Zaller's Theory of Media Politics: Testing the deductions at the state level

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Professor John Zaller has developed "A Theory of Media Politics" that posits a system of political campaigns in which voters, presidential candidates and the media are dependent on one another (Zaller, 1998). This theory is a direct descendant of An Economic Theory of Democracy, (Downs, 1957) which portrays voters and candidates as rational actors. Zaller's theory expands Downs' model to include the role of the media, a role that has changed dramatically with the death of partisan newspapers, the growing influence of television news, and the diminishing influence of political parties in the nominating process.

Zaller portrays the goal of politicians as use of the media to "get their story out." The goal of reporters is to write stories that emphasize "the independent and significant voice of journalists." The public's goal is to monitor politics and learn about candidates with minimal effort. Reporters and candidates are both dependent on voting citizens for their continued employment. "The central dynamic is a competition between candidates and journalists to control the content of news within constraints set by the mass audience." Zaller concludes his introduction emphasizing that his theory is intended to explain presidential campaigns, but he believes "the theory is rooted in very basic ideas and is intended to apply to political news generally."

The purpose of this paper is to consider Zaller's theory of media politics in terms of state elections. The paper will explore some of the assumptions Zaller relies on, compare the role of the news media in national and state elections, and finally examine the applicability of Zaller's presidential model to state elections.

Zaller's assumptions about reporters

In formulating his "Theory of Media Politics," Zaller has introduced the role of the media into Downs' economic theory of government. The "economic" aspect of Downs' theory is not related to money, but to the efficient pursuit of goals. Thus citizens want to hold politicians accountable, and they want to elect representatives who will pursue those policies that will most benefit the individual voter, but citizens want to pursue those goals without expending a lot of time and intellectual effort gathering information to make those choices. On the other hand, politicians seek to win office and they do that by building and preserving credibility, delivering on their promises and appealing to the ideological center of the electorate.

In his model, Downs portrayed the role of reporters as essentially passive. Zaller argues that this was a defensible picture in the 1950s when Downs was writing. Newspapers were, especially when compared to their current embodiment, unassertive, more observer than interpreter. Today reporters are "key intermediaries in the process by which competing politicians attempt to mobilize public support in both the nomination and general phases of presidential elections" (Zaller, 1998).

"A Theory of Media Politics" is Zaller's attempt to explain the role of journalists in the current political environment. That role is more critical today because politicians are forced to make their case for election to the voters through the mass media. Most citizens do not experience electoral politics directly when the campaign is national or statewide. A city council candidate may knock at
the door, or a neighbor may invite you to her home to meet the council candidate she favors. But the odds are slim that a presidential candidate will ever knock at your door -- unless, of course, you live in New Hampshire. For most citizens, perceptions of the political world are shaped by the news media.

The dynamic between the media and the candidate in Zaller's model involves the control of information the media reports. Campaigns, however, regulate what information they pass on to reporters, who select from among the information they have accumulated in writing and reporting their stories. Zaller constructs the drive for journalistic voice as a major ingredient in the relationships of media politics:

The drive for journalistic voice is far from being innocuous. It leads journalists to adopt an adversarial stance toward others, most notably politicians, who venture onto their turf and who, as I have already noted, also wish to control the content of the news; it leads them to create and emphasize distinctive news products over which they can maintain control and which affirm their status as being "in charge" of political communication; and, because so much political conflict now consists of what are, in effect, propagandistic battles for public opinion, it leads them to contest political parties for the organization of ... the selection of issues and candidates for voter attention...." (1998, pg. 20).

Reporters do face a problem in reporting presidential campaign stories because reporters have limited access to the two major sources of information -- the candidate and the campaign manager (Sigal, 1978). When reporters are denied access, or a campaign refuses to provide information on a "hot topic," then the relationship between the candidate and the reporter turns into a struggle -- the candidate trying to control what information is reported to the public and the reporter trying not to allow the candidate to control the news. Patterson (1994, pg. 134-175) details how journalists tend to ignore the messages a candidate stresses and focus instead on controversy. That conflict between journalist and candidate is one reason campaigns use television ads to explain their message.

Various motives are attributed to reporters in this struggle. Zaller's answer to the question, "What do journalists want?" is career success, which he translates into front-page bylines or lots of airtime. From these derive fat salaries, professional respect and celebrity status (1998, pg. 16). He further argues that journalists want to add their own voice to the news, not just report the news but to frame it, interpret it and even regulate the flow of political communication (1998, pg. 19). Patterson argues similarly that interpretive journalism "elevates the journalist's voice above that of the newsmaker" (1995, pg. 102). Thus Zaller postulates as a cornerstone of his theory of media politics that "(j)ournalists aspire, individually and collectively, to maximize their independent and distinctive voice in the news" (1998, pg. 20).

