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DISAPPEARING NEWS, DISAPPEARING DEMOCRACY

Examining the Impact of Local News Decline on Political Engagement in Rural America

By Kimia Adibi

This paper examines the relationship between local newspaper presence and democratic participation, focusing particularly on how news deserts affect political accountability and civic engagement in rural America. Currently, 3.5 million Americans live in counties without any local news coverage. The impact is especially severe in the South, where every state has at least one county without a newspaper. While existing research demonstrates that newspaper closures reduce civic engagement in urban areas, I argue that these effects are significantly more severe in rural regions where geographic isolation and limited digital infrastructure compound the impact. Using comparative quantitative analysis of electoral competition in rural versus urban counties across North Carolina and Arizona from 2020 to 2024, Cooperative Election Study political knowledge data (2020–2022), and a Montana case study, this paper investigates the mechanisms through which declining local news coverage impacts democratic institutions. My findings reveal three key mechanisms through which news deserts reshape local democracy: degraded information access about government activities, reduced electoral competition as evidenced by declining candidate recruitment, and weakened accountability, as shown through case studies of undetected official misconduct. This paper contributes to our understanding of how the erosion of local journalism threatens democratic governance in rural America and suggests the potential emergence of a two-tiered system of democratic participation divided along geographic lines.

I. News deserts and democracy's drought

Thomas Jefferson once declared he would prefer “newspapers without government” over a “government without newspapers.”¹ Two centuries later, rural America is conducting an unintended experiment in the latter scenario, as thousands of local papers have disappeared nationwide since 2005. The results of this democratic experiment are now measurable—and deeply troubling. The collapse of local newspapers across America represents one of the most profound yet overlooked threats to democratic governance in recent decades. This paper examines how the erosion of local news coverage affects political accountability and civic engagement, with special attention to the distinct challenges facing rural communities that have become “news deserts.” While previous research has documented the general relationship between local media and democratic participation, this study addresses a

1 Thomas Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Federal Edition*, vol. 5 (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904).

critical gap by investigating how rural communities—already disadvantaged in media access—experience unique democratic deficits when their limited news sources disappear.

A. What is a news desert, and why should you care?

News deserts—or communities with limited or no access to reliable local news—have proliferated across the American landscape. Between 2004 and 2022, the United States lost over 2,100 newspapers, leaving more than 200 counties without a single local news outlet and roughly 1,600 counties with just one newspaper each—typically a weekly publication struggling to cover multiple communities.² When communities lose their local newspapers, they lose the primary institution responsible for monitoring local government, explaining policy decisions, and providing the information necessary for meaningful civic engagement.^{3,4}

In rural communities, news deserts amplify existing challenges of geographic isolation and economic disadvantage. For example, the South—home to many of America’s poorest states—has the highest concentration of counties without newspapers, with every Southern state containing at least one news desert county.⁵ For this study, the South refers to the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition, encompassing Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. These information vacuums create fertile ground for corruption and government inefficiency. As David Simon, creator of *The Wire* and former *Baltimore Sun* reporter, starkly predicted: “The next 10 or 15 years in this country are going to be a halcyon era for state and local political corruption. It is going to be one of the great times to be a corrupt politician.”⁶

B. How we got here: the evolution and impact of local news decline

The decline of local newspapers has been accelerated by widespread consolidation in media ownership. Over the past two decades, local newspapers have increasingly fallen under the control of investment firms, hedge funds, and large media conglomerates that prioritize profit margins over civic mission. As newspapers consolidate, their coverage retreats like a receding tide, abandoning school board meetings and then city council sessions until only the highest-profile stories remain visible. Independent local newspapers traditionally helped citizens navigate this complexity by providing crucial information about voting logistics, candidate platforms, and electoral processes. Their day-to-day coverage of local government creates accountability journalism—reporting that questions the status quo, investigates potential abuses of power, and ensures elected officials follow through on their promises.

Additionally, as hedge funds and large media conglomerates acquire local newspapers, many once-vibrant publications have become ghost papers—maintaining their historical mastheads while operating with skeleton crews disconnected from their communities. This creates a dangerous illusion of media choice and civic connection, where residents believe they have independent news sources when they actually do not. This false sense of information pluralism may be more harmful than outright news deserts in some ways, as it fosters misplaced trust in coverage that increasingly serves corporate rather than community interests. When citizens cannot distinguish between genuine local journalism and its corporate simulacrum, their ability to make informed electoral choices deteriorates while their confidence in having done so remains intact.

The decline of local newspapers has been further complicated by broadband access issues, creating what researchers call “double deserts”—communities lacking both local news coverage and adequate internet

2 Penelope M. Abernathy and Tim Franklin, *The State of Local News 2022* (Local News Initiative, 2022), https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/assets/the_state_of_local_news_2022.pdf.

3 Sam Schulhofer-Wohl, and Miguel Garrido, “Do Newspapers Matter? Evidence from the Closure of *The Cincinnati Post*,” *Journal of Media Economics* 26, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/08997764.2013.785553>.

4 Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, “As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in US House Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1086/679749>.

5 Penelope M. Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert* (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018).

6 Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108876940>.

connectivity.⁷ Of the 196 counties identified as news deserts in 2020, between 43 and 46 percent were also “broadband deserts”—areas where most residents lack reliable high-speed internet access.⁸ This dual deficit means residents lack both traditional local reporting and reliable digital access to alternative news sources. This overlap is particularly pronounced in rural, low-income, and tribal communities, which are already disadvantaged in terms of both broadband and local news access.

In rural communities where newspaper closures have created complete news deserts, social media platforms often become the primary or only available source of local information. Yet, research consistently shows digital platforms fail to adequately replace traditional local news. Americans who rely primarily on social media for news demonstrate significantly less knowledge about current events and lower rates of following major elections, while communities with diminished local news experience measurable declines in civic health regardless of digital access.⁹ Social media news consumers demonstrate significantly less knowledge about current events than those who obtain news through other sources. Across twenty-nine fact-based questions covering topics from economics to pandemic information, Americans who relied primarily on social media for news scored lower than almost all other groups.¹⁰ More troublingly, these consumers were more likely to encounter and believe misinformation, including conspiracy theories, yet were less concerned about the potential impacts of misinformation on democratic processes. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of democratic erosion: as newspapers close, communities increasingly rely on platforms that provide less substantive political information, leading to reduced knowledge and engagement. This decreases demand for in-depth local coverage, further weakening the economic viability of remaining news outlets. In rural communities already struggling with geographic isolation and limited digital infrastructure, this cycle is particularly difficult to break.

II. Prior research on local news decline

A long line of research has shown that mass media can substantially influence citizens’ political engagement. When citizens have access to high-quality political information, they tend to become more knowledgeable about policy issues, electoral candidates, and political debates.¹¹ Moreover, exposure to news can stimulate various forms of political participation to the extent that a knowledgeable and participatory citizenry is often a marker of a healthy democracy.¹² The quality of the democratic enterprise rests in no small part on the availability of political information in the media. This relationship has taken on renewed relevance in recent years; while national news outlets and social media have expanded, smaller, local news outlets have struggled to stay afloat. Newspapers across the nation have collapsed, reporting resources have been slashed, and most online sites specializing in local news have failed to gain traction.¹³ Amid these developments, evidence suggests that the impoverishment of the local news environment reduces political engagement. Particularly, studies such as “Do newspapers matter? Evidence from the closure of *The Cincinnati Post*” and “Dead Newspapers and Citizens’ Civic Engagement” have examined case studies of closures in Cincinnati, Ohio and Denver, Colorado, respectively, observing significant decreases in civic behaviors and finding an associated increased incumbent advantage.^{14,15} These case studies

7 Christopher Ali and Steven Waldman, “Broadband, Digital Equity and Local News,” Rebuild Local News, May 1, 2023, <https://www.rebuildlocalnews.org/local-news-is-a-part-of-digital-equity-it-should-receive-digital-equity-dollars/>.

8 Ali and Waldman, “Broadband, Digital Equity and Local News.”

9 Tom Infield, “Americans Who Get News Mainly on Social Media Are Less Knowledgeable and Less Engaged,” The Pew Charitable Trusts, November 16, 2020, <https://www.pew.org/en/trust/archive/fall-2020/americans-who-get-news-mainly-on-social-media-are-less-knowledgeable-and-less-engaged>.

10 Infield, “Americans Who Get News.”

11 Hayes and Lawless, “As Local News Goes,”

12 Lee Shaker, “Dead Newspapers and Citizens’ Civic Engagement,” *Political Communication* 31, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.762817>.

13 “For Local News, Americans Embrace Digital but Still Want Strong Community Connection,” Pew Research Center, March 26, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/03/26/for-local-news-americans-embrace-digital-but-still-want-strong-community-connection/>.

14 Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, “Do Newspapers Matter?”

15 Shaker, “Dead Newspapers.”

provide compelling evidence that the loss of a newspaper can meaningfully reduce political engagement at the local level.

Although the argument for such a link is logically compelling, the existing literature faces several limitations in developing a comprehensive account of the relationship between local news and citizen engagement. Few studies have systematically sought to explain variation in the content of political coverage at the local level. Whereas much research examines coverage of presidential or statewide contests, only a few scholars focus on lower-profile elections, such as State House races or municipal contests. Yet these relatively low-information races have much to tell us about the wider landscape of local political news. Pinpointing the factors that influence the substance of coverage to which citizens have access is an essential first step in identifying the conditions under which engagement with local politics is likely to rise or fall. Moreover, while previous studies have focused on aggregate effects, they have largely overlooked how the erosion of local news might disproportionately affect rural populations, particularly in comparison to urban areas that receive consistent coverage. Thus, this review proposes a new avenue for research in addition to investigating previous studies: examining the differential impacts of local news decline on rural communities.

A. The rise and impact of news deserts

The loss of local newspapers and the rise of “news deserts” has been a growing concern for researchers studying local journalism in recent years. “The Expanding News Desert” defines news deserts as “a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level.”¹⁶ This research found that between 2004 and 2018, the United States lost nearly 1,800 newspapers, leaving many communities without a local news source. Professor Penelope Abernathy, creator of the Expanding News Desert project and the scholar who popularized the term “news deserts,” has documented how the loss of local newspapers creates civic blind spots in which government accountability suffers. Her pioneering work in mapping newspaper closures nationwide provides the foundation for understanding the scope and geographic distribution of this crisis.

