Chapter Five: Covering state and federal campaigns in an age of dwindling resources: An analysis of three state capital newspapers during the 2012 races

Introduction

One of the major functions of the American press has been its discursive role in political life. Alexis de Tocqueville observed this function early in the 19th century. He noted that American newspapers had both an intellectual and practical impact on the hearts and minds of citizens through their selection of content and how they chose to present it. He said the newspaper was both “the only way of being able to place the same thought at the same moment into a thousand minds” and that, in the absence of newspapers, “there would be hardly any communal action” (Tocqueville, 2003, p. 600-601). In essence, the French thinker was laying out early conceptions of the contemporary theory of framing. Newspapers, in the early days of the republic, had a civic duty to present information in a way that would engage the electorate. In the political arena, Tocqueville understood the importance of this tool, and modern mass media researchers devote a great deal of time and energy to exploring its impact among audiences.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) are such adherents to a news organizations’ power to choose how to present coverage that they urge reporters toward one primary goal — “to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (p. 12). Using this principle as a guide, researchers wander into questions of where and how this idyllic model breaks down — specifically, ways in which political reporters adhere to certain tropes and themes that neglect substantive discussion of issues. Proposed answers range from changes in technology (Putnam, 2001) to a disinterested and cynical public (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger and Bennett, 1999) to lapses in practices outlined through the
professionalization of journalism (Fico, Freedman, Durisin, 2011). Market forces are included in this spectrum, and recently, market forces have wreaked havoc on the ranks of state-level government reporters (Doroh 2009). This trend raises age-old research questions with a sign-of-the-times veneer.

RQ1: Are daily newspapers in state capitals using the same number of sources in state-level election coverage as national-level election coverage?
RQ2: Are daily newspapers in state capitals using the same variety of sources in state-level election coverage as national-level election coverage?
RQ3: Are daily newspapers in state capitals employing horse-race framing in state-level election coverage more often than in national-level election coverage?

An analysis of election coverage in three newspapers located in state capitals was used to evaluate these research questions.

Theoretical Framework

Framing theory, which provides the basis for this investigation, has become ubiquitous in mass media literature, used to analyze content ranging from racial profiling to political coverage. Scheufele (1999) outlines the theory as it relates to journalism specifically. While suggesting that framing is an extension of agenda-setting, another way reporters, editors and other information-providers may influence the minds of consumers, Scheufele (1999) also points out that its effect is dramatic: It influences the construction of realities and, thus, the decision-making of consumers (pp. 104-105).

In the literature, researchers tend to split political story frames between “horse race” journalism and “substantive” journalism. Broh (1980) used the term “horse race” famously in describing coverage of the 1976 presidential election, laying out certain identifiable characteristics: a great deal of emphasis on and skepticism about polling, playing up spectacle and generally framing the campaign as a sporting event. Academia
has run with the metaphor. The fascination with the horse race vs. substantive coverage analysis continues, likely because many researchers have found the effect to be intensifying with the changes in news technology and the structure of the modern campaign (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006; Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn 2004; Belt, Just and Crigler, 2012).

Aalberg, Stromback and de Vreese (2012) provide a condensed history of the game and strategy frames scholarship and argue for a more standardized method in the literature for descriptively examining the use of strategy frames in political reporting. The authors attempt to delineate game and strategy frames for the purpose of providing a more specific lexicon for researchers to use to deal with the way daily political journalism is produced in an era of television, Internet and social media. The researchers ultimately arrive at a conceptualization of the horse race as encompassing what they term the “strategic game frame” (Aalberg, Stromback and de Vreese, 2012).

Using an investigation of the framing practices of print reporters at mid-sized newspapers across the United States, Fico, Freedman and Durisin (2011) examine the professional practices and frequency with which reporters publish on a particular campaign. They explore whether a framing bias exists in a story about a particular candidate or race. The researchers operationalize this bias as “structural imbalance,” or the use of partisan statements on one side that are never evened out through equitable reporting (pp. 103-104). Fico, Freedman and Durisin suggest this may be due to the dwindling number of experienced reporters at mid-size newspapers across the United States. Whether such a phenomenon can be seen in state capital newspapers, evident in their election coverage at two different levels of government, is a specific aim of this
project and an extension of framing theory to a novel application across different types of
election coverage within the same news source.

**Method**

Wimmer and Dominick (2003) define content analysis as systematic, objective,
and quantitative (p. 141). They outline a process that involves establishing a research
question, defining a universe and sample, and establishing content categories in order to
measure operationalized variables. The authors also point out that content analysis, as a
descriptive method, has provided an empirical starting point for investigations into media
effects through the theoretic lens of framing (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003, p. 143).

Before selecting a universe and sample, it is important to note limitations
researchers have found in comparing newspapers with different sizes, resources and
geographical areas to cover in their political coverage. Kahn (1991) finds several
variables that can confound analysis of news media attention to a political campaign,
including competitiveness, newspaper size, circulation, prominence of other campaigns
and the presence of an incumbent in the race. Efforts to control for these variables may be
confounded, however, by redistricting efforts at the state level to maintain legislative
argues this could have a negative impact on news coverage, and trends in the industry
suggest fewer statehouse resources, which can have an impact on newspapers' ability to
cover state politics (Doroh, 2009).

