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Brendan Nyhan, *University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*
John Sides, *George Washington University*

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How Political Science Can Help Journalism (and Still Let Journalists Be Journalists)

Brendan Nyhan and John Sides

Abstract

Political scientists frequently lament the media's neglect of our research. Although reporters should have a basic understanding of the field, it is not reasonable to expect them to restate the conclusions of academic research on a daily basis. Moreover, it is not always clear how research findings apply within the conventions of political journalism, which is context-specific and episodic in nature. In this article, we propose an approach that would bring more political science to journalism while respecting the professional norms and organizational constraints of news organizations. Although academic research is not always conducive to the demands of the news cycle, political science provides a novel perspective that could improve reporting in five respects: putting episodic developments in a structural context; providing new angles on the news; countering spin about the effects of events by elites; better describing historical trends and comparisons; and identifying known unknowns in politics.

KEYWORDS: political science, journalism

Author Notes: Brendan Nyhan is a Robert Wood Johnson Scholar in Health Policy Research at the University of Michigan. He will join the Department of Government at Dartmouth College in fall 2011 as an assistant professor. John Sides is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at George Washington University. They blog at brendan-nyhan.com and themonkeycage.org, respectively. They would like to thank Ben Fritz, Lisa Hoppenjans, Anne Kornblut, Greg Marx, Jacob Montgomery, Hans Noel, and Matthew Yglesias for helpful comments.

The disjuncture between political science and political journalism is well-known. Journalists who report on politics are frequently unfamiliar with political science research or question its relevance to their work (e.g., Bai 2009). But as Greg Marx noted in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (2010), a small but influential group of political bloggers, reporters, and columnists now regularly read and interact with political science bloggers, a group that includes both of us. Within this group, it is an article of faith that news reporting too often fails to take the findings of political science into account, an argument that seems to have gained some purchase within the larger journalistic community.

We agree, but an important question remains: how *should* reporters incorporate political science research into their day-to-day reporting? Marx notes that “a poli-sci perspective can have value in helping reporters make choices about which storylines, and which nuggets of information, really matter.” The problem is that political science research suggests that most storylines and nuggets *do not* affect important political phenomena such as presidential approval or election outcomes. The challenge is illustrated by a parody Christopher Beam wrote for Slate (2010) of what a news report written by a political scientist might look like, which opens with this lede:

A powerful thunderstorm forced President Obama to cancel his Memorial Day speech near Chicago on Monday—an arbitrary event that had no effect on the trajectory of American politics.

Obama now faces some of the most difficult challenges of his young presidency: the ongoing oil spill, the Gaza flotilla disaster, and revelations about possibly inappropriate conversations between the White House and candidates for federal office. But while these narratives may affect fleeting public perceptions, Americans will ultimately judge Obama on the crude economic fundamentals of jobs numbers and GDP.

Beam’s intent was humorous, but his point is correct: no one (including us) wants to read news coverage like this. Although reporters should understand the basic factors that influence political phenomena and avoid unsupported (or unsupported) empirical claims, they cannot be expected to frame their stories around academic scholarship on a daily basis. The realities of the news business demand that reporters write about events at a much faster pace than academics. Reporters cannot wait for relevant scholarship to be produced on many important questions, nor can they simply ignore events that are not well-understood.

All hope is not lost, however. We believe that political science can improve political reporting *within* the conventions of narrative journalism in five specific respects: providing structural context on episodic events; providing fresh angles on the news; countering spin about the effect of an event for a politician or

party; better describing historical trends and points of comparison; and clarifying what questions are *not* well-understood by scholars, and why. While we recognize that journalists often work under time pressures that preclude long discussions with professors, it is our hope that reporters will internalize the basic findings of political science research, allowing them to incorporate the approaches we recommend into their work without needing to call outside experts.

Providing Structural Context

One of the oddities of journalism is that well-established empirical regularities about politics are so often absent from news coverage, which tends to be framed in episodic terms that neglect the context in which day-to-day events take place (Iyengar and Simon 1993). As Matthew Yglesias, a blogger for the Center for American Progress Action Fund, notes (2009), political reporting that lacks such context can easily go awry:

I think it's obvious to anyone who thinks about it that the features of journalism—original reporting, first-hand conversations, speed, granularity—allow it to push the frontiers of our understanding beyond what rigorous political science could possibly do. At the same time, it's just incredibly foolish to go about doing the work of journalism about politics devoid of any broader theoretical or empirical foundations provided by political science. The events of the day play out against a larger structural backdrop. And it's just not possible to try to understand them atheoretically.

