2016

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Recommended Citation

Morris, Lauren (2016) "Effect of Media Bias on Credibility of Political News," *Xavier Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 4 , Article 6.
Available at: https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/xjur/vol4/iss1/6

Effect of Media Bias on Credibility of Political News

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Abstract

When different media sources favor a party, they end up attracting an audience who shares beliefs and supports them as a credible source, thereby disengaging the other side of the audience who no longer perceives them as a reliable source of information. This study examined the effect of the candidate's political party (Democratic vs. Republican) and the news source where it came from (Fox News vs. CNN). Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight news stories about a hypothetical congressional candidate. Results showed that CNN was perceived as slightly more credible than Fox News regardless of political party. Results also showed that a Democratic candidate was perceived slightly more credible than the Republican candidate regardless of what news source the story came from. Overall, findings suggest general skepticism towards media sources and political candidates.

Introduction

Often media outlets can be seen as biased towards the different parties, which could make them lose their credibility as a reliable source. Certain programs, *Fox News* being the most notable, have taken scrutiny in the past for being biased towards the Republican Party. The hostility of the reporter can be a factor as well as gain or lose viewership by how they come across when talking about the different parties. When these different media sources favor a party,

they end up attracting an audience who supports them as a credible source, thereby disengaging and ultimately losing the other side of the audience who no longer perceives them as a reliable news outlet. In the political world of the United States, this mainly relates to whether the media's viewers are one of the two main parties; Democratic or Republican, which will be the focus of this study. The purpose of the current study is to examine if media outlets lose their credibility as a reliable source to the viewers the more they become biased towards a specific political party.

Wicks, Wicks, and Morimoto (2012) examined how people decided what media outlets to watch correlating to their political predispositions, also known as partisan selective media exposure. Wicks et al. wanted to update previous research conducted by Klapper (1960), which argued that selective exposure operates within predispositions and reinforces belief systems. They use a range of traditional and social media used in the 2012 election to assess if partisans watch equal amounts of rival and non-rival outlets to their party. Wicks et al. concluded that a month prior to the election, there were clear differences between the Democratic and Republican parties. They also found conservatives to be predominately White and religious people who participated in religious projects, and listened to Fox News and Christian Talk radio, whereas Liberals tended not to identify with religion, were predominately female, and used newer media outlets.

Moeller, Vreese, Esser, and Kunz (2013) studied the impact of both online and offline news media on internal efficiency of young adults. Internal efficiency is the belief that one can understand and participate in politics. In general, online news media intends to have a positive impact due to the interactivity of people. Results showed that newspaper usage was the strongest predictor of internal efficiency. The online sources had a slight effect on internal political efficiency, whereas television had little to no effect. Civic messaging was added to make any effect on political efficiency disappear (one's understanding of the influence of political affairs).. Simply put, civic messaging is anything that gets adolescents involved online, and is one of the most important predictors in internal efficiency. Moeller et

al. generally found that internal efficiencies showed strong drive in predicting first time voter turnout (an increase by 50% compared to not having an influence of internal efficiencies).

Richardson, Huddy, and Morgan (2008) examined the relation between the hostile media effect and biased assimilation. Previous research had shown that hostile media effect and biased assimilation are contradictory to one another. Hostile media effect is a phenomenon where people perceive neutral-based news as hostile and biased against their party. Biased assimilation is the idea that we interpret incoming stimuli congruent to our personal preconceptions (Richardson et al. 2008). Using presidential debates of the Bush-Kerry election, Richardson et al. (2008) tested the scenario that partisans could interpret a message to favor their side. This scenario showed that the hostile media effect and biased assimilation are not contradictory, but instead partially overlap.

