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Media markets and politicians involved in scandals☆

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I study whether TV coverage helps voters punish politicians involved in a scandal. Specifically, I compare the vote shares of U.S. senators implicated in scandals from 1970 through 2000 in two different types of media markets: in-state and out-of-state. An in-state media market is centered in a given state, and an out-of-state is located outside a given state. Therefore, the media consumers in an out-of-state media market receive news contents that focus on neighboring states' politicians. I find that U.S. senators implicated in scandals receive smaller vote share in in-state media markets. The results suggest that better access to political news helps voters make more informed decisions.

1. Introduction

Do the media help voters hold politicians accountable? The literature on "retrospective voting" shows that voters punish or reward politicians based on what politicians do in office (Fiorina, 1981). Given that voters typically have only a limited amount of knowledge of politics (Carpini & Keeter, 1997), the media can have a significant effect on how politicians' behaviors in office translate into electoral outcomes by provinding political information to voters.

In this paper, I investigate how the media affects the ability of voters to hold politicians accountable. Specifically, I study whether television helps voters punish U.S. senators implicated in scandals from 1970 through 2000. I focus on the role of television for two reasons. First, during the period of this study, television was the main source of political information for voters (Prior, 2007). Second, television markets typically cover wide areas and can cross state boundaries. Therefore, I can exploit the discrepancies between TV media markets and state boundaries as a measure of senators' media coverage.

Following Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder (2006), I estimate the effect of scandals on incumbent vote share in two different types of media markets: in-state and out-of-state. An in-state media market is defined as a market centered in a given state. For instance, the Chicago media market is an in-state media market for Illinois. In contrast, an out-of-state media market is a market whose center is located outside a given state. For instance, some counties of Indiana belong to the Chicago media market, which mainly covers counties of Illinois. Voters in an out-of-state media market receive much less news about their state's politics from television (Ansolabehere et al., 2006).

My main finding is that the negative effect of scandals depends on the media market structure. The estimates suggest that, on average, incumbent U.S. senators implicated in scandals receive about a 2.6% smaller vote share than other incumbents. More importantly, incumbents involved in scandals receive about a 3% smaller vote share in in-state media markets than in out-of-state media markets. To ensure that my findings are not driven by differences in in-state and out-of-state media market counties unrelated

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to the media coverage of senators, I restrict the sample in two ways. First, I exclude in-state media market counties that are not contiguous to any out-of-state media market county. In-state media market counties that are geographically contiguous to out-of-state counties are expected to be more similar, and thus more comparable, to out-of-state media market counties in terms of both observed and unobserved characteristics. Second, I match the in-state media market counties to out-of-state media market counties on observed demographic and socio-economic characteristics. The results are robust to the sample restrictions. As a further robustness check, I drop each scandal one at a time to ensure that the results are not driven by a single outlier. The results are not sensitive to the exclusion of each scandal.

Previous research shows that scandals hurt members of the U.S. House of Representatives, especially in general elections (Abramowitz, 1988, 1991; Alford, Teeters, Ward, & Wilson, 1994; Brown, 2006a, 2006b; Dimock & Jacobson, 1995; Peters & Welch, 1980; Stewart, 1994; Welch & Hibbing, 1997). Primary elections are considered less efficient tools for punishing politicians involved in malfeasance (Brown, 2006a; Welch & Hibbing, 1997), although Hirano and Snyder (2012) show that incumbents implicated in scandals are more likely to face serious challengers in a primary.

Similar patterns are found in other countries as well. For instance, Pattie and Johnston (2012) and Eggers and Fisher (2012) examine the effect of the 2009 UK parliamentary expenses scandals and find a negative but modest effect of scandals on the electoral fortunes of the implicated members of Parliament (MPs).

As these studies demonstrate, scandals clearly hurt politicians in elections. However, in the U.S., the majority of legislators involved in scandals is still reelected (Basinger, 2013; Brown, 2006a; Peters & Welch, 1980; Welch & Hibbing, 1997). How do politicians in scandals continue to get support from voters?

One explanation is that voters are simply ignorant about scandals. Consistent with this explanation, Klašnja (2014) finds that voters with low levels of political knowledge tend to vote for members of the U.S. House of Representatives charged with corruption. If politicians implicated in scandals get reelected mainly because of voters' ignorance, media coverage of scandals can make it more difficult for politicians in scandals to secure their office.

This paper contributes to the literature on political scandals by showing that scandals are more costly to politicians when voters have access to political news.[1] More broadly, it also contributes to the literature on the role of media and political information in improving political accountability.

Previous studies document the importance of media in improving political accountability. Besley and Burgess (2002) show that the correlation between public food distribution or calamity relief expenditure and measures of need for relief is greater in states with a high newspaper circulation. Strömberg (2004) shows that U.S. counties with more radio listeners received more federal money of the New Deal programs. Dyck, Moss, and Zingales (2013) study the effect of "muckraking" magazines on the voting patterns of members of the U.S. House Representatives and U.S. senators and find a significant effect of muckraking.

Snyder and Strömberg (2010) find that members of the U.S. House of Representatives work harder when the press has more incentive to cover them. They first show that the low-congruence between newspaper markets and congressional districts leads to less press coverage of representatives and that representatives in low-congruence districts are less likely to stand as a witness before congressional hearings, to serve on constituency-oriented committees, to vote against the party line, and to secure federal money for their districts. Using a similar research design, Lim, Snyder, and Strömberg (2014) show that the relationship between voter preferences and judges' sentencing behaviors is stronger in high-congruence districts.

Fergusson (2014) uses the television market measure developed by Ansolabehere et al. (2006) and studies whether television helps voters counter special interest group influence. He finds that concentration of special interest contributions to incumbent U.S. senators is punished in in-state media market counties.

A series of field experiments highlight the importance of information in holding politicians accountable. Ferraz and Finan (2008) use random local government audits in Brazil and test whether the release of audit outcomes affects votes for incumbents. They find that mayors identified as being corrupt receive a 5–10% smaller vote share than similar mayors whose audit outcomes were not released before the election. In their field experiment in an Indian city, Banerjee, Kumar, Pande, and Su (2011) distributed newspapers containing report cards on politicians to residents in a random sample of slums. They find that this treatment results in higher turnout, less vote buying, and a higher vote share for better performing incumbents. Chong, Ana, Karlan, and Wantchekon (2015) also report the results of their field experiment conducted in Mexico. They show that information about corruption decreases incumbent support in local elections, but it also decreases voter turnout and challengers' votes and weakens voters' partisan identification.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the data and the empirical strategy, and Section 3 presents the main results. Finally, Section 4 concludes.

2. Study design

2.1. Data

2.1.1. Scandals

The list of scandals is from Hirano and Snyder (2012). They collected scandals from three sources: the *Historical Summary of Conduct Cases in the House of Representatives* (2004) published after each Congress by the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, the *Report to Congress on the Activities and Operations of the Public Integrity Section* published annually by the US Department of Justice, and *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports*. They code scandal as 1 if (a) the House Committee on

[1] Similarly, Chang, Golden, and Hill (2010) and Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro (2012) show that politicians involved in scandals are punished by voters when the press reports on political corruption.