Hostile Media and the Campaign Trail: Perceived Media Bias in the Race for Governor

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Past research on the hostile media effect (HME) indicates that partisans are prone to evaluate media content as relatively biased against their own position. The present study investigates the progression of the HME within the context of a statewide gubernatorial campaign. A 3-wave panel study is used to trace the existence of the HME, as well as the effect’s relationship to other key public opinion indicators. Results indicate that although the HME did exist in terms of respondents’ perceptions of biased media coverage, its subsequent impact on perceived public opinion was minimal when compared with individual biases, such as respondents projecting their own opinions when considering the views of others. Implications are presented and discussed.

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Public trust in the media has been on the decline for many years in the United States, a trend lamented by numerous political and communication scholars (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Putnam, 2000). In a 1972 poll, more than 70% of the American public reported that they could trust the news media to report the news accurately and fairly most of the time, as compared with just 50% in 2005 (Carroll, 2005). With the explosion of available media options, consumers have become more politicized in both their news choices and their perceptions of media credibility. In particular, consumers who identify themselves as Republicans trust far fewer news sources than Democrats, and have turned to more conservative media outlets in increasing numbers (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004).

This decline in media trust, along with the polarization of news audiences (Tsfati & Capella, 2003), provides a vastly different picture than was evident in the media landscape less than a half-century ago. Such changes generate questions about media effects on not only perceptions of bias in the news, but also on public opinion. The hostile media bias, first recognized in the 1980s, has been documented in nonrandom
local (e.g., Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) and random national (e.g., Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gunther & Christen, 1999) samples. The present study extends this line of research by examining the progression of the hostile media effect (HME) within the context of a heated gubernatorial campaign in order to assess the following perceptions: (a) over time, and (b) in a state-level context with a random sample of registered voters.

The hostile media effect

Conceptualizing the effect

The HME broadly describes the tendency for individuals to see news coverage of an issue with which they are highly involved as biased (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). In particular, this bias is perceived to be against one’s own perspective on the issue. For example, a highly involved social conservative might perceive news coverage of a court ruling on gay marriage to be biased against his or her own view, regardless of the nature of the content in the news story.

The HME was initially labeled by Vallone et al. (1985) as the hostile media phenomenon, in which partisans both perceived slant and recalled different information from news coverage consistent with a perceived bias toward their own side of the issue. Vallone et al. exposed both Arab and Israeli students to news coverage of the Middle East conflict, and found that nonpartisans did not perceive bias, whereas partisans perceived it to be more favorable to the opposing viewpoint. Vallone et al. proposed that there was a basic cognitive mechanism at work that prompted partisans to simply see news coverage differently. The researchers grounded their work in the classic Hastorf and Cantril (1954) study, “They Saw a Game,” which found that supporters of different college teams saw the heroes and villains of the game, as well as subsequent media coverage, in very different ways.

Although many perceptual biases are based upon people’s projection of their own opinions onto others, such that they perceive others to share their opinions, the HME captures the opposite phenomenon (Gunther & Christen, 1999). Several potential explanations for this effect have been offered and are outlined in detail below.

Antecedents of the effect

Earlier study by Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) on biased assimilation provided the foundation—along with Hastorf and Cantril’s (1954) study—for future hostile media studies. Lord et al. presented individuals with the exact same evidence, yet those on either side of a debate perceived the evidence in a directionally biased way, depending on their own perspectives. Respondents accepted evidence that supported their own views while simultaneously rejecting evidence that was dissonant with the views they held. The authors argued, “data relevant to a belief are not processed impartially. Instead, judgments about the validity, reliability, relevance, and sometimes even the meaning of proffered evidence are biased by the apparent
consistency of that evidence with the perceiver’s theories and expectations” (Lord et al., 1979, p. 2099). In this sense, although the general public attempts to treat incoming information in a systematic manner, they tend to be greatly influenced by both internal and external factors.

