

**News Media and the State Policy Process:
Perspectives from Legislators and Political Professionals**

Christopher A. Cooper
Department of Political Science and Public Affairs
Western Carolina University
ccooper@email.wcu.edu

Martin Johnson
Department of Political Science
University of California, Riverside
martin.johnson@ucr.edu

Abstract

We investigate the influence of the mass media in the policy process from the perspective of political professionals in the states and the ratings of state legislators. We develop a theoretical explanation for variations in the perceived importance of the media based on the attributes of state legislatures, the structure and activity of state press corps, as well as individual characteristics of lawmakers. In developing this theoretical approach to the relative influence of news media in state policymaking, we draw on contemporary political communication scholarship, as well as in-depth interviews with public information officers conducted in six states. We test our expectations using a hierarchical linear model of media influence ratings collected in the mid-1990s by Carey, Neimi, and Powell (2002b), merged with contextual measures of attributes of state press corps, tapping their ability to monitor and investigate officials as well as their follow through with covering state government. We find that legislative professionalism conditions the relationship between the attributes of the press corps and their perceived influence on the policy process.

Paper prepared for presentation at the 2007 State Politics and Policy Conference, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, February 22-24. This research was supported by a Western Carolina University Summer Research Grant, UC–Riverside Regents’ Faculty Fellowship, UC–Riverside Academic Senate, and Rice University Department of Political Science. The authors thank Jason Coggins and Alison Melnikova for research assistance, and Margie Ferguson, Ron Hedlund, Nancy Martorano, Chris Mooney, Tracy Sulkin, and Charlie Wheeler for their hospitality. We also owe a debt of gratitude to the state government public information officers, capitol reporters, and other informants willing to discuss their work with us. Any errors are our own.

News Media and the State Policy Process: Perspectives from Legislators and Political Professionals

News media are a primary vehicle through which the public gains information about the political process. Consequently, people often consider the topics covered by the media to be among the most important in American politics. The public is not the only ones who use the media, however. Politicians consume media to learn what their constituents want (Herbst 1996) and attempt to influence the media to further their own political interests (Cook 1998). Despite a sense that the media are important, we know little about how the media affect the policy process, or even how their influence varies—particularly in the American states (Clucas 2003).

Much research on political communication assumes an invariant set of explanations for the importance of news media (e.g., Graber 2002). However, we anticipate variation in the importance of the news media across state institutional and social contexts. If the roles and importance of legislative staff, bureaucrats, the governor, and interest groups in the policy process vary across institutional contexts, why should journalists be any different? For example, we already know that policy makers vary in their strategic approach to news media across the states (Cooper 2002) and we know that the size of the press corps varies across states (Layton and Walton 1998; Layton and Dorroh 2003). Likewise, we expect that because of individual-level attributes, some policymakers will perceive the media to be more important than others.

We investigate the role of news media in the policy process at the state level. We develop a theoretical explanation for variations in the perceived importance of the media based on the attributes of state legislatures, the structure and activity of state press corps, as well as individual characteristics of lawmakers. In developing this theoretical approach to

the relative importance of news media in state policymaking, we draw on contemporary political communication scholarship, as well as in-depth interviews with public information officers conducted in six states. We find that legislative professionalism conditions the relationship between the attributes of the press corps and their perceived importance in the policy process.

Do Reporters Influence Public Policy?

Traditionally, scholars have viewed the news media through the lens of electoral politics—assuming that the media’s largest role is in influencing electoral outcomes. The logic here is simple. Politicians want to gain name recognition and generate favorable impressions, therefore they court journalists to give them free media and further these goals. Journalists, who need to generate stories and for this, quote official sources, frequently comply with legislators’ wishes. Because each side needs something from one another, they each work hard to achieve their individual goals, while simultaneously not alienating the other actor. Despite some evidence that the media affect the policy process (as well as electoral dynamics), the political science literature supported the election-based view of the news media, assigning them a limited role in public policy making. For example, Hess characterizes the unlikely influence of the media thusly, “trying to use the media to get legislation through Congress is a Rube Goldberg design based on (A) legislator influencing (B) reporter to get information into (C) news outlet so as to convince (D) voters who will put pressure on (E) other legislators” (Hess 1986: 103).

Despite this skepticism, the media are important outside of the electoral arena. Linsky (1986) suggests that modern policymaking cannot be understood without understanding how the media inform policymakers and serve as an aid to politicians who

wish to influence the public and governmental agenda. Similarly, Cook (1989) and Kedrowski (1996) argue that members of Congress are media entrepreneurs who use the media to achieve policy goals. These media strategies complement, rather than replace traditional means of legislating. Nonetheless, the lesson that media tactics are an important part of the policy process is unassailable. Cook (1998, 150) summarizes the current situation at the national level: “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.”

