ADDRESSING THE 'MEDICAL MALADY':
SECOND-LEVEL AGENDA SETTING AND PUBLIC APPROVAL OF
'OBAMACARE'

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examined second-level agenda setting effects of six news sources on public opinion about the health care reform bill proposed by President Obama and congressional Democrats. The affective attributes (tone) of media coverage were measured immediately and cumulatively. A regression analysis found cumulative affective attribute salience, but not immediate affective attribute salience, was a significant predictor of support in public opinion polls. Separate regression analyses found that effects were greater on Republicans than on those who identified with another political party. A final regression analysis was performed to examine whether support in public opinion polls was a predictor of affective attribute salience in the media. Support was also measured both immediately and cumulatively. Findings show that only immediate support in public opinion polls was a predictor of affective attribute salience in the media. The political implications and the consequences for health care policy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

On March 21, 2010, House Democrats approved a historic health care reform bill in the face of unanimous Republican opposition. In what reporters from *The New York Times* described as “an epic political battle that could define the differences between the parties for years,” (Pear & Herzenhorn, p. A1/National Desk) President Obama and congressional Democrats instituted the most ambitious overhaul of the American health care system since Medicare was created in 1965.

Though Obama would tout the success of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), resistance toward the bill was widespread. Thirty-four House Democrats joined their Republican counterparts in the vote against the PPACA (Pear & Herzenhorn, p. A1/National Desk). Less than a year after its passage, members of the House, in a bold move, voted to repeal the bill (Pear & Herzenhorn, p. A1/National Desk, Jan. 11, 2011). During the 2010 midterm elections, voters in Oklahoma and Arizona also passed constitutional amendments outlawing the bill’s requirement that Americans acquire health insurance or face monetary penalties (Kliff, 2010). By December 2010, 20 states had filed a lawsuit in Florida challenging the federal mandate, as well as the law’s required expansion of Medicaid (Pear & Abelson, p. A25/National Desk).

During the timeframe of this study, from June 2009 to March 2010, the majority of Americans steadily joined the ranks of dissenters. Though support for the bill had been at or above 50 percent until June 2009, by the time it passed nine months later a USA Today/Gallup poll revealed the majority of Americans opposed the PPACA (Jones,

2009). Months later, a November 2010 Gallup poll indicated that the majority of Americans were in favor of Congress' repealing all or much of the law.

In contrast to the public's opposition to the bill, in 2009, for the third-straight year in a row, access to health care led the list of issues Americans named the "most urgent health problems" facing the United States (Saad, 2009). From 2001 to 2009, Gallup polls showed that anywhere from 54 to 64 percent of respondents believed it was the federal government's responsibility to make sure all Americans had health care coverage (Newport, 2009). By the time the PPACA passed, that number had fallen to less than 47 percent – the first time support fell below 50 percent since Gallup began polling for the subject in 2001 (Newport, 2009). All of this begs the question: How did media coverage influence public support for health care as a government priority? By examining the tone of media coverage from June 2009 to March 2010 and comparing the findings to favorability of public opinion, it might be possible to associate media coverage with aggregate public opinion change.

Based on previous studies it is apparent the news media influence the approval of public policy. Heading into the fifth decade of agenda-setting research, a long list of studies show that journalists have an effect on audience perception of political issues (Blood & Philips, 1995; Hester & Gibson, 2003; Kepplinger & Roth, 1979; Kepplinger, Wolfgang, Brosius & Staab, 1989; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Limas, 2000; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shaw & Martin, 1992; Young & Weaver, 2005; Winter & Eyal, 1981). This happens in two ways: 1) over time, issues emphasized in the media become the issues most salient in the minds of the American public; 2) the attributes

attached to those issues help form the foundation for public opinion (McCombs, 2004).

Passage of historic health care reform, perhaps the largest reform policy the country has seen in the last 30 years, presents a unique opportunity to examine news media impact.

GOALS OF THIS STUDY

This study analyzed the tone of television and print media coverage of the health care reform plan proposed by President Obama and congressional Democrats from June 23, 2009, through March 18, 2010. This time frame was chosen to coincide with extensive polls conducted by the Rasmussen Reports during the nine-month period prior to the bill's passage. By analyzing nightly newscasts in ABC, NBC, and CBS and articles printed in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, this study examined the affective attributes (positive, negative, or neutral) that were commonly attached to the policy as it developed on Capitol Hill.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well the tone of media coverage predicted percent supporting in public opinion polls over the different time periods. The impact of affective attributes commonly attached to the bill was measured immediately and cumulatively. Immediate affective attribute salience was defined as coverage that appeared the day after and day before the most recent poll, while cumulative affective attribute salience was measured by averaging those interval scores over time. Separate multiple regressions were also performed to determine if media attribute salience had a greater effect on Republicans, Democrats, or those identified as other. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was performed to determine whether public opinion, measured immediately and cumulatively, was a predictor of affective attribute salience in the media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda Setting Research Revisited

McCombs and Shaw (1972) were the first to explore the agenda-setting function of the media with their landmark study of Chapel Hill voters. By comparing the voter agenda with that of the media during the 1968 presidential race, they found that the press, by making some campaign topics more prominent than others, had a substantial impact on what voters identified as the major issues of the election. The Chapel Hill study introduced the basic agenda-setting hypothesis, “that the degree of emphasis placed on issues in the news influences the priority accorded to those issues by the public” (McCombs, 2004, p. 68). This initial application of agenda-setting theory broke away from the minimal-effects perspective prominent since the 1950s (See Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; and Kosicki, 1993). It also returned some of the focus of media effects to something “more closely related to the purpose of journalism” (Kosicki, 1993). Since Chapel Hill, researchers have suggested time and again that “whenever there are observations of the media agenda and public agenda at two or more points over time, it is possible simultaneously to compare the cross-lag correlations measuring the strength of these two competing causal hypotheses” (McCombs, 2004, p. 8).

