

ARE PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA BIAS AN EFFECTIVE SHORTCUT? WHY PEOPLE
PERCEIVE BIAS AND WHY IT MATTERS.

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Abstract
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A large portion of Americans perceive a political bias in the news media. Past research suggests that people's perceptions of bias act as a cognitive shortcut, used to evaluate the accuracy of the news. In this research, I examine the effectiveness of the bias heuristic in protecting people from biased news sources. Using both survey and experimental data, I find that people reject news from sources they consider biased, even if there is no evidence of bias in the news from that source. Specifically, the results suggest that only strong partisans (who are least susceptible to media effects) perceive bias because of slant in the news. Meanwhile, independents and weaker partisans base their perceptions of bias on the content of opinion columns and editorials. Despite this, they still use those perceptions of bias to reject the content of the news, but not opinion content. In addition, I find that elite attacks on the media increase perceptions of bias independent of any actual slant in the news. Taken together, the results suggest that perceptions of bias are an ineffective cognitive shortcut to evaluate the accuracy of the news. Perceptions of bias are likely to undermine the news media's ability to inform the public, while failing to protect individuals from biased news organizations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	13
WHY PEOPLE PERCEIVE BIAS	
CHAPTER 3: NEWS AND OPINION SLANT.....	34
CHAPTER 4: ELITE ATTACKS.....	56
THE CONSEQUENCES OF PERCEPTIONS OF BIAS	
CHAPTER 5: PERCEPTIONS OF BIAS AND MEDIA EFFECTS.....	73
CHAPTER 6: ELITE ATTACKS AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY.....	90
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	113
REFERENCES.....	120
APPENDIX	
A. SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTERS 3 AND 5.....	129
B. EXPERIMENTAL MATERIALS FOR CHAPTERS 4 AND 6.....	132

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 3

3.1. Regression Models Predicting Perceptions of Bias.....	46
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Chapter 4

4.1. Characteristics of Experimental Groups.....	63
4.2. Regression Models Predicting Perceptions of Bias.....	69

Chapter 5

5.1. Regression Models Predicting Favorability Toward Candidates.....	79
5.2. Regression Models by Strength and Direction of Party ID.....	82
5.3. Consistency Between Causes and Uses of Perceptions of Bias.....	86

Chapter 6

6.1. Procedures for Experimental Groups.....	101
6.2. Regression Models Predicting Attitudes Toward Gregoire.....	109

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 3

3.1. Perceived Bias in Respondent's Newspaper.....	44
3.2. Perceived Bias by Strength and Direction of Party ID.....	45
3.3. Predicted Probabilities of Perceiving Bias.....	52

Chapter 4

4.1. Perceptions of Liberal and Conservative Bias.....	65
4.2. Perceived Criticism of Obama and McCain.....	66
4.3. Perceived Criticism by Party ID.....	68

Chapter 6

6.1. Favorability Toward Candidates by Experimental Group.....	98
6.2. Favorability by Experimental Group and Party ID.....	99
6.3. Perceptions of Bias by Experimental Group.....	104
6.4. Attitudes Toward Gregoire by Experimental Group.....	106

Chapter 1: Introduction

Near the end of the 2008 presidential election, a Pew Research poll asked Americans if they thought journalists wanted either of the presidential candidates to win. Public opinion was decidedly one-sided as 70% of Americans thought journalists wanted Barack Obama to win the election and only 9% thought journalists favored McCain (Pew, 2008a). There is some evidence that people's perceptions were correct as a content analysis revealed that the major television news networks were more likely to present negative coverage of John McCain compared to his rival (Project, 2008a).

Even outside of the general election season, perceptions of media bias are quite common in the American public. According to a 2008 Pew survey, a majority of Americans think the news media are politically biased in some way (Pew, 2008b). Specifically, 68% of Americans think the media have a great deal or fair amount of political bias. Not all people are equally likely to perceive media bias, however, as Republicans are more likely to perceive bias than Democrats. Among Republicans, 77% thought the media had a great deal or a fair amount of political bias, while 62% of Democrats thought the same. Independents fell in between the two as 67% thought the media were biased. In addition, nearly half of Republicans think the news media have a *great deal* of bias, compared to a quarter of Democrats and a third of independents. Thus, Republicans are more likely to have strong opinions about bias in the news media.

Furthermore, Americans are more likely to think the media favor Democrats over Republicans. The survey discussed above also asked whether the news media favored either party in their coverage of the presidential primary campaign (Pew, 2008b). More than half

(54%) of Republicans thought news coverage favored Democrats, and only 2% thought the media favored Republicans. On the other hand, Democrats were just as likely to think the media favored either side. Independents were more likely to think the coverage favored Democrats than Republicans. In addition, nearly half (45%) of Democrats thought the media had no bias in favor of either party.

That such a large portion of Americans believe the media are biased is somewhat puzzling considering that most empirical studies show no evidence of bias. In a meta-analysis of media bias research, D'Alessio and Allen (2000) found little evidence suggesting that the mainstream news media were more favorable toward either Democrats or Republicans. Of course, there are some elections in which the media favored one candidate over another. In the 1992 presidential election, the mainstream newspapers and television news were more favorable toward Bill Clinton than the incumbent George H. W. Bush (Dalton et al., 1998; Watts et al., 1999). As mentioned above, a similar (pro-Democratic) slant in coverage was found during the 2008 presidential election (Project, 2008a). Although the evidence clearly shows a slant in favor of these candidates, that slant may have resulted from campaign activities and external conditions rather than a liberal media bias. Indeed, during both elections the Republican Party held the presidency during poor economic times. In short, with few exceptions, empirical research has found little evidence of a systematic bias in the mainstream media.

What's going on here? Why do so many people think the media are biased when studies indicate that no bias exists? Are people's perceptions of media bias related to the actual content of the news or to other factors? When people perceive bias in a news source—for whatever reason—do they reject the messages from that source? In this chapter, I discuss why scholars

should be concerned about perceptions of bias in the news media. In brief, I argue that opinions about media bias are quite common in the American public, and that they have the potential to undermine the news media's ability to foster democratic accountability.

Before going on, it is important that I explain what I mean when I talk about media bias. Although there are many different types of bias discussed in scholarly literature, I focus on partisan bias in favor of one of the two major political parties or candidates. Certainly, media biases such as the mainstream bias (Bennett, 1996) or the bias toward controversy (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1994) have important implications for the news media's role in American democracy. However, when most people think of bias, they tend to think about whether it favors one party or candidate. Indeed, this is the grounds on which most of the discussion of media bias is conducted (Alterman, 2003; D'Allesio, 2000; Goldberg, 2001). In short, I define perceptions of bias as the opinion that a particular news source is, or the news media in general are, more favorable toward one party or candidate than they are toward the other side.

The News Media and Democratic Accountability

Political accountability is the foundation of representative democracy. In a governmental system where elected leaders promote the best interests of the people, there must be some form of accountability. When elected representatives fail to promote the public interest, people must have the opportunity and the wherewithal to remove them from office. In a large-scale representative democracy, citizens have only indirect access to the actions of government and the consequences of public policies. In order to hold political elites accountable, they must rely on

the news media to inform them of the state of the outside world. Indeed, this is why a free and open news media is an essential component of democracy.

Without the information provided by the news media, voters' decisions would be informed only by their personal experience and discussions with peers. In this scenario, government responsiveness and accountability would be slow at best and nonexistent at worst. For example, a hurricane might only impact the lives of those living around the Gulf Coast. That does not mean the government's response to the disaster should be of little concern to the rest of the country when evaluating the performance of their elected officials. Must someone wait to experience the government's poor management of a natural disaster or the economy before he or she holds elected officials accountable? The answer is most certainly no, but people require information from the news media to accurately judge the performance of their representatives.

When they fulfill their public informant role, the news media foster political accountability. People rely on the news media to form their opinions about the success or failure of public policies. Not only should people base their decisions on the information in the news media, but evidence suggests that they do (Hetherington, 1996). Citizens' perceptions of national conditions inform their political preferences and voting decisions even more than their personal circumstances (Mutz, 1998). For example, when economic conditions are poor and this is reported by the news media, people tend to vote out incumbent politicians (Fiorina, 1981). Conversely, when conditions are good, incumbents are typically reelected. In the end, it is the slant of media coverage that appears to move public opinion more than people's personal experiences.

Perceptions of Bias and Political Accountability

In order for the news media to foster political accountability, people must believe that the news is accurate. If people disregard the media's messages, they are unlikely to update their opinions based on new information provided by the news media. Whether someone accepts or rejects the media's messages is largely determined by the perceived credibility of the news source. A great deal of research shows that people are more likely to reject messages from low credibility sources (Hass, 1981). Thus, the news media's ability to foster political accountability is contingent on their public credibility.

Public perceptions of media bias speak to a source's credibility. If people think a source is biased they are more likely to ignore that source's messages (Eagly et al., 1978). Research also shows that those perceiving bias are less likely to trust the news media (Tsfati and Cappella, 2005). Moreover, D'Allesio (2003) found that perceiving bias in a source made people far less likely to think the information provided by the news source was accurate.

Studies have found numerous instances where the credibility of the news media affected their influence on public opinion. Miller and Krosnick (2000) found that the priming effect—the tendency for people to base their evaluations of politicians on the issues receiving the most media attention—is dependent on people's trust in the news media. In addition, Kaufman and colleagues (1999) found that people are more likely to think an article is accurate and believable when the news source is considered highly credible.

If perceptions of bias make people ignore the media's messages, democratic accountability is likely to suffer. Overall, election outcomes will be less related to the actual conditions of the country or the successes of public policies. Democracy is healthier when

citizens make decisions based on an accurate picture of social and political conditions. If people reject the media's messages because they perceive bias where none exists, they are less likely to base their voting decisions on an accurate understanding of reality. Perceptions of bias are likely to make it difficult for the news media to foster political accountability, which could have important consequences for American democracy. On the other hand, perceptions of bias might prove beneficial for democracy by preventing biased news sources from influencing public opinion. If news sources actually have a partisan bias, people will benefit from a healthy skepticism of those sources. In this scenario perceptions of bias might protect people from manipulation by partisan news sources.

The normative implications of public perceptions of bias depend, to a large extent, on the relationship between the causes and consequences of those perceptions. Indeed, it is difficult to understand the implications of either the causes or consequences of perceptions of bias, without an understanding of both. Most research has examined the causes *or* the consequences, but rarely both. For example, Baum and Groeling (2009) found that people's beliefs about the biases in *CNN* and *FOX News* influenced the persuasiveness of those sources. However, the authors never questioned whether the opinions about bias in those sources resulted from actual bias. If *FOX News* has a conservative bias in its coverage, it might benefit viewers to approach their messages with more skepticism than they would a more balanced source. The implications of the consequences are difficult to understand without knowing the causes of people's perceptions. I examine both the causes and consequences of perceptions of bias because it should provide a better understanding of their implications for democracy.

An Effective or Misleading Heuristic?

My research adds insight into the effectiveness of perceptions of bias as a cognitive shortcut. All things being equal, people will look for cognitive shortcuts (or heuristics) that do not require a great deal of mental energy (Downs, 1957). This is especially true when people process political information (Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1991). People also want to avoid receiving inaccurate or biased information from the news media. In addition, people seek to avoid information that is contrary to their political predispositions. When people perceive bias in a news source, they can reject the information without the costly mental energy required to evaluate the bias in each message on an individual basis. Evaluating every piece of information from the news media for bias would be tiresome and inefficient. Using a heuristic allows people to simply reject news from biased sources or avoid those sources altogether. Evaluating every media message might be a more effective—though perhaps not efficient—method to avoid inaccurate or discordant messages.

Although avoiding all discordant messages might not benefit society, it is certainly beneficial that people have some defense against inaccurate information. When news sources actually are biased, it is beneficial for society (and the health of democracy) that people are not manipulated by that bias. Past research suggests that the political preferences of owners and editors often influence the content of the news. Gilens and Hertzman (2000) found that newspapers whose parent companies owned more television stations—and therefore benefited from the 1996 Telecommunications Act—were more likely to report favorably on the Act. In contrast, those newspapers facing a competitive disadvantage from the Act were less favorable. For another example, Kahn and Kenney (2002) found that local newspaper coverage of U.S.

Senate races were slanted in favor of incumbents when the newspaper officially endorsed the incumbent. When a newspaper endorsed the challenger, the slant of news coverage was far less favorable to the incumbent. Kahn and Kenney also found that the slant of the news sections influenced the political preferences of readers. Thus, newspapers were biased in favor of the preferences of owners and editors, and that slant influenced readers' voting decisions.

Perceptions of bias might protect people from the slant of biased news organizations. If people use their opinions about the bias of a source as a shortcut to filter out messages from biased sources, it could make media manipulation less likely. Past research suggests that people use their perceptions of bias in a source as a cognitive shortcut to separate good information from bad, inaccurate or biased information. Eagly and Chaiken (1978) found that people's perceptions of the bias in a source acted as shortcuts to process the message. People used the characteristics of the source to establish expectations of the direction of the message. When the direction of a message confirmed the recipient's expectations, the message proved less persuasive. Conversely, when the message disconfirmed the recipient's expectations, it was more likely to change the recipient's opinions. Thus, perceptions of the source allowed people to judge the accuracy of the message without the costly process of evaluating every piece of information.

Baum and Groeling (2009) confirm the results in Eagly and Chaiken (1978), but do so using people's long lasting perceptions of cable news organizations. Specifically, they performed an experiment in which participants watched a news story attributed to either *FOX News*, *CNN* or no network at all. They also varied the content of the story so that it was either favorable or unfavorable to Republican president George W. Bush. The results suggest that

people's perceptions of the news source influenced how they processed the news. When people thought a source was biased, the source was unpersuasive when it confirmed the recipient's expectations. That is, when *FOX News* was favorable toward Bush, and when *CNN* was critical, the messages were rejected. Conversely, criticism from *FOX News* and praise from *CNN* were more persuasive than when the news story had no affiliation. In this case, people's perceptions of the source actually made the news *more* persuasive when it was inconsistent with the source's perceived bias.

The results in Baum and Groeling (2009), together with Eagly and Chaiken (1978) provide convincing evidence that people use their perceptions of the bias in a source as a shortcut to evaluate the bias in the source's content. News from "biased" sources is assumed to be biased unless the recipient recognizes that the source is defying its bias. I expand on past research by examining the effectiveness of this shortcut. Past research has shown that people use their perceptions of bias as a shortcut to avoid inaccurate information. I examine whether this shortcut is beneficial to those using it and to society more generally.

Whether perceptions of bias are an effective heuristic depends on the connection between people's perceptions and the actual content of the news. If people's perceptions of bias are related to the slant of news coverage, they might be a useful heuristic as they would prevent people from accepting biased messages. On the other hand, if people perceive bias for reasons unrelated to any actual slant in the news, their cognitive shortcut might lead them to reject news that they might otherwise find useful in updating their opinions. In the former case, media manipulation is prevented, but in the latter scenario, political accountability is less likely. In the end, the effectiveness of the bias heuristic depends on the relationship between perceptions of

bias and the actual slant in the news. In this dissertation, I begin by examining whether peoples' perceptions of bias are related to the actual content of the news. I then examine how people use their perceptions of bias as a cognitive shortcut to reject (what they believe to be) inaccurate or biased media messages.

Plan of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into two halves with the first two empirical chapters (three and four) devoted to understanding the causes of perceptions of bias and the other two empirical chapters (five and six) devoted to examining the consequences of those perceptions. In chapter two, I discuss past research concerning why people perceive bias and how those perceptions influence the ways they process the news. My goal in chapter two is to highlight the main questions concerning—the causes and consequences of—perceptions of bias and how I plan to address them.

In chapter three, I rely on survey data from the American component of the Cross-National Election Study in 1992 to examine how slant in local newspapers influenced readers' perceptions of bias. Specifically, I examine whether people's perceptions of bias in their daily newspapers were related to slant in the news or opinion content. As the content became more slanted toward either presidential candidate, did readers become more likely to believe the newspaper favored that candidate? Furthermore, I examine who was influenced by news and who was influenced by opinion content. The results in this chapter speak to the relationship between people's perceptions and the actual slant of the news. The main question is, are people's perceptions driven by the news, editorials and opinion columns, or both?

In chapter four, I use an experimental design to examine how elite attacks on the news media influence public perceptions of bias. Participants read articles about the 2008 presidential candidates, but some participants also read an attack on the source by the candidate discussed in the article. The purpose of the experiment is to determine whether reading the attack influences people's evaluation of the bias in the news source. In addition, I examine who is influenced by the attacks. Do attacks only influence the opinions of those in the attacker's party? Are attacks only effective—at influencing perceptions of bias—when they accuse the media of having a liberal bias? The results in chapter four speak to the ability of elites to influence people's perceptions of bias independent of the actual content of the news.

In the second half of the dissertation, I examine how perceptions of bias influence the way people process the news. Is news less persuasive when people think the source is biased? In chapter five, I return to the survey data used in chapter three to examine how people's impressions of the bias in their daily newspaper influenced the persuasiveness of the newspaper's slant. Did slant influence the opinions of everyone or just those not perceiving bias? In addition, I also test whether people reject the news, opinion content or both. If people perceive bias because of the content of editorials and opinion columns, but then reject the messages in the news—and not just the opinion messages—people are rejecting information for reasons unrelated to the bias in the news source. In this case, the bias heuristic would be ineffective because people are rejecting (or ignoring) the news even when there is no evidence of bias.

In chapter six, I more directly examine whether perceptions of bias reduce the persuasiveness of news sources. Using an experimental design similar to the one in chapter four,

I test whether elite attacks—by increasing perceptions of bias—make people more likely to reject the messages in the news. In other words, are people more likely to reject a message when they think the source is biased? Chapter six will also determine whether politicians can avoid political accountability by attacking the news media. When paired with the results in chapter four, chapter six will provide an interesting test of the effectiveness of the attacking the messenger strategy.

Chapter 2: Why People Perceive Bias and Why it Matters

In the previous chapter I discussed how people use their perceptions of bias in a news source as a cognitive shortcut to protect themselves from inaccurate, biased, or unpleasant information. Past research has shown that people use this heuristic, but it remains unclear whether this cognitive shortcut benefits or harms its users. The primary purpose of this dissertation is to shed light on this question. That is, how useful is the bias heuristic? To answer this question, I examine the relationship between the causes and consequences of public perceptions of media bias. The first step is to examine why people perceive bias. I examine two potential causes of people's perceptions: opinion content and elite attacks on the news media. I then examine how people use their perceptions to process the messages coming from those "biased" sources. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss past research concerning why people perceive bias and to build a theory explaining how those perceptions are likely to influence information processing. Throughout this chapter, I use past research to develop broad and general expectations, but I reserve more specific expectations for the individual chapters. I now begin this process with discussion of why people believe the media are biased.

Explaining Perceptions of Media Bias

As mentioned in the last chapter, a large portion of Americans think the news media are politically biased in some way. One of the main purposes of this dissertation is to figure out why people hold this view. Most past research examines perceptions of bias by looking internally at the characteristics of the individual. While I do not ignore characteristics of the individual, I

devote most of my attention to the external factors that act upon individuals to influence their perceptions of media bias. Internal characteristics can go a long way in explaining individuals' perceptions, but external factors are needed to explain changes in perceptions over time or why some news sources are considered biased and others are not.

In this dissertation, I examine two external factors that influence people's opinions about partisan bias in the news media. First, I examine how slant in a source's opinion columns and editorials—which from now on I refer to as opinion content—influences perceptions of bias in that source. Most research examining the role of slant in people's perceptions has focused on news, but opinion content has become a larger part of political coverage in the news media over the last thirty years (Patterson, 1994; West, 2001). As political coverage focuses more on analysis and commentary, it is important to understand the impact of opinion content on public opinion concerning media bias.

Second, I examine how attacks from political elites on the news media—which I refer to as elite attacks—influence perceptions of bias. Although there is evidence that elite attacks increase perceptions of bias (Watts et al., 1999), it remains unclear how this occurs. Do attacks require actual bias in the news media to be effective? How do characteristics of the attacker (the elite) and the recipient (the person hearing the attack) influence the attack's effectiveness? Answering these questions will add insight into how elite attacks increase perceptions of bias. I begin with a review of the literature concerning why people perceive bias in the news media.

News Slant and Perceptions of Bias

Does the content of news influence perceptions of media bias? In other words, are perceptions of bias related to actual bias in the content of the news, or to a perceptual bias in the person watching or reading the news? Past research suggests that perceptions of bias result from factors that are mostly unrelated to news content. Instead of news slant, it is individuals' partisanship that influences their perceptions of bias in the news media (Dalton et al, 1998; Schmitt et al., 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). Experimental research has found that partisans tend to interpret the content of news as hostile to their own opinions, referred to as the hostile media phenomenon.

In one experiment, Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) recruited participants from pro-Arab and pro-Israeli groups on a college campus and had them watch extensive news coverage concerning the Beirut massacre. Consistent with the hostile media phenomenon, those from the pro-Arab group thought the coverage was biased in favor of Israel and those from the pro-Israeli group thought the coverage was biased in the opposite direction. Non-partisans watching the same news coverage were more likely to view it as neutral. One of the striking aspects of this is that the participants watched the same news coverage and thought the news was biased depending on their personal biases rather than an objective evaluation of the content.

The findings in Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) were confirmed by subsequent research (Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994). Indeed, experimental research has found evidence for the hostile media phenomenon on various issues including: genetically modified foods (Schmitt et al., 2004; Gunther and Schmitt, 2004), primate research (Gunther et al., 2001), and the use of genetically modified organisms (Gunther and Liebhart, 2006). In all of these

experiments, partisans saw bias where none existed, or saw less bias than partisans on the other side. The hostile media phenomenon is not limited to experimental settings however, as studies have found evidence for it among the general public (Gunther, 1992; Gunther and Christen, 2002).

Although the hostile media phenomenon is common among partisans, neutral observers are less likely to perceive a hostile bias. Past research suggests that hostile media perceptions are much more likely to occur among people who are highly interested or personally involved in the issue discussed in the media (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994; Christen et al., 2002; Gunther, 1998; Vallone et al., 1985). The strength of these findings has made it common practice in experimental research concerning the hostile media phenomenon to actively recruit participants that are highly interested or personally involved in the issue in question.

Why do partisans believe the news media are hostile to their side? Schmitt and colleagues (2004) found that the hostile media phenomenon resulted from selective categorization of the information and arguments in the news. The theory of selective categorization posits that people categorize neutral information as opposed to their side of the issue. Information considered neutral by non-partisans is considered favoring the opposition by partisans on both sides. The theory of selective categorization explains hostile media perceptions because categorizing neutral arguments as against one's side skews the ratio of arguments and information perceived in the article. For example, if news contains three facts in favor of genetically modified foods, three facts that neither favor nor oppose it and three facts that oppose the issue, people are likely to come to different evaluations of bias depending on where they stand on the issue. Those supporting genetically modified foods would think that the news

presented six facts opposing their preferred side and only three facts supporting their side.

Supporters would naturally evaluate the media as biased against their side. The same would be true of those opposing genetically modified foods. A neutral observer, on the other hand, would think the news presented three facts in favor, three opposed and three neutral, and would rightly perceive neutral (or balanced) news coverage.

Opinion Content and Perceptions of Bias

Most of the research examining why people think the media are biased has focused on the role of hard news coverage. News sources not only present news articles, however, but they also present news commentary such as opinion columns and editorials in newspapers—and political talk shows and pundits on television. From now on I use the term “hard news” to refer to traditional (non-opinionated) straight news coverage.

