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News as a Casualty

District Polarization and Media Coverage of U.S. House Campaigns

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Although scholars have noted a variety of consequences of polarization – from legislative gridlock to a decline in political comity to increasingly negative views of government – virtually no work has considered district polarization's effects on local political news coverage. Using an original, detailed content analysis of local newspaper coverage from every congressional district during the 2010 midterms, we examine how district polarization shapes media coverage of U.S. House races. The data reveal that:

- District polarization affects the competitive context of House campaigns. Lopsided districts – those safe for one party – are less likely than more evenly split districts to see competitive contests.
- Competitiveness then influences the attention congressional races receive from the news media. Districts that are lopsided see less coverage than more evenly split districts do.
- Competitiveness also affects the substance of local news coverage in U.S. House campaigns. The more competitive the race is, the more substantive coverage there is. This is true whether we examine the number of stories that mention both candidates, the number of issue mentions across the campaign's coverage, or the number times the candidates' personal traits are discussed in the coverage.

By linking polarization to competitiveness, and competitiveness to news coverage, we show that polarization impoverishes the news environment. These findings are consequential because a growing body of research suggests that a diminished news environment can depress citizens' political knowledge and engagement.

INTRODUCTION

When Carol Shea-Porter and Frank Guinta took the debate stage at Saint Anselm College on a mid-October day in 2010, most voters in New Hampshire's 1st

Congressional District already knew where the two candidates stood. Shea-Porter, the two-term Democratic incumbent vying to keep her seat, surprised no one in the audience when she blamed the Bush administration for the struggling national economy and persistent federal budget deficits. She was just repeating a central theme in her months-long campaign. “The reality is that when the Republicans came into power,” she said, “we were running a surplus.” And when Guinta lambasted Shea-Porter’s support for the 2009 stimulus package that had promoted only anemic job growth in New Hampshire as “not effective management of money,” debate watchers could have guessed his next line. The Republican former mayor of Manchester had been making the same argument since he entered the race. “When,” he asked Shea-Porter, “are you going to start taking responsibility for the four years you’ve been in Congress?”¹

By the time of the debate – just three weeks before the November election that would see Guinta defeat Shea-Porter and take her seat – 1st District voters had been exposed to a deluge of coverage of the race. In just the last month of the campaign, the *New Hampshire Union-Leader* published 43 stories discussing the contest, an average of more than one per day. And this wasn’t merely the kind of vacuous horse race coverage that scholars and political observers often deride. An attentive reader would have seen 122 mentions of the candidates’ positions on issues from health care to the economy to national security. Those articles also included 58 references to Guinta and Shea-Porter’s personal attributes, such as their integrity and leadership abilities. In short, voters would have gone to the polls with a wealth of knowledge about their choices on election day.

Three thousand miles away, in California’s 31st District, the story could hardly have been more different. Had residents of Democratic Representative Xavier Becerra’s district been curious about their congressman’s contest against Republican Stephen C. Smith, they would have been hard-pressed to find anything about it in the local media. The race – which Becerra went on to win – received virtually no coverage. One story in the *Los Angeles Times* mentioned Becerra briefly, but provided no serious discussion of his campaign or Smith’s arguments about why Becerra shouldn’t be returned to Capitol Hill. Especially diligent citizens might have visited the candidates’ websites, where they could have read up on Becerra’s record in Congress and where Smith, an electronics salesperson, discussed his qualifications: “I have listened to and filled the electronic needs of every type of person who lives in The City of the Angels.”² But otherwise, little information was available.

¹ Jake Berry, “1st Congressional District Debate Has Candidates Disagreeing from Start to End,” *The Telegraph*, October 13, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.nashuatelegraph.com/news/1879225-227/1st-congressional-debate-has-candidates-disagreeing-from.html>. Accessed on July 21, 2014.

² An archive of Smith’s 2010 website is available at http://digital.library.ucla.edu/websites/2010_995_089/index.php%5Ep=1_7_Biography-and-History.htm. Accessed on July 24, 2014.

Considering the competitive landscape of the two districts, this is hardly a surprise. New Hampshire’s 1st District was closely split along partisan lines, a district where in 2008 Barack Obama eked out a narrow victory over John McCain with 54 percent of the vote. The contest between Shea-Porter and Guinta was rated a “toss-up” by the *Cook Political Report*, reflecting the presence of two experienced candidates who collectively spent more than \$3 million on the race.³ Meanwhile, California’s 31st District was a Democratic bastion, giving 82 percent of the 2008 vote to Obama and leaving it essentially abandoned by Republicans during the 2010 midterms. Smith was a sacrificial lamb who spent only \$14,000 in his quixotic campaign to defeat Becerra, a prominent incumbent seeking his tenth term in office. In New Hampshire, reporters had plenty to cover. In California, not so much.

This pattern would be of little concern if most congressional districts in the country looked like the New Hampshire 1st. But since the end of World War II, more and more U.S. House seats look like California’s 31st. The vast majority of congressional districts have become safe for one party; incumbent reelection rates have increased, and district polarization has rendered the outcomes of most contests predictable before the campaign even begins. This change is evident in the number of close House elections. In the congressional elections of the 1950s, 39 percent of seats each cycle on average were decided by 20 points or less. By the 1970s, that figure was down to 24 percent. And after a slight uptick in the 1990s, it had fallen even further by the 2000s.⁴ The number of Americans living in competitive House districts has shrunk to a small minority.

