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Presence to Press: How Campaigns Earn Local Media

JOSHUA P. DARR

Today's campaigns have ample resources with which to influence the media, while plummeting revenue, readership, and reporting staffs make local newspapers more vulnerable than ever. This imbalance raises an important question: if a campaign invests more resources in an area, can it earn positive media coverage? In this article, I propose a strategic relationship between campaigns and local media. Newspapers offer campaigns credibility and exposure, while campaigns offer local newspapers easy-to-report stories that will appeal to their readers. Campaign messages are more impactful when communicated through the local press, so campaigns will try to influence local news coverage (when they have the resources to do so) by establishing a local presence. When newspapers are vulnerable, they should be more likely to accept campaign prompting and provide campaigns with positive earned media. I employ an original data set of newspaper content and campaign investment from the 2004 and 2008 elections. I utilize a within-state matched-pairs design of newspapers from the state of Florida and a detailed content analysis of stories from 21 randomly selected days from each election cycle. I find that regional campaign presence generates positive earned media, but only in smaller newspapers. This article contributes to the fields of campaign and media effects by demonstrating how campaigns' calculated decisions influence the construction of local political news. It is the first study to describe the connection between the voter contact and campaigns' earned local media strategy.

Keywords campaigns, earned media, elections, field offices, newspapers

Campaigns try to reach voters where they live, directly or indirectly—in their communities, in their homes, and through their news. Today's campaigns have ample resources with which to influence the media, while plummeting revenue, readership, and reporting staffs make local newspapers more vulnerable than ever. This current imbalance between campaigns and local newspapers raises an important question: If a campaign invests more resources in an area, can it earn positive media coverage?

In this article, I describe how the strategic interaction of campaigns and local newspapers creates political coverage that benefits campaigns. I expect that selective regional investment by campaigns will lead to positive earned media in local newspapers looking for easier ways to provide their readers with broadly interesting, locally framed political news. Campaigns supply events, connections, and an accessible frame for local news

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producers in the areas where they invest in a local presence, subsidizing the cost of covering the campaign. Newspapers with fewer resources should accept the potential stories instigated by campaigns more frequently, rendering the effect of campaign influence more powerful in smaller, cash-strapped outlets.

I test this theory using an original data set on local campaign presence and newspaper coverage from the 2004 and 2008 American presidential elections. Using the perennial battleground state of Florida as my setting, I create a sample of closely matched pairs of newspapers across elections and regional campaign presence. I separate and classify these newspapers according to their resources and partisan surroundings across either, neither, or both election cycles, and conduct a content analysis of news stories from 21 randomly selected days in each election cycle for each newspaper. My findings demonstrate that regional campaign investment generates positive local media coverage for the campaign, but only in resource-poor newspapers—a troubling finding, given the current struggles of America's local press. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for international elections and the future of local political news, in which campaigns may wield increasingly significant power.

Theory and Background

Local newspapers remain the most informative and influential source of local news (Druckman, 2005; Dunaway, 2008; Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999). Newspapers use their reporting resources to publish political stories that appeal to their intended readers (Hamilton, 2006; Snyder & Stromberg, 2010). Journalists want to publish content according to news values that make stories appealing to readers: stories that deviate from the norm, involve famous figures, recount personal experiences, or—crucially for local newspapers—discuss events and issues in close proximity to readers' homes (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Readers also trust their local newspaper more than other sources (Gandy, 1982; Kaniss, 1991), and information received through trusted media sources can persuade readers to alter their evaluations of candidates and mobilize voters into participating (Dunaway & Stein, 2013; Lemert, Mitzman, Seither, Cook, & Hackett, 1977; Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Nicodemus, 2004; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Unmediated communication from campaigns to voters (such as television advertisements or direct mail) is not as trusted, credible, or impactful as that same information would be if consumed in a local newspaper story (Gandy, 1982; Kaniss, 1991; Sotomayor, 2014). This combination of trusted and appealing coverage makes local news coverage a powerful force in shaping political opinions and an appealing target for campaign influence (Cohen, 2010; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Today's campaigns possess more than enough resources to shape local newspapers' coverage. Campaign spending rises by millions of dollars every election cycle, and campaigns now have enough expendable funds to establish local offices in strategically determined cities and towns across their targeted regions (Darr & Levendusky, 2014; Gimpel, Kaufmann, & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2007; Masket, Sides, & Vavreck, *in press*; Shaw, 2006). By placing dedicated staff and resources in an area, campaigns become enmeshed in the community and position themselves for repeated contact with local reporters as well as voters.

Tactics such as sending out press releases and cultivating source relationships with reporters may help campaigns attract local coverage (Cook, 2005; Flowers, Haynes, & Crespin, 2003; Gandy, 1982; Sigal, 1973). Campaign strategists believe that this sort of

rapport is more easily cultivated when campaigns have staff on the ground in a community making contact with reporters and holding regular events (Harber, 2011; LaPotin, 2011). A deputy state field director for Barack Obama's campaign in 2008 confirmed in an interview that "field was used to generate local media hits," and events like "days of action" for volunteers and visits by campaign surrogates were held to attract coverage.¹ The accomplishment of crucial campaign goals like mobilizing supporters, persuading undecided voters, and disseminating effective messages can be assisted by local media coverage—if local reporters and their editors accept the prompts that campaigns provide.

