

turning knowledge into practice

Another Day, Another Poll: Trends in Media Coverage of Polls and Surveys in the Election Realm and the Non-Election Realm

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Overview

- Background
- Research questions
- Methodology
- Findings
- Discussion

Background

- Survey participation has declined over time (Singer, 2006)
 - Response rates trending downward since early 1990s
 - Caller-identification technology became widespread in early 2000s
 - Refusals increasing
- We would like to examine some possible reasons for the decline.

Background

- Why participate? Benefits outweigh costs.
- Costs are high and may be increasing.
- Our research focuses on the benefits, specifically:
 - the benefits that accrue to society, and
 - the benefits that accrue to the individual from the positive feeling that he helped society benefit.
- Do people understand the benefits that accrue to society?
- People hear about surveys in the media.
- Could the way the media discusses surveys influence the way people understand the benefits of surveys?

Research questions

1. Has there been an increase or decrease in the media coverage of surveys/polls (s/p) over time?
 - Many s/p reported in the media concern pre-election polling or public opinion on elected officials. (“Election realm”)
2. Has there been a change over time in the proportion of election realm s/p relative to non-election s/p?
3. Has there been a change over time in the proportion of s/p which explain the public good of the s/p?

Research questions

- Research questions were exploratory.
- We did not know what the findings would reveal.
- We had different theories (sometimes conflicting theories) about how media coverage would affect participation. Some theories:
 - Media coverage as educational. This increases the public's understanding of the role s/p play which leads to higher participation rates.
 - Media coverage as devaluing. (“Oh, it’s just another one of those surveys”). This leads to lower participation rates.
 - Media coverage as politicizing. Surveys are so frequently about elections and politicians, it is hard to comprehend another purpose that they may have. This leads to lower participation rates.

Methodology

- Searched for stories where article text contained the word “survey” or “poll”
- In three media outlets:
 - New York Times
 - Chicago Sun-Times
 - Television Evening News (NBC, CBS)
- September-October 2007 and September-October 1991

Methodology, cont.

- Used decision rules to determine if the story is eligible.
- Coded s/p in terms of Public Good.
 - Positive: Story shows how s/p designed to improve the public good
 - Negative: Story displays the s/p or the survey profession in a negative light.
 - Neutral: Neither

“How easy is it to see the public good of the s/p.”
- Coded s/p in terms of election realm:
 - Yes: s/p relates directly to campaign, campaign issue, job performance of political figure(s).
 - No: otherwise