While scholars have noted a variety of consequences of polarization – from legislative gridlock (Binder 2003; Theriault 2008) to a decline in political comity (Jamieson and Falk 2000; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) to increasingly negative views of government (Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997; Keele 2005; Bafumi and Herron 2010) – virtually no work has considered district polarization’s effects on local political news coverage. But to the extent that the media’s propensity to cover House elections depends on the presence of competitive contests, then the proliferation of polarization and the decline of truly marginal districts should affect the information environment in which citizens operate. And an erosion of media coverage of congressional elections could have important consequences. After all, when citizens are exposed to news coverage about politics, they are not only more likely to know about their representatives, communities, and issues facing the nation (e.g., Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; deVreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006), but they

³ The two just couldn’t quit each other. In a 2012 rematch, Shea-Porter would defeat Guinta to regain the seat. In 2014, Guinta would again claim victory.

⁴ We calculated these figures from Gary Jacobson’s widely used data on congressional elections. Other measures (e.g., Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006: 76) show a similar trend (see also Mayhew 1974; Cox and Katz 1996).

are also more likely to participate (e.g., Eveland and Scheufele 2000; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Hayes and Lawless 2015). If polarization diminishes the news environment by making more and more congressional districts uncompetitive, then the foundation of democracy – citizen engagement – may be imperiled.

In this chapter, we examine how district polarization shapes media coverage of U.S. House races. Using an original, detailed content analysis of local newspaper coverage from every congressional district during the 2010 midterms, we demonstrate that district polarization affects the competitive context of House campaigns. We then show that levels of competitiveness influence the attention congressional races receive from the news media. Ultimately, by linking polarization to competitiveness, and competitiveness to news coverage, we make a strong – and until now, overlooked – case that polarization impoverishes the news environment. It is not just legislative productivity or a spirit of political cooperation that is threatened by polarization. Local news is a casualty too.

POLARIZATION AND THE MEDIA: WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

With the rise of cable television and the Internet, Americans' options for political news have expanded dramatically – and that adverb may well be an understatement. One of the most important consequences of the proliferation of outlets has been the emergence of news organizations devoted to advocating ideological positions and repeating partisan talking points, a development that has reshaped the kind of information to which citizens have ready access. Whereas Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley, and their broadcast news counterparts were once the face of the American media, they have been replaced by a new generation of partisan and sharp-elbowed media personalities: Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, Rachel Maddow, Lawrence O'Donnell.

This change has spawned a large body of work that explores the consequences of a more partisan and polarized news environment for political attitudes and behavior (see Prior 2013 for a review). One line of research focuses on the extent to which citizens engage in selective exposure, consuming news from outlets that confirm their political beliefs and eschewing sources that challenge them. Both experimental and observational data suggest that people do indeed have a preference for ideologically friendly news (Iyengar et al. 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2011), although the magnitude of these selection effects is open to debate (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011; Prior 2013). A second line of work examines whether exposure to partisan news polarizes the public – that is, whether it moves the attitudes of Democrats and Republicans, for instance, farther apart. While there is little doubt that exposure to “like-minded” programming can reinforce political beliefs and, in some cases, promote attitude extremity (e.g., Jamieson and

Cappella 2008; Levendusky 2013), it remains unclear how widespread such effects are. Because relatively few people actually tune in to cable news programs, there is limited potential for polarization (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Changes to the media environment may be contributing to mass polarization, but so far the size of that contribution is modest at best.

As this brief review makes clear, the research that examines media and polarization tends to focus on how polarized media affect the public's attitudes, not whether polarization itself may be reshaping the media environment. Moreover, the focus of the existing literature has been almost entirely on national news; political communication scholars have largely ignored the relationship between polarization and the volume and content of local political news. Yet, as a practical matter, polarization is most evident at the district level, and it is on local news that voters still rely most for information about local political campaigns. Theoretically, there are good reasons to expect that the rise in district polarization – an increasing number of seats becoming safe for one party – should affect the availability of information about U.S. House races in local media outlets.

HOW POLARIZATION SHOULD AFFECT MEDIA COVERAGE OF HOUSE ELECTIONS

Districts that are closely split in terms of partisanship, such as New Hampshire's 1st District, are considered winnable by both the Democrats and the Republicans. In such locales, the parties can recruit well-qualified candidates to run against incumbents. Ambitious, strategic politicians, after all, are most likely to run in districts where they believe they have a good chance of winning (Black 1972; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Stone and Maisel 2003; Maestas et al. 2006; Lawless 2012). In lopsided districts where one party is dominant, such as California's 31st District, it is far less likely that experienced out-party candidates will emerge. (Those are the kinds of districts where you get electronics salespeople.) This dynamic is critical because the emergence of quality candidates can have a profound effect on the competitiveness of House races (Jacobson 1989). Quality candidates are more likely to be able to raise large amounts of money, hire professional campaign staff, and build a campaign infrastructure. In short, closely split districts with two well-heeled candidates breed competitive, active campaigns.