Though agenda-setting theory did not emerge in its entirety until the 1970s, its roots date back to Pulitzer Prize winner Walter Lippmann. His classic work *Public Opinion* (1922) held that the press act as a gatekeeper to global politics: “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 21). Lippmann not only believed the

majority of information on the political realm came from the media, but also that this representation was far from perfect. Instead of reflecting reality, Lippmann believed the media created “a pseudo environment that significantly shapes how the public views the world” (McCombs, 2004, p. 23).

Decades later, scholars still agree the “news media provide a fragmented and confusing view of the world” (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992, p. 387). Kepplinger and Roth (1979) offered up a supportive example of this pseudo reality in their examination of media coverage during the 1973 oil crisis in the former West Germany. Through an analysis of reporting in five German newspapers and using the results of numerous public opinion polls, their study revealed that the oil crisis occurred not due to a decrease in supply, but rather an increase in demand, partly driven by the media. The study prompted the authors to ask, “What social processes would develop in a different way if the mass media reported on them differently, or not at all?” (p. 295). Studies such as that of Kepplinger and Roth (1979) and Winter and Eyal (1981), which examined the civil rights issue in America, suggested that elections were just the starting point for research into agenda-setting effects. Today, issue agendas are “the best mapped domain of the agenda-setting role” (McCombs, 2004, p. 11).

For McCombs (2004), the father of modern day agenda setting, “the agenda-setting role of the mass media links journalism and its tradition of storytelling to the arena of public opinion, a relationship with considerable consequences for society” (p. xiv). In light of the consequences, there is merit in the constant assessment of media coverage, especially concerning topics with broad implications. When scrutinizing the future of

agenda-setting studies, Kosicki (1993) pointed out that by continuously assessing how the news media are informing audiences about complex issues, researchers and journalists could play an increasingly important role in enhancing democratic decision-making by American citizens. Though news media platforms continue to grow and change, one inherent element has stayed the same – the news media play an important role in the democratic process by informing citizens of the actions of government. For many years, the U.S. news media have operated on a platform of neutrality and objectivity, though this ideal is not always enforced or practiced (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009). As Christians et al. (2009) argue, “normative theory is extremely important for the vitality of democratic communication institutions and for media that support and implement democratic communication” (p. 68). The application of agenda setting is one way to examine how journalism practices may influence political outcomes.

Media Imagery and Everyday Life

Scholars agree the public mind is not an empty chasm waiting to be filled with information by the news media. Gamson and colleagues (1992), though cognizant of the media’s influence, point out that “reading media imagery is an active process in which context, social location, and prior experience can lead to quite different decodings” (p. 375). Each human being brings to the table a different background and set of priorities, which contribute to a complex construction of reality. In “News that Matters,” Iyengar and Kinder (1987) pointed out that “the connection between personal life and political judgment appears to be surprisingly weak” (p. 51). They also found that the problems a person confronts in his or her personal life could contribute to the importance assigned to

an issue on a national scale. In the end, through a study of subjects facing various personal predicaments, they found “personal predicament matter, but sometimes they strengthen agenda-setting and sometimes they weaken it” (p. 52).

In terms of health care as a government priority, a study by Elasmr and Gordon (2010) revealed that decisions are affected by a number of factors, including the susceptibility of one’s self and one’s community to health concerns and attitudes toward democratic freedoms. But even these ideals may incorporate some form of media influence. Culbertson and Stempel III (1985) found that even those who evaluate their own health care favorably can be extremely critical of the American health care system as a whole, indicating that media coverage contributes in some way to the evaluation of health care. In “What Moves Public Opinion?” Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987) wrote that public policies also are “judged in terms of expected costs and benefits for the individual and for his or her family, friends, favored groups, and the nation or world as a whole” (p. 23).

Five decades of agenda-setting research shows that the public ascertains a great deal of information about the world from the media. For McCombs (2004), there is a continuous learning process that occurs between media and audience. This cumulative occurrence “is an important civic instance of a larger phenomenon, incidental learning from the mass media” (p. 46). Twenty years after the Chapel Hill study, further research by Shaw and Martin (1992) revealed those who read newspapers frequently, regardless of race, gender, or age, “tend to cognitively converge when they share news media” (p. 905). Through a survey of North Carolina residents, they found that newspapers and

television “influence us toward a common agenda of public issues and ... away from the agendas perhaps associated with our unique historic reference groups if we read/view enough” (p. 917).

Along with prior experiences and the level of exposure to the media, one of the most important contingent conditions in the process of agenda-setting effects is the need for orientation. As explained by Zucker (1978), “The less direct experience the people have with a given issue area, the more they will rely on the news media for information and interpretation in that area” (p. 227). Whereas with obtrusive issues, those with which individuals have first-hand experience, public interest may lead to media salience. The need for orientation comes into play on those issues beyond direct experience, a category that more often than not includes complex government initiatives – in this case a 2,000-page health care bill. Indeed Weaver (1977) asserts that “persons with a high need for orientation on political matters ... are more susceptible to mass media agenda-setting influence with regard to national political news issues” (pp. 109-110). This influence is heightened by the fact that “for most, mass media provide the best – and only – easily available approximation of ever-changing political realities” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p.185).

