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# *The Vanishing Marginals, the Bandwagon, and the Mass Media*

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We investigate the degree to which exposure to the mass media results in an increased likelihood to vote for the incumbent (or the winner in open-seat races). We also present experimental evidence demonstrating the influence of electoral expectations in individual-level voting decisions.

In 1974, David Mayhew demonstrated a decline in “marginal” congressional seats from 1956 to 1972. A spate of subsequent research has attempted to explain this apparent decline in electoral competition (Ferejohn 1977; Fiorina 1977; Jacobson 1987). A critical assumption underlying all of these works is that the “vanishing marginals” are intricately linked to incumbency—the result of changes either in incumbent behavior or in electoral reactions to incumbent candidates.<sup>1</sup> This would be the case if the decline in electoral competition were apparent *only* in those seats where incumbents were seeking reelection. If, however, a similar decline in competition exists in open-seat elections, then incumbency may not be the sole reason for the vanishing marginals.

On this score, Garand and Gross (1984) found that in the post-1965 electoral environment, both incumbent and nonincumbent winners have significantly increased their share of the two-party vote. These authors contend, therefore, that it is more appropriate to talk about a winners’ rather than an incumbency advantage.

We suggest that as partisan identification has declined (Wattenberg 1990), individuals have become more reliant on media coverage of congressional elections for individual-level voting cues. First, incumbents are capable of using the media to portray themselves as nonpartisan servants of the district (Bagdikian 1974; Paletz and Entman 1981; Clarke and Evans 1983; Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Yiannakis 1982; Robinson 1981; Cook 1989). Second, since media coverage tends to reflect the competitiveness of an election, the amount of media coverage afforded

<sup>1</sup>Krehbiel and Wright (1983) find some support for both hypotheses. They do not, however, rule out the possibility that the mass media may characterize incumbents and expected winners in an entirely different light than challengers and expected losers.

to the respective candidates may send a powerful signal to individual voters (Clarke and Evans 1983; Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Cook 1989; Kahn 1991, 1993).<sup>2</sup> Put simply, candidates that receive little or no coverage in the local media are not likely to be taken seriously by the electorate. This bias in media coverage results in an increased likelihood that voters will vote for the incumbent.<sup>3</sup> At the aggregate level, this process may facilitate the "vanishing marginals."

In open-seat races a similar dynamic may be at work. The leading candidate benefits from greater media coverage that translates into greater electoral support, particularly among independents and weak partisans. The increasing number of independents, tied in with media coverage that enhances the possibility of a bandwagon effect, may result in increasingly noncompetitive, open-seat elections.

#### SURVEY DATA

To test these possibilities, we use the 1990 NES study to construct a number of regression equations estimating: (1) the probability the respondent voted for the incumbent, (2) the probability that the respondent liked something about the incumbent, and (3) the probability that the respondent liked something about the challenger.<sup>4</sup> Including important variables for controls, we expect media exposure to have a positive impact on the probability that the respondent will vote for and

<sup>2</sup>But, see the mixed findings of Hess (1991, 54–61, 107–109).

<sup>3</sup>The positive media coverage of incumbents has been documented by Goldenberg and Traugott (1984), Clarke and Evans (1983), Kahn (1991, 1993), and Hess (1986).