Wei, Chia, and Lo (2011) explored the relation between third-person effect and media perception, similar to the study done by Richardson et al. (2008). However, the purpose of their study was to research the perceived impact of polls, not debates. Due to the huge impact of election polls in campaign coverage they focused on how perceived polls are impacted by social influences and media hostility. Unlike Richardson et al. (2008) Wei et al. found a positive correlation between third person perception and hostile media effect, which caused a joint effect between the two studies of the perception of media. Results showed that voters saw others more vulnerable than themselves, and that America may expect divergent perceptions from the different parties no matter how balanced the polls might be. Also voters' media bias positively correlated with third-person perception, which was opposite findings of Richardson et al. (2008). The researchers concluded that American voters tend to think they are smarter and better than other voters, making them overthink the vulnerability of others, and underestimate their own vulnerability.

Morris (2007) researched the consequences of a fragmented (divided by party on which program they watch) television news audience. More reports of the media being biased and cynical have intensified

levels of skepticism towards programs. "For example, a poll conducted in 2004 found that over two-thirds of the U.S. public (69 percent) saw at least a fair amount of political bias in the news and only 7% saw no bias at all" (Morris 2007). Fox News was the channel that showed most fragmentation only appealing to those who "became disillusioned by their media" (Morris 2007). Fox News was also found to have very distinct opinions about Bush and distinct voting patterns. It was concluded by Morris, that Fox news watchers tend to have a different perception of reality than those of other news channels audiences, and their key factor of success is due to the hostile media effect. However, the study by Morris did not examine content or empirically test whether Fox news is the actual cause behind one's political views to be altered.

Coe et al. (2008) examined two trends: the blurring line between hard (pressing issues) and soft news (not-necessarily time sensitive) and an increase in overt partisanship. The study analyzed factors that led partisans to choose a preferred cable news program over others and how the viewers' leanings influence content perceptions of programs, specifically CNN, Fox News, and The Daily Show. The results showed that age did not have a relationship with the exposure to CNN or Fox News, but education had a negative prediction on Fox News. The results from Coe et al. (2008) ultimately revealed "political partisanship plays a significant role in exposure to CNN, Fox News, *The O'Reilly Factor,* and *The Daily Show."* Results also indicated that liberals perceived slightly more story and program bias in Fox News reports. These results show that "partisanship influences viewers' perceptions of bias in cable news programs and content" (Coe et al. 2008). These findings are consistent with the relative hostile media phenomenon (another term for perceived bias). In conclusion the results of both studies show an increase in partisanship being a driving force of media and the need for incorporation of partisanship in news messaging.

Turner (2007) investigated name association of the newscast with the stories, believing that attaching a label to a news story would be an ideological cue regarding content. Turner specifically studied CNN (liberal viewpoint) and Fox News (conservative viewpoint), which

tend to epitomize bias. "Preliminary evidence demonstrates that at least 35% of the American public perceives FNC [Fox News Channel] as being overtly conservative and at least 26% perceive CNN as being liberally biased" (Turner, 2007). The label could create cognitive roadblocks for viewers to properly interpret the actual story. In the case of labeling the story with FNC or CNN, the message is overwhelmed by where it was coming from. Furthermore, the labels have put a strong bias on the newscast from the opposite party (CNN is seen as biased by the conservative party). Turner (2007) showed that CNN and FNC can show identical news stories and receive different feedback. However, the effects tend to vary widely depending on the individual's ideology and how they personally perceive the news.

Johnson and Kaye (2015) asked, "Why do people rely on media that they do not deem credible?" They compared the difference of perception between that of traditional news sites (newspapers and televisions) with that of social media (Twitter and Facebook). Earlier studies found a link between credibility and motivation where users of the internet judge online political information as higher in credibility than those that go online for entertainment purposes. Motivation and credibility are also linked in traditional news sources. Results from Johnson and Kaye (2015) found that all traditional sources (except FNC) were found to be more credible than social media sites. This shows that traditional sources strive to be unbiased. However, the traditional sources are only moderately credible, showing they are below the expectations of being non-biased. The motivations for social media are seen as overpowering the moderate credibility of traditional sources, meaning, "users are willing to trade credibility for need satisfaction" (Johnson and Kaye, 2015).