Recent work makes clear that the media are also important to state policy makers, both in the electoral politics (Hogan 1997) and policy (Cooper 2002; Rosenthal 1998) arenas. Cooper (2002) finds that legislators use the media to communicate with others. Constituents are the most frequently mentioned target of media tactics, but the majority of legislators also consider other legislators, interest groups, the governor, and even other media as important targets of media tactics. On average, legislators consider media tactics to be more effective than most traditional tactics of legislating, except for contacting the Governor’s office and speaking on the floor (which are tied with media tactics in importance).¹

Many characterizations of news media influence on the policy process ultimately underscore their importance vis-à-vis the stories they write. Graber (2002) underscores multiple roles for reporters in the policy process, but most of these involve the content that reporters produce. For example, she suggests reporters can act as mouthpieces for public officials, agenda setters, and framers. She suggests that on rare occasions, reporters become

¹ Legislators are not alone in using the media to advance policy goals. Dunn (1968), Sigal, (1973), and Graham (1953) demonstrate the media are important to bureaucrats and other political actors.

more involved in policy making as surrogates for public officials in their dealings with other officials, but the majority of the ways news media affect policy ultimately hinge on the stories they write.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) popularized the agenda setting function of the news, in the context of political campaigns, but news media influence policy agendas. Hays and Glick (1997), for example, show that national trends in news coverage affect state-level policy adoption. The agenda-setting function of news media is perhaps best summarized by Cohen: “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen 1963: 13).

Political scientists have been particularly interested in how news media agendas and content affect public opinion (see Leighley 2004 for a review of this literature). One consequence of this research is that many scholars anticipate the influence of the media on public policy will obtain solely through their affect on public opinion via news stories. We anticipate the policy importance of news media includes patterns of coverage and its effects on the mass public, but that their policy influence extends beyond media agendas and news stories that are written. For example, Molotch, Protess, and Gordon (1987) develop the Muckraking Model and several variants for understanding the influence of the news media in the policy process. Their main model charts five potential steps to connect the behavior of reporters and changes in public policies:

...muckrakers (*investigative journalists*) unearth evidence of a problem. The exposure (*publication*) leads to the mobilization of changed *public opinion*, which in turn is reflected in *policy initiatives* by legislators and administrators, followed by some sort of *policy consequence*. (p.29)

They provide a schematic for this model:

Journalistic Investigation → Publication → Public Opinion → Policy Initiatives → Policy Consequences

To affect policy, reporters do not necessarily need to move through each of these five steps. A number of variations on the model involve “leaping impacts” (Molotch et al., 1987: 34). For our purposes here, two of the leaps they describe are particularly interesting. Policy makers can react to news stories upon reading them, absent observed changes in public opinion on an issue. Exposure of the problem, alongside expectations of eventual public reaction on an issue can move policy makers to act. Policy makers can react to journalistic investigation itself, without reporters even writing a news story. The threat of publication can be enough to cause policy makers to act. These alternative routes for reporters in the policy process do not require citizens to be affected by media messages: “Even though publicity rarely causes a tidal surge of public opinion, fear that it might do so makes the media more successful in gaining their objectives” (Graber 2002:167).

Media Influence from the Perspective of Political Professionals

To elaborate on the elements of media influence on the policy process, we examine the perceptions of state political professionals who work with state capitol reporters. Following Beamer (2002), we believe that in-depth interviewing is too rarely used in studies of American politics. As part of our larger project investigating the politics of newsgathering in the American states, we interviewed public information officers (PIOs) in six state capitals: Augusta, Maine; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Columbus, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Lansing, Michigan; and Springfield, Illinois.² In each state, we attempted to interview the PIO for the governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general, legislative leaders for the Democratic and Republican parties in each chamber, and state agencies

² We elaborate on the selection of these state capitols, our procedures for interviewing participants, and other details elsewhere (Cooper and Johnson, 2006), but offer a brief description of the fieldwork in an appendix.

responsible for education, health, and transportation policy. We interviewed 27 public information officers and focus on their perceptions of the role of reporters in the policy process here. Our investigation of the personal politics of newsgathering at the state lends support to the general framework Molotch et al. (1987) develop and underscore the role of the content of news reports and the *potential content* of news reports.

Attention to news content emerged in several of our conversations with PIOs. Several of these political communicators are attentive to particular news outlets as a function of their readership. According to a PIO in Indiana, “the big papers have big voices.” A Wyoming PIO appreciated the importance of the news media to inform the public, in a way that closely corresponds to Graber’s expectation that news media can serve as a mouthpiece for policy makers: “We really rely on them to get the word out about what’s occurring in state government and rely on them to share with the public what’s happening...I think that’s true for most state agencies.” Other PIOs recognized the agenda-setting function of news media. One of our informants in Indiana was explicit on this point: “I’d almost say they set the agenda. Like, we pitch it out there, and they pick what they want.”

Several PIOs suspect that news content influences public opinion in a manner consistent with the expectations of many social scientists and other political observers – effects on the policy process via audience reactions. An informant in Indiana told us, that given story on a particular topic “you get reaction from viewers and from readers about that and it can completely change an agency’s policy direction. For good or for the bad, it really depends. It depends on how the story was reported.” These presumed media effects are thought potentially destructive to political actors. For example, one Ohio PIO said, “the newspaper can make or break public opinion. Thirty years of a reputation can be spoiled with a 30-second sound bite...that’s why they’re the Fourth Estate.”

Some of the PIOs with whom we spoke suspected the media are influential, but could not necessarily explain why. Some of these people inferred the importance of the media from their own actions: “They affect public policy, if they didn’t affect public policy we wouldn’t spend so much of our time trying to woo them,” another Ohio PIO explained. This may be because the influence of the media is not necessarily directly observable from the reaction of the public.

