 379.

¹⁹ Jeffrey D. Grynaviski, *Partisan Bonds: Political Reputations and Legislative Accountability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 71.

²⁰ Arbour, “Issue Frame Ownership”: 608.

²¹ *Ibid.*

public because such disagreement seems unlikely, and few voters are likely to be focused enough on the campaign to view the candidate as aligned with their party on some issues but rebuking it on others.²² It is simpler for a voter to view the candidate along party lines, a factor that is usually played up by the opponent, especially a challenger facing an incumbent.

The power of party branding is undeniable in terms of its expansive reach and overarching effect. The strategy of party branding is identified as having originated with “party communication relied on ‘great mobilizing ideals.’”²³ However, the effects of branding were realized and eventually trickled down into an “individualistic sell of candidate and party” on campaigns.²⁴ Campaigns began to center around marketing both the party’s brand as a whole, in an attempt to win as many seats as possible, while also identifying and emphasizing an individual candidate’s brand that applies to a specific constituency. Political branding emerged as a partisan strategy, a way to sell the party to voters, yet national parties still rely on the selling of individual candidates to win as many elections as possible. In essence, party branding is one factor of an individual campaign, which is then usually elevated by the individual candidate’s brand.

Consistency in message is a useful tool in confirming prior beliefs and maintaining voter loyalty, “but if the party is erratic and constantly changes its platforms, then new information may increase uncertainty so that the party label conveys no useful information that could inform voter choice.”²⁵ Most voters who are not considered amongst the most “politically informed and involved” desire campaigns “where citizens are provided with simple cues and clear choices that

²² Ibid.

²³ Swanson, “Transnational Trends in Political Communication,” 47.

²⁴ Adolphsen, “Branding in Election Campaigns”: 11.

²⁵ Grynaviski, *Partisan Bonds*, 69.

require minimal time and effort to make.”²⁶ Additionally, low-information voters tend to make voting decisions “by taking informational shortcuts, based on candidate cues,” such as race, gender, or party affiliation.²⁷ This pathway to a voting decision is often used in elections where there is little information on the candidates or the race.²⁸ National party brands are useful in these situations because when party brands provide a consistent message over time it confirms certain ideals and qualities that voters immediately associate with candidates in that party.

The tension between party affiliation and individual branding emerges as a point of contention in a number of circumstances. Candidates struggle to craft a brand that represents them as “simultaneously individuals and members of political parties.”²⁹ Candidates will often diverge from their party on issues specific to a single faction in that politician’s constituency. However, in times of low approval numbers, a national party may see more candidates diverge on some of the party’s major issues or policies. As the 2014 midterm elections approached, President Barack Obama faced extremely low approval ratings, and some of his administration’s major policies were viewed with growing rancor by many across the nation. Democrats in a number of races attempted to distance themselves from the President, while Republicans worked to tie their opponents to the President.³⁰ In candidate branding, a divergence from party brand is

²⁶ Keena Lipsitz, Christine Trost, Matthew Grossman and John Sides, “What Voters Want from Political Campaign Communication,” *Political Communication* 22 (2005): 351.

²⁷ Monika L. McDermott, “Race and Gender Cues in Low-Information Elections,” *Political Research Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1998), 895.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 898.

²⁹ Neiheisel and Niebler, “The Use of Party Brand Labels”, 394.

³⁰ Jim Kuhnhenn and Darlene Superville, “Obama Doesn’t Want The Midterm Elections To Be About Him,” *Associated Press*, (October 9, 2014), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/09/obama-midterm-elections_n_5961036.html. In a September 2014 AP-GfK poll, President Obama’s national approval ratings stood at 44 percent approval and 51 percent disapproval. Amongst his major policies, 40 percent approved and 58 percent disapproved of “his handling of the economy,” and 41 percent approved and 58 percent disapproved of “his handling of health care.”

harder to solidify in the minds of voters because they are unlikely to pay close attention to the issues in campaigns and challengers are more likely to emphasize partisan differentiations.

Political campaigns are one of the largest contributors to “inter-party animus.”³¹ Though not the sole contributor to modern polarization, campaigns generally consist of partisan attacks that are emphasized by the game frame obsessed media.³² As the permanent campaign became the norm, partisan branding escalated in scale and frequency, and media followed suit in presenting almost all political events as a brawl between the two parties. The rise of longer, more prevalent campaigns throughout the year rather than during only a few short months resulted in a higher amount of horse race coverage.³³

Media Campaign Coverage

News outlets are both a key asset and the greatest barrier to politicians and communication offices attempting to disseminate their strategically crafted brand to voters in a widespread manner. To some extent, media often pander to political frames, a relationship known as the indexing theory. Indexing claims “the mainstream news generally stays within the sphere of official consensus and conflict displayed in the public statements of the key government officials who manage the policy areas and decision-making processes that make the news.”³⁴ Indexing is a result of reliance, ease, and professional standards and competition, amongst other factors. The lack of funds and resources for media outlets, coupled with the speed

³¹ Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012), 427.

³² *Ibid.*, 427.

³³ Kyu Hahn, Shanto Iyengar and Helmut Norpoth, “Consumer Demand for Election News: The Horseshoe Sells,” *Journal of Politics* 66 (2004): 4.

³⁴ W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence. and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 49.

and urgency of the 24-hour news cycle, forces media to generate stories in a quick and efficient manner. The result is an increased reliance on political sources who want to be featured in the story or want a sounding board for their brand. Media rely increasingly on press releases, prepared statements, and other tools produced by political press offices because they are obtainable, do not require time-consuming and expensive research, and can help reporters produce a story quickly.

Additionally, the reliance on major political figures and media's tendency to relay a press office's framing of issues also stems from the societal pressure to both remain objective and produce credible news. The public expects media outlets to contain widely known, and thus perceived credible, sources. This often results in a major focus on the frames of politicians and political offices rather than counter-frames of unknown groups.³⁵ As a result, indexing posits that political figures largely determine how coverage is framed because the public desires credible sources, and media relay the perceived credible frames as a matter of professional standards and economic competition. All media outlets want their coverage to be consumed by as many people as possible, and that requires pandering to the public's preferences and expectations.

Indexing is also caused in large part by the profit incentive that affects almost all media behaviors currently. The drop in actual purchasing of news resulted in large cuts to media personnel and resources. As a result, journalists need to produce new content quickly and cheaply in order to remain ahead of competition. Economic demands cause journalists to rely heavily on press releases and prepared comments from elite sources because they are readily available and provide a story that costs little in time and labor and is thus more profitable. Politicians are aware of the constraints journalists face in the modern media era and carefully

³⁵ Ibid.

churn out “information subsidies” to journalists in order to ensure the news reflects their message.³⁶

Literature analyzing campaign coverage echoes the ideas put forth in indexing theory, stating that professional journalists understand their role in “broadcasting” the message, as “this is the stuff of political reporting, operating completely within the envelope essentially as trade professionals.”³⁷ Indexing influences campaign coverage because the focus must always be on the candidates, or the political elite. Media are not likely to seek an outside source in a story centered on two candidates. As political opponents seeking to define themselves and each other, the candidates already provide frames and counter-frames, essentially filling the “objectiveness” that media seek. Additionally, a campaign story that does not feature a candidate’s stance or response “would lessen or even erase their [the reporter’s] functional value to their employers.”³⁸ Journalists covering campaigns thus “learn to live in the parameters that the currently evolved system of ‘message’-ing offers to them,” lest they be rendered uninformative, lacking credibility, and useless.³⁹

However, indexing does not mean that a politician’s brand is necessarily dominant or even featured in media coverage. While elite political actors may have an upper hand in how coverage is framed, reporters also have some latitude to set the issue agenda, which may differ from the policy issues that make up the boundary conditions of a politician’s brand. The issues emphasized by media are often “assigned greater importance” in the public’s mind than issues

³⁶ Scott. W. Dunn, “Candidate and Media Agenda Setting in the 2005 Virginia Gubernatorial Election,” *Journal of Communication* 59 (2009), 637.

³⁷ Silverstein, “The ‘message’ in the (political) battle”, 206.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

not prevalent in news coverage.⁴⁰

Agenda setting seeps into campaign coverage in a variety of ways, the most prominent and most important being that the campaign, as a whole, is covered in a horse-race style. In essence, during campaigns “the press concentrates on the strategic game played by the candidates in their pursuit” of political office, which leaves policy discussion and analysis as either secondary or completely forgotten aspects of a campaign.⁴¹ The result is a greater focus on strategy, polling, and opponent attacks rather than individual policy stances, leadership qualities, or overall political capabilities.⁴² Campaign coverage is overwhelmed with the competition of who is ahead and who is behind at any given moment in the campaign, commonly depicted through polling stories. Much of a candidate’s brand is filtered out through this type of coverage, yet what can often remain are the aspects of messaging that seek to define the opponent through attacks or new developments.

The rise of horse-race coverage is not necessarily reflective of the public’s desires, but it is reflective of its choices.⁴³ The rise of 24-hour news requires new developments to be available on a constant basis, and thus “new polls are conducted every day to provide constant updates regarding the fortunes of each candidate.”⁴⁴ Policy is rarely present in campaign coverage

⁴⁰ Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 112-14.

⁴¹ Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), 21.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴³ Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, *The Nightly News Nightmare: Media Coverage of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1988-2008* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 7. In fact, Farnsworth and Lichter explain that a large number of studies show citizens desire more substantial, informative, and issue-based coverage, and the public often retrospectively disapproves of the way media covers campaigns. However, consumption habits over time have shown that horse-race coverage sells well and draws in readers. (Cf. Hahn, Iyengar and Norpoth, “Consumer Demand for Election News: The Horserace Sells”).

⁴⁴ Farnsworth and Lichter, *Nightly News Nightmare*, 9.

because developments and the push-and-pull of campaigns “have a special appeal to the press in part because they conform with traditional news values—they are unexpected, colorful, and unique.”⁴⁵ A main goal of media is to present what is new. As a result, “issues may slip from view because candidates often have nothing new to say about them.”⁴⁶ Instead, reporters will look to aspects of the campaign that change on a daily basis and present fresh information. Horse race stories are easy to produce, and they are easy to sell. Additionally, the public seeks horse race coverage because it provides a clear, simple idea of who will win and is not bogged down by excess information regarding policy or campaign strategy.⁴⁷

Stories that cover poll ratings more often than not relay no information regarding policy, experience, or capabilities. Poll reporting leaves little space for the qualities of political brands, nor is that aspect essential for the reporting. In fact, articles on new polls are not likely to even contain a candidate’s statement regarding the development unless they are truly substantial and game-changing numbers. Most candidates try to spin the results of a poll in their favor, yet articles on polls usually focus solely on numbers. If analysis is present, it usually consists of discussion on strategy, recent developments in the campaign, or what this says about what may happen next. A candidate’s brand has little opportunity to display itself in poll coverage. Voters favor the perceived objectivity of polling and the fact that horse race stories do not tend to offer the messaging from candidates that many citizens find to be “insincere.”⁴⁸

Through horse race coverage, media fail to relay important issue information, yet agenda

⁴⁵ Patterson, *Mass Media Election*, 36.