More recent data from *The State of Local News* shows this trend has worsened, with the US losing over 360 newspapers between late 2019 and May 2022. They estimate that by the end of 2025, the country will have lost one-third of its newspapers compared to 2005 levels.¹⁷ The rise of these news deserts has had widespread dire consequences on political engagement and government accountability. Areas that have lost newspapers tend to have lower voter turnout, increased government corruption, and less community engagement.¹⁸ Furthermore, the loss of local newspapers often leads to a reduction in the number of journalists covering local issues, resulting in less accountability for local officials and fewer stories that directly impact residents’ daily lives.

B. Local newspaper closures and their effects on civic engagement

The closure of local newspapers has been shown to have significant effects on civic engagement and political accountability. Evidence suggests that when local newspapers close, citizens become less politically informed and engaged, while local officials face reduced scrutiny, likely due to the lack of political information. “Press Coverage and Political Accountability” found that areas with higher congruence—the measure of a newspaper’s readership that lives within a given political boundary—had citizens who were more informed about their representatives, leading to higher political participation and accountability.¹⁹ When newspapers close or reduce coverage, this congruence is disrupted, potentially weakening democratic processes. Similarly, in a study of U.S. House elections, “As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in US House Elections,” it was found that the volume and substance of local news coverage varied significantly

16 Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert*.

17 Abernathy and Franklin, *The State of Local News 2022*.

18 Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert*.

19 James M. Snyder and David Strömberg, “Press Coverage and Political Accountability,” *Journal of Political Economy* 118, no. 2 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1086/652903>.

across districts.²⁰ House races received notably less media attention in uncompetitive districts and in areas served by large-circulation newspapers covering multiple congressional districts. This variation in coverage had tangible effects on citizen engagement. Citizens exposed to less coverage were less able to evaluate their House member, less likely to express opinions about candidates, and less likely to vote.²¹

The consequences of newspaper closures extend beyond just reduced political knowledge. Shaker's 2014 study on the closure of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* found significant declines in civic engagement measures such as contacting public officials, attending local meetings, and volunteering for local organizations. This suggests that local newspapers play a crucial role in fostering broader civic participation, not just political engagement. Furthermore, the impact of newspaper closures and layoffs on civic engagement appears to be long lasting.

C. Newsroom layoffs, media consolidation, and its influence on local news content

Elections are only one aspect of the harmful consequences of newsroom layoffs and closures. Martin and McCrain examined the impact of station acquisitions by the Sinclair Broadcast Group on local news content, finding that Sinclair acquisitions led to significant reductions in local politics coverage, replaced by centralized national political content. This shift was associated with lower levels of local political knowledge among viewers. Importantly, these changes were not driven by audience demand—viewership actually declined following the content changes, suggesting supply-side decisions motivated by cost-saving measures through centralized production. These findings highlight that the structure and ownership of local media outlets can have significant effects on the type and quality of political information available to local communities. As local media ownership becomes increasingly consolidated, there is a risk of reduced investment in local political coverage, potentially undermining local democratic processes.

D. Rural news vs. the desert

Unlike larger urban markets, rural areas are often served by small weekly newspapers that specialize in hyperlocal news—covering city council meetings, school board decisions, and community events that would go unreported by any other outlet. These papers play a crucial role in maintaining community cohesion and civic engagement. However, rural papers face significant challenges; the pressure to move online is constant, but rural areas often lack the digital infrastructure to support a full transition to digital news. The rise of news deserts has hit rural communities particularly hard. Many of the over two hundred counties without a local newspaper are rural, leaving these communities without a dedicated source of local information.²² Additionally, urban residents' local media is more likely to cover solely the area they live, whereas rural local media often covers multiple communities and districts.²³ This lack of local news can have severe consequences for rural residents' knowledge of and engagement with local issues. When residents cannot access information about upcoming ballot measures, candidate positions on local concerns, or the details of proposed zoning changes and budget allocations, their ability to participate meaningfully in democracy is fundamentally compromised.

1. Democracy in the Balance

Overall, the existing literature provides compelling evidence for the crucial role that local news plays in maintaining civic engagement, political accountability, and community cohesion. From the rise of news deserts to the impacts of newspaper closures and newsroom layoffs, research consistently demonstrates the negative consequences

20 Hayes and Lawless, "As Local News Goes."

21 Hayes and Lawless, "As Local News Goes."

22 Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert*.

23 Pew Research Center, "For Local News."

of a diminishing local news landscape.^{24,25,26,27,28,29,30} However, while these studies offer valuable insights into the general effects of local news decline, they largely overlook the potentially disproportionate impact on rural communities. Rural areas, which often lack the media diversity of urban centers, may be particularly vulnerable to the erosion of local news. The closure of a single newspaper or significant newsroom layoffs could have more severe consequences in a rural community where alternative news sources are scarce or non-existent.

The existing literature, while valuable in establishing the democratic importance of local news, has fundamentally failed to grapple with the distinctive experience of rural communities in the news desert crisis. Where existing studies have documented general effects, they have entirely missed how heightened the impacts of news poverty are in rural communities. My research directly confronts this blindspot by analyzing how the distinctive characteristics of rural America—lower population density, greater distances between population centers, absence of media alternatives, and severely limited broadband access—interact with local news decline to produce uniquely devastating democratic consequences.

III. Methodology & research design: demonstrating how news deserts impact rural democracy

This research design outlines a mixed-methods approach to examining how the decline in local news affects political accountability and civic engagement in rural America. Building on established literature documenting the challenges facing local journalism, particularly studies by Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido (2011), Abernathy (2018 & 2022), and Shaker (2014), this study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the relationship between newspaper presence and democratic outcomes. The design incorporates natural experiments from recent newspaper closures, comparative case studies of rural and urban counties, and large-scale survey data to provide a comprehensive understanding of how news deserts affect local democracy, with particular attention to rural communities.

The research leverages multiple methodological approaches to strengthen causal inference and enhance generalizability. A rural-urban comparison between rural Tyrrell County and urban Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, provides insight into how newspaper presence interacts with community characteristics. In both counties, newspapers recently closed, allowing for examination of the immediate effects on political competition. To test whether these patterns persist across different state contexts, the analysis extends to Arizona, comparing rural Greenlee County with urban Maricopa County. The Arizona cases offer a valuable contrast to North Carolina as a fellow swing state that does not reside in the south. This cross-state comparison helps isolate the effects of partial versus complete loss of local news coverage in different geographic settings. Finally, the case of Garfield County, Montana illustrates the concrete implications of diminished local oversight through the study of an elected official's misconduct that went unscrutinized until reaching criminal proportions. The quantitative analysis draws on two primary data sources: the 2020 and 2022 Cooperative Election Studies, which provide measures of political knowledge and engagement, and comprehensive electoral records that enable analysis of political competition and incumbent accountability.

The study carefully operationalizes newspaper existence both categorically and continuously, while measuring political accountability through multiple indicators including incumbent win rates, candidate-to-seat ratios, and citizen knowledge of representatives. Through careful integration of natural experiments, comparative case studies, and survey data, this research design creates multiple pathways for understanding how the loss of local news affects democratic processes. The results should provide valuable insights into the democratic implications of news deserts, particularly in rural communities where alternative information sources may be

24 Abernathy, *The Expanding News Desert*.

25 Abernathy and Franklin, *The State of Local News 2022*.

26 Snyder and Strömberg, "Press Coverage."

27 Hayes and Lawless, "As Local News Goes."

28 Shaker, "Dead Newspapers."

29 Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, "Do Newspapers Matter?"

30 Gregory J. Martin and Joshua McCrain, "Local News and National Politics," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000965>.

limited. This ultimately answers the puzzle: How has the decline in local news affected political accountability and civic knowledge in rural areas of America?

A. Case selection and sampling strategy

1. Rural-urban comparative framework

To isolate the effect of rural location on communities experiencing news decline, this study employs a comparative case study approach between rural and urban counties which experienced different degrees of news coverage loss during the study period. Tyrrell County, North Carolina's least populous county with approximately 3,500 residents, lost its only local newspaper in early 2023, creating a complete news desert. In contrast, Mecklenburg County, with over 1.1 million residents, saw its newspaper coverage decline by 50% between 2020 and 2024, from eight papers to four, while maintaining some local media presence. The selection of North Carolina as a Southern swing state provides a testing ground for examining how news decline affects political accountability in electorally consequential environments. The South has experienced particularly severe newspaper closures and North Carolina's competitive political landscape, where races are often decided by narrow margins, makes information access particularly crucial for democratic functioning. As a swing state, North Carolina offers a politically competitive environment where information access can directly influence electoral outcomes. Additionally, the state's unique position at the intersection of traditional Southern political culture and rapidly changing demographics creates distinctive information needs among rural voters. Overall, North Carolina's history of competitive elections across multiple levels of government—from local county races to gubernatorial contests—provides an ideal laboratory for examining how the absence of news coverage affects accountability in politically contested environments where the stakes of democratic participation are particularly high.

The second comparative pair examines Greenlee County and Maricopa County, Arizona. This pairing allows analysis of how different baseline levels of news coverage affect democratic participation across rural and urban settings. Greenlee County, with roughly 9,500 residents, lost their only newspaper during the study period, similar to Tyrrell County. Maricopa County, Arizona's most populous county with over 4.5 million residents, retained multiple news sources despite some consolidation. This contrast with North Carolina's cases, where both counties experienced losses, helps isolate the effects of news reduction versus sustained coverage. Arizona provides a valuable cross-regional comparison as a Western swing state with distinct cultural and media ecosystems from North Carolina. Geographically, Arizona is approximately 133% larger than North Carolina but has about 3.1 million fewer residents, creating vastly different population densities that affect news distribution networks and information accessibility.³¹ The Southwest's vastly different landscape, Indigenous communities, and border dynamics demand distinct reporting needs compared to North Carolina's agriculture-focused region. This cross-regional comparison helps determine whether the relationship between news access and democratic participation represents a regional phenomenon specific to the South or a broader national pattern. Arizona's different demographic composition, political traditions, and economic structure allows us to test whether the effects of news deserts transcend these contextual factors.

