

INTELLIGENT OR IDIOT? ONE-WORD DESCRIPTIONS OF PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATES IN THE 2012 GOP PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY AND GENERAL
ELECTION AND SECOND-LEVEL AGENDA SETTING

by

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ABSTRACT

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) says that the media are able to influence what individuals think about. Second-level agenda-setting theory (McCombs et al., 1997; McCombs & Reynolds, 2008) extends this concept to examine the salience of specific characteristics, or attributes, of objects depicted in media. This research examines the relationships between media coverage and public opinion data regarding the 2012 GOP primary candidates - Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, and Ron Paul - and the 2012 general election candidates - Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Public opinion data were collected by the Pew Research Center asking participants to give a one-word description of the candidates, and attributes characterized in terms of ideology, competence, and integrity were selected. Media coverage of these candidates and selected attributes was reviewed for three days before each public opinion poll to determine whether significant relationships exist. Regarding relationships between media coverage and public opinion, significant relationships exist with some attributes and public opinion but not with all attributes. Further, there is evidence of a significant relationship across some attributes. These results are consistent with some other findings of second-level agenda-setting studies. Implications for future research are discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The mass media play an increasingly integral role in presidential politics in the United States. While the term “mass media” is more loosely defined today than in previous decades, traditional media sources, such as newspapers, still play a powerful role in influencing the top news stories and narratives of the day. Many newer, non-traditional media outlets rely on newspaper giants such as *The New York Times* for content. Newspapers serve as an important provider of information during political campaigns, and people who read newspapers are more likely to vote in presidential elections than those who do not read newspapers (Benoit, Stein, and Hansen 2005). In presidential campaigns in particular, the media play an important role. They often set the agenda or draw the public’s attention toward certain issues or ideas, and ideally they also inform the public and provide important information that helps voters decide whom to vote for.

Increasingly, the media vet candidates running for president through intense scrutiny of the candidates’ issue positions, background and experience, personal characteristics, and a variety of other factors. These candidates’ campaigns often work continuously in the years leading up to an election to shape the narrative regarding their candidate, to attempt to influence the media’s agenda, and ultimately to influence how the public votes. While the media play an important civic role in informing voters about political candidates, political campaign coverage often spends much of its time focused on characteristics and qualities other than candidates’ position on key issues, such as

personal attributes and less tangible characteristics such as whether or not a particular candidate seems presidential.

The current political climate is one marked with intense evaluation of presidential candidates, and voters must often form judgments and opinions on presidential candidates in the midst of a sea of varying information. It is likely that the prolonged period of analyzing and covering presidential politics in the media amplifies the intense scrutinizing of candidates for president. While there is, of course, value in serious evaluation of those who wish to have the highest office in the United States, political campaign coverage often focuses on characteristics and qualities beyond a candidate's position on issues such as the economy, foreign policy, or healthcare reform. Voters use a variety of criteria to compare and contrast primary runners and party nominees. One way to think about how candidates are vetted is to categorize their attributes or qualities in broad terms of competence, integrity and ideology. These terms are more specifically characterized by traits or attributes such as educational background, professional achievements, public speaking ability, likeability, religious beliefs, and personal ethics. When these terms or attributes are associated with presidential candidates in the media, it seems likely that they affect, to some degree, how some voters perceive the candidate being described.

In the 2012 presidential election, incumbent Democrat Barack Obama battled Republican nominee Governor Mitt Romney after an intense GOP primary season that saw the rise and eventual fall of candidates like Representative Michele Bachmann, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, Senator Rick Santorum, Senator Ron Paul, restaurant magnate Herman Cain, and others along the way. Balz (2013) notes that the

three major factors influencing the 2012 election were the economy; the power of demographic change, such as the increase of the Hispanic population in the United States and the aging baby boomer population; and political polarization (p. 240). Additionally, he says that Americans were in a “gloomy mood” in 2012, “beaten down by the effects of the economic collapse in the fall of 2008 and frustrated with three years of dysfunctional government in Washington” (p. 240). Ultimately, President Obama was re-elected by winning the popular vote by 51 percent to Romney’s 47 percent, or 65.9 million votes to Romney’s 60.9 million votes (p. 322). From beginning to end, the 2012 election was discussed, strategized, and analyzed for years before Election Day in November. During presidential election seasons, it is not uncommon for people (and ironically, sometimes the media) to lament how long and drawn out the political campaign season has become – in fact, within days of President Barack Obama’s reelection win in November 2012, media pundits were already discussing whom the Republican Party might position for the presidency in 2016.

This research examines the evaluation of presidential candidates by using the 2012 GOP primary and general election as a field of study. More specifically, how the media may influence public opinion regarding presidential candidates by highlighting certain qualities or attributes, often described as characteristics of competence, integrity, and ideology. This paper explores whether there are any relationships between two aspects of presidential politics: how the media describe presidential candidates and how the public describes presidential candidates. More specifically, this study examines whether certain attributes of presidential candidates mentioned more often in public opinion polls correlate with a higher frequency of mentions of these attributes in the news preceding

the public opinion polls.

Responses to public opinion polls conducted by the Pew Research Center during seven different time periods from October 2011 through September 2012 were used. The public opinion polls, conducted by telephone, asked a random sample of around 1,000 – 1,500 participants each (including Republicans, Democrats, and independents) to give a one-word description of each candidate. Data were collected for Mitt Romney during four time periods. Data were collected for Barack Obama during three time periods. Data were collected for GOP candidate Newt Gingrich during two time periods, and during one of the time periods for GOP primary candidates Rick Santorum and Ron Paul.

Two studies are presented in this paper. The first study examines whether relationships exist between selected public opinion responses (one-word descriptions) of GOP primary candidates (Romney, Gingrich, Santorum, Paul) and media coverage of the GOP primary candidates before the public opinion polls. The second study examines whether relationships exist between selected public opinion responses (one-word descriptions) of general election candidates (Romney and Obama) and media coverage of the general election candidates before the public opinion polls. Several public opinion responses, or attributes, were selected. These attributes were selected because they commonly appeared across all candidates and time periods, and could be broadly characterized as being related to a candidate's perceived competence, integrity, or ideology. The data from these public opinion polls were compared to mentions of these attributes in articles about the election from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, for three days before each poll. Cross-attribute relationships are also examined.

Though other media certainly impact the public agenda, these three newspapers were chosen because of the agenda-setting function they fulfill for other media. Mair (2010) found that 60 percent of the top stories on news websites or news blogs covered the same topics as ones covered in legacy media like *The New York Times*. Moon (2013) notes that “the positive function of newspapers relative to civic engagement has been supported repeatedly” by various scholarly literature (p. 40). According to the highly regarded State of the News Media Report (2013), the 2012 presidential election was the biggest story of 2012, and the three newspapers utilized in this study, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, are the three major newspapers that “employ the most talented writers, columnists, and editors, and a growing corps of younger new media specialists.” Additionally, these papers are leaders in adapting their content to other applications. Newspapers in general, and these three major papers in particular, still play the most important role in covering presidential campaigns and setting the agenda for other news outlets.