Vallone et al. (1985) offered several other psychological explanations for the phenomenon. One “evaluative” explanation (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001) suggests that partisans see the claims associated with their viewpoint as more credible and accurate than the opposing viewpoint and in turn, perceive unbiased coverage to be unfair or imbalanced. In other words, legitimate arguments made by the opposing side are seen as inferior claims, and therefore less worthy of coverage. Hence, the inclusion of such claims is perceived as unfairly offsetting the balance of the debate. Within the realm of political campaigns, this can often be seen in the disparate reactions to political debates. Pundits and audience members may watch the same interactions, but their views of what was important and worthy of coverage often differ dramatically, with either side typically believing that their favored candidate was the clear winner. Along the same lines, partisans have different standards about what is accurate and what is not.

Two other explanations, which can be labeled as “perceptual” biases (Gunther et al., 2001), draw from theories about selective memory and recall. One possibility is that partisans may recall accurate information, but categorize the majority of recalled items as hostile to their views (e.g., Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). It also is possible that partisans simply remember information that is opposed to their viewpoint better than they recall congruent or balanced information. Perloff (1989) furthered this line of thinking by emphasizing the cognitive processes that underlie the phenomenon. In his research, he found that high involvement with an issue was necessary in order to make information that is incongruent with one’s opinion more salient and more memorable.

There are certain characteristics of highly involved partisans that make them more likely to perceive biased media treatment, particularly when they perceive media outlets to have broad reach. Gunther and Liebhart (2006) outlined several of these characteristics: (a) partisans are sensitive to and relatively concerned about others’ opinions; (b) news media content cues partisans to think about the effect of coverage on others (e.g., Gunther & Christen, 1999; Mutz & Soss, 1997); and (c) partisans tend to perceive others as less well-informed than themselves and ultimately vulnerable to media coverage. As a result, partisans process information in a defensive way, and conclude that even neutral coverage is—in effect—biased in an opposing direction.

One additional differentiation should also be addressed in assessing factors contributing to perceptions of media bias. Individuals tend to remain consistent in party identification. On the other hand, each new election cycle brings with it a new slate of candidates with the obvious exception of incumbents. Although past studies have investigated partisanship as a concept capable of encompassing both political party identification and candidate identification, separate questions about individual
candidate evaluations and party identification will allow us to investigate which of these independent variables will play a more substantial role in creating perceptions of media bias.

H1a: Respondents will view campaign media coverage as biased against their preferred candidate.

H1b: Increasing levels of self-reported partisanship will lead to increasingly greater perceptions of media bias against one’s nominee.

RQ1: Between identification with a political party and specific identification with a candidate, which will be more strongly connected to perceived media bias?

It also is important to consider possible temporal components of the HME. Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) argued that past HME explanations had focused solely on the actual content of presented information with no regard for pre-existing biases or attitudes, and that the cause of the HME might also result from such prior beliefs. This “judgmental heuristic” (p. 167) serves as a mental shortcut, and has less to do with actual media coverage than existing beliefs that the media are biased in one direction or another. The results from Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken’s study provide evidence that these prior beliefs have strong effects on perceived bias of news coverage.

H2: Those who perceive bias in media content at the outset of the campaign will be more likely to perceive bias in subsequent survey waves.

The perceived reach of media content might also impact the HME. In other words, if an individual observes that media content has a broad reach (e.g., The New York Times vs. a small-town weekly newspaper), it is perceived to have a greater impact on others because of the numerical superiority of the audience of larger media outlets. The source of news, as well, has been found to be an important predictor of the HME. Arpan and Raney (2003), in an experiment of the HME among sports news consumers, concluded that the news source was an important predictor of HMEs. In their research, the effect depended on whether the source was listed as a hometown newspaper, a rival newspaper, or a neutral source. Gunther and Schmitt (2004) also found a source effect, such that subjects perceived a nonmedia source (a student essay) to be fairly presented, whereas the same information presented as a newspaper article was perceived to be unfair. These results suggest that the source of information, including characteristics such as the location of the media outlet, the reach of the news content, and the credibility of the source, might produce different effects for various partisans. At the time of our study, a reputable news information website reported that three of the newspapers we asked respondents about were considered major metropolitan newspapers (Ohio Newspapers, 2007), based on their circulation numbers. Because these major metropolitan newspapers have a wider circulation than any other newspapers in the state, we were afforded an approximate reach
categorization, with major metropolitan newspapers in one category, and nonmajor papers, with lower circulation and reach, in a separate category.