Just as good business reporting often describes how macroeconomic forces are shaping specific firm strategies or economic policy decisions, political coverage should put the decisions of candidates, elected officials, and citizens in a larger context. Unfortunately, reporters frequently fail to do so.

Perhaps the most important contextual feature of American politics is the state of the economy. The effect of the economy on politics is one of those things that “everyone knows,” yet political reporting often ignores or underplays its role.¹ For instance, many journalists attributed the rise of the Tea Party movement, as well as the Democratic Party's struggles in 2010, to President Obama and, in particular, to Obama's communication tactics. One example comes

¹ To anticipate a frequent rejoinder: we are claiming that the economy deserves more emphasis than it receives in campaign reporting, not that it is the only thing that affects elections. A full account of any election will of course demand attention to factors often than the economy. In 2010, for example, Democratic incumbents in swing districts appear to have been damaged by their support for Obama's legislative agenda (see McGhee, Nyhan, and Sides 2010).

from Dan Balz in the *Washington Post*, who wrote that “One of the persistent mysteries about the president is why someone who began his adult life as a community organizer, working with economically displaced workers in Chicago, has had so much difficulty making a connection with voters on economic issues” (2010). This theme of Obama “not connecting” or “lacking passion” became a mainstay of midterm reporting and punditry (e.g., Dowd 2010, Packer 2010).

However, presidents are typically perceived as “connecting” with voters when a growing economy or some other factor is boosting their popularity. As Salon’s Steve Kornacki (2010b) noted, a relevant historical comparison is Bill Clinton’s efforts to campaign on behalf of Democrats in the 1994 midterm elections. Despite Clinton’s renowned ability to “connect” with voters on the stump, Democrats were swept from office in a landslide that made Newt Gingrich the first Republican House Speaker since the 1950s. By contrast, when the economy was performing better in his later years in office, Clinton apparently regained his ability to connect with voters in the eyes of many journalists. The effectiveness of a president’s communication style is more a reflection of the underlying political conditions than a cause.

The primary disadvantages for Democrats in 2010 were the number of marginal seats held by the party’s incumbents and the poor economy. Jeff Zeleny illustrated the role of these factors in the fall campaign with a pair of stories in the *New York Times* that were built around traditional reporting from Ohio, an important swing state. In May, Zeleny (2010b) reported on the gubernatorial race between Democratic governor Ted Strickland and his opponent, former Republican House member John Kasich, which he framed as illustrating the importance of the state of the economy for Democratic incumbents nationwide:

Their contest will speak to one of the biggest questions about the midterm elections: Will voters see enough improvement in the economy—and enough progress from Washington on related issues like health care and curbing the national debt—to grant Democrats more time in power?

In August, Zeleny (2010a) returned to Ohio for a story on the threat to Democratic incumbents from districts that President Obama lost to John McCain to 2008. As he wrote, “neither side disputes the notion that for Republicans to be successful, some of their victories must come from these split districts.” Zeleny’s reporting focused on the struggles of Rep. John Boccieri, a first-term Democratic member from Ohio’s 16th district, to separate himself from Obama and the Democratic Party. In this way, Zeleny provided an example that helped to illustrate the challenges faced by Democratic incumbents nationwide. (Boccieri ultimately lost to Jim Renacci, his Republican opponent, by more than ten points.)

Incorporating structural context in this way does not require stories that simply say, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Instead, the context serves as a frame of reference that helps readers understand and explain the behavior of political leaders and citizens.

Providing Fresh Angles on the News

Political science can do more than just help reporters provide more context. In some cases, the insights and perspectives it offers can help identify stories that deserve coverage or provide a novel perspective on people and events in the news. One example concerns President Obama’s management of the nomination process to the Federal Reserve. Economists view the Fed as a powerful force shaping short-term economic outcomes, which in turn have been shown by political scientists to drive presidential election results. Moreover, the president has the power to appoint members of the Fed’s Board of Governors, who sit on the Federal Open Market Committee. This appointment power is a key mechanism for presidential influence on monetary policy (Chappell, Havrilesky, and McGregor 1993).