To ensure accurate sampling of the entire election season, articles from
throughout the campaigns were assessed. In order to ensure adequate sampling
throughout the election cycle, a three-month window was used (Aug. 1, 2012 – Nov. 6,
2012) from which news articles were selected. Within that window, Benoit, Stein and Hansen's (2005) method of developing two constructed weeks working backward from Election Day was used to collect the sample. Browser-based database software enabled full-text search with the names of the houses of the state legislature, and the words “election,” “campaign” and “race.”

After a preliminary search using Factiva, whose archives include the greatest number of state capital newspapers among available databases, three newspapers were selected for specific study: The Wisconsin State Journal (Madison, circulation 83,638), The Kennebec Journal (Augusta, ME, circulation 11,199), and The Denver Post (circulation 377,026). For the purposes of coding reliability, stories from The Salt Lake Tribune (Utah, 109,375 circulation) were analyzed. In addition to an analysis of newspaper stories, the staffing of these newspapers were also examined. Editorial professionals were contacted to determine what trend, if any, there has been in assignments to state-level political campaigns. The election in 2008 was used as a benchmark: Did each publication devote more, fewer or about the same number of reporters to state elections as in the previous general election?

The first research question quantified number of sources. To investigate the presence of sourcing, ratio-level variables were used from a method outlined by Fico & Atwater (1986). They counted the number of sources used in a story and averaged them together. The use of multiple sources ties into the deliberative aspect of democracy outlined by de Tocqueville (2003) and the informative function of journalism championed by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007).

Fico and Atwater (1986) go further than simply counting sources. They also look
at the role the sources play in the story, either as an official political source, a member of
the public or the voice of scholarship. The deliberative function of democracy also
demands widespread and varied voices to enable robust public discussion. Accordingly,
this research used ratio-level variables to count the number of sources in stories who are
political actors or non-political actors. The former group comprised politicians,
consultants and individuals directly involved with campaigns, while the latter included
scholars and experts in other fields of study. Categorizing sources in this manner
examines the degree to which daily newspapers brought in sources other than those
quickly relied upon in previous campaign coverage.

The final research question deals with the specific frame that emerges from the
way a political story is told. In this research, storytelling roles are defined by what the
source is doing in the story — how he/she is contributing to the construction of the
writer's central metaphor. The literature addressing how to quantify these statements in a
content analysis is much more exhaustive and constructive. Perhaps the most influential
is Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) description of strategic framing as creating a spiral of
cynicism (a theory for which their text is named) among voters, perpetually weakening
their desire for civic engagement. In their groundbreaking theoretical text, Cappella and
Jamieson (1997) lay out features of substantive and strategic frames that appear in the
empirical work of many subsequent researchers (Lawrence, 2010; Semetko &
Valkenberg, 2000; Devitt, 2002).

Lawrence (2010) appropriates the definitions for her empirical study of game vs.
issue frame in coverage of the health care debate, a strategy that she chooses to employ in
studying randomly sampled news articles as opposed to purposive sampling. Her definitions were adopted with minor caveats geared toward election coverage:

Issue: descriptions of public policy programs or solutions offered by the candidate, descriptions of proposed legislation or other government programs, descriptions of politicians' stands or statements on policy issues.

Game: reference to a politician winning or losing elections, debates, or politics in general, description of campaign or legislative strategies for winning, implications of actions occurring as part of a tactic for winning an election, paragraphs focused narrowly on a particular campaign event or how the crowd responds to a candidate. (Lawrence, 2010; p. 100)

Wimmer and Dominick (2003) point out that the unit of analysis is “the smallest element of a content analysis but also one of the most important” (p. 148). To that end, some attention must be paid to the level to which framing is measured within a text. Devitt (2002), in particular, argues for measuring framing descriptively in texts on the paragraph level, drawing upon the definition of Cappella and Jamieson (1997) that a frame is a linguistically and philosophically autonomous unit, and that multiple frames may appear in a single unit of journalism (Devitt, 2002, p. 451). This research analyzed frames at the paragraph level. Statements from sources were coded based upon their service to the central frame of the story. While coded independently based on their relationship (either political or otherwise) to the race at hand, statements were coded based on the frame they help construct.

An example may be illustrative. Mordecai Lee, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, is quoted in a piece covering third-party
candidates and their chances against U.S. Congressional frontrunners in the 2nd District — a seat vacated by U.S. Senate candidate (at the time) Tammy Baldwin. The reporter introduces Lee as an academic, although there is also mention of his previous time as a Democratic lawmaker. Within the coding structure of this research (found in its entirety in the appendix), he is identified as a nonpolitical source. However, his statement that third-party candidates are like “political fairy tales” reflects their chances of winning an election against bigger spenders with a greater Internet presence. As such, his comments are coded as game-based framing within the story.

Finally, Wimmer and Dominick (2003) point out that reliability is pivotal for content analyses to be worthwhile for the academic community (p. 156). News stories during the same time period from The Salt Lake Tribune were coded by the author and another graduate student, totaling 11 percent (N=12) of the sample size for the entire study, and reliability was measured using Holsti (1969).