In terms of public policy, Downs (1957) argued most people do not spend a great deal of time and effort exploring alternative policies proposed by government officials, therefore new information would rarely produce substantial changes in public opinion. However, Page et al. (1987) posit that new information calling into question the major beliefs and opinions of Americans would most likely bring about changes in public

attitude. This is also contingent on whether audience members are politically involved. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that those highly involved in politics may be less likely to adopt those views espoused by the news media, but “the relationship between involvement and agenda-setting may be positive or negative, depending on the situation” (p. 61).

For McCombs (2004), the need for orientation provides the psychological reasoning for why agenda setting occurs. A combination of high relevance and high uncertainty create “the theoretical condition under which the highest degree of correspondence is predicted between the media agenda and the public agenda” (p. 59). While health care should be considered an obtrusive issue for most Americans, the legislative process and the development of health care policy are things from which most Americans are far removed. For example, during the Clinton Administration’s push for health care reform, the complexity and broad implications of the issue “resulted in high relevance and high uncertainty for many Americans” (McCombs, 2004, p. 56).

Reporting on the development of federal legislation can also be a challenging task for reporters. A study of media coverage during the Clinton health care reform initiative found that, for the American press, “healthcare reform was a challenging story with both social and political dimensions” (Kaiser Family Foundation, Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press, & the Columbia Journalism Review, 1995, p. 2). That same study found that support for the bill fell steadily, as did “the public’s knowledge about key aspects of the reform package” (p. 3).

The same could be said about this most recent debate. If the agenda of the mass media was to inform the public about the progress of the bill and its proposed impacts on the American populace, public opinion polls suggest they might have largely failed in this endeavor. For example, a January 2009 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that when asked about how senators voted for the health care bill in December 2009 only 32 percent of those surveyed knew it received no support from Republicans. Six months after passage of the PPACA, an Associated Press (AP) poll revealed many Americans wrongly thought the bill would raise taxes and didn't know what provisions of the bill made it through Congress (Alonso-Zaldiva & Tompson, 2010). One year after its passage, a Kaiser Family Foundation Poll also revealed that the public "remained confused about the legislation" with only 47 percent reporting that they had enough information to determine how the law would affect them (Connelly, March 23, 2010/Prescriptions Web Blog).

Elevator to the Second Level

Adapted from the first chapter in Lippmann's famous book *Public Opinion* (1992), the initial focus of agenda-setting effects was on the salience of issues or objects – those "pictures in our heads." Over time, research focus shifted to the details or attributes of those pictures, known as second-level agenda setting. Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) defined the difference well: "Whereas agenda setting deals with the salience of issues, attribute agenda setting, an extended version of agenda setting, is concerned with the salience of issue attributes" (p. 11). This presented an even greater move away from the idea of limited effects. That perhaps, by analyzing how the media chose to describe

issues, we could go beyond issue prominence and determine if “the elements of an issue presented in the media – the attribute agenda – shape our perspective and our opinions” (McCombs, 2004, p.125).

Researchers welcomed this addition as the new frontier in agenda setting research. It perfected the initial hypothesis proposed by McCombs and Shaw at Chapel Hill, “which has long been criticized for being somewhat simplistic in its focus on broad issue categories in media coverage and public opinion surveys” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 15). For McCombs (2004), the second level represented “the epitome of political power” (p. 82). McCombs defined two types of attributes at the second level: cognitive and affective. As described by Sheafer (2007), “Cognitive attributes deal with the definition of issues (or objects in general) in the news media, whereas affective attributes deal with the tone of news media presentation, with evaluation of issues (i.e. positive, negative, or neutral)” (p. 23). Today, affective attributes are gaining more attention in the realm of empirical analysis (See Blood & Phillips, 1995; Hester & Gibson, 2003; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Limas, 2000; Sheafer, 2007; Son & Weaver, 2005; Wu & Coleman, 2009). The influence of affective attributes, which can be described as far reaching, raises ethical questions about objectivity in journalism.

Taking on Tone

The first study to analyze tone as an affective attribute was that of Kepplinger, Donsbach, Brosius, and Staab (1989), though they did not label it second-level agenda setting. Their study on media representation of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, which combined data from a content analysis with public opinion surveys, showed that shifts in the tone of media

coverage preceded similar shifts in public opinion, with several months elapsing between the two. They also found little evidence that the news media agenda was influenced by public opinion. Through their time-series analysis, they began to answer “the question that has been debated as long as freedom of the press has existed: Are the mass media “a ‘mirror’ of public opinion or an ‘organ’ of public opinion” (p. 327). In completing their study, Kepplinger and his colleagues proposed a multi-step model in which evaluations made by the most influential media outlets, for example, *The New York Times*, might result in a trickle-down effect, influencing reporting at smaller news outlets – a phenomena known as inter-media agenda setting.

According to McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, and Limas (2000), examining the traits commonly associated with political candidates is one of the most “most straightforward applications of the idea of attribute agenda setting” (p. 81). In a study examining media coverage during the 1996 Spanish general elections, they found a high correlation between the description of candidates by the news media and that of public when voter images were measured subsequent to media coverage. Son and Weaver (2005) further focused on political actors during the 2000 U.S. presidential election. In their study examining media coverage and voter perception over several time periods, they found that the cumulative salience of affective attributes concerning a political candidate significantly predicted standing in public opinion polls.