Many factors from the different studies such as selective exposure, biased assimilation, and name association were used in the current study to examine if media outlets lose credibility as a reliable source to the viewers the more they become biased towards a specific political party. Hypothesis 1 is that by name association, participants will believe a report from CNN over Fox News, even if the report is the same. Hypothesis 2 is that participants will believe Fox will favor

a Republican candidate over a Democratic candidate, and CNN will favor a Democratic candidate over a Republican candidate.

Method

Participants

Out of 174 total participants, 101 participant's data after manipulation check were collected through the participant pool and Canvas site at Xavier University (Appendix A). Participants were also recruited through acquaintances of the researcher through email and social media. Participants received research credit for their participation if they were in the Psychology Participant Pool at Xavier University and were told they were participating in a study on perception of media and politics. Out of the 101 participant's data, 22.8% were male, 75.2% were female and 2 people preferred not to respond, where the age of participants ranged from 18-25. 81.2% of participants were Caucasian, 5 percent were African American, while 3 percent were Hispanic. For political party affiliation, 35.6 percent of participants identified themselves as Republican, 31.7 percent as Democratic, 19.8 percent as Independent, and 10.9 percent were not affiliated with any party/ do not vote.

Design

The current study used a 2x2x2 between-subject, factorial design. However, due to the manipulation check, only a 2x2 between-subject factorial design was used, eliminating the third independent variable after a majority of participants failed the manipulation check. The first independent variable was the type of party. The two levels were Democratic or Republican and were manipulated. The second independent variable was which news station the article came from. The two levels of this independent variable were Fox News and CNN and this variable was manipulated as well. The third independent variable was the type of ideology the state holds where the candidate lives (this independent variable was removed from the data). There also was a fourth manipulation check on whether or not the citizen believed the candidate was fit for the job, but it was not used in the

analysis of the data. The two levels were between a liberal state and conservative state and were manipulated. There were two dependent variables. The first dependent variable that was analyzed was whether or not the news source was a credible source, and the second dependent variable was the credibility of the candidate. Both were based on 5 point scales that measured from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Materials and Measures

All materials and measures were conducted online and included an informed consent (Appendix A), and one vignette (Appendix B), which presented one of the eight conditions (using random assignment). A questionnaire relating to the vignette (Appendix C), a personal opinion questionnaire based on political values (Appendix D), a manipulation check (Appendix E), and a demographics packet (Appendix F) were also included. At the end, participants were redirected to a separate credit form where data were collected for those who needed research credit (Appendix G) and then everyone received a debriefing form (Appendix H).
Procedure

After following a link, participants first saw the informed consent (Appendix A) and were told their answers cannot be correlated back to them, ensuring complete anonymity. One of eight vignettes (Appendix B) were randomly assigned using Qualtrics and after reading the vignette participants then filled out the questionnaire related to the vignette (Appendix C) and personal political opinion based questionnaire (Appendix D), as well as a manipulation check (Appendix E). They were then given the demographics (Appendix F) before being redirected to a credit form (Appendix G) where they had to fill out to receive research credit. Those who were not participating for research credit were also redirected to this page to read the debriefing form. After filling out the credit slip, they were given a debriefing form (Appendix H), which reminded them of their anonymity for complete reassurance.

Results

A 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to investigate the effects of media bias on credibility of the news source and also a congressional candidate. Results for credibility of the news source showed that news channel had a significant main effect, $F(1, 97) = 10.42$, $p = .002$, such that CNN ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.60$) was perceived more credible than Fox News, ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.67$). This supports Hypothesis 1. There was no other significant main effect found for political party, $F(1, 97) = 0.00$, $p = .962$, and no significant interaction between news source and political party, $F(1, 97) = 0.20$, $p = .889$. Refer to table 1 for the ANOVA summary table. Results for credibility of the congressional candidate showed that there was a significant main effect of the candidate's political party, $F(1, 97) = 4.95$, $p = .028$, such that participants perceived the Democratic candidate ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.77$) as more credible than the Republican candidate ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.57$). There is no significant main effect of the new source and no significant interaction between political party and news source. Given that there was not significant interaction, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Table 1