RQ2: Based on the greater perceived reach of larger news outlets, will those who read major metropolitan newspapers perceive a greater hostile media effect?

Research has suggested that instead of a true HME, in which highly involved partisans from both sides perceive neutral media coverage to be hostile to their own view, there often exists a relative hostile media effect (RHME) (Gunther, et al., 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002). This relative effect (RHME) occurs when there is divergence between the perceptions of two opposing groups, though it does not require that both groups classify content as objectively hostile to their own views. In other words, both sides could perceive coverage as hostile toward Candidate A, but supporters of Candidate A would perceive the coverage as significantly more hostile than would supporters of Candidate B. This perception of relatively hostile news content (e.g., Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) leads to ideas that coverage will be perceived to be less favorable to one’s own position, relative to the coverage of the other position. In other words, the effect of the RHME, in terms of discrepant perceptions between opposing partisan groups is quite similar to the HME, yet the conceptual route is slightly different.

Although the literature outlined above suggests that much of this bias results from perceptions based on an individual’s own beliefs and attitudes, it is possible that perceptions of bias result from an actual slant in news coverage. Many scholars have examined media content in order to address claims of bias. A meta-analysis of 59 quantitative studies of partisan bias in media coverage of presidential election campaigns concluded that negligible bias existed in newspaper, newsmagazine, and network news coverage (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000). Similarly, Shah, Watts, Domke, Fan, and Fibison (1999) concluded that, although coverage of winning candidates tends to be more favorable, the difference was slight.

Moreover, the claims of media bias in news may be more an effect of the media’s “self-reporting” than of actual slant in news content (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). In their longitudinal examination of both news content and public opinion, Watts et al. concluded that the public perception that the media are liberally biased can be attributed more to the media’s own coverage of this bias. In other words, because the news media adhere to norms of objectivity (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), they tend to report criticism of the news by political pundits, politicians, and the like.

This criticism, in turn, appears to influence the public perception that such a bias actually exists. Eveland and Shah (2003) found that individuals who surrounded themselves with ideologically like-minded others tended to have stronger perceptions of media bias than those who were not in such “safe discussion” networks (p. 113). In this research, the authors concluded that the HME resulted from the interaction of strong partisanship and high involvement, coupled with “biased sampling,” where individual perceptions of media bias were shaped through selective interactions with others. News media’s self-coverage of bias, combined with individuals’ high
involvement in issues and discussions with ideologically similar individuals, makes the HME one of the most robust phenomena in communication research. Yet it is important to point out that this effect is not likely due to actual bias in news coverage. The idea of the RHME, coupled with the notion that stronger partisans are more likely to perceive bias in media coverage, which they perceive to be more influential to the general public, leads to a final hypothesis.

H3: Partisanship and perceived media bias will bidirectionally impact perceived public opinion, such that partisanship will lead to a projection of higher public support for a respondent’s candidate, while perceived media bias will counteract this effect and be negatively related to perceived public support.

Method

We examined the existence and evolution of the HME within the context of the 2006 gubernatorial race in Ohio, a populous state in the Midwestern United States. In order to investigate the manner in which perceptions of media bias changed over the course of the campaign, we utilized a three-wave panel study, in which voters were randomly selected from registration lists provided by the state. At Wave 1 (W1), the sample included 503 registered voters, with a response rate of 18.9%. At Wave 2 (W2), 301 of the W1 respondents were contacted and interviewed. The n for Wave 3 (W3) was 310, indicating that some of the W1 respondents who were not reachable at W2 were interviewed at W3. For the purposes of investigating the evolution of the HME, we chose to only include those respondents who were interviewed during at least two of the panel waves. This means that respondents may have been interviewed at all three waves (W1, W2, and W3) or two of the three waves (W1 and W2 or W1 and W3). After removing those respondents who were only interviewed at W1, the final n for the study was 372.

