

**STATISTICAL BIAS IN NEWSPAPER
REPORTING:
The Case of Campaign Finance***

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Abstract

This paper examines evidence of statistical bias in newspaper reporting on campaign finance. We gather all stories that mention a dollar amount for campaign expenditures, contributions, and receipts in the five largest circulation newspapers in the United States from 1996 to 2000. We then compare these figures to the universe of campaign expenditures, contributions and receipts, as recorded by the Federal Election Commission. The figures reported in newspaper accounts exceed the average expenditure and contribution by as much as eight fold. Press reporting also focuses excessively on corporations contributions and soft money, rather than on the more common types of donors – individual – and types of contributions – hard money.

1 Introduction

Media bias is a paramount concern for American democracy. Most Americans learn about public affairs and politics through the mass media – especially newspapers and television. Behavioral and psychological research has documented that the balance of information in the media (Zaller 1992) and the way information is presented (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) affect what people think is important, what should be done to solve problems of public importance, and who, if anyone, is responsible (Iyengar 1992; Popkin 1991). It is widely feared that the political orientations of media owners and journalists color what is reported and how. Fear of such problems prompted regulation of ownership of media outlets and, from the 1920s to the 1980s, regulation of broadcast news content in the U.S. Other countries regulate content and ownership more extensively.

Evidence that an ideological bias pervades the media has been difficult to establish. In their study of CBS News and the New York Times, for example, Robinson and Sheehan (1980) found little evidence of a liberal bias or of unfair political coverage. (See Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993 for a survey.) One possible case of bias arises in the area of campaign finance. Frank Sorauf (1987) analyzed the reporting and candidates perceptions of campaign finance reporting for three national newspapers – the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Most journalists, he concluded, strongly adhere to a reform agenda. As a result, they report the most expensive races or the contributions of greatest concern to the public, rather than the typical race or donation. Sorauf, however, offered little concrete evidence of systematic bias, nor did he have complete coverage of the papers under study.

In this paper we measure quantitatively the extent to which the picture of campaign financing presented in the national newspapers reflects the hard reality. Campaign finance is an excellent area to examine the way media present an issue because it is possible to get a complete measure of the baseline reality against which to compare media coverage. Federal law requires that candidates, organizations, and individuals report all expenditures, contributions, and receipts to the Federal Election Commission. The Federal Election Commission's data is, in turn, the source for almost all reporting on federal campaign finance. We developed a database on all stories containing any mention of a dollar value for a campaign contribution, receipt, or expenditure in the

five largest circulation papers in the US – New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, USA Today, and the Los Angeles Times – over the 1996, 1998, and 2000 election cycles.

Briefly, we identify two tendencies of newspaper reporting. First, newspapers cover the most expensive elections, both in a local area and throughout the country. As a result, the total campaign spending in the average race reported in the news was *four to eight* times larger than the total campaign spending in the average race, depending on the sort of race. Second, newspapers coverage to certain sorts of donors and donations – especially corporations and party soft money – greatly exceed their importance. Individual donors receive much less newspaper coverage than their share of total contributions.

While the substantive issue we study here is important in its own right, we believe the methodology we use has far broader applications to other matters of public concern – such as crime or public health. Paulos (1995) surveys how the press report numbers across a wide range of topics.

We begin in section 2 by detailing our methodology for the collection and analysis of data from the press. The next section presents the statistical picture of campaign expenditures as they are reported in newspapers. Section 4 takes a similar approach to looking at campaign contributions and the final section looks at the implications of our findings.

2 Methodology

We surveyed the five largest U.S. newspapers: *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*.¹ Sorauf used three of these papers (*The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*) because “They are by general consensus the three best and most influential general daily newspapers in the United States.” Since his writing, the two additional papers we surveyed (the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*) have grown such that their circulation has eclipsed all three papers Sorauf surveyed.

