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Is Network News Coverage of the President Biased?

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In recent years presidential charges of maltreatment by the press have become commonplace. Various scholarly research into political communication appears to confirm the validity of these charges. However, a number of issues prevent one from inferring bias from the high levels of unfavorable presidential news these studies report. The research reported here is designed to overcome these problems and allow us to test the bias hypothesis more conclusively. Applying this design to the three networks' evening news programs during the years 1990 through 1995, we find qualified support for the bias hypothesis but even more compelling evidence that changes in presidential approval, whether favorable or unfavorable, drive news coverage of the president's public support. We also find surprising differences in the networks' routines and patterns of coverage that call into question the common assumption of homogenous network behavior.

Question: We have a poll out tonight that shows that your job approval rating has gone from 64 to 49 percent in the last 2 months. . . . Why do you think this has happened?

President Clinton: I bet not five percent of the American people know that we passed a budget . . . and it passed at the most rapid point of any budget in 17 years. I bet not one in 20 American voters knows that because . . . success and the lack of discord are not as noteworthy as failure.

—May 7, 1993, Washington, D.C.

In this era when presidents' fortunes increasingly depend on their public support, presidential complaints of unfair news coverage have become commonplace. In response, those who run the nation's newspapers and television news departments typically strike a self-effacing posture: "All we do is report the news." Poor performance, and not biased reporting, accounts for whatever unfavorable news coverage presidents receive. Who is right?

In recent years, increasing numbers of scholars have sought to answer this question. Students of journalism have delved into the professional habits of correspondents (Patterson 1996; Soley 1992) and the routines of modern news organizations (Epstein 1973; Gans 1980; Sabato 1991). Although we find some of this literature rushes to judgment with characterizations of "attack" journalism and "feeding frenzy," we must, nonetheless, acknowledge that these studies

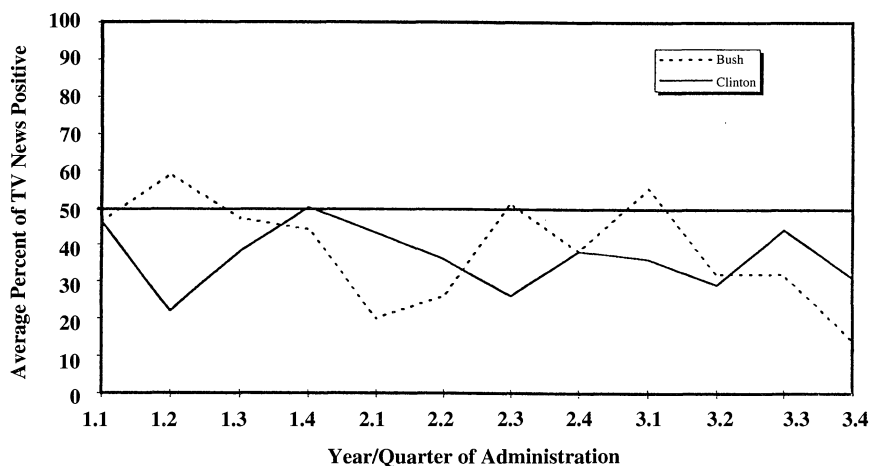
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uncover editorial practices that support presidential assertions of negative news bias.¹

Other scholars (Brody 1991; Grossman and Kumar 1981) have concentrated on the products of these journalistic practices—that is, news about the president—and have sought to frame the question of bias as a testable hypothesis. They, too, muster evidence that appears to support presidential charges of bias. One such study is the Center for Media and Public Affairs' (CMPA) ongoing content analysis of network news coverage of national politics. Since 1989 the Center's staff has systematically scored every sentence of every presidential story broadcast on one of the three major networks' evening news programs. Their findings, summarized as quarterly averages in Figure 1, show that both George Bush and Bill Clinton garnered mostly negative coverage during their first three years in the White House. Only in 3 of the 24 quarters did these presidents average more favorable news than unfavorable. Even during the first quarter of

FIGURE 1

Most TV News Evaluations of the President Are Unfavorable



Source: Ratings based on content analysis of sound bites on ABC, NBC, and CBS evening news programs by the Center for Media and Public Affairs.

¹ There have been many hypothesized types of bias in the communication literature—partisan, antiestablishment, proestablishment, ideological, etc. Any of these might be imagined to influence the news in politically relevant ways. However, in this analysis we have chosen to concentrate on negative bias.

1991 (3.1 in Figure 1) when the Gulf War lifted Bush's Gallup job performance rating to a record-setting 88% approving, the President still barely managed to win a net favorable ratio of news. By these standards, a president who musters a 40:60 ratio of favorable to unfavorable news is doing pretty well.

However suggestive this and similar findings may be, they do not add up to a definitive confirmation of network news bias. Important methodological and evidentiary issues remain to be resolved before one can conclude bias from the presence of high levels of negative news. Until this is done, plausible alternative explanations will frustrate attempts to shift statements of "news bias" from the realm of opinion and judgment to that of inferences derived from testable hypotheses. We have designed the research reported here to eliminate these counterarguments and place bias research on a firmer scientific footing.

Problems with "Bias" Research

Two classes of problems presently confound bias research. The first concerns the inherent subjectivity of content analysis. Coding decisions confront the researcher with seemingly arbitrary choices, which subsequently expose the results to criticism from those who find them disagreeable. The second problem concerns selection bias. By examining only those news stories that are actually reported, one cannot determine whether any observed distribution of favorable and unfavorable presidential news accurately portrays real-world conditions, or as the "attack journalism" literature charges, reflects the news industry's appetite for negative stories.

Subjectivity of Measurement

Many news items clearly constitute favorable or unfavorable news for the president and consequently pose no coding problems. Rising employment and declining inflation attract favorable presidential assessments from the public. Many other stories, however, are more difficult to score, and their presence in the data undermines the validity and reliability of the findings.

These difficult-to-code stories are, in fact, numerous. Evening news broadcasts commonly report the president taking a position on some controversial issue or disagreeing with other national politicians. Consider the coding difficulty posed by a news report that despite vocal congressional opposition, the president has decided to stick with his embattled nominee for surgeon general. Does the president's action reflect favorably on his performance? Among the audience, the president's fans and those who are sympathetic with his nominee may well view the president's persistence as standing firm for what he and they believe in. Others, however, might view it less charitably as indicating the president's ineffectiveness or intransigence. "Good" news for the former perspective

becomes “bad” news for the latter. If an audience might differently evaluate a particular news item, so too might those who code these stories.²

Even if the reliability problems were overcome with sophisticated coding procedures and extensive training of those who would apply them, the above example reminds us of another problem—construct validity. What constitutes good and bad news, and does the content analysis measure what it purports to measure? In the absence of some independent test of validity (Campbell and Stanley 1971), the researcher is left with the task of defending one set of arbitrary coding rules against alternatives that yield different distributions of good and bad presidential news, and hence, different conclusions about bias.

