Please Don't Say Lines Are Long:
How Media Coverage of the Voting Process Shapes
Public Perceptions, Voter Turnout and Confidence in Elections

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Abstract:

News media coverage on Election Day often focuses on long lines at polling places. News outlets are incentivized to cover long lines, as they make for dramatic television – despite long waits being rare. Coverage of long lines potentially deters turnout due to public perception of long wait times, reduces confidence in election administration, and undermines trust in government institutions. However, we know little about the potential deleterious effects of emphasizing long lines. Improving understanding of Election Day coverage has important implications for scholars, election officials, and journalists.

This paper has two parts: First, a systematic content analysis of television news coverage of voting on Election Day: we analyze coverage of Election Day in the 2016 and 2018 elections on six national television news networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC) plus a sample of local network news. Second, we will conduct a survey experiment in which each subject is randomly assigned to a television news story about polling place lines with a different news frame: a baseline condition with a news story unrelated to voting and treatment conditions varying the video imagery, chryons (bottom of screen text characterizing story), and reporter voiceover. We will measure attitudes about vote intention, confidence in elections, expected wait time, blame attribution for long lines, and credibility and fairness of the coverage.

Wisconsin voters face long waits, lines amid coronavirus outbreak

Election Day, April 7, 2020, NBC National News

Long lines in Atlanta for Ga. primary voting: Primary Day in Georgia starts with long lines and multiple problems with voting sites.

Election Day, June 9, 2020, Fox News-Atlanta

Democrats slam Nevada Secretary of State as long lines plague voting sites

Election Day, June 9, 2020, CBS News-Las Vegas

Long wait times at Lexington's only in-person voting site

Election Day, June 23, 2020, WAVE3-NBC Lexington, KY

Television news media coverage on Election Day often focuses on problems in the voting process that lead to long lines at polling places. The headlines from Election Day coverage of recent primary elections (above) indicate this story frame is likely to be even more prevalent as the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the administration of in-person voting in 2020. Shortages of poll-workers, inexperienced poll-workers, consolidation of polling places, and public health protection measures during the pandemic are likely to make lines longer. While the news media's focus on long lines arising from problems in the voting process makes sense amidst the pandemic impacted 2020 primaries, such frames are prevalent and persistent in electoral news coverage even though long lines are generally rare. This research project seeks to assess whether television news coverage of Election Day emphasizing problems in the voting process and long wait times negatively impacts public perception of elections, voter participation, and voter confidence. The impacts of the pandemic on election administration make stories about problems in the voting process leading to long lines at the polls more likely, and thus the question of whether such coverage negatively impacts voter participation is more urgent.

Despite long waits to vote being rare (Fortier et al. 2018; Stein et al. 2020; Stewart and Ansolabehere 2015; Weil et al. 2019), news outlets are incentivized to cover long wait times and

problems in the voting process, as they make for more dramatic television than well-run and efficient polling places (Harcup and O'Neill 2016). The news media's propensity to focus on long lines can be readily explained by news values, or standards for newsworthiness that inform journalistic decisions (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). These criteria, socialized in journalism schools and the newsroom, guide reporters to select stories that are timely and conflictual because these traits appeal to the audience. Television journalists are also motivated by compelling visuals. As such, television journalists are more likely to cover long lines than the less-exciting (and more common) efficiently-run polling place. While these incentives explain journalistic decisions, this (misleading) news media framing of lines on Election Day may be detrimental to democratic governance by inadvertently discouraging participation and undermining confidence in elections.

Past research has shown that experiencing long wait times or other problems at polling places influences voting participation and attitudes about elections (Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn 2008; Atkeson et al. 2014; Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Hall, Monson, and Patterson 2009; King 2020; King and Barnes 2018; Pettigrew 2017a, 2017b; Sances and Stewart 2015; Sinclair, Smith, and Tucker 2018). Although not nearly as dramatic or entangled in partisan polarization, coverage of problems in the voting process and long lines may have similar impacts to news media coverage of voter fraud. The news coverage of claims about voter fraud has been linked to heightened public belief in the occurrence of voter fraud (Udani, Kimball, and Fogarty 2018) and altered voting behavior (Goidel, Gaddie, and Goidel 2019; Hood and McKee 2019). However, news coverage of voter fraud is driven by strategic partisan actors pushing fraud onto the news media agenda (Fogarty et al. 2015), whereas the focus on long lines in coverage of the voting procress appears to be due to journalistic decision making. Given these effects, it seems likely that news coverage of long lines and other problems on Election Day could influence participation, reduce confidence in election administration, and undermine trust in democratic governance.

A clear understanding of the impact of (over-)emphasizing long lines and problems in the voting process is important because news outlets have changed the way they cover elections when confronted with evidence that it has undesirable effects: News outlets have changed the way they cover exit polls and early election returns after research suggested 'calling' election outcomes affect voter turnout (Uscinski 2007); and modified their approach to ad watches after research showed that viewers recalled the false claim, not the correction (Jamieson and Capella 1997). Yet we know little about the potential deleterious effects of coverage of long lines at the polls on participation or public opinion about elections and democracy.

