

Technical Report for
**Understanding Election Administration News Coverage and
its Effects on Political Attitudes**

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Abstract:

Scholars and practitioners have little knowledge of how the news media covers election administration. To study public attitudes about election administration without understanding the information environment is akin to testing medical treatments without understanding anatomy. Our first contribution is describing the election administration information environment using large-scale datasets on local and national news coverage of election administration. The second contribution is demonstrating that journalist's choices about framing and content in news media coverage of election administration influences attitudes about elections and democracy in a series of survey experiments.

Grant Amount:

\$80,982

Accomplishments

This section should list the major goals of the project. Describe what was done, including all important activities or phases of the project, and the major findings. Use this section to describe how you have disseminated your results. Include any outreach activities you've undertaken to directly reach an audience or community.

In the days immediately before an election, most news coverage focuses on voting and election administration. This coverage surpasses polling and campaign coverage, and yet, scholars and practitioners have little knowledge of how the news media covers election administration procedures (e.g., how votes are counted, location of polling places, etc.) or how this coverage influences public opinion. As the news is the primary way Americans learn of politics, this paucity of research makes it difficult to describe the information environment for election administration. Understanding the supply of election administration information via news media is essential for election officials, journalists, and scholars.

Importantly, understanding the supply of information is also the first step in discerning how election administration news coverage affects public attitudes about elections. The few studies prior to this project suggest important relationships between news coverage and attitudes about election administration (e.g., Fogarty et al. 2015; Fogarty, Kimball, and Kosnik 2020; Udani, Kimball, and Fogarty 2018), but these studies only examined narrow aspects of news coverage and relevant attitudes (e.g., belief in election fraud).

We focus on news coverage because it remains the largest supplier of election administration information. While social media disseminates information (and misinformation), social media content often sources news coverage, and the audience for news via traditional mediums remains significantly larger than the audience for news on social media. Thus, we focused on traditional news mediums, specifically, local and national newspaper coverage, as well as national television news coverage. The bulk of our data collection efforts will be assigned to newspapers because print news drives the news agenda and because market incentives mean they often have the wherewithal to deliver more quantity and quality coverage (Hamilton 2011, Dunaway 2008). We looked at national television news coverage because it has a large impact on attitudes, and because of the visual medium, we looked at the divergence on how some aspects of election administration are covered (Searles, Maki, and Mann 2022).

Research into other election and political news coverage suggests coverage of election administration may have considerable effects, but also suggests these effects will vary conditional on a number of coverage characteristics (e.g., positive/negative coverage, procedures, polling place). For election officials, journalists, and others to take steps to make the impact of coverage positive (or at least less negative), we need to move beyond 'anec-data' about especially dramatic stories to rigorous data on patterns of news coverage of election administration.

Our research addressed two types of research questions. In the first phase of our research, we seek to answer questions about identifying what types of information are included in news media coverage of election administration. We use content analysis of news media coverage of election administration to answer these questions. In the second phase of our research, we use survey experiments to answer questions about the impact of journalists' choices about content and framing when covering election administration on public opinion about election administration.

The first goal of this research project was to describe the contours of the American election administration information environment. The first phase of the research provided data to answer broad

question of how news organizations cover election administration: How often is election administration covered? What aspects of election administration are covered and how frequently (e.g., voter registration, mail balloting, early in-person voting, polling places, vote counting, etc.)? How are news stories framed?

A thrust of our effort has been focused on two papers focused on news coverage of voting and voting processes. This category of coverage, or what we call *voting process coverage* (VPC), is defined as coverage that discusses the logistics of voting, and election administration. VPC is important both because it has heretofore been ignored by scholars in political communication who tend to focus on campaign coverage in the lead up to elections, and for its normatively desirable properties. In the first paper, “More than a game: US Election Day Coverage of Voting Processes,” which is under revise and resubmit at *Political Communication*, we find that VPC is a common type of coverage in the days immediately before an election, and that it dominates coverage on Election Day. Importantly, in this paper we also develop and refine an organically validated voting process coverage dictionary which we can use in subsequent projects.

