
OBJECTIVE EVIDENCE ON MEDIA BIAS: NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF CONGRESSIONAL PARTY SWITCHERS

By David Niven

Are the media biased? Many sources answer in the affirmative, typically indicting the media for a pro-liberal or pro-Democratic slant. Analysis subjecting these claims to objective testing, using baselines with which to compare coverage, has been lacking. By studying newspaper articles on congressional party switchers (members who have left their political party in mid-term), this research compares coverage when members of both parties have engaged in the same behavior. The results provide little evidence of partisan media bias, and no support for allegations of a pro-liberal or pro-Democratic bias.



In 1995, U.S. Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado announced he was leaving the Democratic Party to become a Republican. Four years later, Sen. Campbell was still angry about media coverage in the aftermath of his party switch. In a 1999 interview, Campbell said that before the switch he had been among the senators receiving the most favorable media coverage. After the switch, Campbell claimed only Bob Packwood (R-Oregon), who had been enmeshed in a sexual harassment scandal, was treated worse by the media. After becoming a Republican, Campbell fumed, "I couldn't pick up a paper without getting raped in the paper."¹ Campbell's explanation for this sinister coverage was a liberal bias that led the media to cover Democrats favorably, Republicans harshly, and former Democrats turned Republicans with unrestrained hostility.

This study answers Campbell's charge by examining media coverage of congressional party switchers leaving both the Democratic and Republican parties. Beyond addressing the question of whether the media are biased in the face of party defections, an argument is advanced that equivalent political behavior provides a necessary baseline for meaningful comparison of political news coverage. Thus, it is precisely in a comparison such as this where the best evidence of media bias or media fairness is to be found.

While Americans depend on conventional media outlets for information regarding politics and government,² we simultaneously believe the processes and participants that bring us the

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news are so inherently flawed that they can only be regarded as biased.³

When the Gallup Poll asked Americans to rate the honesty and ethics of people in various fields, twenty-six occupations were more trusted than “newspaper reporters.”⁴ Only three (car sales, insurance sales, and the advertising industry) were less trusted. Almost nine in ten Americans believe members of the media are regularly influenced by their personal views when covering politics.⁵

This distrust may have dire consequences. Media credibility influences not only how people react to the news,⁶ but also consumption of news,⁷ and even trust in government.⁸ Kohut and Toth argue that the media have “drawn down the reservoir of support to a level that is dangerous to itself and democratic society.”⁹ Lichter and Noyes assert that “everyone loses if political leaders must communicate with citizens via information media that much of the public doesn’t trust.”¹⁰

Given the potential import of media bias beliefs, it is important that credible evidence be assembled to address this concern. Unfortunately, the main line of evidence available to substantiate claims of bias and the main line of evidence available to refute claims of bias suffer from serious methodological limitations. This paper tries to move the discussion forward by offering an objective method for measuring media bias, and presents results based on that method.

Evidence of Bias: Reporters and Their Opinions. Although attention to claims of media bias has certainly exploded in recent years, it is by no means a new source of concern. Dating back to the Roosevelt administration, Rosten showed that Washington reporters were more likely to vote for Democrat FDR in 1936 than was the general public.¹¹ Indeed, Rosten found 64% support for Roosevelt among reporters, with some of those journalists opposed to Roosevelt (6%) preferring the socialist candidate. Follow-up studies have repeatedly found reporters to be more liberal than the general public.¹²

Allegations of liberal bias were amplified in volume and fervor in the aftermath of the 1992 election. A survey of Washington journalists found 89% had voted for Democrat Bill Clinton in the 1992 presidential election, 7% voted for Republican George H.W. Bush, and 2% voted for independent Ross Perot.¹³ Using the same data, Dautrich and Hartley illustrated that reporters, and even editors, were much more likely to vote Democratic, call themselves Democrats, and consider themselves liberals than were the American people.¹⁴ Dennis noted that these results were “trumpeted by conservative critics as proof positive of their worst fears” of media bias.¹⁵

