

# Nate Silver vs. the Pundits: Examining the Roles of Political Punditry, Big Data and Cognitive Dissonance in a 2012 U.S. Presidential Election Dispute

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the role of political punditry at a time when Big Data is playing a greater role in campaign journalism. It focuses on the dispute between data journalist Nate Silver and the pundits over his predictions during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. A qualitative content analysis is used to assess the online commentary in the weeks before the election. Silver's supporters touted his statistical approach while critics questioned Silver's methods and cited their own gut feelings about the campaign's outcome. When the election results vindicated Silver, most pundits resolved their

cognitive dissonance by declining to give him any credit. The research suggests pundits not only favored their own party in their predictions but also tried to keep uncertainty about the elections results alive and bolster the value of their work. This research not only suggests a new method for covering America's political process, but adds to our understanding of political punditry and the advancement of Big Data journalism.

## Introduction

Election night 2012 saw Democrat Barack Obama win re-election as president of the United States, defeating Republican rival Mitt Romney. Another winner that night was a man who ran for no political office. Data journalist Nate Silver correctly called the presidential winner in all 50 states that night (Abbot, 2013). The election's outcome was a vindication for Silver and his statistical methods after weeks of criticism. Silver's work seen on the website FiveThirtyEight.com had been mocked by some top political pundits on cable news programs.

One of the most outspoken critics was Joe Scarborough, the former Republican congressman from Florida now working as an MSNBC host. Scarborough, basing his beliefs that the race was a toss-up in part because of attending Romney campaign events, suggested Silver was nothing more than an ideologue. An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* questioned Silver's statistical model for the predictions he was making (Abbot, 2013). There was even a website (UnskewedPolls.com) started in the closing weeks of the campaign that argued why Silver's projections were wrong. While Scarborough and some others in the media offered *mea culpas* following the election results, others clung to their opinions. Dean Chambers, the founder of UnskewedPolls.com, argued weeks after the election that Obama had stolen the victory through voter fraud (Kroll, 2012). The impact of Silver's work after the election has also been acknowledged. Klein (2013)

suggested that Silver's reporting and ability to make complicated data something that could produce news stories every day could increase readers' understanding of what was happening in elections.

Partisan political viewpoints and the use of data journalism offer stark contrasts regarding how one could view the lead-up to the 2012 election and its potential outcomes. That some political pundits (almost entirely conservative) predicted a Romney victory while glossing over Silver's statistical work suggests something more was going on. For this study, the researchers first offer a brief overview of the historical roles political pundits have played in the American presidential election process and how it has changed especially in the era of 24-hour cable television news. Next, researchers utilize qualitative content analysis of online commentaries and articles about Silver's data journalism work both prior to and immediately following the November 2012 general election day. In particular, the researchers seek to identify themes used by pundits both attacking and defending Silver. In addition, the researchers seek to identify themes expressed by those criticizing Silver's methods after the results of the election were known and whether political bias or motivations drove their criticism of Silver's work. The researchers use cognitive dissonance theory as the theoretical framework, which suggests that after the election the pundits who had criticized Silver would seek ways to explain away being wrong to relieve their dissonance. This study helps provide a better understanding of the role of political pundits in political journalism at a time when Big Data (such as the work being done by Silver and his peers) is playing a greater role in explaining what is happening in campaigns and how it may signal a change in the way future campaigns are reported in the media.

## **History of Punditry**

Punditry has been part of human society dating back to biblical times (Nimmo & Combs, 1993). Alterman noted the term derived from a Hindu word that acknowledged “great learning” among those anointed with the title (1999, p. 21). The first use of the term was found in Henry Luce’s *Time* magazine when the publishing magnate endowed Walter Lippmann with the title.

The modern era of political punditry began in the early 1980s with the help of new technology in electronic communication. Satellite delivery of national radio shows featuring commentators like Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage gave birth to the conservative talk radio format, aided by the phasing out of the Fairness Doctrine during the Reagan administration (Blaney, 2016). Satellite technology also spawned the cable television network boom of the early 1980s. Cable News Network developed political programs like *Crossfire* and *Capitol Gang* that featured conservative and liberal commentators arguing about the political news of the day. The growth of cable television news during the 1980s and 1990s (with MSNBC and Fox News coming on the air in the 90s) led to two other developments. First, the number of pundits appearing on these networks increased substantially to fill the 24-hour news cycle. While the role of pundits was once rooted in journalism, the need for people to appear on television to help explain the issues of the day led to a wave of political operatives and one-time office holders getting jobs as television pundits (Alterman, 1999). One of the earliest examples of this was Republican Pat Buchanan, who had left his job as a *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* editorial writer to go work in the Nixon White House. Buchanan used the platform that

his participation on shows like *Crossfire* provided to launch multiple unsuccessful bids for the presidency starting in 1992.

Some who have examined this political niche have criticized television's impact on punditry. Nimmo and Combs (1993) suggested *Crossfire* (and shows with similar conservative versus liberal dynamics) was simply show business. Postman (1985) made a similar observation nearly a decade before about news content being presented in a new way that emphasized entertaining the news audience ahead of informing it. Alterman (1999) suggested once-powerful pundits like William F. Buckley had been overtaken because his *Firing Line* program did not have the sitcom-like conventions of the new generation of pundit programs. Despite these concerns, other researchers suggested some in the electorate find the drama generated by these on-air confrontations enjoyable and informative (Holbert, Weeks, & Esralew, 2013).