But a report shows that reporters believe their most important goal is getting information to the public quickly. And the idea of journalistic voice is at direct odds with the role most journalists identify with, that of watchdog of government (Graber, 1997, p. 98). Further, Clarke (1978, pg. 143) recognized that one of the most important roles of journalism is educating the public about political choices.

Zaller offers no empirical evidence for his conclusion, not even a survey about the attitudes of journalists. Even granting that he is correct on a national level -- which is easier to do after watching "Capital Gang," "Washington Week in Review," "The McLaughlin Group," or even "This Week" and "Meet the Press" -- the national and local press operate quite differently. Local reporters -- TV and print -- have a smaller audience, and they are less likely to have the airtime or the
political column space to pursue Zaller's perceived goal of "journalistic voice." Further, members of the local media, unlike the national press corps, are unlikely to be longtime specialists, like Al Hunt, a Wall Street Journal reporter, and Cokie Roberts of ABC, who have both covered Capitol Hill for more than two decades. And few have the opportunity to go on television talk shows and engage in political analysis that goes even to the extent of predicting election outcomes (Fallows, 1997).

Fallows also argues that TV has had two especially debilitating effects on journalism. One is the equivalence of spectacles, where the event of the day is a spectacle, regardless of its true meaning, impact or its context. Lost is perspective, which is an essential for journalists trying to give viewers some idea of how important this event is. The other, and the pertinent one in this context, is the creation of the journalist celebrity. He illustrates by arguing that when Diane Sawyer interviews someone, the story is not the celebrity guest but the interplay between celebrities. When one of the major TV news anchors takes the show on the road, the story is not just the site of the visit but the celebrity anchor in the site (1997, pg. 52-53). Neither of these scenarios is likely to happen on a statewide level. Therefore, to apply Zaller's model to a state election, the role of journalists and the rationale behind that role must be rethought.

Zaller's theory also has an assumption flaw in the relationship between journalists and voters. Researchers have found that reading a newspaper and viewing political advertising helped voters discriminate between the positions of state candidates (Weaver, 1993). But a more recent study of the 1992 presidential election found that political advertising contributes to a well-informed electorate. The study found that voters were more likely to know the candidates' stand on issues because of political ads rather than reading a newspaper or watching television news. The authors of the study even suggest that this finding about newspaper reading could be due to the tendency of newspapers to imitate television news in the manner of USA Today's style of briefs. (Brians, 1996). This finding could undermine Zaller's theory if citizens are not dependent on news media to efficiently learn information about the candidates. Indeed, it would seem that less work is necessary to learn about a candidate from a political ad than from buying and reading a newspaper.

The advocates of civil journalism believe that reporters must tailor the news so that it informs citizens about important happenings known to be of concern to them and helps them to take collective action to resolve problems. One newspaper, The Charlotte Observer, insisted that an incumbent senator respond to issues raised by citizens or it would post "did not respond" in a table of answers from the candidates. That prospect and its impact on voters led the senator to change his strategy (Fallows, 1997). This is a local newspaper and a statewide election, but it suggests that not all journalists are concerned about journalistic voice and that journalists, in line with Zaller's theory, can successfully pressure candidates to answer issue-related questions or face the wrath of citizens.

The national news media vs. the state press corps

Presidential elections in the United States have been studied far more extensively than other elections (Weaver, 1993). Each of the 50 states conducts statewide elections for governor and other constitutional officers and for its two United States senators. And as Delli Carpini (1994) points out, the homogeneous nature of national political coverage does not extend to political news at the state and local level. Much of the presidential campaign coverage is provided by the same group of reporters for the TV networks, the political correspondents for the wire services and the White
House reporters for the major newspapers (Sigal, 1978). It's called pack journalism and Graber (1997, pg. 247) contends that presidential campaign coverage is fairly consistent.

Patterns of presidential election coverage are remarkably uniform, regardless of a newspaper's partisan orientation. Media personnel at highly regarded papers everywhere select the same kinds of stories and emphasize the same types of facts, despite the wealth of diverse materials available to them. The major difference generally is that small newspapers carry fewer election stories and that news stories vary in their evaluation of candidates, issues, and campaign events. Television news patterns are also uniform.

Because most of the newspapers are now part of a chain of newspapers, or because a newspaper sells its coverage or part of its coverage to client newspapers that are usually smaller, a limited number of journalistic voices report on presidential campaigns. And as Graber (1997, pg. 99) points out, behind most of the talking faces on television and the newspaper bylines are gatekeepers, usually respected veterans who help shape the campaign coverage.

