

Do Large-N Media Studies Bury the Lead, or Even Miss the Story?

Bruce M. Hicks (*University of Montreal*)¹

Abstract

This paper uses immigration as a case study to examine whether a qualitative approach to content analysis can offer a different perspective on policy discourse than that provided by quantitative analysis. In examining the Canadian elections of 2004, 2006 and 2008, it finds evidence that immigration was a much greater issue at both a riding-level and within certain communities than evidenced in a large-N study. It suggests that issues surrounding identity may be 'permanent' top-of-mind issues for some voters, and that the reason minor campaign incidents sometimes garner disproportionate attention is because they act as an 'emotional heuristic' for top-of-mind issues even when information is high.

Introduction

It has been well chronicled how behaviouralism came to dominate political science in the 1950s and 1960s, and how historical and rich contextual approaches came to be discarded in favour of sociological and, then, psychological perspectives of the individual citizen's engagement (or lack of engagement) in governance (see, for e.g., Eckstein, 1963).

In many of the sub-fields within political science there has been, in the intervening 50 years, a partial pendulum swing back, with some of the earlier discarded approaches re-emerging as useful and even necessary for a holistic understanding of politics (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). Of course, the methodological debate surrounding qualitative and quantitative, including the more recent infatuation with experiments, continues to divide the discipline, as it does all fields of academic inquiry.

Some have tried to bridge the quantitative-qualitative divide by suggesting that the two sides need only adopt a common language, though less usefully they equally recommend that the common language be quantitative and admonish all researchers to increase their 'N' (e.g. King et al., 2001). In response, it has been argued that through qualitative examination one has access to an almost

¹ Bruce Hicks, Department of Political Science, University of Montreal, Montréal QC H3C 3J7
bruce.hicks@umontreal.ca

unlimited number of 'N's within a single case, as the researcher is free to delve deeper into a question unrestrained by a singular unit of analysis and a finite universe of similar cases (Bennett and George, 1997; George and Bennett, 2005).

This methodological debate has not as yet found its way into media studies in any substantive fashion. The reason for this is because this field of inquiry only relatively recently emerged. There has been sufficient time to experience a partial pendulum swing in terms of findings, but it lacks the longevity which is necessary for an healthy to-and-fro over methodology. For the most part, quantitative researchers have been left alone in this field.

Of course the initial forays into media studies were theoretical and qualitative. These posited a media that could tell people what to think (e.g., Lippmann, 1922). After all, propaganda had been a priority for the state in an era of war and cold war, with entire government ministries devoted to its implementation. This conclusion was challenged by early quantitative researchers who found minimal media effects when they began exploring voting behaviour. The media, it was concluded, did little more than reinforce existing public opinion (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Berleson et al., 1954).

Quantitative research found evidence that people resisted the media by filtering what they were exposed to through their own biases (Surlin and Tate, 1979; Brigham and Giesbrecht, 1976; Soroka, 2000); and these biases caused them to only consider information that conformed to their own views (Hur and Robinson, 1983; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1981). As an alternative, a number of limited media effects were identified, such as telling people what to think *about* instead of what to think. This 'agenda setting' occurs among the public and politicians alike, where the media selects stories and by choosing to cover them, puts them on the public policy agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Soroka, 2000). The media can also tell people *how* to think about a subject, and through 'priming' establish standards by which people evaluate political leaders (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). And the media can 'frame' an issue by, for example, using episodic or thematic news frames that implicitly connect responsibility for policy and for political action to individuals or to society (Iyengar, 1991). Media may also be impacting on different segments of the population differently; with, for example, people with medium amounts of information being prone to greater influence than those with high levels of information (Zaller, 1992, 1996).

As quantitative researchers have been largely left alone to explore these ideas in response to the early qualitative forays, one might be left with the impression that qualitative conclusions are naturally prone to error simply *because* they are qualitative. Or one might conclude that qualitative insights are useful only for suggesting hypothesis which can later be 'tested'. After all, Plato's 'allegory of the cave' led to Lippman's idea of 'pictures in their heads' and this in turn suggested the plethora of research questions around framing, priming and agenda setting that have and continue to be tested.

Yet it is just as possible that qualitative research may offer insights that are materially different from what might emerge through quantitative research. If true, this is important for not only a healthy methodological debate, but also for the study of politics and for the proper functioning of society as the academy is increasingly offering its expertise to the public and the media it is studying. Large-N studies of the media have joined their cousins, the public opinion poll, in offering a lens by which to analyze election campaigns. But if this research has its own blind spots, or if there is an alternative viewpoint that can be obtained through a qualitative approach, it is important that we recognize this and that qualitative researchers join in this research project and in the subsequent public debate.

