

NOT ALL NEWS IS THE SAME PROTESTS, PRESIDENTS, AND THE MASS PUBLIC AGENDA

CORWIN D. SMIDT*

Abstract Few studies examine whether the public agenda responds to different types of issue coverage in the same way. After outlining why such differences are likely, this study takes advantage of daily polling data and a rare sequence of news cycles surrounding the issue of gun control to compare how coverage of different political actors and events drives an issue's placement on the public agenda. Coverage generated by the citizen activist group, the Million Mom March, is estimated to have a greater influence on public opinion compared to coverage of a string of school shootings or, finally, President Clinton's campaign. Tests show that group or political biases do not drive these results but, along with evidence from the 2009 health care protests, coverage of citizen demonstrations consistently outperforms presidential news in its association with the mass public agenda. Although elected officials are granted greater access to news media coverage, the findings suggest that such access does not grant a corresponding influence on the public agenda. More generally, it demonstrates that news storyline content has measurable implications for news media agenda setting at the national level.

For almost 40 years, social science research has demonstrated the powerful role the news media play in setting the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Recognizing the media's influence, political scientists have examined how politicians and political groups use news media coverage to promote their favored agendas (Kernell 1997; Cook 1998; Kollman

CORWIN D. SMIDT is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA. Many thanks go to Ryan Black, Jeff Conroy-Krutz, Matt Grossman, William Jacoby, Eric Juenke, Dan Lee, Evan Parker-Stephen, Sarah Reckhow, Josh Sapotichne, and Ani Sarkissian; to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions; and to Kurt Pyle for his coding assistance. Data used in this study were collected by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania and the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Additional data and code needed for replication purposes are available from the author upon request. *Address correspondence to Corwin D. Smidt, Department of Political Science, Michigan State University, 303 S. Kedzie Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824 USA; e-mail: smidtc@msu.edu.

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1998; Cohen 2008; Sellers 2010). Other scholars have focused on the media's tendency to ignore social movements and public protests (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996) and question whether the institution predominately serves political elites and limits the ability of others to shape the public agenda (Entman 1989; Thrall 2006; Bennett 2007).

A concern within both of these literatures relates to our understanding of agenda setting more broadly. Do all types of media coverage have the same influence on the public agenda? The media give more attention to powerful political figures, but it is unclear whether this bias translates into such actors having an equivalent influence. Scholars have found that different types of media coverage have different consequences for public opinion (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987) but have yet to estimate the effects that politician-driven news has on mass public priorities and compare this relationship with other types of issue coverage. However, recent insights into the mechanisms driving agenda setting suggest that such conditional effects are likely (Miller 2007; Miller and Krosnick 2000).

The following analysis addresses these questions by comparing the effects of presidential news with other types of news coverage within the same issue and context. I take advantage primarily of a rare sequence of news cycles during the first half of 2000 concerning the same issue of gun control and gun violence but with three different storylines: President Clinton's campaign against Republicans and the gun industry for new gun legislation; event-driven storylines of dramatic incidents of gun violence, particularly involving youth; and coverage of a citizen advocacy group, the Million Mom March, and its campaign for gun control. At the same time, the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) (Romer et al. 2004) was in the field providing daily measures of the nation's most important problem. By observing public reactions to different types of news coverage of a single issue and over a short period of time, this analysis offers a rare opportunity to compare the relative influence of each type of coverage on the public's agenda.

Does Greater Coverage Mean Greater Influence?

Government officials and political elites are a common focus of news coverage, for numerous reasons. News organizations permanently station reporters to cover their actions, and officials accommodate reporters' needs through scheduled press releases and news conferences. News organizations also rely on covering officials since they are authorities and they are relatively familiar to news audiences. Indeed, in summarizing these factors, Cook (1998, p. 92) concludes that a focus on official action is "the first central bias of the American news media."

In contrast, the issues and policies of unofficial activists and grassroots social movements rarely get coverage equal to those championed by elected or appointed government officials (Ryan 1991; Entman and Rojecki 1993; McCarthy et al. 1996). For instance, attempts by communities to generate greater awareness of AIDS and combat its growth were severely hampered by the unwillingness

of both the news media and elected officials to give it proper attention (Rogers, Dearing, and Chang 1991; Sparrow 1999). Unofficial groups and movements fall off the most prestigious newsbeats and have little access to journalists. Consequently, many scholars have suggested that journalists and editors too often focus on the voice of governing authorities, thereby minimizing the voices of those outside such positions of influence (e.g., Sigal 1973; Fishman 1980; Entman 1989; Sparrow 1999).

The news media's tendency to focus on governing elites also is a topic that is a fundamental interest in many areas of political science. Since political actors often face strategic incentives to change the political agenda (Riker 1990), news media coverage often is envisioned as a powerful mechanism for politicians to promote and persuade the public (Cook 1998; Cohen 2008; Sellers 2010). Like presidents, political actors who can influence media coverage are assumed to hold important advantages in these battles, and scholars often have investigated whether politicians and political groups use media coverage as a means of changing the agenda to their advantage (Kollman 1998; Edwards and Wood 1999; Cohen 2008).

Is All News the Same?

Despite these interests, research has yet to evaluate whether media coverage of governing authorities translates into an influence on the public agenda. In fact, researchers have found the opposite at times, with media coverage of prominent actors showing no connection to the public agenda. For instance, Edwards (2003) makes a strong case that presidents are essentially ineffective in establishing their favored issues as public priorities, a conclusion that is puzzling considering the news media's considerable mass influence and the frequency with which the media cover presidents.

A possible explanation for this puzzle is that the news media's agenda-setting influence may not be consistent for all types of news coverage. But this consideration has rarely been examined in agenda-setting research, despite its possibility and its broad implications. Previous research has found that different sources of news coverage will have different types of effects on public opinion (Page et al. 1987). Likewise, research on the psychological mechanisms of agenda setting allows for the possibility that not all types of news coverage have a similar agenda-setting influence. Some scholars have proposed that news media coverage increases an issue's salience through greater attitude accessibility (Price and Tewksbury 1997), but many others view agenda setting as a process of inference (Weaver et al. 1981; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Miller 2007). Individuals use the news media as an informed, accurate, and often independent source of information, capable of directing them to the important issues of the day (Miller and Krosnick 2000). Unlike accessibility, inference- or cue-based behavior does not operate in a consistent direction; people can modify their reactions to the news agenda based on the type and content of issue coverage they observe.

