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Samuel Kernell; Gary C. Jacobson

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Congress and the Presidency as News in the Nineteenth Century

Samuel Kernell

University of California, San Diego

Gary C. Jacobson

University of California, San Diego

However successful some recent presidents have been in exploiting their newsworthiness to define the national agenda and promote their politics before Congress, the available evidence suggests that presidents have enjoyed an advantage in press coverage over Congress throughout the twentieth century. The research reported here extends the comparative study of news about these institutions back into the early nineteenth century. A content analysis of 3,335 news articles in the Cleveland press for ten selected years from 1820 to 1876 reveals that the president did not always enjoy such an advantage. Rather, news during this era tended to be bifurcated, with presidents receiving most of the election-related reporting and Congress most of the news on the daily affairs of government. Congress's predominance in this latter realm persisted even as the volume of news about national affairs increased sharply in the 1870s. We conclude with the speculation that changes in the pattern of news coverage early in this century reflected the particular character of modernization of Congress and the presidency.

The president's ascendant role in contemporary American politics is reflected in, and magnified by, his dominance of political news. The expansion of executive authority in this century naturally made the presidency more newsworthy, and, at the same time, the president's ability to attract attention from the news media has contributed to his primacy. News of electoral politics complements institutional coverage. Presidential campaigns are reported exhaustively, while House and Senate contests usually receive far less attention.

Technological developments have, in recent decades, reinforced the president's centrality. Television's emphasis on immediacy, brevity, and personality have made it a presidential medium par excellence. Congress,

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Savannah, Georgia, October 31, 1984. The authors wish to thank Del Powell for his diligence in coding the *Annals'* entries in machine-readable form and Anita Schiller who first put us on to this historical record. Among others, Fred Greenstein, Michael Robinson, Larry Rothenberg, and Gerald Wright provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

speaking with many contradictory voices, is ill-equipped to compete with the president in mobilizing national support through the media.¹ Presidents have shown little reluctance to exploit their advantage. Not surprisingly, the public relations activities of the White House have increasingly attracted the attention of pundits and scholars alike. References to the “chief executive” are giving way to the “Six O’Clock” (Smoller, 1986) or the “Prime Time” (Cronin, 1980) or simply, the “public” (Edwards, 1983) presidency.

Early, by and large troubled, commentary on the subject enlisting “I know it when I see it” evidence portrayed a drift toward an imperial presidency. The coincidence of a concerted “media strategy” early in President Nixon’s term and Watergate subsequently both fueled and appeared to validate these fears. More recently, after a series of unpopular White House occupants, presidential visibility has been diagnosed differently. By monopolizing the public’s attention of politics from Washington, presidents ultimately bear full responsibility for whatever conditions come to ail the country.² The same techniques that at one moment may allow the president to soar in the polls will, over the longer term, likely end in a crash. However much these arguments differ in their forecasts, they agree in identifying presidential dominance of national news as having upset the traditional balance of power in Washington.

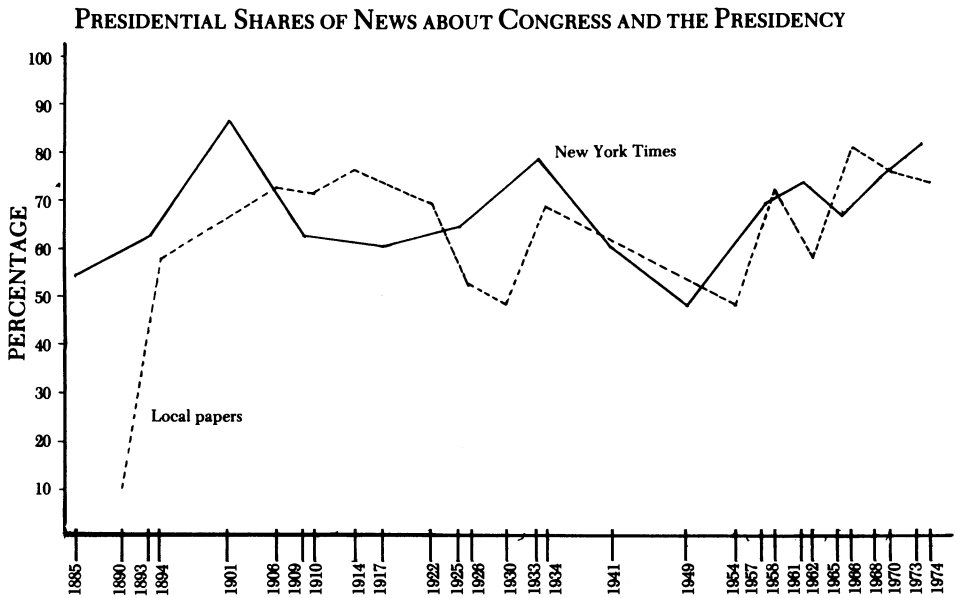
Both the growth of news coverage of the president and his competitive advantage over Congress in public relations predate television, however. That is evident from research that measures the relative volume of printed news about Congress and the presidency. The initial work in this line of inquiry, published in 1959 by Elmer E. Cornwell (1959, p. 283), analyzed the relative coverage given to Congress and the president by the *New York Times* and the *Providence Journal* for selected years from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1950s. Cornwell interpreted his data to read that “Presidential news, and by inference the public’s image of the Presidency and its relative governmental importance, has increased markedly and more or less steadily in this century.” And Alan P. Balutis (1977, pp. 248-49), extending Cornwell’s analysis through the mid-1970s for the *New York Times* and the *Buffalo Evening News*, concluded that “the expansion of Presidential news coverage noted by Cornwell . . . continues apace.”

