

Explaining Policy Coverage of U.S. Senators

Adam Schiffer

University of North Carolina

Department of Political Science
Hamilton Hall, CB# 3265
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3265
schiffer@email.unc.edu

Prepared for presentation at the 2002 Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting. I would like to thank Mike MacKuen for his helpful guidance on all aspects of this project. Also, many thanks to Andrea McAtee for her able assistance with the tedious coding process. By the way, she was paid with money from NSF dissertation improvement grant SES-0136850. Cite this draft without permission at your own risk, as any or all of it might be proven wrong by astute conference discussants, dissertation advisors, or journal referees.

ABSTRACT

Though much is known about the effect of the news media on all aspects of the political process, few studies look systematically at the determinants of variation in the political news product. A piece of this puzzle is explored by modeling variation in the ability of senators to garner policy-related coverage in the Washington Post. Instances of policy coverage were counted for members of three committees in the 105th and 107th congresses by an original content analysis. Factors hypothesized to explain variation in such coverage were derived from two competing theories: 1) senators are able to shape their own policy reputations, or 2) senators' policy associations are constrained by attributes over which they have little control, but that mesh with the norms and routines of professional news organizations. Both factors indeed influence senators' policy coverage. Specifically, the more times that senators mention an issue on their website – a proxy measure for their interest in the issue – the more likely they are to achieve coverage associated with that issue. Such intentional factors are overwhelmed, however, by the finding that more coverage is gained by higher-ranked committee members and, contrary to previous studies, by more moderate senators. Interestingly, the majority party had an enormous coverage advantage when the Republicans controlled the Senate and served as a balance to President Clinton, but the Democrats did not enjoy this same advantage when they took over majority status in June 2001.

The news media affect the political process. While scholars dispute the nature and extent of the effect, decades of thoughtful survey and experimental research enable political scientists to say, at the least, that the media do indeed affect public opinion, the electoral process, and countless other aspects of American politics. Though this important research question continues, rightfully, to command the bulk of political media scholars' attention, a necessary link in the causal chain receives little systematic attention in political science: what explains the composition of political news?

This paper attempts to add to this incipient research area both theoretically and empirically. First, I articulate a conceptual framework to aid systematic inquiry into the political news product. Then, I employ the framework in modeling variation in policy-related newspaper coverage received by United States senators. To what extent are senators able to associate themselves with particular substantive issue areas, and generate news accordingly? And to what extent is such issue association constrained by the norms and routines of political journalism? Systematic documentation of the game between image-conscious senators and norm-driven, watchdog journalists lends new insight into the precise role played by the news media in the legislative process.

THE POLITICAL NEWS SYSTEM

The news media play a vital role in many of the political processes of most interest to scholars. Accordingly, any political science subfield that uses news content as an independent or intervening variable will benefit from a systematic accounting of the process by which the political world is filtered and condensed into a news product. For example, the quality of politically relevant information possessed by the mass public

depends in large part on the incentives and constraints of the messenger, and accordingly on the character and quality of the message. On the institutional side, it is well known that the once insular act of presidential-congressional bargaining is now conducted largely through the press (Kernell 1997). A complete accounting of such a process surely would include knowing the conditions under which the actors are able to shape the message to their advantage.

Of course, explaining the news making process is no novelty to political communication scholars. Though rich theoretical accounts and lucid case studies of news production are abundant, systematic tests are more difficult to find, especially in political science. One reason is that systematic tests of media content involve time- and resource-consuming analyses. Only recently have technologies, such as electronic databases, begun to make this task manageable. Another reason is that, though the theoretical political media literature has provided countless insights into the process of making political news, hypotheses that can be tested systematically are not always apparent.

Media scholars are well-versed in this general insight: news content can be understood in large part through exploration of the values, norms, routines, and constraints of professional journalism. A common implication of this – in stark contrast to the “mirror model” attributed to journalists, which says that the news is merely a reflection of reality – is that the media construct political reality (Tuchman 1978; Epstein 1973). No serious study of political news can ignore this idea. Unfortunately, the journalistic construction of reality is a difficult notion to test empirically. After all, if the news really is *News From Nowhere* (Epstein 1973), then how does a researcher go about

operationalizing “nowhere” as an independent variable? The answer lies in embedding the constructivist insight in an empirically testable framework: the political news system.

This system can be described by an optical metaphor. Many scholars have suggested that, in contrast to a mirror, the press is better understood as a filter. Figure 1 shows a simple, abstract illustration of the effects of an optical filter on rays of light with various characteristics. The political news system (Figure 2) also has input, filters, and output. The output is simply the news product. The input is every element of the political world that might potentially receive news coverage. Finally, the filter is the news production process. It is the sum of all of the journalistic norms, routines, values, constraints, incentives, and imperatives that go into producing a 22-minute newscast, or a day’s newspaper.

As in the optical diagram, the input and output in the political news system vary. Though the norms and constraints of professional journalism vary between sources, and especially over the course of many years, the simplifying assumption is made – within the limited-time and single-source scope of this inquiry – that the journalistic routines shaping the political news product are constant. The norms and constraints, as constants, are neither dependent nor independent variables in the empirical models. Instead, the empirical tests take the following form: systematic variation in the output is the dependent variable, while systematic variation in each category of input composes the independent variables. In other words, variation in the news product can be explained by variation in political reality. The norms and mandates are crucial to understanding the political news system, but only insofar as they are the mechanism for translating potential variance in the inputs into specific hypotheses about the output. After all, the tacit

implications of constructivism notwithstanding, journalists never create news out of whole cloth. No matter the extent to which the news-making process distorts and mangles reality beyond recognition in the output, the *input* is still reality; the input is never the norm or routine.

MEDIA POWER IN POLITICS

True media power in the political process arises from the ability of journalists to constrain the vast political world into a discrete product. This power is attenuated, however, to the extent that the political reality driving variation in the news product is attributable either to tangible phenomena outside of the journalistic process, or to actors consciously trying to influence the news product (officeholders, candidates, interest groups, etc.). Scholars, therefore, should take stock of the various actors fighting to shape the tone of news, as well as inherently newsworthy tangible phenomena, in evaluating the actual extent to which the media are an independent actor in the political process.