Alterman (1999) also suggested a more troubling concern regarding political partisans in the role of television pundit: As no defined code of ethics exists that pundits are expected to follow, the author noted conflicts of interest arise that would not be tolerated with objective journalists. One famous example was George Will's participation in Ronald Reagan's debate preparations during the 1980 campaign. More recent examples are pundits accepting speaking fees from groups they comment upon as part of their job as pundits.

### **A Typology of Political Pundits**

Alterman (1999) has suggested that there is a pecking order when it comes to which political pundits are considered as influential versus inconsequential, with the media playing a direct role in anointing those qualified to state these opinions. Some of

this power may also stem from the political affiliation of the pundit and which party is in control of the White House or Congress (with those pundits seemingly enjoying inside connections). The power of these pundits, however, is significant. Modern political pundits ascended to a new level of influence through cable television in the 1990s as “...television talk shows replaced the stump speech” in the American political system (Denton, 1994, p. xiii)

Some researchers have attempted to offer ways of classifying pundits. For example, Nimmo and Combs (1993) identified four distinct classes. The first is priestly pundits, a group identified “as speaking to and for the established elites” (p. 25). George Will’s close ties to Ronald Reagan is an example of a priestly pundit. A second type was bard pundits, or those who imagined themselves as speaking for the popular interests or sentiments of the people and against the elites. Nimmo and Combs identified comedic figures such as Will Rogers as representative of that type of pundit. In the 2000s, that role was taken on by entertainers like Steven Colbert in his guise of a conservative commentator on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*. Two other types identified by Nimmo and Combs are pundits as sages and pundits as oracles. The researchers described sages as those former priestly pundits who have been around long enough to be able to speak from a historical perspective about the events of the day while oracles engaged in focusing on predicting future events. Nimmo and Combs included political pollsters in this class of pundit, as they would appear on broadcasts or in print to discuss their polling results and offer predictions about the future based on that data. As Nate Silver engages in prognostication through his data work, Silver would appear to fall under this description as an oracle.

Another typology offered by Tetlock suggested two broad classifications for pundits: “foxes” and “hedgehogs” (Tetlock, 2006, pp. 20-21). These are descriptions Silver (2012) adopted in his book when discussing pundits. Tetlock defined foxes as those pundits who are constantly analyzing data and formulating their opinions based on constant analysis. Pundits classified as hedgehogs have a few broad beliefs and try to explain all data using that pre-established belief system. Tetlock’s study of the predictive ability of pundits suggested the foxes had a far better track record than hedgehogs. While Silver could be classified as a fox because of his analysis of data for his predictions, someone like MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough could be classified as a hedgehog, seeing events in the political world through a prism of existing beliefs.

In his book, Silver (2012) discussed his study of 1,000 pundit predictions made on the TV show *The McLaughlin Group* during the 2008 presidential election. Silver concluded their predictions “displayed about as much political acumen as a barbershop quartet” (p. 50). He noted bold hedgehog-like predictions from pundits are more likely to get you on television but are usually wrong, citing Dick Morris, a former adviser to Bill Clinton. Morris predicted George W. Bush’s handling of Hurricane Katrina would help him, Barack Obama would win Republican strongholds Tennessee and Arkansas in 2008, and Donald Trump would run for Republican nomination in 2012 with a good chance of winning. Nevertheless, Silver noted, "But Morris is quick on his feet, entertaining, and successful at marketing himself -- he remains in the regular rotation at Fox News and has sold books to hundreds of thousands of people" (p. 55).

Among the reasons Silver cited for hedgehogs' poor predictions is their partisan ideology. In his study, Silver found partisan pundits on both sides of the political

spectrum did no better than chance because of their biases. Even if they have more information, Tetlock told Silver hedgehogs massage and manipulate these data in ways that confirm their own biases. As Silver put it, "They take a prejudicial view toward the evidence, seeing what they want to see and not what is really there" (2012, p. 57). Foxes, on the other hand, acknowledge their biases and seek to evaluate the information as objectively as possible.

## **Data Journalism**

In his landmark book *Precision Journalism* (1973), Meyer advocated using the scientific methods of social science for journalistic purposes. Meyer suggested using these methods would allow journalists to conduct their analysis with more precise methods and thus better serve the public. In the latest version of his book, Meyer said journalism should be practiced "as if it were a science, adopting scientific method, scientific objectivity, and scientific ideals" (2002, p. 5). It includes a chapter about analyzing data during an election campaign, including making predictions. Because computers were used to gather and analyze the data for analysis, this type of journalism was initially called computer-assisted reporting (Houston, 1999; Garrison, 1998). Aucoin (2005) pointed out these changes fostered a "radical change in news gathering" with replacement of in-person library archive research with computer-based reporting. By 1998, nearly 90 per cent of newspapers with circulations of 20,000 or more in the United States used computers to find and analyze information (Garrison, 2001).

The National Institute of Computer-Assisted Reporting was founded in 1989 as a part of Investigative Reporters and Editors, the largest organization of investigative reporters in the world. NICAR trains journalists in these techniques. A 2011 discussion

on its listserv, NICAR-L led to a name change to data journalism. Listers thought data journalism more accurately reflected what they do, which was well beyond simply using the computer to aid in reporting.