Of the 372 respondents who were surveyed at multiple points, 54% were female. This is relatively close to U.S. Census figures for Ohio in 2000, which found that 51.4% of Ohioans were female. The average age for our sample was 56.3 years of age, which is higher than the median age of 36.2 according to census data. Our sample was 91.9% White, 5.1% Black, with the remaining respondents identifying themselves as other races or refusing to supply an answer. Census data from 2000 indicates that 85% of Ohioans are White and 11.5% are Black. The mean household income for our sample was approximately $50,000, which is slightly higher than the median household income ($41,000) according to census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Though our sample is not a perfect representation of Ohio’s demographic profile, we were comfortable that these characteristics were representative of the basic make-up of Ohioans, especially considering that registered voters tend to be older on average.

The race we chose to examine pitted the then-sitting Republican Secretary of State, Ken Blackwell, against Democratic Congressman Ted Strickland. Republicans held the governor’s mansion in Ohio for 16 consecutive years, but political scandals associated with the state Republican party leading up to the election under study
assured an interesting contest. We collected W1 data in the days immediately following the primary elections in May of 2006, in which both candidates easily won their party’s nomination.

From the start, the Democratic candidate held a significant lead among those surveyed. When asked to offer a 0–100, thermometer-style rating of each of the candidates, with higher ratings indicating increasingly positive feelings, respondents consistently favored Strickland over Blackwell (W1 Strickland rating: $M = 55.29, SD = 22.92$; W1 Blackwell rating: $M = 46.61, SD = 29.49$), and this difference was statistically significant at W1, $t(350) = 3.68, p < .001$. Strickland’s advantage increased at W2, which was held after the campaigns kicked into full gear around the Labor Day weekend in September of 2006 (W2 Strickland rating: $M = 57.78, SD = 27.89$; W2 Blackwell rating: $M = 42.57, SD = 29.96$; $t(293) = 5.14, p < .001$). Wave 3 occurred in the days leading up to the November election, and little had changed in terms of the relative strength of Strickland’s lead in thermometer-style ratings (W3 Strickland rating: $M = 59.60, SD = 28.27$; W3 Blackwell rating: $M = 43.33, SD = 30.61$; $t(307) = 5.32, p < .001$). 2

Procedure
The survey instrument was a three-wave panel design telephone survey conducted at the outset of the general election campaign in May, a second wave of collection in September, and a final wave in the days immediately preceding the November 2006 general election. A private survey research firm in a large, Midwestern U.S. city conducted these surveys using professionally trained interviewers.

Independent variables
During telephone interviews, respondents were asked various questions related to the upcoming gubernatorial election. In addition to offering ratings for the candidates, interviewees were also asked questions pertinent to politics, including interest in politics both in general (Scale 1–4, with higher scores indicating greater political interest; $M = 3.26, SD = 0.66$) and at the state level ($M = 3.20, SD = 0.71$). We also asked respondents about media use related to the campaign, both in terms of newspaper exposure (Scale 1–4, higher scores indicating more exposure; $M = 2.71, SD = 0.82$ at Wave 1; see Table 1) and attention paid to newspapers (Scale 1–4, higher scores indicating more exposure; $M = 2.99, SD = 0.66$ at Wave 1; see Table 1 for more details).