At the state level, the coverage is never as pervasive (Graber, 1997). And it certainly is not greatly diffuse. Most television and radio stations rely on a wire service, generally the Associated Press, for coverage of state events. In a state like Kentucky, where government is located in the heart of the state and all but one of the major media markets is located on the border along the Ohio River, few stations can afford to use their resources to send a reporter and cameraman to Frankfort to routinely cover state government. The same is true when it comes to following a candidate around the state (Morgan, 1978). However, some newspapers have their own reporters, and so there is room for more individualized reporting. Because the reporters must write for regional newspapers which have different regional interests based on economic and demographic factors, newspaper reporters at the state level are less likely than their Washington counterparts to stick to the same storyline.

It is also significant that citizens are less likely to receive much information about state government and state campaigns because reporting on state issues is generally less detailed and extensive than local and national coverage (Delli Carpini, 1994). But what information they receive is more likely to come from the print media than from broadcast media (Graber, 1997). Because citizens know less about state candidates than presidential candidates, newspaper endorsements are weightier in state races.

The major difference between the presidential campaign that is the focus of Zaller's theory and state campaigns for governor or senator is the process of the campaign. On the federal level, the primary is actually a six-month series of state primaries and state party caucuses that serve to select the delegates who will choose the nominees of the two major parties. It would be wrong to argue that the primaries are actually just a series of state elections, a primary in each state. The national media cover the primaries as one long election, which forces reporters to find different ways to write about a process that generally produces little "real" news.

And the role of the media through the primary season has a different twist beyond reporting information to potential voters. Presidential candidates use the national media during the primary season to send messages to four audiences -- rival candidates; members of their own state and national staffs; political elites around the country, particularly donors and prospective donors, as well as office-holders who have yet to commit to a candidate, and other national and local newsmen (Sigal, 1978). In the general election, the primary audience is the voter.
Studies show that voters' choices are more volatile in state elections than in presidential elections and that media expenditures are influential at the state level (Tedin, 1981). More significantly, Tedin's study of the 1978 Texas state election found that a sizable portion of the voters were quite attentive to political media, a finding not supported at the national level.

At the state level, while the state mechanisms are not uniform, most hold one primary that produces the candidates for the November election (although some states do allow for a second primary, a run-off election in the event that no candidate achieves a clear majority). This important difference means that Zaller's hypotheses about presidential primaries would have to be adjusted for state primaries.

Does the media play a key role in helping voters make up their minds before they vote in a statewide election? Weaver (1993) found that viewing political advertising on television and reading newspaper coverage of the 1990 U.S. Senate campaign in Indiana were significant predictors of knowledge about the candidates' issue positions.

In contests below the presidential level, press attention to candidates is more consequential to voter recognition (Kahn, 1994). In statewide contests for both governor and U.S. senator, media coverage is more prevalent than in national and local elections, particularly because of the competitiveness of such races and the good "media market fit." New media opportunities, particularly cable systems and VCRs, also provide state candidates with avenues to reach voters (Graber, 1997).

**Testing Zaller's theory in a state election**

The goal then of this paper is exploring whether there is correspondence between Zaller's theory and state elections. This is somewhat premature since his manuscript has yet to be published, but it would add important understanding to the "rules" for statewide elections.

In his theory, one of the rules Zaller develops to explain how journalists decide what to report as news in an election is his Rule of Anticipated Importance, which he defines as:

Coverage of candidates and issues should be allocated in proportion to its marginal value for shedding light on future developments in American politics.

This rule thus indicates that reporters will devote more time to covering the candidates they believe will do well, and less for the also-rans. This is directly related to the interest of voters in keeping track of politics that are going to affect their lives. Journalists, according to Zaller, not only devote more of their time to the leading candidates, but they also devote more of their energy to trying to break critical stories about the front-runner to enhance their own reputations.

As a consequence of the gulf between presidential primaries and the state primaries, the first six of Zaller's deductions will not be explored in this paper.

Deduction 7, however, should be testable:

"Press-initiated criticism of candidates in general elections will be positively associated with political strength."

This criticism is defined as straight news about topics that candidates don't want the media to report. Zaller's test of this deduction found evidence to support it. This finding also increases the significance of "horse race" coverage, since the candidate's current standing in the polls will be
reflected in the amount of negative coverage the media initiates. Another factor that will affect this finding is that political polls, while a staple now of the national news report on the presidential campaign, are done far less frequently at the state level because of the cost. Thus it could be suggested that journalists are less likely to follow this pattern in state elections because polling information is not readily available to track variations in the polls in a close election. Further, because of the nature of state political reporters in contrast to the national media, and the nature of state election media coverage versus the nature of national media coverage, the effects of this deduction should be minimal in a state race. On the other hand, if the media perceives that one candidate in a two-candidate race has virtually no chance of winning, voter interest in that race would be minimal, which might encourage reporters to look for negative-impact news about the front-runner.