B. Defining variables

The study operationalizes the independent variable of newspaper existence through two primary measures. The primary categorical measure divides counties into three distinct groups: news deserts (zero newspapers), limited coverage areas (one newspaper), and robust coverage areas (two or more newspapers). This categorization, drawn from Northwestern University's State of Local News studies in 2020 and 2024, enables clear visualization of threshold effects in news coverage. A secondary continuous measure examines newspapers per capita to account for population differences across counties. The rural location variable is operationalized using the USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC), which distinguishes counties by population density data and distance

31 "American Community Survey 5-Year Data (2009-2023)," US Census Bureau, 2024.

to the nearest metropolitan area from the U.S. Census Bureau. For the dependent variables, the study examines three to measure political accountability and civic engagement. First, the incumbent win rate is measured as the percentage of incumbent officials who win local reelection races during the 2020 and 2024 election cycles, using state election board records. Second, the candidate-to-seat ratio is calculated as the number of candidates per available position in local elections over the same period, using county election board records. Lastly, citizen knowledge of representatives is measured through survey-based political knowledge scores from the Cooperative Election Study (CES) in 2020 and 2022, supplemented by recognition rates of local, state house, and state senate officials.³² For the purposes of this research, the included CES political knowledge index questions asked respondents to identify their governor, state legislators, and the party controlling their state legislature. These questions collectively assess citizens' familiarity with their elected representatives across multiple levels of government and their awareness of major policy stances.

C. Data collection

For quantitative data, the study employs a systematic data collection and visualization approach that proceeds in two distinct phases. The first phase focuses on analyzing the distribution of political knowledge using the Cooperative Election Study data. The analysis utilizes specific questions from the CES 2020 and CES 2022 survey, including state-level political knowledge questions such as party control of the state senate, as well as recognition and party identification of current officials including governors, senators, and house representatives. The study also incorporates questions about constituent ratings of current officials and candidates. These questions provide a comprehensive measure of citizens' engagement with and knowledge of their political representatives across different levels of government. The resulting data is visualized through box plots that display the distribution of political knowledge scores across varying levels of news presence. These plots effectively demonstrate how political knowledge varies between news deserts (zero newspapers), limited coverage areas (one newspaper), and areas with robust coverage (two or more newspapers).

The second phase examines electoral competition through comprehensive collection of electoral records. This phase involves gathering detailed candidate filing information, election outcomes, and competition metrics from state and county election boards. The data is visualized through time-series bar graphs that compare electoral competition metrics before and after newspaper closures in the North Carolina and Arizona cases. These visualizations help demonstrate how the presence or absence of local news coverage affects patterns of electoral competition over time. The qualitative component of the research focuses on detailed case studies of political accountability in our selected counties, with particular attention to the case of Garfield County, Montana. Any instances of citizen complaints, ethics violations, and other accountability measures before and after newspaper closures are investigated, providing concrete evidence of how the loss of local news affects government oversight. While these instances cannot be identified on a graph, they provide further evidence of local news affecting political accountability.

Ultimately, this research design provides a systematic approach to examining how the decline of local news affects political accountability and civic engagement in rural America. Through careful integration of natural experiments, comparative case studies, and survey data, the design enables both causal inference about the effects of newspaper closures and broader understanding of how these effects may vary across contexts. Overall, the results from this study should provide valuable insights into the democratic implications of news deserts, particularly in rural communities where alternative information sources may be limited.

32 Data limitations note: While this analysis aimed to examine political knowledge trends through 2024, limitations in data availability necessitated using the 2020 and 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES) waves for political knowledge comparisons. The 2024 CES data release has been delayed. However, the 2020–2022 comparison still provides valuable insights into the relationship between newspaper presence and political knowledge, particularly as this period captured significant changes in local news landscapes across both states studied. The electoral competition analysis extends through 2024 using available local election data, allowing us to observe more recent trends in that aspect of civic engagement.

IV. Analysis & assessment: measuring the impact of local news loss

I examine the relationship between local newspaper presence and democratic participation through three distinct components: contested elections, political knowledge, and political accountability. The first section analyzes the impact of local newspapers on contested elections—races where multiple candidates compete for the same position, giving voters meaningful choices. My research compares rural and urban counties in North Carolina and Arizona from 2020–2024, examining how changes in news coverage correspond with electoral competitiveness. The selection of these states was concluded based on the following variables. First, both North Carolina and Arizona represent soft swing states—states that have historically voted for one party, but have shown enough electoral volatility to be potentially flipped—with significant electoral importance, making their democratic health particularly consequential for national politics. For example, Arizona was decided by just 0.4% in the 2020 presidential election, while North Carolina was decided by 1.3%, placing both states among the most competitive in the nation.³³ Second, these states represent different regions (Southeast and Southwest) with distinct political cultures, allowing us to test whether findings are regionally specific or represent broader national patterns. These regional differences include North Carolina’s historically Democratic rural areas that have shifted Republican in recent decades, contrasting with Arizona’s right-leaning rural communities that have maintained different voting patterns.³⁴ Third, I specifically chose North Carolina as the South has the most counties without newspapers, making it ground zero for studying news deserts. Finally, both states have experienced significant changes in their local media landscapes in recent years, providing natural experiments to observe how democratic participation shifts as news coverage changes.

In North Carolina, I contrast Tyrrell County, a rural county which completely lost its local newspaper, with Mecklenburg County, an urban county which experienced a 50% reduction in newspaper coverage. Tyrrell County was selected as it represents one of the most extreme cases of rural news deserts, while Mecklenburg offers insight into how media reduction affects even resource-rich urban areas. The analysis extends to Arizona’s Greenlee, a rural county with zero newspapers, and urban Maricopa county with nineteen newspapers, to provide cross-state comparisons (see appendix). Greenlee and Maricopa counties were chosen to represent similar rural-urban distinctions within a different state context, allowing us to test whether patterns observed in North Carolina persist across regional boundaries. The second component evaluates how newspaper presence affects political knowledge across the mentioned North Carolina and Arizona counties from 2020–2022. Using ANOVA and regression analysis, I test whether newspaper presence significantly impacts political knowledge while controlling for demographics such as age, education level, and income. Political knowledge was measured using the Cooperative Election Study’s standardized political knowledge index, which assesses respondents’ familiarity with local political figures. Scores are represented as percentages, with higher values indicating greater political knowledge. The CES sample included an average of 34.6 respondents per county in North Carolina and 42.3 respondents per county in Arizona, with average political knowledge scores of 58.3% across all counties studied.

Lastly, the third section presents a Qualitative Analysis centered on Montana’s experience with diminishing local news coverage. This detailed case study examines political accountability in news deserts, focusing particularly on the 2023 investigation of Montana Public Service Commissioner Randy Pinocci. The case illustrates how the mechanisms identified in the statistical analysis manifest in practice, demonstrating the real-world implications of reduced local news coverage on political oversight and accountability.

Together, these three components build a comprehensive picture of how local news erosion affects democratic institutions. The electoral competition analysis establishes broad patterns of declining democratic participation, while the political knowledge assessment demonstrates the underlying mechanism of reduced civic awareness. The qualitative case study then illustrates these dynamics in action, showing how diminished local news coverage creates accountability blind spots that persist until issues reach crisis levels.

33 “Presidential Election Results and Electoral Map 2020,” CNN, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/results/president>.

34 Ben Rappaport and Sarah Nagem, “How Republicans Gained Ground in Rural North Carolina,” *The Assembly*, November 26, 2024, <https://www.theassemblync.com/news/politics/republicans-democrats-rural-north-carolina-2024/>.

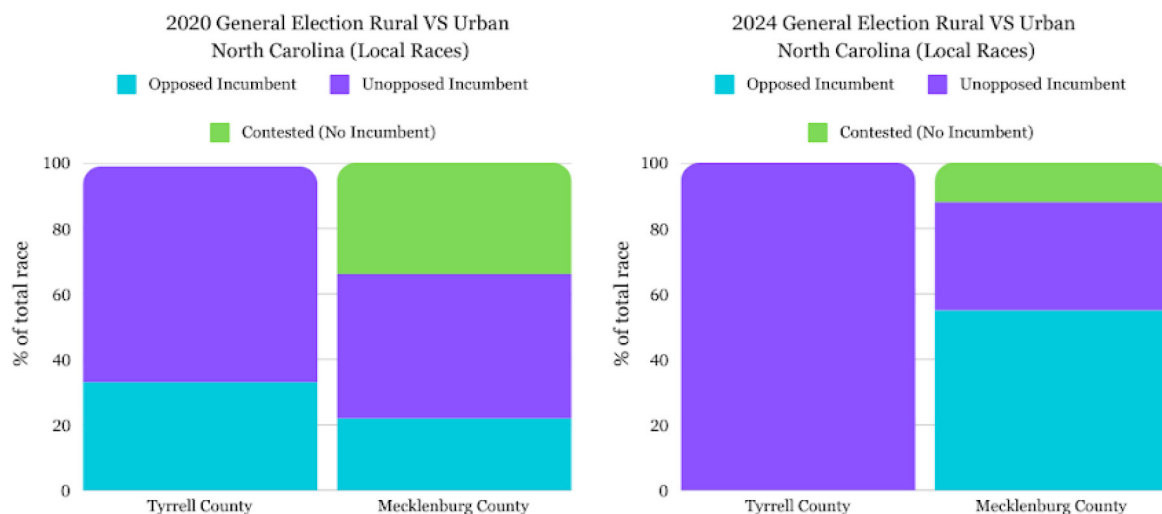


Figure 1. Overall electoral competition in local races—Tyrrell County, NC (rural) vs. Mecklenburg County, NC (urban).

A. Quantitative analysis

1. The impact of contested elections

Tyrrell County, North Carolina’s least populous county with fewer than four thousand residents, represents an extreme case of media loss. This predominantly rural community completely lost its only local newspaper during the study period, transitioning from limited coverage to a complete news desert. In terms of demographics, the county sits at 54% White, 31% Black, and 11% Hispanic. Moreover, the median household income ranges around \$42,000. In contrast, Mecklenburg County—North Carolina’s most populous county with over one million residents—experienced a partial reduction in its media ecosystem, decreasing from eight newspapers to four between 2020–2024. In terms of demographics, Mecklenburg County sits at a similar 47% White, 33% Black, and 16% Hispanic. However, the median household income sits at around \$84,000, far above Tyrrell’s. In both counties, I examined all local races including County Commissioners, County Register of Deeds, School Board members, and other county-level elected positions.