This paper has two-parts: First, a content analysis of television news on Election Day to characterize voting coverage. In this paper, we present preliminary results establishing that television news coverage on Election Day focuses on long lines far more than lines occur at polling places. The second part is a survey experiment to assess the impact of this coverage on public opinion and voting behavior. In this paper, we present the planned experimental design and the pros and cons of fielding this survey during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the hope of feedback and discussion of how and when to implement the experiment. Combining the observational study of recent coverage of lines for Election Day voting with the survey experiment to provide causal estimates of the impact of this coverage, we hope to delineate the breadth and depth of impact of this coverage on voting participation in and attitudes about elections.

The content analysis is the first systematic examination of news media coverage of voting processes on Election Day. We analyze television news media coverage of Election Day voting in the 2016 Presidential and 2018 mid-term elections on six national television news networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC) plus a sample of local network news in selected media markets. Since the news media can have a significant impact on public perception of government activity (e.g. Atkeson and Maestas 2014; Banducci and Karp 2003), understanding the frequency

and nature of news coverage about voting on Election Day is important to understanding participation in elections and attitudes about democratic governance.

Next, to understand the effects of news media coverage of problems in the voting process and long lines at polling places on public opinion and voting behavior, and drawing on the content analyses results, we plan to conduct an experiment that randomly exposes subjects to different news frames about polling place lines on Election Day. The experiment will be embedded in an online survey in which each subject is randomly assigned to a television news story with a different news frame: The experiment uses a baseline condition with a news story unrelated to lines, voting, elections or politics, and treatment conditions varying the video imagery (stock footage from news organizations), chryons (bottom of screen text used on video news to characterize the story), and reporter voiceover audio. Following treatment, we measure several attitudes about vote intention, voter confidence in elections, expected wait time, blame attribution for long waits, perceptions of democratic institutions, and credibility and fairness of the coverage.

Coverage vs. Evidence: Problems in Voting Process and Long Wait Times

The last two decades since the Florida 2000 Presidential election has seen growing attention to the impact of the voting process on public attitudes and voting participation. The voting process on Election Day is very complex, and a wide array of administrative problems can and do arise (Burden et al. 2017). Scholars have examined the impacts of voting machines, poll workers, voter identification requirements, ballot design, polling place location, polling place characteristics, and other aspects of administering Election Day voting, as well as aspects of voter registration and pre-Election Day voting (for recent reviews, see Burden and Stewart 2014; Hale and King 2019).

In recent years, the question of how long someone waits to vote has received increased attention from scholars, in part because lines and wait time receive so much attention from the

news media. The Presidential Commission on Election Administration [PCEA] (2014) recommended that no voter should wait more than 30 minutes to vote. Notably, survey research shows that the share of voters experiencing waits that exceed the PCEA recommendation have declined over the last three Presidential elections (as far back as data is available): in 2008, 10.3% reported waiting 31-60 minutes and another 3.3% reported waiting more than an hour; in 2012, 8.6% reported waiting 31-60 minutes and another 3.9% reported waiting more than an hour; in 2016, 7% reported waiting 31-60 minutes and another 1.8% reported waiting more than an hour (Fortier et al. 2018; Stewart and Ansolabehere 2015). Fewer people experience long waits to vote on Election Day in mid-term elections: The share of voters waiting more than 30 minutes fell to 3% in 2014, although it rose to 6.9% in 2018 when mid-term turnout surged (Weil et al. 2019). Furthermore, African Americans and Latinos are more likely to encounter long lines than whites (Baretto et al. 2009; Chen et al. 2019; King 2020; Pettigrew 2017b; Stein et al. 2020).

Beyond simply quantifying the frequency of long lines on Election Day, scholars have examined how polling place operations and characteristics contribute to long lines (Herron and Smith 2016; Spencer and Markovits 2010; Stein et al. 2020). Lines are most likely to occur in the morning when voting begins due to voters queuing up before the polls open (Stein et al. 2020; Weil et al. 2019). Considering the thousands of polling places on Election Day for federal general elections, broken voting machines, tardy or no-show poll workers, fire alarms caused by burning microwave popcorn, and other misfortunes will inevitably lead to long lines in scattered polling places. Of course, better preparation for these eventualities will minimize likelihood of these misfortunes occurring and the number of voters impacted. More systematically, inadequate allocation of voting machines, poll workers, and other resources leads to longer wait times to vote (Herron and Smith 2016; Highton 2006; Stein et al. 2020).

When these problems at polling places occur and lead to long lines, scholars have found that these incidents can reduce voting participation, lower voter confidence about their own ballot and voting more broadly, and negatively impact perception of fairness and legitimacy of elections (Cottrell, Herron, and Smith 2017; King 2020).

At the outset of this project, we perceived a large a large disconnect between the scholarly evidence about the occurrence of long lines and the frequency of news media coverage of long lines. This disconnect is more alarming because the evidence that experiencing long lines impacts voting behavior and attitudes suggests vicarious experience via news media coverage of long lines could have similar deleterious effects on participation and confidence in democratic governance.

