

Earning Iowa:

Local Newspapers and the Invisible Primary*

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Objectives: Can presidential candidates influence their coverage in Iowa’s smaller local newspapers? I extend the approach of Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) by examining the impact of campaign press releases on newspaper stories before the 2016 Iowa caucuses.

Methods. I coded the topic and tone of candidate press releases, and located “hits” in Iowa newspapers between September 2015 and January 2016 for the top two Democratic and Republican candidates. *Results.* Press releases were used primarily for information dissemination in Iowa, while competitive messages decreased as a share of campaign communications. Small, weekly community newspapers hardly covered the campaign. *Conclusions.* Newspapers in cities outside the state capital are ripe for campaign influence through the Associated Press and deserve more scrutiny, since their combined circulation rivals the largest state newspaper. Media-candidate relations are changing, but press releases remain a critical tool for campaigns to earn local coverage.

Keywords: earned media; newspapers; Iowa; presidential elections; invisible primary

The early states remain decisive in the presidential nominating process (Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan, 2011), and media coverage leading up to the Iowa caucuses may help campaigns reap the earned media rewards of a victory (Bartels, 1988). Can presidential candidates earn their preferred coverage in Iowa’s local newspapers during the “invisible primary”?

I examine this question using an original dataset of campaign press releases and newspaper stories from the 2016 Iowa caucuses. I update and partially extend the analysis from Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) of the 1996 Republican primaries, making two contributions. First, I demonstrate that competitive messages were a much smaller share of campaign press releases in 2016. Second, I examine previously overlooked newspapers in the first electoral contest of the primary season, Iowa’s caucuses. Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) do not address differences in press coverage within early states. I find that when larger regional newspapers covered candidates, they relied heavily upon the Associated Press, and small community newspapers hardly covered the invisible primary at all.

Press Releases and Local Media Attention

Presidential campaigns seek media attention before the voting begins (Buell 1996; Hadley 1976). During the “invisible primary,” or the period between Labor Day and the January before the first contest, campaigns craft press releases with information about candidate appearances, issue positions, endorsements, fundraising, and other signals of strength and support (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin, 2003).

The local media that receive those releases have suffered in recent years, as newspaper revenues and subscriptions declined precipitously. Newspapers’ political coverage depends upon their reporting resources and news budget (Epstein, 1973). Larger newspapers publish more political content using their greater resources for in-depth reporting (Dunaway, 2011). Small-town, rural newspapers are singularly focused on locally relevant content, and often seek to boost the community while reporting the news (Guth, 2015). These small-town newspapers resist technological change and eschew wire services, focusing on community-level events rather than comprehensive coverage (Hindman, Ernst, and Richardson, 2001; Gladney, 1990). It is therefore unclear whether presidential campaigns can earn coverage in these areas, even with targeted outreach focusing on local events and issues.

Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) sample nine newspapers from around the country, only two of which—Iowa’s *Des Moines Register* and the *Union Leader* of Manchester, New Hampshire—are in early primary states. By examining the largest newspapers in Iowa and New Hampshire, Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) may have missed targets of campaign influence. I narrow the geographic focus of my analysis to Iowa alone, while broadening the sample to include more newspapers. The *Des Moines Register* is the largest newspaper in Iowa,

with a 2016 circulation of 79,016 and a readership of 158,032, but it is by no means the only newspaper in the state (Iowa Newspapers Association, 2017). The *Gazette* of Cedar Rapids and the *Quad-City Times* of Davenport, for instance, are each half the size of the *Des Moines Register*, and are located over 100 miles away from Des Moines. Campaigns should care about their coverage in these newspapers since delegates are apportioned by Congressional district, rewarding candidates with broad geographic appeal.¹

Presidential candidates remain focused on Iowa and New Hampshire for the year preceding the contests, and candidates still hope to influence the local press and benefit from the news coverage “bump” received by the winners (Bartels, 1988). Press releases may seem antiquated compared with modern tools such as social media allowing them to communicate directly with voters, but are still frequently issued by campaigns.

I re-examine two of Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003)’s expectations, using a sample of large and small Iowa newspapers. First, they expected frontrunner candidates to earn more newspaper stories from press releases than candidates who are behind in the polls (Semetko et al., 2000; Rosenstiel, 1994).

Status Hypothesis: Frontrunner candidates will earn more hits from their press releases than challenger candidates.

