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Los Angeles

Changes in the News Industry and its Impact on Local News Production and
Political Behavior

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Political Science

by

Sean Tyler Ewing

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Changes in the News Industry and its Impact on Local News Production and Political Behavior

by

Sean Tyler Ewing

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Lynn Vavreck Lewis, Chair

This dissertation examines both how the news industry has changed over the past few decades and how those changes have affected news content and citizen engagement with local politics. Chapter 1 introduces the topic. Chapter 2 details the rise in newspapers owned and operated by investment firms and examines its effect on local newspaper content and citizen engagement. I find that newspapers purchased by investment firms reduced coverage of local politics and increased coverage of national politics and sports, at the expense of citizen knowledge and turnout in local elections. Chapter 3 investigates local newspapers that have reduced their printing schedules from daily to weekly, and I find that overall stories about local politics decrease but the share of stories about local politics remains unaffected. Chapter 4 uses an original survey experiment to investigate the effects of national political reporting on affective polarization.

The dissertation of Sean Tyler Ewing is approved.

Jeffrey B. Lewis

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University of California, Los Angeles

2025

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Don't Say Gay: Does Anti-Transgender Legislation Lead to an Increase in Gender Identity Motivated Hate Crimes? Joint with Sam Acun~a (working paper)

No News Today? The Democratic Costs of Newspapers Scaling Back to Weekly Editions (working paper)

Consuming News in a Divided Nation: The Relationship between Affective Polarization and the Media (working paper)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The American media ecosystem has undergone a significant transformation since the start of the 21st century. Daily newspapers, once regarded as the primary source of political information, have rapidly declined in both numbers and readership. Many cities and counties that were once served by daily newspapers now only have a weekly newspaper, or in some cases, no newspaper at all. Furthermore, many of the daily newspapers that remain are struggling to continue operating and making profit, forcing news owners to make tough decisions about the future of their newspaper. This dissertation studies those local newsrooms and news owners along with the communities they serve.

Chapter 2 studies the rise in newspapers owned and operated by investment oriented firms. I document 856 instances of ownership changes among daily newspapers between 2004-2020, with just under half involving a purchase by an owner who primarily deals in investments. I find that a newspaper's acquisition by an investment-owner leads to more stories about national politics and fewer stories about local politics relative to acquisitions by other types of owners. I also find that a transition to investment ownership leads to reductions in both citizen knowledge and voter turnout. While the effects are not uniformly large or statistically robust across all outcomes, the results are broadly consistent with concerns that investment ownership may weaken local coverage and reduce political engagement in local politics.

Chapter 3 examines daily newspapers that have ceased daily print production and have moved to printing fewer than three times a week. This shift raises serious concerns about the availability of local political information, which is pivotal for political participation and government accountability. However, proponents of scaled-back schedules argue that fewer publication

deadlines allow journalists to focus on deeper coverage of policy and and local governance. This paper tests that claim by comparing the types and number of stories produced before and after newspapers transition to reduced publication frequencies. I find that newspapers that switch to weekly production produce fewer total stories and fewer stories about local politics, however the weight of coverage given to local issues remains relatively stable. I then use data on voter turnout to assess how production changes influence local election dynamics and find a large drop in voter turnout in mayoral elections following a reduction in publication. The results offer new insights into whether fewer publishing days bolster local political coverage or further limit citizens' access to critical political information.

Amid the decline of local news and increasing nationalization of politics, the relationship between polarization and news consumption has become an important topic of study for political communication scholars. In an era of heightened political polarization, news content may play a critical role in shaping public attitudes toward partisan groups. Researchers have found that national news drives polarization while local news can slow it, but the mechanisms driving these effects remain largely unexplored. Chapter 4 presents an original survey experiment ($N = 3,825$) designed to test how specific elements of national news (partisan labels, political conflict, and national political figures) affect levels of affective polarization. The results indicate that stories highlighting partisan conflict and national political figures are associated with modest, though not statistically significant, increases in affective polarization. While the effects are limited in size, the consistent directional patterns suggest that editorial choices about framing and emphasis may contribute to how citizens view political opponents. These findings offer useful insights for scholars and journalists alike seeking to understand and potentially reduce affective polarization.

Chapter 2: Profit over Public Good: The Impact of Investment Firm Ownership on Local News and Political Behavior

1 Introduction

In recent decades, sweeping changes have reshaped the American media landscape. As national cable news and social media have made news content more readily accessible for the average consumer, local news providers have found themselves in increasingly competitive media markets (Abernathy 2020). Newspaper circulation has dropped every year since 1987, and thousands of daily and weekly newspapers have closed since 2004 (Pew Research Center 2022). These drastic changes have raised serious questions about the availability and quality of traditional journalism. This trend is especially concerning given the large body of literature that has demonstrated negative consequences for civic life following the decline of local news (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018, 2021; Hayes and Lawless 2021; Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson 2011; Rubado and Jennings 2020; Shaker 2014; Snyder and Strömberg 2010).

At the same time, large investment-based corporations have become increasingly involved in the news industry, taking advantage of the inability of legacy outlets to continue operating. Hundreds of newspapers have been purchased by private equity firms, hedge funds, or other investment-based firms in recent decades, prompting concern from local communities about the future of place-based reporting. One notable example is the *Fayetteville Observer*, the oldest and one of the largest newspapers in the state of North Carolina, which was owned by the same family for four generations before its sale to GateHouse Media in 2018¹. Charles Broadwell, the publisher and owner of the newspaper and the grandson of a prior publisher, said that while he was “proud to carry it this far,” the newspaper needed to be sold to a “bigger company with

¹ GateHouse Media is a subsidiary of Fortress Investments, a private equity firm.

national resources” that he and his family “just don’t have.”² Although at the time Broadwell was reportedly optimistic about the newspaper’s future, shortly after the purchase he described the consequences of the sale as “like walking around in my own funeral.”³ Broadwell’s story is all too familiar as rising costs and declining revenue makes previous models of news production increasingly unsustainable. These economically driven changes in news production may result in lower-quality local political information available to citizens, with worrisome implications for accountability of local officials and voters’ knowledge of local government.

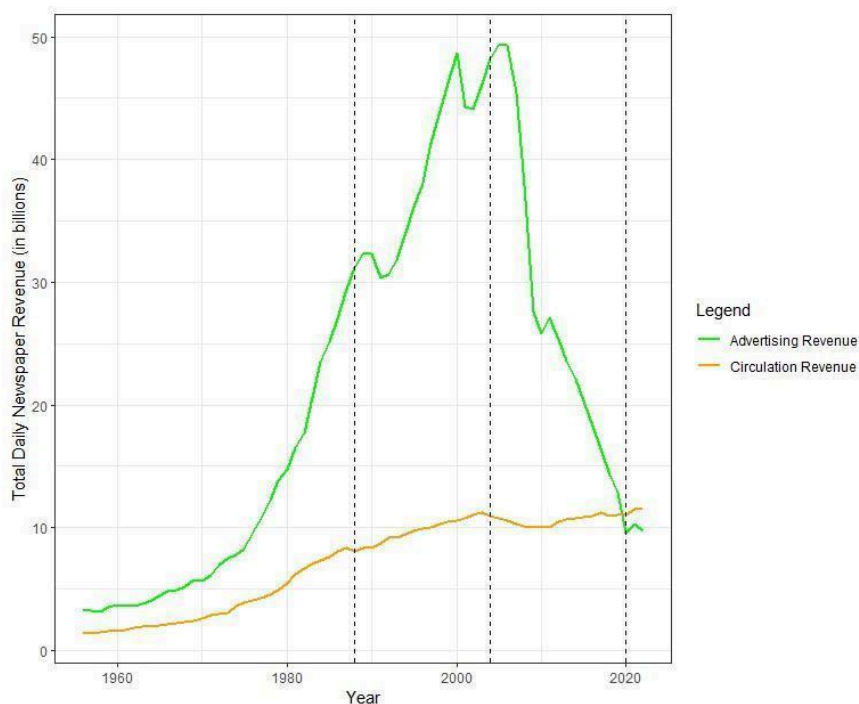


Figure 1: Total Daily Newspaper Revenue (data from Pew Research Center)

Figure 1 illustrates the scope of the problem. The dotted lines mark the 16-year period examined in this paper (2004–2020) and the 16 years preceding it (1988–2004). While circulation has declined considerably in recent years (Pew Research Center 2022), revenue from circulation remained relatively stable across both periods, even increasing slightly between 1988

²<https://www.wral.com/story/fayetteville-observer-sold-to-gatehouse-media/15884799/>

³<https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/expanding-news-desert/loss-of-local-news/bigger-and-bigger-they-grow/>

and 2004. However, circulation revenue has long been dwarfed by advertising revenue, which rose by nearly 40% in the earlier period. Since 2004, advertising revenue has collapsed, falling by nearly 80% and so much so that it dropped below revenue from circulation for the first time in 2020. These trends underscore the financial pressures facing newspaper owners and highlight the broader economic crisis confronting the newspaper industry.

In this paper, I document the widespread changes in ownership and news production in the newspaper industry. I collect ownership data for every daily newspaper in the United States and find that nearly half of all daily newspapers have changed ownership at least once between 2004-2020. Of the 856 daily newspaper ownership changes I document during this period, 445 of those ownership changes are purchases by an investment-owner. Using a difference-in-differences design, I measure the change in news content following a purchase by an investment-owner. My results show an increase in coverage of national politics and sports at the expense of stories about local politics. Other types of ownership changes do not produce the same outcome.

How has this decline in local reporting affected civic life? Using the same difference-in-differences design, I examine the impact of investment firm ownership on voter knowledge and turnout. Although public discourse often frames investment firm acquisitions of newspapers as a major threat to civic engagement, the evidence from my analysis presents a more nuanced picture. I find modest declines in voters' ability to evaluate their House representatives and small reductions in turnout in mayoral elections following an investment-firm acquisition. However, I detect no significant effects on citizens' evaluations of other offices, nor on turnout in city council elections, nor in split ticket voting rates. Overall, the estimated effects are limited in size and scope, suggesting that while investment ownership may have some consequences for civic engagement, it does not produce the sweeping changes often assumed by journalists and academics.

This research contributes to the growing literature surrounding the effects of newspaper ownership. Dunaway (2008) found that newspaper ownership affected the treatment of campaign news, and Bailard (2016) noted that changes in coverage were primarily driven by the political and economic interests of the news owners. More recent scholarship has focused on the extent to which local news stories are being supplanted by national news. Martin and McCrain (2019) take advantage of the Sinclair group's recent acquisition of local TV programs and show that the channels acquired by Sinclair increased their coverage of national politics at the expense of local politics. Mastrorocco and Ornaghi (2023) build on that research by demonstrating that the Sinclair acquisitions affected the behavior of viewers and their ability to hold public institutions accountable. This research does not address the more recent phenomenon of the entry of investment-owners, which has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention.

Dunaway and Peterson (2023) are the first to use the term investment-owners, and they document a decline in newsroom staffing, including journalists and editors, following acquisitions by investment-owners. Ewens, Gupta, and Howell (2023) find a shift from local to national reporting in newspapers under private equity ownership. This research builds on these studies by expanding the design used in Ewens, Gupta, and Howell (2023) to the investment-firm definition introduced by Dunaway and Peterson (2023). I then use the same design to look at how investment firm ownership impacts political knowledge and behavior. Additionally, I examine how acquisitions by investment-owners compare to those by non-investment owners, offering a broader assessment of how ownership changes influence newspaper content and civic life. This approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of news ownership and its societal implications.

2 Theoretical Motivation

Media ownership impacts news production because owners can make choices about hiring/firing journalists and editors, allocating journalistic resources, and setting the agenda of a newsroom (Archer and Clinton 2018; Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Hamilton 2004). Local news is costly to produce and often requires dedicated and knowledgeable staff (Kaniss 1991), and local newsrooms are facing increasingly dire financial situations (Abernathy 2020). Newspapers can cut costs or potentially increase profit by reducing local reporting and filling its pages with content that is cheaper to produce, such as stories about national politics or sports. These types of stories are cheaper than local stories because of the abundance of information available online about national politics or sports. A newspaper would not need to send a journalist to the capital to write a story about national politics, but likely would need to send a journalist to city hall to report on city politics. Additionally, a story about national politics or sports could be run in every newspaper that a corporation owns, while a local news story would only be of interest to residents of a particular community. Research has demonstrated a connection between media consolidation and declining local content (Dunaway 2013; Martin and McCrain 2019), and Hamilton (2004) shows that ownership type matters for newsroom investment and direction.

Why should we be worried about investment ownership of newspapers? Researchers have already documented considerable declines in staffing levels (Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Ewens, Gupta, and Howell 2023), and other research has highlighted the relationship between the size of a newspaper's staff and the amount and quality of the political coverage it produces (Peterson 2021). These concerns are not just theoretical; public statements made by the companies in question can help demonstrate their goals. In a 2015 press release, the CEO of Gatehouse Media said "We believe we can shield our cash flows from topline declines through measured expense reductions at our acquired properties, and remain confident in our ability to

continue to grow free cash flow and our dividend.⁴” The founder and CEO of Alden Global Capital, a hedge fund that owns Digital First Media, said “newspaper companies have a lot of assets that probably aren’t being fully utilized and could be sold off.” As Abernathy (2016) noted, these investment-owners are distinguished from other owners by their own stated emphasis on maximizing profits without a coinciding commitment to local journalism.

Figure 2 presents a theory of how investment-ownership can affect the flow of information, citizen knowledge, and voter behavior. After a purchase by an investment-owner, cost cutting measures are put into place to make the newspaper more profitable. Dunaway and Peterson (2023) find that one of those cost cutting measures is laying off editors and journalists, however other cost saving measures could be put in place that may also diminish local news such as the allocation of limited resources or an

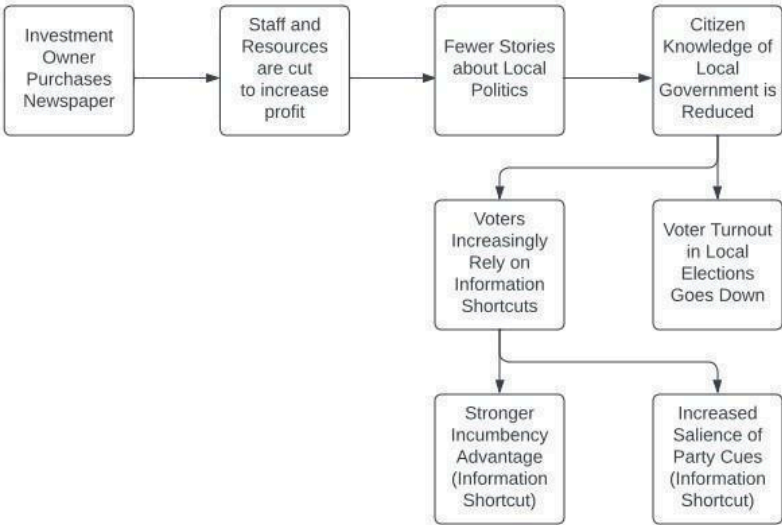


Figure 2: Theoretical Expectations of the Impact of Newspaper Ownership

⁴ <https://newspaperownership.com/additional-material/investment-newspaper-owners-statements/>

increased reliance on cheaper types of news content. All of these changes can lead to fewer stories about local politics, which in turn reduces knowledge about local politics for citizens. This may lead to consequences for local elections, such as lower voter turnout and an increased reliance on information shortcuts. The increased reliance on information shortcuts may increase the salience of both incumbency and party in elections, two important informational cues that prior research has linked to declining local news (Lockhart 2021; Moskowitz 2021).

3 Data and Measurement

I collect data from several sources. The first is the *Editor and Publisher Yearbook*, a newspaper directory that has been published annually for over a hundred years. In each presidential election year from 2004-2020, I extract the name, location, circulation, and ownership of every English-language U.S. daily newspaper for a total of 1,471 newspapers. To check the accuracy of the data, I compare the E&P data with lists of daily newspapers provided by the UNC Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media. The datasets are remarkably similar, with over 99% of newspapers appearing in both datasets. From the data, I identify all newspapers that experience a change in ownership during the 16 year period. I find 856 instances of ownership changes between 2004-2020 among 657 different daily newspapers. Using Internet searches and newspaper websites/articles, I confirm each ownership change and identify the exact year it took place. As it likely takes time for new owners to institute their desired newsroom changes, I consider the first year of new ownership to be the year after the transaction year (for example, if a newspaper was bought in 2018, I consider the first year of "new" ownership to be 2019).

While these datasets provide the name of the newspaper owner, the yearbooks provide no other information about the type of ownership. Using Internet searches and other public information, I hand code every daily newspaper as being owned by an investment-owner or not. Investment firm ownership is a key variable of interest in this paper. Following Dunaway and

Peterson (2023), I define a newspaper as investment-owned if it is owned by a private equity firm, hedge fund, or another owner whose background is primarily in investment and not in media.

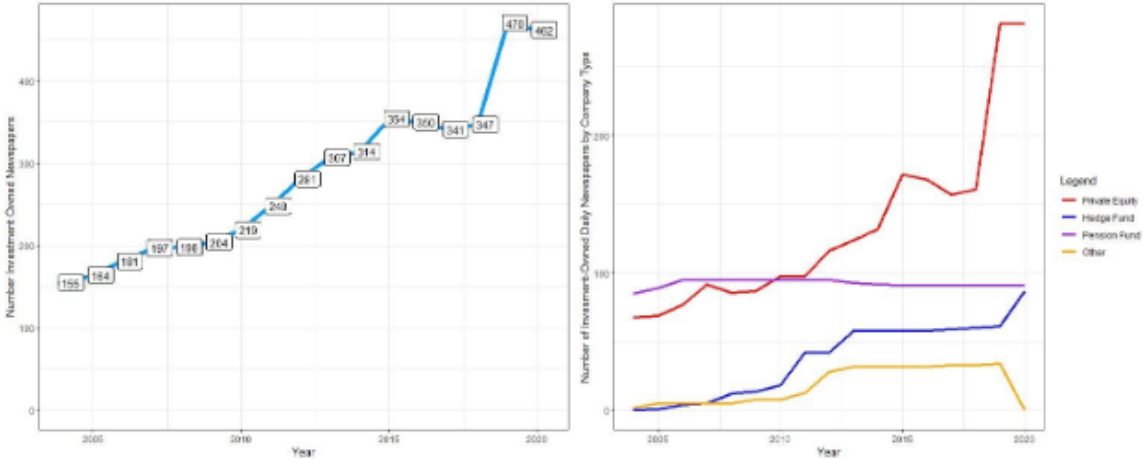


Figure 3: Number of Newspapers owned by Investment Owners 2004-2020

The left side of figure 3 shows the number of daily newspapers that come under investment ownership between 2004-2020. Although there are a few examples of investment-owners selling newspapers back to non-investment-owners, the trend is clear: investment-ownership is on the rise. The number of papers owned by investment-owners is nearly triple what it was in 2004. The right side of figure 3 shows the breakdown of newspaper ownership by type of investment company. Private equity firms and hedge funds see the largest growth in their newspaper portfolio between 2004-2020. The only pension fund in the data, Community Newspaper Holdings Incorporated (CNHI), grew slightly but has been party to relatively few transactions when compared with hedge funds and private equity firms. The other category encompasses corporations that deal primarily in investments but do not fit neatly into the other categories.⁵ There are a few cases that are somewhat challenging to classify, such as Jeff Bezos’ purchase of *The Washington Post* or Patrick Soon-Shiong’s purchase of *The Los Angeles Times*. While these

⁵ One example is Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffet’s investment company that purchased 31 daily newspapers between 2004 and 2020 using the name BH Media.

owners do not primarily deal in media, they also do not have the same profit driven goals that other investment-owners appear to have. For example, Patrick Soon-Shiong stated in several interviews that he planned to invest in his newspapers and increase local reporting.⁶ Jeff Bezos doubled the size of the staff at *The Washington Post*, and initiated several other changes with the express goal of improving the newspaper⁷ Additionally, the UNC database regards these owners as private rather than investment-based, so I classify these ambiguous cases as non-investment purchases.

For data on news content I rely on NewsBank, a newspaper archive that has been used in prior newspaper research (Hayes and Lawless 2021). I collect data from every daily newspaper available in the archive, excluding any newspaper with more than a third of the years of interest missing. Using keyword searches, I collect the approximate number of stories related to local politics, national politics, state politics, and sports. I also collect the total number of articles housed by the archive for each newspaper. I will describe the collection process in greater detail in the content analysis section.