<sup>4</sup>*Media exposure* is the number of days in the past week the respondent either watched TV or read the newspaper (ranging from 0–14). *Partisanship* is coded 1 if the respondent shares the partisan affiliation as the incumbent, 0 if the respondent is an independent, and –1 if the respondent is affiliated with the opposing party. *Candidate evaluation* is coded as the difference between the incumbents feeling thermometer score and the challengers feeling thermometer score. Where respondents refused to evaluate either the incumbent or the challenger, they were coded as a neutral 50. *Economic conditions* are measured in terms of the respondents' evaluations of the national economy with 1 indicating the respondent perceives the economy is improving, 0 as staying the same, and –1 as getting worse. *Presidential popularity* was coded 1 if the respondent approved of the president, 0 if the respondent disapproved. The *candidate contact* variables (both challenger and incumbent) are coded 1 if the respondent had one or more of the following forms of contact with the respective candidates: personally met the incumbent, attended a meeting at which the incumbent spoke, talked with the incumbent's staff, received mail from the incumbent, read about the incumbent in the paper, heard about the incumbent on the radio, or saw the incumbent on television. We also ran the analysis on a contact variable that excluded the media items listed. Doing so did not change the results. *Political sophistication* was measured as an index indicating whether respondents correctly identified Dan Quayle, Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, George Mitchell, William Rehnquist, Nelson Mandela, Tom Foley, which party controlled the House and which party controlled the Senate. *Campaign interest* is defined as whether or not the respondent personally cared about the outcome of the congressional election. It ranges from 1 to 4: one indicates that the respondent did not care at all about the outcome and four indicates that the respondent cared very much.

We also tested interactions between (1) the economy and whether the incumbent/winner was a Republican [for the incumbent vote this interaction produced  $B = .34$  and  $S.E. = .53$ , for the

TABLE 1

LOGIT EQUATIONS ESTIMATING THE EFFECT OF MEDIA EXPOSURE ON VOTING DECISIONS AND CANDIDATE EVALUATIONS IN CONTESTED UNITED HOUSE ELECTIONS (STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES)

	Vote Incumbent	Like Incumbent	Like Challenger
Candidate evaluation	.09*** (.01)	—	—
Partisan similarity	1.65*** (.23)	.65*** (.12)	-.71*** (.21)
Media exposure	.13*** (.04)	.05* (.03)	-.10** (.04)
Economic conditions	-.37 (.31)	-.54*** (.20)	.23 (.33)
Presidential approval	-.19 (.38)	.15 (.21)	-.54 (.38)
Incumbent contact	.47 (.52)	2.30*** (.50)	-.34 (.82)
Challenger contact	-.60* (.36)	-.02 (.21)	2.72*** (.42)
Political sophistication	-.09 (.10)	.03 (.06)	.17* (.10)
Campaign interest	-.37* (.19)	.19 (.11)	.54** (.22)
Constant	.61 (.81)	-3.79*** (.67)	-4.08*** (1.08)
% Predicted correctly	90%	67%	90%
% Reduction of error	11%	15%	1%
Sample size	510	510	493

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

like something about the incumbent but will have a negative impact on whether the respondent will like something about the challenger.

As table 1 shows, individuals with high levels of media exposure are more inclined to like and vote for their incumbent and less inclined to like the challenger. Controlling for campaign interest and political sophistication suggest that media exposure is not simply a surrogate for information about or interest in the congressional campaign.

open-seat vote this interaction produced  $B = 1.8$  and  $S.E. = 24.3$ ] and (2) presidential approval and whether the incumbent/winner was a Republican [for the incumbent vote, this interaction produced  $B = .28$  and  $S.E. = .61$ , for the open-seat vote this interaction produced  $B = 1.8$  and  $S.E. = 24.3$ ]. None of these interactions reached statistical significance nor did they change any of the other results.

TABLE 2

## PROBABILITIES THAT THE RESPONDENT VOTED FOR INCUMBENT

Media Exposure	Independents $Pr(Y) = 1$	Unlike Partisans $Pr(Y) = 1$	Similar Partisans $Pr(Y) = 1$
0	.73	.34	.93
1	.75	.37	.94
2	.78	.40	.95
3	.80	.43	.95
4	.82	.47	.96
5	.84	.50	.96
6	.85	.53	.97
7	.87	.56	.97
8	.88	.59	.98
9	.90	.63	.98
10	.91	.66	.98
11	.92	.68	.98
12	.93	.71	.99
13	.94	.74	.99
14	.94	.76	.99

Table 2 lists the probability that the respondent would vote for the incumbent across various levels of partisanship and media exposure.<sup>5</sup>

Media exposure appears to have its greatest impact on independents and dissimilar partisans.<sup>6</sup> As media exposure increases, independents move from a likely incumbent vote [ $\text{Prob}(Y = 1) = .73$ ] to an almost certain incumbent vote [ $\text{Prob}(Y = 1) = .94$ ]. Similarly, dissimilar partisans move from being more likely to support the challenger [ $\text{Prob}(Y = 1) = .34$ ] to being more likely to support the incumbent [ $\text{Prob}(Y = 1) = .76$ ].