To make an initial foray into this broad question, this paper examines the specific policy issue of immigration and how it unfolded in the media during the last three election campaigns. It draws on the data and findings of the 'Media Observatory' at McGill University for the three federal elections it has studied to date and compares their general analysis of these elections with a qualitative analysis of stories related to immigration. The choice of this policy question as the case study rests on the fact that both the Observatory, for these elections, and large-N studies of previous elections, have found this *not* to be a significant election issue. Yet the popular press has, in each of these three recent elections, specifically identified this as being a major battleground for the political parties. This disconnect not only suggests this as a useful departure point, but is deserving of closer examination.

At the most basic level, if we find evidence that immigration may have had a greater relevance for the campaign, for the media or for certain aspects of the public, in any of these three elections, this would support the argument that a qualitative approach provides a unique perspective. More challengingly, we will be looking for unique insights that a qualitative approach might provide to support the argument that this perspective is a necessary one, whether this be a contribution to our understanding elections, voting behaviour or, even, media effects. We begin by reviewing the work of the Media Observatory for the elections of 2004, 2006 and 2008.

Recent Elections as Seen Through a Large-N Media Study

Founded in advance of the 2004 election, and originally called the 'Observatory on Media and Public Policy', the Observatory's main goal continues to be "to encourage the *quantitative* study of mass media content in Canada" (Media Observatory, 2009, emphasis added). Its methodology for studying elections is content analysis of the large national and regional daily newspapers in Canada which are coded on a daily basis throughout an election campaign.

While not a formal objective, the Observatory has also been focused on trying to eliminate coding bias, a goal that led them in the 2008 election to shift from manual coding to an automated coding done entirely by computer software.

In the 2004 and 2006 elections, researchers coded all stories first dichotomously as either primarily a horserace/campaign story or as an issue-story. Issues, party and leaders mentioned in the story, and general tone towards the leaders and parties, were the secondary areas of coding. In the case of leaders and parties, positioning in the story (i.e. first, second or third) was recorded and coders were asked to identify if (and only if) a journalistic tone was evident. In other words, if the journalist, columnist or editorial writer offered her interpretation with respect to the story, thus actively placing the party or leader in a 'positive' or 'negative' light, these were coded as +1 or -1 respectively. Most news stories, as opposed to opinion pieces or editorials, would be expected to code 'neutral' (0) even if the story itself may have been a report of a negative or positive campaign development for that leader or party.

While this coding approach was based on that adopted by Robinson & Sheehan (1983), it differs in one important way. Horserace/campaign stories were included in this coding, so the journalistic interpretation of how the campaign was unfolding was also being coded, including reports on public opinion polls. Coders were trained, moved around and occasionally subjected to double coding so as to reduce coding error and eliminate systematic bias.

In 2008, a computer program was introduced to search text for key words and then weight these words on number of mentions, an approach which was equally applied to mentions of leaders and parties with the additional consideration of the leader's and party's placement in the story, and with coding for tone using a dictionary-based approach also managed by computer software.

To date, the Observatory has studied, in real time, from the dropping of the writ to Election Day, the federal elections of 2004, 2006 and 2008. In 2004, daily coding occurred between May 17th and June 28th, inclusive, and in 2006, between November 29th and January 21st, inclusive, and during those years the newspapers coded were the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*, *Calgary Herald*, *Vancouver Sun*, *La Press* and *Le Devoir*. In 2008, due to the fact that key word software was being used, the analysis did not include the last two francophone papers, and the period of analysis began several days before the dropping of the writ when an election was felt to be imminent, so ran from September 3rd to October 14th, inclusive.

The research was funded through FQRSC, SSHRC and the Donner Canadian Foundation, though in 2006 *Maclean's Magazine* made a small contribution towards the cost of hiring students for coding. Arrangements were made at the outset of the campaign with a single media outlet to publish weekly reports from the Observatory, and this was the *Globe and Mail* (on-line edition) in 2004 and *Maclean's Magazine* in 2006 and 2008, though these were not contractual nor exclusive, so additional reports were published elsewhere. At least one paper summarizing the overall findings was published following the election in IRPP's *Policy Options*, and more academic papers have and are being produced analyzing the data.

Election Coverage

For context, the 2004 election was called by the new Liberal Leader and Prime Minister, Paul Martin, amid high polling numbers, but these numbers evaporated and the Liberal Party went from a majority position in the House of Commons to barely holding onto a minority government by Election Day. With regards to the media coverage in that election, the Observatory researchers concluded that the media appeared to follow the campaign, rather than set the agenda, and that coverage focused less on issues and more on 'horserace' aspects (Goodyear-Grant et al., 2004). According to the raw data, among the 2,869 articles on the election, of which 41% were articles about issues and 54% concerned the 'horserace', health care received the most attention at 15% (access to the raw data is available at the Media Observatory, 2009). Tied at second place were taxes and the 'sponsorship scandal' with 8% each. Most issues came in at around 1 or 2%.