⁴⁶ Peter Clarke and Susan H. Evans, *Covering Campaigns: Journalism in Congressional Elections* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1983), 48.

⁴⁷ Hahn, Iyengar and Norpoth, “The Horserace Sells.”

⁴⁸ Hahn, Iyengar and Norpoth, “The Horserace Sells”: 30.

setting can affect whether some topics actually gain focus in campaign coverage. Certain issues are present in coverage of campaigns, but “that reporters and candidates have different issue biases can be seen in part when issue news initiated by reporters is compared with that initiated by candidates.”⁴⁹ Agenda setting comes into play in that, during a campaign, whatever topic rules the news day will often be placed in the context of the campaign by seeking the candidates’ stances on the issue. Additionally, whatever topic is driving national news during a campaign will tend to be a main issue in the campaign, even if it is not a priority set by either candidate. National news sets the agenda for what is considered the most important story or issue of the day. That topic filters down to local or state coverage, which causes reporters to insert the national story into the campaign. A tangential concept idea to agenda setting is priming, in which the issues covered in the news tend to be the issues citizens use to evaluate a politician’s performance.⁵⁰ Regardless of what candidates emphasize, citizens will typically evaluate them in the context of major issues in news coverage, ultimately affecting how a citizen will vote.

Candidate brands and media agenda are “markedly different.”⁵¹ Brands are not likely to be used continually in news coverage because they do not possess the “qualities prized in news stories.”⁵² Brands are specific and strategically detailed to contain the exact aspects of policy and leadership qualities that define the candidate in a positive light. Political brands are carefully and specifically crafted and therefore cannot fit into every story, especially breaking news stories. For example, an economy-centered brand has little relevance in a story on foreign policy. If the boundary conditions of a candidate’s brand do not mirror the policy issues at the top of the news

⁴⁹ Patterson, *Mass Media Election*, 33.

⁵⁰ Iyengar and Kinder, *News That Matters*, 114-16.

⁵¹ Patterson, *Mass Media Election*, 34.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 34.

agenda at the moment, then it will be nearly impossible for a candidate to have the central aspects of his or her brand emphasized in news stories.

Candidates must work with the media's agenda because otherwise they would be left out of the conversation completely. When specific campaign issues arise or a singular story begins to dominate the news, candidates have "little choice but to confront the problem...that the press refuses to ignore."⁵³ In campaign coverage, candidates and journalists have different priorities and different biases that affect their actions. On a professional level, candidates are attempting to promote themselves and their brand while journalists are striving to remain objective and nonpartisan in their reporting. In a more realistic analysis, candidates want to discuss their message and accomplishments, while reporters and media outlets want to sell content. The result is that candidates tend to focus on issues and ideology more than media do, and reporters emphasize "party affiliation" and "campaign organization" more frequently than candidates.⁵⁴ As a whole, campaign coverage becomes focused on the partisan differentiations put forth by the candidates, and thus the public receives and interprets coverage through a partisan context.

The Virginia Political Environment

Virginia offers a useful example when it comes to studying the effects of intense partisan polarization in modern campaigns. The Commonwealth's status in the 21st century is that of a "swing state," yet recent electoral results have shown Virginia's demography to be divided both geographically and along party lines. President Barack Obama carried the Commonwealth in 2008 and 2012, and as of 2015, all statewide offices are held by Democrats.⁵⁵ However, as a

⁵³ Patterson, *Mass Media Election*, 37.

⁵⁴ Clarke and Evans, *Covering Campaigns*, 40.

⁵⁵ Governor Terry McAuliffe, Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam, Attorney General Mark Herring, and U.S. Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine

result of strategically gerrymandered districts, Republicans control the Commonwealth's General Assembly, making up 21 of 40 state Senators and 67 of 100 members in the House of Delegates.⁵⁶ The obvious divide in party identification in Virginia is better understood when looking at the demographic makeup of the populations in different areas of Virginia.

The Commonwealth's partisan divide is easily detectable "between rural and white voters, who form the Republican Party's base, and urban and non-white who overwhelming[ly] support Democratic candidates."⁵⁷ The result of this divide is that while Republican-leaning citizens make up the largest geographic space in Virginia, the population of rural Southwest Virginia is minimal compared to the populous cities and counties that Democrats tend to carry.⁵⁸ Cartographic analyses of statewide elections reveal that Virginia is made up of large numbers of Democratic voters, yet the partisan gerrymandering of districts allowed Republicans to continue controlling the General Assembly by isolating their core opponents in a minority of districts.⁵⁹ Very few candidates in Virginia face competitive elections as a result. In the last two elections for Virginia's House of Delegates, in 2011 and 2013, only 17 of the 200 races in total were competitive, "meaning a victory margin of less than 10 percentage points. In 129 of those 200 races, the winning Republican or Democrat faced no opposition from the other major party. And in the 71 contests where a Democrat and Republican did square off, most were blowouts, with an

⁵⁶ "Member and Session," *Virginia General Assembly*, last modified 2015, viriniagenralassembly.gov. Accessed April 13, 2015.

⁵⁷ Stephen J. Farnsworth and Stephen Hanna, "Visualizing Virginia's Changing Electorate: Mapping Presidential Elections from 2000 to 2012," *The Virginia News Letter* 89, no. 2 (2013): 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 5.

⁵⁹ Stephen J. Farnsworth and Benjamin M. Harris, "With Overwhelming Support for Nonpartisan Redistricting, Virginians are Studying Ways to Make That Happen," *The Virginia News Letter* 90, no. 4 (2014).

average victory margin 20 percentage points.”⁶⁰

Therefore, statewide candidates must brand themselves strongly alongside partisan lines in order to drive the turnout necessary to swing the state in their favor. In order to win a Virginia election, candidates have to fight over the “swing-county suburbs,”⁶¹ with their less distinctive or reliable demographics, while also pandering heavily to their party’s brand in order to galvanize partisan turnout. Recent elections showed Democrats winning by small margins due to the votes of the more populous cities.

The power of partisan campaigning in Virginia is no more obvious than in the results of Senator Mark Warner’s 2014 senatorial re-election campaign. Senator Warner, a widely popular Virginia politician since his days as Governor in the early 2000s, built widespread support due to his record of bipartisanship. However, despite nearly every poll placing Senator Warner ahead of Republican challenger Ed Gillespie by a wide margin, the final results were shockingly close, with Senator Warner winning by just 0.8 percent of the vote.⁶² Analysis following the race culminated on two main factors: “one, incumbent Sen. Mark Warner's (D-Va.) political scientists didn't get his people to the polls and, two, that the people who did go were less likely to vote for the Democrat.”⁶³ Between the 2012 and 2014 elections, Virginia voter turnout decreased by the

⁶⁰ “Virginia’s powerless voters,” *Washington Post*, (February 13, 2015), http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/virginias-powerless-voters/2015/02/13/15f8c6e8-b2fe-11e4-886b-c22184f27c35_story.html.

⁶¹ Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, “Media Coverage of the 2005 Governor’s Race: A Comparison to Presidential Election News Coverage,” *The Virginia News Letter* 88, no. 3 (2012): 7. Farnsworth and Hanna, in “Visualizing Virginia’s Changing Electorate,” also discuss how Virginia’s “suburban areas are neither monolithic nor static...their population densities” fluctuate, making these locations the battleground where candidates brawl to win votes and sway the election their way.

⁶² “2014 Virginia Senate Election Results,” *Politico*, (last modified December 17, 2014), <http://www.politico.com/2014-election/results/map/senate/virginia>.

⁶³ Philip Bump, “Why Mark Warner’s race turned into a nail-biter,” *Washington Post*, (November 6, 2014), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/11/06/why-mark-warner-race-turned-into-a-nail-biter>.

largest margins in some of the most populous cities, “particularly in the Northeast, [which] overlaps with where much of the Democratic growth in the state has been over the last decade.”⁶⁴ Democratic voters did not turn out in 2014, making the race much closer than expected.

The question following the election was why Democratic voters failed to turn out in large numbers as they did in the 2012 presidential campaign. Although voter participation is always significantly lower in midterm elections, the notable turnout for the Republican Party raised concerns about a downfall in Democratic voter turnout efforts. Many attributed this to the way Senator Warner campaigned. In his 2001 gubernatorial race and 2008 senatorial race, the Virginia electorate was very different. Senator Warner won those elections by landslides through promoting a “radical centrist” brand. He emphasized the same moderate image in the 2014 election, but rural and Southwest Virginia counties were more assuredly Republican and less likely to swing blue.⁶⁵ The increased partisan frustration with President Barack Obama that affected nearly every election in the 2014 midterms, and Ed Gillespie’s stringent effort to frame Senator Warner as in-line with Obama, helped push the Republican voters to turn out in large numbers. Conversely, Senator Warner’s moderate image failed to inspire core Democratic voters to hit the polls in large quantities in the way more liberal candidates like Obama and Governor Terry McAuliffe’s campaigns did. Overall, it appeared Gillespie’s campaigning, based heavily in partisan attacks, helped him secure a close race, while Senator Warner’s avoidance of partisan alignment almost cost him re-election.

Summary

Branding affects the political communication strategy in a number of ways, most notably

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Stephen Farnsworth, “Missing Moderates in Virginia Politics: Election 2014,” *Daily Kos*, (November 9, 2014), <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2014/11/09/1343505/-Missing-Moderates-in-Virginia-Politics-Election-2014#>.

by contributing to a proliferation of partisan campaigning and an expansion of campaign messaging into daily politics. The game frame obsessed media exacerbates partisan polarization in citizens by emphasizing and confirming partisan frames on a continuous basis. Regardless of whether a politician's brand attempts to play off partisan identity or distance themselves from their party, partisanship stands out as an inescapable aspect of campaign rhetoric, a type of rhetoric that has seeped into almost every politician's brand. Even when politicians emphasize issues in their brands, the power of national party's issue ownership infiltrates the brand in the minds of voters. It is through the combination of the media's game frame coverage, lack of policy focus, and the public's solidified understandings of partisan issue ownership that individualized political branding fails to implant itself in the minds of citizens. As a result, branding must focus heavily on partisan rhetoric in order to gain recognition in media and draw the support of voters in large numbers.