There are numerous factors that potentially modify responses to news media coverage that also relate to coverage of governing officials. For instance, personal levels of trust in the source of the media's coverage might modify one's reaction (Miller and Krosnick 2000): more credible sources might be more persuasive, as the public's low levels of trust in government and politicians might lessen its responsiveness to such news coverage. The credibility of political actors also may depend on the context of each story, where the news media can frame whether events are credible realizations of an issue's importance or whether actors are legitimately promoting an issue. When elites are unified or focus on foreign policy issues, news coverage is often more deferential (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007), thus establishing credibility to their agenda. In contrast, the issues of partisan dispute are often portrayed as outlets for political conflict instead of issues deserving governmental action. Coverage of citizen protests may provide stories and images that appear as credible realizations of an issue's importance to the news audience. Indeed, previous studies of coverage of social protests have found that public receptivity to protest coverage depends on whether or not stories paint such actors as civil and holding legitimate opinions in the face of the status quo (McLeod and Detenber 1999).

The media's constant focus on governing authorities also might modify the public's reaction to such coverage. Studies of cue-based behavior demonstrate that the value of information is conditional on the perceived biases of the source (e.g., Calvert 1985; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). There are prominent and noted tendencies or biases in news media exposure, be it the media's tendency to give frequent coverage of conflict and of government and official figures, or their preferences for reporting on dramatic events. It is possible that the public not only recognizes these biases in news reporting, but also reacts differently to the news agenda depending on whether content adheres to or differs from such biases. For example, the news media's tendency to frequently cover official action and partisan conflict in an episodic, politics-as-usual manner has the potential to trivialize the importance of whatever issue is involved in such conflict (Iyengar 1991; Bennett 2007); it becomes less clear if it is the behavior of elites or the issue itself that justifies the news media's attention.

There are other frames or attributes within news coverage that might shape the effectiveness of governing authorities in moving the public agenda. But currently we lack any evidence demonstrating that content-based modifiers have sufficient consequences for differences in agenda setting at the national level. Therefore, the goal of this study is to explore the extent and nature of public responses to news coverage depending on its content—in this instance, issue coverage of a president versus coverage of dramatic events or protest movements also concerning that issue.

An Informative Test Case: Concerns over Guns and Gun Control in 2000

For an accurate comparison of public responses to different types of issue coverage, it is essential that one observe a compact sequence of different types of

news storylines and have consistent measures of mass public opinion. Furthermore, to control for issue-specific confounds, it is beneficial for a test to examine media coverage within a single issue. However, we typically do not have enough national surveys over a short, comparable stretch of time when different types of issue coverage are present.

During the first half of the year 2000, a string of news storylines developed surrounding the central issue of gun violence and gun control. At that same time, the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (Romer et al. 2004) was in the field, providing consistent daily samples of the American public opinion and an invaluable opportunity to compare the response of mass public opinion to these different storylines over time. Moreover, with the tragic events at Columbine High School less than a year past, the issue already had experienced a triggering event establishing a strong, shared context from which the public would perceive new information.¹

Figure 1 outlines the total amount of time that network evening news devoted to guns and instances of gun violence for each week of the analysis. The multiple peaks in coverage show how often gun control and gun violence were a part of the news agenda. The first dominant storyline was coverage centered on Clinton's campaign to sue gun companies and to pass new gun-control measures. Approaching his final year in office, President Clinton tried to place gun-control measures high on the political agenda. The Clinton administration first made news of this in December 1999 by announcing that it was pursuing lawsuits against gun manufacturers for production rates that eased gun entry into the black market. The president then made news throughout January when he proposed a large expansion in gun crime enforcement funding, new laws requiring photo identification for gun purchases, and child safety locks for new handguns, all culminating with a major emphasis during his State of the Union address.

Clinton's efforts would return as future events developed. The first of these events was the dramatic shooting and death of one first-grade student at the hands of another at a school in Michigan on February 29, 2000. The next day, another dramatic shooting rampage occurred at a restaurant in Pennsylvania, killing three. Although the media had covered other violent shooting events following Columbine, the coverage of the Michigan event was particularly extensive and shocking because it involved two six-year-olds.

These shooting events are examples of a second prominent media storyline on guns and gun control, event-driven news stories reporting on dramatic instances of gun violence that often occurred within schools. The Michigan shooting also was notable for its clear relevance to Clinton's push for child safety locks on handguns. The White House took immediate action, inviting

1. See Lawrence and Birkland (2004) for an extensive analysis of the different elements of public deliberation on gun control following Columbine and leading up to this time period.

