

## **GUIDING THE VOTE: THE *DAILY OKLAHOMAN* AND VOTING ON MORAL ISSUES**

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This note replicates and combines two threads of research to better understand the influence of the *Daily Oklahoman* on voting outcomes of state questions involving moral issues. Multiple regression models are developed with the vote on four ballot proposals as the dependent variable, with the county-level circulation rate of the *Daily Oklahoman*, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, and 2002 county vote for Governor Henry as independent variables. The analysis reveals that the *Daily Oklahoman* circulation rate was marginally related to the voting outcomes on the state questions, while several of the other independent variables showed stronger relationships.

**This research note replicates a study** conducted in the early 1990s examining the influence of *Daily Oklahoman*<sup>1</sup> on referenda constraining the activity of Oklahoma's legislature. Gathering election and demographic data on Oklahoma's 77 counties, Rausch (1994) found

evidence to support the proposition that the *Daily Oklahoman* has some influence on voting on referenda affecting the legislature. Influence was measured using newspaper circulation rates. This note revisits that research and expands it to examine the influence of the *Daily Oklahoman* on votes on moral issues.

Since 2002, Oklahomans have decided several ballot questions dealing with moral issues. This note examines four of those votes. Surprisingly, all four were successfully enacted by the voters. This is surprising because one of the votes enacted a state lottery, a proposal that failed at the ballot box in 1994.

This paper examines voting patterns on four state questions involving moral issues: (1) State Question 687, which banned cockfighting in the state; (2) State Question 705, which created a state lottery; (3) State Question 711, defining marriage as being between one man and one woman; and (4) State Question 712, expanding gambling by allowing race tracks compete with Indian casinos while also dedicating a percentage of the proceeds to fund state government. State Question 705 was approved in 2002. The other three questions appeared on the November 2004 ballot.

Satterthwaite (2005a; 2005b) finds evidence that religion and religious affiliation plays a role in the voting outcomes of moral issues. This paper adds the additional variable of *Daily Oklahoman* influence to more fully specify Satterthwaite's models. Using data collected from a variety of sources, the present research combines the findings in Rausch (1994) with the findings presented by Satterthwaite (2005a; 2005b) to explain the role of the *Daily Oklahoman* in voting on referenda dealing with moral issues.

## **DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES AND IN OKLAHOMA**

Since the history of direct democracy in the United States and in Oklahoma has been examined elsewhere (Cronin 1989, Chapter 3; Magleby 1984, Chapter 2; Meyer 1979), only a brief discussion is needed here. Oklahoma was admitted to statehood during the Progressive era; thus it is not surprising that the Oklahoma constitution would include the Progressive version of direct democracy (Goble 1980; Morgan, et al. 1991).

The referendum and initiative are outlined in Article V of the Oklahoma Constitution. An initiative requires that eight percent of the voters petition to have any legislative matter or constitutional amendment placed on the ballot. The referendum device stipulates that “5 percent of the voters or an absolute majority of the legislature may require that a bill passed by the legislature be submitted to the voters for approval” (Morgan, et al. 1991, 74). In Oklahoma, state questions are worded in a manner that the “yes” vote changes the status quo.

The role of media and money in voting on ballot issues has been demonstrated (Cronin 1989, Chapter 5; Donovan and Snipp 1994; Paul and Brown 2001; Stratman 2006; Zisk 1987). Effective use of the media is an important factor in the success or failure of an initiative campaign. Cronin (1989, 116-117) contends that effective use of the media may even be more important than a campaign’s application of campaign financing.

With the exception of Howard (1979) and Rausch (1994), little has been written about the *Daily Oklahoman*’s influence on politics in Oklahoma. King and Catlett-King (2007) argue that the print media, including the *Daily Oklahoman* may have been a determining factor in the successful 2001 right-to-work referendum. Editorial page editor Patrick McGuigan remarked that “We’re [the *Oklahoman*] trying to change the political culture; we’re trying to make Oklahoma a conservative bastion.” He continued on to discuss a number of other moral issues that the *Oklahoman* editorial page would confront. He wanted the page to “help people understand what’s important in life is pro-free enterprise, anti-regulation,” supporting a strong military defense and favoring conservative social values. The editorials would show that the paper is “not buying into the gay rights agenda” by not using “the word ‘gay’; we use ‘homosexual’ and ‘lesbian.’” (Risser 1998). It is important to note that McGuigan left the paper in 2003.