The extension of this paper, “How the News Covers Elections,” was presented at ESRA in Athens, GA in May and was presented again at APSA in Los Angeles in late August. In this iteration, we increase the range of analysis to 3-months prior to Election Day. We apply both our VPC dictionary and a previously validated game frame dictionary to this data and estimate a structural topic model, which allows us to see how patterns in election news topics emerge over-time, across elections, and between outlets. We find that outlets vary widely in the election topic they cover, noting that Fox News is particularly invested in covering issues regarding election administration (specifically, potential fraud). We also find that the sort of election news topics that emerge in presidential and midterm elections differ, with voting processes dominating coverage in 2020 and game frame coverage dominating in 2022. Ultimately, we find compelling evidence that voting process coverage represents a significant portion of election news coverage, but how and when it is deployed varies depending on context.

A third, more recently developed paper focuses on the ways election news covers voters of color. Our team is collaborating with Dr. Bridgett King to better understand the ways news media speak about voters of color, and the extent to which this coverage can effectively mitigate the sort of election misinformation that is rampant in communities of color, in hopes that we can produce a set of best practices for improved coverage.

Several other student-led papers are also in progress, including one paper that does a close analysis of partisan news coverage of elections, and another paper that attempts to parse the effects of news coverage of election administration on various demographic groups.

Primary Findings

- “More than a game: US Election Day Coverage of Voting Processes”
 - Voting process coverage is a common type of coverage in the days immediately before an election, and that it dominates coverage on Election Day
- “How the News Covers Elections”
 - Outlets vary widely in the election topic they cover
 - Fox News is particularly invested in covering issues regarding election administration (specifically, potential fraud).
 - The sort of election news topics that emerge in presidential and midterm elections differ, with voting processes dominating coverage in 2020 and game frame coverage dominating in 2022

Voting process coverage represents a significant portion of election news coverage, but

how and when it is deployed varies depending on context. Beyond the analyses completed so far on these foundational questions about news coverage, the datasets appear likely to produce valuable insights for practitioners and scholars on a number of questions. While we do not have full results, student research assistants have conducted preliminary analyses for multiple questions using this data that appear to offer promising insights (subject to verification by additional careful analysis). These questions include:

- How much are different voices covered in stories about election administration (e.g., election officials, candidates, activists, etc.)?
- How much coverage provides useful information about the voting process (e.g., instructions, locations and hours)?
- How much coverage is ‘fact-checking’ of misinformation about election administration?
- Does the level of electoral competitiveness influence frequency, content, and framing of election administration coverage?
- How does this coverage change over the course of the campaign period?
- How does the ideological leaning of the news outlet influence coverage?
- How does the ideological leaning of the media market influence coverage?
- How does ownership of local news outlets influence coverage (e.g., corporate vs. privately owned)?
- How much election administration coverage in local newspapers is about the voting process in other states?

The second goal of this research was to understand how news media coverage of election administration influences perceptions and attitudes about elections, including whether and how some coverage damages perceptions and attitudes and whether alternative messages and/or frames can mitigate damage. In the second phase of our research, we used survey experiments to answer questions about the impact of journalists’ choices in stories about election administration on public opinion.

The topics for the experiments were selected because they frequently appeared in election administration coverage with different approaches to coverage on clear theoretical dimensions. The experiments were designed to provide theoretical insights for scholars and actionable practical insights for journalists making decisions about how (or whether) to cover the topic.

The experiment on coverage of polling place lines built on experiments conducted around the 2020 general election and 2021 Georgia run-off election. Our first goal was to confirm the results in a different context, in particular without Covid concerns potentially influencing attitudes about proximity to large groups of people while standing in line. Our second goal was to deepen our understanding with a revised survey instrument drawing on lessons from the earlier experiments.

With the ‘Big Lie’ looming over election administration, we sought to understand how coverage of election results reporting influences confidence in the results and attitudes about election administration. The experiment examines how choices in reporting election results over time, through the pattern of a ‘red surge’ followed by a ‘blue wave’, alter perceptions of election administration and the election result. The treatments vary whether the coverage reported vote share vs. number of votes and vary reporting the vote margin vs. the total number of votes.