Opinion columns and editorials are likely to have a substantial influence on readers’ perceptions of bias for at least two reasons. First, opinion content typically takes a particular position on political issues and candidates. While journalists tend to present both sides of the arguments (Bennett, 1996), opinion columnists and editorial writers feel no such obligation. This should make it easier for readers to detect slant in opinion content compared to hard news articles. Biases in hard news articles could come in the form of presenting better (or more) arguments on one side of a debate, but readers would need previous knowledge of the issue to identify these forms of bias. People are only likely to have that previous knowledge on issues of high interest. On the other hand, those paying any attention to opinion content will easily understand the positions taken by the writers. Thus, it should be easier for readers to notice the

bias in opinion columns than in news articles simply because opinion columns and editorials typically make explicit which position is favored.

Second, editorials and opinion columns are a reflection of the partisan stances of the owners and editors. Editorials especially, are a clear indication of the stance of the newspaper on a particular issue. If a newspaper's editorial staff comes out against a policy or candidate, readers may infer from that stance that the news coverage of that policy or candidate will be biased in favor of the newspaper's official stance. In other words, readers may use the content of opinion columns and editorials as cues to predict the bias of the hard news. For example, people may think *Fox News* must have a conservative bias if they allow Bill O'Reilly to have his own show, just as the *New York Times* must have a liberal bias if the editors and owners allow (liberal) Paul Krugman to write an opinion column. The assumption goes, if the editors or owners are biased—which can be inferred from editorials and opinion columns—the news must be biased in the same direction.

One piece of research has examined whether the content of opinion columns and editorials influenced perceptions of media bias. Russell Dalton and colleagues (1998) examined whether readers' perceptions of bias during the 1992 presidential election were related to the actual slant of news or opinion content. Consistent with the hostile media effect, the largest predictor of people's perceptions of bias were the readers' party identifications. The more partisan readers were, the more likely they were to believe their newspaper was favoring the candidate that they opposed. Although the authors concluded that perceptions of bias resulted from the hostile media phenomenon, they did find evidence that the slant of hard news and opinion content also played a role; albeit a marginal one. Readers were slightly more likely to

think their newspaper favored a candidate if the hard news and opinion sections actually were more favorable to that candidate. In the end, the authors downplay the relationship between content and perceptions of bias, and instead conclude that perceptions of bias result from the political predispositions of the perceiver.

In sum, the limited research on the subject suggests that the slant in hard news and opinion coverage has only a weak influence on why people perceive bias in news sources. I argue that this conclusion resulted from the failure to consider the interaction between the type of news (hard news or opinion content) and the direction and strength of the recipient's partisanship. Experimental research into the hostile media phenomenon considered how characteristics of the recipient influenced how people processed news, but they did not account for differences in the type of news (hard news or opinion content). Research into the hostile media effect focused exclusively on hard news articles and ignored the influence of opinion columns and editorials. Likewise, research examining the role of opinion content did not account for characteristics of the recipient. Taking both of these factors into account should provide a better understanding of how hard news and opinion content influence public opinion about media bias.

The influence of slant should vary depending on the type of story (hard news or opinion content) and the strength of the recipient's partisanship. Independents and weaker partisans should base their perceptions of bias on opinion content because it provides clearer cues to the news source's bias. Conversely, the perceptions of strong partisans should be related more to the slant of hard news. Strong partisans are more likely to evaluate the bias in hard news articles

and to have a negative reaction to any bias that they detect. The result should be a stronger relationship between the slant of hard news and strong partisans' perceptions of bias.

Elite Attacks and Perceptions of Bias

Opinion content is not the only factor that could increase perceptions of bias, as political elites can influence perceptions by attacking the news media. Past research has found that elite attacks on the news media—and the corresponding media coverage of those attacks—increase public perceptions of media bias. Watts and colleagues (1999) combined public opinion data with a content analysis measuring the news media's tone toward the two main presidential candidates during the 1988, 1992 and 1996 presidential elections. In 1988, there was little evidence of bias toward either candidate and few attacks on the news media. As a result, few people thought the media were biased in their coverage of the 1988 presidential election. People were much more likely to think the media were biased in 1992, but a content analysis found that the news media actually *were* more favorable toward Bill Clinton. Although there were also frequent attacks in the news media, it is unclear whether people perceived bias because of the attacks or because they noticed the actual bias in news coverage. Some clarification was provided in 1996, when there were more elite attacks than in 1992, but the news coverage was not favorable toward either candidate. Despite the absence of any actual bias in coverage, public perceptions of bias were at the same levels as they were in 1992. This provides some evidence that perceptions of bias are influenced more by elite attacks on the news media than any actual bias in news coverage.

Watts and colleagues performed a more in-depth analysis of the 1992 presidential election in order to determine whether increases in elite attacks over time were related to increasing public perceptions of bias during the election. The results indicated that increases in perceptions of bias during the 1992 election were best explained by increases in media coverage of elite attacks on the news media. But it was only claims of liberal bias in the news media that influenced public perceptions of bias.

Although Watts and colleagues presented compelling evidence, their research had some shortcomings that require a second look at the relationship between elite attacks and public perceptions of bias. One shortcoming was the use of the 1992 presidential election for their time-series analysis—their strongest evidence for a causal relationship. The 1992 election was the only election (in their study) in which the news media actually *were* more favorable toward one of the two candidates. Watts and colleagues argued that elite attacks provided cues to the public, which were used instead of an evaluation of the actual bias in the news media. An alternative explanation is that elite attacks increased the salience of media bias and people looked for evidence of such a bias. Indeed, their analysis found that only charges of a liberal media bias were effective at moving public opinion. If there had been no evidence of a liberal bias—more favorable coverage toward Clinton relative to Bush—elite attacks might not have had the same effect.¹

¹ One response is that elite attacks appeared to have the same effect in 1996, but those effects could be a hold-over effect from the 1992 election. Past research suggests that once people have an impression of the bias in a news source, the impression tends to color their future evaluations of the bias in that source's content (Turner, 2008). Thus, the interaction between the coverage and the attacks in 1992 might have caused people's perceptions, which in turn colored their evaluation of the bias in future elections.

Another problem is that it remains unclear who was influenced by the attacks. In the aggregate, public perceptions increased over the course of the 1992 election, but which groups of people were influenced the most? Are attacks only effective on members of the attackers' party? Are attacks on a conservative media just as effective as attacks on a liberal media?

My research expands on past research in at least four ways. First, I provide an alternative explanation for how elite attacks influence perceptions of bias in the news. Watts and colleagues argue that elite attacks influence perceptions of bias by providing cues to the reader. An alternative explanation is that attacks make people look for evidence of the alleged bias. That is, people do not simply take the politician's word for it, but rather they evaluate the bias in the news media for themselves. In brief, attacks are effective—at increasing perceptions of bias—by making people into biased information processors. They look for evidence of the type of bias suggested in the attack, and this makes them more likely to notice evidence of that type of bias and to ignore evidence of balance or bias in the opposite direction. For example, an attack on the liberal media will make people look for evidence of a liberal bias—which they are more likely to find given the well documented confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998)—but they will not look for evidence of balance or a conservative bias. In a similar vein, attacks work by framing the question around plausible alternatives. When elites accuse the media of having a liberal bias, it seems implausible (to the public) that the media has a conservative bias. Thus, the question is not what type of bias the source has, but whether the source has a liberal bias or no bias at all.

Second, I conduct experiments that isolate elite attacks on the news media as the treatment conditions. Watts and colleagues relied on survey data, which prevented the researchers from isolating the influence of elite attacks on perceptions of bias. An experimental

design is necessary to determine whether it is elite attacks, and not some combination of factors, that increase perceptions of bias.

Third, I control the content of the news media and manipulate the exposure to an attack on the source. As discussed above, one problem with relying on data from the 1992 election is that the coverage actually was more favorable toward one of the candidates (Bill Clinton). It remains unclear if attacks only work when they alert people to a real bias by raising the salience of media bias. This distinction is not insignificant as it speaks to the usefulness of the bias heuristic. Attacks might benefit the public if they make people more aware of the possibility of bias. People might benefit from noticing that a source is biased. This assumes that attacks make people objectively evaluate the content of the news. If attacks make people into biased processors, the attacks might have a more deleterious influence on how people process the news. Imagine if elites could increase perceptions of bias in a news source—even if no bias existed—and those perceptions made people more likely to ignore that source or the news media altogether. In this scenario, elite attacks would undermine the news media's ability to foster political accountability.

Finally, I examine whether attacks from liberal elites are just as effective as attacks from conservative elites. Watts and colleagues found that most attacks accuse the media of having a liberal bias, and that only those attacks were effective. Perhaps Republican elites attack the news media because it works with their base supporters, but it is possible that attacks from Democratic elites have less resonance with Democrats or independents. It remains to be seen whether attacks from Democratic politicians would be just as successful if they were more consistent at making those attacks.

Consequences of Perceptions of Bias

If people perceive bias in the news media, how are their perceptions likely to influence the way they process the news? We know from past research that perceptions of bias act as a heuristic to protect people from inaccurate or biased information. Again, the purpose of this dissertation is to understand the effectiveness of this shortcut. Understanding the effectiveness of the bias heuristic requires examining how people use the shortcut to reject the news. In this section I will discuss why perceptions of bias are likely to reduce persuasion. How people respond to (supposedly) biased news depends on their interest and involvement in the issue at hand. An individual's cognitive response is less important than the effects of that response, which is typically reduced persuasion.

Cognitive Responses to Biased News

How might perceptions of bias reduce a source's persuasiveness? According to Cognitive Response Theory, people are motivated to learn the truth from information sources such as the news media. When people think a source has low credibility, they are more skeptical of the information and arguments presented by that source. During message exposure, this skepticism pushes people to critically evaluate the information and arguments presented by the source. Indeed, past research suggests that people are more likely to critically evaluate messages when they come from sources with low credibility (Sternthal et al., 1978). For those perceiving low credibility in a source, critical evaluation takes the form of increased counterarguing with the source's messages. In other words, when a message comes from a low credibility source,

people are more likely to critically evaluate the message by thinking of counterarguments (Baron and Miller, 1969; Cook, 1969).

When people are confronted with high credibility sources, they are less skeptical of the veracity of the information. In effect, people trust that high credibility sources are presenting accurate information, which makes them far less critical of messages from high credibility sources. Instead of critical evaluation of the messages, people tend to accept messages from high credibility sources based on the credibility of the sources alone. Furthermore, Gillig and Greenwald (1974) found that even when people were given counterarguments prior to message exposure, they only used them when confronted with a low-credibility source. Thus, people did not counterargue high credibility sources even when counterarguments were known and salient at the time of message exposure. In short, people are willing to accept information—without much critical thought—as long as the source is credible.

To put this in terms of the news media, people should be less influenced by the content of the news when they perceive bias in a news source. Those perceiving bias should react the same as if they were confronting a low-credibility source. When people think a news source is biased, they are likely to critically engage the messages by thinking of counterarguments. On the other hand, when people do not perceive bias they are likely to accept the information based on the credibility of the source.

There is some preliminary evidence confirming this theory. Turner (2007) found that people were more likely to think of counterarguments when they thought a news source was biased. Specifically, Turner had people watch a news story that was attributed to *FOX News*, *CNN* or neither network. Liberals watching the story attributed to *FOX News* thought the story

had a conservative bias, and they were more likely to think of counterarguments. Likewise, conservatives thought *CNN* had a liberal bias, and they too thought of more counterarguments. Thus, even when watching the same news story, people were more likely to critically engage the information and arguments presented by—what they perceived to be—biased news sources.

Heuristic Processing

Although some people are certainly likely to engage in counterarguing news messages, there are at least three reasons why this approach is unlikely for most individuals. First, some people do not have the cognitive ability or the requisite political sophistication to properly evaluate the validity or accuracy of the news. How could someone with little knowledge of an issue properly evaluate the news media's portrayal of that issue? For them, it would be a mistake to engage the news in systematic processing. They would be likely to either falsely reject the content or to accept it only because they do not have the requisite knowledge to properly counterargue the message.

Second, the news is often not grounded in people's experiences. Rather, it involves people and events to which most people have only indirect access. With the news media being the only access to much of the political world, people's acceptance of the news depends on their perceptions of the source. For example, if the news media report that the government's response to a hurricane was slow, I have no way to independently verify the accuracy of their reports. Instead, I have to rely on other factors to decide how likely it is that the report is an accurate depiction of the outside world. Thus, it is not realistic to expect people to evaluate the veracity

of the news on their own without some access to the actual event—and the same is true for social indicators.

Third, engaging the news in systematic processing requires a great deal of cognitive effort that most people are unwilling to expend. In general, people are cognitive misers who look for ways to avoid mental effort when dealing with political matters (Popkin, 1991). There is little incentive for most people to devote significant resources to thinking about political matters when the benefits of such effort are typically quite minimal (Downs, 1957). People are only likely to engage in effortful processing when they are highly interested in the issue at hand (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), or more politically aware in general (Kam, 2005). Instead of engaging in effortful evaluation of the message, people tend to rely on information shortcuts or rules of thumb when processing political information (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993).

Past research has identified numerous informational shortcuts that people use to make judgments in efficient ways. Such heuristics include message repetition (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), multiple sources (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993) and interest group affiliation (Lupia, 1994). Perhaps the most commonly used heuristic—and the most relevant to perceptions of media bias—is relying on the characteristics of the source to evaluate the message. Past research has found that a source's race (Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994), credibility (Hass, 1981; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998), and party identification (Mondack, 1993) all influence the persuasiveness of the message advocated by the source. When sources are highly credible or identify with the same party as the recipient, people are less likely to engage the message in systematic processing. Instead, they tend to accept the message based on the characteristics of the source alone. Whether people rely on effortful processing or cognitive shortcuts depends on their

motivation to know the truth and their interest (or involvement) in the topic discussed in the news media.

When people rely on heuristic processing, they are more likely to reject the message than to engage it by thinking of counterarguments. Rather than spending the time and energy to think of counterarguments, people might simply reject the message because they perceive bias in the source. One approach is to reject all of the messages from biased sources. Democrats would reject messages from *FOX News* and Republicans would do the same when reading the *New York Times*.

Past research suggests that people rarely reject all the messages from biased sources (Eagly and Chaiken, 1978; Baum and Groeling, 2009). Instead, people tend to reject the news when it is consistent with the perceived bias of the source. People's perceptions of the bias in a source carry with them expectations about which side of political issues the news is likely to support. When the news is consistent with those expectations, people attribute the news to the biases of the source rather than the external environment. For example, if *FOX News* is critical of a Democratic politician, those perceiving a conservative bias are likely to attribute the criticism of the Democrat to the biases of the source. Conversely, if *FOX News* criticizes a Republican politician, people are likely to attribute the criticism to external circumstances such as the overwhelming evidence against the Republican. In other words, the criticism must be valid if even a news source with a conservative bias reports it.

If the direction of the message is inconsistent with people's expectations, they can not attribute the cause to the biases of the source. This causes people to form another explanation, and more often than not, people attribute the cause to the external world. In other words, when

FOX News criticizes a Democrat it is because the source is biased, but when they criticize a Republican they are just reporting the news. When people attribute the news to external circumstances (they are just reporting the news) the source is much more persuasive than when people attribute the news to the biases of the source.

It is worth noting that the direction of the message only matters when the recipient has the ability to place the message as either consistent or inconsistent with the bias in the source. When people are dealing with a new issue or one in which they have little knowledge, they will not be able to determine which side of the issue is favored in the news. If people are not able to determine which side is favored by the message, they are more likely to evaluate its accuracy based on their perceptions of the source. In short, when people perceive bias in a news source they are likely to reject the news unless they have enough knowledge to determine which side of the issue the news favors.

Whether perceptions of bias lead people to reject or counterargue the media's messages is of little importance for my purposes. Both responses lead to reduced persuasion and less opinion change. Counterarguing might be slightly more beneficial for democracy than outright rejection of the media's message. The former allows some chance for persuasion, but the latter eliminates almost all possibility. Unfortunately, the process of critical engagement of a message is rarely objective and fair toward both sides. When people engage in effortful evaluation of political messages, they tend to side with their previous opinions or evaluations. In fact, past research has found that people tend to hold their opinion more strongly after considering alternative arguments (Taber and Lodge, 2006). In other words, cognitive engagement tends to have a polarizing effect on public opinion. Thus, if perceptions of bias lead to cognitive engagement,

people will be more resistant to the information and arguments than would otherwise be the case. This would result in opinion stability and polarization when perhaps opinion change is the more prudent path.

In addition, perceptions of bias may not lead to one or the other response: engagement or rejection. Rather, they might cause counterarguing in some circumstances and rejection in others. When people perceive bias in a source they should be more likely to counterargue the message when they are motivated to engage the source, but rejection is more likely when they are less interested or not personally involved with the issue. Indeed, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) found that people are more likely to rely on source cues when they are less interested or uninvolved in the issue at hand. In addition, Kam (2007) found that counterarguing was more likely among the politically aware, while heuristic processing was more likely among the unaware.

In sum, when people perceive bias, they are likely to either counterargue or reject the content of the news. When people are not motivated to counterargue, they are likely to rely on cognitive shortcuts. One shortcut is to ignore the news from (those perceived to be) biased sources. This is most likely to occur when people have no prior knowledge of the issue discussed in the news. When message recipients are able to identify the direction of the message, they are more likely to reject only those messages that are consistent with the direction of the perceived bias. Conversely, the message should be more persuasive when the message is inconsistent with the direction of the bias in the source. Now that we know that perceptions of bias influence persuasion, it is important to understand whether this is beneficial or harmful to individuals and society more generally.

Effectiveness of the Bias Heuristic

I take it as a given that people use perceptions of bias as a cognitive shortcut. I expand on past research by examining the effectiveness of this shortcut. Past research shows that people use their perceptions as a cognitive shortcut that reduces persuasion, but it remains unclear whether the bias heuristic benefits either the individual or society. The bias heuristic might provide people with an efficient way to avoid inaccurate or biased news. This is certainly beneficial for democracy as it would prevent biased news sources from influencing public opinion; at least among those perceiving bias. Conversely, the bias heuristic is likely to harm individuals if they reject news for reasons unrelated to any actual bias in the source. If people perceive bias for one reason—elite attacks for example—but their perceptions make them reject the news even when no bias exists, people might fail to update their opinions even when doing so is called for. Perceptions of bias would also hinder democracy as they would undermine the news media's ability to foster political accountability.

Using the findings of Baum and Groeling (2009) as a starting point, I attempt to test how perceptions of bias reduce persuasion in various circumstances. I add to scholarly understanding of the relationship between perceptions of bias and persuasion in at least two ways. First, I test whether perceptions of bias reduce the persuasiveness of news, opinion content or both. Remember, in chapter three I examine which of these types of news influences people's perceptions of bias. In chapter five, I compare those results to how people use their perceptions as a heuristic. If perceptions of bias are an effective heuristic, they should prevent persuasion from the type of news that causes their perceptions of bias in the first place. For example, if people perceive bias because of the slant in a source's opinion content, they should reject the

messages in the opinion content but still accept the messages from the news. If they perceive bias because of opinion content but then reject the news, they are discounting potentially useful information for no good reason. In this scenario, the shortcut is ineffective.

Second, I examine how elite attacks might decrease persuasion by increasing perceptions of bias in the source. If attacks increase perceptions of bias, they should also make people more likely to reject the source's messages. Although increasing perceptions of bias in a news source is likely to have long-term consequences for that source's ability to foster accountability, they might have the opposite effect in the short-term. If perceptions of bias make people more likely to evaluate the content of the news for evidence of bias—as I argue they do—they might increase persuasion by increasing attention to an article. While people might normally pay little attention to the news, attacking the source might increase people's attention, and in doing so increase persuasion. The more attention people pay to the article the more likely they are to incorporate the information into their opinions. On the other hand, the lower credibility of the source might prevent any persuasion occurring because of people's increased attention. People might process the news with greater attention, but still reject or counterargue the information, resulting in no change in their opinions.

Summary

In sum, this dissertation examines both the causes and consequences of public perceptions of media bias. I begin by examining why people believe the media are biased. In chapters three and four, I examine two potential causes of perceptions of media bias: opinion slant and elite attacks on the media. The rise of news analysis and commentary in political

coverage—and the frequent attacks on the news media—make it important to understand how these two factors influence public opinion about bias in the news media. In chapters five and six, I turn from examining why people perceive bias to why those perceptions matter. Past research has focused mostly on the causes of media bias, but has largely ignored the consequences of those perceptions. In chapter five, I examine how perceptions of bias influence people’s susceptibility to media effects on their political preferences. I then present a more direct test of this phenomenon in chapter six, when I manipulate perceptions to determine if opinion change decreases. Whatever the results show, this research should provide a clearer understanding of public perceptions of bias in the news media.

Chapter 3: News and Opinion Slant

A common practice of newspapers is to have the news in a separate section from the editorials and opinion columns. Newspapers initially did this to symbolize that opinions would have their own section and by implication would be kept out of the news (West, 2001). News was supposed to be objective and based on the professional norms of journalism. Although it is arguable whether opinions can ever be separated from the news, the symbolic “wall of separation” still exists in most newspapers across the country. In television news, radio and the internet, the line between opinionated news shows and hard news has become very blurry. Does Keith Olberman report the news while he counts down the top five news stories of the day on *MSNBC* or does he give his opinions? The same could be asked of Bill O’Reilly’s show on *FOX News*. It is not easy to classify which shows are opinion based and which are meant to report the news according to the professional journalistic standards.²

The rise of opinionated shows on cable news networks was preceded by a move from objective news reporting habits to a focus on news analysis. Darrell West (2001) argues that following Vietnam and Watergate, the press decided that merely reporting the facts allowed for too much government control over the news. The facts required context and analysis by either journalists or political pundits. For journalists, it is not only important what a politician did, but why he did it. News has since focused on the strategy of the political actors more than their

² This is one reason why it would be very difficult to conduct this type of analysis on television news. It would be hard for any researcher to distinguish between hard news and news analysis on cable news shows.

actions or the substance of their policies (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1994). This type of analysis makes it even more difficult to separate news from opinion.

As opinion and analysis become a larger part of the news, it is important to understand how they influence public perceptions of media bias. In the previous chapter, I discussed why opinion content is likely to have a substantial influence on public perceptions of media bias. If this is true, perceptions of bias should increase as hard news and opinion merge.

In this chapter, I examine how the slant in both hard news and opinion content are related to people's opinions about the biases in news sources. Are people more likely to perceive bias in news sources that actually present slanted coverage? Do people evaluate the bias in a news source based on the slant of its hard news or opinion content? Which readers base their opinions on hard news, and which readers are influenced by the slant in opinion content? To answer these questions, I use data from a content analysis of newspapers and a survey of readers during the 1992 presidential election. The analysis focuses on the relationship between the slant of hard news and opinion content and readers' opinions about the bias in their local newspaper. My main contribution to past research is to examine how the slant of hard news and opinion content interacts with the strength and direction of the reader's party identification.

A Reexamination

As mentioned last chapter, most research has found little relationship between the slant of the news and people's perceptions of bias. I argue that this conclusion results from the failure to consider the interaction between the type of news (hard news or opinion content) and the direction and strength of the recipient's partisanship. In the only piece of research that examined

how opinion content influenced perceptions of bias, Dalton and colleagues (1998) lumped all people together rather than separating them by the strength of their partisanship. I argue that strong partisans share characteristics that make them more likely to detect bias in news articles. Conversely, weaker partisans and independents are more likely to perceive bias because of the slant in editorials and opinions columns.