Several PIOs seemed to suggest forms of the leaping impact model are at work in the states, with the media’s influence exerted via coverage, but not necessarily from public reaction to it: “Does having the press corps here impact 95 percent of the people out in the state? Probably not, but for the people who are within capitol square, they look at that...they read what the press corps writes,” an Ohio PIO said. Another PIO in Ohio said officials anticipate press reaction, suggesting that even investigation may not be required for the news media to influence public policy, “This is particularly true as new administrations come in or new people come in to higher management level of government: One of the things that they’ll ask if we go into a crisis mode or a policymaking mode, they’ll say, ‘Well, what’s the press going to say?’”

The influence of the media in the policy process is not uniformly large or small, contrary to the characterization of many students of political communication. One of the main limitations on the influence of reporters in the policy process is the level of policy expertise in the press corps. We conclude with two illustrative quotes from informants on this point. In Maine, a PIO explained that reporters have been unable to influence the governmental agenda on social policy because most lack depth in the policy area: “With child welfare, there’s a very interesting, sophisticated story there. They’ve written stories that say the system is broken, but they’ve never really drilled down and explained the dynamics of

why. And that would be a great story.” This information asymmetry has implications for what gets covered. “You have to explain it to them, and if they don’t understand it, they’re not going to write about it,” an informant in Indiana said.

These comments paint a reasonably complicated picture on the role of the media in the policy process, which we hope to untangle here. In spite of the all-encompassing models of many researchers, the media potentially have more than one source of influence on the policy process – they can affect policy via the stories they write, the investigations they undertake, and potential by their mere presence. Similarly, it is clear that the media will not be perceived influential by everyone in the same way. We see a great deal of variation in the estimated influence of the media among PIOs. Sub-national variation in this area has simply been overlooked. Next we attempt to understand under what conditions the media will be deemed influential to the policy process.

Explaining the Influence of News Media in the Policy Process

We develop a number of expectations about how state policymakers will perceive the greater influence of the news media. We have state legislators in mind, given our source of data for hypothesis testing (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2002b). In explaining the influence of the media, we focus on individual characteristics of policy makers and the contexts in which they operate. Researchers have shown that individual policy makers will perceive the importance of the media differently as a function of individual attributes, including their age, sex, and partisanship. We also investigate the role career ambition plays in perceiving influence of the news media. However, we also underscore the importance of institutional and contextual factors as well. Each of these variables is explained in turn.

Individual Policy Maker Characteristics and Media Influence

Kedrowski (1996) finds that age is an importance influence on whether legislators believe the media are important and useful tools in the policy process. Younger legislators may be shut out of the traditional policy process, and may be more in tune to how to cater to the media than their older counterparts. She finds that this relationship holds, even while controlling for seniority. Similarly, female legislators may be shut out of traditional means of legislating, and thus may find the media to be an important means of legislating outside of the traditional policy process, communicating with a broader audience and expanding the scope of conflict. In analysis of state legislators in three states, Cooper (2002) finds that women are more likely to rate media tactics as important, even while controlling for a host of other factors.

The media are often perceived (whether accurately or not) to be predominately made up of liberal Democrats and this ideological make-up is often presumed to affect coverage. Because of this perceived bias, we hypothesize that Democratic politicians will view the media as more useful than their Republican counterparts. The limited evidence on this matter provides some support for this expectation. Cooper (2001) finds that Democrats are more voracious consumers of the media than Republicans and Kedrowski (1996) finds that Democrats generally view the media as more useful in the policy process.

The final individual-level attribute which should affect opinions on the importance of the media is legislator career ambition. Mass media organizations are venues for publicity to increase name recognition and raise a politician's profile. We expect strategic, ambitious politicians to have a firm grasp of this. Similarly, ambitious politicians will be more keenly aware that news organizations can potential negatively affect their reputation and image.

Consequently, we believe that legislators who have stronger career ambitions are likely to believe the media are important actors in the policy process.

Contextual Factors in Evaluating the Media's Policy Influence

The context of state policy making should strongly influence the perceived importance of the news media. Although there is some (limited) literature on individual factors affecting opinions on the importance of the media, there is almost no research on the contextual factors that affect the importance of the media in the policy process. We believe this is a major limitation of the current literature on media politics as reporters are not just observers of, but rather participants in politics and policy making. As such, their power is constrained in systematic ways by the incentives and disincentives provided by political institutions. As we discuss above, we expect news media to be important as a function of their actual coverage of state politics, as well as their ability to investigate state government, and their potential to investigate the state policy process.

To be sure, coverage of state government varies substantially at the state level. Presumably, the extent to which news organizations actually cover state politics—produce stories about state policy making—will be associated with increased perceptions that the media are important in the policy process. However, beyond actual coverage patterns, news bureaus in state capital cities vary substantially in their opportunities to monitor state political actors and in their capacities to investigate state government.

We have discovered tremendous variability in the physical location of state capitol press corps and in the size of state capitol bureaus (Cooper and Johnson 2006). Some states provide convenient office space for reporters. In many states, these will be offices for news organizations to rent, other states offer free space to state capitol reporters. For example,

the Illinois state capitol press corps is housed in a suite of offices overlooking the foyer to the Governor's Office in the Statehouse. In other states, reporters have offices scattered around the capitol complex. In Michigan, reporters have offices in every direction around the capitol, but no space inside of it. We think this will have implications for the perceived importance of reporters.³ Compared to reporters with offices in a state capitol building, reporters with offices outside capitol should find it more difficult to cover legislative proceedings from inside the chamber itself. In states where reporters are housed in the state capitol, legislators will have more contact with the press, and consequently, will likely see them as a more influential in the policy process. If reporters are not in the chamber, they should be perceived less important because they are not monitoring officials as completely as reporters in states with easier access to the floor of the chamber.

