THE BUSH EFFECT:

CAMPAIGN NEWS LINKING PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES TO THE

INCUMBENT PRESIDENT

_____

A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Political Science

_____

by

MELISSA STELMACKI

Dr. Marvin Overby, Thesis Supervisor

JULY 2010

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

THE BUSH EFFECT: CAMPAIGN NEWS LINKING PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATES TO THE INCUMBENT PRESIDENT

presented by Melissa Stelmacki,

a candidate for the degree of Master in Political Science,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

_____

Dr. Marvin Overby

_____

Dr. Sean Nicholson-Crotty

_____

Dr. Catherine Rymph

I dedicate this work to the late
Dr. Marshall King,
a man without whom
I would not be where I am today.
May your soul rest in peace
knowing your encouragement,
kind words, and everlasting friendship
forever changed one life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Marvin Overby, whose guidance and support throughout the thesis process was indispensible. You not only aided in the writing process by providing comments and recommendations, but also played the role of mentor, guiding me through the trials and tribulations of academic society. I will always be grateful for your words of encouragement and willingness to go above and beyond to help me create a thesis that I am proud of.

I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Sean Nicholson-Crotty and Dr. Catherine Rymph. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, and providing invaluable guidance and support throughout the thesis process. I am grateful for all you help.

Third, I would like to thank my colleagues and professors at the University of Missouri-Columbia. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. James Endersby, whose Political Communication class allowed me the opportunity to explore the media's role in electoral contests, and develop the original idea behind this thesis. In addition, I would like to thank the eleven graduate students who aided in the coding of the newspaper articles used in the first sample of this study. Without your assistance, I would have been unable to complete the research in a timely manner.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional love and support. You have always stood by me and encouraged me to do what I love, and for that I am forever grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

THE BUSH EFFECT:
CAMPAIGN NEWS LINKING PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES
TO THE INCUMBENT PRESIDENT

Melissa Stelmacki

Dr. Marvin Overby, Thesis Adviser

ABSTRACT

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.

A prominent claim made by scholars of political science and political communication is that the public's perception of a president plays a substantial role in the prospects and strategies of candidates running for office at all levels of government. Many legislative scholars assert that presidential performance greatly affects the outcome of congressional elections, particularly midterm electoral races. They purport that midterm losses in congressional elections are attributed to one of three factors: (1) the absence of a popular president on midterm election ballots; (2) a downturn in the economy attributed to presidential leadership; (3) or an expected drop in presidential approval resulting from unattainable public expectations following the election of a president, or poor presidential performance (Campbell, A. 1960; Tufte 1975; Kernell 1977; Kaplowitz 1972; Campbell 1991, 1993). While legislative theories on midterm losses differ substantially, the underlying assumption remains the same: presidential performance has a great impact on the prospects of candidates running for Congress. In addition, scholarship on congressional seat losses in midterm elections assumes that congressional candidates from both parties must consider the public approval of the incumbent president and his/her policies when contemplating their election strategies (Kernell 1977).

Other scholars of American politics address the relationship between public satisfaction with an incumbent administration and presidential hopefuls' prospects and strategies. While scholarship addressing presidential candidates is rare (Wattenberg 2003), the literature hints at the importance of presidential performance in determining presidential contenders' chances of electoral success and their use of campaign tactics. For example, Richard DeSanti (1953), in his study of the election of 1952, argues that the number one reason for Adlai Stevenson's defeat was the unpopularity of President Harry

Truman and his policies. John Mueller (1970) and Richard Boyd (1972) find a similar connection between the loss of Hubert Humphrey and the presidential candidate's association with Lyndon Johnson's unpopular administration. Furthermore, studies of the 1952 and 1968 elections assert that the campaign strategies of the president's party candidates and their opponents were affected by the public's dissatisfaction with Truman and Johnson. Thus, scholarship on presidential approval and the prospects and strategies of presidential candidates rests on the assumption that presidential performance matters in presidential races.

The focus of political communication scholarship differs from political science literature; students of political communication focus primarily on the media's role in electoral contests. They assume that the media is a central player in determining the strategies and prospects of presidential contenders, and assert that the media sets the agenda for campaigns. However, much like political science scholars, students of political communication observe a relationship between presidential performance and the portrayal of presidential candidates. They assert that journalists are preoccupied with the "horse race" aspects of presidential campaigns, focusing on conflict between presidential contenders rather than more substantive election news coverage (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Graber 2009; Bennett 2010).

According to communication scholars, the news media's obsession with conflict in elections is potentially harmful to the prospects of presidential contenders running on an incumbent president's party ticket. They contend that, because presidential performance is often scrutinized by the news media, candidates from the incumbent's party will find it difficult to escape negative stereotypes that link presidential party

candidates to the incumbent administration. Moreover, presidential contenders from the incumbent's party are faced with the difficult task of diverting media attention away from similarities between their agenda and the president's to a more advantageous discussion of differences between their opponents' views and their own (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Graber 2009).

According to scholars of political communication, the problem candidates running on the incumbent president's party ticket face is especially pronounced in presidential electoral contests where the public is dissatisfied with the presidential performance of the retiring administration (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Graber 2009; Bennett 2010). In such races, the media will present the president's party candidates as antagonists, lowering the chances of electoral success for candidates sharing the president's party label. Moreover, in such elections, the media's focus on similarities between the presidential candidates from an unpopular incumbent's party and the retiring president is presumed to affect the campaign strategies of candidates from both parties (Graber, 2009). Therefore, political communication scholars argue that presidential performance matters, not only in regards to media presentation, but candidate prospects and strategies as well.

The consensus that exists among political science and political communication scholars that presidential approval affects candidate strategies and electoral outcomes is based on the supposition that voters and the media view elections through retrospective lens. That is, scholarship addressing the affect of presidential performance on the media's presentation of candidates, and candidate prospects and strategies assumes that the popularity of an incumbent administration and its policies will matter in elections

because journalists and citizens look to the past when passing judgment on congressional and presidential contenders.

However, scholars offer little proof that the assumption of retrospective voting holds in all electoral contests. Despite the fact that theories regarding the effect of presidential approval on candidate prospects and strategies rests on the retrospective voting hypothesis, scholars of political science and political communication rarely address the claim. In addition, literature tackling whether prospective or retrospective voting plays a larger role in electoral contests is largely limited to economic considerations rather than overall performance of an incumbent administration (MacKuen et al. 1992; Lanoue 1994; Reed and Cho 1998; Malhotra and Krosnick 2007; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Moreover, the few works that focus exclusively on retrospective judgments of candidates derived from the public's satisfaction with the sitting incumbent president offer little evidence that voters and the media pass judgment on candidates based on past performance in all elections (Miller and Wattenberg, 1985; Fiorina, Abramas, and Pope 2003).

In short, many puzzles still remain regarding the affect of presidential performance on the media's presentation of candidates and candidate prospects and strategies. First, does the news media and, by association, the people, judge candidates based on an incumbent's performance in office? Are political science and political communication scholars correct in asserting that the prospects of candidates from the president's party hinge on the popularity of the incumbent administration and its policies? Do the news media portray candidates associated with the president's party negatively in

elections where the public is dissatisfied with the incumbent administration? Are candidates' strategies affected by public approval of the sitting president?

In this thesis, I address these questions by employing a content analysis of news media claims linking and distancing presidential candidates to George W. Bush in the 2008 election. I focus on news media claims in order to address political science and political communication scholars' assertion that presidential popularity affects both the media's portrayal of candidates and candidate strategies and prospects. In addition, I look specifically at link and distance claims to the retiring incumbent president to see if voters and the media are more interested in retrospective or prospective analysis of presidential candidates. Furthermore, I attempt to add to political science literature by studying a recent presidential election; while the relationship between an incumbent president, the media, and presidential candidates is common in political communication scholarship, political science studies addressing the impact of presidential performance on presidential races are rare.

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, when link or distance references are made in the news media, political science and political communication scholars' expectations regarding the affect of presidential performance on media presentation and candidates' prospects and strategies hold. The findings have numerous implications for the future of political science and political communication scholarship. First, the results suggest the assumption that voters and the media view elections through retrospective lens is in need of revision. While evidence may exist that some elections revolve around presidential policy and actions, the results presented here

illustrate that not all elections are retrospective in nature. In fact, the findings, combined with Miller and Wattenberg's study on presidential elections from 1952 to 1980 (1985), suggest the type of election (contested or open), and the candidate's status (incumbent or challenger) are important determinants of whether voters and the news media judge candidates on past or future performance.

My thesis also shows evidence that, when the news media presents candidates in a retrospective light, presidential candidates, especially contenders from the president's party, are affected by public satisfaction with a presidential administration and its policies. Therefore, in elections where voters and the media do judge candidates retrospectively, we can expect presidential performance to play a major role in media presentation and candidate strategies and prospects.

Literature Review: Candidate Prospects and Strategies and the Media

Scholarship focusing on the perception of presidential performance, electoral candidates, and the media comes primarily from two separate, yet interdependent fields, of study: political science and political communication. While the focus of each area is different, the basic assumption is the same: presidential performance has a significant impact on candidate prospects and strategies. In this section, I will discuss the major questions addressed by each field, and provide a review of significant findings. I argue that, although scholars of political science and political communication disagree about what area is most deserving of scholarly attention, they do share the belief that presidential popularity plays an important role in studies of elections and the media.

