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Aleksandra Szczesna

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**THE MEDIA AND CANDIDATE POPULARITY DURING THE 2012 AND 2016
ELECTIONS**

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

Aleksandra Szczesna
December 2016

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Aleksandra Szczesna
(digital signature)

12/16/16

“The Media and Candidate Popularity During the 2012 and 2016 Elections”

Aleksandra Szczesna

University of Mary Washington

Anyone who paid the slightest bit of attention during the 2016 presidential elections would be able to identify the most talked about candidate in the media. This candidate mocked a disabled reporter during one of his speeches, and was quoted saying he prefers “people who weren't captured” when referring to war hero John McCain. He talked about women in sexually demeaning ways, and even threatened not to accept the results of the election if he did not win, wanting to keep “the element of surprise” in play. Despite Donald Trump’s outrageous comments, his audacious nature drove the media to cover his every move. As a result, the media often failed to bring attention to the handful of other Republican candidates also running for office in the primary elections. Despite Trump’s unconventional campaign and the negative media coverage he received, Trump dominated the spotlight during the 2016 presidential elections and became the next president-elect of the United States.

The media has been the prevalent source of political information to voters for decades. Meanwhile, negativity in the press has grown as reporters investigate political candidates and often criticize them to try to come up with attention-grabbing news stories. During this time of increasing negativity in the news, do political candidates running for office benefit from media coverage? It is important to determine whether the media has an effect on candidate popularity and if it influences voter opinion during election years. In this paper, I will first describe the media’s relationship with political candidates running for office. I will then discuss the power of the media and the increase in negative coverage over the years. In order to test the media’s effect on candidate popularity, I will present my hypotheses and describe my research methods on the 2012 and 2016 elections. Lastly, I will discuss my findings and the media’s future implications on political candidates and elections in the upcoming years.

Importance of Name Recognition

One of the most important factors to a candidate's campaign is name recognition (Burden, 2002; Goldenberg & Traugott, 1980). Name recognition is a tool in establishing a candidate's viability (Kam & Zechmeister, 2013) and it carries a "positive valence" for candidates who are able to get their name circulated in the media (Mayhew, 1974). Name recognition also serves as the main cue at the polls for voters who are unfamiliar with names of the candidates when voting (Burden, 2002; Kam & Zechmeister, 2013; Primo, 2003). This unfamiliarity of candidates is especially true in low-information elections, such as primaries, where voters are unable to use party identification to guide their vote choice (Sides & Vavreck, 2013, 7). As a result, voters will often rely on information supplied to them by political campaigns advertisements such as yard signs, bumper stickers, mailers, and of course, the media (Burden, 2002; Kam & Zechmeister, 2013).

Incumbent candidates tend to hold higher name recognition than their challengers, giving them the advantage during their campaign (Mayhew, 1974; Prior, 2006). As a result, challengers typically spend more on campaign advertisements than incumbents in an effort to boost their recognition among voters (Burden, 2002; Goldenberg & Traugott, 1980). Boosting name recognition is critical to the success of a political campaign because it helps candidates reach out to voters by establishing a public presence, especially for those constituents who are undecided. Advertising in politics has been defined as "any effort to disseminate one's name among constituents in a fashion as to create a favorable image but in messages having little or no issue content" (Mayhew, 1974). This definition suggests that political candidates can reach voters by simply circulating their name among the media and developing public recognition without even having to discuss their policy issues, at least not at first. A candidate's policy issues are irrelevant

to voters who do not know or cannot recognize the candidate running for office; therefore, increasing name recognition among the public should be the first and most vital step to any candidate's campaign if they hope to have a chance at winning a political race.

The Media Cycle

Since the media is a vital component of a candidate's chances of gaining name recognition, it is important that candidates who do receive media coverage use it to their advantage. Studies have shown that candidates who receive more media coverage and have more campaign advertisements tend to do better in elections overall (Gaissmaier & Marewski, 2011). Candidates who are featured in the news become more recognized, and therefore more popular among voters. This means that candidates should work hard for their campaign to gain momentum in media coverage. On the other hand, candidates who are unable to become recognized enough by the media and by voters will likely drop out of the race or suspend their campaign altogether, especially if their competitors are successfully dominating the media.

John Sides and Lynn Vavreck examine the importance of taking advantage of media coverage in *The Gamble* (2013), where the scholars describe the political campaign cycle in terms of three stages: discovery, scrutiny, and decline. This cycle offers a detailed explanation of how political candidates benefit from media exposure to gain voter support and the risks that follow for candidates who become featured in the news.

Sides and Vavreck explain the discovery phase at the first phase of a candidate's relationship with the media. The discovery phase occurs when a candidate receives a wave of positive news coverage for the first time due to a newsworthy story, typically followed by an increase in public popularity polls. The media is responsible for initiating this surge in news coverage that leads to an increase in popularity, which in turn drives more news coverage. Sides

and Vavreck call this increase in media attention and popularity the “self-reinforcing cycle,” because candidates who see an increase in media coverage and popularity will likely attract attention that will further drive news coverage and continue to increase their popularity (Sides & Vavreck, 2013, 43). Sides and Vavreck speculate that during the discovery phase, voters may support a candidate simply because they are able to recall that candidate’s name from the media, even if they do not have any other motivation from supporting that candidate (Sides & Vavreck, 2013, 44; Kam & Zechmeister, 2013). Again, this makes name recognition a crucial factor that drives voter choice at the polls. The discovery phase is vital to candidates who are otherwise generally unknown in the political sphere, because a candidate’s discovery is their first chance to make an impression on voters and gain attention from the media. Candidates must be newsworthy in order to get discovered and see an initial boost in popularity; however, gaining recognition among the media also means that it’s unlikely that the candidate featured in the spotlight will be able to avoid backlash for long.

The second phase of a candidate’s campaign is scrutiny, where a candidate’s opposition and the media finds ways to criticize the newly discovered candidate. During the scrutiny phase, the media will likely investigate the candidate’s personal history, issue positions, and past performance as a way to test the candidate’s qualifications. As the candidate receives criticism and their honeymoon period with the media subsides, the candidate’s popularity among the public will likely decrease. The negative attention aimed at the candidate may cause some voters to declare themselves undecided due to the media’s criticism of the candidate. The scrutiny phase becomes a test in determining whether a candidate will still be able to mobilize support or whether they will be unable to make a comeback.

Lastly, candidates who are not strong enough to stay featured in the media will undergo the phase of decline. The decline phase is the media's decreasing interest in the given candidate, where the media is likely to move on to a different story that is more newsworthy. The absence of attention from the media will continue to decrease the candidate's popularity, especially as other candidates become featured in the news. The decline phase is not the end of a candidate's campaign if they are able to regain the media's attention with a new story that will boost their media coverage. At this point, the cycle will start over again if the candidate is able to do something that is considered newsworthy to increase media attention, causing their popularity to increase again as they gain attention and support from voters (Sides & Vavreck, 2013, 45).