In this same vein, we have observed a great deal of variation in the size of state capitol bureaus. Journalists, communications scholars, and political scientists have all discussed the declining presence of the news media in America's state capitals, calling it a "sad state" and noting the rise in "Swiss Cheese Journalism" (Graber 1989). Some of these trends are charted by Layton and Walton (1998) and Layton and Dorroh (2003). However, they tend to emphasize the size of the press corps (e.g., the number of capitol bureaus). We discovered in interviewing reporters that the critical variable for effective investigation by state capitol bureaus is bureau size – the number of reporters per bureau (Cooper and Johnson 2006). The logic is straightforward. Each newspaper must cover the daily grind of politics—what bills are introduced, and passed, as well any major scandals in the state. If

³ Unfortunately, we are not able here to consider the direction of this relationship and untangle the alternative possibility that the housing of reporters outside of the capitol building actually reflects policy makers' beliefs that the media are not important.

there is only one reporter per bureau in each of the press corps' bureaus, each will attend a given news conference or event because each is applying a similar logic to judge news value.

It is difficult for single-person bureaus to engage in enterprise journalism. The potential for investigative or enterprise journalism is where the mass media might exert more influence on the policy process. Second and third reporters in bureaus are less likely to overlap in their coverage decisions. We anticipate that in states with larger average bureaus, reporters will be perceived to be more influential because they are able to monitor and investigate more comprehensively. As a result, we expect that in states where the average number of journalists per bureau is higher, we will see a rise in the perceived importance of the media on public policy.

Finally, we think that the professionalism of the legislative chamber will moderate the relationships between these attributes of the press corps and the perceived importance of the news media. Professionalism—the resources provided legislators in terms of staff, salary and session length—is the most obvious contextual variable in state legislative politics. Professionalism affects the incentives of legislators, lobbyists, executive branch officials and citizens. Likewise, we believe it affects the importance of the media to political actors like lawmakers by shaping their priorities and concerns. In isolation of other factors, we would expect members of professional state legislatures, where legislators have more sophisticated staff in charge of managing the media message, to hold news media in less esteem because of their increased capacity. However, considering these other characteristics—the capacity of the news media to monitor and investigate, and the increase actual attention news media give the state legislature in print—we expect professional legislators to respond to attention and potential attention in a way citizen lawmakers will not.

Measuring Perceived Media Influence

To test our expectations about the perceived influence of the media in the policy process, we use Carey, Niemi, and Powell's 50-state survey of more than 3,000 legislators, collected in 1995.⁴ The response rate was 47%. For more detail about the survey methodology, see Carey, Niemi and Powell (2000a, 2000b). Among their numerous questions, Carey, Niemi and Powell ask legislators a question about the importance of the mass media in influencing legislation in their state: "What do you think is the relative influence of the following actors in determining legislative outcomes in your chamber? Mass Media." The response set consisted of a number line from 1 to 7 with 1 anchored by the label "No Influence" and the 7 labeled "Dictates Policy."

How important the media are relative to other political actors? Carey, Niemi and Powell asked a series of questions about the importance of actors in the policy process. As with the question about the mass media, the scores in these items ranged from 1, indicating that the actor(s) in question exerts no influence, to 7, indicating that they dictate policy. The results on the mass media roughly approximate a bell curve, with 27% of the respondents indicating a 4 (the middle value) and few giving answers on the extremes of the distribution.

Figure 1 presents a dot plot of the average score across the eight policy actors addressed by Carey, Niemi and Powell. As you can see, the media are considered fairly influential in the policy process—more important than many traditional policy actors such as legislative staff, bureaucrats, and members of the minority party. These data, while useful, cannot tell us (1) why and how the media are important and, (2) what leads to variation in

⁴ We hope to update this investigation survey data with the release of new data from Carey, Niemi, Powell, and Moncreif and look for changes over time.

media importance across individuals and across the states? We address these questions in more detail in the next two sections.

[Figure 1 about here]

We also note that the perceived importance of the mass media varies substantially across the states. Table 1 shows the average state-level responses to the mass media influence question. The average response ranges from just over 3.12 in Wyoming to 4.5 in Kentucky. Clearly, the influence of the media is not a uniform attribute of the policy process in the states.

[Table 1 about here]

Explaining Variation in Media Importance

Based on the literature reviewed above, we model responses to this question as a function of age (measured as year born), gender (1 = male), party identification (1 = Republican), and progressive ambition (1 = the legislator indicated plans to run for higher office). We also include measures for the contextual variables described.

We measure the average number of journalists per bureau in the state using the earliest comprehensive data on state capitol press corps of which we are aware. This is data collected in 1998 by Layton and Walton. Some may question our use of 1998 journalist data when predicting legislator perceptions, from data collected in 1995. Although we acknowledge that this is not ideal, there is little reason to believe that this is biasing our results in any direction. Indeed, there is little movement from year to year in the number of journalists or bureaus in a state. Although there is a general trend towards fewer reporters, most states are experiencing this decline at about the same rate. To provide a visual demonstration of this, Figure 2 presents a scatterplot of the number of journalists in each

state in 1998 (on the X-axis) and the number of journalists in each state in 2003 on the Y-axis. The figure shows clearly that there is a tight correspondence between the number of journalists over time ($r=.85$, $p<.01$). This suggests that the three year difference between our measure of average bureau size and the similar measure from the preferred time period will not substantially influence our inferences.