<u>Perceptions of Presidential Approval</u>

Scholars of legislative politics have made great strides in the study of presidential performance, and its affect on the election prospects and campaign tactics of congressional candidates. Yet, most of what we know stems from one question: Why does the president's party, with few exceptions, lose seats in midterm elections? Many theories are proposed regarding the repeating pattern of midterm loss in congressional elections. Some scholars argue that the president's party loses seats in off-year elections because of the absence of president coat-tails. This surge and decline theory purports that during presidential election years, congressional candidates from the president's party benefit from the popularity of the winning presidential candidate, and higher level of turnout among supporters of the presidential victor. Yet, members of Congress and challengers running on the president's party ticket lose these benefits during midterm election contests because non-presidential races are low-stimulus elections. That is, the president is not on the ballot, and partisan voters turn out at higher rates than less interested citizens. The result is a downward fluctuation in the number of seats held by the president's party following midterm elections (Campbell, A. 1960; Campbell, J. 1991, 1993; Kaplowitz 1972).

Other students of political science, however, argue that midterm losses are a product of the public's evaluation of the president and his/her administration's handling of economic matters. Edward R. Tufte (1975) asserts that, although midterm losses occur regularly from one off-year election to the next, the magnitude of seats the president's party loses is directly related to the president's management of the economy. In other

words, the party of the incumbent will lose substantially fewer seats if the economy is doing well.

Tufte also purports that presidential popularity plays a part in congressional seat loss in midterm elections, but he does not focus much attention on the affect of presidential approval on congressional candidates' prospects and strategies in midterm elections. Samuel Kernell (1977), however, does argue that presidential approval has a considerable influence on candidates' campaign tactics and electoral success. Kernell asserts "the president's public standing is a major component of national shifts of public opinion which shape voting during midterm elections" (p. 48). He contends that citizens believe they understand the president's actions and policies more clearly than candidate positions on issues. Thus, "voting according to one's evaluation of the president becomes a viable and rational procedure for expressing one's own policy preferences and establishing the parameters of future government policy" (p. 49).

Therefore, Kernell asserts that midterm congressional losses can be attributed to citizens' perceptions of presidential performance. In other words, the more popular an incumbent president is, the fewer seats his party will lose. On the other hand, if a president and his/her administration is perceived as performing poorly, members of Congress who share the president's party label will suffer retribution from voters who are dissatisfied.

Kernell also addresses how presidential approval affects candidate strategies. He states:

> The several key sets of political participants—the President, candidates from his own party, and candidates from the opposition party—all adapt their own campaign roles and strategies to the President's level of public approbation. The role of the President as a campaigner, campaign posture

of his party's candidates toward him, and his status as a political issue to opponents are primarily determined by his public prestige (pp. 48-49).

Kernell assumes that congressional candidates' campaign strategies are directly related to public perception of presidential performance. Although he does not test the notion, Kernell's idea that presidential popularity affects the campaign strategies of candidates is compelling on its face, and worthy of further testing.

Although little consensus over what causes the president's party to lose seats in midterm elections has developed in the political science community, political science scholarship concerning congressional midterm losses has made great contributions to the study presidential approval and its affect on candidate prospects and strategies. Campbell's surge and decline theory, Tufte's economic voting model, and Kernell's negative voting theoretical argument all concede that public perception of the incumbent administration plays some role regarding the prospects of congressional candidates. In addition, Kernell makes a compelling argument that public satisfaction with the president and his/her policies affects candidates' campaign tactics. In short, legislative scholars interested in congressional midterm losses believe presidential performance plays a part in determining congressional candidate prospects and strategies. Thus, the underlying assumption is that voters look to the president's past and current performance when making judgments about congressional candidates. However, scholarship regarding congressional midterm losses rarely acknowledges the existence of this supposition.

Presidential Approval and Presidential Candidates

Students of political science have made various references to the affect of presidential performance on certain incumbents and their presidential candidate prospects and

strategies. Richard DeSanti (1953) argues that the number one problem for Aldai Stevenson in the 1952 election was President Truman and the incumbent's low approval rating. He asserts that Stevenson attempted to distance himself from the incumbent administration, but he was unsuccessful due to Truman's insistence that the president campaign on Stevenson's behalf. Truman's role in Stevenson's bid for the presidency altered the grounds in which the election of 1952 was contested. According to DeSanti, the connection allowed Eisenhower to associate Stevenson with Truman and the president's policies, and run on an effective slogan for change. Eisenhower's slogan "time for a change" took "deep root and was nourished by the fear" that Truman was incapable of handling the issues of the time, "and by the belief that Stevenson was not sufficiently independent of the President to give the country a 'real change' in Washington" (p. 142).

John Mueller (1970) and Richard Boyd (1972) find a similar relationship between the unpopularity of an incumbent administration and the election bid of a presidential candidate from the president's party in the election of 1968. They assert that one of the reasons Hubert Humphrey lost his election bid for president was his association with the Johnson administration. Boyd purports that the public saw Humphrey and Johnson as a single person, causing Humphrey to pay a severe price for the unpopularity of Johnson and his administration. Doris Graber, a political communication scholar, makes a similar claim regarding the 2008 election (2009). She asserts that John McCain lost the election because Barack Obama was successful in linking McCain to the unpopular president, George W. Bush.

Claims such as these are common in political science literature. Yet, much of the work is qualitative in nature; rarely have scholars systematically tested the assumption that presidential performance affects presidential candidate's prospects and strategies. In fact, studies addressing presidential elections are surprisingly few in number. However, one author does provide an adequate quantitative analysis of this topic: Martin Wattenberg.

Wattenberg (2003) offers a case study of the 2000 presidential elections. In his piece, Wattenberg addresses how Clinton's approval ratings affected presidential candidate Al Gore's prospects and strategies. He finds evidence that Gore made the correct decision to distance himself from the incumbent president. Wattenberg shows that a "link between Gore and Clinton would not have helped Gore's election prospects" (p. 171).

While Wattenberg's quantitative study adds much to the understanding of the relationship between presidential performance and Gore's prospects and strategies in the 2000 election, his work offers little evidence that such a relationship exists in other presidential races. In addition, Wattenberg and other scholars of presidential elections assume that voters give great weight to a retiring incumbent president's past performance when determining their vote choice. Yet, the literature provides little evidence that citizens judge presidential candidates retrospectively.

Presidential Approval, Presentation of Candidates, and the Media

While a majority of political communication scholarship focuses on the media's ability to shape and alter citizens' perceptions of public policy, the president, and candidates (See

McCombs and Shaw 1972; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987; Bartel 1993), some seminal works have made great strides in the understanding of the relationship between presidential popularity, media presentation of candidates, and candidate prospects and strategies. Research in this area focuses on two separate, yet interrelated, questions. First, how do the media address elections and report on presidential candidates? Second, how does media presentation affect candidates' chances of electoral success and campaign tactics?

Much of the political communication literature addressing the former question takes an overtly negative view of the media and its presentation of elections and candidates. Lance Bennett (2010) argues that, when reporting election news coverage, the media focuses on "winners and losers and personalities and personal conflict" rather than centering attention on the larger political picture (p. 41). In other words, the press is more concerned with the horse race, and how candidates' personalities and conflicts fit into the political landscape, than substantive issues.

Doris Graber (2009), and Stephen J. Farnsworth and Robert Lichter (2003) agree with Bennett's negative view of the news media. Graber, like Bennett, finds the news media's presentation of candidates unsatisfactory. She argues that the news media's concern with profits has led journalists to emphasize candidates' shortcomings and conflict among presidential and congressional contenders. Thus, candidates are reduced to incompetent warriors.

Farnsworth and Lichter take an even more critical view of news associations. They assert that the news media have failed to "produce serious, substantive, and evenhanded coverage of presidential elections" (p. 179). Using a content analysis of

television news programs during four presidential election cycles (1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000), they find evidence that the news media does an increasingly poor job of presenting presidential candidates. First, journalists spend a majority of their time discussing horse race aspects of elections, and devote very little energy to coverage focusing on substantive matters. Second, news reporters generally reduce candidates to basic stereotypes. Third, the media likes to focus on the negative. That is, journalists center their news reports on conflict between candidates, and make elections appear more negative than they really are. According to Farnsworth and Lichter, the media's emphasis on candidates' flaws, stereotypes, and conflicts encourage candidates to attack one another in an effort to induce media attention. In summary, Farnsworth and Lichter find evidence that the news media's coverage of presidential elections is wanting.