Newspapers' propensity to create and publish political coverage is largely contingent upon their reporting resources and news budget (Epstein, 1973; Tuchman, 1978). With more resources available to spend on reporters and in-depth stories, larger newspapers can cover multiple elections in-depth and publish more political content (Arnold, 2004; Dunaway, 2011; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006; Peake, 2007). Stronger, wealthier newspapers can devote their ample resources to in-depth reporting that is less easily shaped by campaigns, regardless of campaigns' efforts to subsidize their coverage. Unfortunately, the economics of news are trending in the opposite direction of the economics of campaign spending. Local newspapers across the country are losing readers, advertising revenue, and reporting staff (Edmonds, Guskin, Mitchell, & Jurkowitz, 2013; National Press Club, 2014). In their vulnerable state, newspapers are producing less of the political coverage desired by their readers (Downie & Schudson, 2009; Pew Research Center Journalism & Media Staff, 2015; Schaffer, 2010; Waldman, 2011). Newspapers with dwindling resources may find the cost of original reporting on campaigns prohibitive and simply accept campaigns' attractively framed and easily published prompts (Gandy, 1982).

Earned local media is the end product of a negotiated process between campaigns and local newspapers, each of which gain something important from the exchange. Depending upon their relative resources, campaigns or the media may gain the upper hand in this relationship. Campaigns invest their resources in communities to provide reporters with potential stories favorable to their candidate and message, because positive local news stories help campaigns by increasing the efficacy and credibility of their messages. Local newspapers receive appealing, locally framed, and easily produced political content from campaigns, which they may decide to accept and publish as news if they lack the resources to produce their own political reporting.

Hypotheses

The first effect of a campaign's earned media strategy should be to stimulate the production of additional local media coverage. Localized campaign stories appeal to the news values of personal experience as well as proximity, making them attractive subjects of coverage when available (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Newspapers may require some instigation to cover non-local races, and a local presence makes the campaign easier to cover (Shea & Burton, 2010). A local presence should therefore increase the number of stories published about the election in nearby news sources.

H1: Newspapers from areas with a campaign presence will publish more stories on a national election than those without a campaign presence.

If campaigns use field presence to generate earned media, the resulting coverage should portray political campaigning in a positive light and supply information on how citizens can get involved (Lemert et al., 1977). Media content can encourage citizens to believe that their actions can make a difference by sharing stories of local activities that extol the virtues of participation (Nicodemus, 2004; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). The media can also publicize polling locations or early voting hours in the hopes of mobilizing voters (Dunaway & Stein, 2013). Mobilizing stories emphasize proximity and personal experience, appealing to news values while helping campaigns attract volunteers. Voter contact is the primary goal of most campaign events, so coverage of mobilizing information should increase in areas of campaign presence.

H2a: Newspapers from areas with campaign presence should contain more mobilizing information than newspapers in areas without campaign presence.

Campaign staff can also exploit their familiarity with local reporters to provide statistics and arguments about regionally important issues. Nearby stories will appeal to the news value of proximity, increasing their likelihood of publication (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). When campaigns offer them, reporters should substitute toward easy-to-produce, locally framed stories. One way to make a story relevant locally is to include quotes from local citizens. Local campaign staff can send out press releases containing selected quotes from local supporters in the hopes of attracting media attention (Donahower, 2012). Stories resulting from campaign prompts should be framed more locally and contain more quotes from local citizens.

H2b: Newspapers from areas with campaign presence should contain more localized frames than newspapers in areas without campaign presence.

H2c: Newspapers from areas with campaign presence should contain more quotes from local citizens than newspapers in areas without campaign presence.

Variations in newspapers' reporting capacity provide opportunities for campaigns. Newspapers that are constrained by their lack of resources are unable to hire sufficient reporters to produce original stories on local events and elections, and political reporters for smaller newspapers are often equipped to do little else than pass along press releases (Waldman, 2011). In their efforts to earn local media coverage, campaigns may find that smaller local newspapers are willing partners in the co-production of news (Cook, 2005). The same indicators of campaign influence in H2—mobilizing information, frame location, and quotes from local citizens—should be more prevalent in newspapers with fewer resources because reporters at smaller newspapers should be more likely to accept campaign prompting.

H3: Smaller newspapers from areas with a campaign presence should (a) publish more stories with mobilizing information; (b) publish more locally framed stories; and (c) publish more stories with quotes from local citizens than larger newspapers from areas with a campaign presence.

The quantity and content of coverage in local newspapers are not the only aspects of earned media that campaigns care about. Campaign staffers explicitly develop relationships with reporters to amplify the positive impact of campaign activities (LaPotin, 2011). By placing dedicated staff and resources in an area, campaigns become enmeshed in the

community and position themselves to push positive prompts to local reporters. The major advantage of this relationship, from the campaign perspective, should be that more positive coverage of their candidate is published in local newspapers. I expect a local campaign presence to lead to positive coverage of the candidate and positive quotes from supporters in nearby newspapers.

H4a: Newspapers in areas with a campaign presence should publish more positive stories, containing more positive quotes, on that campaign.