One way that I expand on past research is by examining how news influences Republicans, Independents and Democrats differently. Significant portions of all these groups believe the media are biased, and it is important to understand how slant might influence these groups in different ways. Furthermore, factors other than slant are likely to influence people in different ways depending on their party identification. For example, given that conservative elites are much more likely than liberal elites to attack the news media (Domke et al., 1999; Watts et al., 1999), media bias might be more salient among Republicans in the general public. This might make them more likely to detect bias in the news when it actually exists. On the other hand, if elite attacks have a direct influence on perceptions of bias—as Watts and colleagues suggest—Republicans might be more likely to perceive bias independent of any actual slant in the news.

I also examine whether news and editorial content influence perceptions of bias differently among strong partisans and weak partisans. Strong partisans on both sides share common characteristics that make them more likely to detect bias in news coverage. As mentioned in the previous chapter, opinion content typically makes it easier for people to recognize which side is being advocated by the writer. In addition, readers are likely to use the slant of editorials and opinion columns as cues to the partisan biases of the newspaper. Thus,

even if the news has no slant in any direction, readers are likely to assume that a news source is biased if they detect slant in opinion columns and editorials. Whatever the results, the present findings should—at the very least—help clarify the relationship between the actual bias in the media and the perceptions of those in the public.

Theory

How might content influence perceptions of bias? I argue that people base their perceptions of the political leanings of news sources on the actual content of that source. Overall, when sources are slanted in a particular direction, people will tend to perceive bias in that direction. For example, if a source is more favorable toward Democratic candidates and positions, readers or viewers will be more likely to perceive bias in favor of Democrats. This is precisely what Dalton and colleagues (1998) found in their analysis, as perceptions of bias were related to the slant of both hard news and opinion content. These relationships were rather weak, however, because Dalton and colleagues did not account for differences between the type of news and the partisanship of the reader.

Not all news is the same; sources typically present both hard news and opinion content. Opinion content provides clearer signals to the reader or viewer concerning the partisan leanings of the news source. These signals are likely to be picked up by both independents and partisans and used to judge the source's bias. Thus, perceptions of bias should be related to the slant in a news source's opinion content.

Hypothesis 3.1: As opinion content gets more favorable toward a candidate, people will be more likely to think the news source is biased in favor of that candidate.

Hard news slant provides more subtle cues to the reader or viewer. Hard news might be slanted toward a candidate if it presents more positive than negative considerations in a news story. Or, a hard news source might have more stories discussing the economy when the economy is an unfavorable issue for the incumbent candidate. Partisans are more likely to see this treatment as unfair toward their preferred candidate. Moderates are likely to view coverage of the economy as perfectly reasonable and appropriate, but partisans are likely to see the same coverage as evidence of bias when it is unfavorable toward their preferred candidate (Schmitt et al., 2004). In other words, partisans are more likely to react to news coverage that might seem perfectly appropriate to more moderate and independent observers.

In addition, partisans are more likely to go looking for evidence of bias, which should lead them to base their evaluations on news content. Moderates are less invested in election results and the outcomes of political battles. Partisans care more about who wins, which should make them interested in the bias in the news. Past research finds that the perceived reach of the message influenced people's evaluation of bias in the source (Gunther and Schmitt, 2006). People are less likely to think the news is biased if they believe it will only reach a small number of people. This suggests that concern about the impact of the message makes people more likely to evaluate its bias. Partisans are more interested in political outcomes than moderates and independents, which should make them more likely to look for evidence of media bias in political coverage. If they are looking for evidence of bias, their opinions should be related to

the slant in both news and opinion content. Thus, strong partisans are more likely to evaluate a source's bias based on news *and* opinion content. The more favorable the source's news and opinion content are toward one side, the more likely strong partisans are to believe the source favors that side.

Hypothesis 3.2: The slant in both hard news and opinion content will be related to strong partisans' perceptions of bias in news sources. The more a source's news favors one side, the more likely strong partisans are to think the news source favors that side.

Slant in opinion content is easier to detect than slant in hard news even if people are not actively evaluating the bias in the source. Even just reading the headlines of opinion columns or editorials typically provide the reader with a clear indication of the political stance of the writers. This is not typically the case in news articles that attempt to portray balance and neutrality. Thus, independents are likely to notice the slant in opinion content even if they are not looking for it. The slant in hard news is not as obvious as it is in opinion content, which means people might not notice it unless they are actively evaluating the bias in the source. Because independents are less interested in political outcomes, they are less likely to actively look for evidence of bias. If they do not look for evidence of bias, they are unlikely to notice the subtle cues indicating slant in news content. Therefore, the perceptions of independents should be unrelated to any actual slant in news content.

Hypothesis 3.3: News slant will have no influence on perceptions of bias among independents.

Data Sources

To test the above hypotheses, I use data collected for the American component of the Cross National Election Study in 1992, including both a content analysis of daily newspaper election coverage and a survey of readers. The study includes a nationally representative survey of 1,318 Americans in select counties throughout the United States during the 1992 presidential election.³ Surveys were conducted from a week after the election to the end of January. In the survey, respondents were asked to provide the name of the daily newspaper that they read most often, and the surveys were combined with data from a content analysis of those newspapers' election coverage.⁴ In all, 46 newspapers were analyzed and their readers surveyed. The content analysis was conducted from Labor Day to Election Day 1992. Only those who read one of the newspapers that were analyzed were included in the analysis, which reduced the survey sample to 813 respondents.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the respondent's perception of which candidate (if any) was favored by the newspaper he or she read most often. Respondents were asked whether they thought the newspaper they read was more favorable toward either of the two candidates. Thus, the dependent variable representing perceptions of bias has three categories: favors Bush, favors Clinton, or no perceived bias. Those thinking their newspaper favored Ross Perot were dropped

³ Beck, Paul, Russell J. Dalton, and Robert Huckfeldt. Cross-National Election Studies: United States study, 1992 [Computer file]. 2nd ICPSR version. Columbus, OH: Paul A. Beck, Ohio State University/Irvine, CA: Russell J. Dalton, University of California/Bloomington, IN: Robert Huckfeldt, Indiana University [producers], 1993. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2000.

⁴ For more information on the data collection, please see Dalton and Colleagues (1998) or Beck and colleagues (2002).

from the analysis.⁵ In their original analysis, Dalton and colleagues (1998) treated this variable as continuous and estimated OLS regression models. It is more appropriate, however, to treat the variable as ordinal given that 1) it only has three categories and 2) the “no bias” category serves as a middle-point between the other two categories.

Independent Variables

The main explanatory variables are the relative slant of the hard news and opinion content toward Clinton relative to the slant toward Bush. News stories, editorials and opinion columns were coded on a 7-point scale from extremely positive to extremely negative in terms of the evaluative content of each candidate. Each article, editorial or opinion column was coded once for each candidate that was mentioned. If an article mentioned Clinton and Bush, it was coded for its slant toward Clinton and again for its slant toward Bush. Each newspaper was assigned a score representing the mean slant toward Clinton and another score for the mean slant toward Bush. For analysis, news and editorial slant were measured as the slant toward Clinton relative to the slant toward Bush, which is found by subtracting the slant toward Bush from the slant toward Clinton (Clinton slant – Bush slant).⁶ A score of zero represents balanced coverage, with positive scores signifying slant in favor of Clinton and negative scores denoting slant in favor of Bush. News slant ranged from a low of .21 more favorable toward Clinton, to a high of 2.85 more favorable toward Clinton than Bush. Opinion content had a much larger range from a

⁵ Only six respondents thought their daily newspaper favored Ross Perot.

⁶ Coders were instructed to “Evaluate the article from the perspective of the (Bush or Clinton) campaign and assess the content of the article from this perspective. In other words, would the (Bush/Clinton) campaign like seeing this article in print?” (Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt, 1998, p. 115).

low of -2.5 to a high of 4.33.⁷ For more detailed information on the newspaper coding or the newspapers used in the analysis, see Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998).

Other independent variables include numerous measures that might influence perceptions of bias. The respondent's interest in the campaign was included because the uninterested are less likely to perceive bias (Vallone et al., 1985).⁸ I also include the participant's attention to articles about the campaign, which was found by asking participants how much attention they paid to campaign news. In addition, I include a measure of political knowledge as those with more knowledge might be more capable of understanding how the news reports differ from reality, if indeed they do.⁹ In order to control for party identification, I included a three-category variable from Democrat to Republican, with independents as the middle category. I also include the respondents' political ideology, which was measured on a 10-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. The exact wording of the questions used to measure all individual characteristics can be found in Appendix A.

Does Content Matter?

Are perceptions of bias related to any actual slant in hard news or opinion content? The first task in answering this question is to examine people's perceptions of bias in their daily newspapers. Figure 3.1 presents the overall percentage of people perceiving bias in their daily

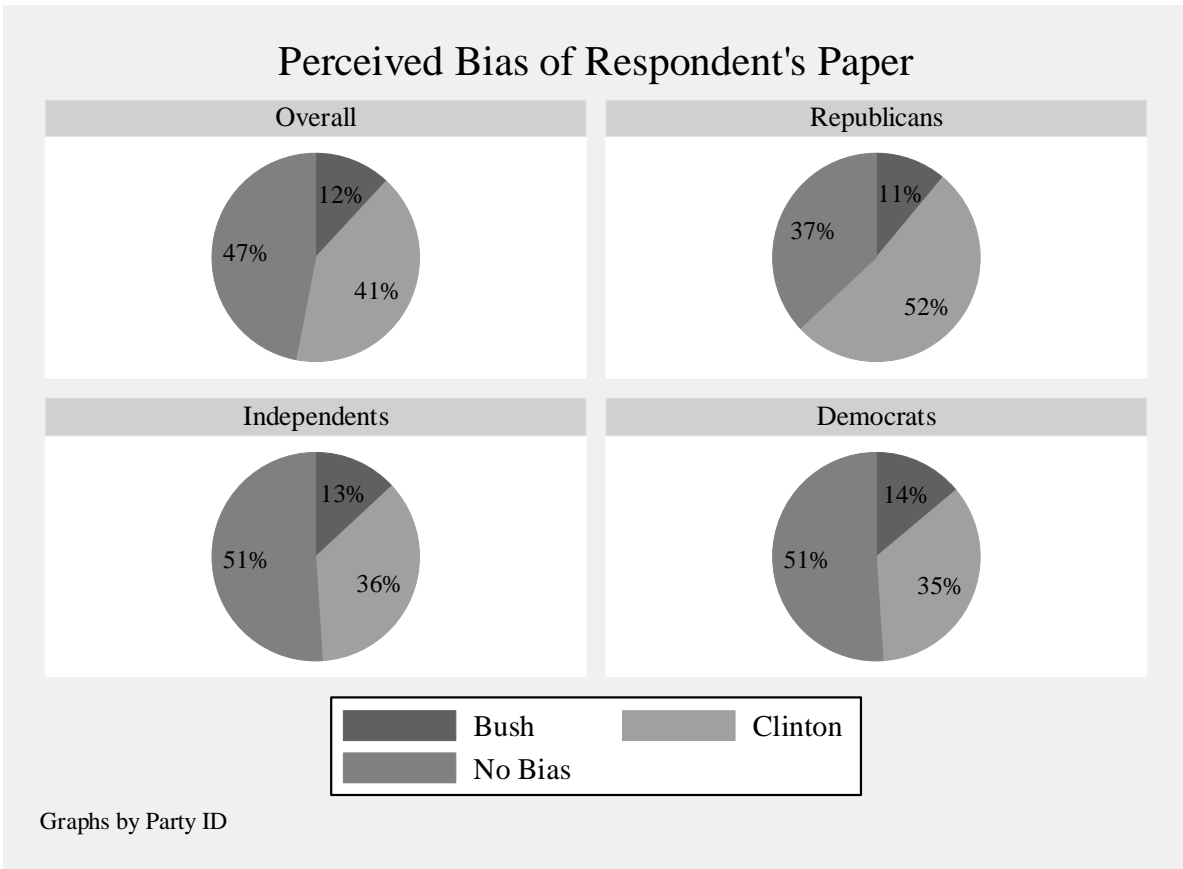
⁷ The highest slant of 4.33 is a potential outlier as it is more than double the next highest score (1.79). I considered removing this newspaper, but decided against it because the results were only slightly more robust when the newspaper was included.

⁸ Interest is measured on a 3-point scale with 1 = Not Much, 2 = Somewhat, and 3 = Very.

⁹ Political knowledge was measured by the interviewer's assessment of how knowledgeable the respondent was about politics. Interviewers rated the respondents on the following scale: very low, fairly low, average, fairly high and very high. Although this is not the ideal measure of political knowledge, it has been used in past research and is certainly suitable as a control variable (Bartels, 1996; Zaller, 1985).

newspaper by party identification. Nearly half of the respondents thought their daily newspaper favored neither candidate, but when people did perceive bias they tended to think it favored Clinton. Indeed, more than three times as many people thought their newspaper favored Clinton as thought their newspaper favored Bush. Figure 3.1 also shows how perceptions of bias break down for Republicans, Democrats and Independents. A majority of Republicans thought their newspaper favored Clinton, and a third of independents and Democrats agreed. Less than one-fifth of Democrats thought their local newspaper favored Bush. This is likely due to the well documented media slant against Bush that was caused by the poor economy leading up to the 1992 presidential election (Dalton et al., 1998; Watts et al., 1999). Thus, very few people thought their newspaper favored Bush, and Republicans were much more likely than others to think their newspaper favored the Democratic presidential candidate.

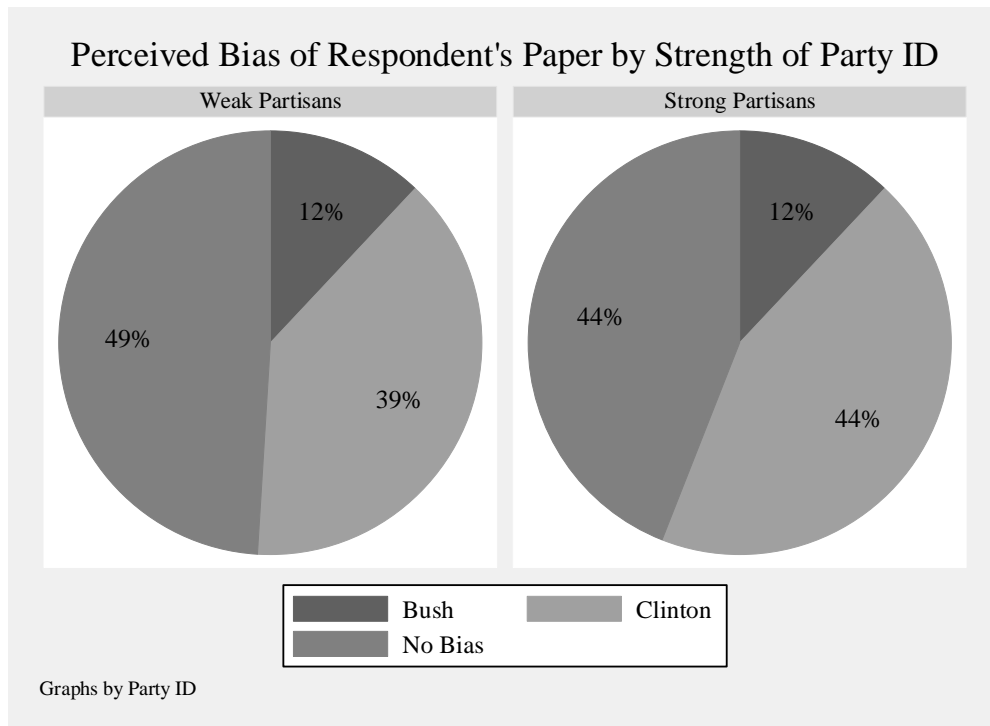
Figure 3.1



It is also important to understand how perceptions of bias were distributed among strong partisans compared to readers with weaker partisan attachments. Vallone and colleagues (1985) found that partisans were more likely than non-partisans to perceive a hostile media. Figure 3.2 shows the distribution of perceptions of bias for strong partisans compared to weaker partisans and independents. Although past research suggests that strong partisans are more likely to perceive a hostile bias in the news media, the results in Figure 3.2 suggest that they are only slightly more likely to perceive bias than independents or those with weaker partisan attachments. The percentage of strong partisans perceiving no bias (44%) in their daily

newspaper was only slightly lower than the percentage (49%) of independents and weaker partisans.¹⁰ Indeed, a majority of both weak and strong partisans perceived bias in their daily newspaper.

Figure 3.2



Now that we understand who perceived bias in the 1992 election coverage, it is important to determine whether those perceptions were related to any actual bias in the content of the newspapers. To that end, I estimated ordered-probit regression models with perceived favorability of the newspaper as the dependent variable. All of the models include the same variables, but they differ in the characteristics of the participants. In all models, I clustered on the newspaper read by the respondent. Once again, the dependent variable for all models is the

¹⁰ The difference between strong and weak partisans was insignificant (chi-square = 2.56, $p < .05$).

respondent’s belief about which candidate was favored by his or her daily newspaper: Bush, neither candidate, or Clinton. Perceived favorability toward Clinton is the highest category so a positive coefficient denotes that the independent variable increases the probability that respondents would think their newspaper is balanced or favored Clinton.

The first column presents the results when all participants are included. Consistent with the findings of Dalton and colleagues (1998), the slant in both hard news and opinion content was significantly related to readers’ perceptions of bias. Thus, the more a newspaper was slanted in favor of either candidate, the more likely readers were to perceive bias in favor that candidate. Other findings in the overall model generally followed expectations. Republicans and conservatives were more likely to think their newspaper favored Clinton and Democrats and liberals were more likely to think their newspaper was balanced or favored Bush.¹¹ None of the other control variables—political knowledge, attention to campaign news or interest in the campaign—had a significant influence on perceptions of bias.

Table 3.1 Ordered-Probit Regression Models Predicting Perceptions of Bias						
	Overall	Republican	Independ.	Democrat	Weak Partisan	Strong Partisan
Hard News	.214* (.104)	.192 (.147)	.029 (.091)	.558* (.282)	.057 (.089)	.510* (.138)
Opinion	.142* (.045)	.067 (.101)	.168* (.054)	.182* (.095)	.144* (.047)	.129* (.064)
Ideology	.053* (.018)	.031 (.011)	.080* (.027)	.047 (.016)	.052* (.017)	.052* (.017)

¹¹ Independents include those who initially said that they identified as independents even if they later said they lean toward one party or another.

	(.023)	(.037)	(.035)	(.030)	(.025)	(.028)
Party ID	.137* (.064)				.118 (.104)	.155* (.074)
Knowledge	.063 (.060)	.105 (.086)	-.044 (.082)	.138 (.088)	.019 (.064)	.118 (.087)
Attention	-.004 (.056)	.137 (.093)	-.104 (.105)	-.058 (.109)	-.007 (.077)	-.019 (.091)
Interest	-.010 (.075)	.092 (.130)	-.035 (.126)	-.150 (.146)	.027 (.103)	-.070 (.128)
Cut 1	-.107 (.292)	.081 (.545)	-.996 (.469)	-.266 (.516)	-.356 (.467)	.181 (.489)
Cut 2	1.29 (.269)	1.25 (.576)	.489 (.474)	1.34 (.489)	1.06 (.457)	1.58 (.485)
Log	-729.93	-242.22	-259.73	-215.13	-406.78	-318.66
Wald (7)	36.09*	7.60	14.62*	14.49*	16.16*	39.00*
N	762	258	270	234	420	342
Columns are ordered-probit regression models with perceived favorability of one's daily newspaper as the dependent variable. All models are clustered around the paper read by the respondents. *p<.05						

Do news and opinion content influence all readers the same? In order to answer this question, I estimated separate models for Republicans, independents and Democrats. A majority of Republicans thought their newspaper favored Bill Clinton, but the results in Table 3.1 suggest

that those perceptions had nothing to do with hard news or opinion slant. For Republican readers, there was no relationship between the actual slant of their daily newspaper (hard news or opinion content) and their perceptions of that newspapers' bias. This probably resulted from George H. W. Bush's attacks on the mainstream news media during the 1992 election. Research shows that media self-coverage of elite charges of bias were quite prominent during that election and that most of the attacks came from Republican elites (Watts et al., 1999). Republican identifiers probably lumped their local newspaper into the overall mainstream liberal media. This probably led them to perceive a liberal bias in their newspaper even if no actual bias existed. The lack of a relationship between content and perceptions of bias among Republicans is not likely an artifact of the 1992 presidential election however, as Republicans are consistently more likely to attack the news media than are Democrats (Domke et al, 1999; Goldberg, 2001; Jamieson and Cappella, 2008). In short, Republicans appeared to perceive bias for reasons largely unrelated to any actual slant in news or opinion coverage.

Unlike Republicans, independents did base their opinions on the content of their newspaper, but relied on opinion content to inform their impressions rather than hard news. These results are consistent with Hypothesis 3.1 as independents' perceptions of bias had a strong relationship with the slant of opinion columns and editorials. To illustrate the influence of opinion content on perceptions of bias, I estimated the difference in probability—between the opinion sections most and least favorable toward Clinton relative to Bush—that an independent reader would perceive bias in favor of Clinton. Those reading the opinion section most favorable toward Clinton had a .41 higher probability of perceiving bias in favor of Clinton.¹² This

¹² Predicted probabilities were calculated with all other independent variables at their means.

suggests that opinion slant had a substantial influence on how independents evaluated the bias in their daily newspaper.

Consistent with hypothesis 3.3, hard news slant had almost no influence on perceptions of bias among independents. Indeed, the coefficient for hard news is nearly zero, indicating a very weak relationship between hard news slant and independents' perceptions of bias in their daily newspaper. It appears that independents were less likely to look for bias in hard news and less likely to react to bias when it existed.

The perceptions of bias among Democrats were influenced by the slant of both news and opinion content. When news or opinion content was more favorable toward Clinton, Democrats were more likely to think the newspaper favored Clinton. It appears that Democrats are more likely to evaluate news sources based on the actual slant of the source. Perhaps Democrats are more open than Republicans to the possibility of a media bias in favor of their side. After years of attacks on the news media from conservative elites, Republicans are more likely to rely on their liberal media schema when evaluating a particular news source. Without such a schema, Democrats are more likely to rely on an evaluation of a news source's content. Recent research suggests, however, that when Democrats have an established schema for a news organization, they become less likely to base their perceptions of bias on news content (Turner, 2008).