Even though a mountain of supporting evidence can be found showing a preference for the Democratic Party and liberal thinking among U.S. journalists, the meaning of that information is questionable. In short, demonstrating the leftward leaning tilt of journalists does not necessarily establish the leftward leaning tilt of journalism.¹⁶

Both scholars and media practitioners point to the many professional incentives that encourage journalists to detach their ideas from their work. Gans suggested that “Personal political beliefs are left at home, not only because journalists are trained to be objective and

detached, but also because their credibility and their paychecks depend on their remaining detached.”¹⁷ Reeves argued that journalists “are anxious to preserve their own credibility” and “most cannot make a living if they are not seen by sources, readers, viewers, and bosses as trying to be fair.”¹⁸

Thus, Sigal argued that journalists’ opinions are functionally eliminated from the reporting process.¹⁹ “Even when a journalist is in a position to observe an event directly, he remains reluctant to offer interpretations of his own,” Sigal wrote, “preferring instead to rely on his news sources. For the reporter, in short, most news is not what has happened, but what someone says has happened.”²⁰ Shoemaker and Reese suggested the possibility that, even if reporters are liberal, and even if their beliefs do affect their work, it is by no means certain that that work will favor liberals.²¹ They found, instead, that some reporters attempt to compensate for their own preferences to such a degree that their work is deferential to the position they disagree with.

Ultimately, then, surveys of journalists’ personal beliefs must be weighed against a long history of journalism studies that find there is little connection between reporters’ personal political beliefs and the final reporting that emerges under their byline.²² In fact, a greater connection has been found between the personal beliefs of the executives and owners of media operations and the final coverage.²³

Evidence of Unbiased Coverage: Coverage of Democrats versus Republicans. Meanwhile, in the forefront of the argument against media bias are content analyses that document similarities in coverage of Democrats and Republicans, primarily measured in the context of a campaign.

One typical but thorough study is Hofstetter’s analysis of television news coverage of the 1972 presidential election (pitting Republican Richard Nixon against Democrat George McGovern).²⁴ Hofstetter found the overwhelming tone of the coverage was neutral for both Democrats and Republicans. That is, in almost eight in ten stories, negative points were balanced with positive points, or there was no positive or negative angle to the story at all. In effect, “most coverage was neutral or ambiguous.”²⁵ Hofstetter argued that his work “certainly challenges studies that assert strong biases in favor of, or in opposition to, a candidate are present in news coverage.”²⁶

Similarly, Domke and colleagues found little evidence of any partisan imbalance in their massive content analysis of newspaper coverage of the 1996 presidential campaign.²⁷ They tabulated the ratio of positive paragraphs written about each candidate to the number of negative paragraphs written on each. For Democrat Bill Clinton, the ratio was 1.18. For Republican Bob Dole, the ratio was 1.17. Domke’s team characterized their results as clear evidence that Dole’s frequent complaints of media bias against him and his party were off target.²⁸

To be sure, there are many studies that come to conflicting conclusions in finding evidence of imbalance in coverage of the two parties. Studies by Stempel, Graber, and Klein and Maccoby reported robust differences favoring Republicans.²⁹ Meanwhile, Clancey and Robinson, and Frank found equally notable differences favoring the

Democrats.³⁰ And even within studies that conclude partisan bias is not a factor in media coverage, some aspects of the data suggest significant differences. Hofstetter found, for example, that Richard Nixon received more and better coverage of his issue positions during the 1972 campaign than did George McGovern.³¹ Domke and his co-authors found that coverage during some weeks of the 1996 campaign clearly favored Bill Clinton.³²

In light of the conflict that exists within this line of research, D'Allesio and Allen argued that the best available evidence comes when varied works are analyzed together.³³ D'Allesio and Allen therefore created a meta-analysis of fifty-nine studies which analyzed coverage of presidential elections. They include studies with data starting in the 1948 election and ending in the 1996 election.

