

Do Trained and Untrained Coders Perceive Electoral Coverage Differently?

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## **Abstract**

Trained and untrained coders' assessments of TV coverage of parties during the 1997 Canadian election are compared. Untrained coders' perceptions are more positive than those of trained coders and can be colored by partisan and personal predispositions. Despite these perceptual screens, both trained and untrained coders' assessments exhibit similar dynamics during the campaign.

## **Introduction**

Trained coders are conventionally employed to conduct content analyses of campaign news coverage. Their training is designed to ensure that they set aside their own biases and predispositions when they perform the coding task. This objectivity is essential when the research hypotheses center on questions of fairness, balance and equitable treatment of the political parties and their candidates. It may not be so appropriate, though, when the focus shifts to the impact of campaign coverage on viewers precisely because the coders have been trained **not** to respond like real-world viewers. Is the use of trained coders, then, likely to distort assessments of media effects? To address this question, we undertake a structured experiment that systematically compares how trained and untrained coders assess television news coverage of the major parties during the 1997 Canadian election campaign. The objective is to determine whether ordinary citizens and trained coders differ significantly in their interpretation of media coverage.

## **Trained versus Untrained Coders**

The expectation that experts' and average citizens' interpretations of the news will be different rests on solid theoretical grounds. The classic works on cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), balance theory (Heider 1957) and selective perception (Freeman and Sears 1965; see Joslyn and Ceccoli 1996 for a recent assessment) all strongly suggest that reactions to media coverage are selective and reflect individual biases and political predispositions. Inspired by the concepts of assimilation and contrast developed in social judgment theory (Sherif and Hovland 1961), work on political perceptions (Page and Brody 1972; Conover and Feldman 1982) points to similar conclusions, showing that people engage in systematic perceptual distortions when estimating the issue position taken by parties and candidates (Granberg and Holmberg 1986).

Dispositions toward the media are another potential source of distortion. In a study of the factors explaining newspaper credibility, Gunther (1992, 150) concluded that "those most involved in an issue, demonstrated by their highly partisan or polarized attitudes, were also more skeptical of mass media." According to this "hostile media environment" hypothesis, partisans tend to believe that the media are biased against their party and that coverage of their preferred party is systematically more negative than that of opposing parties (see Vallone et al. 1985; Perloff 1989; Gunther 1992; Curtice et al. 1998).

It is also possible that untrained coders are systematically more positive in their assessments than trained coders. Professional norms (Patterson and Donsbach 1996) prevent journalists from

making overtly negative comments. As a result, many implicitly negative comments about parties and leaders may not appear as such to those who are not familiar with journalistic codes and practice. Assuming that experts possess a better understanding than ordinary citizens of the devices which journalists can use to manufacture negative stories, we should expect trained coders' assessments to be markedly more negative than those of untrained coders.

Because trained coders' interpretation of media coverage is less subject to distortions induced by personal and partisan predispositions or by a lack of familiarity with journalistic codes, we expect trained and untrained coders to differ significantly in their assessments of media coverage of the parties. We also expect significant differences among untrained coders themselves, subject as they are to the distorting effects of personal and partisan predisposition. This said, we concur with the view expressed by Joslyn and Ceccoli (1996: 164) that individuals' perceptual screens are not powerful enough to completely insulate them from absorbing dissonant information. Collectively, these perspectives produce the following set of hypotheses:

(1) Untrained coders' assessments of TV news coverage of parties will be more positive than trained coders' assessments.

(2) Personal predispositions toward specific political parties or the party system as a whole will be an important source of distortion among untrained coders.<sup>1</sup> Partisans' evaluations of the media coverage of their preferred party will be more positive than

opponents' evaluations, while nonvoters' evaluations of parties' coverage will be more negative than voters' evaluations.

(3) Because perceptual screens do not insulate individuals entirely from dissonant information, the main differences between the groups of coders (trained/untrained, partisans/nonpartisans, voters/nonvoters) will be in terms of level rather than direction; untrained, partisans and voters' assessments will follow basically the same patterns observed for trained, non partisans and non voters during the course of a campaign.

