

Can the Media Influence the Voting Behavior of Legislators?

On any given night, it's nearly impossible to turn on the television without stumbling across a politician on programs like *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Anderson Cooper 360°* or *The Rachel Maddow Show*. Whether they're discussing foreign policy or the recent "fiscal cliff," elected officials often use the press as a platform to share and defend their views to the public. But could the media actually influence the voting behavior of the very politicians who appear on their shows? This question speaks to the role of the "fourth estate" in our democratic society, an institution that Thomas Jefferson once famously defended over government itself. In a new CSDI working paper, Joshua Clinton, associate professor of political science and CSDI co-director, and former Vanderbilt graduate student Ted Enamorado address this topic by studying the impact of Fox News's entry into the media market on the voting behavior of members of Congress. Their work provides insight into how the press affects the policy stances of officials who directly shape the laws governing our nation.

Clinton and Enamorado analyze the emergence and spread of the Fox News Channel in the late '90s and find that its presence in some districts, but not others, caused those legislators whose constituents were exposed

to the news outlet to become more conservative. This transformation occurred despite the fact that the average legislator in this sample was becoming slightly more liberal. Interestingly, the bulk of this effect can be attributed to a change in the voting behavior of Democratic members of Congress—not their Republican counterparts.

In undertaking their analysis, Clinton and Enamorado chose to focus on the Fox News Channel for two key reasons. First, the content on Fox News is ideologically distinct from other broadcast news outlets. Such a distinction makes the effect of its expansion especially strong. Second—and crucial to their research design—the authors demonstrate that the emergence of Fox News in certain congressional districts instead of others occurred in a manner unrelated to the voting behavior of elected officials and policy preferences of their districts. Had the channel's entry and expansion in certain geographic areas been linked to either of those factors, it would be difficult to disentangle the true effect of Fox News from preexisting characteristics of either the legislators or their constituents.

To establish their findings, Clinton and Enamorado first compare the voting behavior of legislators whose

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districts received and did not receive Fox News, and demonstrate that they are statistically identical. Additionally, the authors use both measures of the ideology of the district and the induced voting behavior of the House members prior to the creation of Fox News to estimate the probability that a district received the conservative cable news channel. Importantly, Clinton and Enamorado do not find statistically significant relationships between either of these predictor variables and the likelihood of a region receiving Fox News. To round out their analyses, the authors check for potentially omitted factors by using the emergence of Fox News to predict prior changes in representatives' voting behavior. Once again, there was no relationship between the voting behavior of members of Congress and the entry of Fox News in their districts at a later time. As a whole, these tests provide complementary evidence that the introduction of Fox News was not systematically assigned to congressional districts—a crucial preliminary finding necessary to

ensure that the authors isolate the true effect of the conservative news outlet.

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Regarding their primary analysis, the authors posit that Fox News affected the behavior of elected officials by changing politicians’ incentives for taking certain policy stances. This alteration of incentives could have manifested itself in two ways: either politicians in districts that received Fox News anticipated and adjusted their voting behavior to match potential changes in their constituents’ ideological beliefs, or voters who received the conservative channel replaced incumbents with more right-leaning legislators. To test the first possibility, Clinton and Enamorado compare members’ votes in congressional sessions that took place in 1995-1996 vs. those that occurred in 1997-1998. Their analysis clearly indicates that Fox News’ presence resulted in a conservative shift for members of Congress, despite the fact that the average legislator in their sample was drifting slightly to the left. Clinton and Enamorado also disaggregate the legislators by party and find that the bulk of the

observed change occurred among Democrats. (The effect of Fox News’ entry on Republican members was negligible.) The authors interpret this as suggesting that Democrats were sensitive to partisan conservative shifts among swing voters in their district because of the content of Fox News. Comparisons of members’ votes between 1997-1998 vs. 1999-2000 and 1995-1996 vs. 1999-2000 yield similar results and demonstrate that the conservative shift observed in the initial comparison persisted across time as Fox News continued to broadcast in electoral districts.

Interestingly, the authors do not find any significant evidence that the news outlet generated a replacement effect in the electoral arena. That is, the introduction of Fox News in a legislator’s district did not increase his or her chance of being kicked out of office by a more conservative candidate. To establish this claim, Clinton and Enamorado identify districts in which incumbent legislators either retired or faced defeat in the Congress directly prior to the introduction of Fox News. They further analyze the change in voting behavior of representatives in those districts before and after the channel’s creation, and ultimately find that exposure to the conservative news outlet did not significantly affect these differences in votes. The authors speculate that because members of Congress anticipated a shift in their constituents’ ideological preferences, they adjusted accordingly and thus, avoided electoral punishment at the polls.

Rooted in the legacy of Watergate and the First Amendment’s enumeration of the right to a free press, journalists have long trumpeted their “watchdog” role over elected officials as a key justification for their existence. And while the press’s responsibility for holding politicians accountable represents a normatively desirable function in our democracy, the results of Clinton and Enamorado’s study illuminate a seemingly less attractive aspect of the media’s relationship with politicians. In particular, the analyses demonstrate that the partisan press can create incentives for political elites to change the positions they take; the mere presence of Fox News in certain districts shifted legislators’ voting behavior to become more conservative. Given the prevalence of such media outlets coupled with the mounting success these channels enjoy in the cable ratings wars, such findings point to a phenomenon that may continue to shape the voting behavior of legislators—as well as the policymaking process in our democratic society—for years to come.

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The research summarized in this policy brief can be found in CSDI Working Paper 3-2012, “The Fox News Factor: How the Spread of Fox News Affects Position Taking in Congress” by Joshua D. Clinton and Ted Enamorado:

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/research/CSDI_WP_03-2012.pdf

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