

**DAVID AND GOLIATH:
MEDIA EFFECTS IN THE 1990 OKLAHOMA STATE
TREASURER'S RACE**

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This study adds to the debate on media effects in political campaigns by examining the 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer's race. Extensive interviews with participants in the race supported the hypothesis that Oklahoma City TV news had a significant effect on the outcome of the race.

The power of the press is debated in political science. C. Wright Mills (1956) argued the media control public thinking. V.O. Key (1961) argued the media have little effect. Part of the reason for this debate is the difficulty in separating for study, media effects from other political effects on voting behavior. A variety of political effects are recognized as part of the voting decision. In the 1950s studies concentrated on party identification as the primary predictor of an individual's vote (see Campbell et al. 1960). More recent studies found campaign financing, candidate gender, incumbent advantage, media coverage, and other factors helped determine electoral outcomes (Niemi and Weisberg 1993). Isolating, quantifying, and demonstrating the effect of each of these factors individually is always a problem. The 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer's race provided a rare opportunity to separate these effects.

The race pitted a poorly financed Republican challenger, Claudette Henry, against a well financed Democratic incumbent, Ellis Edwards. Even Henry compared the race to the battle between David and Goliath (Ford 1990). Everyone involved in the race agreed that media effects were responsible for Henry's victory. Edwards had all of the conventionally understood advantages. Only the relentless depictions of scandal in his office by *The Daily Oklahoman*, the *Tulsa World* and KOCO Channel 5 can explain the election outcome.

This paper documents the story of the 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer's race and examines media effects on the election result. Content analysis measured differences in bias between Oklahoma's two major newspapers. Voting returns and circulation rates demonstrated which areas of the state were most affected. Interviews with participants were used for anecdotal evidence. The

paper argues that certain media biases against the incumbent were present. Without the effects of these biases on voters' preferences the challenger would not have won.

DISADVANTAGES FOR THE CHALLENGER

The challenger faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer's race. Henry was a Republican in a Democratic state. She was the challenger. Her campaign was poorly financed. She was seeking a post that previously was never held by a woman. The fact that these effects worked against Henry eliminate them as possible explanations for her victory.

Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) argued that party identification and other long-term psychological and sociological forces are the primary determinants of an individual's vote. The studies that have followed in the tradition of Campbell et al. (see Niemi and Weisberg 1993) continue to view party ID as the most important factor in the voting decision. In the case of the 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer's race, party ID did not predict the result. In Oklahoma 65 percent of the 1990 voters were registered as Democrats and only 33 percent were registered Republicans. During the statewide primary election on August 28 registered Democrats made up 74 percent of the electorate and Republicans only 26 percent. Oklahoma Democrats won five of seven statewide general elections on November 6 including Governor and United States Senator. The overwhelming partisan advantage for the Democratic incumbent eliminated party ID as a predictor of Republican Henry's victory.

Despite anti-incumbency fever, incumbents seldom lose. Even in the election of 1992 when over 100 new members were elected to Congress only five incumbent Congressmen lost in general elections. There are many explanations for incumbent strength (Niemi and Weisberg 1984) but the advantage of currently holding office is not in dispute. Anthony Downs (1957) argued that voters prefer to keep an incumbent whose record as a public servant is well known rather than take a chance on a challenger with no record unless the incumbent's record is so abysmal that random choice would be better. Perhaps in this case random choice looked better to the voters. Since the challenger was the victor, incumbent advantage can be eliminated as an explanation of this electoral outcome.

Some have argued that financial support for a candidate is a key to electoral success (Fiorina 1989; Niemi and Weisberg 1993). In the case of the 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer's race the Democratic incumbent spent \$338,697 and the eventual Republican winner only spent \$41,662. Due to the extreme financial advantage the losing Democratic incumbent had over the winning Re-

publican challenger financial support can be eliminated as an explanation of the outcome of this election.