For example, in a longitudinal study of the tone (positive/negative) of economic news, the extent to which change in the actual economy (as measured by tangible indicators) predicts change in the tone of news coverage is the extent to which the media are mere information carriers, and thus cannot be said to be exerting an independent influence on the political process. Further, if variation in coverage tone is associated with the tone set by the president or members of Congress in their economically relevant public remarks, then the media are mere public relations agents for the governmental officials. If, on the other hand, downward shifts in the economy receive more emphatic

coverage than upward shifts – on account of the journalistic belief that bad news is more salable than good news – then the media have exerted a powerful, non-spurious influence on the political process by paring down the political universe into a news product on account of their routines – and on account of variation in political reality (the direction of economic change) that is arbitrary with respect to the other actors vying for control of the news product.

POLICY COVERAGE OF SENATORS

Why do some senators receive more policy coverage than others? Much is known about the character and consequences of local and national Senate election coverage (see esp. Kahn and Kenney 1999), as well as if, and why, the president receives more coverage than Congress (Miller 1977, Shields and Goidel 1996). Also, some scholars have inquired systematically into the determinants of variation in senators' national news coverage (Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992, Squire 1988), finding that institutional factors such as holding a leadership position best predict the amount of national media mentions. This study takes such inquiry a step further by modeling *issue-related* mentions of senators in *The Washington Post* in 1997, 1998, and 2001.¹

Senators spend exorbitant material and human resources attempting to gain favorable media coverage, from the national press as well as from their home-state newspapers and network affiliates. But not all coverage is of equal value. While many varieties of stories – from policy articles to personal feature stories to horse-race election coverage – potentially serve senators' interests with their local press and its electorally relevant constituency, the national press – particularly *The Washington Post* – is one of

the primary vehicles through which senators communicate with each other and with other Washington actors. It is also vital for those who, for whatever reason, desire to cultivate a national reputation. As Cook (1998) argues, “Congress has shifted in the last fifty years from an institution where its members dealt almost exclusively with the press back home in their constituencies for electoral purposes. . .to one where both backbenchers and leaders routinely seek national publicity to influence national policy” (150). As such, it is reasonable to posit that policy-relevant coverage is of greater value in the national press than horse-race, personal gossip, or other non-policy stories.

In fact, non-policy coverage is, at best, a mixed blessing. For example, pre-election horse-race coverage in the *Post* appears to be reserved exclusively for senators in tough races.² Other non-policy mentions of senators typically range from the banal – more than a dozen mentions of Senator Warner’s romantic relationship with Barbara Walters in 1997 alone – to the embarrassing – a March, 1998, article about Senator Wyden making a progressive magazine’s list of the 10 dumbest members of Congress. Most of Senator Enzi’s 13 *Post* mentions from 1997-1998 concerned his attempt to gain permission to use his laptop computer in the Senate chambers, noting that the accountant and lifetime computer guru finds it “kind of a strain” to work without one. Some senators even surface in stories with no relation to politics, and usually not in a favorable light (i.e., “she moved into a Georgetown neighborhood with some row houses older than Strom Thurmond.”)

By studying only issue coverage, therefore, this paper cuts through the noise of multifaceted congressional reporting to document, in a systematic fashion, the game played between senators aiming to establish policy reputations and the journalists who

endeavor not to let politicians manipulate the news product to serve their reputations and policy interests.

The primary research question is: what explains variation in the amount of coverage received by committee members, in any given month, regarding committee-relevant policy areas? The unit of analysis thus is “senator month.” Members of three committees are studied for the 105th and 107th congresses (through December, 2001): armed services, energy and natural resources, and banking, housing and urban affairs. The committees were selected on account of having relatively limited and clearly demarked jurisdictions. “Policy-relevant” coverage is defined as an article that mentions a committee member in the context of a substantive policy within the committee’s jurisdiction. For example, Senator Murkowski, as a member of the Energy and Natural Resources committee, would receive credit for a story that gives his opinion on the Enron controversy, or one that mentions a national parks bill that he sponsored. The article need not be about actual committee work; it could be about a committee hearing, bill consideration, hearing or floor testimony, reaction to a presidential proposal or statement, or the senator’s opinion on the issue as expressed in a press release or on a Sunday talk show.

To count the number of senator policy mentions in *The Washington Post*, two coders read every article that mentions each of the senators over the period of analysis, via Lexis-Nexis. This cumbersome process was necessitated by the inability of the search engine to discern coverage associated with a particular issue.³ After deciding whether the article was policy-relevant, the coders noted several characteristics about the

quality of the mention, as detailed in the appendix. The number of mentions for each senator was aggregated by month to create the dependent variable.

THE DETERMINANTS OF COVERAGE

The two sides of the congressional coverage game can be described and operationalized through the conceptual framework articulated above. First, to what degree, and in what ways, do the routines and constraints of congressional news reporting anoint the media as an independent actor in the policy process? Measuring this involves documenting the aspects of political reality that explain variation in senators' policy coverage, which can be shown to derive from press norms and constraints, but which are fully or largely out of the senators' control. The other side of the coin is: to what extent is this power attenuated by the senators' ability to establish their own issue reputations? This is measured by creating variables that discern variation in senators' efforts to associate themselves with the particular issues, and then modeling the extent to which these variables influence policy coverage.

Norms and constraints

Many scholars have noted that journalists' strive to follow the ubiquitous norm of objectivity can, paradoxically, lead to predictable biases with consequences for the quality of political news. Cook (1998), for instance, notes that a common technique for insulating news organizations from bias accusations is to defer to sources as high in an accepted hierarchy (i.e., the government) as possible. This "official-sources bias" likely would manifest itself in *committee chairs* being the official spokespersons for the Senate's policy consideration. Likewise, a higher *committee rank* should correlate

positively with the amount of issue coverage a senator is able to garner. Indeed, Cook argues that “members of congress are not equal in the eyes of the national news media, which tend to gravitate toward leaders, committee chairs, and others who are understood to be pivotal players in the continuing script of how-a-bill-becomes-a-law” (151).

Included as independent variables are a dummy variable indicating chairship and an ordinal rank of the senators’ committee positions (with higher values indicating a higher rank).