A third and less frequently noted problem of subjectivity arises from the aggregation of disparate news items. Whether measured by their influence on public opinion, the policy significance of the issue, or simply the quality or seriousness of the report’s content, some news stories are more important than others. Yet in tallying favorable and unfavorable news stories, content analyses typically count them all to be the same. If less important stories were loaded with greater shares of unfavorable news, it would skew the overall distribution of news. President Carter’s press secretary, Jody Powell, suggested this possibility when he complained, “Reporters are always coming up with these little gnats that have to be swatted” (Hallin 1992, 9). One can imagine a variety of thorny coding decisions entailed in subjectively weighting stories. Content analyses of news bias understandably shy away from this exercise. Nonetheless, in failing to weight stories, this research implicitly assumes all weigh equally in importance as news to the audience or on some other dimension.

The aggregation of dissimilar kinds of stories may explain the extraordinary difference between President Bush’s soaring approval ratings in the aftermath of the Gulf War and his barely favorable news coverage. Only 26% of ABC’s third-party statements (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1991) supported the administration’s war policy; many came from foreign nationals. At 21% favorable, Iraq’s policies won only slightly fewer endorsements among outside sources. No one seriously doubts that the resounding victory over Iraq gave Bush a surfeit of favorable news coverage. Yet, coding procedures that failed to discount pro-Iraq statements from noncredible, foreign sources give the appearance that the Gulf “news” war was nip and tuck. These problems of subjectivity—

² Even the most carefully designed and executed content analysis has difficulty in achieving satisfactory levels of intercoder reliability. An innovative attempt to avoid the problems of intercoder reliability can be found in the computer-aided content analysis methods used in the work of David Fan. Fan used a computer to filter and code downloaded verbatim transcripts of randomly selected stories from the AP wire. After initially using rules to exclude certain types of stories that fell outside the scope of the study (e.g., those originating in other countries), computer text analysis was used to apply a set of relational rules and keywords to code the stories. A randomly selected subset of the coding was then compared to independent human coding. See Tims, Fan, and Freeman (1989).

reliability, validity and weighting—point to the same moral: even the most ingenious content analysis has difficulty warding off methodological critiques that threaten to impugn its results.

False Inference from Bad News to News Bias

In the opening passage of this article, President Clinton voices the common White House complaint that those who select news prefer to accent the negative. If, indeed, news gatherers systematically draw an unrepresentative sample from the population of potential presidential stories, this practice alone might suffice to skew presidential coverage. If so, research based exclusively on content analysis of reported news commits the fallacy of drawing inferences from data that has been selected on the dependent variable. The issue of selection bias presents this research with a serious conundrum. How can it assess the representativeness of the sample when the population is comprised mostly of stories that were never reported and thereby elude observation? To establish bias one must also somehow measure these nonevents.³

In the research reported here, we shall take a different tack to minimize these methodological and evidentiary problems. Unlike most research in this field, which compiles a substantively rich body of news data and then grapples with these problems as they are encountered, we shall reverse the strategy by limiting the analysis to a subset of presidential news that minimizes subjective coding and for which we can observe the population of potential news stories as well as those actually reported. In effect, this research strategy accepts the tradeoff of diminished generalizability of our findings and conclusions in return for strengthened confidence in our inferences.

We have identified an important subset of presidential news that satisfies these exacting requirements. These are stories reporting the public's assessment of the president's job performance. Containing quantitative information about the current state of public opinion, they are particularly well suited for formulating defensible definitions of good and bad presidential news.

Decreases in the president's approval rating constitute bad news, and increases, good news. Beyond the direction of shifting public opinion, the percent approving identifies the degree of change. By limiting the analysis to news items based on standardized polling instruments, weighting becomes irrelevant. Finally, with approval stories, we can easily identify and measure the population of potential news from which those reported represent a sample. With each network's in-house public opinion surveys publicly archived, we can identify the full population of approval ratings—that is, potential news stories—and compare those selected for broadcast with those that were not.

³ Successful efforts to assess the distribution of the population include those of Harrington (1993); Bartels (1996); Behr and Iyengar (1985); and Bosso (1989).

Presidential Approval Ratings as News

Newsmaking involves two separate kinds of activities: news gathering and reporting. Each represents a potential source of bias. They are separate tasks involving different kinds of considerations as to what levels and changes in presidential support constitute news. Polling and reporting decisions may influence one another or they might be made wholly independently.⁴ In either case, the selection of a president's performance rating as news should be viewed as the joint outcome of discrete polling and reporting choices.

Obviously bias may be introduced in a news editor's decision whether or not to report the president's current approval rating. Perhaps less apparent, however, is how an antiadministration bias might influence decisions to commission a new survey and, thus in the differential supply of timely information, skew reported news. An approval rating represents an unusual news item in that while the public continuously updates its assessment of the president's performance, these evaluations enter the population of available presidential news only when a news organization elects to record them with a survey. Consequently, the presence of national opinion as news reflects discretionary choices of those who gather news.

National surveys are costly. Network news organizations can, therefore, be expected to ration their polling activities according to some expected payoff. Presumably, the most important payoff consists of newsworthy results. If those who commission network polls suspect that the president's job performance rating is unchanged since the last survey, they will have little incentive to run a new poll. As one network executive who commissions polls reported to us, "If a poll showed no change (in presidential approval), I would recommend that it not be reported." CBS's director of surveys, Kathleen A. Frankovic has observed the special attraction unfavorable presidential ratings hold for network news: "When [presidential] approval ratings go down, it's considered more newsworthy than when they go up" (1994, 9).⁵ If those making polling decisions agree that bad news makes better news than good news, or merely ascribe such views to those who select and report the news, then they might more diligently monitor public

⁴An important constraint on network polling decisions lies in the need to coordinate the schedule and content of these polls with a network's polling partner. Each network poll has a contractual agreement with a nationally oriented newspaper, which at times brings different interests into polling decisions (Moore 1992, 286–99). Only CBS sometimes breaks away from its partner, the *New York Times*, and runs its own survey. In discussions with senior polling executives from all three networks, we confirmed that polling decisions generally involve different members of the news agency from those associated with creating the nightly news program.

⁵Frankovic (1994) cites two instances where this bias appears to have prevailed in presidential coverage. The first involved the networks' ongoing coverage of the Iran-contra scandal. The second, which falls within the time frame of the present study, concerned President Clinton's health care initiative. "There seems to have been more coverage of the slippage in support for President Clinton's health care plan . . . than there was of the original post-speech levels of support."

opinion when they suspect that the president's public standing is deteriorating. These separate paths by which bias may enter presidential news comprise the two hypotheses we test below.⁶

Biased Polling Hypothesis: Other things equal, a network is more likely to administer a job performance survey if it has information that the president's performance rating is declining.

Biased Reporting Hypothesis: Other things equal, a network is more likely to report approval ratings that represent losses in public support since the last report.

