

Public Abstract

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This thesis explores voting behavior and the impact of presidential popularity on the media's portrayal of presidential candidates and presidential contender's prospects and strategies. While much of the current political science and political communication scholarship contends that public approval of the incumbent administration and its policies plays a substantial role in elections at all levels of government, little research has tested the underlying assumption that voters and the media must judge candidates retrospectively in order for presidential performance to matter. I investigate the retrospective hypothesis, as well as four claims made by scholars regarding the impact of retrospective references on the media's presentation of presidential contenders and candidates' chances of electoral success and campaign tactics, by conducting a content analysis of all retrospective claims in 2,880 articles linking or distancing presidential candidates to President George W. Bush during the 2008 presidential election. I find that, contrary to popular belief, voters and the media are not always looking toward the past when passing judgment on presidential candidates. However, I also find evidence that, when the news media presents candidates in a retrospective light, scholars' expectations regarding the affect of presidential performance on media presentation and candidates' prospects and strategies hold. In short, I argue that all elections are not created equal; the type of race (contested or open) and candidates' status (challenger or incumbent) determine how voters and the media judge candidates in elections, and future research should take into consideration the context for which elections are contested.