[Figure 2 about here]

Our surrogate for the quantity of state government coverage in each state, we use the average number of stories covering state politics from each state that moved on the Associated Press State & Local Wire in 1999 and 2000. Content from the AP State & Local Wire is archived on LexisNexis and the archive begins with partial coverage in each state for 1998. Consequently, the first year of systematic data available is 1999. We collected story counts from the AP State & Local Wire by specifying a given state's news sources as the search target and narrowing the search to the AP State & Local Wire. The state-level story counts represent all stories with headlines or lead paragraphs containing the words *governor*, *legislature*, *House*, *Senate*, or *Assembly*, as well as the word *state*, the name of the state, and the name of the capital city. We conducted this search and compiled story counts for both 1999 and 2000, averaging across the two years to minimize the influence of political events that could cause aberrations in the story count for any single year. Further, we took the natural log of this average story because we anticipate the amount of coverage should have a diminishing marginal influence on the reputation of the press corps. Like the measure of reporters per bureau, the story count measure is a bit out of sequence temporally, but we think the measure primarily taps levels of coverage and should also change little on average over the 5-year gap between our legislative survey and the observation of coverage.

To measure the presence of the press room in the state capital, we called the legislative information offices (or if they were not available, the Governor's or Majority Leader's Press Secretary's Office) to ask if there was a press room for state capital journalists, and if so where the office was located. States with a press room located in the state capital are coded 1, while states without a press room, or where one exists, but reporters do not use it are coded 0. 37 of the 50 states have a press office in the state capital.

We also include professionalism—taken directly from the Carey, Niemi and Powell data. This is measured on a continuous scale from 0-1, Index of salary, legislative expenditures, and length of session. To model our expectation that professionalism will moderate the relationship between the influence of the press corps and attributes of the press corps, we interact each of these attributes with professionalism.

Estimating a Multilevel Model

Because we are interested in individual level characteristics, nested within state-level contextual characteristics, a simple regression model is most likely inappropriate. Although a hierarchical linear model seems like a good fit for the data, we first estimate a null model to determine whether there is sufficient variation in the level 2 units to necessitate an HLM (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Steenbergen and Jones 2000). Table 2 presents the results of this ANOVA. The significant value for the variance components indicates that a traditional model would not sufficiently capture the variance across states, thus an HLM is the appropriate tool.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 3 presents the results of the HLM model predicting how important a legislator believes the media are in determining legislative outcomes. Recall that we include individual

level variables for gender (1=male), year born, progressive ambition (1=legislator plans to run for higher office), and partisanship. We also include state-level variables including state legislative professionalism, the ratio of journalists: bureaus in a state, the number of AP stories reported in a state over two year period logged, whether the state has a press room in the state capital, and professionalism. Finally, we include variables interacting each of the other contextual variables interacted with professionalism.

[Table 3 about here]

We begin with the individual-level characteristics. Our results indicate that all four individual level characteristics are associated with perceived media influence, signed in the expected direction, and reliable/statistically significant. Other things equal, a state lawmaker with plans to run for higher office believes mass media are significantly more influential than a legislator content to serve at his/her current level. Likewise, Republican legislators and men in the in the chamber are less likely to believe the media are more important, than their Democratic and female counterparts. Finally, holding other factors constant, younger legislators are likely to believe the media are more influential. Taken together, these results suggest that individual level factors play a large part in determining whether legislators believe the media are important in the policy process.

Of course individual factors only tell part of the story. We anticipate state-level contextual factors should also help determine the perceived importance of the media. Our results suggest that this is the case. Importantly we find support for our general expectation that attributes of the press corps are associated with their perceived importance and these effects are moderated by legislative professionalism. The coefficient for *Professionalism* is negative and significant, suggesting that when the average number of reporters per bureau,

the number of AP stories, and the presence of reporters in the capital are held at 0, legislative professionalism is negatively associated with perceptions of media influence.

We cannot understand the relationship between press corps attributes and media influence without factoring in legislative professionalism. Moving onto these interaction terms, we find that the average size of bureaus is associated with increased perceived media influence, but in professional legislatures. In less professional legislatures, the ratio matters less. In the extreme case of a legislature scoring 0 on professionalism, average bureau size is not significantly associated with media reputation. In professional legislatures, where legislators have access to staff, higher rates of pay, and spend more time in the capitol, the monitoring ability of the press appears particularly important to perceptions of media influence on policy.

The *Professionalism*In Capital* interaction is also positive and significant. In less professional legislatures, legislators are in session less often and spend less time in the capitol, yielding the effect of an office in close proximity to the chamber relatively unimportant to the perceived influence of reporters. In professional legislatures, however, the effect of having a press presence in the capitol is a significant correlate of perceptions of media importance. Although there are potential endogeneity problems with this measure, this does point out the potential importance of proximity to policy-making. This is an area understudied by state politics scholars, as well as political scientists more generally. Despite recent indications that the spatial structure of state capitals matters (Domahidy and Gilsinan 1992), few (if any) works have attempted to quantify this influence.