### **The Experiment**

An experimental design is used to elicit assessments of media coverage of the five major political parties who fought the 1997 Canadian election. The focus is on television news, the main source of political information in Canada and in most other Western democracies (Fletcher 1991; Ansolabehere et al. 1993). The stories assessed by coders include most of the material about political parties and leaders shown in the major 10 p.m. newscasts aired by the French-language (SRC) and English-language (CBC and CTV) networks during the election campaign. The two public broadcasters, CBC and SRC, are conventionally considered to be representative of coverage on the Canadian television news media in general (Taras 1993; Mendelsohn, 1993; De Bonville and Vermette 1994).<sup>2</sup>

The broadcast material was prepared so that each story could be shown to participants one at a time and clearly identified with the party that was the story's main focus. Immediately following the presentation of each story, the participants were asked to make a judgment about the tone of the story (positive, neutral or negative) by circling a number on an answer sheet (-1, 0 or 1). The order of presentation of the parties was the same throughout and the chronology of the newscasts paralleled that of the campaign, going from the announcement of the election (April 27, 1997) to the day before the election (June 2, 1997).

A total of 491 stories, taken from 108 newscasts (36 days each for CBC, CTV and SRC), were coded by three groups of participants during sessions that took place in March 1998 at l'Université de Montréal for the French-language network (SRC; March 14) and McGill University for the English-language networks (CBC and CTV; March 14 and 15). The material shown lasts about five and a half hours on average. The average number of stories per day is 4.5, with the incumbent Liberals typically receiving more coverage. The experiment was conducted under the supervision of three of the main investigators and two research assistants. Breaks and lunch were planned to limit fatigue effects. Each viewing session was followed by a debriefing and discussion.

The participants, who served as our "untrained" coders, were university undergraduates in disciplines other than political science, recruited through advertisements in student newspapers. Potential participants were contacted by telephone and asked a few questions to determine if they were eligible voters in June 1997, whether they had voted and, if so, for which party, along with their

field of specialization. The recruitment was done in January and February 1998. Three groups were formed, one for the French-speaking component of the experiment and two for the English-speaking component, with each group having an equal number of men and women and including nonvoters and supporters of each of the main political parties (the Liberal Party, the Progressive Conservative Party, the NDP and the Reform Party for the English networks and the Liberals, Conservatives and Bloc quebécois for the French network).<sup>3</sup> The sample for the French-speaking component comprised 14 participants (four Liberals, four Bloquistes, three Conservatives and three nonvoters), while the combined samples for the English-speaking component comprised 18 participants (four Liberals, four Conservatives, four NDP, two Reformers and four nonvoters). Because the results are very similar for CBC and CTV, the two English-speaking groups, with nine members for each channel, were collapsed.

The discussions with participants following the viewing sessions confirmed that the news analyzed, though not new, was sufficiently remote in time to allow for independent judgments. Using actual broadcast news stories grounds the experiment in reality and avoids the artificial character of similar tasks applied to fictitious issues, parties or candidates.

The same set of stories was analyzed by two trained coders. Both coders were fluently bilingual. After a first pretest based on a random selection of ten percent of the stories, final decisions were made about the coding criteria (available upon request). A second pretest, again based on a random ten percent of the stories, produced a highly acceptable agreement level of 89 percent (Olsti

1969,160; De Bonville and Vermette 1994, 695). All of the stories were then analyzed by the trained coders, one for the French-language network (SRC) and one for the English-language networks (CBC and CTV).

## **The Results**

The results are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. As predicted, untrained coders' assessments of television news coverage are more positive than those of trained coders. The gap between trained and untrained coders appears consistently for all ten comparisons (overall, regionally, and for the different parties within regions), with all but one of these comparisons being statistically significant. The untrained coders' positivity bias is especially pronounced for the English-language coverage.

There is also clear evidence of the impact of partisanship on the judgment of untrained coders. The differences between partisans and nonpartisans are particularly noticeable in assessments of the English-language coverage. In all four comparisons, partisans are more positive about the media coverage of their own party than are opponents, and all of these differences are statistically significant. The clearest case is that of Reformers whose perceptions of their party's coverage is markedly more favorable than those of other coders. The pattern is weaker for the French-speaking coders. Only Liberal voters exhibit a significant partisan bias, perceiving their party's coverage to be much more favorable than do other coders. It is worth noting that the partisan screen is most apparent for the two parties whose coverage was evaluated the most negatively overall, namely the Reform Party on the English-language networks and the Liberal Party on the French-language network.

The perceptual screen of apathy also seems to be at work. Nonvoters are consistently more negative in their interpretation of the coverage of political parties than are voters, a disposition that presumably reinforces their decision to stay out of the voting process. The pattern is particularly evident in the case of the two parties that provide an outlet for populist protest, the NDP and Reform. Despite their greater inclination to see negative coverage, though, nonvoters still tend to be more positive in their assessments than are trained coders.