Dependent variables
The key outcome variable for this study was perceived media bias. We specifically asked respondents if the newspaper they read most often seemed biased against one of the candidates. If respondents said that they detected no bias, no additional questions related to perceived bias were asked. If, on the other hand, respondents reported that they did perceive bias in the newspaper they read most often, we asked them to report which candidate they felt the bias was against, and how much bias
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics of Major Variables</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W1 (n = 372)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scale Min–max</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent variables</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Thermometer rating: Democrat</td>
<td>0–100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thermometer rating: Republican</td>
<td>0–100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived support: Democrat</td>
<td>0–100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived support: Republican</td>
<td>0–100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper use (none–great deal)</td>
<td>1–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ideology (liberal–conservative)</td>
<td>1–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper favors a candidate (count)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate favored (count)</td>
<td>Dem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount favored (Little–great deal)</td>
<td>1–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean calculated perceived biasb</td>
<td>(Democrat–Republican)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent samples t test</td>
<td>Democrats versus Republicans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Because of a clerical error, the perceived support question was not asked during Wave 1 surveys.

bFor the calculated perceived bias score (−3.00 to 3.00), more negative scores indicate an increasing perception that the newspaper seemed to be biased against the Republican, whereas more positive scores indicate perceived bias against the Democratic candidate. Scores of zero indicate no detection of bias for or against either candidate.

*p < .01. **p < .001. Equal variances not assumed for t tests.
they detected, with response options ranging from “Very Little” to “A Great Deal” on a 3-point scale.

With both the candidate-specific bias information (i.e., which candidate the newspaper seemed to be biased against) as well as the perceived degree to which the bias existed, we were able to construct a numerical index of perceived bias ranging from −3 to +3. For this constructed scale, which positioned the candidates at opposite ends, negative values indicated an increasing perception that a newspaper was biased against the Republican candidate, and increasingly positive values indicated that the newspaper coverage seemed biased against the Democratic candidate. A value of zero indicated that no bias was detected.

Results

Existence of the HME

Our first task in terms of analysis was to establish the existence of the HME within our survey sample. One sample t tests with zero as the test value for each wave revealed that both Democrats (W1: \( M = 0.32, SD = 1.26; t(168) = 3.31, p < .01 \)) and Republicans (W1: \( M = -0.35, SD = 1.40; t(173) = -3.30, p < .01 \)) significantly detected bias early in the campaign. At Waves 2 and 3, however, the story began to change, as Democrats (W2: \( M = 0.13, SD = 1.31; t(137) = 1.17, p = .25 \)) did not detect a significant amount of bias as the campaign wore on (Democrats W3: \( M = -0.01, SD = 1.47; t(140) = -0.11, p = .91 \)). At the same time, Republicans (W2: \( M = -0.37, SD = 1.35; t(137) = -3.21, p < .01 \)) continued to detect significant amounts of media bias throughout the campaign (Republicans W3: \( M = -0.58, SD = 1.47; t(146) = -4.78, p < .001 \)). At each wave, as seen in Table 2, the difference between Democrat and Republican perceptions of media bias were statistically significant.

Table 2  Bivariate Correlations for Political Ideology, Perceived Media Bias, and Ratings of Democratic Candidate Relative to Republican Candidate Across Three Survey Waves

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccccc}
& 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 \\
W1: Liberal–conservative (1) & .76** & .80** & .20** & .21** & .15** & .57** & .63** & .61** \\
W2: Liberal–conservative & .78** & .21** & .21** & .22** & .55** & .60** & .60** \\
W3: Liberal–conservative & .17** & .18** & .13* & .50** & .59** & .57** \\
W1: Perceived media bias & .56** & .47** & .24** & .21** & .24** \\
W1: Perceived media bias & .62** & .15* & .28** & .24** \\
W1: Democrat rating & .15* & .23** & .16** \\
W1: Democrat rating & .76** & .73** \\
W2: Democrat rating & .83** \\
W3: Democrat rating & \\
\end{array}
\]

* \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \).
It is interesting to note that while Republicans’ perceptions of bias grew steadily stronger as the campaign wore on, Democrats perceived increasingly less bias, to the point that they reported virtually no detection of bias at W3. This could be attributed to the fact that opinion polls showed the Democratic candidate with an increasingly large lead as the election approached. In other words, media coverage possibly created the perception that the Democrat held an insurmountable lead, and this perception quelled fears among Democrats that biased coverage might influence other voters. Once the race seemed in hand, concerns about media effects seemed to diminish. Our results serve as a good illustration of the “relative” HME, as the difference between the two opposing groups remained significant even as one group’s perception of bias diminished as the campaign reached its conclusion.