Table 1 shows the availability of daily newspapers in NewsBank. I also exclude newspapers that closed, merged with another newspaper, or shifted to weekly production between 2004-2020. Of the 1,261 newspapers that remain a daily in 2020, 288 are fully or near fully available on the archive. While this is far from complete coverage, the sample does include similar proportions of newspapers that change owners and newspapers that fall under investment-ownership. The newspapers available through NewsBank tend to be larger than an average daily newspaper, but there is still a reasonable sample of smaller circulation newspapers. A list of all newspapers used in the content analysis can be found in the appendix.

⁶<https://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-patrick-soon-shiong-latimes-sold-20180616story.html>

⁷<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/14/business/media/jeff-bezos-washingtonpost.html::text=In%20the%20first%20seven%20years,reporting%20on%20the%20Trump%20administration.>

Table 1: Newspaper Availability in NewsBank

	N	Availability in NewsBank	%
All Newspapers	1261	288	23%
Ownership Change	657	170	26%
IO Ownership Change	445	94	21%

In addition to media data, I also use the 2006-2020 Cooperative Election Studies (CES) to assess citizen knowledge and split ticket voting rates (Kuriwaki 2024).⁸ The CES is an annual, nation-wide survey that asks questions related to knowledge of elected officials and voting behavior. For data on election outcomes, I use the local elections dataset provided by de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023). The local elections dataset includes voter turnout data for elections at the city level, and also allows me to test the electoral success of local incumbents.

For each outcome, I use a difference-in-differences design to estimate the effect of new ownership and investment-ownership. The regression model for the newspaper content analysis is as follows:

$$Y_{nt} = \beta(\text{New Owner}) + \gamma(\text{New Investment Owner}) + \lambda_n + \alpha_t + \epsilon_{nt}$$

with Y_{nt} as the share of stories about local politics, national politics, state politics, or sports in newspaper n in year t , and *New Owner* as an indicator variable, which is zero if the newspaper has not changed owners and one in the first full year of new ownership and all years afterwards. *New Investment Owner* is another indicator variable coded as one if the newspaper is purchased by an investment owner or zero if it is not. λ_n and α_t are newspaper and year fixed effects, respectively. The newspaper fixed effects control for time-consistent omitted variables causing across-newspaper variation. The year fixed effects capture any variation that is due to national trends in a given year rather than the types of newspaper specific effects I am trying to estimate. The year fixed effects are particularly important to include given the myriad of other changes that are affecting the media industry and news production such as the popularization of social

⁸ The CES began in 2006, so there is no data available for 2004 or 2005

media or the availability of news online. The model is nearly the same for analyses that examine aggregate election data except the newspaper fixed effects are replaced by city fixed effects (depending on the unit of analysis).

One significant challenge with studying locations served by newspapers is the existence of large municipalities that have multiple daily newspapers. Los Angeles County, which is home to 9.8 million people, had twelve daily newspapers in 2004, of which 10 changed owners by the end of 2020. This makes it challenging to isolate the effects of any single ownership change. To account for this, I restrict the data to only counties or cities (depending on the regression) that have a single daily newspaper in each of the analyses where location is considered. This does not affect the newspaper content analysis as the measurement occurs within newspapers. Regressions using the full dataset can be found in the appendix, and the results are largely consistent in both approaches.

The model changes slightly for the analyses that rely on survey data of individuals from the CES. That model is:

$$Y_{it} = \beta(\text{New Owner}) + \gamma(\text{New Investment Owner}) + \lambda_c + \alpha_t + X_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

In this model, Y_{it} is the outcome of interest (ability to evaluate elected officials or having cast a split ticket vote) in individual i in year t . X_i denotes individual level partisan and demographic controls. I connect newspaper data with individual survey respondents using county of residence, so I use county and year fixed effects which are λ_c and α_t .

It is important to point out that, in the regression models, I include two separate indicator variables: one for whether a newspaper is acquired by a new owner (*New Owner*), and a second for whether that new owner is an investment firm (*New Investment Owner*). The *New Owner* indicator captures the average effect of any ownership change, regardless of acquirer type, while the *New Investment Owner* indicator captures the differential effect of being acquired specifically by an investment firm, relative to other types of owners. As a result, the marginal effect of an investment firm acquisition is the sum of the coefficients on *New Owner* and *New Investment Owner*. This means that to interpret the total impact of an investment firm

acquisition, one must consider both coefficients jointly. Focusing on the *New Investment Owner* coefficient in isolation reflects only the differential effect, not the full effect of such an acquisition.

4 Newspaper Content Analysis

To conduct the content analysis, I search for key words related to local (mayor, city council, city hall, city government, county government, county executive, school board, school district, planning board, zoning), national (Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden, Congress, White House), and state (Governor, Lieutenant Governor, state senate, state policy, state legislature, state capitol) politics. I also collect sports key words (MLB, NBA, NFL, baseball, basketball, football) to have a non-political group. The search feature in NewsBank allows for boolean searches, so the number of local, national, state, and sports articles in each newspaper-year is the number of articles that contain any of those keywords⁹.

While these terms are not exhaustive, I aimed to select the words that would most likely indicate national, state, or local political reporting. Many of these words have been used by prior media researchers (Hayes and Lawless 2021; Ewens, Gupta, and Howell 2023), and I avoided selecting words that are frequently used outside of politics. For example, I did not include the word “President” because it is used frequently by companies and other entities that are not related to national politics.

As I want to calculate the share of article content, I also collect the total number of articles housed by the archive for each newspaper-year. I use the share of article content rather than the raw number of stories for several reasons. First, the number of stories a newspaper produces varies year to year so a reported change may be due to a change in the overall number of stories rather than stories about a particular topic. Second, the share of articles is a good proxy for the

⁹ For example, if an article uses the word mayor twice and the word city council once, the article would only count once in the local data.

weight of coverage that a newspaper reader is exposed to, which may affect what topics a reader thinks are important and pays attention to (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

In total, I analyze over 85 million articles across 288 newspapers. I calculate the dependent variable as the number of articles mentioning a keyword divided by the total number of articles in each newspaper-year. As a reminder, the independent variable is an indicator meant to denote the ownership status of the newspaper in each given year.

Table 2: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic 2004-2020

	Local	National	State	Sports
New Owner	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.003)
New Investment Owner	-0.006** (0.002)	0.010*** (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.006* (0.003)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.096	0.071	0.032	0.146
Observations	4868	4868	4868	4868

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the share of stories about local politics, national politics, state politics, or sports. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 reports the results of fixed-effects regressions estimating the effects of newspaper ownership changes on the share of articles covering local, national, state, and sports topics. Each column corresponds to a separate regression, and all models include fixed effects for year and newspaper, with standard errors clustered by newspaper.

As a reminder, there are two key coefficients presented in this table. New Owner indicates a change in ownership of any kind, while New Investment Owner captures the additional effect of being acquired specifically by an investment firm (e.g., private equity or hedge fund). Because all investment ownership changes are also ownership changes, the total effect of investment ownership is the sum of the two coefficients.

For example, in the case of local political coverage, the coefficient on New Owner is 0.001, and the coefficient on New Investment Owner is -0.006, resulting in a total effect of -0.005. This corresponds to a 0.5 percentage point decline, which is approximately 5% of the outcome mean (which is 0.096). In contrast, the share of national political stories increases by a total of 0.009 (from -0.001 + 0.010), or roughly 13% of the outcome mean. These patterns suggest that newspapers acquired by investment firms reduce their emphasis on local politics while increasing their focus on national political content.

No significant changes are observed in state political coverage, but investment ownership is associated with a modest but significant increase in sports content, representing a roughly 3.4% increase of the outcome mean.

These shifts are consistent with the economic incentives of investment owners: local political coverage is resource-intensive and locally bounded, while sports coverage is relatively cheap, widely appealing, and easy to syndicate. Prior research suggests that political reporters are more likely to be laid off than entertainment or sports journalists following newsroom cutbacks (Dunaway and Peterson 2023), and local political stories are more difficult to replace with wire content (Hindman 2011).

One potential concern with this analysis is the possibility that investment-owners purchase newspapers that are already in a state of decline, and thus the effect that I show in Table 2 may be due to the characteristics of the newspapers that investment-owners purchase rather than the decisions those owners make after the purchase. Put differently, if investment firms disproportionately target struggling newspapers, the observed changes in content could reflect pre-existing trends rather than post-acquisition decisions. I address this concern using four robustness checks.

First, I re-estimate the model after excluding all newspapers whose prior owner had declared bankruptcy before the sale. Five media chains that collectively owned dozens of newspapers declared bankruptcy before being purchased by investment firms. Removing these cases slightly

weakens the coefficients but does not meaningfully alter the results, suggesting that the findings are not driven solely by distressed assets.

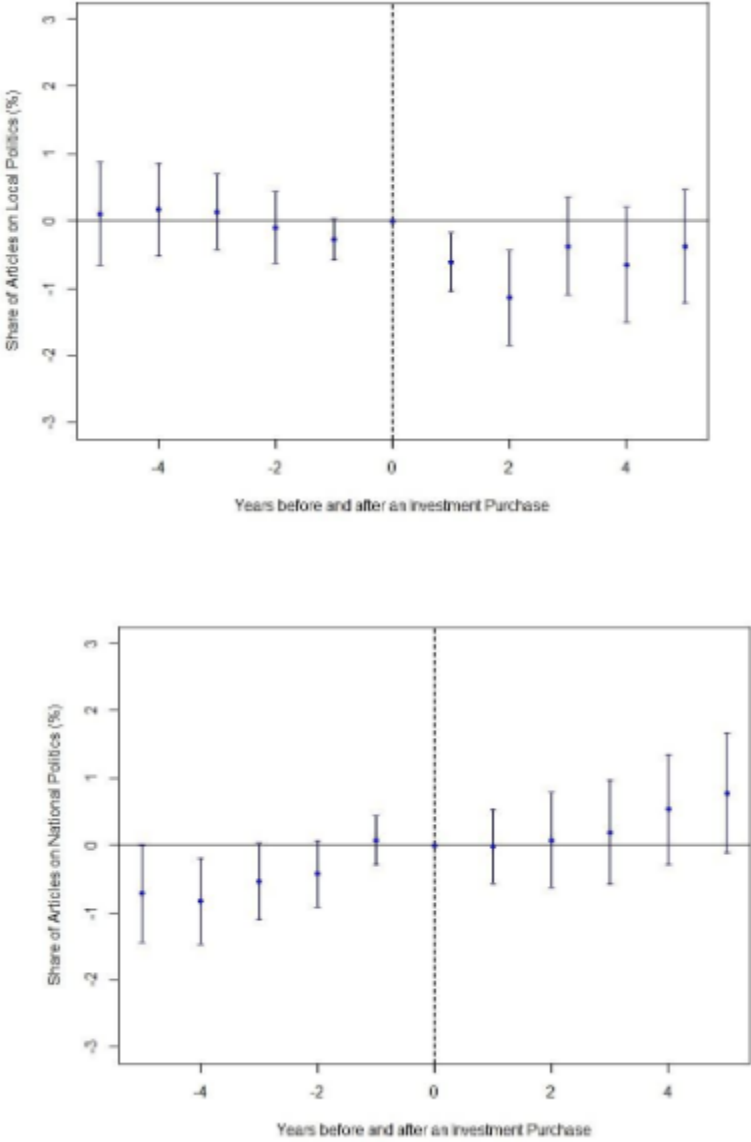


Figure 4: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: Local and National Politics

Next, I conduct an event study to assess whether the decline in local reporting and the rise in national reporting predated the newspaper’s sale. Figure 4 shows the difference-in-differences

event studies on the share of articles about local politics and national politics. The event studies show the point estimates and confidence intervals of the regression in each time period before and after a purchase by an investment-owner. The reference year is the year of the deal as I want to capture the last year of prior ownership. The event study on the share of articles about local politics shows fairly consistent rates of local stories prior to a purchase, followed by a sizable drop in the first full year of investment-ownership. The event study on the share of articles about national politics is less clear; while the point estimates do indeed rise after a purchase by an investment-owner, the rise appears to begin prior to the sale. This raises the possibility of anticipatory effects or other confounding dynamics playing a role in the increase in national political reporting.

Third, I rerun the main model but shift the timing of the treatment: rather than coding ownership change as occurring in the year after the sale, I assign it to the year before the sale. If the effects observed in Table 2 are truly causal, then shifting the intervention to a pre-treatment period should weaken the estimated effects. Indeed, the resulting coefficients are significantly weaker than the main model. This pattern is consistent with the expectation that causal effects should emerge after ownership changes, not before.

Finally, I apply the matching estimator from Imai, Kim, and Wang (2023) using the PanelMatch package in R. This method accounts for selection bias by comparing treated newspapers to matched control units with similar pre-treatment characteristics and trends. The matched estimates corroborate the main findings: investment ownership is associated with a decline in local political coverage and an increase in national political coverage. All robustness checks and further details can be found in the appendix.

5 Citizen Knowledge

Next, I use data from the Cooperative Election Study to test the effects of newspaper ownership on citizen knowledge. The CES asks respondents to evaluate their elected official,

and if respondents were able to give any evaluation then I consider them able to evaluate a particular office. If a respondent answered the survey “Not Sure” or “Never Heard of This Person”, I consider the respondent unable to evaluate their elected official for that office. Although the CES asks other questions about knowledge of elected officials (like ability to recall their name), this question is preferable because it is both simple and has been asked consistently in every CES survey (2006-present). As the CES relies on individual respondents, I use demographic and partisan controls. Specifically, I control for family income, age, race, gender, education, and marital status, in addition to indicators for party affiliation.

Table 3: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Citizen’s Ability to Evaluate Elected Officials (Only Counties with One Newspaper) 2006-2020

	House	Senator	Governor	President
New Owner	0.005 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)
New Investment Owner	-0.012** (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.002)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.745	0.843	0.903	0.972
Observations	301313	301313	301313	301313

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the ability of CCES survey respondents to evaluate elected officials. If a respondent answered the survey “Not Sure” or “Never Heard of This Person,” I consider them unable to evaluate their elected official. Standard errors are clustered by county.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The results in Table 3 indicate a modest but significant decline in respondents’ ability to evaluate their U.S. representative following the purchase of their county’s newspaper by an investment owner. No statistically significant effects are observed for citizens’ ability to evaluate

the other offices. The effect is likely concentrated on U.S. representatives because they are the most locally connected of the four offices.

6 Voter Behavior

I also use the CES data to test for new ownership’s effects on the polarization of voting behavior by looking at split ticket voting rates, or the rates at which voters choose candidates from different party affiliations on the same ballot. Prior research has demonstrated a connection between local news consumption and split ticket voting (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018; Moskowitz 2021). This research has theorized that less information about local officeholders leads to voters using party affiliation as an information shortcut. Thus, less local news may lead to increased split ticket voting. I use the same control variables that I used in the prior analysis.

Table 4: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Split Ticket Voting (Only Counties with One Newspaper) 2008-2020

	House/President	Sen/President	Gov/President
New Owner	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.008 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.006)
New Investment Owner	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.007)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.070	0.059	0.071
Observations	157222	102733	72804

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on split ticket voting between House/Senator/Governor and the President. Standard errors are clustered by county. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 4 presents the results for split ticket voting. Each column represents an individual ballot selection on a lower level office and the president. If a respondent votes for two

candidates with different party affiliations, I consider them having cast a split ticket and they are coded as treated. There is no statistically significant effect of investment ownership on split ticket voting rates, however it should be noted that the sample sizes for this analysis are smaller than the knowledge tests because not every CES respondent has a house, senatorial, or gubernatorial election each year the survey is fielded.

Next, I turn to turnout in local elections. I examine voter turnout rates in city elections, specifically city council and mayoral elections. I focus my analysis on city politics because it is the most common type of local politics to be covered in daily newspapers (Hayes and Lawless 2021). It is important to note that not every city is represented in the local elections database, and the data availability may affect the results. In particular, the database is more likely to include more populous cities, although there are many smaller cities included as well. I calculate the turnout by taking the number of votes for all candidates for a particular office in a given election divided by annual population estimates from the U.S. census. The analysis also includes city and year fixed effects. District fixed effects are also included for the city council regression as this office is sometimes elected in districts.

Table 5: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Turnout in Local Elections (Only Cities with One Newspaper) 2004-2020

	Mayor	City Council
New Owner	0.017 (0.012)	-0.009 (0.013)
New Investment Owner	-0.030* (0.015)	-0.021 (0.016)
Year FE	Yes	Yes
City FE	Yes	Yes
District FE	No	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.173	0.181
Observations	836	3949

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on voter turnout in city elections. Standard errors are in parentheses below the estimates. Standard errors are clustered by city. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

For mayoral elections, the total estimated effect of investment ownership is a decline of approximately 1.3 percentage points, combining a 0.017 increase associated with general ownership changes and a -0.030 shift associated with investment firm acquisitions. While the New Investment Owner coefficient reflects the additional impact beyond a typical ownership change, the overall effect of investment ownership includes both terms. The direction and size of the combined estimate point to a meaningful reduction in turnout following investment acquisitions. For city council elections, the total estimated decline in turnout is somewhat larger, with both ownership-related coefficients contributing negatively. This result, like the mayoral case, points toward a decline in civic participation following ownership changes, especially when the new owner is an investment firm.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Local newspapers are frequently described as being in a state of crisis, and trends of declining circulation and revenue are likely to continue. As newsrooms continue to grapple with changes in communications technology and reductions in available resources, news owners may find it increasingly challenging to sustain previous models of news production. This paper contributes to scholars' understanding of the decline of local news and its consequences by offering evidence of the impact of ownership changes on news production and civic life. There appears to be little effect of newspaper ownership changes when the change is among media focused owners, but investment-ownership is associated with less local news and less participation in local politics. This finding is what one might expect given reductions in reporting staff that occur with these purchases (Dunaway and Peterson 2023).

While there are considerable consequences to investment-ownership, it is worth mentioning that the effects I estimate in this paper are moderate and in smaller magnitude than one might assume given the public discourse surrounding these newspaper acquisitions. In fact, one might argue that despite any deleterious outcomes associated with investment ownership, it may be

preferable to the alternative of a newspaper closing entirely. After all, some local reporting from a local newspaper is almost certainly better than none at all. And indeed several family owned or other privately owned newspapers that were at risk of closing entirely have been purchased by investors. The majority of newspaper acquisitions, however, come from acquisitions of large public, or less often, private chains. While these chains are certainly not immune from the financial pressure facing newsrooms nation-wide, there is little evidence to suggest that the majority of them were in immediate danger of bankruptcy. Rather, lucrative offers and exhausted owners have allowed investment companies to swallow up large numbers of newspapers in a short span of time.

Furthermore, there may be effects of investment-ownership that take a longer amount of time to emerge and be documented by scholars. In the book *Hedged: How Private Investment Funds Helped Destroy American Newspapers and Undermine Democracy*, communications scholar Margot Susca conducts a plethora of in-depth interviews on newspaper staff about the rise of investment-ownership. In one particularly notable interview, a former editor and columnist at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* said “There are governments that nobody watches. There are investigations that might have made major changes that are lost. Investigations that could have led to new approaches and policy, but there’s nobody to call” (Susca 2024, p. 5). This quote highlights the notion that there may be additional consequences of investment-ownership outside of what I find in this paper, and it is my hope that scholars continue to document and investigate the rise of investment-ownership.

Historically, the FCC has pursued relatively limited restrictions on newspaper ownership, and even some of those restrictions have fallen away in recent years. In 2017, the FCC eliminated the Newspaper and Broadcast Cross-Ownership Rule, which prohibited an owner from owning a full-power broadcast station and a daily newspaper if the station’s contour completely encompassed the newspaper’s city of publication and the station and newspaper were in the same relevant Nielsen market. The FCC stated that the rule was “outdated considering the explosive growth of the number and variety of sources of local news and information in the

modern marketplace”. While the report is likely correct about the number and variety of information sources, those sources may not provide the same level of local news coverage that has been historically found in newspapers (Abernathy 2020). A 2011 report by the FCC found that the internet was not a prominent place for local news outlets (Hindman 2011). Additionally, the filtering algorithms used by platforms like Google tend to elevate news produced by national outlets at the expense of local news content (Usher 2019). While local TV stations have not yet been targeted by investment-owners in the same way that newspapers have, the elimination of the FCC rule may change that in the future.

