THIRD PARTY FRAMES: EXAMINING MAJOR NEWSPAPERS' FRAMES OF MINOR PARTIES IN THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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THIRD PARTY FRAMES: EXAMINING MAJOR

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IN THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Thesis

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Third parties in American politics have a rich history of protecting the minority and championing issues such as abolition, woman suffrage, and other civil rights (Bibby & Sandy 1998; Hesseltine, 1948; Richardson, 2004). Yet not since 1856, when the Republicans and Democrats became the two major political parties in America, have third parties been considered a serious political choice (Lowenstein, 1995). In more modern times, third parties struggle to be noticed and to get their message to the voter. The mass media often ignores third parties for their lack of support, or portray the party as an extreme option that has no real chance of achieving any kind of success (Lowi, 1999; Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1996).

Why is it that any kind of political candidate not associated with either the Democrat or Republican Party has almost no chance of success in America? Is it that our democracy is a two party democracy? Is it the way elections are run, or the role the media plays in spreading political information? Or is it that laws set up by the government are biased against third party success? Can third parties work at all in a free society? This thesis studies United States' newspapers portrayal of third party candidates in an attempt to shed some light on the issues surrounding third party success in America. Specifically this thesis asks: to what extent does the newspapers coverage of Ralph

Nader's 2000 presidential campaign potentially contribute to widespread belief of the wasted vote theory?

There are modern examples of countries proving that more than two political choices can work. Turning to America's greatest ally, the United Kingdom, one finds a healthy selection of parties. As of June 2006, in the legislative branch's House of Commons, the Labour party had 353 seats, the Conservative party had 196, the Liberal Democrat party had 61 seats, the Scottish National party/Plaid Cymru party had nine, and other smaller parties had 16 (CIA Factbook, 2006). Canada has a working democracy with more than two dominating parties; as of Canada's last election in January 2006, the legislative branch's House of Commons was made up of 124 seats held by the Conservative party, 103 seats held by the Liberal party, 51 seats held by the Quebecois, and 29 held by the New Democratic party (CIA Factbook, 2006).

The United Kingdom and Canada are not rare examples. There are a number of other democratic countries that provide voters with more than two political choices. India, one of the largest democracies, has over nineteen small regional parties holding seats. The same is true of Mexico, Japan, and Brazil, the list goes on; all are countries that can sustain more than two political parties. So, why is it that the most advanced country in the world is unable to support more than two political parties? Is it that so far the third party issues and candidates[1] have been off base with American voters? First,

[1] There is a difference between an independent candidate, which is someone who runs for office without the aid of a political party, and a third party candidate, which is a someone running for office who was elected to do so by a political party.

This thesis will refer to both types of candidates as third party or a minor party. This is done because they both face the same struggles and problems with the media and other issues addressed by this thesis.

with regard to the candidates, recent third party presidential candidates such as Ralph Nader, Ross Perot, and John Anderson all have a history of advocating on behalf of issues that affect ordinary citizens such as: taxes, government corruption, education, and social security (Sifry, 2002).

Third parties typically receive little media attention. What media attention third parties receive usually focuses on a third party's condemnations of the two major parties. It is true that third parties criticize the two major parties. However, if we look past third party critiques of major parties we would see them giving attention to issues considered relevant by the media (Bibby & Sandy, 1998). In 2000 and 2004 third party Presidential candidate Ralph Nader's campaign website contained information on major issues facing the voters (Votenader.org, 2004). He also spoke publicly on these mainstream issues at many engagements. Despite Nader's effort to focus on campaign issues, the following analysis suggests that the newspapers focused on Nader in terms of a spoiler for a Democrat and Republican election potentially leading the reader to believe that if he or she voted for Nader it would be a waste of a vote.

This thesis examines Ralph Nader's 2000 Presidential bid with the Green Party and its coverage in major U.S. newspapers, as a case study of newspaper coverage of third parties in America. This thesis examines the three major active U.S. newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*) for their coverage of third parties using framing theory to examine frames used by the media that shaped the image and portrayal of this third party candidate. This thesis asks: How did newspapers portray Ralph Nader and did these portrayals contribute to the belief that voting for Nader was casting a wasted vote?

This thesis begins with a literature review that examines the legal challenges of ballot access and other restrictive laws facing third parties. Once the legal struggles for third parties are described, other struggles such as difficulties gaining access to the presidential debates, and overcoming the spoiler role, will be discussed. The spoiler role is when a third party candidate is believed to only be taking votes from a major party candidate. Further, opinion polls will be examined to show popular support for third parties, and are examined with the top theories on third parties and third party voters. Then framing theory will be examined with a brief look at similar theories such as agenda-setting, priming theory, how frames are best used, and the most reoccurring frames found in media by scholars. Chapter two is an analysis of the major newspapers' 2000 presidential election coverage of Ralph Nader searches for frames in media coverage.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern Third Party Challenges

It is important to note that third parties have not always struggled for attention or electoral success in America. In the past, third parties were not only successful, but voting for a third party was not considered a waste of a vote, or throwing one's vote away. Third parties were considered a real choice, attracting much attention and voter support (Richardson, 2004).

Despite major party dominance of the political process in modern times, independent candidates and third parties have still been able to run successful campaigns. Outside of presidential politics, independents and third parties have enjoyed recent success. For example, in 1990, Independent Bernie Sanders was elected to Congress in Vermont, and Lowell Weicker was elected as Governor in Connecticut that same year. Furthermore, Angus King was elected as Governor of Maine in 1994, Jesse Ventura was elected to Governor of Minnesota in 1998, and most recently, Senator Joseph Lieberman was elected to the Senate as an independent. Third parties have also won countless elections on the local level (Sifry, 2002).

Despite the few successes that recent third parties and independent candidates have achieved at the national and state level, there has been much more defeat. Not just the kind of defeat that results from a fair election where the population votes for another candidate, but most third party defeat is dealt before the voters even have the chance to cast their votes. Election laws, barriers to debates, little to no media coverage, and finance laws have all been used to keep third parties and independent candidates out and to keep the system safe for two major political parties. This thesis studies newspapers coverage for the ways it portrayed Ralph Nader's presidential campaign as a spoiler and a waste of a vote. But before that we must examine the other issues third parties face in modern elections.

The biggest problem facing third parties and independent candidates is the inability to get on the ballot. Access to the ballot shows that a campaign is a serious contender, which builds credibility with the voter. Two major party candidates are guaranteed to appear on the ballot, but for third parties, gaining ballot access is a much harder battle. States set different ballot restrictions and requirements for access. However, these restrictions are set by state legislatures which are populated mostly by Republicans and Democrats interested in keeping major party status as well as keeping third parties off the ballots where they could potentially receive support that might otherwise go to the major party (Flood & Mayer, 1996; Lowenstein, 1995). As a result, there are 51 different sets of confusing rules that vary by state and add increased difficulty for third party ballot access. For example, in North Carolina and Ohio, any one page of the nominating petition must contain signatures from only one county. In New Hampshire 3,000 signatures are needed to make it on the ballot of which 1,500 of those

must come from each of the state's congressional districts. In Connecticut, no page of the petition may contain signatures from more than one town and petitions may be signed only by people who did not vote in one of the major-party presidential primaries. These complicated rules coupled with short deadlines to complete the petition drive make it very difficult for third parties to make it on the ballot in every state (Flood & Mayer, 1996; Lowenstein, 1995).

Some think the cost of attempting to make it on the ballot in all 50 states is too high. With what little resources third parties traditionally are able to gather, a good part of it needs to be invested in this struggle to get on the ballot. Petitions, shortage of volunteers to circulate the petitions, and litigation to challenge rulings and laws on ballot access drain the resources of the party (Mayer, 1996; Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1984). The struggle for the ballot, in the end, is worth it for the third party candidate. It is a sign to the voters and the media that they are serious candidates. The newspapers most often mention how many states the third party candidate has qualified for and uses these qualifications when determining how noteworthy and respectable a third party candidate is (Mayer, 1996).

In modern times, the presidential debates have become an important event in establishing credibility with voters. Debates have become highly-viewed televised events that allow voters to see their candidate put to the test and defend their issues and ideas against the competition. Control of who participates in the debates rests in the hands of a ten-member Commission on Presidential Debates led by the former chairmen of the Democrat and Republican parties. To participate in the presidential debates, the commission has set a standard that a candidate must receive at least fifteen percent of the

expected vote in five major media public opinion polls (Morin, 2000). The debates have traditionally kept third parties out, but appearing in the debates has become an important goal for third parties because the high ratings give the third party candidate a rare chance to bring up issues that they wish to focus on and force the major party candidates to speak (Bibby & Sandy, 1998). Ralph Nader took the potential exposure of the debates so seriously that most of his television advertising and radio advertising in the 2000 campaign had the message of putting him into the debates stated clearly.