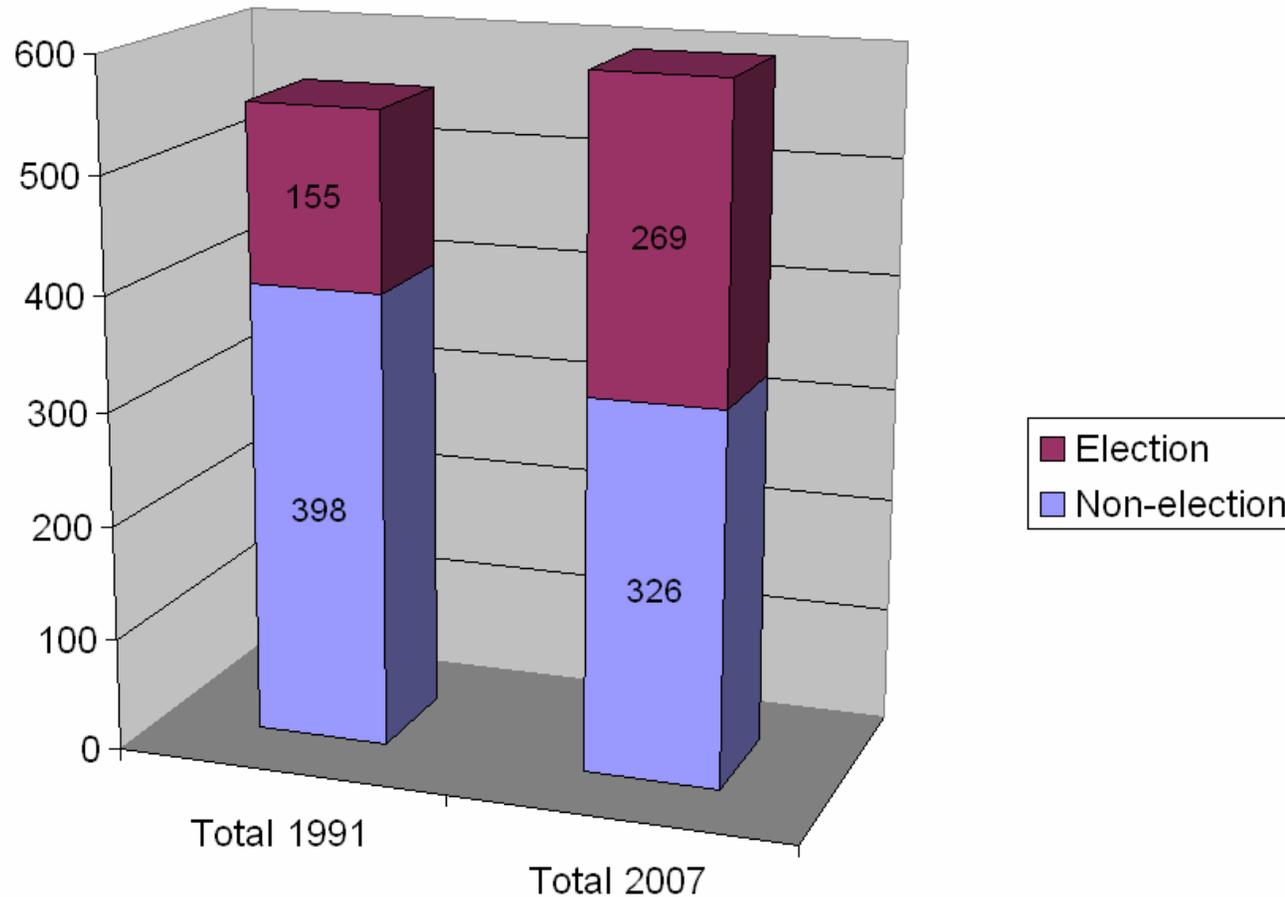
Top stories in 1991 and 2007

- 1991
 - Clarence Thomas nomination
 - U.S.S.R. and the Philippines
 - Democratic and Republican primary campaigns
- 2007
 - Democratic and Republican primary campaigns
 - Iraq

Findings

- (Research question 1) Has there been an increase or decrease in the media coverage of surveys/polls (s/p) over time?
graphs