The Oklahoma City newspaper has an analogue in New Hampshire: the *Manchester Union Leader*. New Hampshire’s leading circulation newspaper has been described as having “screaming headlines, signed editorials on the front page, biased choice of lead stories, and tendentious writing.”<sup>2</sup> The paper’s influence on New Hampshire politics has been recognized (Veblen 1974) and often it is privately derided for that influence (Moore 1987, 105). In the past, the *Daily Oklahoman* was similarly derided for its influential political views, but it is unclear if it has the same level of influence today.

The *Daily Oklahoman* editorialized in support of all four of the state questions under examination in this paper. This support was a dramatic change from the paper's position in 1994. In an editorial published a few days before the election in May 1994, the paper opined, "Voters statewide should reject the ill-conceived state lottery."<sup>3</sup> Ten years later, the same paper argued, "The time has come from an education lottery in Oklahoma."<sup>4</sup>

### STATE QUESTIONS ON MORAL ISSUES

Before proceeding, a brief description of each state question is in order. State Question 687 was approved by voters on November 5, 2002. The initiative enacted a statute banning cockfighting in the state. State Question 687 had the support of 56.2 percent of Oklahomans who voted.

Oklahoma voters approved a state lottery when they voted in support of State Question 705. As a candidate for governor in 2002, Democrat Brad Henry made a state lottery a major focus of his campaign. After his election, Henry worked to have his promise enacted into law. He was not able to find legislative support to approve a lottery, but he was successful in getting the legislature to send the lottery to the voters for their decision. As they did in 1994, churches in the state, especially the Oklahoma Baptist General Convention, worked to defeat the proposal. Lottery opponents were handily outspent by lottery supporters (Satterthwaite 2005b, 7-8). The state question appeared on the ballot over a year after it was approved by the legislature (Satterthwaite 2005b, 5-6). About 65 percent of the voters supported the lottery.

By approving State Question 711, Oklahoma voters added an amendment to the state's constitution defining marriage as being between one man and one woman. Oklahoma voters joined the voters in 11 other states banning same-sex marriages (Rausch 2006). Churches actively supported this proposal. When compared with the other measures on the ballot, very little money was spent by either side of the amendment (Satterthwaite 2005b, 9). Over 75 percent of the voters supported the amendment, an outcome similar to the other states considering marriage amendments.

State Question 712 was a somewhat complicated measure. In an effort to increase revenue at horse racetracks, the horse racing industry called on the legislature to authorize the presence of gaming machines at racetracks. Working with the Native American tribes, the racetrack owners and managers were able to get the legislature to place State Question 712 on the November 2004 ballot. Churches worked hard to defeat this measure, while supporters drew a lot of money from out-of-state gaming interests (Satterthwaite 2005b, 8-9). The measure was successful garnering almost 60 percent of the vote (Satterthwaite 2005b, 6).

## METHODS

Data to test the hypotheses that the way Oklahomans vote on state questions involving moral issues is influenced by the editorial position of the *Daily Oklahoman* were collected from a variety of sources. This study employs aggregate data collected at the county level. While individual-level data collected by a survey would be preferable to county-level data, the level of aggregation I have chosen is more practical. The reliability of the data is much greater than a survey because respondents would have to recall four votes, one of which was cast in 2002 and the others that were part of a package of nine state questions on the ballot. Much error in recall would be realized with a survey design. A strategy involving surveys before, during, and after each initiative campaign also would have yielded more specific information regarding the political influence of the *Daily Oklahoman*, but would have been costly and complex to manage.

## MEASURES

### VOTE ON MORAL ISSUES

The dependent variable, vote on state questions involving moral issues, is measured by the percentage of voters in each of Oklahoma's 77 counties who cast a ballot in favor of the four questions. There is substantial variation among the voting by county on each of the questions. The highest percentage of votes for SQ 687 was 72.40 percent with only 19.39 percent of the voters in one county supporting the measure (mean county vote=43.86 percent). The lottery (SQ 705) gained the

support of every county with the highest county vote at 73.49 percent and the lowest support at 51.63 percent (mean county vote=62.75 percent). Every county supported marriage definition (SQ 711) with the highest percentage of “yes” votes at 87.62 percent. The lowest county vote was 68.78 percent (mean county vote=80.06). The maximum county vote for State Question 712 was 63.84 percent with the lowest county vote at 44.27 percent (mean county vote=57.56 percent).

