



Media Coverage of the 2003 Governor's Recall Campaign

Assessing Balance and Substance

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Calif. Recall News Built Largely on Schwarzenegger's Campaign, UC Study of Media Coverage Finds

Governor-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger benefited from lopsided media attention in the opening weeks of his campaign to unseat Gov. Gray Davis, just before his popular support climbed, according to a University of California study of news reporting to be released today.

The *New York Times* reported on Schwarzenegger in 87% of the 164 stories that ran over the frenzied two-month campaign to unseat Gov. Gray Davis. The actor's wife, Maria Shriver, was discussed more than Green Party candidate, Peter Camejo, in some papers.

The steady blizzard of press coverage emanated from the California dailies, as well, totaling over 1,500 articles appearing in major newspapers and included in the study—published by the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *San Jose Mercury News*. Just under three-quarters of these pieces reported on Schwarzenegger's candidacy.

“Californians were bombarded with messages about Mr. Schwarzenegger's candidacy, cast in positive or negative tones, during the first month of the recall campaign,” said Bruce Fuller, the Berkeley professor who headed the study. “Soon thereafter his support rose from 22% to over 40% of those polled.”

The study also found that Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, the leading Democratic candidate, was “largely eclipsed” by disproportional coverage of the actor and by increased coverage of Gov. Davis during the final two weeks of the race. The *L.A. Times* offered more balanced reporting across the major candidates. For example, 61% of their articles informed readers about Bustamante, compared to 44% of stories appearing in the *New York Times*.

The *San Jose Mercury News* covered ongoing policy action in Sacramento more thoroughly, including bills approved by Gov. Davis to expand child health insurance, grant new civil rights to gays, and permit immigrants to obtain a driver's license. This resulted in more balanced coverage relative to the Schwarzenegger candidacy.

The study team included all news articles written by staff writers in each of the four papers appearing between August 6, the week several candidates entered the race, through October 6, the Monday prior to election day.

Little Talk of Issues

The researchers found little coverage of hardcore policy issues. The *L.A. Times* discussed the state budget crisis in just 9% of the 443 articles it ran. The *New York Times* reported on education issues—schools and colleges make-up about 60% of all state spending—in just 8% of its stories.

The *Los Angeles Times* pushed the candidates to clarify their policy positions, through direct question and answer sessions and “by challenging them when claims about the budget or school reform could not be substantiated,” Prof. Fuller said. “Overall, however, editors came to focus on Schwarzenegger’s personal history and character, with comparatively little attention to how candidates would tackle public problems that affect the lives of most Californians.”

Other Findings

Looking across the frantic nine-week race, Schwarzenegger’s press started-off with a bang after announcing his candidacy on August 6th. He continued to dominate coverage relative to the other contenders in the next few weeks, closely followed by a decisive shift among one-fifth of additional California voters who came to support the actor.

Three times as many stories appeared in the *New York Times* in which Schwarzenegger was the main subject of discussion, compared to Bustamante’s coverage, during the campaign’s initial weeks—even though the lieutenant governor was then out-polling the actor. The California dailies offered more balanced coverage, compared to the national press, until the final week when the horse race came to be defined as between Davis and Schwarzenegger.

Lesser known candidates, including Peter Camejo and Arianna Huffington, received proportionally less coverage. The *New York Times* discussed Maria Shriver, the actor’s wife, three times as frequently as Green Party candidate, Peter Camejo. The *L.A. Times* covered Shriver and Camejo with about equal frequency.

The study was conducted by an independent think tank located at the University of California and Stanford University, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). Graphic displays are available by fax or on the web (call 510-643-5362). Fuller, a sociologist, is professor of education and public policy at Berkeley.