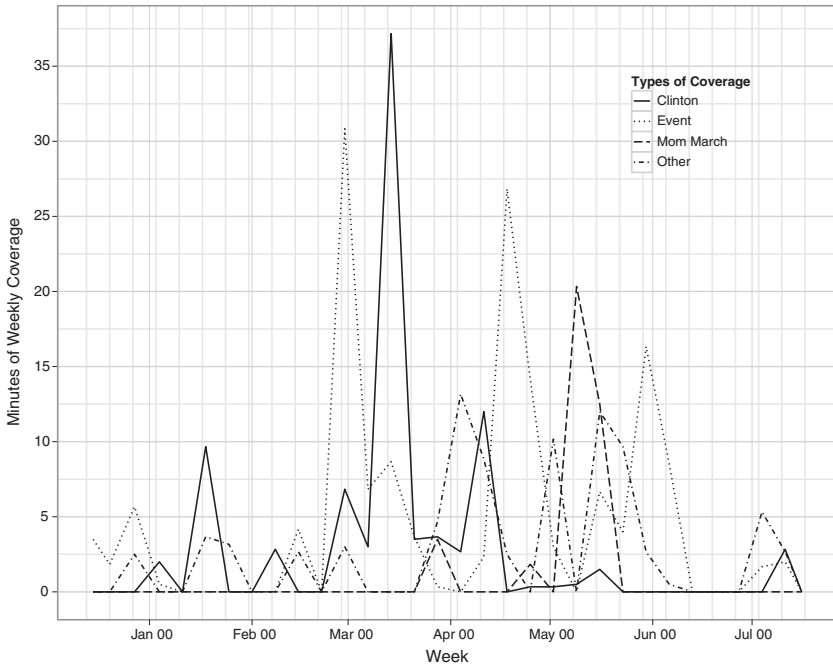


Figure 1. Evening News Focus on Gun Control and Gun Violence. Weekly dynamics in the amount of time ABC, CBS, and NBC devoted to gun control and instances of gun violence within their national evening news shows. Tabulated from broadcast transcripts and the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

the mother of the deceased child to Washington one week later and making renewed efforts to campaign for Clinton's proposals. In fact, evening news coverage of the issue was at its highest two weeks after the shooting, when President Clinton's rhetorical battle with the National Rifle Association (NRA) dominated national news coverage.

Although central to the issue of gun control, the media framed these events in contrasting ways. Stories of Clinton and his administration's actions were framed in terms of his personal battle with gun manufacturers, the NRA, and Republicans, and they represented coverage typical of a presidential administration's campaign against other competing political groups. In contrast, news coverage of events of gun violence focused on details of the shocking events and dramatic responses from many of the shooting victims. This pattern continued in the following weeks, as Clinton made additional public appeals when visiting Colorado one week before the first anniversary of Columbine. Coverage then shifted to a sequence of event-driven news when the first anniversary of the Columbine shooting and violent shootings at the National Zoo and in Arizona generated further media coverage

News coverage of the issue rose again in mid-May with the Million Mom March. In response to violent shootings a year before, and to advocate for more effective gun-control measures, New York publicist Donna Dees-Thomases began organizing a Million Mom March to occur on Mother's Day in Washington, D.C. The movement's media profile increased in the wake of further shooting incidents and the first anniversary of Columbine and was the headline story for all three network evening news shows the weekend of the event. Although the national news media covered another school shooting in Florida in May, their attention to the issue steadily declined when the 2000 campaign and a sharp rise in gas prices became the top stories. By the time the party conventions began, news coverage of gun violence or gun-control issues was only minimal, and was sporadic in nature thereafter.

The Million Mom March stories were unique in that they focused on the activities of a new grassroots political movement with unclear political ties. Therefore, this represents a rare instance of prominent news coverage of average citizens campaigning for a political issue. There also is a remarkable similarity of issue appeals within coverage of both the Million Mom March and President Clinton. Both Clinton and the Million Mom March claimed that gun violence was a problem and pushed for greater efforts to reduce gun access, especially within the hands of children and criminals. The primary difference between them was not a specific policy message, but the way in which the media covered such messages. Clinton's coverage was placed within the common frame of a president's political battle with his rivals, whereas coverage of the Million Mom March was framed within the context of everyday mothers actively demanding political action. Indeed, although coverage of Clinton's actions never questioned the legitimacy of his efforts or the debate, news coverage of the Million Mom March was perhaps atypical of other social protests in that reporters never questioned the authenticity or claims of the organization.²

In comparison, the shooting and Million Mom March coverage provide an important metric from which we can judge the influence of Clinton's coverage and each other. Both held strong connections to Clinton's arguments that greater gun control was needed. However, the event-driven stories mostly excluded political arguments or the presence of prominent political groups. In contrast, the Million Mom March was a political movement that advocated similar issue goals as Clinton, but its coverage focused on its actions, not the arguments and battles of Washington political figures.

2. Despite these differences, along the lines of Smith et al. (2001), coverage of the Million Mom March featured mostly an episodic frame. It documented the stories and beliefs of those women who attended the event but did not discuss the more general features of the issue.

Data and Methods

To evaluate each storyline's relative influence, I specify the public's aggregate rating of guns or gun control as the nation's most important problem as a function of each type of news coverage about gun violence and guns. Each day the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey was in the field, respondents were asked what they thought was the most important problem facing the country that day. Responses to this open-ended question were coded for direct references to guns, gun control, or gun violence. This measure then was summed each day to calculate the daily percentage of individuals who mentioned guns or gun control as their most important problem, post-stratified by the NAES weights.³ The days of analysis extend from December 14, 1999, the first day the survey was in the field, until mid-July of 2000, one week before the Republican Party's national convention, to eliminate the possible confounding influence of the presidential campaign.

Issue coverage of the national news is measured by the total number of minutes of evening news coverage concerning gun control or gun violence across the three broadcast networks for each type of storyline. Total minutes of evening news coverage was chosen as an indicator of the national news agenda because it is well measured; also, its duration, constrained to be less than 90 minutes each day, allows for a very accurate comparison of the amount and type of issue coverage across time. A collection of search terms for "guns," "gun violence," and "gun control" in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive and each network's broadcast transcripts identified relevant news stories.

Each story then was classified into four different categories of coverage, based on each segment's dominant focus or storyline, and the duration of these stories was coded from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive to measure the amount of time devoted to each storyline.⁴ *Clinton-based coverage* included those segments that focused on the president's gun policies, the action of his administration against gun companies, his rhetorical battle with the NRA, and his appearance at Columbine's first anniversary. *Event-driven coverage* included news segments reporting on events of gun violence, including coverage of the school shootings in Oklahoma, Michigan, and Florida, as well as coverage during the first anniversary of Columbine that reviewed the circumstances and repercussions of the event. *Million Mom March coverage* was coded into a third variable, and any remaining news coverage that did not

3. Complete details about the survey's response rates, question wordings, coding, and weighting procedures are discussed in Appendix A.