Factor analysis reveals that the questions share some commonality. There is one factor explaining 60.59 percent of the variance; thus, there is some underlying structure tying the votes together. Despite this commonality, each question is examined individually, a necessary strategy since the votes occurred over two different election cycles.

### ***DAILY OKLAHOMAN* READERSHIP**

While the optimal method for measuring the readership of the *Daily Oklahoman* would be to conduct a survey of Oklahomans, this study utilizes a more economical method. Readership is measured by the total daily circulation of the paper in each of Oklahoma’s 77 counties. The data are presented as a percentage of total households who subscribe to the paper. The figures come from an analysis of circulations conducted in 2003 and obtained from the Audit Bureau of Circulations in Illinois. Since commercial enterprises use this data in planning advertising strategies, it can be assumed that many of the households subscribing to the *Daily Oklahoman* actually read it. Since it is a statewide paper, the *Daily Oklahoman* circulates through almost all of the counties with the highest circulation in the western and southern halves of the state and the lowest circulation in the counties around Tulsa in the northeast (mean=13.21 percent ; standard deviation=8.74; range=35.27).

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the *Daily Oklahoman* had a weekday circulation of about 205,000 and reached 41.8 percent of the homes in Oklahoma City (Selcraig 1999). According to data appearing the *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*, the *Oklahoman* circulation dropped to about 191,000 by 2008.

## RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Data were collected on the proportions of county residents affiliated with different religions. Although religion has been involved in American political life for a long time, social scientists have only seriously researched the role of religion in politics for about the past quarter century (Jelen 1998; Satterthwaite 2005a, 2005b; Wald, Silverman, and Fridy 2005). Jelen (1998) reviews much of the literature that specifically examines the role of religion in political behavior. For example, the Catholic Church has worked in coalition with other groups to enact restrictions on abortion at the state level (Day 1992; O'Hara 1992). Religious conservatives became actively involved in the Republican Party in the late 1970s and early 1980s to advocate their positions on a number of social issues (Guth 1983; Oldfield 1996). It was during the period when religious conservatives began to more actively and more successfully participate in politics that social science experienced a growth in interest in the role of religion in American politics. Recent research has found that religious affiliation played a role in the results of the marriage definition amendment votes (Cadge, Olson, and Harrison 2005; Campbell and Monson 2005; Satterthwaite 2005b; Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2005). Religious groups were well-organized in Oklahoma to offer support and opposition to the state questions under examination.

The present research incorporates three variables for religious affiliation: evangelical Protestants; mainline Protestants; and Catholics. Using data from the Glenmary Research Center (Jones 2002), the proportion of county residents who are *Evangelical Protestants* was calculated using the "List of Religious Bodies" found at the American Religion Data Archive website.<sup>5</sup> The percentages ranged from a high of 97.9 to a low of 20.3 percent. The mean was 50.39 percent with a standard deviation of 14.31.

It is expected that counties with greater percentages of evangelical Protestants will exhibit greater support for the marriage definition amendment and greater opposition to the lottery question and the gaming machine question (see Satterthwaite 2005b). It is not clear how conservative religionists would fall on the question involving cockfighting. Concentrations of evangelical Protestants can be found in rural counties where opposition to the cockfighting prohibition may be strongest as well as in suburban counties where residents are the strongest supporters of any law to ban cockfighting.

A similar procedure was used to calculate the percentage of *Mainline Protestants*. The range among all counties was from 1.6 to 56.9 percent with a mean of 14.01 and a standard deviation of 9.23. Because mainline Protestants tend to be more liberal on social issues (see Fowler, Hertzke, Olson, and Den Dulk 2004, 93), mainline Protestant counties are expected to exhibit lower support for the marriage definition amendment. In fact, the United Church of Christ voted in July 2005 to affirm equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender.<sup>6</sup> Satterthwaite (2005b) finds that mainline Protestant population is positively associated with vote on marriage definition, at least in Oklahoma. It is not clear how mainline Protestants feel about gambling and the lottery, although some mainline Protestant pastors publicly opposed the state questions expanding gambling opportunities.

