Style over Substance: Newspaper Coverage of Early Election Campaigns in Canada, 1820-1841

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ABSTRACT Election coverage today is criticized for its obsession with individual candidates, appearances, and images, a focus on style over substance. During elections, there seems to be little space or air time in the mass media for substantive deliberation of campaign issues. However, this kind of election coverage is not new, despite implications that the age of television brought it about. The first competitive media environment in Canada (1820-1841), which this article documents, saw elections covered in a similar way. More importantly, this article argues that “style over substance” coverage served an important purpose in educating citizens about candidates and encouraging voting in a burgeoning partisan democratic system when the public sphere was still in its infancy.

KEYWORDS Print culture/journalism; Political communication; Newspapers

In the study of political communication, media coverage of elections has received increasing scrutiny over the past few decades. Election campaigns attract attention because they represent short, intense periods in democracies and stand as “signal events” (Fletcher & Everett, 1991, p. 181) and “democratic rituals” (Fletcher, 1996, p. 140). Examining democratic societies and their media, scholars have identified a common focus on election candidate personalities and strategies (Fletcher, 1981; Fletcher & Everett, 1991; Stromback & Kaid, 2008a). The democratic value of election coverage...
seems to be diminishing, as image and personality “take air time and page space, and divert attention of audiences from ‘substance’ or candidates’ stands on issues” (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2008, p. 28). Airtime and page space are valuable in an era in which citizens experience electoral campaigns predominantly through the mass media. The problem has been magnified by the medium of television, where campaign coverage has emphasized candidates’ personalities and appearances instead of ideas and discussion (Fletcher & Taras, 1984; Hart, 1987; Mendelsohn, 1993; Wattenberg, 1991). The concerns for diminished coverage of ideas and discussion reflect an underlying normative ideal for the mass media, which is conceived as a rational-critical public sphere where citizens can come together to find objective information about campaigns and discuss deeply the issues that concern them.

Despite implications in this body of research that this is a recent trend, style over substance can be found in election coverage almost two centuries ago. This emphasis was not, at that time, a problem for democracy; it was important to the public sphere rather than a sign of a democratic deficit. Indeed, in the 1820s and 1830s the coverage of a candidate’s personality and ability and the races between candidates helped to educate, engage, and encourage citizens in a nascent democratic electoral environment. Newspaper election coverage in the first competitive media environments in Canada—the seven Upper Canadian elections from 1820 to 1841—reveals a print public sphere almost entirely devoid of rational-critical political information or deliberation, but not devoid of value to electoral politics. This historical study illuminates the approach early editors took to elections in the style of election coverage content. As the electoral system was new and unsettled, voters were being drawn into a new provincial politics that extended beyond the local, a political environment contested by candidates at a distance and about which voters may have known very little. The emphasis on individual candidates and their identities taught voters who was running on partisan sides, how candidates' interests were tied to their own, and through the enticement of group drama and emotion, why their participation and association mattered.

Criticism of modern election coverage is founded upon the theory of the public sphere. Jürgen Habermas (1989, 2001) famously characterized the public sphere as having a nineteenth-century golden age, when newspapers provided information and encouragement for rational-critical public discussion and spawned further debate in real public spaces. That age, Habermas argues, declined with the rise of the commercialized mass media around the turn of the twentieth century. The public sphere presented a space that seemed to strip away people’s pre-existing statuses and allow rational argument to flourish and eventually lead to consensus in political action (Calhoun, 1993). Scholars have since qualified Habermas’ public sphere, questioning its accessibility, equality, and openness. As well, scholars have argued that Habermas’ public sphere downplays other forms of public political behaviour, beyond the rational, that are reasonable and important (Fraser, 1993). For example, Mary Ryan (1993) notes that “American citizens enacted publicness in an active, raucous, contentious, and unbounded style of debate that defied literary standards of rational and critical discourse” (p. 264). Ryan argues that a public sphere that presents “interest and identity need not be antithetical to the public good” (p. 285). This examination of the Upper Canadian public sphere is located within this trajectory of public sphere criticism.
The 1820s saw the birth of the Canadian print public sphere—distinct from the Habermasian ideal—because of a number of new conditions. Before this time, elections were not covered in any significant way beyond the final reporting of results. For the first 25 years after the colony of Upper Canada was founded in 1791, communities mostly existed within walking distance, an isolation that existed until after the War of 1812 (Errington, 1994). People had to live, and in many cases wanted to live, independently from government, an attitude certainly held by many Americans who had left the United States after the revolution. As S. D. Clark (1959) writes, “For the most part, the American frontiersman … was primarily interested in cheap land … and his main concern was to be left alone” (p. 251). A decentralized population also meant it was hard for people to encounter each other and think of each other as part of a collective (Noel, 1990).

The conditions for fermenting political awareness—and political conflict that would rage during elections between reformers and conservatives—arrived in the colony’s third decade. After the War of 1812, people increasingly found themselves connected to the larger world. Life became more complex to the degree that even people on the edges of society felt the effects of far-reaching economic and political developments (Clark, 1959; Errington, 1994). As Jane Errington (1994) argues, “[P]olitics began to impinge increasingly on the lives of the majority of the colonists” as issues of “taxation, immigration, powers in governments, and citizenship … demanded attention” (p. 8). Habermas (2001) notes that the public sphere was born at such a moment when “society had become a concern of public interest to the degree that the production of life in the wake of the developing market economy had grown beyond the bounds of private domestic authority” (p. 104). This was that time for Upper Canadians.