Smaller newspapers' potential susceptibility to campaign influence may also affect the tone of their political coverage. Newspapers with fewer resources are poorly equipped to refuse information subsidies from campaigns, since their reporting expenditures are much lower in the first place, while newspapers with more resources can produce more original, balanced reporting. Small newspapers, by contrast, reward sitting officials with positive coverage when officials devote attention to the areas they serve (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006), and the same dynamic should hold during elections. Campaigns should expect a better return on their investment of subsidized information in smaller local newspapers.

H4b: Smaller newspapers from areas with a campaign presence should publish more positive stories on that campaign, containing more positive quotes, than larger newspapers from areas with a campaign presence.

Data, Sampling, and Coding

Detecting a campaign's ability to earn local media requires reliable measurement of both campaign presence and newspaper content across a variety of geographic and campaign settings and newspapers. A significant potential for omitted variable bias exists when one assesses the many and varied influences upon newspaper content creation. Newspapers differ greatly between and within states in their intended readership, partisan slant, and reporting resources. Rather than controlling for all of these factors, I choose to match and stratify newspapers on the most important newspaper-level factors—location and newspaper resources—while categorizing newspapers according to my dependent variable of campaign presence. Matching on the largest known influences on the slant and volume of political news enables more powerful inferences about the influence of local campaign activity on news construction.

I employ a within-state analysis of matched pairs of newspapers across a random sample of 21 days during the final two months of two recent elections, 2004 and 2008. Newspapers were matched and categorized according to the variables with the greatest potential to influence their political coverage: campaign presence; reporting resources; and partisan surroundings.²

I chose the state of Florida for the setting of my analysis. Florida provides several advantages toward satisfying the requirements just listed. As a constant battleground state, Florida experiences substantial and regular attention from presidential candidates seeking to win its substantial number of electoral votes. Florida is a geographically vast state with a diffuse population: 60% of the state's population lives within 10 miles of the state's 1,350 miles of coastline (Beaver, 2006; Environmental Protection Agency, 2002). Florida's cities and towns, though numerous, are often diffuse enough that little overlap exists between their local newspaper markets. Florida's newspapers are also well

represented in the newspaper content database NewsBank, which was the most comprehensive online database of newspaper content available during this period. By sampling within a single state, I hold state-level campaign activity constant, accounting for a major potential threat to causal inference.

Newspaper Sampling Strategy

In my content analysis, I use eight newspapers, categorizing them according to the three critical variables described earlier: (a) whether there was a nearby Democratic campaign presence, measured as a field office in their home county in 2004 and/or 2008; (b) their reporting resources, as represented by circulation size in 2008 according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations; and (c) their partisan surroundings, measured by the vote share of Democratic nominee Al Gore in the newspaper's home county in the 2000 presidential election. These factors account for my primary independent variable of interest, local campaign presence; the resources of the newspaper, for testing H3 and H4b; and the partisan composition of the newspaper's county, an important confounding factor for the slant of newspaper coverage (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). The newspapers are listed and categorized in Table 1.

Campaign field presence is operationalized using the county-level location of Democratic campaign field offices.³ Although it is a limitation to have data from only one party, this strategy allows me to isolate the effects of one campaign's decisions. Competition between parties, an important potential confounding factor, was held consistent across markets when possible: there was a Republican field office in each of the

Table 1
Florida newspapers by Democratic field investment

	No field, 2004 or 2008	Field in 2008, not 2004	Field in 2004 and 2008
Small	<i>Daily Commercial</i> (Leesburg, FL) [GVS: 43.5%; C: 24,330] ^a	<i>Bradenton Herald</i> [GVS: 47.4%; C: 38,064]	<i>The Ledger</i> (Lakeland, FL) [GVS: 46.4%; C: 54,036]
		<i>Ocala Star-Banner</i> [GVS: 46.4%; C: 39,926]	
		<i>Charlotte Sun</i> [GVS: 47.0%; C: 37,241]	
Large	<i>Treasure Coast News/ Press-Tribune</i> ^b [GVS: 45.2%; C: 89,450]	<i>Sarasota Herald-Tribune</i> [GVS: 48.4%; C: 84,291]	<i>Florida Times-Union</i> [GVS: 43.6%; C: 127,661]

^aGVS = Gore vote share in 2000. C = circulation in September 2008. The circulation totals used are from the period closest to the last election (Audit Bureau of Circulation, FAS/FAX Report, September 2008).

^bThe city of Stuart, Florida, is the headquarters of the *Treasure Coast News/News-Tribune* newspaper group, which is comprised of the *St. Lucie News Tribune*, the *Vero Beach Press Journal*, and the *Stuart News*. Martin County, where the city of Stuart is located, did not have a Democratic field office in 2004 or 2008, although Indian River County (Vero Beach) and St. Lucie County (Port St. Lucie) did in 2008. Since the newspaper group coproduces content and the headquarters is located in Martin County, I use the *Stuart News* as my representation of the political content produced by this newspaper group.

newspaper counties measured in this study in 2008, the only year with available data on Republicans. In addition, previous studies have demonstrated that estimates of field office effects on voters do not change significantly when both parties are measured.⁴

Field offices are useful measures of local presence because they serve as points of coordination for the get-out-the-vote efforts that have become more prominent in recent years, particularly with Democratic campaigns. They are an increasingly important part of modern campaigns and are often established several months before Election Day (Nielsen, 2012). The staff and volunteers housed in field offices engage with voters, hold events, and interact with local media on behalf of the candidate over the course of several months. These offices stimulate turnout and can help campaigns win closely contested states (Darr & Levendusky, 2014), demonstrating their worth as a measure of active campaign presence.