Is there hope on the horizon? In 2020, the Local Journalism Sustainability Act was introduced in the House of Representatives to provide tax credits to local newspapers in order to help them operate and report on local politics. Although it never received a vote of the full house, the bill was widely supported by the media and newspaper industry. David Chavern, the President and CEO of News Media Alliance, wrote, “As journalists are on the front lines reporting on the coronavirus crisis, local news publishers have been dealt a major blow from the contraction of the local advertising market.” Various state legislatures have considered their own interventions, such as Illinois’ state legislature, which passed a version of the federal bill in May 2024. My research suggests that ownership is another area that lawmakers and policy experts should consider when discussing ways to assist local journalism and the communities they serve.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement

All data for this paper is available upon request. Due to the terms of the NewsBank license, I am not able to share the full text of the articles used in the content analysis. The data I am able to share includes yearly counts and coding indicators but not the articles themselves. However, the coding procedure is fully replicable for any researcher with access to the NewsBank platform. The classification is based on keyword searches that are explicitly described in the paper and appendix, and which can be re-run using NewsBank's advanced search interface.

Chapter 2 Appendix

A.1 Descriptive Appendices

A.1.1 List of Large Newspaper Acquisitions

Table A.1: Ownership Changes Involving 5 or more Daily Newspapers

Acquisitions by Investment-Owner			
<u>Old Owner</u>	<u>New Owner</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Papers Purchased</u>
Gannett	GateHouse Media	2019	112
Liberty Group Publishing	GateHouse Media	2006	34
McClatchy	Chatham Asset Management	2020	26
Halifax	GateHouse Media	2015	23
MediaNews Group	Digital First Media	2011	22
Media General	BH Media	2012	15
Journal Register Co.	Digital First Media	2013	15
Brown Publishing Company	Civitas Media	2010	12
Tronc/Tribune	Tribune (Sam Zell)	2008	7
Stephens Media Group	GateHouse Media	2015	7
Morris Communications Company	GateHouse Media	2017	7
Morris Communications Company	GateHouse Media	2007	7
MediaNews Group	GateHouse Media	2015	7
Copley Press Inc	GateHouse Media	2007	7
Schurz Communications Inc	GateHouse Media	2019	6
NewsCorp	GateHouse Media	2013	6
Heartland Publications LLC	Civitas Media	2012	6
Omaha World-Herald Company	BH Media	2011	5
Heartland Publications	Civitas Media	2012	5
Dix Communications	GateHouse Media	2017	5
Acquisitions by Other Owners			
<u>Old Owner</u>	<u>New Owner</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Papers Purchased</u>
BH Media	Lee Enterprises	2020	31
Knight Ridder	McClatchy	2006	15
New York Times Company	Halifax	2012	13
EW Scripps	Gannett	2016	13
Civitas Media	AIM Media	2017	13
Pioneer News Group	Adams Publishing Group	2017	7
American Consolidated Media	Adams Publishing Group	2014	7
Freedom Community Newspapers Inc	Halifax	2012	6

Dow Jones Co	NewsCorp	2007	6
Pulitzer	Lee Enterprises	2005	5
GateHouse Media	Paddock Publications Inc	2016	5
Freedom Communications	AIM Media	2012	5

A.1.2 Proportion of Daily Newspapers Under Investment-Ownership

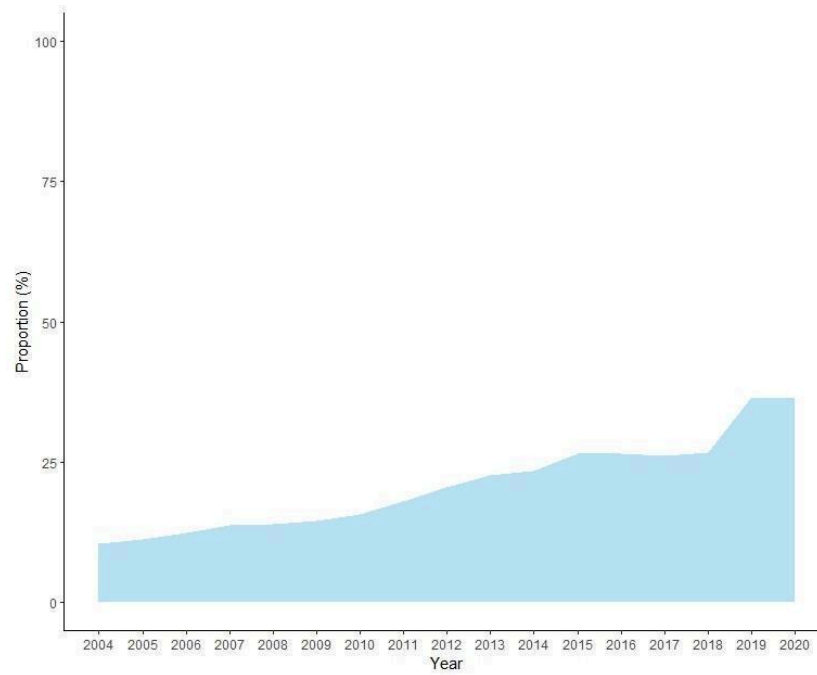


Figure A.1: Proportion of Daily Newspapers Under Investment-Ownership

A.1.3 Unique Newspaper Owners in the Data

Although this paper is not explicitly about consolidation, it is true that newspaper consolidation has accelerated during the period I study. Figure 6 shows the consolidation of newspaper owners from 2004-2020.

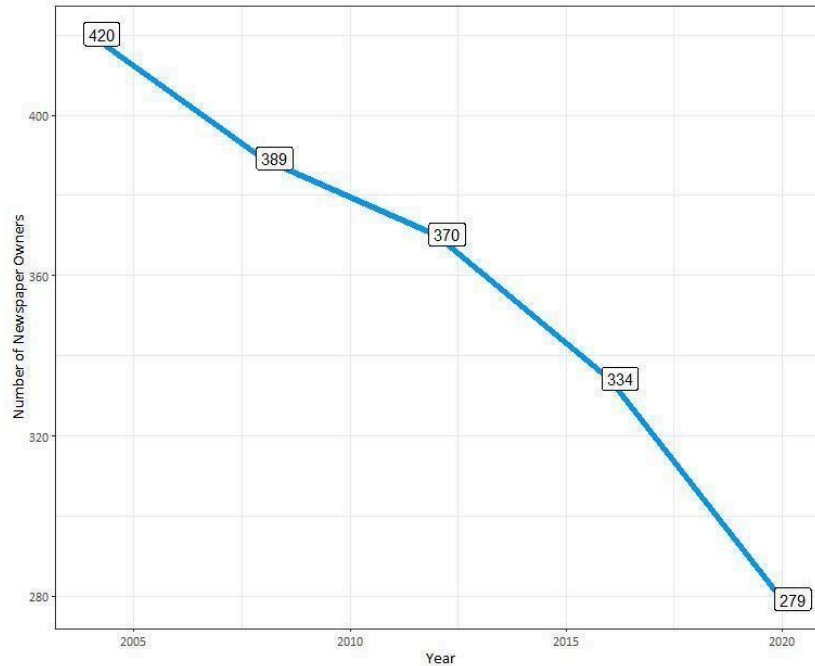


Figure A.2: Number of Unique Newspaper Owners in Data

A.1.4 Ownership changes from 1988-2004 compared to 2004-2020

How new is this large volume of ownership changes? Nearly half of all daily newspaper changed owners during my 16 year period of study. To assess the frequency of ownership changes in the past, I use digitized *Editor and Publisher Yearbooks* from Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson (2011). From 1988-2004, the 16 year period prior to the years I study in this paper, I find a total of 701 daily newspapers that experience an ownership change for a total of 967 ownership changes. Interestingly, this is slightly more than the current period, where I find 856 instances of ownership changes among 657 daily newspapers. However, there were approximately 200 more daily newspapers publishing during 1988-2004 when compared to

2004-2020, meaning the proportion of all daily newspapers that change owners is roughly equal during the two periods.

A.1.5 Total Mentions of Local Offices in NewsBank

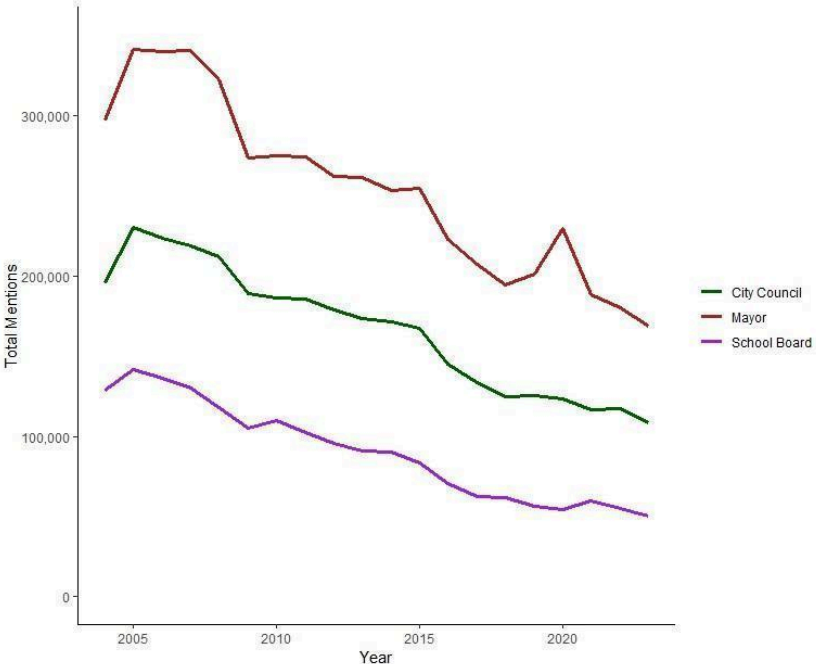


Figure A.3: Total Number of Mentions of Mayor, City Council, and School Board in all NewsBank papers

A.2 Robustness Tests

A.2.1 Results with all Counties and Cities

Table A.2: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Citizen's Ability to Evaluate Elected Officials (All Counties) 2006-2020

	House Rep	Senator	Governor	President
New Owner	0.002 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.003)	0.000 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.001)
New Investment Owner	-0.005 (0.004)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.007** (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.782	0.841	0.906	0.970
Observations	531755	531755	531755	531755

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the ability of CCES survey respondents to evaluate elected officials. If a respondent answered the survey "Not Sure" or "Never Heard of This Person," I consider them unable to evaluate their elected official. Standard errors are clustered by county.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.3: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Split Ticket Voting (All Counties)
2008-2020

	House/President	Gov/President	Sen/President
New Owner	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.006)	0.003 (0.005)
New Investment Owner	0.002 (0.004)	-0.009 (0.007)	0.002 (0.005)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.071	0.072	0.062
Observations	264067	120321	171388

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on split ticket voting between House Rep/Senator/Governor and the President. Standard errors are clustered by county. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.4: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Turnout in Local Elections (Only Cities)
2004-2020

	City Council	Mayor
New Owner	0.008 (0.009)	0.015 (0.014)
New Investment Owner	-0.020* (0.009)	-0.020 (0.015)
Year FE	Yes	Yes
City FE	Yes	Yes
District FE	Yes	No
Outcome Mean	0.121	0.177
Observations	11048	2399

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on voter turnout in city elections.

Standard errors are in parentheses below the estimates. Standard errors are clustered by city. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; p<0.1

A.2.2 Results Excluding Places with Multiple Ownership Changes

One potential critique of my approach is the fact that many newspapers that change owners multiple times. Nearly half of all daily newspapers change owners more than once, and several change owners more than twice. This presents a problem as I can only treat a newspaper, city, or county one time and the model is unable to consider a second or third ownership change of the same type (the model does allow for one non-investment based ownership change and one investment based ownership change). It is possible that the results presented in this paper are affected by this treatment problem. In this section, I run all of the main analyses with any newspaper that changes owners more than once dropped from the analysis.

Table A.6: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic 2004-2020

	Local	National	State	Sports
New Owner	0.001 (0.002)	0.000 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.003)
New Investment Owner	-0.007* (0.003)	0.014*** (0.003)	-0.000 (0.001)	0.008* (0.004)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.097	0.072	0.033	0.147
Observations	3625	3625	3625	3625

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the share of stories about local politics, national politics, state politics, or sports. Only newspapers that change owners once are included in this table. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.7: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Citizen's Ability to Evaluate Elected Officials (All Counties) 2006-2020

	House Rep	Senator	Governor	President
New Owner	0.010* (0.005)	-0.009* (0.004)	-0.003 (0.003)	0.001 (0.002)
New Investment Owner	-0.018*** (0.005)	0.000 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.002)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.782	0.841	0.906	0.970
Observations	294388	295559	297501	298247

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the ability of CCES survey respondents to evaluate elected officials. If a respondent answered the survey "Not Sure" or "Never

Heard of This Person," I consider them unable to evaluate their elected official. Standard errors are clustered by county.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.8: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Split Ticket Voting 2008-2020

	House/President	Gov/President	Sen/President
New Owner	-0.004 (0.005)	0.008 (0.009)	-0.012 (0.006)
New Investment Owner	0.001 (0.006)	-0.027** (0.011)	0.000 (0.008)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.071	0.072	0.062
Observations	129436	53227	81661

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on split ticket voting between House Representative/Senator/Governor and the President. Standard errors are in parentheses and clustered by county. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.9: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Voter Turnout in City Elections

	City Council	Mayor
New Owner	-0.038* (0.016)	0.006 (0.017)
New Investment Owner	0.012 (0.021)	-0.043* (0.020)
Year FE	Yes	Yes
City FE	Yes	Yes
District FE	Yes	No
Outcome Mean	.182	.172
Observations	4329	648

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on voter turnout in city elections (City Council and Mayor races). Standard errors are in parentheses and clustered by city.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

A.2.3 Results Excluding Newspapers that Declared Bankruptcy Prior to Sale

Table A.10: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic 2004-2020

	Local	National	State	Sports
New Owner	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.003)
New Investment Owner	-0.006** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.006 (0.004)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.096	0.071	0.032	0.146
Observations	4868	4868	4868	4868

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the share of stories about local politics, national politics, state politics, or sports. Only newspapers that change owners once are included in this table. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.11: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Citizen's Ability to Evaluate Elected Officials (All Counties) 2006-2020

	House Rep	Senator	Governor	President
New Owner	0.005 (0.004)	0.000 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)
New Investment Owner	-0.009* (0.004)	0.003 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.782	0.841	0.906	0.970
Observations	292311	293573	295508	296261

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the ability of CCES survey respondents to evaluate elected officials. If a respondent answered the survey "Not Sure" or "Never Heard of This Person," I consider them unable to evaluate their elected official. Standard errors are clustered by county.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.12: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Split Ticket Voting 2008-2020

	House/President	Gov/President	Sen/President
New Owner	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.005)
New Investment Owner	0.002 (0.004)	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.005 (0.005)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.071	0.072	0.062
Observations	128541	52901	81309

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on split ticket voting between

House Representative/Senator/Governor and the President. Standard errors are in parentheses and clustered by county. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.13: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Voter Turnout in City Elections 2004-2020

	City Council	Mayor
New Owner	-0.010 (0.013)	0.018 (0.012)
New Investment Owner	-0.021 (0.016)	-0.029 (0.015)
Year FE	Yes	Yes
City FE	Yes	Yes
District FE	Yes	No
Outcome Mean	0.182	0.172
Observations	4009	612

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on voter turnout in city elections (City Council and Mayor races). Standard errors are in parentheses and clustered by city. p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

A.2.3 Event Studies on State Politics and Sports

Figures 7-8 shows the differences-in-difference event study on the share of state political content and sports. The event study shows the point estimates and confidence intervals of the regression in each time period before and after an a purchase by an investment-owner.

The reference year is the year of the deal.

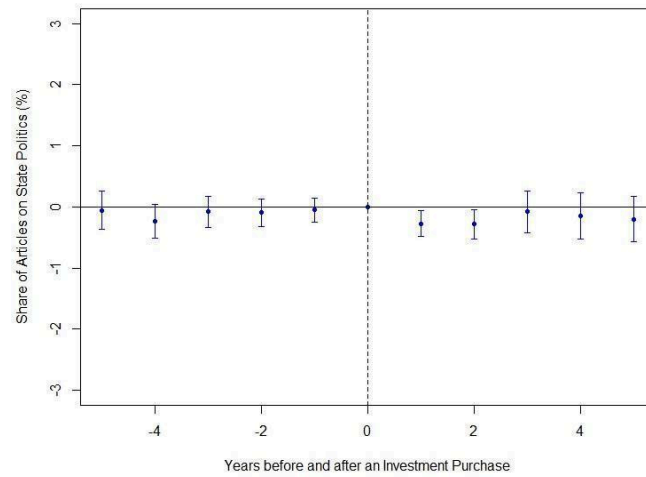


Figure A.4: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: State Politics

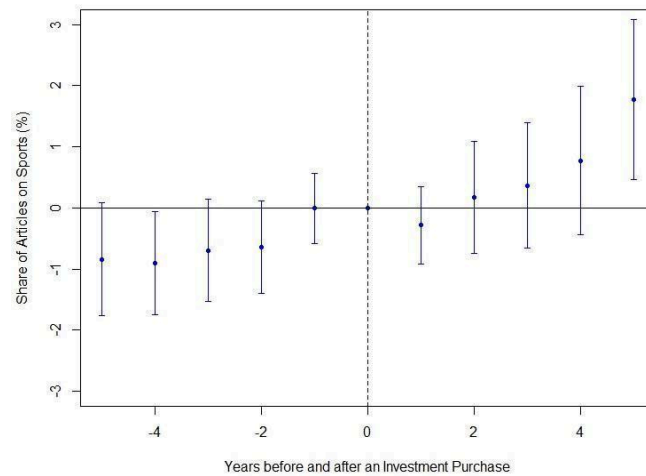


Figure A.5: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: Sports

A.2.4 Event Studies with Sun and Abraham Estimators

Although two way fixed effects (TWFE) models can be powerful tools for causal inference, recent scholarship has demonstrated problems with a staggered differences-in-differences design that relies on two way fixed effects (Sun and Abraham 2020; Goodman-Bacon 2021). In particular, Sun and Abraham (2020) show that variation in treatment timing can cause coefficients in a lead or lag to be contaminated by effects from other periods, which in turn can lead to a violation of the parallel trends assumption. To account for these concerns, I conduct an Event Study using both the traditional TWFE design and the estimator in Sun and Abraham (2020).