Most importantly, the communicative limitations of frontier society slowed its political communication and consciousness development until the rise of the newspaper. Although people were being drawn into more complex political and economic relationships, they “lacked adequate means of keeping in touch with one another” (Craig, 1963, p. 131) in a collective sense for some time. Editors called King’s Printers had published a scattering of weekly newspapers containing only government-approved information since 1791, but these were limited in circulation compared to what would come later, and they were carefully controlled.

In the 1820s and 1830s, newspaper growth, and thus mediated political community growth, occurred as printing presses became cheaper, more and more people learned to read, and more immigrants came to the colony, providing a larger reading audience. Technological advances in printing meant that individuals beyond King’s Printers, particularly people with complaints about how society was encroaching on their lives, could easily afford to purchase publishing equipment. Unlike today, few financial barriers to purchasing printing technology existed for anyone looking to enter the newspaper business. Readership was also growing. Jeffrey McNairn (2000) estimates that 1 in 5 families took a newspaper weekly by 1829, and 1 in 2 families took a newspaper by 1841.

Newspaper editors and politicians could now attempt to harness the audience into print communities. The newspapers of this time were not objective; instead they
were partisan—overtly supporting a cause or a party—and during election periods, news of the candidates and races, rather than issues or discussion, dominated pages. Drawing on the ideology of the Enlightenment, editors and candidates did write generally about truth and principles to their readers (they always believed they were publishing truth), but during elections this was not a print public sphere of rational argumentation between sides to discover truth about politics.

In light of these historical conditions and developments, McNairn (2000) observes an increasing cultural acceptance by Upper Canadians in the decades after 1820 of the idea of the public and of the people’s right to observe and critique leaders through the press—an emancipatory notion. Outside of election periods, published Assembly debates provided the raw material for citizens to assess their leaders and their policies—and citizens seemed greatly interested in these reports, McNairn shows. However, he admits the rational-critical public sphere existed only partially, saying that “some people some of the time could deliberate in public using arguments” (p. 65).

Other recent histories of the early press, acknowledging the idea of the public sphere as fruitful, recognize its limitations while at the same time suggest it served other useful purposes. Michael McGerr (1986) sees the early print public sphere in America as a place where local political rituals were performed to larger, distant reading audiences, attracting citizens to new political parties through displays of the spectacular. Geoff Eley (1993) understands the early public sphere similarly, noting that it exhibited a strong and valuable associational element. McGerr cites increasing voter turnout over the nineteenth century as a positive—and more tangible—effect of print political rituals than the less quantifiable question of how much debate and deliberation was engendered or made possible in newspapers.

Also looking at early America, Richard Kaplan (2002) praises McGerr’s move to study “affective political ties” as the most important product of the early print public sphere. Kaplan argues that the public sphere ideal is anachronistic when applied to judgments of the early press and its coverage, for the public sphere only developed through the transition from a partisan to an objective press around the turn of the twentieth century. This transition was set in motion in part, Kaplan shows, by people’s declining interest in or need for parties and a declining desire for partisan colouring in news. Kaplan (2002) argues that the early print public sphere was “less a matter on instrumentally choosing between different policy options and more a matter of publicly expressing identity and affirming solidarity” (p. 79). These outcomes were “matters of culture and the construction of identity” to which Craig Calhoun (1993) argues Habermas paid little attention. “Habermas,” Calhoun writes, “treats identities and interests as settled within the private world and then brought fully formed into the public sphere” rather than contested within the public sphere (p. 35).

During Upper Canadian elections, the print public sphere deviated from the Habermasian ideal greatly, rarely containing rational arguments or information about political issues. It resembled more closely McGerr’s and Kaplan’s conceptions. While it is impossible to know what quality of non-mediated debate took place face to face in taverns or public spaces, we can assess the newspaper content Upper Canadians would have encountered during elections. However, neither Kaplan nor McGerr looks
systematically at the pages of the press or at how newspapers educated and informed citizens about electoral politics itself in the early period. This study adds to this growing body of literature on the nature of that early print public sphere by, for the first time, documenting the style of early election coverage and arguing for its value to political education and association.

Analyzing today’s election coverage is a relatively straightforward task, as researchers of recent elections have neatly demarcated periods and easily found content. Studying Upper Canadian elections presents problems in terms of choosing samples and, in many cases, simply finding historical newspapers to examine, many of which have not survived. Election periods in Upper Canada were not consistent in length and elections never occurred on the same date in all districts. Second, newspapers were usually published once a week and on different days of the week. To select a sample during election periods thus meant allowing flexible date ranges for each newspaper sample in each election.

A discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995; Fowler, 1991; Gee, 2005, van Dijk, 1988) was performed on all newspaper pages in all elections from 1820 to 1841, from the first reports about the election to the last reports about the election. Within this sample, this study examines not what was explicitly said or argued about politics but the consistent way in which elections were represented in a wide selection of newspapers. Given that this study looks for consistent styles and article forms over all elections, questions of newspaper size or circulation are unimportant. The qualitative findings described below occurred in all newspapers in all elections. The sample does include papers from across the colony to ensure geographic representation.

**Personalities and appearances**

Fletcher and Everett (2008) note that to be successful on television, politicians today must be telegenic and project “a calm, confident demeanour and avoiding gaffes. ... Every perceived flaw is magnified and broadcast” (p. 347). Famous televised campaign debates, such as the presidential Nixon-Kennedy and prime ministerial Mulroney-Turner debates drew attention to political style and performance, particularly how style dominates political discourse. David Taras (1990) argues that debates satisfy television’s “craving for drama, personalities, confrontation, and winners and losers” (p. 167). He further argues that “the debates are the pre-eminent campaign story ... they have become the central fixture of the campaign,” (p. 167) with substantive coverage taking second place. This coverage issue is not unique to television, however. In their study of local print coverage of the 1988 federal election, Bell, Fletcher, and Bolan (1991) found that “much of the coverage featured hecklers, moments of confrontation between candidates, and personalities” as opposed to careful, reasonable presentation or discussion of issues (p. 187).