HYPOTHESES:

- *Media coverage is more likely to reflect Ed Gillespie's definition of Senator Mark Warner as a partisan politician than Senator Warner's definition of himself as a bipartisan politician.*
- *Media coverage will emphasize instances when Senator Mark Warner breaks from his brand of bipartisanship.*
- *Media coverage will highlight health care as a major issue in the campaign more so than any other policy issue.*
- *Media coverage will emphasize attacks between candidates rather than actual policy proposals.*

METHODS

To review, a political brand is the image that candidates want portrayed to voters. The

brand crafted by each candidate is the set of qualities and issues that they want voters to associate them with in their mind. Candidates seek to achieve this association through strategic messaging of their brand to voters in a number of ways, with media acting as a main channel of communication between candidate and constituent. Therefore, this study seeks to identify what image of each candidate is actually portrayed to voters through news reports. Media content analysis is the best process for this study because it generates quantitative empirical results that are then analyzed to make verifiable and justifiable claims based on hard evidence. To ensure that this study is as objective as possible, strict standards ensured that the methods of coding used could be duplicated and results could be reproduced and verified.

The methods used in this study are based in large part on the standards set by Thomas Pepinsky and Stephen Kosack in their text, "How to Code."⁶⁶ The procedure put forth in their article lays out guidelines to ensure coding analysis is clear and verifiable. Pepinsky and Kosack propose four main components of a strong and reputable content analysis: "theory, clarity, generality, and replicability."⁶⁷ Determining and specifying the theory is the most integral aspect of crafting a strong content analysis. Theory explains "(1) what the concept being defined is, and (2) what its possible values are."⁶⁸ The concept studied in this paper is political branding, and the values of political brands are identified in literature as brand differentiators and boundary conditions.⁶⁹ These two categories capture and define the main qualities politicians use political brands to promote. Brands are meant to sell candidates and therefore aim to show voters a

⁶⁶ Thomas Pepinsky and Stephen Kosack, "How to Code." (Paper delivered at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2007).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁹ Manuel Adolphsen, "Branding in Election Campaigns: Just a Buzzword or a New Quality of Political Communication" (MSc dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009).

candidate's political characteristics and policy stances.

Political brands can be defined by a number of terms or phrases, so it was vital to set strict parameters of what specific brand qualities would be coded for and what terms and phrases would indicate the presence of these qualities. The focus of this study is to determine if the brands created and touted by the candidates of Virginia's 2014 U.S. senatorial race were reflected in media coverage of the race. Therefore, I began my analysis by conducting an inductive measurement of each candidate's brand, and I created a codebook based on the brand differentiators and boundary conditions identified through that preliminary assessment [See *Appendix A*].

To conduct this initial analysis, I chose two documents from each candidate that strongly represented their brand. I coded the pages on both incumbent Democratic Senator Mark Warner and Republican challenger Ed Gillespie's campaign websites that laid out their major platforms for the campaign. I then coded each candidate's op-ed contribution to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* on November 1, 2014, in which each candidate wrote a final summation of their candidacy and push for votes. I chose to use these two documents for my inductive measurement because they support the idea that a political brand is crafted and closely adhered to throughout the campaign, as the former was created at the beginning and the latter at the end of the campaign, yet both reiterate many of the same qualities of the respective brand. Additionally, analyzing the documents from the beginning and end of the campaign show what aspects of a candidate's brand changed during the campaign.

The inductive measurement of these documents is what makes up the codebook I used in order to detect if media coverage relayed the brands put forth by each candidate. I identified major themes and qualities present in each candidate's brand and defined the terms and phrases

that would represent the presence of these qualities in coding of news articles. The codebook created allowed for specific analysis so that, while coding, the standards were that when I observe “X” it represents value “Y.” For example, when reading a news article that mentions Senator Mark Warner worked on a certain policy or legislation, it indicates the presence of “Policy Knowledge/Strength” in Senator Warner’s brand, or when an article mentions Ed Gillespie’s argument of repealing and replacing Obamacare, it indicates “Health Care” in Gillespie’s brand. Articles were coded as either having the brand quality present in the report (1) or not having any representation of that brand quality (0). Additionally, each article was coded separately for each candidate.

The codebook is divided by the two main categories of brands outlined in political branding literature. Brand differentiators define a brand as individualistic and are used to set the candidate apart from competitors. Brand differentiators encapsulate the personal and professional qualities that candidates use to define themselves and simultaneously define their opponent. For example, when Mark Warner touts his political experience as a former governor and sitting Senator, he is not only telling voters that he has a successful background in public office, but he is also highlighting that his experience is more substantial than that of his opponent, Ed Gillespie.

However, the polarity aspect of brand differentiators is not always explicit. Though Mark Warner may be implicitly contrasting his experience against Ed Gillespie’s in this example, he is not explicitly criticizing Gillespie’s lack of experience in public office. Therefore, explicit references to an opponent are coded as defining the opposing candidate, while implicit references are coded as only defining the politician speaking. For example, when Ed Gillespie states, “My five-point agenda for growth would be the polar opposite of the failed philosophy of diminished

expectations we have endured for the last five years with Mark Warner and President Obama,”⁷⁰ brand differentiators are coded for both candidates because Gillespie is explicitly defining himself and Warner in this statement. This phrase would be coded as “Policy Knowledge/Strength” under Gillespie’s brand and “Partisan” under Mark Warner’s brand because Gillespie is stating that he has a strong plan for growth while coupling Warner with President Obama and identifying them as partisan allies. Additionally, this would be coded as an “Opponent Failure” brand differentiator under Gillespie’s brand because he is explicitly criticizing Warner’s abilities and thus defining himself as the better candidate in comparison. A converse example would be when Mark Warner says, “I was in business longer than I have been in elected office. I know how to read a balance sheet. I know that when making business decisions, all options have to be on the table.”⁷¹ This would be coded as “Private Sector Experience” and “Policy Knowledge/Strength” brand differentiators under Warner’s brand, but nothing would be coded under Gillespie’s brand because Warner is not explicitly defining Gillespie or clearly stating a contrast in their abilities.

Boundary conditions are any issue that a candidate highlights in their brand as a way to show what values and beliefs they will advocate for as a representative. Candidates use boundary conditions to attach their names to certain policies and values that they support, have experience handling, or have plans to address. Campaigns are often about values, and therefore it is important for politicians to identify a number of values that they will uphold and support if elected. Boundary conditions are usually only used to define a candidate’s attachment to a certain issue, but they are sometimes used to insert an opponent’s stance into the public

⁷⁰ “EG²: The Ed Gillespie Agenda for Economic Growth,” *Ed Gillespie Campaign Site*, accessed January 14, 2015, web.archive.org/web/20141021205202/http://edforsenate.com/eg2.

⁷¹ Mark Warner, “Virginia Senate candidates: Mark Warner,” *Richmond Time-Dispatch*, (November 1, 2014).

conversation. For example, in this race, Gillespie continually brought up and criticized Senator Warner's vote and support for the Affordable Care Act, but media often did not mention Gillespie's own idea for policy changes or alternatives, focusing solely on the attack. Therefore, this is an instance where Gillespie successfully attached a boundary condition to his opponent's brand, but failed to attach himself to the topic. In these instances, "Health Care" is coded as a boundary condition for Warner's brand but not Gillespie's. When Gillespie's reform stance is mentioned, such as his desire to "repeal and replace" the legislation, "Health Care" is coded as a boundary condition for both candidates.

I collected articles from the *Washington Post* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, two of the most widely circulated daily newspapers in Virginia. I decided to code articles between the dates of October 1, 2014 and November 1, 2014 in order to limit the amount of articles in the study and due to the fact that the final month of a campaign is arguably the most closely covered time of the campaign. Additionally, voters are often most attentive to campaigns in the final weeks leading up to Election Day on November 4, 2014, making this month the most crucial for the presentation and dissemination of a brand to constituents.⁷² Articles including any mention of Mark Warner or Ed Gillespie during this time period were collected and coded as part of this study. Articles greater than 150 words from News, Metro, and Style sections were coded, yet news briefs, wrap-ups, opinion pieces, and editorials were not included. Contributions from other outlets, such as Politifact Virginia or the Associated Press that were published in the *Washington Post* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* were included and coded. Finally, articles from both print and online versions were included and coded for this analysis. The current environment in which media and political communication teams operate necessitated the inclusion of online

⁷² John Moore, *Elections A-Z* (New York: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2013), 240.

articles in this study. Oftentimes, after a piece is published, communication teams will reach out to provide a response statement or insist on a correction. This change is inserted online, but is often too late to be included in the print version. Therefore, the online versions of articles offer the most accurate assessment of whether campaigns were successful at inserting their brand into coverage. Additionally, more citizens now access news through online formats than print.⁷³ Since the goal of this study is to analyze the image of candidates that media coverage conveys to voters, it would be impractical to not include the main medium through which constituents receive their political information.

Overall, there was a disparity between coverage of the candidates themselves. Mark Warner was mentioned in 100 percent of *Richmond Times-Dispatch* articles coded and 88.2 percent of *Washington Post* articles coded, whereas Ed Gillespie was only mentioned in 76.5 percent of *Richmond Times-Dispatch* articles and 79.4 percent of *Washington Post* articles [See *Table 1*].

Intercoder reliability was tested with the assistance of a peer researcher. The peer was given the codebook and was explained the process and parameters of coding for this project. The peer then coded six articles, the first three from each news outlet. There were only four instances when the peer's coding diverged from my own. Therefore, 152 out of 156 terms coded were the same between coders, resulting in an intercoder reliability measurement of 97 percent.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Comparing the two candidates' political brands (determined through the preliminary inductive measurement) revealed immediate differentiations between the ways each structured

⁷³ "The Personal News Cycle: How Americans choose to get their news," *American Press Institute*, (March 17, 2014), <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/personal-news-cycle>.

their campaign message. Brand differentiators showed key differences between how each candidate campaigned and sought to frame the race. Brand differentiators are evaluated through percentages because there are fewer variables under this label, and thus it is easier to assess the emphasis candidates placed on each aspect of boundary conditions by viewing percentages [*See Table 2 and Table 3*]. Priority for boundary conditions is determined based on whether the issue was mentioned in one or both of the texts used to measure the candidates' political brands. If a boundary condition is only mentioned in one text, it is assigned "Low" priority; if a boundary condition is mentioned in both texts, it is assigned "High" priority [*See Table 4 and Table 5*].

Amongst his brand differentiators, Senator Mark Warner emphasized political experience and bipartisanship [*See Table 2*], while Ed Gillespie pushed the partisan differentiations between himself and his opponent and focused his brand as a critical assault aimed at Warner [*See Table 3*]. However, the boundary conditions, or policies emphasized in a political brand, mostly overlapped between the two candidates but for a few notable exceptions. Warner kept health care out of his brand completely [*See Table 4*], while Gillespie emphasized the issue as a major part of his brand [*See Table 5*]. Conversely, Warner placed Women's Rights and LGBT issues within his brand, yet Gillespie mentioned neither as a part of his own.