**Degree of HME**

The second part of our first hypothesis predicted, beyond simple binary partisan identification, that the degree of partisanship—measured in this case using a 7-point scale for political ideology—would be linked to the amount of perceived bias against one’s favored candidate, such that strong partisans would perceive the most bias. At each of the three waves, it was the case that stronger partisans perceived more bias against their own candidate ($r_{W1} = 0.20, p < .01; r_{W2} = 0.21, p < .01; r_{W3} = 0.13, p < .05$). The more partisan a respondent reported being, the more likely they were to perceive media bias against their candidate for governor.

Our first research question asked whether general political ideology or specific candidate ratings would be more strongly correlated with perceived media bias. In other words, when individuals perceive that their candidate is being unfairly portrayed in the media—or, conversely, that the opposing candidate is being presented in an unjustly positive light—would identification with a certain political ideology represented by the candidate or identification with the actual candidate drive this perception of hostile media coverage? As seen in Table 3, the results are inconclusive. Although the correlations are slightly stronger for candidate-specific ratings as they relate to perceptions of media bias, they are not noticeably different from the correlations between perceived media bias and political ideology. As seen in the correlations displayed in the corners of Table 3, there obviously is a very strong relationship between ideology and candidate evaluation, such that making distinctions between the impacts of the two as competing forces would certainly result in collinearity problems.

Our second hypothesis proposed that respondents who initially perceived bias in media coverage at the outset of the campaign would be more likely to perceive bias in subsequent survey waves. Bivariate correlation analysis revealed that there was in fact a strong link between perceptions of hostile media bias at Wave 1 and Wave 2 ($r = .56, p < .01$), Waves 1 and 3 ($r = .47, p < .01$), and Waves 2 and 3 ($r = .62, p < .01$). These results support our hypothesis as well as previous research (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994) demonstrating that judgmental heuristics may play a major part in perceptions of media bias. That is, although content may vary, it
is possible that individuals come to media presentations with preconceived notions regarding who their paper or television newscast will favor in an upcoming election.

Reach of the HME

Our second research question addressed the possible reach mechanism of the HME. In line with previous thinking regarding the perception of reach—or how many other individuals are thought to be receiving the same information—we wondered whether those reading major metropolitan newspapers would perceive a greater HME because their paper of choice reached more readers than nonmajor newspapers in the state. As seen in Table 4, only a marginal difference was found at W1, $t(172) = 1.80$, $p < .10$. Still, this partially supports the reach hypothesis, wherein readers of larger papers tend to perceive more bias, possibly because they are fearful that the paper will be read by more individuals. However, at W2, though the difference was not significant, the trend was reversed as those reading nonmajor newspapers were more likely to report perceptions of bias.

When considering the candidate-specific directionality of perceived bias (i.e., which candidate did the paper favor, and how much did they favor that candidate?), there was again a significant difference at W1, $t(167) = 2.59$, $p < .05$, indicating that major metro readers perceived their papers to be biased against the Democratic candidate, whereas readers of nonmajor papers tended to see more bias against
Table 4 Ordinary Least Squares Regressions Across Variables Predicting Perceived Public Opinion Regarding the Democratic Candidate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal rating of candidate</td>
<td>0.43*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper exposure</td>
<td>−1.40</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper attention</td>
<td>−0.40</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper type (1 = major; 0 = nonmajor)</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived media bias</td>
<td>−0.54</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model fit

Adjusted $R^2 = .43$  Adjusted $R^2 = .43$

Note: All coefficients are unstandardized.