In a study of proponents and practitioners of data journalism, Gray, Bounegru and Chambers (2012) asked them about its importance. Key practices included filtering data flow to present important and relevant information, including their methodology so it can be verified and replicated, independently interpreting official information, and holding the powerful accountable. As Fink and Anderson (2015) point out, the resources and expertise used to carry out these practices vary widely in the United States and likely the world, mainly by the size of the media organization. Journalists at smaller organizations said access to fewer resources limits their analysis and presentation of data-driven stories.

Silver is a data journalist with abundant resources. He founded the FiveThirtyEight.com political blog and was writing it for the *New York Times* during the 2012 election. He used the methods of social science to analyze his data and wrote his blog based on it. His book (2012) is about how to make more accurate predictions for everything from selecting the best baseball prospects in sports to predicting the next major earthquake. Regarding political prediction, Silver's three basic principles are think probabilistically, make them based on today's data and don't be afraid to change if needed, and look for consensus among the evidence. FiveThirtyEight's election forecasts typically combine aggregated polling data with information about the economy, the demographics of a state, and some qualitative information. To successfully predict elections, Silver said the following is required:

So you will need to adopt some different habits from the pundits you see on TV.

You will need to learn how to express – and quantify – the uncertainty in your predictions. You will need to update your forecast as facts and circumstances change. You will need to recognize that there is wisdom in seeing the world from a different viewpoint. The more you are willing to do these things, the more capable you will be of evaluating a wide variety of information without abusing it. (Silver, 2012, p. 73)

### **Dissonance Theory and the Electoral Process**

Concepts such as cognitive dissonance and selective exposure have frequently been applied to the study of politics and the attitudes of voters, particularly regarding candidates before and after elections (e.g., Stroud, 2008). Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory is based on the idea that people may have trouble rationalizing inconsistencies in thoughts, thereby creating psychological discomfort, or dissonance. As a result, individuals seek to reduce this dissonance, either by eliminating dissonant beliefs and opinions or adding and revising consonant beliefs and opinions (Festinger, 1957, pp. 2-3). It is this idea that people could take multiple actions related to their political expectations (e.g., eliminate or modify existing beliefs) that suggests cognitive dissonance is the theory of choice for this study. The dissonance some pundits experienced in explaining their belief of Mitt Romney's pending victory (and his eventual defeat) in the face of Nate Silver's statistical data is at the heart of this study.

While much of the prior research about political pundits has focused on predictive abilities (e.g., Metaxas & Leigh, 2013), some dissonance research about the electoral process can be applied to the present study. Two of these studies dealt with the concepts

of bias and overconfidence. Dolan and Holbrook (2001) noted the issue of bias in their study of voters, describing it as a strong attachment to either a political party or to one particular candidate. It is logical to suggest that pundits, especially those from the political realm, would have a level of bias built into their analysis.

Another study from social psychology offers another possible explanation regarding the actions of political pundits. Blanton, Pelham, DeHart, and Carvallo (2001) examined the impact of overconfidence as a way to reduce dissonance. The study's researchers premised their work on a belief that people "desire to see the self as a competent or accurate perceiver" (2001, p. 374). While the researchers examined predictive abilities related to consumer products, it is suggested that these findings translate well in trying to understand political pundits. The researchers concluded motivations should be examined as a factor in explaining why cognitive dissonance may exist. In context with the present research, the growth of political partisans as pundits (as opposed to those emerging from the field of journalism), motivation for seeing one particular candidate winning an election could be applicable.

Other political studies have focused more on the efforts of dissonance reduction related to politics. Holbert, Weeks, and Esralew (2013) suggested from their research of people following the 2012 presidential race that Obama supporters would seek out FiveThirtyEight.com during the campaign while Romney supporters sought out programs on Fox News Channel. The researchers' concluded each outlet offered the type of information (vis-à-vis predictions about the election's outcome) that was congruent with their political point of view. For Obama supporters, it was Silver's cold calculations. For Romney supporters, it was the proclamations and gut predictions from conservative

firebrands like Sean Hannity. Holbert and his fellow researchers argued for further research of political pundits and their role in this area.

### **Research Questions**

The literature review indicates both journalistic and political pundits play a role in how people understand and interpret campaigns. It has also noted not all pundits are alike, nor do they utilize the same methods in order to generate their insights or predictions. The result in 2012 was a variety of views about the work of Nate Silver (positive and negative). Consequently, the researchers wanted to know what themes political pundits used in this campaign to support or oppose Silver and his use of sophisticated social science methods to predict the outcome of the election. Because this study is a qualitative content analysis focusing on how political pundits described Nate Silver's predictions stemming from his work on FiveThirtyEight.com during the 2012 U.S. Presidential election, the first research question is:

**RQ1:** What themes did pundits use to attack or defend Silver and his predictions before the 2012 presidential election?

In addition, the review suggests cognitive dissonance may have been at work among some pundits who kept proclaiming Romney would come out on top election night. As Festinger noted in his seminal work, individuals had to either eliminate dissonant beliefs and opinions (in this case, acknowledging Silver's work) or to add new or revise existing consonant beliefs and opinions (explaining that Romney actually did more to lose the election than Obama did to win it). Consequently, it is important to examine the themes that these pundits used to explain the election results in order to

determine if their explanations contained evidence of efforts to resolve cognitive dissonance. Thus, the second research question is:

**RQ2:** What themes did pundits who criticized Silver before the election use afterward to assess the results of the 2012 presidential election?

