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Michaela Dalton

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**e-Research: A Journal of Undergraduate Work, Vol 1, No 1 (2010)**[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [USER HOME](#) [SEARCH](#) [CURRENT](#) [ARCHIVES](#)[Home](#) > [Vol 1, No 1 \(2010\)](#) > [Dalton](#)**Are Approval Ratings an Accurate Reflection of Success? Effects of Media Coverage on Public Opinion of Colin Powell**

Michaela Dalton

This paper will focus on issue salience, priming, and bias in order to determine the extent of the impact of media on those who are exposed to them, particularly in relation to coverage of former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Many studies explain these occurrences in relation to the presiding president, but little has been done in the way of observing the approval of the cabinet members. We would expect that in low-information environments, approval ratings are relatively constant and track the president; however, trends in Powell's rating do not support this idea. His ratings fluctuate and are independent of President George W. Bush's. To address this issue, the present study looks into the media coverage of former secretary of state Powell, using specific examples of tactics, tones, themes, and other variables present in the news. In doing so, it attempts to identify the specific characteristics of Powell's coverage, in general and in relation to Bush, that cause the interesting variations in public opinion polls.

It is important to understand how the news media influence citizens and what methods they use to do so. There are three functions of the mass media, the first of which is surveillance (Leighley 2004). This means that the media are responsible for placing issues on the public agenda and are crucial for political success as they provide publicity and policy information. In presenting these certain issues, they also help to interpret events by putting them into context. Through this function of interpretation, the media help to shape opinion on certain issues. The third function is socialization, which teaches basic values and support for democracy; this is important because young people acquire most of their information from the mass media, and are thus influenced by it as they develop their own beliefs (Leighley 2004). So the effects of the media can impact the behavior of voters. Research has identified such examples as the "CNN effect," through which the media are able to stir up public opinion with extensive news coverage and dramatic pictures. In recognizing the potentiality of the media's sway, there should be concern about the possible negative results of their influence, such as bias.

Bias is defined as "the opposite of accuracy, balance, and fairness" (Simon, Fico & Lacy 1989; Streckfuss 1990). Accuracy refers to observing only the facts of the matter, while balance is achieved by giving equal amounts of coverage to all parties and fairness results when all perspectives are presented with no one being more favorable than others (Simon, Fico & Lacy 1989; Streckfuss 1990). Fears of bias are not unfounded because opinions on political matters are widely divergent, and so political news bias can have a large impact due to its intent, relevance, and influence (D'Alessio & Allen 2000). According to a 2002 study by the Pew Research Center for the

Michaela Dalton

People and the Press, 47% of participants believed the news media to be politically biased in their reporting, while only 35% disagreed. Although this large percentage suggests that the media is biased in one direction or another, whether the research supports this claim is questionable.

On the one hand, journalists, as a whole, tend to identify themselves as liberal (D'Alessio & Allen 2000; Lee 2005), so it appears it would follow that stories are chosen and candidates are covered according to the political beliefs of reporters and editors (Levite 1996). These claims were made by many political figures such as Vice Presidents Spiro Agnew and Dan Quayle, as well as by presidential candidate Bob Dole (D'Alessio & Allen 2000). However, despite numerous studies, a clear link between reporters' political views and news coverage is yet to be discovered (Black, Steele & Barney 1999; Dennis 1997). This does not necessarily mean that the media is conservatively biased as many others have claimed. Media critic Michael Parenti (1996) identifies the functions of the news media as increasing profit for owners and investors, and promoting corporate economic dominance. For Parenti (1996) and other media observers like Alterman (2003), conservative voices dominate those of the liberal journalists, and any coverage that does not unanimously support this agenda is viewed as evidence of a liberal bias. Claims that the media is conservatively biased, however, are also rejected by research findings that news content does not reflect any significant or consistent partisan or issue favoritism (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt 1998; Dennis 1997).

Despite findings that no ideological bias dominates the news media, the issue of media effects is still relevant because issues like salience and priming come into play. In essence, salience is "the extent to which a stimulus, or referent object in the surrounding situation, stands out from other stimuli, or from other aspects of the situation" (Augoustinos and Walker 1995). Spiro Kiousis (2004) asserts that salience can be internally or externally evident; the former refers to the internal qualities of the object while the latter refers to the external importance placed on it in relation to other issues. He argues that salience seems to be governed by both internal and external characteristics and presents the three dimensions of salience as attention, prominence, and valence. The most common is attention, which is externally grounded and entails media awareness of an object by sheer volume of stories and coverage. Prominence, also externally grounded, refers to the positioning of a story-placement, size, other aesthetic devices-within a media text to convey its importance (Kiousis 2004). The last dimension Kiousis (2004) addresses is valence, which is internally grounded in that it does not emphasize objects (issues, candidates, etc.), but those objects' attributes (description, qualities, etc.).