**Interreliability Coding**

We coded the same 12 articles from The Salt Lake Tribune independently of each other. The articles were culled from the same dates as those used in the larger comparative study. Holsti's (1969) reliability test calls for taking the number of scenarios the two coders agreed upon and dividing by the total number of possible scenarios. In total, the coders recorded 84 variables independently of each other using the same codebook. In total, the coders agreed on 74 of the decisions, for a Holsti coefficient of .88. Krippendorff (1980) calls for reliability above .7 to indicate a valid test.

For each variable, a Holsti coefficient is provided below:

Political actors as sources = .92
Nonpolitical actors as sources = .92
Total sources = 1.00
Issue paragraphs = .83
Game paragraphs = .83
Other paragraphs = .75
Category with most paragraphs = 1.00

Each of these variables meets the Krippendorff (1980) standard and were used in answering the research questions posed above.

**Literature Review**

A great deal of relevant literature has been produced about the ways different media outlets have presented state-level political news, current trends in the industry resulting from a downsizing of reporters and historical studies on framing at a political level below the federal races.

*State-level political coverage*

There is a long history in the literature of a general disinterest with state-level politics across media platforms. Much of the scholarly attention to this phenomenon occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, when the New Federalism movement increased the scope and responsibilities of state governments (Gerston, 2007). Gormley (1978) notes the vast increase in size of state governments and examines the potential ways local television news outlets may increase their coverage of state politics. He argues such an emphasis on state news is necessary “in view of the importance of an informed electorate in a democracy” (p. 356).

Della Carpini, Keeter and Kennamer (1994) use this normative premise that
greater state-level coverage is desirable to increase voter knowledge and civic engagement. They combine content analysis of newspaper stories and a survey of readers in Virginia. First collecting the number of articles focused on state-level political coverage, and then quizzing readers in those coverage areas on their knowledge of state politics, the researchers find a positive correlation between the two variables. Couple that with the wealth of literature combining political knowledge and participation (Putnam, 2001; Gil de Zuniga, 2012; Kenski & Stroud, 2006), and you have a compelling argument for the vital democratic function of reporting state-level political news.

The decline of statehouse reporting

Consequently, it comes as no surprise journalism trade papers have recently focused on the decline in state government reporting. The American Journalism Review is littered with facts, figures and narratives portending the demise of the state beat. Darroh (2009) cites census data taken by the journal indicating a 32 percent decrease in state-capital reporters nationwide between 2003 and 2009, and points out that the gap is being filled by nonprofit organizations, some with an axe to grind. This inspired Gibbons (2010) to argue that someone needed to step up to the plate and hold state-level politicians in check and not the “agenda-driven state 'news' organizations” that have sprouted in the interim. Indeed, researchers in other fields have placed a high regard on statehouse reporters' ability to root out corruption and hold elected officials accountable. Boylan and Long (2003) use a survey of state government reporters in conjunction with other measures to determine public perceptions and actual rates of government corruption. State-level political news also has been shown to have a moderate-to-strong
agenda-setting relationship with the public, despite the relatively small amount of coverage afforded it (Tan & Weaver, 2009).

_Horse race coverage of state- and local-level elections_

Much of the research attention devoted to the frames used in coverage of political campaigns has been on the national level. When he famously used the horse race metaphor, Broh (1980) was studying presidential elections, a popular target of inquiry for researchers (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Zhao & Bleske, 1998). The argument for this wealth of literature devoted to presidential campaigns contains three justifications: Everyone covers the presidential campaign, everyone is affected by a presidential election, and the races are usually more competitive than local campaigns (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005, pp. 357-358).

In studies of political campaigns and issues at a more localized level, researchers may seek to descriptively investigate a particular state or states to show a trend that may be emerging on a grander scale. Stevens, Alger, Allen & Sullivan (2006) select Minnesota as the source of television news coverage analysis to test the theories of social capital formation and political knowledge. The researchers, selecting an area of relatively high levels of social capital seen in the literature, posit the hypothesis that coverage on Minneapolis and St. Paul television stations would broadcast a high level of substantive campaign news, because “if any state should be well served by its local television stations, it is Minnesota” (p. 63). The researchers lament that news coverage too often strayed from local elections and too often sensationalized the competitive race for president over several close local campaigns, with the implication being that if this is happening in Minnesota, it's likely happening elsewhere (p. 79).
Recent comparative studies of horse race vs. substantive coverage have spread to international coverage, differences between presidential and legislative representatives at the federal level and small-scale, community-based political coverage. Ha (2009) examined the use of the horse race frame between major South Korean and United States newspaper stories about the 2008 presidential election, finding a similar reliance in both countries (though the South Korean newspapers may have simply amplified the effect due to their use of foreign news outlets as a primary source in a plurality of their coverage). Iyengar, Woo and McGrady (2005) conducted a content analysis of Congressional election and presidential election stories, determining what they deemed the “local” congressional stories to be more substantive in nature than those detailing the 2004 campaign between Bush and Kerry. Swafford (2012) focused his analysis on coverage of local campaign coverage in community newspapers (between 2,000 and 50,000 circulation) across Missouri, noting a high level of what he termed “literacy frames,” or those providing essential polling information, over any other kind of frame, including a nearly non-existent presence of horse-race framing.