Further, the review noted factors that could be linked to possible cognitive dissonance associated with the 2012 Presidential election, particularly in regards to bias (Metaxas & Leigh, 2013) and motivation (Blanton et al., 2001). Past research of political punditry has noted the evolution of such work, particularly in the cable television news era, as becoming more like entertainment, with NASCAR-like verbal collisions between liberals and conservatives across the cable dial. Pundits taking biased positions that play to party faithful tend to increase ratings for their cable TV talk shows and enhance their entertainment value, as Silver himself pointed out in his book (2012). Thus, the third research question is:

**RQ3:** Did political bias or motivation play a role in the discussion of Nate Silver's work during the 2012 presidential election?

### **Method**

A qualitative content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) was conducted of online political opinion columns about Silver's predictions and methods that appeared before and after the 2012 presidential election. A total of 71 political columns that mentioned "Nate Silver," "election" and "pundits" and appeared online between Oct. 29 and Nov. 22, 2012, were analyzed. This period begins when pundit Joe Scarborough publicly attacked Silver on national television for his presidential predictions and ends two days after he offered a "(semi) apology" in an online column (Scarborough, 2012).

Thus, it represents the period when the Silver-versus-the-pundits controversy was at its height. Further, it includes the period before the election when the pundits were most critical of Silver's methods and the period after the election when they were addressing why his predictions were nearly flawless and their predictions failed.

Qualitative content analysis blends "the traditional notion of objective content analysis with participant observation to form ethnographic content analysis, or how a researcher interacts with documents so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis" (Altheide, 1996, p. 2). Using Altheide's 12-step method, the researchers developed an initial protocol to systematically examine each document (political column) for frames and themes. Frames are "the focus, a parameter or boundary, for discussing a particular event," and themes are "the recurring typical theses that run through a lot of the reports" (1996, p. 53). Unlike quantitative content analysis, the protocol is refined during the analysis if new patterns emerge. Three coders were randomly assigned the documents, and they met periodically to discuss the protocol and refine it as needed to reflect the frames and themes contained in them.

Based on the protocol, researchers coded each column for when the article appeared (before or after the election), the type of pundit (political or journalistic), overall position regarding Silver (support, oppose, mixed, unclear), and party support (pro-Democrat, pro-Republican or unclear). Then, the arguments in the column that supported Silver's predictions were summarized in a list. They were followed by a listing of summarized arguments opposing Silver's predictions. If the column appeared after the election, the columns of pundits opposed to Silver were coded to determine if they included indications of cognitive dissonance (yes or no). A listing of summarized

arguments showing dissonance followed. Finally, how the dissonance was resolved was examined. Possibilities for resolving dissonance included changing their attitude, opinion or belief; retaining their view but adding new elements to it; retaining their view but trivializing the elements; and retaining their view but denying responsibility for it. After the documents were examined in depth according to the protocol, the results were analyzed based on the frames and themes, including those that emerged.

## **Results**

Research question 1 asked what were the themes that pundits used to attack or defend Silver and his predictions before the 2012 presidential election. The most prominent theme used to defend Silver was his statistical approach carries more weight than pundits' gut feelings. In general, they saw Silver's statistical approach as more valid because it was based on scientific principles whereas the pundits' views were based on a vague black-box approach. "If only Silver's writings and the spirit behind them – that is, using data to analyze politics, instead of lazy impressions – could elbow out the role of pundits in our political discourse, we'd all be better off," wrote Eric Wemple (*Washington Post*, November 2, 2012). "What Silver may have ended is political pundits making predictions unsupported by evidence, and good riddance to garbage," wrote Stephen Marche (*Esquire*, November 2, 2012).

A related theme was Silver can do the math to assess poll results and the pundits cannot. Because of their traditional viewpoints, they only see what they want, even in data. Silver has an excellent track record for predicting elections, but Joe Scarborough likely could not perform basic math involving the three doors if appearing on *Let's Make a Deal*, wrote Paul F. Campos (Salon.com, October 31, 2012). "As a great philosopher

once observed, ‘Math class is tough!’ This insight has been confirmed numerous times in the past few weeks, as various pundits have taken innumerate pot shots at Nate Silver.”

Another prominent theme was that Silver was taking the election storyline away from pundits, which they resented and caused them to attack him. His predictions sharply contrast with theirs, raising questions about their legitimacy and threatening their viability and stature. “Complaints like Scarborough’s are helped along by publications that have an interest in maintaining the view of a race that is essentially a flip of the coin, and in preserving the importance of their own roles as gatekeepers with access to critical insider information,” wrote Simon Maloy (MediaMatters.com, October 29, 2012). “Given that, as a general rule, people with the personality of weather forecasters who lack the technical skill wind up in punditry, the rise of numbers has folks quailing,” wrote Alexandra Petri (*Washington Post*, October 31, 2012).

Because Silver poses a threat to them and they do not understand his method, another prominent theme was pundits are harshly attacking him personally and characterizing his method as deviant. They are attacking the messenger because they do not like his message and cannot comprehend it. “Basically, Nate Silver is an animal who does not fit into the local taxonomy of political media. Therefore they have tried to turn him into a deviant. The sophistication of his method, which you can read about in his excellent book, makes him freakish,” wrote Marche (*Esquire*, November 2, 2012). “Critics of Silver's methodology (or rather critics of the results of his methodology) have gone personal — too personal. It's bizarre: They don't like his mathematical modeling, therefore they call him a namby-pamby,” Marche also wrote.

