



Useful Voting Information on Political v. Entertainment Shows

**Group 6
(3 people)**

Question

During the 2008 election, what types of topics did entertainment-oriented and politically oriented programs cover? To what extent did viewers who only watched entertainment shows receive useful voting information about the presidential and vice presidential candidates, compared to politically oriented programs?

Introduction and Hypotheses

While it has been argued that the public today receives less political news and more sensationalized news, we have noticed that entertainment television programming does contain a fair amount of factual news content. Although such shows are not explicitly political, they may help shape the opinions of members of the public who are not as politically engaged.¹ We are interested in the way that soft news programs covered the 2008 presidential and vice presidential candidates. In particular, we examine the amount and percentage of time that they devote to useful voting information topics, such as candidates' policies, public record, and qualifications. We will also consider the proportion of time that soft news shows allot to various topics related to the presidential and vice presidential candidates compared to a typical hard news program. Our research project analyzes the content of two entertainment-oriented shows, *The View* and *Entertainment Tonight*, and one politically oriented show, *Anderson Cooper 360*. Our hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: While viewers who watch entertainment-oriented programs may receive some useful voting information about the candidates, we do not expect entertainment programs to be oriented toward voting information. We expect *Anderson Cooper 360* to devote the most time to useful voting information topics, *The View* the second most, and *Entertainment Tonight* the least.

Hypothesis 2: We expect a larger percentage of the coverage on *Anderson Cooper 360* to be about policy, public record, and candidate qualifications (voting information topics)

and a smaller percentage of that coverage to be about non-voting information topics. Conversely, we expect a larger percentage of the total candidate coverage on the two entertainment shows to be about non-voting issues.

Hypothesis 3: When political and entertainment programs discuss the 2008 candidates, we expect that both types of programs will devote similar proportions of time to campaign race coverage

Methodology and Operational Definitions

To conduct our research, we used the UCLA Communications Archive to read episode transcripts of programs from three different networks. The programs analyzed were: *Anderson Cooper 360* (CNN),² *The View* (ABC),³ and *Entertainment Tonight* (CBS).⁴ In general, the content of *Anderson Cooper 360* can be categorized as politically oriented, and the content of *The View* and *Entertainment Tonight* can be categorized as entertainment-oriented. We define politically oriented programs as those which focus on relevant current events such as breaking news, elections, and political figures. During election season, a politically oriented show might also emphasize topics such as a candidate's stance on different issues, past voting behavior, performance in current or past office, and references to how capable or experienced that candidate is for office. Such political news should give voters relevant insight into how a candidate may perform in office. Our definition of entertainment-oriented programs derives from Matthew Baum's definition of "soft news," which he says consists of "a set of story characteristics, including the absence of a public policy component, a sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes, and an emphasis on dramatic subject matter" (p. 6).⁵

Even though entertainment shows are not explicitly political, they aired a substantial amount of campaign coverage during the 2008 election. We will examine how these three shows

covered the 2008 presidential and vice-presidential candidates in order to determine if their coverage can be considered “useful voting information.” We define “useful voting information” as that which is about a candidate’s policy position, public record, or qualifications. Such information is deemed “useful” because it may offer insight into how candidates will perform in office and what changes they may make.

We analyzed episodes of *Anderson Cooper 360*, *The View*, and *Entertainment Tonight* that aired between July 15, 2008 and November 4, 2008 (Election Day). This time period immediately precedes the election and therefore provides us with a sufficient amount of episodes for our analysis of candidate coverage on the three shows. All episodes of these shows that mentioned the Democratic and Republican presidential and vice-presidential candidates: Barack Obama, Joe Biden, John McCain, and Sarah Palin were examined. We recorded how many seconds each episode spent discussing the candidates according to the following categories:⁶

Personal Topics

- **Physical appearance:** references to the candidate’s clothing, hairstyle, attractiveness, etc.
- **Relationships:** references to the candidate’s marriage, family members, or former spouses
- **Race:** references to a candidate’s race or ethnicity
- **Gender:** references to a candidate’s sex
- **Religion:** references to a candidate’s faith, beliefs, or church-related activity
- **Other personal topics:** references to a candidate’s health, personality, hobbies or interests, etc.