I classify newspapers as having high or low resources. Higher-resource newspapers should sell more copies, generating more revenue that they can use to hire more staff reporters. Circulation size is a reliable and commonly used representation of a newspaper's available resources (Arnold, 2004; Dunaway, 2008). Using an approach similar to Arnold (2004), I rank-order Florida's 38 newspapers before grouping them into quartiles by cumulative circulation.⁵ These categories are clearly distinguished from one another: the smallest newspaper in the high resources category circulates more than 30,000 more copies than the largest newspaper in the low resources category. The low-resource newspapers come from the lowest quartile of Florida newspapers, while the high-resource newspapers come from the middle quartiles. This classification strategy enables me to examine the effect of differing reporting resources of newspapers.

It was essential to match very closely on partisan balance for each newspaper. The partisan composition of a newspaper's readership market influences that newspaper's coverage of politics. Newspapers in Democratic-leaning areas speak more favorably about Democrats and their preferred policies, and vice versa for Republican areas, in order to reflect the preferences of their potential customers (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Mullainathan & Schleifer, 2005). Geographic partisanship influences the slant of a newspaper even more strongly than its ideology of the ownership group (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). Newspapers in heavily Democratic areas may cover Democrats more positively regardless of campaign investment. I therefore required newspapers from counties with an even partisan split—preferably one slightly less favorable to Democrats.

Newspapers that closely match on market partisanship and circulation size are very rare, yet are essential to obtaining reliable inferences in this study. Florida once again contains newspapers that satisfied these strict matching conditions. Every newspaper in my sample comes from a county that voted for Al Gore, the Democratic nominee in 2000, at a rate of between 43.5% (*Daily Commercial* [Leesburg, FL]) and 48.4% (the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*).⁶ By isolating Democratic vote share in a narrow, 5% band just under 50%, I ensure that the areas measured are genuinely competitive and balanced. Neither party should automatically expect more positive coverage in these newspapers, so campaigns may be more incentivized to earn it. Without campaign prompting, newspapers in these competitive areas may be less likely to construct positive coverage of their own volition and may craft more balanced stories to appeal to their balanced audience. I thus minimize the role of partisan context in news construction and avoid newspapers from areas of Democratic dominance.

The partisan slant of a newspaper's editorial staff also affects the tone of newspaper coverage. A given newspaper's coverage of political candidates on the news pages is significantly influenced by the endorsement on its editorial page, and voters can be

persuaded by these endorsement decisions (Kahn & Kenney, 2002; Ladd & Lenz, 2009). The effects of endorsement depend partially on the existing slant of the newspaper, which is affected by its geographic surroundings, as described earlier (Chiang & Knight, 2011). Hence, one must account for each potential confounding influence, even if matching on both is impossible. I match on home county vote share while controlling for endorsement in the previous election closest to the periods sampled (in this case, the 2000 presidential race).

I collected the samples for my content analysis from a search of the NewsBank database of stories published on 21 randomly selected days between Labor Day and Election Day.⁷ The 21 days sampled include three examples from each day of the week, in order to account for variations in length between editions published on different days of the week. Newspapers may increase their political content on Sundays, when their longest edition is published, or on another day of their choosing where politics is featured (Hare, 2014). The search terms used were “Kerry OR Bush” in 2004 and “Obama OR McCain” in 2008. I also added an exclusion term for letters to the editor, and any missed by the exclusion filter were manually removed from the final analysis. Because I am focusing on the values behind news creation, letters to the editor would be an inappropriate measure.

Content Analysis Coding

I conducted a detailed content analysis to quantify the focus and tone of media content.⁸ Content is coded at the story level, rather than by day or by sentence (Cohen, 2010). Stories are first categorized by relevance: whether the focus is primarily on the presidential race; if it is secondary to a focus on state and/or local politics; or if a story is a mistake caused by the word search. (I exclude these unrelated stories). Next, I take note of the primary location of each story—an important measure of a campaign’s ability to encourage the adoption of local frames. Stories are coded as “1” if they adopt a local frame (defined as the newspaper’s home county and bordering counties); “2” if the story refers to campaign events elsewhere in the state; and “3” if the story is nationally framed (including stories from outside the state).⁹ If a story contains multiple frames, it is coded according to its most local frame, since demonstrated reporting effort is necessary to relate the subject matter to local concerns.

Locally framed stories discuss the election in the context of local activities and citizens’ actions. Excitement over the 2008 election spurred high levels of voter registration across the state. The *Florida Times-Union*, Jacksonville’s local newspaper, interviewed several first-time voters and placed the increase in local context: “In Mandarin alone, the number of registered voters as of early September was 44,269, up almost 10% since 2004. Mandarin High School students even beat out all other schools in a county-wide student voter registration drive earlier this year” (Andres, 2008, p. O3).