Our perception of the news media coverage of long lines is unlikely to be surprising or controversial to close observers of elections. Before starting the rigorous content coding of national and local news coverage of Election Day in 2016 and 2018 in this paper, we did a quick check of 2016 coverage of Election Day voting by television news media. Consistent with our anecdotal perception, the most common television news story featured a field reporter outside a polling place, frequently discussing long lines and using images of long lines as the visual theme. The field reporters frequently mentioned the length of wait times, and it did not require applying Benford's Law to be suspicious that mentions of two-hour wait time were not reflective of careful measurement by journalists. These stories often gave an explanation for the wait times (high voter turnout, problems with machines, or both) and included interviews with a voter or an election official that asked about wait times and/or the cause of wait times. As detailed below, more rigorous content coding confirms the frequency of news media coverage of long lines and provides more details and nuance about these stories.

Why Do News Stories Say Lines Are Long?

News organizations do not broadcast stories about all the robberies that are not committed, murders that do not occur, and buildings that do not burn. Similarly, smoothly running polling places and short lines are not newsworthy. Journalistic training and newsroom socialization lead to wide-spread adoption of news values, or standards of newsworthiness, which guide journalistic decisions about whether and how to cover an event like voting on Election Day (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). These news values – such as timeliness, conflict, human interest, accountability – privilege the sort of coverage that satisfy journalist's professional motivations and consumer demand. News organizations are also likely to cover long lines because it has been done before and fits easily with other patterns of election related news coverage. For efficiency, news organizations rely on routines to make decisions about what to cover and how to cover it. When it comes to Election Day coverage, long lines are likely to meet multiple newsworthiness criterion and therefore be accorded more broadcast time.

Television news media use long lines at polling places as a visual frame when covering many different problems in the Election Day voting process. Long lines can be attributed to botched election administration such as voting machine malfunctions, poorly trained or too few poll workers, failure to open polling places on time, etc. Focusing on long lines can also cast high turnout (a normatively desirable event) as a challenge for voters and inadequate preparation by election officials. Over time, long lines may become a heuristic that participation is difficult and elections are poorly run.

News organizations serve the public by providing information about changes or deviations that are actionable or dramatic (Harcup and O'Neill 2016). Indeed, this bias towards negativity has a well-documented utility inasmuch as it alerts consumers that their attention is required (Lamberson and Soroka 2018), and consumers demand such coverage (Trussler and Soroka 2014). The prospect of long lines or other problems at an individual's polling place may influence when

and whether an individual goes to vote. Long lines at other polling places is dramatic because it may have implications for electoral outcomes.

Furthermore, many news organizations see themselves as agents for the public in holding government officials responsible for job performance. Since the public expects hassle-free voting, the occurrence of long lines indicates some underlying failure for which election officials should be held accountable.

The values of journalism, the norms and routines that characterize news-making, and the business incentives of the news industry push news organizations to accord airtime to stories about long lines for voting. Therefore, we expect to see coverage of long lines be more frequent in our content coding than the actual incidence of long lines.

Within Election Day coverage of the voting process, we focus on the framing of the content in stories and the visual framing of stories. Coverage of an event like voting on Election Day can use an episodic frame or a thematic frame. Episodic frames isolate an event, like long lines at Election Day polling places, without contextual information to help a viewer understand how this particular event fits larger patterns. Thematic coverage provides contextual information about past elections, how widespread lines are across polling places, etc. Past research has established that episodic vs. thematic frames can significantly impact public perception of other policy areas, such as protests, crime and social welfare programs.

Given that political news is often accorded only a small proportion of nightly news broadcasts, Election Day packages focusing on voting are unlikely to be accorded the sort of time or resources required to report on the context. Indeed, previous research finds that media attention is assigned to the horse race in part because it requires fewer resources and time (Searles and Banda 2019). Moreover, the long lines frame connects neatly with the news media's predominant focus on horserace between candidates (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004; Patterson

1994): long lines may influence turnout, particularly among supporters of a particular candidate, which may alter the outcome of the horse race. Thus, it is likely that coverage of the Election Day voting process will utilize an episodic frame about long lines because it requires little journalistic investment, and maximal visual payoff.

For television, the compelling image of long lines may also motivate coverage decisions. A field reporter at a polling place is staple of Election Day coverage, and with hundreds or thousands of polling places in a media market it is easy to plan on sending that reporter to a location with dramatic images of voters standing in long lines – or simply use stock footage of long lines. The ease of obtaining compelling images leads us to expect visuals of long lines to be used frequently.

None of the forces that push news organizations to emphasize long lines in Election Day coverage are inherently nefarious. This coverage could usefully inform potential voters about the need to allow adequate time to vote. It could spread positive descriptive norms about fellow citizens' commitment to voting. But the over-emphasis could have deleterious effects by misrepresenting the costs for most voters and undermining confidence in the conduct of elections. For television, the impacts of such coverage are two-fold: coverage of lines elevates wait times as a salient feature of voting in viewers' minds, and coverage of lines means other types of coverage – issues, candidates, election logistics – are less likely to be accorded attention. Our experiment assesses these possible impacts.

What Happens When News Coverage Says Lines Are Long?