Along with the evaluation of political candidates, many researchers have applied second-level agenda setting to media coverage during an economic downturn. Initial studies were undertaken to discover whether the news media actually prolong an

economic downturn, also known as the “Media Malady” (Stevenson, Gonzenbach, & David, 1994). Research has shown that during an economic slump the public is generally “more attentive to the news” and therefore more affected by its coverage (Wu, Stevenson, Chen, & Güner, 2002, p. 32). Results concerning the relationship between public opinion and media coverage of the economy are mixed. Stevenson and colleagues (1994) found that when “controlling for economic reality, public opinion strongly influenced media coverage,” but the media, after picking up on public concern, influenced public opinion as time went on (p. 15). Their findings suggest a type of two-step flow process where “public evaluations influence media attention, which, in turn, heightens public opinion at a later date” (p. 16). Wu et al. (2002) not only found media coverage to be a good predictor of public opinion when the economic reality was controlled for, but also found evidence of the media malady hypothesis. Hester and Gibson (2003) not only found that the majority of media reports were negative, but also that this representation affected how individuals evaluated future conditions, even when those reports failed to reflect real-world economic conditions. Blood and Philips (1995) came to similar conclusions when examining recession coverage during the early '90s, though neither study showed that this had an impact on the actual state of the economy, refuting the media malady. Mixed findings on the influence of public opinion on media coverage suggests that “the direction of causation, either uni-directional or bi-directional, is not equal in all cases” and depends largely on the issue at hand (Weaver & Son, 2005, p. 178).

While studies of affective attribute agenda setting commonly focused on the evaluation of political actors, few have focused on how the evaluation of issues might

affect the development and success of government policies. Despite the lack of studies on the topic, McCombs (2004) states, “there is some evidence that from time to time the media have exerted substantial influence on the policy agenda at both the local and national level,” a relationship that can be described as circular (p. 102). In their book “Agendas and Instability in American Politics,” Baumgartner and Jones (1993) proposed that because media salience influences public opinion it therefore influences public policy and may also create a more favorable environment for the implementation of new policy ideas.

Is it Compelling?

Adding to second-level agenda setting is the idea that different affective attributes (positive v. negative) have different impacts on the public, known as the compelling arguments theory. When examining different attributes, it is inevitable that some will be remembered more readily, regardless of frequency (see McCombs & Smith, 1969).

“Certain characteristics of an object may resonate with the public in such a way that they become especially compelling arguments for the salience of the issue, person, or topic under consideration” (McCombs, 2004, p. 92). In this way, the compelling arguments theory is said to create a link between first- and second-level agenda setting. By describing issues, candidates, and other “objects” in a certain way, it may have an “impact on the salience of that object among the public” (McCombs, 2004, p. 93). This can happen early on or further down the line in an object or issue’s development. The theory of compelling arguments, theoretically grounded in attribute agenda setting,

“examines the patterns of emphasis and tone in media messages and the consequences of these attribute agendas for public thought and behavior” (McCombs, 2004, p. 97).

The majority of evidence suggests that negative news has a greater impact on public opinion. Evidence also shows that both print and broadcast news tend to emphasize negative news on issues such as the economy and health care (Blood and Philips, 1995; Harrington, 1989; Hester & Gibson, 2003; Kepplinger & Roth, 1979; Kurtz, 1990). During the Clinton Era reform initiative, a study found that the percentage of negative coverage increased over time (Kaiser Family Foundation, Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press, & the Columbia Journalism Review, 1995).

Sheafer (2007) offers an obvious explanation for the prevalence of negative news: It attracts more readers. Schoenbach and Semetko (1992) found that the positive tone of political coverage by the German newsmagazine *Bild* actually helped to diminish the importance of an issue in the minds of its readers. Though the coverage was frequent, McCombs (2004) explains, “the compelling argument was the positive tone of the news coverage on the issue of German integration, an attribute that reduced the salience of the issue on the public agenda” (p. 94). This finding could perhaps offer insight into a study by Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004), which examined media coverage of foreign nations. While the study found that negative media coverage of foreign nations led to increased negativity in evaluations by the public, it also found that positive coverage did not have a significant influence. In a recent study of candidate coverage during the 2004 presidential election, Wu and Coleman (2009) also found little significance between positive coverage and positivity among the public. Emphasizing the theory of affective

intelligence, which stresses that emotions play a critical role in engaging people in politics, Wu and Coleman's comparison of survey and content analysis data found that "specific negative emotions led to arousal, which stimulated cognition that resulted in considered judgment" (p. 779). Based on this link, they proposed "a new contingent condition for second-level attribute agenda setting" (p. 779). Their findings, which relied heavily on the need for orientation, "are generalizable to non-election events and other concerns of public life such as the economy, environment or health issues" (p. 785).

Of course, just like the traditional agenda-setting theory, the influence of negative or positive attributes is not the same across the board. Takeshita (2005) points to a reliance on contingent conditions, including whether audience members "have formed a fixed attitude toward a certain object," or "lack stable and enduring attitudes toward the object" (p. 284). Although those who lack a firm position are typically more susceptible to agenda setting effects, those with fixed attitudes are not necessarily immune from media influence. Early on, agenda setting researchers touched on the prevalence of reinforcement, in which the media, rather than changing attitudes, buttresses existing attitudes and opinions concerning a preferred party or candidate (See McCombs, 1972; and Weaver, 1977). This is perhaps more important at the second level. In the case of attribute agenda setting, Kioussis (2005) found that media salience of candidate attributes was positively associated with attitude strength. Furthermore, there was a stronger correlation between attribute salience and attitude strength than there was for the compelling arguments hypothesis.