## OPEN-SEAT ELECTIONS AND THE WINNERS' ADVANTAGE

To provide a test of media effects in the absence of incumbency advantages, we reran the previous analysis for open-seat elections only. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent voted for the winner and 0 otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>We hold the independent variables (candidate evaluations, economic conditions, presidential approval, incumbent contact, challenger contact, political sophistication, and campaign interest) at their means. These are listed respectively as: 15, -.74, .61, .90, .29, 3.75, and 2.87.

<sup>6</sup>We define "dissimilar partisan" as someone who does not hold the same party affiliation as the incumbent while a "similar partisan" does. This is also reflective of the respondents' average candidate evaluation ( $x = 15$ ). As such, the scenario presented in table 2 represents a respondent more predisposed to support the incumbent than his or her partisanship would suggest. However, in probability scenarios where the incumbent is evaluated less favorably similar patterns emerge.

<sup>7</sup>All variables are the same except partisan similarity is based on the respondent's similarity with the winner rather than with the incumbent. Unfortunately, the relatively small sample size of actual voters

TABLE 3  
 LOGIT EQUATIONS ESTIMATING THE EFFECT OF MEDIA EXPOSURE ON  
 VOTING DECISIONS IN OPEN-SEAT HOUSE ELECTIONS  
 (STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES)

	Additive Model	Interactive Model
Candidate evaluation	.18*** (.06)	.24*** (.09)
Partisan similarity	2.77** (1.21)	3.67** (1.51)
Media exposure	.12 (.14)	.11 (.16)
Economic conditions	2.54 (2.03)	5.62* (3.41)
Presidential approval	1.08 (2.86)	1.19 (4.06)
Winner contact	2.47 (3.73)	2.87 (4.40)
Loser contact	-2.78 (3.44)	-1.85 (4.03)
Political sophistication	.43 (.36)	.77 (.56)
Campaign interest	-1.83** (.83)	-3.03** (1.42)
Media exposure × independents	—	.35* (.19)
Constant	2.75 (4.08)	4.26 (5.03)
% Predicted correctly	91%	96%
% Reduction of error	33%	38%
Sample size	75	75

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

As shown in the Additive Model, media exposure has a positive, though insignificant, impact on the probability that the respondent voted for the winner in an open-seat election. Since it is likely that media coverage is most influential among independent voters, we included a multiplicative term capturing the interaction between media exposure and whether the respondent was an independent (see Interactive Model column two of table 3). As expected, the interaction was

in open-seat districts detracts from our ability to generalize from these results. In the original NES sample, only 178 respondents were from districts with open-seat elections. Once we included only actual voters and eliminated cases with missing data, we have only 75 respondents. A positive side of this situation is that the smaller sample size increases the likelihood that we will fail to reject our null hypothesis.

positive and significant. Substantively, the more an independent is exposed to media coverage, the more likely it is that she or he will vote for the eventual winner.

In summary, media exposure tends to bias respondents toward incumbents and winners. Accordingly, at least a part of the incumbency advantage may be explained in terms of the more comprehensive winners' advantage—especially among independents. The benefits accruing to incumbents, however, are more than a simple bandwagon effect. Unlike open-seat winners, incumbents are able to appeal to both independents and across partisan lines through "constituency service" oriented campaigns. In the next section we further explore the bandwagon aspect of the incumbent and winners advantage using experimental analysis.