The hypothesized link between candidate characteristics covered in media and the frequency with which those characteristics are mentioned by the public is a worthy topic to study because many, if not most, American citizens follow presidential election coverage in the news to some degree. While the public’s appreciation or disdain for intense media coverage during campaigns is debatable, many, if not most, voters look to the media for information regarding political candidates. The media set the agenda of campaign coverage by focusing on or highlighting certain narratives, issues, and candidate attributes. Voters paying attention to the media may be influenced to

perceive candidates a certain way, according to how candidates are portrayed in the media, which in turn, could influence how citizens ultimately cast their votes.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda Setting in Presidential Politics

Agenda setting suggests that we learn about issues or objects in proportion to the direct emphasis placed on these objects or issues by the mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The term *agenda* refers to the popular or dominant narrative, topic, or story of a certain time period. As McCombs (2005) explains, the term agenda is “strictly a descriptive term for a prioritized list of items, the major topics found in newspapers, television news programs, and other mass media messages... or those topics that the public and policy makers regard as important” (McCombs, 2005, p. 156). *Setting the agenda* therefore means that the media are often able to influence what issues or topics are considered important to the public by what the media choose to highlight or ignore. This process is often done inadvertently and out of necessity, as the press has a limited capacity for what it can cover (McCombs, 2005, p. 156).

The mass media may be the only contact the public has with objects or issues, and people learn about issues in direct proportion to the emphasis placed on them by the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting is related to the term salience, meaning that the public is likely to view certain topics as more important if the media give them attention. The often-used phrase describing agenda setting is that the media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is very successful in telling people what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The issues or objects determined to be salient in the media are regarded as more important by the public over time (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). Further, understanding the salience of topics on the public agenda is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008).

The agenda setting function of the news media plays a prominent role in politics and presidential elections. Agenda setting effects occur, intentionally or unintentionally, as a result of efforts by both the news media and presidential candidates themselves. There are two relevant audiences in politics, the public and the press, and the press is “both an audience and a participant” (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008, p. 29). Political reporters covering presidential campaigns often “create simple frames, based on one or two characteristics of personality, and channel their coverage through those frames, which simplifies the task set for them” (Hall Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. 25). Presidential candidates attempt to set the agenda, or influence the prominent news story of the day, by portraying themselves in a positive way, or by portraying an opponent in a negative way. Well-organized presidential campaigns strategize about how to describe their candidate to the news media and to the public. Political scientist Samuel Popkin (2012) notes, “On the road to winning their party’s nomination and going to the general election, candidates have to decide how they want to position themselves: which issues and personal traits they will emphasize, and which voters they will target” (Popkin, 2012, p. 63). Candidates have to decide how to position themselves as individuals within the race (Popkin, 2012, p. 63), and they must re-position themselves if they misjudge public opinion or miscalculate rivals (Popkin, 2012, p. 69).

Voters often rely upon stored, simplified information when making political decisions. Patterson (1993) notes that people have full lives to lead and “little time for attending to politics in their daily lives, and their appetite for political knowledge is weak,” and the voters’ problem is one of “overload” (Patterson, 2003, p. 206-207). The press and the public both rely on heuristics, or “information shortcuts,” recalling what is

easily available to evaluate candidates (Hall Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Knowing this, presidential campaigns use a variety of tools to influence media and the public and provide “information shortcuts” about their candidates. The agenda setting efforts of the news media help to provide information shortcuts for the public by increasing the salience of certain topics.

The agenda setting efforts of both the media and presidential campaigns are conducted for the general purpose of informing the public. Voter learning is a type of media effect and the mass media have important effects on society in general, but particularly in regard to covering presidential elections, though the strength of these effects depends on a variety of conditions, such as the length of time being considered (Weaver, 1996). As Weaver notes, “attitudes and opinions are not constructed from thin air but rather from the information that people believe to be true and that is most salient or easily accessible to them” (Weaver, 1996, p. 36). Agenda setting is one form of voter learning, as the public gains awareness of which issues seem to be the most important at a given time (Weaver, 1996). By highlighting or focusing on certain stories, topics, or narratives, the mass media are able to increase the salience of these things and therefore make them more accessible to the public. In turn, this may influence what the public thinks is salient or most important. In studying candidate images, Weaver found that prior knowledge, high interest, and frequent media exposure all correlated with learning about the personality traits of candidates, and that the characteristics of candidates most heavily emphasized in the media were more likely to be cited in voters’ descriptions of them (Weaver, 1996, p. 39). Further, Weaver found a greater agenda setting effect in regard to candidate images rather than in regard to candidate issues, meaning that voters found it

easier to learn about the personality traits of candidates rather than their complicated or more detailed issue positions. By making more salient certain issues, political candidates, and characteristics of political candidates, the media “contribute greatly to the construction of a secondhand reality that is relied upon in making decisions about whether and for whom to vote” (Weaver, 1996, p. 39). Further, the media can raise the salience of politics in general by devoting large amounts of coverage to elections, and thus ignoring other topics (Weaver, 1996).

The media’s ideal role, particularly in politics, is often a topic of debate among scholars. Many suggest the media should serve as a watchdog (Bennett & Serrin, 2005), looking out for the interests of the citizenry with a wary and skeptical eye on the government and potential leaders. Others suggest the news media should primarily act as a burglar alarm (Zaller, 2003), providing information in an attention grabbing way about acute problems, such as a potential scandal or a gaffe made by a candidate running for president that could indicate the candidate is incompetent or morally questionable. Ultimately, the media are able to draw the public’s attention to certain issues and topics by what types of stories the media produce. In politics, the candidates themselves are often the subjects of many news narratives.

Second-Level Agenda-Setting Studies in Presidential Politics

Objects or issues themselves are not the only thing that can be studied – the attributes, or characteristics, of these objects or issues also play a role in influencing public opinion because how attributes are emphasized in the media may influence what people think about the objects or issues (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). These

characteristics, or attributes, are examined in second-level agenda setting. In a political context, in the first level of agenda setting, a specific political candidate might be the unit of analysis, but in second-level agenda setting, a specific characteristic or attribute of the political candidate might be the unit of analysis (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). For example, President Barack Obama is an object; his educational background is an attribute that describes him.

These attributes have two dimensions: a cognitive (also described as substantive) component, and an affective component (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). The cognitive component refers to information about substantive characteristics that describe an object or issue, and the affective component refers to the positive, negative, or neutral tone of the characteristics or attributes (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). Attributes are characteristics of objects or issues that “fill out the picture of each object” (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997) because objects have numerous attributes and properties that describe them (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). Both the objects themselves and the attributes used to describe them are powerful agenda-setting tools (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008).

Second-level agenda setting is an effective lens with which to examine political candidate attributes, particularly the one-word, top-of-mind responses utilized in this study, because agenda setting emphasizes salience. It is important to note, however, that second-level agenda setting is often linked to other mass communication theories, particularly framing and priming. The second level of agenda-setting and the theory of framing are frequently discussed together in research because both “call attention to the perspectives used by communicators and their audiences to picture topics in the daily

news,” with some studies finding similarities between the two, and others dismissing a relationship (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) say there are three models of cognitive media effects: agenda setting, priming, and framing. The authors explain how recent scholarly articles suggest that agenda setting and framing are similar in nature, and the term framing should be replaced by attribute agenda setting or second-level agenda setting. Kim, Scheufele and Shanahan disagree with this conclusion, noting that instead of these concepts being combined, second-level agenda setting or attribute agenda setting should be further refined to distinguish it from framing. Objects or issues are framed in the media when the way they are described offers important interpretive cues to the audience (Kim, et. al, 2002). Framing effects are only noticeable or measurable if these interpretive cues correspond to or activate pre-existing cognitive schema of interpretation (Kim, et. al, 2002). Framing assumes that it is how an issue is described rather than the salience of an issue that affects audience response. Alternatively, priming and agenda setting (and second-level agenda setting) rely on a memory-based model of information processing that affects the accessibility of information (Kim, et. al, 2002). Objects or issues that are most salient in a person’s mind most strongly influence perceptions and opinions (Kim, et. al, 2002). The authors compare priming and agenda setting, noting that both rely on the accessibility of information – “how much” or “how recently” a person has been exposed to certain information, and the media can influence the salience or accessibility of certain issues. The authors explain the effects of attributes further, describing both attribute priming and attribute agenda setting. Attribute agenda setting “hypothesizes that certain issue attributes emphasized in the media become salient in the public mind” (Kim, et al., 2002,

