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Status Quo Bias in the Mainstream American Media Coverage of Senator Bernie Sanders

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Did the mainstream American media exhibit bias in their coverage of Senator Bernie Sanders, the first self-proclaimed socialist candidate for president since Eugene V. Debs in the early 1900s? The Sanders campaign and his supporters believed so, as is often the case with underdog candidates, but in this instance the concerns may carry some weight. In early September of 2015, Margaret Sullivan, the public editor of the *New York Times*, said, "Here's my take: The Times has not ignored Mr. Sanders's campaign, but it hasn't always taken it very seriously. The tone of some stories is regrettably dismissive, even mocking at times." With these claims of bias coming from both Sanders supporters and higher-ups in the mainstream media, I decided to analyze the media coverage of Bernie Sanders following the first Democratic presidential debate, which took place on October 13, 2015, fully expecting to uncover a common theme of bias. I looked specifically for status quo bias, or an irrational "preference to maintain the status quo" (Eidelman and Crandall 271).

The power of the press in elections cannot be understated, as the media provides the foremost medium for communication between candidates and voters. Political advertising and media coverage provide campaigns the opportunity to broadcast their message to a national audience. Citizens are in turn given a platform to respond to these messages through polls, letters to the editor, and many other formats. The media's power to influence elections in this role of "electoral forum," as Shanto Iyengar refers to it in *Media Politics* (21), was evidenced in the 1988 presidential campaign. In the lead-up to the election between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, "journalists elevated the importance of crime as a campaign issue, thus handing Bush (who was more widely seen as tough on crime) a significant edge" (Iyengar 73). Despite the resulting shift towards journalism in which candidates' statements are not merely echoed but critiqued, the media has retained its power as the primary "electoral forum" (Iyengar 21). Therefore, it is crucial to scrutinize the coverage of elections, as John Sides, an associate professor of political science at George Washington University, has done in his *Washington Post* blog piece titled "Is the Media Biased against Bernie Sanders? Not Really."

After reading Margaret Sullivan's findings of bias in the *New York Times*, John Sides examined the media coverage of Bernie Sanders from thousands of

outlets and concluded that the reporting has not been biased in either extent or tone. Sides asserts that, although Hillary Clinton did get more coverage than Sanders until mid-September, this does not indicate a media bias because “news coverage will always focus on front-running candidates more than underdogs.” Sides also provides data on the tone of coverage, showing that Clinton is generally portrayed more negatively in the media than Sanders. While I do not contest Sides’ argument regarding the amount of coverage afforded to each candidate, his data and conclusions on the tone of coverage fail to discredit the findings of Sullivan, since she discovered that the reporting on Sanders was dismissive, not outright negative. Media bias, particularly in the coverage of revolutionary candidates such as Sanders, can often take on a much more a subtle form than outright negativity.

In “Framing The News: Socialism as Deviance,” published in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Patrick Daley and Beverley James reveal the subtle way objective reporting is often biased against “independent thinking” (38) by investigating coverage on the appointment of a socialist commissioner of environmental conservation in Alaska. They found that adherence to the principle of objectivity leads to journalism “biased towards the status quo” (Daley and James 37), which, in the case of the appointed commissioner, reinforced negative stereotypes of socialism. Daley and James argue that the need to “represent both sides of the story” (41) in objective journalism reinforces power structures by relying on official sources. Objective news stories on Bernie Sanders that are “biased towards the status quo” (Daley and James 37) would not be characterized in John Sides’ research as negative coverage, yet would still signify media bias against Sanders. Indeed, many of the articles I examined on Sanders exhibited a status quo bias because of the objective nature of the reporting.

My study included 29 articles published in four major newspapers throughout the week following the first Democratic primary debate of the 2015-16 election cycle. I chose to analyze articles from the *Washington Post*, because it is thought to represent the political center, while the *New York Times* was chosen to represent the left and the *Wall Street Journal* the right. The *Los Angeles Times* is also known as left of center, but was chosen to represent the West Coast, as the other three newspapers are based on the East Coast. The date range for the coverage was set from October 14, 2015, the day after the debate, to October 20, 2015, to obtain a representative but manageable sample size. Within those dates and publications, I searched for articles containing the words “Bernie Sanders” and “socialism” or “socialist.” These keywords were used in the hope that they would return all articles on Sanders and his socialist politics regardless of their bias, or lack thereof, so that the study would be as representative of the mainstream American media as possible.