#p < .10  *p < .001.

the Republican candidate. Yet this particular test may be more indicative of the ideological typology of metropolitan versus nonmetropolitan newspaper readers, as cities and urban areas tend to have greater concentrations of Democrats than rural areas, especially for the state currently under study.

Hostile media and perceptions of opinion

Our final hypothesis assessed the competing nature of individual biases as they relate to perceptions of public opinion. As noted in previous hostile media research, the notion perceptions of bias against one’s own candidate runs counter to other psychological biases, specifically a projection effect, in which individuals tend to see others as more supportive of their own candidate. In other words, the projection effect would lead to thinking that respondents would overestimate support for their own candidate. Hostile media research, on the other hand, illustrates that the same respondents may actually underestimate support for their candidate because of the perceived effect of hostile media accounts on the general public. That is, if individuals perceive the media to be biased against their own candidate, they may perceive that others will be influenced by this biased reporting, and will therefore be less supportive of one’s own candidate.

We chose to assess this relationship using a regression model that accounts for these competing influences—along with key media use variables—to investigate which of these forces better predicts perceived public opinion. The results, displayed in Tables 4 and 5, illustrate that when it comes to which force (i.e., projection effect or HME) is more strongly linked to perceived public opinion, there truly is no contest. For each candidate, we constructed regression models for both W2 and W3 that predicted individuals’ perception of support for the candidate. We included personal ratings of the candidate, media use variables, and perceptions of media bias as predictors in the model. In all four models, personal ratings of the candidates were positive, significant predictors of perceptions of public support. In other words,
Table 5  Ordinary Least Squares Regressions Across Variables Predicting Perceived Public Opinion Regarding the Republican Candidate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal rating of candidate</td>
<td>0.38*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper exposure</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper attention</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper type (1 = major; 0 = nonmajor)</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived media bias</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model fit

- Adjusted $R^2 = .41$
- Adjusted $R^2 = .49$

Note: All coefficients are unstandardized.
* $p < .001$.

the more a respondent supported a candidate, the more that respondent perceived others to support that candidate. Perceived media bias, on the other hand, was a nonsignificant predictor in each of the four models. Our results clearly illustrate that, although the HME is present in our sample, it has little bearing on perceptions of public opinion, especially when personal evaluations of candidates are also included in a predictive model.

Discussion

The primary goal of this research was to examine the existence and evolution of the HME through a statewide, three-wave panel study of voters. By examining perceptions of media bias as these perceptions pertained to a race for the governor’s mansion, we were able to show that the HME was present in individuals’ perceptions of campaign coverage. Those who favored the Democratic candidate were more likely to perceive media as being biased against their candidate, with the exception of Democratic-supporting respondents at W3, who saw media coverage as almost perfectly balanced on the eve of the election. Republicans, on the other hand, saw media coverage as increasingly biased as the election campaign moved forward.

As noted before, during the last few weeks leading up to the election, the outcome of the race, although not a foregone conclusion, was typically seen as favoring the Democratic candidate. Our results indicate that there may be a relationship between the perceived competitiveness of the race and perceptions of hostile media, such that those who are more confident that their candidate will win may be less worried about the opinion of others, and therefore less concerned with how the media presents the candidates. Alternately, it is possible that this reduction in perceptions of hostile media on the part of Democrats could be attributed to editorial board endorsements, typically made by newspapers in the final weeks of a campaign. Although we did not assess editorial content in this study, future research could investigate the link...
between this and other types of media content in assessing the changing nature of hostile media perceptions.

We also investigated the degree to which identification with an ideology and/or a specific political candidate impacts perceptions of media bias. Not surprisingly, we found that those who were at the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum were more likely to perceive the media as being hostile to their candidate. Mechanisms for this linear relationship have been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Gunther & Liebhart, 2006), and our research confirms the notion that those at the extremes tend to perceive and classify media content in ways different from more moderate individuals. Our research also illustrated the fact that hostile media perceptions are at work even among moderate partisans. Past research has typically included the most partisan participants from opposing groups, whereas our study included citizens from across the continuum of political partisanship. Results indicate that the relationship between political partisanship and perceptions of hostile media coverage is basically a linear one, with moderates detecting less bias than hardcore partisans. In this light, the present study can be viewed as a more conservative test of the HME, as the respondents included a more evenly distributed sample across the political spectrum. On the other hand, though we did use panel data for this study, all three survey waves took place within the context of a political campaign. It is possible that we examined the HME at a point when partisan perceptions are more prevalent. Future research should examine comparative hostile media perceptions both within and outside of the campaign timeframe.