Finally, *Professionalism*Story Count* is positive and significant ($p < .05$). In states with professional legislatures where the AP bureau files more stories, legislators view the media as

a more important part of the policy process. In less professional legislatures the generation of news content has less of a relationship with the perceived influence of the news media.

Conclusions

This study sheds light on the role of the media in the policymaking process. Our results suggest that the media are an important part of the policy process, although the reasons why the media are important have been poorly understood in the political science literature. By monitoring government, and taking in information journalists can influence policy—even without writing stories. Just as scholars of direct democracy argue that initiatives and referenda can be understood as the “gun behind the door,” an active, well-staffed press corps with greater access to the legislature can be viewed as a stronger check on potential misdeed by policymakers and an influence on public policy.

We also find that perceptions of the importance of the media in the policymaking process vary both with the individual level characteristics of the legislator and characteristics of the state. While the individual level-characteristics have received some attention in the literature, there has been almost no consideration of how political context affects media politics. We hope that others will join us in treating media politics like other political phenomena— as a dynamic, affected systematically by institutional and contextual variation.

Appendix: Comparative Statehouse Journalists Study, 2005-2006

We conducted in-depth interviews with 41 newspaper reporters and 27 public information officers (PIOs) who work with the press corps in six state capitals: Augusta, ME; Cheyenne, WY; Columbus, OH; Indianapolis, IN; Lansing, MI; and Springfield, IL. To select these states, we characterized states along three measures: professionalism indicators provided by the National Council of State Legislatures, term-limited/non-term limited legislatures also from NCSL, and press corps size. Layton and Dorroh (2003) provide a census of statehouse bureaus. We divide the states at the median number of bureaus, 5, and consider states with 5 or fewer bureaus to have “few bureaus” and those with 6 or more to have “many.” This yields a 12-cell typology of states. From this, we chose four states (OH, IL, IN, and MI) that provide variation across each of these dimensions, while holding region constant. We then selected two states (WY and ME) to provide a check on these data—varying region, while looking at states with low journalist density. The selected states are shown in bold on the table below.

To develop our sample within each state, we started with the census of statehouse bureaus (Layton and Dorroh 2003). We used the Internet to locate names of all active reporters within each bureau, searching newspaper websites and Lexis-Nexis for current by-lines and the membership rolls of legislative press associations where available (e.g., the Ohio Legislative Correspondents Association). With this population of print reporters, we assigned ourselves at random to interviewees and scheduled interviews. We do not include television or radio journalism because they are generally considered less important in state politics and less attentive to state capitols (Lynch 2003; West 1994). Likewise, we do not include weblogs, which have not developed a consistent, institutional role in state politics.

We spent at least two days conducting interviews in each state capital, scheduling 1-7 interviews per investigator each day. We explained to each participant that we were studying the relationship between statehouse reporters and their sources of information. Participants were promised confidentiality and all provided their informed consent. We met with most of our informants in their offices, although some preferred to meet elsewhere in the capital or in coffee shops and restaurants near the capitol. We digitally recorded most interviews. Following the completion of the field work, the interviews were professionally transcribed.

States by Term Limits, Legislative Professionalism, and Press Corps Size

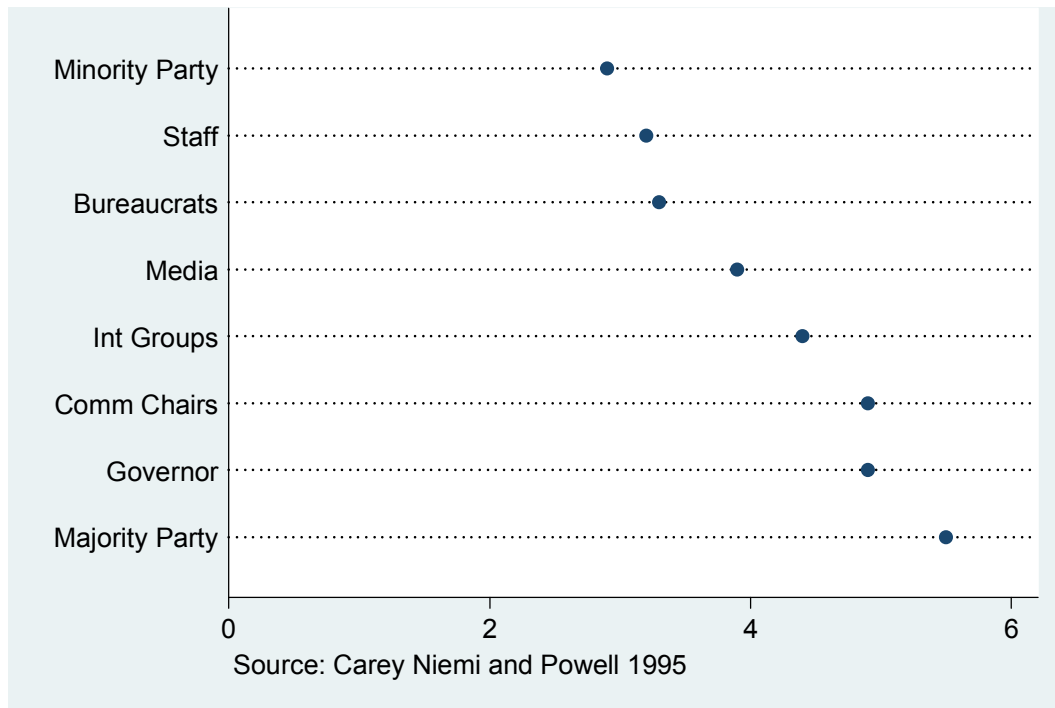
		Professional legislature	Hybrid legislature, semi-professional	Citizen legislature
<u>Term limits</u>	<i>Many bureaus (6 or more)</i>	California (18), Florida (14), Ohio (10)	Colorado (6), Louisiana (6), Missouri (8)	
	<i>Few bureaus (5 or less)</i>	Michigan (5)	Arizona (4), Arkansas (3), Nebraska (2), Oklahoma (4)	Maine (4), Nevada (4), Montana (3), S. Dakota (2)
<u>No term limits</u>	<i>Many bureaus (6 or more)</i>	Illinois (10), Massachusetts (10), New Jersey (10), New York (15), Pennsylvania (14), Wisconsin (6)	Alabama (9), Connecticut (12), Kentucky (8), Maryland (6), Minnesota (8), North Carolina (10), Oregon (7), South Carolina (6), Texas (15), Virginia (12), Washington (10)	Idaho (6), Indiana (11)
	<i>Few bureaus (5 or less)</i>	Alaska (3)	Delaware (2), Hawaii (2), Iowa (5), Tennessee (4)	Georgia (5), Kansas (5), Mississippi (5), New Hampshire (5), New Mexico (3), North Dakota (4), Rhode Island (3), Utah (4), Vermont (3), West Virginia (4), Wyoming (2)