Media Attention and Third Parties

Media coverage is important to third parties because the media is virtually the only source of campaign information the voting public receives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Ramsden, 1996). Most voters educate themselves through the media and learn about the candidates covered the most. In addition to candidates, the amount of coverage also tells the voter which policy issues are important and should be used to evaluate the candidates. Therefore, third parties seek media coverage not only to get the voters' attention but to also gain attention for their campaign issues and force other candidates to address their issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Ramsden, 1996). In 2000, when Ralph Nader announced his candidacy for president, the *Washington Post* did not send a reporter, even though the announcement was held across the street from the *Washington Post's* offices. This was a sign for upcoming struggles that the Nader campaign would face with the media (Nader & Amato, 2001). When the media covers third parties, coverage often centers on the candidate's role as "spoiler" rather than the candidate's

campaign issues. A spoiler, in an election, is a third party candidate who runs and gains support. The argument is that because of the two-party system in America, the support gained by the third party is being taken from one of the major parties, thus helping the other major party. Calling a third party a spoiler is often a strategy used by major parties to scare possible third party voters into voting for the major party (Burden, 2005; Harold, 2001).

Other third parties have experienced more success obtaining media coverage. Ross Perot, believing in the power of television in campaigns, spent seventy-three million dollars of his own money to outspend the Democrats and Republicans on television advertising in 1992. However, Perot is the exception when it comes to third parties. Most candidates are more like the Nader campaign, low on money and dependent on the free media, which mostly ignores the party (Jelen, 2001; Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1996).

Despite the media's disinterest with third parties, citizens' polling evidence has shown a desire for some kind of change in the political system. When a *CNN/USA* poll asked its respondents in 1995 if they would like to see a new party in the next Presidential race, 53 percent agreed that a strong new third party should be supported. The same polling company in 1994 asked respondents how they felt about the present set-up of political parties, and again, 53 percent said they would like to see a new party, or more parties, come into play (Collet, 1996). Similarly, a 1995 *Los Angeles Times* poll found almost half its respondents feeling that the two-party system was "unsound," and a similar *NBC/ Wall Street Journal* poll in the same year found 82% had either "real problems" with the current party system or said it was "seriously broken" (Collet, 1996).

During this time, as the polls were being conducted, Ross Perot was making strong bids for president, first as an independent candidate, then as a candidate from a third party. In 1992, Perot was able to gain almost 19% of the final general election vote; Perot also out spent the two major candidates in television advertising that year, yet received only a small percentage of the overall vote (Jelen, 2001; Rapoport & Stone, 2005). Even with a big budget like Perot's, his campaign did not succeed. There are many theories that work to explain why even high profile third party campaigns cannot succeed in America.

Third Party Theories

Despite citizens' strong desire for more choices, as evidenced in polls, when Perot ran for president in 1996, he was only able to get a little more than five percent of the final general election vote (Jelen, 2001). What happened to all of Perot's supporters on election day? The leading theory on why third party supporters do not vote for third parties is "Duverger's law." Duverger (1954) argues that the single-member district system, or "winner takes all" system, encourages two strong parties and leaves no room for minor parties (Bibby & Sandy, 1998; Duverger, 1955). Duverger's law states that people do not like to waste their vote, and if the voters believe that the candidate does not have a good chance of winning, they will vote for the most favored candidate of the other two parties (Duverger, 1955; Fey, 1997; Fisher, 1973).

Other theories state that in a single-member district, once one party achieves a majority of the voting support, the second party is not meant to be destroyed; rather it is

responsible for gaining a monopoly of the opposition, in an attempt to become the majority once again. Rapoport (2005) argues that third parties are creatures of a two-party system and only form when either of the two major party's positions drift away from the majority of the population. In this situation, the third party will attract support, and the major party will react and change positions to regain the third party supporters (Rapoport & Stone, 2005). In this theory, voters still avoid voting for third parties due to feeling like they wasted their vote. The theory states that once a third party has substantial backing, one or both of the major parties will try to win over the supporters of the third party by changing their platform to appeal to a third party supporter. This reaction by the major parties shows that those who risk voting for a third party are often rewarded by getting what they want from the major parties in exchange for their renewed support (Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1996).

Theodore J. Lowi (1999) argues against Duverger and other scholars that insist single-member systems, specifically in America, cannot support third parties. Lowi points out that if in fact our system is naturally and inevitably a two-party system as theories argue, then why does America have primary laws, nomination laws, campaign finance laws, and ballot access laws that are all heavily biased against the formation of anything other than a two-party system (Lowi, 1999)? Lowi states that third parties bring important benefits to the system. For example, third parties help democratize the electorate. Most third parties work using political activity and volunteers at the local level. Third parties also bring new voters into the system allowing for more people to be involved in government (Lowi, 1999).

This thesis looks at newspaper's role in maintaining the control of two parties in the political system. It is suspected that newspapers help to maintain the two party dominance by ignoring third parties and giving voters specific frames that favor the two-party system.

Framing Theory

Early media research focused largely on the agenda-setting theory which pre dates framing theory. Both were developmental in the evolution of the priming theory. Although all three theories are similar each are considered important in the growth of political theories as a whole.

Agenda-setting has been looked at in depth by many scholars, all of whom have further defined subcategories and different levels of this theory. McCombs and Shaw (1972) have summed up the theory by saying, "[the mass media] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but are stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p.13). That is, by covering certain issues and ignoring others, the mass media are creating what is important and what is considered news (Scheufele, 2000).

The framing theory states that "in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker's [or writer's] emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions" (Druckman, 2001, p. 1042). What is said about an issue, how it is described, and what kind of detail is given are all important to the readers' understanding of the issue or

event. "Frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, and other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame" (Nelson, Oxley & Clawson, 1997, p. 569; Nelson & Oxley, 1999). Setting a frame for a story can be as obvious as presenting an entire issue in a negative way, or simply introducing a candidate, in an otherwise neutral story, as hopeless (Nelson et al., 1997).

In the media, framing is a process that persuades without the reader noticing. It occurs in every issue and every story covered by the media. Its potential is threatening because it can hide itself in subtleties and pass itself off as unbiased reporting. Framing theory can set opinions and attitudes about issues without the consumer of the story realizing it (Gitlin, 1980; Goffman,1974; Trimble & Sampert, 2004).

The priming theory is based in psychology and was first brought to attention by Iyengar and Kindre (1987). The theory states that people create what is described as memory traces when they hear or read a story or issue covered by the media. When they are presented with the issue or story again they will access the memory trace. Therefore, when the media repeats certain issues and silences others, they inevitably allow their own variations of importance to reach the reader or viewer. So the more the reader hears the frame, the more frequently a memory trace will be used, giving the trace more weight and importance (Iyengar & Kindre 1987; Mendelsohn, 1996; Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Scheufele, 2000).

Both the priming and agenda-setting theories focus on the media's coverage or silence of an issue, which sets an agenda. The framing theory, however, deals with the content of media coverage. It could be argued that by simply ignoring an issue, the

media is setting a specific frame as well as setting an agenda. But since the framing theory is mostly about stressing specific values and other considerations to give greater relevance and value to an issue, it is more important what is stated and covered in the story than what is ignored (Nelson et al., 1997; Scheufele, 2000).

Oftentimes framing is defined in a way that does not establish differences between framing and persuasion theory. Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997) have examined both of these theories and argue that there is in fact a difference between the two. The two theories, though closely related, are, at their core, different. The standard model of communication-based persuasion " involves a source who presents a message about an attitude object to an audience" (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 255) " The message affects opinion because it contains positive or negative information about the attitude object not already part of the recipients' knowledge or belief structure" (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 225). In contrast, frames do not rely on new information; rather, they operate by activating information already known by the consumer of the message. Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997) in their comparison of persuasion and framing conclude that frames guide people on how to weigh conflicting considerations by their effect on perceived relevance of alternative considerations (Nelson et al., 1997).

Nelson et. al, (1997) found informed people would be able to connect the considerations offered by the frame with their overall opinions and weigh the importance of these considerations; whereas, less informed people would have no previous opinions to weigh the considerations (Nelson et al., 1997). Korsnick and Brannon (1993) agree with this concept stating "the more knowledge one has about politics, the more quickly and easily one can make sense of a news story and the more efficiently one can store it in,

and retrieve it from, an elaborate and organized mental filing system" (p. 966). Thus less informed people are hearing the news for the first time and do not have a preexisting frame to guide their interpretation, while more informed people already have a frame defining the existing story. Druckman and Nelson (2003) point out that it is not knowledge at work within the framing process, rather the existence of prior opinions. They conclude that more knowledgeable individuals are more likely to possess prior opinions, and therefore, the framing process is more likely to be persuasive (p. 732).

Understanding that more knowledge possibly leads to frames being more persuasive to the consumer of the message, scholars look to see what other variables can affect the reception of frames. One of the more common variables examined are the effects of negative frames versus positive frames. The question on perception--"is the glass half empty or half full"-- can be applied to framing effects. An event can be portrayed as negative or positive depending on how one looks at it. A positive frame will present the positive consequences and outcomes of the message; whereas a negative frame will present the negative consequences of a message (Block & Keller, 1995).