Political communication scholars argue that the news media's focus on conflict and stereotyping has a substantial impact on the prospects and strategies of presidential contenders. First, candidate stereotypes often reduce presidential contenders to clones of their perspective party and its leaders (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Graber 2009; Bennett 2010). While possibly beneficial for opposition party candidates, presidential hopefuls from the president's party will often suffer from such a connection. The reason for this, political communication scholars assert, lies in the modern relationship between the media and the president. Over the past 40 years, the news media and incumbent administrations have increasingly exhibited an adversarial relationship (Schudson and Tifft 2005); the modern press has professional and financial incentives to attack presidents and their policies (Graber 2009; Bennett 2010). Thus, in presidential elections, candidates affiliated with the incumbent's party are at a disadvantage if the

news media stereotypes the contenders as replicates of the sitting president. In short, because presidential performance is often scrutinized by the news media, candidates running on the incumbent's party ticket will find it difficult to escape negative stereotypes linking their candidacies to the incumbent administration. The problem is most pronounced in elections where the incumbent is perceived negatively by the public (Graber 2009).

Second, political communication scholars purport that presidential candidate strategies are affected by news election coverage. Because presidential contenders from the incumbent's party face the difficult task of diverting media attention away from comparisons with the president's agenda to a more advantageous discussion of differences between their opponents' views and their own, presidential contenders from the president's party are forced to use a defensive strategy throughout much of their campaigns (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Graber 2009).

On the other hand, the news media's focus on conflict and negativity allow opponents of the president's party to initiate an offensive campaign, particularly when the incumbent president is unpopular. The media provides more news coverage to candidates who provide "sound bites" attacking their rivals and promoting conflict than to contenders who offer positive, substantive discussion (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003). Thus, because the media has already established a negative relationship between presidential candidates from the president's party and the incumbent president, rivals are encouraged to attack using references to the similarities between a retiring administration and the president's party candidates. According to Graber (2009), the attack strategy is most effective in elections where public approval of an incumbent president is low.

Political communication scholars have made much progress in advancing the understanding of how the media presents candidates during elections. However, much of the scholarship on the affect of presidential approval on media presentation and how such methods influence candidate strategies and prospects is speculative at best; quantitative evidence that presidential popularity can influence media presentation and, in turn, affect candidates' chances of electoral success and campaign tactics is rare. Moreover, political communication literature on presidential approval, media presentation, and candidate strategies and prospects suffers from the same problem as political science scholarship on similar topics: it ignores the key assumption behind its findings. That is, in order for political communication scholars to assert presidential approval affects the news media's presentation of candidates, and, in turn, the electoral success and campaign tactics of presidential contenders, citizens must show interest in presidential candidates' relationship with the incumbent administration. The media will not present news that society deems socially insignificant (Graber 2009). Thus, only if voters judge presidential candidates on the basis of an incumbent's past performance will the media focus large amounts of election news coverage on presidential candidates' similarities and differences from the incumbent president and his/her policies. Yet, political communication scholars offer little evidence that voters and the media view presidential candidates in a retrospective light in all elections.

Retrospective Voting?

A literature review of political science and political communication scholarship on the relationship between public approval of an incumbent, media presentation of presidential

15

hopefuls, and candidate prospects and strategies shows a basic agreement among scholars that presidential popularity is an important component in studies of the media and electoral contests. While, on its face, this assertion is logical and compelling, a closer look reveals a possible error in the underlying assumption. That is, for presidential performance to matter, citizens and the media must view candidates in all elections through retrospective lens. However, scholars interested in the effect of the public's perception on the media's portrayal of candidates and candidate prospects and strategies often entirely overlook this supposition. Moreover, few works discuss retrospective versus prospective voting behavior based on overall presidential performance, and the small amount of literature that does exist provides little substantiation for the claim that public perception of the presidency plays a major role in all elections.

Most of the literature addressing prospective and retrospective voting is concerned with economic vote choice (MacKuen et al. 1992; Lanoue 1994; Reed and Cho 1998; Malhotra and Krosnick 2007; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). In other words, scholars primarily focus on whether citizens base their vote choice on the state of the economy at the time of an election or "on how they expect conditions to be in the future" (Lanoue 1994, 193). However, a few seminal pieces do address the more sweeping claim that citizens judge candidates on overall presidential performance. Yet, the limited scholarly work available on the topic offers minimal support for the claim that citizens vote retrospectively.

For example, Morris Fiorina, Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope (2003) attempt to explain why Al Gore failed to win the election of 2000 despite scholars' predictions that victory was imminent. They find that Gore's personality was not the cause of his defeat.

Rather, Fiorina et al. assert that the main reason Gore failed was that he did not receive the "historically normal amount of credit for the performance of the Clinton administration" (p. 163). In other words, although Gore was Clinton's vice president, voters did not link Clinton's popular administration to Gore. Thus, Fiorina et al. conclude that citizens voted prospectively in the 2000 election rather than retrospectively, harming Gore's chances of electoral success.

Arthur Miller (1985), in collaboration with Martin Wattenberg, offers a more in depth analysis of retrospective and prospective voting in presidential elections. Using survey data from 1952 to 1980, Miller and Wattenberg make a compelling argument that voters do not always make decisions in presidential elections retrospectively. Rather, they find that "incumbents have been judged primarily on the basis of retrospective performance, challengers on prospective policy, and candidates running in non-incumbent races on prospective performance" (p. 359). Thus, Miller and Wattenberg assert that, while citizens do look toward the past when judging incumbent candidates, voters view challengers and non-incumbents in open races through prospective lens. In short, all elections are not created equally when determining voter behavior; the type of race (contested or open) and candidate status (challenger or incumbent) determine how voters judge candidates in presidential elections.

Miller and Wattenberg offer a compelling argument that contradicts the underlying assumption of political communication and political science scholarship addressing the affect of presidential popularity on media presentation of candidates and electoral contenders' strategies and prospects. However, research in this area is limited,

and many scholars maintain the belief that presidential performance matters in all electoral contests.

Expectations of Retrospective Voting and Unpopular Presidents in Presidential Elections

In the remainder of this thesis, I will attempt to test Miller and Wattenberg's novel claim that voters and the media do not judge candidates in all elections based on the performance of the incumbent administration by conducting a content analysis of retrospective newspaper claims linking and distancing presidential candidates from the unpopular incumbent, George W. Bush, in the open presidential race of 2008. Contrary to popular belief, I suspect the number of link and distance references will be minimal. In other words, I expect that Miller and Wattenberg are correct in asserting that citizens will judge non-incumbent candidates running in open races prospectively. Therefore, the newspaper media will not focus attention on link and distance references to the incumbent administration simply because the people are not concerned with such claims.

In addition to exploring whether voters are more interested in looking to the past or the future when judging presidential contenders, I will test four claims made by political science and political communication scholars regarding the predicted effect public approval of an incumbent administration has on media presentation of presidential candidates and the prospects and strategies of presidential contenders. While I expect retrospective claims to be limited in open presidential races, I suspect that, when candidates are linked and distanced to an unpopular incumbent president, the evidence will support the basic assertions made by political science and political communication scholars.

First, I conform to political communication scholars' notion that retrospective claims linking presidential candidates to an unpopular, retiring president will be presented by the media in a derogatory tone. In other words, if public approval of a retiring administration and policies is low, the public should view the president and his/her policies in a negative light. Therefore, if political communication scholars are correct in asserting a relationship exists between public opinion and media presentation, I suspect that the news media will report any links between an unpopular, retiring president and a presidential candidate in a negative tone. On the other hand, I predict that retrospective news media references claiming a presidential hopeful is distanced from a president whose popularity has wavered will carry a positive undertone.

Second, I test the assertion that presidential candidates running for office on an unpopular incumbent's party ticket will receive more retrospective link accusations than presidential candidates affiliated with the opposition party. I suspect that this is indeed the case. Political communication scholars find that candidate stereotypes often reduce presidential contenders to clones of their respective party and its leaders. Thus, if the news media presents retrospective links to an unpopular president negatively, presidential candidates from the incumbent's party will face a greater burden in attempting to maintain distance from the retiring president.

Third, if retrospective references in the news media linking presidential candidates to an unpopular incumbent do carry negative connotations, then I suspect that presidential candidates from both parties should try to distance themselves from the incumbent president. However, I predict that candidates from the incumbent's party will make more distance claims than opposition party candidates. This hypothesis is

consistent with qualitative studies on past presidential elections. However, I do not believe this phenomenon will exist in all stages of the election cycle. Rather, I expect president party candidates to make few distance claims in the primary stage of elections because they will have to appeal to incumbent supporters, as well as, voters dissatisfied with the administration. Thus, I hypothesize that presidential candidates running for president on the incumbent's party ticket will avoid expressing overt distance claims to the president in the early primaries. Yet, I suspect that the president's party nominee will make more distance statements to the press during the late primaries and general election because he/she has to appeal to the broader public. In short, in the latter stages of the election, media statements made by presidential candidates from the president's party will take a defensive posture.

Finally, I address political communication scholars' claim that opposition party candidates will attempt to link their rivals to an unpopular administration in the press. Political communication scholars purport that the media encourages conflict and provides more news coverage to candidates who attack their rivals than to contenders who take a more passive approach (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003). Therefore, I suspect that opposition candidates will take advantage of the presence of an unpopular incumbent president by making retrospective statements to the press that link presidential contenders running on the president's party ticket to the incumbent administration and its policies.