p. 11). Attribute priming is an important outcome of attribute agenda setting, and hypothesizes that “certain attributes emphasized in the media will become significant dimensions of issue evaluation among the public” (Kim, et al., 2002, p. 12). The authors note that priming is an important, yet subtle effect of second-level agenda setting, as priming effects can be based on differences in the amount of media coverage about certain attributes of objects. Further, by emphasizing certain attributes of objects, the media may tell us “how to think about” issues as well as “what to think about” (Kim, et al., 2002, p. 21).

Attributes are characteristics that “fill out the picture” of objects, and objects and their attributes are both powerful agenda-setting tools (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997). McCombs, et al. examined second-level agenda setting during the 1995 Spanish elections to determine the relationship between images of candidates presented in the media, and perceptions of candidates held by voters. Attributes help to construct images of objects, though the purpose of constructing the image may vary. The media select attributes of candidates to “construct images appropriate to news stories about the election while the political parties select attributes of the candidates to construct images in their political advertising aimed at winning votes” (McCombs et al., 1997, p. 706). These constructed images are an important aspect of educating voters about political candidates, implying that the second level of agenda setting is important in the electoral process (McCombs, et al. 1997). Second-level agenda setting effects suggest the media are not restrained to simply setting priorities (first-level agenda setting), but also participate in the selection of specific features or attributes of candidates to emphasize, which influence public opinion of political candidates (McCombs, et al., 1997). The

media “may not dictate to voters what their opinion will be about political candidates, but they may well direct, guide, or orient the content of what the public deems worthy of saying about them to a significant degree” (McCombs, et al., 1997, p. 706). Further, the authors contend that attributes can be examined along two dimensions: substantive attributes (descriptions of personality, issue stance, etc.), and affective attributes (positive, negative, or neutral connotations or descriptions).

The agendas of substantive and affective characteristics of political candidates may show increasing social consensus at the second-level of agenda setting, according to Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, and McCombs (1998). Further, patterns regarding affective attributes described in the media and by the public suggest a homogenizing effect may occur in regards to public opinion of political candidate attributes (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998). The authors asked telephone respondents open-ended questions, such as: “Imagine that you had a friend who didn’t know anything about the candidates for Parliament. What would you tell your friend about ... (each candidate)” (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998, p. 339). Responses were organized according to an affective attribute dimension (positive, negative, neutral tones with which the candidates were described), and a substantive dimension (three categories: the candidates’ ideology and issue positions; the candidates’ qualifications and experience; and the candidates’ personal characteristics and personality). Substantive characteristics reflect the “distinctive characteristics of those who aspire to elected office; characteristics that are considered more or less important by the mass media and society” (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998, p. 339). Affective attributes suggest a “possible contribution by the mass media to an appraisal of political leaders that in some manner is

shared by individuals belonging to different groups” (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998, p. 339). McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas (2000) continued to study affective and substantive attributes in a subsequent follow up study of the 1996 Spanish general election, finding a high degree of correspondence between seven media outlets and voter attribute opinions of three political candidates, and a high degree of correspondence between affective descriptions of candidates in the media and affective descriptions of the candidate attributes in the public.

Second-level agenda setting studies examine different types of substantive and affective attributes, with varying results. Many studies, such as one conducted by Kiouisis, Bantimaroudis and Ban (1999), found that second-level agenda setting effects occurred with some attributes, but not others. The authors conducted experiments to determine how media emphasis on certain attributes influenced public perceptions of candidates. The authors evaluated the attributes of candidate qualifications (determined by education background) and personality traits (operationalized as either a high or low corruption level) by showing participants news articles featuring varying combinations of these traits. In analyzing substantive traits associated with moral quality, leadership ability, and intellectual ability, Kiouisis (2005) found that media attention to certain attributes may resonate more with the public than other attributes, in particular, the attribute of moral quality had a stronger correlation than leadership ability or intellectual ability. The study examined media salience of attributes of the Democratic Party and Republican Party nominees for president during five national elections (1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996) and compared this to public opinion data from National Election Studies polls that measured candidate salience and attitudes towards the candidates. The

study compared the poll data to content from newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Newsweek*).

Other studies compare and contrast the effectiveness of the two general types of attributes, cognitive/substantive and affective, with many focusing on affective characterizations of attributes. Golan and Wanta (2001) found less support for media influence on affective attributes, so whether an attribute was described in a positive, negative, or neutral way, than cognitive attributes. The authors compared newspaper coverage of presidential candidates George W. Bush and John McCain to Gallup poll responses regarding perception of the two candidates during the 2000 New Hampshire primary. The authors examined affective and cognitive attributes of the candidates, though they mention two additional classes of attributes: subtopics and framing mechanisms. Cognitive attributes are similar to substantive attributes, and can be attributes that describe both information about issues and information about personal characteristics. Further, the media can influence candidates' affective attributes, which involve opinions about the candidates (Golan & Wanta, 2001). The study analyzed newspaper articles about the candidates in January 2000, and coded for four variables: candidate issue (taxes, campaign reform, campaign analysis, foreign policy, moral issues, education, the candidate's past, and race); the nature of the issue frame as positive, neutral, or negative; candidate attribute (trust, reformer, leadership, patriotism, compassion, winner/electability, on the attack, has a plan/vision, and vagueness); and the nature of the attribute frame as positive, neutral, or negative. The data were compared to Gallup poll responses about the candidates and similar issues. The characteristics most linked to Bush were electability/winner, on the attack, has a plan/vision, trustworthiness,

leadership, and vagueness. The only attribute framed in an “overwhelmingly positive” manner was the electability/winner attribute, and several attributes (trust, vision, and vagueness) were viewed in a negative manner (Golan & Wanta, 2001, p. 5). The most common attributes linked to McCain were: electability/winner, vision, trust, reformer, leadership, patriotism, and compassion. McCain was viewed more positively overall, with the attributes reformer, patriotism, leadership, and compassion framed very positively (Golan & Wanta, 2001, p. 5).

Several second-level agenda setting studies have examined the effectiveness of attributes described positively or negatively in order to understand whether one or the other has greater agenda-setting effects. Kim and McCombs (2007) found that attributes described positively or negatively were perceived similarly by the public, as the affective tone of specific candidate attributes were linked to the candidates. The authors examined attributes of political candidates, conducting a telephone survey of Austin, Texas residents and a content analysis of local newspaper coverage during the 2002 Texas gubernatorial and senatorial elections. Attributes of four major candidates were aggregated into six major categories: general political descriptions; specific issue positions; personal qualifications and character; biographical information; campaign conduct; and support and endorsements. Personal qualifications and character was the most common category, with 42 percent of the total attributes falling in this category. More specifically, Kim and McCombs (2007) describe eleven attributes within the personal qualifications and character category: leadership; experience; competence; credibility; morality; caring about people; communication skills; pride in family/background, roots, and race/ethnicity; non-politician; style and personality; and

“other” comments. These eleven specific attributes were further coded to determine tone, which Kim and McCombs define as positive, neutral, or negative. The authors note that the study is one of the first to investigate attribute priming processes in “terms of both the substantive and affective dimensions of attributes” (Kim & McCombs, 2007, p. 310).