In a study of post 9-11 coverage, Craft and Wanta (2004) also point to an issue's obtrusiveness as a major factor in public evaluation of negative attributes. While the findings suggest that those attributes commonly focused on by news media searchlights were also prevalent among the public, they also "suggest that the prospect of personal consequences may outweigh extensive media coverage when it comes to identifying concerns" (p. 461).

Time: An Issue still at Large

In terms of the time lag between media coverage and media effects, results differ significantly and have been described as "insufficiently theorized and underspecified" (Kosicki, 1993, p. 107). Findings range from four to six weeks (Winter & Eyal, 1981) to five to seven weeks (Salwen, 1988) to two to six months (Stone and McCombs, 1981). Winter and Eyal (1981) found that agenda-setting effects were based on a recent rather than cumulative coverage. Salwen (1988) found that "the period of peak or optimal relationship between the public agenda and media agenda" happens at approximately eight to ten weeks of media coverage and is also a function of its endurance within the news media (p. 106). With obtrusive issues, he added, it is possible that it takes longer for agenda setting effects to take place because members of the public have direct experience with the issue, "mediating the agenda-setting impact" (p. 130). Stone (1975) reported that cumulative media coverage showed the highest correlation over a period of seven months. Son and Weaver (2005) also found significant agenda-setting affects over a period of seven months.

Overall, the majority of studies show that media effects happen in a cumulative fashion. Those dealing with multiple time periods (Blood & Phillips, 1997; McCombs and Zhu, 1995; and Son & Weaver, 2005) have also shown that public opinion shifts regularly due to myriad factors. Finally, the salience of an issue over a period of time is to some extent a function of the salience of competing issues on the media agenda and that of the public. McCombs and Zhu (1995) argue that an increase in agenda diversity and volatility has lead to a higher turnover rate within the public and media agenda. Overall, the timing of media effects is highly dependent on the issue at hand.

HYPOTHESES

Based on the above literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Immediate issue attribute salience in coverage of health care reform will become increasingly negative over time.

H1b: Cumulative issue attribute salience in coverage of health care reform will become increasingly negative over time.

H2: Only cumulative issue attribute salience will be a significant predictor of public opinion about the bill.

H3: Cumulative issue attribute salience will be a predictor of increased opposition toward the health care reform bill.

H4: Media salience will be a stronger predictor of public opinion than public opinion will be of media salience.

METHOD

This study adopted a three-point scale (positive, neutral, and negative) to examine the affective attributes in coverage of Obama and congressional Democrats' health care reform bill. Multiple regression analyses were used to establish the relationship over time among these affective attributes and public opinion about the bill.

Variable 1: Affective Issue Attribute Salience

This study focused on coverage in six news sources: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, ABC, NBC, and CBS. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were chosen because they are two of the largest circulation newspapers in the United States (State of the News Media, 2010). *The New York Times* often plays the role of inter-media agenda setter for publications nationwide and is considered the nation's elite newspaper (McCombs, 2004; Stevenson et al., 1991; Winter & Eyal, 1981). Though newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Post* have higher subscription numbers, *The Washington Post's* coverage was considered paramount due to the publication's numerous connections to the White House as a news source (Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs, & Nicholas, 1980). *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are also said to command the attention of policy makers (Cose, 1989). *USA Today* was chosen not only because it is the second-largest circulation newspaper in the country, but also because the lower subscription price allows it to reach an audience outside that of elite newspapers (State of the News Media, 2011).

ABC, NBC, and CBS were chosen because they have the largest audiences for network evening news. Though cable news programs cater to large audiences, "the

medium became noticeably more partisan in tone in 2009, adding ideological talk show hosts to prime time and shedding dissenting views” (State of the News Media, 2010). In 2011, it was described to play a “more limited role in the information ecosystem,” a role that has “become more refined and prescribed” (State of the News Media, 2011). Through content analyses, some studies have found that cable news programs feature increasingly partisan coverage (Brubaker & Hanson, 2009; Baum & Groeling, 2008). Research also has shown that those who watch cable news programs are fractured along party lines (State of the News Media, 2010; Morris, 2005). Broadcast networks, on the other hand, feature more even-handed coverage and tend to adhere to traditional journalism norms and values (Fico, Zeldes, Carpenter, & Diddi, 2008; Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2007). Today, “network evening news remains an important source of news for a large number of Americans” (State of the News Media, 2011). Though not discounting the influence of primetime cable news programs, analyzing the tone of primetime cable news, which presents consistently unbalanced viewpoints, was not applicable to this study.

Sampling. A news item (article or newscast) was the unit of analysis. News items had to meet the following criteria:

1. Television: Any newscast 45 seconds or more and aired within the first 15 minutes of the nightly newscast.
2. Newspapers: Any story that appeared in the front or A section of the newspaper and was composed of 500 words or more.

In terms of broadcast, lead newscasts were chosen because they have the “strongest impact on citizens’ perceptions of issue importance” (Behr & Iyengar, 2001, p. 52). When searching for news articles, front-page news stories were given priority due to their assumed importance in the public mind. Incorporating other lengthy stories in the front section allowed the content analysis in this study to be more in-depth as the front page is limited in space. Editorials, op-eds, columns and other articles that were not straight news stories were excluded.