A Natural Experiment in Retrospective Voting: The 2008 Presidential Election

To test these hypotheses, I focus on retrospective news media claims linking and distancing presidential candidates to Republican President George W. Bush in the

election of 2008. This presidential contest is a good case study for an analysis of political science and political communication scholars' claims regarding retrospective references and the affect of an unpopular, incumbent administration on the media's presentation of presidential candidates and the prospects and strategies of presidential contenders.

First, President George W. Bush and his administration had very low approval ratings at the time of the presidential race. In fact, only 25 percent of the public expressed a favorable opinion of the president's job performance prior to the general election in November 2008 (Saad 2009). Thus, if a strong relationship exists between presidential approval, media presentation of presidential contenders, and candidate prospects and strategies, then retrospective claims should be especially prevalent in an election in which the public is dissatisfied with the incumbent administration.

Second, the 2008 election was the first presidential contest since 1952 in which the president's party nominee, John McCain, was not a member of the incumbent's administration. McCain was the primary rival of Bush in the 2000 election and, according to Charles Lewis and the Center for Public Integrity (2004), neither Bush nor McCain believed the other was capable of handing the presidency. Thus, if retrospective claims are prevalent in the 2008 presidential race, then no evidence exists to support Miller and Wattenberg's theory that voters view candidates in open races through retrospective lens. Rather, a finding of many retrospective claims in a race where the presidential nominee is not a member of the president's administration will only strengthen political science and political communication scholars' assumption that presidential performance matters in all elections.

Third, the presidential contest of 2008 is a prime example of speculation regarding the relationship between an unpopular incumbent and presidential candidate prospects and strategies, and retrospective voting. Scholars and pundits alike have asserted that Barack Obama's successful election bid for the presidency can be attributed, in part, to his ability to link his opponent, John McCain, to President George W. Bush. Graber (2009) states:

> Obama was able to brand himself as the candidate of badly needed change away from current distressed conditions and a champion of the neglected needs of younger voters. Possibly more important, he was also able to brand his Republican opponent, John McCain, as a clone of the unpopular incumbent president. The clone image made it easy to blame McCain as an accomplice in starting the failing Iraq War, and facilitating the disastrous collapse of the country's economy. The clone image put McCain on the defensive through much of the campaign (194).

In other words, scholars and pundits assume that John McCain's prospects and Obama's strategy were greatly affected by the unpopularity of the Bush administration. Moreover, they presume such an effect existed because voters voted retrospectively, based on President Bush's performance in office, rather than prospectively.

Fourth, I assert that the election of 2008 is appropriate for this study for methodological reasons. The news media did not begin keeping valid and complete records of news reports until the early 1990s, and some news outlets did not offer full scripts of newspaper and television news accounts until the early 21st century. Therefore, data on media coverage of elections is simply more available and reliable than in previous electoral contests.

Data and Methods

To test Miller and Wattenberg's claim that the media and voters will judge presidential

non-incumbent candidates retrospectively in open races, I counted all claims in 2,880

newspapers articles linking or distancing presidential candidates to President George W.

Bush. In addition, I coded each retrospective claim for a variety of characteristics to

explore political science and political communication scholars' predictions regarding the

affect of an unpopular incumbent president on media presentation of candidates, and

candidate prospects and strategies.

The content analysis consisted of two stages. First, I sampled 2,160 articles from

6 newspapers: the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, the *Denver*

Post, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The sample was

acquired using the *Newsbank* database, and was generated randomly by computer in

order to create an even distribution of articles in three election periods: the early

primaries (November 1, 2007 to March 14, 2008), late primaries (March 15, 2008 to July

31, 2008), and the general election (August 1, 2008 to November 4, 2008).

Once I obtained the sample, I counted the number of claims linking and

distancing presidential candidates to President George W. Bush with the aid of eleven

research participants. Each coder was assigned a given time period and specific search

terms,[1] and asked to code a sample of 30 articles for each paper. At this stage, coders

were only asked to identify any news media references that overtly stated a link or

distance between a presidential candidate and George W. Bush. A *link reference* is

defined here as any claim that tied a candidate, party, or a member of a candidate's

---

[1] For the early primaries, coders used the search terms "Guiliani or Romney or McCain or Huckabee or Obama or Hilary." The terms "McCain or Obama or Hilary" were used in the search for articles in the late primaries. For the general election, the search terms "McCain or Obama" were sufficient.

campaign to President George W. Bush or his administration. For example, phrases that compared a candidate to Bush using terms such as "similar," "same," "like," "agrees with," "visited" or "voted with" were coded as link references. For *distance references*, articles that connected presidential candidates, parties, or campaign associates with President Bush using words such as "distance," "different," "disagree with," and "unlike," were categorized as claims that intended to separate a candidate, party, or campaign affiliate from the incumbent president.   Because claim, not article, is the unit of analysis for this study, I coded multiple claims in each newspaper piece as separate observations. At the conclusion of the count in the first stage, I discovered 88 references linking presidential candidates to George W. Bush. Because 12 coders participated in the coding process, an intercoder reliability test was performed, indicating a 95% agreement among research participants.

Although I suspected a small number of link and distance claims would be present in newspaper coverage of the 2008 election, I did not expect the count to be less than 100. Because the minimal number of references to presidential candidates and the incumbent administration impedes my ability to conduct an adequate content analysis to test the expectations of political science and political communication scholars, I undertook a second content analysis to increase my sample size.

The articles used in the subsequent analysis were gathered from six additional newspapers: the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Miami Herald*[2]. I coded 120 articles (40 per election period) for each newspaper, for a total sample size of 720

[2] The twelve papers used in the content analysis were chosen in order to provide variation. The *New York Times, USA Today*, and the *Washington Post* were selected based on their national readership. The other nine papers were chosen to account for possible differences in regional reporting.

articles. The second content analysis yielded a count of 52 link or distance references to President Bush. In total, I found 99 articles from a sample of 2,880 with references to presidential candidates and links to and distances from President Bush. The average number of claims per article was 1.5, creating a sample size of 146 claims, with 37 from the early primaries, 62 from the late primaries, and 47 from the general election.

In the second stage of the content analysis, I coded each retrospective claim for a variety of characteristics. Tables containing each variable and its corresponding number of claims analyzed in the second part of the study are presented in Appendix A. In addition, the codebook used for coding link and distance references is located in Appendix B. First, I determined *who made the claim* and *who the claim was about* using a prepared list of 38 candidate, party, citizen, journalist, and party affiliation indicators. I also coded each claim according to *claim theme*. That is, if the link or distance was in reference to Bush's character, policy preferences, ideology, or simply a general link or distance claim to the president. If the link or distance reference was associated with a particular policy preference, I coded the claim according to a list of 20 *policy issues* also available in Appendix B. Of the 146 claims, 56% were general link or distance claims to Bush, 40% were policy references, and 3% were made on the basis of Bush's character. I found no articles that referred to a candidate as having a similar ideology as the incumbent president. For the policy link and distance claims, 28% were in regards to conflict in Iraq or Afghanistan, 23% focused on the economy, 13% dealt with taxation, 12% referred to energy or the environment, and 8% concerned diplomacy, foreign affairs, and international trade. I coded for six other issues, but each was only mentioned in one or two instances.

I also categorized the claims according to whether a link or distance reference was *explicit* or *implicit*. An explicit claim is one in which the link or distance was directly stated. That is, the claim had to use a clear connecting or disconnecting term to be considered an explicit link or distance reference. For example, the assertion in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* stating that "John McCain is the same as President George W. Bush" (News Service, April 21, 2008) is a clearly explicit claim. On the other hand, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter's statement that "McCain did best among those who expressed negative feelings about the Bush Administration, and worse among those who had positive thoughts about the current administration" (Galloway and Kemper, 2008) is an implicit distance reference; although the claim implies that McCain is seen by the public as distanced from Bush, it is not clearly stated. Of the 146 claims, 90% were explicit references.

The last variable I coded for was *tone*. I ascertained the tone of each claim based on whether a claim carried negative, neutral, or positive implications. To measure the tone of each claim, I analyzed the connotations surrounding each reference, including the sentences immediately preceding and following the link or distance claims. For example, Barack Obama's claim, reported in the *New York Times*, that "just like George Bush, John McCain refuses to admit his mistakes" (Powell, 2008) was coded as a negative link to the incumbent president. John McCain's statement, also addressed by the *New York Times*, that he was "very honored and humbled to have the opportunity to receive the endorsement of the President of the United States" (Cooper and Bumiller, 2008) was coded as a positive link to President Bush. A *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* journalists assertion that "President George W. Bush starts raising money for John McCain's

campaign next week" (News Source, May 24, 2008) is a prime example of a neutral tone link to the president. Of the 146 link and distance references, 52% were negative in tone, 29% had positive connotations, and 19% were neutral assertions.[3]

Retrospective Claims in the 2008 Election

As mentioned above, I tested Miller and Wattenberg's theory that citizens do not judge non-incumbent presidential candidates in open races retrospectively by conducting a count of all newspaper claims linking or distancing presidential candidates to George W. Bush in the 2008 election. The findings support my supposition that voters and the media were less interested in a presidential candidates' relationship to Bush than in possible future candidate performance in the White House during the presidential contest of 2008. Of the 2,880 articles I analyzed in this study, I only found 144 link and distance claims in 99 articles. In other words, only 3.4% of the articles in the analysis contained statements concerning the relationship between presidential candidates and the unpopular incumbent administration.

