

# THE MEDIA: ALL HORSE RACE, ALL THE TIME

Stephen J. Farnsworth, Blake Andrew, Stuart Soroka and Antonia Maioni

Content analysis of campaign news reports leading up to the March 2007 Quebec election in four of the province's leading newspapers revealed an intense focus on voter surveys, and only limited coverage of key campaign issues, including national unity, immigration, education and the environment. News coverage of the three major parties and their leaders was overwhelmingly neutral in tone in all four papers, displaying an even-handed approach not always found in election news reporting. The ADQ, which went from 5 seats to 41 seats in the election, received slightly more positive news coverage than the more established political parties, a pattern that reflected the party's rise in the polls during the campaign period.

Selon une analyse du traitement réservé par quatre des principaux journaux du Québec à la campagne électorale québécoise de 2007, on a clairement privilégié les sondages d'opinion au détriment d'importants enjeux politiques comme l'unité nationale, l'immigration, l'éducation et l'environnement. Les quatre journaux ont adopté un ton généralement neutre pour parler des trois principaux partis et de leurs chefs, suivant une démarche somme toute impartiale qui n'était pas nécessairement celle des comptes rendus électoraux. Passée de 5 à 41 sièges, l'ADQ a obtenu une couverture de presse légèrement plus favorable que les partis établis, selon un schéma illustrant sa montée dans les sondages tout au long de la campagne.



Quebec voters who selected their election season newspapers based on the expectation that their paper's news coverage would be tilted toward favoured candidates were disappointed, according to a campaign news analysis conducted by McGill University's Observatory of Media and Public Policy.

Readers of *Le Devoir* across Quebec, *The Gazette* and *La Presse* in the greater Montreal area, and *Le Soleil* in Quebec City and the eastern part of the province received coverage that was remarkably similar in volume and tone during the election period. This similarity of coverage exists even though past surveys have shown distinct patterns in media use with Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ) supporter favouring *La Presse* and *The Gazette*, and *Le Devoir* readers more inclined to support the Parti Québécois (PQ). *Le Soleil*, meanwhile, remains the main daily for readers in Quebec City as well as regions south and east of *la capitale nationale*, areas that became lightning rods for the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ).

The very similar treatment of the month-long campaign by the four daily papers suggests a positive evolution of the leading provincial media in the direction of greater

fairness in the news columns and away from the more interpretive and ideologically charged news content that sometimes marks newspaper coverage of Quebec elections. As the once-intense pressure of separatism in the province has eased in recent years (the last referendum on Quebec's future in Canada took place in 1995), reporters in both the English and French press were able to cover the 2007 contest more as a campaign rather than as a proxy referendum on independence. In addition, the rise of the ADQ and its consistently strong showing in polls throughout the campaign period also suggested that the existing spectrum of partisan cleavages between sovereignty and federalism, and between the left and the right, that marked politics in the province for three decades may be changing.

The newspapers also framed their coverage of the election in a similar way. Voters reading any one of the four papers throughout March learned a lot more about the polls than they did about where any of the candidates wanted to take Quebec if they won the election. Vital issues like education, immigration, the environment and national unity were all given short shrift in favour of an overemphasis on daily

poll standings. Overall, the newspapers paid far more attention to the “horse race” between parties and leaders —

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who is gaining ground, and who is losing it — than they did to the issues.

In this article we will look at the amount of horse-race and issue coverage, the coverage of specific key campaign issues and the overall trends in the amount and tone of coverage of each of the three leading candidates during the 2007 campaign. We then turn to an analysis of how each of the three main parties and their leaders were treated in the four daily papers included in this study. (There were too few mentions of the smaller-party candidates in these papers to permit reliable analysis.)

Our findings are based on content analysis of election stories in the main news sections of the four newspapers. A team of graduate and undergraduate student coders were trained to examine the papers, and they did so normally within a day or two of when the news reports appeared. The study tracked both the volume and the tone of coverage for the main parties, leaders and issues. We also recorded the general focus of the articles: primarily campaign-focused (“horse race”) or primarily issue-focused. Our findings include all news content in the four papers between February 22, the day after Premier Jean Charest called a spring election, and March 26, the day of the election. (Detailed description of the methodology used here is available at [ompp.mcgill.ca](http://ompp.mcgill.ca))

