More Media Agenda against Bernie Sanders?
Examining the Emotional Tone of US Political Op-Ed Articles in 2019-20

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Abstract: *The emotional tone of op-eds (N = 120) on Democratic Party primary candidates was examined to determine if the mediais biased towards Bernie Sanders. Using the Dictionary of Affect (Whissell, 2009), article words (N = 114,606) between December 2019 and February 2020 were measured for their pleasantness, activation, and imagery for each candidate - Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, and Mike Bloomberg. Significant differences between Bernie Sanders and the other candidates were found for article pleasantness (p = .002), article activation (p = .002), and article imagery (p = .002). Op-ed articles written on Bernie Sanders were found to have less pleasant, less active,and more abstract words (low in imagery) than the other candidates. The results of this research demonstrated very similar conclusions to Newman (2022) on news articles, suggesting a pattern of media writing for Bernie Sanders compared to his Democratic primary opponents.*

Keywords: *Bernie Sanders, emotion, language, op-ed articles, media, politics*

1. INTRODUCTION

An op-ed, short for 'opposite the editorial' (Shipley 2004), is penned by experts withopinions regarding a political, social, or policy issue. The first op-ed so named appeared in The New York Times on September 21, 1970.Due to its success, other newspapers quickly adopted this format(Day and Golan 2005).

"As the world has grown smaller, the nation more powerful, the problems besetting man infinitely more complex, the pressures more intense, the health of this democracy has increasingly depended on deeper public understanding of difficult issues. Through the new page opposite the Editorial Page that we inaugurate today, we hope that a contribution may be made toward stimulating new thought and provoking new discussion on public concerns." - New York Times, September 21, 1970

Theoretically, the op-ed differsfrom a news article as it does not represent the editors' views. The Wall Street Journal states:

We believe that the ultimate function of the editorial pages is the same as the rest of the newspaper, to inform. But in opinion journalism, we have the additional purpose of making an argument for a point of view. In stating our own views forcefully, we hope to raise and sharpen the level of debate and knowledge. (Our Philosophy, 2006, para. 9)

Op-eds are not only used to express the writer's opinion but also to shape public opinions as well as policymakers' opinions (Kingdon, 2003). If op-eds can influence public and policymaker(officials and lobbyists) opinions, then they area potent tool, but also one that is, by definition, subjective. Op-eds are frequently used in legislative deliberation (Sommer&Maycroft, 2008), and op-ed writers have often been asked to testify before the government. For example, Professor Charles Fried wrote an op-ed on Samuel Elito and testified on the Supreme Court nomination (Fried, 2006). Professor Mark Feldstein penned an op-ed on journalism and the FBI and testified to the Department of Justice on journalists publishing classified information (Feldstein, 2006). Finally, a more famous example would be former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, along with three other politicians, writing op-eds

on nuclear weapons, which "sent waves through the foreign policy establishment" (Crowley, 2007, p. 55) and has been cited by lawmakers in Congress.

What are the characteristics of op-eds? Sommer&Maycroft (2008) analyzed 366 articles from The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Star-Ledger of Newark in 2006. First, 47% had a very negative or negative tone, with 17% either very positive or positive.

The topics varied; the authors created 25 categories,including education, health, and politics. Over half (52%) of the authors made recommendations and/or took a position on a topic.Only 27% cited an academic or peer-reviewed study, and 45% did not even reference any statistics. The authors noted that even when the op-ed writers used statistics, they "used them sparingly" (Sommer &Maycroft, 2008, p. 596), with 22% of the articles citing statistics once or twice in the paper and only 8% of the pieces used polling data. A substantial 86% of the op-eds used anecdotes or stories tohighlight a point and connect with the reader.

Do op-eds affect reader opinions? Little to no research has been done on the effects of op-eds outside of framing studies (Porpora and Nikolaev, 2008). Coppock and colleagues (2018) looked at specific op-ed policies and found that the articles had a treatment effect between 0.30 and 0.50 standard deviations or an approximate movement of 0.5 on a 7-point scale. The research also concluded that the reader's opinion changed for at least one month. Unique to theCoppock and colleagues (2018)study, the authors compared the results of elite readers (lawmakers, journalists, economists, lawyers) and mass subjects and found that both groups werepersuaded but that op-eds were "but marginally more persuasive" (p. 59) for the mass group. Of interest, the authors also found that movement in opinion was predicted by political party identification.