For both of these hypotheses, negative changes in presidential approval disproportionately trigger news gathering and reporting. The asymmetric relationship they posit spawns two counterhypotheses. The null hypothesis holds simply that no relationship exists between the president's approval ratings and the likelihood that they will be reported. This would occur were the networks to schedule polls according to some fixed calendar and routinely report the results. Also, there is what we shall call the "change" hypothesis. It rejects a negativity bias and holds that only the magnitude of change in approval ratings influences news gathering and reporting decisions. The predictions that follow from these competing hypotheses are diagrammed in Figure 2.

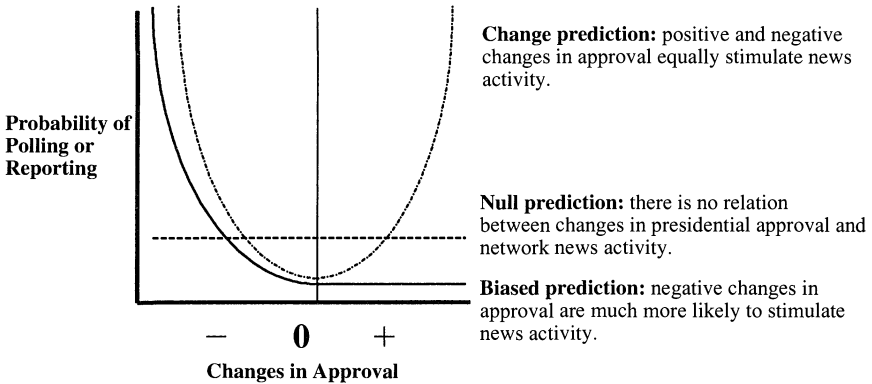
The bias hypotheses predict polling and reporting decisions will respond more to declining than rising presidential approval. In the figure, we have portrayed the likelihood of a polling or reporting decision as dropping to zero when the approval rating is unchanged and staying there as the president becomes more popular. The null hypothesis projects a straight line across the range of popular support at some mean level of polling activity. With absolute levels of popular support driving news activities, the change hypothesis predicts a symmetric, binomial relationship. Throughout our analysis we shall test these competing hypotheses by comparing the shapes of the estimated relationships against these functional forms.⁷

⁶Note that bias at either one of these stages could conceivably skew coverage independent of the actions of other actors. In other words, if reporters were to uniformly present polls that had been commissioned in a negatively biased manner, those reports would then be disproportionately negative. Similarly, even if the network's polling operation were completely evenhanded in its polling practices, biased reporting could conceivably prevent positive polls from ever being reported to viewers. It is important to note that different actors at each stage in the news-gathering process might have discrete effects on the final outcome, even if they do not coordinate their efforts toward.

⁷In addition, this design allows us to test a partisan bias hypothesis by interacting our results with an administration dummy. In other words, the partisan bias hypothesis is simply a special case of the negative bias case in which the negative bias is concentrated against one or another party. Tests that added this partisan information to our logits were not significant.

FIGURE 2

Alternative Hypothesized Relationships between Changes in Approval and Network News Decisions



Methodology

We shall test the bias hypotheses and their alternatives on the three broadcast networks' evening news coverage for the six-year period dating from early January 1990 through the end of 1995. This gives us relatively comparable coverage of Republican and Democratic administrations. By including all three networks in the analysis, we can distinguish the extent to which our results reflect a particular network's practices or are generalizable to the industry.⁸ Since a network news organization may take a survey into the field or report its most recent in-house findings at any time, we shall represent these decisions as daily, binary events for which standard logit estimation procedures are appropriate.⁹ Our dependent polling variable will assume a value of 1 on days when a new poll goes into the field and zero at all other times. Similarly, the reporting variable will be scored 1 on days when the evening news program cited a specific percentage of the public endorsing the president's overall job performance.¹⁰ The appendix

⁸Unlike the general literature on network news, we remain agnostic about the networks' news practices.

⁹One network polling executive confirmed that their staff meets daily to assess and schedule polls.

¹⁰We used only the assessment of overall job performance. For example, we would include the standard CBS/NYT polls that asked "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [Bill Clinton] is handling his job as president?" but exclude "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [Bill Clinton] is handling the situation in Bosnia?" NBC/WSJ's standardized question wording was "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the job [Bill Clinton] is doing as president?" ABC/WP asked two question variants: The first question asks "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [Bill Clinton] is handling his job as president?", while the second is identical, except that it adds "(If approve or disapprove, ask:) Is that approve/disapprove strongly or approve/disapprove somewhat?"

offers a full description of the data sources and procedures used to create these and the independent variables.

As shown in the following frequencies, we are predicting the occurrence of a somewhat rare news event. Given the technology's expense, however, we are impressed that networks administered polls as frequently as they did during the 72-month period of this study. CBS averaged a new survey every three weeks, while NBC and ABC came in just under one a month. Moreover, network reporting of survey results varied greatly as well. From the figures below, we see that most approval ratings went unreported. Clearly, those who select and report the news enjoy ample discretion—and hence, opportunity for bias—in reporting presidential approval.¹¹

	CBS	NBC	ABC
Polls taken	106	64	71
Polls broadcast	32	43	20

For both polling and reporting decisions, the key independent variable is the president's changing levels of public support. In the latter instance, the news reporter examines the latest in-house result and decides whether it is sufficiently compelling to include in the evening's news program. But with respect to the polling choice, one might reasonably ask how changing levels of public support might shape polling decisions when the poll under consideration presumably contains the relevant information for its selection? Presumably network news executives assiduously monitor their competitors' news coverage, and consequently are promptly alerted to shifting public opinion. The wealth of public opinion data on presidential performance may satisfy the scheduling decisions for news gatherers, but it poses a problem for us in trying to identify which surveys cue a network's polling decisions. After testing various survey organizations' approval series, alone and in combination, we concluded that none performed better than the frequently updated approval ratings supplied by the Gallup Poll. Since introducing the concept of the president's job performance as a survey question in the 1930s, Gallup has run far more surveys on this question than any other firm. During the six years covered in this study, it released 184 news reports on the president's job performance rating. Moreover, the networks have copied Gallup's approve-disapprove question format, which makes its results especially attractive to those whose decisions rest in part on anticipating results of a new survey.

To test whether changes in approval trigger network polling, we have taken the difference between the network's most recent in-house figure and the current Gallup rating. This variable, *Rating*, assumes a score of +20, for example, when, according to the latest Gallup figures, the president's public support has increased

¹¹ On 13 additional occasions, an evening news broadcast provided approval ratings from a rival network or some other media source. We have incorporated this information in testing for biased reporting according to a procedure described in the appendix.

20 percentage points since the last in-house survey. On those occasions when the network's approval survey provides more recent information, we assume that news gatherers ignore the older Gallup figures and we set **Rating** to zero.

Turning to the decision to report a poll, a couple of alternative specifications are available for estimating the effects of changes in approval. In deciding whether or not to report a given approval figure, the news executive may weigh the president's current rating against either the previous in-house rating or the network's previously *reported* rating. Generally, the values for these specifications will be the same. When they differ, however, the latter benchmark proved in a preliminary analysis to be a stronger predictor of reporting decisions, and so will be used here. Accordingly, we have defined **Approval** to represent the difference between the most recent in-house approval rating and the one last broadcast on the network's evening news program.