Strength of Partisanship

While there are clearly differences in how slant influences Republicans and Democrats, there are also similarities between strong partisans in both parties that should make them more likely to base their perceptions of bias on hard news. For example, past research suggests that

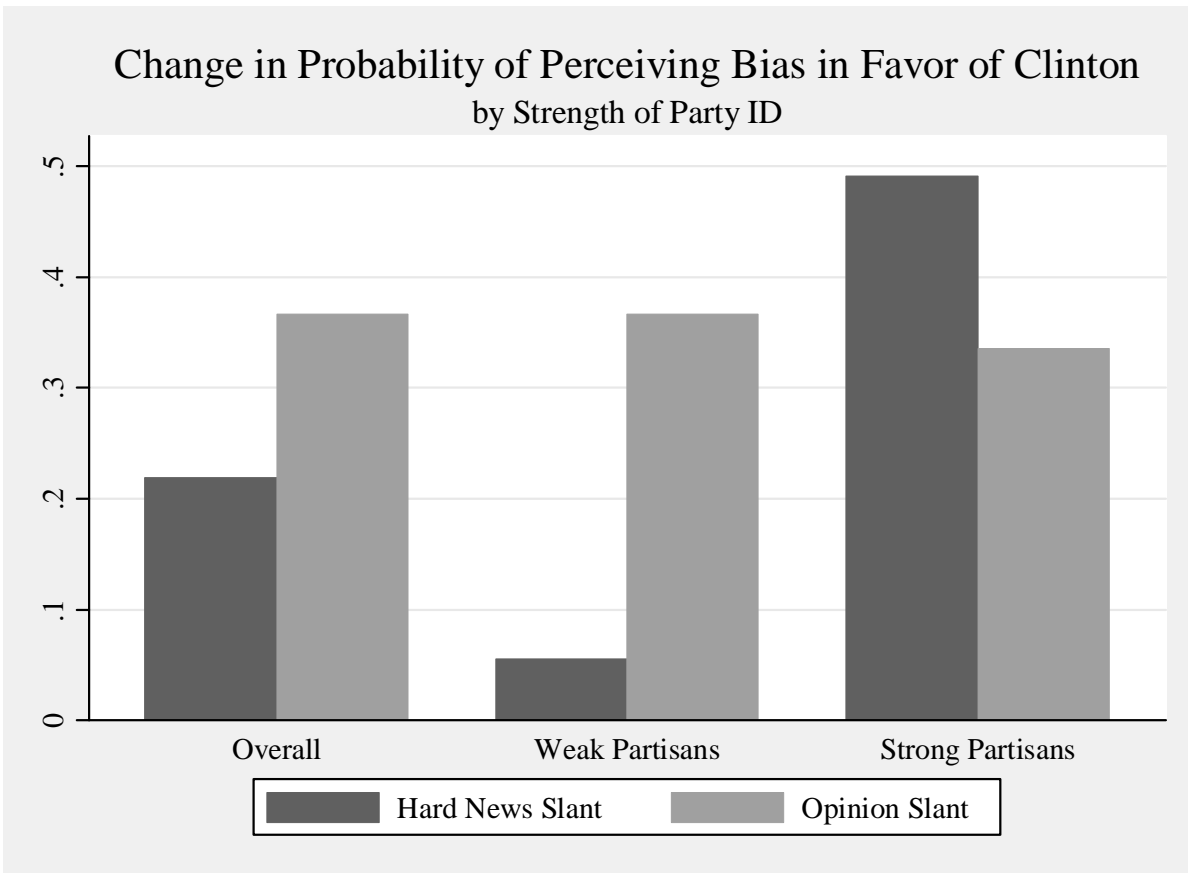
strong partisans on both sides are more likely to perceive bias in neutral news reports (Vallone et al., 1985; Schmitt et al., 2004). The last two columns in Table 3.1 present the results from models broken down by strength of the respondents' party identification. Strong partisans are those saying that they (very or fairly) strongly identify with either the Republican or Democratic parties. Those classified as weaker partisans include both independents and those leaning or weakly identifying as a Republican or a Democrat.

In order to illustrate the influence of news and opinion content on public perceptions of bias, I calculated predicted probabilities that someone would think their daily newspaper favored Clinton. Figure 3.3 shows the change in probability—that the average reader would perceive bias—that occurs when the news and opinion slant measures are changed from their minimum (the newspaper least favorable toward Clinton) to their maximum (the most favorable) value. Consistent with hypothesis 3.2, perceptions of bias among strong partisans were related to the slant in both hard news and opinion content. It appears that strong partisans tend to rely on all of a source's content to inform their perceptions of bias, and not just opinion content.

The difference between strong and weak partisan identifiers came in their reaction to hard news slant. Strong partisans were much more likely than weaker partisans to base their perceptions of bias on the content of hard news. Weaker partisans and independents, on the other hand, relied exclusively on opinion slant. The results suggest that both strong and weak partisans responded to the slant in opinion content. That is, the more favorable an opinion section was toward Clinton (relative to Bush) the more likely readers were to think their newspaper favored Clinton. This provides further evidence for hypothesis 3.1, which argued that both strong and weak partisans would rely on opinion slant to evaluate the bias in the news.

Unlike the influence of opinion content, slant in the news section only influenced the perceptions of strong partisans. The perceptions of readers with weaker partisan attachments were generally unrelated to the actual content of the hard news articles in their daily newspaper. In other words, when independents and weaker partisans evaluate the bias in a news source, they do so without regard to the slant in the actual news. Instead, they rely on opinion content to provide cues to the political bias of the news source. This is an interesting finding considering that independents and weaker partisans are less likely to perceive a hostile bias. The group that is best able to provide an objective evaluation of media bias does not even base their evaluation on the content of hard news. Ironically, it is those least capable of an objective evaluation of news media bias (strong partisans) that are more likely to base their evaluations on the slant in hard news. Although strong partisans base their perceptions of bias on hard news, they evaluate the news through partisan lenses.

Figure 3.3



Discussion

Past research suggests that perceptions of bias are, for the most part, related to the personal characteristics of the perceiver. The results in this chapter do not dispute that personal characteristics play a significant role in why people perceive bias. In fact, these results indicate that the influence of hard news and opinion slant on perceptions of bias depend on readers' personal characteristics. However, the present research also suggests that content matters in explaining public perceptions of media bias.

The results suggest that opinion content has a stronger influence than hard news on why most people think the media are biased. The more a newspaper's editorial and opinion section favored Clinton over Bush, the more likely readers were to think the newspaper favored Clinton. Furthermore, editorial and opinion slant influenced the perceptions of both strong and weak partisans. In fact, Republicans were the only group whose perceptions had no relation to any actual slant. As mentioned last section, Republicans probably perceived bias because of the attacks on the news media from Republican elites and politicians—including the President himself. Although I do not discount the influence of elite attacks on the perceptions of Democrats and independents, the results suggest that their perceptions of bias were, at least in part, due to the content of the newspaper.

Perceptions of bias have the potential to prevent the news media from fulfilling their important roles as public informants and government watchdogs. When people think the media are biased they are less likely to trust the news and to consider it a credible source, which in turn should make people less likely to accept the media's messages. A great deal of research shows that people are much more likely to reject messages from low credibility sources (Baum and Groeling, 2009; Hass, 1981). From this perspective, the results presented here are somewhat troubling. If people perceived bias because of the slant in news content, and then rejected those slanted messages, perceptions of bias might protect people from media manipulation. The results presented in this chapter suggest that only strong partisans—who are unlikely to change their opinions anyway—base their perceptions on the slant in hard news content. Those most likely to be persuaded by the news (independents and weaker partisans) are the least likely to detect slant in that type of news. Instead, weaker partisans and independents appear to base their

perceptions on the slant of editorials and opinions columns. This is a problem if people's perceptions of bias prevent them from learning from the news or holding political elites accountable. In other words, people might perceive bias because of opinion content, but then reject messages in the news even when those messages show no evidence of bias. The full implications of these findings will not be understood until chapter five, when I examine how perceptions of bias influence a source's persuasiveness. If perceiving bias in a news source leads Republicans and independents to reject the news, perceptions of bias will prove an ineffective shortcut.

The findings in this chapter are encouraging for those wishing to reduce perceptions of bias in the news media. Most past research concluded that perceptions of bias result from people's own partisan leanings. That is, the more ideologically extreme people are, the more likely they are to perceive bias. If this were the case, there would be little that news sources could do to reduce audience perceptions of bias because presenting any information contrary to the opinions of either side would cause readers to perceive bias. In this situation, news sources can either pander to one side of the political spectrum or anger both sides by presenting balanced coverage. The results presented here suggest that perceptions of bias are not inevitable, but are influenced by the content of the newspaper's opinion section.

Finally, the results presented here have implications for how scholars study public perceptions of media bias. Most research has focused on the influence of news content, but these results indicate that editorials and opinion columns have a substantial effect why people perceive bias in the news media. Experimental research has had trouble finding evidence of the hostile media phenomenon among neutral participants, but this might have resulted from the exclusive

reliance on hard news articles. Perhaps opinion columns or editorials would be more successful at causing a reaction from neutral observers. In addition, studies trying to explain the gap between public perceptions of bias and the actual bias in the news media might find it useful to examine both hard news and opinion content. News might be mostly neutral, but if commentary and opinion content are slanted in one direction it is likely to have a substantial influence on public perceptions of media bias.

Chapter 4: Attacking the Messenger

Perhaps no other political institution in American politics gets as much criticism as the news media. When politicians get negative coverage, a common strategy is to attack the messenger.¹³ In some cases, attacking the messenger can be a politician's only chance to avoid the consequences of negative news coverage. For example, during the 1992 presidential election, incumbent George H. W. Bush was trying to run for reelection during poor economic times over which he presided. One of Bush's strategies in the election was to attack the news media for focusing on the economy and, in general, giving his campaign poor coverage. Although attacking the news media did not pay off for Bush, it was used again by Republican candidate Bob Dole in the 1996 presidential election. Not to be left out of the media bashing, Bill Clinton even referred to the media as the "knee jerk liberal media" which is ironic considering that his two Republican opponents both accused the liberal media of favoring him.

Even in the most recent presidential election in 2008, the news media took a great deal of criticism from both parties. Hillary Clinton attacked the media for what she perceived to be overly positive coverage of her primary opponent Barack Obama. Also during the primaries, John McCain attacked the *New York Times* for printing a story about his alleged affair with a female lobbyist. The criticism of the media continued in the general election, mostly coming from Republicans and conservative elites. They claimed the media were unfair to Sarah Palin—even sexist in their coverage—and were "in the tank" for Obama.

¹³ For a discussion of notable attacks on the news media, see Project, 2008b.

Politicians are not the only ones who attack the news media. Ironically, members of the news media are often the mainstream media's biggest critics. Attacking the mainstream news media is a frequent occurrence on Rush Limbaugh's radio program (Jamieson and Cappella, 2008). In addition, television personalities on *Fox News* commonly lambaste the media for its supposed liberal bias. Indeed, the notion of a liberal bias in the mainstream media is a prominent part of conservative rhetoric.

These examples illustrate the potential for elite attacks to influence the actions of journalists, but do the attacks have any effect on the people who hear them? In this chapter, I examine the relationship between elite attacks on the media and public perceptions of bias. Although past research suggests that the two are related (Watts et al., 1999), the underlying processes of this relationship remain unclear. In order to examine the effects of elite attacks, I performed an experiment in which participants read an article about the 2008 presidential candidates. While all participants read the same article, some also read a brief statement by one of the candidates accusing the source of bias in its coverage. Comparing those reading the attacks to those who did not allowed me to isolate the influence of elite attacks on the news media. First it is important to understand how elite attacks might influence public perceptions of media bias.

Theory

How might elite attacks on the news media influence public perceptions of bias? Elite attacks should work by making people look for evidence of the supposed bias. When a politician attacks the media, people are likely to question whether the politician is correct. This question

should lead people to either 1) look for evidence of bias or 2) think of instances when the news source displayed a bias consistent with the accusation. For example, if a politician accuses a source of having a liberal bias, people will look for evidence of a liberal bias or think of times when the source displayed a liberal bias in the past.

The effectiveness of elite attacks stems from the tendency for people to find (or remember) evidence that supports a hypothesis and to ignore disconfirming evidence. Past research suggests that people are more likely to notice and remember information that confirms a hypothesis (for review see Nickerson, 1998). For example, if people are asked whether they are an extrovert, they are likely to think of examples of their extroversion (Kunda et al., 1993). People are also more likely to ignore information suggesting introversion (Davies, 2003). This confirmation bias also occurs when people evaluate the characteristics of others (Darley and Gross, 1983). Thus, people look for evidence of a liberal bias, which stands out more than evidence suggesting otherwise. Likewise, if an elite accuses the media of having a conservative bias, people will look for evidence of a conservative bias rather than looking for evidence of neutrality or a liberal bias. Given that most journalists seek to present both sides in their stories, anyone looking for evidence of bias is likely to find it.

Hypothesis 4.1: Exposure to an attack should make people more likely to think a source is biased in the direction of the accusation. Accusing a source of having a liberal bias will increase perceptions of a liberal bias and vice versa.

Not only should attacks increase perceptions of bias in the direction of the accusation, but they should also decrease perceptions in the opposite direction. If people are looking for evidence of one type of bias, they are not looking for evidence of an opposite bias. Essentially, attacks focus people's attention on the evaluation of one particular type of bias when they might normally notice bias in another direction. People are trying to answer whether the source has a liberal bias rather than trying to determine whether either a liberal or conservative bias exists.

Elite attacks not only work by turning people into biased processors, but also by framing the issue in the politician's terms. When a politician accuses the media of having a bias in one direction, s/he frames the argument to exclude the consideration of bias in the opposite direction. That the source is biased in the direction opposite the attack is made to appear beyond the realm of possibility. By attacking the media, politicians restrict the question to two possible alternatives. Either the source is biased in the direction suggested by the elite, or the source has no bias in its coverage. People consider the alternative position—that the source is biased in the opposite direction—as too far from reality to be considered. In short, elite attacks should decrease perceptions of bias in the direction opposite the attack.

Hypothesis 4.2: Exposure to an attack will make people less likely to think the source is biased in the direction opposite the attack. Accusations of a liberal bias will reduce perceptions of a conservative bias.

If elite attacks make people look for evidence of the alleged bias, people will have different evaluations of the source's content. Republicans looking for evidence of a liberal bias

should be more likely to find it than Democrats. While Republicans might interpret an argument as evidence of a liberal bias, Democrats are likely to interpret the same argument as perfectly appropriate and neutral toward both sides. Indeed, Schmitt and colleagues (2004) found that partisans tend to classify information in ways that give the appearance of bias against their side. Partisans will interpret the same content differently, resulting in attacks being more effective among those in the attacker's party. In addition, attacks should be less effective on partisans who identify with the party opposite the attacker. It is helpful to assign labels to these groups for future discussion. From now on, I will refer to those identifying with the attacker's party as "supporting party members" and those identifying with the opposite party as "opposing party members." Thus, if supporting party members are more likely to classify content as evidence of bias against them, attacks should increase perceptions of bias among that group.

Hypothesis 4.3: Attacks will increase perceptions of bias among supporting party members.

Conversely, attacks will make opposing party members less likely to perceive bias in the direction opposite the accusation. If attacks on a news source frame the question of bias around two plausible responses—bias in one direction or no bias at all—opposing party members should be more likely to declare that no bias exists rather than assert that the news source is biased in the opposite direction. For example, an accusation of liberal bias will make liberals think it implausible that the news source has a conservative bias. While liberals might perceive a conservative bias if they judged the content on its own merits, the attack makes a conservative bias seem implausible.

Hypothesis 4.4: Attacks will decrease perceptions of bias among opposing party members.

Methods

To examine the effects of elite attacks on the news media, I conducted an experiment using 130 undergraduates from introductory political science classes at Washington State University. The participants were asked to read an article about the candidates in the 2008 presidential election. The article was attributed to the *Los Angeles Times* and criticized both candidates' economic plans.¹⁴ There was almost no opinion or commentary provided by the writer, who instead relied on experts to argue that both plans would increase the federal deficit. The main treatment condition for the experiment was an attack by one of the two candidates on the newspaper. The treatment condition (the attack) was also manipulated so that the attacker was either John McCain criticizing the newspaper for having a liberal bias or Barack Obama criticizing the newspaper for having a conservative bias. In other words, participants read the same article, but the politician attacking the newspaper was manipulated to be either McCain or Obama.

The message was the same for all groups and read:

Recently, the [McCain or Obama] campaign attacked the Los Angeles Times for printing the story below. In a press release the [Republican or Democratic]

¹⁴ The article was taken from the *Boston Globe* and shortened to save reading time (Mooney, 2008). I attributed the article to the *Los Angeles Times* because that newspaper is not commonly associated with having a liberal or conservative bias. As shown in the next section, when people only read the article, they were just as likely to perceive a liberal bias as they were a conservative bias. This suggests that the article was not blatantly biased in either direction.

presidential candidate said “It is no surprise that the Los Angeles Times would attack Senator [McCain or Obama] in this way, given the consistent and blatant [liberal or conservative] bias they have displayed over the years.”

Thus, even the wording of the attack was the same except for the name and party of the attacker.

Survey Questions

After reading the articles, participants completed a survey measuring their perceptions of bias. In order to measure perceptions of bias, participants were asked whether they thought the *Los Angeles Times* had a liberal bias, conservative bias, or if the newspaper was mostly neutral. I also measured perceptions of bias by asking participants if they thought the article was too critical of the candidates, not critical enough, or if the criticism was appropriate.

Prior to reading the article, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire asking about their attention to politics, interest in the election and party identification. In addition, participants were asked three questions measuring general political knowledge.¹⁵ One of the advantages of assigning participants to groups on a random basis is that it eliminates the need for control variables. Assuming random assignment, any differences between the groups are likely to result from the treatment condition (in this case elite attacks) and not the characteristics of the members in the groups, which should be roughly the same. Unfortunately, the distribution of independents, Democrats and females across the groups was not equal.¹⁶ To

¹⁵ Each participant’s political knowledge score represents the number of correct answers to the three political knowledge questions.

¹⁶ I compared the experimental groups using chi-square tests. I examined Republicans, independents and Democrats separately.

assure that differences in party identification and gender did not influence the results, I will control for those variables in a regression model at the end of the next section. I exclude measures of the participants' interest in the election and general political knowledge because neither variable was significantly different across the three experimental groups.¹⁷

Table 4.1 Characteristics of the Experimental Groups			
	No Attack	McCain Attack	Obama Attack
Republican	32%	35%	27%
Independent	29%	30%	12%
Democrat	39%	35%	61%
Ideology	2.93	2.91	2.62
Interest	2.61	2.88	2.77
Female	33%	50%	28%
Pol. Know.	.86	.93	.95
Ideology was measured on a 5-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. Interest was measured as the respondent's self-described interest in the presidential election on a 4-point scale from not at all interested to very interested. Political knowledge represents the number of questions the respondent answered correctly (out of three) in the pretest. The questions tested general political knowledge and respondent's were offered a "don't know" option. The exact wording of all questions can be found in Appendix B.			

¹⁷ I compared each experimental group to each other group using a series of t-tests. For both interest and political knowledge, I compared the *No Attack Group* to the *McCain Attack Group* and then compared each of those groups to the *Obama Attack Group*. I do not present individual t-scores for each comparison because there were three comparisons for each variable.

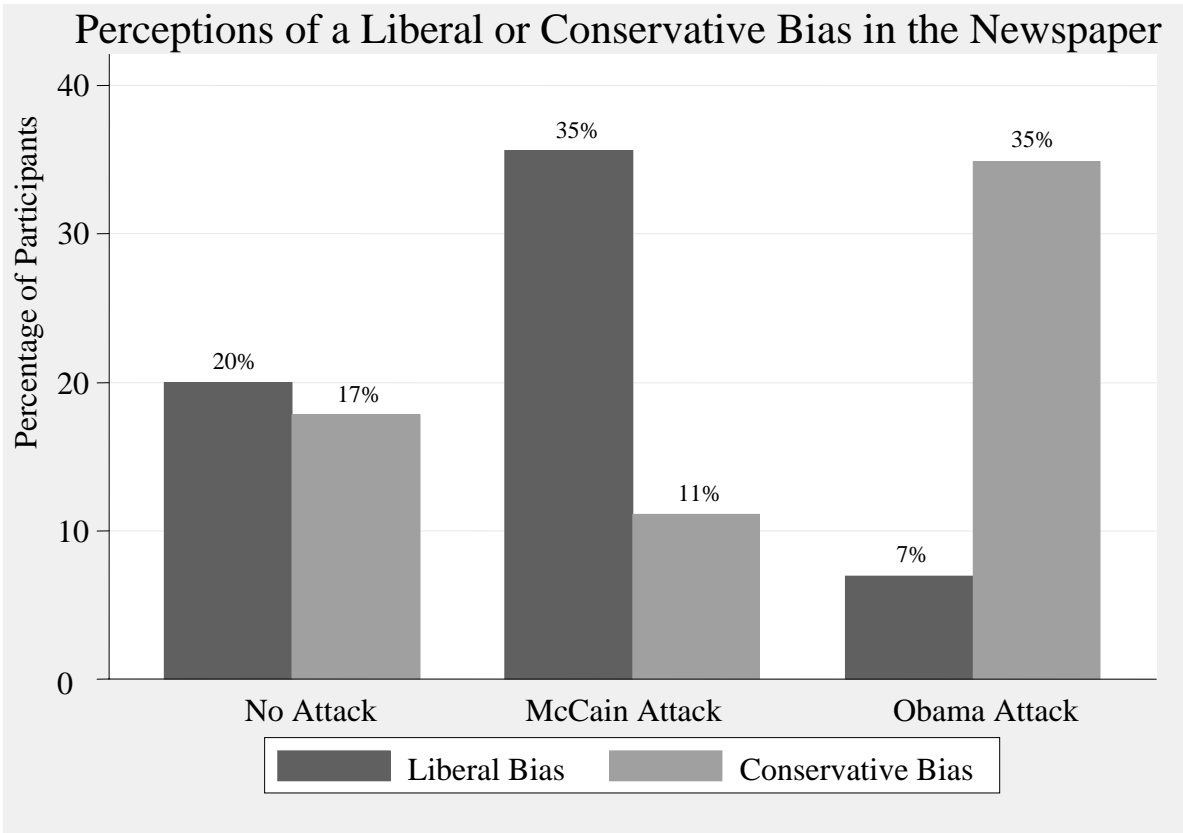
Results

My first hypothesis was that elite attacks would increase perceptions of bias in the direction of the accusation. Figure 4.1 shows the percentage of participants in each experimental group who said the newspaper had a liberal or conservative bias. Those reading the article without an attack were only slightly (3%) more likely to think the newspaper had a liberal bias than they were to think it had a conservative bias. This suggests that the article and attribution (to the *Los Angeles Times*) did not push people to think the newspaper was biased in either direction.

When participants read an attack on the source prior to reading the article, they were more likely to agree with the attacker. Among those reading the McCain attack—accusing the newspaper of a liberal bias—35 percent said the *Los Angeles Times* had a liberal bias compared to 11 percent who believed it had a conservative bias. This is nearly the inverse of the results when Obama attacked the newspaper, as 35 percent of that group perceived a conservative bias and only 7 percent said the newspaper had a liberal bias. Thus, changing the direction of the accused bias changed the perceptions of readers.¹⁸ These results are also consistent with hypothesis 4.2 as readers were less likely to perceive bias in the direction opposite the attack. In short, not only do attacks increase perceptions of the accused bias, but they also decrease the number of people perceiving bias in the opposite direction.