Historically, news articles have been analyzed by their framing and could affect attitudes (Nelson et al., 1997) and beliefs (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Zajonc, 1998). News articles can also elicit emotions (Nerb and Spada, 2001; Kim and Cameron, 2011; Cho and Boster, 2008), and emotional content can lead to increased memory (LeDoux, 2000).In a previous article (Newman, 2022), the emotional tone of news articles on Bernie Sanders was compared to articles written about fellow Democratic nominees Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, and Mike Bloomberg in the first 60 days of 2020. The results demonstrated that the emotional tone of news articles about Sanders was significantly less pleasant ($p < .001$), hadfewer imagined words ($p = .003$), and had more active headline words ($p = 0.23$) compared to articles written aboutthe other candidates.The first article (Newman, 2022) analyzed the first 20 articles from a random candidate name search. From that search, 92% were news articles, and 8% were op-eds. Like Newman (2022), this paper will examine the emotional tone of the words in the op-eds to determine whether there are similar patterns when writing about Bernie Sanders compared to his Democratic primary opponents.

2. METHOD

Opinion pieces were randomly downloaded via Google News by the candidates' full names (Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, and Mike Bloomberg). The first 20 op-eds were pulled for each candidate. The time frame of December 1, 2019, to February 29th, 2020, was selected as the first contest in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, the Iowa caucuses,which was held in early February 2020.The time frame was chosen as voters might be more likely to read opinion pieces due to the primaries approaching. The extra month (December 2019) differs from the previous article (Newman, 2022) and was added due to there being fewer op-ed publications available than news articles. In total, there were four primary contests in the time frame of this study, with the fourth, South Carolina, landing on February 29th, 2020. None of the randomly selected op-ed articles reported the South Carolina primary results. Most op-eds came in February 2020 (61.7%), with January 2020 (22.5%) in second and December 2019 (15.8%) in third. The writers of the articles were predominantly male (65.8%), with only 8.3% written by both genders. There were 32 different publishers, with The Washington Post representing the most op-eds (32.5%), The New York Times representing 17.5%, and CNN a distant third with 8.3%. The analysis was performed on the articles as a whole (including the headline) as well as on the headlines separately, documenting the month of publication, the publisher, and the gender(s) of the writer(s).

The Dictionary of Affect

The emotional tone of the news articles and opinion pieces wasanalyzed using the Dictionary of Affect (DOA) (Whissell, 2009).Outside of any context, volunteers rated the emotional tone of words on three scales: pleasantness/unpleasantness, activation/passivity, and imagery (how easy to form a mental picture). Averages above or below the dictionary's mean score of 50, representing everyday English, would indicate emotional tone differences in one direction or another.The DOA matching ratefor the words in the op-eds was 84.5% and 61.6% for the headlines, the latter somewhat lower than the rate of 90% expected for everyday English texts (Whissell, 2009). Both op-ed and headline matching rates in this study were similar to the matching rate of news articles in Newman (2022): 83.4% for the articles and 61.5% for the headlines. The lowermatching rate for the headlines was likely due to the higher number of names and US states in the political articles.

3. RESULTS

Mean Scores

Overall, the words in the op-eds(N = 114,606) were less pleasant (M = 47.9) and less imaged or more abstract (M = 48.8) thaneveryday English. Activation for the op-eds was at the average of everyday English (M = 50.4). The words in the headlines (N = 1171) were also less pleasant (M = 47.3) than everyday English, but the activation (M = 51.6)and imagery (M = 51.6) were close to everyday English. The average article length was 943.8(SD = 441.8) words, and the average headline length was 8.7 (SD = 3.2). The large standard deviation for the article length was due to the op-eds having a range of 177 to 3518 words. The article or headline length noted no significant differences between the candidates.

Emotional Tone Differences– Articles and Headlines

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to explore the emotional tone differences in op-ed articles on political candidates. There was a statistically significant difference for article pleasantness [$F (5, 114) = 5.06$, $p < .001$], article imagery [$F (5, 114) = 3.48$, $p = .006$], and headline imagery [$F (5, 113) = 3.33$, $p = .008$]. Op-ed activation was approaching significance ($p = 0.58$), and there were no significant differences between the candidates concerning headline pleasantness and activation. The effect size was .18for article pleasantnessand .13 for both article imageryand headline imagery.Forop-ed article pleasantness, post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Bernie Sanders was the lowest of all the candidates (M = 46.9, SD = 0.93) and significantly lower than Pete Buttigieg (M = 48.86, SD = 1.55, p = .001) and Amy Klobuchar (M = 48.58, SD = 1.17, p = .004). For article imagery, post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Bernie Sanders was the lowest of all the candidates (M = 47.02, SD = 2.42) and significantly lower than Joe Biden (M = 49.50, SD = 3.34, p = .042), Amy Klobuchar (M = 49.80, SD = 2.56, p = .015), and Michael Bloomberg (M = 49.73, SD = 2.58, p = .019). For headline imagery, Bernie Sanders was again the lowest of all the candidates (M = 44.44, SD = 16.00) and significantly lower than Joe Biden, who had a very high imagery score (M = 65.38, SD = 21.28).