Objectivity often is equated with balance. Though the logic behind this can be problematic (see Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992), it is easy to understand. Partisan bias has been a major concern of observers, pundits, and mass communications scholars – and thus by necessity of journalists – since the late 1960s. Charges of a liberal slant to the major national news sources were common throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and currently are enjoying a resurgence. For every editor who fails to count the paragraphs devoted to each candidate during an election, there will undoubtedly be a scholar or talk-radio host to do so for them (for example, Efron 1971, Lichter 1986, Lowry and Shidler 1995). Balance, or “presenting both sides” in our two-party system, undeniably is a major concern for political reporters. The strive for this particular form of objectivity might be expected to manifest as a coverage advantage for the opposition party. During the 105th Congress, Republicans were both the *majority party* in the Senate and the presidential opposition party. The strong expectation, then, is that Republicans will receive more coverage than Democrats from 1997-98. The 107th Congress provides a natural experiment – the mid-year power shift – to distinguish 1) whether the majority party always (and immediately) receives more coverage than the minority, or 2) whether

the *Democrats* were the beneficiary throughout the year of the balance norm, in this case as balance to George Bush. Accordingly, dummy variables are included that indicate both the majority/minority status of the senator and his/her partisanship.

Also, though the media take pains to avoid being biased to the left or right, some observers argue that they are biased to the center (Gans 1979). This moderatism bias leads to the expectation that senators reputed to hold more *extreme policy positions* might have a more difficult time garnering policy coverage. This is measured by averaging, then folding, the Americans for Democratic Action Liberalism Quotient (commonly known as “ADA scores”) for each senator for the year of analysis and the year before. A low score indicates a moderate voting record, while a high score reflects aggregate policy extremism. Kuklinski and Sigelman (1992) find just the opposite for television news coverage – that extreme senators are more likely to gain coverage. But their theory for this, that extreme senators are more likely to frame issues in stark, easy-to-understand terms, perhaps does not apply as much to *The Washington Post*, which caters to a more sophisticated audience.

Further, it is well documented that the economic limitations of news organizations afford an advantage to political actors who possess the knowledge and resources to make the press’ job easier. Any work that potential newsmakers can do on their own behalf – such as staging media-ready events or issuing press releases – that minimizes the resources that journalists must commit to a story, is work that more than likely will be rewarded with coverage (Graber 1997). This phenomenon might apply less to the competitive Congressional beat, with 100 senators vying for the attention of a limited number of national news outlets, than perhaps to a senator whose speech in a local park is

sure bait for an area television station. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to hypothesize variance in senators' ability to tailor their policy activities to a national news audience.

This variance is tricky to measure, however, as all senators have dedicated press staff, presumably with at least the minimum press savvy required to attain such a job. Perhaps the best proxy for press-handling ability is *seniority*. First, learning the specific needs and expectations of the congressional news corps undoubtedly is an acquired skill. Also, senators repeatedly returned to office have been selected on a number of characteristics. That media savvy would be one such characteristic is a reasonable postulate in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Seniority is measured simply as the number of years the senator has served, including the current one.

Some senators also might benefit from the privileged position held by celebrities in the modern press. Measuring conventional celebrity status would be difficult conceptually, and quite limiting in the Senate context, with perhaps John Glenn being the sole beneficiary of such coding during the period of analysis (former actor Fred Thompson is not on any of the three committees analyzed). Included instead is a measure of Washington's equivalent of flying to the moon or starring in a movie: running for president. It is clear that senators who run for president attain a greater level of national coverage (Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). Less clear is whether such status entitles them greater access to policy coverage. Two dummy variables are included: *presidential run*, coded for January of election year through December of the following year when a senator gained votes in at least one presidential primary or was nominated for vice president, and *presidential run, ever*, which is coded for any senator who ever did so (beginning with January of the election year).

Senators' conscious issue association

Senators are assigned to committees for a variety of reasons. Some have a strong interest in the policy domain, while others are just killing time before gaining a spot on Appropriations. It is desirable, therefore, to observe and measure variance in the amount of effort senators put into associating themselves with their assigned committees' issue jurisdiction. Cook (1998) notes that not all members of Congress derive equal value from using the national media. “[N]ational media attention. . .is simply more important for those who are interested in making national policy, setting an issue on the national agenda and (not coincidentally) raising their profile as a player to be reckoned with” (151). To the extent that such effort predicts variation in policy coverage, senators are winning, or at least scoring points in, the ongoing battle to control their national reputations.

Such measurement, however, is largely indirect. One available direct indicator is the number of *bills sponsored* by the senator that are relevant to the committee's policy domain. The variable is a count of the number of bills sponsored by month (co-sponsorship is not included).⁴

To design a proxy measure of senators' general desire to be associated with the issues under examination, a content analysis was conducted of each senator's *website*. This variable was used only for the analysis of the current Congress. Points were allotted for each mention of the issue on the senator's home page, as well as on secondary pages dealing with “issues” or “legislation.”⁵ Though this variable is susceptible to considerable random variance as an artifact of individual designers' choices about what to include on websites, it is clear from examining senators' websites that, for the most

part, they bear far more similarities than differences. Further, there is no reason to believe that such variance would be systematic with respect to any variables of interest.

A final independent variable is included as a control, since it does not necessarily fit into the journalistic-norms or senator-effort theories. A dummy variable indicates whether the senator is up for *reelection* that year, coded from June to November of the year.

ANALYSIS

In the quest to model the determinants of senator issue coverage by month, two major methodological barriers must be overcome. First, the data, varying across senators and over time, is of a pooled cross-sectional nature. Second, the dependent variable is a count with an abundance of zeros (in more than half of the senator months, no coverage was attained). Though techniques abound to deal with both issues separately, they are seldom merged. Several fixes exist for the potential deflated variances that can arise from pooled cross-sectional time series, but few are known to be compatible with data analyzed outside of the continuous-variable, ordinary least squares regression framework. One feasible solution – the one utilized herein – is to include a *lagged dependent variable* on the right-hand side of the equation that takes into account the panel nature of the data.⁶

The most common estimator for count data is the negative binomial regression. Unfortunately, estimates are often unreliable when the dependent variable is composed largely of zeros. One solution is to employ zero-inflated negative binomial regression, in which certain independent variables are hypothesized to predict the mere presence (rather

than quantity) of coverage in a given month. These “inflated” variables are analyzed with a logistic estimator in conjunction with the negative binomial regression.