¹⁸ A comparison of the three groups in Figure 4.1 showed a significant difference between respondents' perceptions of bias (Chi-square = 15.12, $p < .05$)

Figure 4.1

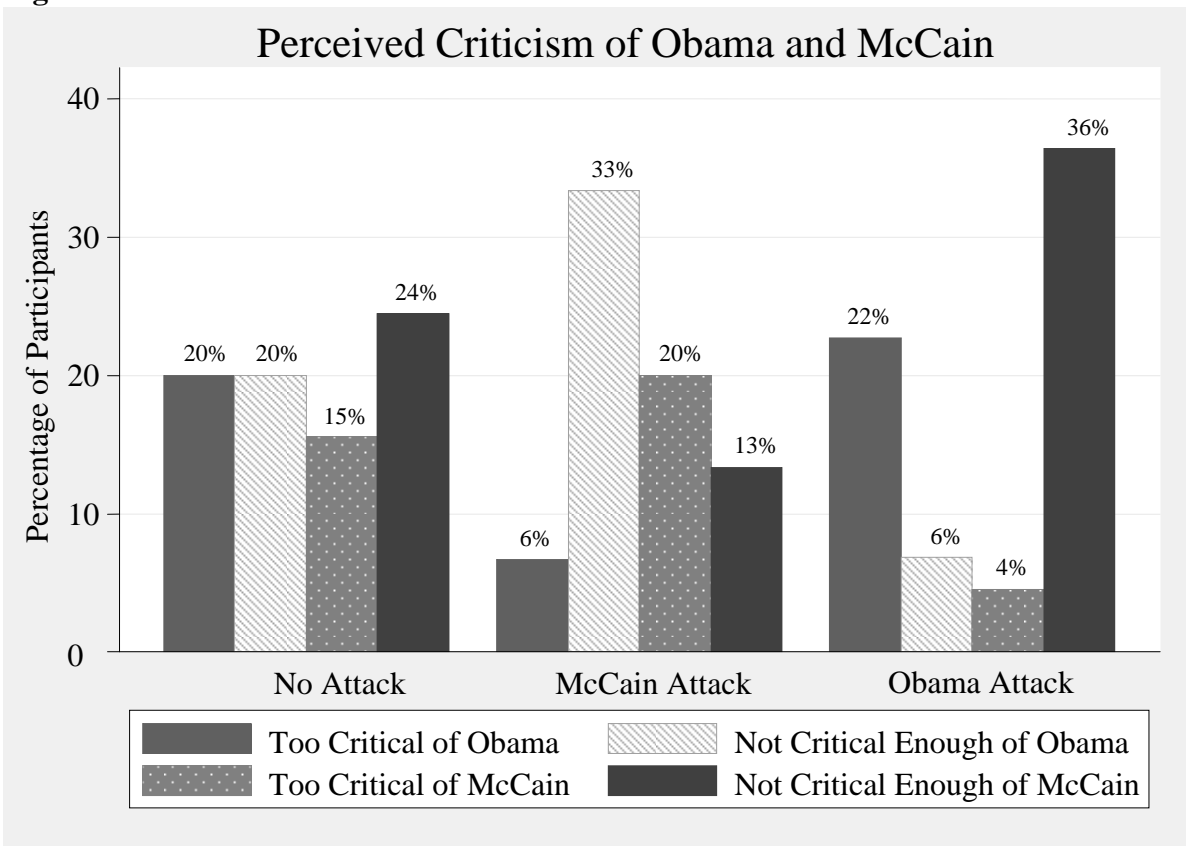


For another measure of perceptions of bias in the newspaper, I asked participants to rate the level of criticism in the articles toward both McCain and Obama. Consistent with the results above, attacks on the source made people more likely to think the article was too critical of the attacking politician and not critical enough of the opposing politician. For example, when John McCain accused the newspaper of having a liberal bias, participants were more likely to think the article was too critical of McCain and not critical enough of Obama.¹⁹ These results provide further support for the theory that people engaged in biased processing of the information in the article. Those looking for evidence of a liberal bias—because they read an attack by McCain—

¹⁹ The differences between those reading the McCain attack and the Obama attack were significant ($p < .05$).

were more likely to notice the criticisms of McCain and this resulted in the perception that the article was too critical of McCain. Conversely, those reading the McCain attack were more likely to think the article was not critical enough of Obama. In the process of looking for evidence of a liberal bias, people ignored evidence of a conservative bias.

Figure 4.2



Influence of Attacks by Party ID

Are attacks only influential on supporting party members? That is, do attacks only work when the source and recipient of the attack (the person reading the attack) identify with the same political party? As the results in Figure 4.3 illustrate, the influence of attacks on processing

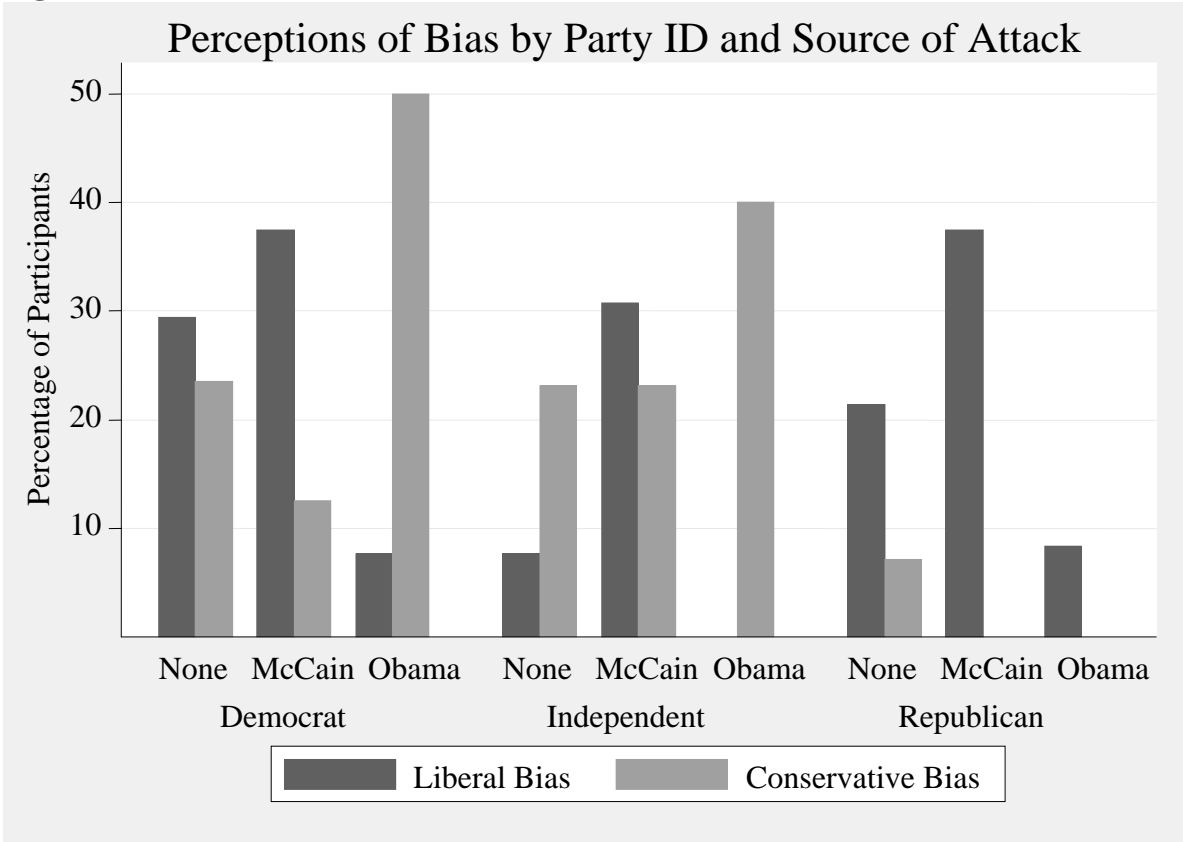
appears to occur independent of one's party identification.²⁰ Figure 4.3 shows how the results in Figure 4.1 break down by the party identification of the participant. Consistent with hypothesis 4.3, supporting party members were more likely to perceive bias in the direction of the accusation. Indeed, nearly 40 percent of Republicans thought the newspaper had a liberal bias when they read the McCain attack, and 50 percent of Democrats perceived a conservative bias when Obama attacked the newspaper. The results also provide support for hypothesis 4.4. Republicans were less likely to perceive a liberal bias when Obama attacked the newspaper than Republicans reading no attack at all or an attack by McCain. Likewise, Democrats were slightly less likely to perceive a conservative bias when McCain attacked the source as opposed to Democrats reading no attack or the attack from Obama. As for independents, their perceptions appeared to follow the direction of the attacks leveled on the source.²¹

Attacking a news source influences both supporting and opposing party members, but does so in different ways. Elite attacks make opposing party members less likely to perceive a hostile bias in the media, but they do not make them more likely to perceive a favorable bias. For example, when Republicans read the attack from Obama, they were less likely—than Republicans in the other groups—to perceive a liberal bias, but no more likely to perceive a conservative bias. Instead, Republicans said the newspaper had no bias. This suggests that elites can frame the question of bias around two possible options—either a hostile bias toward the attacking politician or no bias at all.

²⁰ Four participants identified with another political party (two were libertarians and two said no party), but I classified them as independents. When they are excluded from the analysis, the results were the same.

²¹ Unfortunately, the low number of independents in these groups prevented the results from reaching significance. There were only 31 independents in all three groups combined, compared to 59 Democrats and 42 Republicans. The differences between the *Obama Attack* group and the *McCain Attack* group were significant for both Republicans ($p < .1$) and Democrats ($p < .05$).

Figure 4.3



Interestingly, the attack from McCain was more effective at convincing Democrats that the source had a liberal bias than the Obama attack was at convincing Republicans that the source had a conservative bias. Although it is premature to conclude this, it appears that Democrats are more open to the possibility of a liberal bias than Republicans are open to admitting a source has a conservative bias. This is consistent with recent research suggesting that liberals are more likely than conservatives to admit that a source (academic instead of media) has a favorable bias (MacCoun and Paletz, 2009). Perhaps the idea of a liberal media bias is a more easily accessible schema than a conservative bias. When people think about

media bias, the notion of a conservative bias is likely to be less familiar than the notion of a liberal bias.

	Perceptions of Bias	Criticism of McCain	Criticism of Obama
McCain Attack	-.510 (.251)**	.225 (.249)	-.542 (.256)**
Obama Attack	.626 (.257)**	-.445 (.254)*	.279 (.255)
Party ID	-.018 (.161)	.080 (.160)	-.383 (.166)**
Ideology	-.180 (.161)	.117 (.126)	.027 (.128)
Female	.610 (.223)**	.251 (.216)	.169 (.219)
Cut 1	-1.16 (.426)	-.398 (.417)	-.819 (.425)
Cut 2	.672 (.425)	1.51 (.433)	1.21 (.434)
Log-Likelihood	-112.99	-112.80	-108.16
LR Chi-square (5)	27.36**	13.93**	21.59**
Pseudo R-square	.1080	.0581	.0908
N	130	131	131

The *McCain Attack* and *Obama Attack* variables are binary and denote that the participants read the McCain and Obama attacks on the source, respectively. The *Party ID* variable has three categories from Democrat to independent to Republican based on the participant's self-identification. Ideology was measured on a 5-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. The dependent variable for the first column is the participant's perceived bias in the newspaper (1=liberal, 2=neutral and 3=conservative). The dependent variables for the other two columns are the participant's evaluation of the criticism in the article (1=not enough criticism, 2=criticism was appropriate, and 3=too much criticism). *p<.1 **p<.05

As mentioned in the previous section, the three groups were not equal in terms of the number of independents and females. To assure that the results discussed above were not an artifact of these differences, I estimated three ordered probit regression models with the two measures of perceptions of bias as the dependent variables. The models in Table 4.2 generally

confirm the results discussed above, even when controlling for the participants' gender and party identification.²² Perceptions of a liberal bias increased when participants read the McCain attack and decreased when participants read the Obama attack. The attacks also influenced participants' perceived criticism of the candidates in the expected directions, even though some of the differences were not statistically different from the baseline (No Attack) group. However, participants reading the McCain attack were significantly different than those reading the Obama attack on all three dependent variables.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, my results are consistent with past research suggesting that elite attacks increase perceptions of bias. While I provide confirmation that a relationship exists, I also advance scholarly understanding in a number of ways. First, the results suggest that attacks on the media influence the perceptions of everyone, not just those on the side attacking the politician. When a Republican accuses the media of having a liberal bias in their coverage, the message resonates with Democrats and Independents as well as Republicans.

Second, elite attacks do not require biased content to influence perceptions of bias. Rather, it appears that neutral content is sufficient for attacks to have an effect. Absent an attack, participants were just as likely to perceive bias in either direction, suggesting that the article was balanced—or that people could not detect any bias that existed. When people read an attack they looked for evidence of the accused bias, and their natural tendency to notice confirming evidence—and ignore disconfirming evidence—made them more likely to agree with the

²² I also estimated the models with a more complete party identification scale, and the results were similar.

accusation. Ironically, the more balanced the coverage, the more likely it may be that people will find evidence of the bias suggested by the elite. Indeed, if an article were entirely one-sided, people would have little evidence to support the attacker's charge. Given the tendency for journalists to present balanced coverage, people are likely to find evidence of bias in most news sources.

Third, elite attacks are just as effective on Democrats as they are on Republicans. In fact, the results suggests that Democrats are more susceptible to elite attacks as Democrats are more likely to perceive a liberal bias after reading an attack than are Republicans who read an attack on the conservative media. When Republicans read an attack by Obama, they were less likely to perceive a liberal bias, but they were no more likely to think the source had a conservative bias. Conversely, when Democrats read the McCain attack they were more likely to think the source had a liberal bias. As I argue in chapter three, the liberal media bias schema is likely to be more easily accessible in people's minds given the long history of conservative attacks on the news media. Democrats are open to the idea of a liberal bias because it fits with their schema of the news media. In fact, given the prominence of the liberal media argument, it is striking that half of the Democrats who read the Obama attack agreed that the newspaper had a conservative bias. This provides a clear example of the power of elite attacks to influence people's opinions about a news source's bias.

Finally, I advanced a new theory explaining how elite attacks increase perceptions of bias. I argued that elite attacks work by taking advantage of people's tendency to pay more attention to information that confirms a hypothesis and to ignore disconfirming information. In other words, when a candidate attacks the media, people look for evidence of bias in the content

of that source or think of past instances when the source has exhibited bias. This makes people biased processors in that they are looking for (or remembering) evidence of the bias suggested by the politician, and not for evidence of balance or bias in the opposite direction. The results presented here are consistent with this explanation.

Now, people were not objective evaluators of the information. Republicans reading an attack by Barack Obama were unlikely to think the source had a conservative bias, but they were also unlikely to think it had a liberal bias. Although Obama was not able to convince Republicans that the source had a conservative bias, he was able to bias their processing enough—by focusing them on evaluating a conservative bias—that they were less likely to look for evidence of a liberal bias. In addition, accusing the source of having a conservative bias made it seem implausible that a conservative bias existed. Thus, elite attacks can have two effects on how people evaluate bias in the news. They can increase perceptions of the accused bias, but can also blunt perceptions of the opposite bias. All of this suggests that politicians do have some incentive to attack the media because it makes people more likely to look for bias in the news.

Chapter 5: Perceptions of Bias and Media Effects

The news media play important roles in American democracy as information providers and government watchdogs. For the news media to be effective in their roles, they must be able to persuade the public. If conditions are bad, or a politician is corrupt, and the news media report that information, the public must believe the information and use it to update their opinions. As I argued in chapter one, media effects on public opinion are essential for the news media to fulfill their roles.

However, the ability of the news media to influence public opinion can also pose a danger to democracy. The danger exists when news sources report the news in a slanted or biased way. When media outlets present biased news—whether intentional or not—and the news influences people’s opinions, it gives a great deal of power to the media organizations to shape public opinion and political outcomes. Research has shown that media owners have their own political agendas, and the content of news from those sources is occasionally slanted in favor of those agendas (Gilens and Hertzman, 2000; Kahn and Kenney, 2002).

It is no less dangerous if there are many sources of news that are biased in opposing directions: one source has a liberal bias and another has a conservative bias. Those getting their news from a biased source must have a defense against the bias, whether through predispositions that lead one to reject messages or perceptions of bias that make one doubt the credibility of the message.

Perceptions of bias in the media might diminish the power of news sources to influence public opinion. In this way, perceptions of bias would protect people from the manipulation of

biased news sources. In this chapter, I examine whether those perceiving bias are less susceptible to media effects than those not perceiving bias. I examine one particular type of media effect: the influence of slant on people's evaluation of political candidates. Past research has found a relationship between the slant of the news and people's issue opinions and voting decisions (Dalton et al., 1998; Entman, 1989; Page et al., 1987). When a news source is more favorable toward a particular policy or candidate, those getting their news from that source tend to be more favorable as well. I examine whether these effects occur among both those who perceive bias and those who do not. In addition, I examine how perceptions of bias influence the way people process both news and opinion content. First, it is important to understand the news media's influence on public opinion in general, before examining the role of perceptions of media bias.

News Media and Political Preferences

Although some may disagree about whether media effects present a danger or a benefit to democracy, recent research provides consistent evidence that people's political preferences are influenced by the news media (for review see Kinder, 1998). A great deal of recent research suggests that the news media influence what political issues people think about (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987), as well as how they think about those issues (Iyengar, 1991; Nelson et al., 1997). In addition, the slant of individual news sources can influence the political opinions that people hold (Dalton et al., 1998; Kahn and Kenney, 2002)

In most research examining how the media influence political preferences, analysis and commentary tend to be more important than hard news. Editorial content has more influence on

people's issue opinions than news content (Entman, 1989; Page et al., 1987). There is also evidence that media coverage of political candidates influences voting behavior (Kahn and Kenney, 2002). For example, Dalton and colleagues (1998) found readers' vote choices and attitudes toward the candidates in the 1992 presidential election were related to the slant of their daily newspaper's editorial content. The more favorable a newspaper's opinion columns and editorials were toward Clinton relative to Bush, the more likely readers were to prefer (and vote for) Bill Clinton. The content of news, on the other hand, had an insignificant influence on readers' political preferences. Furthermore, editorial and opinion content had the strongest influence on those paying a moderate amount of attention to the election.

Dalton and colleagues (1998) argued that editorials and opinion columns influenced readers' preferences in the election by providing political cues concerning the candidates. Negative editorial and opinion coverage toward a candidate send a message to the reader that the candidate is weak or deficient in some way—and positive cues send the opposite message. Because most of the editorial content in 1992 favored Clinton, the cues were predominately in his favor. According to Dalton and colleagues, readers picked up on these cues and altered their political preferences (and voting decisions) accordingly. In short, the cues presented by media and political elites appear to influence both public opinion and voting decisions.

In this chapter, I use the same data used by Dalton and colleagues (1998) in order to examine how perceptions of media bias affect how influential the media are in moving public opinion. I expand on past research by separating those who do perceive bias in the news source from those who do not. This should allow me to examine if news slant has a stronger influence on readers' preferences when the reader does not perceive bias. News slant might affect readers'

preferences, but those effects might be lost when all participants are lumped together. In other words, disaggregating readers by their perceptions of bias is likely to provide a clearer picture of the relationship between news slant and public opinion.

Theory

How might news and editorial content influence those who perceive bias? As mentioned in chapter two, those perceiving bias should be more likely to critically engage the news with counterarguments or to ignore the media's messages altogether. Either way, they should be less likely to change their opinions based on the slant of the news source. In addition, perceptions of bias should make people more likely to reject the messages in both news *and* opinion content. Thus, the political preferences of those perceiving bias in their daily newspaper should be unrelated to any actual slant in that newspaper.

Hypothesis 5.1: When people believe a news source is biased, their political preferences will be unrelated to the slant of that news source.

On the other hand, those who do not perceive bias should be more likely to uncritically accept the information and cues from their local newspaper. Remember, people offer few counterarguments when they think an information source is credible. Instead, they tend to accept the messages based on the credibility of the information source alone. If those not perceiving bias are less critical of the arguments and information presented by news sources, any actual slant in those sources should influence their opinions.

Hypothesis 5.2: When people do not perceive bias, their political preferences will be related to the slant of the news *and* opinion sections.

This is an important point because Dalton and colleagues (1998) found an insignificant relationship between news slant and readers' political preferences. News slant might have influenced the opinions of those who did not perceive bias, but that relationship may have been lost in the full sample. In other words, by not accounting for perceptions of bias, past research on media effects may have underestimated media effects among those who do not perceive bias.

Data Sources

For analysis, I use the data collected for the American component of the Cross National Election Study in 1992 that was discussed in chapter three. When Dalton and colleagues (1998) performed their analysis, the dependent variable was the difference between 10-point favorability scales for Clinton and Bush. Each respondent's score for Bush was subtracted from his or her score for Clinton—Clinton favorability minus Bush favorability. The main explanatory variables were the relative slant of the news and editorial sections of each respondent's daily newspaper. The authors added control variables such as party identification, perceptions of bias and the respondent's county-wide vote. With the exception of the respondent's perceptions of bias—which I will explain shortly—I include all of these variables in my analysis. I expand upon their model by controlling for political knowledge, interest in the campaign and the respondent's attention to campaign news.

The most important additions in my models are variables measuring the interaction between perceptions of bias and news and opinion slant. The two interaction variables (*News Slant* x perceived bias and *Opinion Slant* x perceived bias) measure the influence of each type of slant conditional on the respondent believing the newspaper was biased toward one of the two candidates. The perceptions of bias variable is binary representing whether the respondents believed their newspaper favored either of the two candidates—without regard to the direction of perceived bias. Because perceptions of bias should reduce media effects, the direction of bias is less important than whether the respondent perceived bias at all.

Results

Are those perceiving bias less susceptible to media effects? In order to answer this, I estimated OLS regression models with the respondent's political preferences as the dependent variable. Political preferences were measured as the respondent's favorability toward Clinton minus favorability toward Bush. I use the favorability scale rather than the respondent's vote choice because the favorability scale has more explanatory power.²³ Nonetheless, the results are similar when vote choice is the dependent variable.

²³ Vote choice is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent planned to vote for Clinton or Bush. This is likely to underestimate the influence of media effects because it only measures the effects if they are strong enough to change a person's vote. For example, if the slant of a newspaper made people more favorable toward Clinton, this is likely to be reflected in public opinion polling after the election, regardless of the respondent's vote choice. In addition, it also allows me to include those respondents who did not vote for one of the two major party candidates or chose not to vote at all—who would be eliminated if vote choice was the dependent variable.

Table 5.1 OLS Regression Models Predicting Favorability		
	Overall	Including Interactions
Hard News	.321 (.226)	.880 (.288)*
News*Bias		-.967 (.251)*
Opinion	.597 (.193)*	.610 (.206)*
Opinion*Bias		.164 (.235)
Party ID	-3.03 (.180)*	-2.96 (.178)*
Ideology	-.485 (.074)*	-.471 (.072)*
Knowledge	-.182 (.150)	-.120 (.153)
Attention	-.048 (.195)	-.084 (.191)
Interest	.656 (.226)*	.671 (.232)*
County Vote	.018 (.016)	.021 (.016)
Constant	7.15 (1.23)*	6.51 (1.24)*
F	134.51*	118.21*
R-squared	.4061	.4155
N	760	760

The *News*Bias* and *Opinion*Bias* variables represent interaction terms where slant is multiplied by the respondent's perception of bias (1=perceived bias, 0=did not perceive bias). County Level Vote is the percentage of the vote that went for Clinton in the respondent's county of residence. *p<.05

The first column in Table 5.1 reports the results without the interaction terms included. The results are similar to those found by Dalton and colleagues. Readers' evaluations of the candidates were influenced by opinion slant but the relationship with news slant was not statistically significant. The second column of Table 5.1 is similar to the first, but it includes interactions between perceptions of bias and hard news and opinion slant, respectively.