To compare Bernie Sanders with all the other candidates combined, an independent-samples t-test was conducted, and significant differences were found with op-ed article pleasantness (t= -3.16, p = .002, eta squared = .08), article activation (t = -3.12, p = .002, eta squared = .08), and article imagery (t = -3.19, p = 0.002, eta squared = .08). No op-ed headline differences were found between Bernie Sanders and the other candidates. First, concerning articlepleasantness, Bernie Sanders was significantly lower (M = 46.9, SD = 0.93) than the other candidates (M = 48.05, SD = 1.61). Second, with respect to article activation, Bernie Sanders was significantly lower (M = 49.67, SD = 1.05) than the other candidates (M = 50.57, SD = 1.21). Concerning article imagery, Bernie Sanders was significantly lower (M = 47.02, SD = 2.42) than the other candidates (M = 49.12, SD = 2.74). Correlations were noted for two of the three emotional scales between op-ed articles and op-ed headlines: pleasantness (r = .18, n = 120, p = .046) and imagery (r = .23, n = 119, p = .013). In Newman (2022), correlations were noted for all three emotional scales between news articles and news article headlines.

Comparison of Newman (2022) and This Research

Newman (2022) analyzed random news articles for each candidate, and 10 of the 120 pieces (8%) were op-eds. This was due to the author randomly selecting any news article, including op-eds, for analysis in the 2022 research paper. As the majority (92%) were news articles and not op-eds, a comparison can be made between the results of Newman (2022) and this paper. Table 1 contains the mean comparisons between the news articles in Newman (2022) and this research on op-eds. As demonstrated in Table 1, both article pleasantness and activation emotional tones are almost identical, and while imagery falls into the abstract range for the op-eds (48.8), it is very close to the news article imagery mean (50.9). The mean scores for article pleasantness, activation, and imagery being very similar suggests that the emotional tones for news and op-ed articles may be analogous. For headline emotional tone, pleasantness is almost identical between Newman (2022) and this research, but both headline activation and imagery are lower but within the pleasant range for the DOA.

Table1. *Means Comparison (Standard Deviations) for News Articles (2022 study) and Op-Eds (present study)*

Scale	News Articles	Op-Eds
Article Pleasantness	47.9 (1.6)	47.8 (1.5)
Article Activation	50.4 (1.2)	50.7 (1.3)
Article Imagery	48.8 (2.8)	50.9 (2.8)
Headline Pleasantness	47.3 (11.2)	47.9 (11.3)
Headline Activation	51.6 (11.5)	54.7 (12.4)
Headline Imagery	51.6 (18.4)	57.1 (15.8)

Comparison of Bernie Sanders and Other Candidates

To establish if there is a pattern in the emotional tone of news and op-ed articles, Table 2 compares the means from the news articles in Newman (2022) and the op-eds of this paper.

As demonstrated in Table 2, there is a pattern between the news articles in Newman (2022) and this research on op-eds: the emotional tone of the news and op-ed articles are significantly different between Bernie Sanders and his primary opponents. With respect to article pleasantness, for both the news and op-ed articles, Bernie Sanders was written significantly less pleasant than his primary opponents. Concerning article imagery, for both the news and op-ed articles, Bernie Sanders was written with more abstract words than his opponents. Thus, in two of the three DOA emotional scales, there is consistency between news articles in op-ed articles in how Bernie Sanders is written about, compared to his Democratic primary opponents.

Table2. *Comparison of News and Op-Ed Results (Sanders, Opponents, P-Value)*

Scale	News (Newman, 2022)			Op-Eds (This Study)		
Article Pleasantness	46.7	48.0	p < .001	46.9	48.1	p = .002
Article Activation				49.7	50.6	p = .002
Article Imagery	49.2	51.23	p = .003	47.05	49.1	p = .002
Headline Pleasantness						
Headline Activation	60.4	53.51	p = .023			
Headline Imagery						

4. DISCUSSION

News articles, which could include op-eds, have been established to affect attitudes (Nelson et al., 1997), beliefs (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Zajonc, 1998), and elicit emotions (Nerb and Spada, 2001; Kim and Cameron, 2011; Cho and Boster, 2008). The emotions in news articles have also been demonstrated to increase memory (LeDoux, 2000).For op-eds specifically, they have been demonstrated to change reader opinions (Coppock et al., 2018).