With the analytical power of all those studies, D'Allesio and Allen report "no significant biases were found for the newspaper industry,"³⁴ "biases in newsmagazines were virtually zero,"³⁵ and there were no more than "insubstantial" differences in TV coverage.³⁶

The studies included in the meta-analysis encompass all manner of tools to quantify political coverage. Some studies employed rulers and stopwatches to capture the exact amount of coverage in newspapers or on TV,³⁷ others created elaborate lists of positive words and negative words to characterize the tone of coverage,³⁸ and others even codified the level of dignity afforded candidates when they are photographed.³⁹ However, the very premise of available studies' conclusions is based on a standard for comparison that is flawed.

The 50-50 Standard. D'Allesio and Allen's partisan comparison, as well as that of most researchers who have considered campaign coverage, is based on the presumption of a 50-50 fairness standard.⁴⁰ That is, given that the United States has two major parties competing for office, fair coverage of those two parties and their candidates would be equal coverage.

As D'Allesio and Allen wrote: "(A) two-party system, which produces two essentially qualified candidates, each campaigning at roughly the same level, should produce events, activities, and discussion in two roughly equal amounts. Thus, coverage should be roughly equal for each side, and any departure from a '50-50' split could be considered a consequence of some kind of bias."⁴¹ In essence, given the assumption that both candidates are equal, the resulting coverage should be equal. But is this assumption reasonable?

Are both parties' candidates likely to be working equally hard for press coverage? Hofstetter argued that one source of difference in coverage of the 1972 presidential candidates was that Richard Nixon did not regularly make himself available to the media, while his opponent, George McGovern, was ceaselessly available to the media.⁴² Indeed, assumptions of equal media effort would have been particularly off the mark in the 2000 primaries, as Republican contender John McCain invited reporters onto his campaign bus and held court for hours on end, while frontrunner George W. Bush limited press appearances to brief, pre-arranged encounters.

Moreover, were two candidates to make the same effort, their ability to successfully communicate a message would no doubt vary. Simon described the great contrast between the 1996 campaign appearances of Bill Clinton and Bob Dole.⁴³ On the issue of crime, for example, Clinton would invariably speak with a phalanx of uniformed police officers behind his shoulder. If the media covered the event, the positive association between Clinton and the police was essentially unavoidable. By contrast, Bob Dole held crime events in such locales as California's Death Row. With the candidate uneasily walking the aisles of the state penitentiary, eyed by humans condemned to death, a reporter would be hard-pressed to document the event in anything but unpleasant words.

Apart from effort and facility with the media, there is the question of qualifications. Why should candidates of varying ability, experience, and ideas receive the same coverage? Surely, in the case of Richard Nixon for one, who ran for president in 1960, 1968, and 1972, each of his major party opponents (John F. Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and George McGovern) was not his equal in all respects, nor were they precise equals of each other. Thus it is hard to presume the media should have treated each of these candidates as the indistinguishable equal of Nixon.

Indeed, some scholars have concluded that while it is useful to document the relative coverage of the parties' candidates, the expectation that coverage be equal is not a reasonable standard upon which to judge fairness.⁴⁴ Instead, the next logical step in the development of media bias research is to seek comparisons in which we can not only observe the treatment of the two parties, but do so in situations in which they have behaved similarly, thus establishing a basis for claiming that fair coverage requires equal coverage.