There has been conflicting research as to whether negative frames or positive frames are more effective. Levin's (1987) and Gaeth's (1988) respective studies looked at the reaction to beef that was advertised as either 75% lean or 25% fat and found that the positive frame (75% lean) was more effective (Levin & Gaeth, 1988). In contrast, Meyerowitz and Chaiken's (1987) study was on young women's compliance with an advocacy for breast self-examinations. They found that women were more persuaded to get a breast exam when given a negative frame rather than a positive frame (Meyerowitz & Chaiken, 1987).

If involvement is high, individuals engage in more in-depth processing of the message: they are more motivated to reach the desired outcome, so the issue is looked at with more scrutiny. In this case, it has been found that negative frames are more effective (Block & Keller, 1995; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). When issue involvement is low and either the desired outcome is more likely to happen, or the individual is unmotivated to process the message, some would argue that message framing does not matter because there is little processing of the message, thus negative and positive frames, in this case, are equal (Block & Keller, 1995). However, positive frames have been found to work best in issues with low involvement because individuals often make decisions on simple inferences and attitudes, and positive frames work as cues to these attitudes (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990).

One of the most effective tactics of frames is the ability to set attitudes and beliefs while going unnoticed. Scholars have studied how frames operate outside the body of a story. Headlines are supposed to grab the reader's attention while summing up the article in a small amount of space. Trimble and Sampert (2004) conducted their study on frames by analyzing newspaper headlines which are prominently positioned at the top in large bold letters, shaping the interpretation of the story for the audience. Often it is the only part of the story the reader will actually read, or the only part of the story the reader will be able to recall (Trimble & Sampert, 2004). Headlines can set the frame for an otherwise unbiased story, or serve as a setup for the frame in the body of the story. Additionally, headlines are written by the editorial staff and thus represent the news values and express the social and political opinions of the newspaper, rather than the

writer of the story, giving potential for another frame that the writer of the story did not intend (Trimble & Sampert, 2004).

Entman (1993) argues that up until modern times American foreign news was dominated by the "cold war" frame. This frame "highlighted certain foreign events - say civil wars as problems, identified their source (communist rebels), offered moral judgements (atheistic aggression), and commended particular solutions (U.S. support for the other side)" (Entman, 1993, pp. 52).

One of the recurring frames found in political coverage is the "game frame" used in elections, and public policy issues (Lawrence, 2000; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000; Trimble & Sampert, 2004). The game frame, or horse race frame, is reporting that, focuses on who is ahead, who is behind, who is gaining, who is losing, and what strategies the campaigns are following (Joslyn, 1984). Polls and poll numbers are a prime example of game frame reporting as they are used to keep momentum and drama present within the story. During the campaign, polls are the only way to judge how popular a candidate or issue is. Because of this, they are used to frame comebacks, fallouts and the front runner (Mendelsohn, 1993). With such a strong focus on winners and losers, campaign reporting often consists of answering "How will what happened today effect who will win?" (Mendelsohn, 1993, ¶ 2).

Despite the game frame's ability to make the news dramatic and entertaining, scholars believe that focusing on keeping the news interesting causes the substance of politics to fall to the sidelines. Issues and policy positions that candidates deal with are ignored for poll data and strategy coverage (Lawrence, 2000; Trimble & Sampert, 2004). "The game schema, critics contend, offers the public a pinched, one-dimensional view of

politics, and the substantive political information that citizens could use to understand public policy issues, formulate informed opinions, and hold politicians accountable is lost" (Lawrence, 2000, p. 94).

Many studies (Gitlin 1980; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Meyerowitz & Chaiken, 1987; Nelson et al., 1997; Nelson & Oxley 1999) found these frames to be common in media coverage. These scholars find that frames, such as those present in horse races, can be an effective means to sway the thinking of the audience. Because of this, frames are often times considered a bad thing, especially in modern times, when the integrity of the news is a questionable source of non biased, credible information. In this light, frames can be viewed as a way to manipulate the news.

On the contrary, many scholars argue that frames are necessary and inevitable; that frames are needed to explain reality so we can comprehend it (Goffman, 1974). Norris (1997) finds that "news frames give 'stories' a conventional 'peg' to arrange the narrative, to make sense of the facts, to focus the headline, and to define events as newsworthy," and that frames such as the game/horse race frames are acceptable because they make the news simple and add drama that is necessary for the story to gather attention (1997, p. 2-3).

A number of theories have developed over time questioning who and what influences frames in the news. Gitlin (1980) offers a list of previous theories based on the work of Herbert Gans (1979). The first theory is a journalist-centered theory that explains news frames as a product of professional news media's judgments, and argues that journalism is, or should be, insulated from outside influence, whether from political pressures, pressures from publishers, news executives, advertisers, pressures from outside

interest groups, or, ideological opinions of the journalists (Gitlin, 1980, p. 249). The second set of theories emphasizes the sheer habit of the news organization. These theories approach news as a social construct and look at the informal rules that journalists use to process information and repackage it in a form that audiences will accept as news. The third set of theories are event-centered theories. These theories claim that the news mirrors and reflects the actual nature of the world (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980).

Gitlin (1980) and Gans (1979) write, "professional, organizational, directly economic and political and ideological forces together constitute, from the traces of events in the world, images of The News which are limited in definite ways and tilted toward the prevailing frames" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 251). Lowi (1999) suggests that the current system dominated by two parties has set up barriers to keep third parties from gaining success. This thesis is interested to see if the media has become one of the many vanguards against a third party victory.

Research Questions

The media is where most voters receive information on a campaign or candidate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Ramsden, 1996). The following analysis suggests that by examining all the national print coverage of Nader in the 2000 presidential election, one can begin to discover the images of Nader that prevailed in newspapers. Specifically, I asked:

RQ1: How do newspapers portray Nader and his candidacy?

RQ2: To what extent do newspapers provide coverage of third party candidates that will potentially contribute to widespread belief of a "wasted vote"?

Methodology

This thesis is a rhetorical critique that applies framing theory in order to explore media's role in shaping the belief that voting for a third party is a waste. To do this, the study focuses on the 2000 Presidential election and looks at the frames in national newspapers in the 2000 Presidential election. Newspaper was the medium selected because it was found that the newspaper is the medium consulted most frequently by more informed voters seeking information (Chaffee & Frank, 1996). The 2000 Presidential election is used because it is a recent Presidential election with strong third party candidates running a serious campaign and making an impact on the election results as well as the campaigns and coverage of the election.

The Newspaper Association of America, a nonprofit association representing the newspaper industry, offers a list of top national newspapers and their circulation by year. The list of top national newspapers for the year 2000 were the source for the newspapers selected for this thesis. The newspapers studied were: *USA Today,* the *New York Times,* and the *Washington Post.* The *Wall Street Journal,* which was the highest circulated newspaper in the country in 2000, was left off of the list because its focus is on financial matters.

The three selected papers were examined from June 25, 2000, the date on which Ralph Nader announced that he was running for the President of the United States with the Green Party, until November 2, 2000, election day. All articles or headlines mentioning Nader or his campaign were included in the data.

Four major frames were discovered throughout newspaper coverage of the campaign. The spoiler frame, which was when the newspaper coverage made it seem as the only votes Ralph Nader would be able to get would be at the expense of the Democratic candidate Al Gore. The horse race frame was where coverage of the election focused on poll results and candidate standings to make the campaign more entertaining to voters. The discredit frame was when coverage discredited Ralph Nader and his campaign, and lastly the trivialization frame was where the coverage focused on style over substance in the election.

CHAPTER III

STUDY

Spoiler Frame

The spoiler frame was the dominant frame in the newspaper coverage of the Nader campaign. It appeared in over 90 articles and was the topic of much discussion throughout the coverage. In the spoiler frame, newspapers portrayed a candidate that was behind in the polls, as having no hope of winning, and whose only effect was to take votes away from a candidate that had a chance of winning. Timothy Besley and Stephen Coate (1997) define spoiler candidates as, "candidates who run simply to prevent others from winning." (Besley & Coate, 1997, p. 86). This section analyzes the amount of coverage and space dedicated to the spoiler frame, how the spoiler frame portrayed Gore and Bush, and its use to silence Nader and his campaign issues. I will also examine the articles for Nader's defense against the spoiler frame, and examine the article's headlines for frames.