For Silver's attackers, the most prominent theme was he and his methods are pseudo-scientific. His methods do not follow scientific principles as they know them so they perceive them as fundamentally flawed. "Silver seems to have some weird allegedly statistics-based process where he analyzes data from polls and predicts which candidates will win a state or an election and he assigns a percent chance they will win it. I don't see any validity to it at all and certainly don't view it as any kind of 'scientific' process. It entirely seems like voodoo statistics and it might as well be entirely made up what he comes up with," wrote Dean Chambers (Examiner.com, October 29, 2012).

"Conservatives are outraged at Silver for 'predicting' an Obama victory, and nonpartisan [but fiercely ideological] political press elites are all chuckling at his curious notion that fancy math can be used to determine what is most likely to happen in an election," wrote Alex Pareene (Salon.com, November 2, 2012).

Another prominent theme is insight is more important than statistical analysis. Knowledge gained from covering years of elections and talking to campaign strategists is more important than some statistical model. "But the real coin of the realm of talking or writing about politics should be insight, not saying I just talked to this person who doesn't know anything either and so I must know more than you do," said Josh Marshall (TalkingPointsMemo.com, November 1, 2012). "The nearer this campaign has come to its end, the more devoid of substance it has become. This is not the advance of scientific rigor. It is a sad and sterile emptiness at the heart of a noble enterprise," wrote Michael Gerson (*Washington Post*, November 5, 2012).

A similar theme was using numbers to predict an election is trivial because elections are won by persuasion. Elections are won and lost by persuading voters about

the correctness of your views on the issues, and predicting an election based on statistics belittles the process. “In a democracy, the convictions of the public ultimately depends on persuasion, which resists quantification … The value of punditry is clarifying these large policy issues,” Gerson, (*Washington Post*, November 5, 2012) also wrote. “The main problem with this approach to politics is not that it is pseudo-scientific but that it is trivial. An election is not a mathematical equation; it is a nation making a decision.”

A final theme was Silver’s method is based on polls, and they can be wrong. “Sure, this is the guy who correctly predicted the outcome of 2008 election in 49 of 50 states, but this year’s polls suggest a nailbiter,” wrote Dylan Byers (Politico.com, October 29, 2012). “He’s going to be proven so far off and wrong, if he stands with these numbers, when Mitt Romney is elected president next week,” wrote Chambers (Examiner.com, October 29, 2012).

Research Question 2 asked what themes did pundits critical of Silver predictions use after Obama’s victory. Because only two pundits, including Scarborough, addressed this issue online during this period, they will be examined individually and their similarities and differences will be noted. In a “(semi) apology” on Politico.com (November 20, 2012), Scarborough wrote that Silver’s blog basically served to reassure liberals that Obama would win. “Nate Silver provided cool assurance in the middle of a crazed political hothouse, and he did not by offering readers detailed numerical formats with 27 decimal points kept Democrats sane.”

Further, he wrote Silver’s predictions ran counter to established polls such as Gallup and Rasmussen, which made them suspect. Similarly, he noted that his experience had taught him to doubt Silver’s predictions, especially when Silver came out for Obama

early in the campaign. In addition, Scarborough wrote that this campaign was different because the polls did not fluctuate, making it “the least fluid in a generation.” Moreover, Scarborough pointed out the state polls got it right and Silver relied on them. Consequently, he said Silver deserves credit for basing his model on them. He said he previously had ignored liberals’ call for an apology to Silver because “as is usually go case for ideologues their rage is unfocused and based on ignorance.”

Then, Scarborough surprisingly wrote he would not apologize to Silver “for predicting an outcome that I had been predicting for a year.” Further, he said he did not need to apologize to Silver for “leaning in too hard and lumping him with pollsters whose methodology is as rigorous at the Simpsons’ strip mall physician, Dr. Nick. For such “sins,” Scarborough wrote he is sorry. But he also noted that Silver’s formula is “sure to let his fervent admirers down from time to time” (Politico.com, November 20, 2012). Nevertheless, Scarborough concluded by pointing out Silver is a “grounded guy” and he will be “less dismissive of his good work in the future.”

Unlike Scarborough, Brett Joshpe (Politico.com, November 12, 2012) admitted that he wanted to believe the polls were wrong. Joshpe wrote he wanted to believe Dick Morris knew what he was talking about, even if a Romney landslide was not in the cards, a close victory might be. He wrote he hoped highly paid strategists were worth their money in the end. But he acknowledged that he was “dreaming.”

Overall, Joshpe wrote that the lesson that he learned was “trust science and math, not emotion” (Politico.com, November 12, 2012). He acknowledged that Republicans should concede the war with science “is clearly not going well with the electorate.” Also

unlike Scarborough, he asked Silver to “please accept my apologies. You look like a modern-day Galileo right now and your conservative critics Roman inquisitors.”

If the election had been close, Joshepe wrote he could have attributed it to other events, such as Hurricane Sandy (Politico.com, November 12, 2012). But he conceded voters in other parts of the country were not affected by the hurricane. Moreover, he wrote CNN and CBS did not “dupe Americans into voting the way they did because of their pro-Obama slant.” He wrote MSM was simply giving viewers what they wanted, and there’s a reason Glenn Beck does not appear on prime-time anymore.