With increasing attention on election administration and dwindling resources for journalism, there are a number of well-intentioned and well-informed efforts to offer guidance to journalists about how to cover election administration. We focused on the recommendations of one of these efforts, Election Coverage and Democracy Network. While these recommendations are made by smart researchers

who are well-grounded in theory, they are largely extrapolated from other areas to election administration. Moreover, journalists must implement the principles in these recommendations in their stories. Our goal was to examine a good faith implementation of different principles in the ECAD recommendations about election coverage.

We conducted two experiments about news coverage of litigation on election administration controversies. In the proposal for this project, we had (pessimistically) anticipated that our experiments after the 2022 election would focus on the major controversies in the 2022 election. Fortunately, there were few if any major controversies. However, the news still paid considerable attention to courtroom dramas about election administration before and after Election Day and there continues to be attention to legal cases related to misinformation about the 2020 election. The adversarial nature of litigation makes for compelling news that is relatively easy to cover, so election administration litigation is likely to continue to attract news coverage. While the frequency of litigation is well-established in election science, we are not aware of any research on how the coverage of these cases impacts public perception of election administration. Therefore, we designed two large experiments to examine multiple dimensions of news coverage that are relevant to election administration and the judiciary.

Products

List all products resulting from the project. These may include datasets, software, and other research or supplementary materials. Please include any publications, conference papers, and presentations, including planned or forthcoming publications in this list. Attach all publications, including conference papers, which will be posted on the Learning from Elections website. (Requests for embargoes will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Links to publications are acceptable.)

Pre-election blog post for journalists

Searles, Kathleen and Christopher Mann, 2022. "Election coverage that shows generic "long line" images may discourage voting, new research finds." Nieman Lab newsletter, November 7, 2022.

Academic Papers

Searles, Kathleen, Jessica Maki, and Christopher Mann, 2023. "More than a game: U.S. Election Day Coverage of Voting Processes", revise and resubmit at *Political Communication* (please embargo or anonymize on website until completion of review).

Maki, Jessica, Kathleen Searles, and Christopher Mann, 2023. "How Does the News Cover Elections?".

Presented at the Political Communication Pre-Conference for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 2023.

- o An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Election Science Reform and Administration conference at the University of Georgia, May 2023.

Mann, Christopher, Kathleen Searles and Jessica Maki, 2022. "Media Coverage of Polling Place Lines: Survey Experiments about Impact on Public Perceptions, Voter Turnout and Confidence in Elections". In progress. An earlier version on 2020 & 2021 experiment was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

Coverage of election administration and voters of color – in progress

Coverage recommendations from Election Coverage and Democracy Network – paper planned

Coverage of judicial decisions about election administration and election results - paper planned

Datasets

- Observational
 - Voter process coverage – national TV news for election period
 - Voter process coverage – local newspapers for election period
- Content analysis dictionaries
 - Voter process coverage
 - International election coverage dictionary
 - Congressional voting coverage dictionary
 - Voters of Color coverage dictionary
 - Game frame coverage dictionary produced by Hitt and Searles 2018 validated on election news
- Experiments
 - Polling place lines coverage
 - Coverage of election result reporting
 - Election Coverage and Democracy Network recommendations
 - Coverage of judicial decisions about election administration and election results

Participants

Use this section to detail who has been involved in your project, beyond the named authors on the project. Have other organizations been involved as partners? Are there other individuals who have served as collaborators or contacts?

Jess Maki - Ph.D. student at University of Wisconsin, Madison. Lead research assistant in collection and coding of national TV news coverage. Co-author of two papers and lead author of one paper using observational data.

Caley Hewitt - Ph.D. student at Louisiana State University. Research assistant in collection and coding of national TV news coverage. Lead author of two papers using observational data (in progress, not attached).

Sean Whyard - Ph.D. student at Louisiana State University. Research assistant in collection and coding of national TV news coverage. Co-author of one paper using observational data (in progress, not attached).

Sydney Clough - Ph.D. student at Louisiana State University. Research assistant in collection and coding of national TV news coverage. Co-author of one paper using observational data (in progress, not attached).

Li Zhang – Data Librarian at Skidmore College. Technical assistance with scraping content from local newspaper websites.

Skidmore undergraduate research assistants – 16 undergraduate students at Skidmore College assisted with the web scraping of local newspapers.