Because news associations have monetary incentives to produce stories that interest audiences, the lack of retrospective claims found in newspaper election coverage in the 2008 election contradicts the underlying assumption of political communication and political science scholars that voters judge candidates in all election based on the presidential performance of the incumbent administration. On the contrary, by employing a count of all link and distance claims to President Bush in the 2008 election, I

---

[3] The claims were also coded for whether an assertion involved a physical relation to Bush (i.e. met with Bush). However, because most of the references were non-physical, and I did not find the results useful for the analysis at hand, they are not reported in the body of the thesis. Yet, a table of physical and non-physical links and distance claims is presented in Appendix A.

find that the media, and by association the people, are less interested in looking to the past and more concerned with the future, at least in open presidential elections. Therefore, my findings support Miller and Wattenberg's conclusion: Voters do not always vote retrospectively.

Retrospective Claims, Presidential Candidates, and an Unpopular Incumbent

Despite the lack of claims present in newspapers in the 2008 election, the basic assertions of political science and political communication scholars regarding the effect an unpopular incumbent has on the media's presentation of presidential candidates and the prospects and strategies of presidential incumbents may offer some value. That is, references in the news media that link or distance presidential candidates to an unpopular incumbent may offer support for four suppositions asserted by scholars: (1) retrospective claims linking presidential candidates to an unpopular retiring president will be presented by the media in a negative tone, and distance references will carry positive undertones; (2) presidential candidates running for office on an unpopular, retiring incumbent's party ticket will receive more retrospective link accusations than opposition party candidates; (3) candidates from both parties will assert distance from the unpopular incumbent, but presidential candidates from the incumbent party will express more distance claims than opposition party candidates in the late primaries and general election; (4) and opposition party candidates will attempt to link their rivals to an unpopular administration in the press.

To test these hypotheses, I performed a series of cross-tabulations using the data I obtained from the content analysis. Because the dependent variable (DV) in the first

hypothesis (link and distance references) is different from the DV used to analyze the other suppositions (who the claim is about), the findings are presented in separate sections.

Presidential Candidates, George W. Bush, and Media Tone

To determine how the media presents presidential candidates linked to or distanced from President Bush, I utilized a cross-tabulation of link and distance claims and tone. The results are presented in Table 1. The findings support political science and political communication scholars' prediction that media references linking presidential candidates to an unpopular incumbent carry an overall negative tone, while distance references are presented positively by the media. The table shows that, of the 94 link references, 74% of the claims that linked a candidate to President Bush held negative connotations. Only 8% of assertions linking presidential hopefuls to the incumbent were addressed positively

Table 1: Tone of Link and Distance Claims in News Media during the 2008 Election Cycle

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Link	70 74%	17 18%	7 8%
Distance	6 12%	11 21%	35 67%

Chi-Square = 67.34   p<0.0001

On the other hand, 67% of the 52 distance claims carried a positive tone, and only 12% of these were reported in a negative context. The chi-square statistic is 67.34, with a p-value of less than 0.001. Thus, the null hypothesis that no relationship exists between link and distance references and media presentation of presidential candidates is rejected. In short, the data show considerable evidence that the media presents presidential candidates linked to an unpopular incumbent negatively, while presidential hopefuls distanced from the incumbent are portrayed in a more positive light.

Party, Presidential Candidates, and Prospects and Strategies

For the remainder of the hypotheses, I employed a series of cross-tabulations to determine the relationship between who the party/candidate link and distance references were about, who made each claim, tone of the claim, and, for the fourth expectation of political science and political communication scholars, election period. I explored both party and candidate link and distance references.

First, in order to establish a broader picture of candidate strategies and prospects, I analyzed the parties of the presidential contenders. The goal here is to offer an overview of the effect an unpopular president has on party behavior before analyzing scholars more specific candidate link and distance campaign tactics and prospects. I believe that such an analysis will aid in setting the scene for an investigation of political science and political communication scholars claims regarding the affect of presidential performance on candidate strategies and prospects.

The Effect of an Unpopular Incumbent on Party Strategy and Prospects

To determine the validity of scholars' claim that a difference between the party of the

president and the opposition party exists in elections where the public is dissatisfied with

the incumbent president, I separated the candidates according to their party affiliation.

Then, I combined the Republican candidate claims with those of the Republican Party,

Republican campaigns, and references to Republican candidates more generally into one

variable: Republicans. I repeated this process for the Democratic Party. For the first

cross-tabulation, I removed citizen and journalists claims from the analysis in order to

present a clearer picture of party strategy. However, I re-inserted citizen and journalist

references, as well as claims made by the incumbent president, in the second and third

tables.

The results regarding the relationship between retrospective link and distance

claims and candidate strategy are reported in Table 2. The results show that, as scholars

Table 2: Link and Distance References by Party in the 2008 Election Cycle

	Link			Distance		
Claim About	Claim Makers			Claim Makers		
	Democrats	Republicans	Total	Democrats	Republicans	Total
Democrats	5 83%	1 17%	6 100%	12 100%	____	12 100%
Republicans	44 94%	3 6%	47 100%	1 6%	15 94%	16 100%
Total	49 92%	4 8%	53 100%	13 46%	15 54%	28 100%

*Number of claims used for analysis = 81

predict, both parties made distance references. Yet, Republicans made slightly more distance claims overall (54%) than their Democratic opponents (46%). Therefore, I find evidence to support the claim that both parties tried to distance themselves from the unpopular incumbent, and some support for the notion that Republicans were more likely to claim distance from President Bush than Democrats.

Table 2 also provides evidence that the opposition party took an offensive posture in the media. Democrats linked their Republican opponents to the incumbent administration on 44 out of 53 occasions. On the other hand, Republicans rarely attempted to link their rival opponents to President Bush. In fact, the president's party only made one link reference tying their Democratic opponents to the incumbent administration. Therefore, I find some support for political science and political communication scholars' assertion that candidates from the president's party take a more defensive posture in the media, while the opposition party employs an attack strategy, particularly when an incumbent administration is unpopular.

In addition to party strategy, the table also illustrates the burden the president's party faces when retrospective claims are made regarding the party's relationship with an unpopular incumbent administration. Out of 53 party link claims, 47 were made in reference to the Republican Party. Thus, as political communication and political science scholarship suggests, the incumbent's party is the recipients of more retrospective link claims to the incumbent than the opposition party. In short, Republicans appear to have had a difficult time escaping their connection to an unpopular incumbent, at least in the news media.

Yet, what about other claim makers? How do journalist and citizen perspectives of the

parties fit into the equation? Table 3[4] includes journalist, citizen, and incumbent link

claims, and provides additional evidence to support the notion that Republicans were

more predisposed to link claims in the media during the 2008 election. Of the 87 link

references, 75 were directed at the Republican Party, while only 12 referred to the

Democrats. In addition, the Democratic Party made most of the link claims directed

toward the Republicans (59%), illustrating once more that Democrats found an offensive

strategy appealing in the 2008 election. Journalists also made a substantial number of

claims linking the Republican Party to George W. Bush (27%), followed by citizens, who

associated the Republican Party with George W. Bush in 10% of the claims. Republicans,

on the other hand, seldom made link references in regards to themselves (4%) or the

opposition party (only two distance claims were reported in which the Republican Party

linked the Democrats to President Bush). Furthermore, President Bush rarely made any

claims connecting the Republican Party to his administration. The findings add

additional support for scholars' supposition that the party of the president is the target of

Table 3: Party Links to President Bush in the 2008 Election

Claim About	Claim Makers					
	Democrats	Republicans	Journalists	Citizens	Bush	Total
Democrats	5	1	4	1	1	12
Republicans	44	3	20	7	1	75
Total	49	4	24	8	2	87

---

[4] To allow for easier interpretation, percentages are omitted from Table 3.

more retrospective link claims than the opposition party.

Finally, to provide evidence for the prediction that the party of the president will avoid distance references in the early primaries, but offer more assertions of distance than the opposition party in the late primaries and general election, I ran a cross-tabulation of link and distance claims and party by election period. The results are reported in Table 4a, 4b, and 4c.[5] The tables provide ample support for scholars' supposition; the Republican Party made no claim in the early primaries that they were distanced from the incumbent president. However, in the late primaries, 8 of the 15 (53%) claims asserting distance between the Republican Party and the retiring incumbent administration came from the Republicans themselves, and in the general election four of seven such claims were made. Thus, evidence is found to corroborate the notion that Republicans in the 2008 election were leery of expressing distance from the incumbent president in the press during the early primaries, but exerted more retrospective distance references than the Democrats in the late primaries and general election.

In sum, the data presented on link and distance references, parties, and election periods supports political science and political communication scholars' assertion that retrospective statements in the press during elections where the public is dissatisfied with the incumbent administration will affect the prospects and strategies of both parties. However, although the data addressing party behavior helps in understanding the overall picture of the relationship between an unpopular administration, media presentation, and presidential candidates, a closer look at presidential contender strategy and prospects is needed to address whether an unpopular incumbent has the affect scholars contend on

---

[5] Once again, to make the data easier to interpret, percentages were omitted. In addition, the data is divided into three tables to clarify the findings.