The Nader coverage is littered with the spoiler image, which appeared in the first articles from early on in the presidential race. Evidence of the spoiler frame can be found as early as the *New York Time's* June 25th article predicting that, "If the election remains as close as polls indicate, Mr. Nader, the longtime consumer advocate, could be a spoiler"

(Marks, 2000, ¶ 3). Throughout the coverage, to the last article from the *Washington Post's* November 2nd edition, which states, "Growing increasingly defiant during his Midwest stint, Nader said Democrats are telling him his Green Party candidacy will only serve to get Bush elected…" (Edsall, 2000, ¶ 4) Nader's campaign was framed as the spoiler. The newspapers repeat and used the spoiler claim so regularly that nearly every artifact examined of Nader mentioned him as a possible spoiler in some way. Richard Berke writes in the *New York Times* about Nader receiving the nomination,"…Ralph Nader was elected the nominee of the Green Party, leaving Democrats to fret that he would steal votes from Mr. Gore's Base" (Berke, 2000, ¶ 3). John Mintz, from the *Washington Post,* writes of the spoiler threat, "Ralph Nader, the Green Party's presidential nominee, denied on the same program that he is playing the role of spoiler by potentially undermining the Democratic campaign of Vice President Al Gore" (Mintz, 2000, ¶ 3).

One of the most common themes in the spoiler frame was the idea that Nader was a spoiler at the expense of the Democrat challenger Al Gore, thus aiding the Republican candidate George W. Bush. David Chen, in an article from the *New York Times,* poses it as a well known problem, "people interviewed at the Garden were well aware of the problem: that a vote for Mr. Nader would only help Mr. Bush" (Chen, 2000, ¶ 5). Another article from the *New York Times,* October 15th, 2000, makes the same suggestion. "Many of Ralph Nader's supporters say they are aware that a vote for Mr. Nader might only help Gov. George W. Bush but they still plan to side with the Green Party" (News summary, October 2000, ¶ 11). Katharine Seelye from the *New York Times* suggests Nader's spoiler role as a slippery slope that cautions supporting Nader in any

state “He [Al Gore] focused his speech on Gov. George W. Bush, but his eye was on Mr. Nader, the Green Party candidate who threatens to siphon enough votes here to cost him this state and perhaps five others, which, combined, could kill his hopes for the White House” (Seelye, 2000, ¶ 2). *The Washington Post* ran an article for children in an effort to help them understand the differences between political parties and to describe the campaign issues in ways children can understand. This article described Nader and Patrick Buchanan’s parties and wrote, “even if third-party candidates don’t have much chance of winning, they can sometimes affect the campaign by taking votes away from one candidate, or raising issues the Democratic and Republican candidates then have to talk about” (Kastor, 2000, ¶ 20).

In addition to blaming Nader for the potential failure of the Gore campaign, the spoiler frame hurt Nader insofar as the media often reported the spoiler threat without mention of Nader’s issues, positions, or events. Just enough information was given to reveal the threat that Nader posed to Gore. With this image, any support Nader potentially would receive was viewed as taken or stolen from the Democratic challenger, Vice President Al Gore, and seen as helping Republican Governor George W. Bush. The idea that votes belonged to either Republicans or Democrats remained a major theme throughout the coverage of the campaign, becoming more evident as time went on. Adam Clymer, in the *New York Times,* made exactly this point, “right now there is no question that two-thirds or more of Mr. Nader’s backers, in state after state are coming out of the Vice President’s potential support” (Clymer, 2000, ¶ 10). Also in the *New York Times,* B. Drummond Ayres Jr. writes a similar point to Clymer, “polls indicate that while Mr. Nader, now as in 1996, has no chance of becoming president, he has enough

support to steal some votes from Al Gore in some states, no small thing in a close election" (Ayres, 2000, ¶ 3). With no defense from these claims, it left room for speculation about what Nader's real motives were.

The newspapers coverage helped with this speculation, sometimes making Nader's campaign seem like an exposed trick, where Nader was running as a spoiler to help Bush beat Gore. For example, Sam Howe Verhovek's October 27th article in the *New York Times* discusses Nader's support in Portland, Oregon. "with plenty of support in the suburbs and rural regions of the state, Mr. Bush stands a very good chance of winning this state and its seven electoral votes if Mr. Nader drains away critical votes from Mr. Gore in cities like Portland and the college town, Eugene" (Verhovek, 2000, ¶ 8). The headline from Tunku Varadarajan's *New York Times* article serves as another good example: "George W Bush's secret weapon: Ralph Nader" (Varadarajan, 2000). Adam Clymer claims in an article in the *New York Times* that the spoiler role is the only reason for the Nader campaign, "the threat to Mr. Gore is the real meaning of the Nader campaign". He writes that the claim Nader makes about running to win and not to hurt Gore is, "…about as realistic as the defense by General Motors of the Corvair when Mr. Nader attacked it as unsafe in 1965" (Clymer, 2000, ¶ 12). Al Kamen's article in *The Washington Post* actually goes so far as to assume that if Bush wins he would owe Nader a job. "If Bush wins by a hair, the real puzzle is what job would he feel obligated to give Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, who may be the key to delivering not just one measly state but a half – dozen states to Bush" (Kamen, 2000, ¶ 6). These articles convey the idea that Nader is somehow supporting Bush behind the scenes.

The spoiler image was not found in news articles alone, but also in the headlines of newspapers. As stated earlier in this study, headlines can be particularly effective in suggesting a frame because they are in larger print, used to grab the reader's attention, and are often the only part of an article a reader will read or remember (Trimble & Sampert, 2004). With that in mind, we can observe many headlines that would have the potential to influence the spoiler image. For example, the *USA Today* June 26th article is titled "Green Party puts its 'dreams on wheels' with Nader Third-party nominee could become a spoiler in presidential race" (Squitieri, 2000). On July 6th the *New York Times* ran a series of letters to the editor with the headline, "With Nader in, G.O.P. dreams may come true" (With Nader, 2000). The *Washington Post* published an article about Nader in the October 23rd edition with the title "Nader is poised to play spoiler; Green Party's nominee may tip states to Bush" (Edsall, 2000).

The newspapers coverage did not always leave the Nader campaign without a voice to dispute the spoiler charge. Nader's defense of his decision to run and remain in the race was covered, though not as often as the spoiler image. When the campaign took out full page advertisements assuring people that a vote for Nader was not a vote for Bush, the *New York Times* covered the story, even mentioning the papers and magazines in which the ad would appear (Ayres, 2000). Additionally, the newspapers published four letters from Nader defending his positions and campaign (July 4, 2000: August 12, 2000: August, 25 2000: and October 25, 2000 in the *New York Times*). The newspapers even printed more reader letters supporting Nader than those opposed to his campaign. So, the claim of Nader being a spoiler did not go undisputed.

In the coverage of Nader's defense, the newspapers covered voters' arguments for supporting Nader. Jayson Blair interviewed David Joseph for the *New York Times.* Mr. Joseph was quoted as saying, "I don't care how much of a threat he [Nader] is to Bush and Gore… I want to see something new, something fresh in the debates" (Blair, 2000, ¶ 16). The *Washington Post* interviewed Kathleen Dragonman who had just listened to Nader speak and she said, "I was going to vote Democrat but he's making me reconsider that choice. My vote [for Nader] will send a stronger message" (Newman, 2000, ¶ 15). When David Chewn interviewed Jim Davis about his vote for Nader giving the election to Bush he said, "I'm not afraid of Bush…I'm just a disgruntled citizen." A similar answer was given when Chewn interviewed Jennifer Maslowski, "I have to live with myself…my life is not going to change very much if either Bush or Gore are elected" (Chen, 2000, ¶ 19).

Nader defended himself from the spoiler image by using catchy slogans, and insisting that the current system was corrupt and needed change. The newspapers used memorable quotes from the campaign that were aimed at combating the spoiler frame. One article contained the phrases: "The lesser of two evils, you still end up with evil," "you don't make a decision because of fear: you make it on your hopes, your dreams, your aspirations," "Follow your conscience. Do the right thing" (Associated Press, 2000, ¶ 6). Similarly, an article confronting the waste of a vote, Nader would ask, " do you think your member of Congress should vote his conscience? …Then shouldn't you? Invest your vote" (Broder, 2000, ¶ 7).

Many of the slogans involved attacked the other major parties, which developed as a theme for Nader's defense. Nader attacked the two major parties by calling them

corrupt and insisting that change was needed and wanted. Early on in the campaign, when asked about playing a spoiler in the race, an article quoted Nader, "I don't think you can spoil a political system that's spoiled to the core" (Mintz, 2000, ¶ 3). A common accusation used throughout the entire campaign by Nader first appeared in a *New York Times* article by Micheal Janofsky in which Nader claimed that the differences between the two major parties were "virtually indistinguishable" (Nader later goes on to use harsher words saying they are "Tweedledum and Tweedledee" (Rosenbaum, 2000)) and that "…the demands of the people mean very little to Gore and Bush. It is very important to them that the electoral process remains a closed-door affair between the Republican and Democratic parties" (Janofsky, 2000, ¶ 3). Phil Donahue was quoted by the *New York Times* at a rally saying "to all the spinners and handlers of the major parties who would dismiss us as a distraction, we want you to know we will not go away" (Dao, 2000, ¶ 5). In a *Washington Post* article Nader describes the fear of wasting one's vote on a third party candidate as, "right-wing… scare tactics…why waste your vote on two parties that have been wasting our democracy for years?" (Newman, 2000, ¶ 16). Filmmaker and Nader campaign speaker Michael Moore was quoted by David Chen in the *New York Times* debunking the spoiler claim, "a vote for Gore is a vote for Bush…If they both believe in the same thing, wouldn't you want the original than the copy? Wouldn't you want Bush? Sirloin or hamburger? Which would you go for?" (Chen, 2000, ¶ 12). Closely related to the spoiler frame is the horse race frame, which is coverage in the media that focuses on polls and poll results, and ignores other issues in a campaign.