While this research was specific to op-eds, the larger conclusion addresses the pattern of media writing about Bernie Sanders in comparison to the candidates he was up against to become the presidential nominee for the Democratic Partyin 2020. As evidenced in this paper and Newman (2022), the words in both the news and op-eds during the Democratic primary were less pleasant and more abstract. As a reminder from Newman (2022), before the South Carolina primary, Bernie Sanders was leading in the delegate race with 45, Pete Buttigieg had 26, and Joe Biden/Elizabeth

Warren came a distant third and fourth with 15 and 14 delegates. Even in the polls, Bernie Sanders led all other candidates from February 10[th]until March 4th, 2020. Despite being the candidate leading in primary delegates and the polls, the news and op-ed emotional tones (pleasant and imagery) were significantly different, written less pleasant and abstract. In the previous article's (Newman, 2022) discussion, there was a reference to Aristotle (1954),who suggested that leaders could use emotional appeals to persuade and manipulate the masses.If emotional appeals can persuade and manipulate voters, then there seems to be a pattern when the media writes about Bernie Sanders compared to the other candidates.

Newman (2022)discussed how the authors wrote headlines on Sanders like "America's Nightmare - Bernie Sanders,Nominee" and "Chris Matthews Apologizes for Comparison of Bernie Sanders'Nevada Win to Nazi Invasion of France". While going through examples of 120 op-ed article headlines would be beyond the scope of this paper, a short examination of the headlines is required to demonstrate a similar pattern from Newman (2022). Headlines "play a substantial role in news communication" (Ecker et al., 2014, p. 6). Headlines serve many purposes, such as summarizing the main idea of the news or op-ed article and allow the reader to scan a broad range of articles to pick from and which to read (Dor, 2003; Geer & Kahn, 1993; Ifantidou, 2009; van Dijk, 1988). McCrudden and Schraw (2007) also noted that the headline affects what the reader focuses on or ignores.

Table 3demonstrates five op-ed headline examples that illustrate the differences between the final two competitors in the 2020 Democratic Primary (Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden). For example, with Bernie Sanders, words like 'big mistake', 'stop Bernie Sanders', and 'driving people out of their minds' appear, while Joe Biden has words like 'really nice guy', 'love', 'fantasy', and 'candidate of the people'.

Table3. *Sample of Op-Ed Headlines – Sanders v. Biden*

Headlines – Bernie Sanders
1) Bernie Sanders Is Making a Big Mistake
2) Why Bernie Sanders Drives So Many People Out of Their Minds
3) Hillary Clinton And Barack Obama Want to Stop Bernie Sanders - Can They Actually Do It?
4) Bernie Sanders Can't Win
5) Stop Bernie Sanders Now
Headlines – Joe Biden
1) Joe Biden A Really Nice Guy for President
2) Here's Why You Shouldn't Write Off Joe Biden
3) Joe Biden's Old Guy Machismo Is a Serious Flaw but Also What Voters Love About Him
4) Joe Biden's West Wing Fantasy
5) President Joe Biden

Another issue in the 2020 election was the reasons behind Democratic voters casting their vote for Joe Biden over Donald Trump. According to an article by Allassan (2020)for Axois, "58% of registered voters who support Joe Biden in the 2020 election say their vote is more in opposition to President Trump than in support of Biden" (para. 1). This poll results suggest that linking Sanders to Trump would be advantageous for a Biden victory, and this was evident in the op-ed headlines.For the 20 op-ed Bernie Sanders headlines, Trump was mentioned five times, all suggesting common ground between the two candidates. For example: "Vote For Bernie, Elect Trump", "Here's Why Trump Keeps Pumping Up Bernie Sanders", "The Donald Trump Theory of Bernie Sanders", "What Bernie Sanders, Michael Bloomberg, And Donald Trump Have In Common", "and "The Donald Trump of Bernie Sanders". In comparison, Joe Biden had only one mention of the sitting president in the 20 randomly pulled op-ed headlines, suggesting that he can beat Donald Trump: "A New Joe Biden Ad Shows His Theory on How To Beat Trump".From looking at the significant emotional tone differences, the correlations between Newman (2020) and this research on op-eds, and the headline examples above, it is clear that some sort of agenda or narrative was created by the media in the Democratic primary of 2020.

Limitations and Future Research

As with the previous study on Bernie Sanders (Newman, 2022), the DOA's context-free nature must be considered when evaluating and discussing the meaning behind the results. Concerning future research, as forms of written media (news and op-ed) have been exhausted, the next step might be to analyze the emotional tone of the televised debate questions to see if Bernie Sanders gets different questions concerning emotional tones than his fellow candidates.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Opinion pieces written on Bernie Sanders were more unpleasant, active, and abstract(theyhad less vividly imaged words). This research on op-eds was compared to previous work (Newman, 2022) on news articles, and a pattern emerged: the emotional tone of both news and op-eds articles written about Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary of 2020 was significantly different with less pleasant words and more abstract words than the other candidates.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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