Although it is normally appropriate to include the dichotomous perceptions of bias variable—which is interacted with hard news and opinion slant—in the second model, I leave it out because it caused high multicollinearity.²⁴

The results suggest that perceptions of bias nearly eliminate the influence of hard news slant, but only slightly diminish the influence of opinion slant. When readers did not perceive bias, both hard news and opinion slant influenced their opinions of the candidates. When newspapers were more favorable toward Clinton, readers were also more likely to favor Clinton—as long as they did not perceive bias. The coefficient for the *Hard News* variable represents the influence of news slant for those who did not perceive bias. The strong relationship between hard news slant and political preferences presents a stark contrast to the insignificant influence that news slant had in the first model and in Dalton and colleagues' (1998) analysis. Furthermore, it appears that hard news slant influences political preferences only when people do not perceive bias. When readers thought the newspaper favored one of the two candidates, the influence of hard news slant disappeared. The coefficient for *Hard News*—conditional on someone perceiving bias—can be found by adding the *Hard News* coefficient to the coefficient for the *News*Bias* interaction which produces an insignificant coefficient of -.18. Thus, when people perceived bias, their political preferences had no relationship to the slant of hard news articles in their daily newspaper.

²⁴ The multicollinearity is mostly due to the high correlation of .81 between perceptions of bias and the *News*Bias* variable. In fact, when the perceptions of bias variable is removed, the standard errors on both the *Hard News* and the *News*Bias* variable are cut in half. In addition, the coefficient for the perceptions of bias variable was nearly zero, indicating that it had very little direct influence on the dependent variable outside of its interaction with *Hard News* and *Opinion Slant*. Because the perceptions of bias variable adds multicollinearity and little explanatory power to the model, it is appropriate to eliminate it entirely (Brambor et al., 2006).

When it comes to opinion content, the results are somewhat surprising. Similar to hard news slant, opinion slant influenced readers' political preferences when they did not perceive bias. However, unlike news slant, the influence of opinion slant did not disappear among those who perceived bias in the news source. Instead, the influence of opinion content was only slightly diminished among those perceiving bias. The coefficient for opinion slant for those not perceiving bias in the newspaper was .615, meaning that every unit increase in opinion slant corresponded to a .615 increase in favorability toward Clinton relative to Bush. These results suggest that the cues presented in opinion content appear to influence peoples' political preferences even if they think the source of those cues is biased. It is unclear why perceptions of bias would diminish the influence of hard news slant and not opinion slant. Perhaps readers use the cues presented in opinion content to evaluate the bias in the news *and* to learn about the campaign. Opinion content might influence people's political preferences and their perceptions of media bias.

Strength and Direction of Partisanship

Overall, the results suggest that perceptions of bias protect people from news slant but not opinion slant. The next step is to examine this phenomenon among different partisan camps. Table 5.2 reports the results from OLS regression models—similar to the second column of Table 5.1—broken down by the strength and direction of the respondents' party identification. Rather than go through the results for each set of respondents, I will summarize the overall findings. When readers did not perceive bias, hard news slant influenced the opinions of Republicans, independents and weak partisans, but had an insignificant influence on Democrats

and strong partisans. As expected, there was no evidence of media effects among those perceiving bias in the news source. In other words, the only time hard news slant influenced candidate evaluations was when some readers (Republicans, independents and weaker partisans) did not perceive bias in the source. It is unclear whether perceptions of bias would reduce media effects among Democrats as they do Republicans and independents.

	Republicans	Independents	Democrats	Weak Partisans	Strong Partisans
Hard News	1.00* (.490)	1.15* (.345)	-.176 (.437)	.860* (.273)	.824 (.591)
News*Bias	-1.06* (.447)	-1.31* (.410)	-.136 (.444)	-1.01* (.346)	-.794* (.350)
Opinion	1.10* (.501)	-.216 (.235)	1.12* (.191)	.354* (.180)	.917* (.273)
Opinion*Bias	-.442 (.602)	.957* (.441)	-.375 (.333)	.180 (.354)	.102 (.323)
Party ID				-1.19* (.242)	-4.01* (.212)
Ideology	-.748* (.113)	-.498* (.148)	-.237* (.135)	-.450* (.116)	-.274* (.091)
Knowledge	.111 (.234)	-.200 (.281)	-.125 (.245)	-.107 (.241)	-.109 (.184)
Attention	-.181	.073	-.177	-.038	-.026

	(.284)	(.399)	(.234)	(.321)	(.200)
Interest	-.218	1.21*	1.065*	.811*	.398
	(.394)	(.500)	(.369)	(.375)	(.287)
County Vote	.014	.035	.004	.024	.013
	(.027)	(.025)	(.014)	(.019)	(.016)
Constant	1.41	-1.26	3.00	2.62	7.81*
	(1.94)	(2.21)	(1.88)	(2.06)	(1.40)
F	7.49*	4.05*	15.51*	9.21*	191.48*
R-squared	.2166	.1112	.1689	.1209	.7190
N	258	268	234	418	342
*p<.05					

Opinion slant had a far more consistent influence on candidate evaluations. Unlike news slant however, the influence of opinion slant did not disappear among those perceiving bias in the source. With the exception of independents and Republicans, opinion slant had just as much influence on those perceiving bias as it did on those who believed their newspaper was not biased. Republicans were the only group in which those perceiving bias were less likely to accept the messages in hard news and opinion slant. Although the *Opinion*Bias* coefficient is not significant, it does have a negative sign, meaning that those perceiving bias were slightly (though not significantly) less influenced by the opinion slant. Perhaps Republicans had a more resistant position to all news sources because of the hostility between the news media and

Republican elites during the campaign. Republican readers might have seen all parts of the newspaper—both news and opinion—as reflecting the liberal media elite.

For independents, opinion slant had less influence among those not perceiving bias. In fact, opinion slant had no influence on those not perceiving bias, but had a substantial influence on those who did perceive bias. Perhaps those perceiving bias were simply the ones who understood and processed the cues provided by opinion content. This provides additional evidence that cues in opinion content have a dual influence on peoples' opinions. Opinion content appears to provide people a shortcut to evaluate the bias in the source, while also helping them understand the political environment. For example, an editorial criticizing Bush's handling of the economy provides readers with 1) a cue to the preferences of the newspaper and 2) a simplified way to understand the election. In short, just because opinion content provides a useful shortcut to evaluate bias, does not mean people will reject the arguments made therein.

Evaluating the Bias Heuristic

Are perceptions of bias an effective heuristic? The answer depends on the consistency between the causes of peoples' perceptions and how those perceptions are used to process the news. Table 5.3 compares the reasons people perceive bias (from chapter three) to the type of content that readers reject (from chapter five) when they believe the source is biased. For instance, the results in chapter three showed that independents perceived bias because of opinion slant, and this chapter suggests that independents tend to reject the news when they perceive bias. Thus, the middle column summarizes the results in chapter three and the right-most column summarizes the results in this chapter.

Perceptions of bias appear to be an ineffective shortcut for Republicans, independents and weaker partisans. When members of those groups perceived bias, they rejected the content of the news. Recall from chapter three that these groups perceived bias for reasons unrelated to any actual slant in hard news. Thus, a large number of readers rejected the content of the news for no good reason. These readers were just as likely to reject the news from a slanted source as they were a more balanced one.

Republicans rejected hard news on an almost random basis, as their perceptions were unrelated to any slant in the hard news or opinion sections. Independents and weaker partisans rejected the news because they assumed it was biased based on the slant of the opinion section. When the opinion section favored Clinton, independents and weaker partisans were more likely to perceive bias in favor of Clinton, which in turn caused them to ignore (or reject) the messages in the hard news section. Although there was at least some reason for independents and weaker partisans to reject the news, the bias heuristic is still ineffective. Readers were rejecting the news for reasons unrelated to any actual slant in the content they were rejecting.

Groups	Why They Perceive Bias - From Chapter Three	Type of Content Rejected - From Chapter Five
All Participants	Both News and Opinion	News
Republicans	Neither	Both News and Opinion
Independents	Opinion	News
Democrats	Both News and Opinion	Neither*
Weak Partisans	Opinion	News
Strong Partisans	Both News and Opinion	News
<p>This table summarizes the results from chapter three (Why They Perceive Bias) and chapter five (Type of Content Rejected).</p> <p>*The preferences of Democrats were only influenced by opinion content, and perceptions of bias did not diminish that effect. Hard news slant had no influence on Democrats' evaluations of the candidates, so it is unclear whether perceptions of bias would have diminished those effects had they existed.</p>		

The bias heuristic appears to work more effectively for Democrats and strong partisans. Their perceptions are related to hard news content, and they tend to reject the messages from the news. News slant has less influence over the opinions of Democrats and strong partisans, whether or not they perceive bias in the source. In other words, those readers who are less influenced by the news to begin with—and therefore are in less need of the bias heuristic—are the ones for which the bias shortcut is most effective. In short, perceptions of bias appear to work for the very people who require it least, and the shortcut fails those who need it most.

Implications

Perhaps the most important finding in the above analysis is that perceptions of bias reduce the effects of news slant on public opinion. When readers thought their daily newspaper favored one of the two candidates, news slant had no influence on their political preferences. On the other hand, hard news slant had a substantial influence on the opinions of those who thought the news source favored neither candidate. Perceptions of bias could have reduced media effects by reducing the credibility of the source or by acting as a cognitive shortcut. Either way, people were less likely to accept the media's messages if they perceived bias in the source. This might be a positive for democracy if people's perceptions stemmed from the slant in the news. In that scenario, people would detect the slant in the news and this awareness would protect them from media manipulation. Unfortunately, we know from chapter three that most readers' perceptions have no relationship to the content of the news, especially for those most susceptible to hard news slant—independents and weak partisans. Thus, it appears that people are rejecting the content of the news independent of any bias that may or may not exist.

Unlike hard news slant, opinion slant influenced readers' political preferences even when they perceived bias in the source. This finding is at odds with expectations given that people base their perceptions on the slant of opinion content. Past research suggests that opinion content and news commentary are influential because they represent elite opinion and in some cases elite consensus (Entman, 1989; Page et al., 1987). Opinion leaders such as politicians, government officials and media elites frame political issues and send cues to the public concerning the performance of political leaders. Those in the public rely on these cues because it requires less energy than examining public policies and closely monitoring the activities of their

elected representatives. Perhaps people rely on these cues from opinion leaders even if they think the opinion is biased in one direction. For example, I might think my daily newspaper favors Clinton, but that does not mean it is wrong about Bush's handling of the economy. The newspaper makes good arguments about the election even if it clearly favors one side. This would explain why most voters—even a sizable portion of Democrats—thought the news media favored Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, but the perceived bias did not cost either candidates the election. The news media do not need to be thought unbiased in order to have an influence on public opinion. Perceptions of bias reduce the influence of the news, but it is opinion content that appears to have the strongest impact on public opinion and the bias heuristic does not reduce those effects.

These findings also have implications for the study of media effects. The results suggest that when all people are lumped together, it provides an incomplete picture of the news media's influence on public opinion. This is likely to underestimate the influence of the news media among those that do not perceive bias and overestimate the influence on those that do. The reduced effect among those perceiving bias might mask some important media effects among those who do not perceive bias. In the present research, the influence of news slant was insignificant when people were not distinguished by perceived bias. When they were, news slant clearly influenced the political preferences of those not perceiving bias. It appears that readers confront the news differently when they perceive bias in the source. Future research into media effects should take perceptions of bias into account because they are likely to reduce a news source's effects on public opinion. This is consistent with the results in Miller and Krosnick (2000), who found evidence of the priming effect only among those who trusted the news media.

In short, separating the groups based on perceptions of bias in the news source should provide a clearer understanding of whatever media effects might exist.

One shortcoming of the present research is that it relies on data from the 1992 presidential election. Although the data used in this research are a little dated, they have proved quite useful to many recent research endeavors (Beck et al., 2002; Mutz and Martin, 2001). Furthermore, many of the conclusions from Dalton and colleagues (1998) inform our present understanding of perceptions of bias and media effects. A reexamination of the data provides a clearer understanding of the past results and allows for more informed theory in the future. Moreover, there is also little reason to expect that perceptions of bias influence information processing differently today than they did when the study was conducted.

On the other hand, the fragmented media environment of today affords people more choice in where they get their news (West, 2001). This could allow people to avoid news sources that they consider biased. This is likely to result in increased media effects as people are more trusting of their news source—because they do not perceive bias—and they uncritically accept the source’s information. One advantage of the 1992 data is that it focused on daily newspapers, which typically offer little choice to readers seeking local news; most people had access to only one local newspaper. This adds greater validity to the media effects that were identified because most people were not able to self-select their newspaper.

This chapter has focused on the long-term consequences of perceptions of bias. In the next chapter, I examine whether elite attacks—by influencing perceptions of bias—can allow politicians to avoid accountability for their actions.

Chapter 6: Elite Attacks and Political Accountability

In February 2008, the *New York Times* released a story concerning an alleged extra-marital affair between the presumptive Republican presidential nominee John McCain and a Washington D.C. lobbyist and admitted friend. According to the article, McCain used his power as a United States Senator to the benefit of the lobbyist in question. If these allegations were accurate—and the *New York Times* still claims they are—they might have had serious consequences for McCain’s presidential campaign.

Although McCain eventually denied the allegations, his first public statement did not confront any of the information or evidence in the *New York Times* article. Rather, McCain’s first press release attacked the source of the story by saying that the *NYT* was engaging in a smear campaign and gutter politics. In the days following the controversy, conservatives such as Rush Limbaugh—who had openly expressed reservations about McCain—rallied to the candidate’s side. Although conservative elites rallied behind McCain following the story, the preferences of Republican primary voters remained unchanged by the controversy (Gallup, 2008). Thus, while it is difficult to prove that McCain benefited in public approval—from a rallying effect—it is certain that the scandal did not hurt his candidacy. By attacking the source, McCain might have given people reason to doubt the accuracy of the information in the news.

This story illustrates the potential of perceptions of bias to influence how people process the information presented in the news. Imagine if the story about McCain had been broken by *Fox News* rather than the *New York Times*. Would McCain have lost support rather than gained it? When people believe a news source is biased, do they reject the information and arguments

presented by that source? Does attacking the media allow politicians to avoid the consequences of negative media coverage?

In the previous chapter, I examined how perceptions of bias influenced the media's ability to move public opinion. The results suggest that, in the long run, perceptions of bias minimize media effects on people's political preferences. In this chapter, I provide a more direct test of this phenomenon. Specifically, I increase perceptions of bias by exposing people to elite attacks on the news source and then examine whether opinion change decreases when perceptions of bias increase. This chapter also provides the first test of the "attacking the messenger" strategy. When politicians receive unfavorable news coverage they might be able to reduce its negative impact on public opinion by attacking the news source. If this tactic is successful, it would undermine the media's ability to foster political accountability.

Political Accountability

Although media effects on public opinion might have a negative connotation for many, political accountability depends on media influence. If voters did not update their opinions based on the information provided by the news media, they would be unlikely to hold political elites accountable for their action or inaction. For example, if the crime rate in a city increases during a mayor's term, and the news media report on the increase in crime, a certain amount of persuasion is expected and desirable. If the news media were unpersuasive when they reported the news, changes in conditions would lead to little change in political leadership, and no one would be held responsible for social problems. People might learn that the crime rate has increased during a mayor's term, but if they do not attribute blame to the mayor, accountability is

highly unlikely—except maybe by chance if the mayor loses anyway. Thus, the connection between social conditions and voting behavior depends (to a large extent) on the news media and their ability to change public opinion when appropriate.

Whether mayors should be held accountable for the crime rate is debatable, but surely everyone thinks that public officials should be held accountable for something. If elected officials should be held accountable for their actions, and the news media report on those actions—which is often necessary to inform the public—the news media must be able to change people’s opinions in some circumstances. Indeed, in a large-scale representative democracy—where people have only indirect access to most political affairs—media effects are both necessary and beneficial.

In the present research, I test whether elite attacks—and perceptions of bias—undermine the news media’s ability to foster political accountability. I argue that elite attacks can influence people’s impressions of the attacking politicians in either a direct or indirect way. Attacks could have a direct influence on people’s opinions of the attacking politician by creating a rally effect or by making the politician appear irresponsible. Elite attacks could also affect people’s opinions by influencing how they process the news. After reading an attack on the source, people might be more skeptical of the news (decreasing its persuasiveness) or pay more attention to the news (increasing its persuasiveness). In order to examine how elite attacks influence public opinion, I conducted two experiments in which I manipulated exposure to an attack on the source and the placement of the attack—before or after exposure to the news. Before getting to this test, it is important to understand how elite attacks might influence public opinion.

Theory

How might attacking a news source influence the persuasiveness of the source's message? As I discuss in chapter two and demonstrate in chapter five, perceptions of bias are likely to make news sources less persuasive. This is because (when all else is equal) those perceiving bias must rely on their perceptions of the news source to evaluate the validity of the message. Those perceiving bias are less likely to trust the source, which should lead them to reject the message. The results in chapter five along with the findings of past research provide convincing evidence that perceptions of bias have a long-term effect of lowering the persuasiveness of news sources (Baum and Groeling, 2009, Eagly and Chaiken, 1978). That is, when people think a news source is biased, they are less likely to alter their opinions based on the news reported by that source. I also showed in chapter four that elite attacks are likely to influence people's perceptions of bias in news sources. Thus, elite attacks can reduce the long term effectiveness of news sources by increasing perceptions of bias. Although this might protect politicians from future negative news, it remains unclear whether it also protects them in the short term when they are confronted with negative news.

In the short term, elite attacks are likely to influence people's opinions of the attacking politician in one of the following four ways. It is important to note that only one of the following hypotheses is likely to be correct. First, elite attacks could have a direct effect on the politician's favorability by giving the impression that the politician is avoiding responsibility for the problem discussed in the news media. People might agree that news reporters are biased in their coverage, but also believe the politician should take some responsibility for the problem—

whether it be a scandal or poor policies. By attacking the media, politicians come out looking irresponsible rather than the victim of media bias.

Hypothesis 6.1: Exposure to an attack makes people less favorable toward the attacking politician.

Second, elite attacks might make people more favorable toward the politician by creating a backlash against the news media. People might react to the perceived bias in the news by increasing their support for the candidate. This would be especially likely among members of the politician's party, as they might rally around the candidate when he is attacked by a perceived enemy. Perhaps partisans would become more supportive of their candidate when it appears that the other side is trying to destroy them. For example, many conservative pundits—such as Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly—came to John McCain's side when he attacked the *New York Times* story discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Perceived attacks by the opposition might foster a sense of team unity between the politician and fellow partisans.

Hypothesis 6.2: Exposure to an attack will make supporting party members more favorable toward the attacking politician.

Elite attacks might also have an indirect effect on people's opinions by influencing the way they process the news. Attacking the news source might increase people's perceptions of bias in the source, and those perceptions would have an immediate effect on the way people

process the news. Specifically, those perceiving bias would either reject (or counterargue) the content of the messages following an attack on the source. Absent an attack, people might simply accept the message because they have no reason to doubt it. Elite attacks might provide people a reason to doubt the accuracy of the source's messages, which should make people reject those messages.

Hypothesis 6.3: Exposure to an attack will prevent the news media from influencing the politician's favorability by making people counterargue or reject damaging news.

Finally, elite attacks could increase persuasion by making people pay more attention to the news. In chapter four, I argued that elite attacks on the media made people more likely to evaluate the content of the news. This evaluation might make people more likely to remember the news than if they had not evaluated the news at all. If people pay no attention to the news, it will have little influence on their opinions. Elite attacks might increase attention to the news, which should make the content of the news more persuasive. In other words, elite attacks increase the persuasiveness of news sources in the short term by increasing people's attention to the content of the news. For example, if a news source reports that the crime rate has increased, many people might have ignored the news. An attack on the source motivates people to evaluate the news for bias, which would make them more likely to remember that the crime rate has increased. Attacking the source might make the news more controversial and interesting, which should increase people's attention to the content. Increased attention would then lead to more persuasion than if the politician never attacked the source.

Hypothesis 6.4: Exposure to an attack will increase the persuasiveness of the news accompanying the attack. If a politician attacks the source, the news from that source will be more persuasive.

Experiment 1

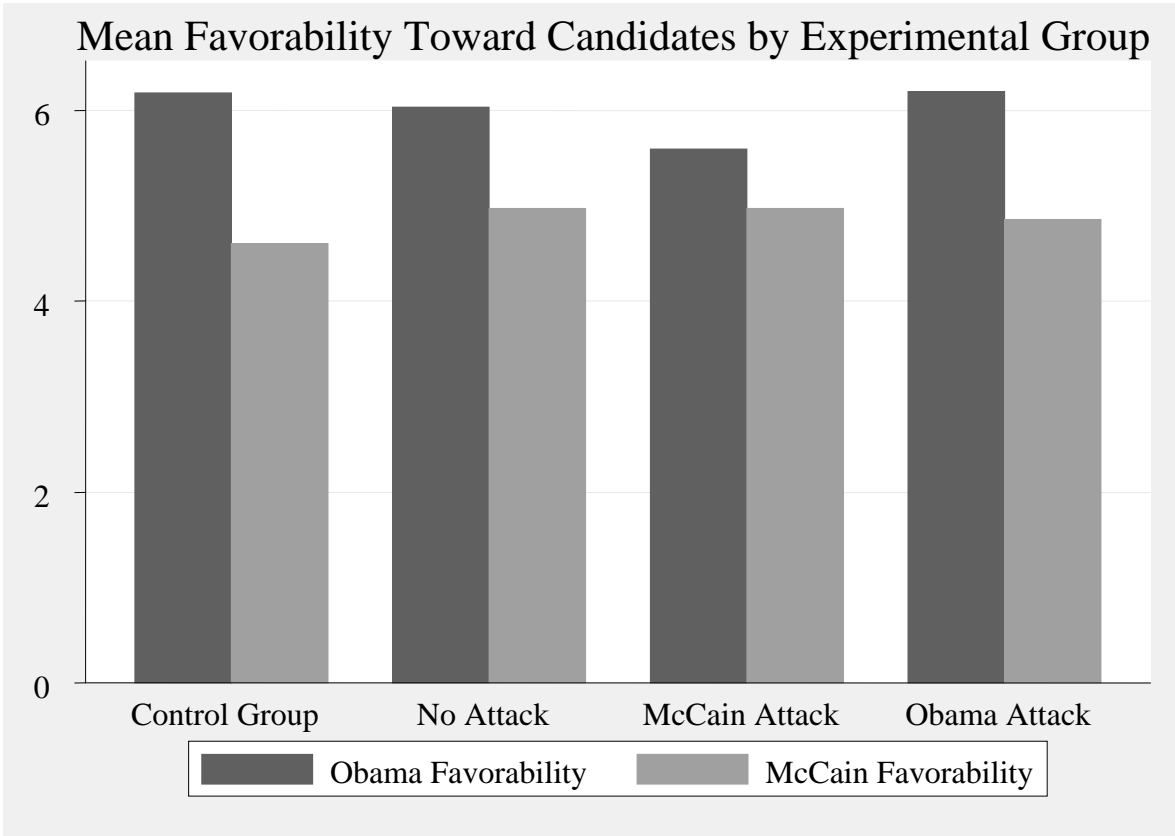
In order to examine the short-term consequences of elite attacks on the news media, I rely on data from the same experiment described in chapter four. Recall from chapter four that elite attacks on a news source made people more likely to think the source was biased in the direction of the accusation. I present a detailed description of the experimental design in chapter four. In brief, participants read an article about Barack Obama and John McCain. The article criticized both candidates' spending plans. Prior to reading the article, some participants read an attack on the source (the Los Angeles Times) from either Obama or McCain, while another group only read the article. An additional group—one not mentioned in chapter four—did not read the article or the attack. This group serves as the control group as it measures participants' attitudes toward Obama and McCain when no article was read. In short, there were four experimental groups: a Control Group, a No Attack Group, an Obama Attack Group, and a McCain Attack Group. The main dependent variables for this chapter are the participants' favorability ratings toward McCain and Obama. I measured favorability on an 11-point scale from very unfavorable (zero) to very favorable (ten).