Impact

Use this section to summarize how the project has contributed to the field of election science and election administration. Describe the ways in which the work, findings, and specific products of your project have or will have an impact. This may include a description of how your findings, results, techniques that were developed or extended, or other products from the project have made (or are likely to make) an impact on the base of knowledge, theory research, and/or pedagogical methods in the field of election science.

The project's broadest contribution is connecting election science research and political communication research. Heightened public and news media attention to election administration in recent years increases the importance of understanding how information about election administration is conveyed to and understood by the public. While the field of election science has long theorized about how the voting experience shapes public attitudes about election administration and democracy, this project makes significant strides in accounting for how information delivered via the news similarly shapes public attitudes about election administration and democracy.

The project's contributions can be organized into three broad categories. First, theoretical and methodological contributions to understanding how the news media delivers information about election administration to the public. Second, a series of experiments grounded in actual news coverage and theory about news influence on public opinion that increases understanding of how public perception of election administration is shaped. Third, bringing new, diverse young scholars into the study of election administration.

Understanding Voting Process Coverage

The first set of contributions comes from the first phase of the project collecting and coding TV and newspaper coverage of election administration.

First, we establish how extensive news coverage of election administration is in TV and newspaper coverage. Working from a theoretical definition of "voting process coverage" (VPC), we had developed and validate a dictionary that identifies the occurrence of VPC in all news coverage during the election period. Surprisingly to many political communication scholars, the frequency of VPC matches game frame coverage of candidates in elections since 2016. In the political communication field, game frame (a.k.a. horse-race coverage) is generally thought to be the most pervasive way in which the news media coverage elections and has large impacts on public opinion and behavior. Identifying VPC as a major element of election coverage has important implications for political communication research. More relevant to the motivations for this project, VPC rivalling the scope of game frame coverage clearly indicates that election science should pay more attention to news coverage: coverage this extensive is very likely to have large impacts on public opinion and behavior. So far, these contributions are found in our manuscript focused on the empirical and methodological contributions (under revise and resubmit at *Political Communication*) and a newer paper furthering the theoretical contribution (presented at the 2023 ESRA conference and Political Communication pre-conference at APSA).

To make the contributions to theory above, this aspect of the project makes several methodological contributions. The largest methodological contribution is the development and validation of data dictionaries to facilitate the collection and coding of news coverage related to election administration.

The central voting process coverage dictionary has been deployed to collect and code coverage from national TV, local TV, national newspapers, and local newspapers. These news corpora are quite different, and thus necessitated developing procedures for reliably identifying election administration related news, including identifying the scope of coverage within TV news transcripts, sorting election administration from linguistically adjacent but substantively different topics prevalent in local newspapers (e.g., voting for sports all-star teams or restaurant of the year), and development of supplemental dictionaries to examine specific aspects of election administration coverage.

When we began this project, we were unable to find any data on news coverage of election administration, except for narrowly focused research on coverage of claims about election fraud. Future research can draw on multiple datasets from this project: national television news coverage over multiple elections, national newspaper coverage, and local news coverage across states with diverse electoral contexts. These datasets can be used to address a wide array of theoretical and empirical questions related to the intersection of election science and election administration. As outlined in the third section, the new, diverse set of graduate students who worked on the project are working on independent (but supervised) research projects using this data exploring areas in addition to the papers by the project PIs.

The figures and tables below provide descriptive statistics about the scope of the datasets created. Figure 1 shows the number of television manuscripts included in the analysis in 2016, 2018, and 2020, a total of 1,778 transcripts containing includes 3,547,683 analyzed words and 97,593 voting process dictionary terms. Figure 2 breaks down the local TV news stories across the 48 local TV stations. (Figures from an updated analysis during peer review of the Searles, Maki and Mann 2022 manuscript.)