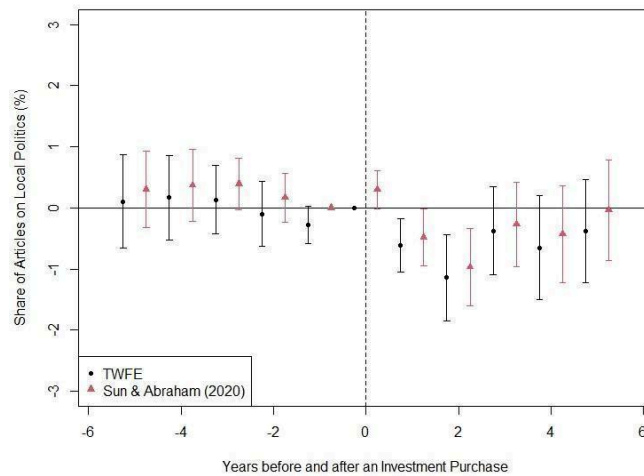


Figure A.6: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: Local Politics

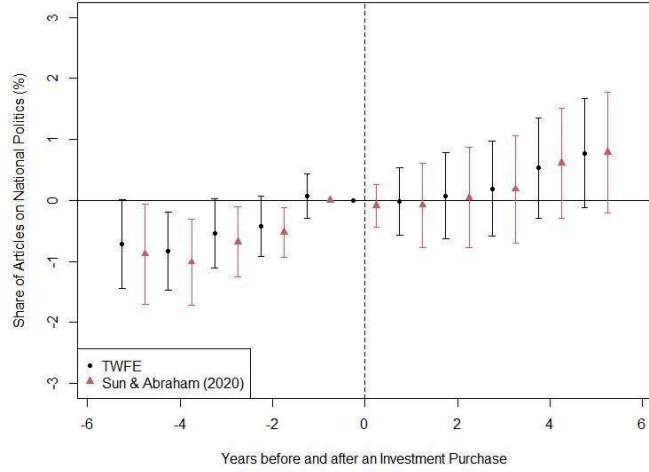


Figure A.7: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: National Politics

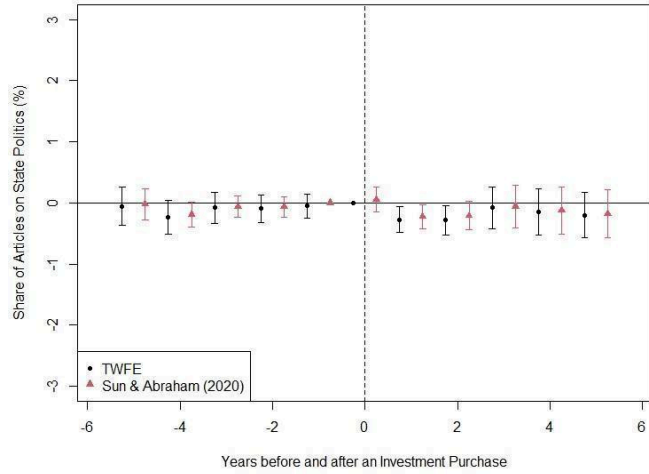


Figure A.8: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: State Politics

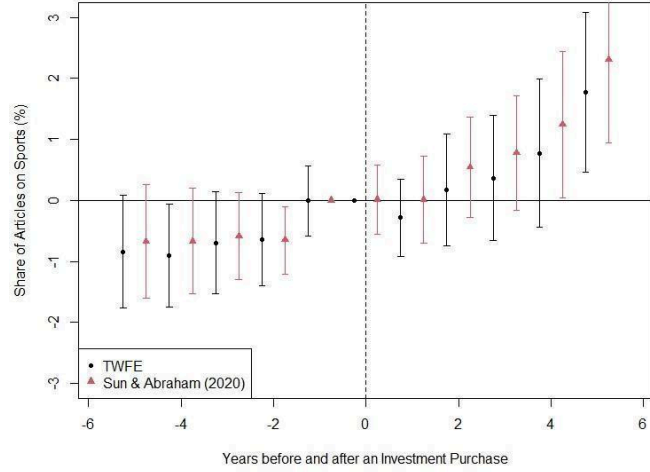


Figure A.9: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: Sports

A.2.5 Event Studies with -5 as the Reference Period

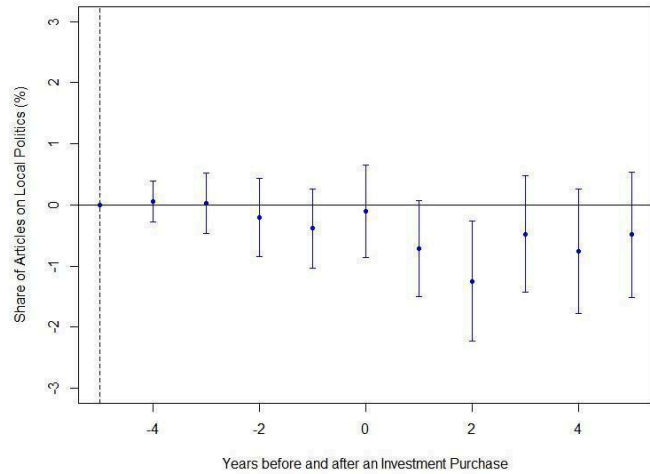


Figure A.10: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: Local Politics

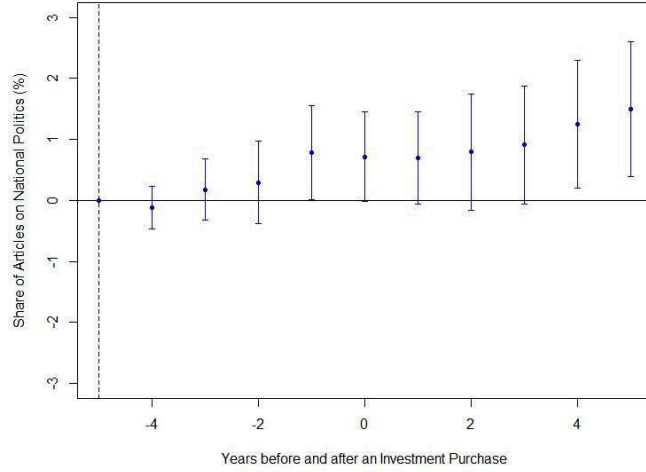


Figure A.11: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: National Politics

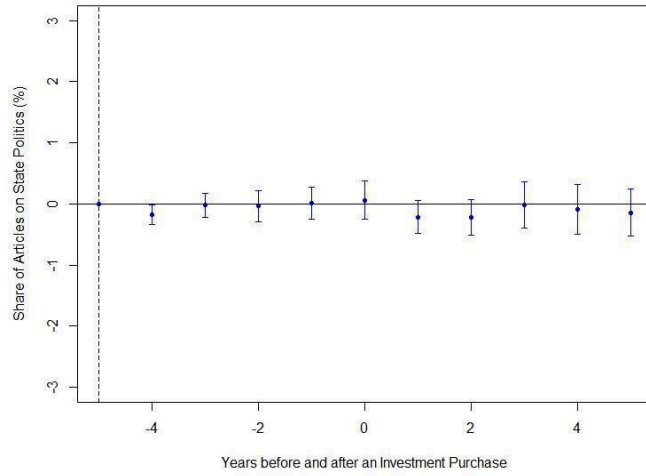


Figure A.12: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: State Politics

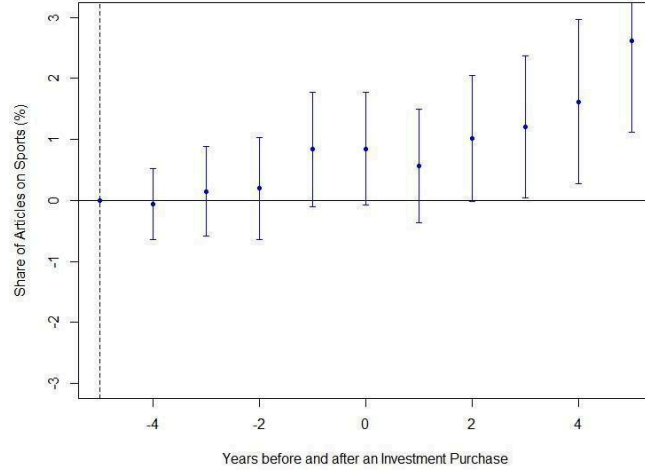


Figure A.13: Event Study of Investment Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic: Sport

A.2.6 Main Results using PanelMatch

I implement a matching-based strategy using the PanelMatch package Imai, Kim, and Wang (2023). This method allows me to estimate average treatment effects on the treated (ATT) by comparing treated units to a weighted average of similar control units that were not treated during the same period. I match treated and control newspaper-years based on two pre-treatment periods of outcome history (lag = 2) and a set of covariates, including log circulation and two lagged values of the outcome variable (e.g., local coverage share). I use propensity score matching (ps.match) as the refinement method, which produces strong covariate balance among matched units. I assess balance using standardized mean differences and find that all covariates achieve good balance in the matched sample. Overall, this gives me confidence that treated and control units are comparable on observed characteristics and pre-treatment outcome trends, mitigating concerns about selection bias.

Table A.14: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic 2004-2020

	Local	National	State	Sports
New Owner	-0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	0.001 (0.001)	0.004 (0.005)
New Investment Owner	-0.005 (0.005)	0.004 (0.004)	0.000 (0.002)	-0.008 (0.008)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.096	0.071	0.032	0.146
Observations	4868	4868	4868	4868

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the share of stories about local politics, national politics, state politics, or sports. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper.

A.2.7 Main Results dropping GateHouse transactions

Table A.15: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Share of Articles by Topic with GateHouse papers removed (2004–2020)

	Local	National	State	Sports
New Owner	0.002 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.002)
New Investment Owner	-0.009*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)	0.008* (0.003)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.096	0.071	0.032	0.146
Observations	4868	4868	4868	4868

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the share of stories about local politics, national politics, state politics, or sports. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

A.2.8 Main Results with sale point shifted to the year before the sale

Table A.16: Placebo Test: Effects of Ownership One Year Before Acquisition on Share of Articles by Topic (2004–2020)

	Local	National	State	Sports
New Owner	0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.013*** (0.003)
New Investment Owner	-0.004* (0.002)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)	0.016*** (0.003)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.096	0.071	0.032	0.146
Observations	4868	4868	4868	4868

Note: This placebo test shifts the intervention date two years earlier than the actual acquisition year. It tests for pre-trends by estimating the effects of a treatment that had not yet occurred. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper.

p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

1. A.3 Newspapers included in Content Sample

Table A.17: Newspapers included in Content Sample

Newspaper Name	Circulation	Location
Anniston Star	25411	Anniston, AL
Appeal-Democrat	21722	Marysville, CA
Arizona Daily Star	103618	Tucson, AZ
Bulletin The	26583	Norwich, CT
Centre Daily Times	24395	State College, PA
Chronicle The	9491	Willimantic, CT
Chronicle-Tribune	17414	Marion, IN
Cleveland Plain Dealer The	354309	Brooklyn, OH
Courier The	6100	Lincoln, IL
Daily Chronicle	8460	DeKalb, IL
Daily Courier-Observer	4924	Massena, NY
Daily Democrat The	10089	Woodland, CA
Daily Press	29278	Victorville, CA
Daily Times	21379	Maryville, TN
The Daily Times	22435	Salisbury, MD
Daytona Beach News-Journal The	73664	Daytona Beach, FL
Democrat and Chronicle	114502	Rochester, NY
Durant Daily Democrat	6100	Durant, OK
Englewood Sun	7700	Englewood, FL
Erie Times-News	59454	Erie, PA
Freeman The	14395	Waukesha, WI
Gazette-Mail	45072	Charleston, WV
Globe-Gazette	16177	Mason City, IA
Harlan Daily Enterprise	6600	Harlan, KY
Herald and News	16532	Klamath Falls, OR
Herald Journal	14874	Logan, UT
Herald-Dispatch The	22648	Huntington, WV
Herald-Journal	48798	Spartanburg, SC
Herald-Whig The	18748	Quincy, IL
Intelligencer	41227	Doylestown, PA
Intelligencer Journal/Lancaster New Era	44923	Lancaster, PA
Intelligencer Wheeling News-Register	22263	Wheeling, WV

Jersey Journal The	26667	Secaucus, NJ
Journal-Advocate	5000	Sterling, CO
Journal Gazette	70000	Fort Wayne, IN
Journal Inquirer	41888	Manchester, CT
Journal Star	68089	Peoria, IL
Kalamazoo Gazette	56706	Kalamazoo, MI
Kane County Chronicle	14753	Geneva, IL
Kansas City Star The	270335	Kansas City, MO
Kerrville Daily Times	10000	Kerrville, TX
LaGrange Daily News	13400	LaGrange, GA
Las Vegas Review-Journal	159507	Las Vegas, NV
Lexington Herald-Leader	114234	Lexington, KY
Lima News	34148	Lima, OH
Lincoln Journal Star	74893	Lincoln, NE
Lodi News-Sentinel	16553	Lodi, CA
Longview News-Journal	28848	Longview, TX
Los Angeles Daily News	175404	Woodland Hills, CA
Lowell Sun, The	48584	Lowell, MA
Lubbock Avalanche-Journal	52976	Lubbock, TX
Lufkin Daily News	14700	Lufkin, TX
Macon Telegraph The	62228	Macon, GA
Manhattan Mercury, The	9500	Winfield, KS
Marin Independent Journal	40245	San Rafael, CA
Marion Chronicle-Tribune	17414	Marion, IN
Marysville Appeal-Democrat	21722	Marysville, CA
Merced Sun-Star	16878	Merced, CA
Meriden Record-Journal	24296	Meriden, CT
Miami Herald	306943	Doral, FL
Midland Daily News	16439	Midland, MI
Midland Reporter-Telegram	19664	Midland, TX
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	240581	Milwaukee, WI
Minneapolis Star Tribune	381094	Minneapolis, MN
Modesto Bee	83387	Modesto, CA
Monroe News-Star	33622	Monroe, LA
Monterey County Herald The	33766	Monterey, CA
Morning Sun, The	14000	Pittsburg, KS

Morris Herald-News	7148	Morris, IL
Mountain Democrat	12792	Placerville, CA
Muskogee Phoenix	16455	Muskogee, OK
Myrtle Beach Sun News	49462	Myrtle Beach, SC
Napa Valley Register	17851	Napa, CA
Nashua Telegraph	26566	Nashua, NH
New Castle News	17742	New Castle, PA
New Haven Register	92098	New Haven, CT
New York Post	686207	New York, NY
Newark Star-Ledger	400042	Newark, NJ
Newport Daily News The	14300	Newport, RI
Newton Daily News	5476	Newton, IA
Newton Kansan, The	6000	Columbus, KS
Norwich Bulletin The	26583	Norwich, CT
Observer-Dispatch	43421	Utica, NY
Observer-Reporter	33714	Washington, PA
Ocala Star-Banner	47901	Ocala, FL
Odessa American	24139	Odessa, TX
Olympian	33848	Olympia, WA
Opelika-Auburn News	14924	Opelika, AL
Orange County Register	303418	Santa Ana, CA
Orlando Sentinel	248492	Orlando, FL
Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer	27960	Owensboro, KY
Palm Beach Daily News	6270	Palm Beach, FL
Palm Beach Post	154786	West Palm Beach, FL
Paris News	10400	Paris, TX
Patriot-News	100129	Mechanicsburg, PA
Peoria Journal Star	68089	Peoria, IL
Philadelphia Daily News	135956	Philadelphia, PA
Philadelphia Inquirer	368883	Philadelphia, PA
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	238860	Clinton, PA
Plainview Herald	8000	Plainview, TX
Placerville Mountain Democrat	12792	Placerville, CA
Portland Oregonian The	337707	Portland, OR
Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram	77788	Portland, ME
Progress-Index	13584	Petersburg, VA

Redlands Daily Facts	6948	Redlands, CA
Record Searchlight	30827	Redding, CA
Record-Journal	24296	Meriden, CT
Register-Guard	70794	Eugene, OR
Richmond Times-Dispatch	184950	Richmond, VA
Roanoke Times	98687	Roanoke, VA
Rockford Register Star	64519	Rockford, IL
Rutland Herald	20833	Rutland, VT
Sacramento Bee	293705	Sacramento, CA
Saginaw News	46439	Saginaw, MI
Salem News	14542	Beverly, MA
Salina Journal, The	27272	Salina, KS
Salt Lake Tribune	118919	Salt Lake City, UT
San Antonio Express-News	226109	San Antonio, TX
San Bernardino Sun The	71934	San Bernardino, CA
San Diego Union-Tribune	328531	San Diego, CA
San Francisco Chronicle	431718	San Francisco, CA
San Gabriel Valley Tribune	47266	Monrovia, CA
San Jose Mercury News	263067	San Jose, CA
San Luis Obispo Tribune	39427	San Luis Obispo, CA
Santa Cruz Sentinel	25305	Scotts Valley, CA
Santa Fe New Mexican	24790	Santa Fe, NM
Santa Maria Times	16562	Santa Maria, CA
Santa Monica Daily Press	19000	Santa Monica, CA
Savannah Morning News	53825	Savannah, GA
Scranton Times-Tribune	59188	Scranton, PA
Seattle Times	231051	Seattle, WA
Seguin Gazette	4800	Seguin, TX
Sentinel	17373	Carlisle, PA
Shamokin News-Item	10569	Shamokin, PA
Shreveport Times	49025	Shreveport, LA
Signal, The	9200	Santa Clarita, CA
Siskiyou Daily News	6000	Yreka, CA
Southern Illinoisan The	27671	Carbondale, IL
Spartanburg Herald-Journal	48798	Spartanburg, SC
Springfield Republican	85745	Springfield, MA

Springfield State Journal-Register	55334	Springfield, IL
St. Albans Messenger	5200	St. Albans, VT
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	286310	Saint Louis, MO
St. Paul Pioneer Press	191264	Saint Paul, MN
Star-Ledger The	400042	Newark, NJ
StarNews	53571	Wilmington, NC
State Journal-Register The	55334	Springfield, IL
State	115464	Columbia, SC
Sterling Journal-Advocate	5000	Sterling, CO
Sun Herald	38897	Biloxi, MS
Sun-Gazette	28040	Williamsport, PA
Tacoma News Tribune	127928	Tacoma, WA
Telegraph	26566	Nashua, NH
Telegraph The	62228	Macon, GA
Times Daily	26861	Florence, AL
Times Leader	42585	Wilkes Barre, PA
Times Record News	29825	Wichita Falls, TX
Times The	49025	Shreveport, LA
Times-Tribune	59188	Scranton, PA
Times-News	42913	Hendersonville, NC
Times-News	19506	Burlington, NC
Times-News	21440	Twin Falls, ID
Topeka Capital-Journal, The	50754	Topeka, KS
Tulsa World	141000	Tulsa, OK
Union Democrat	11682	Sonora, CA
Union-Bulletin	15304	Walla Walla, WA
Utica Observer-Dispatch	43421	Utica, NY
Vallejo Times-Herald	20927	Vallejo, CA
Victoria Advocate The	34747	Victoria, TX
Vindicator The	57943	Youngstown, OH
Vincennes Sun-Commercial	10538	Vincennes, IN
Waco Tribune-Herald	39520	Waco, TX
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin	15304	Walla Walla, WA
Washington Examiner	101552	Washington, DC
Washington Observer-Reporter	33714	Washington, PA
Watertown Daily Times	31484	Watertown, NY

Waukesha Freeman The	14395	Waukesha, WI
Westerly Sun	8370	Pawcatuck, CT
Wheeling Intelligencer	22263	Wheeling, WV
Whittier Daily News	16964	Monrovia, CA
Wichita Eagle, The	87063	Wichita, KS
Williamsport Sun-Gazette	28040	Williamsport, PA
Willimantic Chronicle The	9491	Willimantic, CT
Winchester Star The	21253	Winchester, VA
Winston-Salem Journal	84459	Winston-Salem, NC
Wisconsin State Journal	110291	Madison, WI
World	13010	Coos Bay, OR
Wyoming Tribune-Eagle	15564	Cheyenne, WY
Yakima Herald-Republic	38104	Yakima, WA
York Dispatch	34412	York, PA
Youngstown Vindicator The	57943	Youngstown, OH
Yreka Siskiyou Daily News	6000	Yreka, CA

A.4 Results with all covariates included

Table A.18: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Citizen's Ability to Evaluate Elected Officials (Only Counties with One Newspaper) 2006-2020

	House	Senator	Governor	President
New Owner	0.004 (0.004)	-0.000 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)
New Investment Owner	-0.012** (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.002)
Family Income	0.004*** (0.000)	0.004*** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
Gender	-0.083*** (0.001)	-0.082*** (0.001)	-0.050*** (0.001)	-0.017*** (0.001)
Race	-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.003*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)
Education	0.027*** (0.000)	0.027*** (0.000)	0.015*** (0.000)	0.007*** (0.000)
Age	0.006*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)	0.003*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
Married	-0.006*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)
Democrat	0.004* (0.002)	0.005** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
Independent	-0.053*** (0.002)	-0.052*** (0.001)	-0.049*** (0.001)	-0.032*** (0.001)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.745	0.843	0.903	0.972
Observations	301313	301313	301313	301313

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on the ability of CCES survey respondents to evaluate elected officials. If a respondent answered the survey "Not Sure" or "Never Heard of This Person," I consider them unable to evaluate their elected official. Standard errors are clustered by county.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.19: Effects of New Newspaper Ownership on Split Ticket Voting (Only Counties with One Newspaper) 2008-2020

	House/President	Sen/President	Gov/President
New Owner	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.008 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.006)
New Investment Owner	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.007)
Family Income	-0.0018*** (0.0002)	-0.0020*** (0.0003)	-0.0027*** (0.0004)
Gender	0.0103*** (0.0015)	0.0056*** (0.0017)	0.0119*** (0.0023)
Race	-0.0022*** (0.0006)	-0.0025*** (0.0007)	-0.0023* (0.0010)
Education	-0.0058*** (0.0005)	-0.0065*** (0.0006)	-0.0068*** (0.0008)
Age	-0.0007*** (0.00005)	-0.0006*** (0.00006)	-0.0008*** (0.00008)
Marital Status	-0.0015*** (0.0005)	-0.0018*** (0.0005)	-0.0025*** (0.0007)
Democrat	0.0033* (0.0018)	-0.0236*** (0.0021)	-0.0003 (0.0029)
Independent	0.0548*** (0.0019)	0.0351*** (0.0022)	0.0547*** (0.0030)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes

County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Partisan Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.070	0.059	0.071
Observations	157222	102733	72804

Note: This table shows the effects of a newspaper ownership change on split ticket voting between House/Senator/Governor and the President. Standard errors are clustered by county. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

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Chapter 3: No News Today: The Democratic Costs of Newspapers Scaling back to Weekly Production

1 Introduction

The news media ecosystem in the United States has undergone a rapid evolution as declining revenue and new technologies disrupt legacy news providers. Daily newspapers in particular have been affected, as the costs and challenges associated with producing and delivering a newspaper everyday became increasingly challenging for newsrooms. While there was once over 1,700 newspapers delivering a printed news product daily to local communities, that number is fewer than half that today. While some of these defunct daily newspapers have merged with another newspaper or closed entirely, the majority are still operating as a weekly newspaper instead of a daily newspaper.¹⁰ In other words, newspapers are reducing the number of days they produce news in order to cope with industry challenges. This change has prompted questions about the ability of newsrooms to keep their readers informed about what is happening in their community.