**I**n the first week of the 2007 Quebec election campaign, newspapers

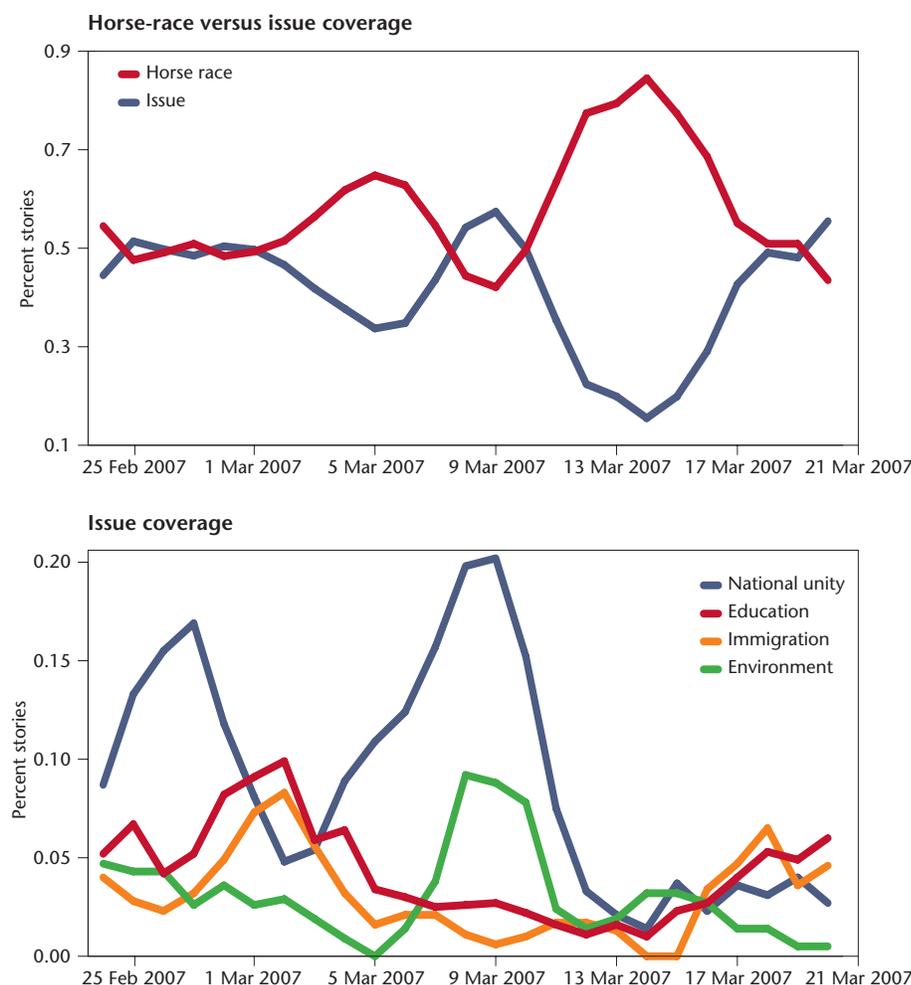
devoted roughly half their coverage to news of issues and news of the campaign. This provided readers both with

a sense of the candidates’ policy positions and a sense of who was ahead or behind in the race. As shown in figure 1, after the first week horse-race coverage surged ahead of issue coverage and

remained the dominant frame of coverage for nearly all of March. Issues outpaced horse-race coverage by a significant margin only once during the campaign, when the candidates debated whether Quebec could be partitioned if it left Canada, in the middle of week two. Issue coverage also modestly exceeded horse-race news briefly with the release of the federal budget and all that fiscal imbalance money, a week before the election.

Most of the time horse-race coverage dominated issue coverage by a substantial margin. During one period — around the time of the March 13 party leaders’ debate — horse-race coverage

FIGURE 1. TRENDS IN HORSE-RACE AND ISSUE COVERAGE



Note: Three-day moving average, four newspapers combined.

exceeded 80 percent of campaign news content in the four papers. Reporters could have used the debate to trigger an extended period of issue discussion in the press. Instead press coverage immediately before and after the debate contained almost no discussion of existing public policy or pending political promises. The dominance of horse-race coverage in this election mirrored news reports of the 2004 federal election, where substantive news coverage took a back seat to reports on the latest polls. It stands in contrast to the 2006 federal campaign, however, where issues received considerably more attention than the race between parties and leaders.

