



Fox News and political knowledge[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The effects of partisan media on political knowledge are theoretically ambiguous. Knowledge effects are important because of their close connection to welfare effects, but the existing empirical literature on knowledge is limited. We study the knowledge effects of the Fox News Channel. Following DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007), we exploit naturally random variation in Fox's availability to identify causal effects. We use knowledge survey data from 2000, 2004 and 2008; our final sample has nearly one million question-level observations. We first confirm and expand on previous findings of Fox effects on voting. We then present an array of results from our knowledge analysis. While average effects (across issues), over the full time-frame are near-zero and most precise, we find evidence of positive effects both for issues that were more favorable to Republicans and for issues that Fox covered more often, and negative effects for issues Fox neglected. We also present evidence of Fox being associated with a decline in newspaper readership.

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1. Introduction

The economics literature on the causes and consequences of the behavior of political media firms has developed considerably in recent years. A key issue is partisan bias, or slant (these terms are often used interchangeably). The literature has shown that slant is real and quantified it, developed and tested theories of slant, and shown that slant has effects on voting.¹

In this paper, we extend this literature by studying a new aspect of partisan media, its effects on political knowledge. This topic is of first-order importance because the welfare implications of partisan media effects depend on changes in knowledge (Gentzkow et al., 2014), and

these knowledge effects are, in theory, ambiguous. It is unclear if and how entry of a partisan outlet causes voters to be more or less informed on different issues, and thus more or less likely to vote and monitor politicians optimally. We expect the media in general to provide information to voters. But while a partisan outlet could provide a distinct and useful perspective on the issues, it could also distort voters' beliefs and choices (or both). A partisan outlet could also affect voting and other political behavior via other mechanisms, for example, by influencing attitudes.

We analyze the knowledge effects of entry into new markets by a particular partisan outlet, the Fox News Channel cable station. We study Fox for three reasons. First, Fox is important—it has been the most highly rated cable news station in the US since 2002 (Collins, 2004; O'Connell, 2014). Second, Fox is well-known to have a (relatively rightist) slant (Grosseclose and Milyo, 2005). Third, the gradual roll-out of Fox to cable systems across the US since Fox's inception in 1996 yields exogenous variation in access to Fox, conditional on controls. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) (DVK) were the first to use this research design, which we extend to additional years.

Our knowledge data are from the 2000, 2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Studies (NAES). Each of these surveys has over 50,000 respondents, and includes dozens of questions on political facts with right and wrong answers. Most of the questions refer to the platform positions of the US presidential candidates of that year. Questions were answered correctly around 50% of the time on average, and cover substantive and possibly politically-charged issues. For example, the 2008 survey included questions on which presidential candidate

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¹ See Prat and Strömberg (2011) and Sobbrío (2014) for useful surveys.

avored lifting the ban on coastal oil drilling, and which favored federal funding of stem cell research. Other field studies of media knowledge effects typically use more straightforward, less politically-charged questions (e.g., “Do you know the name of your Congressman?”). Our final sample has over 80,000 respondent-level observations, and nearly one million question-level observations.

In Section 2 we briefly review the relevant theory literature and present a stylized model tailored to our empirical setting, allowing Fox News to affect voting either by influencing NAES knowledge or via another mechanism. Key predictions are that Fox is relatively likely to increase knowledge for policy issues that are favorable to Republicans, more so when beliefs would otherwise be inaccurate, and relatively likely to decrease knowledge for issues favorable to Democrats. In Section 3 we describe the data, and in Section 4 we revisit the exogeneity of Fox News entry and voting effects. We find some evidence of entry being correlated with education in 00 and 04, but the effects are small, and wash out in the data pooled across all years. We also find that Fox News is associated with a two percentage point increase in Republican vote share in 00. We find no significant voting effects in 04, but in the 00–04–08 data there is a significant one point effect. We do not analyze the 08 data separately because there is very little variation in Fox News access in that year, but include 08 in the pooled data analysis because this yields variation in access to Fox across time. The pooled (00–04–08) data should be least subject to endogeneity concerns, since nearly all towns gained Fox access by the end of the sample time-frame.

In Section 5 we present the main results on knowledge effects. We regress the fraction of questions a respondent answered correctly on Fox access and a large set of individual political, demographic, survey, US Census and cable controls, and county fixed effects (FEs). We present three sets of results in this section. First, results for all knowledge questions grouped together. There is some suggestive evidence of Fox having positive effects in 2004, but no evidence of effects in 2000 or in the pooled data. Next, motivated by the model of Section 2, we separate questions into two groups, topics favorable or unfavorable to Republicans. We find significant evidence of positive effects for the favorable group in 2004, and marginally significant evidence for 00–04–08. The effects tend to be larger for subsamples that we expected, a priori, to experience larger effects. Third, we incorporate data from Fox News transcripts to directly measure the channel's informativeness across issues. Results from this analysis indicate that Fox News caused knowledge to increase for issues that Fox News was most informative about (as one would expect), to decrease for issues that Fox misled on (which happened rarely), and to also decrease for issues that Fox News simply neglected (which happened often). These results only indirectly imply that Fox News changed knowledge in a partisan way, since we do not know how exactly Fox News chose topic coverage. However, we do find a positive correlation (0.24) between our measures of transcript informativeness and issue favorability to the Republican party.