In this analysis, it is difficult to derive theoretical justification for which variables, if any, should be inflated. Arguably, all of the independent variables could correspond to the ability of senators to garner any coverage at all, as well as predicting the amount given that they receive coverage. Thus, to work around the issue of a zero-heavy dependent variable, while maintaining model robustness and interpretive simplicity, the dependent variable is collapsed to a binary variable indicating whether the senator received any coverage that month, and the model is estimated with binary logistic regression. Since this analysis requires the loss of information in the data, potentially masking elements of the causal process not picked up by a binary dependent variable, the primary analysis is replicated in the appendix using both negative binomial regression and zero-inflated negative binomial regression. For the 105th Congress, the estimates are nearly identical across all three estimation techniques, instilling confidence in the robustness of the model. For the 107th Congress, the negative binomial estimations yield more null findings, but no apparent divergence in the relative influence of the independent variables.

RESULTS

Why do some senators receive more policy coverage than others during the 105th and 107th congresses? Table 1 shows separate logistic regressions for each session.⁷ Turning first to the 105th, both higher rank and majority status increase the likelihood of coverage. For every notch up the committee-rank ladder a Senator attains, he or she can

be expected to receive coverage 1.2 times as often as someone one step below. Also, Republicans, on average, received coverage more than twice as frequently as Democrats. Interestingly, being the committee chair does not afford Senators any more coverage than would be expected from their position as the top-ranked majority member.

The 107th Congress produced a major surprise. The strong expectation was that members of the majority party would continue to receive more coverage. Any divergence from such an outcome was hypothesized to lean in favor of Democrats, on account of their role as opposition to President Bush. Instead, members of the majority party – Republicans through May, then Democrats – were no more likely to receive coverage, in contrast to the strong advantage Republicans held in the 105th Congress. Further, Democrats maintained their coverage deficit to Republicans in 2001, though the coefficient is not statistically significant in this first analysis. This seems to indicate the importance of routine and consistency in the congressional beat. Despite the change in power, journalists still turned to ranking-minority member Phil Gramm rather than new chair Paul Sarbanes when covering Banking issues, and continued to rely on Senator Murkowski as a knowledgeable and active advocate for energy policy, at the expense of Senator Bingaman. In fairness, this is a short window of time, made shorter – at least in terms of substantive policy work – by the events of September. It also should be noted that, in the absence of majority party as a meaningful predictor, the committee chairs were five times as likely to receive coverage as other members in 2001, holding other factors constant.

The most consistent finding across all analyses, including those yet to be reported, is the strong negative effect of ideological extremity on senators' ability to gain issue

coverage. In both sessions, for every point more extreme (on a 50-point scale with a standard deviation of 9), a senator was only 97 percent as likely to receive coverage as a similar senator one point more moderate. Apparently the norm of moderation helps journalists set the ideological boundaries, outside of which a senator ventures at the expense of issue association. It is possible, however, that the measurement of moderation serves as a proxy for qualities of a senator that make him or her a more viable policy spokesperson, of which moderation is only one. But the association between moderation and coverage clearly exists.

Turning to the indicators of senators' conscious efforts at policy association, bill sponsorship fails to predict coverage in either session. Having a website heavy with issue references, however, does give senators a modest coverage advantage over those who fail to mention the committee-relevant issue on their sites (108% as likely to receive coverage for every addition point on a scale that ranges from 0-18 with a mean of 4.8 and a standard deviation of 4.1).

Also, the positive results for the lagged coverage variables indicate the presence of attributes unique to each senator that are not picked up by other variables. In the 105th, a senator was more than twice as likely to receive policy coverage if he or she had done so the month before, and almost 4 ½ times as likely in 2001.

QUALITY OF MENTION: CREDIT VS. ASSOCIATION

To explore the nuances of senator issue coverage in more depth, the dependent variable was parsed into two exhaustive and mutually exclusive coverage indicators, depending on whether the senators were given *credit* within the story for substantive

policy initiation such as a bill or amendment proposal, or whether they were merely *associated* with the issue through opinion, a vote, floor or hearing testimony, or through mention of their committee membership.

For the most part, each equation is similar to the full analysis, though a couple of trends are worth noting. First, if bill sponsorship has any explanatory value, it should predict the ability to receive coverage that credits senators with such activity. In fact, during the 105th Congress, every bill sponsorship slightly increased the likelihood of receiving credit coverage (Table 2). Also, continuing the analysis of the startling findings from the 107th Congress, Democrats actually hold a marked disadvantage in association coverage in 2001, garnering on average only 67 percent as many months with at least one policy association article as Republicans. The parties were even, however, in credit, perhaps reflecting the greater volume of proposals made by the new majority party.

STORY SUBJECT / NEWS HOOK

For more detailed analysis, as well as for an additional robustness test of the primary findings, the policy coverage variable is further parsed into 4 mutually exclusive categories reflecting the news hook of the story. The categories are 1) ***Congressional***: a story about congressional action such as bill consideration, a vote, floor debate, a committee hearing, etc. 2) Non-congressional ***governmental***: a story about a presidential proposal or statement, a military or bureaucratic action or statement, a judicial action, etc. 3) ***Personal***: a news item or feature story about an individual senator, a story about personnel change within the Senate, or election coverage. 4) ***Exogenous event***: a story

about a discrete event or ongoing phenomenon outside of the government, such as the economy, crime, or a natural disaster. Even though the news hook might be an election or an exogenous event, the story still must mention the senator in the context of committee-relevant policy in order to be included in the data.

