Media behavior during electoral campaigns is often considered a crucial determinant of election results. In this paper we attempt to describe the attitude of the major Italian media toward candidates and political parties during the 2008 general elections campaign.

A long tradition of contributions have underlined the relevance of media bias, often focusing in media coverage, political orientation, and voting behavior. In particular following the "agenda setting" theory a part of the literature has shown how media are able to effect their customers’ perception of the relative issues importance [6]. A relatively smaller economic literature has attempted to explain how media providers behave in a slightly different perspective. Some authors model media biased reports as an effect of the market for information in case of not ex ante political editorial orientation [5], others assuming ex ante biased journalists' view [1]. As proposed by Slater both view can be conjugated in a mutually reinforcing spiral dynamic [9]. Moreover, these theories disagree about causality but are all consistent with a correlation between media content and election results.

In some recent case studies an interesting correlation between web content and socio-economic activities has emerged. Choi and Varian proposed to use the volume of Google queries to predict economic activity [3], Ferrettu and Pattarin show the role of newspaper coverage to explain stock prices [4], similarly in a case study we have shown a strong correlation between web coverage and electoral results during the Italian PD primary election in 2007 [2].

We propose a very simple working hypothesis to explain such powerful correlation. We assume that the whole voting population consumes news and that on line news can be considered a good proxy of paper version. We then build a model to explain media content as a function of readers’ political view. In this model candidates prominence in each medium is a function of the editor’s biased view and of the political attitude of the medium customers. Under a number of conditions, weighted online visibility can be considered an unbiased predictor of electoral results, and therefore such a model is able to explain a strong correlation between online visibility and electoral results.

To make our analysis more robust we perform a second exercise in which we adopt the classical “issue ownership” assumption: a media willing to support a political actor will give more relevance to issues favorable to this actor. Generally candidates are seen as more or less able in handling issues, right wing parties, for example, have a reputation in dealing with terrorism issues, while social democratic parties are traditionally considered more able in solving social problems. Candidates know strengths and weaknesses voters associate with their party and build their campaign strategy considering it. Issues ownership even though based on party’s reputation, is not time invariant, in particular situations an issue traditionally owned by a party can be gained by the oppositor, especially when past policies implemented by an incumbent government are seen as ineffective by voters. The usual way to identify issues ownership is to consider voters opinion, consistently with the Petrocik definition: an issue as owned by a given party if a majority of people believes that this party is more likely to solve problems related to that issue [7] [8].

We identify owned issues in the last general electoral campaign looking at opinion polls: we have found no issue owned by the a centre-left coalition while two issues were clearly owned by the right: immigration and economic performance. We then identified the relative space given to these two issues in all major online newspapers and we use these shares to find relative position of media in a pro-against right space and to cluster them.

Our analysis is based on two dataset; ITANES survey that contains information on political orientation and news consumption in Italy, and the Bayes-Swarm database obtained by a spider software monitoring the main Italian web sources daily.