These results are all confirmed by the multivariate regression analysis whose results are presented in Table 2. The unit of analysis in this regression is the evaluation of the news and the explanatory variables refer to the coders' characteristics (trained, partisan, participant) and the identity of the party featured in the news item. The regression includes the 7 competitive parties in our study (the Liberals and the Conservatives for both the French and English-language networks, the other parties for either one or the other of the networks) with the Reform Party as the reference category. These party variables (all positive and statistically significant) clearly show that Reform received the most negative coverage, and the notable difference between the Liberal Party's coefficients for the French and English-language networks confirm that the party received clearly less favourable coverage in Québec than in the rest of Canada.

The coefficients that interest us most are those which deal with the coders' characteristics. The results clearly confirm the negative impact of expertise and the positive impact of partisan attachment on the evaluation of the news, but are more mitigated in highlighting the positive effect of

participation on these same evaluations. The standardized regression coefficients (of .073, .066 and .023 respectively) confirm the more significant impact of the expertise and partisanship dimensions on perceptions of party coverage, as compared to electoral participation.

Our last hypothesis posits that differences between groups of coders (trained/untrained, partisans/nonpartisans, voters/nonvoters) are differences in levels rather than direction. Graphically, this means that the lines depicting the various groups of coders' assessments across the campaign will be parallel. The lines for untrained, partisans and voters though, will be higher, reflecting their positivity bias. Figure 2 strongly confirms this expectation. Apart from a limited number of exceptions, the dynamics appear essentially the same among the groups, shifting in response to the same set of events during the campaign.

This result is neatly confirmed by a more direct test of our hypothesis presented in Table 3. It consists of three time-series regressions measuring the link between the coders' evaluations and their group of belonging for all 36 days of the campaign. Two expectations flow from our third hypothesis. The first is that of a very strong link between the evaluations of the coders of the different groups, which would reflect the similarity of their reactions to the campaign's evolution. This should show itself by fairly high percentages of explained variation and by positive and significant regression coefficients, in principle close to the value of 1. The second expectation deals with the constants of these regressions. In the three cases, they should be similar to the regression coefficients in Table 2 for the variables concerning the coders' characteristics.

The results clearly confirm these hypotheses. The case of the coders' expertise is the clearest. The coefficient in this regression is very close to the value of 1 (.95) and the constant (-.20) is almost identical to the regression coefficient comparing the trained and untrained coders (-.21) in Table 2. The results based on the distinction between partisans and non-partisans are also very suggestive. The coefficient measuring the link between the evaluations of these two groups is high (.70) and the constant is very similar to the coefficient in Table 2 measuring the effect of the partisan filter on these evaluations (.15 vs. .13). Finally, the results based on the effect of participation are again less clear-cut, but still in conformity with our expectations. The link between the evaluations of voters and abstentionists is fairly systematic (coefficient of .62) and the constant is positive and significant, and of similar size to the coefficient measuring the effect of this dimension in Table 2 (.06 vs. .04). Overall, then, our third hypothesis is largely confirmed.

### **Conclusion**

Three conclusions emerge from this systematic comparison of trained and untrained coders' assessments of election campaign news coverage. First, untrained coders perceive television news coverage of parties much more positively than do trained coders, a tendency that may reflect their lack of knowledge of journalistic codes. Second, significant perceptual screens are at work among untrained coders. Their judgments are colored by personal and especially partisan predispositions. Partisans tend to see the coverage of their own party in a more favorable light than opponents do. This is especially true of parties that receive negative coverage. This finding contradicts the notion that ordinary citizens perceive themselves to be living in a «hostile media environment». Nonvoters, on the

other hand, tend to perceive media coverage of parties more negatively than do voters. Partisanship thus protects believers from absorbing massive doses of dissonant information, while the negativity bias of nonvoters confirms them in their decision to stay on the sidelines. Third, despite these perceptual screens, ordinary citizens' assessments of television news do reflect campaign dynamics. In other words, partisan and personal perceptual screens are not powerful enough to insulate individuals from the pulse of campaign dynamics, confirming Joslyn and Ceccoli's contention (1996,164) that "even in those instances when television news reinforces preexisting attitudes, its contribution of political images and interpretations cannot be ignored."