The newspaper coverage of elections in Upper Canada regularly emphasized and judged candidate appearances and oratory ability over issues or dialogue between politicians and citizens. Before voting began, candidates and voters would meet at the hustings, the stages on which candidates spoke to voters—sometimes for hours—at the polling place on the day of election. Upper Canadians would not have been able to attend more than their local hustings events, so newspaper hustings reports gave
readers a window, biased by partisanship, into these debates occurring across the province. Their ubiquity—found in almost all newspapers in this study—represented a type of “press rite.” Philip Elliot (1980) defines press rites as “those stories which the press as a whole unite in treating as important. They are stories which reflect on the stability of the social system by showing it under threat, overcoming threat or working in a united consensual way” (p. 143). Such stories have a predictable treatment and they “display the authorities and citizenry performing an idealised version of their secular roles” (p. 161).

Reports of the hustings, as all media texts do, did not so much depict reality as construct a world and the identities within it (Fairclough, 1995). Language in its very nature does not simply transmit ideas pre-formed but has an ideational role in expressing concepts about the way our world is or should be. Authors use language in texts to encode ways of seeing the world, setting up relations—in this case political—between participants (Fairclough, 1989). The reports of the hustings revealed a discourse of politics, a consistent structure of language that defined what could and could not be said, who was involved, and how they related to each other (see Figure 1, for example).

As far back as the 1820 Kingston town election, newspapers focused on appearances and oratory abilities, with the Kingston Chronicle reporting that candidate Hagerman “displayed his usual ability” and Markland's speech was “manly and dignified” (June 30, 1820). Yet readers were rarely told what the candidates actually said. William Lyon Mackenzie wrote in the Colonial Advocate that a candidate “delivers his ideas with ease and freedom” but failed to report those ideas (July 29, 1820). Mackenzie did not report his political enemies’ speeches either, and he could not refrain from telling his readers that one candidate’s speech was “a curious mixture of the grossest egotism—barefaced and unfounded assertions, and selfish-

Figure 1: A hustings report, Kingston Chronicle, June 29, 1836
ness” (July 31, 1828). It is unknown from reading the article just what those unfounded assertions were.

Speeches were portrayed as either superb or pathetic: there was no middle ground in the partisan battle. A writer in the *Canadian Freeman* called a speech by Jesse Ketchum “the greatest stupidity and grossest ignorance we ever heard or saw” and said Ketchum told a story that “drove every intelligent man into a burst of laughter” (October 21, 1830), yet he failed to print exactly what Ketchum said. The *Patriot* reported that its favoured candidate Draper “shone out with a brilliancy perhaps somewhat heightened by his foils, as the lustre of a gem is increased by the tinsel beneath it” (June 21, 1836). The tinsel in this dramatic statement was the other, less favoured candidates. Similarly, the conservative *Kingston Chronicle* on June 29, 1836, noted a conservative candidate gave an “eloquent and appropriate address to the Electors.” A week earlier, the reform *Correspondent and Advocate* said Robert Baldwin made “an excellent speech” in his nomination of a candidate. In addition, the *Cobourg Reformer* said candidate Boswell “ably and eloquently exposed” another candidate’s lies about him (July 8, 1836).

Candidates who spoke firmly and decisively were rated the best by partisan editors; these were implied to be the traits of a good candidate. One such speech was so well done, Mackenzie said it “called forth the applause of even his bitterest opponents” (*Correspondent and Advocate*, July 6, 1836). Never did an editor reveal mistakes in, or problems with, his favoured candidate’s speech, but enemy candidates received criticism. One man’s speech was described simply as “a precious long speech, which appeared to give himself very great satisfaction and his hearers very cold feet” (*Patriot*, April 9, 1841). The exact times of speeches were given (usually more than an hour long each) and even a fact as seemingly inconsequential as length served partisan purposes too, reflecting, according to editors, either a great orator who could command a crowd for long periods or a fool who bored his listeners by droning on. These examples represent early instances of Fletcher’s (1988) observation of the 1984 federal election, in which the media pundits assessed leaders’ television “competence (mistake-prone, fumbling)” and “personal style (insecure, nervous)” (p. 177).

Hustings reports also set a scene for readers, and that scene showed citizens swallowed up by the crowd and acting as one in support of—or against—candidates. Citizens were not depicted as asking questions of the candidates as in a town hall meeting, and they were not shown to discuss issues among themselves as if in a rational-critical public sphere. (Whether this is an accurate portrayal of what truly happened at those hustings is unknown.) Instead, according to the typical report, people only cheered and jeered the candidates, like supporters of a sports team. This representation of the political crowd served to express the importance and partisan drama of the key democratic moment and the strength behind the newspapers’ favourite candidates—people in large numbers were shown to be out and active.

In 1836 the “multitude” laughed in unison at reformer Jessie Ketchum, according to a conservative writer (*Patriot*, June 21, 1836). The whole of one crowd—not a portion or an individual—accosted one candidate, who “attempted to address the meeting, but was extremely unsuccessfull. The hisses and groaning of the audience evinced but too plainly that he was considered as an intruder” (*Kingston Chronicle*, June 29, 1836).
At the Toronto city election in 1834, the crowd's response was reported as collective sounds, printed in brackets, such as “(cheers and hisses),” “(great confusion),” and “(uproar).” At one point, an editor noted the crowd's reaction to an opposition candidate's comments with the words “(shame and laughter)” and “(no, no)” (Patriot, October 10, 1834). One can imagine readers finding great delight in the partisan drama of democracy, even if such reports contained little discussion. A writer for the Kingston Chronicle described one hustings event where “every one of the immense crowd was on tiptoe” (July 2, 1836). The correspondent described the feeling of being there as people jostled, squeezed, and crowded into the area.