News coverage about long lines on Election Day can influence behavior that directly effects electoral outcomes and attitudes about elections that are important to sustaining democratic governance. If news coverage of long lines increases a voter's expectations about the time cost of voting, it will have a suppressive effect on voter turnout. If the voter perceives higher costs being imposed on others, it could lower confidence in election outcomes and assessments of

performance by election officials. The magnitude of these effects is likely to be conditioned on whether the story is deemed credible and fair in describing the local community or other areas of the country.

As the news media – and particularly television news media – are the primary way the public learns of politics, and one of few sources of information citizens have on election administration, it is likely that a focus on wait times at polling places has an outsized influence on political behavior and political attitudes. We draw on work at the intersection of political communication and behavior to generate several hypotheses about the experimental results. First, any coverage of long lines will decrease vote intention and confidence outcomes and increase expected wait time relative to the control group. Coverage of short lines will have effects in the opposite direction. The absolute magnitude of the effects of long lines coverage will be greater than the absolute magnitude of the short lines coverage because negative information has a larger impact than positive information. Second, thematic framing about long lines will have larger impacts than episodic framing on vote intention, confidence, wait time, and blame attribution outcomes. Episodic framing will have larger impact than thematic framing on story belief and fairness measures.

Assessing Election Day Coverage Content: Data and Methods

To explore the hypotheses about voting process coverage, we generate and content analyze three datasets: The first contains all television transcripts from major broadcast and cable news channels coverage airing on Election Day and the day prior for 2016 and 2018. The second is a subset of the first, with more detailed content coding of television transcripts featuring voting process coverage aired by major broadcast and cable news channels during this time period. The third dataset contains all local television news closed caption transcripts from 58 stations in 10 battleground states plus CA and DC airing on Election Day and the day prior for 2016. These

news transcripts were considerably harder to obtain than initially expected: It took over a year to collect the necessary data, train coders, content analyze all 3 datasets, conduct reliability testing, and analyses. Next we explain the data collection and content analysis protocols for each dataset.

Election Day Coverage

In order to understand how the major television news broadcasters and cable news channels cover voting process, we first needed to gather all news coverage in advance of Election Day for the 2016 and 2018 general election, defined as November 7-8, 2016 and November 5-6, 2018. We compiled all news transcripts in Nexis Uni that mentioned election or voting or polling place or precinct or ballot or Congress or Senate or President or Governor or legislature in any iteration on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. Nexis Uni identified 523 transcripts aired in total on these networks during this time period.[1] The unit of analysis is each transcript.

To sort transcripts by whether they include voting process coverage or not, a coder used a more general instrument (see Appendix A) to capture basic descriptive information (Date, Channel, Name of Program) and voting process (YES=1, NO=0).[2] Voting process is defined in the codebook as, "includes coverage that discusses elements, processes, institutions related to the physical act of voting such as polling places, vote centers, wait time, polling lines, poll workers, election administration, confidence in elections administration, voter id requirements, voting id-related controversies, voting machines, mail ballots, absentee ballots, issues related to the process of voting, voting logistics." After this process 171 transcripts were found to include voting process coverage. A 10 percent random draw of transcripts were recoded by a second coder; information on reliability appears in Appendix A.

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[1] Initial data collection yielded no transcripts from MSNBC or NBC on Election Day, November 8, 2016. An Academic Customer Success Manager at Nexis Uni working in tandem with research librarians at LSU were able to secure missing transcripts for NBC (*N*=8), but transcripts for MSNBC were never recovered. Lexis Nexis blamed this missingness on the provider, in this case, MSNBC.

[2] Other latent content variables were coded at this stage but are not used in this project.

Voting Process Coverage on Election Day

A more detailed coding instrument was applied to the 171 transcripts found to include

voting process coverage (see Appendix B). This instrument included coding for a discussion of

lines, civic duty, polling place, poll workers, voting requirements, voting machines, voting rights,

election integrity, ballots, and other related latent content variables. Importantly, with intent to

construct a manually validated organic dictionary, this instrument also captures phrases and words

related to voting process coverage. The final number of transcripts for each network in this dataset

are as follows: MSNBC (13), and Fox News Network (11), CNN Transcripts (91), ABC (23), CBS

(19), NBC (14). The coding for this dataset is ongoing.

Local News Voting Process Coverage on Election Day

Understanding the characteristics and effects of voting process coverage by local news

outlets– particularly television news – is arguably more important than national news coverage.

However, we faced several challenges content analyzing such content. First, the data are difficult

to collect. The coverage of local news in Nexis Uni and similar databases is either limited or non-

existent. While there are some for-profit services that record local news affiliates, they are costly

and do not archive their recordings. This difficulty is why much work on local television news

often relies on the recordings of just a few local news affiliates, during short periods of time.

Second, a full sense of local news coverage of voting necessitates multiple news affiliates across

the United States, generating a high volume of text making human coding difficult. Which brings

us to the third challenge: automated coding can alleviate the labor intense human coding, but

requires clearly operationalization of the voting process. Since the concept of voting process

coverage is new in this project, we have to develop the definitions to operationalize it before we

can deploy automated text analysis. Third, voting process coverage is context-dependent:

keywords and phrases that constitute such coverage may also occur in other types of coverage,

such as the horse race. Therefore out-of-the-box dictionaries are not available to code the high volume of local television news transcripts.