Given these facts, it was therefore surprising that Obama failed to nominate replacements for two Board of Governors vacancies for more than a year after taking office. After a third member announced his resignation, Obama finally selected three nominees who were announced in April of 2010. However, he made little public effort to support their nominations, even though observers believe his nominees would have been more likely to take aggressive action to stimulate the economy (including, perhaps, unconventional monetary policy) than current members of the board.

Obama’s inaction appears to have contributed to delays in the confirmation of his nominees: two were not confirmed for five months and a third (Nobel winner Peter Diamond) has not yet been confirmed. These members could have made an important difference in the Fed’s decisions during this period, potentially affecting the economy and Obama’s political fortunes. Yet journalists gave almost no attention to the issue (perhaps because Obama and other elites said so little about it [Bennett 1990]). Indeed, a long *New York Times Magazine* article on the administration’s economic policy process barely mentioned the Fed (Baker 2011). By contrast, an approach to reporting that is informed by political science research on the predictors of presidential election outcomes would have helped journalists identify the fate of Obama’s Fed nominees as an important topic. They could then have reported and written the story using traditional journalistic techniques.

A second example involves the campaign strategies of presidential candidates. Although media coverage often exaggerates the effects of campaign

events and strategy (as we discuss below), political science also offers insights that could improve that coverage. Research by Lynn Vavreck, a political scientist at UCLA, suggests that *how* candidates address the economy matters for any given level of economic performance (2009). Candidates who are advantaged by economic conditions, such as an incumbent running during a period of economic growth, should focus on the economy. But their opponents should seek to shift the focus of the race to some other issue, preferably one on which the opponent's position is more popular than the incumbent's and on which the incumbent cannot easily change his position.

If reporters took Vavreck's research seriously, it might lead them to ask different questions of the candidates. First, they could interrogate each candidate's campaign tactics. How are the candidates addressing the prevailing economic context? Is the candidate who is advantaged by the economy actually taking advantage of it, or is he, perhaps inexplicably, focusing on other issues? For the candidate disadvantaged by the economy, what issues is he emphasizing, and why? Is he successfully changing the subject from the economy? Such a line of questioning demonstrates how attending to political science can fit within the imperatives of political journalists, who often focus heavily on strategy.

A positive example of using political science to generate novel storylines involves research on the "submerged state" by Cornell's Suzanne Mettler (2010). Both political science and journalism often note the public's ambivalence about government spending, which is evident in its concern about deficits but reluctance to cut many categories of spending. Yet Mettler's key finding adds another dimension to the story: relatively few beneficiaries of government programs realize they are benefiting from a government program, even among those getting Social Security checks or Medicare coverage—a particularly important blind spot given the role played by Medicare in future deficit projections. After a blog post about Mettler's research on *The Monkey Cage*, it was featured in several stories and columns (see Farrell 2011), illustrating how political science can generate new stories or new frames for existing stories.

Countering Spin by Political Elites

A third way in which political science can help reporters is by enabling them to debunk spin about the effects of some event or action. As Christopher Beam's *Slate* parody notes, a lot of widely-covered events simply do not affect election outcomes or presidential approval. This perspective contrasts with that of both politicians and journalists. Politicians and other political actors are continually trying to hype certain events as "game-changers" even though the actual effects of the events are likely to be quite limited. Unfortunately, reporters often adopt these frames in their own reporting, or just quote spin and counter-spin without

clarifying the likely result of the event. Although covering events in this way may help create interest, it misleads readers about the factors that drive political outcomes.

Political campaigns are good examples of this dynamic. In the 2008 campaign, much ink was spilled over such events as:

- Hillary Clinton's answer to a question about driver's licenses for illegal immigrants during a Democratic primary debate in October of 2007;
- The revelations about controversial statements made by Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, during sermons at his church in Chicago;
- Barack Obama's comment at a private fundraiser about "bitter voters" who "cling to guns and religion"; and
- Jeremiah Wright's media appearances in April of 2008.