Power of the Media

A candidate's relationship with the media as described in *The Gamble* highlights the importance of news coverage for candidates who rely on the media to gain recognition and popularity among voters. Today, a majority if not all of political information reaches voters through the various media outlets; such as newspapers, TV news, or the Internet (Stroud, 2010). Due to the variety of news sources available, voters are able to self-select what type of media they are exposed to (Stroud, 2008). This makes it more likely that voters expose themselves to biased media sources based on ideology and personal preference (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Most sources of political information are ideologically biased, in the way that Fox News is more conservative whereas MSNBC is more liberal (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2006; Murphy & Westbury, 2013). These biased sources of political information become factors in the shaping of voter attitudes (Beck et al., 2002; Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), giving the media influence over voter knowledge based on the type of coverage they offer.

Due to market competition within the media industry (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), news channels and newspapers will often exaggerate storylines and headlines in order to increase viewer attention (Newton, 1999). This exaggeration of news stories affects the information voters receive and how they shape their opinions. A study conducted by Geer and Kahn on the nature of newspaper headlines found that only 42 percent of headlines represented the content of the story in the article (Geer & Kahn, 1993). This suggests that the wording of a headline can alter the way the audience reads and interprets the article that follows, leaving the media with the power to “set the agenda” for interpretation (Geer & Kahn, 1993; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This method of framing news stories shows that by emphasizing certain points over others, the media can manipulate how the audience forms its opinions and perceives information based on positive and negative tones (Druckman, 2001). By making certain issues more important than others and presenting them in a biased way, the media can influence voter opinions about political candidates (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Increasing Negativity

The power of the media to shape political opinion is especially influential in a time of political polarization in our nation. Fundamentally, democratic theory encourages discussion and disagreement in politics (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Geer, 2008, 6). However, due to an increase in political polarization, Americans have grown to be more negative towards the political system (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). While negativity in politics has been said to lead to cynicism and political distrust among voters (Arceneaux, Johnson & Murphy, 2012; Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Newton, 1999), studies have also shown that exposure to negativity in the media can actually stimulate voter turnout (Banducci & Karp, 2003; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999). Richard Lau explains this idea of voter mobilization as a result of increasing

negativity through the cost-orientation hypothesis. The cost-orientation hypothesis states that people are more motivated to avoid the costs of an election's outcome when exposed to negative information, as opposed to when exposed to positive information (Lau, 1985). Overall, negative information is more likely to shape voter opinion on political candidates; therefore, negativity in the media can increase voter turnout in cases where voters would rather to go to the polls in order to avoid an election outcome that will be more costly (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Lau, 1985).

Negative media has also been supported as a measure of legitimacy of political candidates (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Geer, 2008, 10). John Geer argues that democracy requires negative political media because it creates transparency, where citizens are able to discover good and bad information about candidates running for office (Geer, 2008, 6). Negative advertising provides relevant information to viewers such as a candidate's history, mistakes, and weaknesses (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Mayer, 1996). Geer believes that negative media increases candidate accountability and adds credibility to those who are able to succeed through oppositional criticism and backlash (2008, 10). Since 1960, negative political advertisements have become increasingly popular in presidential campaigns, rising from only 10 percent of campaign ads to approximately 65 percent in 2008 (Geer, 2012). John Geer provides three explanations for this rise in negativity (2012). First, there is a general understanding that attack advertisements are more effective than positive advertisements (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999). Second, polarization between parties in itself has led to more negativity in politics. Third, since the media is now increasingly involved in political campaigning, it bears a portion of the responsibility for the rise in negativity.

The media's role in the rise of negativity reflects the fact that the ultimate goal of the media is to generate a compelling narrative for the audience (Sides and Vavreck, 2013, 5). Geer

argues that positive advertisements aren't "newsworthy" in the way that negative advertisements spark controversy. Audiences are attracted to negative media and advertisements, even if the public is cynical towards the political game (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Sides & Vavreck, 2013, 5). Negative campaign advertisements have been argued to be a tool in gaining attention from the media and distinguishing a candidate, more than a tool for swaying voters (Geer, 2012; Peterson & Djupe, 2005). The increase in media exposure is why challengers are more likely to run advertisements that target their opponents negatively (Peterson & Djupe, 2005). Since the release of a negative advertisement is likely to be circulated among the media, it will gain free media coverage for the candidate and be beneficial in boosting name recognition. This is especially true because negative stories are more likely to be covered by the media than positive stories (Geer, 2012; Lau, 1985). However, while free media coverage is financially beneficial for a campaign it is also far less predictable, making it difficult for a candidate to control their own image and media content (Burden, 2002).

Hypotheses

My hypotheses will test whether today's media has a significant effect on shaping voter opinion. In order to do so, I will be looking at political candidates who ran for office in the 2012 and 2016 elections, and analyzing the relationship between their mentions in the media and popularity polls. I will be testing the theory of the media cycle as explained by Sides and Vavreck in *The Gamble*. Sides and Vavreck describe the discovery phase as an increase in candidate popularity polls as a result of that candidate's increase in media coverage. What was not addressed in this theory is whether media coverage must be positive in order to increase popularity, or if any attention from the news is instrumental in increasing a candidate's popularity.

My hypotheses are listed as follows:

H1: *Candidates in the discovery phase will benefit from positive mentions through an increase in popularity polls.*

My first hypothesis is that candidates who go through the discovery phase will see an increase in their popularity polls as a result of positive media attention. By being featured in the news, candidates will gain recognition among the public that will lead to a gain in popularity through positive mentions in the media.

H1b: *Candidates who have already been discovered will not see any effect in popularity polls from mentions in the media.*

My second hypothesis takes into account incumbents and candidates who have already been through the discovery phase and have substantial name recognition. Candidates who have already gone through the discovery phase would be considered those candidates who have previously ran for political office in the primaries or general elections. For these candidates, such as Mitt Romney or Hillary Clinton, we would not expect to see much of a boost in popularity as a result of media coverage because the public has likely already formed their opinion about these candidates; therefore, their popularity is not expected to change through media mentions.

H0: *The media has no effect on candidate popularity polls.*

Lastly, my null hypothesis states that there is no relationship between candidate popularity polls and media mentions. In this case, the media would prove not to have a significant impact on voter opinion or the election process because it would not affect a candidate's popularity polls.