A couple of hypotheses about coverage under various conditions can be deduced from the theoretical framework. First, it is reasonable to expect senators to have more control in shaping coverage for events about Congress, as opposed to in the other three categories. Thus bills sponsored should affect Senators' policy coverage in Congress-related stories. Also, for news about other branches of government – which in this sample primarily consists of news about the executive branch – the balance norm should be at its maximum effect. Perhaps this is where Democrats will attain more coverage than Republicans during the Bush administration. Also, reporters might be more likely to defer to “officials” (committee chairs or high-ranking members) in stories about other branches in order to lend authority to the strive for balance. Also, it might be the case that, the farther removed from congressional action the stories are, the more likely the selection of congressional spokespersons might be idiosyncratic. After all, as noted above, senators make news about electoral and personal issues for a variety of reasons, some fairly haphazard and context-specific such as being in a close election or having a personal scandal. Thus it is hypothesized that policy stories with a personal or exogenous news hook will show less autocorrelation than those about governmental action (including Congress), indicating less consistency across time in the senators chosen as issue spokespersons. Finally, if being up for reelection has any effect at all on issue

coverage, it should come in stories with a personal news hook, as they include election coverage.

The results are mixed (tables 3 and 4). Senators do not hold more sway over their reputations in stories about Congress, despite the fact that many of the stories refer specifically to the bills they sponsor. In fact, only in the exogenous news-hook category did bills sponsored predict coverage. It is interesting to note, however, that website issue emphasis seems to be a robust predictor of policy coverage, affecting coverage in all but the personal category. That a measure with such large potential for random variance consistently predicts issue coverage is strong evidence of senators' effectiveness in establishing national policy reputations.

Far from solving the puzzle of Democratic senators' inability to balance the Bush administration's policy coverage when they take over the Senate, the analysis of the four coverage categories adds further intrigue to the puzzle. Where Democrats are most predicted to provide balance to the administration – in coverage of governmental statements and outcomes, most of which originate from the administration – Democrats are only 59 percent as likely as Republicans to receive policy mentions in 2001! Further, in none of the four categories does the majority party gain more coverage than the minority in 2001, despite that variable's powerful and consistent effect in the 105th Congress (when Republicans were both the majority party in the Senate and the primary spokespersons for the “other side”). Also, one might predict that if the norm of “balance” should manifest as equal coverage between the parties anywhere, it should happen in stories about exogenous events, when the subject is neither specific congressional proposals (which are more likely to come from the majority party) nor administration

action. Instead, for exogenous news-hook stories during the 105th Congress, Republicans were 8.4 times as likely as Democrats to receive policy coverage, by far the largest effect of the four categories.⁸ Additionally, contrary to prediction, high rank and chairship do not seem markedly better predictors of coverage for stories about non-congressional governmental action than for the other three categories.

As expected, lagged coverage better predicts coverage of both congressional and non-congressional governmental action than personal and exogenous news-hooks. Of the latter two, only for personal news in 2001 is lagged coverage significant. Meanwhile, for both types of governmental stories in both sessions, a senator is more likely to receive policy coverage if he/she did so the month before. Thus coverage across senators is more consistent from month to month for governmental stories, the subjects of which are more amenable to the routines of hierarchy-minded journalists, rather than idiosyncratic personal and exogenous stories, which any given month could involve a senator who otherwise is unable to garner policy coverage. Finally, though being up for reelection self-evidently leads to more election-related coverage for senators, this analysis shows that they are unable to turn such coverage into association with their pet policies. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the vast literature on the predominance of horse-race election news at the expense of policy coverage.

DISCUSSION

This paper is intended as one small slice of a larger, ongoing project to explore the systematic determinants of variation in the political news product in a variety of contexts. The conceptual framework guiding the larger project, articulated at the outset, argues that

news content is best studied by understanding the norms, routines, and constraints of news organizations – hardly a novel supposition – but also by embedding them in an analytical context most conducive to empirical testing. The basic insight is that variation in news content should be explained by variation in political reality, with journalistic norms as neither independent nor intervening variables, but rather as a mechanism through which to hypothesize about the translation of reality into coverage. Through this framework, true media power can be ascertained by measuring the influence of reality variables that affect coverage by virtue of being amenable to journalistic norms and routines, and that are not spurious to concrete exogenous-to-politics events or attempts by elite political actors to influence the news product.

Policy coverage of senators – which has never been studied systematically – is an appropriate venue in which to test the relative power of journalistic norms and routines versus news-making activity by image-conscious elected officials. With national news being such an important policy-making tool on Capitol Hill, it is worthwhile to give systematic treatment to the much-discussed game between Senators and Hill reporters. Such treatment yielded expected findings and some novel, surprise findings.

The focus here on policy coverage advanced the study of Congressional news past the focus on any news, the domain of other systematic studies. For example, while other studies have either failed to find an effect of ideological extremism or have found that more extreme senators receive more press attention, it turns out that the opposite is true for policy-related attention, at least in *The Washington Post*. A robust finding across all analyses herein is that more moderate senators achieve greater policy coverage. Also, though it is understood theoretically and has been demonstrated anecdotally that

committee chairs garner considerable press attention, in the 105th Congress the three examined were no more likely to receive policy coverage in any given month once committee rank and majority/minority status were controlled.

Overall, evidence is presented that senators are constrained heavily by their attributes that are more or less compatible with the norms of political news, most of which are out of their control. The modest association between the issues that senators choose to prioritize on their websites and the issues with which they are associated in *The Washington Post*, however, is at least preliminary indication that senators can compensate for low rank or minority status by selling their own issue reputation. A fruitful step for future research would be to design more direct measures of senators' intentional issue association, and their conscious efforts to make issue news. Along those lines, a study of senators' issue-related press releases will be conducted over the summer of 2002, time and resource permitting. Also, the study will be extended through the 106th Congress as well as into 2002 as an out-of-sample test of the findings presented herein.

APPENDIX 1

COLLECTION AND CODING OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Policy coverage of senators for the three committees was collected from the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe major newspapers database. All articles that in any way mentioned each senator were gathered with the following search:

“Sen.” or “Senator” and [name] (all in “full text”) for [period of analysis] in “Washington Post.”

Every article was read by a coder and evaluated for relevance; in other words, was the senator mentioned in the article in association with a committee-relevant policy? If yes, then the article was recorded as a policy mention for that senator in that month, and three additional coding choices were made:

1) **In what capacity was the senator mentioned in the story?** Six categories were created out of two coding dimensions:

- a) Was the senator given credit for a bill or amendment proposal? Or was the senator merely associated with the issue, through a public, floor, or hearing statement, or by reference to a vote or opinion?
- b) Was the story about the senator’s work on the issue? Or was it about the senator but merely mentioned the issue? Or did it merely mention the senator?