Horse Race Frame

The frame that appeared throughout the coverage, and helped define Nader's image and affect on the race, was the horse race or game frame. This frame appeared in every article that covered poll results, but was covered in a significant way in over 44 articles.

Scholars have debated the usefulness of this frame with regard to its ability to inform readers. Some scholars argue that the horse race frame focuses on entertaining rather than informing. These scholars argue that this frame ignores the issues and focuses on who is ahead thereby turning the whole campaign into a sporting event (Lawrence, 2000; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000; Trimble & Sampert, 2004). Other scholars such as Anthony Borh (1980) have found that the horse race frame serves valuable functions such as enhancing the public's interest in the election process, focusing on polls that hold a great interest for special groups of voters, and placing media attention on the race rather than forecasting a winner and thus possibly influencing the outcome (Broh, 1980). This section explores how the horse race frame shaped the coverage of the Nader campaign. Specifically it looks at early portrayals of the Nader campaign, polls and opinion polls in the coverage, the benefits of the horse race frame to the Nader campaign, and coverage of the Nader campaign's super rallies.

In coverage of the election, newspapers employed the horse race frame at the expense of the Nader campaign. This is because of the focus the frame puts on polls and poll data, thereby pushing aside and ignoring issues (Lawrence, 2000; Trimble & Sampert, 2004). Since the Nader campaign was a campaign with low numbers in the

polls, the Nader campaign did not lend itself to favorable coverage within the horse race frame. However, the media attention they did receive focused on whether Nader's polling numbers would have an affect on the Democratic challenger. In this way, the horse race frame worked hand in hand with the spoiler frame.

A good example of the horse race frame appeared when Nader announced his candidacy. It was too early in the campaign for serious opinion polls to be conducted and reported, so coverage focused on exploring possibilities of Nader's affect in the polls. *USA Today* writer Tom Squitieri wrote this about Nader, "Nader has run a surprisingly energetic campaign so far. His poll numbers….have raised concerns among Democrats that he could siphon support from Vice President Gore and throw the election to Republican George W. Bush" (Squitieri, 2000, ¶ 6). Steven Greenhouse of the *New York Times* wrote this about Democrats' speculations of Nader in the race "Mr. Nader worries many Democrats, who fear that so many steelworkers, auto workers, teamsters and other union members will vote for him this fall that Mr. Gore could lose in Ohio and other Midwestern swing states" (Greenhouse, 2000, ¶ 9). This coverage is similar to the spoiler frame and could even be argued to have the same affect. However, the horse race frame was used throughout the entire election, applied to all candidates, and focused on poll results, whereas the spoiler claim was only used in coverage pertaining specifically to the Nader campaign.

From the start, Nader was portrayed as a candidate that was not going to win; rather, Nader had potential to play the role of a spoiler as explained earlier. Early preliminary polls showed Nader as being behind; he had been in the race only two days when all three papers called him a spoiler and gave his campaign no hope of winning.

The *New York Times*, on June 25th, 2000 wrote, "If the election remains as close as polls indicate, Mr. Nader, the longtime consumer advocate, could be a spoiler" (Marks, 2000, ¶ 3). The headline of a June 26th article in *USA Today* read, "Green Party puts its 'dreams on wheels' with Nader Third-party nominee could become spoiler in presidential race" (Squitieri, 2000). In a *Washington Post* article about Nader announcing his candidacy for president, the paper asked if he feared he would play the spoiler role (Booth, 2000). These reports come after Nader had been in the campaign officially for only two days. It is surprising to see this coverage of the early Nader campaign, especially when Nader started with an advantage; he was not a political unknown. With several books published, years of consumer advocacy, and a number of consumer advocacy groups bringing him some amount of fame, Nader had a reputation that could be comparable to his opponents. Although, because Nader did not belong to either major political party, newspaper coverage gave the impression that he would not receive any votes.

A key issue with the horse race frame was that newspapers portrayed votes as either belonging to the Democrats or Republicans, with little to no attention on third party votes. In the big picture, the campaign was framed as a horse race between the two major parties, instead of a campaign with several options. Nader's support was never his own. Instead, he was siphoning it from the Democrat challenger. Regardless of all the arguments from the Nader campaign, the horse race frame supported the image of spoiler and eventually the media stopped treating Nader as a possible candidate and more of a hurdle in the way of the Democratic challenger.

Due to the emphasis on polls, not all presidential candidates were represented, or even considered. Those polls that did include Nader and other third party candidates

often did so as an afterthought, or reported Nader's points in the poll as a hindrance to Gore. With George W. Bush and Al Gore polling within a few points of each other, in most cases everyone expected a close race. With such close numbers and all campaigns trying to pull ahead, even the slightest change became newsworthy. This logic would seem to beg the consideration of all political candidates that had support but instead, third parties were not offered as a choice. Polls such as the Post-ABC news poll conducted in October 2000 did include Nader in the initial findings and then offered a hypothetical poll of what the race would look like without Nader. With no indication from the Nader campaign that he was going to drop out, polls that held these hypothetical questions only strengthened the idea that Nader was stealing votes from Gore. All of this combined raised anger in democratic voters who believed the Nader campaign was going to cost the Gore campaign the race. Janet Elder from the *New York Times* writes that, "if Mr. Nader were not in the race, his supporters say they would vote for Mr. Gore over Mr. Bush by more than 2 to 1" (Elder, 2000, ¶ 5). Another example is an article in the *New York Times,* from October 25, that reported a poll by the Public Policy Institute of California, "Mr. Gore's support slipped away to the Green Party candidate, Ralph Nader, who polled at 6 percent" (Ayres, 2000, ¶ 2).

The Nader campaign did attract some media attention that stood at odds with poll results. Nader started to hold what the campaign called "super rallies" that attracted thousands of people. What was even more interesting was that the Nader campaign charged people ten dollars to attend the rally (Dao, 2000). In early October, Portland held one of three super rallies to attract over 10,000 people in a little over a week (12,000 in Minneapolis, 10,000 in Seattle) (Barstow, 2000). The super rally crowds were so

impressive that *USA Today* stated, “as the presidential campaign enters its last two weeks, Nader is drawing crowds like a front-runner” (Squitieri, 2000, ¶ 5).

Despite the large draw of the rallies, Nader’s poll numbers did not jump nationally. One *New York Times* article described it as, “the paradox of the Nader campaign that his crowds have grown, his poll numbers have shrunk” (Dao, 2000, ¶ 7). It is beyond the scope of this analysis to explore what caused this paradox, but all the coverage of the “super rallies” fit the horse racing frame with Nader as the beyond-hope candidate. The newspapers ignored rally coverage of Nader’s campaign speeches; instead the only quotes in the coverage from the rallies focused on the spoiler issue defense the campaign gave. For example, in James Dao’s *New York Time* article, a quote from the national director for Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal group that endorsed Gore, said, “I think Nader is fading” (Dao, 2000, ¶ 9). A second quote from a rally attendee said, “I really want to vote for him…but I don’t want Bush to be president” (Dao, 2000, ¶ 10). In a Tom Squitieri article from *USA Today,* Andy Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, is quoted as saying, “the only person Ralph Nader is going to elect president is George Bush,” and a quote from Gore’s lead field organizer stated, “don’t kid yourself; almost every Nader vote comes out of us” (Squitieri, 2000, ¶ 7-9). The only time Nader was quoted in the article was to attack the Democrat party. Framing the rallies in this manner made them appear as a “too little, too late” event from the Nader campaign.

There were favorable portrayals of the Nader campaign that came out of the horse racing frame. As stated earlier, the frame focused on polls and poll results. The polls showed Gore and Bush in a very close race, often exchanging the lead depending on the

state and poll through the duration of the race. The poll results caused newspapers to speculate Nader's numbers and casted him in the role of the spoiler. Eventually this caused the Gore campaign to worry that they would lose the race because of Nader's supporters, who they felt would vote for Gore if Nader were not in the race. This caused the Gore campaign to actively campaign after Nader supporters by visiting places that would have otherwise been written off, such as Oregon, where Nader polled high. The impact on Gore's campaign was covered in *USA Today*

> Gore, clearly concerned that support for the Green Party candidate Ralph Nader could hurt him in close states, told an audience…if the big oil companies and the chemical manufactures, and other big polluters were able to communicate a message in this state, they would say vote for George Bush, or in any case vote for Ralph Nader…It marked the first time he mentioned Nader as he campaigned this week, a sign that he is worried about his impact" (Benedetto, 2000, ¶ 4).