Variables

My dependent variable is the popularity change for each candidate analyzed in my study. A candidate's popularity acts as a predictor of who voters are likely to choose, therefore it is

important to analyze whether the media is affecting candidate popularity polls. The elections on which I collected candidate popularity ratings were the 2012 Republican Primaries and General Election, and the 2016 Republican Primaries and General Election. The reason for choosing the Republican Primaries is due to the large number of candidates that were running for the nomination in both years. I also chose to analyze the General Elections because these elections receive the most national coverage and the highest voter turnout rates. I collected data for the top six candidates leading in the polls for the primary elections, because in both the 2012 and 2016 Republican primary elections there was a high number of candidates running for office and they were on all different levels of popularity during the election cycle. By focusing on the top six candidates leading in popularity polls, I was able to collect enough data on candidates of different popularity levels. I chose not to focus on candidates that did not lead in the top six of the popularity polls because it was unlikely that I would be able to collect enough data to come to a clear conclusion about their relationship with the media. This is especially true because in order to test my hypotheses, these candidates would have had to be popular enough to be featured in the news and see a movement in their popularity polls. I focused on the Republican primaries rather than the Democratic because in both years, there was a high number of candidates running for office which allowed for me to analyze candidates competing in the same election. On the other hand, the 2012 and 2016 Democratic primaries had only two main competitors both years. For the general elections, I collected data on the two final major party candidates in order to see how the media would affect candidate popularity once they reached the election for the highest office. The time frame for which I collected data on each election is as follows: 2012 Republican primaries (June 27, 2011 through June 27, 2012); 2012 General Election (November 6, 2011 through November 6, 2012); 2016 Republican primaries (June 7,

2015 through June 7, 2016); 2016 General Election (November 8, 2015 through November 8, 2016). I collected the daily popularity rating for each candidate from Real Clear Politics¹, an online source which collects popularity poll averages. Looking at a poll average rather than using one poll is important in improving accuracy and reducing reporting bias in sources. I used Real Clear Politics to measure popularity for all candidates in all the elections. I collected these numbers for a year in advance of the last day of the election itself to be able to capture each candidate's discovery phase if applicable, which is more likely to happen several months in advance of Election Day. Additionally, looking at each candidate's popularity polls a year in advance of the election gave me a better chance of seeing different cycles of popularity throughout different candidates, whether that was an increase, decrease, or no effect on popularity polls. Once I collected the daily average popularity rating for each candidate, I calculated the weekly change in popularity by percentage. Looking at the percentage change in popularity rather than just the popularity poll number allowed for me to analyze each candidate on an individual basis, no matter what the candidates' popularity ratings were at any given time.

My explanatory variable is the number of net positive mentions a candidate receives on the front page of three major newspapers. The reason I chose only front page articles is because front page stories are typically the most important and are most likely to be discussed among other media sources as well. Additionally, it can be expected that the average voter will skim the front page of a paper and be able to get a general sense of what is happening in current day politics. The three newspapers I used to collect the data for my explanatory and control variable were the Chicago Tribune, USA Today, and the Washington Post.² The reason for choosing

¹ <http://www.realclearpolitics.com>

² I would have used the New York Times as one of my newspapers since it is the nation's leading newspaper; however, the online archives database for newspapers, ProQuest Archiver, did not have New York Times archives.

these newspapers is because they are some of the most popular newspapers nationwide, and they are relatively moderate in terms of political ideology. I used the ProQuest Archiver online database for each newspaper to collect this data. I chose newspapers as a source of media because although newspaper sales have generally decreased in the last decade due to increased use of the Internet and TV access, newspapers are still viewed as a more “serious” type of media when compared to political television news (Banducci & Karp, 2003). Voters who read newspapers have been proven to be better educated, have higher political knowledge, a more positive view of the political system, and are more likely to recognize candidates (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Goldenberg & Traugott, 1980; Newton, 1999). Then, I rated each front page mention of the political candidate into categories of positive, neutral, and negative. I decided this rating based on the headline and summary description of the article which typically provided key words that set the tone for the overall message. In order to get the “net positive” number of mentions of the candidates on the front page of newspapers, I subtracted the total negative mentions from the total positive mentions for every week. I looked at net positive mentions to create a ratio that compared the number of positive to negative mentions for each individual candidate during any given period in their campaign.

My control variable is the number of neutral mentions for each candidate. Many times, candidates will be listed out in articles or have their names mentioned without being the spotlight of the story. I considered neutral media mentions to be ones that did not necessarily support nor criticize the candidate at hand. Neutral mentions are still important because they help to determine how often a candidate’s name is circulated among the audience in comparison to other candidates. While neutral mentions are not expected to shape public opinion, they are important in comparing candidate popularity to competitors.

In order to test the effect of media mentions and a candidate's popularity, I ran a linear regression to examine the relationships between the variables. I ran a separate regression for every candidate in each election in order to test the relationship of each individual candidate's popularity to their media mentions.

Descriptive Statistics

I focused on the top candidates that ended up leading in popularity polls by the end of each election. For the 2012 Republican primaries, these top six candidates were Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, Ron Paul, Newt Gingrich, Herman Cain, and Rick Perry. Throughout all three separate newspapers, Romney had significantly more mentions in the newspapers than the other candidates. There were candidates with a very small number of front page mentions, including Ron Paul, Herman Cain, and Rick Perry. These candidates did not have a good chance of being the Republican nominee for president due to a lack in name recognition; however, it was important to include them in the study in order to see whether they saw a discovery phase through an increase in media mentions, and if they also went through scrutiny and finally decline like Sides and Vavreck theorized.

In the 2012 General Election I compared the two major party nominees, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Obama was an incumbent President running for re-election at the time, making it more difficult for Romney to gain as much media attention when Obama was being covered by the news both due to his presidency and his campaign. As a result, Obama received more news coverage than Romney in the 2012 General Election.

The 2016 Republican primaries were unique due to the exceptionally high number of candidates running on the Republican ticket. In order to keep the data consistent with the 2012 Republican primaries, I focused on the top six candidates leading in the polls: Donald Trump,

Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, John Kasich, and Jeb Bush. Donald Trump had more mentions in the newspapers than any of the other candidates.

Lastly, the 2016 General Election came down to a race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, neither of which were incumbents. In the 2016 General Election, Trump received more media mentions than Clinton. The breakdown of the descriptive statistics can be viewed below in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Total Mentions in the Media

Election	Candidate	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
2012 Republican Primaries	Romney	62	73	52	187
	Santorum	17	38	18	73
	Paul	5	16	3	24
	Gingrich	24	25	17	66
	Perry	5	23	16	44
	Cain	5	12	13	30
2012 General Election	Romney	79	142	77	298
	Obama	87	291	67	445
2016 Republican Primaries	Trump	71	164	120	355
	Cruz	18	40	16	74
	Rubio	14	28	14	56
	Kasich	13	20	1	34
	Carson	5	8	1	14
	Bush	14	32	16	62
2016 General Election	Trump	79	247	213	539
	Clinton	86	156	109	351

Analysis

My regression tested the relationship between the dependent variable, a candidate's change in popularity polls, and the explanatory variable, a candidate's number of net positive mentions in the media. The results of my regression show significance for certain candidates between these variables (see Tables 2-5).