The relationship between polarization and electoral competitiveness is important because competitiveness strongly affects the calculus for journalists and, therefore, carries profound consequences for the quality of local news coverage. Because close elections have uncertain outcomes, they generate more drama and are inherently more newsworthy (e.g., Graber 2010; Bennett 2011). In addition, competitive races produce more campaign activity (and more conflict between candidates), so they offer more campaign-trail developments for reporters to cover (e.g., Bruni 2002; Dunaway and Stein

2013). Indeed, numerous studies have found a strong relationship between competitiveness and news attention (Clark and Evans 1983; Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Vinson 2003; Arnold 2004; Gershon 2012). And because competition leads to more coverage, competitive contests also produce reporting about candidates' issue positions (Westlye 1991; Kahn and Kenney 1999; though see Hayes 2010). Competitiveness, then, tends to breed a news environment that more closely approximates democratic ideals. The corollary, of course, is that when races are not competitive, the news media tend to ignore them. Less electoral competition produces an information environment with less volume and substance. Thus, we expect district polarization to have an indirect effect on news coverage of House races by shaping the competitive context in which those contests take place.

As straightforward as these propositions might sound, they are based on very little empirical evidence. Over the course of the last 40 years, only a dozen studies have investigated news coverage in U.S. House elections (Manheim 1974; Clarke and Evans 1983; Tidmarsh and Karp 1983; Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Orman 1985; Vermeer 1987; Larson 1992; Vinson 2003; Arnold 2004; Gershon 2012, 2013; Fogarty 2013). And most of this research is quite limited in scope. None of the studies analyzes coverage in more than 100 districts, and some focus on just one (Orman 1985; Larson 1992). Many can say little about House coverage specifically because the analyses combine House and Senate races. Still others restrict their inquiries to specific types of candidates and contests by focusing only on incumbents, contested races, or members implicated in scandals (e.g., Fogarty 2013). This has left us with an incomplete understanding of the conditions under which journalists will be more or less likely to cover House races, which is central to developing a fuller understanding of the consequences of district polarization.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA SET

To study the relationship between polarization and local news coverage of U.S. House campaigns, we rely on three sets of data. First, we conducted an unusually detailed content analysis of the general election coverage in all House districts during the 2010 midterm elections. In each of the 435 congressional districts across the country, we identified the largest circulation local newspaper that we could access through one of several electronic databases or the newspaper's online archives. We focus on local newspapers because most of the information available to voters during congressional election campaigns comes from local print media (Vinson 2003; Graber and Dunaway 2014). In addition, local print coverage has been found to affect voter attitudes toward members of Congress, but local television has not (Schaffner 2006).⁵ After identifying the

⁵ We do not analyze national newspapers, cable television, blogs, or social media because there is very little coverage of individual congressional campaigns in outlets such as the *New York Times* and Fox News, and the audiences for political information in many newer venues remain very

appropriate newspaper in each district, we collected every article that mentioned at least one of the two major-party candidates for the House seat and analyzed the content of the coverage in the month leading up to election day (October 2–November 2, 2010).

We focus on four measures that allow us to assess the volume and substance of political coverage: (1) the number of articles published about each House race, (2) the share of stories that mentioned both candidates (in contested races), (3) the number of mentions of issues in news coverage, and (4) the number of mentions of candidates' traits. We assume that more coverage, coverage that provides information about both candidates, and coverage that includes attention to issues and the candidates' personal attributes (as opposed to topics such as fundraising, campaign strategy, or the horse race) are likely to give voters more useful information about their electoral choices, and promote knowledge and participation. In all, we coded 6,003 news stories, editorials, and op-ed columns. (See the Appendix for details about the newspapers included in the content analysis, as well as the issues and traits we coded.)

Second, we collected data that allow us to gauge both the level of polarization in a district and the competitiveness of its House race. To measure district polarization, we rely on the percentage of the vote in each congressional district that Barack Obama and John McCain received during the 2008 presidential election. Because the presidential vote closely reflects district partisanship, districts in which Obama or McCain won by a small margin are far more likely to generate competitive House contests than are districts where one candidate won in a landslide. Thus, our measure of polarization is the presidential election margin of victory in percentage points. In other words, by how many points did the winner take the district? A district where Obama beat McCain by six points has the same "polarization score" as a district where McCain defeated Obama by the same margin. To gauge the competitive context of the race in each district, we rely on three measures. The *Cook Political Report* classifies House races on a four-category scale: safe for one party, likely to be won by one party, leaning toward one party, or toss-up. We collected the Cook Report rating for each district as of October 5, 2010. We also collected data on whether the race featured a "quality challenger" (someone with previous office-holding experience), as well as the total amount of money the candidates (combined) spent on the race.⁶

For instance, blog readers constitute just a fraction of the public (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010), fewer than one in five Americans are on Twitter (Smith and Brenner 2012), and just 9 percent of consumers in 2010 said they regularly got news from a social networking site (Rainie and Smith 2012). Although Facebook and Twitter are growing in importance for both candidates and news consumers, they do not yet constitute a significant source of political information for most Americans. Despite changes to the media environment, local newspaper coverage remains the most thorough and influential political news source during House campaigns, which is why we train our focus there.

⁶ For simplicity, our use of the term "quality challenger" encompasses open-seat candidates who have held previous electoral office, even though these individuals are not challenging incumbents.

Third, we collected contextual information about each congressional district and the newspaper that serves it. We tracked the district's median income, percentage of college graduates, racial composition, and "market convergence," which is the level of overlap between a district and a media market.⁷ Previous work has identified these as potential influences on news content (Schaffner and Sellers 2003; Arnold 2004; Cohen, Noel, and Zaller 2004; Napoli and Yan 2007; Dunaway 2008). By accounting for these attributes, we can be confident that any polarization or competitiveness effects we uncover are not an artifact of other district or newspaper characteristics.