In order to analyze the articles included in this study, I drew on psychologists Scott Eidelman and Christian Crandall's article "Bias in Favor of the Status Quo," published in *Social & Personality Psychology Compass*, which explores the psychological causes and political implications of status quo bias. They note that, while there is rationale behind maintaining the status quo in many cases, people often exhibit a preference for the status quo in instances where it does not make sense. In these cases, Eidelman and Crandall argue that people display a status quo bias based on irrationalities such as "loss aversion" (271), "mere exposure effects" (272), "existence bias" (272), and "longer is better" (273). People exhibit "loss aversion," and thereby a bias against change, when they "give more weight to losses than to equal gains" (Eidelman and Crandall 271). The tendency to prefer stimuli they have exposure to, or the "mere exposure effect" identified by Eidelman and Crandall, also biases people toward the existing states they most frequently encounter.

In fact, people favor existing states merely because of their existence, as in "existence bias," and further prefer states the longer they have existed, believing that "longer is better" (Eidelman and Crandall 272). To illustrate the influence these biases toward the status quo can have on politics, Eidelman and Crandall "randomly assign[ed] participants to imagine vividly that Obama [or] Clinton won the nomination" (273) during the 2008 Democratic primary and found that "imagining Obama (or Clinton) winning made it seem more likely, and this in turn increased people's sense that Obama (or Clinton) winning the nomination was a good thing" (273). They "conceptualized likelihood as a future status quo" (Eidelman and Crandall 273), so their findings show that people exhibit a status quo bias towards the candidate they think is most likely to win. Finally, Eidelman and Crandall discuss how status quo bias "plays a role—under certain conditions—in promoting political conservatism" (276). Status quo bias towards the candidate perceived as more likely to win and bias towards political conservatism both constituted bias against Bernie Sanders in his presidential campaign.

Drawing on Daley and James's "Framing The News: Socialism as Deviance" and Eidelman and Crandall's "Bias in Favor of the Status Quo," I examined the 29 articles included in this study for status quo bias in the forms of "objectivity" (Daley and James 38), "loss avers[ion]" (Eidelman and Crandall 271), "mere exposure" bias (272), "existence bias" (272), and "longer is better" bias (273). The results are compiled in Table 1 below, with the number of articles exhibiting status quo bias (in any form) being the first figure in each cell and the second figure being the total number of articles in that category. For example, five out of the 12 news articles published in the *Washington Post* exhibited some form of status quo bias.

The mainstream American print media exhibited a status quo bias in 13 of the 29 articles included in the study. This bias was generally displayed more overtly in the right-leaning *Wall Street Journal* as well as in editorial and commentary pieces, whereas it was more subliminal in the centrist and left-leaning publications and news articles. More than half of the articles included in the study (17/29) were from the *Washington Post*, which in itself is not problematic because it is the most moderate of the three newspapers. However, the very small sample sizes for the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* are problematic. For this reason, as well as the fact that bias is not precisely quantifiable, the following examples of the status quo bias found in the study are more informative than the numerical results.

Table 1 Results of status quo bias investigation in mainstream American newspapers

| | <i>Washington Post</i> | <i>Wall Street Journal</i> | <i>New York Times</i> | <i>Los Angeles Times</i> | Totals |
|------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| News | 5/12 | 2/2 | 0/1 | 1/5 | 8/20 |
| Commentary | 0/0 | 1/1 | 1/2 | 0/0 | 2/3 |
| Editorial | 2/5 | 1/1 | 0/0 | 0/0 | 3/6 |
| Totals | 7/17 | 4/4 | 1/3 | 1/5 | 13/29 |

Patrick Healey provides a subtle example of status quo bias in his commentary piece “After Months of Difficulties, a Night that Turned Clinton’s Way,” published in the *New York Times*, in which he analyzes Hillary Clinton’s performance in the Democratic debate and concludes that she dominated the stage. When Healey addresses Bernie Sanders’s definition of democratic socialism, he writes that Clinton “chid[ed] Mr. Sanders over his distaste for the excesses of capitalism and his embrace of democratic socialism and political systems like the government of Denmark,” and then quotes Clinton’s response to Sanders. Healey’s failure to quote Sanders on the issue, instead paraphrasing and quoting Clinton without providing commentary on the veracity of her statements, leaves the reader with a skewed view of Sanders’s political ideology, which constitutes status quo bias. Healey’s bias is very subtle, most likely because of his left-leaning audience.

An underlying bias in favor of the status quo is also apparent in David Lauter’s review of the Democratic debate, “After a Wobbly Summer, Clinton Seizes the Stage,” a news article published in the *Los Angeles Times*. When talking about Sanders’s performance, Lauter writes, “While his repeated calls

for political ‘revolution’ and suggestions that the U.S. should look to Denmark for answers to social policy problems may have thrilled his followers on the party’s left, they seemed unlikely to expand his support.”

