

The Scoop on the Spill:

The Media, Public Opinion & the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

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QAC Summer Apprenticeship 2011

The People-Press Interaction

It is inherently difficult to study the effects of media on public opinion because “people who are exposed to the mass media already possess a fund of knowledge and attitudes which they bring to bear on new information” (Graber). However, the theory of “agenda-setting” sees the press as influential because of its ability to communicate “not only [information] about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue “ (McCombs).

Media Coverage of Environmental Issues

The “prime source of information” on science for the masses is the news media, creating a responsibility for journalists to supply accurate coverage (Nelkin). However, coverage of climate change often focuses on conflict and controversy, emphasizing the debate between skeptics and scientists in an attempt to provide “balanced reporting.” This creates a “bias” towards conflict when there is really consensus in the scientific community (Boykoff). Oil spills are uniquely symbolic and visual environmental events; oil is both the largest source of energy in the U.S. and the country’s biggest greenhouse gas emitter (U.S. EIA). These events could be harnessed by the media to question and debate this interaction between oil dependency and the environment. Yet media coverage of oil spills tends to follow a cyclical pattern similar to all disaster reporting, “including the disruption of normalcy, investigation of mystery, and finally the restoration of normalcy” (Anderson; Browning & Shetler). The focus remains “on ‘events’ rather than issues,” placing blame on “particular companies rather than see this in terms of broader structural problems” (Hannigan).

Project Objectives

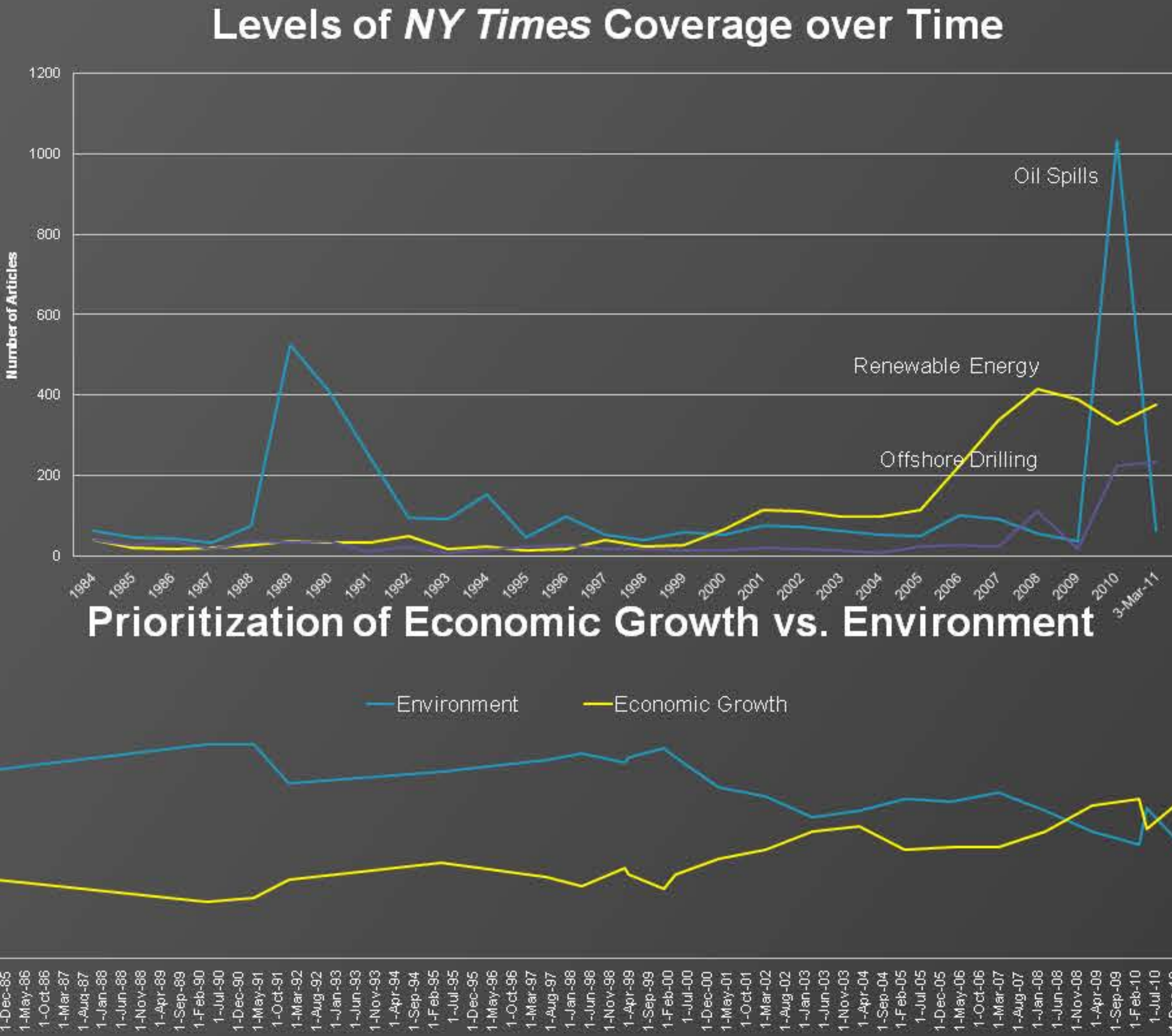
The aim of this project is to investigate whether media coverage of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill affected both the extent to which the American public attaches importance to environmental and energy issues and whether the coverage influenced opinions on those structural problems—namely, environmental protection and the need for alternative fuels sources to oil. The 2010 spill was unique in its long duration and in that it was both the largest accidental marine oil spill in U.S. history and, according to President Obama, the “worst environmental disaster America has ever faced” (Robertson, Obama). Was the disgust and devastation caused by this historic spill enough to produce real changes in public opinion towards the environment?