4. Different types of storylines often were aired each day, but each news segment usually emphasized one dominant storyline. For a few stories focusing on both Clinton's campaign and the release of the 911 call from the Michigan school shooting, the time measure was apportioned based on each storyline's relative focus. Further details about content coding procedures are provided in Appendix A.

accurately fit within any of these frames was placed within a fourth variable combining all *other types of coverage*.⁵

Method of Analysis

The NAES has relatively small daily samples and was not in the field some days, thereby creating large day-to-day sampling error variation and additional missing data considerations. I therefore estimate a state space or Kalman filter model, which can distinguish between systematic and sampling error movements, easily accommodate missing data, and estimate time-series regression models (Beck 1989; Green, Gerber, and De Boef 1999). The day's observed proportion of respondents mentioning guns or gun control as the most important problem ($\hat{\pi}_t$) is specified as an unbiased estimate of the day's latent or "true" proportion (π_t), where the survey's unweighted sample size approximates the sampling variance. One then specifies a functional form for the underlying transition model that allows for estimates of public opinion dynamics.

Because the percentage of respondents naming guns as an important problem is low, typical normal approximations of the binomial are inappropriate. Cargnoni, Müller, and West (1997) offer a means of applying Bayesian linear state space model techniques to compositional data of this type. First, I transform the day's proportion (π_t) into a continuous unbounded variable (η_t) using, in this case, the inverse of the logistic function. I then specify that variable as a function of a latent mean parameter plus a day-specific normally distributed random error, which approximates the day's sampling error:

$$\eta_t = \theta_t + v_t, \text{ where } v_t \sim N(0, \sigma_v^2)$$

The transition model for the day's underlying opinion (θ_t) is set as a linear function of a constant, the previous day's value, the effects of the previous day's different types of storylines, and a normally distributed daily error. Summing across the vector of the previous day's news-coverage variables (C_{t-1}), this can be expressed as

$$\theta_t = \alpha + \beta\theta_{t-1} + \zeta C_{t-1} + w_t, \text{ where } w_t \sim N(0, \sigma_w^2)$$

The inclusion of the lagged component (θ_{t-1}) in the transition model captures the dynamic nature of agenda setting; changes in issue priorities do not disappear instantly but decay over time. The coefficient vector ζ captures the effect of the previous day's news coverage on public opinion.

Following Cargnoni, Müller, and West (1997), Bayesian posterior estimates were calculated via Gibbs sampling with an additional Metropolis-Hastings

5. This variable included mostly news coverage of the NRA's national convention and some efforts by states to pass new gun laws.

step that uses each day's maximum likelihood estimate of the transformed proportion ($\hat{\eta}_t$) to update draws from its marginal posterior density function. Diffuse priors were specified that weakly favored finding no media agenda-setting effects; further details of these estimation procedures are detailed in Appendix B. Using three simulation chains, 10,000 draws were sampled from the posterior distribution after 1,000 initial burn-in draws,⁶ resulting in a total sample of 30,000 simulations to generate estimates of the posterior distribution.

Table 1. Bayesian State Space Regression Estimates of Daily Aggregate Opinion (sampled standard deviations in parentheses)

Variable	Parameter Estimates
Lagged Opinion	0.852* (.071)
Clinton Coverage	0.016 (.019)
Event Coverage	0.036* (.017)
Mom March Coverage	0.053* (.028)
Other Coverage	-0.011 (.030)
Constant	-0.594* (.278)
σ_v^2	0.260* (.091)
σ_w^2	0.049* (.025)
N	217
R^2	.379

NOTE.—Bayesian state space regression of daily aggregate opinion on previous day's minutes of each news coverage type (December 14, 1999–July 17, 2000). Explained variance ratio is on the scale of the latent proportion π and is calculated by using the mean of the posterior simulations.

* indicates that 95% Bayesian Central Credible Interval excludes zero.

6. Since each simulation chain uses different starting values that are far from the posterior distribution, these first 1,000, or burn-in, draws are ignored because they allow the simulation chains to converge on the posterior distribution before they are used to generate any estimates.

Results

Table 1 presents the estimates from the posterior simulations. Similar to a logit model, the coefficient estimates for television coverage effects are nonlinear; they represent the expected change one additional minute of coverage has on the average log-odds that gun control is named as the nation's most important problem.

President Clinton might have gained greater levels of news exposure, but public opinion exhibited the smallest response to such coverage compared to the other two substantive storylines. Television news coverage of the Million Mom March, in contrast, showed the largest average effect on public opinion, beating out even the estimated contribution of the event-driven news. Furthermore, we cannot confidently reject the null hypothesis that President Clinton's coverage had no effect on public opinion, but we can confidently reject the null hypothesis for the coverage of both shooting events and the Million Mom March.

The Bayesian framework also can provide estimates of the posterior probability that each coefficient is greater than the other by counting how often each coefficient estimate is greater than the others within the simulated sample. These estimates strongly favor an interpretation that coverage of the Million Mom March had the greatest influence on public opinion. The effect for the Million Mom March is estimated to be greater than that of Clinton's coverage, with about 89-percent probability and greater than event-driven coverage with a 71-percent probability. Finally, other types of news coverage of guns and gun violence that were not connected to a prominent storyline and were sporadic in nature appear to have had no effect.

The model coefficients are on the logit scale, so it is helpful to transform these estimates onto their corresponding percentage scale for clearer substantive interpretation. For example, without any past news coverage, 1.7 percent of Americans are expected to mention gun control as their top priority.⁷ If Clinton were to receive a total of 10 minutes of news coverage, we would expect to find a 0.3-percentage-point change in public ratings the next day. In contrast, when the Million Mom March is given 10 minutes of television coverage, it exceeds Clinton's estimated influence with an average 1.2-percentage-point increase in public ratings the next day. Moreover, successive days of media coverage build on each other to generate a large total change in gun concerns. Two consecutive days of 10 minutes of Million Mom March coverage would have raised public concerns to about 4.5 percent, almost a 3-percentage-point gain over the baseline percentage.