Understanding salience is important because research shows that the media can influence the importance people ascribe to issues. By giving prominence to certain issues, the news media subtly shape opinion about what is the most important issue facing the country or community (Iyengar & Kinder 1987). Danny Hayes (2008) argues that salience is actually extremely important because people are highly resistant to persuasion and it is difficult to change their minds. With relatively well-established views, people interpret information in a way that is consistent with their beliefs and they ignore messages that conflict with them. Therefore, it is much easier to make certain issues more salient to viewers and readers (Hayes 2008). Because people experience little direct interaction with the political world, their perceptions of issue relevance are highly malleable (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972). When it comes time to make a decision, like voting, they rely on their memory to

provide relevant considerations (Kelley and Mirer 1974) because they cannot take a consensus of all the information they have on the subject (Simon 1955). The most accessible information are often the issues or candidate characteristics that receive news attention (Zaller and Feldman 1992).

Along with this is the idea of priming, the activation of knowledge stored in long-term memory following exposure to a stimulus (Althaus & Kim 2006) that influences what issues citizens consider when making political assessments and decisions (Kelleher & Wolak 2006). Research shows that increasing a construct's accessibility alone does not necessarily produce knowledge activation; it is one of two factors, the second of which is the construct's applicability to the relevant task (Higgins 1996). Those issues that receive more coverage and are considered most important carry more weight than other issues—they are more accessible, less likely to change, and better understood than other issues (Krosnick 1990; Kelleher & Wolak 2006). Because priming alters the criteria used to evaluate political issues, events, and leaders, it has tremendous influence on election outcomes, public support, and approval ratings.

Most important of the three to this paper is approval ratings. A study by Pan and Kosicki (1997) observed priming effects in relation to approval ratings of George H.W. Bush from 1990 to 1992, during which media coverage of the president focused on one of two things: the Gulf War issue, which contributed positively to his performance ratings, and the economy, which contributed negatively. The study shows that as each issue dominates the coverage, positive approval ratings coincide with more positive issue coverage and negative approval ratings coincide with more negative issue coverage. Pan and Kosicki (1997) argue that "this clearly recognizable positive or negative underpinning concerning Bush...might be the underlying force that moved people toward either a positive or negative direction in their evaluations of Bush." Therefore, increase in issue salience and valence are subject to priming and may be two factors in forming evaluations (Pan & Kosicki 1997).

It is a well-established idea that priming does affect approval ratings. Thus, Kelleher and Wolak (2006) set out to determine which components of presidential evaluation are most vulnerable to priming effects. To do so, they identify two components—economic evaluations and character assessments—that are considered "easy" issues because even less politically involved citizens rely on them to evaluate the president; and two "hard" issues—domestic policy preferences and foreign policy assessments—that are less familiar and less likely to be primed. Findings show that economic health and presidential character are easy for all people to consider in their judgments; matters of domestic and foreign policy, however, are much more difficult. Policy issues are usually much more specific, and it may be challenging to draw implications (Kelleher & Wolak 2006). Identifying the economy as good or bad is much more straightforward than doing the same for hard issues such as policies, education reform, and foreign affairs decisions. It has been shown that positive evaluations of domestic and foreign policy performance translate to higher presidential approval, and policy assessments are less likely to be primed in evaluations (Goidel, Shields, & Peffley, 1997; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Therefore, the specific category of issues addressed may affect how people perceive politicians.

Michaela Dalton

Studying media effects on approval ratings is important and relevant. American presidents depend on public opinion to win support for their legislative and international initiatives, which are therefore important resources in attaining power and influencing Washington (Burden & Mughan 2003). On a gubernatorial level, approval has been shown to affect elections and help gain more support from the legislature (Cohen & King 2004). Because favorability ratings can have a large impact, there is a great need for further research on the topic, especially in areas that are lacking enough information, such as the effects of priming on evaluations of people other than the president. The present study regarding Colin Powell will be a start to explaining the connection between approval and media among the president's cabinet members.