¹ Studies that emphasize the advantage television confers to presidents include Grossman and Kumar (1981), Kaid and Foote (1985), and Kernell (1986a).

² An example of the former genre, which nonetheless raised some important issues, is Minow, Martin and Mitchell (1973). Theodore Lowi (1985) has forcefully elaborated the down-side risks of leadership founded on public relations.

What seems most striking in their data, however, is not the trend, but that presidents have usually attracted more coverage than Congress throughout this century. These two studies' findings are presented for comparable years in figure 1. The figures for the *New York Times* articles include only presidential inaugural years. While this selection may bias reporting somewhat in favor of the president, it offers a common benchmark for comparing change that would otherwise be obscured by dissimilar political settings. Again for comparison, institutional reporting for the other papers in figure 1 is limited to midterm election years. On this evidence, seldom during the twentieth century has Congress drawn more attention than the president. Television may guarantee presidents center stage, but its absence did not preclude it.

FIGURE 1



Sources: Cornwell, 1959; Balutis, 1977.

There is a hint in these data that things were different in the nineteenth century. In light of the current interest in the reciprocal connection between news coverage and institutional primacy in Washington, it is instructive to explore the relative newsworthiness of Congress and the presidency in an earlier era, one in which presidents were, it is generally thought, less central in affairs of state. Has the presidency—because it is occupied by a single individual—always been a more interesting and

hence newsworthy institution? Or did news attend the steady twentieth-century growth of presidential responsibility and authority and the emergence of a communications technology that appears to favor such an institution? If the former, we would be cautioned against reading too much into the media advantage enjoyed by modern presidents. If the latter, it would strengthen the frequently made argument that the president's visibility, and with it his advantage as the nation's agenda setter, distinguishes the modern office.

DATA AND METHOD

We shall address these historical questions by examining news reporting on Congress and the presidency by Cleveland's press for selected years from 1820 through 1876. The reason for selecting this city's papers for these particular dates has more to do with the availability of good data than with any claim of this city's national representativeness.³ During the middle half of the nineteenth century, Cleveland, in the heart of the Western Reserve, developed in a manner and pace not unlike that of other eastern and midwestern cities. From 1820 to the mid-1870s, it grew from a hamlet of 6,000 settlers concerned chiefly with getting their crops to market to a regional transportation and industrial center of about 100,000 citizens, many of whom had recently immigrated to America.

In the 1930s, the Ohio division of the Works Progress Administration embarked on an ambitious project to record Cleveland's past. Among various other archival activities was a program that hired unemployed school teachers, clerks, and newspaper editors to summarize and classify the daily entries of those newspapers which enjoyed the highest circulation during the years under study. The *Annals of Cleveland* included every item that appeared in each day's paper from the first page to the last. In addition to news stories, one finds in the *Annals* letters to the editor, advertisements, announcements, and even vital statistics. Each *Annals* entry includes a synopsis and classification of the item by type (such as advertisement), its location in the paper, and its length in column inches.

For unexplained reasons, the project was suspended after the 1876 volume was completed. Yet for the more than 50 years covered, the *Annals* provides unparalleled data with which to study nineteenth-century news. In order to obtain a variety of electoral settings, the 10 years presented in table 1 were selected for study. To evaluate the place of Congress and the presidency in nineteenth-century politics, all political

³ For more information on the *Annals of Cleveland* and its employment in studying the growing national focus of political reporting during those years, see Kernell (1986b).

entries at every level of government have been included in the analysis. The coding procedures and the specific operational definitions of categories of stories presented below are described in the appendix.

TABLE I
THE CONFIGURATION OF ELECTIONS AND DATA

YEAR	ELECTORAL SETTING			TYPE ^a	NUMBER OF ARTICLES	COLUMN INCHES
	PRESIDENTIAL	CONGRESSIONAL	STATE			
1820	Yes	Yes	Yes	P	43	320
1830	No	Yes	Yes	C	73	490
1835	No	No	No	N	134	871
1840	Yes	Yes	Yes	P	164	1123
1845	No	No	No	N	232	1688
1850	No	Yes	Yes	C	693	8252
1855	No	No	Yes	S	289	2854
1860	Yes	Yes	Yes	P	765	5861
1870	No	Yes	No	C	419 ^b	2860 ^b
1876	Yes	Yes	No	P	523 ^b	3718 ^b
					(N=3,335)	(N=28,037)

^a In subsequent tables the electoral setting will be summarized by reference to Type.