Figure 2 presents the resulting estimates of how public opinion moved in response to the combination of modeled events. Through January, Clinton's first push to place gun control on the agenda with his budget proposals and lawsuits had little to no effect on public concerns for that issue. These levels changed at the end of February when 3.5 percent of Americans rated guns and

7. This baseline number is calculated by taking the logistic transformation of the mean equilibrium estimate of θ_t : $\exp(\hat{\theta})/(1 + \exp(\hat{\theta}))$ where $\hat{\theta} = \alpha/(1 - \beta)$.

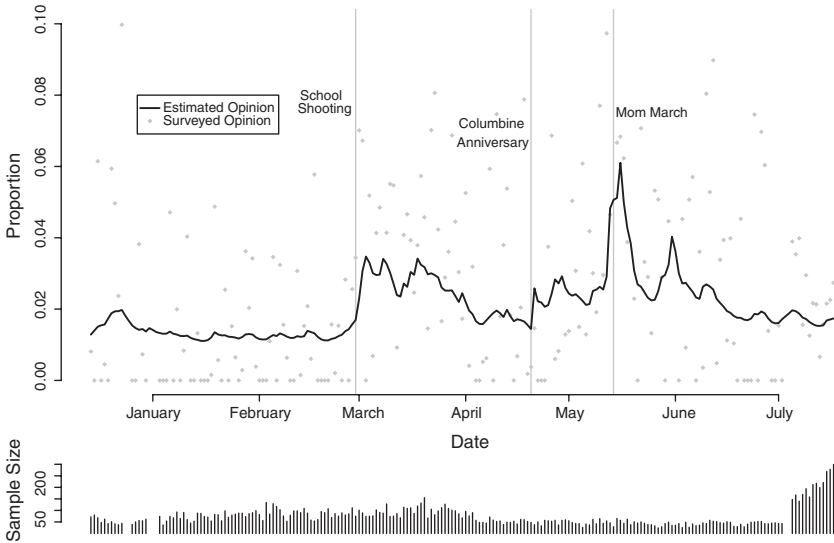


Figure 2. Estimated Opinion Dynamics in Guns/Gun Control as Most Important Problem. Dots indicate observed percentages, and the dark line represents the estimated percentage of adults mentioning guns or gun control as their most important problem absent sampling error. Bottom histogram presents the survey item's sample size each day.

gun control as an important problem following the Michigan school shooting. Clinton's push for his proposals over the next two weeks were somewhat successful, as 2.5 percent of the public still rated the issue as important. Clinton's campaign was mostly unsuccessful in convincing more people of the issue's importance, considering the amount of media attention received. Public concerns steadily declined for the following weeks, with some noticeable increase around the events of the first anniversary of Columbine. These levels soon are dwarfed during the weekend of the Million Mom March. On the day of the event and the following Monday, the proportion of the public naming gun control as an important issue reaches its highest estimated level, at around 6 percent. However, with the exception of another school shooting later that month, public concerns over guns and gun control declined during the next month.

President Clinton consistently gained large amounts of news coverage, but the public was largely unresponsive to such coverage. In comparison, the Million Mom March's influence is an impressive accomplishment, considering it had the same political goals as Clinton. Furthermore, the event occurred last in the order of events. The public had already witnessed multiple stories on guns

and gun control, such that the issue was far from a new consideration. Despite these limitations, coverage of the Million Mom March still managed to convince a greater portion of the public that gun control was an important issue.⁸

Why Was the March So Influential?

The results in figure 2 demonstrate that the public agenda does not respond to all types of issue coverage in a similar manner. While these findings have important implications for our theories of agenda setting, they also motivate the question of what made the Million Mom March's coverage so influential compared to coverage of President Clinton's campaign or the school shootings. Were these differences driven by factors specific to these particular actors, or do they represent a dynamic applicable to other storylines and situations more generally?

One notable difference between these political actors might be the public's evaluations or level of trust in the sources of these two storylines. As a partisan actor, President Clinton was likely not a persuasive source for all individuals. For many Republicans, his coverage might have had no influence, thus minimizing estimates of his national influence. Therefore, coverage of the Million Mom March might have been more influential because coverage portrayed the movement as less partisan and as having greater general appeal.

To determine whether those less approving of him limit Clinton's influence, I estimated the same model but only among survey respondents who expressed favorable ratings of President Clinton.⁹ If partisan or political biases are limiting Clinton's success, then we should expect Clinton coverage to be more influential among those respondents with positive evaluations. The results from this model are presented in the first column of table 2; each cell presents the average coefficient estimate, with its sample standard deviation in parentheses underneath. The model estimates fail to reject the null hypothesis that Clinton coverage had no influence on public concerns. An examination of the simulations indicates that the contribution of Clinton coverage was less than that of the Million Mom March and shooting events, with 97 percent and 93 percent probability, respectively. Therefore, the limited national influence of President Clinton's campaign also is apparent among those favorable toward him.

8. It is unlikely that dynamics in other issues are mitigating the effects of Clinton's coverage. Both party nomination campaigns essentially were won by March. Likewise, tests for dynamics across the nation's entire issue priorities identify only international relations as a priority with significant change during this time period. This dynamic is strongly associated with coverage of the Elian Gonzalez controversy, which occurred in early and mid-April, when coverage of Clinton or the Million Mom March was less prominent.

9. I include respondents who rated Clinton above 50 on the NAES thermometer evaluation item (approximately one-half of the sample). This is the only consistently available measure of Clinton evaluation or approval in the NAES.

Table 2. Subgroup Regression Model Estimates (sampled standard deviations in parentheses)

Variable	Parameter Estimates		
	Clinton Supporters	Males	News Watchers
Lagged Opinion	0.854* (.062)	0.736* (.060)	0.712* (.132)
Clinton Coverage	0.016 (.018)	0.019 (.022)	0.052 (.031)
Event Coverage	0.052* (.015)	0.034* (.020)	0.052* (.027)
Mom March Coverage	0.065* (.024)	0.083* (.027)	0.101* (.043)
Other Coverage	-0.054 (.032)	-0.004 (.041)	0.035 (.048)
Constant	-0.562* (.234)	-1.074* (.236)	-1.247* (.543)
σ_v^2	0.329* (.125)	0.119* (.066)	0.471* (.171)
σ_w^2	0.010* (.007)	0.007* (.005)	0.072* (.044)
N	217	217	217
R^2	.203	.324	.269

NOTE.—Bayesian state space regression of each group's daily aggregate opinion on previous day's minutes of each news coverage type (December 14, 1999–July 17, 2000). Explained variance ratio is on the scale of the latent proportion π and is calculated by using the mean of the posterior simulations.