By highlighting the strong temporal relationship of hostile media perceptions between waves of our study, we also supported previous arguments (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994) regarding the endurance of the HME. Those who perceived bias early on in the campaign were much more likely to perceive bias later on, suggesting that individuals may use mental shortcuts when assessing the balance or bias of media content from specific media outlets. Whether this effect was content specific or existed mostly in the cognitive processes of respondents was beyond the scope of our study, but previous research (e.g., Eveland & Shah, 2003; Shah et al., 1999) has indicated that perceptions of media bias are related to factors other than actual political content, such as heterogeneity of political discussion networks and media self-reports on bias.

The perceived reach of media outlets has been an area of past investigation within hostile media research. Although we did find a small difference between perceptions of bias among readers of major metropolitan newspapers versus those who read smaller papers, it is likely that such a relationship may have more to do with the readership of metro newspapers in terms of their political ideology. Future research should investigate the forces involved in determining the effect that perceived reach has on perceptions of bias while also controlling for the ideology of media consumers under study.

Perhaps the most striking result of our study was the modeling of perceived support for political candidates. We included individual support, media use variables, and perceptions of media bias as key predictors and found that individual support was by far the best predictor of perceived public support for candidates. In other words,
we found the projection effect to be much stronger than the HME in considering the impact on perceptions of others. News coverage may affect perceptions of public opinion (e.g., the “persuasive press inference” proposed by Gunther et al., 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002) to the extent that individuals ascribe opinions gleaned from media coverage to be representative of the public at large. It must be acknowledged that perceptions of hostile media can also influence individuals’ feelings of trust in media, as well as mistrust in democracy as an institution (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). However, at least in the case of our study, this effect was minimal to nonexistent when compared with the impact of individuals projecting their own opinion when assessing public support for a political candidate.

This study was not without its limitations. Without assessment of the media content in question so that we could affirm or disprove the existence of slanted or biased coverage, the claims we are able to make regarding the true nature of the HME are somewhat limited. However, we did detect the presence of the effect at all points in our panel study. We also chose to limit our survey questions to perceived bias in newspapers. It is quite possible that respondents detected bias in other media outlets, such as local television coverage, political blogs, and other online news sources. As it was our goal to examine the degree to which the HME existed and changed over the course of the campaign, we chose to limit our focus to newspapers covering the campaign. We also must acknowledge that the contest under study was a rather one-sided affair from start to finish. It is possible that the HME would perform differently in a more closely contested race.

This study will not quell the acrimonious debate over whether different media outlets are biased, but it does speak to the overall impact that the perceptions of bias have on individuals in the midst of a statewide gubernatorial campaign. Although citizens tend to perceive that the media treat their candidate with some degree of negative bias, this perception seems to have little effect on those same individuals’ ideas about what the general public thinks of one candidate or another. What does impact perceptions of public assessment of candidates, at least when considering the implications of the present study, is personal assessments of candidates, which are then projected onto the public at large. Although the media may not always present the most even-handed treatment of political candidates and causes, the impact of these distortions or exaggerations seems to be quite minimal in terms of voters’ assessments of public sentiment.

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**Notes**

1 The response rate was calculated using the American Association for Public Opinion Research Response Rate 1 formula. Though the calculated response rate for our sample
is low, recent work by Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, and Presser (2000) demonstrates that lower response rates typically do not result in a significant loss of data quality.

2 Strickland eventually won the election by a sizable margin (60.4–38.8%).

References