Furthermore, the difference in what issues each candidate placed higher emphasis on reflected the Virginia electorate at the time and the outreach of the campaigns. Mark Warner placed low emphasis on energy and the environment and rural Virginia, issues that Ed Gillespie gave high priority in his brand. Southwest Virginia has grown more securely Republican, and Gillespie narrowed in on this electorate as the portion of the state that he could easily take from Warner. With the goal of this portion of the state in mind, Gillespie's brand emphasized energy and environment issues through a discussion of EPA regulations due to the coal mining

population in Southwest Virginia. Warner included his work and history on these issues in his brand, but he did not give them a high priority, signaling a perceived weakness against Gillespie.

Gillespie's focus on Southwest Virginia coincides with the overall partisan-centered focus of his brand. Gillespie emphasized party affiliation over bipartisanship in his brand, while Warner never defined himself in partisan terms. Rather, Warner always discussed himself as a bipartisan lawmaker, even touting the phrase "radical centrist" to define himself. Gillespie, on the other hand, highlighted his work as chairman of the Republican National Committee and in the George W. Bush administration, while Warner emphasized his history of bucking Democratic leadership and always working with Republican partners on legislation. The difference the candidates emphasized in their brand differentiators is then reflected in the boundary conditions they chose to attach to their brand. Warner focused on a broad range of issues that addressed Virginians throughout the state, and Gillespie placed higher emphasis on the more conservative values important to those in areas like Southwest Virginia, such as environmental regulations, and less on policies important to the more liberal Northern Virginia electorate, such as progressive social issues.

It is undeniable that the Republican Party's national brand contributed to the hyper partisan focus of the 2014 midterms across the nation because its cornerstone was presenting a clear alternative to Democratic policies. In a broad view, the 2014 elections were seen as intense partisan battles due to both the high probability that Republicans would take over the Senate and the unpopularity of President Barack Obama at the time. This added set of dramatics intensified the partisan nature of the campaigns because Republican candidates across the nation crafted their brands as partisan attacks against Democratic policies. As a result, many Democratic incumbents attempted to promote a brand of bipartisanship and sought to distance themselves

from partisan alliances. These national brands were apparent in the Warner–Gillespie race.

The significance of the differences between brand strategies is important because candidates use their constructed brands to define and sell themselves to voters and encourage base turnout while also attempting to define their opponent in an effort to gain the undecided support. The essence of branding is to define something as individualistic. In doing so, a brand will always exist as a contrast to the alternative. In marketing, branding is about convincing the public to buy one product versus the other because the branded product works better. This, in turn, explicitly or implicitly defines the opposing product as lesser. Therefore, branding essentially exists as an offensive strategy. This is no less true in political branding; in constructing one's image, a candidate will simultaneously deconstruct their opponent.⁷⁴

Gillespie was in a difficult position compared to other Republican challengers due to Warner's strong bipartisan history. Furthermore, Gillespie was virtually unknown in Virginia, and therefore had to build his brand from scratch while competing against a politician with a brand built and reinforced through previous statewide campaigns and throughout years of public service in elected office. Gillespie's strategy was to tap into the partisan conflict prevalent in the national discussion and attempt to rebrand Warner. By redefining Warner as a politician who stood in line with President Obama, Gillespie was able to utilize Obama's unpopularity and inject that into the Virginia campaign, forcing Warner to work harder at selling his brand. Despite Warner's popularity in Virginia, Gillespie used Obama to define Warner, and in turn was able to define himself as the alternative to both.

However, as stated before, this study focuses on explicit attempts to define an opponent. When determining the candidates' brands, and when coding articles, an attack from Gillespie against Warner elicits coding for Gillespie's brand and Warner's brand. For instance, Gillespie's

⁷⁴ Jennifer Stromer-Galley, *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age*, 174.

focus on health care was an effort to attach Warner to the Affordable Care Act, something Warner sought to keep out of his brand. When Gillespie mentioned Warner's involvement with the health care legislation, "Health Care" is coded as a boundary condition for Warner's brand – a successful instance of Gillespie defining Warner. Furthermore, when Warner highlights himself as a bipartisan politician, he is setting himself apart from Gillespie and in turn defining his opponent as a partisan candidate. However, only when Warner explicitly calls Gillespie a partisan operative is both "Bipartisanship" coded under Warner's brand differentiators and "Partisan" under Gillespie's brand differentiators. If Warner highlights himself as bipartisan with no explicit mention of his opponent, only Warner's "Bipartisanship" brand differentiator is coded.

Regardless of the efforts by candidates to define themselves and their opponents through messaging, speeches, and campaign events, media remain a main source of information for most voters who are not inclined to attend political events or seek out information on campaign websites. Therefore, whether or not media reflect the brands created by candidates is significant to the success of a campaign. Across the board, media coverage of Virginia's 2014 U.S. senatorial candidates did not fully represent the brands crafted and posited by the individual candidates. There was a clear disparity between the candidates' constructed brands and the discussion of the campaign present in media coverage. The majority of brand qualities identified in the inductive measurement of each candidate's brand were not often present in news coverage by both the *Washington Post* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

The disparity in coverage is understandable considering the political history of each candidate [See Table 1]. Mark Warner has been a part of Virginia politics for nearly two decades and served as a U.S. Senator during the campaign. Therefore, articles mentioning Senator

Warner were not always solely focused on the campaign. Media covered Senator Warner's work in the Senate, as well as his role in Virginia issues. Conversely, the 2014 Senatorial campaign was Ed Gillespie's first foray into Virginia politics and his only role at the time of the campaign was as a candidate for U.S. Senate. Therefore, nearly every mention of Ed Gillespie in these two news outlets was in the context of his race against Senator Warner. As a result, since Senator Warner dominated media coverage, he presumably had more opportunity for his brand to be present in media coverage.

There were only three instances in which a quality of a political brand was represented in the majority of news articles coded. For Senator Mark Warner, the brand differentiator of "Political Experience" was present in 66.67 percent of *Washington Post* articles, and the brand differentiator of "Partisan" was present in 56.67 percent of articles discussing Warner. For Ed Gillespie, the brand differentiator of "Partisan" was present in 69.23 percent of *Richmond Times-Dispatch* articles. All other brand differentiators were not present in the majority of articles coded, and no boundary conditions were present in the majority of articles [See Table 6].

However, the lack of brand qualities present in a majority of articles is an expected result because not every article is focused on the campaign or even the candidate. For instance, some articles that mentioned Senator Mark Warner were unrelated to the senatorial campaign or even his political career.⁷⁵

It is almost impossible for news coverage to mirror candidate brands, as political brands encompass a large number of policy issues, while articles usually have a singular focus on a specific event or policy. The only instances in which media typically highlight a large quantity of boundary conditions from a candidate's brand is in a candidate profile or the first reporting of a

⁷⁵ Senator Warner was mentioned in *Richmond Times-Dispatch* article about the 2015 UCI Road World Championship, a bicycle tournament, because of his role as chairman of the board of Richmond 2015 (the organization overseeing the tournament taking place in Richmond).

stump speech. Those cases did not arise here because the articles coded were from the final month of the campaign, in which campaign reporters are presumably tired of focusing on the same message points and rhetoric candidates have delivered since they first hit the trail. In the articles coded, the stories that presented the most boundary conditions in a single report were coverage of debates, which are one of few instances in which media consider a variety of issues to be newsworthy at a singular event. Even the candidates themselves do not emphasize every policy of their brand at every campaign stop. Candidates often tailor their message to the specific constituency they are addressing, and therefore it is unlikely that media across the board would reflect in a major way the specific policies that exist as part of a candidate's brand.

In theory, the strategies behind political branding and news reporting are exact opposites. Political brands are carefully crafted to represent comprehensively the qualities of political experience and ability, policy knowledge, and value stances of a candidate. These brands are promoted continuously and in a uniform manner throughout the duration of the campaign in an effort to inform and inspire voters. Conversely, news reporting is meant to sell. Profit motivations force the media to churn out exciting and compelling news to the public, and the public seeks drama, entertainment, and confirmation of prior beliefs through their news consumption. While candidates continue to push their respective brands, coverage narrows in on the qualities of opposition and discordance between candidates and within brands.

Media coverage for the 2014 midterms was not atypical for a media that is usually focused on game frame coverage of politics. Partisan game framing of political news as a struggle between parties is prominent because this type of coverage sells. This coverage is emphasized in campaign reporting because campaigns tend to be a constant narrative of one candidate making gains on the other for a day and then falling behind the next. Horse race

coverage is gripping and makes for exciting and changing news throughout the months that campaigns last.

However, within this national narrative of 2014, the Virginia senatorial campaign provides a unique perspective because while both candidates closely mirrored the national strategy of their parties, media coverage varied in Virginia as compared to other races because Senator Warner was expected to defeat Ed Gillespie overwhelmingly. Virginia media could not follow the typical horse race coverage of campaigns because every poll placed Warner with a large lead over Gillespie. Additionally, Warner's bipartisan brand was unique in that it was not new in 2014. For years, as a Virginia governor and as a U.S. Senator, Warner produced and promoted a bipartisan brand through his efforts and successes in working across the aisle to achieve solutions. Therefore, while many media described embattled Democratic candidates in 2014 as running from their party, media covering the Virginia race described Warner within the context of his continued bipartisan brand. As a result, Gillespie crafted an explicitly partisan attack-based campaign, while Warner sought to defend his record and protect his brand rather than spend his time messaging against his opponent. The clear difference in strategy between the two candidates is that Ed Gillespie sought to define himself through redefining his opponent explicitly, while Senator Warner sought to define his opponent implicitly through reaffirming his own brand.

A disparity in coverage between the two candidates in Virginia's senatorial race further shows how redefinition of an opponent's recognized brand is more difficult than defending a brand established over time. The higher amount of coverage for Senator Warner [*See Table 1*] explains why the most prominent aspect of Warner's brand conveyed in media coverage was "Political Experience" [*See Table 6*]. If an article did not mention Warner in relation to the

campaign, it was still likely to mention his work in the Senate or the fact that he served as Governor of Virginia, both instances that indicate experience in politics. However, the reverse effect of this assumed advantage is that an incumbent has a political history more susceptible to criticism. Gillespie capitalized on this, focusing his brand as an attack on Senator Warner's history, including past votes, statements, and actions while in office. While most brands are used simultaneously to define a candidate and the opponent, Gillespie's brand is an attempt to define himself through redefining Warner. "Opponent Failure" is a major portion of Gillespie brand differentiators, revealing he attempted to craft his brand as a contrast to Warner's alleged failures [See Table 3]. It is strategic for a challenger to craft their brand as an attack on an incumbent's history because the opponent can identify the problems constituents feel are most prevalent, attach those problems to the incumbent's history, and then promote one's own brand as the solution.