Alternatively, negative depictions of candidate attributes may be more influential than positive ones, according to Wu and Coleman (2009). The authors propose a contingent condition of second-level agenda setting called affective intelligence, which contends that “emotions are critical in getting people to pay attention to politics, and people use emotions, particularly negative ones, to think deeply about their political views” (Wu & Coleman, 2009, p. 775). This condition suggests that negative information, or negative depictions of candidate attributes, may have a stronger agenda setting effect than attributes described positively (Wu & Coleman, 2009). To study these questions, the authors conducted a content analysis from Labor Day 2004 to Election Day 2004 of two major newspapers in Southern cities; the evening news programs on *ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*; and programs on *CNN* and *Fox News*. The news programs/articles were coded according to several categories, which were attributes mentioned frequently in second-level agenda setting literature and in the news: appearance; leadership and charisma; integrity; qualification for office; consistency on issues; knowledge; intelligence; speaking ability; and care and compassion. The data were compared to poll data gathered by a university-associated polling center. Random digit dialing was used to contact respondents and ask them to name the three most important problems facing the country; their opinions on both candidates’ (George W. Bush and John Kerry) traits (the previously mentioned six attributes); and also which candidate the respondent would vote

for if the election were held that day. Data were coded as positive or negative. The study found that second-level agenda setting effects were stronger for Kerry, perhaps because of the need for orientation condition, and second-level agenda setting effects were stronger than first-level agenda setting effects. Additionally, the new contingent condition of affective intelligence was supported, as negative information about the candidates' image and character exerted a stronger influence on public opinion than positive information, though this may be contingent on the need for orientation. The results suggest that perhaps when less is known about a political candidate, and therefore the need for orientation is high, there may be a stronger correlation between media depictions of the candidate as negative and public opinion assessments of negativity (Wu & Coleman, 2009). Additionally, the media's emotional-affective agenda corresponds with the public's emotional impression of candidates, negative emotions are more powerful than positive emotions, even when the topic is not necessarily a negative topic, and agenda setting effects are greater on the public's emotions, or feelings, than on their cognitive assessments of character traits, according to Coleman and Wu (2010). Because the public expects candidates to "put their best foot forward," when candidates make mistakes, or are portrayed negatively, it may get more attention (Coleman & Wu, 2010).

Additional second-level agenda setting studies have examined the theory in relationship to other factors, such as political participation and need for orientation. News attention to presidential candidates creates second-level agenda-setting effects among the public, which may lead to the public forming stronger attitudes towards presidential candidates and various forms of political participation, according to Moon (2013). Moon (2013) used the hierarchy-of-effects model, organizing attributes into categories of traits

addressing perceived candidate qualifications (traits such as leadership, intellectual ability, and decisiveness) and personality (traits such as integrity, moral, and compassionate). Additionally, while the need for orientation measure has played a role in strengthening second-level agenda setting effects in some studies (Wu & Coleman, 2009), other research suggests that need for orientation does not predict opinions regarding candidate attributes, and that media attention is a better predictor of second-level agenda setting effects than media exposure (Camaj & Weaver, 2013). The national survey data asked respondents how well several attributes (moral; provides strong leadership; really cares about people like you; knowledgeable; intelligent; honest; optimistic) described presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain during the 2008 presidential election.

Overall, politics and political candidates appear to be the most popular avenue for examining the effects of second-level agenda setting. Perhaps candidates are unique in that a single object (or candidate) can be portrayed in the media according to a variety of perspectives, or attributes, including cognitive/substantive and affective descriptors. As discussed in the literature, these attributes are often grouped into specific categories that frequently occur in the vetting of presidential candidates – most frequently, integrity, competence and ideology.

Integrity, Competence, and Ideology

Many of the attributes examined in second level agenda setting literature regarding presidential candidates can be categorized into three topics: a candidate's perceived competence, a candidate's perceived integrity, and a candidate's perceived

ideological position. Generally, these categories address a candidate's perceived ability to be an effective presidential candidate and president, assuming that effective candidates are aligned with what the public values in these areas. Attributes typically fall into one of these three categories, though they may be described in different ways. For example, competence may be described as candidate qualification, and integrity may be described as personality. A presidential candidate's perceived integrity, competence, and ideology are important indicators of a candidate's popularity and electability. The attributes selected in the present study, or one-word descriptions, fall into one of these three categories.

Attributes, or candidate traits, are of political interest when they influence public perception of candidates and shape citizen perception, which may shape electoral outcomes (Kilburn, 2005). Americans hold their presidents to a high standard, and while Americans vote for issues and ideas, they also vote for a person – “someone they can trust to lead the nation” (Maisel & Brewer, 2010, p. 291). The press has increased its interest in examining the personal qualities of presidential candidates in recent decades, particularly during primary seasons (King, 1995). In examining how citizens decide which candidates to support, Mondak and Huckfeldt (2006) have two assumptions. First, voters have strong incentives to simplify the choice among or between candidates, often reducing complex and large numbers of factors to simple criteria like partisanship, experience, and maybe a candidate's stance on a few key issues. The second assumption the authors make is that candidates vary in quality (traits like character, experience, and trustworthiness). Mondak and Huckfeldt define quality as competence and integrity. The authors note that even citizens who are well informed about policy matters should want

politicians who are hard working and principled, meaning that competence and integrity should influence vote choice independently of other factors like partisanship, ideology, or the economy. Mondak and Huckfeldt's study examined how character information influences candidate evaluations by using surveys and computer-based laboratory experiments, finding that character information is highly accessible to voters, and using character evaluations is a reasonable strategy for voters to use when evaluating candidates. By increasing the salience of certain candidate qualities, the media are able to help voters simplify a vast amount of political information and distinguish between candidates.

References to candidate integrity, or personality, may be described by words such as kind, moral, honest, trustworthy, likeable, family-oriented, or even described by the phrase *someone you'd like to have a beer with*. References to candidate character frequently appear in campaign materials, media coverage, and public opinion poll questions during presidential campaigns. There are many possible reasons for this. Campaigns often attempt to differentiate their candidates from others or make them more relatable to average Americans by sharing character or personality information.

Media and public opinion polling frequently address topics and questions related to personality and character, as many Americans relate character/personality traits (or flaws) as insight into the candidate as a person, which may indicate the candidate's effectiveness as president. Competence and integrity are commonly discussed together in the literature. King (1995) cites research conducted by Kinder, Iyengar, and Abelson, who found that integrity (traits such as "moral" and "honest") and competence (traits such as "knowledgeable," "inspiring," and "strong") were deemed the two most

important aspects of a candidate's character. King examined candidate character in the 1992 presidential election by conducting a content analysis of news articles in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times* from Sept. 7 – Nov. 3 to determine the overall tone of the articles and how the candidates' credibility, compassion, trustworthiness, and morality was portrayed. The study found that references to candidate character appeared in about half of the news articles. Additionally, character references conformed to the candidates' *subtexts*, or preconceived images and stereotypes. Character or candidate integrity references are pervasive in political campaign coverage, and character references can be "directly informative about a candidate's temperament and suitability for office," (Bishin, Stevens, & Wilson, 2006, p. 237). In examining the 2000 presidential election, Bishin, Stevens and Wilson (2006) concluded that character evaluations "played a statistically and substantively significant role in influencing voters' choice for president" (Bishin, Stevens, & Wilson, 2006, p. 244).