The 2006 election was triggered by the opposition parties defeating the Martin Government on a question of confidence shortly after the Gomery Inquiry released its first report into the 'sponsorship scandal', and concluded with the Conservatives under Stephen Harper winning slightly more seats than any other party and forming a minority government. The media coverage in this election, according to the Observatory researchers, also did not involve the media in agenda setting. While the campaign began focused on the 'sponsorship scandal', by the second week policy pronouncements had begun to take over, with the Conservative Party taking the lead on such matters as national unity, crime and taxes, with other leaders responding, thereby moving issues to the forefront of the media's coverage (Andrew et al., 2006). As for general media coverage of the campaign, the researchers concluded that the Conservatives did, in fact, run a better campaign than the Liberals, and that the media only reported this reality, in addition to the issues which the party leaders were identifying (Soroka and Maioni, 2006). According to the raw data, while policy issues scored 7 points higher than

the previous year, at only 48% of the total coverage (compared to 44% which still focused on the election as a 'horserace') it can hardly be seen as an issue driven campaign based solely on the Observatory's raw data (Media Observatory, 2009). No single issue dominated the campaign or advantaged a political party. In the 3,753 election articles written over what was a much longer campaign period, interrupted by a Christmas break, national unity/separatism was the most mentioned at 8%, followed by taxes and the 'sponsorship scandal' which tied at 7%, and defence/foreign affairs and social issues/programmes tied at 6%.

The 2008 federal election was called by Prime Minister Stephen Harper after claiming the House of Commons had become unworkable, and while the election call was likely precipitated by a perceived strategic advantage, the Conservatives were unable to win a majority of seats though they obtained a slightly larger minority. As for the media coverage, the Observatory researchers conclude that the coverage in this election was much different than the previous campaigns in that the Conservatives overwhelmingly dominated the media coverage, though this coverage did not have a positive tone according to their new computerized system of coding, leading them to also conclude that it was the sheer volume of coverage and not the content which advantaged the Conservatives over the other political parties (Andrew et al., 2008). It should be noted that stories were not identified as being horserace/campaign stories in this election. This makes it impossible to determine the balance between media coverage on electoral competition rather than issues, and to compare this to previous years, and this coding change may have altered the percentages of issue mentions, as well as the results concerning tone. It is the intention of the Observatory to go back and code the previous two elections using the new computer software, which will answer these questions. According to the raw data, the economy came in at 27%, followed by foreign affairs at 17% and finance/commerce at 14% (Media Observatory, 2009). Clearly media reports of the world's economic situation set the agenda for the overall campaign, which is a conclusion of the Observatory researchers who also note that even the environment and the Liberal Party's controversial Green Plan "was overshadowed by the financial crisis in the U.S." (Andrew et al., 2008; 79). The environment came in at 11%, just behind crime/justice at 13% (Media Observatory, 2009).

Media Effects

While its post-election analysis did not point to any media effects – in fact it suggested that the predominant effect that could be expected in an election, agenda setting, did not occur – the Observatory has since developed a predictive model using its coding for tone, and it has tested daily shifts in media tone with and against aggregated polling data collected by the eight Canadian polling firms operating during the 2004 and 2006 elections (Soroka et al., n.d.). Using a lead time of four days, they found that the addition of media tone to polling data increases its predictive quality to within 1.5 percent of the public's actual position (as evidenced by polls conducted four days later). Further, media tone alone can explain as much as 75 percent of the variance between the main parties' levels of support. This, they cautiously suggest, can be seen as evidence of a media effect.

The argument for a media effect proceeds as follows... The authors suggest that since "most information about the campaign that citizens receive comes from mass media; it follows that almost all movement over a campaign is a media effect" and since the coding the Observatory did for tone is not a coding of information but rather of affect-laden vocabulary, if this leads public opinion then it likely represents a causal direction (*ibid.*: 12). Ergo, the media is having an influence on vote choice.

The authors freely acknowledge that they cannot defend against the counter argument that journalists are simply mirrors for what is happening, so that even their evidence of a lead time for media tone over vote choice could be the result of journalists' attentiveness to information the public obtains later, and reflects shifts in the mood of the campaign, shifts in public opinion and the views of opinion leaders. Journalists may also be interpreting the campaign and thus the lead over opinion reflects expectations. However, the consistency of their model in two elections makes them believe they are seeing an effect.

Immigration as a Case Study

In none of the data sets collected by the Media Observatory, for the three federal elections that they have coded, does immigration emerge as a significant issue. In 2004, immigration accounted for only 1% of all mentions, and while in 2006 immigration coverage incrementally increased to reach 2%, it appears to have fallen back to 1% in 2008. As noted above, the coding process changed in 2008 which may have altered weighting of issues, though our own search of Canadian newspapers using the key words 'immigration' and 'election' found a similar proportion of articles in both 2004 and 2008 (1,173 of 21,101 election articles in 2004, and 1,158 of 19,964 in 2008).