The papers we surveyed are not intended as a representative sample of all newspapers. However, since many smaller newspapers pick up stories that originally appeared

¹See <http://www.freep.com/jobspage/links/top100.htm> for circulation figures.

in the top publications, it is likely that the data we collected from these papers is not significantly different than what one would find from surveying all papers.²

We searched for articles in these publications that cited specific dollar amounts of political contributions or expenditures for the calendar years of 1996, 1998 and 2000.³ Most of the citations were references to financial transactions that took place during the same year the article was written. However, some articles sought to put current contributions and expenditures in an historical context by using data from past election years. We choose to include such historical citations in the data set for the year they were cited, not when the transactions took place. Since campaign spending increases over time⁴ including citations of past amounts should theoretically put a downward bias on the averages of amounts cited.

Each citation is made up of several elements: the article in which it was found – which includes a newspaper, a page number, an author and a date – the size of the contribution or expenditure, and its source and destination. We classified the sources and destinations into one of the following groups: Advertising; Expected, Needed; Expenditure; Fact; Firm or PAC; Fundraiser; Group of Candidates; Group of Individuals; Hard Money; Individual; Individual Candidate; Industry; Leadership PAC; National Party; National Party Committee; On Hand; Partial; Race; Soft Money; Total. These groups are defined in the Appendix.

While some of these groups can be either the source or the destination, groups such as “Advertising” or “Expenditure” are always destinations and groups such as “Industry” or “Individual” are always sources. Groups that can be either sources or destinations have slightly different meanings in each context. For example, a citation that has “Total” as its source and “Individual Candidate” as its destination would be the total donations to a particular candidate. However, a citation that has “Individual Candidate” as its source and “Total” as its destination would be the total expenditure of a given candidate. All of the statistics reported below were generated using these groups.

We included citations that had an actual dollar amount attached to them, and

²I don't have a citation here, but it seems like it would be nice

³We used the Dow Jones Interactive, Lexis-Nexis Academic, and ProQuest Databases with the following query: (congress or house or congressman or senate or senator or senators or congressmen or congresswomen) and (election or elections or campaign or campaigns) and (dollars) and (raise or spend) and (contribution)

⁴I don't have a citation here, but it seems like it would be nice

others that were implicitly quantitative. An example of such a citation would be “[Duangnet ‘Georgie’] Kronenberg and her sister-in-law, Thai businesswoman Pauline Kanchanalak, steered hundreds of thousands of dollars in illegal contributions to various Democratic Party organizations and candidates.”⁵ In order to make this compatible with the rest of the data we collected, we would change “hundreds of thousands” to \$200,000 – the smallest amount that could be considered “hundreds of thousands”. When a range of values was given, we picked the lowest one. These two approximations can only bias the data downwards.

If two articles quoted the same figure, or if two newspapers ran the same story, we did not remove one of the citations or articles. However, if the same article quoted the same figure more than once, we used it only once. We also made no attempt to verify that numbers quoted were accurate. If a correction was printed later in the same paper, we used the lower of the original and the correction. This occurred very rarely, and consequently put only a slight downward bias on the data.

3 Reporting of Expenditures by Candidates

Candidate’s total expenditures, as reported in the newspapers we studied, are shown in Table 1.

⁵Fletcher, Michael A., Politics, *Washington Post*, July 21, 1998, Page A06

		Reported in Press			Actual	Ratio of
		Mean Expenditure	# of Citations	% Above Actual Mean	Mean Expenditure	Reported to Actual
House:	Challenger	\$1,178,215	35	83%	\$151,674	7.8
	Incumbent	\$1,330,391	66	68%	\$779,031	1.7
	Open Seat	\$1,338,561	5	100%	\$318,761	4.2
	Total	\$1,280,529	106	78%	\$359,861	3.6
Senate:	Challenger	\$12,648,689	71	94%	\$881,238	14.4
	Incumbent	\$11,280,074	34	85%	\$4,404,493	2.6
	Open Seat	\$14,457,014	45	78%	\$1,955,500	7.4
	Total	\$12,880,967	150	91%	\$1,687,108	7.6

The FEC averages above excluded third party candidates from the challenger and open seat categories, as they were *never* reported on in the newspapers we studied and would bias the FEC averages downwards. We included independents (where applicable) in the numbers for incumbents. In general the amount spent by independent incumbents was almost exactly the same as the mean for all other candidates. In this case, including independents had very little effect on the reported averages. All data from <http://www.fec.gov/finance/allsum.htm>, <http://www.fec.gov/press/allsum98.htm> and <http://www.fec.gov/press/051501congfinact/tables/allcong2000.html>.