Perceived candidate competence is a common evaluation of presidential candidates. This may be described by traits associated with leadership (such as experienced or decisive), education level, or previous job experience. It's unsurprising that Americans generally look for a potential president to demonstrate qualities associated with being highly qualified to serve in the role. Presidential candidates often find themselves in the ironic position of having to demonstrate that they are highly educated and fluent in important issues such as foreign affairs and economic policy, while also being relatable and average in other ways. Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier (2004) agree that the public often finds candidate characteristics associated with

performance-based traits of competence and interpersonal characteristics appealing, suggesting that voters may value traits associated with performance, or competence, as most important. Additionally, candidates may be able to counteract questionable perceptions of their character by demonstrating strength or success in competence attributes (Druckman, Jacobs, & Ostermeier, 2004). The dynamic between character or integrity and leadership traits have also been examined in other studies. For example, in a study regarding the 2000 presidential election, candidate personality attributes, such as need for achievement and emotional empathy may drive evaluations of leadership, which may influence voting participation and behavior (Pillai, Williams, Lowe, & Jung, 2003).

Candidates' ideological positions also play an important, yet different role in public perception. Ideology often acts as a stabilizer in determining voter intentions, meaning that voters have a natural tendency to align with the party they self-identify with (Pillai, et al.). During primaries, candidates often tailor their ideological positions to fit the current electorate (Aldrich and Alvarez, 1994). Alvarez and Nagler (1995) include ideology as one of three factors that influence election outcomes (the other two being the state of the economy and the effectiveness of the campaigns). The authors examined the 1992 presidential election, finding that ideology and issues played a substantial role in the outcome. Candidate movement away from a voter ideologically reduced the probability by .12 that the voter would support the candidate. Though candidates may tailor their ideological positions in primaries and the general election to fit the electorate, Alvarez and Nagler (2005) note that candidates must be careful, because while moving ideologically closer to some voters, candidates move ideologically further away from others.

Attributes associated with ideology are more defined than competence and integrity, meaning that ideology is typically described by a few common terms, such as conservative or liberal, or by political associations or parties such as the Tea Party. Ideology is also unique in that there are more obvious ways for voters to engage in selective exposure, whereby voters only view or engage with media that supports or reinforces common ideological positions, which ultimately influences voting behavior (Stroud, 2007). Many believe the American electorate is increasingly more polarized, as Congressional members more consistently oppose each other and party platforms and issues are considered more ideologically extreme, though some research has found that Americans are not as ideologically extreme as commonly believed (Treir & Hillygus, 2009).

CHAPTER THREE: HYPOTHESES/RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODS, AND RESULTS

Rationale

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) says that the media are able to influence what individuals think about. Second-level agenda-setting theory (McCombs et al, 1997; McCombs & Reynolds, 2008) extends this concept to examine the salience of specific characteristics, or attributes, of certain objects. The first level of agenda-setting focuses on issues or objects, while the second level of agenda-setting focuses on the attributes or characteristics of an issue, object, or public figure (McCombs & Reynolds, 2008). Agenda-setting and second-level agenda setting effects are examined between two aspects of presidential politics: media coverage and public opinion. Individuals will deem traits or attributes of political candidates that are highlighted in the media as more important than other traits or attributes that are not highlighted. Two studies are presented. Both studies utilize a similar approach in terms of the data collection, though four different public opinion responses, or attributes, were selected in each study. Generally, these attributes were selected because they were commonly given for all/both candidates during all public opinion polls, they had both positive and negative connotations, and they addressed a candidate's perceived competence, integrity, or ideology.

Study One: Media Coverage and Public Opinion in the GOP Primary

Study one examines news media content and poll data regarding several of the 2012 GOP primary candidates for president – Mitt Romney, Ron Paul, Rick Santorum, and Newt

Gingrich. Candidate attributes that have meanings associated with ideology, competence and integrity will be studied to predict relationships between certain attributes and public opinion.

Study One: Hypotheses and Research Question

H1: More mentions of ideology in the media will be associated with more mentions of ideology in public opinion polling.

H2: More mentions of competence in the media will be associated with more mentions of competence in public opinion polling.

H3: More mentions of integrity in the media will be associated with more mentions of integrity in public opinion polling.

RQ1: How do media mentions of ideology, competence, and integrity relate to public opinion mentions in general?

Study One: Methods

Data collection used publicly available aggregate public opinion poll data from the Pew Research Center for People and the Press (Pew) between October of 2011 and August of 2012 and a content analysis of articles from *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Washington Post* (WP), and *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) during the same time period. The poll data examined was comprised of the number of poll respondents who gave each of four responses, as coded by Pew, to the question “As I name a few Republican candidates for president please tell me the one word that comes to mind.” Four commonly given responses were selected: 1) *no/no way/ nope*, 2) *good*, 3) *conservative*,

and 4) *idiot*. The news articles were content analyzed according to a codebook of terms similar to the four terms from the poll data (Appendix A).

Dependent Variables: Public Opinion Poll Data

The public opinion data were taken from four cross-sectional surveys of the American public conducted by Pew between October of 2011 and August of 2012. Interviews were conducted using random digit dialing (RDD) and computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) in dual (cell phone and landline) frames. All participants (not just Republicans and Republican leaners) were asked the one-word attribute item in each sample. GOP primary candidates mentioned in the surveys included Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, and Rick Santorum. Table 1 shows the time frames, sample sizes, and candidates asked about in each sample.

TABLE 1

Sample Characteristics for Public Opinion Data, GOP Candidates

<i>Sample #</i>	<i>Field Dates</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Candidates</i>
1	October 13 - 16, 2011	1,007	Romney
2	December 8 - 11, 2011	1,008	Gingrich, Romney
3	March 15 - 18, 2012	1,009	Gingrich, Paul, Romney, Santorum
4	August 23 - 26, 2012	1,010	Romney

All RDD, dual frame samples of the American public, 18 years old and up

Four responses, or candidate attributes, were selected: *idiot*, *good/good man*, *conservative*, and *no/no way/nope*. These responses were selected because they were consistently high-ranking responses among all candidates and time periods; they dealt with competence (e.g. *idiot*), overall acceptance or rejection (e.g. *no/no way/nope*), ideology (*conservative*), and integrity (e.g. *good/good man*); they were terms that represented both positive and negative characteristics of the candidates; and because I sought terms that would be as straightforward as possible to empirically identify in the sampled news content. The attribute *no/no way/nope* speaks to both overall rejection, as well as competence, *no/no way/nope* suggests an overall rejection of a candidate's competence or electability.