Source of Variance	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Political Party	.001	1	.001	.002	.962
News Source	4.31	1	4.31	10.42	.002
Party*News	.008	1	.008	.020	.889
Error	40.12	97	0.41		

Credibility of News Source

Table 2

Source of Variance	SS	df	MS	F	p
Political Party	2.24	1	2.24	4.95	.028
News Source	.334	1	.334	.738	.392
Party*News	.011	1	.011	.025	.874
Error	43.93	97	.453		

Credibility of Political Candidate

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine if media outlets lose their credibility as a reliable source to the viewers the more they become biased towards a specific political party. Hypothesis 1, CNN is more credible than Fox, was supported. In general it did not matter if the candidate was Republican or Democrat, CNN was perceived more credible than Fox. The means for the news company were neutral (CNN had a slightly higher mean than Fox), overall finding that the participants were skeptical of the credibility of the news sources. Given that there was not significant interaction, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. However participants viewed the Democratic candidate more credible than the Republican candidate, no matter the news source. The credibility means were also neutral for both political parties, suggesting that participants were skeptical of the credibility of the candidates. It is interesting to note that only 32 % of participants were Democratic therefore political party of the participants should not have affected the findings.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

A wide range of media outlets can use this study to determine viewership, including Television hosts, newspapers, online news outlets, and even blog posts. Anyone in politics, specifically political campaigns, can also benefit from this study on how they come across to the media and what can be done differently. This study can

theoretically help media outlets understand the importance of how they present their information and how they come across to the audience in order to help them with their viewership numbers, as well as not be discredited as a reliable news outlet to be used for future references.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations to this study included not having enough participants to have a significant effect, which was controlled by having the study eliminate one of the independent variables and having the researcher's acquaintances participate as well. Since political orientation stems from a variety of background characteristics, it was hard to gain information needed to determine factors of their pre-existing beliefs. To control this an extensive demographics form was included, but it did not give much insight into pre-existing beliefs, however random assignment was used to address individual differences. Another limitation was that the study used a hypothetical candidate and while it controlled for candidate bias, it was not realistic. Future studies should try to use a stronger manipulation of the independent variable that was removed from this study: the residency of the candidate.

Conclusions

Results showed that CNN was perceived as slightly more credible than Fox News regardless of political party, supporting Hypothesis 1. Given that there was not significant interaction, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Results also showed that a Democratic candidate was perceived slightly more credible than the Republican candidate regardless of what news source the story came from. Overall, findings suggest general skepticism towards the credibility of both media sources and political candidates, due to neutral means found in the study.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Lauren Morris investigating perceptions of media and politics. In order to participate in this study, Xavier University requires that you provide your consent. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for PSYC 222 & 224: Research Methods and Design II. This project is covered under the class's Course Certification approval, provided by Xavier University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and was individually reviewed by the IRB. If any issues arise over the course of the study relating to your rights as a research participant, you should contact Xavier University's IRB at (513) 745-2870 or via e-mail at irb@xavier.edu.

Your participation in this study will involve reading a vignette, followed by a few questionnaires and a demographics form. The total time to complete this study is approximately 15 minutes.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts related to your participation in this study. For participant pool credit you must fill out a form on a separate webpage with your name and class. If you are not in the participant pool, you do not have to fill out a credit slip, and no research credit will be granted, but I do appreciate your time and assistance in this study. Your responses will remain anonymous and there will be no link between you and your responses. In addition, any demographic information you provide will not be used for identification purposes and will only be reported on an aggregated basis.

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services to which you may be entitled from Xavier University. You are under no obligation to participate in this study, and you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty
.
If you have any questions at any time during the study, you may contact the researcher, Lauren Morris, at morrisl@xavier.edu , or the professor supervising this study, Dr. Dalia Diab, at diabd@xavier.edu.
_____

By reading the vignette and completing the questionnaires, I am agreeing to participate in this study.