Issue Studies. Beyond studies of reporters' ideas and campaign coverage, there have been considerable efforts put forward to demonstrate bias in the way issues are presented or framed by the media. Studies focused on the issues of abortion and homelessness, for example, have found that the media adopt a liberal perspective for understanding and framing issues.⁴⁵ Similarly, though, other scholars have used the issues of abortion and hunger to show that the media have a conservative mindset in presenting the issues.⁴⁶ Often these studies hinge on examples the authors find disappointing or distressing, rather than on presentations of falsifiable evidence. Indeed, in assessing much of the work measuring bias in issue coverage, it is difficult to weigh the data because there is no baseline established or asserted to define what the presence of fair coverage might look like.⁴⁷

Ultimately, the two major bodies of evidence on partisan media bias are based in surveys, which do not demonstrate differences in coverage, and in content analyses which do not provide a meaningful baseline for comparison of coverage (and which frequently present conflicting conclusions). To demonstrate the presence or absence of bias in coverage, however, analysts must (1) study actual coverage, and (2) present a baseline of comparison in order to establish parameters for fair and unfair coverage. Here, by comparing coverage when behavior

is equal, we can see if Democrats and Republicans are treated fairly, which is to say, equally.

To analyze coverage in cases of comparable behavior, this research utilizes newspaper coverage of the decision to switch political parties by members of Congress. Switching parties is a momentous political decision, a career-defining decision. The move is subject to critical portrayals of betrayal, or congratulatory portrayals of free-thinking and independence.

More to the point for this research, party switching is an equivalent political behavior that can be used as a fair baseline of comparison. If the media are biased for liberals and Democrats, then their coverage should be more sympathetic to Republicans who are leaving their party than to defecting Democrats. If the media are unbiased, then their coverage should treat the decision of Republicans and Democrats to leave their parties comparably.

Method

The focus here is on the last four members of Congress to switch parties before 1 January 2003. That group includes two Democrats and two Republicans, with one member from each party having switched to the opposing party, and one member from each party having switched to independent status (see Table 1). For each of the four party switchers, coverage is examined beginning seven days prior to their party switching announcement and concluding thirty days after the announcement.

The study goes beyond the national newspapers of note, which Shaw and Sparrow warn are often quite different in coverage and tone from the local papers most Americans typically read.⁴⁸ As such, this study includes original coverage of each of the four party switchers from the newspapers in the Nexis major newspaper database. Additionally, original coverage for each of the four party switchers was also analyzed in available newspapers from their home states.⁴⁹

For three of the four switchers (Forbes, Hayes, and Goode), every available article that mentioned the representative in the relevant period was initially selected for analysis. Given the far greater prominence of Sen. Jeffords, 5% of the articles that mentioned him in the relevant period were randomly selected for analysis.

More than 99% of the articles in the analysis period mentioned the party switch (or the potential for a party switch). Those that did not were removed from further analysis.⁵⁰ Ultimately, there were 157 articles on Forbes, 42 on Hayes, 64 on Goode, and 207 on Jeffords included in the analysis.

The analysis was conducted based on a coder's estimate of the tone of each paragraph. Based on a preliminary examination of coverage of previous party switchers, a group of positive and negative words and frames were assembled to guide the coders. Specifically, paragraphs were coded positive if they suggested the decision to switch parties was appropriate, courageous, done at a personal sacrifice, a benefit to the district and its constituents, indicative of independent thinking, or in some way linked to a positive outcome. Paragraphs were coded negative if they suggested the member had falsely presented himself,

TABLE 1
Recent Congressional Party Switchers

Name	Party Change	Date of Party Switch Announcement	State
Rep. Jimmy Hayes	Democrat to Republican	1 December 1995	LA
Rep. Michael Forbes	Republican to Democrat	17 July 1999	NY
Rep. Virgil Goode	Democrat to Independent	24 January 2000	VA
Sen. Jim Jeffords	Republican to Independent	24 May 2001	VT

betrayed his party or supporters, weakened his political standing, made this decision for selfish reasons, hurt his district or constituents, or was in some way linked to a negative outcome. Paragraphs which centered on a factual description of the decision and process, or which included both positive and negative portrayals of the decision, were labeled neutral. Two trained coders were used.⁵¹

With a score for each paragraph of each article, a ratio of positive to negative articles (positive articles defined as articles with more positive than negative paragraphs; negative articles defined as articles with more negative than positive paragraphs) and positive to negative paragraphs were calculated. The ratio of positive to negative paragraphs among each article's first five paragraphs was also calculated to assess whether the most prominent (and presumably the most likely to be read) information was consistent in tone with the overall coverage. As the examples below illustrate, positive coverage in the face of a party switch extolled such laudatory notions as independence, courage, and political invincibility.