In 2020, Tyrrell County already showed limited electoral competition, with approximately 65% of local races featuring unopposed incumbents and 35% opposed incumbents.³⁵ This already concerning situation deteriorated further by 2024, following the loss of its only local newspaper, when the county experienced an almost complete collapse of electoral competition with 100% of local races featuring unopposed incumbents. In Mecklenburg County, the 50% reduction in newspaper coverage—from eight papers to four—between 2020 and 2024 coincided with a notable decline in electoral competition, with the proportion of local races with incumbents increasing from approximately 66% to 88%.³⁶ While Mecklenburg maintained more competitive elections than Tyrrell County, both counties demonstrate concerning trends in democratic participation. Though incumbents faced more direct challenges following partial news reduction in Mecklenburg County, the more alarming trend is the dramatic increase in races featuring incumbents overall. This surge in incumbent-dominated races coincided with a steep decline in contested elections without incumbents, which fell from 34% to just 12%. These shifts suggest that even with multiple remaining news outlets, urban areas experience a fundamental narrowing of democratic opportunity as media contraction reduces the pipeline for new political entrants. The decreased presence of non-incumbent races indicates a weakening candidate recruitment mechanism, potentially creating a political environment increasingly dominated by established figures regardless of whether they face opposition. This narrowing of the candidate pool represents a quieter but still consequential threat to democratic vitality than changes in incumbent opposition alone. Meanwhile, Tyrrell County’s total loss of local electoral competition following the elimination of its only newspaper represents the most severe end of this democratic

35 Tyrrell County, NC, “Election Summary Report,” November 5, 2024.

36 Mecklenburg County, NC, “Election Summary Report,” November 5, 2024.

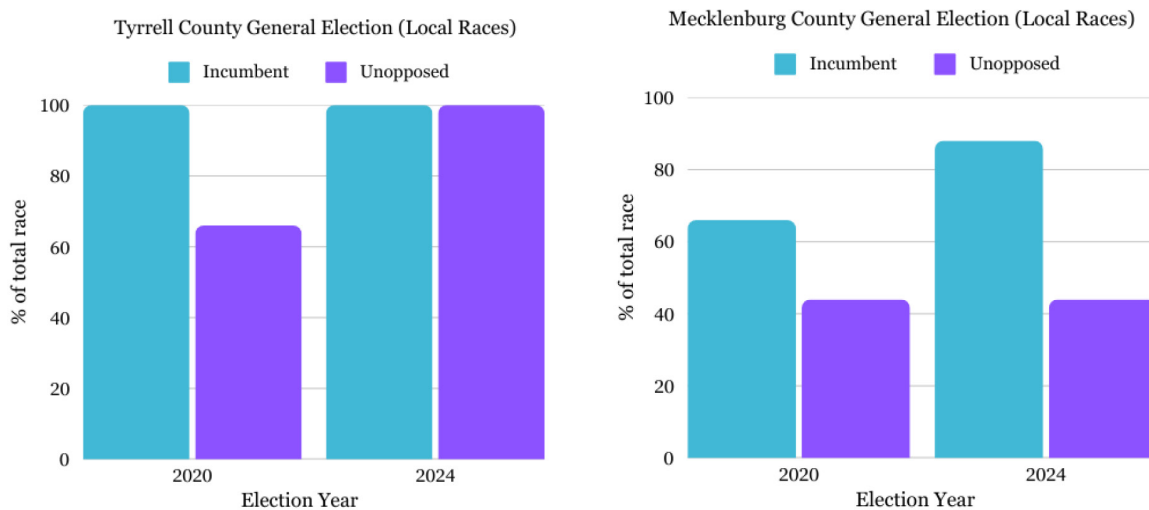


Figure 2. Incumbents' electoral competition in local races—Tyrrell County, NC (rural) vs. Mecklenburg County, NC (urban).

erosion. Though differing in severity, these parallel declines suggest that the reduction of local news coverage—whether partial or complete—contributes to a broader deterioration of electoral competition across both rural and urban communities.

Figures 1 and 2 present a comparative analysis of electoral competition between rural Tyrrell County and urban Mecklenburg County across the 2020 and 2024 election cycles. The evidence from these figures demonstrates the direct relationship between local news decline and democratic erosion. The data reveals a clear pattern: as local newspapers disappear, democratic institutions weaken. This is particularly illustrated in rural Tyrrell County, where losing its only newspaper coincided with the virtual elimination of electoral competition in local races. While both urban and rural communities experience changes following local news reductions, their effects manifest differently. As figure 2 demonstrates, Tyrrell County's complete loss of local news coincided with a dramatic increase in unopposed incumbents, with all incumbent races going uncontested by 2024. Meanwhile, Mecklenburg County saw an increase in incumbents, while the number of opposed candidates remained the same. The complete absence of contested races in Tyrrell County following its newspaper closure illuminates how local media traditionally supported candidate recruitment and development. Moreover, the increased proportion of incumbents in both counties indicates that news decline generally favors established political figures. Local newspapers historically played a vital role in fostering new candidates by publicizing filing deadlines, explaining qualification requirements, and providing platforms for political newcomers to build name recognition. For example, in Mecklenburg County, *The Charlotte Observer* publishes profiles of all candidates featuring their policy positions and community backgrounds. This section helps newcomers build name recognition despite lacking the resources of established incumbents. Without such coverage, potential candidates in news deserts face significant barriers to introducing themselves to voters and can lack the basic knowledge needed to enter races.

Additionally, in *The Charlotte Observer*, these profiles are listed under a greater Voter Guide, under which the paper writes “Before you cast your vote, use our Voter Guide to research what’s on the ballot.”³⁷ Under this guide, *The Charlotte Observer* has included articles regarding voter ID laws, ballot measures, and issue-specific articles titled “What would the candidates do?”³⁸ While League of Women Voters and other civic organizations attempt to fill this information gap, their reach and resources are limited, especially in rural areas. This creates a compound effect where the loss of local news coverage not only reduces voter knowledge but also dismantles the traditional pathways through which new candidates emerge to challenge incumbents.

While North Carolina provides important insights into the relationship between news deserts and democratic participation, expanding analysis to Arizona allows the testability of whether these patterns persist across different regional contexts. The contrasting environments offer valuable comparative data to strengthen understanding of how local news influences electoral competition nationwide. Greenlee County, one of Arizona's least populous

37 “Voter Guide: 2024 Charlotte Elections,” *Charlotte Observer*, 2024, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/politics-government/election/voter-guide/>.

38 *Charlotte Observer*, “Voter Guide.”

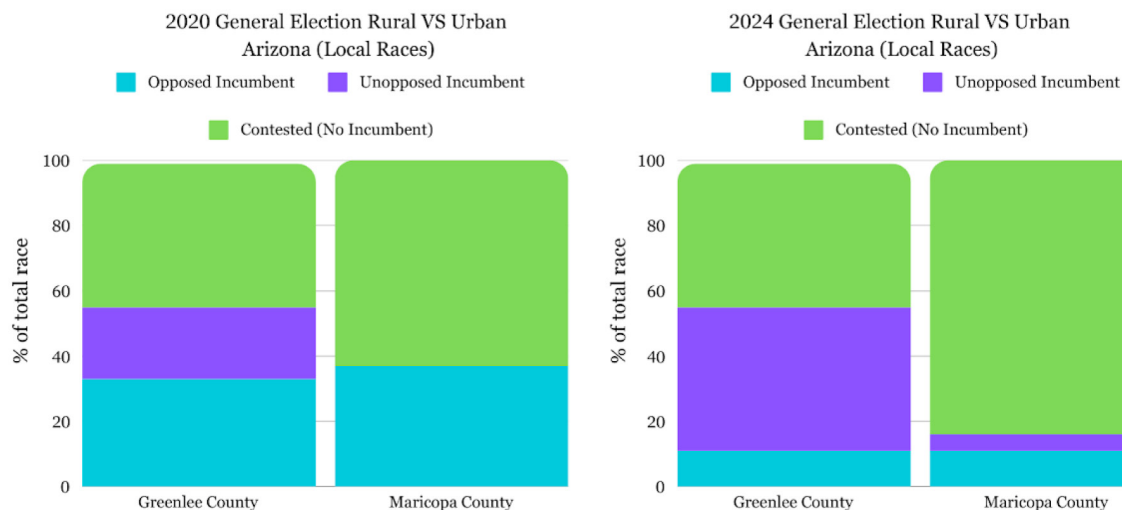


Figure 3. Incumbents' electoral competition in local races—Greenlee County, AZ (rural) vs. Maricopa County, AZ (urban).

counties with approximately 9,500 residents, represents a rural community with limited media resources. Located in eastern Arizona along the New Mexico border, this historically mining-dependent county maintained a single local newspaper for years, providing residents with basic but constrained coverage of local governance and electoral affairs. This is, until 2024, when its last newspaper folded. The county has a homogeneous population, with demographics sitting at 88% White, alongside a median household income ranging around \$75,000.³⁹ In contrast, Maricopa County has over 4.5 million residents, covering Phoenix and its surrounding metropolitan area. Though Maricopa has a similar homogeneous population, with demographics sitting at 81% White, and similar household income ranging around \$85,000.⁴⁰ Despite its relative media abundance, Maricopa County has also experienced slight consolidation—from twenty-two to nineteen newspapers—between 2020–2024, though not as severely as many rural communities. Maricopa's position as a major metropolitan area with substantial resources make it an important counterpoint for understanding how media environments influence electoral competition in resource-rich urban settings. In both counties, I examined all local races including county sheriff, county recorder, and other county-level elected positions.