Next, Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) argued that press releases picked up by the Associated Press (AP) should be most likely to appear in newspapers. If a press release “hits” in the Associated Press, local news organizations are likely to receive it twice: once as a press release, and once as an AP story. Smaller community newspapers are less likely to receive AP wire reports or publish less local information.

¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this benefit to campaigns.

AP Hypothesis: Earned AP coverage should lead to the most stories in larger local newspapers, but not small newspapers.

Data

My sample includes stories from nineteen newspapers throughout Iowa and the AP Wire for Iowa, taken from online database *Newsbank*.² Candidate press releases and newspaper stories were assessed from September 10, 2015, through January 5, 2016, to correspond with time period examined in Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003).³

I assess four candidates corresponding to two of the categories from Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003): “frontrunner” (Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump) and “challenger” (Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz). Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) also include “third tier candidates,” but with only two serious contenders on the Democratic side, I limited Republicans to include only Trump, the frontrunner, and Cruz, the most prominent challenger during the period ending January 5. These classifications were based on the RealClearPolitics average of Iowa polls ending during the period sampled: Clinton (50.2 percent) clearly led Sanders (34 percent), and Trump’s average (24 percent) surpassed Cruz (18 percent).⁴ Stories were located by searching for each candidate’s full name (i.e. “Donald Trump”).

² I do not examine the *Des Moines Register*, which is no longer included in Newsbank or LexisNexis. This lack of availability meant I could not obtain *Des Moines Register* coverage through a comparable process. No picture of Iowa news is complete without the *Des Moines Register*, but the unexplored dynamics of earned media outside the state’s capital and largest city were my focus.

³ Their coverage window extends from September 22, 1995 to January 17, 1996, before the Iowa caucuses on February 12, 1996: given that Iowa’s caucuses were held on February 1, 2016, I shifted that range forward by twelve days.

⁴ Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, and other candidates were occasionally competitive, but did not reach the prominence of the frontrunner or challenger candidates. Rubio’s rise occurred during

There are few newspapers in Iowa that are published seven days a week and circulate to over 20,000 people. I classify those included in the *Newsbank* sample—the *Gazette*, *The Quad-City Times*, the *Sioux City Journal*, the *Telegraph Herald*—as large newspapers. More than half of the newspapers (13/19) have a circulation of less than 10,000, including all weekly newspapers sampled. The total circulation of all these newspapers, 204,759, represents 8.7 percent of eligible voters in the state, larger than the Republican caucus turnout in 2016 (186,932). Descriptive statistics by newspaper appear in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Most stories about the campaigns appeared in the largest newspapers, and few were published in weeklies. Iowa’s local newspapers may need some prompting to cover the election, making them potential targets for influence by campaigns.

Press releases were taken from the website *4president.org* (blog.4president.org). I collected press releases for each candidate using a Python script and limited my sample to press releases on Iowa-specific topics and broadly national topics. Unlike Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003), I excluded press releases with topics from non-Iowa states, rather than classify their topics as “national,” because smaller Iowa newspapers may not receive these releases. Only releases about upcoming Iowa events, polls, or endorsements, and truly national topics—policy speeches, endorsements by national figures, or appearances at debates and candidate forums—were included. Figure 1 contains comparisons of included press releases to the full sample of press releases from each candidate. Clinton, Sanders, and Cruz devoted each roughly 56 percent of their press releases to Iowa and purely national topics, while Trump only devoted 31 percent.

the final weeks of the campaign, while Carson’s support collapsed by October. A full table of polls ending during the period sampled appears in Tables A1 and A2 in the Online Appendix.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The dependent variable in this study is the “hit,” a dummy variable indicating that “the theme of the press release must be represented in the story” and “the presentation of the candidate information must ... be in the same tone as it is presented in the press release” (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin, 2003: 264). Press releases were sorted into four categories: informative, substantive, and positive or negative competitive messages. For example, press releases detailing an issue position are substantive, as are endorsements by an organized group, because they convey information about the candidate’s stances on issues. If a press release mentions an issue in the context of a competitive message, or if a staffing change is framed competitively, that release is coded as competitive in its corresponding tone. Scheduling announcements or most staffing changes are classified as informative.⁵ Covariates in the “norm-based model of message transmission” described by Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) account for newspaper-level considerations, such as the geographic focus of the release, temporal proximity to a major campaign event (such as a candidate forum, debate, or an Iowa party event where all candidates attended), days remaining until the election, the length of the press release, and the presence of quotes. Local newspaper stories are counted as an “AP hit” if a press release hit in the Iowa AP Wire and in a newspaper.