Independent Variables: Newspaper Content

Newspapers for the content analysis portion of the present study were chosen for their status as widely-recognized, agenda-setting papers of record and, for the *WSJ*, its status as a conservative media agenda-setter in particular. For the *NYT* and *WP*, Lexis-Nexis was used to search for articles in those papers during each of the three-day periods before each poll's field dates that mentioned the names of each of the candidates whom the one-word attribute was asked about in that poll. The same procedure was used for the *WSJ* in the ProQuest database, where that paper's articles are available. For each of these searches, one of the candidate's full names (i.e. "Newt Gingrich," "Ron Paul," "Mitt Romney," or "Rick Santorum") was used as the search term. A total of 24 searches (8 examinations of candidates across the 4 polls, times 3 newspapers) were conducted. Date

ranges, candidates, papers, and the number of articles obtained via these searches are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Newspaper Data, GOP Candidates

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Date Range</i>	<i>Paper</i>	<i>No. of Articles</i>
Gingrich	December 5-7, 2011	NYT	21
		WP	26
		WSJ	9
	March 12-14, 2012	NYT	18
		WP	25
		WSJ	13
<i>Total Gingrich</i>			<i>112</i>
Paul	March 12-14, 2012	NYT	7
		WP	8
		WSJ	4
<i>Total Paul</i>			<i>19</i>

TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Date Range</i>	<i>Paper</i>	<i>No. of Articles</i>
Romney	October 10-12, 2011	NYT	12
		WP	16
		WSJ	10
	December 5-7, 2011	NYT	23
		WP	24
		WSJ	7
	March 12-14, 2012	NYT	23
		WP	31
		WSJ	18
	August 20-22, 2012	NYT	35
		WP	46
		WSJ	25
<i>Total Romney</i>			270
Santorum	March 12-14, 2012	NYT	16
		WP	29
		WSJ	15
<i>Total Santorum</i>			60

NYT = New York Times, WP = Washington Post, WSJ = Wall Street Journal

Next, each candidate's articles in each time period were content analyzed by a single coder for counts of instances in which each of the four, one-word attributes taken from the public opinion poll data, or pre-determined synonyms, were used. A codebook was developed by identifying definitions of the four attributes and using a thesaurus to determine synonyms of the attributes. Articles were analyzed on a sentence-by-sentence basis, and counts of statements that indicated each attribute for each candidate for each time period were tallied. The synonym lists are for the purpose of guidance, the coder used her discretion when determining whether a statement indicated the one-word attribute or not.

Study One: Analysis

The public opinion and content data were merged into a single data set. The unit of analysis was candidate in time period. The time period was defined as the three days before the poll for news content, and the four days of the poll for the public opinion content. Each candidate's public opinion data in time period was comprised of variables indicating the number of poll participants who had given *no/no way/nope*, *good/good man*, *conservative*, or *idiot* as the first one-word attribute that came to mind for that candidate during the time of that poll, which were used as the primary dependent variables in analysis. Each candidate's news content data consisted of variables counting the number of statements consistent with *no/no way/nope*, *good/good man*, *conservative*, and *idiot*, in each the NYT, WP, and WSJ during the time period. These content counts were then summed into a single, total, attribute mention content variable for each

attribute for each candidate during each time period, which were used as the primary independent variables in analysis.

In order to examine not only the impact of the mentions of an attribute in the news content on the mentions of that same attribute in the public opinion data, but also the cross-attribute relationships, multiple Poisson regression was used to estimate the dependent variables. Poisson regression is more appropriate for analyses of zero-bounded count data than OLS regression (Cameron & Trivedi, 1998).

Study One: Results

Table 3 shows the results of four Poisson regression equations estimating the percentage of public opinion one-word attribute mentions from the total number of mentions of each attribute examined in the content data.

TABLE 3

Poisson Regression Results, GOP Candidates

<i>Public opinion</i>	<i>No/no way/nope</i>	<i>Good/good man</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Idiot</i>
<hr/> News mentions <hr/>				
Intercept	3.450*	2.390*	2.162*	1.887*
No /no way/nope	0.012	-0.002	-0.014	0.061*
Good/good man	-0.093*	0.062*	0.020	-0.116*
Conservative	0.006	0.007	0.070*	0.022

TABLE 3 (CONTINUED)

Idiot	0.004	-0.002	-0.043	0.074+
Dependent Variables: Public Opinion				
Independent Variables: News mentions				
* $p < .05$, + $p < .10$				

Regarding H1, the only news mentions of *conservative* significantly predicted public opinion mentions of *conservative*. For every mention of *conservative* ($b = 0.070$, $p = .000$) in reference to a candidate in the three papers in the three days before the poll, the number of poll participants who gave *conservative* as the one-word attribute they associated with that candidate increased by 0.070.

Regarding H2, there was not evidence of a relationship between news mentions of *no/no way/nope* ($b = 0.012$, $p = ns$) for a candidate and the number of public opinion respondents who said *no/no way/nope* regarding the same candidate. For every mention of *no/no way/nope* ($b = 0.061$, $p = .003$) regarding a candidate in the three papers in the three days preceding a poll, the number of participants who gave *idiot* as the one-word attribute that came to mind increased by 0.061. The direct relationship between newspaper mentions of *idiot* ($b = 0.074$, $p = .053$) regarding a candidate and the number of poll participants who said the first word that came to mind regarding the same candidate was in the direction expected, the public opinion response increased with each news media mention, but this relationship was only marginally significant. The most complex relationship between news mentions and public opinion mentions of attributes involved the public opinion attribute *idiot*. For every mention of *good/good man* ($b = -$

0.116, $p = .001$) in reference to a candidate in the three papers in the three days before a poll, the number of participants who said that *idiot* was the attribute that came to mind decreased by 0.116.

Regarding H3, for every mention of *good/good man* ($b = -0.093$, $p = .000$) regarding a candidate in the three papers of record in the three days preceding a poll, the number of respondents who gave *no/no way/nope* as a one-word response when presented with the same candidate's name declined by 0.093. *Good/good man* news mentions for a candidate were also the only news mention attribute associated with the public opinion attribute mention of *good/good man*. For every mention of *good/good man* ($b = 0.062$, $p = .039$) for a candidate in the three papers in the three days preceding a poll, the number of respondents who gave *good/good man* as the one-word attribute describing the candidate increased by 0.062. None of the other news mention attributes examined were significantly associated with public opinion mentions of *good/good man*.

Study Two: Media Coverage and Public Opinion in the General Election

Study two examines news media content and poll data regarding the two general election candidates for president – Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. Candidate attributes that have meanings associated with competence and integrity will be studied to predict relationships between certain attributes and public opinion. Attributes associated with ideology were not considered in study two, which dealt with the general election candidates, as public opinion poll respondents were unlikely to give the same response for both of the candidates.

Study Two: Hypotheses and Research Question

H1: More mentions of competence in the media will be associated with more mentions of competence in public opinion polling.

H2: More mentions of integrity in the media will be associated with more mentions of integrity in public opinion polling.

RQ1: How do media mentions of competence and integrity relate to public opinion mentions in general?

Study Two: Methods

Newspaper articles were sampled from three agenda-setting papers, *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Washington Post* (WP), and the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) from the population of articles available for those papers in the LexisNexis and ProQuest databases for the three days prior to each poll's data collection. Poll data were publicly available via the Pew Research Center.

Dependent Variables: Public Opinion Poll Data

Public opinion data were gathered from several polls conducted by Pew asking respondents, "What ONE WORD best describes your impression of [presidential candidate]? Just the one word that best describes him" (Pew Research Center, 2012a; Pew Research Center, 2012b).

For the purposes of the present study, I considered the beginning of 2011 to be the beginning of the presidential campaign. All of Pew's one-word attribute results for the eventual Democratic Party and Republican Party nominees, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney respectively, were included as data for this research. In all, one-word attribute

questions about the two eventual nominees were asked seven times between January 1, 2011 and November 6, 2012: three times about Obama and four times about Romney.