#### EXPERIMENTAL ANALYSIS

While the evidence drawn from the survey data suggests that a bandwagon effect may be induced by media coverage of congressional elections (Bartels 1988; McAllistar and Studlar 1991; Abramson et al. 1992), we supplement the survey evidence with experimental data. In the present study, 180 students participated from the University of Kentucky. Participants were randomly assigned to nine groups and were asked questions concerning typical congressional election scenarios. The scenarios presented to each group were identical except that some subjects received polling data indicating which candidate was leading the race.<sup>8</sup> We expect polling information to influence subjects, especially independents, to vote for the projected winner.

As shown in table 4, expectations played a significant role in individual-level vote choice, even after controlling for the respondent's partisan and ideological identification. In addition, we computed the probability that the respondent will vote for the Republican candidate across different levels of partisan identification and expectations.

As seen in table 5, the presence of electoral expectations plays an important role in vote choice, but the effect varies across partisan groups. As expected, however, independents are heavily influenced by the presence of expectations. In fact,

<sup>8</sup>For example, one group received this scenario:

If the following candidates were running for a seat to the United States House which would you vote for:

(a) Tom Lewis, 46, married with 2 children, is a Republican and a conservative. He favors cutting back government spending on social services and on environmental protection. Furthermore, he wants increased spending on defense. The latest opinion polls show that Lewis is ahead 60% to 40%.

(b) Scott Brisbee, 49, married with 3 children, is a Democrat and a liberal. He favors increased government spending on social services as well as environmental protection. Furthermore, he wants decreased spending on defense.

Approximately 70% of the subjects received knowledge concerning the expected winner. Alternatively, the control group (approximately 30%) received only candidate relevant information. In half of

TABLE 4  
 LOGIT EQUATIONS ESTIMATING THE EFFECT OF EXPECTATIONS  
 ON EXPERIMENTAL VOTE CHOICE

	Republican Vote	
	MLE	S.E.
Partisan identification	.9785**	.1999
Ideological identification	.3863*	.2021
Expectations	1.012**	.3309
Constant	-7.040**	1.081
% Predicted correctly	94.1%	
% Reduction of error	26.7%	

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

TABLE 5  
 PROBABILITY THAT RESPONDENT VOTED FOR REPUBLICAN

	Republican Expected	No Expectations	Democrat Expected
Strong Democrat	.026	.010	.004
Weak Democrat	.066	.025	.009
Leans Democrat	.158	.064	.024
Independent	.335	.155	.062
Leans Republican	.572	.328	.150
Weak Republican	.781	.564	.316
Strong Republican	.905	.775	.556

\*Ideological identification held at its mean (3.69). Notably, this places the mean respondent in the "leans liberal" category.

independents are twice as likely to vote for the Republican candidate when the Republican is expected to win. The largest impact in the experiment, however, occurs among Republicans.<sup>9</sup> When the Democrat is expected to win, independent Republican leaners and weak Republicans are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate. Moreover, given expectations that the Democratic candidate will win, even strong Republicans are almost as likely to vote for the Democratic candidate as for the Republican.

the experimental groups, the Democratic candidate was reported as leading while in the other half the Republican candidate was reported as leading. An analysis of variance test shows that there was a significant difference between those groups who received no knowledge of the expected winner and those groups who did  $F(2,78) = 4.39, p > .0157$ .

<sup>9</sup>Similar patterns also emerged when we assumed a moderate respondent rather than a liberal.



## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Individual voting behavior may be significantly influenced by both media exposure and by the presence of electoral expectations. While this appears to be particularly true among independents who lack the perceptual filter of partisanship, it is also true of partisans. Consequently, at the individual-level, the presence of polling information and the "constituency service" oriented campaigns of incumbents, as reported in the mass media, may facilitate an incumbency and winners' advantage. Finally, at the aggregate-level, such individual-level processes may contribute to the so called "vanishing marginals."

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