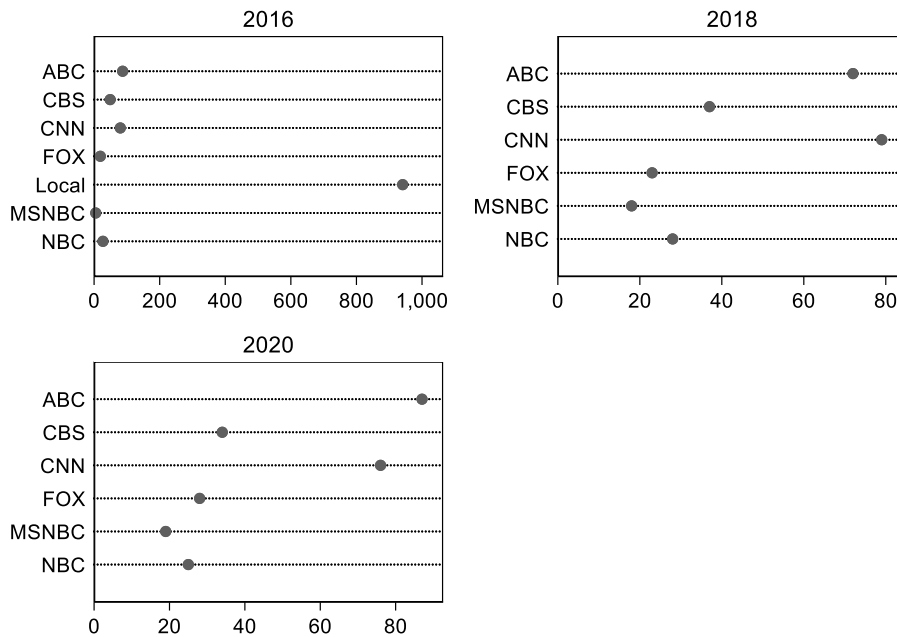


Figure 1: Transcripts included in the analysis by Year

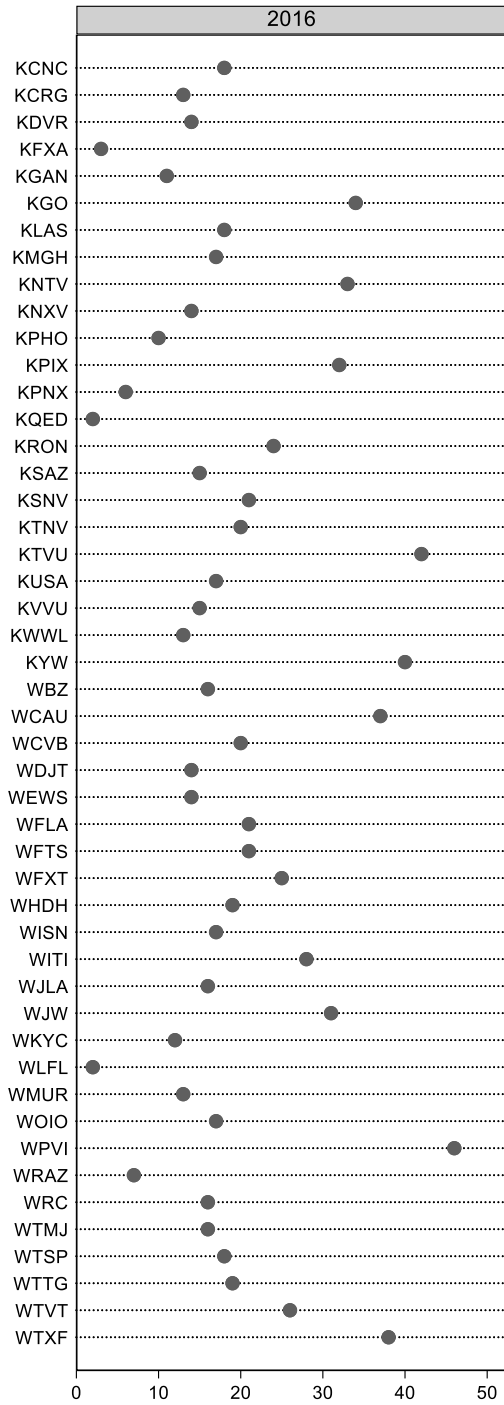


Figure 2: Local transcripts included in the analysis by Station in 2016

Our 2022 expansion of data collection for VPC coverage on the TV networks from September through election day identified 6112 manuscripts containing VPC coverage.