Gillespie succeeded in this strategy, and media coverage reflected Ed Gillespie's definition of Senator Warner more so than Warner's own branding of himself. Reporters emphasized the partisan qualities of Warner that Gillespie highlighted because it was such an unexpected divergence from Warner's history. Due to the fact that this race was not close, journalists were inclined to emphasize any possible instance that might make the race more exciting and similar to the national narrative of the 2014 midterms.

The Affordable Care Act provides the clearest example of Gillespie's strategy manifesting in media coverage. Gillespie tapped into the frustration felt by constituents regarding this legislation, defined Warner's time in office as a reason for the law's passing, and in turn defined himself as the candidate who would act as the antithesis to Warner on this issue. This is a clear example of how brand differentiators and boundary conditions overlap to construct a brand.

By highlighting a specific boundary condition – in this case “Health Care” – Gillespie criticized his opponent’s attachment to a certain issue and thus differentiated his brand from Warner’s.

The fact that brand qualities are largely unrepresented in the coded articles, however, does not mean that the political brands of either candidate were not successful. Rather, major qualities of both brands were present in media coverage, but media descriptions of the candidates never manifested as exact replicas of the promoted brands. It is unlikely that brands would be represented fully in campaign coverage because the brands crafted by the candidates are comprehensive looks at their political beliefs, ideology, and goals as an elected official. A political brand contains a large number of characteristics and qualities, and therefore it would be both impossible and impractical for media coverage to pick up and convey a full brand in a single article. Rather, looking at the number of times certain brand qualities appeared in media coverage as compared to other qualities reveals interesting results in terms of what aspects of the political brands were represented in media for each candidate.

When analyzing the presence of certain brand differentiators over others, the candidates were fairly successful in seeing significant characteristics of their brands represented in media coverage. As mentioned earlier, Senator Warner was often written of as an experienced public servant, an aspect that he personally emphasized. Additionally, coverage across the board displayed Warner as a bipartisan representative more often than Ed Gillespie. “Bipartisanship” is the most prominent aspect of Senator Warner’s brand [*See Table 2*] and is a quality that his brand connects from his time as Governor to the present. The emphasis on this was successful, as coverage of Senator Warner defined him as bipartisan in 41.18 percent of *Richmond Times-Dispatch* articles and 40 percent of *Washington Post* articles, whereas only 23.08 percent of *Richmond Times-Dispatch* articles and 22.22 percent of *Washington Post* articles described Ed

Gillespie as having bipartisan qualities [*See Table 6*].

Similarly, Gillespie is displayed in a heavily partisan light because that is emphasized highly in his brand [*See Table 3*]. He brands himself as a clear alternative to Senator Warner and President Obama, and he highlights his experience serving as chairman of the Republican National Committee, both clear indications of partisan loyalty. Gillespie emphasized partisanship because of the political climate that existed during the 2014 midterm elections. Presidential approval numbers were low, yet Senator Warner's approval numbers in Virginia were high, so it made sense for Gillespie to construct his brand as the polar opposite to Democratic policies, most notably the Affordable Care Act.

The results of Gillespie's partisan branding strategy assisted him in reconstructing Senator Warner's brand. Despite Warner's reiteration of a bipartisan record and the media's fairly consistent display of that quality, the number of news articles that described Warner as "Partisan" were surprisingly high: 35.29 percent of *Richmond Times-Dispatch* articles and 56.67 percent of *Washington Post* articles cast Warner as partisan. The *Washington Post* even wrote of Warner in partisan terms more often than they did of Gillespie, as well as more than they described Warner in bipartisan terms [*See Table 6*].

A few factors caused these results. Both strategic political branding by Gillespie and outside circumstances contributed to the high percentage of articles casting Warner in a partisan light. First, Gillespie's brand from the start of his campaign was centered on the idea of Gillespie being a departure from Obama–Warner policies. In his campaign platform, Gillespie states, "My five-point agenda for growth would be the polar opposite of the failed philosophy of diminished expectations we have endured for the last five years with Mark Warner and President Obama."⁷⁶ He goes on to use phrases such as, "At every turn, President Obama and his Democratic allies in

⁷⁶ "EG²: The Ed Gillespie Agenda for Economic Growth."

Congress like Mark Warner,” “the Warner–Obama solution,” and “promises President Obama and Mark Warner made.” Ed Gillespie essentially made his campaign a proxy race against President Obama, with Mark Warner standing as a representative of the President’s policies. While this was a contrast to the brand that Senator Warner pushed, it was more accessible to both those disgruntled with the Obama’s administration and a media reliant on game frame, adversarial coverage. Additionally, the national story of the 2014 midterms was one of a Republican surge against Obama policies, so it was easier for Gillespie’s story to resonate with and be projected in the media’s agenda.

However, beyond consistent rhetoric tying Warner to Obama, Gillespie also employed a powerful tool to catch the media and the public’s attention: the sound bite. Gillespie put forth a statistic that Senator Warner had voted with President Obama 97 percent of the time during the past six years. Though the statistic was labeled as misleading and not accurate of Warner’s truly bipartisan record, the phrase stuck and was mentioned, discussed, and analyzed in a large number of articles. Gillespie stuck to this sound bite throughout the campaign, and it became both a top point of his stump speech, a recurring message in his commercials, and one of the easiest phrases for journalists to employ in describing the nature of the race.

The other reason a large percentage of articles were coded as representing Warner in a partisan light is due to the emergence of a story in early October that tied Warner to a move by Democratic elected officials in Virginia to dissuade state Senator Phil Puckett from retiring and thereby shifting the Democratic majority in the state Senate over to Republicans. The story was often mentioned in conjunction with campaign coverage for the remainder of the race, and Ed Gillespie seized the opportunity to further highlight his opponent as a partisan politician.

Again, a notable aspect of Gillespie’s partisan-based brand in this context is that even

while attempting to redefine Warner as a partisan politician, he never sought to explicitly present himself as the contrast to partisan politics. Gillespie did not promote in his brand that he would provide a bipartisan voice in the Senate, and media coverage did not draw the conclusion that Gillespie casting Warner as bipartisan was an attempt to say he, as an alternative, would be bipartisan. In fact, media coverage described Gillespie as a partisan at a rate of more than 50 percent of the time that they described him as bipartisan [*See Table 6*]. While branding is often a strategy of showing a black-and-white contrast, Gillespie's branding strategy on this issue was a two-step process. In defining Warner as partisan, Gillespie attached him to Democratic policies and could then sell voters on his own Republican policies as being the stronger alternative. Neither voters nor media would have easily bought into a Republican challenger being a clear alternative to Warner unless Warner was recast as being further to the left than his brand claimed.

Even while faced with these factors, though, Senator Warner's bipartisan brand was not badly diminished despite the increase of partisan-focused coverage [*See Table 6*]. The final article coded for the *Washington Post*, published four days before Election Day still noted, "Warner's past as a popular governor and willingness to buck his party... will likely help him avoid the fate many of his colleagues face."⁷⁷ The final article coded from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, published three days before Election Day, discussed Warner's "record as a bipartisan deal maker."⁷⁸

The strength of Warner's bipartisan brand despite numerous factors pushing against and

⁷⁷ Rachel Weiner, "Virginia Senate race narrows to seven-point gap as Election Day nears; Ed Gillespie gains on Mark Warner in new survey," *Washington Post*, (October 31, 2014), http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/virginia-senate-race-narrows-to-seven-point-gap-as-election-day-nears/2014/10/30/aa72b048-6099-11e4-9f3a-7e28799e0549_story.html.

⁷⁸ Markus Schmidt, "Warner tries to maintain edge in tightening Senate race," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, (November 1, 2014), http://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/government-politics/article_1f986c8e-73f3-5c89-8cca-c01d840f3924.html.

attempting to redefine it confirms many of the ideas posited by political brand theory. First, Warner's brand was harder to break because it existed for years and was reiterated by legitimate actions and achievements as both Governor and Senator. It is harder for a challenger to redefine an incumbent opponent's brand because the incumbent has essentially built their brand since his or her first campaign and reinforced it in the minds of constituents during time in office. Secondly, Warner's extensive history in Virginia gave him a name recognition that was unrivaled by Ed Gillespie, a newcomer when it came to public candidacy. This case reveals that it is harder for a candidate to define an opponent when they face a barrier to defining their own brand first.

Despite the way media constantly reiterated the attacks presented by Gillespie, Warner's brand remained strong due to its verifiable history. More often than not, media would present Gillespie's challenge to Warner's bipartisanship with a supplemental description of Warner's bipartisan successes or by explicitly pointing out that Gillespie was attempting to negate the incumbent's record. This move by the media to seemingly defend Warner's record is reflective of the power of a well-crafted and implemented brand. While Gillespie's claims were factual (Warner did vote for the Affordable Care Act, and the 97 percent figure, though misleading, was, in fact, accurate), challenging a brand built and reinforced over a number of years is nearly impossible. While other Democrats in the 2014 midterms tried to almost re-brand themselves, Warner was defending the brand he held from the start of his political career, making Gillespie's redefinition more scrutinized in media than other Republican challengers in the country.

Furthermore, it was difficult for Gillespie to define Warner because most voters did not even know Gillespie, who had for years been a national political figure behind the scenes but had never before run for office. Gillespie tried to navigate this obstacle by defining himself as the

direct contrast to Warner and Obama, but this counter-definition was still weak against Warner's fortified brand. Conversely, it was easier for Warner to define Gillespie as his polar opposite – a “partisan warrior”⁷⁹ – because voters possessed an understanding of Warner as a bipartisan politician and could thus easily interpret his antithesis as a partisan politician.

However, Ed Gillespie was more successful at bringing major aspects of his brand into the center of the campaign conversation by crafting portions of his brand around the national conversation. Gillespie tapped into topics that ruled the national debate during the 2014 midterms, such as the Affordable Care Act and environmental issues like the Keystone pipeline, while also centering much of his brand on constantly accessible topics such as the economy and jobs [See Table 5]. These issues resonated with voters and media because they were prevalent topics being discussed throughout the nation.

The most obvious example of Gillespie's success in this regard was his focus on the Affordable Care Act. The policy was widely unpopular amongst Republicans and thus many Democratic incumbents in purple states, such as Virginia, tried to avoid the ACA as a topic of debate in the midterms. Gillespie tapped into the discontent and used the ACA as his main line of attack in attaching Mark Warner to President Obama and the policies that angered Republican and some independent voters. The resulting data shows that health care was a larger defining quality in coverage of Mark Warner than in coverage of Ed Gillespie [See Table 7]. In the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 35.29 percent of Mark Warner coverage included health care versus only 26.92 percent of Ed Gillespie. An even more dramatic contrast exists in the *Washington Post's* coverage, with 30 percent of Mark Warner articles focusing on health care, while only 7.41 percent of articles attached Ed Gillespie to health care policy. The disparity stems from the

⁷⁹ Mark Warner, “Virginia Senate candidates: Mark Warner,” *Richmond Time-Dispatch*, (November 1, 2014).

fact that health care was used in Gillespie's brand to define Warner rather than himself. Gillespie did not present his own ideas for an alternative on health care until October 10, and even then, media coverage focused on Warner's ACA vote rather than Gillespie's proposed changes, a fact reflective of the media's tendency to focus on conflict over policy specifics. Warner obviously wanted to avoid the subject, as "Health Care" made up zero percent of his brand [See Table 4], yet Gillespie utilized the media and the public's obsession and attachment to this issue to promote this agenda and weaken the incumbent.