* indicates that 95% Bayesian Central Credible Interval excludes zero.

The second column in table 2 presents a similar analysis, but only for males. This analysis accounts for two alternative confounding factors that also may explain the sizable success of the Million Mom March. First, the Million Mom March might have been influential because of persuasive in-group cues, where mostly women responded to the Million Mom March because they saw that a number of women like them thought this issue to be important. Second, the Million Mom March was an organization that directly contacted women and organized numerous rallies across the nation. Therefore, the large effect for Million Mom March in table 1 might represent a response to the organization's direct mobilization and not national media coverage. The results among only males, however, indicate that females are not the only group driving the national results; the same pattern of findings and substantive conclusions holds when examining these dynamics among just males. The null hypothesis that Clinton coverage had no effect cannot be

rejected, and the simulations indicate that Million Mom March coverage had a greater influence among male issue priorities than coverage of shooting events or Clinton, with respective probabilities of 93 percent and 97 percent.¹⁰ Likewise, the results in the third column indicate that the national results are not explained by the Million Mom March's direct contact or a potential correlation between news viewing rates and each news cycle. When estimating the model only among respondents who reported watching five or more days of television news in the previous week, I find slightly greater responsiveness to all types of coverage, but frequent news watchers also showed the strongest and clearest response to coverage of the Million Mom March by far.¹¹

Additional Evidence from the 2009 Health Care Debate

A remaining explanation for the Million Mom March's relative success is that the public was responding not because of attributes specific to each group in this context, but to these types of actors or news frames more generally. News coverage of Clinton was typical of Washington news; it featured gun control within the context of common political battles. In contrast, news coverage of the Million Mom March may have persuaded the public that the issue was important because it was rare, news organizations had few incentives to cover such movements, or coverage of this mass-based protest movement featured the images and stories of common people, which may be a frame more effective in convincing the public of an issue's personal relevance.

If coverage of the Million Mom March was more influential because of a general aspect of its content, then we should find other movements also demonstrating a relatively greater influence on the mass public's agenda. The public debate surrounding President Obama's push for health care reform provides another incident where politicians and citizen town-hall protesters were given frequent coverage in relation to a single issue over a relatively short stretch of time. Limited surveys were in the field at this time, with a consistent measure of people's issue priorities, but the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press's weekly news interest poll allows a comparison of which type of news generated greater rates of public attention toward the issue of health care reform.¹²

10. Since these models present coefficients on the logit scale, coefficients cannot be compared across models, as they are expressed relative to the baseline log-odds (the constant) within each model.

11. A similar analysis among non-news watchers did not show a clear public response to any of the issue coverage variables, supporting beliefs that these responses are a product of news media exposure.

12. This measure is preferable in this case, since the protesters and President Obama did not share similar ideological goals about the need to address health care. This makes a comparison of questions about whether individuals considered health care an important *problem* problematic (Wlezien 2005). Further details about the Pew surveys are reported in Appendix A.

During July 2009, President Obama engaged in a vigorous media campaign and negotiations within Congress to get a health care reform bill passed before the August recess. While Democrats in Congress worked on negotiating a bill, President Obama frequently made news media appearances in which he advocated the need for health care reform. On July 15, each of the three evening news shows aired extensive interviews with Obama about the topic. On July 22, Obama delivered a primetime speech and news conference in an attempt to convince the public that Congress needed to act on the current health care proposal. Coverage of Obama's campaign and Washington negotiations dropped once there was no vote and the August recess began. However, coverage of the issue soon rose again, as angry and vociferous individuals held numerous demonstrations during legislator town-hall meetings across the country. Initially, a majority of protesters were shown as opposing the proposed bill, but coverage of these town halls gradually developed to feature the activity of various individuals who both favored and opposed reform.

To compare the relative influence of these two types of issue coverage on the public's interest in health care reform, a similar coding of broadcast network evening news coverage was undertaken as was done for gun control in 2000.¹³ All news coverage that predominantly featured President Obama's push and congressional negotiations was coded as *Washington-based news coverage*. News coverage that discussed and featured images of events at town-hall meetings was coded as *town hall-based news coverage*. All other news coverage of health care reform, which revolved mainly around problems with the current system or journalist evaluations of specific policy proposals, was coded into a remaining category. The total number of minutes devoted to each type of coverage was summed over the two weeks preceding each survey's dates in the field.

Table 3 shows the percentage of adults naming health care reform as the issue they followed most closely in the news for three successive two-week periods. Compared to the previous two weeks, total evening news coverage of health care reform doubled during the last half of July (from 52 minutes to 103 minutes), as coverage of Obama's push and congressional negotiations made up more than 75 percent of all evening news health care coverage. The public responded by showing significantly greater interest. By the end of July, about 36 percent of the public reported that health care reform was the news story they followed most closely, a 15-percentage-point rise from two weeks before.