Other considerations, such as competing news stories, may also influence polling and reporting decisions and therefore need to be taken into account in testing the alternative hypotheses. Earlier we suggested that the value of a news item decays sharply over time. To represent the timeliness of the current in-house rating, we have created a variable, **Reporting Sequence**, that indicates the number of days since the network's most recent result became available. Once the approval rating is broadcast, Reporting Sequence is reset to zero until a new poll is taken.¹²

While other news may crowd approval reports off the program, some kinds of stories might enhance the news value of the president's performance rating and increase its likelihood of being aired. In serving as a "news peg" (Frankovic 1994, 7), presidential approval frequently finds a place in presidential coverage on substantive issues. International crises and national elections are two of these topics for which the president's public support offers especially relevant information to the substantive news item. Presumably the surge in approval that commonly accompanies international crises gives the president the latitude to deal with foreign adversaries from a position of strength (Kernell 1978; Mueller 1973). The implication of this "rally around the flag" phenomenon has not been lost on network newsmakers. Also, in both midterm and presidential elections, the president's performance appears to be a major consideration voters take into the voting booth (Campbell 1993; Kernell 1977; Tufte 1975).

The tendency to emphasize approval ratings during crises can be seen in the frequency of polling and reporting displayed in Figures A1–A3 in the appendix.

¹² Since we assume that polls take a few days to return results from the field, the reporting sequence actually takes its maximum value of 1 five days after a poll is commissioned by a network. The value of reporting sequence decreases incrementally the newer or older than five days a poll gets. We achieve this scoring by starting at a value of 5 on the day the poll goes into the field. We then decrease the previous day's value by 1 each day after that until reaching a value of 1 on the fifth day, and then increase by 1 each day after that. Next, these scores are inverted. Finally, we replace the incremental scoring with a zero value when the poll has been reported by that network.

About the same time President Bush sent the military into the field with Desert Shield in August 1990 and again with Desert Storm in January 1991, the networks took to the field as well, armed with presidential job performance surveys. To measure the independent effects of international crises and elections, we have created dummy variables; *Rally* and *Elections* assume a value of 1 during international crisis and national election campaigns, respectively. The appendix lists the crises and election periods covered by these variables.¹³

The Findings

Below we test the bias hypotheses on polling and reporting decisions in two ways. First, in a more descriptive vein, we examine whether a given change in approval produced a polling or reporting decision during the subsequent days and weeks when that rating was still the most current. In this specification, the observations are the ratings, which span varying time periods that end when the network takes an action or when new polling information updates the approval variable (i.e., *Rating* or *Approval*).¹⁴ This approach will allow us to easily identify those changes in presidential approval that eventually resulted in one of our hypothesized network news responses.

In order to test our competing hypotheses, however, we need to approach the data differently. The varying time intervals allowed in the above specification open the findings to the possibility that some approval ratings are more closely associated with news activity solely because they lasted longer. Our second approach to these relationships solves this problem by changing the observation from the approval rating to the daily decision to poll (or report). This expands the number of observations from an average of 250 across the networks to 2,191 daily, binary decisions for each network to poll or report the public's evaluation of the president. Moreover, this approach makes it far easier to specify the decaying value of news over time and to control for *Rally* events and *Elections*. Finally, in estimating these decisions as daily events, we are accurately

¹³ We have scored the midterm elections as 1 from September 1 until the election. We have scored presidential elections as 1 from January 29 (the beginning of the primary season) until the election. We also tested for the effects of state of the union addresses on network polling, but found no relationship.

¹⁴ If the network acts, the time period is reset, and for our analysis scored 1; if, however, the period ends with the introduction of new polling results, it is scored zero. By plotting these values against their corresponding level of *Rating* or *Approval*, we can generate a probability curve that helps indicate whether a network has keyed equally on positive or negative changes in approval as it polls and reports on the president's performance. Suppose on day t Gallup releases a new approval figure from which we then calculate a new *Rating* value and on $t + 20$ issued a second rating. We determine whether during period t through $t + 19$ the network commissioned a survey. The figures represent, then, the percentage of "time periods" when a particular value of *Rating* contained a network rating. There were 289, 247, and 254 changes in the value of *Rating* for CBS, NBC, and ABC, respectively, over the 2,191 days. We only plotted the curves for the ranges for which we had observations for each network.

representing the routine of the daily “polling meeting” that, we learned from our interviews, two networks follow. Accordingly, we have scored each day that network commissioned a new survey (or reports the president’s approval) as 1 and the rest as zero. This gives us binary dependent variables for which multivariate logit procedures are appropriate.

To Poll or Not to Poll

In Figure 3 we have plotted the frequency (stated as a percentage) with which a given value of **Rating** ended with the network commissioning a new poll.¹⁵ That the percentages in Figure 3 for CBS are uniformly greater signifies its higher overall level of polling activity. CBS also appears to have been much more responsive to changes in the president’s approval in deciding when to run new surveys. When a new Gallup Poll pushed **Rating** beyond 15 percentage points, either positively or negatively, CBS nearly always ran a survey. With the curve’s lowest point near zero change in approval and the slopes essentially symmetrical, we may tentatively conclude that change rather than an anti-administration bias governed CBS’s polling strategy.

NBC’s polling decisions respond to changes in approval as well, but here one also finds signs of bias. Across the range of Rating values, this network more frequently commissioned surveys when the president’s support was declining. Moreover, the curve bottoms out at +5% change in approval, indicating that minor favorable swings in approval were the least likely to elicit a new survey. ABC’s polling decisions plot a function that resembles the prediction of the null hypothesis in Figure 2. The slant of the slope points to the presence of a weak bias. So far, then, each of the several hypotheses finds support from one of the networks’ polling practices.