Thomas Edsall from the *Washington Post* wrote,"…Nader has attracted enough support in six traditionally Democratic states to give Bush a chance to win and collect their 61 electoral votes… alarmed by the numbers, Gore's campaign plans an intensified effort in the campaign's final days…" (Edsall, 2000, ¶ 3).

While Gore was campaigning in the states where Nader polled high, he was also speaking on issues that Nader championed largely environment issues. This led the newspapers to cover Nader issues as well as Nader's reaction to Gore's strategy on capturing Nader voters. Kevin Sack's October 24 article in the *New York Times* gives a good example, "Gore has been forced to reach out to the disaffected Democrats who form the core of Mr. Nader's base. …he [Gore] devoted more time than usual to promoting his environmental record, a critical issue for the Green Party" (Sack, 2000, ¶ 7).

Any of the good publicity and benefits that the horse race frame brought Nader was turned negative by the context in which it was placed. Throughout the last weeks of the campaign the question loomed overhead as to wether or not Nader would cause Gore to lose or if Nader had enough support to even matter. It was largely a debate questioning how severely Nader would lose.

The next frame found in the newspaper coverage, known as the discredit frame, focuses on newspapers taking away credibility from the Nader campaign. This frame also works closely with the spoiler frame as well as the horse race frame, but removes credibility from Nader himself as well as his campaign issues.

Discredit Frame

This section examines the ways newspapers discredited the Nader campaign. The discredit frame appeared in over 100 articles, portraying Nader as the "no-hope" candidate and emphasized Nader campaign attacks on opponents while giving short shrift to the campaign's issues. The discrediting frame holds some similarities to the trivialization frame, discussed next, insofar as both frames de-emphasize campaign issues. While the trivialization frame replaces substance with style, the discrediting frame tends to undermine the credibility of the Nader campaign issues. McCombs and Shaw (1972) find that, "candidates go before the people through the mass media rather than in person. The information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). This means the media is serving as the

most credible source for political information for most voters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Ramsden, 1996).

In this section, I examine the media's coverage of Nader attacking his opponents, the sources used by the media, and the lack of hope given to the Nader campaign.

A number of articles focused on Nader blaming the two major parties for the current system and situation he believed the country was in. Because Nader dedicated large parts of his speeches to attacking his opponents, this coverage was to be expected. Nader spoke openly about his position on political issues; covering the same topics as Bush and Gore. However, newspapers paid closer attention to attacks against his opponents than to Nader's own political agenda. To get full coverage, Nader had to use harsh words to attack his opponents, attract media attention, and get a message across.

John Mintz from the *Washington Post* quoted Nader, who referred to then Governor George W. Bush as, "…basically a conglomerate political corporation running for president" (Mintz, 2000, ¶ 5), and Vice President Al Gore as a, "consummate political coward speaking with forked tongue" (Will, 2000, ¶ 3). "He [Nader] mocked Mr. Gore's pledge to fight big oil, major pharmaceutical companies, and health maintenance organizations. 'Yeah, yeah, and I've got a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you, he said" (Barstow, 2000, ¶ 26).

James Dao quoted Nader, in the *New York Times* referring to Vice President Al Gore as "'an environmental imposter"' and a "'gee-whiz techno twit"' (Dao, 2000, ¶ 13). Nader also spoke about George W. Bush saying, '"The problem with George W. Bush is that he's beyond satire…He's the corporate welfare king of all presidential candidates"' (Dao, 2000, ¶ 14). Out of the entire article, Dao only writes one paragraph about Nader's

issue. "He said a much broader investigation by the Justice Department and state attorneys general was warranted. He also called for increasing the nation's oil reserves and taxing oil companies' profits found to be excessive" (Dao, 2000, ¶ 16).

In a *Washington Post* October 23rd article, Thomas Edsall covered a Nader rally. The article relied on the spoiler frame, portraying Nader as a possible threat to Gore. It covered Nader's struggle in the polls and his attacks on Bush and Gore, with no mention of his stance on key political issues. Nader was quoted in the article as saying, '"George W. Bush we can dismiss with a summary comment: nothing more than a corporation disguised as a human being."' Nader said of Gore, '"there's no end to his betrayal… the only difference between Al Gore and George W. Bush is the velocity with which their knees hit the floor when corporations knock"' (Edsall, 2000, ¶ 16 -18). In this coverage, Nader appeared as a naysayer. His credibility was called into question why the media only covering his shocking statements to his opponents, and seemingly never offering positions of his own.

At times newspaper coverage denied Nader a voice of his own and did not give him a chance to defend himself. Some articles used sources that came from only Democratic-biased sources or Gore representatives as sources. An example of this is David Broder's October 9th article in *The Washington Post*. In the article, Broder writes about how Nader's campaign "looms as a factor in the outcome" (Broder, 2000). For example, Representative Barney Frank said "a vote for Nader is a vote for Bush," or Representative Tammy Baldwin who was quoted in saying, "I have seen a shift in the last few weeks. Some people who are actively working for Nader and told me they're going to reserve judgment until they actually go to vote…they don't want to help Bush get

elected" (Broder, 2000, ¶ 10). Another example is an article in the *USA Today's* October 25th edition. Walter Shapiro writes of Nader's effect and quotes Democrats saying such things as, "I think the Nader thing is a few extremists…I think the Nader campaign is very healthy and positive up until the point that it leads to Bush winning. That's where I draw the line" (Shapiro, 2000, ¶ 4). Nowhere in this coverage exists a pro Nader perspective. Instead, the reader was offered biased material from the Democratic sources that discredited Nader and his campaign.

In addition to emphasizing Nader attacks and stripping him of his own voice, the discredit frame also undermined Nader's credibility by portraying him as the no-hope candidate. The no-hope message was a method found within the comments newspapers and their sources used that indicated there was no-hope of Nader winning. It was often found in conjunction with the spoiler and other frames that discredited Nader. The no-hope message did not always come from the reporter, often it came from opponents' campaigns, unions and other groups Nader appealed to for support, even Nader's own supporters. The no-hope message can be given in passing, such as when Joyce Wadler wrote in the *New York Times* describing a hard working Nader staff member, "why, now, work seven days a week for a candidate she must know will not win?" (Wadler, 2000, ¶ 19), or when Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* described Nader's candidacy as a "long-shot candidacy" (Blair, 2000). The no-hope message can also be as obvious as when John Anderson wrote in a letter to the *New York Times* "yes, it is unlikely that Mr. Nader will become president. But why shouldn't his views be heard?" (Anderson, 2000, ¶ 10).

Although Nader's campaign issues were often ignored, they did not go completely uncovered. There were a few articles that touched on Nader's issues without the use of potentially harmful frames. *USA Today's* June 26th article by Susan Page interviews Nader about two of his campaign issues: globalization and corporate globalization, and prints the transcript of the interview (Page, 2000). Sewell Chan's September 21st *Washington Post* article covered a Nader speech, including issues he spoke about, instead of his potential role as spoiler. Chan covered a Nader rally and recognized it as "…the largest gathering yet for the D.C. Statehood Green Party," and covered Nader's call for D.C. to gain statehood (Chan, 2000, ¶ 1). Sam Verhovek from the *New York Times* covered some of Nader's issues in his August 19th article. However, Verhovek does mention the spoiler frame in his article , "… the Gore campaign, which has always insisted that in the end, many people will not want to 'throw away' their vote on Mr. Nader." Before Verhovek mentions the spoiler frame he writes, "the Gore speech left all the friends grumbling that only Mr. Nader was still bringing up the issues they considered central in this election: Corporate power, the forces of globalization, the widening divide between the rich and poor, here in this country and around the world" (Verhovek, 2000, ¶ 10).

David Kairys July 2nd *Washington Post* article explained why third parties should be allowed in the presidential debates. In the article, Kairys mentioned third party candidates and their issues, and gave the argument that without third parties in the presidential debate, the two major parties would keep ignoring issues they do not like (Kairys, 2000). Articles like Sewell Chan from the *Washington Post* and Gail Collins from the *New York Times* wrote of Nader as a serious presidential candidate that draws

people together. Collins writes about a Nader rally and comments on the strong draw of a paying crowd where "the Republican and Democratic tickets probably could not get this kind of youthful turnout if they paid the audience" (Collins, 2000, ¶ 2). Chan writes how the rally was "…the largest gathering yet for the D. C. Statehood Green Party" (Chan, 2000, ¶ 7).

