

The process of expectation setting—the poll-driven media framework in which all the above takes place—is a dynamic one by necessity. As new polls are released, adjustments are made in coverage regardless of whether a candidate has announced new policies, adopted new campaigning strategies or even changed his stump speech. A good example of this is from 1988, when Michael Dukakis led George Bush early in the campaign. When an August 6 CBS/New York Times poll showed a 17-point lead for Dukakis, CBS reporter Bruce Morton, covering the Dukakis campaign in Denver, took standard positive campaign rhetoric from Dukakis and justified its use by citing poll results:

DUKAKIS: I think we have an opportunity to win the West, and I mean all of the West . . . I think it's because the people of the West are ready for change.

MORTON: He may be right. In that CBS News/New York Times Poll, Dukakis leads George Bush in the West, 53-to-35. Why is he doing well in a region where Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale did badly?

DUKAKIS: I'm independent, I'm pragmatic . . .

VOICES FROM PODIUM: And you're here. And you're here.

DUKAKIS: And I'm here . . .

MORTON: Westerners say Dukakis has more of a chance than Carter or Mondale because some western states are in economic trouble, because the Democrats themselves are more unified, and because Westerners don't love George Bush as they did Ronald Reagan. In our poll, 27 percent of westerners had a favorable opinion of Bush; 37 percent, an unfavorable—his worst region—so today, Dukakis was smiling, stressing Western themes.⁴⁴

While candidates generally smile and stress regional themes, Morton's story credited such behavior—and, a few sentences later, Dukakis' confidence—to the favorable poll results and nothing else. Similar positive stories on Dukakis appeared through the beginning of the Republican convention on August 15, as polls showed Dukakis still leading by 8 to 10 points.

The positive coverage of Dukakis was abandoned on August 22, however, when the next CBS/NYT poll (the first since the convention began) showed Bush suddenly ahead by six points, 46% to 40%. With this abrupt shift, Dukakis' standard campaign rhetoric, which had documentably changed little since the Democratic convention, was suddenly portrayed in a very different light. In Bill Whitaker's August 22 story, the candidate who had received a "boost" in a story two days earlier was now "fighting to reverse his slip in the polls." Dukakis' campaign rhetoric, which Morton had earlier characterized as resonant with Western voters wanting a change, was now criticized by Whitaker as "a vague message, and one that seems to fly in the face of reality." This clearly shows a poll-driven shift in the tone of the coverage. Whitaker concluded his report with wary words for Dukakis. "Despite the drop in the polls, Dukakis plans to continue pushing his message of character over substance. But it's a risky strategy." Taken together, the CBS coverage does not just offer commentary on Dukakis' campaign strategy or policy preferences—it uses the same message from the same candidate to tell two diametrically opposed stories.

While using polls as scorecards within campaigns has long been discussed and decried as "horserace coverage," what we have here is something much deeper and possibly more influential. This is a case of voters being told by reporters (both directly and indirectly) that candidates are either effective or inept based on nothing related to governance. In many early polls, voters admit that they don't know much about the candidates yet, but this incomplete information is taken as justification for portraying one candidate as a "winner" and another as a "loser."