Studies on gender effects in elections indicate that gender could have been a disadvantage to the challenger. Jeane Kirkpatrick (1974) and Debra Leff (1978) both noted disadvantages that women have when trying to win elections. Some recent work (Carroll 1985; Darcy et al. 1987) challenged much of the "wisdom" about voters' gender discrimination, but they also recognized many obstacles still remained for women. As a whole this literature still supports the idea that if a gender advantage exists, it favors men. Gender can be eliminated as an explanation of why she won.

With all of these factors against her, what can account for the fact that Claudette Henry, a female Republican challenger with \$40,000, was able to defeat Ellis Edwards a male Democratic incumbent with over \$300,000 in a statewide election?

MEDIA EFFECTS

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) argue the media set the agenda in elections. According to this view, the issues the mass media focus on become the salient issues with the public.

Leonard Tipton, Roger D. Haney, and John R. Baseheart (1975) challenged the notion that agenda setting can be applied to the state level. Using a Kentucky governor's race and a local race they re-examined the agenda-setting hypothesis. While they found a correlation between the media's agenda and the public's agenda they asserted that causality could not be established. Tipton's study might suggest that media effects cannot account for the election results in the Oklahoma State Treasurer's race. However, Tipton noted that the media focused primarily on the horse race aspects of the gubernatorial race they used in their study. In the Oklahoma treasurer's race the media focused on scandal rather than on the horse race. Also, Tipton, et al., failed to include Kentucky's major TV station in their analysis. In Oklahoma City the Gannett TV station broke several of the major stories involving scandal in the state treasurer's office.

J. A. Krosnick and D. R. Kinder (1990) argued that the media had a greater effect on voting behavior than just agenda setting. They suggested the media primed public opinion. By priming they meant that the public tends to focus on the events most recently reported by the media, giving the media the ability to prime the public just before an election.

David Swanson and Dan Nimmo (1990) argued that the media intrude into politics. Because the press largely derives its day-to-day power from its role as

mediator, when information flows through the media they have the ability to prioritize, edit, interpret, and mediate that information. Sometimes, Swanson and Nimmo argue, the media go beyond their role as mediator, intruding into politics by constructing their own version of reality.

“Intrusion” is a harsh word, but it is certainly a word Ellis Edwards would have used to describe the media’s role in the 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer’s race. Edwards felt the media were out to get him. Paul English, a reporter for *The Daily Oklahoman* interviewed for this research, said with an air of satisfaction, “We just did the best we could to let the people know what was going on.”

PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS

Each of the major participants in the campaign were interviewed. These interviews included primary candidates, political consultants, and reporters. Some were conducted face to face and others by telephone. The discussions were somewhat unstructured, but generally they focused on what made the difference for Henry and the importance of the media coverage in determining the result. Unanimously the participants felt that television reports caused Edwards’ defeat.

According to Delmas Ford, the third place finisher in the Democratic primary, “Channel 5’s Terry Watkins totally destroyed Ellis for Claudette.” Watkins, an investigative reporter for KOCO-TV, tried for several days to get an interview with Edwards. When she concluded that Edwards was avoiding her she took a TV camera into his office and photographed a remodeling project which the general public viewed as an extravagant use of funds. The remodeling project included an etched glass window and an automatic office door opener. Henry said, people “were most offended about the remodeling expenditures. The average citizen does not have the means to remodel their home like that.” Clinton Key, chairman of the Oklahoma Republican party, called the Watkins piece “the most significant event in the campaign.” Doug Nesbitt, Edwards runoff opponent said, “Channel 5’s TV pictures in the office killed it for him.” According to Edwards, “TV won the race for Claudette in one week. It was Channel 5 and that story on the furniture.”

When asked if her story made the difference Watkins replied, “You can draw your own conclusions.” Even Paul English the reporter for *The Daily Oklahoman* agreed that the TV coverage was a significant factor. It was his opinion that the “Love Ellis” newspaper story and Terry Watkins TV reports really hurt Edwards. According to English, “They were simple stories – people understood.”

Edwards’ political pollster Tom Kielhorn said, “Where the metropolitan press stopped, Ellis did better.” Edwards felt people in the rural area were skep-

tical of *The Daily Oklahoman* and metro television did not reach them.