Not every story involving local citizens contains a local frame, however. In a 2008 story from *The Ledger* of Lakeland, Florida, for instance, the author relies entirely upon national statistics to explore religious trends. The only local reporting comes from interviews with local pastors. The views expressed, however, are rooted in religious opinions, not in the concerns of their local church: “McCain didn’t excite most evangelicals I know... we’re scared of death of Barack Obama. We see him as a threat to religious liberty,” Lynne Breidenbach, co-pastor of Family Life Fellowship, said” (McMullen, 2008, p. A1). The frame of the story is coded as national, since local concerns are not used to contextualize the issues and strategy of the national election.

I also measure whether newspaper coverage contains “mobilizing information”: content that encourages political participation.¹⁰ In Florida’s newspapers, early voting received extensive coverage:

Robin Estess took time out from husband Steven Christesen’s medical practice Tuesday to cast her vote. She said she plans to cover for every employee in the next few days so they have time to get out and vote early also. “I really envision people still standing in line on Nov. 4 and the polls closing,” Estess said. (Hackworth, 2008)

Mobilizing information includes several subcategories of campaign actions: signing up volunteers; phone banking; door knocking; gatherings and house parties; fundraising; rally attendance; and nonpartisan voter registration and early voting information. These activities encompass the most common types of political participation by local citizens, particularly those encouraged by local campaign staffers.

I adopt a cautious approach to coding the tonality of stories. Tonality can be coded in three ways: statement level, story level, and sentence level (Cohen, 2010). Knowing the psychology of how readers interpret a story’s positive, negative, or neutral tone is difficult. I code each article as positive or negative only if it is unambiguous (i.e., a story is positive if it contains no phrases that can be coded as negative). I also employ Jeffrey Cohen’s definition of positive and negative statements: if the coder were the candidate, would the statement in the story hurt or help him or her (Cohen, 2010)? Using this approach, I classify stories according to measures of tone for each candidate, coded as -1 (negative statements only), 0 (entirely neutral or both positive and negative statements), or 1 (positive statements only).¹¹

Purely positive stories often center on the actions of a particular campaign, since it can exercise more control over the newsworthy occurrence. In 2004, for example, a nationwide tour of musicians supporting John Kerry visited Florida. Kerry’s supporters attended the concerts to hear acts such as Bruce Springsteen and R.E.M., and they were encouraged to vote and participate in the election. News reporters covering the events reflected this positive messaging in their stories:

Phoebe Cohen, a member of the League of Conservation Voters, an environmental group in Orlando, passed out flyers from her group in front of the arena. Her friend Jeff Shelby was dressed in an over-sized John Kerry costume, similar to those seen at parades. “We are endorsing John Kerry,” she said. “He is a dream come true for the environmental community.” (Dunn, 2004, p. B1)

By holding local events, campaigns can also use surrogates—public officials or celebrities speaking on behalf of the candidates—to criticize their opponents. When describing an event, journalists cannot help but summarize the speaker’s message: “[Former New York City Mayor Rudy] Giuliani criticized Democrat Barack Obama, calling him too liberal and ‘way off the charts.’ He also alleged that a liberal agenda would give criminals second chances they don’t deserve through numerous liberal Supreme Court appointments” (Hunt, 2008, p. A1).

If a campaign is well connected with the local press, however, it may be able to issue a statement in response, transforming a negative story into a neutral one: “Obama campaign officials countered by attacking McCain’s record in the U.S. Senate, saying in

1994 he voted against Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden's crime bill that put 100,000 officers on the streets and led to a decline in murder" (Hunt, 2008, p. A1). Using local press contacts to convey prepared counter-points, the Obama campaign was able to neutralize some of the impact of Giuliani's pre-election visit to Jacksonville.

Quotes are included as an indicator of reporting cost and localism. Journalists attempt to find quotes to illustrate stories. Campaigns can make positive quotes more accessible to local reporters by providing them directly or easing reporters' access to the candidate, staff, surrogates, and local supporters. Quotes are classified by speaker in the following categories: candidate/running mate; high-level state official (governor, senator, or judge); national officials and experts; campaign staffers; and local citizens. For example, Giuliani's quote is marked as a negative quote for Obama by a national official, while Phoebe Cohen's quote is marked as positive for Kerry from a local citizen.

This coding scheme provides a comprehensive account of the ways in which campaigns may influence newspapers' political reporting. Several variables capture the hypothesized mechanisms of effect—for example, localized frames, quotes, and mobilizing information—in addition to the effects on quantity and tone specified in the hypotheses. Using this array of dependent variables, it should be possible to discern the impact of campaign presence on the construction of stories in the local newspaper.

Results: Can Campaigns Earn Local Media?

Campaign influence on newspaper coverage may manifest itself in the quantity or content of that news, depending on the resources available to each newspaper. H1 looks at quantity, H2 and H3 examine the content and construction of newspaper coverage, and H4 examines the tone of that coverage. Descriptive statistics on the number of stories in high- and low-resource newspapers by election and by campaign presence illustrate these trends and provide the basis for difference-in-means tests of H1. Table 2 gives these statistics both as totals for the sample and as stories per newspaper per week in one election cycle.

In areas with a campaign presence, newspapers publish significantly more campaign stories—averaging 9.42 ($SD = 2.69$; $N = 204$) stories per week, compared to 6.07 ($SD = 2.43$; $N = 100$) in newspapers from areas without campaign presence ($t_{302} = 10.52$, $p < 0.01$ for a two-tailed t -test). When there is more campaign news to report, newspapers will report it. These findings support H1, demonstrating that campaigns can seemingly stimulate political reporting. More sophisticated measures and methods are needed to determine whether this finding is influenced by newspaper-level factors or specific campaign actions.