^b These numbers represent 1/2 of total entries for 1870 and 1/5 for 1876.

FINDINGS

In examining Cleveland's national political news by institution, one quickly discovers that Washington coverage rarely extended beyond Congress and the presidency. Occasionally, references to cabinet members, executive agencies, and federal courts appear in stories, but even in these instances the primary focus of most articles remains Congress or the president. This pattern persists throughout the series; as late as the 1870s, over 95% of the national articles having significant institutional content dealt with one of these two branches.

Comparing news stories in table 2, one does not find early signs of presidential dominance of the news displayed for the twentieth century series in figure 1. Instead, the distribution of coverage between the two branches vacillates greatly from one observation to the next. In the presidential election year of 1840, stories about the current incumbent and aspirants for the office dominated coverage of national politics throughout the year. In other years, the bias is reversed. In 1845 and 1850, for example, the president nearly dropped from sight with over 80% of the stories focusing on Congress.

TABLE 2
RELATIVE PROPORTION OF SPACE GIVEN TO CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENT*

	1820 (P)	1830 (C)	1835 (N)	1840 (P)	1845 (N)	1850 (C)	1855 (S)	1860 (P)	1870 (C)	1876 (P)
President	44%	39%	86%	96%	17%	13%	15%	74%	17%	68%
Congress	56	61	14	4	83	87	85	26	83	32
N (column inches)	(43)	(168)	(360)	(580)	(191)	(2617)	(385)	(2361)	(1183)	(2316)

*Percentaging based upon total column inches given to Congress and the president (including Cabinet).

That 1850 would be a "good" news year for Congress can readily be explained by the fact that before enacting the historic compromise of 1850, northerners and southerners in Congress rehearsed the Civil War before a rapt national audience. Ad hoc explanations are unnecessary, however, to account for the dramatic swings in press coverage throughout the era. Rather, on closer inspection, one finds that the distribution of news closely followed the calendar of presidential elections. With two exceptions, presidents received their greatest coverage during election years: 1840, 1860, and 1876. One exception is 1820, the only presidential election in our sample to predate mass political campaigning that would be introduced in Andrew Jackson's first bid for the White House four years later.

The other exception is 1835 when far more presidential news appeared in Cleveland's papers than would seem warranted by the electoral calendar. But appearances here are deceiving. During this era political parties, as well as nominating procedures, were in continuous flux, requiring presidential aspirants to posture and jockey feverishly to position themselves for the next year's race for the White House. A close inspection of the presidential stories shows the 1836 presidential election to have been a favorite subject of press speculation. The possible successors to Andrew Jackson in the Democratic party and the regional fissure of Whigs were favorite subjects of the local press. Nearly three-quarters of the space devoted to national politics that year concerned the next year's elections, and (as shown in table 3) almost all of it was devoted to the presidency.⁴

In order to test the degree to which these swings in coverage are election related, and if so, to address what it implies for the portrayal of these nineteenth-century institutions by the press, we shall disaggregate the percentage in table 2 along several dimensions. First, the straightforward distinction between election and nonelection news needs to be made. Second, to gain a better appreciation of the content of nonelection news, this residual classification will be subdivided into stories that either do or do not have a clear institutional component. (By our definition, most do; see appendix for a detailed description of coding procedures.) Finally, all entries are classified according to their policy content, when any was present.

Election Related News

The primacy of presidential elections as news is amply demonstrated by the evidence in table 3. In election years, news of both branches

⁴ One other pre-presidential election year was included in this analysis. In 1855 most of the electoral news concerned that year's gubernatorial election. Conforming to the distributions in table 2 for the other off-year settings, most of the national news was reported on nonelectoral politics and had a congressional focus.

and their current occupants is dominated by election stories. As expected, an overwhelming majority of stories are about the presidential election. The frequencies suggest that presidential election coverage actually depressed the volume of congressional election news in presidential election years. The dramatic drop-off in space devoted to election stories in general at the midterm is further evidence that, independent of presidential elections, congressional elections were not very newsworthy.

TABLE 3
RELATIVE PROPORTION OF ELECTION AND INSTITUTIONAL COVERAGE
GIVEN TO THE PRESIDENT AND CONGRESS

	ELECTION ARTICLES			INSTITUTIONAL ARTICLES		
	PRESIDENT	CONGRESS	(N)	PRESIDENT	CONGRESS	(N)
1820 (P)	88	12	(17)	0	100	(18)
1830 (C)	29	71	(58)	44	56	(88)
1835 (N)	98	2	(251)	66	34	(100)
1840 (P)	94	6	(501)	39	61	(23)
1845 (N)	18	82	(33)	21	89	(147)
1850 (C)	6	94	(174)	15	85	(1996)
1855 (N)	3	97	(131)	15	85	(246)
1860 (P)	95	5	(1665)	16	84	(855)
1870 (C)	11	89	(347)	20	80	(825)
1876 (P)	94	6	(1323)	17	83	(818)

The predominance of presidential elections in the news can be more easily reconciled with some aspects of our previous understanding of electoral politics of the era than with others. After 1820, each of the presidential elections in Ohio occurred under the ticket system whereby all of a political party's candidates ran together as a team effectively bound together by the printed ballot bearing their names. Contemporary and historical accounts agree that local politicians saw their party's fortunes in contests at every level of government highly dependent upon the public's favor of their presidential candidate. Typically, local campaigns spent more time and effort promoting the head of the ticket than their local candidacies. The passage below, which comes from a newspaper-based history of Cleveland (Rose, 1950, pp. 175-76), describes the frenetic campaigning in the spring of 1840 directed toward that fall's presidential election.