Overall, these results provide a clear reminder that the "objective" media content as seen by expert coders may be significantly different from the "subjective" reality as perceived by ordinary viewers. The implications of our findings about untrained coders for the study of media effects are mixed. Whether coders are trained or not, they are likely to detect similar trends in the tone of campaign coverage. Relying on the judgments of trained coders, though, may lead us to overstate the potential for media effects in the real world. Ordinary viewers appear as able as experts to catch what is going on during a campaign, but partisanship for some, cynicism for others, and the inability to perceive negative cues for many, appear to be strong counteracting forces to electoral change

Table 1. The Impact of Training, Partisanship, and Apathy on Assessments of Television News Coverage

*English Networks (CBC and CTV):*

	Trained Coders	Untrained Coders				
		All	Partisans	Nonpartisans	Voters	Nonvoters
Liberal	-.36	.00**	.13	-.01**	-.01	-.09
Conservative	-.01	.20**	.33	.14**	.21	.10
NDP	.21	.30*	.43	.25**	.34	.17**
Reform	-.60	-.34**	.03	-.41**	-.29	-.54**
<i>Overall</i>	-.22	.02**	.24	-.03**	.04	-.04*

*French Network (SRC):*

	Trained Coders	Untrained Coders				
		All	Partisans	Nonpartisans	Voters	Nonvoters
Liberal	-.46	-.18**	-.08	-.25**	-.19	-.24
Conservative	.03	.18**	.20	.17	.19	.12
Bloc	-.20	-.15	-.14	-.16	-.14	-.21*
<i>Overall</i>	-.23	-.06**	-.03	-.07*	-.05	-.13*

*All Networks:*

	Trained Coders	Untrained Coders				
		All	Partisans	Nonpartisans	Voters	Nonvoters
<i>Overall</i>	-.23	-.01**	.12	-.03**	.01	-.07**

Note: T-tests are for trained coders vs. all untrained coders, partisans vs. nonpartisans, and voters vs. nonvoters.

\*\* p<.01 ; \* p<.05

Table 2. Pooled Regression on Coders' Evaluations, All Networks.

	Coders' Evaluations
Constant	-.39 (.04)*
Trained coders	-.21 (.04)*
Partisans	.13 (.03)*
Voters	.04 (.03)
Liberals, English networks	.32 (.04)*
Liberals, French network	.14 (.04)*
Conservatives, English networks	.53 (.04)*
Conservatives, French network	.52 (.05)*
NDP, English networks	.64 (.04)*
BQ, French network	.19 (.04)*
<i>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i>	.09
<i>N</i> =	4370

Note : Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Each observation represents a coder's evaluation of a news item.

\*  $p < .01$

Table 3. Predicting Daily Evaluations of One Group of Coders with the Outgroup's Evaluations, All Networks

	Evaluations of		
	Trained coders	Partisans	Voters
Constant	-.20 (.03)**	.15 (.02)**	.06 (.03)*
Outgroup's evaluations (untrained / nonpartisans / nonvoters)	.95 (.17)**	.70 (.13)**	.62 (.15)**
<i>Adjusted R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.46	.44	.32
<i>N</i> =	36	36	36

Note : Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\*\* p<.01 ; \* p<.05

Figure 1. The Impact of Training, Partisanship, and Apathy on Assessments of Television News Coverage