These interviews suggest media bias and media effects. The interviewees seemed to conclude that the media intentionally set out to expose Edwards and that TV was most effective.

THE STORY

Included below is a summary of the campaign. This account should help the reader understand the type of pressure Edwards was facing during the 1990 election season.

Auditor and Inspector Clifton Scott released a critical audit of the State Treasurer's Office on Monday, July 9, 1990. According to Scott the audit had been completed in late February or early March at which time the treasurer was given the standard 30 days to write responses and correct problems. Edwards' office asked for and was granted several extensions. Eventually it became "obvious they wanted the extensions to get past filing. I could not let that happen. As an elected official I felt an obligation to the people," Scott said in an interview.

Finally Scott gave the treasurer an ultimatum. Edwards was to complete his responses in June or the audit would be released without the treasurer's comments. Scott felt the public had a right to know about the treasurer's audit before the candidate filing period for statewide offices ended. After arguing over many points, Scott and Edwards' offices worked all weekend July 6, 7, and 8, to complete the report.

The audit uncovered an apparent \$866,000 kickback scheme (English 1990). Edwards said he called for the audit after discovering the irregularities himself. According to Edwards "It was his (Scott's) comments that were bad, not the audit. We earned more money per dollars invested than any treasurer in the United States. No state money was lost or jeopardized."

In an editorial on July 11th *The Daily Oklahoman* called Edwards "a loose cannon at the Capitol" and urged candidates to come forward saying,

Last-minute attempts to enter a political race are seldom successful, but the uncertainties in the treasurer's race call for candidates of impeccable credentials to come forward and file for the treasurer's office.

Ten candidates joined the race.

Unfortunately for Edwards the story was just beginning. On July 26 the banner headline was "Treasurer's Probe Uncovers Letters Signed 'Love Ellis'" (English and Ellis 1990). Personal letters from him to his chief trader, Belle

Ambre, were subpoenaed. Edwards strongly denied ever having a romantic relationship with Ambre and said they were just "good friends." "They are not love letters. Nowhere in there can you find that it's a love letter. If you read the whole letter...and skip the salutations," he said. "I sign all my letters 'Love Ellis'," he insisted. Sara Pyle, Edwards' press secretary, agreed saying she had several notes signed "Love Ellis." She showed one letter to the press signed, "Your friend, Ellis."

Five days before the August 28 primary *The Daily Oklahoman* reported that Robert Jackson, one of Edwards' opponents, had accused Edwards of breaking the law by using private contributions to pay off a loan on his Mercedes Benz. Edwards acknowledged the use of the contributions for his office remodeling but denied receiving any personal gain from it (English 1990a).

"Edwards Punched While Campaigning" was the headline August 24. While in Lawton at a Cotton Rural Electric Cooperative banquet passing out campaign stickers, Edwards encountered a Republican man who refused to wear an Edwards sticker. Edwards passed by him and asked the man's wife about a sticker. She accepted and Edwards put the sticker on her purse. The man became upset. While passing along the next row Edwards bumped the man, who then got up and started shoving Edwards. Another Democratic treasurer candidate Allen Greeson and a man in the crowd constrained the two combatants. Greeson said Edwards pushed them several times trying to get to the man (English 1990b).

Edwards denied trying to retaliate and claimed Greeson stirred up the event. Edwards told the *Tulsa World* the next day, "Allen Greeson came over and helped like you help put out a fire by pouring gasoline on it" (Ford 1990a).

Delmas Ford seemed to have everything going for him on primary day. Several newspapers including both of the Tulsa papers had endorsed him. Former Governor George Nigh's wife, Donna, was helping him and many speculated that Governor Bellmon was supporting him. However, it was not enough. In the August 28 Democratic primary Edwards received 39 percent, Doug Nesbitt 26 percent, and Delmas Ford only 14 percent of the vote.

When asked how Nesbitt, a newcomer to politics, overcame Ford to make the runoff, Nesbitt said, "Logistics won it. I used my own money and was able to purchase TV time by Friday (the week of filing). Delmas did not have money; he had to raise it. By that time all of the best time slots were taken because of the numbers of candidates buying time."