Campaign race coverage

- **Polling:** references to how well a candidate is performing in various polls
- **Political Attacks:** references to when a candidate is either the subject or aggressor in a political attack
- **General Campaign Activity:** references to a candidate’s campaigning efforts. This includes travel, events, rallies, strategy, or ads. However, this category does not include references to a candidate’s policy position, public record, or qualifications. For example, if a candidate’s policy is mentioned in the context of a discussion about his or her participation in a debate, we categorized the time

spent discussing his or her policy as “policy position” and the rest as “general campaign activity.”

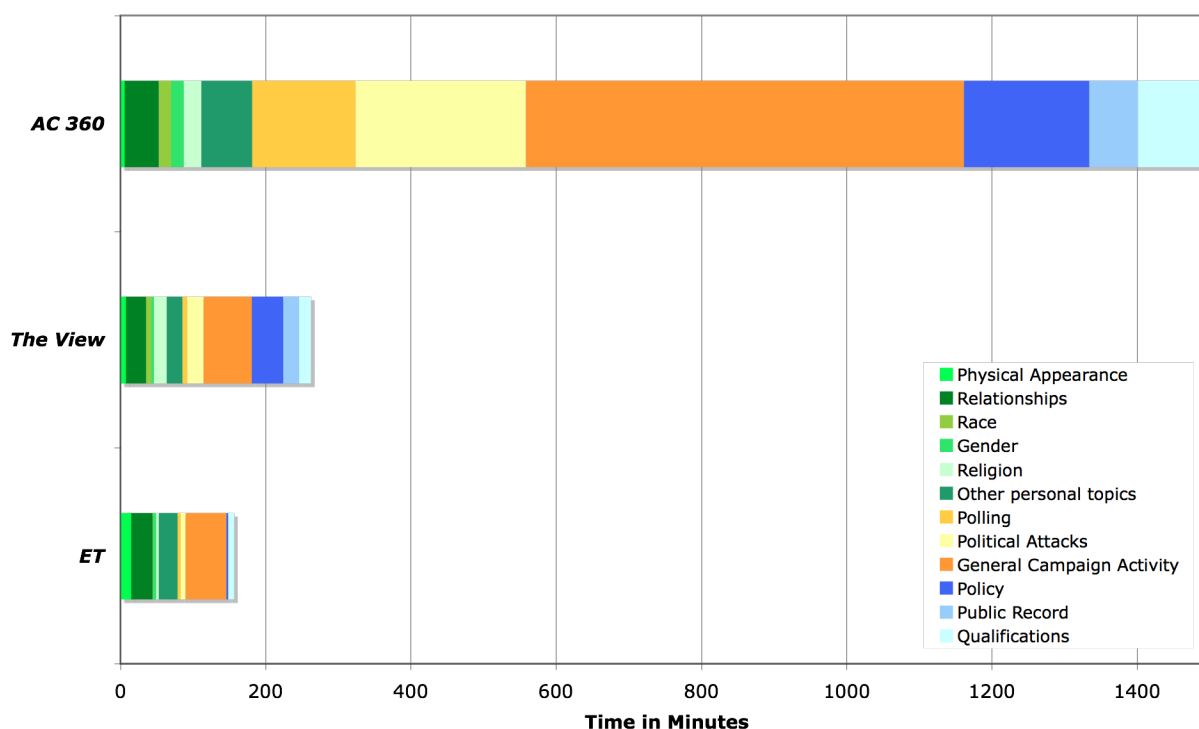
Voting information

- **Policy Position:** references to a candidate’s stance to a particular issue, such as the War in Afghanistan, the economy, or abortion
- **Public Record:** references to how a candidate voted on past legislation, or to his or her past performance in office
- **Qualifications:** references to a candidate’s suitability or preparedness for office

All of the references that the three shows made about the candidates fell into one of our twelve categories.

Results and Analysis

Graph 1: Time that Each Show Devoted to Various Topics about the Candidates



Graph 1 (above) depicts the amount of time in minutes that each show devoted to the various topics when they covered the 2008 presidential and vice-presidential candidates. We

labeled the personal topics with different shades of green, the campaign race topics with different shades of yellow, and the voting information topics with different shades of blue. *Anderson Cooper 360*, *The View*, and *Entertainment Tonight* all devoted a large proportion of the 2008 election coverage to general campaign activity, polling, and political attacks. We grouped these three topics into the more general “campaign race coverage” category. Although the topics in this category are relevant to the presidential and vice-presidential election, they are not information that would help voters make an informed voting decision.