Table 4a: Party Distances from President Bush in the Early Primaries

Claim About	Claim Makers				
	Democrats	Republicans	Journalists	Citizens	Total
Republicans	7	____	3	1	11
Democrats	1	3	____	2	6
Total	8	3	3	3	17

Table 4b: Party Distances from President Bush in the Late Primaries

Claim About	Claim Makers				
	Democrats	Republicans	Journalists	Citizens	Total
Democrats	1	____	4	1	6
Republicans	____	8	6	1	15
Total	1	8	10	2	21

Table 4c: Party Distances from President Bush in the General Election

Claim About	Claim Makers				
	Democrats	Republicans	Journalists	Citizens	Total
Democrats	4	____	3	____	7
Republicans	____	4	3	____	7
Total	4	4	6	____	14

specific candidate's campaign behavior and chances of electoral success.

The Effect of an Unpopular Incumbent on Candidate Strategies and Prospects

First, to test political science and political scholars claim that retrospective claims and

public dissatisfaction with a retiring incumbent and his/her policies affect individual

presidential candidates' campaign strategies, I ran a cross-tabulation of link and distance

claims to the incumbent administration throughout the election cycle and reported by the

news media according to the target and claim maker of each retrospective assertion. For

this analysis, I omitted references in which journalists, citizens, or the candidates' parties

were the claim makers in order to focus exclusively on campaign tactics. In addition, I

dropped presidential candidates who made two or fewer link or distance references

because the claims are not sufficient to draw conclusions regarding campaign strategy in

the media.[6] The results are reported in Table 5.

The first aspect of the table that stands out in regards to presidential candidates and link

and distance references is that only four presidential candidates—John McCain, Barack

Obama, Hilary Clinton, and Joe Biden—made more than two link or distance references

in regards to themselves or their opponents. Yet, considering that McCain and Obama

became their party's nominee, Clinton was a substantial player in the primaries, and

Biden was Obama's choice for vice president, the results are as expected. In addition, the

absence of link and distance statements by other presidential candidates throughout the

election lends some support for the prediction that Republican candidates in the early

---

[6] Two presidential candidates made two claims throughout the election cycle. Mitt Romney asserted that
John McCain was distanced from the incumbent administration on two occasions. John Edwards
reportedly stated that Clinton was linked to President Bush once, and claimed distance from the
administration in one case. Although interesting, not enough data is available on these candidates to make
conclusions about their campaign tactics.

Table 5: Link and Distance References and Presidential Candidates in the 2008
Election*

	Link					Distance				
Candidate About	Candidate Making Claim					Candidate Making Claim				
	McCain	Obama	Clinton	Biden	Total	McCain	Obama	Clinton	Biden	Total
McCain	2 6%	29 82%	1 3%	3 9%	35 ≈100%	12 100%	___	___	___	12 100%
Obama	1 33%	1 33%	1 33%	___	3 ≈100%	___	4 100%	___	___	4 100%
Clinton	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	5 100%	___	5 100%
Total	3 8%	30 79%	2 5%	3 8%	38 100%	12 57%	4 19%	5 24%	___	21 100%

*Percents do not add up to 100% in all cases due to rounding.

primaries avoided distance references to the incumbent administration. Furthermore, the

link strategy is also nearly non-existent for Republican presidential candidates, which

indicates that presidential candidates running on the incumbent party's ticket chose to

avoid asserting distance from the unpopular incumbent in the press during the early

primaries.

The second noteworthy finding in Table 5 deals with distance references. As

political science and political communication scholarship suggests, presidential

candidates from both parties claimed distance from the unpopular president and his

administration. However, John McCain, the only Republican candidate in the sample,

asserted distance more times (12) than his Democratic opponents, Clinton and Obama,

put together (9). This implies that John McCain, as Graber (2009) asserts, was put on the defensive much of the campaign.

Third, I found support for the supposition that Democratic candidates employed an offensive strategy more often than their Republican counterparts. Of the 38 link claims, McCain only attempted to link one of his rivals, Barack Obama, to Bush once. On the other hand, Barack Obama claimed that McCain was tied to the incumbent administration 29 times. In fact, approximately 82% of the candidate link references directed at McCain came from Obama. Clinton and Biden were also shown to use the link strategy, but much more sparingly.

Finally, the table offers some evidence for the expectation that Republican candidates are more vulnerable to link references than their Democratic rivals. The data shows that of the 38 link claims, McCain was linked to Bush by other candidates 33 times.[7] Yet, how does this proposition hold up when journalists and citizens are included in the analysis? Did journalists and citizens also link presidential candidate John McCain to the Bush administration more than his Democratic rivals? Table 6 addresses these questions.[8]

Table 6 provides additional evidence supporting scholars' prediction that presidential candidates running for office on the president's party ticket are more likely to be linked to the incumbent administration than candidates from the opposition party. The data illustrates that most of the link claims in the press were directed at McCain. In fact, only 6 of the 70 claims, including link statements made by a candidate in regards to his or her own affiliation with the incumbent president, were in reference to Democratic

---

[7] The number does not include links to the incumbent administration in which McCain himself asserted.
[8] Once again, percents are not included in the table to aid in interpretation.

Table 6: Candidate Links to President Bush in the 2008 Election

Claim About	Claim Maker							
	McCain	Obama	Clinton	Biden	Journalists	Citizens	Bush	Total
McCain	2	29	1	3	20	8	1	64
Obama	1	1	1	___	1	___	___	4
Clinton	___	___	___	___	2	___	___	2
Total	3	30	2	3	23	8	1	70

presidential hopefuls. The other 64 link claims were specifically directed at John McCain. Yet, McCain only asserted a link to President Bush, his policies, or his administration in 4% of these cases.

Finally, I assessed the expected relationship between retrospective distance references, presidential candidates, and election period more thoroughly in Table 7a, 7b, and 7c. The findings provide further support for the prediction that presidential candidates from the president's party avoided distance references in the early primaries. In the sample of newspaper reports obtained for this study, only 10 distance claims were made by presidential candidates, journalists, and citizens in the early primaries. However, none of the assertions declaring distance from President Bush came from John McCain or any other Republican candidates. The findings suggest, once again, that presidential hopefuls were unsure of the affect distance references would have in the media on their prospects of obtaining the votes needed to achieve the party nomination.

The data also conforms to the notion that presidential contenders running on the

Table 7a: Candidate Distances from President Bush in the Early Primaries

Claim About	Claim Makers					
	McCain	Obama	Clinton	Journalists	Citizens	Total
McCain	___	___	___	1	2	3
Obama	___	1	___	1	1	3
Clinton	___	___	4	___	___	4
Total	___	1	4	2	3	10

Table 7b: Candidate Distances from President Bush in the Late Primaries

Claim About	Claim Makers					
	McCain	Obama	Clinton	Journalists	Citizens	Total
McCain	8	___	___	7	2	17
Obama	___	___	___	3	___	3
Clinton	___	___	1	___	___	1
Total	8	___	1	10	2	21

Table 7c: Candidate Distances from President Bush in the General Election

Claim About	Claim Makers					
	McCain	Obama	Clinton	Journalists	Citizens	Total
McCain	4	___	___	5	___	9
Obama	___	3	___	1	___	4
Clinton	___	___	___	___	___	___
Total	4	3	___	6	___	13

president's party ticket will assert more distance claims than the opposition party's candidates in the late primaries. In the latter half of the primary election period, McCain claimed distance from President Bush on eight occasions, while Clinton only expressed differences from the incumbent administration once, and Obama made no distance references whatsoever. Evidence for the assertion that Republican candidates will make more distance references in the media during the 2008 general election is less pronounced. McCain and Obama offered comparable amounts of distance references in the general election, with McCain asserting he was different than the Bush administration four times, and Obama claiming distance on three occasions. However, because only 13 distance claims were referenced in the sample of news reports gathered for the analysis, McCain's four references compared to Obama's three claims is slightly supportive of scholars' assertion regarding an unpopular incumbent and the defensive strategies of the presidential candidates running on the president's party ticket.

Thus, the data on link and distance references, presidential candidates, and election periods conforms nicely with the findings regarding the relationship between party and the incumbent administration. Therefore, the results indicate that, while retrospective claims are rare in contested presidential races, political science and political communications scholars' predictions that public dissatisfaction with a retiring, incumbent president affects candidate strategy and prospects hold when the press reports link and distance claims.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this thesis offer much to the study of presidential performance and elections. I have shown evidence that, at least in contested races for the presidency, retrospective claims in the press linking and distancing presidential candidates to an unpopular, retiring president are minimal. In fact, of 2,880 newspaper articles analyzed for this study, I found only 99 articles with 144 claims throughout the election cycle containing references to presidential candidates and their relationship to George W. Bush.