We take two steps to manage the difficulty associated with examining local television news content. We first were able to overcome some of the data limitations in the study of local television news by securing closed caption text files from the Internet Archive (archive.org), a non-profit digital library organization. Internet Archives provided closed caption text files for news broadcasts on 58 stations from 11/7-11/8 in 2016. These stations included affiliates in ten battle ground states (AZ, CO, FL, IA, NC, NH, NV, OH, PA, WI), in addition to stations in San Francisco and the District of Columbia. The Internet Archive recorded these programs as part of another research project to track candidate advertising. After some discussion with a Television Archive Fellow at the Internet Archive, we were granted access to the text files. Because the Internet Archive recorded continuously during the time period of interest, we first cleaned the data, removing any files not related to local news (N=20,880).

To make the coding task manageable while balancing concerns around conceptual validity, we adapt an automated text analysis method by Muddiman, McGregor, and Stroud (2019) that utilizes a combination of human checks and deductive and inductive processes to manually validate a dictionary that originates from the text, as opposed to an out-of-the-box dictionary. We are developing our dictionary of voting process coverage for automated text analysis based on the hand coded national news transcripts. When this manually validated organic dictionary is completed, we will apply it to the local news closed caption transcripts.

Election Day Coverage Content: Initial Results from National Networks

Looking at the national news Election Day Coverage dataset, the 3 broadcast channels made-up 56.8% (N=297$)$ of election coverage, while CNN (N=161), Fox News (N=42), and MSNBC (N=23) made-up 43.4% (though recall that MSNBC's transcripts are missing for Election

Day 2016). Almost a third, or 32.7% of these transcripts featured voting process coverage

(*N*=171). CNN was the most focused on voting process coverage of the 6 channels (*N*=91), with

ABC a distant second (*N*=23). This is perhaps not surprising, as all 24-hour news channels face

the same conundrum: the news hole. Outlets like CNN must fill a full day with coverage, and

unlike Fox News and MSNBC, CNN cannot lean on partisan news analysis or opinion shows to

generate content.

If we just look at the coverage for Election Day 2018, for which we have no missingness,

then still CNN has the most voting process coverage (*N*=37), and again ABC is a distant second

with 13 transcripts, however, MSNBC is not too far behind (*N*=12). Notable is the scarcity of

voting process coverage on Fox News for both elections (2016 *N*=4, 2018 *N*=7). It may be that

Fox News is not incentivized to discuss the process of voting given their partisan make-up of their

audience. Indeed, previous work finds that partisan news channels cover polls that generally

partisan news outlets focus on negative out-party coverage during elections (Smith and Searles

2014), even going so far as to cover polls that favor the in-party more often (Searles et al. 2016). It

is not too far from the realm of possibility that Fox News does not assign airtime to covering voting

issues because it is not a priority of its primarily Republican audience.

Not surprisingly, most Election Day coverage transcripts were dominated by candidate

coverage (*N*=409), which includes the horse race. Of the 94 news programs dominated by

something other than election coverage, most were aired by broadcast news networks: ABC

(*N*=47), CBS (*N*=21), NBC (*N*=17). Again, notably, the partisan news networks had 0 news

programs dominated by something other than the election.   Similarly, all but 83 (15.9%)

transcripts featured candidate coverage. These numbers echo what is known well in the literature

on election news: the horse race dominates (Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004; Patterson 1994).

Assessing Impact on Perceptions, Behavior & Attitudes with a Survey Experiment

The second stage of our research project is conducting an experiment randomly exposing subjects to different news frames about polling place lines on Election Day to measure the effects of news media coverage of wait times at polling places. Initially planned for late spring 2020, the experiment was postponed due to uncertainty about fielding in the midst of the pandemic (and the challenges in completing the content coding). In this section, we outline the planned experiment and considerations about conducting it during the pandemic. We have tentatively concluded that we should proceed with the experiment this summer, and seek suggestions on the design, content, and how to interpret the results related to the pandemic.

The experiment will be conducted in an online survey in which each subject will be randomly assigned to a television news story with a different news frame. The television news story videos in the experiment will appear to be local television news coverage, albeit generic with regard to identifying details about location, election, etc. The experiment will use a nationally representative sample of subjects from Lucid, an online survey organization increasingly used in social science survey experiments (Coppock and McClellan 2019).

We plan to conduct the survey in late summer in order to draw on the full analysis of national and local content coding in developing treatments. Our timing will also consider the potential for subjects to have been 'pre-treated' by national news stories about election administration problems during recent primary elections (e.g. Wisconsin, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Kentucky) and the potential for early August primaries and run-offs (e.g. Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota) to generate another round of national media coverage of election administration problems (Druckman and Leeper 2012). The former pre-treatment concern suggests waiting as long as possible to conduct the experiment. The latter pre-treatment concern suggests urgency to conduct the experiment.

Experimental Conditions

The first condition will be a placebo or baseline condition with a news story unrelated to lines, voting, elections or politics.[3] This condition provides a measure of attitudes about voting, elections, and confidence in government without (recent and direct) exposure to news media framing of lines at polling locations. Each of the treatment conditions will show subjects a story about voting on Election Day.[4] The treatment videos will vary the video imagery (stock footage from news organizations), chryons (bottom of screen text used on video news to characterize the story), and reporter voiceover audio.