In the 2012 Republican primaries, the three candidates for which net positive mentions in newspapers were statistically significant were Herman Cain, Rick Perry, and Rick Santorum. It can be concluded that all three candidates were through a “discovery” phase, as described in *The Gamble*, because all of them had a significant relationship between their popularity and media mentions, and none of them were well known candidates nor had previously run in high office elections. On the other hand, the remaining three candidates in my study for the 2012 Republican primaries were individuals who had already been in the political sphere for some time. Newt Gingrich is a known political figure and he served as Speaker of the House in the 1990’s, while Ron Paul and Mitt Romney both ran in the 2008 Republican primaries. These candidates already experienced their discovery phase earlier in their political careers. When analyzing one of the discovery candidates, Rick Santorum, it is apparent that Santorum received two substantial boosts in popularity after he received positive mentions on the front pages of newspapers (Figure 1). Following Santorum’s boost in popularity polls, he received more negative than positive mentions, causing his popularity to start to decrease and the scrutiny phase to begin, ultimately leading to his decline. This pattern is slightly less obvious in Perry and Cain’s cases, although this can be attributed to the fact that both these candidates did not have enough mentions on the front page of newspapers to make a strong conclusion. When comparing all three discovery candidates to Mitt Romney, who ultimately won the Republican nomination in 2012, it is apparent that Romney’s change in popularity was not tied to an increase in positive mentions. This is likely due to the fact that Romney had already been discovered when he ran in the Republican primaries in 2008 (Sides & Vavreck, 2013, 33). Romney’s relationship with the media showed that he received an increase in positive mentions after increases in his popularity

polls (Figure 2), speaking to the fact that he was receiving his boost in popularity from his candidacy and political gain from previous elections rather than directly from the media.

The regression results for the 2012 General Election followed the same idea of the discovery theory; however, this time Romney's story was slightly different. During the time a year prior to Election Day, Romney had a statistically significant and positive relationship between newspaper mentions and change in popularity, while Obama did not (Figures 3 and 4). This means that Romney received a boost in popularity as a result of positive media mentions, while positive mentions in the media did not matter for Obama. This is different for Romney when compared to the 2012 Republican primaries when he did not have a significant relationship with media mentions. This can be explained with the fact that when Romney moved up to the General Election against President Barack Obama, Romney experienced a new discovery phase on the national level. Rather than being recognized primarily among Republican voters who paid attention during the primary elections, Romney now moved up to become a nationally recognized candidate as a challenger to President Obama. Romney became a new contestant to the public nationwide, and what the media said about Romney mattered to the voters who were just now getting a first impression of the candidate. On the other hand, Obama was not affected by the media because he had already been in the public eye for over four years. Applying this result more generally, presidential incumbents overall should never expect to see a discovery phase nor be directly affected by media mentions. Voters are likely to form their opinions of incumbent presidents based on their four year record in the White House than as a result of what the media reports. Even Bill Clinton, who was highly criticized in the media for the famous Lewinsky affair that led to his impeachment trial, ended his presidency with the highest popularity poll of the last few presidents.

In the 2016 Republican Primaries, the regression results also showed significance for discovery candidates, although this election proved to be more complex than the 2012 Republican primaries. The results were significant for candidates John Kasich and Donald Trump, two candidates who both went through the discovery phase. While Kasich's regression showed a positive relationship between net positive mentions in the media and his popularity (Figure 6), Trump's regression had a significant but *negative* relationship between the media and his popularity. This means that Trump actually saw a boost in popularity from negative mentions in the media. When looking at Figure 5, Trump's cycle shows this inverse relationship between net positive mentions and his popularity polls. This graph shows instances where Trump received more negative than positive mentions and his popularity polls increased. This pattern makes Trump an exception to the typical discovery phase of a new candidate running for office, where discovery candidates typically see a boost in popularity as a result of positive, not negative press. Negative media is typically detrimental to a candidate's popularity because voters view criticism of the candidate as a bad indicator of their credibility when compared to candidates who are receiving positive media coverage. Negative media coverage also typically occurs during a candidate's scrutiny and decline phase. This was not the case for Trump who led a political campaign based on scrutiny from the media, and what makes him the exception is that the media's criticism of Trump during his campaign did not discourage voters from supporting him. When analyzing the 2016 Republican primaries, a point to consider is that while Trump was a new political figure, he already had substantial name recognition due to his billionaire status and his presence in pop culture. This also means that his discovery phase was not as challenging as it was for the other candidates because his name was already well recognized. Instead, what Trump did have to accomplish was convincing the public that he was a worthy candidate for political

office. It is possible that Trump was able to win the primaries due to a lack of strong competition among other Republican candidates. With Trump dominating the media with his extreme comments, he made it difficult for other candidates to get enough media coverage to increase their popularity among the public.

The regression results for the 2016 General Election showed significance for Trump but not Clinton. This time, Trump had the opposite result with a positive relationship between mentions in the media and popularity (Figure 7). This result is likely due to the fact that Trump saw so much criticism from the media during the Republican primaries that any positive mentions in the media during the General Election, no matter how small, were able to boost his popularity because anything that wasn't a criticism of Trump looked good in comparison. On the other hand, Clinton's relationship with the media had no significance because she had already been discovered a long time ago (Figure 8). Clinton has been in the political sphere for decades, first as First Lady of Arkansas, then as First Lady of the United States, Secretary of State of the United States, as a runner up candidate in the 2008 Democratic Primaries, and finally as the first female major party nominee in the 2016 General Election. Clinton had been in the spotlight for over twenty years, giving a majority of voters the chance to have already shaped their opinions about her.

Reflecting on Trump's Candidacy

Scholars view negativity in the media as a tool for both candidates and audiences (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Geer, 2008; Sides & Vavreck, 2013). As we have seen, negative attention can be beneficial to a candidate, like Trump in the Republican primaries, who is able to gain recognition and popularity through stories featured in the news. The idea that negative mentions in the media are beneficial to a candidate is portrayed in Barry Burden's analysis of district

elections (2002). In Ohio's 15th District elections in 1992 and Massachusetts' 9th District elections in 2001, the candidate who had received the most negative media coverage ended up winning the primary election solely because they were the candidates most mentioned in the media (Burden, 2002). As the most talked about candidate in the 2016 presidential elections, it can also be suggested that Trump won the Republican primaries and General Election for the same methods that Burden studied.