When Nader was seeking support from special interest groups such as labor unions, the coverage focused on groups that did not support Nader. During the election the Teamsters considered endorsing Mr. Nader but ultimately decided on Gore. When commenting on their decision, the president of the Teamsters, James Hoffa, was covered as saying, "I think we have to look at reality as to who has a chance of winning, and while I have a great respect for him, I think it's going to be hard for him to pull enough votes to win" (White, 2000, ¶ 6). When The Friends of the Earth, who also debated endorsing Nader and ultimately went with Gore, were interviewed in the *New York Times,* they said of third parties in general, " we're looking at the reality here…in the United States, third parties do not get elected to the presidency" (Dao, 2000, ¶ 5).

A constant negative message, in addition to descriptions of no-hope, strengthened the idea that Nader would never win. The no-hope message reinforced the image that Nader could not win and encouraged the idea that the reader would be wasting their vote if they vote for Nader.

Adding to the discredit of the Nader campaign were themes attempting to remove credibility from his past work. A good example from early on in the campaign was when it was made public the amount of money Nader had personally. No one expected Nader to be worth 3.9 million dollars and some saw this at odds with his consumer advocacy

and anti-corporation image. With this information, articles started to speculate that there was more to Nader than he let on. For example, Paul Krugman's *New York Times* July 23rd, article stated, "some commentators have made much of the secrecy shrouding the accounts of Ralph Nader's organizations, of the revelation that speaking fees and stock market investments have made him a multimillionaire, and of hints that his lifestyle might not be quite as austere as it seems" (Krugman, 2000, ¶ 2). In discussing Nader's lifestyle, Dana Milbank from the *Washington Post* describes how much Nader was worth and wrote that, "he wears leather shoes, eats meat and junk food, drinks wine and reads novels," then later states that "…to Nader's would-be allies in the Green Party and among the far left, the realization that Nader is tainted by compromise and corporate culture comes as a disappointment" (Milbank, 2000, ¶ 8).

Nader's past work as a consumer advocate was also targeted by a few articles. Paul Krugman's July 23rd article in the *New York Times* starts off paying compliments to Nader's work with car safety in the 1960's, but attacked his current work. "The causes that Mr. Nader and his organizations have pursued in the last couple of decades seem to have less and less to do with his original, humane goals" (Krugman, 2000, ¶ 4). He goes on to suggest that Nader no longer cares about the cause; instead he is just anti-corporation. In the end of Mr. Krugman's article, he offers the warning, "Many of those who are thinking about voting for Mr. Nader probably imagine that he is still the moderate, humane activist of the 1960's. They should know that whatever the reason – your amateur psychology is as good as mine – he is now a changed man" (Krugman, 2000, ¶ 10).

These attacks, though not very common throughout the coverage, served to discredit Nader as a person and drive voters away with a different image of Nader then what was being sold to them by the campaign. Disagreeing with Nader's past work, outside of the campaign, was acceptable since he was a public figure, but doing it to cast doubt on his campaign motives and decision making skills was discrediting. It reinforced an image that Nader never had claimed to be or lived by.

Similar to the discredit frame is the trivialization frame. The trivialization frame focuses newspaper's coverage on style over substance.

Trivialization Frame

The trivialization frame is one of the more damaging frames used in the coverage of the Nader campaign in 2000, appearing in over 40 articles throughout the coverage. The frame is effective in taking attention from more substantive discussions and topics and diverting it to more superficial topics (Rhode, 1995). It is damaging because it is a frame that puts style over substance by focusing on personal attributes such as appearance, marital status, personal habits, or personal style. It also makes light of the campaign's language, dress, age, and goals (Gitlin, 1980; Lind & Salo, 2002). In this section of the analysis I will examine the newspaper's trivialization of Nader and the Green Party, more specifically how they trivialized the Green Party's members, and portray the two groups that make the Green Party and the Green Party member's image. The section will then examine how newspaper coverage trivialized Nader's campaign, Nader personally, his dress, and how he was portrayed as a joke.

In the newspaper coverage, Nader's campaign supporters and the Green Party were targets of trivialization more than Nader himself. Nader stated on several occasions that one of his goals was to help create the Green Party as a strong third party in America so the party became just as important to the cause of his candidacy. Like most third parties, the Green Party had somewhat of an image problem, being seen as extreme environmentalists and old hippies. Newspapers jumped on this stereotype and pushed it as the party image. William Booth, in the *Washington Post,* gives a clear idea of what that stereotype is, "the stereotype of the Green Party is one of tofu-obsessed, aging, mostly white hippies who care most deeply about neighborhood recycling. And there were some older, ponytailed hipsters at the convention…" (Booth, 2000, ¶ 14). Booth's article from The *Washington Post* indicated there was some change in membership in the Green Party, however, the stereotype was still mentioned and confirmed through the article. Tom Squitieri from *USA Today* wrote a simular article about Nader and the Green Party. Squitieri, covering the Green's convention, did not mention any of the issues that Nader spoke on during his two hour acceptance speech but did mention that Nader beat two others out for the nomination. One, he describes, runs a Tennessee commune and advocates legalizing marijuana and the other was a former punk rock singer (Squitieri, 2000). Squitieri goes on to describe the convention;

> The Greens beat on drums to call their delegates to meetings. LaDuke, the vice presidential candidate, was available for interviews only when she was not nursing her 4-month-old son, Gwekaanimad. Folk singers strummed in the hallways. There were large numbers of sandals, flowered skirts and massage therapists. Some people called one another comrade. It was, in short, Woodstock with catering (Squitieri, 2000, ¶ 14).

With this description of the convention and party, it is hard to imagine it as anything else but a strange collection of social outcasts who banned together and suffered each other's oddities because no one else would.

With this image of the Green Party, readers may not think the party a viable one to join. Portrayals of aging hippies and crazy environmentalists separate the party from the average reader. By focusing on the extreme positions and party members, and ignoring the more moderate ones, newspapers gave the image that voters may be safer to join one of the major parties. Squitieri sets the two major parties apart by stating, "No one would confuse the style and substance of the three-day Green convention with the Republican and Democratic meetings to be held later this summer" (Squitieri, 2000, ¶ 10).

The trivialization theme was repeated often in the coverage, usually appearing as blunt. When comparing Nader and his workers to those of the Green Party Dana Milbank wrote in the *Washington Post*, "the Greens are radical activists in sandals who would rather replace the system. A gathering of Greens attracts a vast array of oddball causes, from Malthusians to a group called Beaver Power! That wants to install hydroelectric generators in beaver dams" (Milbank, 2000, ¶ 22).

The Green Party, in 2000, was really a collation of two pre-existing Green Parties: the more extreme, Green Party USA, and the more moderate Association of State Green Parties (Newman, 2000). This difference was only mentioned in detail once in Cathy Newman's August 17th *Washington Post* article. Nader insisted that he was not a member of the Green Party to avoid associating himself with the more extreme half of the Green party. In many cases, there was no distinction between the Green Party and Nader

supporters. A September 5th article in the *New York Times*, by James Dao, attempted to sum up the look of those that came to support Nader, "Nader events always draw eclectic crowds of ex-hippies with graying ponytails, well-dressed professionals, purple-haired 20 somethings and blue-jeaned union activists" (Dao, 2000, ¶ 22). Sam Verhovek's article in the *New York Times* describes how Nader created his base support, "Nader sees the West Coast – with its mix of liberals, radicals, environmentalists and others who lean to the left – as a fertile ground for his campaign" (Verhovek, 2000, ¶ 15). David Barstow from the *New York Times* described a Nader convention as looking like "less a political happening than a body piercing convention, with earrings sprouting from noses, eyebrows, tounges, lips and sometimes even ears" (Barstow, 2000, ¶ 13).

The trivialization frame does not always appear in such obvious statements as shown above. Often it can be subtle and simply pass as a description. This was found to happen when media reporters singled out Nader supporters for direct quotes. For example, on July 28th, Joyce Wadler of the *New York Times* quoted Masada Disenhouse, the New York State coordinator for the Nader campaign, and described her as, "Disenhouse, 32, a onetime graduate student in mathematics, who, with her black-framed glasses, face clean of makeup and simply-furnished apartment, still has that graduate student air" (Wadler, 2000, ¶ 7). After this description, Walder encourages her to stereotype those that support Nader, "have you many politically incorrect stereotypical generalizations about the people who work for Mr. Nader?...Vegetarian? 'Yep', says Ms. Disenhouse, cheerfully… Anti-fur? 'Except for on cats.' Opposed to makeup? 'That's laziness more than anything else.'" (Walder, 2000, ¶ 7-10). This line of discussion almost dominated the article, while managing to avoid mentioning any issues from the

campaign. It does, however, mention that Ms. Disenhouse's cat drinks from a "human's glass" (Walder, 2000, ¶ 11).

The image portrayed by newspapers for Nader supporters and Green party members can even carry over to people who were not Nader supporters. Dana Milbank, a staff writer for the *Washington Post*, interviewed a Gore supporter who was critical of Nader. The description Milbank used was "Straw-Gast, who wears a bandanna and a tattoo, and participated in the protests at the Democratic National Convention, should be a natural Nader supporter. But if the election is close, she says, 'I'll vote for Gore'" (Milbank, 2000, ¶ 3).