Figure 3 presents a comparative analysis of electoral competition between rural Greenlee County and urban Maricopa County across the 2020 and 2024 election cycles. The data reveals distinct patterns of electoral competition between rural and urban jurisdictions, with both areas showing concerning trends in democratic participation, albeit manifesting differently. In 2020, Greenlee County demonstrated a mixed electoral landscape, with approximately 33% opposed incumbents, 22% unopposed incumbents, and 44% contested races without incumbents. Following its newspaper collapse in 2024, while maintaining some level of competition, the county showed a shift toward less competitive races, with opposed incumbents dropping to about 11% and unopposed incumbents increasing to roughly 44% of races—including the race for county attorney general.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Maricopa County demonstrated a different pattern. In 2020, about 37% opposed incumbents. The other 63% consisted of contested races without incumbents, reflecting its more diverse political environment. By 2024, Maricopa County experienced its own shift in electoral dynamics, with opposed incumbents decreasing to approximately 5%, unopposed incumbents emerging at about 11%, and contested non-incumbent races comprising roughly 84% of local races.⁴² While Maricopa maintained a higher proportion of contested races overall, the emergence of unopposed incumbents is still slightly concerning. When incumbents run unopposed, voters lose their fundamental right to electoral choice, officials escape the scrutiny that competitive campaigns provide, and policy debates that might otherwise occur during contested elections never materialize. These results likely reflect its local media environment, with multiple newspapers serving the metropolitan area, compared to Greenlee County's limited news coverage.

39 US Census Bureau, "American Community Survey."

40 US Census Bureau, "American Community Survey."

41 Greenlee County, AZ, "Election Summary Report," November 5, 2024.

42 Maricopa County, AZ, "Election Summary Report," November 5, 2024.

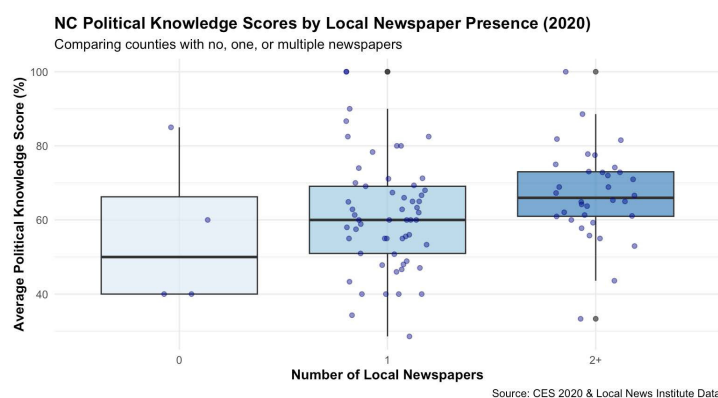


Figure 4. North Carolina political knowledge scores by local newspaper presence (2020).

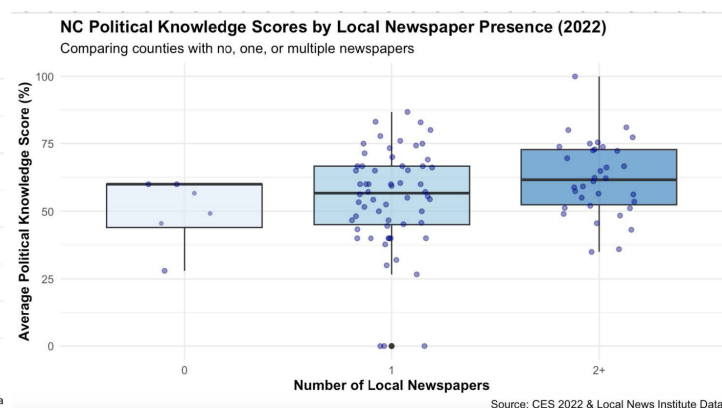


Figure 5. North Carolina political knowledge scores by local newspaper presence (2022).

2. The impact of local newspaper presence on political knowledge

The following analysis examines how access to local newspapers correlates with citizens' political knowledge across counties with varying levels of news coverage. Using data from the Cooperative Election Study (2020–2022), I constructed a political knowledge index that measures respondents' ability to identify key political figures and accurately answer questions about local governance. This approach allows us to quantify how newspaper presence translates into measurable differences in civic awareness while controlling for other factors that might influence political knowledge.

Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate the relationship between local newspaper presence and political knowledge scores across North Carolina counties in 2020 and 2022. Statistical analysis reveals that the presence of even a single newspaper is associated with significantly higher political knowledge scores, showing an increase of 10.09 points ($p = 0.051$) compared to counties without newspapers. Counties with multiple newspapers demonstrate an even larger advantage, with an increase of 12.40 points ($p < 0.05$).

Table 1. North Carolina's political knowledge score change and statistical significance

Newspaper Presence	Avg. Political Knowledge Score Change	Statistical Significance
None (News Desert)	Control	Control
Single Newspaper	+10.09	$p < 0.05$
Multiple Newspapers	+12.40	$p < 0.05$

The temporal comparison between 2020 and 2022 reveals a concerning trend, with overall political knowledge scores declining by 5.08 points ($p < 0.01$). This decline coincides with the continued erosion of local news coverage. The data shows this effect persists consistently even after controlling for key demographic factors. Age has a small but highly significant positive effect, with each additional year associated with a 0.79-point increase in political knowledge ($p < 0.001$). Education level demonstrates an even stronger relationship, with each additional level corresponding to an 8.81-point increase in political knowledge scores ($p < 0.001$). Overall, the model explains 41.73% of the variance in political knowledge scores ($R^2 = 0.4173$), indicating that newspaper presence and demographic factors are helpful predictors of political awareness.

Notably, the data reveals systematic changes in newspaper presence between 2020 and 2022, with several counties losing news coverage entirely during this period. This transition from limited coverage to news desert status appears to have immediate and measurable impacts on political knowledge scores, suggesting that the

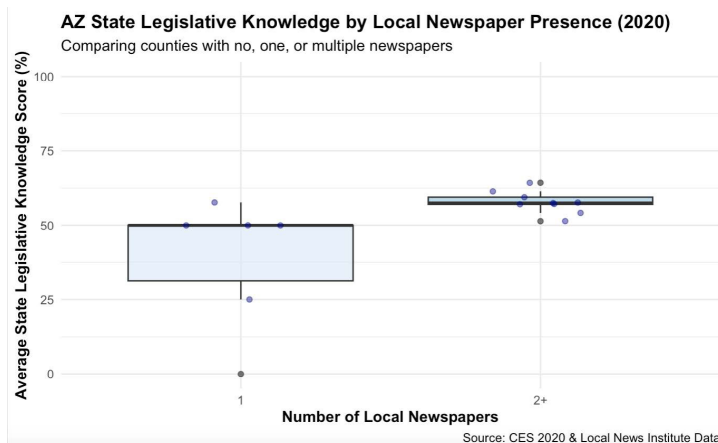


Figure 6. Arizona political knowledge scores by local newspaper presence (2020).

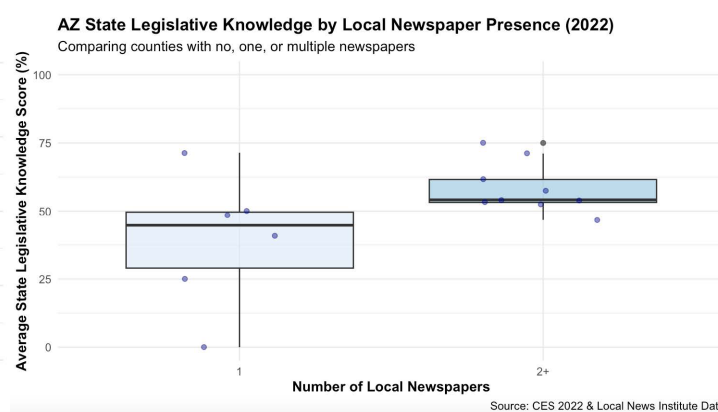


Figure 7. Arizona political knowledge scores by local newspaper presence (2022).

loss of local news coverage has real-time effects on democratic engagement and political awareness in affected communities.

Figures 6 and 7 highlight the relationship between local newspaper presence and state legislative knowledge across Arizona counties in 2020 and 2022. Statistical analysis reveals a substantial advantage in counties with multiple newspapers, showing an increase of 19 percentage points in political knowledge scores ($p = 0.023$) compared to counties with a single newspaper in 2020. This pattern persisted into 2022, maintaining a similar 19.1 percentage point gap ($p = 0.050$). Notably, in 2020 and 2022, no counties in Arizona had zero newspapers. The comparison between 2020 and 2022 shows remarkable consistency in the relationship between newspaper presence and political knowledge. Counties with multiple newspapers maintained higher average knowledge scores—57.8% in 2020 and 58.4% in 2022—compared to single-newspaper counties—38.8% in 2020 and 39.3% in 2022. The strength of this relationship is demonstrated by the R^2 values, with newspaper presence explaining 33.8% of the variance in political knowledge in 2020 and 26.4% in 2022.

Table 2. Arizona's Political Knowledge Score Change X Statistical Significance

Newspaper Presence	Avg. Political Knowledge Score Change	Statistical Significance
Single Newspaper	Control	Control
Multiple Newspapers	+19	$p < 0.05$

It is important to note that counties with multiple newspapers often differ from those with limited or no coverage in ways beyond just their media environments. These counties tend to have higher population density, higher average education levels, and different economic profiles. To account for these potential confounding factors, the regression analysis controls for key demographic variables including education level, age, and income. Even after these controls, newspaper presence remains significantly associated with political knowledge, suggesting a relationship that extends beyond demographic differences. Analysis using the Kruskal-Wallis test further confirms these findings, showing significant differences between newspaper categories in both 2020 ($p = 0.011$) and 2022 ($p = 0.045$). The persistence of this substantial gap in political knowledge scores between single and multiple newspaper counties, even as other factors shift, suggests that local news coverage plays a vital role in maintaining political awareness and democratic engagement in Arizona communities.

These findings from Arizona complement the North Carolina results, demonstrating how the relationship between newspaper presence and political knowledge remains consistent across different state contexts and time periods. This impact is particularly prevalent in the South, where every state has at least one county without a newspaper, making it the region most affected by news deserts. This regional vulnerability is illustrated in rural Tyrrell County, North Carolina, where the loss of its only newspaper coincided with the virtual elimination of electoral competition in local races. While urban Mecklenburg County saw declining electoral competition

following its reduction in news coverage, rural areas face deeper challenges. When a rural community's only newspaper closes, they often lose their primary source of local political information and oversight, significantly weakening democratic participation. The loss of local newspapers affects electoral competition not just through voter information, but through the critical process of candidate recruitment. Local papers traditionally served as key platforms for potential candidates to emerge and build support. Without regular coverage of local government activities, potential candidates lack both the information to identify opportunities for public service and the platforms to introduce themselves to voters. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where reduced media coverage leads to fewer candidates, which in turn reduces pressure for substantive campaign coverage. While these statistical patterns reveal the broad impact of declining local news coverage, individual cases help illustrate how this democratic erosion manifests in practice.