Limitations, and where to go from here

To date, academic interest in state-level elections has been slanted toward the executive branch and policy issues. Dunn (2009) conducted an agenda-setting analysis comparing the issues broached by Virginia state newspapers and candidates for governor. Lancendorfer and Lee (2010) follow this path of reasoning in their examination of the 2002 Michigan governor's race. McCune (2003), on the other hand, employs content analysis to investigate the way news media and others framed the discussion of teaching evolution in Tennessee schools as a policy question in the mid-1990s.
This research seeks to fill a gap in descriptive framing studies by investigating the use of substantive vs. game-based frames in news coverage of a state and federal election in three competitive states during the 2012 election cycle. The aim is to illuminate the possible effects of decades of downsizing at statehouses on the way election stories are presented, both in terms of the way they are sourced and the predominant theme of the piece. In order to conduct this analysis, terms must be operationalized.

**Definitions**

The research questions single out “daily newspapers in state capitals.” This research specifically pulled print news stories culled from newspapers serving cities where a state legislature is located. This ensured fair geographic representation by establishing a uniform level of interest and devoted coverage to state politics as other levels of government. Research suggests those papers yield the greatest sample size of state-level news (Atwater & Fico, 1986).

Second, the question deals with issues-based framing. Within the theoretical framework laid out, issues-based framing is negatively defined as that which does not adhere to the horse-race frame defined in the above literature review. Bennett (1996) lays out a normative argument for the role of the press in the political process. Specifically, he points out the horse race is an example of the “highly ritualized metaphors” used to construct daily political news (p. 378). In other words, when reporters depend on the horse race frame, they are producing a news narrative, or frame, that scratches an already-exhausted surface of campaign coverage. Issues-based coverage is defined as dependence upon original frames that are driven by election issues, rather than polls or endorsements. Category definitions outlined in the methods section of this proposal are
designed to delineate these two types of stories.

Working from the outline set forth by Fico and Atwater (1986), the research also investigated the number and type of sourcing in each article examined at the state and federal level. Scheufele (1999) describes framing as a construction of reality, and Bennett (1996) argues horse-race coverage provides a metaphoric representation of political reality that relies too often on the same tropes and surface-level description. Voices in a text piece often provide this context and help establish the metaphor. The horse race, typically, has relied upon polls and public opinion experts, whereas issue-based frames pull in authoritative voices on a number of topics, and voters' perceptions of the candidate. Number and type of sources used in each piece provide a broader picture of the type of metaphor each news outlet creates.

State- and federal-level politics requires some clarification as well. In order to control for the influence and prestige of the elected official, analysis was restricted to candidates for the particular state Legislature and that state's U.S. Congressional candidates.

**Findings**

A total of 113 articles from three newspapers were analyzed. Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 show several descriptive statistics. Briefly, 58 stories focused on national races and 55 focused on state-level races were analyzed.

**Figure 5.1 Story type in sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The average length of analyzed articles was 816 words, clocking in at around 20 paragraphs. Monday and Tuesday featured the fewest stories, with eight and 10 analyzed stories, respectively. The most coverage appeared on Sunday, with 27 stories, or roughly one quarter of the sample total, appearing in those editions.

The first research question asked whether the newspapers were using a similar number of total sources in constructing their election stories. An independent sample t test was conducted comparing the mean number of total sources used in the two story categories across all three newspapers. The Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was not significant, so equal variances were assumed. No significant difference was found ($t(111) = .78, p > .05$). The mean number of total sources used in federal-level election stories ($M = 3.29, SD = 2.26$) was not significantly more than the total number of sources.
used in state-level election stories \((M = 3.00, SD = 1.69)\). Full results can be found in figures 5.4 and 5.5. From this analysis, it cannot be said that a significant difference exists between total number of sources used in the two levels of election coverage.

**Figure 5.4 Mean number of sources in federal and state election stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story type</th>
<th>Stories published</th>
<th>Average total sources used</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>2.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.689</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.5 Significance test for difference between sources used in federal, state stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levene's test for equality of variances</th>
<th>t test for equality of means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eq. variances not assumed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research question two drills deeper into the issue of sourcing. It asks whether the variety of sourcing differs in coverage of state and federal elections. To operationalize this question, sources were coded as political and non-political actors when used as sources. Independent sample \(t\) tests were conducted to evaluate the mean total of both types of sources used in stories at the state and federal level across all newspapers. When comparing political sources, the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was not significant, so equal variances were assumed. No significant difference was found \((t(111) = -1.18, p > .05)\). The mean number of political sources used in federal-level election
coverage ($M = 2.22, SD = 1.34$) was not significantly different from the mean number of political sources used in state-level election coverage ($M = 2.51, SD = 1.23$). Full results can be found in figures 5.6 and 5.7. Reporters at the three newspapers used roughly the same number of political sources (just more than 2) in federal legislative election stories as state-level legislative election stories.