Citizens were engaged in this important moment of democracy—the voting day and the interaction with candidates—yet they seemed easily swallowed by the masses. The only people emphasized as individuals in reports of the hustings were the candidates and those who nominated them. With multiple candidates—sometimes 10 in all—running for one seat in the elected Assembly, readers could not necessarily have known every candidate, so these reports provided details on the frontrunners and the fringe candidates.

Newspapers described pageantry and spectacle on the campaign trail too. In October 1834, the Patriot reported that a “party of about 300, preceded by a cart on which was hoisted the British ensign, and carrying two men playing the bagpipes and flute, marched in procession to the hustings” (October 10, 1834). Some people held a sign that said “Small and Reform,” associating the candidate clearly with a political label. Reports of the 1841 election described a gathering partisan crowd. The Patriot noted, “A vast concourse attended and there was a rich display of banners on both sides” (March 16, 1841). On the first election day, 80 sleighs led Robert Baldwin on a path to the polling place ( Examiner, March 10, 1841). For the city of Toronto's election that year, reformers travelled en masse to the polling place, according to the Examiner: “The body, which consisted of about 800 or 900, moved up Market-street, through Yonge-street, and then down King-street to the hustings at the South West corner of the Market Square” (March 17, 1841). These reports suggest the support behind the candidates, as people went to the trouble to make signs and drive sleighs—participation was portrayed as fun.

Occasionally people were shown to speak out from these crowds, but they offered little of substance. One heckler yelled at a candidate, “You little mannikin, go home and attend to your business.—Selling Morrison's Pills is an occupation more suited to your capacity than Legislation” (June 29, 1836). Since the candidate was a reformer, this report in the conservative Kingston Chronicle served a partisan purpose; to publicly demean its opponent. While entertaining as a piece of election theatre, the comment also showed that citizens were assessing the ability of candidates, however flawed that assessment might have been. Similarly, during an 1824 hustings speech, Mackenzie reported in the Advocate that “one of his schoolboys from amongst the crowd, spoiled the [candidate’s] whole oration, and discomposed the orator's train of ideas, by crying out ‘Georgey Ryerson, if you will come down from that there place and be quiet, I'll give you this knife and a piece of gingerbread ’” (July 29, 1824).

Nothing is inherently wrong with these examples of the emphasis on candidates' abilities and images or the partisan crowds and their verbal attacks, if we understand
the political context. These depictions served a purpose in an emerging democratic system: newspapers were attempting to engage voters in elections. As newspapers were partisan vehicles, engagement was important to getting out the vote on sides that would, in theory, serve their interests.

Editors and candidates needed to encourage voting at the time, lamenting often that many electors were seemingly uninterested in politics. Editors and politicians complained about apathy among the people, almost as if people were asleep (e.g., Farmers' Journal, July 9, 1828; Brockville Gazette, September 18). The sleep metaphor, often used, suggests a people who could be awakened and put into service of one side or another depending on the strength of appeals from candidates (e.g., Patriot, June 21, 1836; Brockville Recorder, July 8, 1836). Politicians needed this support on the ground.

Another word that came up often in election coverage was “exertion.” Editors and candidates of both sides encouraged readers to exert themselves. Sometimes people did not exert themselves enough, wrote editor James Macfarlane of the Kingston Chronicle (October 9, 1830). Writing in the Advocate, Mackenzie believed that people were often too busy working to care about voting (September 16 and October 14, 1830). Reformers during the 1834 election were particularly worried about people not coming out to vote. Elections saw “ruinous apathy,” wrote editor William O’Grady of the Canadian Correspondent (September 27), a point lamented by other writers (e.g., Kingston Chronicle, September 20, 1834; British Whig, October 3, 1834). In the 1836 election, each side expressed concerns that its supporters were less organized and active than the opposition’s (e.g., Correspondent and Advocate, June 8, 1836; Kingston Chronicle, June 25, 1836).

If voting was simply an individual task in the marketplace—like buying a hat or a horse—voters likely would not have expended much effort to support a cause or get behind a candidate. In this light, editors and candidates needed to use the press, indeed the power of language, to evoke a sense of the individual candidates and the greater groups and their political struggles, to encourage interest in voting. Without such encouragement, voters would become disinterested because, as Terence Ball (1988) notes, a vote does not “pay” and “democracy dies on the vine” (p. 138). David Nord (2001) argues that early newspapers reduced the “menace of individualism,” (pp. 93-94) a tension in democracy between the individual and the community. McNairn (2000) similarly notices that pure reason—the reason glorified by the public sphere ideal—was not enough to interest people in politics, and certain kinds of newspaper content were required “to excite and motivate a large audience ... [by working] on the senses as well as the mind” (p. 426). Capturing the physical sense of the hustings debates was one way politicians and editors did this. To win at the new political game created by editors and politicians, attention was placed on the exciting crowds that supported candidates.

Addresses to electors
Candidates also emphasized their personalities and encouraged affiliation by speaking directly to readers through addresses to electors (see Figures 2 and 3). Addresses found a place in almost every newspaper issue examined in this study (even in newspapers with little election coverage), although addresses have never been examined by scholars.
of the early press. Even as early as the 1820 election period, significant Upper Canadian figures such as Peter Robinson, Henry J. Boulton, and William Warren Baldwin advertised themselves directly to voters in this way (*Upper Canada Gazette*, May 11, 1820).