Candidates continue to use the press release to reach the media and the public, as Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) found. The style of those press releases is different today, however, as Table 2 shows.

⁵ The procedures outlined in the Appendix to Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003), “Search Methods for News Story Database,” were followed to code hits. The name of the candidate issuing the release was entered into the *Newsbank* search, followed by a keyword for each release. The releases were matched to the news stories on the day of the release and three days afterwards.

[Insert Table 2 here]

The smallest category in 1996—informational press releases—is the largest in 2016, at 62.9 percent (compared to 18 percent). Within candidate categories, there is more similarity: 52.9 percent of releases from Clinton and Trump were informative, close to the 45 percent in 1996. Negative competitive messages, the largest category in 1996 (36 percent) is by far the smallest in 2016, with a mere 1.3 percent. Over 60 percent of all releases were competitive in 1996, compared to 10 percent in 2016. Future research should explore whether campaigns have moved competitive messaging to Twitter, in an attempt to influence journalists there, or whether greater access to polls means that journalists no longer rely upon campaigns for this information.⁶

Results

I estimated a logit model based on Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) for hits in all newspapers, as well as hits in large and small newspapers separately. Since there are only two candidate categories, “Frontrunner” is included as a dummy variable where Clinton and Trump are coded as “1” and Sanders and Cruz are coded as “0.” Logit is used because the dependent variable, the press release “hit,” is binary. These results are displayed in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Frontrunners’ press releases are significantly more likely to hit than challengers’ ($p < 0.01$), consistent with Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003)’s findings in national newspapers. Press releases by frontrunners were less likely to hit in state press in their sample, however, while those candidates enjoyed a positive and significant advantage in my full and large newspaper samples, supporting the *Status Hypothesis*. Substantive press releases were significantly less

⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this potential avenue for future research.

likely to hit in the full sample ($p < 0.05$) and in large newspapers ($p < 0.1$), again similar to the dynamics Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) observe in national newspapers but not the state press. AP hits have a strongly significant and positive effect in the full sample and the larger newspapers ($p < 0.01$), but not for smaller newspapers, partially consistent with the *AP Hypothesis*. Predicted probabilities for AP and non-AP hits are presented in Figure 2, below.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Only frontrunners earn meaningful amounts of coverage in local newspapers without earning an AP hit as well, receiving more than double the amount of original coverage as challengers. Smaller, weekly newspapers remain uninterested in the campaign, but an AP hit still gives a story twice the probability of hitting in a small weekly newspaper according to the predicted probabilities. A hit in the state AP wire makes the most substantial impact for candidates, and should remain their primary goal if they want to earn media in local newspapers.

Conclusion

Newspapers within Iowa report on the campaign differently, and most are uninterested in the “invisible primary.” Given the outsized impact of a relatively small number of voters in early primary states (Bartels, 1988), their information environment deserves greater scrutiny. Rural citizens who are interested in the upcoming caucuses may turn to more national or partisan news sources absent local coverage, while the surviving newspapers in cities far outside the state capital are ripe for campaign influence through the state wire of the Associated Press. These newspapers deserve more scrutiny from scholars of American presidential campaigns. Press releases may be changing with the times, but they remain a critical tool for campaigns to influence journalists in the places they need to receive coverage.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Publication and circulation information from newspapers sampled in Iowa.

Newspaper	City or Town	Circulation	Days published per week	Tier	Campaign stories published, 9/10/15 – 1/5/16
<i>Associated Press State Wire: Iowa</i>	n/a	n/a	7	1	184
<i>The Gazette</i>	Cedar Rapids and Iowa City	37,874	7	1	135
<i>The Quad-City Times</i>	Davenport	35,547	7	1	411
<i>Sioux City Journal</i>	Sioux City	27,339	7	1	124
<i>Telegraph Herald</i>	Dubuque	24,361	7	1	194
<i>Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier</i>	Waterloo and Cedar Falls	23,483	5	0	154
<i>The Hawk Eye</i>	Burlington	16,578	7	0	62
<i>The Ottumwa Courier</i>	Ottumwa	7,367	5	0	21
<i>Clinton Herald</i>	Clinton	6,808	5	0	53
<i>Daily Gate City</i>	Keokuk	3,352	4	0	3
<i>Creston News-Advertiser</i>	Creston	3,300	5	0	8
<i>Daily Democrat</i>	Fort Madison	3,077	4	0	20
<i>Red Oak Express</i>	Red Oak	2,727	1	0	12
<i>New Hampton Tribune</i>	New Hampton	2,258	2	0	0
<i>Charles City Courier</i>	Charles City	2,175	1	0	4
<i>Oskaloosa Herald</i>	Oskaloosa	1,877	4	0	14
<i>Osceola Sentinel-Tribune</i>	Osceola	1,560	1	0	3
<i>Ad Express & Daily Iowegian</i>	Centerville	1,529	4	0	38
<i>Pella Chronicle</i>	Pella	1,516	1	0	17
<i>Hamburg Reporter</i>	Hamburg	570	1	0	2