Four attributes were chosen for examination according to three criteria: attributes/responses that were commonly given for both candidates across all time periods were desired; balance was sought between attributes with positive and negative connotations; and attributes that addressed candidate competence and integrity were also sought. Attributes that described candidate ideology were not considered for the general election study because Obama and Romney would most likely be described along different ideological spectrums, and so these responses would naturally not be given for both candidates. Based on these criteria, four one-word candidate attributes were chosen: *intelligent*, *idiot*, *good*, and *arrogant*. The one-word attribute public opinion data used in this study are summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Sample Characteristics for Public Opinion Data, General Election

Poll Date	N	Candidate	Intelligent	Idiot	Good	Arrogant
January 5-9, 2011	1503	Obama	13	9	30	4
October 13-16, 2011	1007	Romney	10	0	13	0
December 8-11, 2011	1008	Romney	4	7	15	0
January 11-16, 2012	1502	Obama	19	0	24	6
March 15-18, 2012	1009	Romney	3	11	19	9
August 23-26, 2012	1010	Romney	6	6	23	12

TABLE 4 (CONTINUED)

August 31 -	1008	Obama	17	7	38	8
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September 3, 2012

Data from Pew Research Center.

N is sample size for the poll.

Numbers under attributes (intelligent, idiot, good, arrogant) are the number of respondents who mentioned that attribute when asked “What ONE WORD best describes your impression of [candidate]?”

Independent Variables: Newspaper Coverage

Based on the dates for which polling data on the eventual nominees were available, newspaper articles from *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* available in the LexisNexis (*New York Times* and *Washington Post*) and ProQuest (*Wall Street Journal*) databases for the three days preceding each poll were sampled. Samples were taken from the three days preceding each poll to account for lag between coverage and its impact on public opinion. Search terms were “Barack Obama” OR “Obama;” and “Mitt Romney” OR “Romney.” For all three papers, a total population of 753 articles was available across all time periods. A systematic random sample of 24 percent of these articles were selected for coding (N = 181).

Two undergraduate student coders were given a dictionary of synonyms for each one-word attribute (Appendix B) and trained to code. A codebook was developed by identifying definitions of the four attributes and using a thesaurus to determine synonyms of the attributes. Articles were analyzed on a sentence-by-sentence basis, and counts of statements that indicated each attribute for each candidate for each time period were

tallied. Each coded the entire sample of newspaper articles. Coders were compensated with gift cards for their work upon completion.

Inter-coder reliability was quantified using Krippendorff's α calculated using Freelon's (2011) ReCal utility. For *intelligent* Krippendorff's $\alpha = .511$, for *idiot* Krippendorff's $\alpha = .674$, for *good* Krippendorff's $\alpha = .819$, and for *arrogant* Krippendorff's $\alpha = .654$. Thus, the one-word attribute content data yielded by the two coders were only marginally reliable, with the exception of the *good* attribute data, but reliability for the other attributes was not so poor as to require their exclusion from the project.

The two coders' counts were averaged together into single scores for each one-word attribute in each paper in each time period, as a method of reconciling data provided by two or more coders endorsed by Krippendorff (2004, p. 219). Finally, mentions of each one-word attribute in the three papers in each time period were summed into a total number of mentions of *intelligent*, *idiot*, *good*, and *arrogant* in reference to the candidate in the time period. These data are show in Table 5.

TABLE 5

Newspaper Data, General Election

Date Range	N	Candidate	Intelligent	Idiot	Good	Arrogant
January 2-4, 2011	27	Obama	4.0	5.5	8.0	3.0
October 10-12, 2011	10	Romney	4.0	2.0	6.0	0.5
December 5-7, 2011	12	Romney	1.5	7.5	1.5	1.5
January 8-10, 2012	42	Obama	7.5	9.5	11.0	7.0

TABLE 5 (CONTINUED)

March 12-14, 2012	17	Romney	0.5	2.0	1.0	4.0
August 20-22, 2012	26	Romney	5.0	10.0	19.5	6.5
August 28-30, 2012	47	Obama	6.5	8.0	9.0	6.0

N is total number of articles sampled from *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

Numbers under attributes (intelligent, idiot, good, arrogant) total coded mentions (average between two coders) across the three papers.

Study Two: Analysis

The public opinion and newspaper content data were merged into a single data set. The unit of analysis was candidate in time period. The time period was defined as the three days before the poll for news content, and the four to six days of the poll for the public opinion content. Each candidate's public opinion data in each time period was comprised of variables indicating the count of poll participants who had given *intelligent*, *idiot*, *good*, and *arrogant* as the first one-word attribute that came to mind for that candidate during the time of that poll; these were used as the dependent variables in analysis. Each candidate's newspaper content data consisted of variables indicating the sum of coder-counted mentions of *intelligent*, *idiot*, *good*, and *arrogant* in the *NYT*, *WP*, and *WSJ* during each time period. Multiple Poisson regression was used to examine the relationships between media coverage and public opinion, as well as cross-attribute relationships.

Study Two: Results

The results of four multiple Poisson regression equations estimating public opinion mentions of one-word candidate attributes from newspaper mentions of those same attributes are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6

Poisson Regression Results, General Election

Public opinion	Intelligent	Idiot	Good	Arrogant
News mentions				
Intercept	1.335*	1.863*	2.697*	0.187
Intelligent	0.345*	-0.295*	0.058	-0.104
Idiot	-0.024	0.055	-0.009	-0.286
Good	-0.029	-0.003	-0.012	0.076
Arrogant	-0.054	0.159	0.082	0.649*

Dependent Variables: Public Opinion

Independent Variables: Newspaper mentions

* $p < .05$

With respect to H1, which dealt with assessments of competence, when newspapers referred to a candidate as *intelligent* more often ($b = 0.345, p < .05$), more public opinion poll participants said that *intelligent* was the first word that came to mind when asked about the candidate. Similarly, though there was not a relationship between newspaper

references to a candidate as an *idiot* and public opinion responses of the same ($b = 0.055$, $p = ns$), the more often that newspapers referred to a candidate as *intelligent* ($b = -0.295$, $p < .05$), the less often public opinion poll participants said that *idiot* was the first word that came to mind when presented with the candidate.

Regarding H2, which dealt with integrity assessments, there were no statistically significant newspaper mention predictors of public opinion responses of *good*. Finally, the more often newspapers referred to a candidate as *arrogant* ($b = 0.649$, $p < .05$), the more often public opinion poll participants said that was the first word that came to mind when asked about the same candidate.

To answer RQ1, which dealt with relationships between competence and integrity between newspaper mentions and public opinion mentions, there was no evidence of such relationships.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

The results of the two studies presented here were mostly consistent with second-level agenda setting's proposition that media don't only tell us what to think about, but what attributes of those objects to think about. When it comes to candidates for the office of President of the United States, news media references to particular aspects of the important qualifications of ideology, competence, and integrity are sometimes associated with mentions of those same attributes in public opinion poll responses.

Presidential campaigns are increasingly utilizing more sophisticated communication techniques to reach, engage, and persuade voters. The process of communicating with the public generally occurs in three often repeating and overlapping cycles: information is presented by the media or political campaigns to the public, the public views the information and may or may not form opinions, and voters decide whether to participate, or vote, which is the ultimate goal of presidential campaigns. This research attempted to examine the middle step, or the stage where voters form opinions, by analyzing top-of-mind, one-word responses that are most salient to respondents at the time of the survey. Of course, there are many other factors that may play a role in influencing public opinion, and the description of the process of communication's influence on the responses of the public is oversimplified in many ways. However, understanding the stage where voters receive information and then form opinions may help presidential campaigns influence public opinion by understanding what types of attributes or candidate descriptions remain salient in the public's mind.