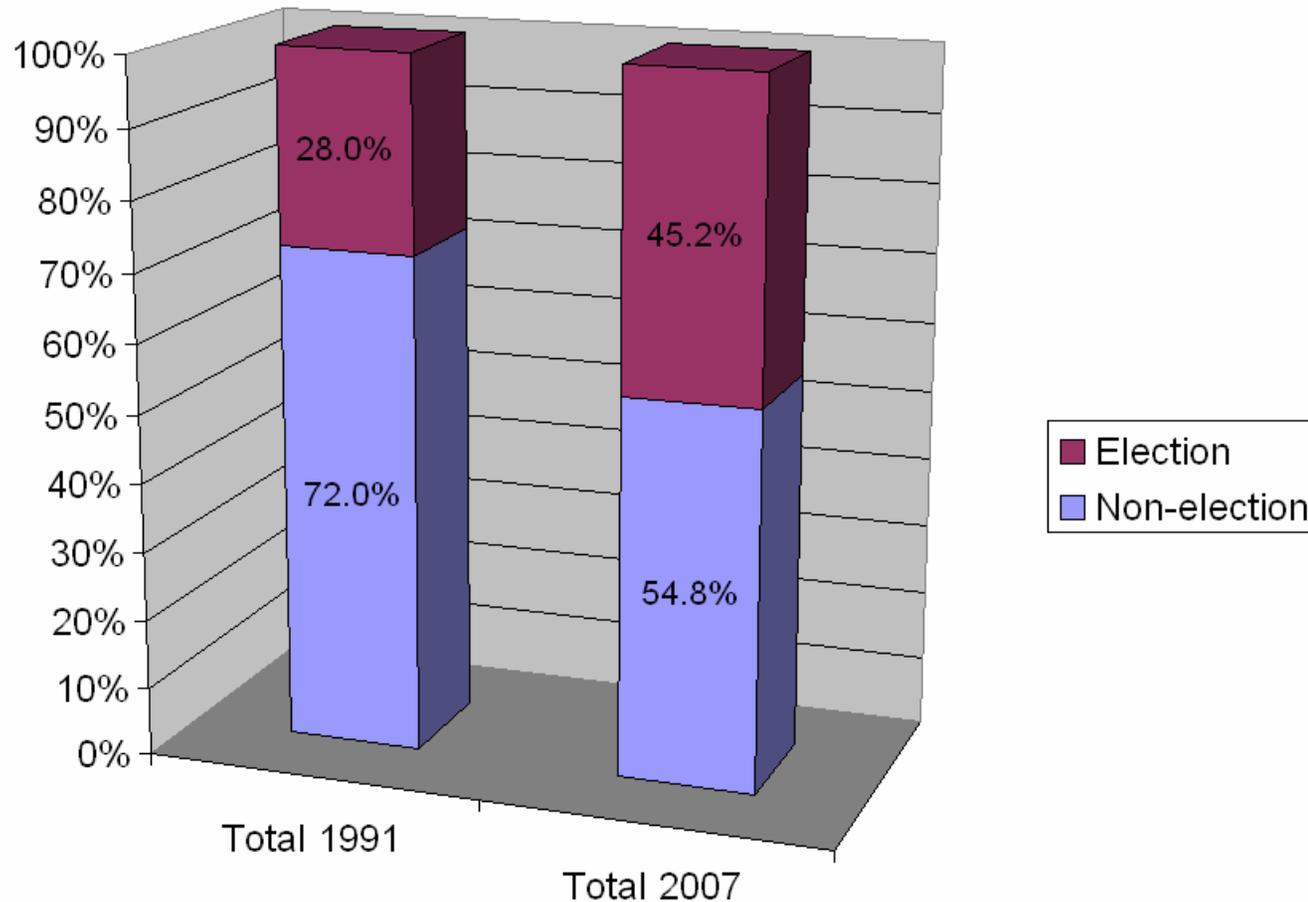
Findings: Number of election/ non-election stories (all outlets)