Since the voter only has two or three issues at the top-of-mind at any one time, and these are brought to the top by the media, then non-significant issues should remain buried. And if there is a media and/or campaign effect that emerges via the tone of the mass media, then all issues become less relevant. Further, in the two elections for which coding is available (and it is likely true also in 2008), stories about the campaign as a horserace or strategic maneuver for electoral advantage accounted for half of all the media, with even the most primed issue never getting over one-quarter of the overall coverage even in an 'issue' dominated election. One would have to conclude based on this data that even through self selection it would be a challenge for consumers of mainstream media to be swayed by a policy issue which only eked out a single percent of this noisy election coverage.

Yet the popular press has characterized immigration as a central battleground between the Liberals and the Conservatives in all three of these elections. This assumption is based on the fact that the outcome of these elections, in terms of which party will win the most seats in Parliament, due to Canada's current electoral dynamics, is being decided in a handful of ridings in the urban electoral battlegrounds of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, all of which have large immigrant populations (Black and Hicks, 2008). Swaying multicultural communities to the Conservatives was seen to have the potential to deliver the government, and then the possibility to deliver majorities, and it is increasingly discussed in terms of strategically altering Canadian politics for years to come.

The *Vancouver Sun* noted in an editorial during the 2006 election that "the Liberals have been the party of record when it comes to wrapping themselves in the saris, kimonos or chadors of multiethnic representation... but you can only bank on the achievements of the past for so long" (Jan. 10, 2006: A11). CBC's *National* reported that "the Conservatives are pushing hard trying to win over vote-rich immigrant communities" (Peter Mansbridge, Jan. 13, 2006) and that "the NDP's message has sold well with immigrants in the inner cities, but when it comes to the middle class suburbs, the battle for the immigrant vote is between the Liberals and the Conservatives" (Julie Van Dusen, *ibid.*). In the 2008 election, one of the co-directors of the Media Observatory is even quoted as saying that support for the Liberals among immigrant communities was waning and that a shift was underway, sentiments which were echoed by academics from several other Canadian universities (*Globe and Mail*, Sept. 17, 2008).

There is clearly a perception among politicians, journalists and even academics that a hotly contested campaign over immigration is taking place, and yet if an election campaign only exists through the communications media, then no significant campaign can actually be seen to be taking place. Immigration thus emerges as an appropriate litmus test for evaluating whether or not qualitative research can make a unique contribution to our understanding of these elections, distinct from that provided by large-N media studies.

To that end, the ProQuest search engine was used with 'Canadian Newsstand' to separate out articles on immigration which were published during the period from the drop of the writ to election day in each of these three elections. This catalogue of newspapers includes not only the major urban dailies, but also local and rural newspapers across Canada. The key word searched was the single word 'immigration', and while this wide casting resulted in a large number of stories turning up that had minimal reference to immigration (it identified 1,173 stories in 2004, 3,099 in 2006 and 1,158 in 2008), it had the benefit of finding stories with unique immigration dimensions that would have been missed using more refined search parameters. From these stories, as will be noted in the text, the 'world wide web' was periodically used to get a sense for how and if these news items disseminated into the new media of blogs and ethnic community and immigration oriented websites. Before turning to these elections and to the evidence of how a campaign involving immigration may have occurred, it is worthwhile to place this in the context of the literature which has already examined immigration as an issue in past Canadian elections.

Media, Campaigns and the Immigration Literature

It is noteworthy that in most immigrant receiving countries, immigration has become such a politically divisive issue that anti-immigrant parties have successfully emerged on the political scene and have been able to not only get a foothold in their legislatures, but in their governments as well (Jupp, 2003; Koopmans et al., 2005). This does not appear to have been the case in Canada, though an argument could be made that the early version of the Reform Party had anti-immigration elements. The literature on immigration, which is informed in part by the large-N studies of media, suggests that immigration has remained largely a non-issue in elections.

Previous election studies using the media concluded that, at least from the 1960s to the 1980s, immigration was not the subject of partisan debate (Nord, 1997: 152) and may have even enjoyed all party consensus (Hawkins, 1991: 248-249), though the NDP is sometimes suggested to be the most supportive of immigration, at least with respect to refugees (Hardcastle et al., 1994: 113).

There are theories for why immigration has not emerged as a partisan election issue. One view is that political parties in Canada, at least those which have aspirations of becoming government, have avoided the issue because of a possible backlash in the public-at-large due to the place immigration holds in Canada's founding myth (Reitz, 2004; Hiebert, 2006). Another view is that multicultural policies have made Canadians more predisposed towards immigration (Kymlicka, 2005).

Gallup reports that the majority of Canadians consistently support immigration being maintained at the same level (Reitz 2004). Public and elite support does appear to fluctuate some when the media raises issues surrounding queue jumping and illegal immigration, but this is primarily with respect to support for refugees (Holton and Lanphier, 1994). And while immigration may become a more significant issue when elections are extremely competitive, the immigration programme is complex

enough that political parties can cherry pick policies to support without being seen as anti-immigrant (Black and Hicks, 2008).