Second level agenda studies examine a wide range of candidate attributes. These attributes are usually identified by researchers prior to data collection, and media or public opinion polls are subsequently collected and assigned into pre-existing categories. Alternatively, this research attempts to utilize a more narrowly-focused approach to specifically examine descriptions of candidates, or attributes, that are more commonly given by public opinion respondents and then examining media to determine whether any relationships exist. This research is unique in how the data were collected. Instead of pre-determining categories of potential candidate attributes and descriptions, the present studies begin with responses already salient in public opinion, and then examine media content before the public opinion polls to try to understand why respondents described the candidates in certain, specific ways.

The one-word descriptions examined here were given fairly commonly to describe most candidates across most time periods that the polls were conducted, which indicates that somehow, voters were influenced to perceive the 2012 GOP primary candidates and general election candidates along those dimensions. The attributes examined here do not constitute an exhaustive list of the attributes coded in the public opinion data. Especially considering that the results indicated complex relationships between news media mentions and public opinion mentions, future research should examine the impact of news media mentions of additional attributes.

The results from studies one and two are mixed. There were relationships between media mentions of the attributes *conservative* and *good* and public opinion responses in study one, though there was not evidence of a relationship between media mentions and public opinion responses of *good* in study two. This could be because the term *good* is

fairly nebulous, even with the assistance of a codebook. While perhaps difficult to define and more challenging to empirically identify, examining candidate descriptions associated with the attribute *good* should still be considered in future studies, as candidates are increasingly described along personality and integrity dimensions. The attribute *idiot* was commonly given to describe all candidates during all time periods, though there was only a marginally significant relationship between media and public opinion mentions of this phrase in study one, and no significant relationships in study two. *Idiot* was also a challenging word to identify in the newspapers, as most news story rarely directly refer to a candidate as an idiot. *Idiot* can also mean different things to different people – it could mean a candidate is stupid or incompetent, or it could mean that a candidate is competent but a person simply disagrees with the candidate. *No/no way/nope* is obviously nebulous as well. Though nebulous, the attribute *no/no way/nope* seemed to be identified most appropriately as an attribute speaking to a candidate's perceived competence, as most media mentions involving *no/no way/nope* referred to a candidate's electability – phrases suggesting there was no way a certain candidate could win, for example. Little research exists that examines the perceived overall rejection of a candidate, though the high frequency of poll participants who gave *no/no way/nope* as the first word that came to mind to describe certain candidates in the Pew data suggest that it would be worthwhile to explore. *Intelligent* and *arrogant* are both easier to identify, which may explain why relationships were found between media and public opinion mentions of these attributes. Future research should consider more latent forms of content than the words and phrases that directly indicate a candidate attribute than those examined here.

Context carries some meanings not assessed in the present research. The same statement by a candidate may be portrayed as intelligent by one source and arrogant by another, for example. Further research would benefit from the use of additional coders to achieve greater reliability and moderate for individual perceptions of manifest vs. latent content. It could be helpful to extend the pool of media outlets, and perhaps even extend the time period of media coverage. Another important consideration is the number of respondents in each study. In study one, the polls surveyed around 1,000 people each time, while around 1,000 – 1,500 people were surveyed each time in study two. In a future study, a more rigorous approach could further break down the differences in the number of participants in each study by percentages and then compare these results to media content to account for varying numbers of participants.

The current study suggests that by capturing a respondent's top of the head, one-word description of a candidate, it may be possible to predict the respondent's increased or decreased likelihood to also accept or reject other beliefs about a candidate's perceived competence or integrity. Mondak and Huckfeldt's (2006) first assumption, that voters have strong incentive to simplify complex information about political candidates down to simple criteria, is also particularly relevant. This research suggests that voters may simplify complex information down to certain words associated with candidates, for example, Barack Obama is *intelligent*, or Mitt Romney is *good*. These one-word responses indicate that voters may manage the large amounts of information disseminated about political candidates in the media by simplifying it to brief characterizations, and the frequent polling on this topic by Pew Research Center suggests it may be reasonable for voters to do so. Ultimately, there were relationships between media mentions of some

attributes and not others, and some of the attributes were nebulous and therefore difficult to empirically to define, but future research should work through these issues. These responses were commonly given by respondents to describe all of the candidates during most of the time periods, indicating that something is influencing these public opinion respondents and further research could possibly identify these causes.

Ideology, competence, and integrity are attributes of candidates that are highlighted during campaigns in various ways, often to both the benefit and detriment of candidates depending on the day and the news agenda. How these attributes are described in the media likely influences voter perceptions of candidates, though further research is needed to determine which types of attributes have greater effects. Ultimately, political candidates, especially those running for president, would do well to understand that voters are likely influenced to perceive them in specific ways, depending on how they are portrayed in the media. Further, political candidates may use this information to their advantage by devising communication strategies associated with certain key words or phrases. Future research could examine one-word attributes in regards to political campaign advertising, political campaign social media efforts, campaign website design, and much more.

While it is clear that media play an agenda-setting role by determining the stories of the day in the media's role as "watch dog" for the public. Based on the current study, some attributes appear to have greater agenda-setting effects on public opinion than others. Other theories, such as priming or framing, might also be useful tools of analysis. Finally, attribute salience or second-level agenda setting could be applied to a wide range of newsworthy topics to better understand how things such as politics, key issues, and

major events are covered in the media and the effects of this on political knowledge and communication, civic engagement, and public perception and understanding.

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APPENDIX A

Attribute	Description
No/no way/nope	a negative used to express dissent, denial, or refusal, as in response to a question or request - difficult, can't win, antithesis, antonym, blank, cancellation, contrary, converse, counterpart, disavowal, disclaimer, forget it, gainsaying, inverse, negatory, neutralization, no, nonexistence, nothingness, nullification, nullity, opposite, opposition, proscription, refusal, rejection, renunciation, repudiation, reverse, vacuity, veto, void
Idiot	an utterly foolish or senseless person; fool; half-wit; imbecile; dunce; dolt; numskull; moron; simpleton; blockhead
Good/good man	morally excellent; virtuous; righteous; pious; satisfactory in quality, quantity or degree; of high quality; right; proper; fit; acceptable; admirable; commendable; congenial; honorable
Conservative	disposed to preserve existing conditions, institutions, etc. or restore traditional ones, moderate, constant, controlled, inflexible, not extreme, right of center, right-wing, traditional, unchanging, uncreative, unprogressive, steady

APPENDIX B

Attribute	Description
Intelligent	having good understanding or high mental capacity; quick to comprehend; smart; astute; brilliant; clever; brainy; knowledgeable; wise; sharp; ingenious; quick-witted
Idiot	an utterly foolish or senseless person; fool; half-wit; imbecile; dunce; dolt; numskull; moron; simpleton; blockhead
Good	morally excellent; virtuous; righteous; pious; satisfactory in quality, quantity or degree; of high quality; right; proper; fit; acceptable; admirable; commendable; congenial; honorable
Arrogant	making claims or pretensions to superior importance or rights; overbearingly assuming; insolently proud; a sense of superiority, self-importance, or entitlement; having exaggerated self-opinion; conceited; egotistic; haughty; puffed up