Nonetheless, Gillespie's success here does more to confirm that media are influenced by profit than by disseminating specific policy information or the candidates' constructed brands. Reporters are motivated to produce coverage that will draw in readers and sell news. The result is game frame coverage and a focus on issues of competition, criticism, and conflict. The ACA was a perfect issue for that type of coverage, and it was further enticing to reporters because it was a national topic of debate and a topic that was easily accessible by the public and controversial enough to draw in readers. Furthermore, Gillespie's use of the ACA in his branding was in a critical attack against Warner. Reporters ran with this frame and used it to set the dialogue of the race as a clash between the candidates.

Overall, major policy cornerstones of each campaign were represented in media coverage in small numbers, and amongst all the issues that made up the candidates' boundary conditions, only a select few existed in large percentages media coverage [See Table 7]. Gillespie's campaign was centered around his "agenda for economic growth," and 34.62 percent of articles in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and 33.33 percent of *Washington Post* articles emphasized the economy in coverage of Ed Gillespie. Mark Warner had greater success seeing major aspects of his brand emphasized in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* than in the *Washington Post*. Working to

fix the budget was a high priority for Warner in the Senate, and that history is reflected and emphasized in his brand [See Table 4]. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* discussed Warner in relation to budget issues 20.59 percent of the time, but the *Washington Post* only did so 6.67 percent of the time. Additionally, the media did not cover Warner in conjunction with a focus on the economy in the same way they did for Gillespie, even though Warner also emphasized the issue in his own brand. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* wrote of Warner and the economy 17.65 percent of the time, and the *Washington Post* reported on Warner and the economy 6.67 percent of the time [See Table 7].

Reporters failed to cover comprehensively all other boundary conditions for either candidate as well. The prevalence of economic issues in media coverage is reflective of the fact that the economy is constantly a major issue in the public's mind and the media's agenda. Disenchantment with the state of the economy is an issue that is always prevalent, yet given the fact that Gillespie's brand was presented as "Ed Gillespie's Agenda for Economic Growth," the fact that media only covered economic issues in less than 35 percent of articles across the board shows that they are not receptive to covering the boundary conditions promoted by candidates in their brands.

Amongst all the attempts to brand and rebrand one another, both candidates failed in getting their policy focuses promoted in media coverage. The nuts and bolts of policy are largely ignored by media, and instead, the debate and opposition surrounding certain issues and values is what media displayed. This approach is what caused health care to be picked up as a major issue both nationally and in Virginia coverage of the 2014 midterms. The Affordable Care Act provided the clearest partisan divide when it came to policy, and media covered health care in the context of partisan disagreement rather than presenting and critically analyzing facts and

ideas of health care policy. Media coverage reflected Ed Gillespie's attempt to prioritize health care in the campaign conversation, yet it rarely focused on proposals of reform from either candidate. Media coverage failed even to couple the issue of health care alongside descriptions of Gillespie's candidacy, despite the fact that he dedicated a major portion of his brand to this issue [*See Table 5*]. In all of Gillespie's campaign text, he argued for repeal and reform of the Affordable Care Act, yet this was rarely mentioned in media coverage. Rather, Gillespie's portrayal of Warner's attachment to the health care policy was the most prevalent issue at hand in coverage, resulting in media continually describing Warner's relation to health care policy and almost completely ignoring the issue in relation to Gillespie.

The media's agenda setting priority often outweighs any compulsion to discuss the topics put forth and emphasized by candidates. In the case of health care, a lucky intersection for Ed Gillespie occurred between a candidate's agenda and the media's agenda. However, there were few other instances where that happened. During October, Ebola arose as a major topic of discussion in the United States, and Ebola response became a main topic in many senatorial races. The result in Virginia media was national security becoming one of the most discussed boundary conditions in news coverage⁸⁰ [*See Table 7*] even though neither candidate gave that policy high priority in their espoused brands [*See Table 4 and Table 5*]. This supports the idea that the policies a candidate pushes as the main tenants of their brand are only likely to be picked up heavily in media coverage if those topics match the media's agenda. The media's agenda reflects the national discussion because media want to sell news and therefore cover issues the public is focused on. In turn, media assist in driving the national conversation by focusing on certain issues over others. In this instance, the public feared Ebola, which media tapped into and

⁸⁰ Ebola stories were coded as a national security issue because the story was discussed as a threat to public health and national security, with many political officials urging a close of travel to the U.S. from infected countries.

exacerbated the issue through their dramatized coverage and connection of the issue to the campaign.

The most prevalent aspect of media coverage, especially during campaigns, is game frame coverage. The data acquired from coding shows that media were more likely to pick up and emphasize aspects of candidate brands that involved criticism or attacks of the opponent. From the start of Gillespie's campaign, criticism of his opponent was a major part of his brand [See Table 3]. Opponent criticism made up 20 percent of Gillespie's overall brand differentiators whereas the same quality made up only 7 percent of Mark Warner's brand [See Table 2]. Both texts used to measure Gillespie's brand contained criticism of his opponent, indicating a high priority on this quality. As the challenger, Gillespie sought from the start of his campaign to cast himself as a contrast to his opponent, which required immediate and continuous criticisms.

However, Mark Warner's first text contained no criticism of his opponent or even the opposing party. His second text, published later in the campaign, actually criticized Gillespie, yet Warner's criticism is notable because it is focused more as a criticism of partisanship than of Gillespie. Gillespie differentiated his brand from Warner's by immediately and repeatedly criticizing Warner's policy stances and political actions, including his vote for the ACA and lack of support for a balanced budget amendment. Warner, however, crafted his brand as an emphasis of his bipartisan record and focused criticism on Gillespie as "a partisan political operative," saying, "He sees every issue through the lens of Republican-versus-Democrat. He even calls himself a 'partisan warrior.'"⁸¹

This contrast is significant because the criticism present in Warner's brand thus stands out as an attack on partisanship more so than an attack against Gillespie or the Republican Party. This is understandable because it complements the bipartisan legislator brand, yet it also affected

⁸¹ Mark Warner, "Virginia Senate candidates: Mark Warner," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

the way media covered Warner in the campaign. The media ignored this nuance, and the inclination toward game framing resulted in extreme scrutiny once Warner finally went negative and released attack ads against Gillespie. The media jumped on this development, emphasizing the conflict in the story and delving into the validity of the attacks. Warner's ads incited a media firestorm around his claims, likely because they were a fresh development to the rather stagnant and uncompetitive race. Gillespie engaged in the same attacks throughout his time on the campaign trail, and polls continued to show Warner in the lead by a huge margin, so reporters were excited to see a development that they could play up in order to make the race appear more thrilling. Coverage of Warner's attack ads focused on two major aspects: that they were a departure from Warner's previous rhetoric and signaled a tightening race. Additionally, the strategy of many Democratic candidates to distance themselves from partisan rhetoric backfired because rather than cover these candidates as bipartisan politicians, media narrowed in on the intra-party conflict, focusing on how Democrats tried to distance themselves from unpopular policies. The result was an increased scrutiny of the strategy employed by many Democrats.

The evidence is ample in this study that the media's focus during campaign season is on horse race coverage rather than policy, issues, or candidate brands. Even though horse race coverage was not prevalent in this analysis given the lack of new polling in the final few weeks of the campaign, the news coverage analyzed still revealed that brands fail to be picked up in media coverage because they do not offer developing information. Rather, brands are strictly crafted and adhered to throughout the campaign. This is evident by analyzing the two example texts of each candidate's brand. Though they were written at the beginning and end of the campaign, respectively, there were few changes in the brands. While media will continually mention brief identifiers posited in a brand, such as party affiliation and political experience,

they are unlikely to mention the major policy proposals candidates consistently push throughout the campaign. Especially for reporters who follow the candidates for the length of the campaign, it is impractical to publish stories continually on the candidates' stump speeches, so reporters narrow in on any potential development or change to the fairly repetitive rhetoric present during campaigns.

This type of focus often manifests in a large amount of polling coverage by the media, but again, polling in the Virginia senatorial race did not offer many new developments for media to focus coverage on. Senator Warner maintained a huge lead over Ed Gillespie throughout the campaign, and the most interesting development media were able to pull from new polls was that Gillespie “gained ground,” though polls still showed Warner with “a double-digit lead.”⁸² However, the media's inclination toward horse race coverage is evident in the large amount of process stories published during this campaign. Many stories focused on funds raised by the two candidates, ad buys, and debates, whereas campaign events throughout the state were overwhelmingly ignored.

Furthermore, while aspects of brands promoted by candidates do appear in media coverage, it is clear that media pick the characteristics of political brands that fit their agenda and inclination toward dramatic and combative coverage. The policy areas focused on heavily in this race were those that incited harsh sparring between the two candidates, such as the debate over health care policy. Additionally, media emphasized the brand differentiators of criticizing and attempting to define the opponent because of the antagonistic nature of those brands. For example, when it came to brand differentiators, reporters were more likely to pick up on Gillespie's attacks on Warner's bipartisan record, which resulted in the media portraying

⁸² Jim Nolan, “Senate poll: Warner up 51-39,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, (October 8, 2014), http://www.roanoke.com/news/politics/new-poll-shows-warner-maintaining-double-digit-lead-over-gillespie/article_e3fbb0d6-2f24-5f3c-9eb2-07fda9a313e3.html.

Warner's reality as contrary to his own brand while simultaneously describing Gillespie as the alternative.

This coverage is significant in this race because of Ed Gillespie's brand played into this type of coverage, while Senator Warner's brand attempted to break from the partisan-focused, game frame coverage that is present in most news. By crafting a brand centered around attacks on his opponent, Gillespie was more successful at having his message easily received and disseminated by the media, while Warner was less able to see his centrist brand reflected in a media environment hungry for dramatic stories. Additionally, this resulted in greater scrutiny when Warner's brand broke from its established norms. Gillespie's method of defining himself through re-defining Warner was a unique strategy that is difficult to execute due to the name recognition advantage of incumbents. However, Gillespie's success stems from attempting to define Warner through frames that the media were more likely to pick up.