This trend is particularly concerning given the large body of literature that shows the importance of local news for political accountability and civic engagement. Local newspaper decline has been linked to diminished knowledge about representatives and declining turnout rates, particularly in local elections (Hayes and Lawless 2015, 2018, 2021; Rubado and Jennings 2020; Shaker 2014; Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson 2011). Newspapers can also facilitate political accountability (Snyder and Strömberg 2010), and voters who lack access to local media are likely to turn to other cues for information, such as party or incumbency. As a consequence, voters are less likely to split their ticket and more likely to vote for the incumbent (Lockhart 2021; Moskowitz 2021; Ewing 2024). The decline of local news has been exacerbating both

¹⁰ According to the FCC, a daily newspaper publishes at least 4 days a week.

nationalization of politics and partisan polarization, two areas of considerable concern for political scientists (Hopkins 2018).

The connection between a newspaper's publication schedule and the availability of local news is complex. While publishing fewer times per week may reduce the overall volume of news stories, it can also free up resources for more in-depth reporting. Because local journalism is both costly and time-consuming (Kaniss 1991), reducing the pressure to fill the pages of a newspaper every day may give newsrooms the bandwidth to undertake deeper, more substantive local coverage. Moreover, if cutting back on publication days is what keeps a paper financially sustainable, this is undoubtedly preferable to having it shut down altogether, especially in cities that are only served by one newspaper¹¹. In such cases, preserving that local newspaper, regardless of how frequently it prints, can be more important than risking its closure.

In fact, many newspapers have made this pitch to their subscribers when they announce the reduction in publication. In addition to claims of declining revenue and rising costs, newspapers frequently state that the reduction in print days will allow for a greater focus on local journalism. When *The Selma Times Journal* moved to weekly publication in August of 2023, the announcement said that the change would “allow our staff to devote more time to producing local content and coverage”¹². *The Auburn Journal* went even further and attributed its reduction to responding to subscribers' demands. “Over the last year, many of you have expressed your concerns that your local paper often contains more national news than local news,” the Journal said in its news release. “You have spoken, we have listened and you will be pleased when you see what is coming to your Auburn Journal in the near future.”¹³. Yet there are good reasons to doubt these claims, particularly because reductions in staff often accompany reductions in print publication. Is the move towards fewer printing days helping or harming local journalism?

¹¹ While cities commonly had competing daily newspapers in the 1990s and early 2000s, fewer than a dozen cities have competing newspapers today.

¹²<https://www.selmatimesjournal.com/2023/08/15/the-selma-times-journal-to-cease-e-edit-on-days/>

¹³<https://kahi.com/auburn-journal-cuts-three-print-publication-days-per-week-beginning-december-3rd/>

In this paper, I collect data on the publication schedule of every daily newspaper in the United States from 2004 to 2025 and show that over a third of daily newspapers have reduced their print publication schedule from printing five, six, or seven days a week to three or fewer times a week. Using content data on a sample of 88 newspapers, I show that newspapers that switch to weekly production produce fewer total stories and fewer stories about local politics, but the share of stories about local politics stayed relatively unchanged. Additionally, I show that cities served by newspapers that switched to weekly production saw large drops in turnout in mayoral elections, which highlights the democratic costs of the loss of local political reporting.

2 Production Schedules and the Decline of Local News

Before the introduction of radio, television, and the Internet, print newspapers were the only way to receive news at home directly. The demand for news, especially in larger and more populated cities, allowed daily newspapers to prosper for hundreds of years on the model of delivering a daily news product to their consumers. While various news products today are easily accessible at any time, Americans living before the digital age had to subscribe to their city's daily newspaper to receive any news at all. Thus, large proportions of local communities subscribed to their daily newspaper and adopted habits of daily newspaper consumption. In one study from 1970, Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1970) took advantage of a newspaper strike and found that even one week of not receiving daily news led to significant reductions in civic knowledge among community residents.

Daily newspapers reached their financial peak in the early 2000s as newspaper revenue skyrocketed due to large gains in revenue from advertising. Although newspaper circulation began to decline in the late 1980s, the financial portfolio of daily newspapers remained strong in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, the rise of the Internet, social media, and partisan media began to take its toll on newspapers, and revenue from advertising has fallen so much that it

dipped below circulation for the first time since the 1950s in 2020. Figure 1 shows the extent of the problem; newspapers have lost nearly 80% of the revenue they once took in from advertising.

In addition to declining revenue, the costs of operating a newspaper have increased in recent years. The costs of newsprint, lumber, and gas have all increased while newspaper

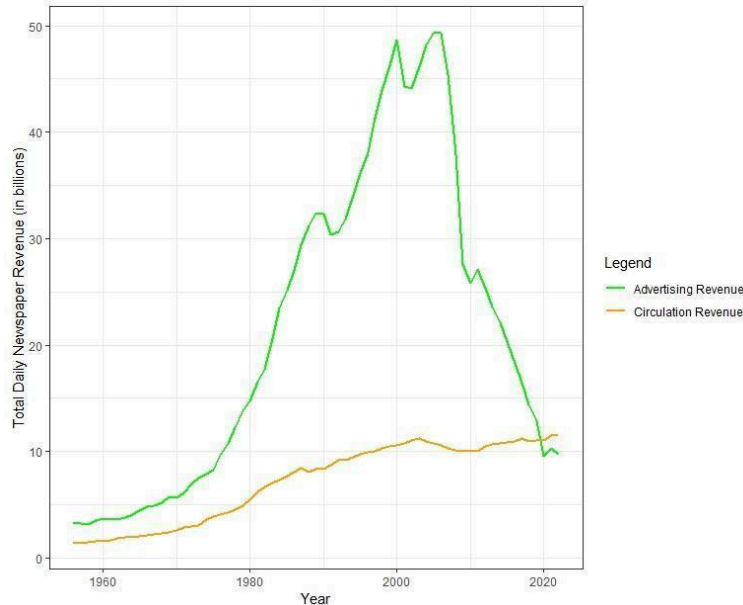


Figure 1: Daily Newspaper Revenue 1950-2021

revenue is simultaneously decreasing. Dean Ridings, the CEO of the trade group America’s Newspapers, said in 2022:

“The cost of newsprint has increased 30% over last year, and the cost of gas used to deliver the newspaper is up more than 50% in the past two years. Many newspaper carriers drive hundreds and even thousands of miles each week. These increases have driven many local newspapers closer to making further reductions or even ceasing operations.”¹⁴

Recent trade wars with America’s neighbors, Canada in particular, have caused further concern from industry experts about rising costs, as many American newspapers import newsprint and other important industry supplies from Canada. Tariffs on newsprint from Canada,

¹⁴ https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/newsprint_cost_inflation_supply_chain.php

which were briefly put in place in 2018, caused significant financial hardships for the news industry.¹⁵ Only a few days after the Trump administration announced 25% tariffs on Canadian goods in 2025, the *Indiana Gazette* added a \$2 surcharge on print subscriptions, and others considered a similar increase.¹⁶ These rapid changes in cost and revenue have forced newsrooms to make tough choices in an attempt to adapt and ensure the survival of their newspaper.

When newspapers face financial distress, owners often resort to selling the paper as a temporary solution. However, this merely shifts the challenge of sustainability to the new owner, who must find ways to keep operations running despite declining revenue. To survive, newsrooms must significantly reduce expenses, particularly in major cost areas such as staffing and printing. One common strategy is reducing the number of print editions published each week. Fewer print days means newspapers spend less on printing materials and delivery services. Additionally, decreasing publication frequency can allow a newsroom to reduce staffing levels while still meeting the demand to fill the pages of the newspaper. Ultimately, printing fewer editions can substantially lower costs related to production, distribution, and content creation, helping newspapers maintain financial viability. However, a decline in local reporting may come in tandem with a decline in expenses.

While the decision to print fewer times a week can significantly reduce expenses for newspapers, industry experts have warned that the reality isn't always so simple. John Newby, a newspaper publisher and founder of 360 Media Alliance, said "Reducing frequency is a local decision based on local parameters. What is right for one community or market may not be the correct path in another."¹⁷ Newby cautioned that newspapers could lose as many as 15% of their subscribers in the transition, and revenue from advertising would likely decline as well. Newspapers have adopted a number of strategies to cope with the expected pushback from reducing print days. *The State Journal* in Kentucky held informal focus groups, while *The*

¹⁵ <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/tariffs-canada-newsprint.php>

¹⁶ https://www.indianagazette.com/news/indiana-gazette-to-add-2-monthly-surcharge-on-print-subscriptio/article_83aafc3a-f919-11ef-95aa-1b430d1145f6.html

¹⁷ <https://www.editorandpublisher.com/stories/navigating-print-frequency,243307>

Greeley Tribune had conducted surveys of reader habits for a long time before the frequency reduction. *The Daily Sentinel* in Colorado held seminars to teach subscribers how to use the e-edition at libraries where readers brought their own devices

¹⁸. Members of the management team even visited subscribers in their homes, and several newsrooms have even offered free iPads to encourage and support readers' digital transition.

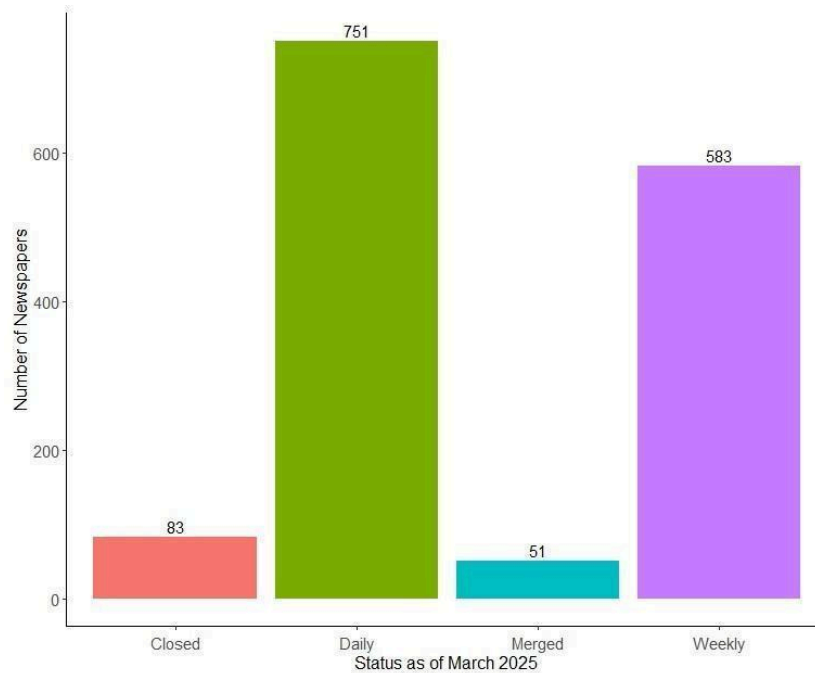


Figure 2: Status of Newspapers Today that were Dailies in 2004

Figure 2 shows the fate of the 1,469 newspapers that were operating as dailies in 2004. Although a small number of newspapers have closed or merged with another newspaper, the vast majority of newspapers that have ceased daily print operations have simply moved to publishing fewer editions a week.

Importantly, this figure only represents print publication, as the ways in which newspapers change their digital production schedules vary. Some papers, particularly larger ones, produce a daily e-edition that mirrors the print version and is automatically emailed to subscribers each morning. In many ways, this approach is minimally disruptive because subscribers may continue

¹⁸ <https://americanpressinstitute.org/expecting-pushback-before-and-after-reducing-print-days/>

to receive roughly the same amount of news. Moreover, if readers adapt their print-reading habits to digital platforms, the overall volume of news they consume could remain unchanged. However, as newspaper subscribers tend to be both older and likely less tech savvy, there is still likely considerable disruption for subscribers following the reduction even when an e-edition is offered daily.

Other newspapers, particularly smaller newspapers, often reduce their digital publishing as well. While these newspapers still generally produce an e-edition, it is only offered on the days that a print newspaper is offered. On the days where a print or e-edition is not available, newspapers often promise to update their websites in order to assure subscribers that local news will still be available. While many newspapers do routinely update their websites, local community members are unlikely to be regularly checking the website for updates and thus those updates may not be filling the gap left by the reduction in news production.

Although there are undoubtedly important differences about these different digital offerings, it is quite challenging to determine what every newspaper offers digitally as much of the information is pay walled or otherwise unclear. I was able to determine the digital offerings for newspapers that explicitly mentioned it in their announcements or newspapers that made this information available on their website¹⁹. This represented only 30% of the newspapers that switched to a weekly production schedule, and I am unable to determine the digital offerings for the remaining newspapers.

3 Hypotheses

To assess both my own research questions and the claims being made by these newspapers, I will test the following hypotheses related to news production.

¹⁹ Some newspaper websites allow you to see what days e-editions are available, but many do not

H1: Newspapers that transition to weekly production will produce fewer stories annually relative to newspapers that remain dailies.

H2: Newspapers that transition to weekly production will produce fewer stories about local politics annually relative to newspapers that remain dailies.

H1 and H2 are relatively intuitive; as a newspaper produces fewer editions each week, it is also likely to produce fewer stories annually. This is particularly true for newspapers that do not continue to produce a daily e-edition as the pressure to fill the pages of a newspaper everyday disappears. Even newspapers that continue to produce a daily e-edition may see reductions in overall stories because reducing publication frequency often coincides with newsroom staff cuts and diminished reporting resources, limiting the newspaper's capacity to generate content.

H3: Newspapers that transition to weekly production will increase the share of stories about local politics annually relative to newspapers that remain dailies.

H4: Newspapers that transition to weekly production will decrease the share of stories about local politics annually relative to newspapers that remain dailies.

H5: Newspapers that transition to weekly production will see no change in the share of stories about local politics annually relative to newspapers that remain dailies.

H3, H4, and H5 offer competing predictions about how shifting from daily to weekly publication might impact the relative focus newspapers place on local political coverage. The distinction is important because readers typically do not consume newspapers from front to back. Instead, news consumers read a subset of available articles. Thus, if newspapers reduce their total output but increase the share of stories dedicated to local politics, a reader's random selection of stories may actually become more focused on local political news. H3 is the most theoretically

motivated hypotheses given the frequency by which newspapers state their intention to increase local coverage as print editions decrease.

It is possible, however, that newsrooms are making this claim merely to assure customers and not risk a subscriber rebellion. This is a real fear for newspapers, as reports of a mass subscriber exodus following changes in print production are not uncommon. Newspapers may be stating publicly that there will be more focus on local content with no change or even a decreased amount of reporting in mind. If the share of local political coverage decreases, the reduced frequency of publication could exacerbate the deficits in local political knowledge. If no change in the share occurs, readers may be no better nor worse off in terms of exposure to local political coverage, despite an overall decline in total news stories. These are denoted as hypotheses 4 and 5.

H6: Citizens served by newspapers that transition to weekly production will be less likely to turnout in local elections relative to newspapers that remain dailies.

The final hypothesis will examine the effect of shifting from daily to weekly publication on voter turnout. While a number of existing studies examine the relationship between local newspapers and civic engagement (Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson 2011; Shaker 2014), the challenging nature of collecting data on local elections has limited the ability of scholars to study local electoral dynamics. This paper uses the dataset assembled by de BenedictisKessner et al. (2023), in particular the data on city level elections (mayoral elections and city council elections).

4 Data and Method

To test my hypotheses, I compiled an original dataset detailing the current print frequencies of all newspapers that were published daily in 2004. If a newspaper is no longer operating as a daily, I attempt to determine the year the newspaper made the switch to becoming a weekly. I

collected information from news articles, newspaper websites, and industry reports, but data collection was challenging due to paywalls, inconsistent web content, and limited access to reliable information. As a result, I could not verify the status of every newspaper. In cases where I lacked confirmation, I assumed that the newspaper continued to operate

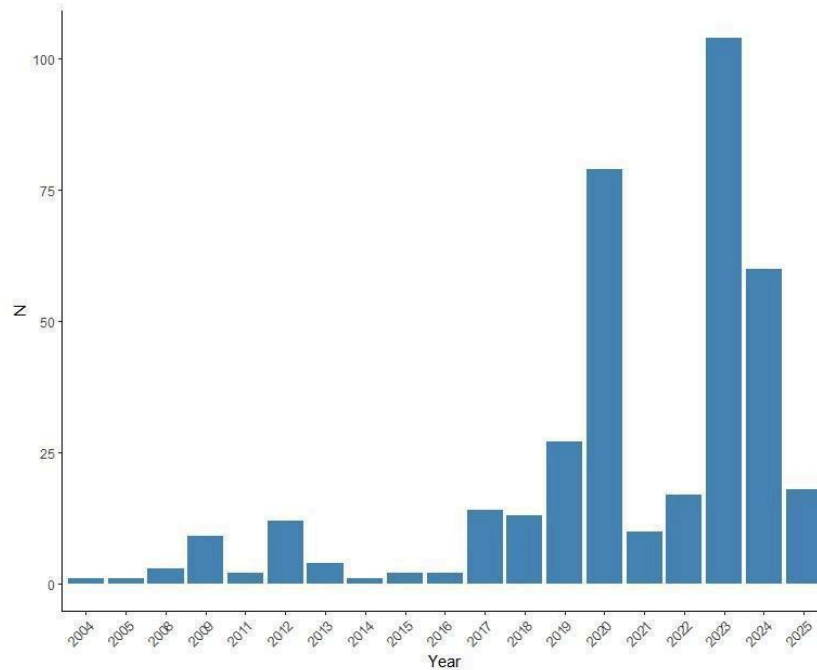


Figure 3: Number of Newspapers Switching to Weekly Production by Year 2004-2025

as a daily, which almost certainly means my count is an under count of the true number of dailies that have reduced their production schedules.

Figure 3 shows the number of newspapers switching to weekly production by year. As is evident in the figure, very few newspapers made the transition prior to 2017. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 2020 was one of the most common years where newspapers made the switch, largely driven by industry challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. 2023 had the largest number of switches, in part due to Lee Enterprises decision to move the majority of its

newspapers to weeklies²⁰. The trend is still continuing today, with dozens of newspapers already announcing the reduction in the first few months of 2025 alone.

In addition to gathering data on print production schedules, I also collected information on digital publishing where available. As I previously mentioned, newspapers sometimes continue to offer a daily e-edition that is meant to be a replica of the print edition. According to my data, this represents approximately 50% of all newspapers that reduce their print frequency. The remaining 50% promised only to regularly update their website, with a small number also offering a daily newsletter²¹.

To analyze newspaper content, I use digital archives provided by NewsBank, a comprehensive text database with full coverage of over 300 newspapers. Of these, 102 newspapers transitioned from daily to weekly publication, while 201 remained dailies throughout the analysis period. I exclude from the analysis newspapers that transitioned recently (in 2023, 2024, or 2025), as these cases lack sufficient post-transition data in the NewsBank archive. Additionally, newspapers for which I was unable to confirm the exact year of transition were dropped, leaving me with 44 newspapers that switched to weekly print production between 2004-2022 that are fully available in the archive. I also collected a random sample of 72 newspapers that did not switch to weekly production but instead maintained daily production. In total, I use 116 newspapers and over 23 million articles.

In the NewsBank archive, I collect the total number of articles housed in each newspaper year in the archive. I then use keyword searches to approximate the presence of local reporting in the individual stories, a method used in prior media research (Ewing 2024; Ewens, Gupta, and Howell 2023; Hayes and Lawless 2021). I use individual counts of the number of times the words mayor, city council, and school board are mentioned. Additionally, I use an aggregate

²⁰ In 2023, Lee Enterprises announced that, with the exception of its largest publications, its newspapers would be switching to publishing three times a week, a decision that affected over 60 newspapers.

²¹ Generally, this is a short email or attachment that is sent to subscribers daily with the most recent news. Unlike the e-edition, it is not usually formatted like a newspaper.

measure of 10 different local keywords ²². As several of my hypotheses use the share of the local reporting, I also divide the three keyword counts and the aggregate measure by the total number of stories in each newspaper-year.