References

- Beamer, Glenn. 2002. "Elite Interviews and State Politics Research." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 2: 86-96.
- Carey, John M., Richard G. Niemi, and Lynda W. Powell. 2000a. *Term Limits in the State Legislatures*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Carey, John M., Richard G. Niemi, and Lynda W. Powell. 2000b. State Legislative Survey and Contextual Data, 1995 [Computer file]. ICPSR version. Columbus, OH: Kathleen Carr, Ohio State University, Polimetrics Lab [producer], 1995. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor].
- Clucas, Richard A. 2003. "Improving the Harvest of State Legislative Research." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 3:387-419.
- Cohen, Bernard C. 1963. *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cook, Timothy E. 1989. *Making Laws and Making News*. Washington DC: Brookings.
- Cook, Timothy E. 1998. *Governing with the News*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cooper, Christopher A. 2002. "Media Tactics in the State Legislature." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 2: 353-371.
- Cooper, Christopher A., and Martin Johnson. 2006. "Politics and the Press Corps: Reporters, State Legislative Institutions, and Context." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 2006, Philadelphia, PA.
- Domahidy, Mary R., and James F. Gilsinan. 1992. "The Back Stage is not the Back Room: How Spatial Arrangements Affect the Administration of Public Affairs." *Public Administration Review* 52; 588-93.
- Dunn, Delmer. 1968. "Transmitting Information to the Press; Differences among Officials." *Public Administration Review*. 28; 445-52.
- Graber, Doris A. 1989. "Flashlight Coverage: State News on National Broadcasts." *American Politics Quarterly* 17:277-90.
- Graber, Doris A. 2002. *Mass Media and American Politics*. 6th edition. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- Graham, Philip L. 1953. "Public Administration and the Press." *Public Administration Review* 13: 87-88.
- Hays, Scott P., and Harry R. Glick. 1997. "The Role of Agenda Setting in Policy Innovation." *American Politics Quarterly* 25:497-516.
- Herbst, Susan. 1998. *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hess, Stephen. 1986. *The Ultimate Insiders*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Hogan, Robert E. 1997. "Voter Contact Techniques in State Legislative Campaigns: The Prevalence of Mass Media Advertising." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22: 551-71.