This deduction was tested in the Illinois governor's race between Republican George Ryan, the two-term secretary of state, and Glenn Poshard, a five-term congressman. Eighteen articles published between Oct. 19 and Nov. 1 in the Chicago Tribune, the largest-circulation newspaper in Illinois. Were analyzed for content. Any criticism that was not directed by the opposing candidate was counted as press-initiated criticism.

Contrary to what was expected because of the differences identified above, the findings were consistent with Zaller's deduction. Ryan had a huge lead in the polls that he has maintained since the spring primary. In an article published Oct. 25, the newspaper reported the results of its last election poll, showing Ryan with a 15-point lead, 49 percent to 34 percent. Seventeen percent of those who were polled remained undecided. The Tribune poll two weeks earlier had shown Ryan with a 21-percent point lead.

A review of the 18 articles found five stories that contained instances of press-initiated criticism of front-runner Ryan, while one story contained similar criticism of Poshard. Interestingly, only one of the stories that criticized Ryan was actually a straight news story.

On Oct. 29, reporter John Kass wrote a column, "These candidates look like winners come election day." In handicapping the governor's race, Kass said Ryan was the favorite. "He's got the big cash box, (and) the patronage, and the Republican establishment behind him wants a crony in office. His people are hoping there are no more indictments in the license-and-bribery scandal in Ryan's office until after the election .... With Ryan in Springfield, both Chicago and Rosemont will finally get their gambling casinos. That's why Ryan is backed by the labor bosses who benefit from blackjack." By contrast, Kass predicts Poshard will win, even though Kass admits the prediction paints him as a starry-eyed optimist. He says he's been supporting Poshard since July. "What gets Poshard in trouble with special interest groups is the same quality we say we want in our kids and our friends and out leaders: integrity."

The second reference came in a column by Eric Zorn entitled, "Politicians owe us the chance to view an honest debate." Zorn reported that Ryan refused to appear on a Chicago area television talk show. "These candidate do not deserve your vote," he wrote. "If they ain't tough enough to parry (the talk show host) and their opponents in prime time, then they ain't tough enough to be our leaders." In the final paragraph, he strikes again: "And as for George 'Is my scandal over yet?' Ryan ...." The scandal reference is in regards to the secretary of state's office, where two employees are accused of taking bribes.

The third reference was found in the Oct. 25 story concerning the results of the final Tribune poll. After the story reported the poll results and the results of the previous poll, it turned to the scandal.
"After week of reports about a federal investigation in the license-selling scheme, more than 60 percent of voters agreed that there was a problem with corruption in the secretary of state's office. But a majority of voters ... said Ryan should not be blamed because a few bad employees cannot be avoided." Another paragraph lower in the story expanded the scandal reference, reporting that sources said bribes paid for commercial driver's licenses for unqualified applicants ended up in Ryan's war chest. Five defendants had pleaded guilty.

The fourth critical reference was made the same day in the Tribune's endorsement editorial, in which it recommended that voters choose Ryan to continue the 22-year string of Republican governors. The newspaper almost ruefully didn't endorse Poshard, calling him a "thoughtful, engaging and honest man. His presence will be missed in Congress." After a half-dozen paragraphs emphasizing its choice of Ryan, the editorial said, "Our enthusiasm for Ryan is tempered by a couple of factors." The first, of course, was the scandal. The second involved his deal-making ability and his inability or refusal to convince voters of the rightness of his programs.

Finally, on October 20, the Tribune ran long, matching political profiles about the candidates. Each story contained some negative criticism. But the one about Ryan was especially critical. The headline set the tone:

George Ryan:
Veteran employs spoils of his office;

>From public service ads to refrigerator magnet campaigns, the Secretary of State had kept his name before the public.

Ryan is portrayed in images designed to make the reader picture an old-time political boss, a cigar in his mouth, his feet up on his desk. The name of former Chicago Mayor Richard Daley is invoked, certainly a negative image for many Illinois voters outside of the city. The story contains a list of incidents in which Ryan used state money to put his name before the voters, especially in the last months before the election.

In July, for example, Ryan's name was printed on 503,000 refrigerator magnets advertising a seniors hot line. The cost to the state, including printing and mailing: $165,642.

Ryan, the Republican nominee in the Nov. 3 election for governor, brushes aside suggestions that he has used state programs for political gain.

