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Issue on the Rise: Media Coverage of Poverty in Politics

A study of print media from 2003 through 2007

By Freedman Consulting, LLC: Tom Freedman, Matt Lindsey, and Jessica Goad and Civic Enterprises, LLC: John Bridgeland, Ryan Streeter, and Mary McNaught

Introduction and Summary

This study examines U.S. media print coverage of the topic of poverty and politics from 2003 through 2007. In order to conduct the study, we reviewed all stories in all papers available under LexisNexis that mentioned "poverty," "candidates," and "politics" as well as other key search terms. Comparing the last pre-presidential year, 2003, with 2007, we found a dramatic 145% increase in the number of stories that mention "politics," "candidate," and "poverty." In part this may be attributable to the relatively early start to the campaign season and heavier news coverage along with it, but it also likely signals a more general trend of increased interest in the problem of poverty. For instance, both 2005 and 2006 saw more stories mentioning "politics," "candidate," and "poverty" than 2003. This conclusion is also supported anecdotally, as candidates in the 2008 presidential election have discussed the issue and key journalists have given the topic serious consideration.¹ It is also worth noting that as was true comparing 2003 to 2004, it is likely that the issue of poverty will receive more coverage in the actual election year, and 2008 will likely be a year of significantly increased coverage of the political debate over poverty. The study details several different approaches to the data and is divided into three sections: (I) a description of the methodology; (II) findings; and (III) key conclusions. Among other conclusions, the study suggests that 2008 may be an important year for anti-poverty advocates who seek to have the issue gain greater attention.

Methodology

The LexisNexis search engine was used to find articles in the print media with key words related to poverty and politics. The research was undertaken in three parts. In Part I, a search of all national news media was conducted, which included major national newspapers, national wires, and local newspapers. In the first search of Part I, the terms "poverty," "politics," and "candidate" were included, and in the second search, the terms "poverty," "politics," "candidate," and "presidential" were included.

For Part II, only 20 of the top-ranking newspapers in the U.S. by circulation were analyzed.² The key words searched included: "poverty," "politics," "candidate," and "presidential" in the first run and "poverty," "politics," "candidate," "presidential," and "campaign" in the second instance.

In Part III, the study searched all national newspapers and newswires with the terms "poverty," "politics," "candidate," and "presidential," but we used a function of LexisNexis to sort the results by the category "U.S. Presidential Elections." This was designed to ensure that all of the documents included in the count were topical. We also examined each story individually to make sure that it was relevant to domestic poverty and removed those which were not appropriate, such as articles about elections in a foreign country.

We used data from the entirety of the years 2003-2007, from January 1st each year until December 31st. The searches were conducted on February 27, 2008 (Parts I and II) and December 20, 2007 (Part III).³

Findings

Part I: All U.S Newspapers and Wires

Using search terms:

"poverty," "politics," and "candidate"

Year	Documents returned
2003	1,775
2004	4,086
2005	2,340
2006	3,453
2007	4,344

Increase from 2003-2007: 145%

"poverty," "politics," "candidate,"
and "presidential"

Year	Documents returned
2003	924
2004	2,600
2005	1,147
2006	1,708
2007	3,217

Increase from 2003-2007: 248%

Part II: Twenty of the Top U.S. Newspapers by Circulation

Using search terms:

"poverty," "politics," "candidate," "presidential"

Year	Documents returned
2003	169
2004	562
2005	144
2006	286
2007	347

Increase from 2003-2007: 105%

"poverty," "politics," "candidate,"
"presidential," and "campaign"

Year	Documents returned
2003	150
2004	355
2005	110
2006	245
2007	304

Increase from 2003-2007: 103%

Part III: Data Controlled for Topical Articles, U.S. Newspapers and Wires

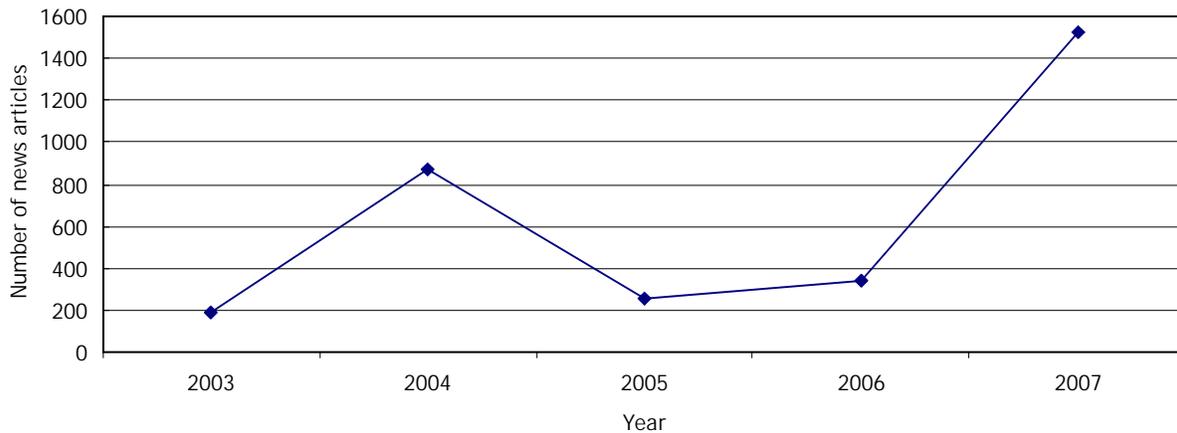
Using search terms:

"poverty" and "politics" and "presidential" and "candidate" and reviewed to include only U.S. domestic references

Year	Documents returned
2003	186
2004	869
2005	252
2006	337
2007	1,525

Increase from 2003-2007: 720%

Increase in number of news articles involving poverty and U.S. presidential campaigns



Conclusion

It is reasonable to conclude that coverage of poverty as a political issue is increasing in the print media. In the searches of the country's top newspapers (Part II), the most documents were returned during 2004, the year of a presidential election. There has also been a significant percentage increase in the coverage of poverty between 2003 and 2007. The fact that 2007 had a large number of stories, actually outpacing stories in 2003, may indicate that poverty will be a more important topic in the 2008 election than it was in the 2004 election.

The data above thus suggests that 2008 will see a significant number of articles in the print media about politics and poverty. This is an important opportunity for those interested in making poverty in America a key issue. American presidential elections frequently help set the policy agenda for the country for the years ahead, and the reality that poverty is an increasingly important public topic makes it vital that advocates work hard to influence the policy options under consideration.

¹See, for example, John Edwards' announcement that poverty "is the cause of my life" in *TIME* magazine (<http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1644425,00.html>) and columns such as those by E.J. Dionne ("Making the Poor Visible," *Washington Post*, July 20, 2007), Matt Bai ("The Poverty Platform," *New York Times*, June 10, 2007), and David Brooks ("A Reality Based Economy," *New York Times*, July 24, 2007).

²These were: *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Daily News*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Denver Post*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *New York Post*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Star Tribune*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Newark Star Ledger*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Seattle Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, and the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*. Notable exceptions to the Lexis-Nexis newspaper search engine are: the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Detroit Free Press*, *New York Newsday*, and the *Arizona Republic*, all of which consistently rank in the top 20 newspapers in the U.S. by circulation.

³It is worth noting that because LexisNexis periodically adds stories to its database, future search results could differ somewhat if conducted on different dates.