Local Campaign

Of the stories which concerned immigration published during the 2004 election period, some were about immigration entirely removed from the campaign, in that they discussed the government programme in the context of recently released data or studies on immigration, or they reported on a particular immigrant(s) story. Most articles were directly related to the campaign, and they fell into one of three categories: either reflecting the issue being raised by a party leader or party platform announcement, raised by local candidates in terms of their stated priorities or raised by the newspaper in terms of issues which were important to a specific riding they had chosen to highlight.

The impression created by the major daily newspapers is that the immigration issue played out without direct engagement in this campaign, which is not true for the local papers, particularly when they carried reports from all candidates' meetings. These papers carried the immigration planks of the party platforms, both at the time of announcement (with quotes from the announcement as well as references to the choice of riding which was invariably identified by some variation of 'immigrant rich') and a summary of the platform closer to Election Day. These were bureau or wire stories, unless the announcement was local, and always included reference to the other parties' platforms or comments from the other main party leaders that were solicited from them or issued by their campaigns in response to their opponent's announcements.

The choice of ridings used to make policy pronouncements would support the belief that the political parties felt there was mileage to be gained from being seen to be proactive on immigration, at least in that particular urban area. There were, however, few direct confrontations, even though each party had taken different positions on what parts of the programme needed to be improved. So it is perhaps not surprising that the *National Post*, in an editorial on immigration, suggested that the party leaders were equally committed to improving the immigration programme, and selected the common commitment of strengthening credentials recognition as evidence of this consensus (*National Post*, June 14, 2004: A11).

That does not mean that there was not any direct engagement or policy debate unfolding. This was most evident at the local level. There was even one local debate over immigration that made it to the national news, but this was as much due to the fact that two party leaders were running in the same riding (the NDP's Jack Layton and the Green Party's Jim Harris) and that the all candidates' meeting deteriorated into expletives over the same-sex marriage question (Black and Hicks, 2008).

The local issue that seemed to get the most attention at the local level concerned the 'landing fee'. This was a \$975 fee imposed on immigrants as part of (then Finance Minister) Paul Martin's deficit reduction plan. The NDP had committed to repealing the fee, which differentiated them from both the Liberals and Conservatives, and they had dubbed it 'Paul Martin's head tax', alluding to the discriminatory \$50 fee imposed on Chinese people in the late 1880s in order to discourage more immigration from this specific ethnic group once the railroad was completed. In the riding of Toronto-Danforth where Layton was running, the Liberal MP even broke ranks with his party and acknowledged that the fee was not a "good thing" and suggested that it could be removed since the deficit had been eliminated (*National Post*, June 22, 2004: A6). Other Liberal candidates were more circumspect, but this is the first evidence we have of a campaign occurring where the parties are

directly engaging on the same issue, suggesting a debate over immigration in terms of quality if not quantity at the local riding-level.

The leaders' tours and its capacity to dominate the national media (Mughan, 2000), in a system of strict party discipline, has led many to conclude that local politics could have little influence on voter choice in Canada (see, for e.g., Lee, 1989; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). But it is still true that local campaigns offer dramatic variation in terms of the capacity to contact and deliver voters and in terms of the type of candidates, so at the very least they should be considered as something that has the capacity to operate both independently and symbiotically with the national campaign (Carty and Eagles, 2005).

That we might find a local campaign that had not been captured by the large-N study which studied this same election is not surprising. The research design of the large-N study was geared towards looking for overall coverage emphasis and tone in order to identify national trends. Presumably a content analysis of a specific local paper or candidates' debate could have captured and quantified the extent of the immigration issue in a single riding or small group of ridings. Then again, the nuances of the debate, the degree of engagement and why it might have (or not have) resonance with voters is probably easier to capture using a qualitative approach.

If not a National, then a Specific Community Issue

In the 2006 election, we find a similar diversity in immigration stories. These stories included reports of candidates who had identified the immigration issue as their personal priority in candidates meetings and in interviews, and newspapers which identified the issue as being important to a specific riding. The immigration planks of the party platform were again seen to have been unveiled by the political parties in immigrant rich ridings, though these now included ridings in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto. Also different from the previous election is that the national media increasingly reported direct engagement over the immigration platform, with the immigration minister quoted during the announcement of the Liberal immigration plank as saying the Conservative approach to immigration was to "send them back and keep them out" (BN, Dec. 22, 2005). This shift likely reflected the perception among the political parties that this was a very hotly contested election (Black and Hicks, 2008).