Findings

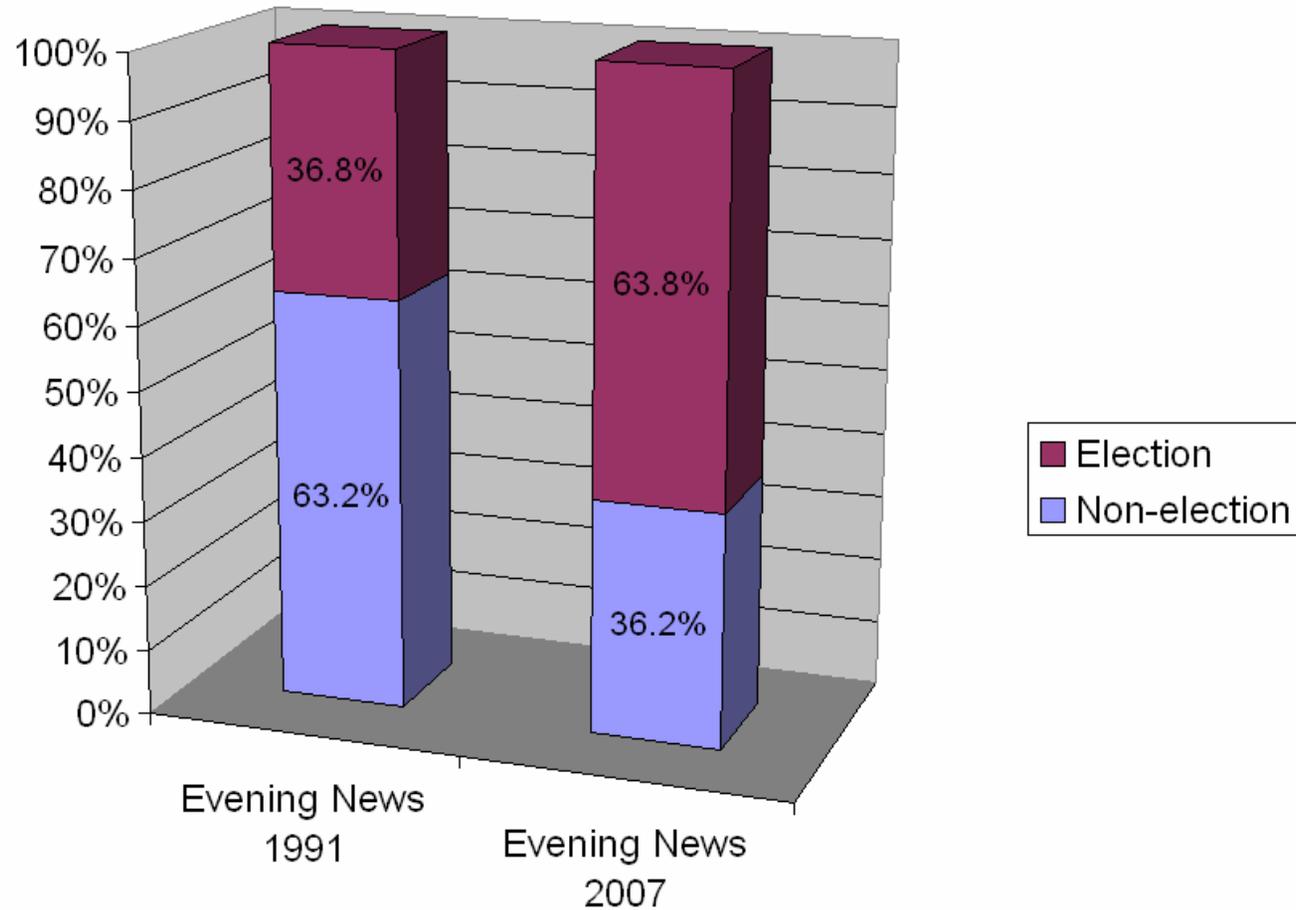
- (Research question 2) Has there been a change over time in the proportion of election realm s/p relative to non-election s/p? graphs

Findings: Election vs. non-election coverage (all outlets)