No other political columns by pundits who criticized Silver’s methods and addressed the Obama victory were found online during this period. However, Dean Chambers, the creator of Unskewed Polls and one of Silver’s harshest critics, did discuss his views with media soon after the election, including with Brett Logiurato of *Business Insider* (November 7, 2012) and Eric Benson of *New York* magazine (November 9, 2012). Because Chambers is a central figure in this dispute and so few online commentaries of Silver’s critics appeared online, his themes are included. Unlike Scarborough, Chambers initially admitted that he was wrong about the election in a phone interview with Logiurato: “Nate Silver was right, and I was wrong,” Chambers, who reweighted the poll results to match his beliefs, acknowledged that voters were “much more in the Democratic direction than most people predicted” and admitted his assumptions “were wrong.” Like Joshepe, he said conservative-leaning pollsters like Rasmussen and Morris have a lot of explaining to do. “He has lost a lot of credibility, as far as I am concerned,” Chambers said of Rasmussen. “He did a lot of surveys, A lot of those surveys were wrong.”

Benson's story two days later was mainly in question and answer format, although he pointed out Chambers had called Silver "thin and effeminate" and a "poster child for the New Castrati" (*New York*, November 9, 2012). Similar to Scarborough, Chambers said he thought the polls were oversampling Democrats and were thus biased toward a Democratic victory. As a result, he said he and others with similar beliefs "turned out to be wrong in that belief or assumption." Further, Chambers said Republicans were following the election more closely and were more enthusiastic about Romney than Democrats were for Obama, which he thought would translate into a Republican victory. But he said the surge of enthusiasm that he thought would put Romney over the top did not happen. In addition, he said the government was likely purposely releasing inaccurate economic indicators, such as a lower unemployment rate, that would bolster Obama's campaign.

About two weeks later, Chambers expanded such beliefs when he launched a new website, BarackOFraudo.com, in which he alleged voter fraud as a likely reason for Obama's victory (Kroll, November 21, 2012). Chambers alleged the fraud occurred in the swing states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Florida. "I'm getting credible information of evidence in those states that there are enough numbers that are questionable and could have swung the election." He said some precincts in Philadelphia reported no votes and districts in other states voted 99 percent Democratic, both of which he said were unfeasible. In addition, he said some projections on election night in Virginia favored Obama when the results actually pointed to a Romney victory.

Research Question 3 asked whether political bias or motivation played a role in the discussion of Nate Silver's work during the 2012 presidential election. The main

theme for Silver's supporters appeared to be his opponents were concerned most about Silver's predictions because they were more precise and thus threatened them and their livelihood, which led most directly to their biased criticism of him and his methods. It appeared to be a political bias primarily in the sense that pundits criticizing Silver were mainly Republican supporters because his predictions favored Democrats. As Robert Schlesinger (*U.S. News & World Report*, October, 31, 2012) noted, the "stathead (or quants) versus gut-feeling traditionalist split" broke down along party lines at this time.

Overall, they suggested pundits favoring Democrats would have taken the same position as Republicans in criticizing Silver if his predictions had favored Romney. "First, there are the conservatives who don't like Silver's model because, well, they don't like it. Obama's continued strong showing is *prima facie* evidence of bias. Or, to put it slightly differently, the model must be skewed," wrote Ezra Klein (*Washington Post*, October 30, 2012). "There's always the potential for a rare 'black swan' polling failure, but what this really comes down to is pundits whose livelihoods depend on people caring about their subjective feelings about elections saying they think Silver's overrated because Silver isn't giving them the answer that they want to hear," wrote Bruce Maiman (Examiner.com, November 7, 2012). "One issue that people seem to refuse to believe is that if Nate Silver's famous model – a model that mostly just averages and weighs publicly available polls – forecast a likely Romney win, Silver would be writing, every day, about why Romney looked likely to win. He is not working backward, as pundits who write "why [...] will win" stories do," wrote Pareene (Salon.com, November 2, 2012).

Economic and entertainment motives also played a role as portraying the race as close increased the value of pundits insights' and boosted TV ratings and online hits. Thus, keeping the race alive and close was to their benefit, regardless of what Silver was saying. "Pundits clung stubbornly to the easy and convenient narrative that the race for the White House was on a knife edge: That the candidates were neck-and-neck. It helped that it was clearly in their interests to do so: Democrats played up the closeness of the race to get supporters to turn out, Republicans did the same, and exaggerated excitements boosted ratings for everybody," wrote Martin Robbins (*The Guardian*, November 13, 2012). "If you had to distill the work of a political pundit down to a single question, you'd have to pick the perennial 'who will win the election?' During election years, that's the question at the base of most careers in punditry, almost all cable news appearances, and most A1 news articles. Traditionally, we've answered that question by drawing on some combination of experience, intuition, reporting and polls. Now Silver — and Silver's imitators and political scientists — are taking that question away from us. It would be shocking if the profession didn't try and defend itself," wrote Klein (*Washington Post*, October 30, 2012).

## **Discussion**

This study, through the use of qualitative content analysis, has considered the praise and criticism of Nate Silver's data journalism work during the 2012 U.S. Presidential election. The researchers suggested three research questions. The first question asked about the themes pundits used to either attack or defend Silver's statistical projections (most predicting an Obama victory in the Presidential race). The most prominent theme emerging from articles examined from the weeks before the 2012

election argued Silver's statistical approach carried more weight than the pundits' gut feelings. A second theme in the same articles noted Silver's statistical acumen, something these political pundits did not possess.