B. Qualitative analysis

This qualitative analysis examines political accountability mechanisms in news deserts through detailed case studies of incidents in Montana and North Carolina. These cases were selected based on their occurrence in regions with diminished local news coverage, involvement of elected officials facing accountability challenges, and the presence of official investigations or legal actions. Thus, these case studies provide concrete illustrations of the statistical relationships identified in our broader dataset. Examining court documents, regional media coverage, electoral data, and public statements highlights how accountability functions differently when local watchdog journalism is absent or severely constrained. This mixed-methods approach allows us to not only identify broad patterns but also understand their real-world implications for governance and civic engagement in communities experiencing significant local news decline.

1. When no one's watching: political accountability in Montana's news deserts

From local corruption going undetected in small Southern towns to government contracts avoiding scrutiny in Midwestern counties, the consequences of diminished local journalism emerge in countless communities. The 2023 arrest of Montana Public Service Commissioner Randy Pinocci on felony witness tampering charges provides an illustrative case study of how public official accountability may function differently in news deserts. In 2015, Montana State Representative Randy Pinocci sponsored House Bill 584, a piece of legislation specifically addressing retaliatory conduct between landlords and tenants. The bill established that if either a landlord or tenant was found to have filed a valid complaint against the other party, any negative action taken within six months would be legally presumed to be retaliation unless proven otherwise. For example, if a tenant complained about unsafe living conditions and the landlord raised their rent within six months, the law would assume this was retaliation unless the landlord could prove otherwise. This type of legal mechanism is known as a "rebuttable presumption"; however, it was vetoed by the then Governor of Montana.⁴³ Still, in an ironic twist, eight years later, Pinocci—now serving as a Montana Public Service Commissioner—was arrested on felony witness tampering charges related to his activities as a landlord. Pinocci had refused to return a tenant's \$5,400 security deposit unless they recanted testimony regarding the commissioner's verbal and physical altercation with a tenant's friend after disputes arose regarding a security deposit. This relatively minor incident escalated to an arrest warrant when Pinocci failed to appear in court after being denied a second continuance. His subsequent arrest on September 6, 2023, might have remained a footnote in local judicial records had the investigation not uncovered evidence of alleged witness tampering. According to court documents, Pinocci allegedly attempted to leverage his position as a landlord to influence testimony about the original incident. Text messages cited in the affidavit showed Pinocci

43 "HB 584, An Act Revising Retaliatory Conduct Laws Related To Landlords And Tenants," 64th State of Montana Legislature, 2015.

explicitly conditioning the return of the security deposit on the witness changing their testimony, writing, “For us to continue a relationship, you’re going to have to recant your testimony with the sheriff’s department.”⁴⁴

While Pinocci’s arrest received thorough coverage from the *Montana Free Press*, an independent nonprofit news source based in Helena—a Montana city located three hundred miles away from Garfield County—the broader pattern of his alleged misconduct as a landlord raises questions about earlier oversight and accountability. Without the *Montana Free Press*, Pinocci’s felony charges would have been ignored. Although it was beneficial that the public was informed about Pinocci’s arrest, the paper that reported the news was not local to Garfield County. The physical and digital disconnect between regional news outlets and rural communities like Garfield County creates an information gap—even well-reported stories may not reach the constituents most affected by an official’s conduct. This information vacuum has direct electoral consequences: Pinocci ran unopposed in his 2022 bid for Public Service Commissioner. Although these allegations emerged after his reelection, even if constituents harbored concerns regarding Pinocci’s ethics, there were no other options. While major regional outlets like the *Montana Free Press* effectively covered the arrests once they occurred, the absence of local media may have reduced the likelihood of early detection and prevention of problematic patterns of behavior. The traditional watchdog function of local newspapers, particularly in monitoring elected officials’ private business dealings that may conflict with their public duties, appears to have been absent in this case until the situation reached a criminal threshold, warranting regional news attention. Ultimately, the erosion of local news infrastructure through consolidation creates accountability blind spots, where concerning patterns of official conduct go unnoticed until they escalate to crisis levels.

The Montana case illustrates a broader pattern visible in our quantitative analysis: the loss of local newspapers does not just reduce political competition—it fundamentally alters how information about public officials reaches rural communities. Regional papers may eventually cover major scandals, but the daily oversight that once helped prevent minor ethics issues from escalating into criminal matters has largely disappeared. This research confirms that the disappearance of local news in rural America is not just about lost newspapers—it is about the systematic erosion of democratic accountability and political engagement in communities that can least afford to lose these vital democratic institutions.

C. Limitations & future research

My research on newspaper closures and political knowledge faced several interconnected limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting its findings. Methodological constraints, data limitations, and unique contextual factors all influenced the scope and depth of my analysis in important ways. For one, resource constraints prevented collection of original survey data specifically targeting news desert communities, necessitating reliance on existing CES data. This reliance on secondary data restricted my ability to ask targeted questions about local information sources and civic engagement patterns specific to news deserts. Additionally, while my analysis captures point-in-time measurements of political knowledge and electoral competition, longitudinal studies tracking communities over five to ten years following newspaper closures would better illuminate the cumulative democratic effects of sustained information deficits.

Data accessibility issues further complicated my research. Accessing comprehensive local electoral data proved challenging in counties without published digitized records, creating potential sampling bias toward better-resourced communities that maintain more accessible public records. Furthermore, this study was geographically constrained to swing states to highlight the significance of the issue in politically important areas, raising questions about whether these results might hold in states with different levels of political competition. News deserts in non-swing states may exhibit different dynamics in how information gaps affect political knowledge and participation. Given additional time and financial resources, expanding the analysis to include the entire United States could have provided more comprehensive insights into these phenomena across diverse political landscapes. Moreover, contextually, the COVID-19 pandemic created an atypical environment for political

44 Arren Kimbel-Sannit, “Utility Commissioner Pinocci Arrested on Felony Witness Tampering Charges,” *Montana Free Press*, October 14, 2023, <https://montanafreepress.org/2023/10/13/utility-commissioner-randy-pinocci-arrested-on-felony-witness-tampering-charges/>.

engagement during the study period, potentially exaggerating or masking certain effects of local news gaps. This extraordinary circumstance likely influenced both information-seeking behaviors and electoral participation in ways that may not persist in post-pandemic conditions.

Looking forward, this research points toward several promising avenues for deeper investigation. Future studies would benefit greatly from examining how citizens in news deserts develop alternative information networks. These grassroots adaptations, however imperfect, might reveal resilience mechanisms that could be strengthened through targeted support rather than imposing external solutions disconnected from community practices. The relationship between news desert formation and increasing partisan polarization in local governance also demands closer examination. As national political frameworks increasingly fill the vacuum left by disappeared local coverage, understanding this dynamic could help identify practical interventions to preserve local political independence despite the broader nationalization of political discourse.

V. News desert formation fundamentally reshapes local democratic processes

When a local newspaper closes, the most immediate effect is the disruption of regular information flows between government institutions and citizens. Local newspapers have traditionally served as the primary conduit through which residents learn about upcoming meetings, policy proposals, budget decisions, and other governmental activities. The elimination of this information channel creates what researchers have termed “knowledge gaps”—disparities in awareness that systematically advantage those with personal connections to local government or the resources to seek out information independently.⁴⁵ These knowledge gaps represent the first stage in a cascade of democratic consequences that ultimately transform how local governance functions in affected communities.

A. Local news shapes political information access and voter participation

Local journalism plays a distinctive role in democratic functioning that cannot be replicated by national media or social platforms. As the primary conduit for information about local governance, newspapers connect citizens to their immediate political environments through sustained coverage of local officials, policies, and electoral races. Unlike national news outlets that focus primarily on federal politics, local newspapers traditionally devote significant resources to covering school boards, city councils, county commissions, and other local governing bodies whose decisions directly affect community life. The implications of news deserts are particularly concerning because state and local governments control nearly half of all government spending and maintain primary responsibility for essential public services.⁴⁶ Yet without robust local coverage, citizens lack the information necessary to effectively evaluate their local officials’ performance or make informed electoral choices.

News desertification has coincided with and likely accelerated a broader trend toward the nationalization of American politics. As local newspapers close or become ghost papers under corporate ownership, their role in connecting citizens to local governance diminishes, creating a local democracy vacuum. This vacuum has significant implications for how local governments function and how citizens engage with local issues. As newspapers fold, they leave civic blind spots that spread like cataracts across democracy’s vision—they typically reduce coverage of school boards, city councils, and other local government bodies first. This information void affects not just voters but the entire ecosystem of local democratic accountability. As regular coverage fades, citizens lose not just headlines, but their window into local government operations. Thus, local officials face reduced scrutiny of their actions and voting records. Challengers to incumbent officials struggle to build name recognition and communicate their platforms, while complex local issues receive less in-depth analysis and context. Perhaps most significantly, community debate about local priorities diminishes.

45 Hayes and Lawless, *News Hole*.

46 “Public Welfare Expenditures,” Urban Institute, April 26, 2024, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/public-welfare-expenditures>.

B. Dismantling the candidate pipeline

Perhaps the most significant democratic transformation occurs in the electoral arena, where news desert formation fundamentally alters the process of candidate emergence and competition. Local newspapers have historically played a vital role in the candidate pipeline through several mechanisms: publicizing filing deadlines and qualification requirements, providing platforms for newcomers to build name recognition, and covering government activities that help potential candidates identify opportunities for public service and develop informed policy positions. The electoral data from both North Carolina and Arizona demonstrates that news desert formation directly impacts this candidate pipeline. In Tyrrell County, the transition to a complete news desert coincided with the collapse of electoral competition—by 2024, all local races featured unopposed incumbents. While Mecklenburg County’s partial reduction in news coverage produced a less severe but still significant decline in contested non-incumbent elections (from 34 to 12 percent), the contrast illustrates how rural communities face particular vulnerability when their sole information source disappears.

This divergence creates a troubling paradox: voters in news deserts may be well equipped to make decisions in presidential elections while knowing little about the city council members appearing on the same ballot. The implications are particularly concerning because, as Greenbaum and Harwood note, city council members and other local government positions typically have a more direct impact on residents’ daily lives than their state and federal legislators.⁴⁷ These local officials wield considerable power over community development, resource allocation, and future planning, yet their actions often go unscrutinized in communities without robust local news coverage.