**Figure 5.6 Mean number of political sources in federal and state election stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story type</th>
<th>Stories published</th>
<th>Average political sources used</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.7 Significance test for difference between political sources used in federal, state stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's test for equality of variances</th>
<th>$t$ test for equality of means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>.969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eq. variances not assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same test was carried out comparing the means between the two story categories in their use of nonpolitical sources. In this test, Levene's Test for the Equality of Variances was not significant, so equal variances were assumed. A statistically significant difference was found in the mean number of nonpolitical sources used in ($t(111) = 2.1, p < .05$). The mean number of nonpolitical sources used in federal-level election stories ($M = 1.07, SD = 1.4$) outpaced their use in state-level stories ($M = .49, SD$...
= 1.48). Full results can be found in figures 5.8 and 5.9. In other words, more nonpolitical sources were likely to appear in stories on federal elections than state elections. As an answer to research question two, political sources appear with roughly the same frequency, while in federal stories a greater variety of nonpolitical stories were likely to appear in sampled stories.

**Figure 5.8 Mean number of nonpolitical sources in federal and state election stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story type</th>
<th>Stories published</th>
<th>Average nonpolitical sources used</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.9 Significance test for difference between nonpolitical sources used in federal, state stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equal variances assumed</th>
<th>Levene's test for equality of variances</th>
<th>t test for equality of means</th>
<th>Degrees of freedom</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>F: 1.42, Sig: 0.236</td>
<td>t: 2.10</td>
<td>Degrees of freedom: 111</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed): 0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eq. variances not assumed</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>110.4</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final research question deals with story framing. While ratio-level data were collected to investigate this variable in the counting of paragraphs, sampled stories in each category varied in length. Federal stories averaged 22 paragraphs in length, while state stories averaged 18. Therefore, the nominal-level variable identifying the frame employed most prominently in the story was used to explore this research question to control for the paragraph length discrepancy. Because variables were at the nominal level,
A Pearson's Chi-Square Test for Association was conducted. A total of 6 stories did not have a clear frame throughout based upon paragraph totals. Those were removed from this section of analysis for a grand total of 107 stories analyzed ($N = 56$ federal, 51 state).

Prevalence of frame was found to be significantly different between federal and state election stories ($\chi^2(2, N = 107) = 6.33, p < .05$). Federal stories employing game framing significantly outnumbered state stories employing the same frame, and state stories employing an issue-based frame significantly outnumbered federal stories employing the same frame. In the “Other” category, stories were close to their expected totals. In the selected sample, then, federal stories were much more likely to lean upon the game theory than state-level stories, and the opposite was true of issue-based framing. Full results can be found in figures 5.10 and 5.11.

**Figure 5.10 Breakdown of federal, state election stories by prevalent frame**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story type</th>
<th>Frame</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Game</td>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Totals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expected count</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expected count</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expected count</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.11 Chi-Square significance test of prevalent frame differences between federal,
state stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Degrees of freedom</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>6.327</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c²)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>6.404</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of valid cases</td>
<td>107</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The literature review in this paper painted a picture of statehouse reporting on the decline. In speaking with sources at the newspapers analyzed in this study, that picture is realized — to a certain degree. Life imitating academia may be a rarity, but most of the professional journalists who have worked in these newsrooms say that while state-level reporting has become more of a priority, election coverage is still constrained by the demands of individual races. But state reporting on the whole, they say, is on the decline.

At *The Denver Post*, Tim Hoover contributed to coverage that was analyzed in this research. He covered legislative races for state seats in November but is now working for the paper's editorial board. In 2008, four reporters covered the state house in Denver, Hoover said (personal communication, March 26, 2013). By 2012, there were only two names under the masthead listed as statehouse specialists. By contrast, the paper employs one Washington bureau reporter. In elections, however, the number of reporters devoted to politics fluctuates frequently, Hoover said. But the way he described the changes is instructive. Colorado is very much a “purple state” — it was referred to as such in a couple of stories coded for analysis. This leads to lively primaries and general elections. That is to say, close contests. And those close contests invite more reporters into the fray. Despite this, the trend is clear, Hoover wrote in an email: “I will say generally that

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1 0 cells have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.25.
election staffing has gone down.” That is across the board, not simply limited to state elections. But his answers show that, in terms of staffing cuts, decisions are made not at the level of the race, but by the interests of readers — at least, as perceived by editorial staff.

In Madison, Managing Editor Chris Murphy of the Capital Journal said the newspaper has made a renewed commitment to state-level coverage (personal communication, Feb. 8, 2013). The paper has five full-time reporters covering the state house, two who do so regularly, according to Murphy. The paper also had two full-time state political reporters during election cycles in 2010 and 2008, but only one covered elections on a permanent basis, Murphy said. More reporters were brought in to cover the state races as Election Day approached, mimicking the “all hands on deck” approach described at the Post.