Bill Maguire finished first in the Republican primary with 44 percent of the vote. Claudette Henry was second with 40 percent and Elmer Million received 15 percent. Million said he quit the race early, partly because the Republican candidates were not getting any press coverage. "The editors thought Ellis Edwards would not win (the Democratic primary)," he said.

According to a report in *The Daily Oklahoman* on September 16, just two days before the runoff, campaign finance reports for the primary showed that 60 percent of Edwards major contributors or their companies had benefited directly from his investment of state funds. They included brokers from New York and California. Edwards said “it doesn’t bother me” that some of his contributors had received commissions from trades with his office (English 1990c).

The Daily Oklahoman ran an editorial that day proclaiming Nesbitt the “clear choice ... committed to stop the shenanigans of the incumbent.” Two days later on election day they supported him again saying, “The incumbent fooled voters four years ago.”

Although Nesbitt had hoped the continuing controversy over Edwards’ conduct of his office would weaken him, the challenger knew the treasurer remained strong. A poll Nesbitt commissioned by George Shipley of Houston indicated 10 days prior to the runoff election that Edwards was ahead. Shipley found Edwards gaining 43 percent of the vote and Nesbitt 25 percent. There was 30 percent undecided, enough to win if they all broke for Nesbitt.

Nesbitt promised not to run a negative campaign even though that is what his advisors recommended. “I did not have the stomach for it. You have to look at yourself in the mirror, you know.” He said, “If I had attacked I probably would have won.” On election night, September 18, Edwards garnered 234,628 votes and Nesbitt 222,788.

Official campaign finance reports indicate that Edwards spent \$323,000 while Nesbitt only spent \$172,000. Even so, Edwards barely survived. Nesbitt believed his smaller advertising budget was enhanced by the negative news coverage the incumbent was receiving while at the same time Edwards had to spend a lot of money just to keep pace. Both campaigns ended with large debts, Edwards with \$223,000 and Nesbitt with \$154,000.

After an endorsement by Million and the Republican leadership, Henry won the Republican runoff with 85,554 votes over Maguire with 82,671. Up to this point she had spent \$18,000. Few gave her much hope as a Republican woman with no money running against an incumbent Democrat man who had already spent more than \$300,000.

A poll conducted by Cole, Hargrave, Snodgrass and Associates for the Oklahoma Republican Party on October 1 showed Edwards with 41 percent, Henry with 36 percent, and 23 percent undecided. Henry went on the offensive. In a press conference she accused Edwards of broken promises that amounted to “acts of vandalism against the people of Oklahoma,” and “an act of treason.” “For weeks, the headlines concerning Edwards read like something out of a cheap tabloid,” she said (Greiner 1990).

Just 7 days before the general election Attorney General Robert Henry

ruled some of Edwards' trading practices improper. Once again Edwards' office was on the front page (English 1990d).

Edwards said his Republican opponent spent more than he did in the general election because he "thought it was over after Nesbitt." She spent \$23,000 while he spent only \$15,000. These limited budgets prevented paid media from being a factor in the general election. In the end Henry received 459,995 votes to Edwards' 415,864.

Scandal dogged Edwards throughout the campaign. His own actions and statements often only added fuel to the fire. The media could argue that they were simply reporting what happened, but the depth, intensity and frequency of the scrutiny tend to support the notion that efforts were being made by reporters to keep voters reminded of Edwards' problems. Krosnick and Kinder (1990) called it priming.

HYPOTHESES

Conventional wisdom in Oklahoma has it that *The Daily Oklahoman* has a very conservative and Republican bias in its news coverage (see Morgan et al. 1991). Edwards felt that *The Daily Oklahoman's* coverage hurt him. One hypothesis examines media bias by comparing the state's two major newspapers. The interviews with those involved in the campaign gave rise to a second hypothesis which examines the role of television.