### Data and Methods

Most studies that observe media or priming effects choose candidates or presidents as case studies. To demonstrate application of the present theories, this paper will focus on neither candidate nor president, but on former secretary of state Colin Powell. Because Secretary of State is the first cabinet member in both the line of succession and order of precedence, it is arguably one of the most important of the secretaries. Colin Powell, specifically, was identified by a 2001 PEW survey to be the most visible Bush appointee, and so it makes sense to track his coverage, because it will be followed more than most, if not all, of the former Bush cabinet members. In order to observe the effects of priming on approval ratings, I collected approval ratings of the past secretary of state and former president George W. Bush during months where ratings are available for both, as well as *New York Times* newspaper articles covering Powell's performance while in office from 2001-2005. The New York Times Company owns an additional eighteen newspapers, a radio station, and over fifty websites. As the national newspaper of record, its viewership is large, and most people will get information either directly from the newspaper or indirectly from another news source that gets its content from the *New York Times*. All articles that were published in months when ratings are available and contain "Colin Powell" were reviewed and coded based on, among other variables, characteristics and issues discussed, techniques used, and overall tone. In the analysis, news coverage that did not substantially address the topic at hand was not included in the data set.<sup>[1]</sup> Content analysis on relevant articles was performed and grouped according to month so that trends in newspaper articles could be compared to trends in monthly favorability polls. The overall goal of this process is to observe the effects that media have on the way citizens view politicians; in other words, how priming influences public opinion and approval ratings.

By choosing Powell specifically, I am able to address a key variable that needs further research, and that is the role of association with the presiding president. Poll data was converted into graphs to show the progressions of approval over time not only for former secretary of state Powell but also for former president George W. Bush. As a result, conclusions can be drawn regarding the impact that Bush's approval had on Powell's approval, and the hybrid effect of both media and political association on favorability.

## Hypothesis

Priming has been shown to have significant impacts on approval ratings (Pan and Kosicki 1997). While media play a crucial role in this, there are other variables to be considered. I propose that favorability shifts not only according to media coverage of the politician in question, but also those with whom he or she interacts and is associated. Therefore, Colin Powell's approval ratings will fluctuate as issue salience varies and as Bush receives more positive or negative coverage. Certain aspects of Powell's personal life and career, as well as his relationship with Bush, will be accessible, and because priming alters criteria used to evaluate political situations (Kelleher & Wolak 2006), they will alter public opinion in various ways. Regarding media coverage of Powell and his relationship with Bush, along with monthly favorability rating polls, I have developed five hypotheses:

**H1** The media will exert a temporal bias in their coverage of Powell's years as secretary of state; during the middle months, he will be passed over much more so than at the beginning and end.

**H2** News articles that specifically distinguish between Powell and Bush or other Republicans will have more positive tones.

**H3** Colin Powell and George W. Bush will be clearly separated when it comes to situations of aggression and force.

**H4** Powell will have the most favorable ratings when news does not associate the two.

**H5** Low approval ratings will coincide with negative media coverage.

Except for when major events happen, there is little coverage of cabinet members during their term. I hypothesize that in this study, it is in the beginning and end periods that coverage of Powell will increase in both quantity and quality.

The unfavorableness of the Bush administration is mirrored in public opinion ratings for many government officials such as Condoleeza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney. Whether articles address these previous cabinet members or the former president, the specific stressing of a separation with Powell will lead to more positive tones for Powell.

Bush is criticized as being aggressive and forceful in military and international affairs (Pape 2005). Powell, however, is much more moderate in his political views and has executive and military experience that makes him more deliberate. Therefore, articles in which Powell is portrayed as moderate in the use of force and aggression will specifically draw a distinction between the former president and secretary of state.

Former president Bush is fairly unpopular; his favorability, during the months of focus, averages 62.6% as opposed to Powell's 78%, and so associations with him would be negative for Powell. I hypothesize that Powell's approval will go up when news deliberately distinguishes him from Bush.