I use a difference-in-differences research design to estimate the effect of newspapers transitioning from daily to weekly publication on local news coverage. Formally, the DiD regression specification is:

$$\text{LocalCoverage}_{it} = \beta(\text{Treated}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

where $\text{LocalCoverage}_{it}$ is the measure of local news content produced by newspaper i at time t . The indicator variable Treated_i equals 1 if newspaper i transitioned from daily to weekly publication at some point during the study period and 0 otherwise, and the indicator Post_t equals 1 for all time periods after the newspaper switched to weekly publication and 0 for all prior periods. The coefficient of interest, β , captures the average effect of transitioning to weekly publication on local news coverage. Newspaper fixed effects (α_i) account for stable, unobserved characteristics unique to each newspaper, while year fixed effects (γ_t) control for common shocks or trends that influence all newspapers in a given year. Standard errors are clustered at the newspaper level.

²² These words are mayor, city council, city hall, city government, county government, county executive, school board, school district, planning board, zoning



Figure 4: U.S. Cities in the Top 100 (in population) Whose Newspaper has Switched to Weekly Production

One potential critique is that the observed results might stem more from the struggles of smaller newspapers than from the switch to weekly production itself. On average, newspapers that convert to weekly production have a circulation of about 21,000, compared to 46,000 for those that remain printing daily. However, there is substantial variation, and many large-circulation newspapers have also made the switch. Even among the top 100 U.S. cities some newspapers have transitioned, as shown in Figure 4, indicating that this trend affects both small and large publications and small and large localities.

5 Content Analysis Results

Table 1: Effects of Switching to Weekly Publication on Articles Produced Annually

	All Articles	Local Politics	Mayor	City Council	School Board
Weekly	-2489.7*** (743.2)	-166.1* (67.7)	-65.56* (29.14)	-1.846 (18.52)	-61.23*** (11.78)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2264	2264	2264	2264	2264
Outcome Mean	14756.2	1432.214	603.1572	402.2562	191.4329

Note: This table presents estimates from regressions examining the effects of switching from daily to weekly newspaper production on annual story counts across categories. Standard errors, clustered by newspaper, are presented in parentheses. *Weekly* is coded 0 before the switch and 1 after. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 1 presents the results of the content analysis examining the number of articles produced annually by newspapers. Newspapers that transition from daily to weekly publication produce significantly fewer articles per year relative to newspapers that remain daily. On average, newspapers lose approximately one-third of their total annual story output upon switching to weekly publication. Additionally, three of the four keyword-based measures of local political coverage—total local political mentions and stories referencing the mayor and school board—show substantial and statistically significant declines following the transition. Interestingly, however, coverage of the city council remains stable, possibly indicating strategic decisions by newspapers to prioritize certain local topics as resources become constrained. Taken together, these findings provide strong support for Hypotheses 1 and 2, clearly rejecting the null hypothesis that newspapers maintain similar levels of local coverage after transitioning to weekly publication.

Table 2: Effects of Transitioning to Weekly Publication on Share of Articles by Topic (2004–2023)

	Local Politics	Mayor	City Council	School Board
Weekly	0.000 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	-0.002** (0.001)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newspaper FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2264	2264	2264	2264
Outcome Mean	0.10568	0.04169	0.03458	0.01355

Note: This table shows the effects of newspapers transitioning from daily to weekly publication on the share of stories about local politics, mayor, city council, and school board. Standard errors, clustered by newspaper, are presented in parentheses. *Weekly* is coded 0 before the switch and 1 after. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 presents results from the content analysis examining the share of annual newspaper articles focused on local politics. Overall, changes in content share following a newspaper’s switch from daily to weekly production are small in magnitude and mixed in direction. While there is minimal change in the aggregate measure of local political coverage, results differ notably among specific local topics. The share of articles mentioning the mayor remains essentially unchanged; however, the share devoted to city council coverage increases, while the share related to school board coverage decreases. Given the mixed directions and small magnitude of these changes—and considering the lack of consistent movement in overall local politics coverage—I reject both H3 (an increase in local coverage share) and H4 (a decrease in local coverage share). Instead, the evidence supports H5: newspapers that transition to weekly production generally maintain their relative emphasis on local politics, despite the overall reduction in story volume.

6 City Elections Turnout Results

Next, I look at the relationship between newspapers that transition to weekly publication and changes in voter turnout. The decline in local content has been shown to affect civic engagement

and voter participation (Hayes and Lawless 2015, 2018; Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson 2011). Given the sizable loss in local content that communities face when their paper transitions to publishing fewer times a week, there is considerable reason to be concerned about the impact this may have on voter turnout, particularly in local elections like city elections.

To examine the effect of publication schedules on voter turnout, I use a similar difference-in-differences design as in my previous analysis, with newspaper fixed effects being replaced by city fixed effects. Additionally, I drop any cities that have multiple daily newspapers from the analysis as voters served newspapers that have reduced their publication schedules may still have access to daily local news through another news outlet.

I use the local elections dataset from de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023). I look at voter turnout in mayoral and city council elections, which I connect to my newspaper data using the city variable. Although school board elections are available in the dataset, there is considerable variation in the name and jurisdictions of various school boards, making it challenging to link to individual cities. Examining mayoral and city council elections together is useful because of the considerable difference in the results in Table 1. If newspapers are losing hundreds of stories about the mayor each year but are not losing any stories about the city council, mayoral elections should be most affected by the switch. Additionally, it is easier to learn about the mayor through a newspaper than individual city councilors (a story about the city council may not help a voter evaluate individual city councilors who may or may not be mentioned by name in a story). I calculate voter turnout using vote totals from de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023) divided by city population estimates from the U.S. Census.

Table 3 presents the effects of newspapers switching from daily to weekly publication on Table 3: Effects of Switching to Weekly Publication on Turnout in Local Elections (Only Cities with One Newspaper) 2004-2023

	Mayor	City Council
Weekly	-0.039* (0.015)	-0.009 (0.020)
Year FE	Yes	Yes
City FE	Yes	Yes
District FE	No	Yes
Observations	1007	5036
Outcome Mean	.171	.190

Note: This table presents regression estimates of the effects of newspapers switching from daily to weekly publication on voter turnout in local elections. Standard errors, clustered by city, are presented in parentheses. *Weekly* is coded 0 before the switch and 1 after.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

voter turnout in local elections. Turnout in mayoral elections declines by nearly 4% after a newspaper reduces its frequency, while turnout in city council elections remains largely unaffected. This differential result aligns closely with the findings from the content analysis presented earlier—while coverage of the mayor significantly declined, coverage of city council members remained relatively stable. These parallel results strongly suggest a direct link between the volume of coverage voters receive about particular offices and their likelihood of participating in elections for those offices. Specifically, reduced coverage of mayoral politics may diminish voters’ information about the incumbent mayor or mayoral candidates, ultimately suppressing voter engagement. These findings underscore the important role local journalism plays in sustaining informed citizen participation, highlighting a critical civic consequence when local news resources diminish.

7 Why Do Newspapers Become Weeklies?

Industry experts and observers often assume that newspapers make the switch to weekly production in order to remain financially viable. This assumption does not come without basis; newsrooms frequently cite dire financial situations when they announce their decision to lower production. If the primary motive behind the reduction is to avoid closure, the associated democratic costs may be considered an acceptable trade-off. In this context, moving to a weekly schedule can be viewed as a necessary compromise to preserve the newspaper's survival when the alternative is an outright closure.

However, the vast majority of newspapers in the United States are for profit businesses. Furthermore, many newspapers have been purchased by investment-oriented firms in recent decades, prompting concerns about how newspapers juggle the need to engage in costly reporting and inform citizens about local government. Scholars have already noted some negative outcomes associated with investment ownership, such as fewer staff and less local news (Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Ewing 2024) Investment firms, with their focus on maximizing returns, could push for cost-cutting measures that reduce publication frequency, even if doing so compromises local news coverage and civic participation.

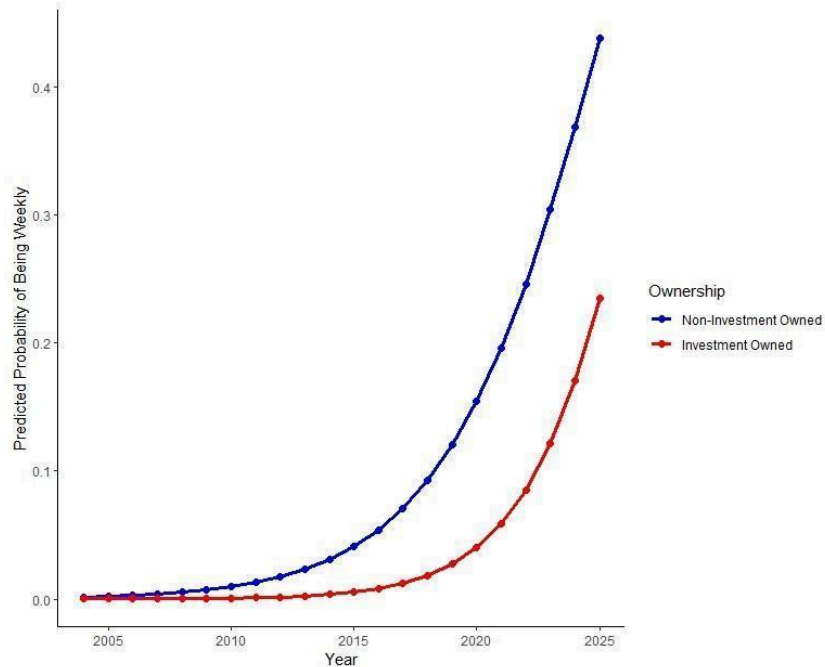


Figure 5: Predicted Probability of a Newspaper becoming a weekly by Investment Ownership Status

Figure 5 presents the predicted probabilities. The y axis shows the predicted probability that a newspaper is a weekly rather than a daily, and the x axis denotes the year.

As expected, both lines trend upward, indicating that newspapers overall are increasingly likely to adopt a weekly format as time progresses. However, the red line—which represents investment-owned newspapers—is consistently below the blue line, indicating that these newspapers are actually less likely to switch to a weekly format compared to those that are not owned by investment firms.

Although Figure 4 offers useful insights into trends in weekly publication, the graph reflects associations rather than causal relationships, so it cannot definitively establish that investment ownership influences the decision to switch to a weekly format. Omitted variables, such as local market conditions and internal newsroom dynamics, might confound the observed relationship between investment ownership and production frequency. However, the negative association

between investment firm ownership and switching to weekly production suggests that the profit motive alone does not explain newspapers making this change.

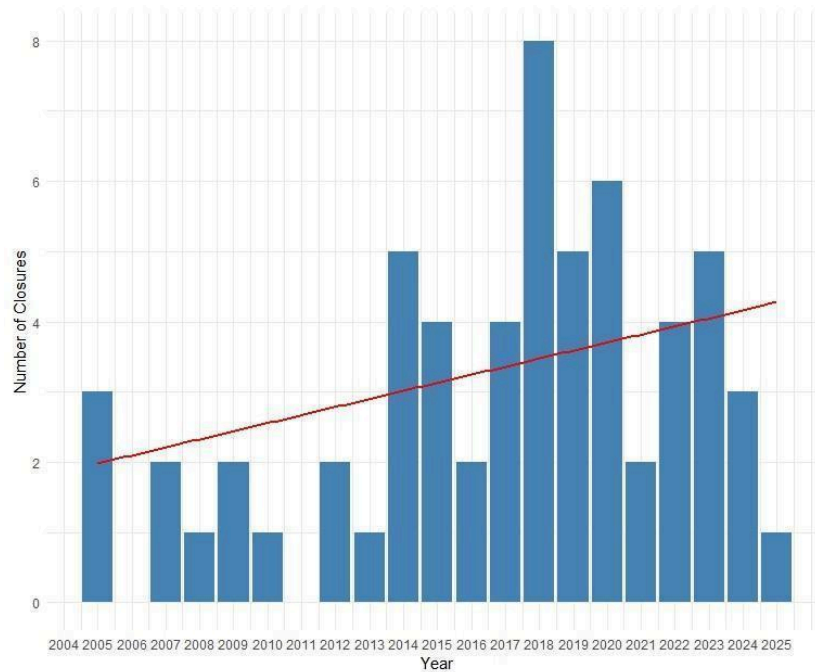


Figure 6: Newspaper Closures with Best Fit Line 2004-2025

If newspapers are not making this change for profit reasons alone, another obvious motivation is to forestall closure. Figure 5 shows the number of newspaper closures by year with a line of best fit added. Although the line shows that newspaper closures are indeed rising, the number of newspapers closing each year is quite small. Given the recent volatility of the newspaper industry, fewer than 1% of daily newspapers are closing annually is a relatively reassuring figure. Furthermore, there was only a handful of cases where a newspaper that had previously switched to weekly production later closed, which suggests that moving from daily to weekly production is helping newspapers survive that otherwise may not.

8 Discussion

Moving to weekly newspaper production and away from daily newspaper production represents a massive change for both newsrooms and news consumers. As newsrooms grapple with how to best adapt to industry changes, citizens are left without a consistent source of local news. Other places for political information, such as national news or social media, are not prominent sources of local news and generally cannot provide what communities have lost (Hindman 2011; Hopkins 2018). The results in this paper show that a change to weekly production comes with considerable losses in both content and civic engagement.

While the reduction in publishing has resulted in less local news, it has also likely resulted in the survival of an unknown number of newspapers. Only 83 daily newspapers closed between 2004 and 2025 while 583 have survived as weeklies, which can be viewed as a relatively successful transition for newspapers that otherwise may have been forced to close their doors. Very few newspapers in my data reduced publication frequency and then closed later on, which suggests that the reduction improved the financial standing of most newspapers well enough to stay afloat, at least so far. The work is far from complete and many newspapers continue to struggle in light of further losses in revenue and subscribers. As Ken Herts, director of operations at The Lenfest Institute for Journalism., said “Reducing publishing days is not an end in itself. It’s part of your path to sustaining your newsroom in a digital future.”

As more newspapers inevitably make this transition in the future, this paper can serve as both a cautionary tale to communities and industry experts but also a reassurance that switching to weekly production can help a newsroom survive financially. To my knowledge, this paper is the first to assess the impact of the rising number of newspapers that are abandoning daily production. It is my hope that scholars continue to study and document these changes. Future work could examine other outcomes such as split-ticket voting or the incumbency advantage, or provide more direct guidance to newsrooms on how to best make this transition.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement

All data for this paper is available upon request.

Chapter 3 Appendix

A.1 Descriptive Appendices

A.1.1 NewsBank Archive Total Articles and Keyword Mentions

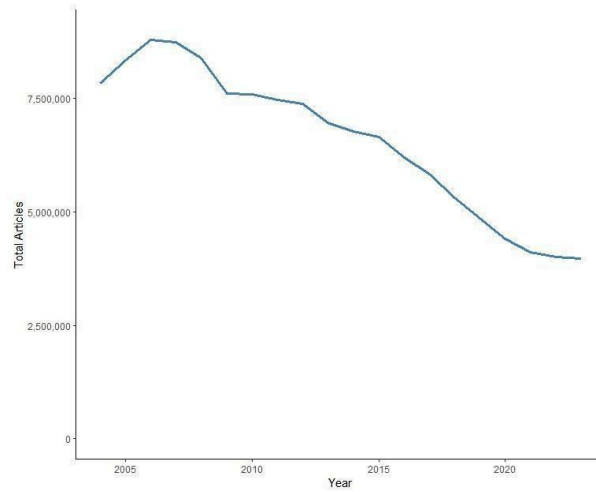


Figure A.1: Total Number of Articles in NewsBank Newspapers 2004-2023

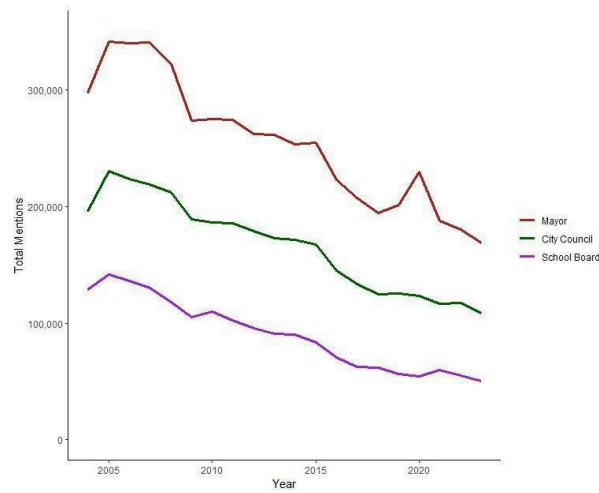


Figure A.2: Total Number of Articles Mentioning Local Keyword in NewsBank Newspapers 2004-2023

A.2 Robustness Tests

A.2.1 Results with all Cities

Table A.1: Effects of Switching to Weekly Publication on Turnout in Local Elections (All Cities) 2004-2023

	Mayor	City Council
Weekly	-0.017 (0.010)	0.002 (0.010)
Year FE	Yes	Yes
City FE	Yes	Yes
District FE	No	Yes
Observations	1131	6522
Outcome Mean	0.172	0.185

Note: This table presents regression estimates of the effects of newspapers switching from daily to weekly publication on voter turnout in local elections. Standard errors, clustered by city, are presented in parentheses. *Weekly* is coded 0 before the switch and 1 after.

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

A.3 Newspapers included in Content Sample

Table A.2: Newspapers included in Content Sample

Newspaper Name	Circulation	Location
Arizona Daily Star	103618	Tucson, AZ
Daytona Beach News-Journal The	73664	Daytona Beach, FL
Journal Inquirer	41888	Manchester, CT
Kalamazoo Gazette	56706	Kalamazoo, MI
Kane County Chronicle	14753	Geneva, IL
Kerrville Daily Times	10000	Kerrville, TX
LaGrange Daily News	13400	LaGrange, GA
Lodi News-Sentinel	16553	Lodi, CA
Herald Journal	14874	Logan, UT

Longview News-Journal	28848	Longview, TX
Los Angeles Daily News	175404	Woodland Hills, CA
Lufkin Daily News	14700	Lufkin, TX
Manhattan Mercury, The	9500	Winfield, KS

Newspaper Name	Circulation	Location
Marin Independent Journal	40245	San Rafael, CA
Merced Sun-Star	16878	Merced, CA
Record-Journal	24296	Meriden, CT
Miami Herald	306943	Doral, FL
Modesto Bee	83387	Modesto, CA
Monterey County Herald The	33766	Monterey, CA
Mountain Democrat	12792	Placerville, CA
Napa Valley Register	17851	Napa, CA
Telegraph	26566	Nashua, NH
New Haven Register	92098	New Haven, CT
Newton Daily News	5476	Newton, IA
Bulletin The	26583	Norwich, CT
Ocala Star-Banner	47901	Ocala, FL
Odessa American	24139	Odessa, TX
Opelika-Auburn News	14924	Opelika, AL
Orange County Register	303418	Santa Ana, CA
Orlando Sentinel	248492	Orlando, FL
Palm Beach Post	154786	West Palm Beach, FL
Paris News	10400	Paris, TX
Patriot-News	100129	Mechanicsburg, PA
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	238860	Clinton, PA
Cleveland Plain Dealer The	354309	Brooklyn, OH
Porterville Recorder	9202	Porterville, CA
Redlands Daily Facts	6948	Redlands, CA
Rutland Herald	20833	Rutland, VT
Sacramento Bee	293705	Sacramento, CA
Saginaw News	46439	Saginaw, MI
Salt Lake Tribune	118919	Salt Lake City, UT

San Bernardino Sun The	71934	San Bernardino, CA
San Francisco Chronicle	431718	San Francisco, CA
San Gabriel Valley Tribune	47266	Monrovia, CA
San Jose Mercury News	263067	San Jose, CA
San Luis Obispo Tribune	39427	San Luis Obispo, CA
Santa Cruz Sentinel	25305	Scotts Valley, CA
Santa Maria Times	16562	Santa Maria, CA
Savannah Morning News	53825	Savannah, GA
Signal, The	9200	Santa Clarita, CA

Newspaper Name	Circulation	Location
Siskiyou Daily News	6000	Yreka, CA
St. Albans Messenger	5200	St. Albans, VT
Anniston Star	25411	Anniston, AL
Journal-Advocate	5000	Sterling, CO
Union Democrat	11682	Sonora, CA
Vallejo Times-Herald	20927	Vallejo, CA
Daily Press	29278	Victorville, CA
Whittier Daily News	16964	Monrovia, CA
Chronicle The	9491	Willimantic, CT
Daily Democrat The	10089	Woodland, CA
World	13010	Coos Bay, OR
Yakima Herald-Republic	38104	Yakima, WA
Appeal-Democrat	21722	Marysville, CA
Harlan Daily Enterprise	6600	Harlan, KY
Seguin Gazette	4800	Seguin, TX
Santa Monica Daily Press	19000	Santa Monica, CA
Westerly Sun	8370	Pawcatuck, CT
Daily Courier-Observer	4924	Massena, NY
Palm Beach Daily News	6270	Palm Beach, FL
San Diego Union-Tribune	328531	San Diego, CA

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Chapter 4: Consuming News in a Divided Nation: The Relationship between Affective Polarization and the Media

1 Introduction

The rise in affective polarization represents one of the biggest and most consequential changes in American public opinion in recent decades. Across the country and across demographic groups, Americans increasingly like their own party and dislike the out-party (Holliday, Lelkes, and Westwood 2024; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015). Scholars have linked the rise in affective polarization to a number of concerning outcomes, such as economic discrimination (McConnell et al. 2018; Engelhardt and Utych 2020), employment discrimination (Gift and Gift 2015), belief in misinformation (Jenke 2024), and even declining family interactions (Chen and Rohla 2018).