Results

The first task is to examine whether the article influenced people's impressions of the candidates when there was no attack on the source. Figure 6.1 shows the average favorability toward the two candidates across the four experimental groups. Overall, the results suggest that participants had very stable impressions of the two presidential candidates. Reading the articles without an attack did not influence participants' favorability toward the candidates. Likewise, when people read an attack on the source prior to reading the article, there was no significant difference in favorability toward either candidate.²⁵ Thus, attacking the source had no influence on people's impressions of the candidates. This is an unfortunate finding as it prevents me from testing the power of elite attacks to undo the negative impact of unfavorable news coverage. If the unfavorable news coverage fails to lower the politician's favorability, it is difficult to test whether elite attacks can diminish that effect.

²⁵ I compared each group to each other group using difference of means tests. The differences in favorability between the groups did not reach significance.

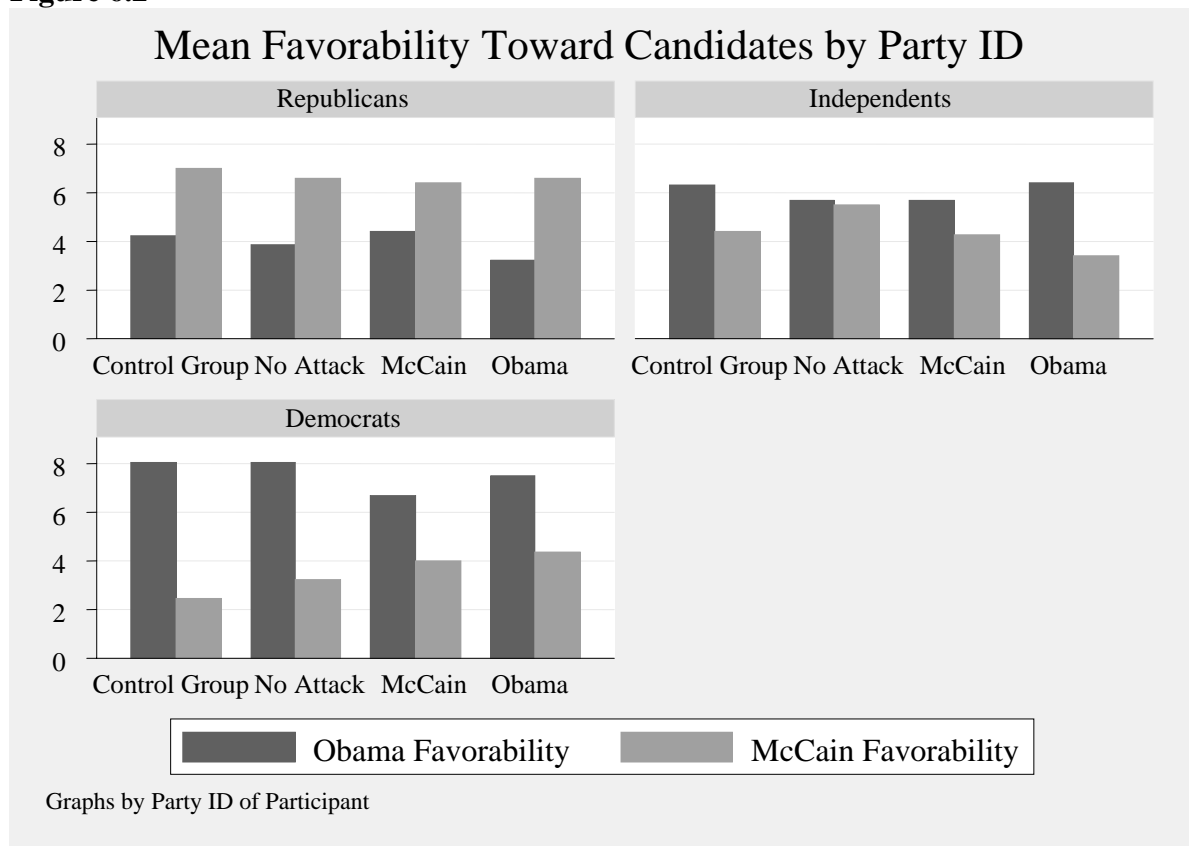
Figure 6.1



Although the results in the first experiment do not allow me to test hypothesis 6.1, they do provide some evidence refuting hypothesis 6.2, which suggests that elite attacks would increase the politician's favorability. Stable opinions should not prevent a rally effect as they would opinion change. A rally effect is most likely among strong partisan identifiers, who are likely to have stable opinions. There is no evidence that a rally effect occurred when participants read an attack on their favored politician. Figure 6.2 shows the favorability toward the two candidates broken down by the party identification of the participant. If a rally effect occurred, supporting party members should have *higher* favorability when their preferred candidate attacks the media. Participants in the *McCain Attack Group*—who read McCain's attack on the

source—were no more favorable toward McCain than participants in the *No Attack Group* or the *Control Group*. Likewise, Democrats were no more favorable toward Obama after reading his attack on the newspaper than Democrats in the *Control Group*. In short, the articles did not influence people’s impressions of the politicians, which prevents me from testing hypotheses 6.1, 6.3 or 6.4, but the evidence is inconsistent with hypothesis 6.2.

Figure 6.2



Experiment 2

The problem with experiment 1 is that people's opinions of the politicians were too strong to be moved by the news. The experiment was conducted at the end of a very long election season in which both presidential candidates were well known by the public. Perhaps opinion change would have been more likely to occur earlier in the campaign season before people had made up their minds. I attempt to overcome this shortcoming by having participants read an article about a less prominent political figure—a state-wide governor. For this experiment, I have participants read an article about Christine Gregoire—the Democratic Governor from Washington State—and a distraction article about George W. Bush. I chose to focus on Governor Gregoire because most of the participants were residents of Washington State, making the article somewhat relevant to their lives. The articles are negative toward both Gregoire and Bush. The Bush article was meant to present an anti-Republican article to counter the anti-Democratic article concerning Gregoire. Having articles that are negative toward both a Republican and a Democratic politician should make the bias of the news source less obvious. The main treatment condition is the attack on the source of the article, in this case the *Seattle Times*. In the attack, Governor Gregoire accuses the *Seattle Times* of having a conservative bias and compares the newspaper to the coverage in *FOX News*.

For this experiment, participants were recruited from introductory political science classes at Washington State University. The 179 participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups: a *Control Group*, a *No Attack Group*, a *Pre-Attack Group* and *Post-Attack Group*. Table 6.1 illustrates the experimental conditions for each group. The *Control Group* is a pre-post design where the pre-test serves as the control group for comparison to the post-test results

and the other experimental groups. Participants in the *Control Group* also read the same articles (and half read the Gregoire attack) as the members of the other groups. The purpose of the pre-post design is to directly measure opinion change. The other experimental groups are meant to measure opinion change without the potential stabilization effect that can occur in a pre-post design. When participants are asked the same question before and after a treatment condition, their responses might be more similar than if they did not recently answer the question. For analysis, I use the pre-test as the control group and I use the results from the post-test as additional evidence to support my analysis. As for the other experimental groups, some participants read the attack prior to reading both articles, and others read the attack after reading the articles.

Table 6.1 Procedures for the Experimental Groups			
Control Group	No Attack Group	Pre-Attack Group	Post-Attack Group
Expanded Pre-test	Standard Pre-test	Standard Pre-test	Standard Pre-test
Gregoire Attack (1/2)		Gregoire Attack	
Gregoire Article	Gregoire Article	Gregoire Article	Gregoire Article
			Gregoire Attack
Bush Article	Bush Article	Bush Article	Bush Article
Post-test	Post-test	Post-test	Post-test
N = 42	N = 42	N = 46	N = 49
The expanded pre-test includes the same questions asked in the standard pre-test, but also includes questions concerning participants' attitudes toward Gregoire. In the Control Group, only half of the participants read the attack on the source while the others only read the articles. The bottom row shows the number of participants in each group.			

Prior to reading the articles, all participants completed a short questionnaire concerning their attention to politics, party identification, ideology, sex and three questions measuring general political knowledge. Participants' correct answers to the knowledge questions were summed to create a measure of political knowledge from zero to three correct answers. Ideology was measured on a 5-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. Participants also rated their attention to politics on a 4-point scale from a lot of attention to none at all. The groups showed no significant differences across the main independent variables—ideology, attention to politics, sex and political knowledge.²⁶ Thus, any differences between the groups on the dependent variables are likely due to the experimental manipulation rather than previous group differences.

After reading the articles, participants answered numerous questions concerning their perceptions of bias in the *Seattle Times* and their attitudes toward Christine Gregoire. Perceptions of bias were measured by asking participants if they thought the *Seattle Times* had a liberal bias, conservative bias or if the newspaper was mostly neutral. The main dependent variables are participants' attitudes toward Governor Gregoire. The purpose of the experiment is to determine if the attacks on the source made people less likely to accept the information in the news. In order to measure the influence of the articles on readers' opinions, I asked participants questions concerning their attitudes toward Christine Gregoire including their overall favorability and their approval of Gregoire's handling of the economy. I asked participants to rate their favorability toward Gregoire—and their approval of her handling of the economy—on 11-point

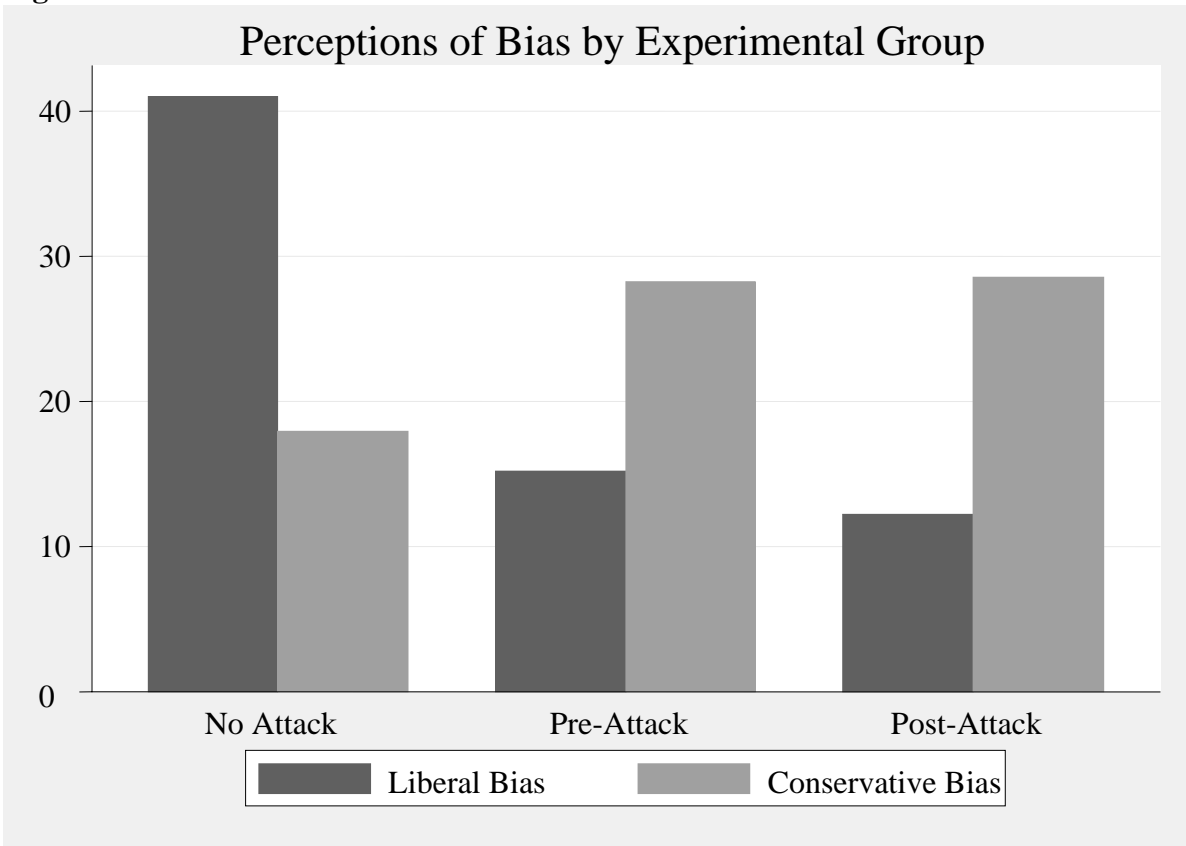
²⁶ For each variables, I compared each group to each other group using either difference of means tests or chi-square tests. I do not report the results because none of the groups were significantly different on any of the measures. I also include some of these characteristics in the regression models later on in this chapter.

scales from very unfavorable (strongly disapprove) to very favorable (strongly approve). Only the *Control Group* provided pre-test ratings of Gregoire, while the other groups only provided their attitudes toward Gregoire in the post-test survey.

Results

My argument is that elite attacks increase perceptions of bias, which in turn influence how people process the news. Therefore, it is first necessary to understand if the attacks influenced people's impressions of the news source. Figure 6.3 shows the proportion of participants in each group who believed the *Seattle Times* had a liberal or conservative bias. When people did not read an attack on the source, they were more likely ($t = 1.94, p < .1$) to perceive a liberal bias than a conservative bias. After reading Gregoire's attack—in which the governor accuses the *Seattle Times* of having a conservative bias—participants were significantly less likely ($z = 2.66, p < .05$) than the *No Attack Group* to believe the newspaper had a liberal bias. Participants were also slightly more likely to perceive a conservative bias when they were exposed to an attack, but these differences were not significant ($z = -1.11, p > .05$). For the most part, however, the attacks influenced people's perceptions by making them more likely to perceive neutrality instead of a liberal bias, which they would have perceived otherwise.

Figure 6.3



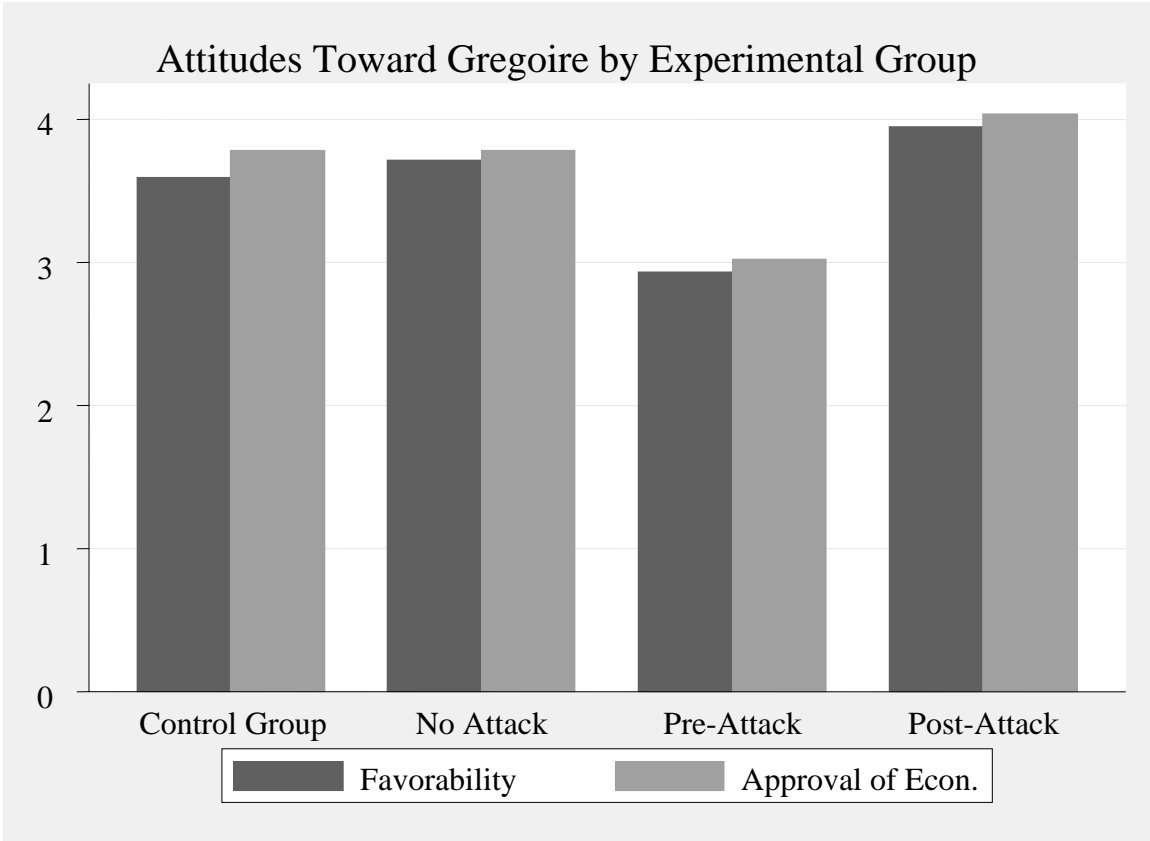
These results provide further evidence that elite attacks work (at least in part) by framing the question of media bias around two plausible alternatives. When Gregoire accuses the *Seattle Times* of having a conservative bias, she makes the notion of a liberal bias seem implausible. In other words, people evaluated whether or not the *Seattle Times* had a conservative bias rather than evaluating the content for evidence of *any* bias, which they did in the *No Attack Group*. Thus, people were more likely to perceive a liberal bias when they evaluated the content on its own, but the attack on the source altered people's evaluation of the articles.

Perceptions of Bias and Accountability

The main weakness of the first experiment is that the content of the news had no influence on people's opinions of the politicians. I tried to overcome this weakness by having participants read an article about a less well-known politician. Presumably, people would have less stable opinions about a state-wide governor than they would a presidential candidate in the middle of a campaign. In the end, the results suggest that people's opinions are less strong than in the first experiment. People were open to changing their opinions, just not in the way that I expected. Figure 6.4 shows the average favorability toward Gregoire by experimental group. Similar to the first experiment, reading the article without an attack was not enough to change readers' impressions of the Governor. In fact, on both dependent variables the *No Attack Group* was not significantly different than the *Control Group*.²⁷

²⁷ Rather than conduct significance tests for each group on each dependent variable, I save the question of significance for the regression models later in the chapter. The significance tests will be more illustrative when participant characteristics such as ideology and political knowledge are controlled.

Figure 6.4



Although the article was not able to change readers' opinions on its own, there is evidence suggesting that hypothesis 6.2 is incorrect. Recall that hypothesis 6.2 states that attacks make people more skeptical of the news, which in turn, leads them to reject the media's messages. If hypothesis 6.2 were correct, participants in the *Pre-Attack Group* would either be more favorable or equally favorable toward Gregoire. The results suggest the opposite occurred as participants reading the attack prior to reading the article were less favorable toward Gregoire than participants in any of the other groups. That the attack made people less favorable toward the attacking politician suggests that attacks do not diminish the influence of the content, at least in the short term.

For more direct evidence of opinion change, I examine the results in the pre-post design in the *Control Group*. Thus far, whenever I have mentioned the *Control Group* I was referring to the pre-test results. After completing the pre-test questionnaire, participants in the *Control Group* read the same articles as the other groups, but half read the attack prior to reading the articles (similar to the *Pre-Attack Group*) and the other half only read the articles.²⁸ When participants only read the articles their average favorability toward Gregoire changed from 3.69 to 3.13, which is an insignificant difference ($t = 1.64, p > .05, n = 19$). Once again, this suggests that the article does not move opinions on its own. When participants read the attack prior to reading the articles, Gregoire's post-test favorability (2.31) was significantly lower ($t = 2.89, p < .05, n = 19$) than her pre-test favorability (3.47). Similar to the between-groups results, these findings suggest that the content of the article only influenced opinions when accompanied by an attack on the source. Attacks appear to have a negative effect on the impressions of the attacker.

Why did exposure to an attack on the news source make people less favorable toward the attacking politician? One explanation is consistent with hypothesis 6.1, arguing that attacks on the news media make the attacking politician look irresponsible. If politicians attack the source, people might think they are unwilling to take responsibility for the weak economy. Another possibility is that attacks on the news source increase readers' attention to the content of the articles. If the article did not influence readers' opinions because of low attention, attacks might increase the influence of the article by increasing readers' attention to the article's content. In chapter four, I argue that elite attacks make people more likely to evaluate bias in the news.

²⁸ There were no differences between the characteristics—ideology, party ID, sex or attention to politics—of those exposed to the attack and those only reading the articles.

Evaluating the article for bias requires that people pay attention to its content. Increased attention to the content of the article should lead to more opinion change than if people pay no attention to the article at all.

I can determine which of the above possibilities is correct by manipulating the placement of the attack. If the attack directly caused a backlash—as is consistent with hypothesis 6.1—then it should not matter if people read the attack before or after the article. Hypothesis 6.1 predicts that the attack has a direct effect on people’s impressions of the candidate, which makes the positioning of the attack irrelevant. On the other hand, if the attack increases attention to the article, which in turn increases persuasion, the attack should only work when it is read prior to the article. If the attack is read after the article, it would not increase people’s attention during the time that they read the article.

The results in Figure 6.4 suggest that Gregoire’s attack on the source did not have a direct influence on readers’ impressions of the governor. When people read the attack after reading the article, their favorability toward Gregoire was no different than the *Control Group* ($t = -0.69$, $p > .05$) or the *No Attack Group* ($t = -0.54$, $p > .05$). In other words, the attack had no effect on public opinion when it was read after the article. This suggests that elite attacks increase people’s attention to the news, which in turn increases the persuasiveness of the news source.

Table 6.2 OLS Regression Models Predicting Attitudes Toward Gregoire		
	Gregoire Favorability	Approval of Economy
No Attack Group	-.165 (.423)	-.216 (.385)
Pre-Attack Group	-.956 (.413)**	-.996 (.378)**
Post-Attack Group	.082 (.409)	.015 (.372)
Ideology	-.690 (.130)**	-.541 (.119)**
Political Knowledge	.031 (.160)	-.115 (.145)
Attention to Politics	-.253 (.240)	-.310 (.218)
Female	.468 (.319)	.513 (.290)*
Constant	5.94 (.632)**	5.92 (.572)**
F-score (prob.)	5.77**	5.94**
Adjusted r-squared	.1579	.1635
N	179	178

The dependent variable in the second column is the respondent's approval of Gregoire's handling of the Washington economy. The three experimental groups are listed with the *Control Group* as the baseline for comparison. Ideology is measured on a 5-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. Political Knowledge is measured as the number of correct answers to three general knowledge questions. *p < .1 **p < .05

In order to control for other intervening variables, I estimated two OLS regression models with participants' attitudes toward Gregoire as the dependent variables. The results in Table 6.2 consistently show that participants in the *Pre-Attack Group* were significantly less favorable toward Gregoire—and less approving of her handling of the economy—than any of the other groups. In fact, in none of the models were any of the other groups significantly different in their attitudes toward Gregoire. In sum, these results provide evidence (on numerous measures) that attacks on the source made readers less favorable toward the attacking politician.