The candidates and their surrogates worked hard to suggest that these events were crucial whenever doing so worked in their favor. Unfortunately, journalistic accounts of the campaign frequently adopted these frames, suggesting that these events changed the likely outcome of the race. In their book *The Battle for America 2008*, Dan Balz and Haynes Johnson write, for instance, that such events caused Clinton or Obama to "suffer" or their poll numbers to "plummet" (2009). In fact, these events had little discernible impact on the Democratic candidates' poll numbers nationally or in crucial primary states (Sides 2010a, 2010b). The same was also true of the presidential debates, which rarely affect the candidates' standing in any presidential election (Stimson 2004).

The converse of this tendency is that journalists frequently attribute changes in the polls to highly visible events even when such explanations are implausible. For instance, *New York Times* TV columnist Alessandra Stanley credited Mike Huckabee's performance in a single, little-watched primary debate in 2007 with boosting him from the second tier of GOP presidential candidates (Stanley 2007):

Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor, rose from the second tier, in part because of a few deft moments during the Republicans' CNN/YouTube debate in late November. (When asked by a voter whether Jesus would have supported the death penalty, Mr. Huckabee replied, "Jesus was too smart to ever run for public office.")

To be clear, we are not recommending that journalists refuse to cover events such as candidate debates or that journalists must always quote a political scientist expressing skepticism about the significance of these events. It is simply a question of framing the importance of an event differently. Events are not important because they are likely to be “game-changers,” but because political candidates and leaders treat those events as important. This approach enables reporters to frame the stakes more realistically. Given the evidence from previous presidential debates, a presidential candidate who hopes to change the dynamic of a campaign in a debate is likely to fail.² Using political science research in this way can help journalists to puncture spin and reveal the limitations of political strategy, treating the statements of politicians, candidates, campaign consultants, and other elites with a skepticism that is backed by hard data.

For instance, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* story published two days before President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union address noted that the effects of tragedies such as the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords can be “short-lived” and quoted a political scientist predicting that Obama’s upturn in the polls at that time would not last (Fitzgerald 2011). The reporter, Thomas Fitzgerald, also paraphrased Leonard Steinhorn, an American University professor, as saying that “History shows that State of the Union speeches usually don’t budge a president’s political standing much.” Much more could be done, but Fitzgerald deserves credit for incorporating the basics into his story.

Trends and Historical Comparisons

Reporters can also benefit from political science research when they are interested in providing a historical perspective in their stories, especially in enterprise reporting or news analysis articles. Both qualitative and quantitative research can improve such stories by more systematically documenting trends or identifying historical comparisons to current events. For instance, numerous stories have focused on the deep philosophical divisions on the Supreme Court. However, recent scholarship makes it possible to characterize more precisely the ideological trajectory of the court’s members. Adam Liptak of *The New York Times* drew on this work in a 2010 story titled “Court Under Roberts Is Most Conservative in Decades”:

² Here is a possible analogy. Sports reporters will not hype an NCAA tournament game where a #1 seed plays a #16 seed. The #1 seeds have never lost, and that fact gets mentioned in most stories about these games. Similarly, a story about a presidential debate could simply mention the fact that they rarely affect the election’s outcome. Reporters would not need to quote a political scientist to cite this fact.

[S]cholars who look at overall trends rather than individual decisions say that widely accepted political science data tell an unmistakable story about a notably conservative court.

Almost all judicial decisions, they say, can be assigned an ideological value. Those favoring, say, prosecutors and employers are said to be conservative, while those favoring criminal defendants and people claiming discrimination are said to be liberal.

Analyses of databases coding Supreme Court decisions and justices' votes along these lines, one going back to 1953 and another to 1937, show that the Roberts court has staked out territory to the right of the two conservative courts that immediately preceded it. . .

Similar analyses could be used to improve stories on legislative polarization, public opinion toward government, and other topics where well-accepted statistical measures can help illustrate how our politics compare to the past.

Political science can also inform traditional reporting by helping to identify relevant historical comparisons to juxtapose with current events. Salon's Steve Kornacki has repeatedly used this approach in his coverage of the 2010 and 2012 elections. Consider his response (2010a) to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's suggestion that "Barring a transformation of the Democratic and Republican Parties, there is going to be a serious third party candidate in 2012... one definitely big enough to impact the election's outcome." Political science bloggers have repeatedly explained the structural reasons why third party candidacies typically fizzle (party loyalty, ballot access, fundraising difficulties, the lack of organizational infrastructure, voters' unwillingness to "waste" their vote on a third-place candidate, etc.). However, Kornacki illustrated these points in a more compelling fashion by recounting the story of John Anderson's ill-fated third-party candidacy in 1980, which encountered many of these obstacles on his way to receiving less than seven percent of the vote.