The heated political contest of 1839-40 was the absorbing topic in Cleveland. General William Henry Harrison, of "log cabin and hard cider" fame, was the champion of staunch supporters in the Western Reserve, a stronghold of the Whigs. At the height of the opposition

to President Martin Van Buren, the local Whigs organized Tippecanoe clubs, and joined the surging ranks that were rallying behind the slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too." James A. Briggs, young Cleveland lawyer, is credited by some with having created the famous fight words. . . . The local clubs made plans to erect "cabins," typifying the log-cabin sentiment, on each side of the river as campaign headquarters. On the evening of March 18, east-side enthusiasts met at the American House, and led by the Cleveland Grays, they marched to the Ohio City cabin (Detroit and West 25th) for rousing dedication ceremonies. The rough interior was decorated with strips of dried pumpkin and strings of dried peppers, and a rifle, a pouch, and powder horn hung on the wall. In one corner stood a split broom. In another was a barrel of cider that was drained in pledges to "Old Tip" and the "Union of the Whigs."⁵

Recurrent campaign activities like these explain why 94% of the Cleveland press's coverage of the 1840 election concerned the presidential contest.

The dominance of presidential over congressional election news does not square well, however, with research that appears to show national level forces only marginally influencing nineteenth-century congressional voting. Donald Stokes' (1965, p. 76) conclusion that "the great contests for the presidency have extraordinary importance in getting people to the polls but they do not dominate what the people do there in voting for Congress," has been recently endorsed by a study (Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale, 1984; but see Carrothers and Stonecash, 1985, pp. 1170-71) of American congressional elections that extends Stokes' earlier analysis back into the 1840s. The estimated effect of national forces varies across studies according to the particular methodology employed, but even generous estimates fall short in conveying the degree to which presidential elections appear in table 3 to have dominated the election setting.⁶ The problem may simply be that in estimating these effects for every congressional election, half of which were midterm years, and by measuring the degree to which each county's or district's congressional vote swung uniformly with national trends, past research has failed to gauge the local impact of presidential contests on congressional elections.

Far more so in the mid-nineteenth century than today, presidential elections were local events. National issues were differently regarded from one community to the next. Unlike downstate, Ohio's Western Reserve was, for example, a stronghold of abolition. Moreover, the strength of the presidential candidate depended heavily upon the vigor of local politicians and party organizations in promoting their ticket. As these attributes varied over time and across communities, so too would the correspondence of local voting with national trends.

⁵ For more on Ohio electoral politics of the era, see Ratcliffe (1979).

⁶ The most favorable estimates of an early trend toward nationalization of congressional elections are provided by Richard S. Katz (1973), who employs correlational statistics as an alternative to the analysis of variance method employed above.

Striking evidence of this can be found in the election returns of Cleveland's congressional district from 1836 through 1876.⁷ During these years the national presidential vote accounts for barely 5% of the variance in this district's congressional vote. Ohio's presidential vote does little better at 9%. But the district's presidential vote during these years explains 86% of the variance in its congressional returns. This finding, along with the distribution of election news, supports the view that presidential campaigns were a critical electoral stimulus to which local communities variously responded. This also helps to explain why picking a party's standard-bearer was frequently an all-encompassing activity of nineteenth-century party conventions.

Institutional News

The idea that nineteenth-century presidents were important primarily for electoral purposes is reinforced by the relatively low share of institutional coverage they received after 1840. From 1845 through 1876, no more than a quarter of these stories focused chiefly upon the president. And typically, they failed to report the president performing some specific constitutional or statutory duty. Rather, stories were skewed toward describing the president's position on current issues and his relations with congressional and party leaders. In part, the scarcity of truly institutional stories may reflect the distance between Washington correspondents and presidents until the early twentieth century. It also probably reflects the paucity of routine presidential responsibilities and prerogatives that guarantee modern presidents active participation in the daily affairs of fellow Washingtonians. The frequencies in table 3 indicate that Congress's greater newsworthiness held steady over a time when overall reporting on events in Washington was expanding dramatically.

In figure 2 the growing volume of stories about Congress and the president has been plotted as natural logarithms in order to present on the same page trends occurring at vastly different plateaus. They follow remarkably parallel paths, although one should keep in mind that at the upper ranges the differences in log values represent substantially greater coverage of Congress than of the presidency.