2) **What was the story’s news hook?**

News story about senator; feature story about senator; Senate personnel action (ascendance to chairship, etc.); campaign, horse race; campaign, issue; senator-involved, external-to-Congress event (fundraiser, etc.); exogenous event (coded in third coding choice); congressional action: confirmation, bill hearing, policy hearing, bill proposal/consideration, floor activity, vote, investigation, public statement, other (ceremony, etc.); alleged governmental wrongdoing; presidential administration statement/outcome; legislative-executive statement/outcome (that doesn’t fit “congressional action” category); bureaucratic statement/outcome; judicial decision/action; budget battle; misc. policy.

3) **Did an exogenous event/ongoing phenomenon precipitate the news hook?**

No; Yes: alleged non-governmental wrongdoing, real impact of policy, US economy (general), world issues (non-conflict), foreign conflict, social services, public safety/criminal justice, nature/environment, natural disaster, energy, business/commerce, financial sector, urban affairs, science/technology, other.

Two coders were used. Inter-coder reliability was over 90% for all choices.

APPENDIX 2

ALTERNATIVE MODEL ESTIMATION

Negative binomial regression (NBR) and zero-inflated negative binomial regression (ZINBR)

	NBR				ZINBR			
	105th		107th		105th		107th	
	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>
Committee Rank	-.239	.042	-.080	.034	.194	.064	-.005	.053
Committee Chair	-.308	.260	.808	.316	-4.007	25.60	-2.470	1.535
Majority party	.966	.149	.001	.178	-.975	.257	-.303	.290
Democrat			-.241	.178			.192	.304
Ideological extremity	-.025	.006	-.030	.011	.034	.013	.021	.018
Seniority	-.012	.014	.026	.011	-.007	.023	-.013	.026
Presidential run	-.525	.525	.436	.441	.176	1.102	-13.43	922.17
Presidential run, ever	.592	.372	.152	.311	-.668	.633	-1.575	1.051
Up for reelection	-.013	.214			.226	.432		
Bills sponsored	.083	.075	-.112	.118	-.091	.230	-.041	.260
Website mentions			.075	.020			-.056	.035
Lagged coverage	.256	.051	.249	.062	-.761	.233	-1.833	.447
Constant	1.722	.696	1.302	1.139	.096	.093	-.004	1.776
N	1288		748		1288		748	

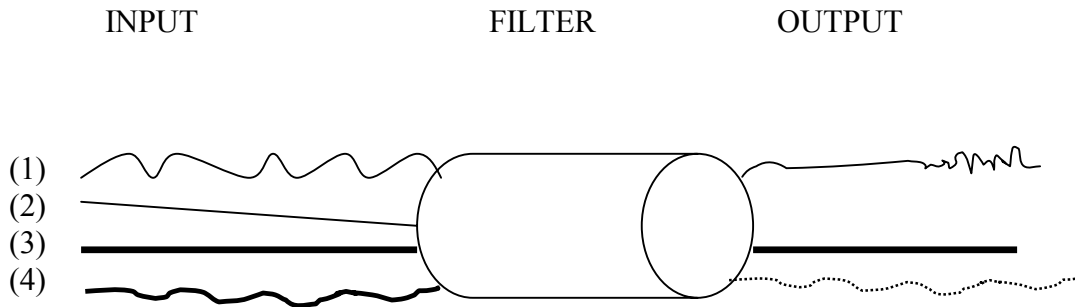
NOTES:

--ZINBR predicts non-coverage, rather than coverage; thus the signs are opposite that of logit or negative binomial.

--For ZINBR, all variables are inflated (predicting coverage vs. non-coverage rather than coverage count).

--NBR predicts coverage count.

FIGURE 1 – rays of light and a prism or lens



Some rays pass through the filter undisturbed (3)

Some rays pass through in a recognizable, though clearly diminished form (4)

Some rays pass through, but so altered as to be unrecognizable (1)

Finally, some rays don't pass through at all (2)