The Journal does not employ a Washington bureau reporter, but it has made a more concerted effort to emphasize original political reporting, Murphy said. However, it's impossible in the sample culled for this analysis to ignore the major Senate race that occurred in Wisconsin during the 2012 campaign: Tammy Baldwin vs. Tommy Thompson. The coverage offered by the Capital Times was also significant in that it made repeated use of the Q-and-A format, which comprised a great deal of the paper's state-level coverage. This allowed the candidates to speak directly to the voters, with little editorial intervention. The result was a much more issue-based approach to reporting, allowing candidates to expound upon their policy views (which some did, while others took unabashed potshots at their competitors).
The Kennebec Journal is a bit of an anomaly among the newspapers selected for analysis. It uses pooled coverage of state house reporting from three newspapers under the Maine Today Media label. Maine Today's Deputy Managing Editor Dieter Bradbury said that under new ownership the company has made a renewed commitment to state-level political coverage. In 2008 and 2010, the paper employed only one full-time statehouse reporter. During the 2012 cycle, three reporters shared state house duty under the Maine Today label (Dieter Bradbury, personal communication, April 10, 2013).

Federal news continues to receive relatively fewer resources than state coverage. Only one reporter, Kevin Miller, covers Washington politics for Maine Today. However, no reporters were in Washington in 2010 after the one-person bureau shutdown following the 2008 campaign, Bradbury said.

When it comes to election coverage, Maine Today's practices mimic the “all-hands-on-deck” approach adopted by other newspaper operations in state capitals. “We basically draft people for specific races,” Bradbury said, noting that the process starts ratcheting up in the final fever-pitch weeks of a campaign. By contrast, on the federal level, one reporter handles the coverage most of the time. Miller wrote the majority of the coverage devoted to the three-way race to replace Olympia Snowe in the U.S. Senate.

Maine Today offers a picture of what collaborative coverage can accomplish — often, the work of one reporter, covering a particular part of the state in the legislature, made it into another of the family's publications. The practical extent of coverage is not unlike that of the Spokane Spokesman-Review, which features coverage of both the Washington and Idaho legislatures from two different reporters assigned to Olympia and Boise, respectively. The result is a blend of state-level coverage from reporters with
varying styles and journalistic strategies that provides the reader with a multi-layered understanding of local politics.

The picture offered of political reporting at the state and federal level during an election cycle from the selected publications shows the resources devoted to coverage are often fluid in today's staff-shortened newsrooms. While researchers such as Darroh (2009) point to the macro-level decline in state house reporting through the cutting of staff following legislatures full-time, the picture offered by the three news professionals cited above shows a much more practical and real-world approach to news-gathering once the election season is underway. Specifically, more hands are called on deck when warranted by reader and editor interest. However, all three newspapers do have a greater number of resources devoted to state house coverage than federal coverage.

Staff variety and interest-driven coverage strategies may explain the reason for a lack of significant differences in certain professional practices between journalists covering state-level legislative elections and federal-level elections in the newspapers selected for this study. The similarities may also be a symptom of what Alan Ehrenhalt, an editor previously with Stateline and now with Governing magazine, said is his impression of the skills required to report on politics at varying levels. If you can cover a city council meeting, you can cover the state or U.S. legislatures, he said (Ehrenhalt 2013). The widespread adoption of this creed among reporters working their way up from local to federal coverage could explain the lack of a clear distinction in professional practice between seeking out sources, particularly those with political affiliations.

What of nonpolitical sourcing? The difference between state and federal level reporting was stark. On average, federal stories featured about double the number of
nonpolitical sources compared to state stories. The variable was operationalized as persons in both an unofficial capacity (neighbors, friends, relatives) and official capacity (bureaucrats, scholars and pollsters) without a political axe to grind. Why are they more frequently cited in national stories? The answer could be, simply, there aren't as many nonpolitical resources in more localized races (Parry, Kisida and Langley; 2008). While this study didn't break down the number of nonpolitical sources into professional pollsters and voters or scholars, the dearth of polling data in smaller races (and, when it does appear at the lower levels, it's often commissioned by the campaigns themselves, which can call into question accuracy) could explain the discrepancy.

Another potential explanation is the lack of scholarly interest in state-level campaigns. The study of political science has been shown over and again to follow the model of top-down, national-to-state thinking (Overby, Kazee & Prince, 2004; Herrnson, Stokes-Brown & Hindson, 2007; Cooper & Richardson, 2006). Thus, while investigating state governments may provide fodder for academic publications among intellectual peers, the attention of political scientists has been invariably swayed in favor of federal-level politics at the outset. In other words, for pollsters and academics, eyes are mostly glued to the up-ticket races. Journalists may simply be following suit.

The proliferation of poll data may also explain this study's finding with regard to the final research question. A second portion of the operational definition included mentions of money raised and spent during a campaign. Unlike polling data, state-level campaign finance reports are often just as easy — if not easier — to obtain than Federal Election Commission reports. Maine, Wisconsin and Colorado all have publicly accessible campaign finance records online, suggesting the only barrier to including such
figures in an election story on either level is the framing choice of the writer.

Finally, the game-based operational definition includes any mention of strategy on the part of the candidate. This manifested itself in paragraphs in which candidates tried to link their opponent to an unpopular figure or pander to a specific base of their party within a given constituency. These are all paragraphs that came up in both levels of election coverage. Because each election analyzed was partisan (though some more competitive than others), the opportunity existed for disparagement in every race. Thus, inclusion of these comments and crafting a frame around them proved a consequence of news judgment rather than the partisan nature of the campaign.