Two weeks later, the overall amount of issue coverage by national evening news increased only slightly (less than a minute a day). However, the nature of news coverage profoundly changed, from stories focusing on Obama's push for a legislative compromise to videos of agitated individuals at various town-hall meetings. Despite overall levels of news attention being mostly unchanged, the change to coverage of these town-hall incidents was associated with a significant

13. Details of these procedures and reliability measures are presented in Appendix A.

Table 3. National Attention to 2009 Health Care Debate by Type of Evening News Coverage (standard errors in parentheses)

Survey Dates	% Following Health Care	Total Minutes of Coverage for the Period			
		Washington	Town Hall	Other	Total
Jul 17–Jul 20 (<i>n</i> =1001)	21 (1.3)	49.5	0.0	2.7	52.2
Jul 31–Aug 3 (<i>n</i> =1013)	36 (1.5)	78.3	0.0	24.9	103.2
Aug 14–Aug 17 (<i>n</i> =1003)	46 (1.6)	14.3	71.3	29.8	115.5
Aug 28–Aug 31 (<i>n</i> =1006)	31 (1.5)	35.1	20.4	12.5	68.0

NOTE.—National sample of adults surveyed for the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press’s weekly News Interest Index Poll. Respondents were asked to select from a list of stories those that they “followed most closely.” Evening news coverage minutes were tabulated and coded by author from broadcast transcripts and the Vanderbilt Television News Archive over each of the previous two weeks.

10-point gain in attention to the issue. Then, as coverage of the issue dropped and reverted to focusing on the efforts of Obama and Democrats to refashion the bill, public attention to the issue greatly declined.¹⁴

Once again, news coverage of citizen activists is associated with greater levels of the public’s issue focus than are equivalent levels of coverage generated by presidents and Washington politics. In this case, coverage of the town-hall protesters was not nearly as positive as that of the Million Mom March; the protesters acted in opposition to a fairly popular president (although an unpopular Congress) and on an issue many people already considered a priority. News coverage of Obama’s campaign for a legislative compromise focused on the debates of partisan elites, but also featured a much less combative political environment. Despite these differences, coverage of citizen demonstrations in both cases was more effective in attracting the public’s attention than was coverage generated by presidents and other governing elites.

Discussion

Although scholars often criticize the news media for their tendency to focus on the actions and arguments of governing elites, the results of this analysis

14. Additional measures of the cable news, radio, and newspaper issue agendas by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism also demonstrate that the amount of news attention to the issue across these outlets was relatively similar over these two periods.

question whether the public agenda is equally responsive to such coverage compared to other types of issue coverage. For the first case examined, coverage of the Million Mom March campaign demonstrated a sizable influence on public opinion, while President Clinton's news coverage failed to show a similar influence, despite the similarity of their policy goals. To the extent possible, these different reactions were not explained by evaluations, identifications, or exposure factors associated with each specific storyline. Rather, as found during the 2009 health care debate, they appear to be associated with differences in these types of coverage more generally.

These findings potentially have broad implications for our understanding of agenda setting. They not only validate arguments that agenda setting represents an inferential process and that news coverage content has consequences for the nature of the public's reaction (Miller 2007; Miller and Krosnick 2000), but demonstrate on a national scale that differences in prominent aspects of news coverage have sizable consequences for agenda setting. Gaining news coverage is not always sufficient for an issue's placement on the public agenda. Scholars of agenda setting should look beyond the quantity of issue coverage and examine how the events within or nature of such coverage can produce differences in the public's reaction, since such findings have the potential to modify evaluations of our political communication system. In this case, it is commonplace for scholars to assert that the news media's bias in covering governing officials increases their ability to shape public opinion. However, these claims overlook the possibility that the public agenda does not react similarly to all types of news coverage.

While informative, these results do not allow us to determine exactly why the public agenda was more responsive to protest coverage than to coverage of governing elites. It may be because of the actors, frames, or images that accompany these stories, or even a combination of these factors, and how they compare to other news storylines. Washington-based coverage may have been less influential because it is more common or because issues with elite conflict are frequently portrayed in an episodic or less deferential manner. In contrast, although coverage of the town-hall protesters was not necessarily supportive, both types of protest coverage were uncommon and rarely questioned the legitimacy of the protesters' actions or concerns. Indeed, it may be that what made protest coverage influential in these cases is not common to all forms of social protest coverage, as the media's treatment and coverage of activist groups often differs depending on the profiles and attributes of such groups (McCluskey 2008). Regardless, the size and consistency of this study's findings suggest that scholars should explore these and other possibilities.

The public was not as responsive to news focused on Washington politics, but there remain some important qualifiers to this result. Both of these issues had significant elite opposition within the president's issue coverage and may not represent the influence of coverage when governing elites are unified. But even with the potential for political opposition, governing elites have repeated

access over a long period of time and an ability to generate massive exposure. It may not matter how often they fail, as long as they can succeed a few times. The struggle for social movements is not only in gaining coverage, but also in maintaining exposure and translating it into political influence. The Million Mom March was successful as a single public demonstration, but the organization and movement had little sustaining power. The news media extensively covered the movement for only a few days after the event, and the organization was unsuccessful in capitalizing on its initial success (Spitzer 2008). While it is still early to judge, the health care town-hall protesters' association with the larger national Tea Party movement has translated into the growth of a movement that apparently has wielded some influence within the political process. Therefore, gaining media exposure is one of many difficult steps these movements must take to alter the political agenda.

Appendix A. Measurement and Coding

The 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey: The 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (Romer et al. 2004) was a national telephone survey of adults via random digit dialing of area codes in the continental United States. Response rates vary by day but, for the entire daily cross-section survey, are reported in the 25- to 31-percent range (total households sampled minus ineligible households and a percentage range of indeterminate-status households). Further details about the survey's sampling procedures are reported by Romer et al. (2004, pp. 12–17).

Open-ended responses concerning a respondent's most important problem were recorded mostly using simple categorical terms like "gun control," "school shootings," or "gun violence." To categorize those responses recorded in a verbatim fashion, a search term of related terms (firearms, guns, NRA, shooting, violence, weapons) was used to identify potentially relevant responses. These potentially gun-related responses then were read through by the author and classified according to whether guns or gun violence were expressed as the individual's most important problem. These coding data are available on the author's website.

Post-stratification survey weights were calculated by each day according to the weighting procedures outlined by the NAES. Weighting categories included household phone lines, adults in household, gender, age, education, and race. Sampling weights first were calculated based on phone lines and adults in household and then were combined with the post-stratification weights using an iterative ranking procedure; some weighting categories at times had to be limited because of a small daily sample size. The weighted proportion estimate and the unweighted sample size were used within the measurement model estimates.