Table 1: Total time spent covering topics considered voting information and non-voting information

(Time in minutes)	Non-Voting Information		Voting Information	Total
	Personal Topics	Campaign Race Coverage		
<i>Anderson Cooper 360</i>	1161.25		341.07	1502.32
	181.17	980.08		
<i>The View</i>	180.59		81.58	255.17
	85.17	95.42		
<i>Entertainment Tonight</i>	145.40		11.00	156.4
	78.62	66.78		

Table 1 (above) compares the time in minutes that each show spent covering all of the personal and campaign race issues (non-voting information topics) to the combined time spent covering the candidates’ policy, public record, and qualifications (voting information topics).

Anderson Cooper 360 overwhelmingly spent the most time covering the candidates. During the period from July 15 to November 4, 2008, the show allotted about five times as much time to candidate coverage than *The View* and about ten times as much time than *Entertainment Tonight*. Since *Anderson Cooper 360* spent so much time discussing the candidates, this hard news show contained more voting information as well as non-voting information than the two soft news shows.

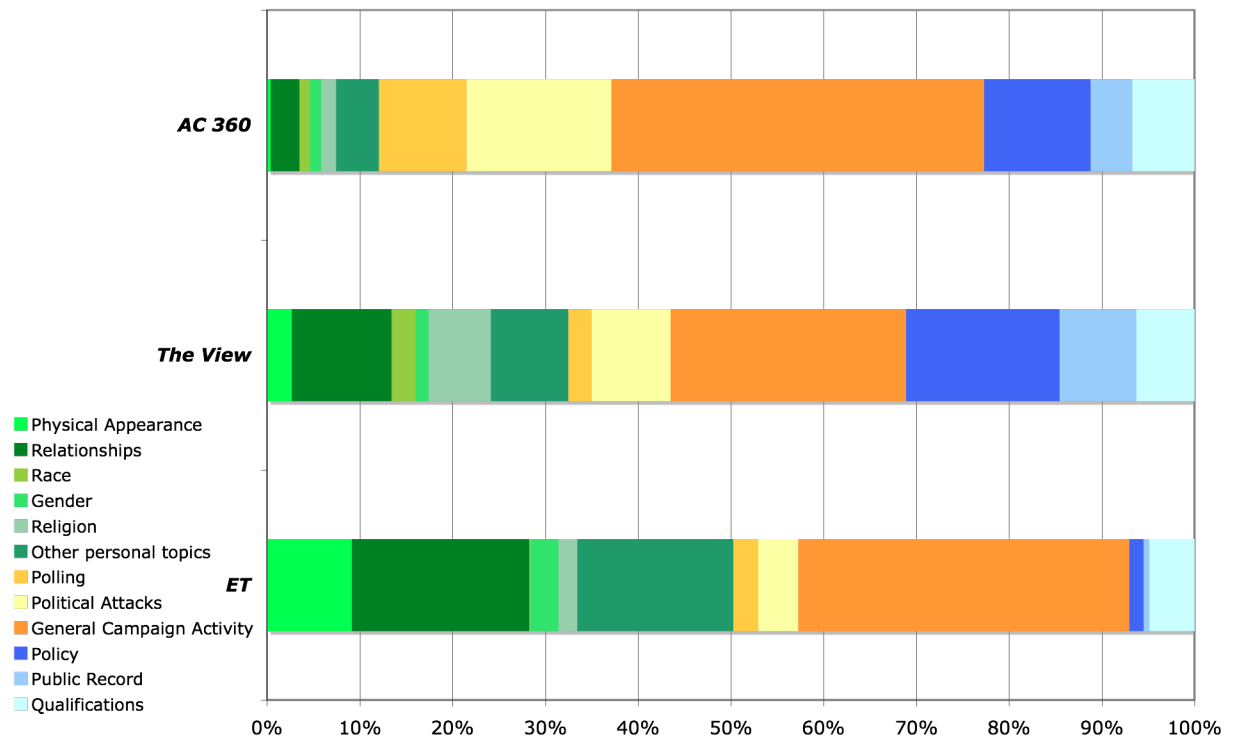
The data support our first hypothesis that a hard news show such as *Anderson Cooper 360* is more oriented toward voting information and that *The View*, which sometimes examines political issues with a human-interest bias, discusses more voting information than *Entertainment Tonight*, which is more celebrity-oriented. This outcome is not surprising as *Anderson Cooper 360* emphasizes headline news and political coverage. Furthermore, *Anderson Cooper 360* spent very little time on personal topics. When the show mentioned a personal issue, it was usually to discuss its political implications, such as how race or religion might affect the political race or a candidate's ability to reach certain voters.