The scandal within the secretary of state's office is also rehearsed. His fund-raising is also suspect; Ryan has received $800,000 from the 750 employees of his office, an office that is rich in patronage. In addition, Ryan has raised thousands of dollars from the auto industry, which uses Ryan's office to license cars, and from the trucking industry, which uses Ryan's office for commercial driver's licenses. State regulators are investigating the latter. Ryan denies there was any quid pro quo. The story is full of information that paints a rather pervasive picture of the appearance -- if not the fact -- of machine politics and conflicts of interest. The story also includes information about a couple of controversial issues -- the state Equal Rights Amendment, which Ryan essentially killed as the majority leader in the state House, and casino gambling, which Ryan favors -- that are bound to offend some voters.

The companion piece on Poshard is of a different tone, even though it was of the same evaluative nature as the Ryan piece. Poshard is depicted not as a boss of a corrupt political machine but as a man of faith who wrestles with how his faith applies to issues he has confronted in public office. A
poll shows that 59 percent of Illinois voters don't believe a public official should rely on religious faith to make decisions on political issues. He is pictured as low-key, having represented the interests of his conservative, downstate congressional district and now moving toward the center to capture more Illinois voters. The Ryan piece has three times more negative information.

Two other deductions are also testable. Both involve third-party candidates.

Deductions 8 and 9 read:

8) Third-party candidates will be covered at a level somewhat above what would be expected on the basis of their public support alone, if they are new to national politics or capable of affecting the outcome of the major party contest.

9) Press-initiated criticism of third-party candidates will be positively associated with political strength.

These deductions certainly held in this race. Initially, three third-party candidates filed, a Libertarian candidate, a National Taxpayers Union candidate and a Reform Party candidate. The first two were removed from the ballot in mid-October after Ryan's campaign challenged the validity of the signatures on the nominating petitions. But in the 18 stories that were reviewed, no mention was found of the remaining candidate, Lawrence Redmond, not even in the election eve wrap-up. A website search indicates Redmond's name has not appeared in the Tribune since a month before Labor Day. With polls indicating Ryan had an almost insurmountable lead, the third-party candidate played no determinative role. In fact, he received 50,372 votes, a far cry from Ryan's 1,714,094 and Poshard's 1,594,191. As a consequence, the Reform Party is no longer automatically qualified for Illinois elections.

One further observation about Zaller's deductions concerns deduction 11 and the horse race coverage approach to the election coverage. With the exception of the story about the Tribune poll and the column by John Kass "calling" the election winners, the stories surveyed do not reflect horse-race coverage. Most of the stories are issue-oriented and designed to tell readers where the candidates stood on the issues. One story concerned transportation, another gun control, and yet another abortion. But the reality that this election never seemed too close to call would have made it rather difficult to interest readers in horse race coverage in this election.

Observations

First, despite what was expected with deduction 7, Zaller's Theory of Media Politics was supported in the Illinois governor's race. Likewise, deductions 8 and 9 concerning third-party candidates were also supported.

Second, this is obviously a limited study. Because of the lack of competition in this race, it might not be a good race to use to test Zaller's theory. Another factor that may make it difficult to test is that Chicago is one of the nation's top media markets, and media there may be more like the national press corps than in smaller states without top 10 media markets. Still, testing this theory on the Kentucky Senate race might likewise not be effective because it was such a seesaw race. The Minnesota governor's race where the third-party candidate won would be an interesting study.

Third, even though deduction 7 was supported, the causal link is clearly questionable. Ryan's office was hit by scandal even before this race began, and charges about using his office for campaign purposes were raised four years before by the Democratic opponent. The negative coverage here was not something the media dug up, even though it was negative and repeated months later. It is
certainly noteworthy that even when endorsing Ryan for governor editorially, the Tribune was harsher in its criticism of him and more supportive of Poshard. The amount of coverage of both candidates, the long profile that obviously included an interview with Ryan, would seem to indicate little resistance on the part of the campaign to interaction with the media, one of the contributing factors to negative coverage. Still, Ryan obviously was not happy about the issues that were raised about his office and his campaign.

Fourth, to give this study weight, other Illinois media should be compared and the time coverage extended at least to the last month of the campaign. The Tribune historically has been a Republican-oriented newspaper and still competes in a multi-newspaper town, another factor that is not the norm today.

This is an interesting area of study. Once Zaller finalizes his theory, political science and/or communication researchers should pursue evaluating his deductions on the state level. It would enlarge our understanding of statewide elections and the role of media.

Endnote

Zaller acknowledges that most journalists would not describe "voice" as a major motive in their efforts to cover campaigns.


References