Note: The *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier* is included in Tier 0 because it only publishes five days per week.

Table 2. Distribution of press release categories across frontrunner (Clinton and Trump) and challenger (Sanders and Cruz) candidates.

	All press releases	Frontrunner press releases	Challenger press releases
Informative	62.9%	52.9%	71.1%
Substantive	26.3%	38.5%	16.4%
Positive competitive	9.5%	6.7%	11.7%
Negative competitive	1.3%	1.9%	0.8%
Total press releases	232	104	128

Table 3. Logit results of norm-based model of message transmission. Dependent variable is a dummy indicator of whether a press release “hit.”

	(1) All Iowa newspapers Logit coeff.	(3) Large newspapers Logit coeff.	(5) Small newspapers Logit coeff.
Story picked up by AP	3.206*** (0.796)	2.901*** (0.680)	0.839 (0.806)
Frontrunner	1.174*** (0.372)	1.050*** (0.399)	0.294 (0.479)
Substantive	-1.565** (0.618)	-1.097* (0.630)	-
Positive competitive	-1.325 (0.884)	-0.880 (0.863)	-
Negative competitive	-	-	-
Individual quoted	-0.923* (0.489)	-0.491 (0.518)	-0.442 (0.673)
Iowa focus	1.265** (0.548)	1.202** (0.571)	1.010 (0.865)
Proximate political event	0.126 (0.564)	0.238 (0.572)	-0.005 (0.746)
Days remaining until Iowa	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.006)
Log(length of press release)	0.637*** (0.236)	0.617** (0.248)	0.383 (0.331)
Constant	-6.510	-7.036	-4.951
Observations	230	230	148

Note. The number of observations is smaller in Column 3 because substantive, positive competitive, and negative competitive press releases were dropped from the model because they predicted failure perfectly. Standard errors in parentheses: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Figures

Figure 1. Press releases by candidate: total published by campaign, and total included in dataset (Iowa and purely national topics).

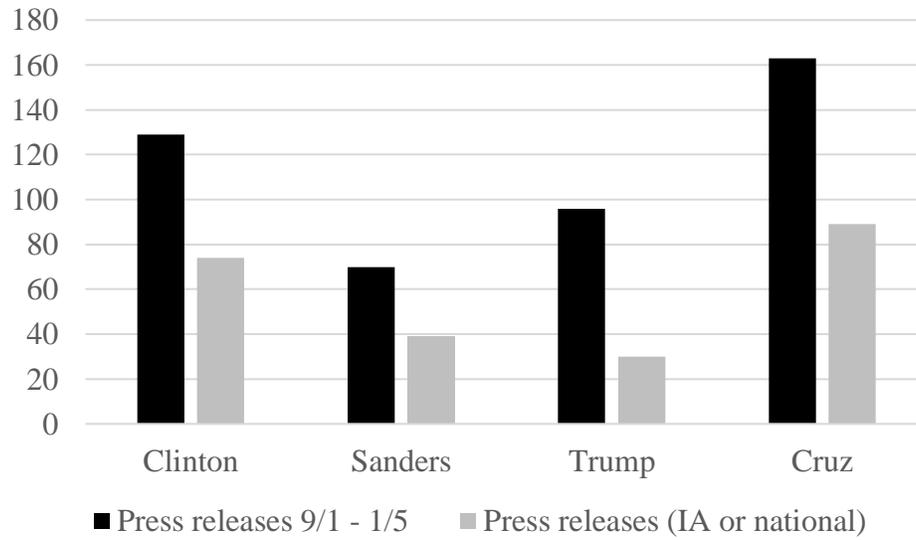


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of press release hit, by candidate and newspaper resources and whether the press release also hit in the state Associated Press wire.