Michael Forbes: "Michael Forbes has changed parties because he believes it is best for his constituents, for the people of New York and for our country," Clinton said. "He is joining a party that welcomes independent thinking and the courage to change." Clinton met at the White House with Forbes about two weeks ago. The president encouraged him to switch his political affiliation, Clinton aides said.⁵²

Virgil Goode: Democrat Delegate Barnie Day, on 5th District Congressman Virgil Goode (who will leave the Democratic Party and run as an independent this year): "The plain truth is, Virgil could get elected running as a Rastafarian here. He polls the moon."⁵³

Jimmy Hayes: Mr. Hayes, first elected from the Seventh District in 1986, said he no longer felt welcome in the

Democratic Party. "The national Democratic Party had no tolerance for everything I love about the independence and individuality of all Louisianians, Democrats, Republicans and independents," he said in a statement.⁵⁴

Jim Jeffords: There's something here about hope. At a stroke, Jeffords made politics seem to be about the right to stand for something, rather than to obey the party line in return for party funds come next election. (As Jeffords' opponents over the years have found to their cost, Jeffords could win re-election if he ran a campaign on the change he found on the floor of his car.) This radical act made it seem as if a vote for either of the parties is a vote for big business—which, given the amount of money being spent on elections these days, is not far off.⁵⁵

Negative coverage, meanwhile, alluded with some frequency to hypocrisy, betrayal, and even mental instability.

Michael Forbes: Mike Forbes likes soup. But he doesn't like corn. So when Forbes, a third-term congressman from New York, found corn in his dehydrated soup-in-a-cup, he had a member of his staff remove every kernel. Picking corn out of soup is a tedious task, even by the standards of Capitol Hill, but members of Forbes' staff were used to such assignments. Many had already seen him explode after an aide was slow to wash a dirty cereal bowl Forbes had left in a sink. Others had heard about the time he lost his temper when a female assistant forgot to drain the water from his canned tuna. Forbes has never been an easy man to work for. Over the course of his first 4 years in Congress, a total of 53 staffers resigned or were fired from his office, a rate of about one a month. Then, two weeks ago, Forbes announced he was leaving the Republican Party and becoming a Democrat. Every member of his staff immediately quit. Many say they are happy to be looking for new jobs. "He's a screamer," says one. "I was afraid of him," says Tina Mufford, his former staff assistant, "afraid he'd go off."⁵⁶

Virgil Goode: "Now that he's shown his true colors and betrayed his Democratic heritage for the 30 pieces of silver, we will be actively recruiting candidates," said Craig Bieber, Virginia Democratic Party executive director.⁵⁷

Jimmy Hayes: "Today, Congressman Hayes told us where he stands," said Jim Nickel, executive director of the state Democratic Party. "He has embraced the radical, right-wing agenda of Newt Gingrich and the House Republicans. Now he must answer to his constituents who thought they were electing a mainstream Democrat."⁵⁸

TABLE 2

Ratio of Positive to Negative Newspaper Coverage for Congressional Party Switchers

	Early Paragraphs (n=2,338)	Overall Paragraphs (n=7,097)	Articles (n=470)
Defected from Republicans	1.16	1.12	1.48
Defected from Democrats	1.21	1.09	1.60

Note: “Early Paragraphs” reflect the results for the first 5 paragraphs of every article. “Overall Paragraphs” reflect the results for all paragraphs. “Articles” reflect the sum tone of the paragraphs within each article.