RESULTS: DISTRICT POLARIZATION, ELECTORAL COMPETITIVENESS, AND LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE

Perhaps the best place to begin the analysis is with a summary of the landscape of local newspaper coverage in the 2010 midterm elections. In terms of the volume of coverage, the average number of stories per race was 14.4, which is about one article every other day in the month leading up to the election. In districts with contested races, an average of 44.5 percent of stories mentioned both candidates. The average number of issue mentions over a month's worth of campaign coverage was 48.6, and the average number of trait mentions was 6.4.

If district polarization is related to the volume and content of local news, then we should see a lower volume of coverage and less attention to candidates' issue positions and personal traits in lopsided districts than in more evenly split ones. That is exactly what we find. Figure 1 presents the bivariate relationships between district polarization and the number of stories written about the race, the percentage of articles mentioning both candidates, and the total number of times issues and traits were mentioned in the coverage. The upper left panel of the figure, for example, shows that the districts where Obama or McCain saw the largest margins of victory in 2008 were the districts that were least likely to garner House race coverage in 2010. Whereas more evenly split districts (those that delivered no more than a five-point victory to Obama or McCain) saw an average of 17.2 stories written about the 2010 House race, lopsided districts (where the presidential race was decided by at least a 20-point margin) saw on average only about 7.8 stories.

The same pattern emerges when we turn to the number of stories that mentioned both candidates, and the total number of times issues and traits were mentioned in relation to the candidates. In the most closely split districts, 55.8 percent of stories mentioned both candidates. As for the substance of the coverage, these evenly split districts saw on average 64.2 mentions of issues and

⁷ We thank Gary Jacobson for providing the candidate quality and campaign spending data. We also coded whether the race in each district was contested and whether there was an open seat, since both of these measures reflect the extent to which the electoral context is competitive.

⁸ We thank Hans Noel for the media market data.

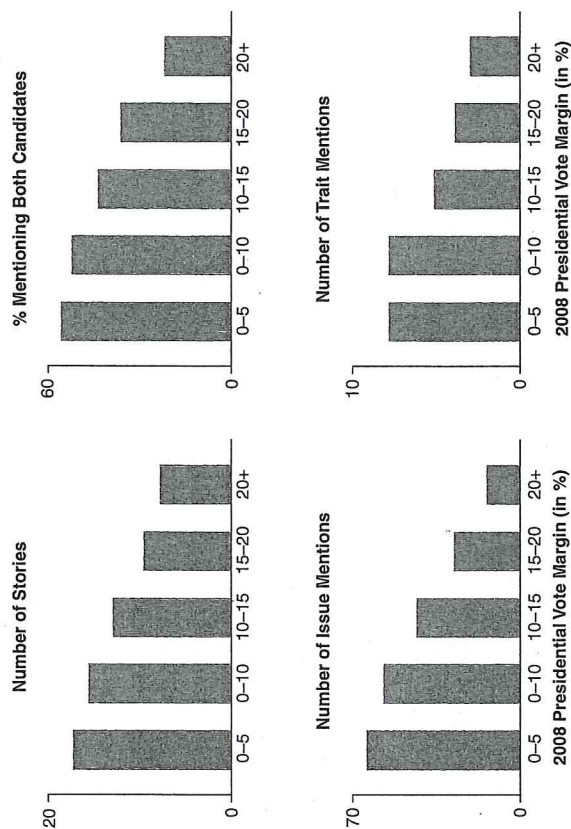


FIGURE 1. District Polarization and Campaign News Coverage

Note: News data come from a content analysis of local newspaper campaign coverage (6,003 stories overall) in all 435 House districts from October 2–November 2, 2010. Data for percentage of stories mentioning both candidates include only contested districts.

7.9 references to the candidates' traits. On the other hand, in the most lopsided districts, just 21.9 percent of stories referenced both candidates, and throughout a month's worth of coverage, there were on average only 14.3 issue mentions and a meager three references to candidate traits. Regardless of the measure we use, a district where Obama or McCain won narrowly saw more than twice as much – and far more substantive – coverage of the 2010 House race than a district where the presidential contest was a landslide. This leaves little doubt that polarization is closely connected to House campaign coverage.

By moving into a multivariate context, we can provide a more refined assessment of the relationship between district polarization and the information environment in House races. Here, we account for some basic features of the race, such as whether it is for an open seat and whether it is contested, as well as the demographics of the district and overlap between the district and its media market. Table 1 presents four OLS regression models, each of which predicts a measure of coverage in the House race. In each equation, the coefficient on the 2008 presidential vote margin is negative and significant. This means that as the margin of victory increases – indicating that the district is more lopsided – the volume and substance of House race coverage

TABLE 1. *The Relationship between District Polarization and the Volume and Substance of Newspaper Coverage in House Elections, 2010*