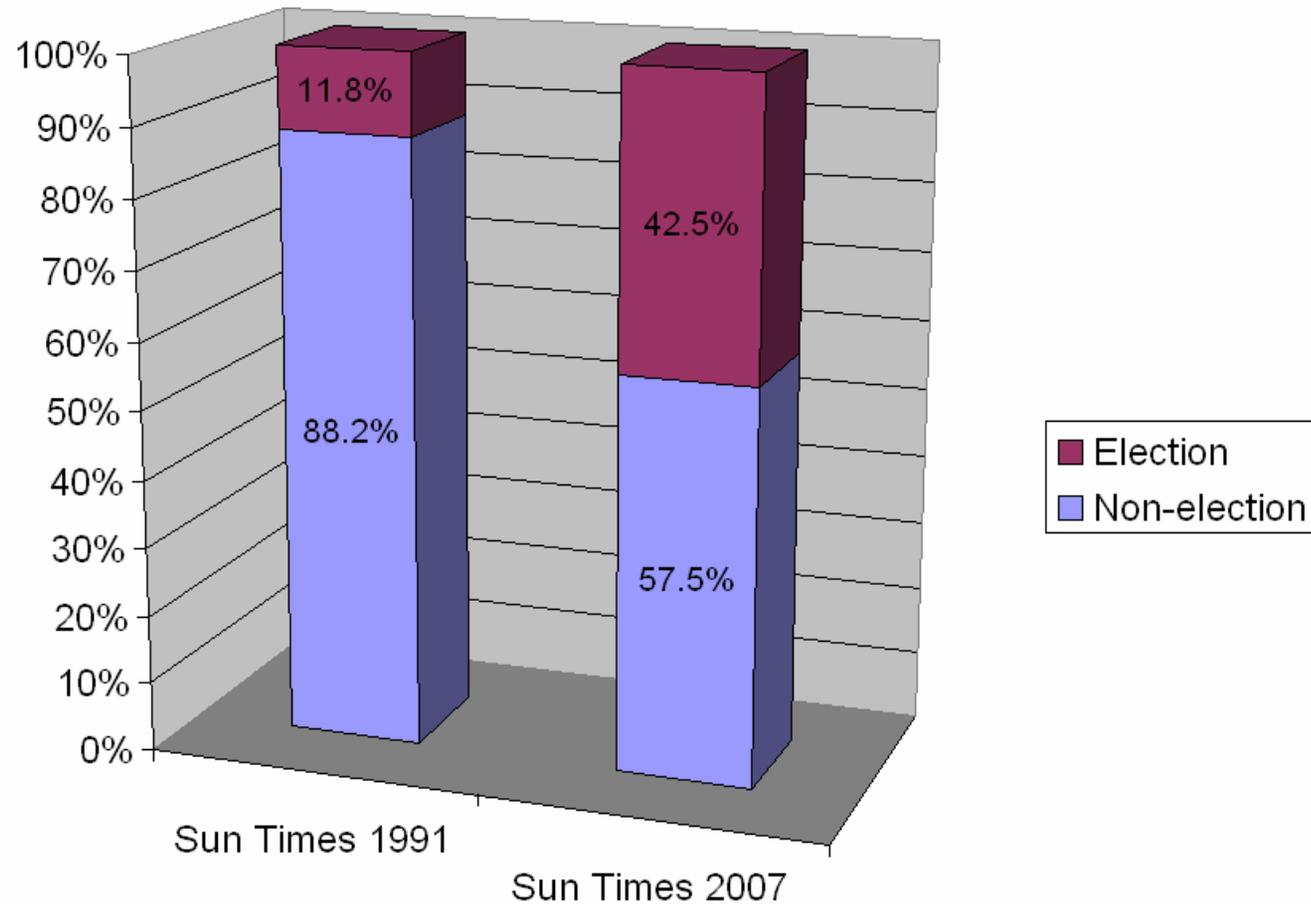


- Difference statistically significant at 99% CI

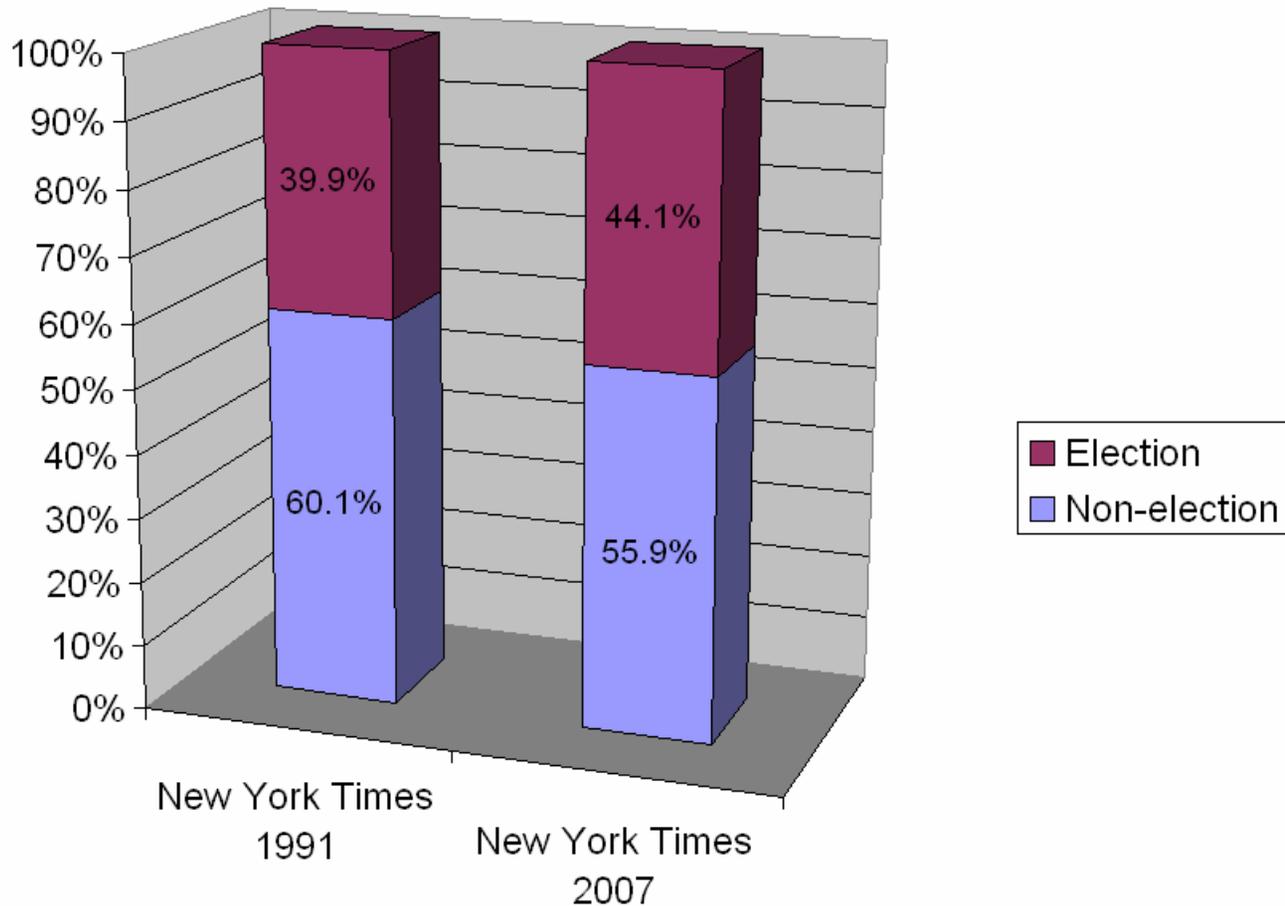
Findings: Election vs. non-election coverage (Evening News)



Findings: Election vs. non-election coverage (Chicago Sun Times)



Findings: Election vs. non-election coverage (New York Times)