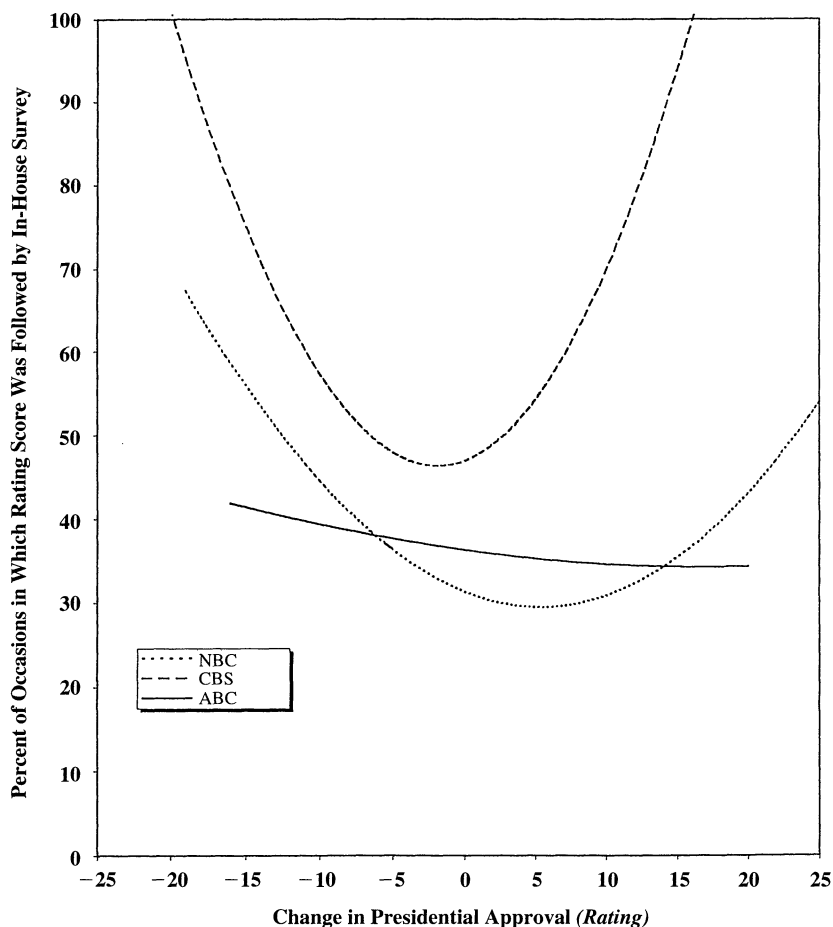
We now turn to an estimation of polling decisions as daily events. To allow an antiadministration bias to come to the fore, we have split **Rating** into two variables—the original, full range of approval change and **Rating Down** which assumes **Rating**’s negative values and otherwise zero. (With this scoring, one must subtract the coefficient for **Rating Down** from **Rating** to arrive at a coefficient that can be compared to the positive change coefficient now contained in the **Rating** variable.) As controls we have added **Rally** and **Elections**. Both display the correct sign in Table 1, but fail to satisfy minimal levels of significance.

All of the Rating-based variables yield relationships indicating that both positive and negative changes in the president’s approval trigger polling activity. We also find variety across the networks in how each responds to **Rating**. NBC displays a marginally greater propensity to poll as the president’s support levels decline. For CBS, however, the relationship is reversed (.10 compared to

¹⁵Because our dependent variable is binary, the resulting observations of network action or inaction would be difficult to distinguish visually. So, we have used these values to generate the functional form presented in the figure.

FIGURE 3

The Relationship between Changes in Presidential Approval and the Likelihood of a New Network Poll



-.053—that is, $.1 - .153$). And ABC with its substantially weaker coefficients appears equally indifferent to favorable or unfavorable political conditions.

The consistently significant Rating variables in these equations demonstrate that the networks pay attention to the president's approval ratings as they decide to gather new readings of public opinion. But while these relationships hint of bias, the large network differences preclude a strong inference one way or the other. Perhaps the reason for the poor showing of the biased polling hypothesis can be found in various extraneous considerations specific to each network that

TABLE 1

Logit Results Estimating the Likelihood That a Network Will Conduct a
Poll on Presidential Approval on Any Given Day

Variable	Coefficient (SE)
<i>NBC (64 polls taken)</i>	
Constant	-3.976 (.197)
Rating	0.068 (.043)
Rating Down	-0.160 (.063)
Rally	1.141 (.405)
Elections	0.246 (.314)
<i>CBS (106 polls taken)</i>	
Constant	-3.427 (.161)
Rating	0.100 (.035)
Rating Down	-0.153 (.064)
Rally	0.668 (.360)
Elections	0.737 (.227)
<i>ABC (71 polls taken)</i>	
Constant	-3.676 (.202)
Rating	0.026 (.044)
Rating Down	-0.060 (.062)
Rally	0.590 (.445)
Elections	0.548 (.290)

Note: The **Rating** variable measures the difference between the network's last in-house poll of presidential approval and the most recent Gallup poll result. The **Rating Down** variable is simply the negative values of **Rating**, with positive values replaced with 0s. The **Rally** dummy variable controls for foreign policy rally events. The **Elections** dummy variable controls for congressional and presidential election periods. All networks have 2,189 observations.

influence polling decisions. According to one network executive, the news department sometimes casually adds a single job performance question to surveys designed to measure some other aspect of public opinion.¹⁶ Another cited the need to coordinate survey schedules with the desires of the newspaper partner as interfering with the network's ability to commission surveys whenever it wants.¹⁷ We suspect that these mitigating considerations limit the influence of bias or any other journalistic preference in turning on and off the flow of opinion data. Since these considerations are absent in choosing the news, the weak signs of bias uncovered here could be easily reconciled with stronger evidence of bias in the network's reporting decisions.

¹⁶ The executive added, "The beauty of the president's job performance question is that it offers us a barometer of the nation's mood. We are always wanting to update the trend."

¹⁷ This is the reason one executive enlisted to predict that he "would be surprised if we found approval polling to be correlated with politics."

To Report or Not to Report

As we observed earlier, the fairly low share of network polls that are actually aired means the decision to report them appears highly discretionary. The frequency with which the networks poll the public gives them a steady stream of fresh information.¹⁸ Moreover, presidential stories abound and with them, opportunities to inject the latest ratings figures.

As before, we begin by examining the overall relationship between news reports and changes in the president's job performance rating. In this instance approval change is measured by *Approval*—the difference between the current in-house rating and the last one reported by the network. The relationships plotted in Figure 4 point more strongly to bias than anything we have examined thus far. Note that the low point of the curves for ABC, and to a lesser extent CBS, hover over positive values of approval change. These networks were least likely to report the president's approval rating when it improved modestly since the last report. Both NBC and ABC also display a pronounced negative slope. As the president's support worsens, the prospect of it being reported increases sharply.¹⁹

Turning to the logit analysis, we have again distinguished positive and negative changes in our chief theoretical variable, *Approval*, to detect any asymmetry in the relationship. Following the same procedure used for creating *Rating Down*, we generated *Approval Down* to assume this variable's negative values. In a preliminary examination of the relationships, we discovered that the probability of reporting the president's approval increases significantly at CBS and NBC whenever the values of *Approval* swing in a negative direction regardless of the magnitude of the swing picked up by the *Approval* variables. Accordingly in the second column of Table 2, we have added a dummy variable, *Negative Intercept Shift*, to capture the additional impact of declining approval on reporting decisions.

In addition to reintroducing *Elections* and *Rally*, we have created a new control variable to represent the decaying news value of ratings over time. *Reporting Sequence* operationalizes the journalistic adage "Old news is no news," by setting the variable's highest value on the first day a new poll figure was available for a news report and diminishing it every day thereafter. Once a rating is reported, it presumably becomes worthless for future reports and we have reset it to zero.