When it comes time to make a decision, the most accessible information are usually issues and characteristics that receive the most media attention (Zaller and Feldman 1992). If coverage of Powell is predominantly negative, then

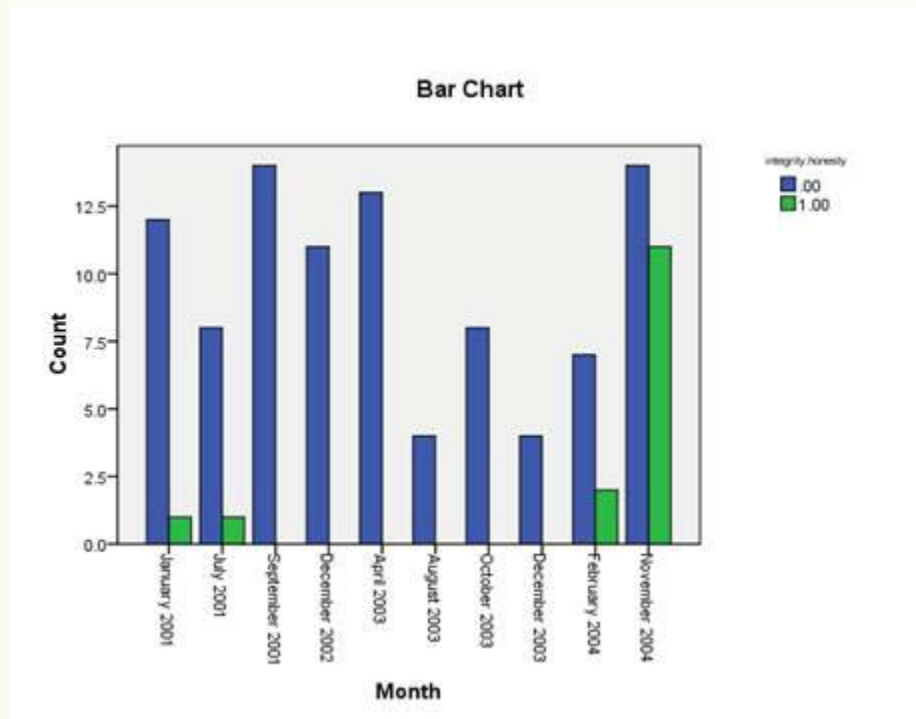
Michaela Dalton

people will most likely remember these negative qualities in making their evaluations. Therefore, I hypothesize that overall negative public opinion regarding Colin Powell will result when news addresses Powell in a negative tone and also discusses his faults and failures.

## Results

The mere amount of news articles in major US publications reflects the claim made by Hypothesis 1 in that the beginning and end months-minus September of 2001 after the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers in New York City -coincide with larger numbers of articles. Running any number of crosstabs with this data can help to test this hypothesis because it notes the prevalence of coverage at the beginning and end of Powell's career under the Bush administration. This seems to be the case with many of his characteristics. Integrity or honesty is only addressed in the first two and last two months ( $r=.38$ ,  $p<.01$ ); likewise, the variable labeled "not being forceful enough" is present in the first three and last two months ( $r=.22$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

**Figure 1**



Other instances of this occur in an article's drawing comparison of the present to the past. Throughout the first year of Powell's term, references were made to the past, especially in the context of his service in the Persian Gulf War and under the first Bush administration as seen in a number of *New York Times* articles, such as "Powell's Complex Record" (Rubin 23) and "The Bush All-Stars" (Editorial 18). The last year or so-seen in February and November of 2004 article data-also witnessed these references to the past, except in these cases, they looked back

on Powell's service under first administration of George W. Bush, from which he was resigning. Regardless, it is important to note that various variables show the same pattern.

In order to determine which tones applicable to Hypothesis 2 were present in these articles, I ran a crosstab between positive tone toward Powell and "separate from Bush." The data showed that when Powell was specifically differentiated from Bush and his other close cabinet members, more articles had positive tones toward Powell and negative tones toward former president Bush (Figure 2, 3).

**Figure 2**

**powell.positive \* separate.from.bush.republicans Crosstabulation**

		separate.from.bush.republicans		
		0	1	Total
powell.positive	Count	23	11	34
	% within separate.from.bush.republicans	28.8%	36.7%	30.9%

**Figure 3**

**bush.negative \* separate.from.bush.republicans Crosstabulation**

		separate.from.bush.republicans		
		0	1	Total
bush.negative	Count	11	14	25
	% within separate.from.bush.republicans	13.8%	46.7%	22.7%
	% of Total	10.0%	12.7%	22.7%

More specifically, 36.7% were positive toward Powell under this condition, as opposed to 30.9% of all articles. Similarly, 46.7% of these articles expressed a negative tone toward Bush, while his overall negative tone was 22.7%. This gap is even larger, and so it seems that there must be significance to the large differences in both.