The percentage of *Catholics* in each county was determined using the Glenmary data. Only the category labeled "Catholic" was included in this classification. The percentage of Catholics ranged from zero to 27.9 percent. The mean was 3.60 percent with a standard deviation of 4.34. Counties with greater populations of Catholics are expected to show more support for marriage definition. Catholics could be more supportive of the state questions establishing the lottery and expanding gambling.

#### CONTROL VARIABLES

Indicators of socioeconomic status (SES), demographic variables, and a measure of support for Democratic Governor Brad Henry are included as control variables. SES is measured by the percentage of each county's population with a high school diploma, each county's median age, and the median household income in each county. The percentage of each county's population who are African-American also is included in the analysis. To control for the rural/urban split, a measure of the percent of county that lives in a rural area is included. This variable is expected to be significant when examining the vote on the cockfighting ban.<sup>7</sup> The percentage of the 2002 county vote for Governor Brad Henry is included to control for party and the fact that his campaign focused on the lottery.



## ANALYSIS

The present study expands the findings presented by Rausch (1994) and Satterthwaite (2005a; 2005b) to better understand any influence of the *Daily Oklahoman* on the voting outcomes of state questions dealing with moral issues. For each of the four state questions, a multiple regression was run with *Daily Oklahoman* circulation, percent rural, percent evangelical Protestant, percent mainline Protestant, percent Catholic, percent high school graduate, median age, median household income, African-American percent, and percent of county vote for Henry in 2002. Standardized regression coefficients (Betas) appear in Table 1. The level of prediction ( $R^2$ ) for the state questions is moderate ranging from .368 to .746.

*Daily Oklahoman* circulation does not seem to have a significant relationship with the voting outcomes of these four state questions. The circulation rate is a significant predictor in the model for State Question 705 on creating a state lottery and State Question 712, expanding gambling into horse racetracks and Indian casinos.

The *Daily Oklahoman* circulation variable appears as a marginally significant predictor (Beta=.224,  $p=.048$ ) of the county vote for State Question 705, creating a state lottery. The strongest predictor of the vote is the 2002 county vote for Governor Henry (Beta=.444,  $p=.005$ ). County vote for SQ 705 also was negatively related to the percent of rural residents in a county (Beta=-.425,  $p=.006$ ). Also negatively related was the percent of county residents affiliated with an evangelical Protestant denomination (Beta=-.281,  $p=.033$ ). This final relationship supports the findings presented in Satterthwaite (2005a; 2005b). The model appears underspecified with an adjusted  $R^2$  of only .272 ( $p=.000$ ). There are additional variables at work here that need to be uncovered. It is possible that local political considerations played a role in causing some interactions among the variables in the model.

In counties where the circulation is high, the vote on SQ 712 also was higher than in other counties. The stronger predictor of the vote on SQ 712 is the county vote for Democratic Governor Brad Henry in 2002 (Beta=.617,  $p=.000$ ), an interesting finding considering the negative relationship between county vote and the percent of rural residents in a county. Median household income also plays a significant role in the vote on SQ 712 (Beta=.376,  $p=.019$ ). Counties with residents having

TABLE 1

OLS Regression of County for State Questions on *Daily Oklahoman* Circulation,  
Religious Affiliation Variables, and Control Variables.

	SQ 687		SQ 705		SQ 711		SQ 712	
	Beta	p	Beta	p	Beta	p	Beta	p
<i>Daily Oklahoman</i> Circulation	-.037	.605	.224	.048	.064	.446	.234	.037
Percent Rural	-.541	.000	-.425	.006	.278	.016	-.381	.013
Percent Evangelical	.010	.899	-.281	.033	.405	.000	-.231	.076
Percent Mainline	.113	.187	.218	.107	-.010	.917	.088	.509
Percent Catholic	-.254	.003	-.093	.475	.283	.005	-.170	.192
Percent High School Graduate	-.109	.189	-.053	.686	.243	.015	-.013	.921
Median Age	.005	.960	.103	.487	.103	.354	.130	.378
Median Household Income	.161	.112	.190	.232	-.054	.649	.376	.019
County Vote for Henry	-.460	.000	.444	.005	-.217	.065	.617	.000
African-American Percent	.026	.723	.045	.694	-.098	.259	-.119	.298
	R <sup>2</sup> =.746 Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.707 p=.000		R <sup>2</sup> =.368 Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.272 p=.000		R <sup>2</sup> =.645 Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.592 p=.000		R <sup>2</sup> =.376 Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.281 p=.000	

greater household incomes were more supportive of the proposal to expand gambling into racetracks and Indian casinos. None of the religious affiliation variables were significant in this model.

