News as a Casualty: District Polarization and Media Coverage of U.S. House Campaigns

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Polarization and the Media: Flipping the Focus

• Much work has focused on whether the media environment leads to mass polarization
  – Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Jacobson 2014; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Levendusky 2013; Stroud 2011 (gratuitous panel cites!)

• But we know little about how district polarization affects media coverage
  – Potential consequences for citizen knowledge and participation
How Polarization Could Affect Media Coverage of House Campaigns

• There will be less campaign coverage in lopsided districts than in more evenly split districts
  – District partisanship influences candidate emergence, campaign intensity, and competitiveness
A Tale of Two 2nds: AZ and NC
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How Polarization Could Affect Media Coverage of House Campaigns

• There will be less campaign coverage in lopsided districts than in more evenly split districts
  – District partisanship influences candidate emergence, campaign intensity, and competitiveness
  – Those factors shape the newsworthiness of an election, which determines the amount of media coverage

• Coverage in lopsided districts will reflect a different set of candidate issue priorities than in more evenly split districts
  – Candidates in lopsided districts can avoid talking about “tough” issues
  – Citizens in lopsided districts will hear a different campaign than will citizens in more evenly split districts
Data: 2010 Midterm Election Coverage

• Content analysis of local House campaign newspaper coverage
  – Largest-circulating newspaper in all 435 CDs
  – Coded every story from October 2\textsuperscript{nd} – November 2\textsuperscript{nd}
  – Analyzed a total of 6,004 stories

• Key measures of coverage
  – Number of stories
  – Number of issue mentions
  – Number of different issues mentioned
  – Number of candidate traits mentioned
  – Issue emphases of Democratic and Republican candidates

• Contextual data
  – District partisanship (2008 presidential vote margin)
  – Competitiveness of race (Cook Report rating)
  – Campaign spending
  – Quality candidate
District Polarization and Campaign News Coverage

Note: Data are from a content analysis of 6,004 campaign stories in local newspapers during the 2010 midterms.
District Polarization and Campaign Context

**% TOSS UP OR LEANING**

- 0-5
- 5-10
- 10-15
- 15-20
- 20+

2008 Presidential Vote Margin (in %)

**CAMPAIGN SPENDING**

- (in $100,000)

- 0-5
- 5-10
- 10-15
- 15-20
- 20+

2008 Presidential Vote Margin (in %)

**% WITH QUALITY CANDIDATE**

2008 Presidential Vote Margin (in %)
## The Effect of Campaign Context on Media Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
<th>Number of Issue Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008 Presidential</td>
<td>-0.25*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote Margin</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competitiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campaign Spending</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality Candidate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Entries are OLS coefficients. Robust standard errors clustered on newspaper are in parentheses. Equations controls for open seat, uncontested, district demographics, and media market-district overlap. Levels of significance: *p < .05.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>435</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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## The Effect of Campaign Context on Media Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Count</th>
<th>Number of Trait Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008 Presidential Vote Margin</td>
<td>-0.05* (0.02)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competitiveness</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Spending</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality Candidate</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N | 435 |
| R² | 0.17 |

Notes: Entries are OLS coefficients. Robust standard errors clustered on newspaper are in parentheses. Equations controls for open seat, uncontested, district demographics, and media market-district overlap. Levels of significance: *p < .05.
Democratic Issue Agendas and District Polarization

Note: Data are from a content analysis of 6,004 campaign stories in local newspapers during the 2010 midterms.
Republican Issue Agendas and District Polarization

Note: Data are from a content analysis of 6,004 campaign stories in local newspapers during the 2010 midterms.
Conclusion

• By shaping the competitive context of districts, polarization influences the information environment during House campaigns
  – Lopsided districts get less, and less substantive, coverage
  – It does not, however, produce dramatically different issue agendas in the news (the campaign reflects a national conversation)

• As a result, district polarization may widen gaps in political knowledge and participation
  – This is especially consequential as the sources of local political news continue to diminish

• Is polarization a fundamental barrier to the renaissance of local political coverage?