Citizens learn about politics and government primarily from television and newspapers; these media outlets can influence voters not only through the slant of a particular report, but also merely by choosing which to stories to cover. This study measured the effect of receiving free subscriptions to either a liberal or conservative leaning newspaper on voters' political knowledge and opinions in the United States. Results demonstrated that neither subscription had an impact on voters' political knowledge, but that both subscriptions caused voters to increase their support for the Democratic presidential candidate. This suggests that the informational effect of news exposure was stronger than the effect of the slant.

Policy Issue: Citizens learn about politics and government primarily from television and newspapers. These media outlets can influence voters not only through the slant of a particular report, but also merely by choosing which to stories to cover. Recent studies suggest that media exposure can have a sizable impact in shaping the public's political knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. However, these studies may have overestimated the impacts of media influence due to individuals' tendency to seek out information that agrees with their pre-existing views.

Context of the Evaluation: Prince William County in northeastern Virginia lies just 25 miles from Washington, D.C. Here, the population is far enough away from the nation's capital so as not to be dominated by citizens involved professionally with politics, but close enough to be within the circulation of Washington's conservative and liberal newspapers. The Washington, D.C. metro area is served by two major newspapers, the conservative Washington Times and the more liberal Washington Post. The presence of a liberal and conservative paper serving the same region creates an opportunity to study the effect of media slant in a natural setting within a single population,
which is subject to the same outside factors, such as political
events and outcomes, and has a range of political leanings.

Details of the Intervention: This study takes advantage of
this natural setting to measure the effect of political news
content on people’s political behavior and opinions.
Approximately one month prior to the Virginia gubernatorial
election in November 2005, researchers administered a
short survey to a random selection of households in Prince
William County.

From the 3,347 households of registered voters who
reported that they received neither the Post nor the Times,
researchers randomly assigned households to receive a free
subscription to one of the two papers for ten weeks, or to
the comparison group that was not sent either paper. A
week after the election, a follow-up survey was administered
asking individuals whether they voted in the November 2005
election, which candidate they selected or preferred, their
attitudes toward news events of the previous weeks, and
their knowledge about recent news events. Voter turnout
data was also collected for the November 2005 and 2006
elections from state administrative records.

Results and Policy Lessons: Impact on Political Knowledge:
Receiving either paper produced no effect on knowledge of
political events or stated opinions about those events, and
there were no differences between the treatment and
comparison groups in voter turnout for the 2005
gubernatorial election. In November 2006, however, there
was a 2.8 percentage point increase in voter turnout. It is
surprising to see a result in 2006 but not in 2005. This could
be a result of the post-election exposure to the remainder of
the ten-week newspaper subscriptions, or the fact that 17
percent of the treatment group renewed their subscription
after the free period ended.

Impact on Political Preference: Interestingly, receiving either
newspaper led to an increase of support for the Democratic
candidate. Despite the political slant of the newspapers, the
effects were similar for the Post and the Times, resulting in
an overall 7.2 percentage point increase in likelihood of
voting for the Democratic candidate. This may be due to the
fact that the Republican President’s approval ratings were
falling over that period of time, or perhaps the Democratic
candidate was conservative leaning. In either case, these
results suggest that the informational effect of more
exposure to news was stronger than the effect of its slant.

Related Papers Citations: Gerber, Alan S., Dean Karlan, and
Experiment Measuring the Effect of Newspapers on Voting
Behavior and Political Opinions.” American Economic Journal:

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