The disappearance of local newspapers does not just reduce information available to voters—it systematically dismantles the infrastructure through which new candidates traditionally emerge and build support. This process creates a self-reinforcing cycle of democratic erosion: as coverage of local government diminishes, citizens become less aware of problematic policies or official misconduct that might motivate electoral challenges. Meanwhile, potential candidates face multiple barriers—they lack platforms to build name recognition, opportunities to publicly critique incumbent performance, and even basic information about filing requirements and deadlines. The resulting reduction in electoral competition creates a feedback loop where incumbents face less pressure to respond to constituent concerns, further reducing public engagement with local governance. In this environment, even deeply unpopular policies or significant official misconduct may fail to generate electoral consequences because the mechanisms for transforming public dissatisfaction into political alternatives have collapsed along with local journalism.

While organizations like the League of Women Voters attempt to fill this information gap, their volunteer-driven model faces structural limitations that prevent them from replicating journalism’s accountability function. These civic organizations typically focus on one-off events like candidate forums rather than the sustained coverage of governance that newspapers traditionally provided. Furthermore, their reach remains limited in rural areas, precisely where alternative information sources are most needed. The mismatch between these well-intentioned civic efforts and the comprehensive coverage once provided by local newspapers highlights how the institutional collapse of local journalism creates democratic deficits that cannot be easily addressed through volunteer initiatives alone.

C. The collapse of oversight mechanisms

Beyond electoral competition, news desert formation fundamentally reshapes accountability structures by eliminating the primary oversight mechanism for local government. Journalists covering local beats develop specialized knowledge about government processes, build relationships with sources, and maintain institutional memory about ongoing issues—capabilities that citizen watchdogs or occasional regional coverage cannot replicate. The Montana case study of Public Service Commissioner Randy Pinocci illustrates how the absence of

47 Joshua Greenbaum and Neil Harwood, *Fixing the Problem of Low Voter Turnout in US Local Elections: A Data-Driven Solution* (US Vote Foundation, 2017), https://usvotefoundation-drupal.s3.amazonaws.com/prod/US_Vote_LOCElections_Whitepaper.pdf.

local journalistic oversight creates accountability blind spots. While Pinocci's arrest eventually received coverage from the *Montana Free Press*—a regional outlet based hundreds of miles away—the pattern of concerning conduct that preceded this criminal case went largely unnoticed. In communities with functioning local media, such behavior might have faced earlier scrutiny through regular coverage of constituent complaints, ethical concerns, or conflicts of interest before escalating to criminal conduct.

This pattern represents a gradual weakening of oversight mechanisms that occurs when journalistic monitoring disappears—accountability atrophy. Without regular scrutiny, minor ethical violations or conflicts of interest that might have been addressed through public pressure may instead evolve into more serious misconduct. The loss of this preventive function, what Hayes and Lawless (2021) describe as the crucial monitoring role of local journalism, fundamentally alters the relationship between officials and the communities they serve.

D. National politics filling the local vacuum

Nature abhors a vacuum, and in the absence of robust local political coverage, national political narratives and partisan frameworks increasingly dominate local discourse. Local officials increasingly align themselves with national party positions rather than focusing on local issues, while voters apply national political heuristics to local races where party affiliation may be less relevant. As Northwestern University researcher Zachary Metzger explains, “When local news disappears, national politics become your local politics.”⁴⁸

Americans have become “almost simple-minded focused on what’s going on in Washington, D.C.” even when state and local governments have more direct impact on daily life. This nationalization creates what Hopkins describes as shifted incentives for local officials.⁴⁹ Local media, facing market pressures and seeking to maintain readership with reduced resources, prioritizes coverage that will “generate views or clicks,” often focusing on national horse-race coverage rather than substantive local issues.⁵⁰ The research suggests this creates a feedback loop, where diminished local coverage leads voters to rely more heavily on national partisan cues, which in turn influences both local officials’ behavior and media coverage decisions.

E. Creating information asymmetry between rural and urban communities

Perhaps most concerning is how news desert formation creates systemic information asymmetry between rural and urban communities. As our analysis demonstrates, rural areas are disproportionately likely to become complete news deserts, while urban areas typically retain some form of local coverage even when experiencing media contraction. This creates a two-tiered information environment that fundamentally disadvantages rural residents. The political knowledge data from both North Carolina and Arizona illustrate how these disparities manifest in measurable democratic deficits. The significant gap in political knowledge scores between counties with zero newspapers and those with even one newspaper (10.09 points, $p = 0.051$) demonstrates how complete information vacuums produce distinctly different democratic outcomes compared to reduced but still present coverage. This emerging rural-urban information divide has implications beyond individual communities. As rural areas experience disproportionate democratic deficits, their ability to advocate effectively for resources, representation, and policy attention may diminish—potentially exacerbating existing inequalities between rural and metropolitan regions.

48 Zachary Metzger, interview by Kimia Adibi, December 6, 2024.

49 “Does Nationalized Media Mean the Death of Local Politics?” Niskanen Center, February 6, 2024, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/does-nationalized-media-mean-the-death-of-local-politics/>.

50 Niskanen Center, “Does Nationalized Media.”

F. News mirages

If communities living in a news desert are starved of credible, trustworthy information, then communities living in a news mirage are feasting on information that looks like trustworthy news—but isn't news at all.⁵¹

1. The *Richmond Standard*: when corporations fill the news void

For decades, in Richmond, California, the *Richmond Independent* delivered daily dispatches from City Hall, while the *San Francisco Chronicle* operated a dedicated East Bay bureau that regularly reported on the city's industrial sector, including its refineries. But one by one, these journalistic sentinels fell silent. The *Richmond Independent*, after being merged into a Berkeley paper, printed its final edition in 1984. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, responding to the same financial pressures that have hollowed out newsrooms across America, gradually reduced and eventually eliminated its dedicated Richmond coverage. Other East Bay publications similarly contracted their coverage areas, leaving Richmond's 115,000 residents with dramatically diminished access to local news coverage. Unlike traditional news deserts where local coverage simply disappears, Richmond exemplifies an emerging phenomenon: the corporate-sponsored news mirage, where a major corporation establishes its own news outlet to shape public discourse in communities where it holds significant economic and political interest. Chevron launched the *Richmond Standard* in 2014 during a pivotal moment in local politics. The timing was not coincidental—it came as progressives threatened to take control of City government and promoted a future that could potentially phase out Chevron's refinery operations. The company had just suffered a major setback when its \$3 million investment in pro-industry candidates during the 2014 election failed to prevent the victory of politicians who were more critical of its operations. The *Richmond Standard* emerged as part of Chevron's strategic response to maintain influence over local narrative and policy.

Dig beneath the digital pages of the *Richmond Standard*, and a careful pattern emerges—one that reveals the subtle architecture of corporate narrative control. Of the 434 stories mentioning the company since the site's launch, most paint portraits of corporate benevolence: the opening of a new community center, the awarding of scholarships, and the sponsorship of cultural celebrations. Yet, in this carefully curated gallery of corporate citizenship, the more troubling images are conspicuously absent. Critical coverage of incidents like flaring events—only eight stories—and oil spills—zero stories—is notably absent or minimized. When covering regulatory actions against Chevron, the *Richmond Standard* consistently frames events to downplay corporate culpability—for instance, describing a \$20 million fine for hundreds of air quality violations as an “agreement” that “solidifies the future of energy production.”⁵² Through this linguistic alchemy, penalties become partnerships, and corporate accountability dissolves into corporate continuity.

The November 2023 flaring incident at the Chevron refinery illustrates this pattern vividly. While residents watched black smoke billow across their city, the *Richmond Standard* maintained its silence. This was not an isolated editorial choice but part of a broader strategy of selective coverage. In the absence of the *Richmond Standard*'s reporting, residents have resorted to word of mouth to learn about events that directly impact their health and safety. Similarly, in 2021 when a Chevron refinery pipeline ruptured and dumped nearly eight hundred gallons of diesel fuel into San Francisco Bay, the *Richmond Standard* did not cover it at all. The spill was first spotted by a resident, not reported by any news outlet, demonstrating how corporate ownership can create systematic blind spots in community oversight. By dominating the local news ecosystem with corporate-friendly narratives, it creates what journalism scholars call an “information capture”—where even residents who understand the outlet's bias rely on it for basic community news, subtly shaping their broader political perspectives. Chevron's expansion of this model to other regions suggests its effectiveness as a corporate strategy. The company has replicated the approach in Texas's Permian Basin with *Permian Proud* and in Ecuador with multiple outlets, including

51 Sarah Wei, “News Mirages (Not News Deserts) Are the Scarier Problem,” Nieman Lab, 2024, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/news-mirages-not-news-deserts-are-the-scarier-problem/>.

52 Miranda Green and David Folkenflik, “Chevron Owns This City's News Site. Many Stories Aren't Told,” *Floodlight*, March 28, 2024, <https://floodlightnews.org/chevron-owns-this-citys-news-site-many-stories-arent-told/>.

El Oriente, indicating a systematic effort to shape public discourse in areas critical to its operations. This pattern raises broader concerns about how corporate-sponsored news might fill the growing void left by traditional local media's decline.

Unlike traditional news deserts where voters simply lack information, corporate news mirages can actively shape voter understanding of local issues, potentially influencing electoral outcomes in ways that favor corporate interests while maintaining an appearance of legitimate local journalism. This distinction is crucial for understanding the evolving landscape of local news: while news deserts create passive harm through information absence, news mirages actively construct narratives that can mislead voters and distort democratic discourse. The *Richmond Standard's* coverage patterns demonstrate how corporate news outlets can selectively amplify certain voices while suppressing others, creating an information environment that appears comprehensive while systematically excluding perspectives that might challenge corporate interests. Since this incident, the nonprofit news organization *Richmondside* was launched in the summer of 2024, dedicated to covering Richmond and only Richmond.⁵³

2. The Inland Empire news mirage: when one paper masquerades as many

The appearance of healthy local journalism in California's Inland Empire masks a troubling reality. At first glance, the region's four daily newspapers—the *San Bernardino Sun*, *The Press-Enterprise*, the *Redlands Daily Facts*, and the *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*—seem to represent distinct editorial voices serving their respective communities. A closer examination reveals something far more concerning: these supposedly independent papers publish virtually identical content every day, differing only in their mastheads, creating an illusion of diverse local coverage that masks the reality of consolidated ownership under Alden Global Capital's MediaNews Group. This duplication goes far beyond shared wire stories or occasional content sharing between sister publications. On November 8, 2023, the *San Bernardino Sun* and *The Press-Enterprise* published identical front pages. Not just similar—identical. Every headline, every story, every photograph appeared in exactly the same position on both papers' front pages. Only the mastheads and weather forecasts differed.⁵⁴ Inside, the pattern continued through every section: identical local news pages, identical opinion sections, identical advertisements, and even identical obituaries. This was not an isolated occurrence; analysis of the first week of November 2023 revealed that all four papers published nearly identical content every day, with only minor structural variations in the *Redlands Daily Facts*. What appears to be four independent local newspapers is effectively one regional publication operating under different brands.