A third theme in articles supporting Silver's work from before the elections was perhaps the most interesting because it suggests we may be at the start of a paradigm shift in how journalists cover the horse race aspect of campaigns. The precision with which Silver and other data journalists applied to understanding polling data questioned the credibility of those who have made a living off of pontificating about daily political developments on various media platforms. As Robbins of *The Guardian* pointed out, "Whether evidence-based punditry can have a lasting impact depends whether readers and viewers will ultimately choose to reject the misinformation, or the reality" (November 13, 2012). Coverage of the 2016 presidential election already points to journalists making a greater commitment to sophisticated data analysis. For example, to replace Silver's 538.com site (after he joined Disney/ABC), the *New York Times* created an online section called *The Upshot* (Bercovici, 2013). In addition to its statistical analysis of presidential and congressional elections, data journalism methods have been applied to everything from the gun culture to the educational divide in the U.S. ("The Upshot," n.d.). Other sites such as the *Princeton Election Consortium* and *The Huffington Post* have also taken to following Silver's methods for a comprehensive examination of poll numbers rather than the mainstream media's snapshot analysis of polls as each one comes out (Kilgore, 2016).

When the researchers studied articles criticizing Silver's work, the first theme that emerged was Silver was attacked personally (e.g., he tilted numbers to fit his own

political narrative) and for his methods (e.g., too much trust in polling data). When Chambers said "Silver seems to have some weird allegedly statistics-based process..." (Examiner.com, October 29, 2012), he was not only casting doubt on Silver's professional ability, but that the individual is also flawed. Another theme revealed in the analysis was the pundits' contention that numbers in and of themselves did not determine elections—rather, it was the candidate's ability of persuasion among voters. In other words, the rhetorical arguments made in the candidate's words and policies (and the interpretations of those words and policies by pundits) were far more important in determining an election's outlook than the data collected by pollsters. As Gerson stated, "An election is not a mathematical equation; it is a nation making a decision" (*Washington Post*, November 5, 2012).

The second research question examines the themes pundits critical of Silver used to explain the election results. They will now be examined further for evidence of cognitive dissonance. Perhaps the strongest evidence of Scarborough's cognitive dissonance is his contention that he had agreed with Silver all along that Romney would lose and held that opinion for more than a year (Politico.com, November 2012). Thus, he appeared to partly resolve his dissonance by denying a difference of opinion about the election's ultimate outcome even existed, which was likely news to Silver. But he also said he doubted Silver's predictions because they ran counter to those of established polls such as Gallup and his predictions did not change substantially during the campaign, which turned out to mirror the views of the electorate and made the campaign "the least fluid in a generation." Thus, Scarborough seemed to explain away his criticism of Silver because the election turned out to be atypical in his view. Further, Scarborough said

Silver “deserves credit” for basing his model on state polls, which turned out to be right this year, another apparent attempt to shift blame to perceived unusual circumstances of the election but still partly acknowledging Silver’s acumen in polling. Moreover, he praised Silver as a “grounded guy” and said he would be “less dismissing of him in the future,” another example of acknowledging that Silver was right. It also showed that even Scarborough would likely pay closer attention to the predictions of data journalism in the next election. Nevertheless, he pointed out that Silver’s method was bound to let him down in the future, a criticism of his method was potentially flawed – and he was right -- despite his muted praise of him.

Joshpe (Politico.com, November 12, 2012) resolved his cognitive dissonance by openly conceding he was wrong soon after the election and apologizing to Silver. He also noted the lesson he learned was to “trust science and math, not emotion,” also conceding the war with science “is clearly not going well with the electorate.” Like Scarborough, he seems to be saying he will pay closer attention to data journalists next time. Moreover, Joshpe said he wanted to believe the other pundits and especially the political consultants who predicted a Romney victory, but acknowledged that he was dreaming. Further, he also acknowledged that other events such as Hurricane Sandy did not affect the election and the media was not biased. Thus, he seems to have resolved his cognitive dissonance by admitting he was wrong and vowing to rely on other sources in the future.

Like Joshpe, Chambers of Unskewed Polls initially appeared to resolve his cognitive dissonance by admitting to journalists that Silver was right and apologizing to him (*Business Insider*, November 7, 2012; *New York*, November 9, 2012. But he apparently had second thoughts and reversed course about two weeks later when he

launched a new website, BarackOFraudo.com, and alleged voter fraud as a likely reason for Obama's victory (Kroll, November 21, 2012). Thus, he seemed to reduce his continuing cognitive dissonance by citing reasons beyond his control. At first, he acknowledged voters were "much more in the Democratic direction than most people predicted" and like Joshepe asserted conservative-leaning pollsters had a lot of explaining to do. Further, he admitted the late surge for Romney that he expected did not materialize. However, in an apparent signal of things to come he accused the Obama administration of purposely releasing overly optimistic economic indicators to bolster his chances at the polls. Then, he abruptly wrote on his new website that he had received credible information to allege voter fraud in the swing states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Florida, enough to affect the outcome of the election (Kroll, November 21, 2012). Thus, Chambers appeared to finally resolve his cognitive dissonance by blaming it on fraud, not his faulty predictions.