Coinciding with the rise of affective polarization, the media environment in the United States has undergone a significant transformation. National news has become increasingly dominant in Americans' media diets, while local journalism has declined in reach, resources, and relevance (Hopkins 2018). As local newspapers scale back operations or close their doors entirely, citizens are increasingly likely to consume political information through nationalized sources that emphasize partisanship, ideological conflict, and elite narratives. This shift raises important questions about how changes in media content and structure may be contributing to the growing divide between Democrats and Republicans.

Scholars have already linked the decline of local news to affective polarization. In a clever study, Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway (2021) take advantage of *The Desert Sun's* decision to temporarily suspend opinion content centered around national news. The authors find a small but significant decrease in affective polarization among newspaper readers, suggesting that the absence of national news or the increase in local news helped to curb polarization. This important finding raises additional questions about the relationship between news consumption

and affective polarization. National and local news differ considerably in content, tone, and style, yet scholars know relatively little about which specific components of news coverage increase or dampen affective polarization. As legacy news outlets continue to decline and Americans increasingly turn to newer, less vetted sources for political information, it is more important than ever for journalists, researchers, and the public to understand how news shapes partisan attitudes. Identifying the features of news content that activate or mitigate polarization is critical to making sense of the contemporary media environment and its effects on democratic life.

In this paper, I run an original survey experiment that randomly assigns respondents to read one of four news stories varying in the presence of partisan labels, ideological conflict, and national political figures. While the estimated effects are small and not statistically significant, they consistently point in the direction predicted by existing theories: stories that emphasize partisanship, conflict, and national figures like Donald Trump and Kamala Harris are associated with higher levels of affective polarization, as measured by feeling thermometer ratings. Ultimately, these results suggest that, while the effects of news content on affective polarization may be limited in magnitude, journalistic emphasis on partisan conflict and national figures could still contribute to polarization in the public.

2 Literature and Theory

Local news plays a vital role in American democracy by providing political coverage that is geographically relevant to readers, something that national news is unable to do. Unlike national outlets, which focus heavily on elite conflict and federal institutions (York 2013; Patterson 2013), local news prioritizes coverage of state and municipal governments, highlighting how elected officials serve their constituents (Arnold 2004; Fenno 1978). This localized focus not only informs citizens about issues that directly affect their communities, but also helps foster accountability. Representatives who are more visible in local coverage tend to

work harder for their districts, to bring home more funding, and to be more responsive to constituent needs (Snyder and Strömberg 2010). In contrast, areas with weak or absent local news coverage experience more corruption (Campante and Do 2014), lower civic knowledge and participation (Hopkins 2018; Hayes and Lawless 2015; Moskowitz 2021), and less competitive elections (Rubado and Jennings 2020). Importantly, local news may also serve as a counterbalance to polarization by emphasizing practical governance over ideological conflict, and by maintaining higher levels of public trust compared to national media (Pew Research Center 2021).

Yet despite its civic importance, local news is in crisis. Legacy outlets are facing severe financial strain due to the collapse of the advertising market and increasing media fragmentation. Since 2004, thousands of local newspapers have closed, and newsroom employment has declined dramatically (Peterson 2021; Pew Research Center 2022). In addition to these economic pressures, rising corporate consolidation, particularly by investment-oriented firms, has further weakened local journalism and raised serious concerns about whether these owners remain committed to covering local issues (Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Ewing 2024). Given the importance of local news for citizen engagement and elite accountability, these structural changes have prompted considerable concern among scholars about the long-term consequences for democratic responsiveness, civic participation, and the public's ability to hold local officials accountable.

In addition to its implications for democratic participation and accountability, the changing media environment has raised important questions about its role in shaping political polarization. As the news ecosystem has fragmented and diversified, scholars have investigated whether individuals gravitate toward ideologically similar sources, creating “echo chambers” that reinforce partisan worldviews (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016; Stroud 2011). While the evidence for widespread selective exposure is mixed, it is clear that some partisan media, Fox News in particular, can influence vote choice and political attitudes (Dellavigna and Kaplan 2007; Hopkins and Ladd 2014; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). Another

line of research asks whether the proliferation of partisan news and greater access to broadband internet have contributed to rising polarization. The results in that area have also been mixed: while some find that partisan media and online access increase polarization (Levendusky 2013; Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017), others suggest the effects are limited or conditional on political interest (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017; Davis and Dunaway 2016). The availability of local media has also been linked with polarization of voting behavior, and scholars have noted an increased salience of party and declining rates of split ticket voting when voters have less access to local news (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018; Moskowitz 2021) Taken together, this literature suggests that the structure and tone of media content may shape how citizens perceive and relate to political opponents.

While ideological polarization has long been a focus of scholarly concern, the rise of affective polarization is arguably even more troubling. Affective polarization refers to the growing tendency of partisans to view members of the opposing party with distrust and animosity, perceiving them as morally inferior or even threatening. These emotions undermine democratic norms by eroding social trust, reducing willingness to compromise, and increasing support for undemocratic practices (Mason 2018). Existing scholarship has already linked the changing media environment with the rise in affective polarization. Garrett et al. (2014) shows that that exposure to counter-attitudinal news decreases negative attitudes toward the opposing political party, however social media algorithms may limit exposure to this type of content (Levy 2021). Digital media and the internet also encourage nonlocal interactions, which subsequently highlights partisan conflict (Törnberg 2022) and may limit more unifying content that could reduce affective polarization (Overgaard 2024). These findings are all consistent with Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway (2021), who find that limiting exposure to national news and increasing exposure to local news can slow affective polarization.

3 Data, Design, and Method

To unpack the mechanisms between affective polarization and news content, I run an original vignette experiment (N=3,825) where respondents are shown news articles with various randomized features. I tested three different mechanisms that separate local news from national news: partisan cues, conflict, and the presence of national figures. While these features are not unheard of in local news, they are rare when compared with national news. Partisan content is featured heavily in national news (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2021), while the non-partisan nature of many local offices limits partisan cues. Partisan conflict is a common and pre-existing frame for national news outlets (Levendusky 2018), and national politicians like the president or prominent members of congress are often the topic of national news articles. Given the findings in the existing literature linking national news to affective polarization, it is reasonable to infer that any one of these mechanisms (or all three) may be driving polarizing attitudes in the American public.

Figure 1 lists the four simulated news articles I used in this survey experiment. Each respondent was randomly assigned to read one of the four news articles, followed by a brief survey that asked about various attitudes related to politics. Participants that were assigned story 1 served as the control group, and were assigned to read a story that was designed to mirror an average story that might appear in a local newspaper. The story describes a recently elected mayor attempting to use city funds to improve road quality, while a city councilor pushes back by suggesting the money could be used instead for public safety. Participants that were assigned story 2 got virtually the same story, with the only difference being the inclusion of partisan labels for the mayor and city councilor. Story 3 included the partisan labels alongside conflict, with the quotes from the mayor and city councilor changed to be hostile and bitter. Finally, story 4 included the partisan labels along with an additional paragraph that included statements from Donald Trump and Kamala Harris emphasizing their support for one of the positions taken by the mayor and city councilor.

Treatment Condition	Vignette
Control	<p>Jay Caldwell was recently elected to serve as Mayor. He is a 42-year-old former school teacher. Caldwell ran on a platform of initiating community reforms that he argued are necessary to improve the lives of citizens in the community. Mayor Caldwell initiated that series of reforms last week, announcing a new program to report potholes directly to the city’s public works division. In a speech at city hall, he announced his goal to use city funds to improve road quality for city residents. He is currently working with city officials to implement these policy goals. The program includes a simple online reporting tool and a dedicated hotline, making it easier for residents to notify the city of road maintenance issues. City officials are actively creating and testing the system and hope to make it public in the coming months. Janice Bowman, a city councilor, expressed concern that the mayor’s focus on his new initiatives might be diverting resources from more pressing community needs. In a social media post yesterday, she stated, "Mayor Caldwell seems to be prioritizing smaller projects while critical issues like public safety are being overlooked." When asked about Bowman’s remarks, Mayor Caldwell responded by saying “I thank councilor Bowman for her input, and I look forward to working with all community members to make life better for city residents.”</p>
Treatment #1 (Party)	<p>Jay Caldwell was recently elected to serve as Mayor. A member of the Democratic Party, he is a 42-year-old former school teacher. Caldwell ran on a platform of initiating community reforms that he argued are necessary to improve the lives of citizens in the community. Mayor Caldwell initiated that series of reforms last week, announcing a new program to report potholes directly to the city’s public works division. In a speech at city hall, he announced his goal to use city</p>

	<p>funds to improve road quality for city residents. He is currently working with city officials to implement these policy goals. The program includes a simple online reporting tool and a dedicated hotline, making it easier for residents to notify the city of road maintenance issues. City officials are actively creating and testing the system and hope to make it public in the coming months. Janice Bowman, a city councilor and member of the Republican Party, expressed concern that the mayor's focus on his new initiatives might be diverting resources from more pressing community needs. In a social media post yesterday, she stated, "Mayor Caldwell seems to be prioritizing smaller projects while critical issues like public safety are being overlooked." When asked about Bowman's remarks, Mayor Caldwell responded by saying "I thank councilor Bowman for her input, and I look forward to working with all community members to make life better for city residents." Jay Caldwell was recently elected to serve as Mayor. A member of the Democratic Party, he is a 42 year old former school teacher. Caldwell ran on a platform of initiating community reforms that he argued are necessary to improve the lives of citizens in the community.</p>
<p>Treatment #2 (Party + Conflict)</p>	<p>Mayor Caldwell initiated that series of reforms last week, announcing a new program to report potholes directly to the city's public works division. In a speech at city hall, he announced his goal to use city funds to improve road quality for city residents. He is currently working with city officials to implement these policy goals. The program includes a simple online reporting tool and a dedicated hotline, making it easier for residents to notify the city of road maintenance issues. City officials are actively creating and testing the system and hope to make it public in the coming months. Janice Bowman, a city councilor and member of the Republican Party, expressed concern that the</p>

	<p>mayor’s focus on his new initiatives might be diverting resources from more pressing community needs. In a social media post yesterday, she stated, "It’s becoming painfully obvious that Mayor Caldwell has no idea what he’s doing. He’s wasting taxpayer money on feel-good gimmicks while the city falls apart. This isn’t a classroom, and he needs to grow up and govern like an adult." When asked about Bowman’s remarks, Mayor Caldwell responded by saying “Councilor Bowman criticizing me is like a broken smoke alarm—loud, useless, and always going off at the worst time. If whining and obstructing progress were a policy, she’d be the most productive member on the council.” Jay Caldwell was recently elected to serve as Mayor. A member of the Democratic Party, he is a 42 year old former school teacher. Caldwell ran on a platform of initiating community reforms that he argued are necessary to improve the lives of citizens in the community.</p>
<p>Treatment #3 (Party + National Figures)</p>	<p>Mayor Caldwell initiated that series of reforms last week, announcing a new program to report potholes directly to the city’s public works division. In a speech at city hall, he announced his goal to use city funds to improve road quality for city residents. He is currently working with city officials to implement these policy goals. The program includes a simple online reporting tool and a dedicated hotline, making it easier for residents to notify the city of road maintenance issues. City officials are actively creating and testing the system and hope to make it public in the coming months. Janice Bowman, a city councilor and member of the Republican Party, expressed concern that the mayor’s focus on his new initiatives might be diverting resources from more pressing community needs. In a social media post yesterday, she stated, "Mayor Caldwell seems to be prioritizing smaller projects while critical issues like public safety are being</p>

	<p>overlooked." When asked about Bowman's remarks, Mayor Caldwell responded by saying "I thank councilor Bowman for her input, and I look forward to working with all community members to make life better for city residents." Mayor Caldwell and Councilor Bowman find themselves part of a broader national conversation about how cities should prioritize taxpayer dollars. In a recent social media post, President Donald Trump encouraged city officials across the country to allocate more funds toward policing and public safety initiatives, arguing that reducing crime should be every local leader's top priority. When asked about Trump's remarks, former Vice President Kamala Harris voiced her support for investing in infrastructure projects, responding that simply adding police officers isn't always what communities need. Instead, she argued cities should spend public funds on improving roads and quality-of-life projects that directly enhance residents' daily lives.</p>
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Figure 1: Simulated News Articles used in Survey Experiment

The main outcome of interest in this paper is affective polarization, which is commonly measured by the distance between a respondents feelings about their own party minus the respondents feelings about the other party. A larger score reflects a greater distance between the respondent's evaluations of their own party and the other party, while a smaller score represents less distance (and less affective polarization). While I ask other questions in the survey that are related to affective polarization, this measure is both simple to understand and frequently used by social science researchers.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of affective polarization among the respondents in my survey that expressed a party affiliation on a 7 point party ID scale (respondents that answered independent or not sure are not included in this figure). The figure shows a significant amount of variation in affective polarization among respondents. Notably, the most common individual

score for affective polarization was 100. In other words, the most common choice that respondents made was to rate their own party as 100 and the opposing party as 0. Curiously, the second most common choice was to rate both parties at 0, which perhaps reflects American's general distaste for political parties.

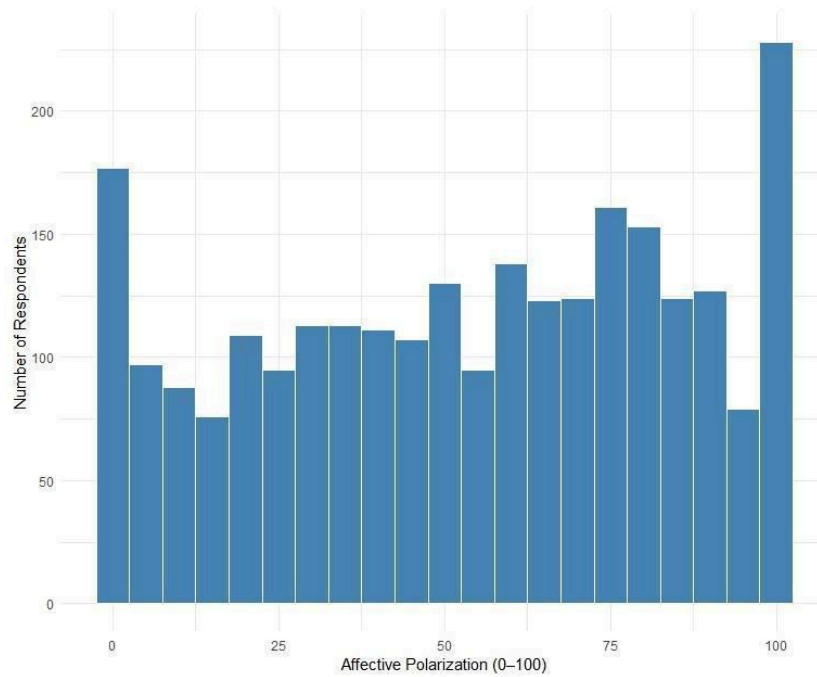


Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents' Affective Polarization

4 Results

Figure 3 presents the average levels of affective polarization by treatment condition. Respondents who read the control article reported the lowest levels of affective polarization. In contrast, the three treatment groups, which introduced partisan cues, conflict, and national figures, showed modest increases in polarization. The largest effect appears in the group exposed to both partisan labels and conflict (Story 3), followed closely by the story that also included national political figures (Story 4). While the differences between groups are not statistically significant, the consistent upward trend across treatment conditions suggests that the content of a local news story, even subtle partisan cues, may shape how citizens feel toward

the opposing party. Figure 4 displays mean affective polarization by treatment condition and separated by party identification.

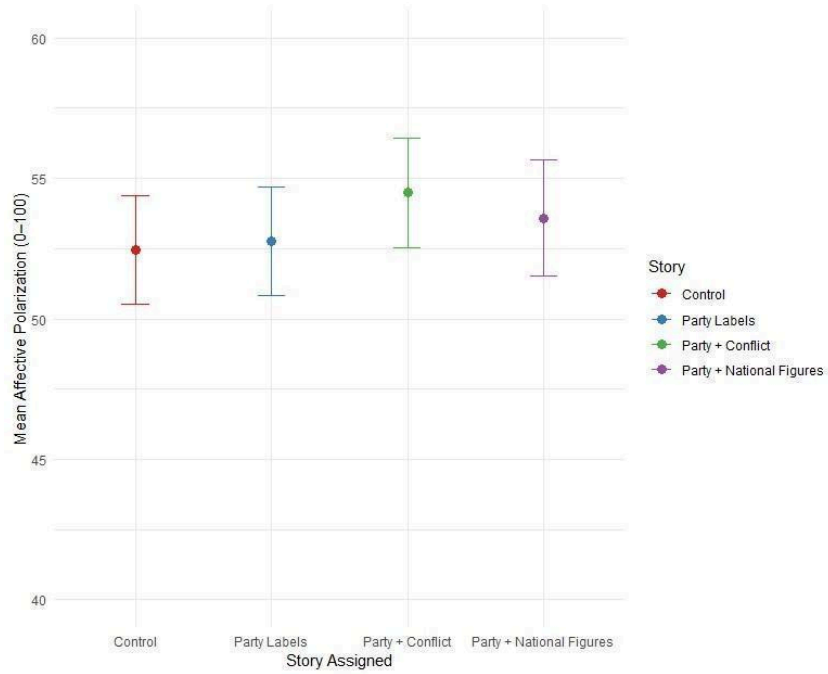


Figure 3: Mean Affective Polarization by Treatment Group

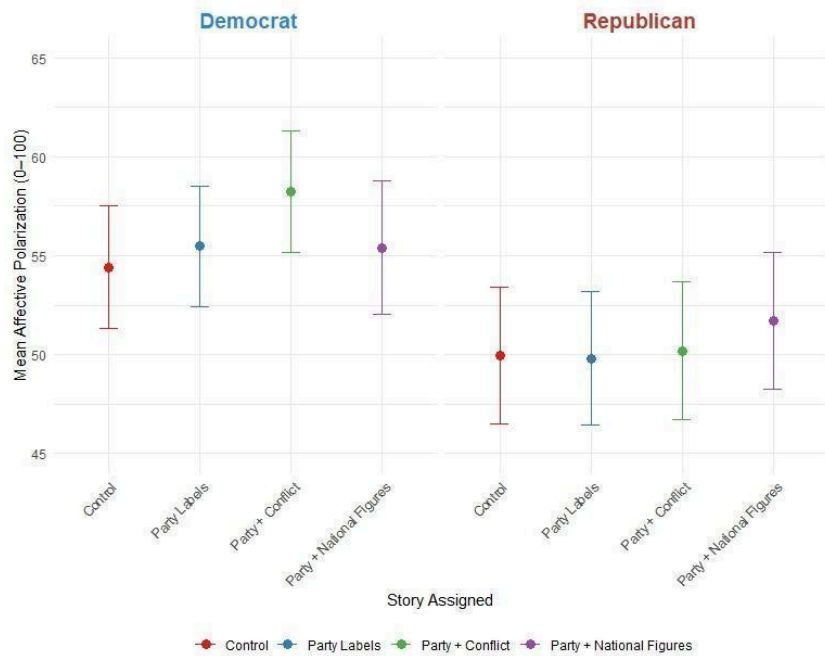


Figure 4: Mean Affective Polarization by Party and Treatment Group

Among Democrats, affective polarization increases modestly across the treatment conditions relative to the control group, with the highest levels observed in the story that contained conflict. By contrast, Republicans exhibit relatively flat levels of affective polarization across most of the conditions, with the only the story mentioning national figures inducing more affective polarization. This pattern suggests that all the features present in national news can heighten Democrats’ negative feelings toward Republicans, with sharp conflict yielding slightly stronger effects. Republicans, however, appear to be most affected by the presence of national figures (in this case, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump). This divergence implies that the consequences of polarizing news content may differ across partisan audiences. While confidence intervals across conditions overlap, the directional patterns are consistent with the hypothesis that features of national news can increase polarization, particularly among Democratic readers.