The numbers from the press indicate that in Congressional campaigns challengers spend about as much as those who are defending their seats. In both cases the numbers from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) reveal that incumbents tend to spend about five times what challengers do in both House and Senate races.

Table 1 also tells us that 82% of the citations of total campaign expenditures were higher than the real average expenditure. This means that if one were to read only one article containing a citation of a campaign expenditure, there would be an 82% chance that this citation was higher than the real world mean. Almost all of the citations in the press were higher than the real world median.

A simple back-of-the-envelope calculation, assuming that every race has two candidates who spend the above averages, yields a figure of over \$1.95 billion spent on Congressional campaigns in a given election year. This number is greater than twice the actual average total expenditure for the years we surveyed.

Newspapers tend to have more coverage of news from the region in which they are located. The discrepancy between the average reported expenditures above

and the true numbers from the FEC might just be a result of this “location bias.” *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* would be expected to have more reporting from the states of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut; the *Los Angeles Times*: California and *The Washington Post*: Maryland and Virginia.

The average cost of a House race in these states during the years we surveyed was slightly lower than the national average. The average cost of a Senate Race was about 2.5 times higher than the national average. This is not enough to explain the 8x difference between the average reported figures and those from the FEC.

This 2.5x difference assumes that all of the reporting from each of the newspapers is about local races. This is not the case. Only 10% of the citations of Senate races in the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* were about local contests. The other papers we studied had much higher rates: 70% for *The New York Times*, and 80% for the *Los Angeles Times*. A reasonable estimate of this “location bias” would be 1.5x for Senate races, leaving a 5x inflation of Senate expenditures from reporting techniques alone.

Some articles detail more than just the gross expenditures of candidates. This reporting is idiosyncratic at best as it can include money spent on everything from dry cleaning to direct mail. These reports can be broken down into two broad categories: television and radio advertising, and other expenditures. The breakdown of money reported in the press is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Candidate Spending on Advertising and Other Items, Reported in Press vs. Actual		
	Reported % of Money Cited	Actual % of Expenditures
Advertising	66%	22%
Other Expenditures	34%	78%
Actual advertising spending is for 1998 and 2000 only. Figures are from “Buying Time, 1998” (p. 33) and “Buying Time, 2000” (p. 57). They only include advertising spending by candidates, not soft money or issue ads sponsored by outside groups.		

Reporting of campaign expenditures shows a clear emphasis on Advertising above all other forms of candidate spending. The proportions in the press are

almost a mirror image of what candidate spending actually looks like.

4 Reporting of Contributions to Candidates

Donations come from one of three sources: individuals, PACs, or political parties. Money from political party committees can be either “hard money”, which is coordinated with the candidate it is spent on, or “soft money” which can be given in unlimited amounts and spent only indirectly on campaigns. This is only the source immediately before it gets to the candidate, and ignores the fact that PAC money has to originate with individuals and that party money often comes from corporations, labor unions and other groups.

The chart below shows the relative percentages of money cited in our dataset that came from individuals and PACs, broken out by House and Senate campaigns. It also has the percentage of total citations that were from that particular source. Referring to the definitions found in the appendix, contributions that came from either “Individuals” or “Groups of Individuals” were considered to be from Individuals. Donations from “Industries” or “Firms or PACs” were considered to be from PACs.