My results support Miller and Wattenberg's theory that voters do not always judge candidates in a retrospective light. Because news associations have monetary incentives to produce stories that interest audiences (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Graber 2009; Bennett 2010), the findings suggest that, in the 2008 presidential election, voters were less concerned with presidential candidates' relationship with the retiring, incumbent administration than the possible future performance of the presidential nominees. In other words, the findings reinforce Miller and Wattenberg's assertion that voters will judge non-incumbent presidential candidates in open races prospectively, not retrospectively.

The discovery that the media and, by association, voters viewed presidential candidates prospectively in the 2008 election is significant. The results suggest that political science and political communication scholars' assertion that presidential performance plays a substantial role in all elections is misguided. In other words, in order for the popularity of a sitting president to affect media presentation and candidate prospects and strategies, voters must judge candidates retrospectively. Yet, my analysis does not support this underlying assumption. Rather, my thesis, combined with Miller

and Wattenberg's study of presidential races from 1952 to 1980, suggests that the type of election (contested or open), and the candidate's status (incumbent or challenger), are important determinants of whether voters and the news media judge candidates on past or future performance. Therefore, I argue that political science and political communication scholarship is in need of revision; all elections are not created equal, and future research should take into consideration the context for which elections are contested.

However, my thesis also shows evidence that, when the news media do present candidates in a retrospective light, presidential candidates, especially contenders from the president's party, are affected by public satisfaction with a presidential administration and its policies. A content analysis of the 144 retrospective claims gathered in 12 newspapers throughout the 2008 election corroborates four predictions of political science and political communication scholars. First, I find support for the claim that retrospective links tying presidential candidates to an unpopular incumbent president are presented by the media in a derogatory tone, while distance references carry an overall positive undertone. Second, the analysis provides evidence that the president's party and candidates running for president on the incumbent's party ticket were more predisposed to link accusations in the news media than the opposition party and its candidates.

Third, I uncovered evidence that, while both parties and their candidates expressed distance from the incumbent administration, Republicans and Republican candidates avoided making distance references to the press in the 2008 early primaries. Yet, an analysis of retrospective claims indicates that the party of the incumbent and presidential contenders running on the president's party ticket did generally make more statements asserting distance from President Bush in the late primaries and general

election. Finally, I find support for scholars' assertion that the opposition party and its candidates will take advantage of the presence of an unpopular incumbent president by making retrospective statements to the press that link presidential contenders running on the president's party ticket to the incumbent administration and its policies. In short, in presidential races where the public is dissatisfied with the current administration, the president's party and its candidates are forced to conduct a defensive campaign strategy, while opponents of the administration are allowed to take a more offensive posture in the media.

Therefore, I find evidence that, when link or distance references are made in the news media, political science and political communication scholars' expectations regarding the effect of presidential performance on media presentation and candidates' prospects and strategies hold. While the low number of claims in the 2008 election race contradicts the notion that presidential performance plays a substantial role in open elections, the results indicate the possibility that an unpopular presidential administration may affect media presentation and candidate strategies and prospects in other elections. That is, in elections where voters and the media do judge candidates retrospectively, we can expect presidential performance to play a major role on the outcome of electoral contests. For example, I suspect that in races where an incumbent is running for re-election, retrospective analysis of the sitting president will have the intended consequences political science and political communication scholars purport. However, more studies are needed to determine if this is indeed the case.

While the findings of this thesis are promising, four caveats are in order. First, this study does not account for actual voter behavior; I did not test voters' reactions to

presidential contenders in the 2008 election, or ask citizens directly why they voted for particular candidates. However, I contend that the news media is a good proxy for voter interest in elections, and, thus, is capable of offering insight into how voters make decisions in elections. Because, as Graber (2009) notes, "what is news depends on what a particular society deems socially significant or personally satisfying to the media audience" (p. 105), we can expect the press to take citizens' views into consideration when presenting the news. In effect, I believe retrospective claims reported in the media offer an adequate analysis of voter considerations regarding candidate selection. Yet, I encourage future scholars to further this study by using survey data to analyze voters' statements and feelings toward presidential candidates in the 2008 elections.

The second caveat deals with candidate strategy. My theory is limited to candidate statements made in the press. Therefore, I am unable to analyze overall candidate strategy. Rather, I can only state that retrospective claims were used by presidential candidates as predicted by political science and political communication scholars in the media during the 2008 election. I suggest that further studies gauge the affect of presidential performance on other campaign activities, such as campaign advertisements. In addition, a content analysis of debates and speeches would offer much in the way of determining candidate strategies outside the realm of the news media.

Third, this thesis by no means predicts that media claims linking presidential candidates to a presidential administration will always harm the prospects of candidates running on the president's party ticket. Like elections, all candidates and voters are not created equal. While retrospective claims may impede on the chances of electoral success for many candidates, some contenders may actually be helped by such

comparisons. Moreover, some scholars note that party is an important determinant in voting behavior, and many voters simply tow the party line, voting for their party no matter how well the incumbent administration is performing (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Kaufman et al. 2008). Therefore, in districts filled with faithful supporters of the president's party, candidates may suffer little from national dissatisfaction with an incumbent administration and its policies.

The final caveat is methodological. My analysis is a case study, focusing on one contested election: the presidential election of 2008. Therefore, while I can offer predictions regarding other presidential races, I am unable to offer direct evidence confirming that races do indeed have the proposed effect. Thus, I encourage scholars to continue research in this area by conducting other case studies and time-series analyses to corroborate my findings. Some questions political science and political communication scholars interested in the affect of presidential performance on media presentation and candidate strategy and prospects should ask: What role does public perception of incumbent administrations have on other elections such as congressional contests or gubernatorial races? Do the media present candidates differently in elections where the public is satisfied with the performance of an incumbent administration? Do the results of this study hold in other open races? Do citizens, as this theory suggests, judge incumbents running for re-election retrospectively? Do my findings hold across time? Answers to inquires such as these may add much to the understanding of American politics and political communication.

In short, while a few caveats exist, this thesis contributes much to political science and political communication scholarship. My study calls into question the notion that

presidential approval of an incumbent administration plays a substantial role in all electoral contests. In addition, I challenge the nearly universal assumption that the media and voters judge candidates retrospectively, not prospectively. I encourage scholars to continue work in this promising field of study; without more research in this area, the true relationship between presidential performance, the media, and candidate prospects and strategies may never be fully realized.

References

Bartel, Larry M. 1993. "Messages Received: The Political Impact of Media Exposure." *The American Political Science Review* 87: 2: 267-285.

Bennett, Lance W. 2009. *News: The Politics of Illusion.* New York: Longman.

Boyd, Richard W. 1972. "Popular Control of Public Policy: A Normal Vote Analysis of the 1968 Election." *The American Political Science Review* 66: 2: 429-449.

Campbell, Angus. 1960. "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 24: 3: 397-410.

Campbell, James E. 1987. "The Revised Theory of Surge and Decline." *American Journal of Political Science* 31: 4: 965-979.

Campbell, James E. 1991. "The Presidential Surge and Its Midterm Decline in Congressional Elections."

Campbell, James E. 1993. *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

DeSantis, Vincent P. 1953. "The Presidential Election of 1952." *The Review of Politics* 15: 2: 131-150.

Erbring, Lutz, Edie N. Goldenberg, and Arthur H. Miller. 1980. "Front Page News and Real World Cues: A new look at agenda setting by the media." *American Journal of Politics* 24: 1: 16-49.

Farnsworth, Stephen J. and S. Robert Lichter. 2003. *The Nightly News Nightmare: Network Television's Coverage of US Presidential Elections, 1988-2000.* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Fiorina, Morris, Samuel Abrams, and Jeremy Pope. 2003. "The 2000 US Presidential Election: Can Retrospective Voting Be Saved?" *British Journal of Political Science* 33: 163:187.

Galloway, Jim and Bob Kemper. 2008, February 6. "Watercooler Ammunition for Republicans: How Tuesday's vote went down." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: *Online*.

Graber, Doris A. 2010. *Mass Media and American Politics*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Iyengar, Shanto and Donald R. Kinder. 1987. *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kaplowitz, Stan. 1971. "Using Aggregate Voting Data to Measure Presidential Coat-Tail Effects." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35: 3: 415-419.

Kaufmann, Karen M., John R. Petrocik, and Daron R. Shaw. 2008. *Unconventional Wisdom: Facts and Myths about American Voters*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kernell, Samuel. 1977. "Presidential Popularity and Negative Voting: An Alternative Explanation of the Midterm Congressional Decline of the President's Party." *The American Political Science Review* 71: 44-66.

Lanoue, David J. 1994. "Retrospective and Prospective Voting in Presidential-Year Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 47: 1: 193-205.

Lewis, Charles and the Center for Public Integrity. *The Buying of the President 2004: Who's Really Bankrolling Bush and His Democratic Challengers—and What They Expect in Return*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2004.

Lewis-Beck, Michael S., William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. 2008. *The American Voter Revisited*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

MacKuen, Michael, Robert Erikson, and James A. Stimson. 1992. "Peasants or Bankers? The American Electorate and the US Economy." *American Political Science Review* 86: 3: 597-611.

Malhotra, Neil and Jon A. Krosnick. 2007. "Retrospective and Prospective Performance Assessments during the 2004 Election Campaign: Tests of Mediation and News Media Priming." *Political Behavior* 29: 249-278.