The vote on State Question 687 to ban cockfighting was a rural versus urban issue. The negative direction of the rural variable in the model indicates that as the percent of a county's population living in a rural area increases, the vote for the ban decreases (Beta=-.541, p=.000). It is interesting to note that a negative relationship also exists between the vote on the state question and the vote for Henry in 2002. Apparently counties with a high level of support for Henry had a much lower level of support for the cockfighting ban. A check of the correlation between the vote on State Question 687 and the vote for Henry reveals a moderate Pearson's  $r$  of .227, significant at the .05 level. The robust adjusted  $R^2$  of .707 allows for confidence that the model is properly specified.

Examining the model for State Question 711, putting a definition of marriage into the Oklahoma Constitution, we see that evangelical Protestant affiliation plays an important role in explaining the county vote (Beta=.405, p=.000). Catholic affiliation also is significant with a Beta of .283 (p=.005). Counties with greater percentages of high school graduates also supported the amendment (Beta=.243, p=.015). It is possible that the strong level of approval of marriage definition hides the diversity in voting.

## DISCUSSION

The present research seeks to identify the factors behind the voting outcomes on Oklahoma state questions dealing with moral issues. Specifically, the research examines the possible influence of the *Daily Oklahoman* in those voting outcomes. While the evidence is far from definitive, it is difficult to assert that the *Daily Oklahoman* played a significant role in influencing voting outcomes on moral issues.

It is possible that the paper is no longer the solid conservative drumbeat it once was. This theory could be tested by a content analysis of editorials from several decades in the paper's history. Has the paper become more "liberal" or "progressive" in its editorial positions? If the paper's message has become less reliable it is possible that the influence of the *Daily Oklahoman* could be mitigated or mediated by other factors such as religious affiliation and support for Governor Henry. Any ideological change in *Daily*

*Oklahoman* could have been the result of the departure of Patrick McGuigan from the paper's staff. Additional research is necessary to tease the influence of the *Daily Oklahoman* from the influence of these other factors.

Finally, the present research did not consider other sources of political information such as political commercials and the editorials published by more local newspapers. Satterthwaite (2005b) identifies some of these potential sources of information. Voter guides prepared by interest groups affiliated with evangelical Protestant denominations reviewed the marriage definition amendment as well as the gambling and lottery questions. He also notes "the campaigns for and against [gambling and the lottery] brought in millions of dollars of advertising" (Satterthwaite 2005b, 9). This money paid for some sophisticated television and print advertising as well as a number of engaging advertising sites on the Internet.

It is clear that the *Daily Oklahoman* exhibits less influence on voting outcomes on moral issues in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century than it did on state questions constraining the legislature in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. More research at the individual-level is necessary to determine the degree to which Oklahomans continue to rely on the paper's editorial positions to assist in voting decisions.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The *Daily Oklahoman* changed its name in October 2003, dropping the *Daily*. The paper is now known just as *The Oklahoman*. The present research uses *Daily Oklahoman* throughout, largely because it is more convenient for the author.

<sup>2</sup>The Oklahoma newspaper has been described similarly. Carter (1984) records that Edward K. Gaylord, the early publisher of the *Daily Oklahoman*, "believed in making his opinions clearly known in editorials on the front page of the [paper]."

<sup>3</sup>"Lottery No, Lucas Yes," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8 May 1994, p. 219.

<sup>4</sup>"Our Choices On the Nine State Questions," *The Oklahoman*, 31 October 2004, p. 27A.

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/RCMS\\_Notes.asp](http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/RCMS_Notes.asp). According to the American Religion Data Archive, their classification scheme was derived from Steensland, et al. (2000). When denominations were not included in the

Steensland, et al., classification, the religious bodies were classified based on Melton (1999) and Mead and Hill (1995).

<sup>6</sup>Shaila Dewan, "United Church of Christ Backs Same-Sex Marriage," *New York Times*, 4 July 2005, p. 10A.

<sup>7</sup>Chris Casteel, "Cockfighting Vote Highlights Urban/Rural Gap," *Daily Oklahoman*, 30 October 2002, p1.

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