To coincide with polls taken by the Rasmussen Reports, only news items from June 23, 2009 through March 18, 2010, were used. Though media coverage of health care reform began much earlier, Rasmussen did not begin polling until June 23, two weeks after the initial bill was introduced in the senate. News stories from ABC, CBS, and NBC’s daily prime-time evening news broadcasts and stories from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* were found using the Lexis-Nexis database by doing a subject search for the following terms: “health care reform,” “health care debate,” “health care legislation,” “health care law,” or “health care bill.”

All relevant newscasts were double-checked through Vanderbilt to ensure they were more than 45 seconds and aired within the first 15 minutes. Due to the smaller number of newscasts from the three networks, as well as lower number of articles from *USA Today*, all relevant items were coded. Due to the large number of articles printed in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, a sample of articles was taken. First, a random number generator was used to identify four days within each time interval. Then one of the two newspapers was chosen at random and automatically assigned the first two

numbers. If there were only four days between each poll, a newspaper chosen at random was assigned the first and third day, while the subsequent newspaper was assigned the second and fourth day. If an article or newscast was irrelevant it was automatically discarded. Articles were considered irrelevant if they only mentioned the bill briefly or the bulk of the article dealt with an unrelated topic. The process yielded 245 relevant articles and 203 relevant newscasts. Of the 448 items coded, *The New York Times* had 92, *The Washington Post* had 93, *USA Today* had 60, ABC had 76, CBS had 60, and NBC had 67.

Coding. The unit of analysis was the article or the newscast. Two coders coded an equal number of articles and newscasts. Articles assigned to each coder were equally dispersed throughout the time period to avoid any discrepancies in coding. Issue attribute salience was measured based on the degree of affective tone of issue coverage. Each paragraph was assigned a value of positive, negative, neutral. Paragraphs were only coded as positive or negative if an evaluation about the components, development, or future of the health care bill was made. The values assigned to each paragraph were then evaluated, and each article was assigned a value of 3 (positive), 2 (neutral) or 1 (negative) based on the number of negative and positive statements. For intercoder-reliability, 10 percent of the articles were randomly selected and coded by a third coder. Using Krippendorff's Alpha, an acceptable level of coder agreement for tone was established (.82).

Positive attributes were defined as favorable references about the bill, including its components, development, possible effect on the American people, and possibility of

passing. Negative attributes were defined as unfavorable references about the bill, including its components, development, possible effect on the American people, and possibility of passing. Coverage was classified as neutral if it was not clearly favorable or unfavorable, was unclear, did not reference the bill, or had equal amounts of negative and positive references. For example, “Two labor unions have pulled out of a broad coalition seeking agreement on major changes in the health care system” is a factual statement. On the other hand, “If anyone scores a victory on health care reform, it may be Obama” presents the news as positive. And “the prospect of passing the health care overall by pushing the senate plan through the house appeared significantly diminished” depicts the plan negatively.

Variable 2: Public Opinion Data

Figure 1: Public Support in Rasmussen Reports

Aggregate public opinion data were obtained from the Rasmussen Reports. Today, more than any time in history, the implementation of new polling technologies such as those

employed by Rasmussen give agenda-setting researchers an edge over those in years past. These technologies bring with them more data available for analysis in the form of more frequent surveys.

Claiming to have the “most comprehensive public opinion data,” Rasmussen polls are commonly cited by major news sources and results have been found to have major implications. A study by Boston University and the Pew Research Center’s Project for Journalism Excellence (2010) found that Rasmussen polls were the first to indicate that Republican underdog Scott Brown, a candidate in the 2010 Massachusetts Senate race, was gaining in popularity. He would later win the seat held by Senator Edward M. Kennedy for almost half a century.

Figure 2: Republican, Democrat, and other support in polls

This study used Rasmussen polls published between June 23, 2009, and March 20, 2010, in which the public was asked, “Generally speaking, do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the health care reform plan

proposed by President Obama and the congressional Democrats?” Respondents also were asked a series of demographic questions, including political affiliation. After discounting three polls taken within close proximity to demonstrate media effects, the result was a total of 31 polls with intervals ranging from 4 to 22 days. No news items were coded on the days the polls took place.

Research Design

Similar to the study by Son and Weaver (2005), which also worked with data over several intervals, the values of predictor variables were measured at both immediate and cumulative time intervals. Immediate news coverage was defined as that occurring between the day after the most recent poll and the day before the present poll, while immediate percent supporting was defined as the most recent poll measure. Cumulative coverage was accumulated news coverage from June 23, 2009, to March 18, 2010 – the day before the final poll – with intervals averaged over time. Cumulative support was calculated by averaging poll measures over time. This made it possible to test for media effects on the percent supporting at both the immediate and cumulative level over different time periods and vice versa. Also similar to the design by Son and Weaver (2005), though “the cumulative coverage is not completely exclusive in that immediate coverage is included in the cumulative data” this should be considered acceptable due to the large number of time periods (31) and the strength of the multiple regression analysis (p. 185).

FINDINGS

In order to determine whether coverage became more negative over time, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were computed among immediate affective attribute salience, cumulative affective attribute salience, and time. The results of the analysis show that the correlation between cumulative affective attribute salience and time was negative and statistically significant, $r = -.973, p < .01$, while the correlation between immediate attribute salience and time was not significant ($r = -.277$). Also, the correlation between immediate and cumulative attribute salience was positive and statistically significant, $r = .413, p < .05$.