Although it is possible to imagine a wide range of news frames, we are interested in the most frequently used news frames from the content analysis. Therefore, the content analysis results will inform stimulus design to ensure realism.

Based on theories about news media framing and our preliminary investigation of coverage in the 2016 election, we anticipate using the following the treatment conditions to investigate the impact of visual and content frames in television news coverage:

1) Long lines visual with thematic frame about problems in the voting process causing lines
2) Long lines visual with episodic frame about problems in the voting process causing lines
3) Long lines visual with content about voting or election unrelated to lines
4) Other visual with thematic frame about problems in the voting process causing lines
5) Other visual with episodic frame about problems in the voting process causing lines
6) Other visual with content about voting or election unrelated to lines

The survey will begin with a series of basic demographic and attitudinal questions. Subjects will then be asked to watch a local news story and answer questions about the outcome measures described below.

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[3] The placebo story will focus on some non-political pro-social behavior such as volunteering, recycling, etc. The selection of the placebo story seems more challenging during the pandemic because we also do not want to prime consideration of public health concerns or restrictions that could impact attitudes about voting, elections, or confidence in government.

[4] We plan to have ~350-400 subjects in each experimental condition, depending on the total number of treatment conditions.

Our online survey experiment has several methodological advantages for assessing the impact of television news coverage of Election Day voting. First, we are able to deliver audiovisual treatments that appear to be actual local television news coverage. These videos are much more realistic than much of the work on media effects that relies on vignettes or scripts that don't resemble actual news consumption. The high attention to the television news story in the survey context does not reflect the way most people engage with news media coverage, but this deviation from realism is useful to establish whether news media frames elicit different responses from citizens. Accordingly, the results will be interpreted as upper bounds on the potential real-world effects of news media frames. Although a field experiment might be more realistic regarding attention to news coverage of voting on election day, conducting a field experiment with the news frames under investigation seems unethical because the news frames being investigated are hypothesized to *reduce* normatively desirable behaviors and attitudes about voting and democracy. Reliable inferences from observational studies of news frames are likely to be extremely challenging since the nationalization of news content and consumption makes exposure to different frames hard to reliably identify and, as noted for our content analysis, data on local coverage is very difficult to obtain.

Outcome Measures

Following exposure to the treatment video in the online survey experiment, we will measure several attitudes about voting and elections. These outcome measures are based on prior research on election administration.

Vote intention:
- How likely are you to vote in the next election?
- How likely are you to vote at an Election Day polling place in the next election?
- How likely are you to consider using an alternative to Election Day voting such as voting by mail or early voting?

Wait time:
- How long do you think you will have to wait to vote in the next election?
- Think about voting throughout your county or city, and not just your own personal situation. How long do you think an average voter in your county or city will have to wait to vote?
- How long do you think an average voter in your state will have to wait to vote?
- Think about voting throughout the country. How long do you think an average voter nationwide will have to wait to vote?

Belief and fairness:
- This news story reflects what happens on Election Day in my community
- This news story reflects what happens on Election Day in other areas of the country
- Journalists provide fair coverage of elections

Voter confidence:
- How confident are you that your vote was counted as intended the last time you voted?
- Think about vote counting throughout your county or city, and not just your own personal situation. How confident are you that votes in your county or city were counted as voters intended?
- Think about vote counting in your state. How confident are you that votes in your state were counted as voters intended?
- Think about vote counting throughout the country. How confident are you that votes nationwide were counted as voters intended?
- Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each institution in American politics listed below -- a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little?
    - Federal government
    - State government
    - Local government
    - News media
    - Political parties
    - Candidates for political office

Blame attribution:
- Please rate the job performance of the following officials involved in running elections:
    - Poll workers and staff at the polling place where you voted
    - Election officials who run elections in your county or city
    - The top official who is responsible for elections throughout your state
    - National officials responsible for elections throughout the country[5]

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[5] The US has no national election officials, but we believe it is nonetheless important to measure potential (mis-)attribution of blame at the national level due to the 'nationalization' of politics.

COVID Pandemic: Challenge, Opportunity, Urgency

The (hopefully) unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic raise new considerations for the survey experiment design and interpretation of results. We have reached a tentative conclusion about the challenges, opportunities and urgency of this research during the pandemic, but seek feedback before we proceed with the experiment.

The generalizability of results beyond the experimental context is a central question about the value of experimental research. Beyond the usual questions about the artificiality of a survey experiment, this temporal context of this experiment is an extreme outlier. Waiting in a line raises public health threats that have not been a factor in voting in the US since the 1918 election. The likelihood of lines may also be perceived to be much higher due to social distancing requirements, cleaning procedures, consolidation of polling places, and poll worker shortages. One indicator of the unusual context is that concern about the safety and viability of in-person voting is causing a large and unprecedented increase in interest in voting by mail: 68% of Americans support conducting the 2020 general election entirely by mail in a recent Harris Research poll.[6] Therefore, the results of this experiment may not provide clear insights about what to expect when these concerns dissipate in future elections nor what happened in past elections.