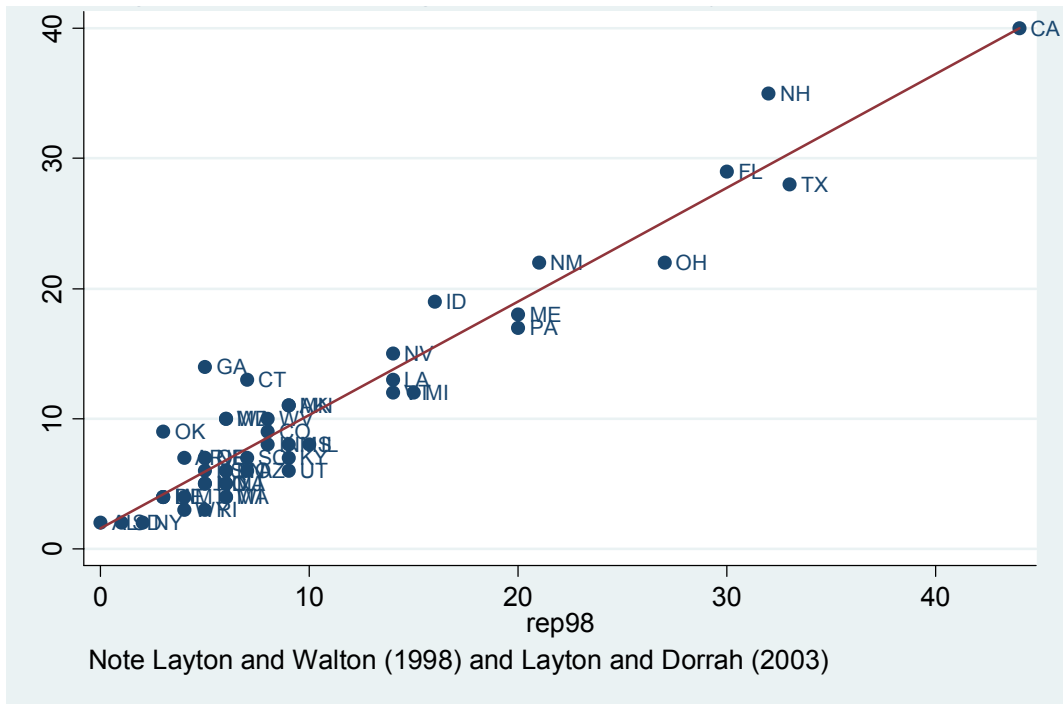
- Kaniss, Phyllis. 1996. *Reading Public Opinion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kedrowski, Karen. 1996. *Media Entrepreneurs in the United States Congress*. Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Leighley, Jan E. 2004. *Mass Media and Politics: A Social Science Perspective*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Linsky, Martin. 1986. *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking*. New York: WW Norton.
- Lynch, G. Patrick. 2003. "The Media in State and Local Politics." In Mark J. Rozell, ed. *Media, Power, Media Politics*. Lanham, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, pp 119-139.
- McCombs, Maxwell, and Donald Shaw. 1972. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36:176-187.
- Molotch, Harvey L., David L. Prosser, and Margaret Gordon. 1987 "The Media-Policy Connection: Ecologies of News." In David L. Paletz, ed. *Political Communication Research: Approaches, Studies, Assessments*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Raudenbush, Stephen W., and Anthony S. Bryk. 2002. *Hierarchical Linear Models: Applications and Data Analysis Methods. 2nd edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rosenthal, Alan. 1998. *The Decline of Representative Democracy*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Sigal, Leon V. 1973. "Bureaucratic Objectives and Tactical Uses of the Press." *Public Administration Review* 33; 336-45.
- Steenbergen, Marco R., and Bradford S. Jones. 2002. "Modeling Multilevel Data Structures." *American Journal of Political Science* 46: 218-237.
- West, Sharon Crook. 1994. "The News Media in Ohio Politics." In Alexander Lamis, ed. *Ohio Politics*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, pp181-195.

Figure 1. The Relative Influence of Political Actors in the Legislative Process



Note: These are the average state legislative responses to questions about the importance of various political actors in the legislative process. The item underlying these averages is a 7-point scale, with 1 indicating no influence 7 indicating “dictates policy.”

Figure 2. Comparing Press Corps Size in 1998 and 2003



Note: State scores on the X-axis are the number of reporters in state capitol press corps in 1998. Scores on the Y-axis are the number of reporters in state capitol bureaus in 2003.

Table 1. State-level variation in the perceived importance of the mass media

State	Average rating for mass media importance	Responses
KY	4.50	74
MS	4.48	44
NV	4.38	29
HI	4.34	41
MA	4.32	77
LA	4.30	30
SC	4.30	60
OH	4.27	55
MN	4.25	88
RI	4.12	69
CO	4.09	57
AZ	4.00	50
NJ	4.00	40
TX	3.98	62
TN	3.98	49
NH	3.97	151
FL	3.97	63
MO	3.96	77
MT	3.96	122
AR	3.94	54
WA	3.93	106
UT	3.93	74
CA	3.92	39
IL	3.87	77
VT	3.87	83
NE	3.86	35
PA	3.85	96
IN	3.84	85
OR	3.83	58
OK	3.82	61
MD	3.80	102
AL	3.80	60
WI	3.79	75
ME	3.78	101
WV	3.73	75
IA	3.73	97
AK	3.72	36
NM	3.69	45
GA	3.67	79
NY	3.65	98
SD	3.65	74
CT	3.62	66
VA	3.61	67
NC	3.60	108
KS	3.60	89
ND	3.57	88
MI	3.54	70
ID	3.29	69
DE	3.15	34
WY	3.12	65

Source: Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2002b.

Table 2: ANOVA Results for the Null Model

<i>Fixed Effects</i>	
Constant	3.882*** (.042)
<i>Variance Components</i>	
State Level	.237** (.056)

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, two-tailed tests

Table 3: Modeling the Importance of the Media in the Policy Process

	β (robust SE)
<i>Individual-Level Attributes (Level 1)</i>	
Career in politics	.118** (.048)
Male	-.342* (.069)
Year Born	.004* (.002)
Republican	-.268*** (.087)
<i>Contextual Variables (Level 2)</i>	
Professionalism	-3.61*** (1.22)
Average Bureau Size	-.109 (.101)
Professionalism*Average Bureau Size	.534** (.216)
In Capital	-.184 (.149)
Professionalism*In Capital	.502* (.290)
Story Count	-.072 (.068)
Professionalism* Story Count	.405** (.166)
Level 1 N	50
Level 2 N	3049

Note: *** p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1, all two-tailed tests. Data are weighted as suggested by Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000a).