		Reported			Actual
		Citations	% of Money	% of Citations	% of Money
House:	Individual	21	26%	14%	63%
	PAC	129	74%	86%	37%
Senate:	Individual	76	40%	32%	80%
	PAC	165	60%	68%	20%
The actual numbers are only percentages of total money from individuals and PACs. This does not imply that 80% of all money contributed to Senate campaigns comes from individuals, only that 80% of the money that comes from either individuals or PACs comes from individuals.					

It is clear from this chart that the newspapers in our study overstate the percentage of contributions that come from PACs, and understates the percentage that comes from individuals. We will show below that many of the contributions in the press attributed to individuals must actually be soft money. Filtering out such citations would lead to an even greater skew than the above chart shows.

Table 4 is similar to Table 3, but includes an additional row for soft money. This category is made up of contributions from “National Party Committees” or “Soft Money”.⁶ We ignore donations from other candidates (“Leadership PAC”, “Individual Candidate” and “Group of Candidates”) and coordinated party expenditures (“Coordinated Party Expenditures”) since there were too few citations of these types. These contributions made up 14% of the money raised by House candidates and 23% of the money raised by Senate candidates.

		Reported			Actual
		Citations	% of Money	% of Citations	% of Money
House:	Individual	21	22%	13%	56%
	PAC	129	62%	80%	35%
	Soft Money	12	16%	7%	9%
Senate:	Individual	76	23%	28%	64%
	PAC	165	34%	60%	19%
	Soft Money	33	44%	12%	13%

The same pattern that appeared in Table 3 exists in Table 4: contributions from individuals are understated and those from PACs are overstated in the press. However, the discrepancy for PAC giving to Senate campaigns has narrowed considerably due to a large overstatement of soft money.

Soft money is just money donated by individuals, corporations and politicians to National Party Committees. We conducted the same analysis as above on the sources of soft money. We used the same categories for Individuals and PACs, and added a third category – Other Candidates – made up of “Individual Candidates” and “Group of Candidates.” The results are summarized in Table 5 below.

⁶Since Soft Money is not given directly to candidates it is difficult to assess how much of it is actually spent on House or Senate Campaigns. We estimated the amount of Soft Money in House and Senate Campaigns in the following way: Buying Time from the Brennan Center (p. 57) gives the estimated amount of money soft money spent on television ads by parties in House and Senate races. La Raja p. 100 gives the uses of Soft Money. We took advertising as a percentage of total expenditures that would be directed at candidates (Media, Mobilization, and Traditional Party Hoopla). Dividing the advertising expenditures by the percentage above, we arrived at a number for soft money for House and Senate races. We combined this with the numbers for total receipts, receipts from individuals and receipts from PACs from the FEC to calculate the above percentages. Since the relative percentages of money raised in campaigns is generally very stable, this is probably a good estimate for all three years surveyed.

	Reported			Actual
	Citations	% of Money	% of Citations	% of Money
Individuals	92	6%	28%	28%
Corporations	222	93%	69%	72%
Candidates	10	1%	3%	<1%
From La Raja, 2001, p. 89. La Raja only calculated these percentages for 1994-1998. They were very stable, so we extended them to 2000. We also independently confirmed his numbers for 1998.				

These figures differ sharply from the reality of soft money. According to La Raja (19xx), Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo and Snyder (2002), and our own research, 28% of Soft Money comes from individuals. This is almost five times larger than the 6% implied by the press. As with contributions in general, the percentage given by individuals is understated.

Finally, we looked at the average size of contributions from various groups to individual candidates as reported in the newspapers we studied. The results are summarized in Table 6.

		Average Citation	Total Citations
House:	Individual	\$12,333	9
	Firm or PAC	\$57,870	74
	Soft Money	\$305,792	12
	Industry	\$173,571	55
	Group of Individuals	\$404,075	12
Senate:	Individual	\$31,535	47
	Firm or PAC	\$82,690	95
	Soft Money	\$1,059,894	33
	Industry	\$272,184	70
	Group of Individuals	\$570,164	29

We could no longer group “Individual” and “Group of Individuals” together since it is impossible to discern how large the individual donations in that group are, or in many cases, how big the group is. The same is true of “Industries” and “Firm or PAC.”