A closer look at the scatterplot in Figure 2 reveals the high correlation between cumulative affective attribute salience and time is due to a remarkably consistent downward trend in the cumulative tone. The scatterplot also reveals that T1 and T2 had unusually positive scores when compared to T3-TN. When T1 was removed from cumulative coverage, the correlation between time and cumulative salience remained significant at the .01 level ($r = -.943$). When both T1 and T2 were removed from cumulative coverage the correlation between cumulative salience and time was still significant at the .01 level ($r = -.773$), indicating that even when the initial positive scores are removed the negative trend in cumulative media salience is still substantial.

Figure 3: Relationship between cumulative affective attribute salience and time

In general, the results suggest that although the scores for cumulative and immediate affective attribute salience are associated there was not a significant linear shift in the tone of immediate coverage. However, for cumulative affective attribute salience the shift in tone was significant. While H1a could not be supported (immediate affective attribute salience did not become increasingly negative over time), data showed support for H1b as cumulative affective attribute salience showed a consistent negative trend.

A multiple regression analysis was then conducted to evaluate how well the tone of media coverage predicted percent supporting in public opinion polls. The predictors were immediate and cumulative affective attribute salience in the media, while the criterion was the percentage of poll respondents supporting the health care reform bill. The linear combination of the two media measures was significantly related to public opinion, $F(2, 28) = 9.24, p < .01$. The sample multiple correlation coefficient was .63 (adjusted $R^2 = .36$), indicating that approximately 36% of the variance in public opinion can be accounted for by the linear combination of media attribute salience.

Table 1: Overall effects of affective issue attribute salience on percent supporting in polls

	β Coefficients	Bivariate	Partial	Part
Immediate ($T_{n-1} \sim T_n$)	.03	.30	.04	.03
Cumulative ($T_1 \sim T_n$)	.62*	.63*	.58	.56
Adjusted $R^2 = .36, N = 31$ * $p < .01$				

Table 1 contains the indices to indicate the relative strength of the individual predictors. Only cumulative affective attribute salience was statistically significant ($p < .01$). Therefore, H2 was supported. The relationship between cumulative affective attribute salience and percent supporting is displayed in Figure 4.

With T1 removed the results were still significant, $F(2, 27) = 4.42, p < .05$, indicating that the media accounted for 19% of the variance in public opinion (adjusted $R^2 = .19$). Once again, only cumulative affective attribute salience was significant. With both T1 and T2 removed, the results were no longer significant, ($p = .25$).

Figure 4: Relationship between cumulative affective attribute salience and percent supporting. For the purpose of this graph, cumulative attribute salience was transformed into a z score.

Three separate multiple regression computations were performed to evaluate how well the tone of media coverage predicted support from those affiliated with the different political parties. The predictors for all three regressions were immediate and cumulative affective attribute salience in the media, while the different criterion were (1) the percent of respondents supporting the bill who identified themselves as Democrats, (2) the percent of respondents supporting the bill who identified themselves as Republican, and (3) the percent of respondents supporting the bill who identified themselves as other. H3 posited that the tone of coverage would predict increased opposition toward the bill.

Figure 5: Relationship between cumulative affective attribute salience and percent Republican supporting. For the purpose of this graph, cumulative attribute salience was transformed into a z score.

For the first multiple regression, the linear combination of media salience variables was not a significant predictor of Democratic support ($p = .617$). For the second multiple regression, the linear combination was a significant predictor of Republican support, $F(2, 28) = 12.8, p < .001$. The sample multiple correlation coefficient when regressing Republican support on affective attribute salience was .69, indicating that 44% (adjusted $R^2 = .44$) of the variance in support among Republicans surveyed was accounted for by the media. Once again, only cumulative affective attribute salience was a significant predictor ($p < .001$). For the multiple regression examining whether tone was a predictor of support among respondents identified as “other” the results were also insignificant ($p = .762$). Therefore, H3 was supported among Republicans.

Finally, to evaluate the influence of aggregate public opinion on media coverage, a multiple regression analysis was performed to examine whether percent supporting in

public opinion polls was a predictor of issue attribute salience in the media. The predictors were immediate and cumulative percent of poll respondents supporting the health care reform bill, while the criterion was immediate affective attribute salience in the media. The results show that the linear combination of percent supporting was a significant predictor of issue attribute salience, $F(2, 27) = 4.7, p < .05$. The sample multiple correlation coefficient was .50, indicating that approximately 20% (adjusted $R^2 = .20$) of the variance in media salience can be accounted for by the linear combination of percent supporting in public opinion polls. In this case, only immediate percent supporting was statistically significant ($p < .05$). The relationship between immediate percent supporting and media attribute salience is displayed in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Relationship between immediate affective attribute salience and immediate percent supporting. For the purpose of this graph, cumulative attribute salience was transformed into a z score.

Here the beta coefficient for immediate percent supporting was larger than the value of its zero order coefficient, while the zero order coefficient for cumulative percent supporting was larger than its beta coefficient and part and partial correlations, which all became negative. Due to its significant correlation with immediate percent supporting (.625) and little correlation with immediate attribute salience (.247), cumulative percent supporting displayed a suppression effect, which adds irrelevant variance to immediate percent supporting as a predictor. Strength indicators are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Overall effects of percent supporting on affective issue attribute salience

Variables	β Coefficients	Bivariate	Partial	Part
<i>Percent Aggregate Supporting</i>				
Immediate ($T_{n-1} \sim T_n$)	.60*	.50	.44	.43
Cumulative ($T_1 \sim T_n$)	-.15	.28	-.12	-.11
Adjusted $R^2 = .20$, $N = 30$, $*p < .05$				

Overall, affective attribute salience in the media was a much stronger predictor of public opinion. Immediate public opinion also appeared to serve as a predictor of affective attribute salience. H4 was supported.