Even at the national level we find evidence that immigrant communities are a direct battleground for the Liberals and Conservatives. One example of this is the issue of a formal governmental or parliamentary apology over the Chinese 'head tax'. This issue is particularly interesting because the very battle for compensation, and politicians' opposition to it, is tied to the mythology of Canada being founded by immigrants and of immigration as a 'choice', which is the view held by the Canadian population in general but not shared by the Chinese community (Mawani, 2004). For this community, the question was one of respect and was tied to their sense of identity, so the fact that apologies had been given in other countries that used similar discriminatory practices, put the community at odds with the political elites (Li, 2008).

It should be noted that the Chinese-Canadian Community is divided between those who oppose the communist regime in China, absolutely, and those who favour economic and political relations with their former or ancestral homeland. This is not dissimilar to divides which have been shown to exist in the U.S. among the Latino and Cuban communities (see Hero, 1992). The Conservative strategy in this election, therefore, was similar to the Republican strategy in the U.S., and that is to use China's human

rights record as a wedge issue so as to win support of the anti-communist regime group (see Flanagan, 2007).

Prior to the election, the national media had widely reported the Liberal Government's announcement of an agreement reached with the National Chinese Canadian Congress, which would have put \$2.5 million into a foundation to educate Canadians about this discriminatory use of immigration policy, but there was no formal apology or compensation for individuals; the Conservatives had equally opposed apologizing or offering compensation; while the NDP supported a formal apology from Parliament and supported direct financial compensation. In the middle of the campaign Harper announced that as soon as he became Prime Minister he would formally apologize for the head tax and, within hours of that, Prime Minister Paul Martin had apologized to Chinese Canadians publically in a radio interview. This was reported in the national media in the context of the election campaign drama, with Martin being given credit for one-upping Harper.

The ethnic press coverage lacked both an interest in the campaign machinations or in what was seen as an as yet unfulfilled offer. An apology over a radio station was not the goal of the community groups which had been demanding an apology, and it was not the equivalent to precedents set in other countries. It also appears that the divisions within the Chinese community had a bearing on receptiveness to initiatives on this issue. For example, *The Epoch Times*, which is a publication that services the side of the Chinese community vehemently opposed to the communist regime, was consistently critical of the Liberal offer. As further evidence of the divide, even after the election the paper was still reminding its readers that it was the NCCC which had agreed to a foundation, pointing out that it did not represent the CCNC (Chinese Canadian National Council) (March 30, 2006).

The other direct engagement over immigration which occurred at the national level was over the landing fee, which the NDP had dubbed in the previous election 'Paul Martin's head tax'. As noted above, this had been an issue at the local-level in certain ridings during the previous campaign. Hours before Stephen Harper was scheduled to make a major speech unveiling his party's immigration platform, Paul Martin announced that the Liberals would eliminate the landing fee by the following election. Stephen Harper stuck to his prepared text and only committed to cutting the fee in stages: in half immediately and then to \$100 over time, though he did fight back by accusing the Liberals of making-up policy on the fly and suggested that this was evidence of desperation. The national media, here too, focused on the campaign drama, with emphasis on the scoop by Martin and the rejoinder by Harper. While the details of both offers were contained in stories, the discussion of intrigue left one with the impression that Martin's promise to eliminate the fee was better for immigrants.

A Google search of the announcement that Martin had committed to eliminating the fee by the following election turned up over 3,000 websites that retransmitted this story. A number of these are sites specifically aimed at immigrants and immigrant communities (e.g., despardes.com, Jan. 12, 2006; workpermit.com, Jan. 6, 2006), online ethnic publications likely to have a Canadian following (e.g., newsindia-times.com, Jan. 13, 2006; jamaicaobserver.com Jan. 8, 2006) and new media, such as blogs (e.g., jaymeister.blogspot.com, Jan. 4, 2006; smalldeadanimals.com, Jan. 4, 2006) and websites of non-governmental organizations that have an active membership (e.g., psacbc.com, Jan. 12, 2006).

Unlike the national media, there is no discussion of the campaign drama in most of these websites (except for the blogs). Particularly with the ethnic and immigration oriented websites we find the two commitments treated similar and not as a better offer from the Liberals. The Liberals' commitment was in fact to only reduce the fee to \$600 in one year's time, then \$300 in two budgets' time and then

zero before the next election, and these websites weighed the merits of having a lower fee immediately against a lower fee in two years time or a promise of no fee in the future.

The other interesting thing about these community oriented publications is that a number of other election stories not carried in national media were published for this community, and some derivative stories were taken from national or local media and recast specifically for their audience. For example, *Diaspora News* used a report in the *Toronto Star* which said some candidates in Toronto were going door-to-door with teams of translators and turned it into a story about *desi* power in the 2006 Canadian election. It notes that Roy Cullen, in Etobicoke North, had been campaigning with six volunteers who, between them, spoke nine languages, quoting one Indo-Canadian observer as saying "it reminds me of India" (despardes.com, Jan. 12, 2006).