The first hypothesis is that there were more negative stories published in Oklahoma City's leading newspaper *The Daily Oklahoman* than in Tulsa's major newspaper the *Tulsa World*. Support for this hypothesis would lead to the conclusion that one newspaper was more biased than the other in reporting this story.

The second hypothesis is that when the 1986 and 1990 elections were compared, Ellis Edwards' loss of electoral support from 1986 to 1990 was significantly greater in the Oklahoma City media market than it was outside the Oklahoma City area. Support for this hypothesis would indicate that something in the Oklahoma City media affected the electoral result.

If something in the Oklahoma City media affected voters support for Edwards and there was no difference in newspaper coverage, then television would be the obvious suspect. Radio effects on the campaign were discounted by most of the participants. Together these findings would provide some evidence that, as the participants in the campaign claimed, Terry Watkins and Channel 5 truly made a difference. This would also support the overall contention of this work that the news media played an important role in electing Claudette Henry state treasurer.

METHODS

The first hypothesis was tested through a content analysis of news stories in *The Daily Oklahoman* and the *Tulsa World* during the official campaign period from July 1 to November 7, 1990. Stories were divided into two categories, "attacks" and "non-attacks."

Stories were considered to be attacks if they discussed problems found with the incumbent state treasurer or in his office. In *The Daily Oklahoman* several neutral stories were published about activity in the treasurer's office but they were almost always tagged with a paragraph about the scandal. These stories were classified as attacks. Some readers may be concerned that counting such neutral stories as attacks biased the research. However, it was just such attempts to keep the scandal before the public that this research sought to identify. The fact that even neutral stories were tagged with scandalous statements demonstrates effectively the degree of media bias that existed in this situation. For that reason it is appropriate to measure all attacks. Stories that mentioned Edwards without mentioning his problems were classified as non-attacks.

Other media biases could be measured: story placement, headlines, story length or editorials. Coverage of the other candidates could also have been measured. Admittedly other biases may have existed. But the method used here is often used in media effect studies and does examine the quantity of stories that mention the incumbent and the quantity that reminded voters of his internal office problems.

Stories from each newspaper were located using the DataTimes Information Network. This electronic data base indexes both newspapers. As a supplement to the DataTimes index the researcher searched through most of the individual newspapers personally looking for additional mentions of Edwards. After each of the stories were examined and classified, the total number of stories in each category for each newspaper was compared to determine if one paper demonstrated more bias than the other.

The second hypothesis was examined by measuring the degree to which aspects of the Oklahoma City media market could explain the change in vote for Edwards. Official election returns published by the Oklahoma State Election Board were used to determine the difference of percentages in general election vote for Edwards between 1986 and 1990 for each of Oklahoma's 77 counties. The 1990 results were subtracted from the 1986 results; a positive value reflected movement toward Edwards' opponent.

The first variable used to measure the Oklahoma City media market was the readership of *The Daily Oklahoman*. The percentage of households in each county who subscribed to *The Daily Oklahoman* was used to measure the newspaper's impact. Readership of the *Tulsa World* was measured in the same

manner. Miles from Oklahoma City was measured for each county. Presumably, the further Oklahoma residents live from Oklahoma City the less attention they pay to Oklahoma City television media. Competing news sources become increasingly important the farther residents are from the specified source and the closer they are to the competing source. Because TV travels via airwaves or ground cable, reception is reduced and competition from other TV markets is increased as counties fall geographically farther from the source. Oklahoma City television then was presumed to have decreasing viewership at farther distances from the city. The Republican percentage of the registered voters measured partisanship. In 1990 Republicans were 33 percent of the registered voters statewide. The mean, median and standard deviation for the several variables are reported in Table 1.

The first hypothesis posited that there would be substantial difference in the *Tulsa World* and *The Daily Oklahoman's* coverage of the treasurer's office scandal. The results of the content analysis are reported in Table 2. While the proportion of negative stories was larger in *The Daily Oklahoman*, there was no significant difference between the two newspapers.