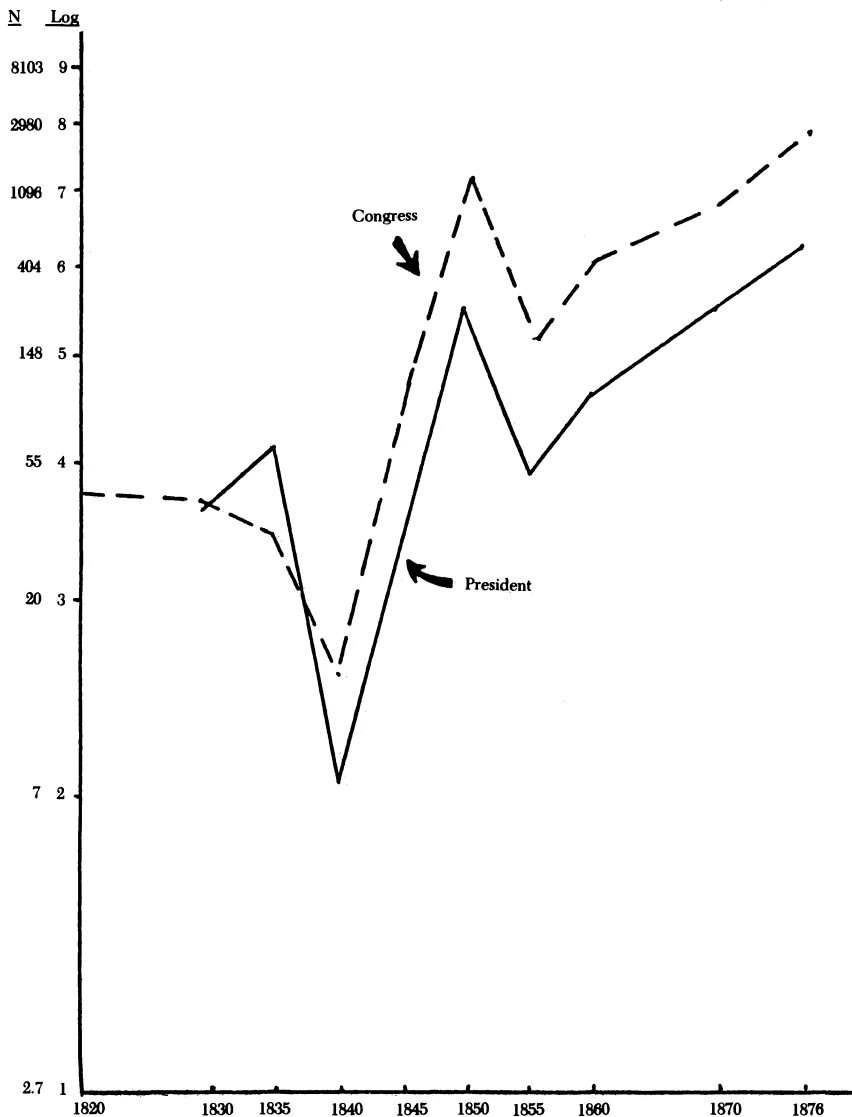
In an earlier study of Cleveland's political news, one of us (Kernell, 1986b) reported a similar trend in growth of reporting about national affairs over politics at the state and local levels. A favorite argument for the emergence of an active and highly visible president during the twentieth century has been the steady growth of national issues and the

⁷ The presidential vote returns for Cleveland's congressional district were compiled by adding county returns from Burnham (1955). The other counties in Cleveland's district were obtained from Martis (1982).

federal government's responsibilities. Perhaps for the twentieth century this is correct, but the evidence presented here indicates that the elevation of issues to the national level has not always worked to enhance the presidency's institutional importance. Throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century, national issues became congressional news.

FIGURE 2

VOLUME OF INSTITUTIONAL COVERAGE OF CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENT*



*Entries plotted as natural logarithms.

Perhaps another reason for Congress's greater newsworthiness can be found in the organizational character of these nineteenth-century institutions. Unlike the presidency which, until Theodore Roosevelt, stood mute with the press, Congress was both open and complex, thereby providing the press with numerous access points. Early in the century, correspondents had won the right to occupy the gallery, and by midcentury they had assumed authority to accredit and discipline fellow community members (Hudson, 1968; Pollard, 1947). As today, the corridors of Congress could be a correspondent's workplace. Even when little legislation was forthcoming, the institution was a beehive of activity. Numerous committee hearings and animated floor debates in both chambers assured reporters plenty of copy. "By mid-century no citizen with a taste for news . . . could escape detailed accounts of drama on Capitol Hill," writes one historian (Leonard, 1986, p. 94) of political communication in America. "The growth of reporting . . . was one aspect of the increased accountability of Congress to the public." Today, in the face of intensive public relations from the White House, Congress's organizational complexity probably disadvantages it as a source of news. But in the nineteenth century when there were few competing channels of government information, Congress's openness made it attractive to correspondents.