	Number of Stories	Both Candidates Mentioned	Number of Issue Mentions	Number of Trait Mentions
District Polarization				
2008 presidential vote margin	-0.25* (0.06)	-0.83* (0.15)	-1.19* (0.27)	-0.14* (0.04)
District and Newspaper Features				
Open seat	0.81 (2.33)	16.62* (4.14)	8.87 (13.01)	1.83 (1.79)
Uncontested	-5.63* (1.45)	-	-28.66* (4.69)	-4.73* (0.94)
Percent white	0.07 (0.39)	0.25* (0.09)	0.45* (0.14)	0.02 (0.03)
Median income	-0.81 (0.67)	-1.61 (1.51)	-3.05 (3.04)	-0.46 (0.45)
College educated(%)	0.17 (0.11)	-0.14 (0.29)	0.79 (0.46)	0.18* (0.08)
Market convergence	8.19 (7.45)	33.52* (13.45)	39.23 (27.83)	6.93 (5.13)
Constant	10.71* (4.39)	41.67* (8.95)	39.23 (27.83)	3.56 (2.59)
R ²	0.09	0.23	0.13	0.06
N	435	380	435	435

Notes: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors clustered on newspaper are in parentheses. For the "Both Candidates Mentioned" equation, we restrict the analysis to contested races. Levels of significance: * $p < .05$.

decreases. For instance, controlling for other factors, an eight-point increase in the presidential vote margin reduces by two the number of stories published about the congressional race. Given that the average number of stories in a district is 14, a decline of about 14 percent is not insubstantial. The multivariate results, in other words, confirm the bivariate relationships presented in Figure 1. Voters in more evenly split districts have access to more local newspaper coverage of their House races, and to coverage that is more likely to inform them about both candidates and the candidates' issue positions and personal traits.

As we discussed earlier, though, we do not expect polarization, in and of itself, to affect journalists' assessments of what is newsworthy in a congressional

race. That is, the margin by which Obama or McCain won a district in 2008 should not directly influence the volume or substance of newspaper coverage about the 2010 midterms. Rather, because lopsided districts tilt heavily in favor of one of the two parties, the congressional races in those districts should be less competitive and, accordingly, less newsworthy to the journalists covering them. The competitive context of the race – a function of district polarization – is the mechanism that should drive down coverage.

In order to determine whether this is the case, we turn once again to a series of bivariate relationships – this time, between district polarization and the features of a congressional race that reflect its competitiveness: the Cook Report rating, the total amount of campaign spending, and whether the race includes a quality challenger. The data displayed in Figure 2 support our expectations, and the inverse relationships between polarization and competitiveness are striking. The leftmost panel of the figure plots the percentage of races that the Cook Report classified as toss-up or leaning against the 2008 presidential election vote margin in the district. Nearly 40 percent of the districts that Obama or McCain won by no more than five points saw competitive House races in 2010. Compare that to the only 2.5 percent of competitive House races in districts that McCain or Obama swept by at least 20 points. The relationship is similarly robust and monotonic when we consider average campaign spending in a district and the presence of a quality candidate. The most competitive districts saw nearly \$3 million in spending, whereas the least competitive saw less than half that. And although 42.7 percent of the most closely split districts had a race with a candidate who previously held elective office, that was true in just 5 percent of landslide districts.

Although these cross-tabulations are suggestive, we can use regression analysis to gain a better handle on whether the competitive context of the House race, as opposed to district polarization itself, affects news coverage. We supplemented the four regression equations we presented in Table 1 with our three measures of competitiveness. Table 2 presents the four fully specified models. In three of the four models, the 2008 presidential vote margin is no longer statistically significant. Once we account for the Cook Report rating, campaign spending, and the presence of a quality challenger, district polarization does not exert a direct effect on the volume or substance of local news coverage. But the gauges of competitiveness do.

Consider the effects of the Cook Report rating. Congressional races rated toss-up saw an average of 2.6 stories, districts rated leaning saw 2.3, and districts rated likely to go for one party received on average 2.0 stories. But in the 72 percent of districts rated as safe for one party – districts that are very lopsided – the average number of news stories was just 1.0. Indeed, in every model, the more competitive the race is, the more coverage (or substantive coverage) there is. This is true whether we examine the total number of stories published about a race, the number of stories that mention both candidates, the number of issue mentions across the campaign's coverage, or the number of times the

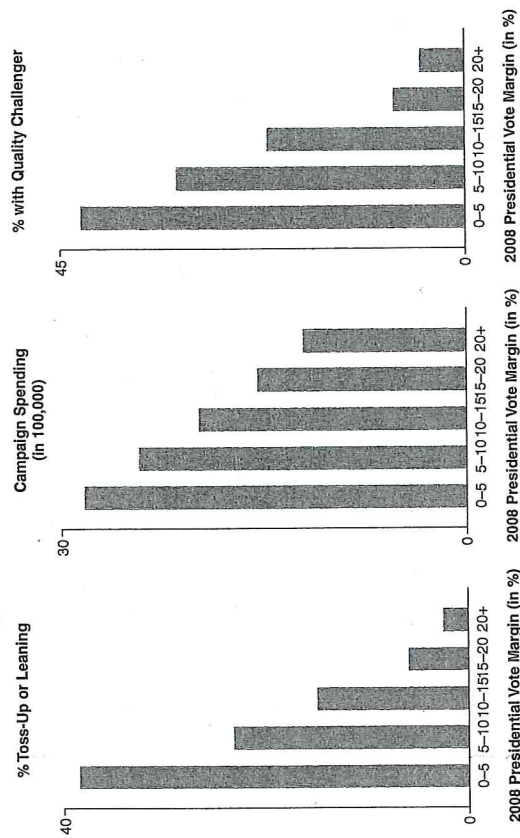


FIGURE 2. District Polarization and the Campaign Context of the 2010 Midterms
 Note: Competitiveness data are from the Cook Political Report, as of October 5, 2010.

candidates' personal traits are discussed in the coverage. All are indicators of an information environment that could help inform citizens' choices, and all are strongly related to the competitiveness of the House race, controlling for a host of other factors that might also plausibly be related to media attention. Campaign spending has slightly weaker effects than competitiveness, but it is significant in every model as well. The presence of a quality challenger does not exert as strong or consistent an effect, but that variable still affects the overall volume of coverage.