TABLE 1

County Characteristics

County Characteristics	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
Change in Edwards' 1986-1990 Vote*	9.130	6.131	10.0
Miles from Oklahoma City*	121.779	56.908	116.0
Percent of households subscribing to <i>The Daily Oklahoman</i> **	13.711	10.497	12.6
Percent of households subscribing to the <i>Tulsa World</i> **	5.503	10.936	0.0
Republican percent of registered voters*	24.195	16.162	21.0

SOURCES: * Author's calculations.** Consumer Data Service of Oklahoma City, 1991.

TABLE 2

The Daily Oklahoman and *Tulsa World* Coverage of Treasurer's Office

	<i>The Daily Oklahoman</i> Percent	<i>Tulsa World</i> Percent
Attacks	84.1	78.4
Non-Attacks	15.9	21.6
Total (n)	100.0 (44)	100.0 (51)
Chi-Sq. = .492		
df = 1		
p < .48		

SOURCE: Author's calculations.

Most mentions of Ellis Edwards included discussion of the scandal. The stories that did not were not really news stories but lists of candidates running for office. Virtually every news story that mentioned him included words like "embattled state treasurer" or "following the release of a critical audit."

The second hypothesis was that Ellis Edwards lost significantly more support in the Oklahoma City media market than he lost outside the Oklahoma City area. The results are reported in Table 3. Miles from Oklahoma City had the strongest relationship and that relationship was negative as expected. The farther away the county, the fewer votes Ellis Edwards lost between 1986 and 1990. Readership of *The Daily Oklahoman* (but not the *Tulsa World*) was also associated with Edwards' vote loss. The greater the readership, the greater the loss. As expected, the more Republicans in the county, the greater Edwards' vote loss.

A multiple regression equation relating Edwards' vote loss to county characteristics is reported in Table 4. Miles from Oklahoma City accounted for 49.86 percent of the variance in vote change (Table 3). Adding the other three variables only raised the explained variance to 56.72 percent. *Tulsa World* circulation was not a significant factor in predicting the change in votes for Ellis Edwards. Also, Republican registration was not significant when other variables were controlled. *The Daily Oklahoman* readership did have a significant effect on change in vote even with controls. Miles, however, was the most important predictor of Edwards' vote change.

TABLE 3

Correlations of Change in Edwards' Vote 1986-1990 and County Characteristics (N=77).

County Characteristics	Change in Edwards' Vote 1986-1990	Two-tailed probability
Miles from Oklahoma City.	-.706	<.001
Percent of households subscribing to <i>The Daily Oklahoman</i>	.486	<.001
Percent of households subscribing to the <i>Tulsa World</i>	-.163	.078
Republican percent of registered voters	.228	.023

SOURCE: Author's calculations.

TABLE 4

**OLS Regressions of Change in Vote for Edwards,
1986-1990 and County Characteristics (N=77).**

County Characteristics	Standardized Slope (Beta)	Probability
Miles from Oklahoma City	-.594	<.001
Percent of households subscribing to <i>The Daily Oklahoman</i>	.263	.008
Percent of households subscribing to the <i>Tulsa World</i>	.050	.309
Republican percent of registered voters	.124	.069
Intercept	13.520	
R ²	.567	
p	<.001	

SOURCE: Author's calculations.

CONCLUSION

This study leaves little doubt that the media played an important role in determining the outcome of the 1990 Oklahoma State Treasurer's race. However it also raises several questions about the media coverage in the race. What explains the effect demonstrated by *The Daily Oklahoman*? What specifically was the difference in television coverage between Oklahoma City and Tulsa? These questions may be difficult to answer. Television recordings from the campaign may no longer exist.

The Daily Oklahoman and Oklahoma City TV news coverage explained the significant loss of support Ellis Edwards suffered between the 1986 and 1990 elections. This explains why a Republican woman challenger with little financial support could defeat an incumbent Democratic man with a large campaign war chest in a heavily Democratic state. It is perhaps unfair to imply that the media vindictively went after Edwards and single-handedly, purposefully, destroyed him. However, interviews revealed they believed he needed to be replaced, supported his opponents, and took credit for his defeat.

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