Attaching Warner to the Affordable Care Act and President Obama was the type of game frame attack that media jumped on and were thrilled to write about for two major reasons: one, it was based in conflict between the two candidates, and two, it defined Warner as completely antithetical to his own brand. This may have been more dramatic in this race than in others because of Warner's long and successful history as a Virginia politician and bipartisan lawmaker, but Gillespie's ability to come in and make cracks in Warner's brand successfully affected media coverage because it showed a dramatic break from the norm of Warner that most of Virginia knew.

CONCLUSIONS

Political branding remains a concept that is difficult to define and critically analyze

because the strategy itself continues to develop over the course of a campaign alongside the constant changes in political dynamics, media behavior, and public opinion. Candidate branding cannot be understood as a single formula that can be implemented in a right or wrong way. The context in which a campaign exists is detrimental to whether or not a political brand will succeed. Public sentiment changes over time and across constituencies, affecting how receptive an electorate will be toward a certain brand. Understanding the effectiveness of one political brand against another only reveals so much about political branding because a brand that works in one election could fail completely in another.

What this study sought to identify was not whether political branding works in securing votes or driving voter turnout. It is undeniable that messaging of a candidate's brand is an effective and imperative factor amongst many in winning a campaign, but the question posed by this study is how well the implementation of brand messaging in media relations strategies works in regards to directly relaying a candidate's brand to constituents. It should be understood, of course, that media coverage is only one way in which candidates disseminate their brand. However, considering most voters acquire their political knowledge through the media, this study aimed to determine whether media are likely to reflect the political brands crafted and disseminated by candidates throughout a campaign. With media acting as the main channel of information from candidate to voter, if a political brand is lost in that process then it begs the question of how useful the technique of pushing brands through media is to a campaign. The main conclusion pulled from this study is that the media will not serve as a conduit for the promotion of a single candidate's brand, but brands do have a strong effect on how a campaign is covered and partially contribute to what image of the candidate and the campaign voters receive through media coverage.

The success or failure regarding the potential of a candidate's political brand to be reflected in media's campaign coverage is dependent upon whether or not that brand is conducive to the media's behaviors, biases, and agenda. Candidates that promote combative, partisan-focused brands will see more traces of their narrative in media coverage than candidates that prioritize policy, compromise, or experience. This is evident in the coding of news coverage of the Warner–Gillespie race. It is unclear whether the media's tendency to game frame coverage leads to more partisan-focused political branding or whether increasingly negative campaigns leads to a rise in combative media narratives. However, what is evident in literature and as a conclusive thought from this study is that the media's game frame coverage and the rise of partisan polarization in both the political and public arena all influence one another and generate a cyclical relationship of increasingly partisan campaign politics.

Political brands more likely to be reflected in media coverage and more likely to drive voter turnout are brands based in challenge and change. This was apparent in the 2008 presidential election, when the media promoted President Barack Obama's message of change, and voters turned out in large numbers of support because of their anger with the status quo and desire for something completely new. As a result, brands of change are by nature based in partisanship. A change in the political environment almost always means a change in party.

The Republican Party had a powerful advantage in the 2014 midterm elections because they were in a position of challenging the status quo, while Democrats had to defend the current status of the country that disheartened a large number of Americans. The Democratic defense failed to inspire voter turnout by their party's base because the brand they promoted, and the one that was reflected in the media, was that of retreating from the issues on which they were elected initially. Conversely, the Republican Party's brand inspired their voters to turn out in large

numbers because the national party tapped into frustration felt by both their stringent supporters and undecided voters. Media coverage on the national level reflected this narrative, continually highlighting the inevitability of a Republican takeover of Congress and how that would damage the status of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. Horse race coverage existed in some local races, but the national story was not close at all. It was expected that Republicans would take control of the Senate, and the debate became more about what that meant rather than if it would happen.

Media coverage of Virginia's 2014 senatorial campaign followed similar trends of national coverage in framing the campaign between Senator Mark Warner and challenger Ed Gillespie in the same manner as many of the other high profile midterm races in the United States. The conclusions in this study further confirm the idea that local media follow national media trends in their coverage. Despite the nature of this race – in that Senator Warner maintained a substantial lead over Gillespie in the polls for the entirety of the campaign – media coverage framed the race within the same context of other closer, more contested midterm elections. In most midterm races, media focused on the Democratic candidates' ties to President Obama and the Affordable Care Act, and they highlighted the race as a partisan battle in which the Republicans were on pace to take the Senate. Similarly, Virginia media played up Gillespie's attempts to tie Warner to Obama and the ACA.

Media content analysis of Virginia's 2014 senatorial race revealed that media coverage will more heavily reflect the qualities of political brands that match up with their agenda to sell dramatic, exciting, and fresh news on a daily basis. This study is able to draw the conclusion that the very nature of campaigns emphasizes the type of game frame focus on politics that media publish. However, this case study in particular shows that media's agenda is a strong factor in

pushing for this frame and injecting it into campaigns. This campaign provided very little opportunity for horse race coverage, so media focused on process stories to simulate and speculate candidates' standings in the place of polling. This led to an increased focus on instances where Senator Warner broke from his established brand and attacked his opponent. For the Virginia media, these breaks were a proxy for polling: they symbolized Gillespie's success at redefining Warner and were described as a sign that the race was becoming closer.

Another conclusive aspect of this study is that political branding, like most campaign strategies, is susceptible to being compromised by an unexpected development. This is evident in the Warner/Gillespie race: the Puckett scandal was unforeseen by either candidate, and it arguably did more to deconstruct Warner's brand than all of Gillespie's communicative strategies during the campaign. Media jump on these unexpected changes due to the dramatic, developing nature and because it often sets candidates to zero, and both must figure out how to act moving forward.

Additionally, regardless of how well a political brand fits into the mold of news coverage, media will go rogue and attempt to identify and scrutinize political strategies. While coverage more often reflected Gillespie's branding, media were never hesitant to explicitly acknowledge the strategy. The dramatic statistics that Gillespie promoted (Warner voting with President Obama 97 percent of the time and his vote for the Affordable Care Act) were present in copious media reports, but articles typically acknowledged how Gillespie was trying to redefine Warner. Furthermore, unique to traditional qualities of modern media, Virginia media actually sought outside voices from Virginia politics experts in many articles. This usually consisted of an unbiased assessment of the race, and typically described Gillespie's strategy as an attempt to redefine his opponent in a state where he maintained very little name recognition.

It is impossible to determine precisely why the results of this race turned out much closer than ever expected, but analyzing the realities of each candidate's brand, the sentiment of the country in 2014, and the structure of the Virginia electorate provide useful insight as to why Senator Mark Warner's lead diminished so greatly on November 4, 2014. The polarization of the country drove voter turnout in 2014 and caused Republicans to see huge waves of support while Democrats faced major losses. In Virginia, a state with an uncertain electorate, galvanizing core supporters is necessary to winning any statewide election. While Warner's bipartisan brand worked in past elections, a brand that emphasized breaking from his own party (coupled with the presumably unstoppable lead Warner held in every poll) may have failed to inspire the large liberal base of Northern Virginia to go out and secure Warner's victory.

Ultimately, this study should not be viewed as a definitive conclusion on the success of political brands in modern campaigns or a final say on how media coverage affects campaign results or voter interpretation of candidates. It is important to note that while the results of this particular case study reveal broad trends in the discussion of candidate branding and campaign coverage, the conclusions posited in this paper must be understood as purely speculative due to the fact that only a single race was analyzed in depth. As previously noted, the strategies and effects of political branding vary depending on candidate, electorate, time, media agenda, and a number of other factors that contribute to the ever-changing nature of politics and political behavior.

This study draws conclusions about political branding and media coverage of the candidate brands in Virginia's 2014 U.S. senatorial race between Senator Mark Warner and Ed Gillespie. It is impossible to say the same conclusions would be present in the study of another 2014 midterm race, or a race between Mark Warner and different candidate, or even a race

between the same candidates in a different state or different year. However, what the results of this study can assert are general conclusions about the relationship between candidate brands and media coverage of those brands in political campaigns:

- *Media remain focused on game frame coverage, and candidate brands that emphasize opponent criticism will see that narrative played out in news coverage.*
- *Brands are built over time, and media are receptive to brands that are reinforced over years. Conversely, when there emerges a break from a politician's established brand, media will emphasize that break in coverage.*
- *Media will ignore the nuts and bolts of policy, choosing rather to focus on the contention between candidates on certain issues without delving deeply into the divergence of ideas or specifics of reform.*

These conclusions can be applied generally in theorizing how media will cover campaigns, but these are not definitive results that would necessarily be echoed in other campaign analyses looking at the same ideas. The race between Senator Mark Warner and Ed Gillespie provides a unique look at how political branding exists in a race where an incumbent sought to defend their established brand, and an unknown challenger sought to define himself by redefining a well-known politician.

Political branding is an imperative aspect to a successful campaign, and the media are not the sole channel through which candidates can promote and disseminate the qualities of their brand that set them apart from their opponent. However, in utilizing media coverage to their greatest advantage, candidates will find brand messaging focused on criticizing their opponent and drawing partisan-based contrasts are more likely to be conveyed in news coverage. Media's tendency toward game frame coverage undoubtedly drives a greater implementation of partisan attacks by candidates.

This study hopes to serve as a piece in the ever-developing discussion of political brands, campaign strategies, media behaviors, and the intersection of these concepts. It is the goal of this

study that the conclusions posited here can assist in future studies that seek to identify more information about the strategy of creating and successfully implementing a political brand in a campaign. The results of this study in particular beg for further research into not only what aspects of a candidate's brand are portrayed in media coverage, but also what aspects of a candidate's brand are actually engrained in constituents' minds by the end of a campaign. A compelling study could focus on whether media actually serve as a channel of information in campaigns or whether voters are likely to receive knowledge of a candidate's brand firsthand. Given the specificity of a brand to a certain constituency, and the numerous avenues of outreach efforts employed by communication teams, it is possible that the media's game frame coverage does not serve as the main source of information for many citizens, especially those in specific communities with stringent issue loyalties that candidates seek to access by utilizing distinct cues in their brands.

Political branding will remain an integral aspect of campaigning that will vary depending on the political environment at the time and the constituency a candidate is campaigning for. As the economic restraints on media continue to affect the framing of coverage, campaigns will continue to be portrayed through a game frame lens. Candidates that seek to capitalize on this will construct their campaign brand around critical attacks on their opponent, but no candidate will be able to tailor the issues of a campaign apart from the media's agenda. A campaign's strategy for promoting a candidate's brand through media can play a significant role in driving voter turnout, as the image of a candidate and the nature of a race portrayed through the news remains undoubtedly a major factor in affecting how voters comprehend and interpret campaigns.