Trump dominated the news for a majority of the Republican primary and General Election. Despite the way in which the media attacked him, Trump was still able to gain popularity among voters without decline. Trump's relationship with the media was unfavorable to him from the beginning, allowing the public to get used to the media criticizing Trump. In fact, the media became increasingly critical of Trump as he received more negative coverage closer to Election Day. While it is unusual that positive mentions had a negative effect on Trump's popularity, there is an argument to be made about Trump's time in the spotlight. Anytime Trump was featured in the media, news reporters would discuss his most negative stories. Yet, these stories were not deal breakers for voters who supported Trump for his political positions, such as supporting Second Amendment rights and his promise to protect politics from corrupt officials, like he claimed his opponent Hillary Clinton to be. Despite the fact that the media loved to criticize Trump and rarely chose to discuss his policies, news outlets were still instrumental in maintaining Trump's support by never letting him leave the scrutiny phase to enter decline. By covering Trump more than any other candidate throughout both the Republican primaries and General Election, the media increased Trump's popularity among voters. It was difficult for Trump's popularity to decline when no other candidate was featured in the news enough to gain popularity to be a real challenger to Trump. Despite the negative media coverage

and criticism that Trump received, he was still the most popular candidate of the election whether he was the most qualified candidate or not. Voters may not have considered Trump's shortcomings to be deal breakers because he was the most dominant candidate of the elections, and even more likely, voters were not informed enough about other candidates running for office as Trump dominated the spotlight.

Implications

It is important to consider the implications of the results of this study on our electoral process. We have entered an era where not only does the media play a primary role in shaping political information among voters, but it also acts as the only option for political candidates to gain the attention of voters. The winning candidate in every election studied in this paper was the one who received the highest number of mentions in the media overall. Does that mean that whether a candidate receives positive or negative press, the content of what is being said about them does not matter as long as they dominate the news? Trump's unique relationship with the negative media coverage that drove his popularity to increase demonstrated that all press truly is good press. However, can any candidate do what Donald Trump did, in winning the 2016 Republican primaries through negative mentions alone? Not necessarily. As we saw in 2012, Herman Cain started gaining momentum as we went through his discovery phase. However, it did not take long for negative mentions of resurfacing sexual harassment allegations to tank his popularity and put an end to any chances he had of winning in the 2012 Republican primaries. Trump was a candidate who acted as an exception to the rule that negative press will lead to decline. It takes a unique candidate to be able to pull off what Trump did, whether it has to do with the lack of viable options among competitors or the simply good timing. For some candidates, their charismatic nature may be a key in gaining popularity despite criticism from the

media, though I would argue that charisma was not Trump's strong suit. In reality, not everyone can succeed through negative mentions like president-elect Trump and I would not expect future political candidates for apply his tactics to their campaigns.

As a general rule, every candidate should try to be discovered by the media within a reasonable time prior to the election. The 2016 Republican primaries may have had a different outcome had John Kasich been discovered earlier. Kasich's discovery phase did not occur until mid-March, however this was already about halfway into the primary elections. Kasich was a moderate conservative who was deemed as "the only plausible choice for Republicans tired of the extremism and inexperience" by the New York Times Editorial Board in January 2016.³ However, while Kasich received a substantial boost in popularity it came too late in the election. Although Kasich had momentum during the last months of the primaries, he did not have enough time to gain the recognition he needed nor rally enough support among voters.

Once candidates are discovered, their next goal should be to try to become "untouchable" by the media. Becoming untouchable means that a candidate's fundamental supporters will not be swayed by what the media says. While gaining such strong support is difficult in such a short period of time, voters who have already chosen their candidate a year prior to the election will be unlikely to change their vote based on what the media says (Sides & Vavreck, 2013, 2). However, for candidates who don't have the time or advantage of rallying up such strong support, it will often come down to sway voters who can still be up for grabs or at risk of being lost. While candidates cannot control the media or their competitors, they should work hard to lead a transparent campaign and make sure their supporters are committed to their vote. The

³ The Editorial Board. "A Chance to Reset the Republican Race." *The New York Times*.
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/opinion/sunday/a-chance-to-reset-the-republican-race.html?_r=0

media cycle of positive and negative news coverage will come and go, but steady support is vital for winning the vote.

Conclusion

Media matters in elections because it helps determine which candidates will get discovered. As we have seen, media mentions for a candidate are especially important in primary elections where candidates have a chance to go through the discovery phase. By making their appearance in the media, candidates are able to gain name recognition, and most importantly gain popularity among voters. We have seen that every winning candidate among the elections studied had the highest numbers of mentions in the media overall. While a majority of candidates who had a significant relationship with the media saw an increase in popularity polls as a result of an increase in positive mentions in the media, there is an exception to this rule with Donald Trump. As it turns out, Trump was able to win the 2016 Republican Primaries despite a majority of negative mentions in the media and then continued to win the 2016 General Election.

While the discovery phase is essential for a candidate's initial debut, it is important to point out that a candidate's discovery is temporary and the candidate must do their best to take advantage of being in the spotlight to gain support. Sooner or later, the media will move on if the discovery candidate is not able to gain momentum and if they are not as interesting to the public as their competitors. Nevertheless, the political world does not have a secret formula for success. Every election is unique with all different candidates, and in today's elections it often comes down to good timing in receiving strong media coverage in order to increase one's popularity.

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Number of Total Mentions in the Media

Election	Candidate	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
2012 Republican Primaries	Romney	62	73	52	187
	Santorum	17	38	18	73
	Paul	5	16	3	24
	Gingrich	24	25	17	66
	Perry	5	23	16	44
	Cain	5	12	13	30
2012 General Election	Romney	79	142	77	298
	Obama	87	291	67	445
2016 Republican Primaries	Trump	71	164	120	355
	Cruz	18	40	16	74
	Rubio	14	28	14	56
	Kasich	13	20	1	34
	Carson	5	8	1	14
	Bush	14	32	16	62
2016 General Election	Trump	79	247	213	539
	Clinton	86	156	109	351

Table 2. Regression Results for 2012 Republican Primaries (June 27, 2011-June 27, 2012)

2012 Republican Primaries		
Candidate	Total Neutral Mentions	Total Net Positive Mentions
Cain	0.2345 (-0.9119)	2.2835 ** (1.0417)
Gingrich	-0.1076 (-0.4727)	0.4226 (0.3046)
Paul	-0.1029 (-0.5640)	-0.2135 (0.6913)
Perry	0.3535 (-0.4151)	1.1468 *** (0.4309)
Romney	0.3472 (-0.2383)	0.1949 (0.1913)
Santorum	0.3181 (-0.2439)	1.075 *** (0.3018)

Model is estimated with ordinary least squares regression.

*=p<0.10 **=p<0.05 ***=p<0.01

Table 3. Regression Results for 2012 Presidential Elections (Nov. 6, 2011-Nov. 6, 2012)

2012 Presidential Elections		
Candidate	Total Neutral Mentions	Total Net Positive Mentions
Obama	0.0096 (0.0792)	0.107 (0.1079)
Romney	-0.0126 (0.1004)	0.1943 ** (0.0921)

Model is estimated with ordinary least squares regression.