FIGURE 2 – The political news system

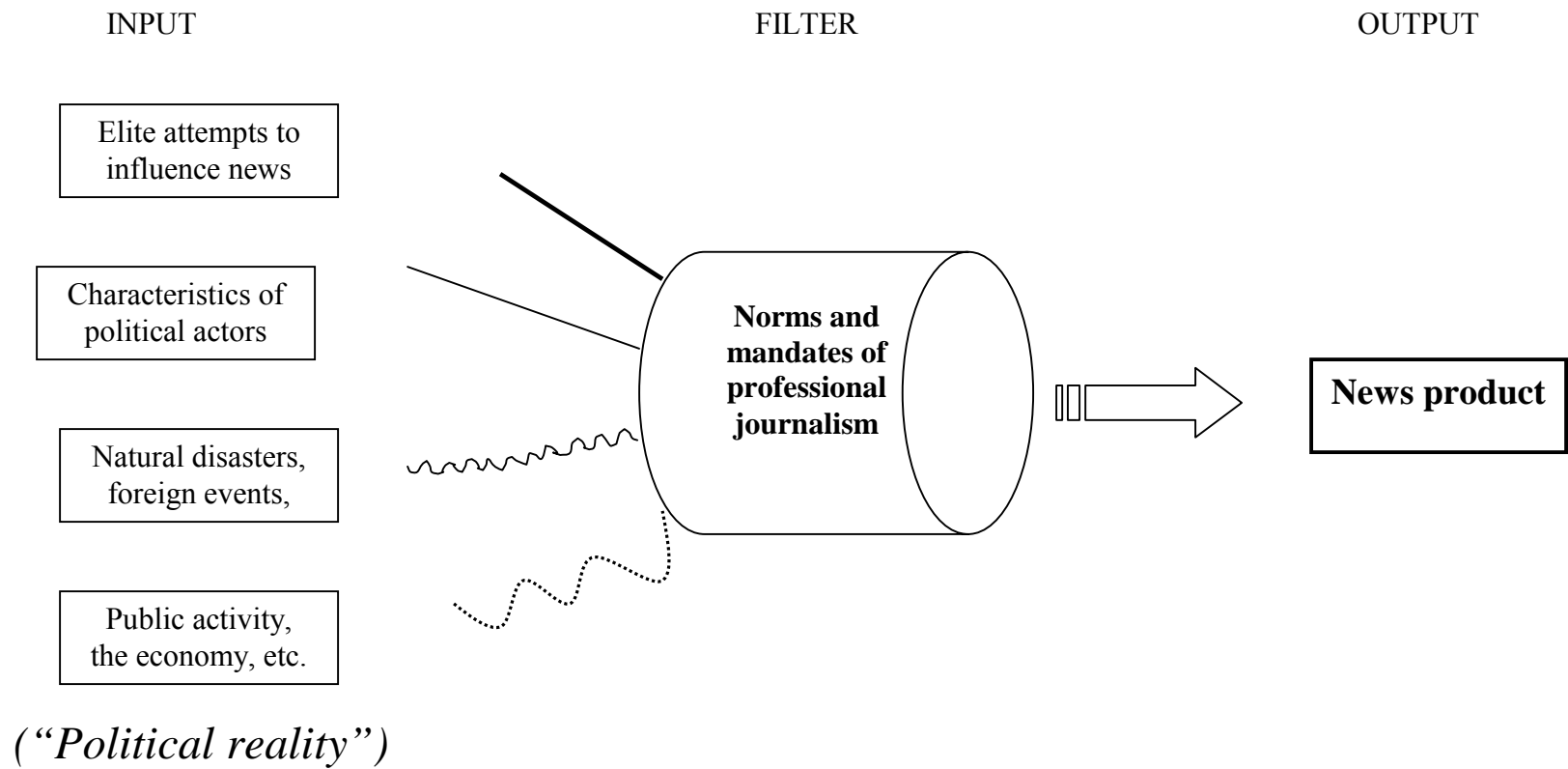


TABLE 1
Explaining the presence of policy coverage

	<u>105th Congress</u>			<u>107th Congress (2001)</u>		
	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Exp(B)</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Exp(B)</u>
Committee Rank	.206	.049	1.23	.043	.042	1.04
Committee Chair	.545	.371	1.72	1.604	.542	4.97
Majority party	.788	.171	2.20	.062	.219	1.06
Democrat				-.352	.231	.70
Ideological extremity	-.030	.007	.97	-.028	.014	.97
Seniority	-.009	.016	.99	.008	.017	1.01
Presidential run	-.338	.651	.71	.074	.724	1.08
Presidential run, ever	.468	.434	1.60	1.001	.579	2.72
Up for reelection	-.054	.287	.95			
Bills sponsored	.153	.112	1.17	.067	.145	1.07
Website mentions				.074	.025	1.08
Lagged coverage	.805	.156	2.24	1.481	.221	4.40
Constant	1.841	.838		.523	1.366	
N	1288			748		

Logistic regression, coefficients are unstandardized. Exp(B) are odds ratios.

Bolded results = $p < .05$ (one-tailed test)

TABLE 2
Explaining senators' coverage: policy credit and policy association

	105 th Congress						107 th Congress (2001)					
	<u>Credit</u>			<u>Association</u>			<u>Credit</u>			<u>Association</u>		
	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)
Committee Rank	.289	.105	1.34	.198	.051	1.22	.101	.071	1.11	.029	.045	1.03
Committee Chair	.215	.501	1.24	.473	.365	1.60	1.640	.593	5.16	.751	.495	2.12
Majority party	1.377	.331	3.96	.661	.177	1.94	.362	.361	1.44	-.011	.234	.99
Democrat							.016	.365	1.02	-.402	.243	.67
Ideo. extremity	-.027	.013	.97	-.033	.008	.97	-.007	.023	.99	-.034	.015	.97
Seniority	.013	.032	1.01	-.018	.017	.98	-.016	.023	.98	.019	.017	1.02
Presidential run	2.076	1.254	7.97	-.710	.677	.49	-1.014	.911	.36	.375	.676	1.45
Pres. run, ever	-1.408	1.040	.24	.827	.444	2.29	1.568	.682	4.80	.854	.522	2.35
Reelection	.536	.380	1.71	-.171	.301	.84						
Bills sponsored	.226	.129	1.25	.134	.109	1.14	-.014	.214	.99	.105	.147	1.11
Website mentions							.060	.041	1.06	.076	.027	1.08
Lagged coverage	.137	.170	1.15	.401	.084	1.49	.916	.265	2.50	.495	.117	1.64
Constant	-.268	1.515		2.048	.853		-2.234	2.296		.867	1.459	
N	1288			1288			748			748		

Logistic regression, coefficients are unstandardized. Exp(B) are odds ratios.
Bolded results = p<.05 (one-tailed test)

TABLE 3
Explaining senators' coverage in congressional and non-congressional governmental stories

	105 th Congress						107 th Congress (2001)					
	<u>Congressional</u>			<u>Governmental</u>			<u>Congressional</u>			<u>Governmental</u>		
	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)
Committee Rank	.162	.059	1.18	.363	.074	1.44	.114	.058	1.12	.026	.055	1.03
Committee Chair	.164	.380	1.18	-.184	.396	.83	1.079	.500	2.94	1.447	.519	4.25
Majority party Democrat	.811	.213	2.25	1.053	.226	2.87	-.103	.290	.90	-.308	.283	.73
							-.210	.299	.81	-.524	.288	.59
Ideo. extremity	-.019	.009	.98	-.023	.009	.98	-.044	.018	.96	-.030	.018	.97
Seniority	.016	.020	1.02	-.052	.023	.95	.010	.019	1.01	.019	.019	1.02
Presidential run	.565	.761	1.76	-.133	.810	.26	-.373	.723	.69	.499	.712	1.65
Pres. run, ever	-.082	.544	.92	1.29	.581	3.63	.697	.549	2.01	.813	.555	2.25
Reelection	.382	.304	1.47	-.372	.363	.69						
Bills sponsored	.179	.110	1.20	.018	.117	1.02	.139	.158	1.15	.020	.174	1.02
Website mentions							.127	.032	1.14	.061	.033	1.06
Lagged coverage	.375	.139	1.45	.315	.120	1.37	.342	.205	1.41	.308	.152	1.36
Constant	-.312	.974		1.587	1.059		1.518	1.781		.285	1.778	
N	1288			1288			748			748		