In order to determine if Hypothesis 3 is correct in asserting that Bush and Powell will be separated regarding aggression, I ran a crosstab between month and "separate from Bush and other Republicans," including "not aggressive enough" as a layer. Although I can make no significant conclusions about monthly occurrences, data shows that 61.1% of articles that suggest Powell is not pressing or forceful enough separate him from Bush ( $r=.34$ ,  $p<.01$ ).



Michaela Dalton

Figure 4

**Month \* separate.from.bush.republicans \* not.aggressive.enough Crosstabulation**

		separate.from.bush.republicans		
		0	1	Total
not.aggressive.enough	Count	7	11	18
	% of Total	38.9%	61.1%	100.0%

This occurrence is especially common in November of 2004, just after Powell announced his resignation. In "Colin Powell's Redeeming Failures" (Isaacson 27), there is discussion of disappointment by Bush loyalists in Powell's lack of support for the Bush strategies that led to occupation of Iraq, and his role in the Bush administration is described as a "push for a little bit more realism." Powell is noted to be a counterweight to Donald Rumsfeld's drive to win (Safire 29) and the "voice of reason in foreign policy" (Kristof 29). Most of these comments are positive, which can explain Powell's high ratings. Of the articles that address these two variables, 44.4% have an overall negative tone toward Bush. A favorability poll taken just after he announced his resignation determined his rating to be 87%, which is just short of his post-9/11 high. Therefore, although many might consider "not pressing enough" to be a negative quality, newspaper articles reveal that it was actually a positive variable because it was used to contrast with Bush.

Articles that separate Powell from Bush were the starting point for determining how dissociation with Bush affects approval (Hypothesis 4). The months with the highest percentage of this occurrence are August 2003, October 2003, December 2003, and November 2004. However, favorability ratings taken at these times range from 70 to 74, which is not particularly high compared to Powell's usual ratings (Figure 5).

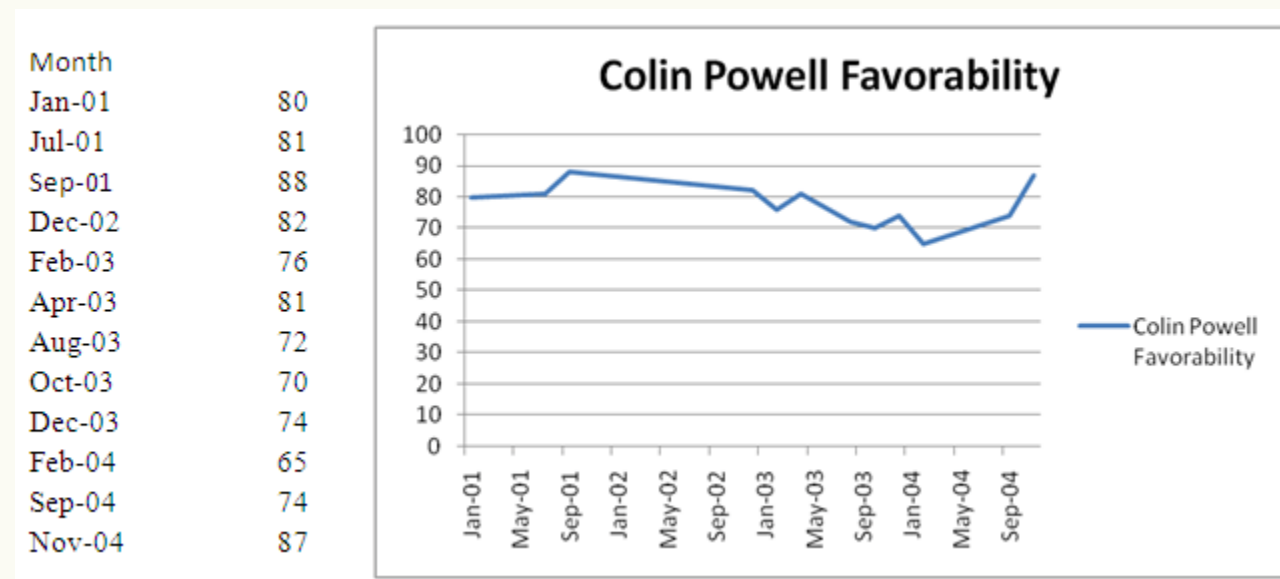


Figure 5

But once again, data analysis for November 2004 goes against the norm; 64% of these articles separate Powell from Bush, and Powell has an all time high rating of 88%. Because it is only evident in this month, Hypothesis 4 is not supported.