Again, the fact that stories about immigration would be of interest to the ethnic and immigrant oriented media is not surprising. What is interesting though is the difference in tone – with no interest in campaign machinations, only in the actual specifics of the announcements and how they might impact on immigrants. The only 'spin' which could be seen to emerge was a sense of pride in the attention the community was receiving from certain parties, and this inevitable was offered to candidates who were specifically doing outreach to the community or who had a community connection.

Emotional Heuristics

During the 2008 election period there was again a range of articles published, including some about immigration policy/programme and some about immigrants, independent from the campaign, and campaign stories that identified immigration as an issue for the party leader, party platform, local candidates and particular ridings. Again we have evidence of a local riding campaign and ethnic community oriented campaign which is more involved than might be evident from the national election coverage or the larger news outlets.

There is, however, an event that is worthy of closer examination because it appears to offer insight into a relationship that may exist between news reporting and voter behaviour not as yet explored, and which bears a parallel to a much higher profile event which occurred in this election involving Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion.

During the campaign, Dion had given an interview to a CTV Atlantic affiliate. In that interview, after three false starts on a question, he asked if he could re-start. While the news outlet agreed, it then decided to release the tape of the 'do over', creating its own story. In addition to being picked up by every news outlet in Canada, it also spawned numerous blog entries, and there were a number of re-postings of the original 'out-take' on YouTube. As many news outlets reported at the time, the request to take a question again in a taped interview is not unusual, yet this incident took on a life of its own (for a detailed review of the event and a discussion of the journalistic ethics, see j-source.ca, Oct. 24, 2008).

On the immigration file in this same election, a seemingly inconsequential incident took on a life of its own in a similar manner. In an interview with a Calgary news magazine, *Fast Forward Weekly*, the local Conservative candidate Lee Richardson responded to a question about gun violence by referring to the diversity in Canada's cities created by immigration (the quotes can be found at ffwdweekly.com, Sept. 25, 2008). His quotes were picked up by other media outlets and quickly

disseminated through the web, finding their way onto websites that are geared towards specific ethnic communities or have a particular immigrant interest across Canada (e.g., chinesevancouver.ca, Sept. 25, 2008; straight.com, Sept. 25, 2008), and of course, became a debated issue on blogs, with Canadians there taking both sides on the issue (e.g., canadianblogs.net, Sept. 25, 2008). A protest was organized outside of Richardson's office (ffwdweekly.com, Oct. 9, 2008) and a petition was launched and promoted on facebook (facebook.com, May 4, 2008). The incident has now even been added to Richardson's Wikipedia profile (wikipedia.org, May 5, 2008). The Prime Minister accused the media of engaging in "gotcha journalism" (canada.com, Sept. 26, 2008) and the Conservative Party press office put out a release showing how Liberal MPs – "Hedy Fry, Garth Turner and Keith Martin" – had made similar connections between inner city gang crime and urban ethnic diversity with no negative reaction offered or reported by the media (see nationalpost.com, Sept. 25, 2008).

So why would this incident, aside from occurring in the middle of an election, warrant a reaction when similar comments went unnoticed? One possibility is that these moments have resonance well beyond the event, because they tap into an already existing suspicion that voters have about the person or party in question. Much in the way a satirical cartoon can strike a cord, they offer an 'emotional heuristic'.

It should be noted that while emotion has been a central component in theories from psychology concerning behaviour, it has not been central to theories concerning judgment and decision making, largely due to the way rationality with respect to choice has driven this particular modeling (Slovic et al., 2007). More common, to the point where it dominates the literature (see, Shafir et al., 1993 for a literature survey), is a focus on how cognitive strategies drive judgment and, thus, how bounded rational individuals employ heuristics (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; Kahneman et al., 1982). Though there is an acceptance that people's choices will occasionally be based on affective judgments (Shafir et al., 1993), and that there might be a simultaneous affective process occurring (Epstein, 1994), there is little literature on affect heuristics. What literature exists, treats affect heuristics as biases leading to poor decision making, and suggests that they are confined to persons with low information, and this is true in psychology, law and business management where heuristic decision making at the individual level has received more direct examination (see, for e.g., Murphy and Zajonc, 1993, in psychology; Simon et al., 1999, in business management). The reason for the distinct label 'emotional heuristic' here, is to suggest that what may be occurring is a priming effect that taps emotionally into conscious or unconscious cognitive evaluations, and this would be able to permeate barriers posed by high information.

There was, for many Canadians, a sense that Dion was not prepared to be Prime Minister, so the relevance of the story that he had stumbled in answering a question lay not in the details of the incident but in the way it encapsulated those voters' unease. The reason the Richardson incident had resonance for people concerned with the immigration file, and the earlier similar comments did not, was because for those directly concerned with the immigration file there has long been a suspicion that remnants of the old Reform Party remain in the new Conservative Party, and that this party's newfound support for immigration may not be genuine.