Do local newspapers in areas with campaign investment publish stories with more evidence of campaign influence? H2a, H2b, and H2c offer predictions about the specific forms that campaign coverage may take in areas with a campaign presence. To test these hypotheses, I utilize an OLS regression analysis of the effect of campaign presence on an array of dependent variables derived from my coding scheme: mobilizing information (column 1); frame location (column 2); and quotes by local citizens (column 3).¹² H3a, H3b, and H3c explore the strategic interaction of campaign investment and newspaper resources. The results of the tests of these hypotheses appear in columns 4, 5, and 6 of Table 2, testing the same dependent variables as H2a, H2b, and H2c but introducing an independent variable indicating newspaper resources and a variable denoting the interaction of newspaper resources and campaign presence.

I test H3a, H3b, and H3c using an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with a full interaction of my dummy variables for field presence and newspaper resources

Table 2
 Story totals by newspaper type, year, and presence

	All newspapers (8)		Small newspapers (5)		Large newspapers (3)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Total stories	Stories per newspaper/week	Total stories	Stories per newspaper/week	Total stories	Stories per newspaper/week
2004	140	8.43	67	5.51	73	11.12
2008	164	8.23	85	7.55	79	8.96
No campaign presence	100	6.07	47	4.45	53	7.52
Campaign presence	204	9.42	105	7.63	99	11.32
Full sample	304	8.32	152	6.65	152	10.00

(low = 0, high = 1). An interaction of this sort changes the interpretation of all coefficients. The coefficient on campaign presence alone, for example, does not represent the main effect: instead, it indicates the impact of campaign presence (1) on the political content of a small newspaper (0). The coefficient on the variable labeled “High-resource newspaper” expresses the effect of having no local presence on the campaign coverage in a large newspaper. Finally, the interaction term captures the impact of campaign presence on areas with a large newspaper. The results for tests of H2 and H3 appear in [Table 3](#).

When newspapers large and small are considered together, campaign investment appears to have little impact. In columns 1, 2, and 3 of [Table 2](#), there is no significant effect of campaign presence on the inclusion of mobilizing information, the location of a story’s frame, or quotes from locals in newspaper stories. Newspapers may generally be able to resist a campaign’s preferred types of coverage. These results show that a local campaign presence alone is not enough to influence all newspapers.

The coefficients in columns 4, 5, and 6 of [Table 2](#) do not necessarily confirm H3, but they affirm that a newspaper’s capacity to produce coverage is a meaningful variable. These coefficients represent the percentage of content influenced by the indicated variable. For clarity, I discuss the results in terms of story counts (stories each week per newspaper in each election).¹³ Election stories in large newspapers in areas without campaign presence are significantly less likely to contain quotes from locals ($p < 0.01$): two stories per week, compared to two and a half in small newspapers from areas also lacking campaign presence. Obtaining these quotes requires local reporting effort. Without local campaign competition, larger newspapers may use their resources on national frames and figures instead of exploring the race’s impact in their community. Although none of the individual interaction terms are significant, the sum total of the coefficients suggests that newspaper resources influence the construction of political coverage.

When campaigns interact with newspapers of differing resources, can they influence the tone of coverage they receive? I utilize the same empirical strategy as above to test H4a and H4b, examining two independent variables: story tone for the Democratic candidate and the tone of all quotes in the article for the Democratic candidate.¹⁴ The results are presented in [Table 4](#).

A newspaper’s resource level is critical to determining campaigns’ power to generate positive news coverage. In columns 1 and 2 of [Table 3](#), containing the results of H4a, there is no effect of campaign presence on story tone. This result follows the pattern of results in H2, by demonstrating that campaign presence alone cannot influence the tone of media coverage. In columns 3 and 4, however, I find a strong and significant interactive effect of campaign investment and newspaper size on story tone ($p < 0.05$). Large newspapers in areas with campaign presence actually publish fewer positive campaign stories per week than large newspapers without campaign influence (0.83 versus 1.4). No amplification of campaign influence exists in newspapers with more capacity to cover politics: instead, larger newspapers are able to counterbalance campaigns’ attempts to control tone. When campaigns invest in markets with a larger newspaper, they struggle to attract purely positive coverage—and they may lose some when those newspapers are capable of reaching out to both sides.

The best way for a campaign to earn positive media in the local news is by locating its resources in a market with a small newspaper. Four times more positive stories per week were published in small newspapers in areas with campaign presence than in those without it (2.15 versus 0.48). This substantial effect demonstrates campaigns’ leverage in their strategic interaction with local media. Without a local hook—often provided by the campaign—local

Table 3
Evidence of campaign influence in local newspapers, 2004 and 2008

	H2: All newspapers			H3: Larger vs. smaller newspapers		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Mobilizing information	Frame location (higher = less local)	Quotes from locals	Mobilizing information	Frame location (higher = less local)	Quotes from locals
Hypothesis tested:	H2a	H2b	H2c	H3a	H3b	H3c
Campaign presence	-0.051 (0.046)	0.041 (0.078)	0.071 (0.045)	0.041 (0.089)	0.107 (0.151)	-0.056 (0.086)
Large newspaper				-0.169* (0.099)	0.320* (0.168)	-0.255*** (0.095)
Campaign presence x Large newspaper				-0.052	-0.111	0.116
Endorsement in 2000	0.023 (0.063)	0.037 (0.106)	0.013 (0.061)	(0.121) -0.053 (0.046)	(0.206) 0.037 (0.078)	(0.116) 0.076* (0.044)
Constant	0.552	1.562	0.239	0.644	1.398	0.368
Observations	304	304	304	304	304	304
R-squared	0.004	0.002	0.010	0.046	0.024	0.046

Notes. Campaign presence and newspaper assessed at the country level. Standard errors in parentheses.
*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.1$.