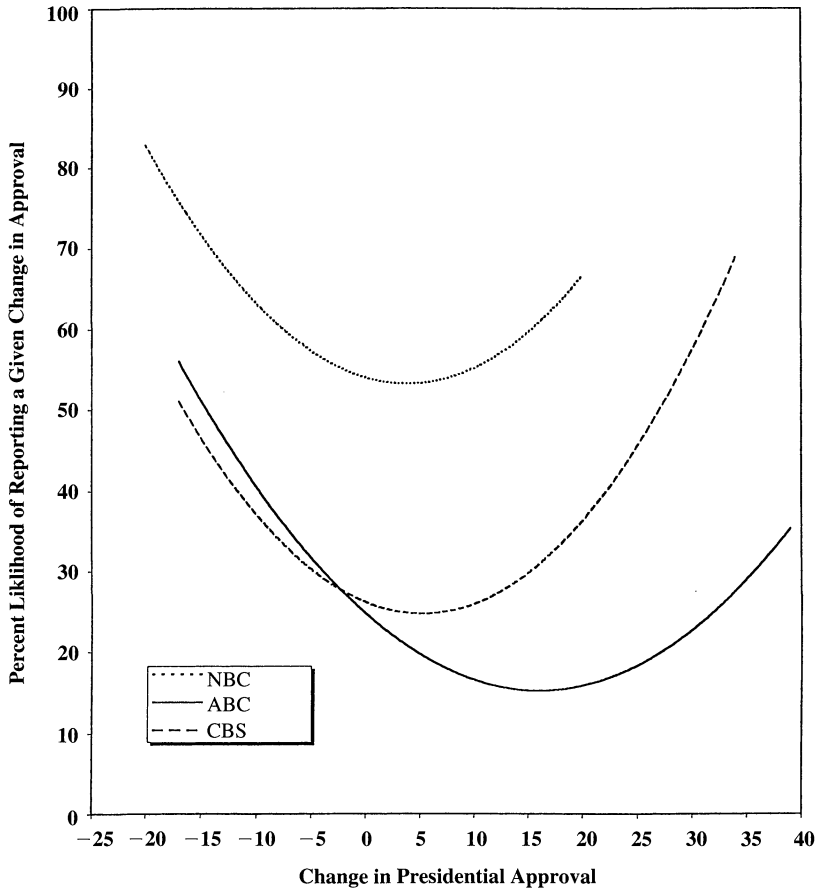
Again, the *Rally* variable proved unrelated to these news choices, but *Elections* triggered approval reports for all three networks. The new control variable,

¹⁸ On rare occasions when they are caught short without satisfactory in-house survey figures, they can turn to the poll reports of other news organizations. CBS and ABC cited outside polls less than once a year, while NBC used them slightly more in the period we study.

¹⁹ Note that the higher plateau of reporting reflects simply that NBC, which took the fewest number of approval polls, reported a greater share of them on the evening news.

FIGURE 4

Relationship between Changes in Presidential Approval and the Likelihood of a Network Poll Being Reported



Reporting Sequence, shows up in every equation as highly significant. Timeliness indeed proves to be a virtue. However, these variables are less able to control for the effects of outside events at the reporting stage of the decision-making process, since they cannot account for the influence of nonpresidential stories “crowding out” poll stories that might otherwise have aired.

This brings us to the critical test of the biased reporting hypothesis. In Table 2 all three of the ratings-based variables produce significant coefficients for NBC and CBS. In each case, the strength of the intercept shift clearly suggests bias, but its impact is largely offset by the marginally stronger relationships for the

TABLE 2

Logit Results Estimating the Likelihood That a Network Will Air a Poll on Presidential Approval on Any Given Day

Variable	Without Intercept Term Coefficient (Std. Error)	With Intercept Term Coefficient (SE)
<i>NBC</i>		
Constant	-5.315 (.329)	-5.706 (.412)
Approval	0.146 (.044)	0.183 (.048)
Approval Down	-0.259 (.068)	-0.225 (.074)
Reporting Sequence	2.852 (.452)	2.904 (.458)
Elections	0.969 (.364)	1.093 (.373)
Rally	0.590 (.554)	0.569 (.560)
Negative Intercept Shift	—	1.095 (.534)
<i>CBS</i>		
Constant	-6.031 (.417)	-6.866 (.584)
Approval	0.164 (.054)	0.257 (.065)
Approval Down	-0.296 (.083)	-0.300 (.087)
Reporting Sequence	2.723 (.510)	2.558 (.525)
Elections	0.995 (.426)	1.160 (.437)
Rally	0.673 (.587)	0.675 (.593)
Negative Intercept Shift	—	1.828 (.646)
<i>ABC</i>		
Constant	-6.630 (.540)	-6.352 (.579)
Approval	0.028 (.029)	0.016 (.032)
Approval Down	-0.132 (.068)	-0.187 (.087)
Reporting Sequence	3.693 (.588)	3.753 (.591)
Elections	1.413 (.506)	1.321 (.513)
Rally	-0.476 (1.113)	-0.546 (1.114)
Negative Intercept Shift	—	-0.962 (.904)

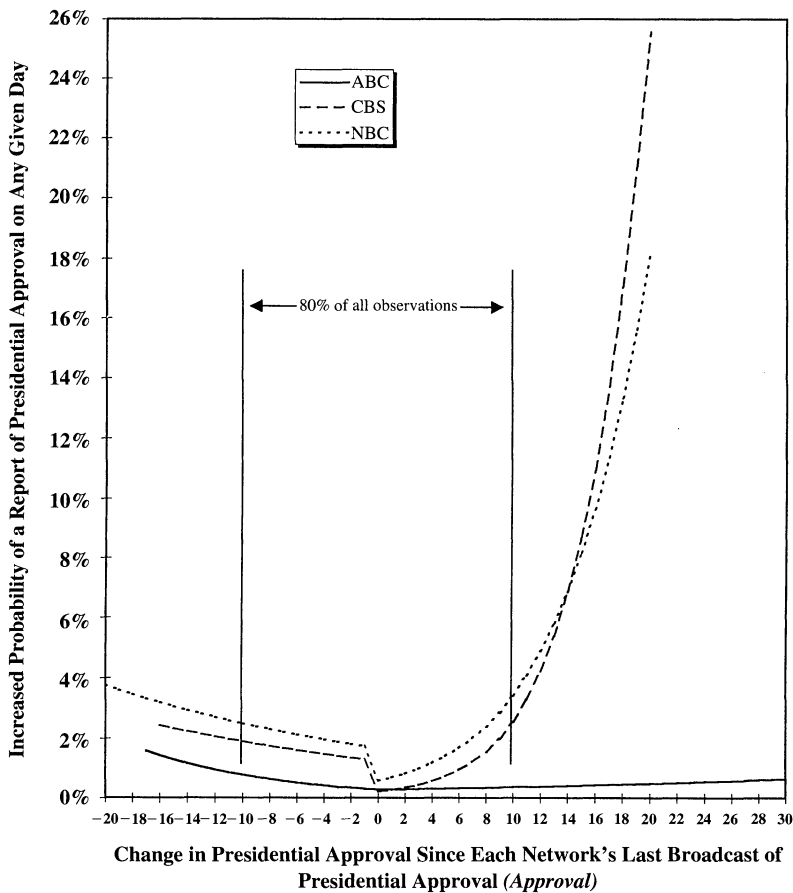
Note: The *Approval* variables measure the difference between the network's last reported poll of presidential approval and the most recent network poll result. The *Approval Down* variable is simply the negative values of *Approval*, with positive values replaced with 0s. The *Reporting Sequence* variable takes a value of 0 when the network has aired its most recent poll result, and incrementally approaches 0 as the most recent poll result ages. The *Elections* dummy variable controls for congressional and presidential election periods. The *Rally* dummy variable controls for foreign policy rally events. Finally, the *Negative Intercept Shift* dummy variable takes a value of 1 if *Approval* is negative, and 0 otherwise.