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Table 1: News Coverage of 2014 Virginia Senatorial Candidates

News Outlet	Total	Mark Warner		Ed Gillespie	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>	34	34	100	26	76.5
<i>Washington Post</i>	34	30	88.24	27	79.41

Note: The above chart represents the coverage of each candidate in the articles coded. Both media outlets yielded 34 articles containing coverage of either Mark Warner or Ed Gillespie between the dates of October 1, 2014 and November 1, 2014. The percentages above represent the percentage out of 34 articles that contained a mention of either candidate.

Table 2: Political Brand – Brand Differentiators: Senator Mark Warner, 2014 Virginia U.S. Senatorial Campaign



Table 3: Political Brand – Brand Differentiators: Ed Gillespie, 2014 Virginia U.S. Senatorial Campaign

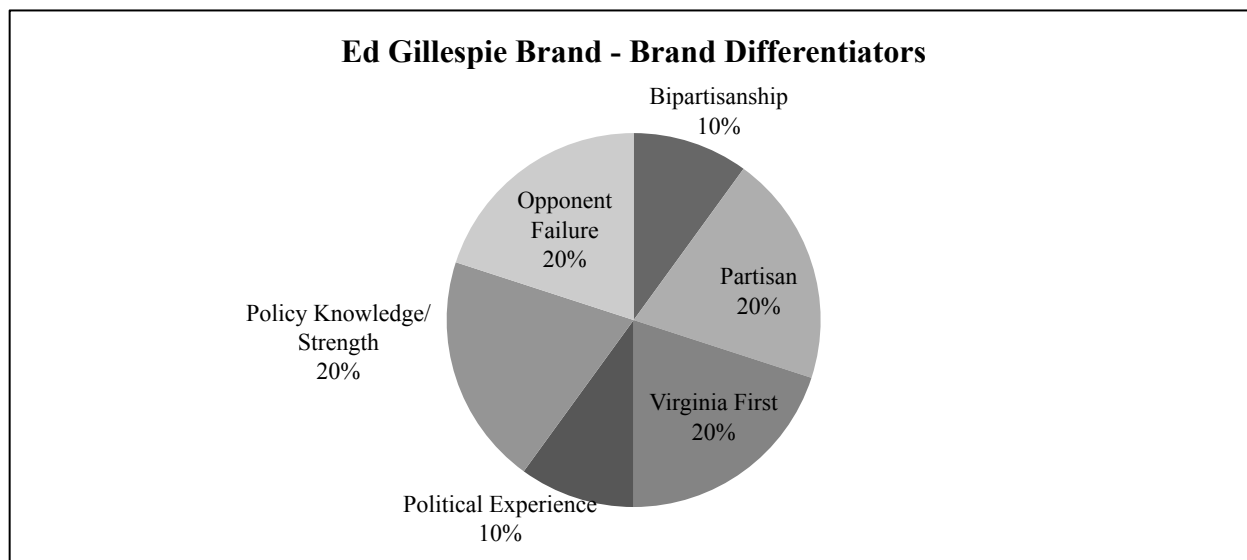


Table 4: Political Brand – Boundary Conditions: Senator Mark Warner, 2014 Virginia U.S. Senatorial Campaign

Policy Issue	Emphasis
Economy	High
Budget	High
Business	High
Education	High
LGBT	Low
Women’s Rights	High
Government Accountability	High
Jobs	High
Military/Veterans	High
Senior Issues	Low
Energy/Environment	Low
Rural Virginia	Low
Income Inequality	Low
Immigration	Low
Inequality	High
National Security	Low

Table 5: Political Brand – Boundary Conditions: Ed Gillespie, 2014 Virginia U.S. Senatorial Campaign

Policy Issue	Emphasis
Economy	High
Health Care	High
Budget	High
Business	High
Education	High
Government Accountability	High
Jobs	High
Military/Veterans	Low
Energy/Environment	High
Rural Virginia	High
Income Inequality	High
Immigration	Low
Inequality	High
National Security	Low

Note: The amount of emphasis either candidate placed on a certain boundary condition was determined through the preliminary inductive measurement of each candidate’s brand through the texts crafted by the official campaign (see page 24). If the boundary condition was mentioned in only one text, it received a rating of ‘Low’ emphasis. If the boundary condition was mentioned in both texts, it received a rating of ‘High’ emphasis.

Table 6: Brand Differentiators in News Coverage of 2014 Virginia U.S. Senatorial Campaign

News Outlet/Brand Differentiator	Mark Warner		Ed Gillespie		Total
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	
<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>					
Bipartisanship	41.18	14	23.08	6	15
Partisan	35.29	12	69.23	18	22
Virginia First	23.53	8	26.92	7	11
Leadership	29.41	10	0.00	0	10
Political Success	11.76	4	0.00	0	4
Political Experience	44.12	15	46.15	12	20
Private Sector Experience	5.88	2	7.69	2	3
Policy Knowledge/Strength	29.41	10	11.54	3	10
Opponent Failure	44.12	15	50.00	13	14
<i>Washington Post</i>					
Bipartisanship	40.00	12	22.22	6	14
Partisan	56.67	17	48.15	13	23
Virginia First	33.33	10	18.52	5	11
Leadership	3.33	1	0.00	0	1
Political Success	40.00	12	11.11	3	14
Political Experience	66.67	20	37.04	10	23
Private Sector Experience	3.33	1	3.70	1	2
Policy Knowledge/Strength	20.00	6	3.70	1	7
Opponent Failure	36.67	11	59.26	16	19

Table 7: Boundary Conditions in News Coverage of 2014 Virginia U.S. Senatorial Campaign

News Outlet/Brand Differentiator	Mark Warner		Ed Gillespie		Total
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	
<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>					
Economy	17.65	6	34.62	9	11
Health Care	35.29	12	26.92	7	12
Budget	20.59	7	11.54	3	8
Business	11.76	4	11.54	3	6
Education	5.88	2	7.69	2	3
LGBT	14.71	5	11.54	3	5
Jobs	8.82	3	19.23	5	7
Military/Veterans	2.94	1	3.85	1	2
Senior Issues	5.88	2	3.85	1	2
Energy/Environment	17.65	8	15.38	4	7
Rural Virginia	5.88	2	3.85	1	2
Income Inequality	5.88	2	7.69	2	3
Immigration	2.94	1	7.69	2	2
National Security	20.59	7	30.77	8	9
<i>Washington Post</i>					
Economy	6.67	2	33.33	9	9
Health Care	30.00	9	7.41	2	10
Budget	6.67	2	3.70	1	2
Business	3.33	1	3.70	1	2
Education	0.00	0	3.70	1	1

LGBT	13.33	4	7.41	2	3
Women's Rights	6.67	2	3.70	1	2
Jobs	0.00	0	14.81	4	4
Military/Veterans	6.67	2	0.00	0	2
Senior Issues	0.00	0	3.70	1	1
Energy/Environment	6.67	2	11.11	3	4
Rural Virginia	3.33	1	3.70	1	1
Income Inequality	0.00	0	7.41	2	2
Immigration	3.33	1	7.41	2	2
Inequality	3.33	1	7.41	2	2
National Security	6.67	2	22.22	6	5

Appendix A: Codebook

<u>Personality/Professional Qualities</u>					
Bipartisanship	Partisan	Virginia First	Leadership	Political Success	Political Experience
Private Sector Experience	Policy Knowledge/Strength	Opponent Failure			
<u>Policy</u>					
Economy	Health Care	Budget	Business	Education	LGBT
Women's Rights	Government Accountability	Jobs	Military/Veterans	Senior Issues	Energy/Environment
(Rural Virginia)	Income Inequality	Immigration	Inequality	National Security	

Coding Dictionary**Personality/Professional Qualities**

<i>Bipartisanship</i>	bipartisan	across the aisle	cross party lines	worked with member of opposing party	partnership with member of opposing party
	moderate	independent	work together	bucked leadership	stood up to/disagreed with affiliated party
<i>Partisan</i>	affiliated party	worked with member of affiliated party	campaigns for affiliated party or member	partnership with member of affiliated party	criticize opposing party
<i>Virginia First</i>	Virginia first	Virginia-focused legislation	accomplishments for Virginia	prosperity	Virginia jobs
	taxpayers	voice for Virginia			
<i>Leadership</i>	sponsored legislation	led group/organization	build consensus	solve problems	Senate leader
<i>Political Success</i>	passed legislation	build consensus	solve problems	record	solutions
<i>Political Experience</i>	elected to [political position]	served as [political position]	worked as [role in politics]	public service	voice in Washington

<i>Private Sector Experience</i>	worked in business pro-business	started a business entrepreneur	succeeded in business	investments	apply business experience to politics
<i>Policy Knowledge/Strength</i>	sponsored legislation	co-sponsored legislation	introduced legislation	solve problems	
<i>Opponent Failure</i>	criticize opponent hold accountable	criticize opposing party	failed legislation	opponent is partisan	better direction
Policy					
<i>Economy</i>	prosperity taxes squeeze	turmoil American companies consumer costs	new jobs tax code	growth financial burden	gas prices rising prices
<i>Health Care</i>	Obamacare insurance	health care doctors	affordable care	patients	accessible care
<i>Budget</i>	deficits balanced budget	debt balance sheet	surplus save [money]	fiscal	government spending
<i>Business</i>	start-ups investment	innovation businesses grow/thrive	entrepreneurship business taxes/corporate tax	regulation/red tape American companies	small business
<i>Education</i>	student loans children	public schools education funding	college/university future generation	K-12	charter schools
<i>LGBT</i>	sexual orientation	marriage equality	discrimination		
<i>Women's Rights</i>	women-focused policy	abortion	birth control	women's health	
<i>Government Accountability</i>	transparency	accountability	government spending		
<i>Jobs</i>	new jobs kill jobs	create jobs American jobs	bring jobs	unemployed	hire
<i>Military/Veterans</i>	military military funding	veterans benefits	served the country	Veterans Administration (V-A)	military families
<i>Senior Issues</i>	Social	Medicare			

<i>Energy/Environment</i>	Security				
	off-shore	climate change	coal; oil; natural gas	alternative energy	renewable energy
<i>Rural Virginia</i>	EPA	Virginia coast	natural resources	foreign energy	carbon tax
	cap-and-trade	Keystone XL pipeline	drilling	carbon emission	
<i>Income Inequality</i>	rural Virginia	broadband	coal	manufacturing jobs	equal [when discussing Va. Citizens]
	fair [when discussing Va. Citizens]	opportunity [when discussing Va. Citizens]			
<i>Immigration</i>	Wall Street	taxes	housing finance	take-home pay	middle class
	poor food stamps	poverty welfare	increase wages	loophole	upward mobility
<i>Inequality</i>	immigration reform	border	immigrant	U.S. citizen	
<i>National Security</i>	opportunity	fair shot			
<i>National Security</i>	threats	safety	terrorism		