A crosstab between month and overall negative tone toward Powell was performed to test Hypothesis 5. Presence of negative tones is much more common during the months that offer lower favorability ratings ( $p < .1$ ), which fall between August of 2003 and February of 2004 of this data set (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

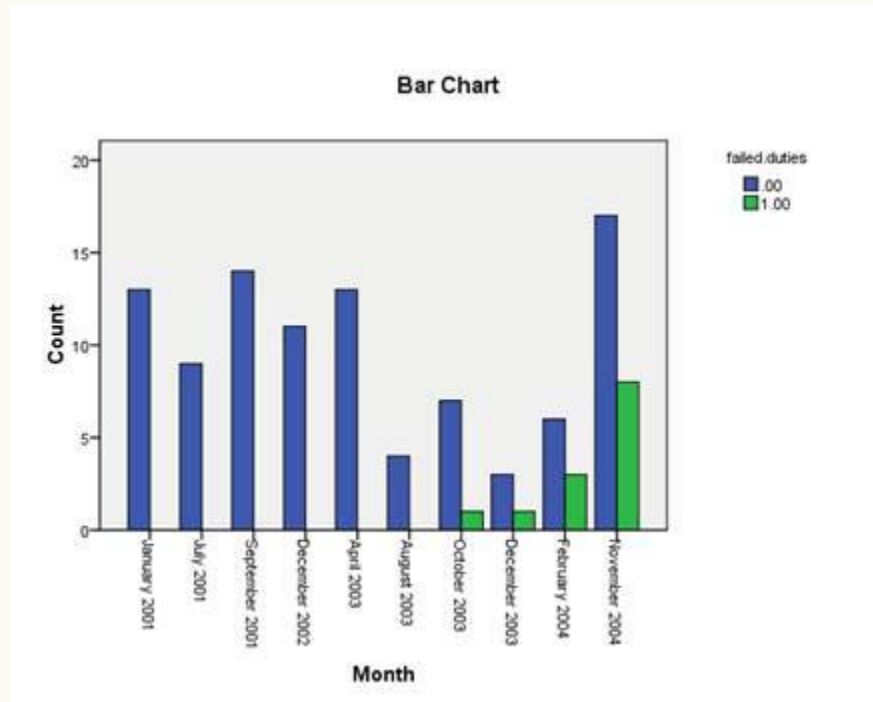
		powell.negative Crosstabulation		
		0	1	Total
Month January 2001	Count	12	1	13
	% within powell.negative	12.8%	6.2%	11.8%
July 2001	Count	8	1	9
	% within powell.negative	8.5%	6.2%	8.2%
September 2001	Count	13	1	14
	% within powell.negative	13.8%	6.2%	12.7%
December 2002	Count	10	1	11
	% within powell.negative	10.6%	6.2%	10.0%
April 2003	Count	12	1	13
	% within powell.negative	12.8%	6.2%	11.8%
August 2003	Count	3	1	4
	% within powell.negative	3.2%	6.2%	3.6%
October 2003	Count	7	1	8
	% within powell.negative	7.4%	6.2%	7.3%
December 2003	Count	3	1	4
	% within powell.negative	3.2%	6.2%	3.6%
February 2004	Count	5	4	9
	% within powell.negative	5.3%	25.0%	8.2%
November 2004	Count	21	4	25
	% within powell.negative	22.3%	25.0%	22.7%

A second crosstab with "failed duties"-which includes lack of success, disappointment in performance, and overall tones of regret-yielded interesting findings ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Over the course of Powell's first three years as secretary of state, no *New York Times* articles indicated that the secretary of state had somehow failed in his responsibilities. However, there is a gradual increase in themes of failure in late 2003; 12.5% of articles in October 2003, 25% in December 2003, 33.3% in February 2004, and 32% in

Michaela Dalton

November 2004. Through October and December, there is a definite drop in Powell's respective ratings of 70% and 74%, which were at 81% in April of 2003 (Pew). Additionally, just as his rating was lowest in February 2004 (65%), the percentage of failed duty incidents was 33.3 and that of negative tone incidents was 44.4, both of which are the highest of all other months (Figure 7).