*=p<0.10 **=p<0.05 ***=p<0.01

Table 4. Regression Results for 2016 Republican Primaries (June 7, 2015-June 7, 2016)

2016 Republican Primaries		
Candidate	Total Neutral Mentions	Total Net Positive Mentions
Bush	0.0498 (0.2590)	0.0982 (0.2359)
Carson	0.3837 (0.6561)	1.487 (1.0032)
Cruz	-0.1674 (0.2181)	0.3401 (0.2577)
Kasich	0.2125 (0.2890)	1.3585 *** (0.4766)
Rubio	0.4088 * (0.2342)	0.0227 (0.2320)
Trump	-0.0569 (0.1106)	-0.1734 * (0.0990)

Model is estimated with ordinary least squares regression.

*=p<0.10 **=p<0.05 ***=p<0.01

Table 5. Regression Results for 2016 Presidential Elections (Nov. 8, 2015-Nov. 8, 2016)

2016 Presidential Elections		
Candidate	Total Neutral Mentions	Total Net Positive Mentions
Clinton	0.0813 (0.0639)	-0.0019 (0.0569)
Trump	0.0861 (0.0524)	0.1287 *** (0.0450)

Model is estimated with ordinary least squares regression.

*=p<0.10 **=p<0.05 ***=p<0.01

Figure 1. 2012 Republican Primaries: Santorum’s Discovery Phase

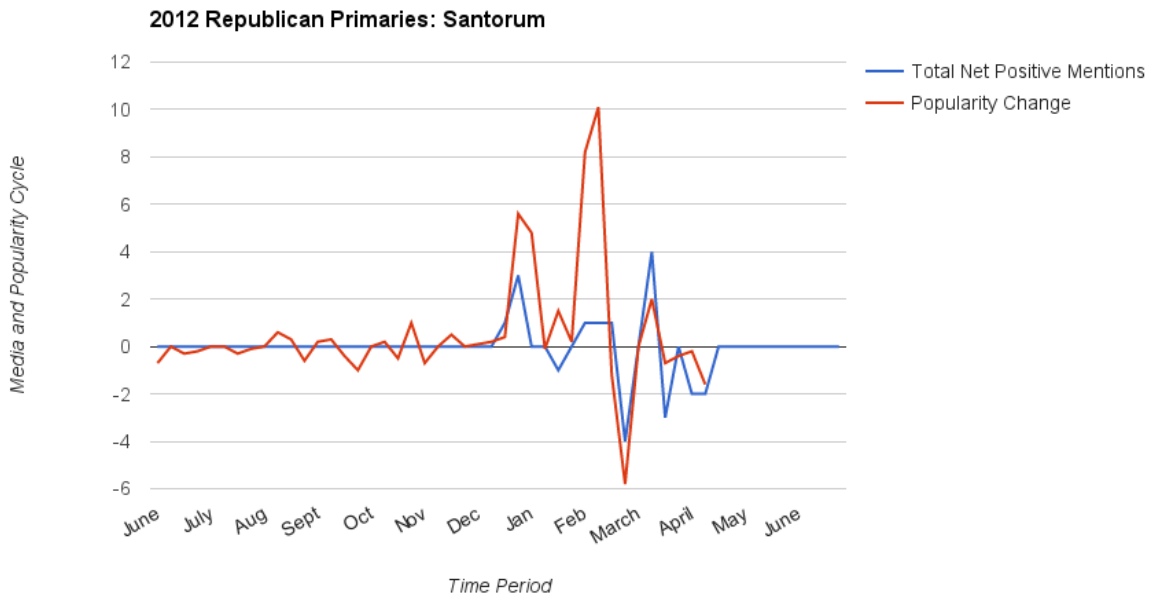


Figure 2. 2012 Republican Primaries: Romney

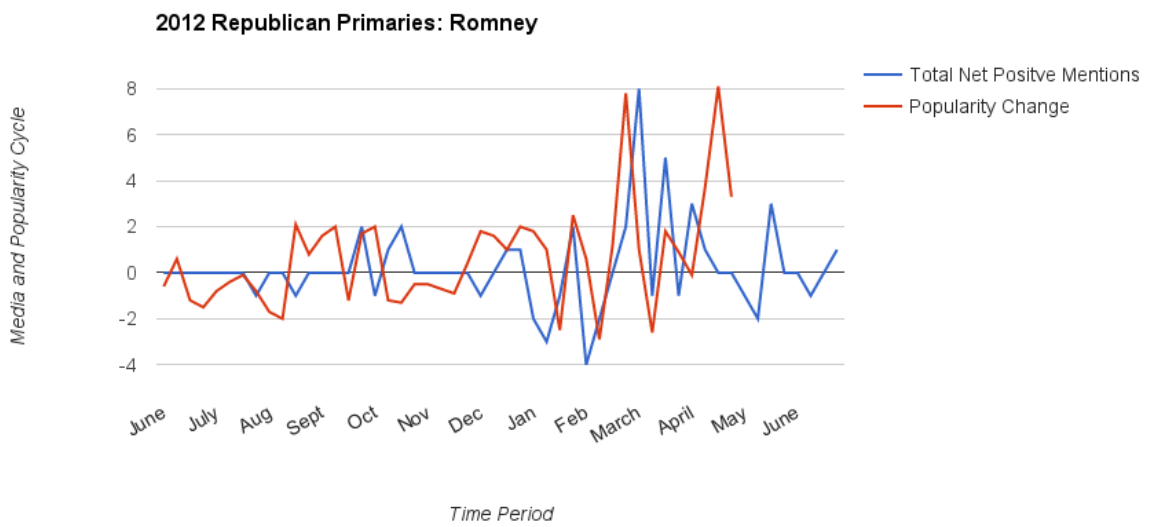