Only in the model for the percentage of stories mentioning both candidates does the 2008 presidential vote margin remain significant. It is not entirely clear why polarization would exert an independent effect here, and not for the other measures of coverage. But even here, two results underscore the importance of campaign context as a mediator of polarization's effect on news coverage. First, the size of the coefficient on presidential vote margin (-0.42) is far smaller than it was in Table 1 (-0.83). The inclusion of the campaign measures reduced its effect by half. Second, the fact that the indicators of campaign activity behave similarly as they do in the models predicting volume of coverage and issue and trait mentions show that journalists appear to be responding primarily to the competitive context of the race.

In sum, the results - which emerge from more than 6,000 articles and hundreds of local newspapers, House races, and candidates - are clear: the

TABLE 2. The Relationship between Campaign Context and the Volume and Substance of Newspaper Coverage in House Elections, 2010

	Number of Stories	Both Candidates Mentioned	Number of Issue Mentions	Number of Trait Mentions
District Polarization				
2008 presidential vote margin	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.42* (0.16)	-0.23 (0.25)	-0.01 (0.04)
Competitive Context				
Cook Report rating	3.20* (1.03)	7.96* (1.48)	17.63* (4.75)	2.27* (1.02)
Campaign spending	0.15* (0.05)	0.17^ (0.10)	0.52* (0.23)	0.09^ (0.05)
Quality candidate	4.27* (1.97)	-0.42 (3.48)	10.29 (8.56)	2.58 (1.67)
District and Newspaper Features				
Open seat	-2.13 (2.12)	14.67 (4.14)	-1.02 (11.23)	-0.04 (1.89)
Uncontested	-2.10 (1.49)	-	14.09* (4.51)	2.41* (0.85)
Percent white	0.46 (0.03)	0.23* (0.09)	0.35* (0.12)	0.01 (0.03)
Median income	-0.38 (0.60)	-0.73 (1.44)	-0.89 (2.78)	-0.16 (0.41)
College educated (%)	0.14 (0.11)	-0.17 (0.29)	0.66 (0.44)	0.16* (0.08)
Market convergence	8.09 (6.92)	34.02* (11.80)	40.14 (25.71)	6.90 (4.55)
Constant	2.09 (4.06)	25.43* (9.09)	18.60 (12.77)	-2.17 (2.32)
R ²	0.29	0.34	0.30	0.20
N	435	380	435	435

Notes: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors clustered on newspaper are in parentheses. For the "Both Candidates Mentioned" equation, we restrict the analysis to contested races. Levels of significance: * $p < .05$; ^ $p < .10$.

competitive context of a district is a central driver of election coverage. This is the case across a variety of measures of news content. Because lopsided districts are less likely than more evenly split districts to see competitive contests, district polarization contributes indirectly to the richness - or, more to the point, the poverty - of the information environment of U.S. House races.

CONCLUSION

Given the large body of research devoted to the effects of district polarization, it is surprising that the relationship between polarization and news coverage in congressional elections has been largely overlooked. But as the results presented in this chapter now make clear, polarization does more than hinder Congress's ability to pass legislation or generate ill will between partisans in the public. By shaping the competitive context of congressional districts, polarization influences the information environment during House campaigns. Lopsided districts receive less, and less substantive, coverage than more evenly split ones. These findings are consequential because a growing body of research suggests that a diminished news environment can depress political knowledge and engagement. Consider, for example, the effects of recent newspaper closures on political participation. Although the *Cincinnati Post* had a daily circulation of less than 30,000 when it folded in 2007, in subsequent elections relatively fewer people went to the polls in the places where the *Post* served as the main newspaper (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2011). When newspapers closed in Seattle and Denver between 2008 and 2009, citizens' political engagement dropped more in those two cities than in other major cities that did not lose a newspaper (Shaker 2014). Of course, the effects of a reduction in local political news can emerge even when a newspaper does not close. Citizens in districts with less campaign coverage are less able to evaluate their incumbent and not as capable of making ideological judgments about the candidates vying for office (Hayes and Lawless 2015). By making it more difficult for citizens to gain the information that would help them hold their local officials accountable, district polarization chips away at the foundation of electoral democracy.

Given the trends in contemporary American politics, there is no reason to expect that a renaissance of local political coverage is anywhere on the horizon. District polarization has increased over time, and because the decline in competitiveness is principally a product of polarization, uncompetitive elections – which generate few incentives for journalists to cover them – are likely here to stay. Moreover, at the local level, mainstream news organizations constitute the main – and sometimes only – source of information about House races and other lower-level contests. In an analysis of more than a thousand local news and information sources in the top 100 U.S. television markets, Hindman (2010) reports that less than 2 percent of local news websites are unaffiliated with traditional print or broadcast media. When local news outlets like daily newspapers devote less coverage, and less substantive coverage, to politics, there are few alternative sources to which citizens can turn. For all the recent efforts to save local news (Abernathy 2014), the vast majority of U.S. communities are beholden to local newspapers for information about local politics.