Findings

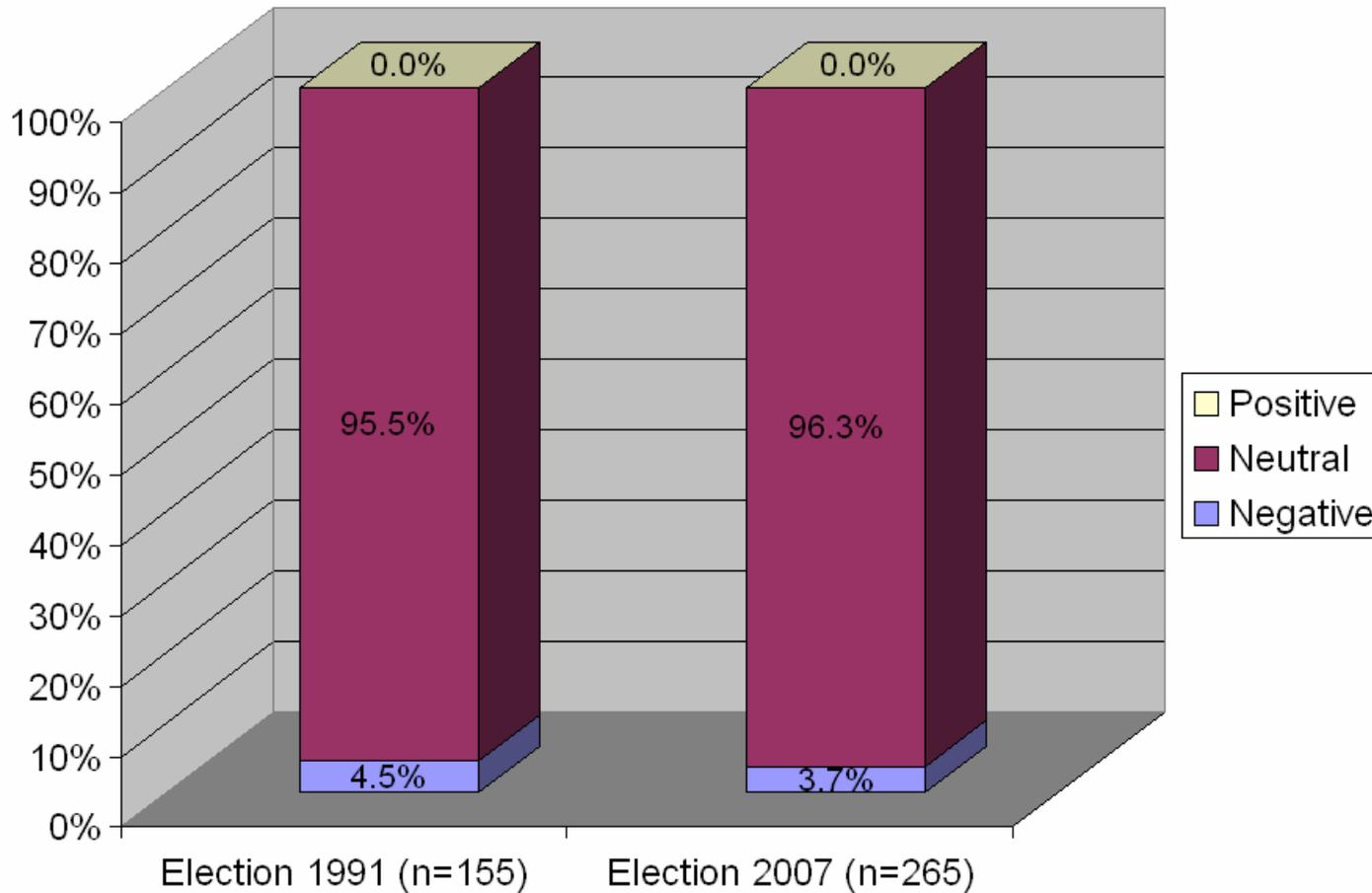
- (Research question 3) Has there been a change over time in the proportion of s/p which explain the public good of the s/p? graphs

Findings: Public good indications – all stories (all outlets)