Instead of receiving focused local coverage, these communities get regional content masquerading as local journalism. The implications of this practice are particularly concerning because the deception is difficult for communities to recognize. Unlike straightforward newspaper closures that create obvious news deserts, this approach maintains the appearance of vibrant local coverage while actually delivering homogenized regional content. Northwestern University's State of Local News 2024 report, for instance, identifies twenty-six local newspapers in the two-county region, and, because of those copious news sources, neither county is listed on the report's "watch list" of U.S. counties.⁵⁵ This inadvertently masks the reality that several of these "sources" are effectively the same publication.

This was not a one-time mistake; evidence of this consolidation appears throughout the papers' content. The November 8 editions of the *San Bernardino Sun* and *The Press-Enterprise* ran identical "Local News" sections, opinion pages, and classifieds, suggesting not just shared resources but complete content consolidation. Even local advertisements and death notices appeared identical, indicating a fundamental shift from local papers serving distinct communities to a regional publication maintaining multiple local brands. This represents an evolution beyond the traditional ghost paper phenomenon; the practice parallels other instances of consolidation

53 "About Richmondside," Richmondside, 2024, <https://richmondside.org/about/>.

54 Thomas Corrigan, "The Inland Empire 'News Mirage,' Part 1: The Masquerade," *Inland Empire MediaWatch*, November 28, 2023, <https://tccorrigan.substack.com/p/the-inland-empire-news-mirage-part>.

55 Zachary Metzger, *The State of Local News 2024* (Local News Initiative, 2024), https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/assets/slnp/the_state_of_local_news_2024.pdf.

discussed in this paper but represents a more sophisticated approach to cost-cutting that maintains the appearance of local coverage while eliminating its substance. When a community believes it has four independent daily newspapers but actually receives a single regional publication, the impact on local democratic discourse becomes profound but difficult to measure or address.

The implications of this news mirage take quantifiable form when examining historical voter participation trends in local elections. San Bernardino County's 2024 primary election turnout of 26.22% and Riverside County's 30.84% represent not only a significant deviation from the state average of 34%, but also a dramatic decline from the two counties's 2016 primary turnout of 38.51% and 44.31%, respectively.^{56,57,58,59,60} This decrease in voter participation coincides with the period of increased news consolidation in the region after Alden Global Capital's MediaNews Group bought out the aforementioned Riverside *Press-Enterprise* shortly after the primary in 2016.⁶¹ Ultimately, when papers serving distinct communities like San Bernardino, Riverside, Redlands, and Ontario publish identical content, they lose their ability to focus on specific local issues or serve as distinct voices in their communities. This homogenization of coverage means that local political discussions, campaign coverage, and government oversight all become regionalized rather than localized, fundamentally altering how communities engage with local democracy. This practice of maintaining multiple mastheads while consolidating content represents an incredibly sophisticated form of local news deterioration: one that does not just reduce coverage but actively obscures that reduction from public view. The result is a democratic blind spot where communities believe they have robust local coverage while actually receiving regional content that may miss or minimize crucial local issues.

VI. Discussion

This study's findings suggest that the presence of local newspapers significantly impacts democratic functioning, with both quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrating how news desert formation fundamentally undermines local governance. The democratic implications of local news decline extend beyond simply losing a source of information; they represent the systematic erosion of fundamental democratic infrastructure. As my research demonstrates, when local newspapers disappear, communities experience measurable declines in both political knowledge and electoral competitiveness that transform how citizens engage with local government and how local officials operate.

The quantitative analysis establishes a clear relationship between newspaper presence and political knowledge—counties with at least one local newspaper demonstrate political knowledge scores approximately 10.09 points higher ($p = 0.051$) than news deserts, while those with multiple newspapers show even greater advantages of 12.40 points ($p < 0.05$). This statistical relationship persists even after controlling for demographic factors like education and age, suggesting that local news access directly influences civic awareness independent of other socioeconomic variables.

Beyond these statistical patterns, this research demonstrates how news desert formation fundamentally reshapes local democratic processes through three key mechanisms: degraded access to information about government activities, reduced electoral competition, and weakened accountability structures. The complete collapse of electoral competition in Tyrrell County following its newspaper closure illustrates how the loss of local news can trigger immediate democratic erosion. Meanwhile, the Montana case study reveals how the absence of journalistic oversight allows official misconduct to go undetected until crisis levels. These findings extend beyond the heavy urban focus of previous research by Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido (2013) and Shaker (2014) on

56 San Bernardino County, CA, "Election Summary Report," March 5, 2024.

57 Riverside County, CA, "Election Summary Report," March 5, 2024.

58 Lynn La, "California's Primary Turnout Not a Record Low, but Vote Count Still Slow," *CalMatters*, March 11, 2024, <https://calmatters.org/newsletter/california-primary-voter-turnout/>.

59 San Bernardino County, CA, "Election Summary Report."

60 Riverside County, CA, "Election Summary Report," June 7, 2016.

61 Beau Yarbrough, "Sun Owner Completes Purchase of Orange County Register, Riverside Press-Enterprise," *San Bernardino Sun*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.sbsun.com/2016/03/31/sun-owner-completes-purchase-of-orange-county-register-riverside-press-enterprise/>.

newspaper closures. My work demonstrates that while urban and rural communities both experience democratic deficits following media contraction, rural areas face distinctly more severe consequences when their sole news source disappears. This rural–urban disparity creates a troubling information asymmetry that may exacerbate existing inequalities—creating a two-tiered democratic system where rural voters remain systematically less informed about their local governments than their urban counterparts. This study’s findings not only confirm the statistical relationship between local news presence and democratic health, but also reveal more fundamental mechanisms through which news deserts affect democratic function.

Two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson articulated a fundamental principle of American democracy: “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”⁶² This assertion was not mere rhetoric but a recognition that democratic self-governance depends on citizens having access to reliable information about their government. Jefferson’s insight—that newspapers serve as essential infrastructure for democracy—has been empirically validated by this research. What receives less attention, however, is the rest of Jefferson’s statement: “. . . but I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”⁶³ This second part of Jefferson’s quote takes on new significance in light of this study’s findings. The information asymmetry between rural and urban communities—where geographic location increasingly determines citizens’ access to local political information—creates precisely the situation where not “every man” receives the news necessary for informed democratic participation.

The measured gaps in political knowledge, collapse of electoral competition, and weakened accountability mechanisms in news deserts represent tangible evidence of democracy functioning differently when citizens lack equitable information access. As local news continues to decline, particularly in rural America, addressing this growing information inequality becomes essential not just for preserving journalism, but for maintaining the basic infrastructure of democratic governance across all communities. As filmmaker Rick Goldsmith warns in *Stripped For Parts*, “History will not judge us kindly if one day we wake up to realize we failed to protect our community’s right to know, and in turn our very democracy.”⁶⁴ Without a renewal of local news in these forgotten corners of America, the nation risks creating not just news deserts, but democracy deserts—places where self-governance exists in name only, while the substance of democracy withers in the shadow of ignorance.

VII. Appendix: newspaper presence in study counties (2020–2024)

Table A1. Newspaper presence in Tyrrell County, NC (rural)

Year	Publication(s)	Number of Papers	Reduction Rate
2020	<i>Scuppernonong Reminder</i>	1	—
2024	N/A	0	100%

62 Jefferson, *The Works*.

63 Jefferson, *The Works*.

64 Rick Goldsmith, dir., *Stripped For Parts* (Kovno Communications, 2023), 2:09.

Table A2. Newspaper presence in Mecklenburg County, NC (urban)

Year	Publication(s)	Number of Papers	Reduction Rate
2020	<i>The Charlotte Observer, The Pineville Pilot, Lake Norman Citizen, the Matthews-Mint Hill, Union County Weekly, South Charlotte Weekly, The Charlotte Post, and Que Pasa Mi Gente Charlotte</i>	8	—
2024	<i>The Charlotte Observer, The Matthews-Mint Hill, Lake Norman Citizen, and South Charlotte Weekly</i>	4	50%

Table A3. Newspaper presence in Greenlee County, AZ (rural)

Year	Publication(s)	Number of Papers	Reduction Rate
2020	<i>Copper Era</i>	1	—
2024	N/A	0	100%

Table A4. Newspaper presence in Maricopa County, AZ (urban)

Year	Publication(s)	Number of Papers	Reduction Rate
2020	<i>Ahwatukee Foothills News, Arizona Informant, Arizona Republic, Au-Authm Action News, Daily News-Sun, East Valley Tribune, Fountain Hill Times, The Glendale Independent, Glendale Star, Litchfield Park/Goodyear Independent, Maricopa Monitor, New Times, Peoria Independent, Peoria Times, Queen Creek/San Tan Valley Independent, Scottsdale Independent, Scottsdale Progress, Sun City Independent, Sun City West Independent, Town of Paradise Valley Independent, West Valley View, Wickenburg Sun</i>	22	—
2024	<i>Arizona Republic, Glendale Star, West Valley View, Peoria Times, Tempe Tribune, Foothills Focus, Arizona Capitol Times, Mesa Tribune, Gilbert Sun News, Wickenburg Sun, Town of Paradise Valley Independent, Phoenix New Times, Sun City Independent, Ahwatukee Foothills News, Scottsdale Independent, Sun City West Independent, Queen Creek Tribune, Daily Independent, Scottsdale Progress</i>	19	14% ⁶⁵

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⁶⁵ Throughout the study period, approximately 26 percent of papers underwent ownership changes or rebranding.

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