Our 2022 addition of examining local and national newspapers from September through election day identified 4,016 stories with VPC terms from the five newspapers with national or regional

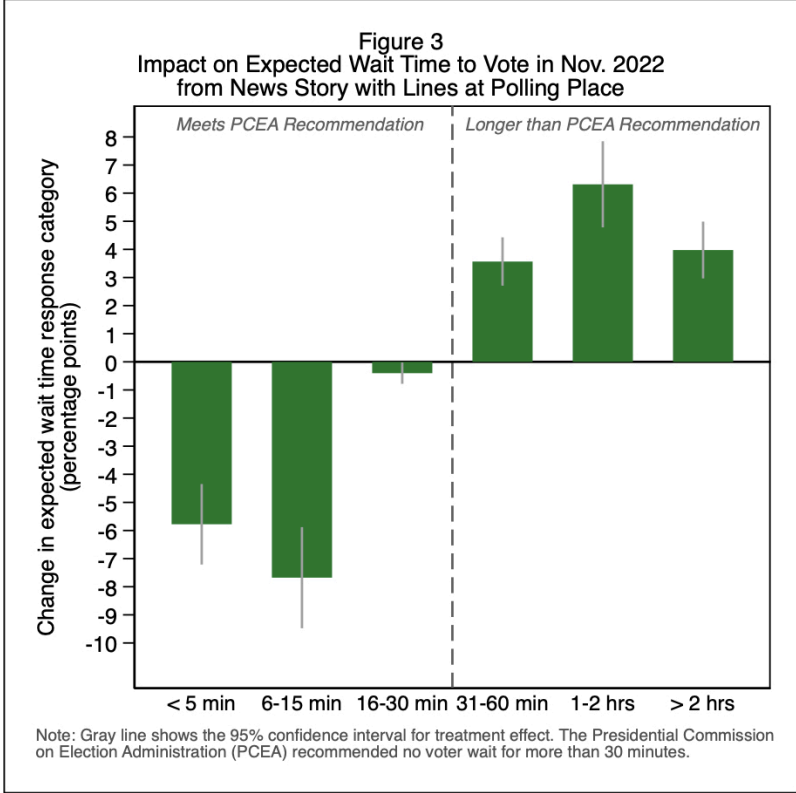
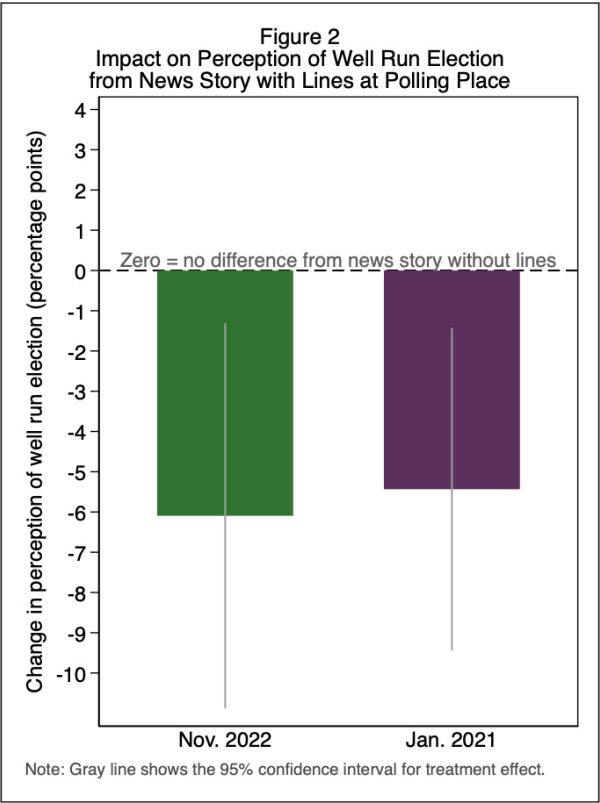
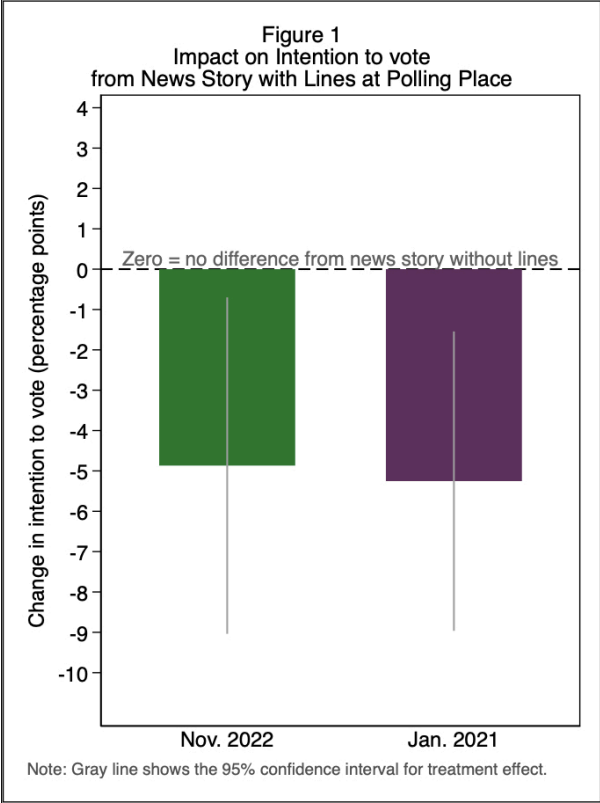
circulation and 13,024 stories containing VPC terms from 32 local newspapers across 17 states.