Whether published by reformers or conservatives, addresses were remarkably consistent in style, tone, and content. Never did a candidate criticize other candidates, suggest taking up arms to solve political problems, offer money or other incentives for votes, or ask people to vote along religious lines—the old ways of doing politics that editors and candidates opposed in print (although in reality, elections would still see these actions for decades). Given their uniformity and ubiquity, addresses can be seen as a material representation of political discourse. Addresses rarely adjusted to new political circumstances or issues; they were like a badge of political honour rather than recognition of any changing political realities or specific issues. Politicians seemed socially compelled to address their electors in the public press even though these ad-

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**Figure 2: An address to electors, Loyalist, July 5, 1828**

TO THE FREE AND INDEPENDENT ELECTORS OF THE TOWN OF NIAGARA.

Gentlemen—

Repeated solicitations, and a sincere desire to become instrumental in promoting the prosperity of this Town, have induced me, even at this late period, to become a Candidate for your suffrages at the approaching Election. I was in hopes that the necessity of my doing so would have been superseded by the nomination, on your part, of some other individual, not less able, and equally zealous to serve you faithfully. In truth, Gentlemen, I feel that in now coming forward I am acting against my own individual interest; but impelled by the powerful consideration that I am bound to succour the solicitation of my Fellow-Townsmen, I cannot forbear.

Although I cannot boast of being a native of this place, I am proud to say I am a CANADIAN, and a descendant of one of the oldest inhabitants of the Province. Here have I commenced my professional career, and here I hope to end my days with the pre-eminent satisfaction of having discharged my duty faithfully to God and to my country.

You cannot but agree with me in opinion, Gentlemen, that this is a crisis of vast importance, especially to this place. It behoves you therefore to send into the Assembly one who will guard your dearest rights, and exert every nerve in furthering the interests, not only of this place, but also of the Province at large.

For my own part I must stand before you, Gentlemen, resting solely on my own merits, whatever they may be, and on the sincerity of my intentions, to strive to be of real service to you.

Should you think proper to clothe me with the distinguished honor of being your Representative, time will shew you that I have not only a heart to desire, but likewise a mind to promote your welfare.

Reserving further explanation until the day of Election, I beg leave to subscribe myself,

Gentlemen,

Your Obliged and Faithful Servant,

CHARLES RICHARDSON.

Niagara, June 30th, 1828.

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**Figure 3: An address to electors, Colonial Advocate, June 26, 1828**

TO THE FREE AND INDEPENDENT ELECTORS OF THE COUNTY OF YORK.

Gentlemen—From the very liberal and highly flattering support I received at the last election for the Counties of York and Simcoe, I was induced at the close of the poll to declare my intention of offering myself at the next election, as a candidate for your suffrages.

As the time for that election is now fast approaching, I beg leave to acquaint you with my determination to redeem the pledge I then gave you; and although I am well aware that there are many other individuals as well, if not better, qualified than myself, who may tender you their services, yet from the disinterested assurances of esteem tendered me at the last election, together with the unsolicited encouragement I have lately received, it is with some flattering hopes of success I now come forward to solicit your support; and I can assure you, in case my expectation of being elected to the honorable and responsible situation of one of your representatives in parliament for this county shall, by your unanimous support, be realized, it will be my business to devote my time, and the humble abilities with which I am blessed, to the welfare, prosperity, and best interests of my fellow-subjects and my country.

I have the honor to be,

Gentlemen,

Your very obedient servant,

JAMES E. SMALL.
addresses were not particularly informative.

This consistency of the style of the address to electors reflected the idea that candidates on both partisan sides had a similar goal: to promote a principled and peaceful politics in the face of what had been a factional politics and to harness the power of the enlarged, diverse electorate—with them leading the way. Addresses thus represented an attempt at hegemony in the press. Fraser (1993) sees the public sphere not as a place of equality but as a “new mode of political domination” that is a site for the “construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination” (p. 117). Similarly, Eley (1993) recognizes the public sphere as a location where hegemony “had to be systematically worked at” (p. 326). Addresses were a way to do that.

In making appeals directly to the public, candidates encouraged voters to come out and vote and to see candidates as working in their interests. Rather than discussing or debating, candidates encouraged confidence by appealing foremost to their local connections; candidates told voters they would work in people's best interests because they had both grown up and run businesses in the riding. During the 1828 election period, James Mackenzie asked electors to vote for him because, in part, he had lived in the riding for a long time (Upper Canada Herald, July 17, 1828). Yet by making such comments, candidates clearly did not have personal connections to all voters in their districts—they needed the press to make those connections.

Even in the new mediated press world of provincial politics, locality still mattered; candidates argued they would do work in the Assembly that benefited local voters because it benefited the candidate too. In the sort of language common among many candidates who ran businesses, Benjamin Thorne explained that his own business interests were directly tied to the future success of the area, which meant that he could be trusted to do what was right for everyone (Canadian Freeman, September 30, 1830). Anthony Manahan wrote similarly to electors in the Patriot that “with its prosperity, I shall be prosperous;—in its downfall, I shall fail” (May 31, 1836). The assumption was that a politician not from the area might be running for the money and not for the interests of constituents. Residing in the riding provided a sort of check on power at the local level.

Given the patronage controversies of the time that reflected a widespread fear of factional interests, tying politicians' prosperity to electors' prosperity was an important election argument for candidates, where people were less likely to know each other personally. Personal connection, a key element of faction, did not disappear in the new print public sphere, but it became reconstituted. This issue of locality erupted in a controversy in the 1836 election. Reformers parachuted a candidate, William O'Grady, into Kingston to run against the well-known Christopher Hagerman, and conservative newspapers attacked the candidate as a stranger and outsider. This concern would not have existed under the communal, factional partisanship of the past because people would have already known these candidates after having lived and worked beside them for many years. As the political field expanded across greater distances through the newspaper, the personal and the face-to-face could no longer suffice as a way to know a candidate.