**Figure 7**

The only thing that cannot be explained by this is the fact that in November 2004, 32% of articles addressed Powell's failure, but his favorability ratings were at 87%, one of the highest they had ever been. This gap can be explained by the content and timing of the news articles, which are written during the month that Powell resigns. The fact that they were written at this time makes them the exception to the rule because of such special circumstances. Most articles that refer to his failure do so in a reminiscence of his time as secretary of state, and so it makes sense that the scope of Powell's performance reached both success and failure. For example, "Imagining How Powell Might Still Have a Job" (Purdum 4) denotes disappointment that Powell missed out on succeeding Clinton, and "Powell at the Exit: A Debate Over His Legacy" (Vinson 28) claims that he has been one of the least effective modern secretaries of state. Aside from this exception, overall negative tones and suggestions of failure have a significant impact on favorability ratings.

### Discussion

By using content analysis of *New York Times* articles that address Colin Powell, many connections were made between certain tactics and overall tones or favorability ratings. First, it is clear that a temporal bias exists in the coverage because the number of articles and number of specific details within those articles are higher at the beginning and end of Powell's time in office. This suggests, in accordance with priming research, that approval

ratings will most likely be higher or lower than normal at these times, depending on whether coverage is positive or negative.

Simply separating Powell from Bush in coverage does not have a consistent effect on approval. Instead, it is when this separation is taken into consideration with other factors that conclusions can be drawn. For example, November 2004 ratings are among the highest for Powell, and there are many instances in which journalists draw a distinction between Bush and Powell. Because these results do not match up with the other months, it seems that another variable is at work. November's articles predominantly, in separating the two, yield negative tones toward Bush, and so it makes sense that in this case favorability would be higher. Another example is demonstrated through observations of tone. When an article specifically cites a distinction between the two, overall positive tones toward Powell increase and overall negative tones toward Bush increase. Therefore, most articles that separate the two tend to speak more highly and offer a positive image of Powell, while looking down on Bush.

Separation between the two also has a strong relationship with aggression and force. When Powell is described as lacking force or not utilizing pressure in his foreign affairs, news clearly alludes to a separation from former president Bush. Given the previous finding, this suggests that when news mentions Powell as lacking aggression, it is not negative, but instead positive because articles that distinguish between them are more likely to favor Powell.

These observations defined the two biggest predictors of lower ratings for Powell to be mention of failed duties and negative tones. The months in which he is least favorable coincide with the months that most often address these issues. This shows a distinct pattern and suggests that negative media coverage, due to the effects of salience and priming, can have a significant impact on approval ratings.

Powell's public opinion ratings cannot be explained as a matter of whether he receives coverage and whether he is associated with Bush, but in relation to coverage of specific issues. In other words, attention and prominence—the two externally grounded dimensions of salience—are not present, but the internally grounded valence is. Patterns in the news show that issues are selectively made salient by the media. As demonstrated in this study of Powell, certain variables influence tones, which impact approval ratings. As a result of priming, individuals specifically recall what stands out in coverage when making evaluations. Though Powell's ratings were not directly affected by the amount of coverage he received—both alone and in comparison with Bush—, they were influenced by Bush's presence within the specific variables that received focus (e.g. separation from Bush, situations of aggression and force, etc.). Overall findings show that Bush, through these variables, was oftentimes used as a contrast to Powell in order to highlight Powell's success and competency. Therefore, the way the president is addressed in relation to the cabinet members is extremely important in predicting their favorability ratings. Given this information, it would be interesting for future studies to investigate in what way public opinion and approval impacted foreign policy making.

Michaela Dalton

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Michaela Dalton

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[1] 19 of January 2001's 32 articles were excluded; 6 of July 2001's 15 articles were excluded; 4 of September 2001's 18 articles were excluded; 5 of December 2002's 16 articles were excluded; 10 of April 2003's 23 articles were excluded; 2 of August 2003's 6 articles were excluded; 4 of October 2003's 12 articles were excluded; 4 of December 2003's 8 articles were excluded; 6 of February 2004's 15 articles were excluded; and 7 of November 2004's 32 articles were excluded.

The total number of articles included in this data set is 110; 67 total were excluded.

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