Measuring Impact of News Coverage on Attitudes about Election Administration

The second set of contributions come from the series of survey experiments about the impact of news coverage of election administration on public attitudes. Each of the experiments contributes to distinct theoretical questions.

Beyond theoretical implications for the study of election science, the topics selected for the experiments are covered frequently in the news media, the treatments were grounded in actual coverage practices, and designed to offer practical guidance about the implications of journalists' choices about how to cover the given topic. Although we are still working on dissemination of results of several of the experiments, we are encouraged by the interest from journalists in our Nieman Lab blog post outlining the implications of covering polling place lines on the eve of the 2022 election. We hope that the results of the other experiments, when the results are statistically robust and substantive meaningful, will find similar receptivity.

- Coverage of polling place lines: This experiment was an extension and replication of our initial experiments on polling place lines in the 2020 and 2021 elections. The results in the 2022 experiment were consistent with the earlier experiment, and the additional replication allowed us to deepen our understanding the impact of this coverage. The choice to show lines – despite lines being rare - has significant impacts on confidence in election administration and intention to participate in future elections. As noted above, we shared the results of these experiments with journalists via the lead story in the Nieman Lab newsletter on the eve of the election. The Nieman Lab newsletter is widely read by journalists as a trusted source about journalism research. Our description of the research generated significant attention among journalists on social media. The figures below were used in the Nieman Lab newsletter to illustrate the impact of news coverage about lines compared to otherwise identical coverage without lines. Figure 1 shows a large and statistically significant decline in intention to vote in the next election. Figure 2 shows a large and statistically significant decline in perception the election was well run. Figure 3 shows a large and statistically significant shift towards expecting long wait times to cast a ballot in the next election.



- Election Coverage and Democracy Network recommendations: The Election Coverage and Democracy Network is an effort to draw on social science to provide advice to journalists. In

particular, ECAD (and others) advocates for personalizing election administration coverage by talking about the people who administer elections. However, these types of efforts to advise journalists on how to frame coverage of election administration – including ECAD – largely extrapolate from theoretical principles from other arenas in developing their recommendations. Then journalists have to implement these principles in their coverage. This experiment shows the potential and limitations of these types of recommendations, at least as we implemented them, and provides direct empirical evidence about the value of personalizing coverage of election administration processes.

- Coverage of judicial decisions about election administration and election results: Litigation is now a routine occurrence in election administration and courtroom drama makes for compelling news stories. While election science researchers have examined the trends in litigation and the impacts on how elections are administered, we are not aware of any other investigations of how these cases shape perceptions of election administration and the courts. These experiments begin to fill this considerable gap in election science research. In the absence of prior research, we designed multi-dimensional experiments to examine a number of questions. Consequently, we are still sorting through all of the implications at the deadline for this technical report. Among the insights from these two experiments, we connect the well-known partisan ‘winners effect’ on confidence from election outcomes to a partisan ‘winners effect’ in the courtroom and connect the ‘blue wave’ shift in election reporting to the potential for court cases to shift initial expectations about electoral victories. We also assess how framing judges as partisan actors alters perceptions of election administration. In addition to contributions to election science and political communication, we also included measure about the impact on attitudes about the judicial branch. While the shifts in attitudes about the judiciary are influenced by many other issues, understanding the impact of involvement in election administration controversies has implications for the judiciary beyond election science.
- Coverage of election result reporting: Unfortunately, these experiments produced no clear evidence. The first iteration produced suggestive but not statistically significant results, and we had concerns about the balance in the random assignment by the Qualtrics survey platform. However, the second iteration with revised treatments and survey instrument produced similarly inconclusive results. The most we can say is that different journalistic frames for