Table 4

The influence of campaign presence on story and quote tone in local newspapers, 2004 and 2008

	H4a: All newspapers		H4b: Larger vs. smaller newspapers	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Story tone for Democrat	Quote tone for Democrat	Story tone for Democrat	Quote tone for Democrat
Campaign presence	-0.019 (0.067)	-0.030 (0.053)	0.328** (0.129)	0.229** (0.103)
Large newspaper			0.069 (0.143)	0.054 (0.115)
Campaign presence x Large newspaper			-0.390** (0.175)	-0.261* (0.140)
Endorsement in 2000	0.131 (0.091)	0.096 (0.073)	-0.033 (0.066)	-0.040 (0.053)
Constant	0.167	0.153	0.151	0.137
Observations	304	304	304	304
R-squared	0.007	0.006	0.040	0.028

Notes. Campaign presence and newspaper assessed at the county level. Standard errors in parentheses.

** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

newspapers have little incentive to cover larger races. When campaigns do invest in smaller areas, however, they are rewarded with positive coverage. As additional evidence, campaigns have more success feeding positive quotes to small newspapers. A campaign presence in the area leads to four times more stories with (net) positive quotes in small newspapers (1.53 to 0.37), but 25% fewer such stories in large newspapers (0.8 to 1.07). Reporters are more likely to be exposed to positive quotes about a campaign in areas with campaign presence. Only in small newspapers, however, does a local presence lead to the publication of more positive quotes.

A clear earned media benefit exists for campaigns that invest in areas with smaller newspapers, but some drawbacks emerge as well. Campaigns can be more confident that the coverage they encourage will be published in small newspapers, but readership of those sources is minimal. Earning positive coverage in high-resource newspapers is more difficult, but these newspapers are the most widely read (Arnold, 2004). Campaigns must strategically navigate the trade-off between their ability to influence tone of coverage and the number of voters who will read that coverage. Investment in areas with smaller newspapers may be more useful for pushing specific messages and generating headlines that can be used in advertisements. If “all publicity is good publicity,” then focusing on larger sources might be preferable. Without coverage in high-resource newspapers, campaigns limit potential exposure to their earned media message. Depending on the specifics

of their messages and needs, campaigns could establish a presence in an area based upon its potential for earned local media.

Discussion

Campaigns can influence their media coverage when they establish a campaign presence close to a small local newspaper. Newspapers with more resources are better at resisting campaign influence because they are better equipped to collect news independently. Earned media is not exclusively a product of campaign effort. It is a strategic interaction between campaigns and local media in which the comparative strength of local news sources plays an essential role. Campaigns can influence the characteristics and tone of stories most effectively when newspapers are vulnerable.

This study explores the strategic dynamics of earned media in American elections, but the theoretical interaction between politicians and local media should also apply to other nations. In India, the combination of rising literacy rates and poor broadband penetration created a booming local newspaper business, with even greater increases in readership during elections (Mallet, 2013; Vaidyanathan, 2011). Readership of France's local newspapers dominates that of national sources, and French politicians (including those running for the nationally elected office of President) are increasingly adopting strategies of local investment and organizing pioneered in American elections (Issenberg, 2012; Kuhn, 2002). Indian and French politicians therefore have great incentive to earn local media coverage, and may pursue similar earned media strategies to those described here. In Great Britain, on the other hand, national newspapers dominate local dailies and politicians have far less incentive to shape local journalists' political reporting (Kuhn, 2002; Ladd & Lenz, 2009). Future studies could use this research model to determine how different media systems and preferences shape earned media strategies of campaigns, particularly as full-text availability of international newspapers rises.

As campaign resources grow and voter data improves, more campaigns are establishing local offices—particularly in subnational elections and in Republican presidential campaigns. In subnational elections, where candidates are better known and more inherently local, it may be more difficult to use field offices to influence local newspapers. Future research should exploit this development to investigate other states, the dynamics of partisan competition, and other competitive contexts. Another useful study might examine media coverage of campaigns in the same newspapers over the course of several elections, measuring the relationship between circulation decline and production of earned campaign coverage.

If campaigns are incentivized to invest in field offices in previously ignored small towns, more people may well be encouraged to participate in the political process. Small local newspapers provide campaigns additional returns on their investment in regional organization. These findings give campaigns added incentive to invest in smaller towns and communities. Part of the observed effects of local campaign presence on turnout and vote may be due to increased positive coverage of that campaign in the local media (Darr & Levendusky, 2014; Masket et al., *in press*). The losses in rigorous campaign reporting could be counterbalanced by gains in participatory activity if campaigns continue to invest in big cities and small towns alike.