The average citation from an individual or a PAC to a House or Senate candidate is larger by an order of magnitude than the legal limit for such contributions. This is generally due to one of two factors: either imprecise specification of the route by which a contribution gets from an individual to a candidate or the lumping together of all contributions from individuals at a particular firm. In many

cases, what is truly a soft money donation to a party organization is reported as a donation directly to a candidate, as in the following example:

“New York Senate candidate Hillary Clinton has attracted names as well, including \$20,000 from Spielberg and his wife, Kate Capshaw, and \$10,000 from Tom Cruise and his wife, Nicole Kidman.”⁷

Also, contributions that come from individuals tend to be stated in such a way that they appear to be coming from a firm, as in the following example:

“Employees of MBNA Corp.’s MBNA America Bank, Delaware’s second-largest private employer, contributed a whopping \$240,750 to his campaign as of Oct. 1, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan research group that analyzes campaign contributions.”⁸

Such imprecision may lead to general confusion about campaign finance regulation. Indeed, polls indicate that only 22% of people can properly identify \$1000 per election as the legal limit that can be given by an individual to a candidate and only 2% of people know that corporations cannot give directly to individual candidates. (Mayer, 2001, pp. 52-53)

5 Conclusion

Our statistical analysis provides strong support Sorauf’s assertion that the press overstates the amount of money in US politics, and the importance of PACs and corporations as a source for that money. The data cited by the press in stories about campaign contributions and expenditures from 1996 to 2000 cite numbers that are on average higher than the relevant population of campaign expenditures and receipts. Newspapers also under report the role of individuals in funding campaigns and National Party Committees. Readers of the five major national newspapers are likely to have an inflated estimate of the cost of running for Congress and how much of that money goes to television and radio advertising.

For its part the public does seem to echo the bias in campaign finance reporting. Mayer (2001) documents that people think there is “too much money

⁷DeBarros, Anthony, Democratic campaign theme: ‘Hooray for Hollywood’ Fundraising favors Gore over the GOP, *USA Today*, May 30, 2000, Page 4D

⁸McKinnon, John, Sen. Roth Fights to Hang Onto Delaware, *Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2000, Page A8

in politics,” which translates into support for regulations, but not public financing. Also, public opinion on soft money, the target of the most recent round of campaign finance reform, was based on poor understanding of where soft money comes from or how it is used (La Raja, 2001. p. 83).

The patterns of reporting that we document may reflect, as Sorauf argued, the reform agenda of most journalists. While this may play some role, we do not attribute the patterns above primarily to ideological bias. Ideological bias corresponds to giving more or more favorable coverage to one sort of political view. There is little evidence that liberal candidates’ campaign expenditures receive more favorable treatment. To the extent that one interest or ideology is targeted it is reflected in the exaggerated reporting of corporate contributions

We believe another, more general force is at work, as well. Newspaper reporting exhibits a strong “statistical bias” because journalists focus on cases in the “upper tail” – the most expensive races, highest-spending candidates, largest contributors and contributions, and so on. What is typical or average may not seem as important or interesting as what is exceptional or extreme. It is, perhaps, natural to draw attention to events that are out of the ordinary, especially if that helps sell the news. It may even be a public service to report the extremes, as that may be where one is more likely to uncover illegal or unethical behavior. Nonetheless, excessive attention to extremes creates cognitive biases among the public as to the magnitude of campaign spending and the frequency of unethical behavior.

We believe that the unrepresentativeness of statistics reported in newspapers extends beyond campaign finance. A limited number of studies note the existence or potential for such biases in other areas of public importance. Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein (1980), for example, document biased perceptions of risk in public health and tie those to media coverage of accidents and diseases (see also Paulos 1995).