Jim Jeffords: When Winston Churchill switched from the Tory Party to the Liberal Party in 1904, he said, “Some men change their party for the sake of their principles, others their principles for the sake of their party.” Last week, for the sake of no principle but rather out of personal pique and political petulance, Sen. James Jeffords of Vermont changed political parties.⁵⁹

Results

While the examples above illustrate the sometimes extreme nature of coverage in the face of party switching, the analysis reveals that the overall tenor of the coverage does not appear to be affected by party distinctions.

Indeed, the results, as displayed in Table 2, reveal a startling similarity in treatment of former Democrats and former Republicans. Considering coverage in the first 5 paragraphs of the articles, former Republicans received slightly less than 1.2 positive paragraphs for every negative, while former Democrats received slightly more than 1.2 positive paragraphs for every negative. When considering the entire article, the coverage becomes somewhat less positive, both for the former Republicans and former Democrats. That is, former Republicans received 1.12 positive paragraphs for every negative one, while former Democrats received 1.09 positive paragraphs for every negative one. Neither the first 5 paragraphs nor the overall paragraphs comparison produces a statistically significant difference.

Turning from the paragraph to the article as the unit of analysis reveals that the ratio of positive to negative articles is 1.6 for the defecting Democrats, and almost 1.5 for defecting Republicans. Not only are these numbers similar, but they also suggest that the media cost of leaving a party is not high. The numbers reveal that far more typical than the hypocritical, nonsensical, political suicide portrayal of party switching is portrayal of the defecting member as having noteworthy independence.

TABLE 3

Tone of Local vs. National Newspaper Coverage for Congressional Party Switchers

	Ratio of Positive to Negative Early Paragraphs		Ratio of Positive to Negative Overall Paragraphs		Ratio of Positive to Negative Articles	
	Local (n=1,153)	National (n=1,185)	Local (n=3,336)	National (n=3,761)	Local (n=231)	National (n=239)
Defected from Republicans	1.07	1.37	.99	1.25	.84	2.2
Defected from Democrats	1.14	1.31	1.02	1.20	1.1*	2.2

Note: “Early Paragraphs” reflect the results for the first 5 paragraphs of every article. “Overall Paragraphs” reflect the results for all paragraphs. “Articles” reflect the sum tone of the paragraphs within each article.

*Difference in coverage of “Defected from Republicans” and “Defected from Democrats” statistically significant, $p < .05$, using two-tailed *t*-test.

However, the relatively higher ratio of positive to negative articles, compared to positive to negative paragraphs, appears to reflect a tendency for negative articles to be highly critical. Positive articles, while more prevalent, tend to be more balanced. An article on Michael Forbes, for example, had 9 negative and no positive paragraphs, while using words such as “betrayed” and (treated his staff) “shabbily,” as well as asserting that “he showed absolutely no loyalty;” “He’s high as a kite one minute and screaming at somebody the next,” and that his party switch was “about Michael Forbes getting attention, being in the center, being loved, being touched.”⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the data offer no support for Sen. Campbell’s claim that the media have a double standard for defecting Democrats and Republicans, and instead suggest that newspaper coverage is nearly indistinguishable. Could these results reflect something unique about the papers included in the analysis? Perhaps the national papers included were tilted to favor Democratic/liberal concerns, but happened to be balanced in these results by local papers with opposite inclinations. To address that concern, the data were further divided into local papers and national papers.⁶¹

As Table 3 reveals, separating local and national papers in the analysis does nothing to substantiate claims of anti-Republican bias. In the national papers, defectors from both parties garnered the same ratio of positive to negative stories, and quite similar ratios of positive to negative early paragraphs and overall paragraphs (with none of the three comparisons reaching a statistically significant difference). For local papers, defectors received much the same treatment in the two paragraph ratio measures (difference not statistically significant).