These findings, while limited to three specific newspapers during a single election cycle, provide a snapshot that dovetails with previous research on the prevalence of game-based (or horse race) coverage of political campaigns. For example, Kahn (1991) found that U.S. Senate campaigns featured more issues-based coverage compared to the media's depiction of presidential campaigns. Follow-up research (Kahn 1995) showed that Senate candidates received more horse-race coverage attention than gubernatorial candidates, suggesting that type of office (legislative or executive) may be less important in influencing coverage substance than scope of the office (federal vs. statewide). While researchers have continued Kahn's strain of legislative vs. executive election framing (Brown & Jacobson, 2008), little work has been done to drill deeper into potential discrepancies between larger and smaller-scale races, and there has been little bridging of the gap between the mass media and political science disciplines. While limited, this research provides a jumping-off point for similar investigations into that relationship.
Some caveats must be introduced. This research was based on a purposive sampling of newspaper stories in states where legislative races at the state and federal level were competitive. Researchers have shown that varying levels of competitiveness create different levels of media and media consumer interest (Goldenberg & Traugott, 1987). By focusing specifically on state capital newspapers as well, sample findings indicating a greater emphasis on issue reporting may be more due to the fact that reporters have in-depth knowledge of state legislative issues rather than issues before Congress, leading them to lean toward strategic, game-based coverage for higher-profile campaigns. In other words, the issues frame predominance may simply be a function of statehouse reporters writing about what they know and are comfortable relaying to the public — explanations of state policy.

**Conclusions**

This research sought to analyze staff cutting at the state level and its effect on professional practices and the way political stories were told. It did so through the lens of election coverage, where researchers historically have focused their efforts on isolating and quantifying the “horse race” frame found in political coverage. Journalism scholarship historically has shunned the horse race, using its prevalence to explain civic disengagement and cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Burr, & Beckmann, 2001). Researchers contend time spent following the horse race is not spent informing decision-making by covering substantive issues (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

The study showed that of selected newspapers, the game frame was significantly more prevalent in coverage of federal elections, while issues coverage dominated state-level coverage. Given the connection between gamesmanship and cynicism, the findings
suggest readers of statehouse newspapers may develop more pessimistic views of Congress than their state legislature, a theory with some empirical backing (Richardson, Konisky, & Milyo, 2012). This research did not delve into media effects, but future studies could expound upon findings about cynicism at different levels of government and use a similar analysis to evaluate news coverage's contribution to that cynicism. The finding of a discrepancy suggests fruitful outlets for future research into the development of partisanship in America at all levels and the role media plays in this phenomenon.

In addition, the research used the discursive function of journalism as outlined by de Tocqueville (2003) in its assessment of professional practices by journalists at statehouse newspapers. The power of the newspaper, de Tocqueville said, lies in its ability to bring democratic minds together and foster the creation of civil society. In election coverage, the inclusion of more quoted sources and those traditionally outside the realm of politics enables robust discussion unfettered by political spin. This research took as a premise the decline in statehouse reporting and evaluated whether a decline in resources for state coverage was associated with any variance in source-seeking, based on the assumption that statehouse reporters would be stretched thin by newsroom realities and unable to keep pace with the coverage afforded federal candidates.

The newspapers sought out in this project offered a different picture of state campaign coverage. The approach at each newsroom was more of an “all hands on deck” strategy than placing the burden on full-time statehouse reporters, who were for the most part less numerous than they had been in previous election cycles. The findings of this research must be painted by this pragmatic, realistic depiction of the strategies for covering elections at various levels. Staffing decisions are made based on editorial and
reader interest and incorporate various personnel in news production, rather than simply title or expertise.

This may explain the agreement in total sourcing and political sourcing used in stories on both federal and state legislative campaigns in the newspapers sampled. However, a discrepancy was found in the number of nonpolitical sources used in race coverage. This suggests a lower volume of unaffiliated sources providing input on state-level races in the pages of the newspaper. However, because nonpolitical sources were coded in one catch-all category, it is impossible from this research to determine whether this is a consequence of a lack of professional experts on state legislative campaigns or specific journalistic practices. A more widespread study specifically delineating scholarly and nonscholarly sources would be able to answer this question much more fully.

The lack of nonpolitical voices, however, suggests politicians and their surrogates at the state level have firmer control of the discourse than federal political actors. This could have consequences for the discursive ability of readers and their ability to hold elected officials accountable. Future studies could examine source dependence and its effect on readers' ability to engage with a story and their perceptions of the outlet's trustworthiness. Is it the purpose of the newspaper to simply relate what was said, or to evaluate what was said based on the reaction of witnesses and other sources in the know based on the topics? This is a question that would be best answered by consequent questions to readers following a descriptive study like this.

Future research beckoned by this study includes an analysis of newspapers in dissimilar markets should be analyzed using the same framework on a larger scale. This will get at the heart of the question whether geographic and metaphoric proximity to the
state capital produces more substantive, issues-based news framing as that illustrated in the selected newspapers.