reporting election results seem to impact perceptions of fairness and confidence in the results but further work is need either to identify relevant differences in coverage and/or create treatments that operationalize these differences in a survey experiment.

Like the voting process coverage datasets, the datasets from these experiments offer the potential for future research to explore additional hypotheses. By the nature of experiments, this opportunity is more limited, but one of the graduate students involved in the project has already begun additional analysis using the lines experiment data to test additional hypotheses about partisan differences in response to election administration news coverage.

New, Diverse Young Scholars

This project also brought new, diverse young scholars into studying election administration, and therefore the potential for more research with fresh perspectives and ideas.

University of Wisconsin Ph.D. student Jess Maki is a full collaborator with the PIs on several papers, building on her involvement as a research assistant at LSU in the initial phase of this project in 2018. We hope and expect that she will continue to make significant contributions to the theoretical, empirical, and practical understanding of news coverage of election administration and how it impacts the public using the data from this project and her own future projects.

Several Ph.D. students on the LSU research team are newer to this topic but are using both the observational and experimental datasets from the project to explore additional hypotheses about news coverage of the voting process in independent (but supervised) research projects. We hope that these projects will mark the beginning of long-term engagement in research about the intersection of election administration and news coverage for these young scholars. Additionally, these working papers may provide new theoretical insights about how the public receives and perceives information about election administration.

Changes and/or Problems

If you encountered unanticipated obstacles in conducting your project, or changed your approach during the research, please detail those here.

- For the LSU team, managing the television news dataset in a methodical way was time consuming. Namely, the development of the various dictionaries, particularly the exclusion dictionaries, was a slow iterative process that yielded robust results, but took more of the grant period than anticipated.
- For the local newspapers, the original plan of searching stories using the [MediaCloud](#) platform failed to provide coverage of multiple large circulation newspapers so we added a second search approach using Google News searches. We decided the benefits of expanded coverage exceeded the risks of different search processes, based on similarity of search results across the two approaches for a sample of newspapers available for both methods.
- For the local newspapers, scraping content of newspapers behind robust paywalls presented technical barriers that the Skidmore team was not able to resolve. The original set of target papers was the two largest circulation newspapers in each state with separate corporate ownership (i.e., no shared coverage). We changed to skip papers with paywalls or other technical barriers to scraping so we aimed to have the largest circulation papers that could

be scraped but were still unable to scrape two major newspapers in all of the intended states.

- Therefore, the data on local newspaper coverage of election administration covers, 25 local newspapers in 15 states rather than the originally proposed 36 newspapers in 18 states.
- Local newspaper content includes a much broader range of news than the TV news coverage from which the voting process coverage data dictionary was developed. Therefore, we had to develop additional exclusion dictionaries to remove clearly irrelevant news stories (e.g., voting for sports all-star teams, voting for best restaurant in the community, etc.)
- Increased fees for the Lucid survey platform used to recruit participants in the survey experiments required adjusting the number and size of survey experiments. To make optimal use of the survey budget, we fielded three rounds of surveys with larger N that each included multiple experiments using more treatment conditions rather than the original proposal for 6 smaller surveys with fewer experiments using fewer treatment conditions.
- The proposed examination of the relationship between public opinion and news coverage proved to be more challenging than anticipated. The anticipated partnership with the Franklin & Marshall Poll did not produce the hoped-for time series data due to the constraints on the space the F&M Poll was able to dedicate to election administration questions. For the proposed comparison of local news coverage to national surveys, we failed to appreciate the obstacle that national surveys do not provide representative samples of individual states (nor smaller media markets). The exception is the Survey on the Performance of American Elections but the state level samples are too small to provide sufficient statistical power to detect relationship between attitudes about elections and news coverage.