The View spent a little bit less than an hour and a half covering voting information topics during the three and a half months examined. This is especially interesting because prominent political figures such as Bill Clinton and candidate John McCain himself appeared on *The View*. Even when *The View* examined political issues, its coverage was mostly superficial and did not delve into substantive voting issues. For example, when Bill Clinton appeared on *The View*, he publicly endorsed Obama and vaguely referenced Obama's qualifications. However, he mainly discussed Hillary Clinton's relationship with Obama and how race and gender might cloud voters' decisions. Therefore, we did not categorize most of what he said as voting information. However, *The View* contained more voting information than *Entertainment Tonight*, which spent only eleven minutes discussing candidates' policy, public record, and qualifications during the three-and-a-half month period.

Since it seems fairly obvious that a hard news show such as *Anderson Cooper 360* would spend the most time discussing the 2008 candidates, we also examined the percentage of time that each show devoted to voting and non-voting information topics out of the total amount of time it spent discussing the candidates. Graph 2 (below) breaks down the amount of time that

each show allotted to each topic. As with Graph 1, we labeled the personal topics with different shades of green, the campaign race topics with different shades of yellow, and the voting information topics with different shades of blue.

Graph 2: Percentage of Time Devoted to Each Topic for the 2008 Candidates



Overall, *Anderson Cooper 360* devoted almost 70% of its candidate coverage discussing campaign race coverage topics. This was surprising because we expected the show to spend a greater proportion of time discussing useful voting information, such as a candidate's stance on an issue, past voting record, and qualifications. In contrast, *The View* spent almost the same proportion of time covering useful voting information as it did on general campaign race.

Table 2 compares the percentage of time spent that each show spent discussing voting and non-voting information topics, out of the total time spent discussing the candidates.

Table 2: Percentage of time spent covering topics considered voting and non-voting information out of total time spent discussing the candidates

	Non-Voting Information		Voting Information
	Personal Topics	Campaign Race Coverage	
<i>Anderson Cooper 360</i>	77%		23%
	12%	65%	
<i>The View</i>	68%		32%
	31%	37%	
<i>Entertainment Tonight</i>	93%		7%
	50%	43%	

All the shows devoted the smallest percentage of time to voting information topics about the candidates. This result is only partially consistent with our second hypothesis, which predicted that the two soft news shows would cover larger percentage of non-voting information topics than voting information topics. However, we expected *Anderson Cooper 360* to allocate a greater portion of time to the voting issues of policy, public record, and candidate qualifications.

When discussing the candidates, all three programs devoted the largest percentage of time to general campaign activity. Slightly less than half of the candidate coverage (40%) on *Anderson Cooper 360* was related to general campaign activities. *The View* devoted a quarter (25%) of its candidate coverage to this topic, and *Entertainment Tonight* devoted a little over a third (36%) of its candidate coverage. On *The View* and *Entertainment Tonight*, personal topics collectively were discussed 31% and 50%, respectively, of total time allocated to the candidates. Within the “personal topics” category, candidates’ personal relationships received the highest percentage of coverage (19% on *Entertainment Tonight* and 11% on *The View*). Both McCain’s wife and daughter were interviewed on *The View*, as well as Todd Palin. It is also interesting that

candidate coverage on *The View* consisted of the greatest percentage of voting information topics (32%), compared to *Anderson Cooper 360* (23%) and *Entertainment Tonight* (7%).

Our third hypothesis predicted that the three shows would spend approximately the same percentage of time discussing the campaign race. However, *Anderson Cooper 360* devoted 65% of its discussion of the candidates to campaign race coverage, while *The View* and *Entertainment Tonight* spent about 40% of their coverage of the candidates on the campaign race. Cooper and his guest pundits spent entire episodes discussing the candidates and campaign race, analyzing polls, and speculating about the political repercussions of various candidate activities. Since *Anderson Cooper 360* is a politically oriented show, we expected it to spend a greater proportion of time on topics such as policy, public records, and qualifications that would give viewers useful voting information. However, this outlet devoted a greater proportion of its coverage on the 2008 candidates to campaign race coverage than it did useful voting information.