No single issue dominated the news coverage throughout the Quebec campaign, in contrast to more sovereignty-focused provincial campaigns of the past. While the national question remained the most prominent issue, never did it exceed even one-quarter of the daily news campaign coverage. The issue also ranked as the main topic of discussion — not counting the horse race — of news reports during more days than any other issue, including the final weekend of the campaign, when André Boisclair spoke of the possibility of proposing a referendum question, even in a minority legislature where the Liberals and the ADQ would join forces to defeat it.

Early on, from the first to the third week, coverage of the question of Quebec's future dominated other issues. The first spike on national question coverage occurred when the PQ stood ahead of the ADQ in the polls and within a few points of the Liberals. The second spike occurred during the partition controversy, when politicians debated over whether parts of Quebec could separate from the province if the province someday voted to separate from Canada.

Both the Liberals and the PQ sought to portray ADQ leader Mario Dumont in ways that would advantage their own party. Premier Charest argued that the ADQ leader, who cam-



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The four papers whose coverage was followed by the McGill team on the final Saturday of the campaign, two days before the vote. Three of them, *Le Soleil*, *La Presse* and *The Gazette*, were dominated by polls from CROP and Léger Marketing, which reinforced the horse-race coverage of the campaign.

paigned in favour of the 1995 referendum, remained a “closet separatist.” PQ chief André Boisclair also claimed that Dumont would help the PQ pursue Quebec’s independence. But Dumont positioned himself as an autonomist, supportive of greater flexibility for Quebec within Canada. After that exchange in early March, and as

the ADQ poll numbers remained much stronger than they had been in the run-up to the 2003 provincial election, the national question faded as a news story as it became clear that the PQ had no prospect of forming a majority government.

Education remained the second-most covered issue throughout much

of the campaign, as candidates mainly reacted to the ADQ proposal to abolish school boards and have education management taken over by municipalities. As the PQ pushed forward with its campaign emphasis on post-secondary education, the incumbent PLQ also faced a backlash among younger voters over plans to increase college and university tuition. The education issue hit the 10 percent coverage threshold the first week of March, when news reports on the possible elimination of school boards peaked.

Immigration occasionally made headlines during this campaign. News on this topic was marked by Dumont's dismissal of an ADQ candidate who said that francophone Quebecers needed to

increase their birth rate to counter rising immigration, and by long-running "reasonable accommodation" controversies. There was also limited coverage of the candidates' reaction to a municipal declaration by Hérouville that purported to establish cultural standards for would-be immigrants, and of the request of several Muslims for a space to pray at an outing to a traditional Quebec sugar shack.

Overall, the three parties and their leaders received similar amounts of news coverage during the campaign, though there were brief periods when one party's coverage surged above that of competing parties. As shown in figure 2, the PQ and their leader at first received far more coverage than their rivals, as the official opposition party was seen as the main alternative to the