Part 1

Did increased salience of the spill in newspapers lead the public to display greater, lasting concern for the environment? Was the agenda-setting capability of the media able to increase the importance of environmental issues in the minds of the public?

Part 2

The second part of the study will analyze the content of news coverage of the oil spill in conjunction with cross-sectional public opinion data that examines specific views regarding prioritization of exploratory domestic energy production versus prioritization of conservation and investment in alternative energy. Does an episodic focus in news coverage lead to a lower concern for the structural environmental issues than more thematically-focused coverage? As the preliminary graphs above illustrate, the trend in public opinion follows a decline in preference of the environment over the economy, one that only reverses during the period of extensive coverage—the 2010 spill—yet recent data suggests that this reversal was short lived.



Methods

Part 1

A pooled cross-sectional analysis was conducted using four independent random samples of the American public collected by the CNN/Opinion Research Corporation at four different times during and after the Gulf Coast oil spill. These nationally representative, time-consistent questionnaires were administered May 21-23rd, July 16-21st, Sept 21-23rd and Oct 27-30, 2010. They surveyed a total of 4,507 U.S. adults, asking, among others, the following question:

Which of the following is the most important issue facing the country today? 1.) Wars in Iraq/Afghanistan, 2.) Education, 3.) Health care, 4.) Terrorism, 5.) The economy, 6.) The federal budget deficit, 7.) Energy and environmental policy, 8.) Illegal immigration