DISCUSSION

This study offers new insight into how media coverage might have influenced public approval of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. First, results show that when affective attributes are measured cumulatively, the tone of coverage became increasingly negative over the nine-month period. This provides support for previous findings that suggest print and broadcast media tend to emphasize negative news on certain national issues (Blood and Philips, 1995; Harrington, 1989; Hester & Gibson, 2003; Kepplinger & Roth, 1979; Kurtz, 1990).

A multiple regression analysis revealed that approximately one-third of the variance in public opinion polls concerning the bill could be accounted for by affective attribute salience in the media. Cumulative affective attribute salience in six major news outlets significantly predicted the level of public support for the bill. However, immediate affective attribute salience was not a significant predictor of public opinion. This supports earlier findings that agenda-setting effects occur not instantly, but over a period of several months (Salwen, 1988; Son and Weaver, 2005; Stone, 1975; Stone and McCombs, 1981). Specifically, a study by Son and Weaver (2005) employed a similar method and found that cumulative affective attribute salience was a significant predictor of support for candidates in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. However, they did not examine whether public opinion influenced affective attribute salience.

The ability of public opinion to predict immediate salience of media tone coincides with the findings of Stevenson et al. (1994). Their study found that the public may initially develop attitudes that are transmitted to the media, but the media then influence

public opinion at a later time. Though the bill itself resulted in the need for orientation among Americans, health care in general is an issue that hits extremely close to home, making the topic somewhat unique. Indications that public opinion contributed significantly to media coverage could be a result of the personal nature of the issue at hand. This would coincide with the findings of Zucker (1978) that public interest may lead to media salience when it comes to obtrusive topics. Much of the coverage focused on the infamous town hall meetings and protests in Washington where members of the public were open and honest about their evaluation of the bill. But these events could also have attracted a larger number of those who wished to voice opposition to the bill, further influencing the negative tone of coverage.

The negativity of coverage in the cumulative and its ability to predict increased opposition could support the idea that that negative news has a compelling impact (see Wu and Colman, 2009). Furthermore, the ability of coverage to predict increased opposition among Republicans not only indicates agenda reinforcement, but also supports the findings of Kiouisis (2005) that a strong correlation exists between media coverage and attitude strength. This could have major implications concerning the current state of the PPACA, and the future implementation of alternative policies concerning topics of a personal nature. It could be used a prime example of the consequences inherent in the relationship between media coverage and public opinion and reinforces Kosicki's (1993) idea that we need to be continuously evaluating on how various media outlets are informing audiences about complex issues.

As many scholars would agree, one cannot say the media are successful in dictating public opinion. There are many other contributors to public opinion about health care. Kosicki (1993) would also argue that this study fails to present evidence that “the people alleged to be affected have, in fact, been exposed to the content” (p. 107). Though one cannot concretely say those surveyed by Rasmussen were exposed to the media coverage examined in this study, the debate over health care reform was a frequent topic across media for several months. If a respondent never watched the news or read a newspaper over the eight-month period, it is quite possible that they were informed of the debate from family members or friends. Over a period of weeks and months information on health care reform would have accumulated. In a study almost 25 years ago, Page et al. (1987) already assumed that everyone was exposed to media content, be it directly or indirectly – and that was before the internet. Considering the strong link between media salience and public opinion as well as the public’s obvious reliance on outside sources concerning the content of this 2,000-page bill, it is hard to deny that the news media were major players in capturing the debate.

There also is no denying that there are inherent limitations in this study. Due to the unusually positive scores of the initial intervals, further investigation needs to be done to discover the tone of coverage during the months prior to this study’s starting point. While nine months is a substantially long period of time, this study failed to capture the tone of initial coverage as lawmakers began to put together a plan for health care reform. The initial draft of the Senate health care reform bill was circulated during the first week of June while the House unveiled a separate bill on June 20. The positivity of the two initial

intervals (T1 took place from June 23-26 while T2 took place from June 29-July 9) could be the tail end of positive coverage concerning the bills, with coverage becoming increasingly negative for the remainder. It could also be the result of a smaller sample of news items within the two time periods, as the majority of heavy coverage took place during the last few months of the debate. But the gradual downward trend in cumulative coverage makes the former highly probable. This study may have identified the general time at which the tone of coverage changed in the media. Unfortunately, the availability of polling data dictated the time period, indicating that advances in public opinion polling have only come so far. The irregular intervals between polls could have also influenced the impact of immediate salience, and accounted for its low significance in predicting public opinion.

While overall tone is an important factor in media coverage, this study does not include details on the effects of different news sources – politicians, reporters, polls, experts – which could offer further insight into the bill's portrayal by the media. Page et al. (1987) saw it as inadequate to “lump media content together as if it came from a single source with a single level of credibility” and found that news from different sources did in fact have effects of different magnitudes (p. 27). Further studies could not only look at the different sources used by various news outlets in portraying the bill, but also news outlets other than newspapers and network television such as online publications.

Negativity toward the bill also could be linked to other external events. In terms of contingent conditions, there also is no denying the Great Recession has had an effect on the public opinion about many issues, including this trillion-dollar health care bill.

Further studies could examine how often the cost of the bill was mention along with the economy.

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