Addresses reflected a tension in texts between what John Thompson (1995) calls...
co-presence and wholly mediated publicness. The address to electors represented a sort of middle site in the formation of meaning between what had traditionally served as a marker of co-presence (the town, the village) and the demands of association through the press (no face-to-face presence). The new imaginary bonds formed through texts were not enough to connect people alone; locality still had to be represented through texts. Voters still needed the representation of the personal and the local to feel connected to the candidate and his party.

Politics was not done completely through the press; face-to-face meetings still mattered, as candidates often toured ridings to drum up interest and spoke at the hustings. What is clear from addresses, however, is that the new imaginary associative bonds formed through public texts were tenuous and abstract unless formally grounded in places; locality still had to be represented or suggested in forms such as addresses. Candidate addresses provided symbols of the personal and the local to encourage association with the candidate in the new political field. Taking the long view, Thompson (1995) recognizes the issue of mediated presentation of the self as having roots centuries old. Before mediation, leaders controlled their public visibility, since their audiences were found predominantly in person. The arrival of print allowed the first “extended availability” of a politician’s image but also allowed others to express counter-images of politicians. TV heightened the need for management of that visibility (Thompson, 1995).

Candidates promoted and managed their visibility in addresses to electors by touching on certain themes to do with political behaviour, implying just what a politician should be. In Upper Canada, the notion of just what a politician should be was still contested, and the ambitious politician was regularly decried (Kingston Spectator, September 11, 1834). The wrong kind of politician was described as a conniving person, a “designing individual,” as described by the editor of the Farmers’ Journal (July 16, 1828). Some politicians, they said, told lies about other candidates and appealed to the base passions of voters to further their factional plans (Upper Canada Herald, July 1, 1828; Farmers’ Journal, July 2, 16, and 23, 1828). This language should not be seen as a direct reflection of a reality; not all politicians would have been personally ambitious, and some politicians were likely interested in the principles underlying their campaigns for office. Most importantly, this constant critique of ambition created a discursive boundary that politicians had to stay within in their own language and action.

The negative depiction of ambition in political campaigning would have resonated with Upper Canadians because it reflected the relationship between politicians and society. The government played a major role in everyone’s life by 1820—farmers needed land provided by the government, businesses depended upon trade policies of the government, and many people worked in some capacity for the government, as politicians, judges, commissioners, and postal workers. Public jobs were valuable in the same way as property and were awarded according to the whims of the government (Romney, 1986). Reformers especially said their opponents supported the government because they profited personally from appointments or other forms of preferment. People were not naïve about government; they were somewhat suspicious of the motives of people running for office. One of the major criticisms of political life at the time was the unequal distribution of patronage. Opposition writers such as
William Lyon Mackenzie railed against men working together simply to get into office and earn government jobs. Writers insinuated that certain politicians wanted jobs simply for the money, that they cared more about their own careers than serving constituents, that they jumped from riding to riding to see where they could best win, and that they did not always come through with their promises (e.g., *Upper Canada Herald*, June 17, 1828; *Kingston Chronicle*, October 9, 1830). Editors and politicians complained about others who used means other than reason to bring together voters; they accused men of buying or bribing voters (e.g., *Brockville Gazette*, September 18, 1830; *Patriot*, February 2, 1841). Reform editors described conservative candidates as pretentious, arrogant, and full of bluster (e.g., *British Whig*, September 16, 1834; *Canadian Correspondent*, September 27, 1834). Reformers turned the criticism around. The editor of the *Correspondent* said that conservatives were in it for themselves and only pretended to be interested in the desires and interests of the public (September 27, 1834). Did candidates want power to serve the people or did they do it for the money? That was a key question underlying coverage of elections as editors tried to separate the virtuous from the corrupt (e.g., *Bathurst Courier*, February 19, 1841; *Mirror*, March 5, 1841). The corrupt candidate was portrayed as more interested in gaining political patronage than helping constituents (*Upper Canada Herald*, June 17, 1828).

In their desire to show deference and humility rather than ambition, candidates went so far as to criticize their own abilities and suggest other candidates were more skilled (e.g., *Weekly Register*, June 3, 1824; *Kingston Chronicle*, February 17, 1841). We could hardly imagine a candidate today telling voters he or she was not educated or experienced enough to warrant their votes, but this was a norm in addresses throughout the 1820 and 1830s. Candidates who downplayed their own abilities did not hesitate, however, to mention that they were solicited to run by friends or associates, suggesting to voters that some group of people saw some worth in them. Getting behind a candidate was portrayed not as an individual act, but as a communal one.

**Game frames**

Candidates were also regularly situated foremost as part of larger contests about winning (the “game frame” commonly found in modern election coverage). Simply put, game frames emphasize elections as races between individuals to capture the poll, with “the tendency to focus on who is ahead and who is behind, on poll results, and on the campaign itself” rather than public discussion and issues (Stromback & Kaid, 2008a, p. 425). If policies are mentioned, the media tend to contextualize them in terms of how they will bear on the success or failure of candidates in the race for power (Gidengil, 2008).

One characteristic form of game frame is the publication or broadcasting of public opinion polls before the final results are known (Fletcher, 1988; Fletcher & Everett, 1991). The first public opinion polls took place in the 1930s and 1940s (Lewis, 2001). But Upper Canadians had a form of opinion poll thanks to electoral rules of the period: voting polls were open over multiple days to allow people to travel great distances to the voting place, and in-progress results were known.
Without daily newspapers, Upper Canadians generally received weeklies with publication dates that fell during the extended voting period. Without laws preventing the reporting of in-progress voting, as we have today, editors of almost all newspapers gathered numbers and printed mid-poll results from many ridings (see Figure 4).