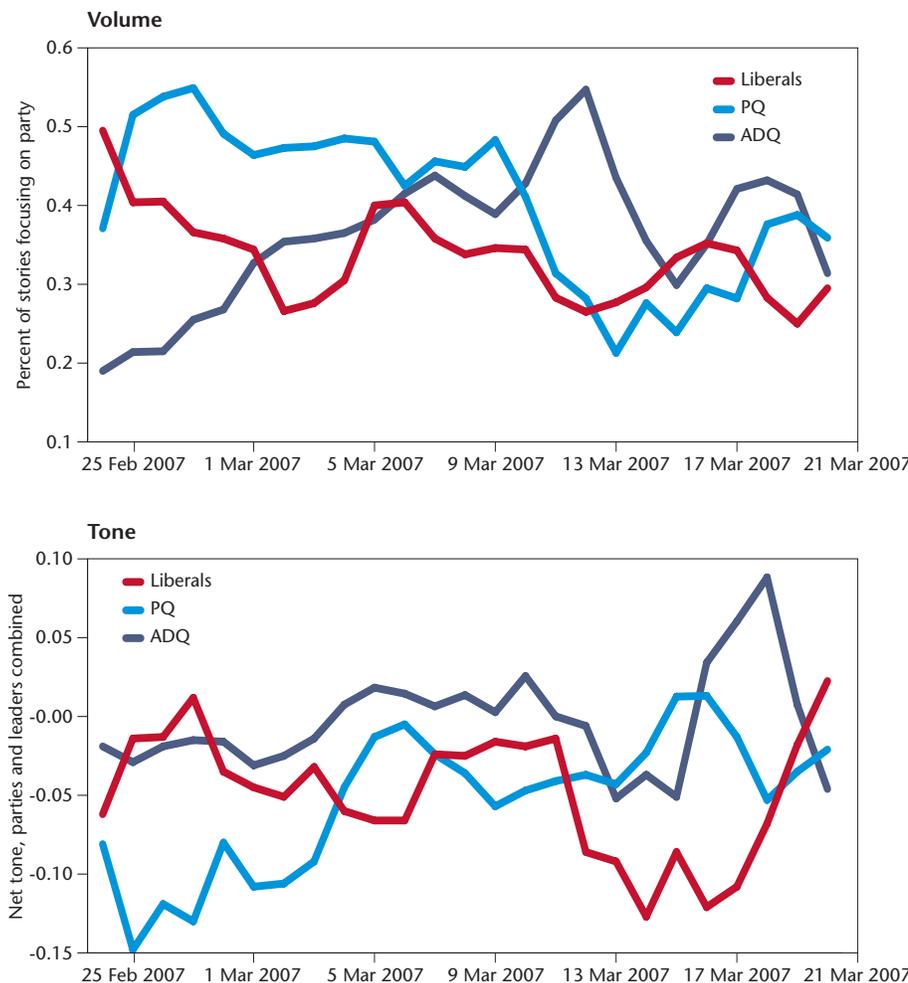
governing Liberals. Boisclair was competing in his first provincial election as a party leader, making him far less well known than Charest, the sitting premier and a long-time party leader in provincial and national politics. Second-place candidates often receive what is known as "compensatory coverage" in the early stages of the campaign, as an incumbent gets less attention than a lesser-known rival.

Indeed, the Liberals were in second or third place in the amount of coverage during nearly every day of the campaign. This may have reflected both the party's front-runner status in nearly all the campaign polls and the less-than-aggressive campaign style of its party chief. When the party briefly received more coverage than its rivals it was not during a period of good news. Around March 15, for example, when Charest and his party briefly were the subject of more stories than the other two parties, the Liberal leader was defending himself against Dumont's attack that the government had not done enough to prevent the collapse of a highway overpass in Laval that killed five people last fall.

The ADQ and Dumont began with the least coverage of the three leaders and their parties. Yet, for a small party that held only a handful of seats (5 of 125) before the campaign, the amount of coverage devoted to the ADQ by the press was remarkable — even during the early phase of this campaign. Reporters began to take the party and its leader even more seriously as it rose in voter surveys, a sharp contrast with the ADQ's precipitous fall in pledged voter support during the final weeks of the 2003 provincial election. At two points in the 2007 campaign — around March 9 and again around March 17 — coverage of the ADQ and its leader soared above that of the PQ and the Liberals.

The increased volume of coverage for the third party was not necessarily good news for Dumont. The first spike in ADQ coverage occurred when Dumont had to deal with an ADQ candidate north of Montreal who made

FIGURE 2. COMBINED PARTY/LEADER COVERAGE



Note: Three-day moving average, four newspapers combined.

anti-gay and anti-feminist statements. (Dumont replaced the radio “shock jock” on March 8, but the story was kept alive for a few days by Dumont’s attacks on what he called a “witch hunt” being conducted against the upstart party’s candidates.) The second period of intense ADQ coverage came when polls suggested Dumont’s strong performance in the party leader’s debate had pushed the ADQ into a tie with the PQ for second place in voter surveys.

Overall, the ADQ was treated most favourably by the Quebec press. During most of the campaign, particularly during the first two weeks of March and again around March 16, the tone of the news reports on the party and its chief was markedly more positive than that of stories about the other candidates and their parties. Dumont’s aggressive performance in the debate, and the ADQ’s subsequent rise in the polls, helped boost the party’s fortunes to the highest level of coverage enjoyed by any party throughout the campaign, which occurred about two weeks before voting day.

Given the expectation that the Liberals would finish first in the election, much of the news coverage of the campaign focused on the race for second place in the National Assembly, a contest the ADQ eventually won. The tone of news coverage consistently favoured the ADQ over the PQ. The PQ received more positive coverage than the Conservatives for only a few days during the campaign, in the wake of Boisclair’s better-than-expected performance in the leaders’ debate. Rarely was ADQ in third place in the competition for most positive coverage. Only during the final days of the campaign, when Charest and Boisclair both claimed credit for the very Quebec-friendly federal budget, did the ADQ get the most negative media reviews.