The trivialization frame was taken a lot further when describing Nader's party and support than it was Nader himself. It is important to pay attention to the frame and the images it paints. Anyone choosing to cast a vote for Nader would count themselves a Nader supporter and part of this Green Party movement, which was portrayed as full of oddities. Oftentimes, in regards to coverage in the trivialization frame, Nader, who looked like a typical candidate, would be overshadowed by his supporters who dressed, believed, or acted in non-traditional ways.

When Nader was trivialized, it was often for the way he dressed. Nader, unlike the Green Party members, dressed in simple business suits that did not stand out. Nader was portrayed as a no-nonsense candidate, who looked like what could be described as a traditional candidate. Still newspapers criticized his dress. One article, from *USA Today*, described "The Green Party's Ralph Nader wears "cool" shoes, say reporters who follow him, but he might want to get a new suit – it appears as if he had been wearing the same thing for 30 years." (Puente, 2000, ¶ 10). Joyce Wadler from the *New York Times* does

not find space in her article to write about the issues or campaign. She does, however, find space to comment on Nader's dress style. "There are no doubt many who are stunned to learn that Ralph Nader, our famously austere presidential candidate, who has been on the stump using his senior discount for air travel and has been wearing the same dark suit day after day…" (Wadler, 2000, ¶ 1).

Nader was also trivialized in quick, negative descriptions that seemed to poke fun at his personality. For example, Adam Nagourney from the *New York Times* described him as a "professional gadfly" when Nader appeared at the Republican National convention (Nagourney, 2000). Gail Collins from the *New York Times* called Nader an "irritating nag" (Collins, 2000). Or when Peter Marks from the *New York Times* describe Nader as a "…professional thorn in Vice President Al Gore's side" (Marks, 2000, ¶ 3). These quick descriptions, though not abundant in the coverage, further help paint the image that Nader was not as serious a candidate as he was an annoyance.

Another way Nader was trivialized was by being the punch lines for jokes as a reference of someone that could never obtain success. Joe Drape, in a sports article from the *New York Times*, was interviewing Lou Holtz about his team's chances of making it to a bowl game. Holtz was quoted as saying, "we have as good a chance of making a bowl game as Ralph Nader does winning the presidency" (Drape, 2000, ¶ 5). Walter Shapiro makes light of Nader's popularity in *USA Today* by describing a Nader rally turnout, "it is unimaginable a scene as Al Gore cruising a singles bar or George W. Bush boning up on his physics by reading Stephen Hawking. But Sunday afternoon at the Fleet Center, there was the enduring figure of Ralph Nader, dressed in what might be the same dark suit he wore while testifying on auto safety before Congress in the 1960's…"

(Shapiro, 2000, ¶ 3). Again, though not found often in the coverage, this joking portrayed Nader's candidacy as a joke and who would take a joke, so far as to vote for it?

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Through this analysis we have recognized four frames to identify an image of Ralph Nader used by the newspapers. The spoiler frame, horse race frame, discredit frame, and trivialization frame. In the introduction I posed the research questions:

RQ1: How does newspapers' portray Nader and his candidacy?

RQ2: To what extent does newspapers' provide coverage of third party candidates that will potentially contribute to widespread belief of a "wasted vote"?

The analysis shows evidence of frames used in newspaper's coverage have the potential to lead readers to the wasted vote theory. The wasted vote theory states that voters do not like to waste their vote. If a voter believes that a candidate has no chance of winning they will not vote for that candidate even if the voter favors the candidate. The voter will more likely cast their vote for a candidate they believe has a chance of winning (Duverger, 1955; Fey, 1997; Fisher, 1973).

Analysis of the four major frames throughout the newspaper coverage has discovered biases that skewed the coverage of third parties. Given that the public depends heavily on the media for its political information, this study indicates that readers may not be receiving the sort of unbiased, complete coverage needed in order to make an informed decision (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Ramsden, 1996).

The spoiler frame, which appeared with the most repetition throughout the coverage, took focus off of how well Nader was going to do in the election and changed focus to how much damage Nader was going to cause. This shifted the Nader campaign's image from a possible candidate for presidency that could bring change for the good, to a campaign that does harm. Also impacting Nader's image was the idea that Nader actually wanted Bush to win, so he ran for president to hurt Gore's chances. This hurt Nader's image with the voters by making him appear as if he were secretly working against them.

Newspapers did not give Nader an adequate voice to defend his campaign from the spoiler claim. Coverage of Nader campaign's defense typically worked to strengthen the spoiler frame instead of debunk it. Often, spoiler claim would be mentioned several times and the defense from the Nader campaign would consist of one short quote. Limiting Nader's response and repeating the problem made it seem as if Nader's campaign had no defense and was hoping to side step the claim all together. This is not to say Nader was completely silenced by the media. Nader's campaign dedicated a significant amount of time to seeking free media. Without the budget of the two major parties, the Nader campaign needed the free media coverage in order to get exposure. The Nader campaign struggled to be recognized by the media, but often times when the

campaign was successful in obtaining coverage it resulted in coverage that discredited the campaign.

The horse race frame made media confident Nader was going to lose because of the poll results. The 2000 election was a very close race and because of this much of the attention went to polls. Treating the election as a horse race, focusing on only the numbers and speculating on what affected the numbers, left out any candidate that was not competing for the top two spots. Nader was trying to run a campaign on reform based on complicated issues that often did not translate easily to quick sound bites. Because of this, his issues were left out of the coverage in exchange for his often disappointing polling numbers.

Nader claimed that his polling numbers were low because the polls only covered voters in the last election, those registered to vote, and telephone polls counting people with land line phones only. He claimed that many of his voters were previously unregistered voters or college students with only a cell phone, and that his actual total numbers were higher if everyone was counted. Claims like these were rarely covered. The newspaper coverage was taken by the poll results and instead of focusing on the issue and informing voters on which candidate was for what positions, readers were given poll numbers and issues were pushed aside.

In examining the discredit frame, Nader was found attacking his opponents. He tried to gain the media's attention by attacking the two major party candidates. This caught the newspaper's attention only long enough to cover the attacks, so when the public did read about Nader and his campaign they were exposed to an attack on the two major parties. Newspapers did not always give Nader a voice to help shape his own

image. Many times an article would be printed about Nader and his campaign and its potential affects in the election, and the only voices interviewed were those in the Democratic Party, leaving the Democratic Party free to make undisputed claims.

Also shaping Nader's image in the discredit frame was the "no-hope." For example, they referred to Nader as a "long-shot" candidate and assumed that he could not win. This portrayed Nader's campaign as a hopeless campaign that would not give up. Just as the wasted voting theory suggests, why would anyone consider voting for something they know has no hope of winning? The newspaper's no-hope message reinforced the idea that no matter what the Nader campaign did or said they were going to lose and therefore were a waste of a vote.

Lastly, newspapers trivialized both Nader and the Green Party in the coverage of the 2000 election. In this frame, the Green Party was more of the target than Nader himself. Since the Green Party was Nader's party, what was said about the Green Party reflected on Nader and affected his image. Trivialization is the frame where style is placed over substance and the coverage of the Green Party reinforced negative stereotypes, made light of the campaign, and highlighted some of the more extreme ideas and members of the party.

Newspapers presented the Green Party as disconnected from the common voter. By focusing on "old hippies" and making light of some of the members' life choices, potential voters would have to think twice about supporting a party of seeming social outcasts.

When trivializing Nader himself, newspapers often aimed at his dress. Nader always wore a dark gray suit and many times writers wondered if the suit was the same

one he had worn since the sixties. When not aimed at his dress, they called him names or used him as a punch line of a joke. By making light of the movement and focusing on style over substance, Nader was portrayed as a joke of a candidate.

In sure, the voting public is becoming more dependent on mass media to bring them the political information they need to make a voting decision (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Ramsden, 1996). This great public trust is being placed in print media, which claims to adhere to a standard of objectivity (Reese, 1990; Schudson, 1979). The insights garnered from this study of news coverage of third party candidates indicates that, rather than present an objective view of political candidates, newspapers cover political campaigns through various frame (e.g. spoiler, discredit, trivialization, and horse race) that limit the possibilities of remaining objective. The study in this thesis adds to existing studies that similarly demonstrate media bias in coverage of political events and individuals (Alterman, 2003; McChesney, 2004, 1999; Schudson, 1979).

Though this study was unable to determine what effect, if any, the biases offered by the media had on the voting public, it did show that biases exist against third parties in media coverage. The next step in this research should be a study focusing on voter reaction to frames in the media. Now that it is known frames do exist and carry the wasted vote message to the voters, it now needs to be known if the message is being received and interpreted by the voter. A quantitative study examining the information sources and voting habit and opinions of voters would yield such results.

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