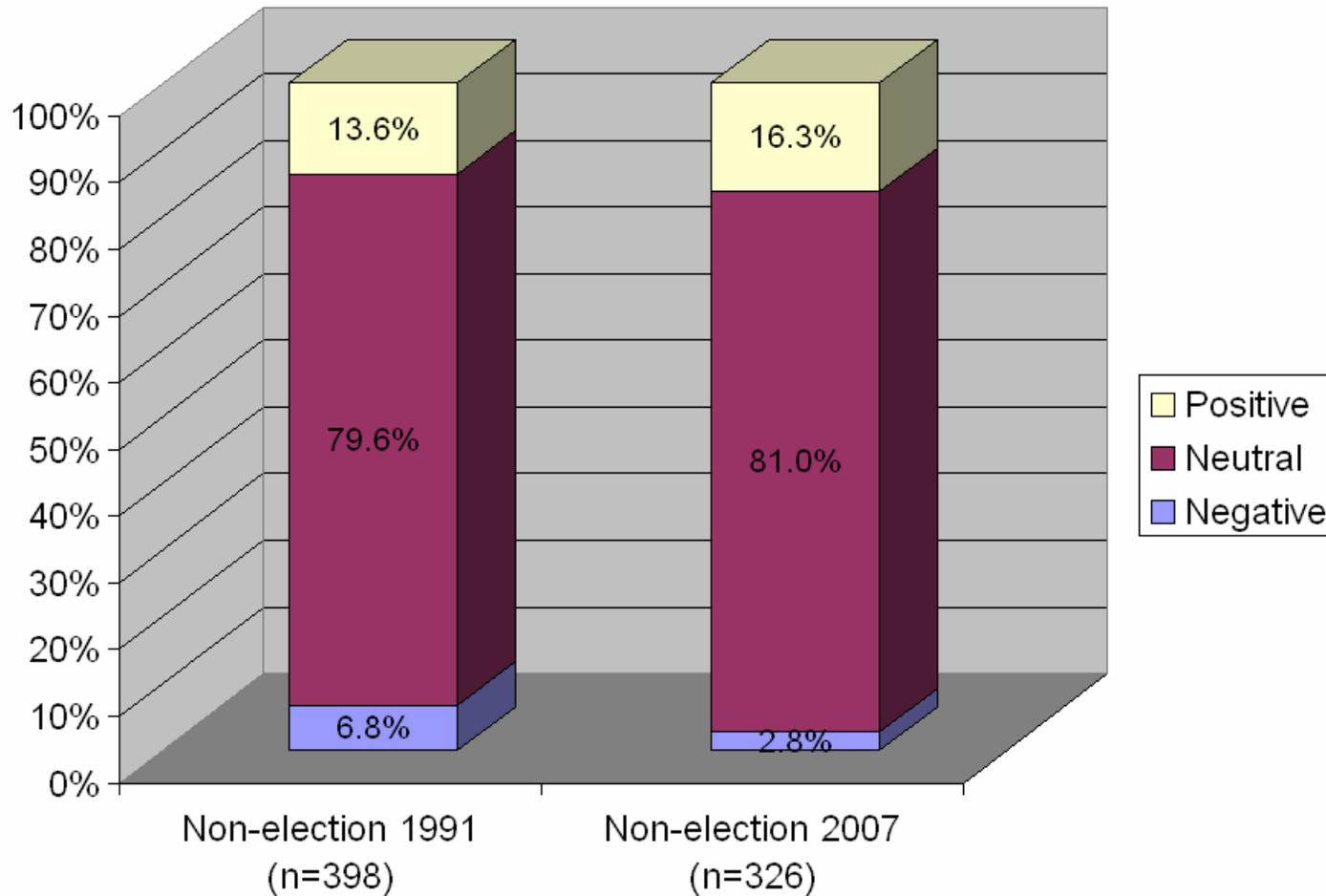
- Positive difference not statistically significant; negative difference statistically significant at 95% CI

Findings: Public good indications - election (all outlets)



- Differences not statistically significant

Findings: Public good indications – non-election (all outlets)



- Positive difference not statistically significant; negative difference statistically significant at 95% CI

Discussion

- There has not been a great rise in reporting of surveys (in this sample).
- There has been an increase in the proportion of stories in the election realm.
- The election realm never portrays the positive benefits of surveys.
- Outside the election realm, there has been an increase in the proportion of stories portraying the positive benefits.
- The increase in the election realm may drown out the positive messages about surveys.

Future research

- Expand the selection of publications we sample, to make it more representative.
- Examine additional years between 1991 and 2007 in order to better detect trends and to control for temporal circumstances in particular years.
- Examine additional months where campaign election coverage is lower. This might reveal different trends in the percent of s/p concerning election coverage.
- Discuss with media professionals.

References

- Singer, E. (2006). Nonresponse Bias in Household Surveys: Introduction. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70(5):637-645.

Thank you

Thank you.

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