The PQ suffered the single most negative period of news coverage of

any party during the first week of the campaign, when the party and its leader were treated far more negatively than the ADQ or the Liberals. As the campaign began, the PQ’s 40-year-old leader was attacked for his relative inex-

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perience, and was forced to respond to a radio host’s claim that voters should abandon the PQ because Boisclair is gay. In addition, news reports during that period took note of the considerable dissent within the party over the choice of Boisclair as leader.

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An examination of the tone of coverage in the four newspapers reveals several similarities. As shown

in figure 3, the four papers treated each of the three main parties in much the same way, with mostly neutral coverage for all leaders and parties. When coverage did turn either positive or negative, the differences among the

media outlets were slight. *The Gazette*, the paper of choice for the anglophone community both on and off the island of Montreal, which tends to vote overwhelmingly Liberal, was slightly more positive in tone in its news columns toward the PLQ than was *Le Devoir*, editorially the most anti-Liberal paper of the four in this study. *La Presse* and *Le Soleil* (owned by the same media conglomerate) offered similar tones in their news coverage of Charest and the Liberals. (By comparing percentages, these results allow for a more effective comparison of tone than would a raw count of stories, particularly since *Le Devoir* is the smallest paper of the four and offered roughly half as much election news as the other three papers.) Over 6 stories out of every 10 were neutral in tone for Charest and his party in all four papers.

A comparison of the PQ coverage in the four papers also shows approximately equal treatment for the party. Even though the PQ remains the primary political expression of the sovereignty movement in Quebec and has represented the key source of cleavage in provincial politics for decades, the party received very similar news coverage (although, as one might expect, *Le Devoir* was less negative to the party than the other three papers). Yet *Le*

*Devoir* was also less positive about the party than the other three papers, perhaps on account of the ostensible unpopularity of Boisclair within segments of PQ partisans.

The ADQ, the main rival for the PQ among francophone voters, was also treated less negatively in *Le Devoir* than in the other papers. *Le Soleil* had the smallest amount of positive coverage for the party, even though the ADQ was particularly popular in the paper's circulation area. Once again, the overall treatment of the party by the four papers was more consistent than divergent.

All four papers treated the three parties in similar fashions, with mostly neutral news coverage. Negative coverage outweighed positive coverage in 10 of the 12 examples: only *The Gazette* and *Le Devoir* — two papers with divergent editorial stands on sovereignty — offered more positive than negative coverage for a single party. In both cases the beneficiary was the upstart party, the ADQ, which ended up drawing voters from the PQ and especially the PLQ in the March 26 election.

Indeed, when one compares the papers' treatment, the ADQ had a

higher percentage of positive news than the other two parties in all four papers. Although *La Presse* and *Le Soleil* offered more negative assessments of the ADQ than positive ones in its news columns, in both cases the margin of negative coverage of Dumont and his party approximated each paper's treatment of the PQ and the PLQ.