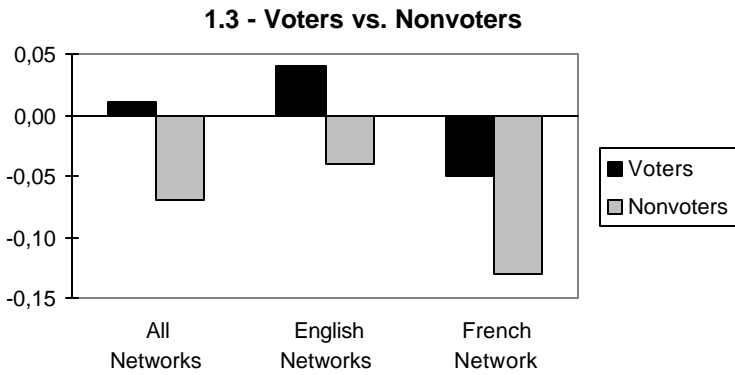
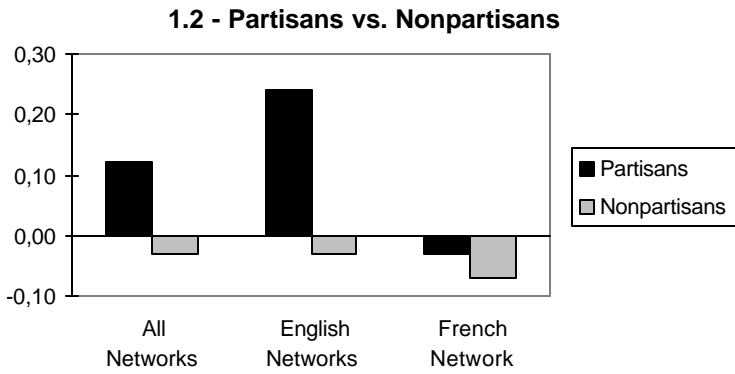
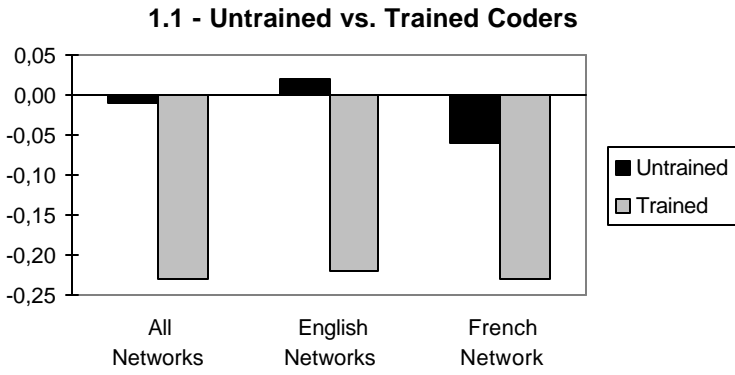
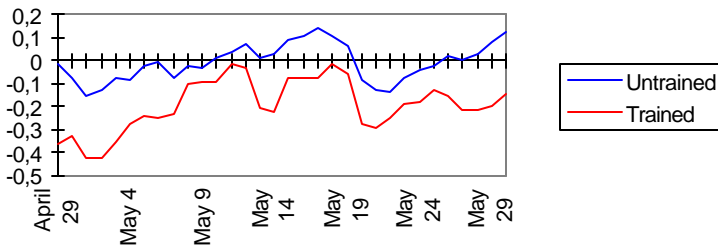
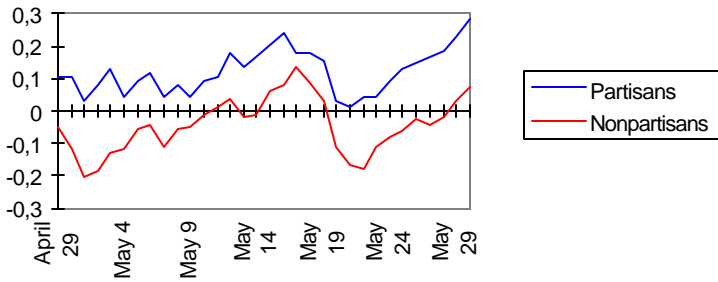


Figure 2. Dynamic Patterns in Assessments of the Parties' Television News Coverage Between Groups of Coders

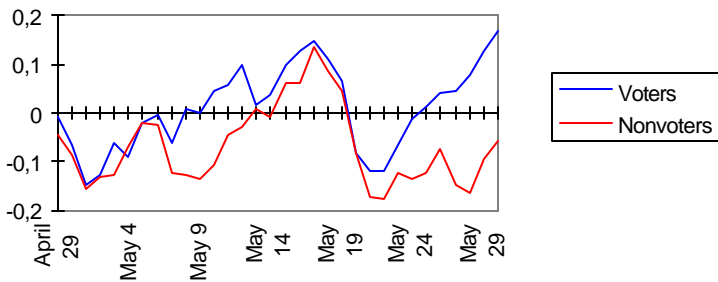
**2.1 - Untrained vs. Trained Coders, All Networks**



**2.2 - Partisans vs. Nonpartisans, All Networks**



**2.3 - Voters vs. Nonvoters, All Networks**



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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Because television is generally perceived as a neutral medium (Curtice et al 1998), though, attitudes toward the media should not be a significant source of distortion.

<sup>2</sup> The original intention was to include two private stations in the experiment, the English-language CTV and the French-language TVA, but due to difficulties in recruitment, only CTV coverage could be used.

<sup>3</sup> The Reform Party presented only 10 token candidates in Quebec (75 ridings) while the NDP received less than 2 percent of the Quebec vote. The Bloc qu6becois did not field candidates outside Quebec.