This, of course, doesn't mean that citizen knowledge and participation in congressional elections are doomed. Indeed, there is evidence in a recent report

that some Americans are becoming increasingly politically engaged (Pew Research Center 2014). And as the media environment continues to evolve, new outlets may emerge to provide coverage of House elections where mainstream news has fallen away. But both of these developments are likely to contribute to a more ideologically extreme electorate. The individuals who polarization has spurred to action tend to be “the most ideologically oriented and politically rancorous Americans” (Pew Research Center 2014: 7). And the fastest-growing online political news sites are those that are more likely to inflame than inform. If polarization continues to contribute to the diminishment of the mainstream news environment, this may pose yet another barrier to broad-based participation in congressional elections. To the extent that the electorate is made up primarily of impassioned partisans, political leaders will have even fewer incentives to pursue the compromises that are the antidote to political gridlock.

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APPENDIX

NEWSPAPER SELECTION

Very little political science research has sought to analyze media coverage of House elections from more than a handful of districts. Thus, there is no accepted method for identifying the local news outlets that serve a particular House contest. To identify the appropriate newspaper for each House race, we first consulted maps of each congressional district and identified the largest city in each district. We then determined whether the city had a daily newspaper that we could access through one of several electronic databases or the newspaper's online archives. In the vast majority of cases, this was a straightforward, though time-consuming, task. In the few cases for which we could not gain access to newspaper coverage from the district's largest-circulation daily paper, we relied on coverage from the next largest paper.

We identified every news story in each congressional district from October 2 through November 2, 2010 (election day) that mentioned at least one of the two major party candidates. We included in the sample straight news reports, news analyses, editorials, and op-ed columns. We did not code letters to the editor. We

TABLE A1. Summary Statistics on Newspaper Sample and News Stories

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Daily circulation of newspaper	195,149	202,379	6,772	876,638
Number of stories	14	13	1	81
Average number of words in a story	696	274	34	3,275

Notes: Circulation and number of stories reflect data from all 435 congressional districts. Average number of words reflect data from the 405 districts with at least one story mentioning a major-party candidate. The total number of stories is 6,003.

did not restrict the analysis strictly to "campaign" stories because we assume that any information about the House candidates is potentially relevant for voters. As a result, our coding includes a comprehensive analysis of the media coverage to which voters could have been exposed in the lead-up to the election. Our analyses do not include independent and minor-party candidates.

Table A1 provides an overview of our media data. The figures in the table represent summary statistics on the circulation size of the newspapers in our sample, the number of stories about the congressional race, and the length of those stories. The circulation of the newspapers and the amount of attention to the House race varies quite a bit, as one would expect, given differences in district composition and competitiveness.

NEWS CONTENT ANALYSIS

We tracked every time an issue was mentioned, beginning with a list of issues commonly included in previous studies and then recording references to additional issues as they emerged in the coverage. We then classified each issue into eight broad categories following previous scholars' coding schemes: (1) Defense, Security, and Military, (2) Taxes and Spending, (3) Race and Social Groups, (4) Civil and Social Order, (5) Social Welfare, (6) Economy, (7) Foreign Affairs, and (8) Government Functioning. Table A2 presents a list of the 173 issues we identified.

Coders also recorded the number of explicit references to candidate traits, both positive and negative (e.g., "honest" and "dishonest"). These references could come from candidates themselves ("I have shown the leadership abilities to represent this district effectively"), their opponents ("My opponent does not care about the people of this district"), or reporters ("Questions about Thompson's trustworthiness have been a problem for her campaign"). We coded for traits that fell into one of the four dimensions that previous research has identified as salient for voters: competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy. In total, we coded for 131 separate specific trait references that fell into the four trait dimensions. Table A3 displays the full list.