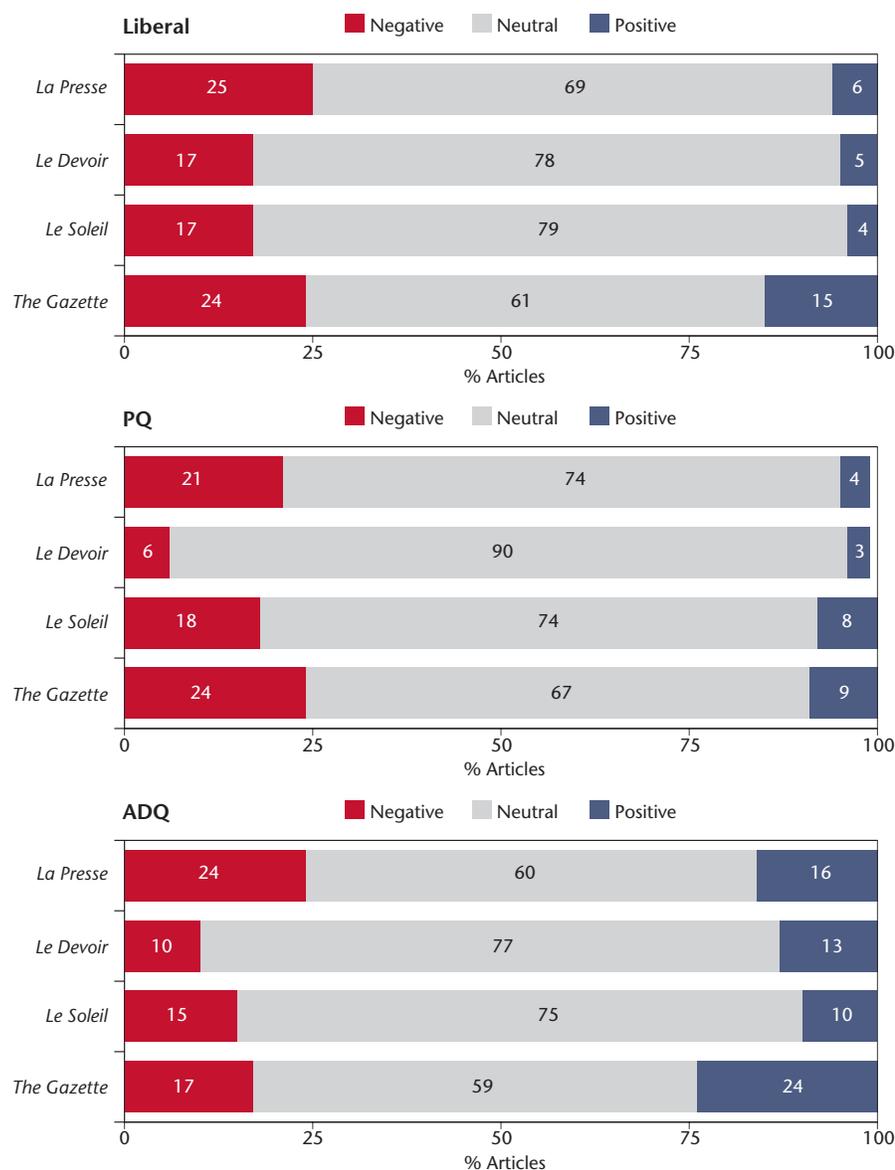
Political leaders frequently complain about the allegedly unfair treatment they receive in the mass media. Those complaints come from politicians across the ideological spectrum, as elected officials of proverbial left, right and centre complain that reporters treat their rivals more gently. On balance, our study of four leading Quebec newspapers during the March 2007 provincial elections suggests that the three leading candidates and their parties were treated similarly. While the ADQ was treated a bit more positively overall than the Liberals and the PQ, all three parties received mostly neutral coverage from the four papers. It is also interesting that the ADQ received as much coverage as it did, particularly in the early stages of the campaign.

In addition, each party had a period of ranking first and last in the competition for most positive news coverage during the 33-day campaign.

But critics of the mass media may not be entirely off the mark in this case. Our results clearly showed that the emphasis of the press was on horse-race coverage rather than policy coverage. Candidates trying to convince the voters to support them on the basis of their plans to improve education, health care or the environment would have been far better off — given the media's focus — to try to sell themselves and their parties largely on the basis of poll standings. Democracy depends on informed citizens, but even the press — where coverage tends to be more substantial than on television — did not do a good job of telling voters what each of these parties would do if elected.

Although we cannot fully test this point empirically, it is important to

FIGURE 3. COMBINED PARTY/LEADER TONE, BY NEWSPAPER



remember that some of these coverage differences are less a result of reporters' decisions than of deliberate choices by the candidates and their campaign teams. When a party leader, like Charest, runs a lacklustre campaign,

one would expect less news coverage — and perhaps less positive coverage — than reports on a more aggressive candidate, like Dumont. When party elites vigorously criticize their party's standard-bearer in the middle of the cam-