McCombs, Maxwell E. and Donald L. Shaw. 1972. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *The Political Opinion Quarterly* 36: 2: 176-187.

Miller, Arthur H. and Martin P. Wattenberg. 1985. "Throwing the Rascals Out: Policy and Performance Evaluations of Presidential Candidates, 1952-1980." *The American Political Science Review* 79: 2: 359-372.

Mueller, John E. 1970. "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson." *The American Political Science Review* 64: 1: 18-34.

News Service. 2008, April 21. "Digest." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

News Service. 2008, May 24. "Digest." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

Page, Benjamin I, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Glen R. Dempsey. 1987. "What Moves Public Opinion?" *The American Political Science Review* 81: 1: 23-43.

Powell, Michael. 2008, June 3. "Obama, Awaiting a New Title, Carefully Hones His Partisan Image." *The New York Times*.

Reed, Robert W. and Joonmo Cho. 1998. "A Comparison of Prospective and Retrospective Voting with Heterogeneous Politicians." *Public Choice* 96: 93-116.

Saad, Lydia. 2009. "Bush Presidency Closes With 34% Approval, 61% Disapproval." Retrieved from www.gallup/polls

Schudson, Michael and Susan Tifft. 2005. "American Journalism in Historical Perspective." *The Press*. Ed. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tufte, Edward R. 1975. "Determinants of the Outcome of Midterm Congressional Elections." *The American Political Science Review* 69: 3: 1975.

Wattenberg, Martin P. 2003. "The Clinton Effect in Perspective: The Impact of Retiring Presidents on Their Parties' Chances of Retaining the White House." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33: 1: 164-171.

Table I: Number of Claims by Newspaper

Newspaper	Frequency of claims	Percent of claims
New York Times	28	19%
USA Today	27	19%
St. Louis Post Dispatch	18	12%
Washington Post	14	10%
Boston Globe	13	9%
Houston Chronicle	11	8%
Philadelphia Inquirer	9	6%
Denver Post	7	5%
San Francisco Chronicle	7	5%
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	5	3%
Miami Herald	5	3%
Cleveland Plain Dealer	2	1%
TOTAL	146	100%

Table II: Number of Claims by Election Period

Election period	Frequency of claims	Percent of claims
Early Primary	37	25%
Late Primary	62	43%
General Election	47	32%
TOTAL	146	100%

Table III: Number of Claims by Article Type

Article Type	Frequency of claims	Percent of claims
News/Feature	104	71%
Editorial	29	20%
News Brief	12	8%
Miscellaneous	1	1%
TOTAL	146	100%

Table IV: Number of Claims by Theme of the Article

Theme	Frequency of Claims	Percent of Claims
Issue, Platform, Ideology	43	30%
Candidate Characteristics	21	14%
Horse Race Elements	80	55%
Election Administration	2	1%
TOTAL	146	100%

Table V: Number of Claims by Link and Distance References

Link and Distance References	Frequency of Claims	Percent of Claims
Link	94	64%
Distance	52	36%
TOTAL	146	100%

Table VI: Number of Claims by Directness or Indirectness of Reference

Explicit/Implicit	Frequency of Claims	Percent of Claims
Explicit Reference	131	90%
Implicit Reference	15	10%
TOTAL	146	100%

Table VII: Number of Claims by Tone

Tone	Frequency of Claims	Percent of Claims
Negative	76	52%
Neutral	28	19%
Positive	42	29%
TOTAL	146	100%

Table VIII: Number of Claims by Type of Reference to President George W. Bush

Type of Claim	Frequency of Claims	Percent of Claims
Character	4	3%
Specific Policy	59	40%
Ideology	0	0
General Distance/Link	81	56%
Other	2	1%
TOTAL	146	100%

Tables IX: Policy claims by Type of Policy Mentioned

Policy	Frequency of Claims	Percentage of Claims
Economy	14	23%
Taxation and Revenue	8	13%
Immigration	1	2%
Health Care	1	2%
Social Issues	1	2%
Conflict with Iraq/Afghanistan	17	28%
Defense, Security, War, International Conflict, Terrorism	2	3%
Foreign Affairs, Diplomacy, Trade	5	8%
Environment, Energy	7	12%
Civil Liberties and Rights	1	2%
Natural Disasters	2	3%
Other	1	2%
TOTAL	60	100%

Appendix B

Codebook for Links and Distance References to George W. Bush

Unit of Analysis: Newspaper claim referring to a presidential candidate, political party, or candidate campaign affiliate with incumbent president, George W. Bush

Newspaper
1. New York Times
2. USA Today
3. St. Louis Post Dispatch
4. Denver Post
5. Atlanta Journal-Constitution
6. Philadelphia Inquirer

Election period
1. Early primaries
2. Late primaries
3. General election

Date (YMMDD)

Number of Words

Unique Page
0. no
1. front page
2. web only

Article Type
1. News or Feature
2. Editorial or opinion
3. News brief
4. Miscellaneous: relevant article not covered in categories 1-3

Theme of Article
1. Issue, platform, ideology
2. Candidate characteristics
3. Horse race elements
4. Election administration

Mention
1. Mention of family/relative or close associates but not of one or more candidates
2. Mention of characteristic of at least one candidate
3. Characteristic receives prominent attention in article, two paragraphs or four sentences or more
4. Characteristic is primary focus of article

Similarity or difference
1. Link reference (possible key words: similar, like, agree, same, compares, compatible, voted with, visited, discussed with, etc.)
2. Distance reference (possible key words: distance, different, unlike, dissimilar, contradictory, disagree with, etc)

Claim Maker: Who is making the claim
1. John McCain
2. Mike Huckabee
3. Mitt Romney
4. Ron Paul
5. Fred Thompson
6. Duncan Hunter
7. Rudy Giuliani
8. Alan Keyes
9. Sam Brownback
10. Jim Gilmore
11. Tom Tancredo
12. Tommy Thompson
13. Barack Obama
14. Hilary Clinton
15. John Edwards
16. Bill Richardson
17. Dennis Kucinich
18. Joe Biden
19. Mike Gravel
20. Christopher Dodd
21. Tom Vilsack
22. Evan Bayh
23. Republicans
24. Democrats
25. Libertarian

26. Green Party
27. Journalist
28. Citizen/voter
29. Journalist say general public making claim (general media reference to voter's view of link or distance to Bush)
30. Democratic opponents
31. Republican opponents
32. Democratic campaign (members of campaign staff, campaign advisors, etc)
33. Republican campaign (members of campaign staff, campaign advisors, etc)
34. Republican presidential candidates generally
35. Democratic presidential candidates generally
36. Media generally
37. Bush
38. Other

Claim About: Who claim is in reference to
1. John McCain
2. Mike Huckabee
3. Mitt Romney
4. Ron Paul
5. Fred Thompson
6. Duncan Hunter
7. Rudy Giuliani
8. Alan Keyes
9. Sam Brownback
10. Jim Gilmore
11. Tom Tancredo
12. Tommy Thompson
13. Barack Obama
14. Hillary Clinton
15. John Edwards
16. Bill Richardson
17. Dennis Kucinich
18. Joe Biden
19. Mike Gravel
20. Christopher Dodd
21. Tom Vilsack
22. Evan Bayh
23. Republicans
24. Democrats

25. Libertarian
26. Green
27. Journalist
28. Citizen/voter
29. Democratic opponents
30. Republican opponents
31. Democratic opponent's campaign
32. Republican opponent's campaign
33. Republican presidential candidates generally
34. Democratic presidential candidates generally
35. Other

Physical claim: Whether claim is a physical or non-physical link to Bush. Physical implies actual contact with President Bush
1. Non-physical
2. Physical (example: visited the White House for Bush's approval; also terms such as discussed with, met with, etc. NOT vote)

Policy or character
1. Character
2. Specific policy
3. Ideology
4. General distance or link (distance or link to Bush, but does not specify context)
5. Other

Policy: If specific policy referenced, which policy?
1. Economy, unemployment, inflation, stock market, savings, investment, business, jobs, trade (internal focus)
2. Taxation and revenue
3. Immigration
4. Social Welfare, social security, aged
5. Education
6. Health Care, Medicare, Medicaid
7. Social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, morality issues, family values gender/women's issues
8. Race relations
9. Religion and politics, separation of church and state
10. Conflict in Iraq and/or Afghanistan
11. Defense, security, military, terrorism, war/international conflict (other than related to Iraq and Afghanistan)

12. Foreign affairs, diplomacy, trade with other nations (external focus)
13. Environment, energy
14. Crime, police, personal security, gun control/rights
15. Agriculture
16. Election reform, political reform, budget balancing
17. Civil Liberties and Rights
18. National disasters (floods, hurricanes, tornados, etc)
19. Other, miscellaneous

Explicit or implicit: Is claim stated outright (distance or link reference is obvious), or implied (not directly stated)?
1. Explicit
2. implicit

Tone of link
1. Negative (either negative in tone or followed or proceeded by a negative statement)
2. Positive (either referred to as positive, or followed or proceeded by a positive statement)
3. Neutral