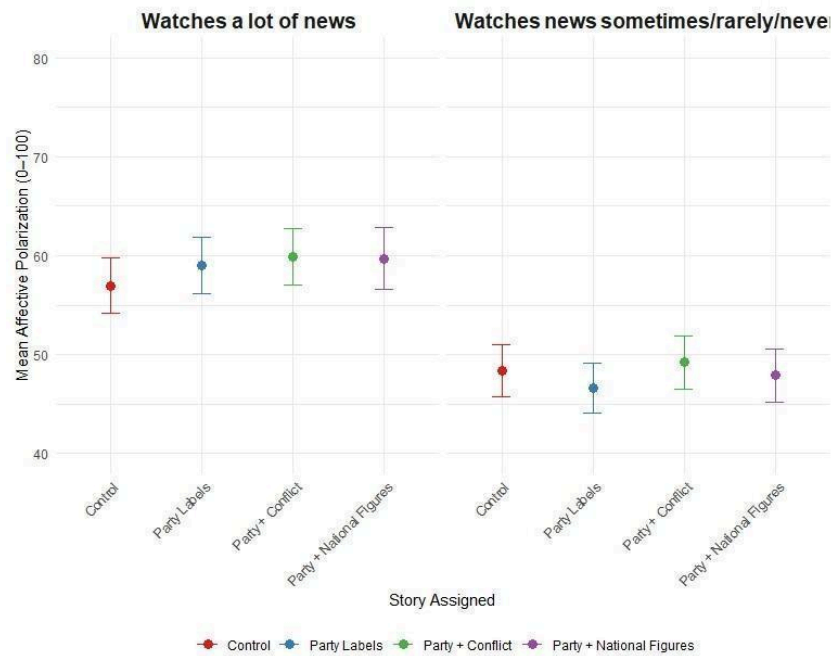


Figure 5: Mean Affective Polarization by News Consumption and Treatment Group

Figure 5 shows the effect of story assignment on affective polarization, separated by how frequently respondents report watching the news. Among respondents who watch a lot of news,

affective polarization is high across all four conditions, suggesting that respondents who frequently watched the news are already more polarized than those that do not. The effects among respondents who watch a lot of news are fairly close to the main finding- affective polarization increases modestly across all three treatment conditions, with the biggest effects observed for stories that include conflict and national figures. Among respondents who watch less news, polarization is lower overall, and there is little difference in affective polarization among the treatment groups. This pattern suggests that people who watch less news are less reactive to its contents, while those who watch news more frequently are more affected.

5 Independents

While scholarship on affective polarization has generally focused on partisans, there is considerable reason to be concerned about independents as well. True independents are quite rare and most survey respondents that identify as independent do prefer one party over the other (Pew Research Center 2021). Independents also increasingly dislike both political parties, which suggests that the sentiment for affective polarization is growing among that group.

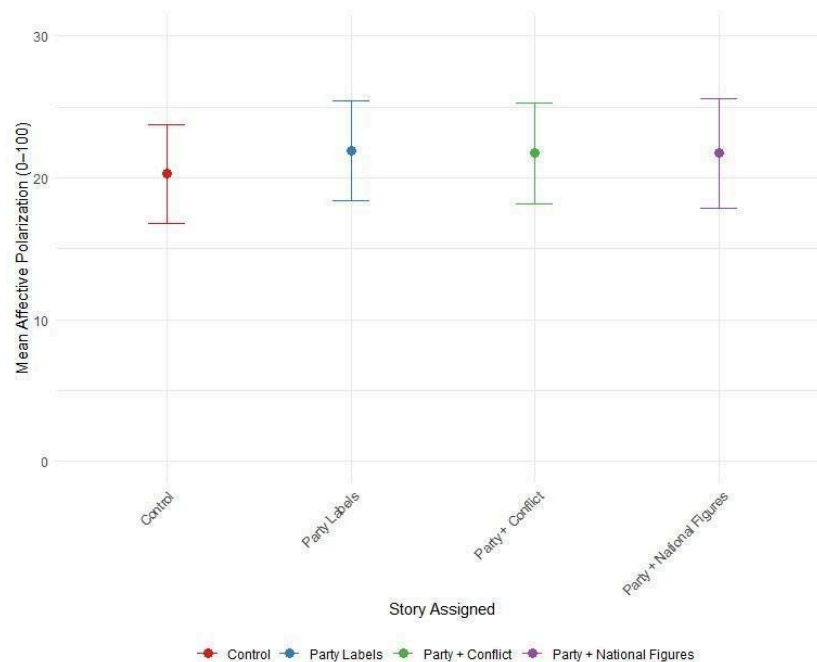


Figure 6: Mean Affective Polarization Among Independents

Figure 6 shows mean affective polarization among independents broken down by treatment group. Affective polarization is measured for independents by taking the absolute value of the evaluation of one political party minus the evaluation of the other. Because I take the absolute value, the order of the parties does not matter. As figure 6 shows, independents show far lesser rates of affective polarization across all groups. However, consistent with the findings for partisans, participants assigned to the three treatment groups expressed higher rates of affective polarization than those assigned to the control group. This suggests that news content can also increase affective polarization among those that view the parties relatively similarly.

6 Social Polarization

Another concern related to affective polarization is social polarization. While affective polarization generally measures feelings towards political parties and its supporters, social polarization refers to how Americans interact with each other in a community sense. Scholars that study social polarization think about the segregation or sorting of people into homogeneous social, cultural, or geographic communities based on partisanship or ideology (Mason 2018).

Similarly to affective polarization, social polarization is of considerable concern to scholars. If Americans are increasingly spending their social time with like minded partisans, it may reduce exposure to differing viewpoints and undermine tolerance (Putnam 2007). Additionally, as partisanship aligns with non-political traits like race or religion, it may feel more like a core identity to citizens, thus making disagreement feel like a personal attack rather than policy debate (Mason 2018). Finally, communities sorted by partisanship show lower trust in local institutions, less civic engagement, more social conflict, and even a greater propensity for violence (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Kalmoe and Mason 2022) To further unpack respondents' levels of social polarization, I examine three additional survey items, each designed to capture a different dimension of interpersonal discomfort or bias toward political opponents.

Table 1: Treatment Effects on Social Polarization Outcomes

	Neighborhood Comfort	Blame Outparty	Marriage Reaction
Story 2: Party Labels	0.005 (0.085)	0.060 (0.090)	0.196 (0.102)
Story 3: Party + Conflict	-0.167* (0.085)	0.006 (0.090)	0.019 (0.101)
Story 4: Party + National Figures	-0.045 (0.087)	0.100 (0.091)	0.131 (0.104)

Note: This table presents coefficients from ordinal logistic regression models predicting three social polarization outcomes: comfort living near outparty supporters, blaming the outparty for national problems, and reaction to a family member marrying a member of the outparty. Positive coefficients indicate lower polarization, negative coefficients indicate higher polarization. All models include demographic and partisan controls and survey weights. Standard errors are in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

In addition to reporting their affective ratings of the outparty, respondents answered: (1) how comfortable they would feel living in a neighborhood where most residents supported the opposing party; (2) how they would react if a member of their immediate family married a supporter of the opposing party; and (3) how much they believe supporters of the opposing party are responsible for the problems facing the country. These questions capture both behavioral discomfort and the attribution of blame—core features of social polarization distinct from affective evaluations. In each question, the outparty was piped in from the respondent’s previous answer to a party ID question. Respondents who answered independent or not sure got assigned a random party.

Because the outcome variables are ordinal, I use ordinal logistic regression models to estimate the effects of the treatment conditions on each of the three social polarization measures. In each model, a more positive coefficient indicates lower social polarization, while a more negative coefficient indicates higher social polarization. As shown in Table 1, the treatment effects are generally small and statistically indistinguishable from zero, with no consistent pattern across the different outcomes. The lone statistically significant finding suggests that respondents exposed to partisan conflict were less comfortable with the idea of living in a neighborhood where most residents supported the opposing party. This may reflect heightened sensitivity to group identity or perceived threats to social cohesion in shared spaces, which are less directly invoked by the other measures of social polarization. Furthermore, newspapers are inextricably linked to community (de Tocqueville 1835), making it possible that respondents would be most reactive to neighborhood character when prompted to think about conflict in a local newspaper.

7 Democratic Norms

Another area of increasing concern for scholars is support for Democracy. Prior research has found that media diets and levels of affective polarization can affect support for democratic institutions and norms (Levendusky and Malhotra 2015; Druckman, Green, and Iyengar 2024). Local news may be able to moderate distrust in institutions by emphasizing practical governance and procedures. Conversely, national news may amplify distrust by framing democratic norms and election outcomes as a partisan conflict. Additionally, national news frequently quotes national politicians, many of whom have expressed distrust in election outcomes, court rulings, and other core features of democracy.

To investigate this question, I use three survey questions that ask about support for anti-democratic attitudes. Respondents were asked (1) Do you agree or disagree with the following: Elected officials that are inparty should sometimes consider ignoring court decisions when the judges who issued those decisions were appointed by outparty Presidents; (2) Do you

agree or disagree with the following: The government should be able to censor media sources that spend more time attacking the in party than the outparty; and (3) Do you agree or disagree with the following: When a inparty candidate questions the outcome of an election other inparty officials should be more loyal to the inparty than to election rules and the constitution.

Table 2: Effects of Treatment on Anti-Democratic Attitudes

	Ignore Courts	Censor Media	Party over Rules/Norms
Story 2: Party Labels	0.066 (0.083)	0.094 (0.083)	0.132 (0.083)
Story 3: Party + Conflict	0.002 (0.083)	-0.002 (0.082)	0.057 (0.083)
Story 4: Party + National Figures	-0.018 (0.084)	0.031 (0.084)	-0.017 (0.084)

Note: Coefficients are from ordinal logistic regression models predicting attitudes toward anti-democratic statements. Positive coefficients indicate more democratic responses (greater disagreement with the anti-democratic statement). All models include demographic and partisan controls and survey weights. Standard errors are in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 2 shows the effect of the treatment on anti-democratic attitudes. Across the board, the coefficients are quite small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. This suggests that the content of a lone news article does not create or amplify anti-democratic attitudes.

8 Discussion

As local news continues to decline and Americans increasingly turn to national outlets for political information, it is more critical than ever for researchers to understand both how content differs between local and national news and the impact this may have on news consumers. This paper contributes to this line of scholarship by testing three major mechanisms

that may be driving the polarizing effect of national news: partisanship, conflict, and national figures. While exposure to partisan cues alone appears to have little impact, news stories featuring political conflict or national figures are associated with modest increases in affective polarization. Although these patterns are not statistically significant, they offer suggestive evidence that specific features of national news content may contribute to affective polarization.

One other feature that separates local from national news that I did not test in this paper is the types of issues that are covered. Local media frequently reports on issues that are not explicitly partisan and more related to governance, like schools, roads, zoning, and homelessness. National media, on the other hand, is filled with issues that are more explicitly partisan and thus likely more polarizing. Identity inflected issues, which have become common in national discourse, are particularly dividing because they are person based (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). While I could not test issue type in this paper due to the design of the vignette, future work could explore this likely driver of affective polarization in national news.

It is worth noting that, while the effects found in this paper are generally small, they also reflect a relatively weak treatment. Respondents only read one news article, and while the experimental design lends significant causal credibility to the findings in this research, the trade off is a treatment that only minimally reflects how Americans consume news. Most Americans are repeatedly exposed to news content everyday, which may result in larger increases of affective polarization than what this paper finds.

One potential critique of this research is that Americans may want more polarizing content, either because it is more entertaining or because it conforms with pre-existing beliefs. If that is the case, it's difficult to blame the decline of local news for polarization; rather, it would suggest that newer forms of media, such as partisan media like Fox News or MSNBC, have met the demand that already existed in the public. To attempt to address this concern, I asked respondents immediately after the treatment if their city's newspaper covered local politics in this way, how would it affect their likelihood of reading local news? Table 3 shows the number of respondents indicating they would be more likely, less likely, or have no change in their

likelihood of reading local news. While most respondents across treatment groups answered similarly, the respondents who read the story that contained conflict were far more likely to say they were less likely to read local news relative to the other groups. This demonstrates that citizens generally do not want conflict in local news, but do not appear to mind the presence of national figures and party labels.

Table 3: Response Distribution for: If your city’s newspaper covered local politics in this way, how would it affect your likelihood of reading local news?

Treatment Group	More Likely	Less Likely	No Change
Story 1 (Control)	383	78	500
Story 2 (Party Labels)	368	82	511
Story 3 (Party Labels + Conflict)	304	186	470
Story 4 (Party Labels + National Figures)	373	74	489

As the media ecosystem in the United States continues to evolve, understanding how content cues affect public attitudes is essential. This experiment provides evidence that partisan conflict and national political figures drive affective polarization. News organizations, especially those committed to local news, may consider the civic consequences of such content. By minimizing polarizing cues, journalists and news editors can help foster informed, engaged, and less divided communities.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement

All data for this paper is available upon request.

Funding statement

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Chapter 4 Appendix

A.1 Alternative Results and Specifications

A.1.1 Regression Results for Main Analysis

Table A.1: Effect of Treatment on Affective Polarization (All Partisan Identifiers Included)

	Affective Polarization
Story 2: Party Labels	0.22 (1.71)
Story 3: Party + Conflict	1.94 (1.72)
Story 4: Party + National Figures	1.01 (1.72)

Note: Coefficients are from OLS regression models. Higher values indicate greater affective polarization. All models include demographic controls and survey weights. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table A.2: Effect of Treatment on Affective Polarization (Democratic Respondents)

	Affective Polarization
Story 2: Party Labels	1.30
Story 3: Party + Conflict	(2.27) * 4.58 (2.29)
Story 4: Party + National Figures	0.75 (2.30)

Note: Coefficients are from OLS regression models among Democratic respondents. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table A.3: Effect of Treatment on Affective Polarization (Republican Respondents)

	Affective Polarization
Story 2: Party Labels	-0.20 (2.56)
Story 3: Party + Conflict	-0.52 (2.57)
Story 4: Party + National Figures	1.49 (2.56)

Note: Coefficients are from OLS regression models among Republican respondents. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table A.4: Effect of Treatment \times News Exposure on Affective Polarization

	Affective Polarization
Story 2 \times Low Exposure	-5.34 (3.39)
Story 3 \times Low Exposure	-2.20 (3.41)
Story 4 \times Low Exposure	-3.53 (3.41)

Note: Coefficients are from OLS regression models with interaction terms between treatment and news exposure. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table A.5: Effect of Treatment on Affective Polarization (Independents)

	Affective Polarization
Story 2: Party Labels	0.84 (2.42)
Story 3: Party + Conflict	0.87 (2.51)
Story 4: Party + National Figures	1.96 (2.60)

Note: Coefficients are from OLS regression models predicting among self-identified Independents. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

A.2 Additional Figures

A.2.1 Distribution of Affective Polarization by Partisanship

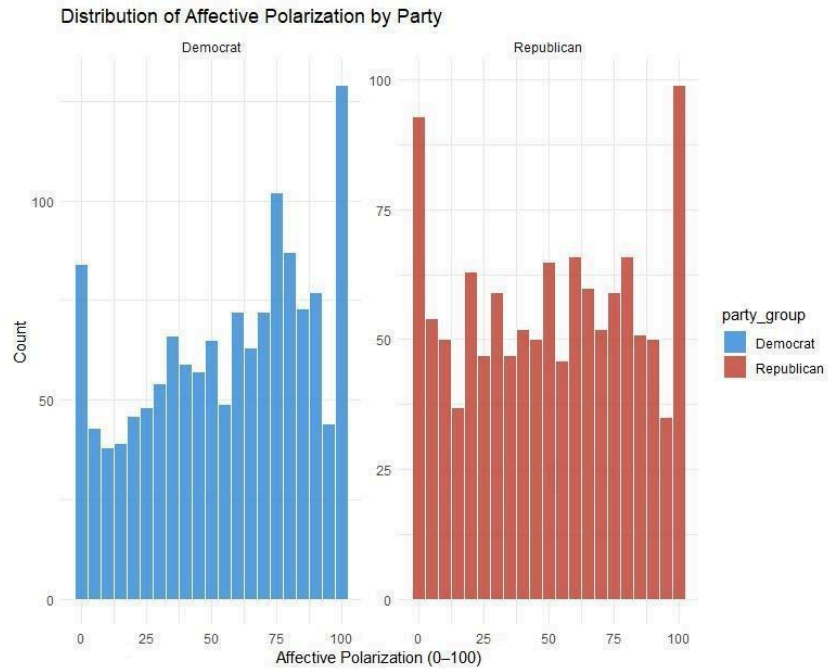


Figure A.1: Distribution of Affective Polarization by Party

A.3 Survey Questionnaire

- [q1] Some people follow what's going on in government most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Would you say you follow what's going on...
 - Most of the time
 - Some of the time
 - Only now and then
 - Hardly at all
- [q2] Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a ...
 - Democrat

- Republican
- Independent
- Not sure

• **[q3] Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a ...**

- Strong Democrat
- Not very strong Democrat
- Lean Democrat
- Independent
- Lean Republican
- Not very strong Republican
- Strong Republican
- Not sure

• **[q4] Now I am going to ask you some questions about your news consumption habits.**

Would you say you listen, read, or watch the news

- A lot
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

• **[q5.1] In the past 24 hours, have you done any of the following? (check all that apply)**

Read a newspaper

– Read a newspaper

- **[q5.2] In the past 24 hours, have you done any of the following? (check all that apply)**

Watched a TV news program

– Watched a TV news program

- **[q5.3] In the past 24 hours, have you done any of the following? (check all that apply)**

Listened to a News Podcast

– Listened to a News Podcast

- **[q5.4] In the past 24 hours, have you done any of the following? (check all that apply)**

Got news from social media

– Got news from social media

- **[q6.1] If you indicated that you watched TV news, which of these networks did you watch? (check all that apply) ABC**

– ABC

- **[q6.2] If you indicated that you watched TV news, which of these networks did you watch? (check all that apply) CBS**

– CBS

- **[q6.3] If you indicated that you watched TV news, which of these networks did you watch? (check all that apply) CNN**

– CNN

- **[q6.4] If you indicated that you watched TV news, which of these networks did you watch? (check all that apply) Fox**

– Fox

- **[q6.5] If you indicated that you watched TV news, which of these networks did you watch? (check all that apply) MSNBC**
 - MSNBC

- **[q6.6] If you indicated that you watched TV news, which of these networks did you watch? (check all that apply) PBS**
 - PBS

- **[q6.7] If you indicated that you watched TV news, which of these networks did you watch? (check all that apply) Other**
 - Other

- **[q7] If you indicated that you watched TV news, did you watch local news, national news, or both?**
 - Local News
 - National News
 - Both

- **[q8] If you indicated that you read a newspaper, did you read a local newspaper, national newspaper, or both?**
 - Local Newspaper
 - National Newspaper
 - Both

- **[q10]**
 - I would be more likely to read local news

- I would be less likely to read local news
 - It would not change my likelihood of reading local news
- **[q11.1] How would you rate your feeling toward - Democrats (0 to 100 scale)**
- **[q11.2] How would you rate your feeling toward - Republicans (0 to 100 scale)**
- **[q12] If a member of Congress were offered a bribe [...] do you think that the member of Congress would accept or refuse the bribe?**
 - Extremely Likely to Accept
 - Likely to Accept
 - Equally Likely to Refuse or Accept
 - Likely to Refuse
 - Extremely Likely to Refuse
- **[q13] Do you think your wallet (or your valuables) would be returned to you if it were found by a stranger?**
 - Yes
 - No
- **[q14] How do you think you would react if a member of your immediate family told you they were going to marry a [out-party]?**
 - Happy
 - Unhappy
 - Wouldn't matter at all to me

- **[q15] How much do you think [out-party]s are responsible for the problems facing our country today?**
 - A great deal
 - Somewhat
 - Not at all

- **[q16] How comfortable would you feel living in a neighborhood where most residents supported [out-party]s?**
 - Very comfortable
 - Comfortable
 - Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
 - Uncomfortable
 - Very uncomfortable

- **[q17] Elected officials that are [in-party]s should sometimes consider ignoring court decisions when the judges who issued those decisions were appointed by [out-party] Presidents.**
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- **[q18] The government should be able to censor media sources that spend more time attacking [in-party]s than [out-party]s.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

- **[q19] When a [In-Party] candidate questions the outcome of an election other [in-party]s should be more loyal to the [In-Party] party than to election rules and the constitution.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

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