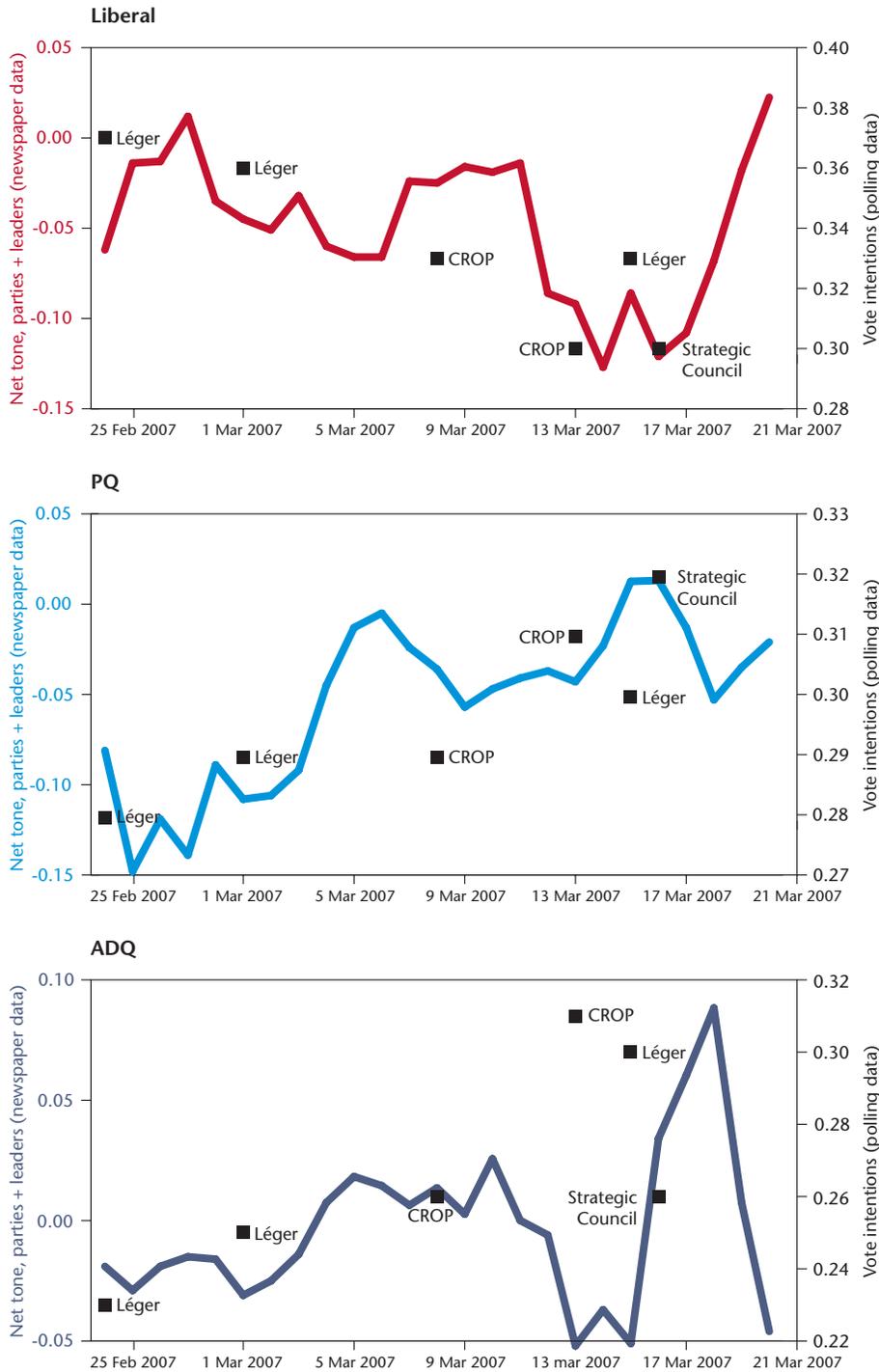
paign, as the PQ did to Boisclair, one would expect less positive coverage than of a candidate who leads a party devoted to its leader, like Dumont.

How well does media content capture campaign dynamics? Is the picture we get from media content reflective of the larger campaign? Again, this is difficult to test, but we do note a striking relationship between our tone measures and public opinion polling results. For all three parties, the tone of media coverage moves alongside survey results. As shown in figure 4, high polling numbers lead to more positive news coverage in the days that follow. These figures lend support to the idea that reporters find it necessary to write stories that justify the daily gains and losses of the candidates.

But these campaign realities offer only a portion of the explanation of why news coverage took the shape it did. Truly biased news content, if it exists, would be revealed by content analysis despite the activities of the party leaders and their followers. The results of our study suggest that Quebec's leading newspapers deserve high marks on the fairness of campaign news coverage, but far lower marks for their treatment of policy matters.

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FIGURE 4. NEWSPAPER COVERAGE AND POLLS



Note: Three-day moving average, four newspapers combined, CROP, Léger, Strategic Council.