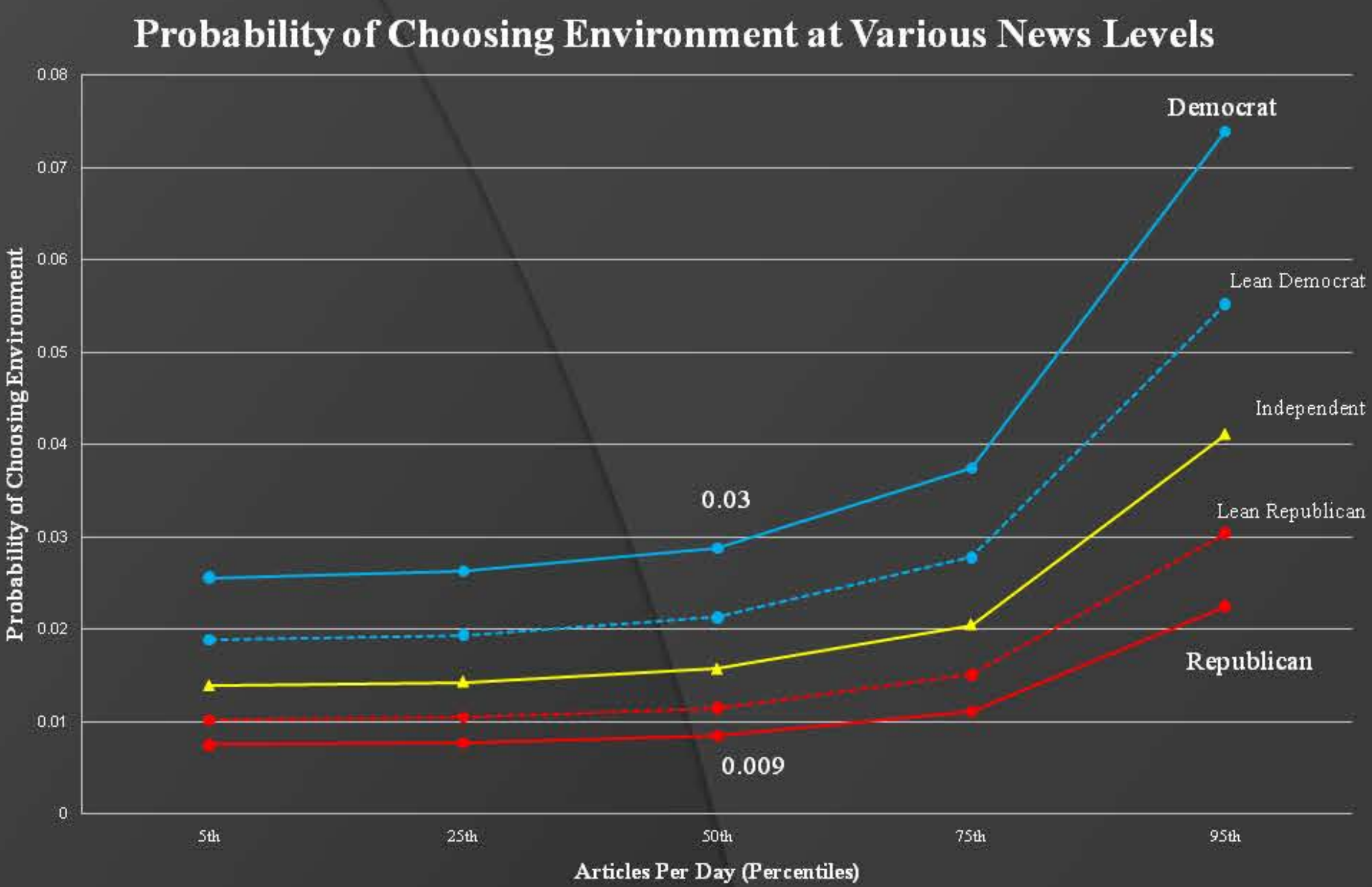
The answers—and probability of answering “Energy and environmental policy”—were analyzed by matching respondents to the level of coverage of the oil spill in their state’s largest daily newspaper, as accessed through the LexisNexis and Factiva databases. Controls were taken for political leaning, income level, education, sex, age, race, and proximity to the Gulf.

Results

| EQUATION | VARIABLES | Energy/Envi | Robust S.E. |
|-------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Energy/Envi | Articles per day | 0.173*** | (0.0565) |
| | PID5 (Repub) | -0.311*** | (0.107) |
| | Age | -0.0297*** | (0.0104) |
| | Female | -0.400 | (0.276) |
| | Education | 0.0165 | (0.100) |
| | Nonwhite | -0.530 | (0.359) |
| | Income | 0.0760 | (0.0828) |
| | Gulf Coast | -0.315 | (0.467) |
| | July | -0.882** | (0.358) |
| | Sept | -1.923*** | (0.418) |
| | Oct | -0.462 | (0.379) |
| | Constant | -0.596 | (0.803) |
| | Observations | 3,196 | |

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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Discussion

The results provide support for the theory of media agenda setting having an influential impact on public opinion. The amount of news coverage of the oil spill available to citizens in their state is positively associated with an increased likelihood of ascribing importance to energy and environmental issues. This impact remains significant even when controlling for time, party, sex, income, education, racial and age factors. The only other variables that display a statistically significant impact on the likelihood of choosing environment as the most important issue are party (increasing in the PID five-point scale leans toward Republican party) and age, both of which have negative associations with the variable. Democrats appear to be more greatly impacted by the level of coverage than Republicans and—surprisingly, living in a Gulf State has no significant relationship with the variable.

Future Study

The next stage in the study will entail a quantitative content analysis of the state papers’ articles on the oil spill. Each story will be coded as either thematic or episodic, depending on whether it focuses on the specific details of the spill or is able to draw connections to larger environmental problems like climate change and alternative fuels. Analysis will investigate whether readers of newspapers with higher proportions of thematic stories are more likely to be concerned with energy/environmental policy, to oppose increased drilling in the immediate aftermath of the spill and a year later and/or to be more concerned with climate change.

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