Such reports seem today to be harmful to the voting process, but these were important to Upper Canadian candidates. If the vote was going well, these tallies provided readers with confirmations of support for their preferred candidates. If the vote was not going well, the tallies warned readers that favoured candidates needed greater turnout in the remaining election days if they hoped for victory. Paul Romney (1984) notes that multi-day non-secret ballot voting meant that a candidate’s publicized lead may have helped to “influence the floating voters,” voters unsure or lacking knowledge (p. 29). All newspapers in this study obsessed over mid-poll results, suggesting their strategic importance in encouraging voting.

**Post-election dinner reports**
The candidates and their supporters were also regularly reported as part of another common article type: the report of partisan dinners (see Figure 5). These resembled present-day television reports from party headquarters after the completion of voting. These gatherings, such as the one held for two candidates by their friends in 1828, were also called “public” dinners, suggesting their greater importance to democracy (e.g., *Upper Canada Herald*, July 30, 1828; *Kingston Chronicle*, October 23, 1830; *Patriot*, October 24, 1834; *Courier of Upper Canada*, July 16, 1836). However, the dinners were essentially private (for the candidates and their immediate friends), and their dates and times were only occasionally advertised (*Courier of Upper Canada*, July 20, 1836). Dinners were always reported as well attended, with sometimes up to 100 supporters acknowledging the candidate with roaring applause (*Loyalist*, July 12 and 19, 1828). After the 1834 Kingston town election, both government-friendly and anti-government newspapers printed extensive reports of the respective candidates’ dinner parties (*British Whig*, October 3, 1834; *Canadian Correspondent*, October 11, 1834; *Kingston Chronicle*, October 11, 1834). On both sides, people toasted the King and Britain but then the toasts diverged into partisan political criticism. William O’Grady’s friends toasted the “Reformers of Upper Canada” while Christopher Hagerman’s friends toasted “Constitutionalists of Upper Canada.” O’Grady’s dinner also saw a mocking toast to the people who said they would vote for him but did not. After this jest, the dinner guests responded by drinking “in contemtuous silence” for those “traitors.”
As Jeffrey Pasley (2004) explains, “No mere drinking game, political banquet toasts served, and were intended to serve, as informal platforms for the community, party, or faction”; more importantly, they were “intended for public consumption in the newspapers” (p. 40). David Waldstreicher (1995) argues reports of toasts took local sentiment and sent it across the land, symbolically linking the locale to the nation. These dinner reports did not deal with issues or, for the winning politicians, plans for the future. Instead, these reports depicted evidence of political sociability; even the losing side would live to fight another day. In a time of political violence in Upper Canada, this was a marker of democratic civility.

These publicized rituals of the guidings, addresses, and dinners, in Waldstreicher’s (1995) terms, “resolved certain problems” of the political sphere (p. 38). Partisan rituals acted as a “collective dramatic portrayal,” as Kaplan (2002) explains, and they “transformed political parties into concrete, meaningful entities.” Furthermore, he says:

In campaign rites as well as in press narratives, parties were conjoined into all-encompassing, living, breathing animate political beings. In this public theatre, the whole of the political world was translated into simplified us-against-them narratives. Such political stories permitted easy comprehension and strong emotional identification.

Reports of these post-election dinners need not have been published, as they served no purely informational value to readers; however, they suggested the importance of the cause and group, whether successful or not. People did not just win or lose, disappearing until the next election, in these reports; they symbolized people sticking together as political friends. The *Dundas Weekly Post* of 1836 printed a

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**Figure 5: A partisan dinner report, Loyalist, July 19, 1828**

*The Dinner to Mr. Robinson, by his Electors and friends on his re-election for the Town of York, as we have already stated, attended by a very numerous party. We should have given a list of the Toasts which were drunk, last week, but the lateness of the hour prevented our doing so. We have since however procured a copy of them, and the sentiments which they express, are such, as will, we have little doubt, be most heartily concurred in by every person who is actuated by the same cordial wish, for the prosperity of the Province, as were those, who were present on the occasion.*

1. The King.—Long may he continue to reign in the affections of a loyal and happy people. (Music.—God save the King!)

2. The Royal Family. (Rule Britannia.)

3. The Army and Navy.—(Britons Strike Home.)

4. The Colonial Secretary and His Majesty’s Ministry.—May the people of Upper Canada, acknowledge with gratitude their exertions to promote the interests of the Province, Sweet Home. (Home, Sweet Home.)

5. Sir Peregrine Maitland, His Majesty’s Representative in U. Canada. May he ever continue, as He always has done, to exercise the Royal prerogative with mercy—to dispense justice with impartiality, and to ensure the confidence and respect of a loyal and affectionate people. (British Grenadiers.)

6. John B. Robinson Esq.—our worthy Representative. While he emulates with others the ambition of his countrymen, may he stand a firm pillar of the State—-not a weathercock on the top of the edifice to show which way the wind blows.—("Up and away thee a’ Johnny.")

7. The Executive and Legislative Councils of U. C. (Hearts of Oak.)

8. The House of Assembly.—May their wisdom tend to bind together, the People, and the Government, by the strong and powerful ties of mutual interest, and reciprocal obligation. (Canadian Boat Song.)

9. The Militia of Upper Canada.—Their former distinguished conduct, is the best pledge of their future devotion to their country, in the hour of danger. (Scott’s Address.)

10. The Trade of Canada.—May its increasing prosperity, and good faith, ensure the confidence of distant countries. (Speed the Plough.)

11. Public Improvements.—While the influence of the Parent State, and of all public spiritual individuals is exerted to improve the country, by making canals to flow through it—may those whose duty it is, make it their study to emulate the noble example, by "wrestling their way." (Meeting of the Waters.)