One indicator of the value of openness can be found in the distribution of news among Congress's subunits. To measure this, each congressional article has been classified according to chamber and whether the news mostly concerns committee or floor business. As shown in table 4, coverage of committees prior to 1860 was sporadic, but from then through the end of our series, news about committee-related business grew dramatically. In 1860 and 1870, in fact, there were more stories about congressional committees than about the institutional activities of the president. Nationally prominent issues such as slavery and, later, reconstruction attracted much of the press's interest in committees but the later observations also reveal extensive coverage of the routine affairs of state such as taxes and services. Differences between the House and Senate are not great, but they do consistently favor the "popular" chamber. Individually, patronage-wielding, self-centered senators may have been Washington's celebrities in Henry Adams' day, but collectively, the House of Representatives appears to have bested the Senate in attracting press coverage.⁸

⁸ There is, nonetheless, a clear tendency for policy discussion to shift to the White House during presidential election years. Comparing in figure 3 the source of policy discussion during the nonelection years 1855 and 1870 with presidential election years 1860 and 1876 reveals presidents to be more notable sources of policy discourse in four areas: slavery, scandal, governmental services, and national affairs.

TABLE 4
 FOCUS OF INSTITUTIONAL REPORTING ON CONGRESS

	(N)	<u>SENATE</u>		<u>HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES</u>	
		COMMITTEES	FLOOR OR OVERALL	COMMITTEES	FLOOR OR OVERALL
(percentaging across)					
1820	(18)	0	28	11	61
1830	(46)	0	87	0	13
1835	(34)	0	34	0	66
1840	(14)	0	43	0	57
1845	(121)	10	57	3	30
1850	(1690)	3	41	3	53
1855	(210)	0	69	0	31
1860	(547)	16	26	22	35
1870	(663)	11	18	16	56
1876	(683)	0	5	19	76

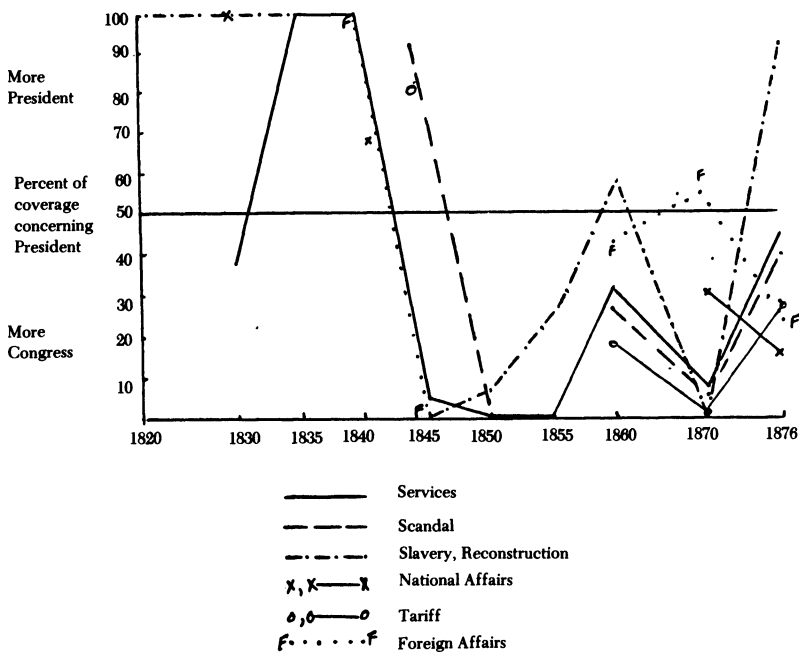
Policy Issues

Further evidence of Congress's preeminence can be discerned in the institutional direction of policy issues that increasingly flowed into Washington. In comparing the issue content of presidential and congressional stories, one could reasonably argue that the analysis should be limited to governmental matters, rather than include campaign issues, because many in the latter category never became serious policy proposals. Given the congressional concentration of institutional articles in table 3, however, this definition would virtually guarantee Congress's primacy. In order to give nineteenth-century presidents in their circumscribed role as electoral engines a chance to be associated with national issues, we have included coverage of campaign issues.

Several patterns in the institutional distribution of policy issues emerge in figure 3. Most striking is the shift of all issues from the presidential to the congressional arena at midcentury. Prior to 1845 slavery, foreign and national affairs, and government services were almost exclusively presidential matters, and up to 1850 so too were stories concerning scandal and the tariff. Then, within a decade these issues shifted dramatically to Congress. Only slavery in 1860, foreign affairs in 1870, and reconstruction in 1876 received more play as presidential stories, and in two of these instances, they were reported on almost exclusively as controversial campaign issues. With the variability in issue coverage one finds across the sampled years, generalizations for the half-century era necessarily must be tentative. Nonetheless, it is impressive that even with

four of the ten sampled years containing a presidential election and therefore skewed in favor of the president's policy involvement, Congress still emerges as the center of national policy debate during the post-Civil War era.

FIGURE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF ISSUES BETWEEN CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENT



*To be included in tabulation at least 5 column inches had to be devoted to the issue. From 1850 on this threshold was increased to 10 column inches.