Figure 3. 2012 General Election: Obama

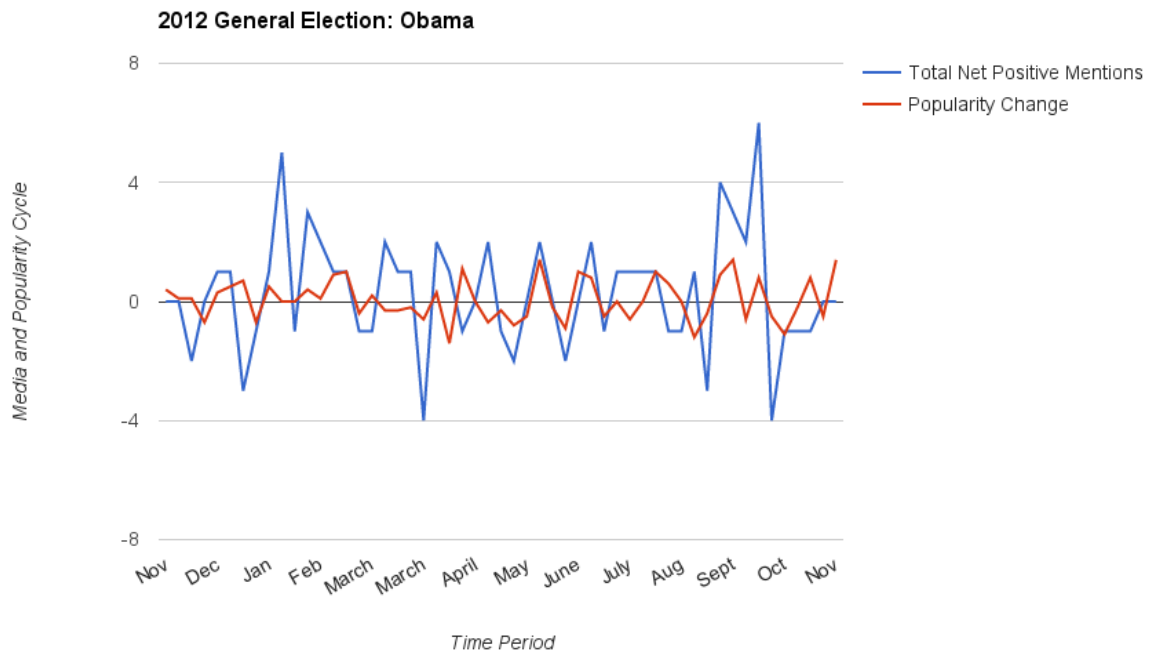


Figure 4. 2012 General Election: Romney

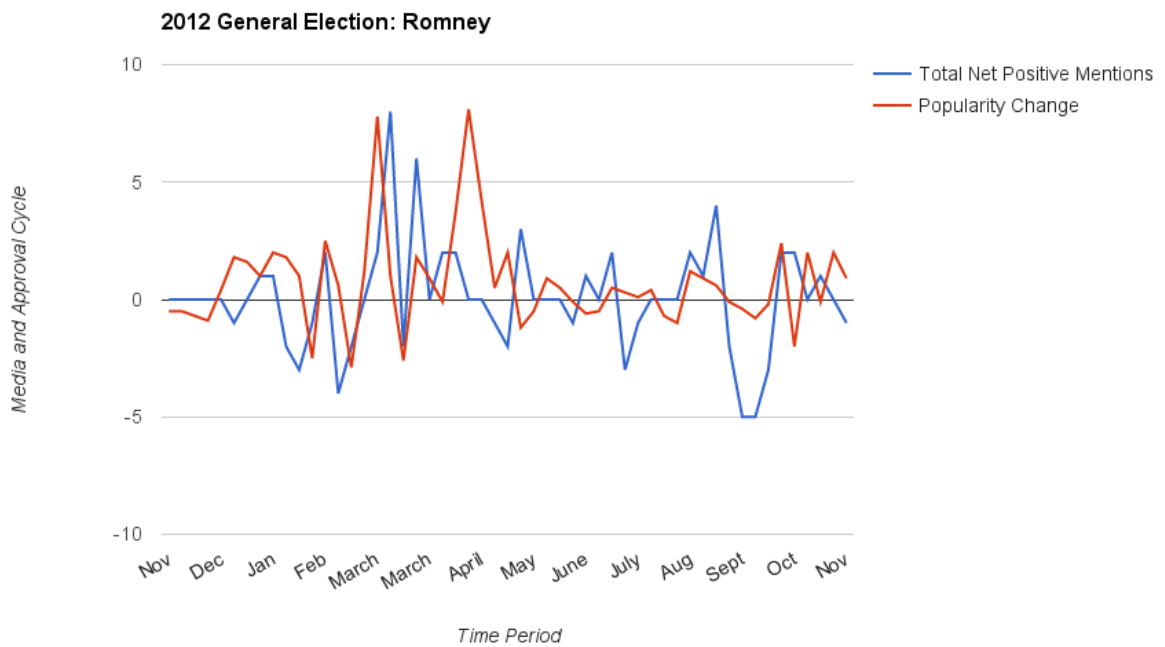


Figure 5. 2016 Republican Primaries: Trump

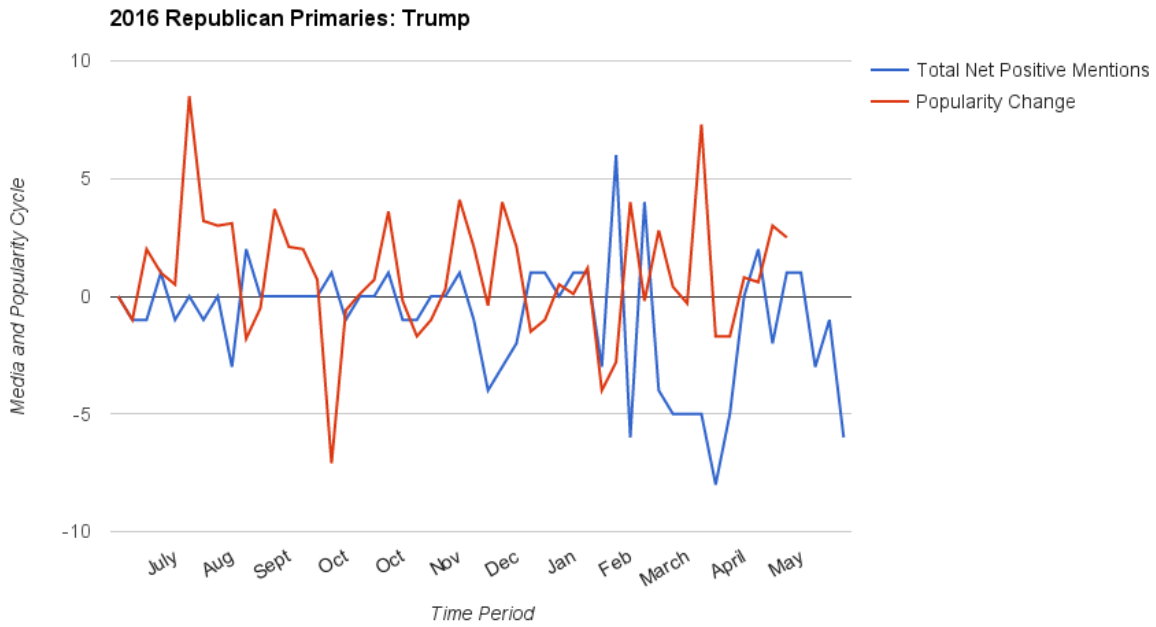


Figure 6. 2016 Republican Primaries: Kasich

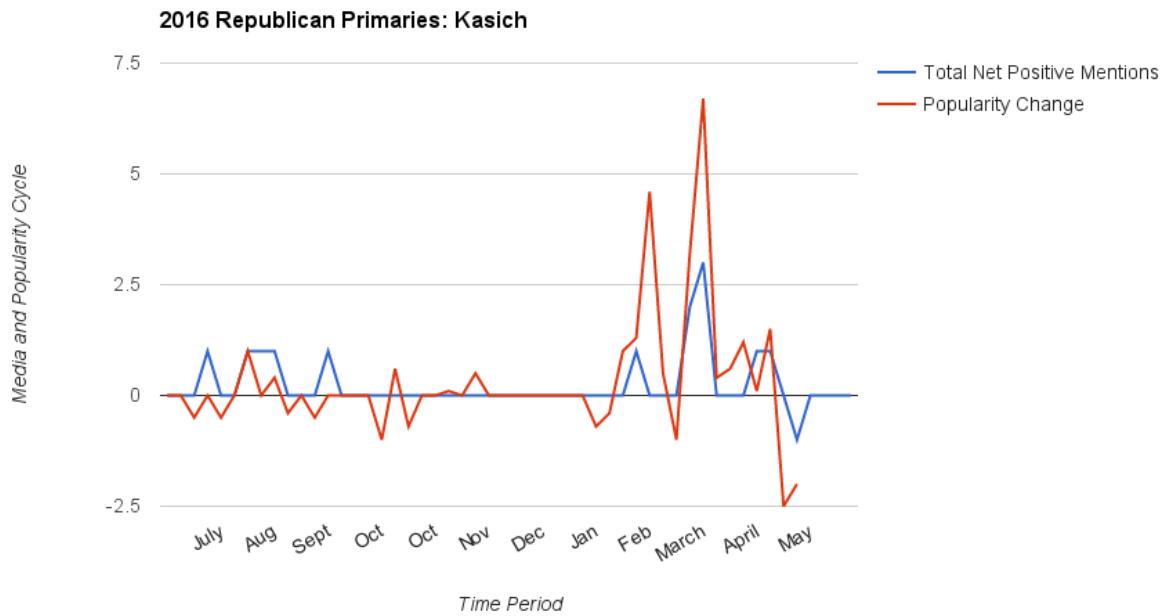


Figure 7. 2016 General Election: Trump

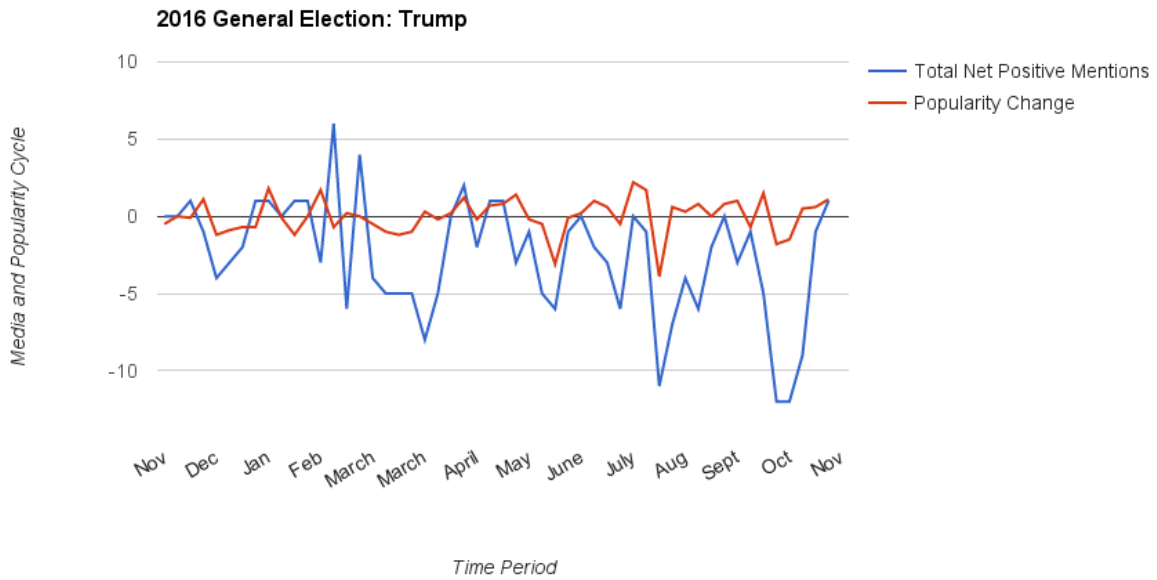
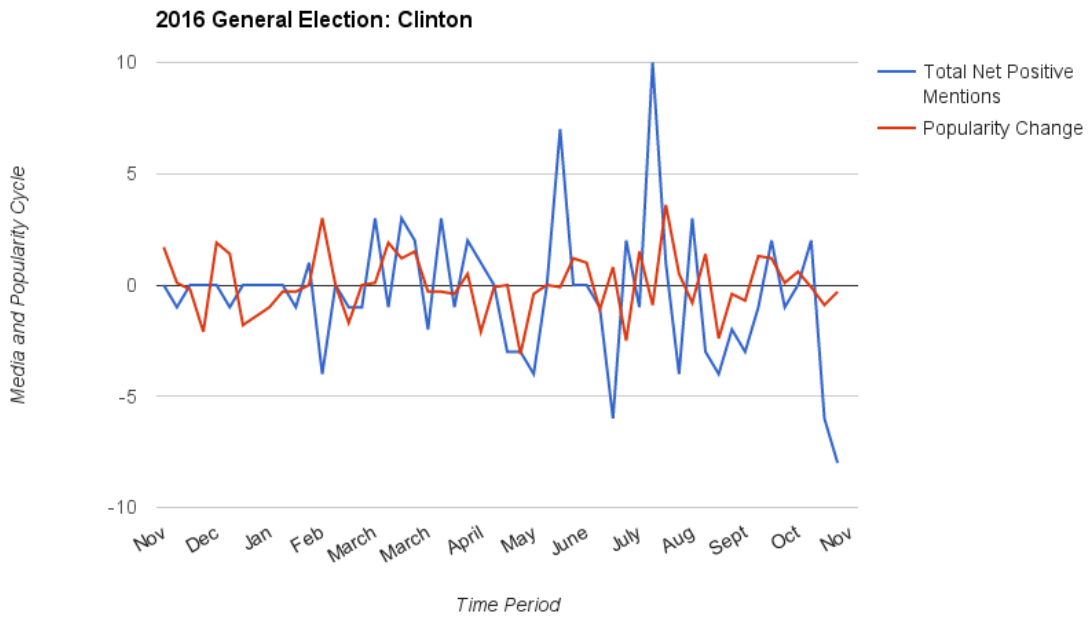


Figure 8. 2016 General Election: Clinton



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