On the other hand, the unusual circumstances of the 2020 election increase the urgency to understand how coverage of long lines might impact voting behavior, confidence in elections, blame attribution, and related attitudes. The challenges of administering in-person voting during the pandemic makes long lines much more likely to occur. Even if the number of poll workers is somehow sustained, loss of polling place locations will increase the appearance of lines to enter the multi-precinct facilities. Even in a best-case scenario without loss of polling places or poll worker shortages, cleaning protocols will mean lines move more slowly and social distancing of

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[6] https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/504380-poll-partisan-divide-on-vote-by-mail-widens

six feet between individuals will make lines appear longer than past elections. The prevalence of this symbol of election administration problems is especially fraught in the current highly polarized political environment. President Trump's rhetoric about election legitimacy raises the risks to participation and public confidence still higher. And the fiscal impact of the pandemic means election officials will have scant resources to address any of these challenges. Insights that could inform journalistic decisions about framing of lines are more critical than ever with election administration and voter confidence under tremendous strain.

The heightened salience of lines at polling places may have some advantages as a moment to investigate this question. Personal experience of short lines when voting is a 'pre-treatment' that could attenuate observed effects from the experimental treatments. The experimental treatments may be more credible with the pandemic priming respondents to expect the upcoming election to be different than their past experience. In particular, even subconscious awareness of long lines in recent elections (e.g. prominent national coverage of Wisconsin and Georgia 2020 primaries) may increase engagement with and processing of the information in the survey experiment treatments.

As we consider the implementation of the experiment, we are wrestling with whether to explicitly reference the occurrence of long lines in recent elections and attribute these to pandemic related changes, or maintain our initial plan of attributing lines to the causes seen in the content coding of past elections (machine failures, high turnout, etc).

We are also very aware that the increased fragility of participation and attitudes due to the pandemic demands extra care about the ethics of treatments with theoretical expectations of reducing turnout and undermining normatively desirable beliefs.

Our assessment is that the pros outweigh the cons for proceeding with the experiment in the near future. The content coding provides strong evidence that the news media use frames that may have deleterious implications for voting behavior and attitudes, but demonstrating these

impacts will allow journalists to make informed choices about how to cover long lines. In many jurisdictions, the 2020 General Election is likely to be conducted differently than any in the past or the future, but the impact of this election on public attitudes and behavior will not revert to 'normal' nearly as quickly as administrative practice. Thus, this election is potentially a moment of inflection in voting behavior and attitudes about elections, and as such research at this moment may be especially valuable to understand the path of American democracy. While the opportunity to conduct the experiment in the pre-COVID era of our content analysis is gone, we can replicate the experiment in the post-COVID normal to see how results change as the pandemic recedes.

Discussion

Since this paper lays out work in progress, we encourage feedback. While the content analysis is close to the final stages, there is still some opportunity to fill in missing elements. We plan to conduct the experiment in the near future, but are open to questioning our tentative decision that it is appropriate and worthwhile. Assuming that we do proceed with the experiment, we would appreciate feedback about the design generally and specific considerations related to this distinctive moment for researching the intersection of news media and election administration.

By combining the observational study of television coverage of voting process on Election Day with experimental results we can facilitate assessment of the overall impact of media coverage on participation, confidence, and blame attribution. In addition, better understanding of Election Day voting coverage can inform newsroom practices, so news organizations are making informed choices when deciding how to frame their news coverage.

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Appendix A: Election Day Coverage Coding

Content Collection Protocol
       To identify the transcripts in Nexis Uni, we utilized the search terms (Election! OR vote! OR voting OR polling place OR precinct! OR ballot! OR Congress! OR Senate! OR President! OR Governor! Or legislature!) and publication (ABC News OR CBS OR NBC OR CNN OR FOX NEWS OR MSNBC and not CNN International) and publication-type (Transcripts) for the dates of study. These search terms were tested and verified with the help of research librarians at LSU, and Nexis Uni research specialists. The raw frequencies of transcripts for each network are as follows: MSNBC (23), and Fox News Network (42), CNN Transcripts (161), ABC (156), CBS (86), NBC (55).

Election Day Coverage Codebook
Universe (broadcast and cable television coverage of election): all programs aired on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox, MSNBC – excluding televised proceedings, speeches, for-profit programs – which mentioned election or voting and iterations thereof; dated November 7-8, 2016, November 5-6, 2018.

Unit: transcript (broadcast) per program by station

Method of Data Collection: Lexis Nexis Academic

Directions: Fill out entirety of codebook for each transcript included in universe.

Additional coding detail on Coverage_Type Variable:

Of election coverage, which of the following categories *dominates* (makes up largest percentage)? For example, if only 10% of coverage in a transcript is devoted to the election, and ¾ of that coverage is devoted to candidates, then mark 2. In other words, we are trying to capture which of our two frames of interest dominates the proportion of coverage devoted to the Election in a transcript.

Process of voting coverage includes coverage that discusses elements, processes, institutions related to the physical act of voting such as polling places, vote centers, wait time, polling lines, poll workers, election administration, confidence in elections administration, voter id

requirements, voting id-related controversies, voting machines, mail ballots, absentee ballots, issues related to the process of voting, voting logistics.