Known Unknowns

Finally, journalism can draw on political science to identify relevant and newsworthy questions for enterprise reporting that scholars themselves seek to answer but generally cannot. These are what former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld described as "known unknowns." When choosing angles to pursue, reporters can capitalize on their access and sources to ferret out crucial details about these topics that will otherwise never see the light of day.

For example, consider the presidential nominations process. Recent work by political scientists emphasizes the importance of the "invisible primary"—the campaigning that occurs before the Iowa caucus (Cohen et al. 2008). A key aspect

of the invisible primary is the campaign for endorsements from party leaders. In fact, the number of endorsements candidates receive is strongly associated with the number of delegates they eventually win even after accounting for the amount of money they raise and the amount of news coverage they receive. Unfortunately, as the moniker “invisible primary” suggests, most of the conversations among party elites and between party elites and candidates cannot be easily observed.

However, campaign reporters can use their network of sources to get on- and off-the-record information about the prevailing views among party leaders and whether and why they are supporting certain candidates over others. A piece in March of 2011 by Jonathan Martin and John Harris of *Politico* on the dissatisfaction of conservative intellectuals with Sarah Palin is a good example (Martin and Harris 2011). Political scientists believe this kind of jockeying within a party is important, but we frequently lack sufficient information about the process due to the media’s tendency to cover events from the candidates’ perspective (Cohen et al. 2008: 17).

Journalists have a similar opportunity in the legislative arena. Although political science explanations of legislative behavior center on the party loyalty of members and their ideological point of view, those explanations are not the entire story. In particular, relatively little is known about the interactions between members of Congress and interest group representatives, including lobbyists. Political scientists have shown that roll-call votes are typically not related to campaign contributions (see Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003). Instead, interest group lobbying may simply provide important information to allies in Congress such as technical information about legislation and strategic political advice (Hall 2006).

Although theories like this can be empirically tested using surveys of lobbyists (e.g., Hall and Miler 2008), these investigations must necessarily take place after the fact and are limited in scope. Reporters on Capitol Hill can use their sources in Congress to investigate the lobbying process more directly, identifying the level of access that outside groups are being provided, the types of assistance they are offering to members, and the policy goals they are pursuing. Regardless of the merits of the policies these groups are pursuing, their role and influence deserves far more coverage. These are only two of many possible examples. The key point is that familiarity with what political science does not “know” should add impetus to journalists’ search for certain kinds of information.

Conclusion

We have sketched only an outline of how journalists might better take advantage of political science. Clearly, more could be said. The most important lesson,

however, is that journalists can draw on political science without giving up their professional role as people who write interesting stories about current events. Indeed, doing so will help them better meet their obligation to inform readers while also providing reporting that will benefit future political science research.

Although this article has focused on the media, political scientists also need to reach out to journalists, who are often too busy to seek out academic experts, much less their publications. Growth in the political science blogosphere (Farrell and Sides 2010) and the increasing willingness of academic journals to place content outside of their pay-walls has helped to build interest in the discipline. Still, we should think creatively about how our discipline could make its work more available and accessible to the press. This might take the form of organizing seminars for political journalists, hiring bloggers to publicize research that is relevant to topics in the news, or creating expanded subject-matter guides for reporters and the public. Similarly, it might be possible to provide institutional support to help political scientists engage with the press, including offering media training, creating venues for building personal relationships with reporters, or publicizing resources for journalists.

Ultimately, however, our recommendations will only succeed if they can help reporters and news organizations meet their professional and economic goals. We believe that this is possible. At the individual level, the approach described above can identify different angles and fresh stories that will help enterprising journalists stand out among their peers. Likewise, media organizations that face pressure from the commodification of news can use the approaches we describe to add value to their reporting and differentiate themselves from their competitors. In this sense, political science might be, as Ezra Klein put it, “the most significant untapped resource” for journalists who cover politics (Marx 2010).

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