positive over the negative slopes.²⁰ By comparison ABC's reporting decisions conform more closely to the simpler bias predictions in Figure 2. Here, the intercept shift dummy is insignificant, and the negative change slope is substantially larger than that for the positive slope.

²⁰ Recall that given the way these variables are scored, the negative slope requires subtracting *Approval Down* from *Approval*. This yields a slope for declining approval of .113 for CBS and .132 for NBC, both of which are slightly smaller than the coefficient for improving support.

In Figure 5 we combine the effects of the several ratings-based variables to plot the overall relationship between the network’s reporting decision and changes in the president’s job performance ratings. We have converted the non-linear logarithms in Table 2 to probabilities and plotted the news value of the changes in approval.²¹ The results for ABC are the most straightforward. As the

FIGURE 5
Probability That a Network Will Broadcast a Poll Result



Note: all variables except *Approval*, *Approval Down*, and *Negative Intercept Shift* have been held at their mean values.

²¹ Following standard practice, all other variables have been fixed at their mean values. Bear in mind that the low probabilities reflect that the unit of analysis is the daily decision, which sum to overall probabilities akin to those displayed in Figure 4.

president's popularity declines, it becomes more newsworthy; as it rises, it does not. On the other hand, these are not especially strong relationships. ABC displays relatively little interest in reporting the president's approval level one way or another.

Within the highly populated, narrow range of approval change of nine percentage points, NBC and CBS exhibit significantly greater probability of reporting the president's approval rating when it is on the wane. But on those infrequent occasions when the president's popularity soars, these networks' stronger positive slopes in Table 2 kick in and dramatically increase the probability of news reports. Bear in mind, in examining these trends, however, that the great majority of changes in approval and news reports occur within the limited range where the negative bias prevails.

Conclusion

The table below summarizes our findings. The relationships for polling decisions offer weaker evidence of bias than do those for reporting decisions. While we find some evidence of bias in NBC's polling decisions, ABC's polling schedule is only weakly related to the president's standing and CBS responds with equal alacrity in polling both favorable or unfavorable changes in the president's support. Surprisingly, we have found that each network has developed its own distinctive approach to presidential approval polling. We suspect that these differences reflect the parent organization's support for polling within its news division. CBS runs far more polls than do the other network news organizations and therefore can more closely monitor changes in presidential approval. Moreover, our network informants described different constraints posed by their newspaper partners in scheduling polls. NBC and ABC commission surveys only in cooperation with their print partners. CBS News, on the other hand, frequently runs its own surveys.

Hypothesis	Newsmaking Activity	
	Polling	Reporting
Null	ABC	
Change	CBS	CBS and NBC (when changing approval approaches 8% or greater)
Bias	NBC	ABC; CBS, NBC (in narrow range of approval)

More consistent and persuasive evidence of an antipresidential bias can be found in reporting decisions. While NBC and CBS report change in both directions, downturns in presidential support garner more careful coverage, except during times when the president's support soars. ABC's reporting practices conform most closely to the predictions of the bias hypothesis in Figure 2. While declining performance does indeed find the networks receptive to so informing the nation, the relationships are neither so consistent nor strong as to sustain the charges of reckless bias that presidents are sometimes inclined to make and past research has occasionally endorsed.

News matters. Presidents have long accepted this fact of life. It accounts for their reported attentiveness to evening news programming—one recalls Lyndon Johnson's practice of simultaneously watching three televisions so as not to miss any network story—and also accounts for their complaints that the networks mistreat them. More recently, scholars have also come to appreciate that news matters. The pathbreaking work of Iyengar and Kinder (1987), for example, demonstrates how network news can prime viewers to evaluate the president's performance on some issues but not on others.

Recognition that "news matters" begets a question we have addressed in part: Do those who produce the news matter? If news objectively mirrors reality, then presidents and the rest of us can safely ignore the practices of network news and concentrate instead on the news itself.

The evidence of bias presented here, however, confirms an independent, mediating role for those who report the news. Beyond bias, our research has turned up another unexpected display of the news media's independent role in shaping the news. Contrary to the existing wisdom in the field, which views the three networks as interchangeable, we have discovered striking differences across networks in polling and reporting public opinion about the president's performance. In citing industry-wide professional norms and competitive pressures, research into the operation and content of a single network news department can give the impression that what is true for one network is true for all. Our findings indicate otherwise. How network newsmakers decide to fill each evening's 22-minute news hole remains highly discretionary and, consequently, is an even more complicated and compelling question for future research than the simple bias hypothesis suggests.

Appendix

Data Sources and Coding

The interviews with each network's polling executives were conducted in phone conversations on December 11 and 12, 1996. We wish to thank Kathleen Frankovic of CBS, Mary Klette of NBC, and Gary Langer of ABC for their valuable insights.

Dependent Variables

In conducting this study, we have attempted to explain two specific types of network news actions. Our first dependent variable measures whether the network chose to conduct a poll on presidential approval on a particular day. To establish daily values for this variable, we relied on the comprehensive listing of polls archived at the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. It can be accessed on-line as RPOLL in the MARKET library of the Nexis information system.

The second dependent variable measures whether the network chose to include a presidential approval poll citation in a particular evening news broadcast. To establish values for this variable, we relied on machine-readable archives of *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News* verbatim transcripts available in the ProQuest CD-ROM-based database. Since ProQuest did not archive ABC's *World News Tonight*, we relied on Nexis' ABCNEW archive for these data.

In searching the transcripts for references to approval ratings, we sought to eliminate coder subjectivity by including only those that cite specific poll results. This means that a story that included a reference to President Bush's "sagging popularity" without citing a particular approval figure was excluded. We also excluded citations that pertained only to some specific dimension of popularity (e.g., approval of the president's handling of the economy).

A word of caution is in order regarding the use of the popular Vanderbilt Television synopses in measuring the content of network news programming. After initially utilizing this source for our dependent variable, we found that coding based on these synopses was prone to errors. In particular, our coders were unable to use the broad story summaries archived by Vanderbilt to reliably distinguish between different types of stories. Poll results that appeared in verbatim transcripts were often missing or vaguely cited in the abstracts.