Candidate coverage includes information regarding candidates (personality, biography, stances, image, policy stances, voting records) and their campaign (strategies and tactics, turnout, standings, polls, public opinion). The category of candidate subsumes horse race coverage, which is defined as coverage that focuses on strategies, tactics, and public opinion, often using the language of sports and war.

The final category, *Other*, refers to any type of coverage not included in process of voting or candidate coverage. If a 0 is marked for this variable, fill in additional details in the variable "Other."

Additional coding detail on Voting Variable: This captures whether voting process coverage (defined previously) is present in transcript yes/no (rather than whether it is dominant coverage type in transcript, for example).

Variable Name	Label	Values
Date	Date Story Aired	MM/DD/YY
Channel_Type	Level of broadcast	1 LOCAL 2 BROADCAST 3 CABLE
Channel	Non-local channel name	0 LOCAL 1 ABC 2 CBS 3 NBC 4 CNN 5 FOX NEWS 6 MSNBC
Program	Name of Program	
Coverage_Type	Which of the election coverage categories dominates election coverage in transcript	0 OTHER 1 PROCESS OF VOTING 2 CANDIDATE

Other	Details on other category for Coverage Type	(input what characterizes other if 0 is denoted for previous variable)
Voting	Contains Process of Voting Coverage	0 NO 1 YES
Candidate	Contains Candidate Coverage	0 NO 1 YES

Reliability Tests

      The Krippendorff's Alpha met an acceptable level on 2 each of the latent content variables (>.8), however, for "Voting" (contains process of voting coverage yes/no) the reliability was lower. While a reliability indicator exceeding .6 is acceptable for exploratory research, given that the primary goal of this stage of coding was to sort transcripts featuring voting process coverage from those that do not a faculty coder adjudicated each disagreement (*N=7*) erring on the side of inclusion.

Variable	% Agreement	KALPHA
Coverage Type	98.08	.95
Voting	86.54	.72
Candidate	90.38	.68

Appendix B: Voting Process Coverage Coding

Voting Process Coverage Codebook

Universe (broadcast and cable television coverage of election): all programs aired on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox, MSNBC – excluding televised proceedings, speeches, for-profit programs – which cover process of voting according to first round of coding conducted fall 2019 by Stephanie, ICR by Patrick; dated November 7-8, 2016, November 5-6, 2018; also excluding MSNBC coverage on 11/8/2016 which is not on LNA

Unit: voting process coverage within transcripts (broadcast) per program by station

Method of Data Collection: Lexis Nexis Academic

Directions: Fill out entirety of codebook for each transcript included in universe. Note that the highlighted sections of each transcript indicate where the voting process coverage is located.

Part 2 focuses on transcripts that contain some process of voting discussion. Recall that process of voting is defined as (from Part 1 codebook): "Process of voting coverage includes coverage that discusses elements, processes, institutions related to the physical act of voting such as polling places, vote centers, wait time, polling lines, poll workers, election administration, confidence in elections administration, voter id requirements, voting id-related controversies, voting machines, mail ballots, absentee ballots, issues related to the process of voting, voting logistics."

Civic_Duty	Speaker discusses civic duty	0 no 1 yes
Discussed_lines	Speaker discussed lines, wait times at polling places	0 no 1 yes
Interview_poll	Interview conducted with person at polling place or in line (not an election administrator or	0 no 1 polling place 2 in line

	poll worker)	
Interview_admin	Interview conducted with election administrator (someone from county clerk, secretary of state or other similar titles for election office)	0 no 1 yes
Interview_PollWorker	Interview conducted with poll worker	
Polling_Places	Speaker discussed polling place (aside from wait times, lines) physical polling place discussed	0 no 1 yes
Poll_Workers	Speaker discussed poll workers	0 no 1 yes
Voting_Requirements	Speaker discussed voting requirements, ID, registration, and related issues	0 no 1 yes
Voting_Machines	Speaker referred to voting machines or voting systems	0 no 1 yes
Voting_Rights	Explicit discussion of voting rights (or suppression of voting rights)	0 no 1 yes
Election_Integrity	Speaker generally raises issues related to election integrity (but not voting rights); e.g. Russian	0 no 1 yes

	interference, rigging, voter fraud	
Ballots	Speaker referred to ballots	0 no 1 yes
Pre_EDay_Voting	Speaker discusses absentee, mail or early-in-person voting	0 no 1 yes
Turnout	Speaker referred to voter turnout	0 no 1 yes
Voting Process Words/Phrases	Record any of the unique words (so not "the" "and" "in", etc) that indicated the presence of voting process coverage and delimit each with a ; As much as possible only include the part of the text that conveys voting process (fewer words the better), but include word groups when the adjective is a relevant descriptive (ie "voter fraud" rather than "voter" and "fraud"). For example, one transcript may have the following: ballot; election administrator; poll worker; lines; long lines; wait time; voting; civic duty; voter fraud	(open-ended) If n/a enter 999

	Note this responds to voting process coverage conceptualized narrowly.	
Notes	Anything of note not captured by other variables	(open-ended) If n/a enter 999