However, those who left the Democratic party received *better* treatment from their local media than those who left the Republican party, a difference that reaches statistical significance (*t*-test, $p < .05$). That is, instead of treating those who desert the Democratic Party worse, as the complaints of Sen. Campbell and many critics of liberal bias in the media would have it, the one comparison in this analysis that shows any evidence of imbalance indicates that former Republicans are treated worse than former Democrats.

More significant, this further breakdown of the results provides no support for the claim of a liberal, pro-Democratic bias in newspaper coverage exacting revenge against former Democrats and rewarding new Democrats. That is, coverage of the two parties' switchers is quite similar, with the one measure that suggests a difference pointing in the direction of better coverage for new Republicans.⁶²

One important difference that does stand out from Table 3 is the more positive tone that emerges from national newspaper coverage than from local. Here, it would seem, local papers have a greater stake in the identity of the member, are more likely to react with skepticism to the announcement that the member no longer fits in his party, and are more apt to give voice to those locals who wish to call their member some variant of Benedict Arnold (Benedict Jeffords, Benedict Forbes, etc).⁶³ National papers, conversely, have less of a stake in the member's past, and appear more willing to give voice to the journey of personal discovery that led to the party affiliation change.

There are hundreds of articles published every year in U.S. newspapers on media bias, most alleging that newspapers favor liberals and Democrats over conservatives and Republicans.⁶⁴ This coverage, and the belief in bias that it helps foster, has untold implications for our proclivity for receiving the news, believing the news, and using the news.

Despite the importance of this coverage of bias and this belief in bias, scholarly research on this topic has been hamstrung by limitations of method. Those who argue the case for bias largely rely upon surveys of reporters which are ill-suited to demonstrate bias in the actual coverage that emerges. Those who argue the case against bias largely rely upon studies that compare coverage of Democrats and Republicans, often in campaign settings. Apart from the conflicting conclusions of many of these studies, these comparisons are of modest value since the candidates of the two parties have no logical claim on equivalent coverage. Thus the resulting comparison, whether finding differences or similarities, lacks a meaningful baseline with which to make an informed conclusion.

Here, newspaper coverage of congressional party switchers is compared. These are members who have engaged in the exact same behavior—they have run under the banner of one political party, and announced in office that they can no longer affiliate with that party. Such a move could prompt condemnation or congratulation, but, more important, for the purposes of this study, it is an equivalent political

Conclusion

behavior, the source of a baseline of comparison to allow one to compare newspaper reaction when someone leaves the Democrats to coverage when someone leaves the Republicans.

The findings are quite clear. Far from providing support for the complaints of Sen. Campbell and countless others who believe in a pro-liberal, pro-Democratic media bias, the data suggest members of Congress who leave the Democratic Party can expect coverage that is quite similar to coverage of members who leave the Republican Party. In short, when Democrats and Republicans engage in the same behavior, they get the same coverage.⁶⁵

This evidence represents not only a step toward understanding whether bias infects coverage received by political leaders, it also presents a basis for studying bias. That is, through the use of an objective baseline of equivalent behavior or outcome, future content analyses will offer far stronger evidence when asserting the presence or absence of bias. Indeed, this method can be applied in assessing coverage of issues (with baselines such as measures of policy outcome and spending) as well as political leaders.

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34. D'Alessio and Allen, "Media Bias," 133.
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37. See, for example, Hofstetter, *Bias in the News*.
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39. See, for example, Paul Waldman and James Devitt, "Newspaper Photographs and the 1996 Presidential Election: The Question of Bias," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 75 (winter 1998): 302-311.
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44. Sidney Kobre, "How Florida Dailies Handled the 1952 Presidential Campaign," *Journalism Quarterly* 30 (spring 1953): 163-69; Stempel, "Media Coverage."

45. For example: Marvin Olasky, *The Press and Abortion, 1838-1988* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988); Christopher Hewitt, "Estimating the Number of Homeless: Media Misrepresentation of an Urban Problem," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 18 (winter 1996): 431-47.