When newspapers become yet another outlet for campaign press releases, however, they contribute less to the information that citizens require for making sense of the political world. Local media coverage should ideally provide a rigorous check on

campaign claims, countering the ever-present influence of paid media. The press is supposed to interpret and supplement the messages of political elites, not merely transmit them (Jamieson & Waldman, 2004). If the trend away from original reporting continues, campaigns will find it increasingly easy to control the flow of political information through the news media.

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Notes

1. This staffer did not wish to be named.
2. Newspapers focus most of their attention on the city or town for which they are named (Kaniss, 1991). I adopt the county of its headquarters as a consistent (if inexact) measurement of the area of a local newspaper's primary area of attention.
3. Data on field office locations come from George Washington University's Democracy in Action website: <http://www.gwu.edu/~action/>.
4. For examples in the 2012 election, see Darr and Levendusky (2014) and Masket and colleagues (in press).
5. Data come from the 2008 *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook*. Arnold (2004) uses this strategy to divide all American newspapers into sextiles by cumulative circulation. I wish to compare a smaller number of newspapers (within one state); therefore, I used fewer categories (quartiles). A full table of Florida's newspapers, ordered by quartile, appears in the Appendix (Table A1).
6. 2000 vote share (the partisan environment at $t-1$) is used to avoid confounding with results from the periods sampled (t_1 and t_2).
7. I use "days" to refer to the count of days before the election, not an actual calendar date, in order to improve comparability between elections.
8. Interrater reliability was assessed using the coding results of an undergraduate research assistant, who was provided with a detailed coding help sheet to refer to while coding. Agreement was calculated using 10% of the sample, as is standard practice (Stemler, 2001). Interrater reliability is calculated using Cohen's kappa, which accounts for agreement expected by chance. A kappa value of 1 indicates that coding is perfectly reliable while 0 indicates no agreement other than what would be expected by chance. A kappa value of 0.61 indicates reasonable agreement between coders (Stemler, 2001), and the scores of all variables used in this analysis exceed this threshold (see following footnotes for exact scores).
9. The kappa score for the variable assessing frame location was 0.68.
10. The kappa score for the variable assessing mobilizing information was 0.72.
11. This variable was constructed by combining variables indicating the presence (1) or absence (0) of positive and negative statements about each party's candidate. The kappa scores for positive statements about the Democratic candidate, negative statements about the Democratic candidate, and the combined ordinal variable (used in the analysis) are 0.86, 0.61, and 0.70, respectively.
12. The kappa score for the variable assessing the inclusion of quotes from local citizens was 0.68.
13. Predicted story counts were computed by multiplying predicted probabilities for each possible outcome by the story counts in small and large newspapers (152 in each), and dividing the outcome by the number of newspapers per category (five for small, three for large), the number of elections sampled (two), and the number of weeks sampled (three).

14. The quote tone variable is constructed by combining the tone of the quotes regarding the Democratic candidate from all five categories of quoted persons in the article. The kappa score for this variable is 0.65.

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Appendix

Table A1

Florida newspapers grouped by circulation quartiles, ordered from smallest to largest. Sampled newspapers in bold.

Newspaper City	Newspaper Name
Cape Coral	<i>Cape Coral Daily Breeze</i>
Okeechobee	<i>Okeechobee News</i>
Palm Beach	<i>Palm Beach Daily News</i>
Marianna	<i>Jackson County Floridian</i>
Lake City	<i>Lake City Reporter</i>
Key West	<i>Key West Citizen</i>
Winter Haven	<i>News Chief</i>
Palatka	<i>Palatka Daily News</i>
Boca Raton	<i>Boca Raton News</i>
Brooksville	<i>Hernando Today</i>
Sebring	<i>Highlands Today</i>
St. Augustine	<i>St. Augustine Record</i>
Leesburg	<i>Daily Commercial</i>
Crystal River	<i>Citrus County Chronicle</i>
Panama City	<i>News Herald</i>
The Villages	<i>Daily Sun</i>
Fort Walton Beach	<i>Northwest Florida Daily News</i>
Charlotte Harbor	<i>Charlotte Sun</i>
Bradenton	<i>Bradenton Herald</i>
Ocala	<i>Ocala Star-Banner</i>
Tallahassee	<i>Tallahassee Democrat</i>
Naples	<i>Naples Daily News</i>
Pensacola	<i>Pensacola News Journal</i>
Lakeland	<i>Ledger</i>
Miami	<i>Diario Las Americas</i>
Miami	<i>El Nuevo Herald</i>
Melbourne	<i>Florida Today</i>
Fort Myers	<i>News-Press</i>
Daytona Beach	<i>Daytona Beach News-Journal</i>

(Continued)

Table A1
(Continued)

Newspaper City	Newspaper Name
Stuart Sarasota	<i>Treasure Coast News/Press-Tribune</i> <i>Sarasota Herald-Tribune</i>
Jacksonville West Palm Beach Tampa Fort Lauderdale	<i>Florida Times-Union</i> <i>Palm Beach Post</i> <i>Tampa Tribune</i> <i>South Florida Sun-Sentinel</i>
Orlando Miami St. Petersburg	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i> <i>Miami Herald</i> <i>St. Petersburg Times</i>