But the overwhelming majority of pundits who criticized Silver before the election remained silent during this period. They appeared to resolve their cognitive dissonance by ignoring it, much like the participants in the TV talk show that Silver (2012) pointed out never mentioned their false predictions the next week but simply carried on as if nothing had happened. Thus, most Silver critics appeared to resolve their cognitive dissonance by simply evading responsibility for their incorrect prognostications.

The third research question asked whether political bias or motivation had a role in the commentary surrounding Silver's work leading up to the 2012 Presidential election. The major theme that emerged was the appearance of a political bias in the sense that all

of the pundits criticizing Silver were Republicans. Schlesinger (*U.S. News & World Report*, October, 31, 2012) noted the breakdown of pundits for and against Silver's methods was along party lines (Democrats noting Republican pundits denouncing Silver's methods). This finding supports the research of Dolan and Holbrook (2001) that points to the impact of bias. It is interesting to note that in the 2014 midterm congressional election, the roles seemed reversed. As Silver's data journalism forecasted major gains for Republicans in the off-year election as early as March 2014, there were Democrats calling out Silver's projections, noting much of the polling had been done by Republican firms and that not enough polling had been done (Berg, 2014). By November, Silver's forecasts again panned out, with GOP retaking the U.S. Senate and picking up more seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (Silver was off on predictions of more gubernatorial races in 2014 than he had in 2008 and 2012) (Brinker, 2014). While the level of vitriol Democrats directed at Silver was far less in 2014 than what Silver faced from Republicans in 2012, it still points the dissonance experienced by passionate supporters of a party when they are informed the electoral forecast is not good. The 2016 presidential race has given hope

Whether those in the political world will ever be able to overcome their passions to recognize the precision of the work of Silver and others in the field of data journalism appears unlikely for now. The findings in this study point to the punditry world (and the journalistic organizations that allow them to express their viewpoint) as experiencing almost complete denial about the existence of data journalism and the growing record of accurate election forecasts. Rather than worry about explaining or even acknowledging their pre-election forecasts in 2012, these pundits went back to making predictions, much

like the daily forecaster who said it would be sunny the day before and was surprised as anyone by the three inches of rain that fell. The desire of some of these politically based pundits to retain their status within their parties (e.g., Nimmo and Combs' (1993) priestly pundit) may explain some of this. But this business-as-usual approach also supports Nimmo and Combs' observation that political commentary has devolved to an entertainment-based venture rather than informing the audience. Political punditry has become a necessary tool in the 24-hour news cycle.

What is the responsibility of these news organizations when presented with evidence generated through data journalism techniques such as Silver's that raise serious questions about pundits' predictions? The ethical norms of journalism tell us the responsibility of those communicating information is to value accuracy and fairness above all. It would seem common sense for news organizations to shift toward the Silver method in covering the horse race narrative of Presidential elections. The continued reliance on political pundits belting opinions "from their gut," however, suggests the focus remains on the hybrid blend of news and entertainment used to squeeze every last quarter-hour of viewership or click-through.

Even more concerning is the continuing revolving door of using past office-holders (e.g., former Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell on MSNBC and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee on Fox News Channel) or political operatives who will speak to the party line to keep influence in their own circles of power. While the researchers acknowledge the near impossibility of drastically changing the role of punditry in election coverage, it is apparent from this study that journalistic organizations

need to rethink past traditions and establish new ones where the “foxes” are given as much credence as the “hedgehogs.”

The researchers offer two proposals in this area. First, news organizations should attempt balancing their use of punditry by developing their own data journalism units that can bring a scientific outlook to the elections ahead. Second, the type of pundits used (journalism-based versus those with a political background) should change. If more journalism-based pundits were utilized for campaign analyses, it would seem more likely that such pundits would employ data-driven claims than their partisan-based counterparts.

It should also be noted that like pundits, Nate Silver can also be wrong—if he is not following his prescribed methods outlined in his book (2012). Even Silver admits to falling into the punditry trap in downplaying Donald Trump’s success in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries (Silver, 2016). Silver’s predictions that Trump would fade in the race were made without the type of modeling methods utilized by the data journalist in previous elections. Silver was proven wrong as the business mogul became the last candidate standing in the Republican field. Unlike most pundits, however, Silver admitted his mistakes in excruciating detail in a lengthy article with 18 footnotes on his website. He blamed himself for acting like a pundit and disregarding the role of uncertainty in making predictions, along with the need for rigor and humility when trying to make sense of it. Silver admitted “cases like these are why you should be wary about claims that journalists (data-driven or otherwise) ought to have known better. Very often it’s hindsight bias, sometimes mixed with cherry-picking and – since a lot of people got Trump wrong – occasionally a pinch of hypocrisy” (Silver 2016, para. 48).

Overall, this study helps provide a better understanding of the role of political pundits in political journalism at a time when Big Data is playing a greater role in explaining what is happening in campaigns. Silver's highly successful use of data journalism was staunchly defended by his supporters and even acknowledged by some of his critics. As Joshpe put it: "trust science and math, not emotion" (Politico.com, November 12, 2012). Thus, the high profile use of data journalism in this election may signal a large role for it and change the way future campaigns are reported in the media.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The researchers acknowledge that this study covering only one race in one election cycle (2012 Presidential campaign) can only make limited claims and cannot be generalized. Future presidential races (and off-year elections) should be followed to note whether (a) journalists and political commentators are giving greater credence to data journalism's work on predicting elections and (b) whether the link between those criticizing the work of data journalists and the political background of those critics continues to be a central factor.

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