At this stage, a number of quantitative methods spring to mind for how to further explore this possibility, of which experiments may offer the most direct path, but it is hard to see how the possibility of this effect occurring would have been identified via a large-N media study, unless of course it was abstractly theorized beforehand and then evidence of this effect was included in the search.

Conclusion

A popular Vancouver blog site (straight.com, Sept. 22, 2008) during the 2008 election reported that almost half of Chinese voters who responded to their on-line poll said relations with China – the issue that the Conservatives had been, since the 2006 election, attempting to stake out different ground on – was their primary issue for deciding how to vote (in what the large-N media study suggested was singularly an ‘economy’ election). The accuracy of this web poll is unimportant. That *some* people see their culture as so defining that it would dictate their vote choice is what is relevant. It is this same identity perspective that made an apology for the Chinese head tax so key to their community and yet was lost on politicians and Canadian society at large for decades.

It is safe to say with confidence that for some groups, particular minority groups which have experienced oppression or discrimination, identity issues will dominate much of what they do, whether it be the way they dress, their opinions and attitudes or social networking, whether this identity comes from race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or shared history, language and culture. For these people, it seems that identity is a *permanent* top-of-mind issue. This explains the elevated significance for an issue like immigration to a community like Chinese Canadians, something that goes beyond the level warranted by the media coverage it received during these election campaigns.

A permanent top-of-mind issue should carry with it a high degree of knowledge, as the person or persons in question will be continuously thinking of the issue. We expect media to impact on people differently based on their existing level of information, so for people with high information we would expect them to rarely change their position – new information is simply incorporated into and filtered through their existing stockpile.

As was noted above, one of the stories that ran in the 2008 election involved a number of scholars confirming the media’s suspicion that there *might be* a shift in loyalty occurring among the immigrant community, which has been historically loyal to the Liberals. The more interesting question is why has there been such *resistance to* inroads by the Conservatives. This idea of a permanent top-of-mind issue offers one explanation. If identity issues are a *permanent* top-of-mind issue and this leads to high information, then there will be a natural resistance to new information. Campaign promises on an issue like immigration, or promises of future apologies over past wrongs, will not be looked at in the context of the campaign drama, but will be filtered through a substantive body of knowledge and experience.

If we use the persons who work on specialty websites as a proxy for the informed citizen in these communities, then we can look at the websites themselves as a reflection of this very thought process. These sites were not swayed by the more general media effects suggested in the large-N study (tone did not influence them nor did the reported campaign drama). They immediately honed in on the details of the announcement and made no immediate assumptions about what promise was better, rather weighing the relative merits and maintaining some skepticism (undoubtedly informed by past political promises on these same files).

But if those who have high knowledge are resistant to new information, then why would a story of campaign theatre, like Lee Richardson commenting on violence committed by ethnic gangs in cities suddenly become of interest to this community (when previous similar comments by politicians did not)? The use of cognitive heuristics and information shortcuts favoured by people who have low information and don’t want (and can’t be expected to rationally) spend the resources necessary to

increase their information. The suggestion offered here is that the event offered an *emotional* heuristic. It is possible that an emotional heuristic is able to penetrate the barrier of high information specifically because it plays to emotion rather than reason. At the very least, it appears to have encapsulated a disquiet that already existed. And people who have an issue at the top-of-mind, as they are thinking with some intensity about it, may be more prone to certain emotions, such as doubt.

So what about the Dion 'do over' incident? Was this a significant issue only for those with less information? Here we can use journalists in the mainstream media as a proxy for the informed voter. Running this story, both the first time by the CTV station which then came under criticism for doing so, and then by other outlets, can be seen as a decision against self-interest; it raised questions of journalistic ethics, questions of trust that could impact on future interviews and involved an individual speaking in a second language (the language of the majority) which is a particularly sensitive issue in Canada. It would seem that at a base level, journalists *felt* this was an important moment, even if they could not easily and consistently identify the reason for that sense.

The question of Dion's preparedness to govern had been an issue in the election. While the Observatory did not code horseshoe versus issue stories, we can assume based on previous elections that between 45 and 55 percent of the coverage focused on the machinations of the campaign. Leadership is thus always a top-of-mind issue for voters. So a conclusion may be, given both the Dion and Richardson incidents, that top-of-mind issues, whether permanent or media induced, may be susceptible to emotional heuristics. This suggests a number of research possibilities and avenues to explore by both qualitative and quantitative researchers.

This paper set out to determine whether or not a qualitative approach could contribute something distinct to that which was being found by a large-N media study, using an analysis of the news stories surrounding a single policy issue for the same three elections. This goal has been met, as there is evidence of a campaign involving immigration occurring at the local riding- and ethnic community-level. We also found the possibility of a media effect and how it might operate. Clearly there is something unique that qualitative researchers can contribute to both the examination of elections and to media studies.

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