A second distinct pattern appears after midcentury in the marginal shifts of institutional concentrations. Presidential elections increased the office's association with each issue. Nonetheless, during this time those policy areas having a great impact on local constituencies—government services, the tariff and the byproduct of particularism, scandal—became well-entrenched as congressional issues. In this regard, one can find the preferred agenda of the modern Congress in the issue domains most closely associated with Congress of the mid-nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

The press's preoccupation with presidential candidates in election years and with congressional politics at most other times suggests a bifurcated status for these institutions as the nation entered the modernizing era. Presidents were party instruments in elections and, with a few famous exceptions, little else. This view is consistent with that frequently expressed by contemporary commentators (Adams, 1981, p. 271, *passim*). Presidents were selected to head the national ticket according to their electability and willingness to distribute the spoils fairly among the many state organizations. Their role was to provide a rallying point for the hundreds of state and local party organizations around the country, and an appealing choice to voters. Candidates who were associated with divisive issues or the party politics of a particular region were unattractive. Consequently, men with little experience in government and political parties held an advantage. Appropriately, with election to the White House, their function ended.

In office presidents reigned, but Congress ruled. From the 1840s until Lincoln's election, slavery appears in our data to have been almost exclusively a congressional concern. During the Civil War it was Congress's committees that administered the daily operations of the war bureaucracy. After the war, the Senate drafted Reconstruction. Among contemporary observers of public life, the Tenure of Office Act, which nearly resulted in the removal of President Andrew Johnson from office, was emblematic of the Senate's power during the postwar decade. By the end of the half-century under study, Woodrow Wilson (1885) and others were describing a thoroughly emasculated presidency, one which, through the assertion of senatorial prerogatives, no longer had much say even on the mundane matters of patronage. The evidence presented here squares with this view of *Congressional Government*.

During the early twentieth century presidents—Wilson prominent among them—began to redress this imbalance in the presidency's standing both in Washington and via news coverage in the country. Election reporting continued to focus on the presidential contest, just as it had in the nineteenth century. But not at all for the same reasons. Presidential candidates had early in the century ceased to be the engines pulling the whole party train. Rather, the modern news media concentrated on presidential elections for the same reasons they were concentrating on presidents after the election.

Anticipating the trends presented here, Nelson W. Polsby (1981, p. 1010) several years ago raised the question, "How and under what conditions did Congress relinquish to the president the publicity spotlight in national politics?" Alone, trends in reporting cannot be more than suggestive, so our answer to this question must necessarily be somewhat

speculative. One important thing we do learn from the data is that the rise of political issues and news attention up the federalism ladder was in itself insufficient to guarantee the president's preeminence in national affairs. That development awaited the emergence of an ideology which vested in the president the authority to represent the collective interest of the country. Progressivism at the turn of the century supplied the legitimizing creed, and presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson put it into practice (Cooper, 1983). As the evidence in figure 1 indicates, presidential dominance of the news did not await the development of modern broadcast technology.

The presidency's gain has been Congress's loss. The emerging institutional history of Congress during this era suggests, however, that Congress was not simply bested in head-on competition with the White House; the story is more complicated. In the middle half of the nineteenth century, politicians passed through Congress on their way to other political offices (Bogue et al, 1976; Price, 1971; and Kernell, 1977). For them, active participation in national political debate posed few problems. Evaluating press fascination with the midcentury Congress, Thomas Leonard (1986, pp. 94-96) explains, "The institution was . . . more open, keyed to the external rewards offered by constituents rather than by the internal rewards of colleagues." He adds, "reporting to constituencies beyond Capitol Hill [was] more compelling than the persuasion of colleagues."⁹ Indeed, the era is marked by raucous floor proceedings which found ample space in the nation's newspapers.

By the early twentieth century, circumstances had begun to change. Transient politicians were steadily being replaced by careerists for whom posturing on controversial public issues would present serious risk to their re-election and stand them in low esteem among their colleagues. For many, the loss of the national spotlight was probably welcomed.

Near the turn of the century, Congress's institutional arrangements evolved in ways congenial to the changing needs of its membership. The rise of committees as the locus of institutional decisions, the growth of seniority, the emergence of a normative order that rewarded "work horses" over "show horses," and the emasculation of floor and party leadership distributed power broadly among members and gave them the wherewithal to satisfy the particular interests of their constituencies. At the same time, these organizational developments made Congress an institution less well suited to speak openly—much less authoritatively—on affairs of state.

If in this television age the presidency appears to have arrogated the right to set the nation's policy agenda, one should recognize that

⁹ In such a setting, Leonard adds, "The political press becomes fascinated with such performances, ignoring many substantive issues and the process of government itself."

presidential primacy in the news is not a recent development, but in fact predates the emergence of broadcast technology. Nor may we conclude that it inheres in the personal character of the office. Congress once dominated the national forum, even for a time as issues rapidly grew more national in scope. Rather, presidential dominance of news from Washington appears to have arisen from the transformation of the modern Congress and presidency during the early decades of the twentieth century. Presidents in the grip of progressivism became national tribunes. Members of Congress in the grip of institutionalized particularism receded from view.