Appendix B

Vignettes

John Smith (Democrat), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that might put him in trouble. Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, friendlier immigration laws into his more conservative state. His plan seems more on the far left of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll taken by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters want. "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a socialist government and that is *not* what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the conservative state.
-Fox News

John Smith (Republican), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that might put him in trouble. Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, stricter immigration laws into his more liberal state. His plan seems more on the far right of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll taken by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters don't want . "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a capitalist government and that is not what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the liberal state.
-Fox News

John Smith (Democrat), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that might put him in trouble. Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, friendlier immigration laws into his more conservative state. His plan seems more on the far left of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll taken by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters don't want. "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a socialist government and that is *not* what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the conservative state.
-CNN

John Smith (Democrat), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that could boost his campaign Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, friendlier immigration laws into his more liberal state. His plan seems more on the far left of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll taken

by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters want. "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a socialist government and that is what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the liberal state.
-CNN

John Smith (Democrat), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that could boost his campaign Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, friendlier immigration laws into his more liberal state. His plan seems more on the far left of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll taken by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters want. "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a socialist government and that is what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the liberal state.
-Fox News

John Smith (Republican), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that might put him in trouble. Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, stricter immigration laws into his more liberal state. His plan seems more on the far right of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll taken by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters don't want. "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a capitalist government and that is *not* what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the liberal state.
-CNN

John Smith (Republican), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that could boost his campaign. Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, stricter immigration laws into his more conservative state. His plan seems more on the far right of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll taken by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters want. "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a capitalist government and that is what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the conservative state.
-Fox News

John Smith (Republican), who is running for the open U.S. Senate seat, has started new legislation that could boost his campaign. Smith currently holds a position as a state senator and plans to introduce a bill to implement new, stricter immigration laws into his more conservative state. His plan seems more on the far right of the scale of the political spectrum according to a poll

taken by prospective voters which seems to be what his voters want. "I see his plan is moving our state to more of a capitalist government and that is what America should be", said Sara Miller a resident of the conservative state.
-CNN

Appendix D

Opinion based political survey

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements based on your personal attitudes and behaviors.

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

The issue in the vignette is one that matters to me
I watch FOX News on a regular basis
I actively involve myself in political conversations
The issue in the vignette is something I am opposed to
I attend events (rallies, protests, information sessions, talks) involving political conversation
I watch CNN on a regular basis
I actively watch news reports involving political conversations
The issue in the vignette is something I agree with
I vote in primary elections for the President of the United States
I vote in state/local elections
I vote in federal elections (U.S. Senate, House, and Presidential)

Appendix E

Manipulation Check

Please answer the following questions related to the news story you read:

Which Political Party did the candidate belong to?
        Democratic
        Republican

What type of state did the candidate reside in?
        Conservative
        Liberal

Which news site did this vignette come from?
        FOX
        CNN

Did the citizen think the candidate was fit for the job?
        YES
        NO

Appendix F

Demographics

The following items collect demographic information about individuals participating in this study. This information will not be used for identification purposes and will only be reported on an aggregated basis.

Gender

 Male   Female   Other _____   Prefer not to respond

Race/Ethnicity

Caucasian or White   Black or African American
Indian or Alaska Native   Hispanic
Pacific Islander   Multiracial
Other _____   Prefer not to respond

Age _____

Year in School

First Year   Second Year   Third Year   Fourth Year
Graduate   Other _____

Political Ideology

           1   2   3   4   5

   Highly Conservative   Moderate   Highly Liberal

Political Party Affiliation

Republican
    Democratic
    Independent
    No Party
    Other _____

Appendix G

Credit Survey

Are you in the Psychology Participant Pool? If no, there is no need to answer the following questions but please answer this question and read the debriefing form.
> **Yes**
> **No**

<u>Please provide the following information to receive research credit, read the debriefing form, and then click submit</u>

First and Last Name
Professor's Name
Course