His decision to put “revolution” in quotation marks could be construed as status quo bias, as he seems to be mocking the idea of drastic change. Moreover, Lauter’s characterization of Sanders’s platform as “unlikely to expand his support” echoes the dismissiveness identified by Margaret Sullivan. Lauter adds that “for many viewers, Tuesday night was probably their first sustained exposure to the independent Vermont senator,” which, while not biased in itself, may appeal to readers’ “mere exposure” bias (Daley and James 272), or to the preference for ideas and people to which one has had more exposure. Lauter’s status quo bias is very subtle, which makes sense based on the genre of his article and his left-leaning audience.

“Trump Whips Up Va. Crowd with Critique of Democrats’ Debate,” a *Washington Post* news article in which Jenna Portnoy details a speech made by Donald Trump the day after the Democratic debate, provides an example of status quo bias masquerading as objective reporting. Although Portnoy adheres to the journalistic principle of objectivity by quoting and paraphrasing Trump for the majority of the article, her writing still exhibits status quo bias against Bernie Sanders. Journalists’ reliance on official sources without addressing the claims made by those sources is the basis for Patrick Daley and Beverley James’ argument that objectivity leads to journalism “biased towards the status quo” (37), and Portnoy’s article is no exception. She quotes Trump saying “I call [Sanders] a socialist-slash-communist, okay? Because that’s what he is.” Trump’s allegation goes unchallenged despite its inaccuracy, so because Portnoy does not examine the truth behind Trump’s claim, her article is biased against Sanders and towards the status quo. Portnoy’s status quo bias is fairly subliminal in her article, presumably because it is a news story written for a moderate audience.

Kathleen Parker exhibits more noticeable status quo bias when she explores why Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are so popular in her editorial piece “The Sanders-Trump Magical Mystery Tour,” published in *The Washington Post*. She discusses an interview with Bernie Sanders in which he stated he is not a capitalist, saying this was “shocking” because “surely no one hoping to become president would dare admit wanting to fundamentally change the nation’s economic system” (Parker). Parker is either overtly displaying her own status quo bias or believes voters are biased towards the status quo and therefore would never vote for so revolutionary a candidate. A recurrence of status quo bias in the article suggests the bias lies with the author. Parker goes on to say that “a few regulations here and there” would not be as shocking

as “wholesale socialism, albeit alongside a political democracy, however that works,” and points out that “Thus far, there’s no such model in the world, according to Sanders himself.” Her rhetoric inverts Eidelman and Crandall’s idea of “existence bias” (272), the belief that existence is proof of positive qualities, because she implies that, since “wholesale socialism, albeit alongside a political democracy” (Parker) has never before existed, it must not have positive qualities. Parker’s status quo bias is moderately conspicuous in her editorial, most likely because it is an editorial written for the moderate audience of the *Washington Post*.

Finally, for an example of blatant status quo bias, we turn to “Bernie Loves Hillary,” a commentary piece published in the *Wall Street Journal*, in which Daniel Henninger argues that Hillary Clinton secured the Democratic nomination when Bernie Sanders dismissed her email scandal during the debate. Henninger goes on to assert that “an American politician preaching ‘revolution’ won’t win a presidential nomination.” His declaration is reminiscent of one made by Kathleen Parker in “The Sanders-Trump Magical Mystery Tour,” both either plainly revealing the author’s status quo bias or suggesting voters are the ones who are biased. Again, there is a repetition of status quo bias that implicates the author, as Henninger refers to Sanders’s proposal to make public colleges tuition-free as “wishful thinking” without supporting his claim. His rhetoric implies that making public colleges tuition-free is bad because it is implausible, inversely exhibiting the status quo bias Eidelman and Crandall found when manipulating the likelihood of Obama or Clinton winning the 2008 Democratic nomination. Lastly, Henninger displays bias in his contention that “Bernie Sanders may not become the nominee, but the Vermont socialist represents the logical ending point of the modern Democratic Party’s belief system: It’s all free!” Although Henninger’s usage of the slippery-slope fallacy may or may not constitute status quo bias, it certainly constitutes bias against Sanders. Of the five examples, Henninger most prominently demonstrates status quo bias, doubtlessly due to the genre of his article and because it is written for the right-leaning audience of the *Wall Street Journal*.

The status quo bias uncovered in this study may have played a major role in the 2016 Democratic primary. Since voters already harbor their own biases in favor of the status quo, seeing their irrational preferences echoed in the media only further discourages radical change. I expect a more comprehensive study on status quo bias in the mainstream American media—and the effects of that bias on voters—would reveal that it exerts a vast influence in our everyday lives. With the pervasiveness of status quo bias, it may be a while before we see another revolutionary candidate like Bernie Sanders competing for the nomination of a major party. Hopefully, by then, the media will give that person a fair chance.

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