Research Note:
U.S. Senate Elections and Newspaper Competition

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The contextual factors that structure electoral contests affect election outcomes. This research examines the impact of one such factor, the existence of newspaper competition, on the closeness of election results for U.S. Senate elections, using county-level data. Using counties with cities over 50,000 in population, the study finds that additional daily newspapers in a county lead to closer elections. Controls for socio-economic factors are incorporated into the analysis. The possibility that the finding reflects a regional difference between the South and non-South is explored and rejected. Implications of these findings are briefly discussed.

Context matters. Election outcomes are the product not only of voter attributes and attitudes and of campaign specific factors such as incumbency, but also of constituency characteristics that structure the electoral contest. Recent work on the information context in campaigns has demonstrated the impact of media market-district fit (Campbell et al. 1984; Goldenberg & Traugott 1984; Prinz 1991), the effect of television market advertising purchases (Goldenberg & Traugott 1987), and the relative cost of reaching voters through television in various states (Stewart & Reynolds 1990). Collectively, this body of research suggests strongly that the information environment within which voters learn about candidates and campaigns and within which campaigners attempt to reach the electorate affects the outcome of the contest.

Because newspapers remain an important source of voter information (Wagner 1983), especially for non-presidential races, the effect of the newspaper environment on electoral outcomes also should be considered. Specifically, in contexts where more than one daily newspaper is available, elections may turn out differently than in monopoly newspaper markets. For one thing, readers of one daily may perceive the candidates differently from those who read another paper. Candidates have greater opportunities to place stories in the press, because different editors may make somewhat different news judgments and because deadlines may vary. Finally, dailies in a multi-newspaper market may be inclined to cover campaigns and elections more thoroughly, given the competitive pressures they experience (e.g., see Lacy 1987).

From a different perspective, another line of research has developed the notion that the richness of the information environment itself may lead to greater voter awareness of campaigns. Chaffee and Wilson (1977) found more diverse public agendas in communities in a "media-rich" environment than those in "media-poor" environments. Zukin and Snyder (1984) discovered that citizens in

an area well-served by media are even cognizant of elections they are not eligible to vote in. Clark and Fredin (1978) point out that the passive influence of the media environment is felt even by those who do not seek information. Goldenberg and Traugott (1987) found that both recognition and recall of candidates was influenced greatly by the nature of the media environment where voters lived. And Lasorsa recently demonstrated an effect of newspaper competition on the "variety of political opinions publicly encountered in a community" (1991, 39). In other words, the environment itself may have an impact on election outcomes.

Hypothesis and Method

The effect I investigate here is closeness of election outcomes. Using county-level data, I ask whether elections for U.S. Senate are closer where more daily newspapers are published. Every U.S. county with a city of at least 50,000 in population that was at least fifty miles distant from a larger city in the same state was included in the analysis. The fifty-mile criterion admittedly is arbitrary. Since there is no standard for newspaper markets as there is for television markets (the Area of Dominant Influence, or ADI), I chose fifty miles as a compromise between isolation of counties from other newspaper markets and generating a large number of cases for the study. A total of 194 counties were selected (including five independent cities and counting New York City as one county). Elections in 1986 and 1988 were examined.

The dependent variable, closeness of election outcomes, was measured by subtracting 50 from the percentage of the vote received by the winning candidates. In the rare cases where the winner received less than 50% of the vote, 50 was subtracted from the winner's percentage of the two-party vote. The chief explanatory variable was operationalized as the total of the number of general circulation daily newspapers published in the county, according to *Gale's Directory of Publications*. Given the way these variables are measured, a negative relationship indicates closer elections where more newspapers circulate.

Because both newspaper competition and the closeness of elections may reflect socio-economic diversity in an area, several control variables were added. The percentage of owner-occupied housing and the percentage of high school graduates were included to tap sources of such diversity. Campaign-specific factors were controlled for by a dummy variable for incumbency and by relative candidate quality, measured by the difference between the ratings each candidate receives on Abramowitz's (1988) scale. Ratio of campaign spending also was computed and included in the analysis. It was measured as the percentage of the total expenditures of both candidates accounted for by the outlays of the leading spender. Other contextual factors included were region and level of party competition, as indicated by calculating, over the last three presidential elections, the average departure of the county vote for president from the national average. Multicollinearity among these variables was not a problem.

Results

The closeness of election outcomes in races for the U.S. Senate at the county level is significantly related to the number of dailies therein. For each additional newspaper published in the county, electoral results tend to be more than 1.2 percentage points closer (see Table 1). The effect is consistent, showing up early in the stepwise regression and maintaining its relative magnitude as other variables entered the equation. The regression as a whole accounted for over 26 percent of the variance.