TABLE A2. Specific Issue References Coded from News Coverage

<p>Defense, Security, and Military Afghanistans, defense, defense spending, GI bill, Guantanamo spending, intelligence, Iran, Iraq, Bay, intelligence, Iran, Iraq, military issues (bases, benefits, health care, pay), NASA/space, national security, nuclear weapons, Pakistan, Patriot Act, security, veterans' affairs, war breaks</p>	<p>Taxes and Spending arts programs, balanced budget, budget/spending, Bush tax cuts, business, debt ceiling, debt or deficit, earmarks/pork, funding for rights, marriage equality, Native American issues, race advocacy, racial equality, seniors, workplace discrimination, research and development, spending, taxes/tax breaks</p>	<p>Economy agriculture, auto industry, bailout, banks, business, Cash for Clunkers, consumer protection, credit card reform, economy, ethanol subsidies, farms, federal employee wages, Freddie Mac/Fannie Mae, free enterprise, gas prices, global currency, housing/</p>	<p>Social Welfare 9/11 workers health plan, birth control/contraception, BR oil spill, cap and trade, children's issues/child care, climate change, education, energy/electricity/coal nuclear power, entitlements, environment, family planning, health care/health insurance/</p>
<p>Civil and Social Order abortion, alcohol, assisted suicide, bullying, civil liberties, crime, criminal justice system, death penalty, domestic violence, English as the national language, gambling and casinos, guns, hate crimes, hunting rights, illegal drugs, immigration, police or fire funding, pornography, privacy, public safety, religion/religious issues/creationism taught in schools, school prayer, securing the border, separation of church and state, social issues, stem cell research</p>	<p>Race and Social Groups advocacy for women, affirmative action, civil rights, Don't Ask Don't Tell, ERA/pay equity, gay rights, marriage equality, Native American issues, race advocacy, racial equality, seniors, workplace discrimination, research and development, spending, taxes/tax breaks</p>	<p>Foreign Affairs Africa, China, diplomacy, foreign policy, human rights, international issues in health, Israel, Mexico, Middle East, other specific country, spending on foreign aid, trade</p>	<p>Government Functioning campaign finance reform, constitutional amendments, decreasing partisanship in Congress, disaster relief/FEMA, ethics, FDA, government reform/transparency, insurance reform (not health care), lobbying, PACs, personal scandal, reforms to</p>
<p>Obama care, homelessness, Medicaid, medical research, Medicare, mining, natural gas, oil drilling, oil pipelines, prescription drugs, school vouchers, social security, social services, student loans, teacher salaries, utilities, water, welfare, wildlife/forests, women's health, women's issues (not abortion, contraception), work safety, workers' compensation</p>	<p>foreclosures, inequality (economic), infrastructure, jobs, labor, manufacturing, minimum wage, mortgage rates, net neutrality, outsourcing, personal finances, poverty, redistribution of wealth, regulations, retirement, stimulus, TARP, technology, tourism, transportation, Wall Street reform</p>	<p>foreclosures, inequality (economic), infrastructure, jobs, labor, manufacturing, minimum wage, mortgage rates, net neutrality, outsourcing, personal finances, poverty, redistribution of wealth, regulations, retirement, stimulus, TARP, technology, tourism, transportation, Wall Street reform</p>	<p>foreclosures, inequality (economic), infrastructure, jobs, labor, manufacturing, minimum wage, mortgage rates, net neutrality, outsourcing, personal finances, poverty, redistribution of wealth, regulations, retirement, stimulus, TARP, technology, tourism, transportation, Wall Street reform</p>
<p>congressional campaigns, term limits, tort reform, wages for members of Congress and other elected officials</p>			

More a Symptom Than a Cause
Polarization and Partisan News Media in America

Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson

Many observers blame partisan news media for the high level of partisan polarization in U.S. government and the American electorate. In this chapter, we discuss the emergence of partisan news media in the United States and review disparate sources of evidence to assess its effect on political polarization. Taken together, we contend that the emergence of partisan news media is more a symptom of a polarized political system than a source.

- Political parties in the U.S. Congress polarized before the advent of partisan news media.
- The expansion of entertainment options on television and the Internet has limited the reach of both mainstream and partisan news.
- Although exposure to partisan news programs can polarize political attitudes, exposure to mainstream news can *also* polarize.
- News programs are polarizing, in part, because they communicate to the public the degree to which politicians are polarized along party lines. Consequently, if political elites were to become less partisan, the electorate would likely follow.

The debate over the Affordable Care Act in 2009 and 2010 offers a prime example of the polarized polity in the United States. It was cast in ideological terms, with supporters advancing access to medical care as a universal human right to be afforded by government and opponents decrying any government intrusion into the provision of medical care as creeping socialism. President Obama, attempting to craft the image of a “post-partisan” politician, met publicly with congressional Republicans multiple times and made a show of including some of their proposals. Whether these attempts were genuine is a matter of perspective, but their ineffectiveness is not. Not one Republican in either the House of Representatives or the Senate voted in support of the health care bill (Herszenhorn and Pear 2010).

TABLE A3. *Specific Trait References Coded from News Coverage*

	Empathy	Integrity	Leadership	Competence	Positive	Negative
	accessible, affable, caring, has decent, earnest, ethical, has integrity, honest, honorable, principled, reliable, sincere, trustworthy	active, ambitious, brave, committed, confident, consistent, courageous, decisive, direct, effective, energetic, enthusiastic, entrepreneurial, feisty, fighter, independent, independent thinker, maverick, optimistic, passionate, persistent, straight shooter, strong, strong leader, team player, tough	active, ambitious, brave, committed, confident, consistent, courageous, decisive, direct, effective, energetic, enthusiastic, entrepreneurial, feisty, fighter, independent, independent thinker, maverick, optimistic, passionate, persistent, straight shooter, strong, strong leader, team player, tough	accomplished, articulate, assertive, careful, cautious, competent, consistent, contemplative, creative, dedicated, determined, diligent, effective, experienced, focused, good speaker/orator, hardworking, has common sense, intelligent, knowledgeable, open-minded, pragmatic, proactive, rational, reasonable, reliable, responsible, savvy, thoughtful, understated, worky	careless, clueless, incompetent, ineffective, inexperienced, irrational, irresponsible, not pragmatic, reactive, superficial, unft, uninformed, unintelligent, party puppet/lapdog, rigid, scared, unsure, weak, weak leader	dirty fighter, dishonest, disingenuous, greedy, hypocritical, immoral, lacks integrity, liar, malicious, manipulative, not trustworthy, unethical