12. Lady Sarah Maitland, and the Fair of Upper Canada. ("Sweet Home of Richmond Hill.")

On Mr. Robinson’s health being drunk, he rose, and returned thanks for the honor which had been done him. He was repeatedly cheered, during the course of a long Speech, in which he explained many important parts of his public conduct, showing in the most satisfactory manner, that the aspersions which had been cast upon him, were unjust, and without foundation; he vindicated the course he had pursued in Parliament, as being founded on the principle contained in the Toast, and said that if the desire of popularity which actuated him could make itself subservient to every Gale which blew, he should rather resemble the weathercock on the top of the Edder, than the firm supporter of those constitutional rights which he felt satisfied it was the desire of his Electors to see inviolably preserved. He concluded by offering a Hump-er, to Prosperity to the Town of York, which was drank with three times three.
particularly detailed report of a dinner in Guelph to celebrate the election victories of
the conservatives both in Halton and across Upper Canada. In his speech, Absalom
Shade said:

Gentlemen, when I look around me on this numerous, most respectable and
intelligent mass of British Settlers whom I have the honor to represent, I feel
deeper the great weight and the solemn trust you have confided to my care.
His speech was interrupted regularly by “[Loud Cheers.]” Shade continued:

Gentlemen, what can be more gratifying, than a view of such an assemblage
as the present, collected as if by magic volition in the cause of the British con-
stitution; uniting in heart and hand, in word and act.

The report ended with a comment that the dinner “broke up at a late hour, highly de-
lighted with the proceedings of the day, [and] the songs and the enthusiasm which
prevailed” (July 19 and 26). This language suggested to the readership the collegiality
of a partisan political community but also served as another occasion where partisans
could attack their enemies.

Conclusion
The election coverage of the distant past looks remarkably similar to the election cov-
erce of today, but a vastly different relationship between the media and politics existed
in each era. Upper Canadian editors cared little about objective reporting (objectivity
as a cultural ideal would not develop until near the end of the century) while modern
journalists at least attempt to follow that ideal. The Upper Canadian press had not yet
reached Stromback and Kaid’s (2008b) first phase of mediatization of politics, whereby
the media constitute the most important communication channels between the gov-
erned and those who govern, as we see today. Upper Canadians likely still received a
great deal of news about elections face to face, where they could discuss politics ra-
tionally and critically. The press coverage itself reflected an understanding that people
needed to be educated about candidates and races across the vast colony.

There is no indication that Upper Canadian election campaigns were run according
to modern media logic or, first and foremost, for media attention. But some tran-
sition was occurring: the exceedingly common form of the address to electors—which
all politicians seemed socially compelled to publish, no matter how little information
they actually included—reflected the beginning of this mediatization process. By con-
trast, politics today finds itself completely mediatized (Stromback & Kaid, 2008b) and
citizens are aware of the importance of elections and how they work, even if they have
disengaged from the process. Modern campaigns in Canada “are, to a large extent,
media campaigns … In many respects, campaigns are contests in which media atten-
tion is the prize” (Fletcher & Everett, 2008, p. 347), raising concerns about the demo-
cratic value of this kind of election coverage in our time.

Commentators today lament the traits of election coverage discussed here and
rightly so. At first glance the Habermasian ideal looks lost, crowded out by game frames
and personalities; however, the functions of that coverage are important to consider
when judging coverage of two eras separated by many decades. Fletcher and Everett
(1991), in summarizing a major study of election coverage in Canada, suggested going
beyond description of these coverage faults (a necessary first step, of course), to understanding what that coverage meant in context for the public. They wrote:

Campaigns should promote a constructive engagement of citizens, foster their interests and confidence in and understanding of the electoral process, and provide a stimulus to participation. (p. 180)

Upper Canadian election coverage attempted to do all of those things, although we cannot be certain if it succeeded. Upper Canadian coverage may have existed to consolidate support or it may have attempted to persuade the undecided, or a combination of both. But we do know it attempted to address problems of awareness, education, and interest in partisan political campaigns. It did not allow or present any real deliberation or discussion—perhaps the heat of the campaign meant there was little need for that. Instead, Upper Canadians came together and put forth partisan identities and attempted to teach readers about candidates and encourage voting. More importantly, this comparison suggests that rather than criticizing the early public sphere for its lack of rational-critical discussion and praising a later time in the century when the ideal existed (Rutherford, 1982), we should recognize that the early print public sphere and its characteristic forms served an important role in a developing democratic electoral system.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Gene Allen, Fred Fletcher, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Notes


2. To ensure fairness of comparison between the newspapers, copies came only from newspapers that had complete runs during elections available on microfilm. An extensive examination of every available Upper Canadian newspaper microfilm between 1820 and 1841 was done to discover which ones contained complete runs during each election period. To be systematic, an attempt was made to select three newspapers with complete runs on each “side” of the political divide in each election between 1820 and 1841. However, as this examination progressed, it was clear that there were not enough complete runs to satisfy this requirement exactly in every election period. Microfilm collections were found that satisfied this requirement for the 1828, 1834, and 1841 elections. However, for the 1830 and 1836 elections, only five newspapers with complete runs could be found. (Only two complete conservative newspapers exist on microfilm for the 1830 election, and only two complete reform newspapers exist on microfilm for the 1836 election.) However, since quantitative analysis was not attempted and the qualitative analysis was directed at discovering consistencies across newspapers and across periods, this discrepancy should not be considered a problem. The general conclusions drawn about the discourse of the period are based on the 1828 to 1841 samples, because it was not possible to come close to the “three per side” requirement in the 1820 and 1824 historical newspaper collections.
References