To get a fuller picture of staffing cuts across times, coverage should be analyzed historically along with staffing numbers to find potential correlation. Each of the newspapers targeted in this study experienced some kind of staffing change, whether it was a glut or a cut, since the 2008 election cycle. Perhaps the best way to conduct such research would be to quantify total average sourcing during the time intervals, to see if a greater emphasis was placed on seeking out voices to tell political stories as newsrooms were in flux. A historical analysis would also negate the effects of a particularly close or high-interest campaign, to see if voter attention and prominence of the race has any effect on newsroom practices. Such research would give newsrooms a better idea of the direct impact staff-cutting measures have on their news coverage quality, and whether the discrepancy found in this research is merely a consequence of the races in the states chosen or a national trend.

As a consequence of the “all hands on deck” approach, news stories could be broken down by author/reporter, to see if those who have less experience covering politics rely on a certain type of frame more often than their seasoned counterparts. Perhaps, as an election cycle grows more frantic and more inexperienced journalists enter the coverage fray, some change takes place on the frame dependence and sourcing.

Finally, this framework could be used outside of the traditional election cycle, simply to see if statehouse coverage during times without so many reporters covering the beat leads to a change in reporting practices as seen through the journalism produced. This research suggests in election cycles, the deleterious effects of staff shrinkage are
mitigated by a warm bodies approach. Perhaps, after an election cycle, the dust clears on a single reporter who finds his hands full with too many stories to cover, leading to a change in his habits and the quality of work produced.

This study paints a significant but incomplete picture of the type of news coverage offered in targeted areas where state government maintains prominence and reporters are sensitive to the issues affecting the state. Discrepancies in professional practices and the framing of campaign stories were found, but the prevalent narrative of the empty desks at the statehouse bureau was not supported as a reason for this discrepancy. In fact, issues-based framing was much more prevalent in state-level election stories produced at bureaus than federal-level campaigns. This should give us some comfort that statehouse bureaus are not shirking their advantage in covering state politics in a comprehensive, issue-based way. However, the dependence upon political sources in state-level campaign coverage should give caution to reporters crafting their stories based on official messages. While complete agreement in these categories may be impossible and undesirable across both levels of election coverage, the variance found should give writers and editors pause about the effect such discrepancies could have on reader engagement in democratic decision-making and the formation of a civil society.
References


Appendix 1: Codebook

The following is a reproduction of the codebook used to analyze stories for this project.

Coder # (Kip 1; Recruit 2)
Story type # (National 1; State 2)
Article Number: alphanumeric code assigned to each story for each individual newspaper and story type.
Day of the week the story was published: Monday – Sunday, write out in full.
Number of words: The total number of words in the article, as appearing in the Factiva database search return.
Count the number of sources who are quoted or paraphrased as POLITICAL ACTORS. These include the candidate themselves, other elected officials or those who previously held office, campaign workers, those identified with a political party or as a member of a political party, actors or voiceovers in political ads and any other source actively involved in the political process.
Count the number of sources who are quoted or paraphrased as NON-POLITICAL ACTORS. These include non-campaigning voters, neighbors of a candidate, poll workers, state officials or other bureaucrats, academics, rally attendees or any source not otherwise involved in the political process directly.
Add together items 6 and 7 to get a total number of sources quoted or paraphrased in the article. Do not include non-human sources, like journals or reports, unless a name is given and the source can be categorized as POLITICAL or NON-POLITICAL ACTOR from the news story.
Count the number of PARAGRAPHS (including quotes) that present an election in an ISSUE-based way. These paragraphs include: descriptions of public policy programs or solutions offered by the candidate, descriptions of proposed legislation, constituent work (such as lobbying for buildings or new programs in the district) or other programs, or descriptions of a politicians’ stands or statements on policy issues. It could also include insight from a source on the effect of legislation or a policy issue, or an explanation of a character trait or quality of a particular candidate. It could also include fact-checking statements, or attempts to investigate the source of a political statement or charge made by one candidate against an opponent. In a Q-and-A format, it would include questions asked about specific policy measures and where a candidate stands on the issue. (see Lawrence, 2010; p. 100)
Count the number of PARAGRAPHS (including quotes) that present an election in a GAME-based way. This includes reference to a candidate winning or losing elections, debates, or politics in general, description of campaign or legislative strategies for winning an election, mentions of poll results, mentions of money spent or raised, paragraphs focused narrowly on a particular campaign event or how a crowd responds to a candidate. It may also include discussion of district boundaries and the process of redistricting and how they’ll affect a campaign. It may also include charges from a candidate about the activities or statements of their opponent.
or any attempt to cast the campaign as a fight, battle or conflict without qualification or fact-checking. In a Q-and-A format, the category would include questions aimed at playing up divisiveness between the parties, questions about strategy or those posed about the campaign outlook. (see Lawrence, 2010; p. 100)

Count the number of PARAGRAPHS (including quotes) that fall outside these two categories. These can be mentions of upcoming debates or campaign functions (but not descriptions, those are classified as GAME-based paragraphs), election literacy (where and when to vote, when to register), or exposition providing background information about the candidate with no political implications.

Compare the totals of items 9, 10 and 11. Write the name of the category (GAME, ISSUE, OTHER) with the greatest number of paragraphs in the story.