Table 1. Determinants of Closeness of Election Outcomes in U.S. Senate Elections

Variable	b (S.E. of b)	significance
Number of dailies	-1.21 (.40)	.01
Campaign sending ratio	20.60 (2.87)	.001
Percent Owner-occupied housing	-0.23 (.06)	.001
Educational level	-0.11 (.05)	.05
Party competition	0.17 (.10)	.05
Region	-2.49 (1.03)	.01
Candidate quality	-0.94 (.42)	.05
Incumbent in race	1.10 (1.38)	n.s.

$R_2 = .51$
$R = .26$
$N = 263$

The control variables generally functioned as expected. The campaign spending measure had the largest overall effect: the closer the opposing candidates are in their campaign expenditures, the closer the election outcome. Despite the fact that this variable was measured at the state level and applied to county-level data, it still accounted for a larger proportion of the variance than any other factor. Its robustness demonstrates not only the importance of the relative campaign funding of competing candidates, but also the opportunities that the larger cities (the ones located in the counties analyzed here) present for effective use of campaign resources to attract voter support. Although candidates make strategic decisions to concentrate their resources in one geographic area or another,

the statewide measure of campaign spending still performs very well at the county level. Both the housing and the education variables also contribute to the overall explanation of the closeness of election outcomes.

Perhaps surprisingly, incumbency by itself did not affect election closeness after campaign spending and differences in candidate quality were taken into account. Party competition levels in the county barely met conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .05$, one-tailed test), suggesting that competition at the U.S. Senate level taps some of the same factors that are involved in presidential elections. Finally, as may be expected, elections in southern states still are significantly less competitive than in northern states.

The size of the regional effect suggests that separate regressions by region should be estimated. The results of those regressions, reported in Table 2, demonstrate that political competition in the South is markedly different than in the rest of the nation. The party competition factor fades into insignificance in the

Table 2. Determinants of Closeness of Election Outcomes,
by Region

Variables	South b (S.E. of b)	significance	Non-South b (S.E. of b)	signficance
Number of dailies	-2.15 (.88)	.01	-0.96 (.43)	.05
Campaign spending	11.42	.05	20.50	.001
Percent owner-occupied housing	-0.44 (.11)	.001	-0.12 (.07)	n.s.
Educational level	-0.20 (.10)	.05	-0.15 (.06)	.05
Party competition	-0.19 (.19)	n.s.	0.31 (.13)	.05
Candidate quality	0.32 (.82)	n.s.	-1.23 (.49)	.05
Incumbent in race	-2.42 (2.11)	n.s	3.55 (1.89)	.05
$R_2=$	.59		.54	
$R =$	.35		.29	
$N =$	94		169	

South but increases in strength for the non-South, indicating that differences among counties in party competition are much less significant in the South (and in fact much smaller in size, with a standard deviation of 3.96 compared to the non-south's 8.01). With a less competitive party environment, candidate spending ratios also are less important (although still statistically significant) in the South. And, for the same reason, the effect of incumbency is greater in the non-South.

For our purpose here, the effect of the number of daily newspapers published in the county is of more immediate interest. Although region made a difference in a number of other variables in the model, the impact of daily newspapers is substantially more impressive in the South than elsewhere. Although each additional daily in a county outside the South increases competitiveness by about one percent, within the South the effect more than doubles in magnitude. Yet in both regions, the effect that the number of daily newspapers published in a county has on the closeness of election outcomes is statistically significant, confirming the finding reported in Table 1. The effect of multiple newspaper counties, then, did not arise spuriously through a differential effect by region. In fact, the overall explanatory power of the model was greater within each region than it was for the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

Contextual variables that capture the nature of the information environment within which voters live, and within which campaigners have to operate, affect election outcomes. Generally, contextual variables are not subject to manipulation by candidates during the course of a campaign. However, they do represent structural elements that impinge significantly on their strategic choices. Multiple newspapers give candidates multiple outlets for their messages, and voters multiple sources of electoral information. Candidates' strategic choices can be expected to reinforce the impact of the number of daily papers operating in a county.

The political context therefore is not neutral for candidates. Its effect is neither random nor insignificant. The findings reported here suggest that even such a factor as the number of daily newspapers, generally disregarded by political analysts, may play a consistent role in the electoral drama. Campaigners then must sculpt a strategy designed to take advantage of the opportunities, and to avoid the pitfalls, that the newspaper configuration and other elements of the political context provide.

The next step is to explore the content of the information environments that voters experience. Specifically, an examination of the extent to which papers in multi-newspaper communities differ from papers in single-newspaper areas should indicate whether the results found here can be attributed factually to competition among dailies. Although newspapers clearly compete with each other economically, it remains to be established whether and how much they compete politically. In other words, having found that one element of the political context affects electoral races, it now is appropriate to determine *how*, specifically, that element may contribute to the results presented here.

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