The Effects of Partisan News Availability on State-Level Polarization and Strategic Candidate Entry

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News media are central to democracy, because they provide a crucial link between the public and its elected representatives. Case studies suggest that elected officials rely on news reports to form beliefs about what their constituents want (Herbst, 1998; Linsky, 1986; Yanovitzky, 2002). As Susan Herbst (1998) explains, politicians often see news coverage as an indication of public opinion, inferring shifts in public opinion from shifts in news coverage. In effect, politicians behave in line with the folk psychology of the third person effect (Davison, 1983) in which people assume that *others* (but not themselves) are heavily influenced by news media and propaganda.

Until recently, there has been little systematic research that evaluates the influence of news media on the behavior of political elites. Technological changes in the late 1990s created an asymmetry in the partisan balance of news networks, giving researchers a unique opportunity to empirically test our theoretical claims about the effects of news media on both the public's and legislators' behavior. In particular, the haphazard rollout of the conservative Fox News Channel from the late 1990s through the early 2000s created rare exogenous variation in the availability of partisan news programming. The presence of Fox News in a media market increased the vote share of Republican presidential candidates (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Hopkins and Ladd, 2014; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017) and induced members of congress to reduce their support of policies that Democrat Bill Clinton supported (Clinton and Enamorado, 2014), while it increased support for Republican legislation (Arceneaux et al., 2016). Researchers have also been able to study the effects of Fox News and the leftward shift of MSNBC on voters' behavior by taking advantage of the quasi-random

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placement of these channels in the line-up across media markets (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017).

In this proposal, we seek to obtain Nielsen data to analyze the influence of partisan news on the behavior of state legislators. State legislatures are important because they make decisions that are consequential (if under-appreciated) for people's everyday lives. These decisions include budgets that fund elementary, secondary, and higher education as well as health care coverage (e.g., Medicaid is administered by the states). State legislatures regulate the use of private property, define criminal behavior, and provide public safety. Moreover, state legislators provide a deep pool of potential candidates for the US House of Representatives (Maestas et al., 2006). State legislatures often consider issues that intersect with the national agenda that new organizations like Fox News tend to cover. Controversies over reproductive rights, gun laws, and tax policies are central to many states' legislative agendas. Many of the partisan controversies that animate coverage on partisan news channels begin at the state level, such as recent fracases over transgender bathroom access and right-to-cary gun laws.

Just like the US Congress, Democratic and Republican representatives in state legislatures have become more polarized, but the degree of partisan polarization varies from state to state (Shor and McCarty, 2011). We know little about what contributes to variation in partisan polarization across states. While some of the variation may be rooted in the different demographic and cultural characteristics of the states, we suspect that differences in institutions and media environments likely play a role as well. By combining data from Nielsen with data on state legislators' voting behavior from the mid-1990s to the present (Shor and McCarty, 2011), we would be able to investigate whether the presence and prominence of Fox News — and later MSNBC — shapes the ideological extremity of the votes that state legislators make. Moreover, we would be able to analyze whether characteristics of state legislatures, such as how professionalized they are, moderates the impact of media markets on state-level polarization. Some state legislatures are highly professionalized miniature versions of the US Congress, while others are filled with mostly part-time citizen legislators (Rosenthal, 1981), and we anticipate that citizen legislators may be swayed by news media than more professional legislators.

With respect to legislators' decisions to seek higher office, deciding to run for political office is not an easy decision for those who want a career in politics. Like most careers, politicians typically start by winning lower level offices and working their way up. Each step up the proverbial career ladder

incurs some risk. A state legislator who wants to be a member of the US House of Representatives cannot simply run whenever she wants. A resounding defeat could forestal her ability to attract funds from donors and support from party elites that one needs to mount a formidable campaign in the future. To maintain a successful career in politics, a "progressively ambitious" politician must strongly consider her chances of winning before choosing to run (Black, 1972; Rohde, 1979). The standard theoretical model for how potential candidates make the decision to run for office is a seemingly straightforward rational calculation (Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts, 2007; Jacobson and Kernell, 1981),

$$E[r] = pb - c, \tag{1}$$

where $E[r]$ is the expected utility that a potential candidate gains from running for office, p is the probability of winning if the potential candidate runs, b are the expected benefits that come from winning office, and c are the costs associated with running for office.

One of the most important district-level considerations potential candidates must consider is their "partisan fit" with the district (Stone and Maisel, 2003; Thomsen, 2014). Even in times of national calamity, a district in which 90% of the voters affiliate with one party are unlikely to hand victory to a candidate from the opposing party. As a result, potential candidates are sensitive to shifts in district partisanship when they estimate p (Bianco, 1984; Cox and Katz, 2002). Following Herbst's (1998) work that shows state legislators infer shifts in public opinion from shifts in news coverage, we anticipate that introduction of Fox News into state legislative districts caused Republican state legislators to increase the value of p, while causing Democratic state legislators to decrease the value of p.

In order to investigate the influence of partisan news media on the strategic entry decision of state legislators into Congressional elections, we propose combining Nielsen data on the presence and prominence of Fox News in media markets with a novel survey of state legislators' perceptions of their Congressional Districts (including their plans to run for office) conducted in the late 1990s (just as Fox News emerged) (Maestas et al., 2006) as well as official election data in Congressional elections (including outcomes and the "quality" of challengers).

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