46. For example: Nayda Terkildsen, Frauke Schnell, and Cristina Ling, "Interest Groups, the Media and Policy Debate Formation," *Political Communication* 15 (October 1998): 45-61; Robert Cirino, *Don't Blame the People* (New York: Random House, 1971); Norman Solomon, *The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media: Decoding Spin and Lies in Mainstream News* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1999).

47. Certainly there are examples of logically quantified studies of issue coverage, such as Bennett's work on media indexing (W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations." *Journal of Communication* 40 [June 1990]: 103-125.) However, the inconsistent applicability (see, for example, Regina Lawrence, "Accidents, Icons, and Indexing: The Dynamics of News Coverage of Police Use of Force," *Political Communication* 13 [October 1996]: 437-54) of the media indexing theory has thus far limited its value to shed light on partisan and ideological bias arguments.

48. Daron Shaw and Bartholomew Sparrow, "From the Inner Ring Out: News Congruence, Cue-Taking, and Campaign Coverage," *Political Research Quarterly* 52 (June 1999): 323-51.

49. Papers available either through Nexis or Newsbank were utilized. Home state newspapers included: Louisiana, the *Advocate*, the *Times-Picayune*; New York, *Daily News*, *Newsday*, the *New York Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Times Union*; Vermont, *Burlington Free Press*, *Rutland Herald*; Virginia, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *Virginian-Pilot*, *Roanoke Times*.

50. Duplicate wire service coverage in these papers was counted as one article in the analysis.

51. The work was carried out by two trained coders. For an intercoder reliability check, a random sample of 10% of the articles in the analysis was coded by both, resulting in a Scott's Pi of .85 for the paragraph tone estimate.

52. "To Clinton's delight, GOP congressman shifts to Democrats," *Houston Chronicle*, 18 July 1999, p. 23.

53. "Week's End," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 29 January 2000, sec. A, p. 14.

54. "7th House Democrat Switches to G.O.P.," *New York Times*, 2 December 1995, p. 8.

55. Tim Brookes, "Where Were You on Jeffords Day?" *Rutland Herald*, 24 June 2001.

56. Tucker Carlson, "Why Did Mike Forbes Switch?" *New York Post*, 26 July 1999, p. 33.

57. Peter Hardin, "Switch Makes Goode Star," *Richmond Times*

Dispatch, 28 January 2000, sec. B, p. 1.

58. "Arcadiana Congressman Switching to GOP," *The Times-Picayune*, 2 December 1995, sec. A, p. 6.

59. Jack Kemp, "Sen. Jeffords Stages a Palace Coup," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 30 May 2001, sec. B, p. 8.

60. Ellen Yan and Jenn Abelson, "Forbes' Angry Staffers Resign," *Newsday*, 20 July 1999, sec. A, p. 8.

61. Where in-state coverage was also included in the Lexis major paper database, it is categorized as local coverage in the analysis.

62. These four members not only made an equivalent political move by switching parties, but also appear to have achieved similar and successful relations with the media preceding their switch. Which is to say, a check on two months' worth of coverage of the four, reflecting coverage twelve and thirteen months in advance of their switch announcement, using the same newspapers and coding technique discussed in the post-switch analysis, revealed that each had received more positive coverage than negative by a fairly wide margin before the switch. (The ratio of positive to negative articles was 2.0 for Hayes, 2.1 for Forbes, 2.2 for Jeffords and Goode).

63. See, for example, Matthew Carolan and Raymond Keating, "Mike Forbes is Dangerously Hooked on Politics," *Newsday*, 27 July 1999, sec. A, p. 28.

64. David Niven, *Tilt? The Search for Media Bias* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

65. David Niven, "Partisan Bias in the Media? A New Test," *Social Science Quarterly* 80 (December 1999): 847-58; David Niven, "Bias in the News: Partisanship and Negativity in Coverage of Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 6 (summer 2001): 31-46.