Figures A1–A3 plot the two dependent variables over time. Each network's most current presidential approval result is shown as a line, with each reported rating identified as a hollow square.

FIGURE A1

ABC Polls Taken and Broadcast

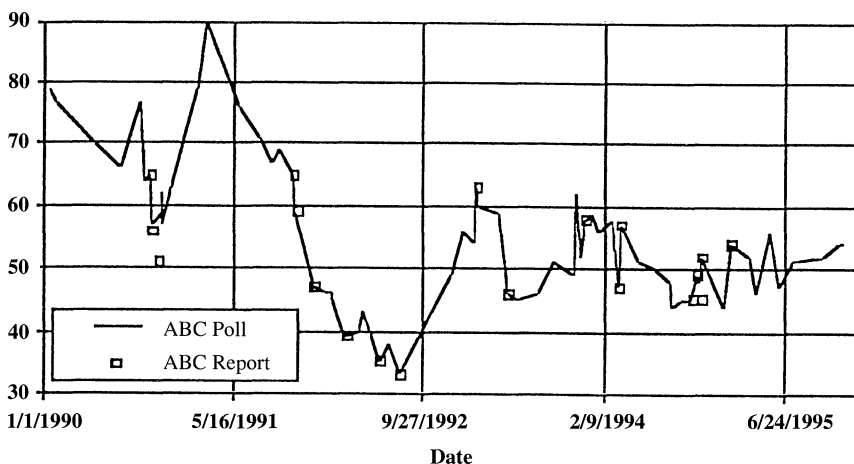


FIGURE A2
CBS Polls Taken and Broadcast

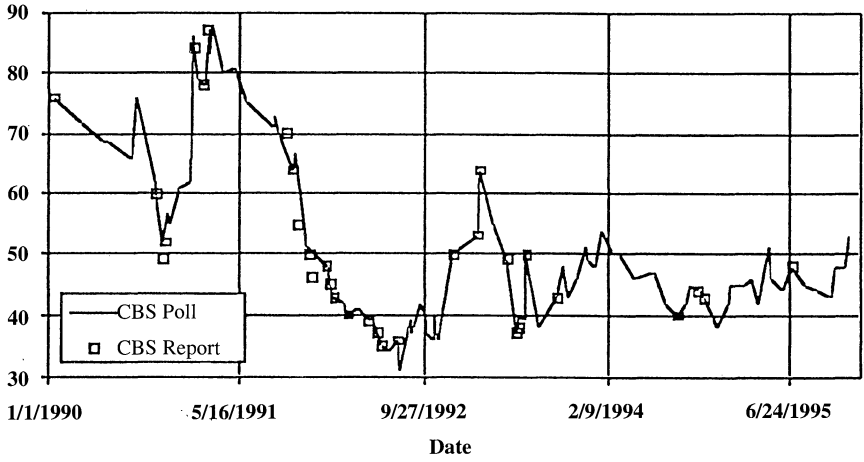
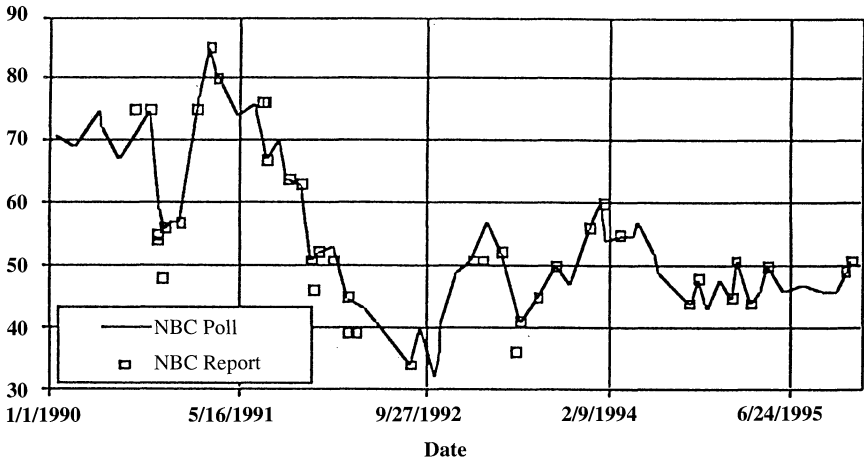


FIGURE A3
NBC Polls Taken and Broadcast



Independent Variables

The **Rating** variable represents the difference between the network's most recent poll result and Gallup's most recent approval rating. The Gallup data were acquired from the Roper Center. The polls were entered into a time-series database and then used to calculate daily values of **Rating** for each network. Similarly, the **Approval** variable represents the difference between a given network's last broadcasted poll result and its most recent poll result. The calculation of this variable relied on the same data series used to represent our dependent variables and **Rating**.

One complication in this coding that becomes apparent in Figures A1–A3 is the networks' occasional use of outside ratings. Altogether, we identified 13 instances when outside surveys were enlisted. These occasions apparently arose when the network news bureau wanted to employ the president's rating but had no timely in-house figures. While such polls clearly do not affect the values of our **Rating** variable, they do potentially influence **Approval**. If we excluded these observations, then we would be measuring our values of **Approval** (which is intended to measure the change in the president's approval since the network last commented on approval) against a false baseline. If we included them, we ran the risk of inferring that the network's own value of **Approval** had produced a broadcast, when in fact it had not. As a compromise, we decided to track down the source of the cited outside poll, and then treat it as if it were an internal network poll result (although we did not use it to change the values of our **Rating** variable), noting each of the affected data points. After estimating our equations, we then re-ran the equations with the affected observations excluded. The results did not significantly differ from our original estimates.

Our **Rally** variable is intended to control for the effects of coverage of foreign policy crises. We have scored the dummy variable as 1 on the day of the event and for the subsequent week, and zero otherwise. The rally events listed below were collected from the year-end review edition of *Facts on File*.

- Jan. 2, 1990: Manuel Noriega surrenders to U.S. forces
- Aug. 1, 1990: Iraqi invasion of Kuwait
- Jan. 15, 1991: Desert Storm begins
- Feb. 24, 1991: Ground war begins in Gulf War
- Aug. 18, 1991: Soviet coup attempt
- Dec. 8, 1992: Operation Restore Hope (Somalia intervention)
- June 6, 1993: Mohammed Aidid ambushes and kills Pakistani peacekeepers (leading to reprisals from U.S. and U.N. forces)
- June 28, 1993: Cruise missile strike in retaliation for Iraqi assassination attempt on former president Bush
- Oct. 3, 1993: 18 U.S. peacekeepers killed in Somalia
- Feb. 27, 1994: U.S. shoots down 2 Serb jets over Bosnia and bombs ground targets

- Sept. 18, 1994: Haiti intervention
- Oct. 7, 1994: U.S. sends troops to Kuwait in response to Iraqi troop movements
- May 25, 1995: NATO air strikes against Serb weapons depots
- June 2, 1995: Scott O'Grady's F-16 shot down over Bosnia

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