APPENDIX

The Source: The Annals of Cleveland

According to *Lathrop's Report on Newspaper Indexes*, the *Annals* "was to be a set of 200 volumes, covering the years 1818-1935, and including an abstract of every news story that has recorded a local event or expressed a local opinion. It was to be exhaustive in the field of local news." The "main file" was to provide a comprehensive compendium of news, while the supplementary files (which were not created) would abstract all local political stories, editorials, and letters not included in the main file.

The following newspapers were abstracted for the years in our series:

Name	Dates	Party Support	Cleveland's Population
<i>Herald</i>	1820	(Not identified)	150
	1830	Jackson Democrat	1,075
	1840, 1845	Whig	6,071
<i>Whig</i>	1835	Whig	
<i>Daily True Democrat</i>	1850	Free Soil	17,034
<i>Leader</i>	1855-1876	Republican	42,417 (1860)
			92,829 (1870)

To check the validity of the synopses provide in the *Annals*, we also coded over 250 articles directly from the Cleveland papers. The results closely matched those produced from the *Annals'* abstracts.¹⁰ To assess the representativeness of the distribution of news across levels of government for the years 1860, 1870, and 1876, sampled issues of the

¹⁰ Satisfied that the *Annals'* synopses provide an accurate summary of the news stories, we decided to use the abstracts because they offered two important advantages over the primary source. First, the coding took less than a third of the time, making it possible to study a much larger sample of papers than would otherwise have been possible. Second, by recording the location and length (in column inches) of a story, the abstracts overcome a serious problem of working with newspaper microfilm where page size and even the placement of pages within the paper can be difficult to determine.

Cleveland *Plain Dealer* were also coded. The breakdown of coverage in column inches by local, state, and national government did not significantly differ from that shown here for the *Leader*. A Democratic paper, the *Plain Dealer*, was found to be more partisan in its news reportage and to contain more editorials than the *Leader*. Moreover, the generalizability of the trends in political reporting for other communities was tested by analyzing a sample of issues of the *Hartford Daily Courant* for the same years. While some differences appeared, the broad trend toward greater attention to national electoral and institutional politics was confirmed.¹¹

Coding Rules

Unlike the procedures followed by Cornwell and Balutis, who examined only the front page, every political story throughout the paper has been coded here. This is necessary given the nonstandard (and in fact, highly changeable) layout of the nineteenth century press. Since many articles did not exclusively fit a single category on one or more of our variables, we coded preponderant coverage. The branch receiving preponderant institutional coverage was generally easy to assess: the story would center on a decision or current activity of one institution and mention the other in passing. But in roughly 15% of the cases, the primary thrust of the article was less clear, and arbitrary but consistent coding rules had to be applied. Where the news story concerned the resolution of a particular policy issue, it was assigned to the arena in which the issue was currently located. For example, one story that reported congressional reactions to a threatened veto was coded as presidential. In other instances, such as news stories devoid of policy or issue content or some specific institutional activity, we simply counted the frequency with which the root words “president” and “Congress” appeared in the synopsis. Fortunately, only a small share of stories required us to enlist this criterion.

Each entry was coded on the following operational definitions:

Levels of government. Two problem areas quickly arose in classifying articles by local, state and national government. First, many articles cross levels. When approximately equal coverage was given to two or three levels, the level of the article’s principle actor was coded. A stump speech by a local partisan extolling the virtues of his party’s presidential candidate, for example, was coded as a local story. When in doubt, we scored the article at the lowest appropriate level of government. Second, many stories—especially those on slavery and elections—concerned politics in other states. These were coded as national news.

¹¹ For more information about the findings for the *Daily Courant*, see Kernell (1986b, p. 263).

Institutional stories. To be scored as institutional coverage, the article had to involve some actor or collectivity (such as a committee) fulfilling the duties of office. We have operationally defined institutional coverage to include two general types of information. First, it obviously refers to the behavior of governments as organizations: judicial pronouncements (from the Supreme Court to the justice of the peace), committee hearings, a veto, treaty ratification, and the election of a senator, to name but a few. Second, we have also coded as institutional, articles that describe the behavior of individual politicians who are pursuing their office's responsibilities or exercising its prerogatives. A president's veto message would so qualify where a stump speech attacking some members of the legislature would not.

Election stories. These include articles on possible future candidates, election campaigns, and postelection analyses of the results. Election and institutional stories were coded as mutually exclusive. Nonelection, partisan attacks comprised a third, residual category of stories.

Issue stories. Institutional and election news were also classified by issue if the issue was judged to be a prominent aspect of the story. When more than one issue was reported, the one receiving the greatest attention was coded. The general issue categories include the following:

Slavery	Foreign Affairs	Services	National Affairs
Slavery	Foreign policy	Rivers and harbors	Government finance
Reconstruction	International affairs	Public lands	Pardons
	National defense	Postal services	Indian affairs
		Homesteading	Territories
		Veteran's benefits	Capital administration
		Roads	Reforms
		Patronage jobs and contracts	

Other general issue categories are tariff politics, civil rights (broadly defined), and scandal.

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