Such a statistical bias, social choice theorists remind us, can present a fundamental problem for democracy. Voting reflects not only people’s ideological preferences but their beliefs about the state of the world. Votes express private information and elections aggregate that information. Theorists studying elec-

tions from the perspective of Condorcet's jury theorem conclude that common information, such as that conveyed by the media, allow for coordinated learning and strategies in voting. Biases in the media, then, create biases in collective choice.

In the case of campaign finance, it is the statistical tail wagging the dog. The question is, how pervasive is the statistical bias in reporting?

A Appendix

In general we tried to categorize citations according to the discernable intentions of the author of the article. The rules below for categorization reflect this:

Advertising - This is a type of expenditure, as in “Candidate x spent \$30,000 for a 30 second spot on the evening news.”

Expected, Needed - This was not an actual dollar amount that someone or something took in or spent. These citations often read something like “Candidate X will need \$1,000,000 to run an effective campaign.” Or “The RNC promised to raise \$2,000,000 for Candidate X” or even “It is expected that this race will cost \$10,000,000 in the primary alone.”

Expenditure A candidate spent some money on something other than television and radio advertising.

Firm or PAC - This was a particular organization, firm or PAC that gave money to a race or party. This is a broad category and includes: Unions, Political interest groups, firms, and groups of people specifically associated with a firm. This last group has to do with the intention of the person writing the article. For example if the author wrote “WorldCom executives gave \$100,000 to the DNC,” “WorldCom executives” would be categorized as a firm. This would cause the data to have a downward bias since WorldCom may have given much more than just what their executives kicked in.

Fundraiser - A particular event to raise funds. For example “Dinner featuring Bill Clinton.”

Group of Candidates - This is a group of candidates that is not organized in some way that fits in above. For example “Congressmen in vulnerable seats.” If it is explicitly an average for such a class the citation was classified as either “Expected, Needed” or “Individual Candidates.”

Group of Individuals - A group of individuals who gave to a campaign that doesn’t seem to have some sort of overarching organization that fits into one of the above groups. For example, “Donors outside of Georgia” or “Person X’s family” or “Person X and Person Y”.

Coordinated Party Expenditures - Data that is specifically labeled as hard money.

Individual - A person who is not running for office who is explicitly named. For example, “Bill Gates” is a person, “Microsoft’s Chairman” is not.

Individual Candidate - A candidate for a particular office.

Industry A group of firms, PACs corporations or other groups. Both of the following would be classified as industries: “Trial Lawyers” and “13 Lawyers and their families from firms with tobacco cases pending” - it is unclear whether the second citation should be the tobacco industry or trial lawyers but it is certainly an industry. However, we would classify the AFL-CIO or similar union as a “Firm or PAC” but “unions” or “labor” as an industry.

Leadership PAC These are PACs associated with a particular candidate.

National Party - A citation of a particular party or group of party committees. For example “John Huang gave \$30,000 to the DCCC and other congressional campaign committees” would have a destination type of “National Party.”

National Party Committee - A particular committee run by the national party such as the DNC or the NRSC.

On Hand - These were citations of a candidate or other group having a certain amount “on hand”, “in the bank” or in their “war chest.”

Partial - This is a citation of an amount spent or received during a particular time, or up to a particular place in time. For example “Candidate x spent \$30,000,000 in the primary” would be “Partial” since it is likely that the candidate spent more overall. If the candidate was eliminated in the primary, such a citation would be classified as “Total.”

Race - This refers to a group of candidates that make up an entire race or most of a race. For example “Clinton and Lazio” or “Clinton, Lazio and Giuliani” or “Newt Gingrich’s race.”

Soft Money - A donation or transaction that is explicitly labeled as soft money. For example, the sentence “Hillary Clinton took in \$300 in soft money”

would in theory translate to a source of “soft money”, a destination of “individual candidate” and an amount of \$300. However, the sentence “Hillary Clinton received \$300 from the Democratic Party” would have a source of “National Party” even though the contribution is most likely soft money.

State Party - A state part or organization.

Total - This is the total amount given to a candidate, spent by a candidate, donated by a firm, PAC, individual, industry, national party committee, etc.

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