In Section 6, we consider the interpretation of our results in additional ways. We calculate approximate individual-level effects, some of which, frankly, seem questionably high. We also look at other dependent variables to better understand the mechanism underlying Fox News effects or the lack thereof. There is some evidence that Fox increased interest in online news in 2004, which may have contributed to the positive effects that year, and that Fox News decreased newspaper reading in other years, possibly contributing to negative effects for issues that were less covered. We also discuss our results' implications for the connection between voting and knowledge. In Section 7, we offer further remarks on interpretation and conclude.

1.1. Related literature

We first discuss the existing literature on Fox News effects, then turn to the literature on slanted media effects, and finally the more general literature on media information effects.

As referred to above, DVK were the first to use Fox's gradual roll-out to identify Fox's effects; DVK found Fox had a 0.4 to 0.7 percentage point increase on the Republican presidential vote share in 2000. Several other papers have used DVK's cable data and empirical approach. Hopkins and Ladd (2014) also merge the DVK cable data to NAES data, but use only the 2000 survey. They find significant effects on Republican voting in 2000 for the subsample of non-Democrats only. Their point estimates are similar to those that we find for that year. Clinton and Enamorado (2014) show that the presidential support score, for Democratic President Bill Clinton, declined for members of Congress in districts that obtained access to Fox News, indicating that Fox caused a shift in legislator behavior to the right. Arceneaux et al. (2013) conduct a similar analysis, finding that effects were stronger as elections approached.

Martin and Yurukoglu (2014) use Nielsen cable data and employ channel position as an instrument for watching Fox News; they find the marginal effect on voting Republican of an hour of Fox viewing per week is over 10 percentage points, about equal to DVK's viewer-level estimates. They compare their Nielsen data to the *Television and Cable Factbook* data used by DVK (and others), and find that from year to year, fewer than half of observations were updated in the Factbooks. We take these findings into account, but we are confident that the Factbook data still capture Fox News exposure reasonably accurately for several reasons. First, since we look at variation in Fox access every four years, the year-to-year non-updates should be less problematic. Second, the effects found by the several studies that use the Factbook data, including our own, support the validity of the data. Third, the non-updating would cause towns coded with Fox News access to on average have had access for longer periods of time than towns mis-coded as not having access. This correlation of the measurement error with duration of Fox access should reduce the attenuation problem, since longer access was likely associated with stronger effects.²

Much of the other recent literature on partisan media uses lab experiments (see, e.g., Levendusky, 2013). While some lab work suggests substantial effects, there is reason to be skeptical. Prior (2005) argues, and provides evidence, that technological change yielding greater media choice has led to greater inequality of political knowledge, with people most interested in entertainment (and not politics) becoming more likely to avoid political news altogether. Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) discuss several experiments showing that when lab subjects are given the opportunity to choose entertainment options over news, this mitigates (apparent) partisan media effects substantially.³

We briefly discuss a few other relevant papers on media information effects. Gerber et al. (2009) report a field experiment, in which free subscriptions to Washington, D.C. newspapers with different slants were given to random households. They find that newspapers did not affect knowledge, regardless of slant; however, their knowledge questions were of a less partisan nature than ours (as we refer to in Section 1). Snyder and Strömberg (2010) find that, in areas where newspapers were, for exogenous reasons, more likely to cover local members of Congress, survey respondents were better able to answer questions about their Congressional representatives from 1982–2004, but local TV markets did not have the same effect. Gentzkow (2006) finds that the quasi-random entry of network TV reduced voter turnout between 1950 and 1970, and argues that this result was due to the crowding out of political information. He finds evidence that, during that time, individuals substituted their media consumption away from radio and newspapers.

² The non-updating would almost never cause towns to be mis-coded as having Fox News access, since once towns gained access they almost always kept it. Fox News effects were likely greater for towns that gained access earlier due to Fox having lower channel numbers in those towns, as discussed by Martin and Yurukoglu, or Fox's effects growing over time (due to increasing probability or duration of exposure to Fox for individual viewers).

³ Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) also provide (in Chapter 3) a nice discussion of selection bias concerns for previous survey-based research on Fox News knowledge effects in particular.

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