Wording of items used: cB01: "In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing our country today?"; cA52: "On a scale of zero to 100, how would you rate Bill Clinton? Zero means very unfavorable, and 100 means favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. If you don't

know enough about the person to rate him or her, just tell me.”; cE01: “How many days in the past week did you watch the national network news on TV—by national network news I mean Peter Jennings on ABC, Dan Rather on CBS, or Tom Brokaw on NBC, Fox News or UPN News?”; cE02: “How many days in the past week did you watch cable news, such as CNN or MSNBC?” Responses of five or more days for either item were used to identify frequent television news watchers.

Identification and Coding of Gun-Control and Health Care News Coverage:

To identify broadcast network news stories concerning gun control or gun violence in 2000 or health care in 2009, search terms were entered into the Vanderbilt Television News Archive and confirmed by searching each network’s broadcast transcript on LexisNexis.

For the case of gun control, a broad Boolean search was used (gun OR shooting OR “mom march” OR violence), identifying 328 different broadcast news segments over the dates of interest. After excluding segments concerning international incidents (82) or events of non-gun violence or police shootings (55), 191 segments were identified as pertaining to gun control or gun violence. To verify these identifications, a search for gun control was performed for each network’s broadcast transcripts within LexisNexis, revealing no additional stories.

A similar procedure was used to identify broadcast network evening news stories relating to health care reform or the protests. From July 8 to August 28, 2000, a search for a collection of terms (“health care” OR medicine OR protest) identified 220 broadcast network segments within the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Those discussing Obama’s health care reform efforts were classified and verified using an additional search within LexisNexis, identifying a total of 111 news segments.

For gun control, stories were classified originally into one of seven categories, depending on the impetus for such coverage. In addition to the three specific categories in the article, distinctions were made for stories focusing on the NRA, the efforts of state government, stories driven by an organization’s investigative efforts, or any other type of news. These codings were combined into the category of “other” news coverage. For health care, coverage was coded into three categories based on whether the focus was on President Obama’s or the Democrats’ negotiations within Washington, the town-hall protests, or all other news coverage pertaining to health care reform.

To evaluate the reliability and subjectivity of these measures, a random selection of 10 percent of topic-related stories were recoded into storyline categories by a second coder. These results verified the categorizations as very reliable, as the gun-control measures had an inter-coder agreement rating of 84 percent and a Cohen’s kappa of .78.

The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press: News Interest Index:

Each News Interest Index is conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press based on telephone interviews among a nationwide sample of approximately 1,000 adults, 18 years of age or older, under the direction of

the Opinion Research Corporation. Results were retrieved from individual reports available from the Center's website: <http://people-press.org/news-interest>. Response rates are not provided in each report. After a previous item listing a number of top stories from the past week, respondents were asked: "Which one of the stories I just mentioned have you followed most closely, or is there another story you've been following more closely?"

Appendix B: Regression Estimation Details

Let X represent the set of exogenously determined television coverage variables and δ represent the vector of both the autoregressive model parameters (α, β) and the exogenous coefficient parameters (ζ). The estimation task results to summarizing the joint posterior $p(\eta, \theta, \sigma_v^2, \sigma_w^2, \delta | y, X)$, which I evaluate via simulations using the Gibbs sampler.

The overall model was first estimated as a simple first-order autoregressive process, without the television coverage variables, to establish priors for the other models' dynamic properties. The resulting priors weakly posit each dynamic series as being completely independent of television coverage influences. The Gibbs sampler then was implemented in the following order:

- (1) Sample $p(\eta | \theta, \sigma_v^2, \sigma_w^2, \delta, y, X)$: Maximum likelihood estimates of the log-odds ratio ($\hat{\eta}$) were calculated for use within the model's Metropolis-Hastings algorithm. For those few days with zero counts, their counts were transformed by adding an observation with a count value equal to the overall mean rate of gun control being mentioned ($\approx .02$). These estimated values in combination with the dynamic linear model estimates then were used to accept or reject simulated draws of η as detailed by Cargoni, Müller, and West (1997).
- (2) Sample $p(\theta | \eta, \sigma_v^2, \sigma_w^2, \delta, y, X)$: Updated estimates of the state vector θ were calculated using the Kalman filter recursions; samples were drawn jointly using the backward sampling approach (Frühwirth-Schnatter 1994). To initiate the Kalman filter chain, the initial observation (θ_0) was given a diffuse normal prior distribution centered on estimates over the first three days' observations.
- (3) Sample $p(\sigma_v^2 | \eta, \theta, \sigma_w^2, \delta, y, X)$: With an inverse-Gamma prior on σ_v^2 with $\nu_0 = 2$ and prior variance generated from the initial model estimate σ_{0v}^2 , the conditional posterior distribution is then $\sigma_v^2 \sim \text{inverse-Gamma}(\nu_1/2, \nu_1 \sigma_1^2/2)$, where $\nu_1 = \nu_0 + n$ and $\sigma_1^2 = 2\sigma_{0v}^2 + \sum_{t=1}^n (\eta_t - \theta_t)^2$.
- (4) Sample $p(\delta, \sigma_w^2 | \eta, \theta, \sigma_v^2, y, X)$: With an inverse-Gamma prior for σ_w^2 with $\nu_0 = 2$ and prior variance generated from the initial model estimate σ_{0w}^2 , and a multivariate-normal 0 prior for δ where prior expectations for the effects of coverage were centered on zero and the autoregressive components centered on the initial model estimates, scaled variances on these

priors were set to 100. The respective posterior distributions are then also inverse-Gamma and multivariate-normal following standard conjugate Bayesian regression estimates (Jackman 2009).

Using three sets of different starting values, separate simulation chains were run from these priors with different starting values. The first 1,000 simulated draws were discarded as burn-in simulations; 10,000 posterior simulations then were included from each chain. Examination and the Gelman-Rubin comparison of the within- and between-chain variance and Raftery-Lewis diagnostic estimates all indicated proper convergence for each posterior distribution.

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