Logistic regression, coefficients are unstandardized. Exp(B) are odds ratios.
Bolded results = p<.05 (one-tailed test)

TABLE 4
Explaining senators' coverage in personal-senator and exogenous-event stories

	105 th Congress						107 th Congress (2001)					
	<u>Personal</u>			<u>Exogenous</u>			<u>Personal</u>			<u>Exogenous</u>		
	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)	B	SE	Exp(B)
Committee Rank	.140	.101	1.15	1.542	.440	4.67	-.037	.092	.96	.327	.116	1.39
Committee Chair	1.128	.551	3.09	-2.930	1.098	.05	1.360	.745	3.90	1.409	.689	4.09
Majority party Democrat	1.041	.387	2.83	2.128	.702	8.40	.713	.472	2.04	-.132	.506	.88
							-1.016	.491	.36	-.686	.520	.50
Ideo. extremity	-.043	.012	.96	-.092	.022	.91	.001	.034	1.00	-.049	.034	.95
Seniority	.000	.034	1.00	-.216	.083	.81	.048	.027	1.05	.001	.030	1.00
Presidential run	-.541	1.458	.58	-3.85	2.35	.02	.493	1.208	1.64	-.735	1.356	.50
Pres. run, ever	.601	.925	1.82	4.13	1.87	62.18	.318	.786	1.37	-.456	.775	.63
Reelection	.468	.460	1.60	.529	.564	1.70						
Bills sponsored	-.058	.149	.94	.451	.172	1.57	-.410	.357	.66	-.052	.228	.95
Website mentions							.075	.054	1.08	.096	.054	1.10
Lagged coverage	.371	.261	1.45	.158	.397	1.17	.715	.318	2.04	-.122	.402	.89
Constant	.354	1.411		10.862	3.461		-4.839	3.411		2.517	3.488	
N	1288			1288			748			748		

Logistic regression, coefficients are unstandardized. Exp(B) are odds ratios.
Bolded results = p<.05 (one-tailed test)

REFERENCES

- Cook, Timothy E. (1998). *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Efron, Edith (1971). *The News Twisters*. Los Angeles: Nash.
- Epstein, Edward Jay (1973). *News from Nowhere: Television and the News*. New York: Random House.
- Gans, Herbert (1979). *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Graber, Doris A. (1997). *Mass Media and American Politics*, 5th ed. Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Kahn, Kim Fridkin, and Patrick J. Kenney (1999). *The Spectacle of U.S. Senate Campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kernell, Samuel (1997). *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Washington: Congressional Quarterly.
- Kuklinski, James H., and Lee Sigelman (1992). "When Objectivity is not Objective: Network Television News Coverage of U.S. Senators and the 'Paradox of Objectivity.'" *The Journal of Politics*, 54: 810-833.
- Lichter, Robert (1986). *The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers*. Adler and Adler Publishers.
- Lowry, Dennis T., and Jon A. Shidler (1995). "The Sound Bites, The Biters, and the Bitten: An Analysis of Network TV News Bias in Campaign '92." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 72: 33-44.
- Miller, Susan H. (1977). "News Coverage of Congress: the Search For the Ultimate Spokesman." *Journalism Quarterly* 54: 459-65.
- Shields, Todd, and Robert K. Goidel (1996). "The President and Congress as Sources in Television News Coverage of the National Debt." *Polity* 28: 401-410.
- Squire, Peverill (1988). "Who Gets National News Coverage in the U.S. Senate?" *American Politics Quarterly* 16: 139-156.
- Tuchman, Gaye (1978). *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: Free Press.

¹ Time constraints prohibited the examination of the 106th Congress. So why skip to 2001 instead of going sequentially to 1999? The answer is that 2001 provides a natural experiment to answer certain questions – such as “what happens to senators’ news coverage during a partisan power shift?” – that no other recent year could answer.

² This was the strong impression formed by those who read thousands of articles for this project.

³ For example, the set of code words that would have been needed to produce an exhaustive list of armed services articles would include: military, armed, army, navy, air force, war, defense, etc. And even that would 1) undoubtedly miss many articles, and 2) include such articles as one about Senator Carnahan’s sponsorship of a bill “to require the Secretary of Agriculture to provide payments to producers of forage crops for losses due to *army* worms.” [Emphasis added]

⁴ Bills were obtained from the Lexis-Nexis Congressional Universe database. All bills sponsored by each senator were examined by coders and included if deemed relevant to the issue jurisdiction of the appropriate committee.

⁵ Two points were given for each short (one sentence or less) reference to an issue, as well as for links to information about the issue, on the homepage. Three points were given for a more-than-one-sentence issue write-up on the homepage. Secondary pages were included only if 1) links to them appeared on the homepage, and 2) if they dealt with issue positions, legislation, or committee assignments. All websites had at least one such link, and most had one or two. Exactly one secondary page was coded for each senator, though all were examined to find the one with the most policy references. On secondary pages, two points were given for each write-up, and one point for each mention of the issue.

⁶ As the data is stacked from January to December for each senator, the variable excludes the first month observed for each senator to avoid a situation where, for example, Senator Allard’s January, 1997, coverage count is predicted by the prior case, Senator Akaka’s December, 1998, coverage. Though the loss of cases is regrettable, degrees of freedom must be lost to account properly for potential autocorrelation in panel data.

⁷ In all analyses, the three committees are combined. This is for two reasons: 1) any theoretical motivation for separating them would be purely ad hoc, since it is difficult to compare three cases systematically. 2) Upon separate analysis, the committees appear to work with roughly the same processes (for spatial considerations, these analyses are not included, but are available from the author upon request). In general, the armed services committee bears the most fruit, because it has the least skewed dependent variable (that is, senators received more military-related coverage than energy or banking).

⁸ Coefficients, of course, are not comparable across models with different dependent variables. But the sheer magnitude of difference between the majority coefficient for the exogenous category and for the other three categories makes reasonably safe the assumption that it exerts a larger effect than the other three.