Discussion and Implications

The results in this chapter, together with chapter four, suggest that elites can influence people's opinions about media bias. Unfortunately for them, politicians do not appear to gain any short-term benefits from attacking the news media. In fact, when politicians attack the news media, they appear to increase the effects of the news on public opinion. When people read an attack, they are more likely to evaluate the content of the news for bias. Evaluating the news for bias increases the influence of the news on people's opinions. Thus, politicians might do themselves a disservice by attacking the news media when in normal circumstances people would have ignored the news.

An alternative approach is to have a third party—a fellow politician or media personality—attack the news media on one's behalf. Perhaps a third party would make the attack appear less self-serving than when a politician attacks the news media themselves. Although this is certainly a plausible theory, the results in this chapter provide little evidence to suggest that a third party attack would be more effective. There was no apparent backlash when the politician attacked the media following the article, suggesting that people did not view the attack as self-serving.

In some ways, the significance of the results in this chapter remain unclear. Do attacks only increase attention to the news in an experimental setting? Are these findings relevant in the real world? It is certainly true that, in most circumstances, people are unlikely to read an attack right before they read an article. On the other hand, attacking the media makes the story more controversial than otherwise would be the case. Most people pay little attention to news coverage of politics, so they might not even hear about a news story that receives a days worth of

coverage in the news media. But if a politician attacks the source, the news media might devote more coverage to the controversy, which would increase the chance that it will reach the public. Of course, it might not hurt candidates to attack the media when caught in a scandal that is going to receive significant coverage anyway. If the story is going to receive substantial media coverage and public attention, it might not hurt to blame the media. On the other hand, attacking the media over a story has the potential to increase public attention, which could have the short-term consequence of augmenting the effects of the news.

Unfortunately, the results in this chapter do not rule out the possibility that elite attacks might reduce media effects in *some* circumstances. Perhaps attacks diminish media effects when people would have changed their opinions had the politician not attacked the media. For example, if a politician attacked the news media for covering a political scandal, it might prove beneficial. People are likely to hear about a scandal anyway, and a politician might be able to blunt the effects of news coverage if he or she can blame the news media. On the other hand, I find no evidence suggesting that elites can escape accountability by attacking the media. The only significant finding from two experiments points in the opposite direction; that attacking the media magnifies the effects of negative news.

Perhaps the lesson for politicians is to attack the news media before they get in political trouble. An effective strategy might be to attack the news media on a consistent basis, and not in regards to one story or controversy. Political elites can influence public opinion about the bias in news sources, but it might not be wise to wait until one is facing negative news. Instead, repeated attacks over time are likely to create a cognitive shortcut that will make people less likely to believe the news when it is negative toward the politician. Furthermore, when people

think a source is biased against the politician's party, it should make favorable news even more persuasive. Politicians can influence people's expectations of the news by attacking the source. These expectations can diminish the effects of negative news while augmenting the effects of positive news (Baum and Groeling, 2009). If politicians poison the water by attacking the media, they might be able to avoid accountability for future mistakes.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have examined the causes and consequences of public perceptions of media bias. To summarize, people's perceptions of bias in the news media are unrelated to the content of hard news. The exceptions to this were strong partisans and Democrats, whose perceptions of the source were related to the actual slant in the news as well as the slant in opinion columns. For moderate and weak party identifiers, opinions about bias in the news media were related to the slant in a source's opinion columns and editorials. During the 1992 presidential election, the more a newspaper's opinion content favored Bill Clinton, the more likely readers were to think the newspaper favored Clinton. These results suggest that people's opinions about the bias in news sources have more to do with what is said in opinion columns and editorials than any actual bias in the news.

I also tested how elite attacks influenced people's perceptions of bias in the news media. In two experiments, elite attacks influenced people's perceptions of bias even when the content of the news was the same. Thus, elite attacks have an independent influence on people's opinions about the bias in the news media. These elite attacks influence perceptions of bias by 1) framing the issue and 2) biasing people's evaluation of the news. Essentially, attacks influence people's perceptions by biasing their evaluation of the news, which means that attacks do interact with the actual content of the news. If the news is overly partisan one way or another, attacks will have their largest influence by framing the issue, but if the news is neutral, attacks will lead people to notice the content that is consistent with bias rather than the content that is inconsistent. Furthermore, the more balanced the news, the more likely it is that people will find

evidence of bias to support the claims of the elites. When news presents both sides of political issues, it provides evidence to support the elite accusations of bias.

I also find evidence that elite attacks are no more effective—at influencing perceptions of bias—when they come from conservative elites as opposed to liberal elites. Although conservative elites have a longer and more prominent history of attacking the news media (Watts et al., 1999; Project, 2009b), my findings suggest that liberal elites could be just as effective at influencing public perceptions of news media bias. In other words, elite attacks appear to be just as effective independent of the ideology or party identification of the attacking politician.

While the results in chapters three and four suggest that people’s perceptions of bias are largely unrelated to the content of the news, it appears that people still use those perceptions as a cognitive shortcut. Past research has found that people rely on their perceptions of the bias in news sources to protect themselves from biased, inaccurate or unpleasant news. The results in chapter five support this contention, but suggest that perceptions of bias only push people to reject hard news. When people perceive bias in a news source, they reject the content of the news, but opinion content still influences their opinions. Together with chapter three, the results suggest that people perceive bias because of opinion content but then use those perceptions to reject not opinion content but hard news.

Finally, I examined how elite attacks influenced the way people processed the news. Chapter four showed that elite attacks can influence people’s perceptions, but the short-term consequences of that phenomenon remain unclear. Although attacks on the media have long-term consequences for the news media’s ability to foster political accountability, it is unclear whether attacks can provide immediate protection for politicians from negative news coverage.

Chapter six provided the first direct test of the attacking the messenger strategy. The results suggest that attacking the messenger does not have the short-term benefits that politicians might have hoped for. When politicians attack the media, people are more likely to pay attention to the news in order to evaluate the bias in its content. Increased attention to the news made the content more influential on people's impressions of the candidates. It remains to be seen whether attacks could protect politicians if people were going to pay attention anyway, but the increased attention that attacks bring might have a backlash for the attacking politician. In other words, in some circumstances keeping attention low might be a better strategy than attacking the source of negative news.

Testing the Bias Heuristic

The main purpose of this dissertation was to examine the effectiveness of the bias heuristic. We know from past research that people use their perceptions of the source when they process the news. What remained unclear until now was whether that shortcut was an effective tool to protect people from biased, inaccurate or dissonant news. The results in this dissertation suggest that the bias heuristic is an ineffective shortcut. The bias heuristic would be effective if people's perceptions were based on the slant in the news, and they used those perceptions to reject the content of the news. Instead, the results in this dissertation suggest that people's perceptions stem from opinion content, but cause people to only reject the content of hard news. Therefore, if a news source has slanted opinion content, people will perceive bias and still be influenced by that content. Conversely, if the news is biased and the opinion content is balanced, people will be more likely to accept the content of the news even though it is actually slanted in

one direction. Thus, the reasons that people perceive bias are unrelated to the way they use their perceptions as a cognitive shortcut.

In addition, elite attacks make people perceive bias even when no bias exists in the content of the news. Attacks from both Democratic and Republican politicians can influence people's evaluations of the exact same news. If attacks only worked by focusing attention on the news, the increased perceptions of bias that result might be useful. In that scenario, attacks would point out a biased source but the ultimate judgment would be left to the individual. The results in chapters four and six suggest that attacks work by framing the issue and biasing people's evaluations of the news. The end result is that people might reject the news—because they perceive bias—even though there is no evidence of bias. Instead, their perceptions are influenced by the goals and rhetoric of political elites. Once again, the causes of people's perceptions are unrelated to any actual bias in the news source. It appears that politicians have the ability to tarnish a news source, which is likely to influence how people process the news from that source in the future. If a source is balanced and reports the news by strict standards of objectivity, attacks from political elites will still make people more likely to perceive bias in the news source. People will then process the news from that source by relying on the bias heuristic.

The main danger of perceptions of bias for democracy is that they will prevent the news media from fostering political accountability. This is only a danger if people's perceptions are disconnected from reality. If people perceive bias because the news actually is biased in one direction or another, then the bias heuristic is quite useful in protecting people from biased news sources. The results in this dissertation suggest that perceptions of bias *do not* protect people

from biased sources. A biased news source can still influence people as long as elites do not attack the source or the opinion content is not too favorable toward one side.

Meanwhile, perceptions of bias can still have negative effects on the news media. Since people's perceptions of bias are unrelated to the news, they are likely to reject news for no good reason. The more people perceive bias in the mainstream media—which is what most conservative attacks allege—the less likely they are to believe the news. This could prevent the media from fulfilling their essential roles as public informants and government watchdogs. Thus, perceptions of bias can still have consequences for democracy, without the benefits of protecting people from biased news sources. In short, perceptions of bias appear to be an ineffective heuristic because they do not protect people from biased news, and they might prevent political accountability in the process.

Directions for Future Research

There are numerous areas for future research concerning both the causes and consequences of public perceptions of media bias. For one, it is unclear how the slant of the news and opinion content interact with elite attacks on the media. Elite attacks might make people evaluate the bias in news sources, but do people evaluate the news or opinion content? Perhaps elite attacks make people look for bias, but they still notice the bias in opinion content more than the news. This would result in perceptions of bias being related to opinion content. There is some evidence for this in chapter three as opinion content had a larger influence on perceptions during the 1992 presidential election when elite attacks on the media were quite

prominent. It would also be interesting to see how degrees of slant interact with elite attacks to influence perceptions of bias. When is content too slanted for attacks to work?

The present research also sparks questions pertaining to the consequences of perceptions of bias. When do elite attacks protect politicians from negative news coverage? Perhaps elite attacks work best when people already perceive bias in a news source. In this scenario, politicians would be pinning negative news coverage on the bias of the source instead of any mistakes they might have made. Elite attacks might serve as a reminder of the source's bias. If people already think the source is biased, they might not think it necessary to evaluate the content of the source for evidence of bias. Without an evaluation of the content, elite attacks would not have the negative effects for politicians. Instead, people might reject the content of the source after they are reminded of the source's bias.

Another area of research concerns how perceptions of bias interact with cognitive dissonance. Do people use their perceptions as an excuse to discount information they think is biased? Perhaps people are able to forget that their favored politician performed poorly, or to justify their preferred policies, by attacking the news media. For example, some might argue that the media exaggerate an economic downturn because they are biased against the incumbent president. How motivated reasoning is aided by people's perceptions of bias is an interesting area for future research.

In conclusion, perceptions of media bias appear to be an unreliable and altogether dangerous informational shortcut. Past research suggests that people use their perceptions of a news source's bias as a heuristic when evaluating the accuracy of the news. The research in the previous chapters suggests that perceptions of bias do not provide reliable protection from

unbiased sources. Perceptions of bias also pose a problem for the news media in a representative democracy. When people perceive bias—whether because of elite attacks or opinion content—they tend to reject or ignore the news, which undermines the news media’s ability to perform their essential roles as public informants and government watchdogs. In short, perceptions of bias provide little benefit to the individual or society, but still have the potential to harm both.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions and Coding for Chapters 3 and 5

Perceptions of Bias

During a normal week, did you read one or more daily newspapers? What is the name of the newspaper? Which presidential candidate do you think the [newspaper] favored during the campaign?

Attention to Campaign News

During the election campaign, how much attention did you generally pay to newspaper articles about the presidential campaign? Did you pay:

4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, or 1 = no attention?

Interest in the Campaigns

Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. During this recent election, were you very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in the political campaigns? 1 = very much interested, 2 = somewhat interested, 3 = not much interested.

Party Identification

Many people lean toward a particular political party for a long time, although they may occasionally vote for a different party. Do you generally lean toward a political party?

If the respondent did not choose one of the two parties, they were asked "If you had to choose, do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or the Democratic party?"

Strength of Party Identification

“Taken altogether, how strongly or weakly do you lean toward the [fill in] party? Would you say: 1 = very strongly, 2 = fairly strongly, 3 = moderately, 4 = fairly weakly, 5 = very weakly.”

Ideology

“Many people use the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ to recognize different political opinions. I have a scale that runs from 1 to 10, where 1 is the most liberal position and 10 is the most conservative position. Using any number between 1 and 10, where do you place yourself on this scale when you think of your own political views?”

Favorability of Candidates

I’d like to get your feelings toward the major candidates for president by asking you to rate each one on a scale that runs from 0 to 10. Zero means you feel most unfavorable toward the candidate, 10 means you feel most favorable toward the candidate, and 5 means you feel neutral toward the candidate. Using any number from 0 to 10, overall how unfavorable or favorable do you feel toward Bush? On the same 0 to 10 scale, how unfavorable or favorable do you feel toward Clinton?

Newspaper Coding

Newspapers were coded on every third day and every Sunday. Articles were coded based on whether they were news articles (including events occurring within the last 48 hours and news analysis) or editorial and opinion columns. Letters to the editor and political cartoons were not included in the analysis.

Slant Toward Candidates

Articles were coded to measure the overall favorability toward each of the candidates in the election. Articles mentioning both candidates were coded for the tone toward each candidate. Slant toward Bush was coded the same as slant toward Clinton. For example, an article that mentioned both candidates was coded for the slant toward Clinton and again for the slant toward Bush. Articles were coded from the candidate's perspective; asking whether the candidate would have wanted to see this article in print.

1 = extremely negative, 2 = negative, 3 = slightly negative, 4 = balanced (equal positive/negative), 5 = slightly positive, 6 = positive, 7 = extremely positive.

Appendix B

Experiment 1 [First Described in Chapter 4]

Party Identification

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent or some other political party? If other party, please write it in the space provided.

Democrat
 Independent
 Republican
 Other Political Party _____

Ideology

Some people think about politics in terms of liberal and conservative ideologies. If you had to choose, where would you say you fall on the scale below?

Very Liberal
 Somewhat Liberal
 Moderate
 Somewhat Conservative
 Very Conservative

Sex: Male _____ Female _____

Perceptions of Bias

The article you just read came from the Los Angeles Times. Do you think the newspaper displayed a liberal bias, conservative bias, or was the newspaper mostly neutral?

Liberal Bias
 Mostly Neutral
 Conservative Bias

Perceptions of Criticism

[Participants were asked this question once for each candidate.]

Do you think the article you just read was too critical of [Barack Obama or John McCain], not critical enough, or was the level of criticism appropriate?

Too Critical
 Not Critical Enough

Article Read by the Participants

The Los Angeles Times

Analysts see red in candidates' economic blueprints; Say proposals are ambitious but implausible

CAMPAIGN 2008

As the campaigns of John McCain and Barack Obama flail away at the details of each other's economic blueprints, independent analysts say neither candidate's plan will balance the federal budget any time soon. McCain this week contended that by the end of his first term he would erase the budget deficit, projected this year at more than \$400 billion.

"The problem with the McCain proposal is that he has an ambitious goal out there with no plausible way of achieving it," said Robert L. Bixby, executive director of the Concord Coalition, a nonpartisan group that advocates "generationally responsible" fiscal policy. McCain, he said, "has proposed an enormous amount of tax cuts and a very vague plan of spending restraints."

Obama, Bixby said, "doesn't have the [balanced budget] goal, so we're not quite sure what the fiscal policy goal is. He's got some very ambitious proposals - healthcare coverage and tax breaks for the middle class and for education and investment. It could all be quite expensive, and I think it's uncertain whether he's made credible provisions to pay for them by raising taxes or cutting other spending."

An analysis of the candidates' tax plans, released last month by the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center, estimated that McCain's program would reduce tax revenues by \$3.6 trillion over the next 10 years while Obama's would cost \$2.7 trillion over that time. And both would greatly increase the national debt, now more than \$9 trillion.

The analysis excludes the impact of the candidates' healthcare proposals. Obama's expanded-coverage plan would cost an estimated \$50 billion to \$65 billion a year, his campaign estimates. McCain's campaign contends his proposal is revenue neutral - offsetting the cost of new tax credits of \$2,500 for individuals and \$5,000 for families who purchase their own health coverage by making employer-paid insurance benefits a taxable benefit.

Obama has proposed raising about \$100 billion annually in new revenue by allowing the so-called Bush tax cuts for individuals earning more than \$250,000 to expire by 2011. McCain's campaign this week argued that Obama's vote in June for a nonbinding budget resolution, essentially a five-year guideline for the future, reflected his support for increasing taxes on the middle class. The Democratic-led resolution was based on the assumption that the Bush tax cuts on all income levels would expire and return to their higher pre-2001 rates.

Experiment 2 [Described in Chapter 6]

Attention to Politics

How much attention do you usually pay to news coverage of politics?

A lot Some Not Much None

Ideology

Some people think about politics in terms of liberal and conservative ideologies. If you had to choose, where would you say you fall on the scale below?

Very Liberal
 Somewhat Liberal
 Moderate
 Somewhat Conservative
 Very Conservative

Political Knowledge

Which party currently has the most seats in the United States House of Representatives?

Republicans
 Democrats (*Correct*)
 Evenly Split
 Don't Know

Who is the Secretary of Defense of the United States?

Condoleezza Rice
 Donald Rumsfeld
 William Perry
 Robert Gates (*Correct*)
 Don't Know

Which of the offices below is currently held by Harry Reid?

Speaker of the House

- Attorney General
- Senate Majority Leader (*Correct*)
- Secretary of State
- Don't Know

Favorability Toward Gregoire

Christine Gregoire is the governor of Washington and is a Democrat. Overall, would you say you have a favorable impression of Governor Gregoire or an unfavorable impression? On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being very unfavorable and 10 being very favorable, how would you rate your overall impression of Governor Gregoire? Please circle one of the numbers below.

0 - - - - 1 - - - - 2 - - - - 3 - - - - 4 - - - - 5 - - - - 6 - - - - 7 - - - - 8 - - - - 9 - - - - 10

Very Unfavorable

Very Favorable

Economic Approval

What about Governor Gregoire's handling of the statewide economy? Do you approve or disapprove of the Governor's handling of that issue?

0 - - - - 1 - - - - 2 - - - - 3 - - - - 4 - - - - 5 - - - - 6 - - - - 7 - - - - 8 - - - - 9 - - - - 10

Strongly Disapprove

Strongly Approve

Perceptions of Bias

In general, do you think the Seattle Times has a liberal bias, conservative bias, or is the Times mostly neutral in its political coverage? If you have never read the newspaper, please say so.

- Liberal Bias
- Conservative Bias
- Mostly Neutral
- Never Read/No Opinion

Instructions and Articles

The following articles were taken from the Seattle Times. The first article was printed in January of this year and the second article was printed in June, 2008. Please read the articles as you would normally read an article in a newspaper.

Recently, Democrat Governor Christine Gregoire attacked the Seattle Times for printing the story below. Gregoire's staff issued a press release that said "It is no surprise that the Seattle Times would attack Governor Gregoire in this way, given the consistent and blatant conservative bias they have displayed over the years. Their reporting is about as fair and balanced as FOX News."

The Seattle Times

January 4, 2009

Grading the governor on the ECONOMY | The recession hit Washington hard, as the state lost jobs for two years running, per capita income decreased and unemployment doubled.

'A strong economy,' Christine Gregoire, a Democrat, told a crowd of 3,000 gathered on a cold, breezy day for her January 2005 inauguration, 'means that moms and dads can do an even better job of feeding, clothing and sheltering their children.' And the weak economy, which soon followed, made that harder.

No governor can be expected to fend off a national recession, but Washington's economy in some ways has suffered more than the nation's. One measure of how families are faring is per capita income. By this standard, which divides total income by population, citizens of Washington thrived though 2004. But from 2006 to 2008, Washington was last in the nation in per capita income growth, dropping half a percentage point, the federal Commerce Department found.

Washington lost jobs in 2007 and again in 2008, an estimated 76,000 all told, a historic two-year first, according to a University of Washington economic report. The annual unemployment rate more than doubled from an extraordinarily low 2.8 percent when Gregoire took office to 5.7 percent the past two years. National rates, while higher, increased at about half that pace.

Washington is in its worst fiscal crisis since the Depression, according to a legislative study released in September. The state has had to chop many programs that Gregoire said 'were worthy and deserving in their own right.' 'I wish we hadn't cut mental health,' she said. 'I wish we hadn't cut transportation. I wish we hadn't cut higher education.'

But Gregoire said she has to heed those who pay the taxes as well as those who receive the services. 'While there are needs out there, there is also a class of person out there called the taxpayer,' she said. 'Their needs for their families are as important in many cases as government needs for their money.'

Gregoire labels the state's financial situation 'a challenge, not a crisis.' Many Democrats, Republicans and economists say she's understating it.

Recently, Democrat Governor Christine Gregoire attacked the Seattle Times for printing this article. Gregoire's staff issued a press release that said "It is no surprise that the Seattle Times would attack Governor Gregoire in this way, given the consistent and blatant conservative bias they have displayed over the years. Their reporting is about as fair and balanced as FOX News."

The Seattle Times

June 21, 2008

McClellan: Bush is to blame; Congressional hearing - Former press secretary says White House "packaged" its version of the truth

WASHINGTON If the nation doesn't trust the Bush White House, it's the president's and Dick Cheney's own fault, Bush's former spokesman told Congress on Friday.

From life-and-death matters on down the rationale for war, the leaking of classified information, Cheney's accidental shooting of a friend the government's top two leaders undermined their credibility by "packaging" their version of the truth, former press secretary Scott McClellan said. He described the loss of trust as self-inflicted, telling the House Judiciary Committee that Bush and his administration failed to open up about White House mistakes.

The focus of the panel's hearing was the leak of CIA operative Valerie Plame's identity, and McClellan said that was a good example of the administration's damaging itself by backtracking on a pledge to be upfront. "This White House promised or assured the American people that at some point when this was behind us they would talk publicly about it. And they have refused to," McClellan said. "And that's why I think more than any other reason we are here today and the suspicion still remains."

The White House dismissed Friday's hearing as un-enlightening and McClellan, the president's former top spokesman, as uninformed.

Republicans on the committee accused him of writing about sensitive matters to make money, a reference to his recent book, "What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception."

McClellan, considered an ultimate Bush loyalist until the book came out, worked for Bush when the president was Texas governor, jumped to his presidential campaign and then followed him to Washington when he won.

On Friday, McClellan returned repeatedly to his theme that Bush, Cheney and others in the administration had done great damage to themselves and by extension to aides like McClellan by being less than truthful on a range of official matters.

McClellan made clear in the book and in person that he felt especially burned by the Plame matter. He said former White House chief of staff Andy Card told him the president and vice president wanted him to publicly say Cheney's top aide, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was not involved in the leak.

"I was reluctant to do it," McClellan said Friday. "I got on the phone with Scooter Libby and asked him point-blank, 'Were you involved in this in any way?' And he assured me in unequivocal terms that he was not." Both Libby and former presidential adviser Karl Rove had discussed Plame's identity with reporters. Rove said McClellan "sounds like a left-wing blogger." Former White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, who preceded McClellan in the job, told National Public Radio "I'm heartbroken about this ... If Scott thought it was propaganda, then Scott should not have accepted the job as White House press secretary.

Debriefing

[The following was read to all participants after the experiment was completed.]

The articles you read for this experiment were modified from their original versions in order to set up experimental conditions. In fact, the article about Governor Gregoire was written in 2004 about Governor Bill Owens of Colorado and came from the Denver Post and not the Seattle Times. The content of the articles in no way represent the past or present economic conditions in the state of Washington. The second article was printed in the Seattle Times, but I made some minor additions to the article in order to make it more critical of Scott McClellan. In addition, Governor Gregoire's comments about the Seattle Times were entirely fictional and did not reflect her

actual attitudes toward that newspaper. Please disregard what you read for this experiment. Thank you for participating.