Conclusion

We found that *Anderson Cooper 360* spent the most total time on voting information topics, but *The View* allocated the greatest proportion of time to these topics. At the beginning of each episode of *The View*, the hosts briefly introduce the topics that they will discuss and mention the scheduled guest appearances. During the 2008 election season, if a viewer only tuned in to episodes of *The View* that discussed the candidates, there is a good chance that viewer would have received a substantial amount of voting information. In contrast, a viewer who causally watched a few episodes of *Anderson Cooper 360* might become more aware of “horse topics” such as polling and voting districts, but may not be as familiar with the candidates’ policies.

We would be able to arrive at a more definitive conclusion about the relationship between the amount and percentage of voting information on political versus entertainment shows had we examined more political and entertainment shows. We also could have expanded our time frame for a more in-depth analysis of each show. Another limitation relates to the way that we categorized the program content. Some of the news coverage categorized as “Campaign Race Coverage” may have actually contained useful voting information. For example, candidate gaffes were classified as “Campaign Race Coverage.” However, some may regard these gaffes as useful voting information, as gaffes could indicate that a candidate is ill equipped for office. Finally, since we noticed a clear distinction in content between *The View* and *Entertainment Tonight*, it would be interesting to analyze the extent to which entertainment-oriented shows themselves differ from politically oriented news in their candidate coverage.

¹ Matthew Baum makes this argument in the 2005 article, “Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit.” *Journal of Politics*. 96: 91-109

² *Anderson Cooper 360* is a two-hour daily television show hosted by the American journalist, Anderson Cooper. The show covers a number of news stories throughout the day, which are usually live or taped reports from CNN’s correspondents. The coverage typically includes analysis from experts on various issues discussed (From the official show website at <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/?iref=allsearch>). We selected this show to analyze because it is a good example of a politically oriented program and provides a good basis of comparison to the entertainment-oriented programs.

³ ABC’s website promotes *The View* as “a morning chatfest featuring a team of dynamic women [...] discussing the most exciting events of the day” (From the official show description at <http://theview.abc.go.com/about-view>). *The View* attracts its audience with its human-interest content. The show is centered on the female hosts’ varying perspectives on various controversial topics. We selected this show because it contains gossip, soft news, and political opinions. We are interested in what types of political stories the ladies discuss, and in particular, what they say about the presidential and vice presidential candidates.

⁴ The official website for *Entertainment Tonight* describes the show as the “most-watched entertainment news magazine in the world” (From the show description on *Entertainment*

Tonight's official website: <http://www.etonline.com/about/bio/2007/03/79004/index.html>). This tabloid-like entertainment news show primarily carries stories about celebrities and gossip. During the fall 2008 election season, the program also aired a substantial amount of stories that mentioned the presidential and vice presidential candidates. We selected this show in order to analyze how a gossip-oriented program would cover the election.

⁵ Baum, M.A. *Soft news goes to war: Public opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press (2003).

⁶ **Detailed explanation of search methods and workload:**

We entered the search terms “Obama,” “McCain,” “Palin,” and “Biden” to the UCLA Communications Archive search engine. We restricted the search to episodes of each show that aired between July 14, 2008 and November 4, 2008. For *Anderson Cooper 360* our search resulted in 74 episodes that mentioned Obama, 74 episodes that mentioned McCain, 48 that mentioned Biden, and 42 that mentioned Palin. For *The View* our search resulted in 62 episodes that mentioned Obama, 57 episodes that mentioned McCain, 28 episodes that mentioned Biden, and 42 episodes that mentioned Palin. For *Entertainment Tonight* we found 55 episodes that mentioned Obama, 49 episodes that mentioned McCain, 13 episodes that mentioned Biden, and 45 episodes that mentioned Palin. As a group, we read transcripts of all 589 episodes.

Our group has three members, so we each read or skimmed 196 transcripts. This exceeds the workload requirement of the equivalent of 250 news articles because reading the entire transcript of a sixty-minute show (over 6,000 words) requires much more time than reading a typical newspaper story (which, according to a quick Google Search is about 500-1000 words).