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How Does Local TV News Change Viewers' Attitudes? The Case of Sinclair Broadcasting

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ABSTRACT



How does local television news shape viewers' national political attitudes? The answer is unclear, because local news typically focuses on local, not national, stories, and is politically neutral. But the rise of Sinclair Broadcasting, now the nation's second-largest owner of local TV stations, upends that assumption. News on Sinclair-owned stations focuses more on national topics, and presents them with a right-wing slant. Given this, we might expect it to shift its viewers' attitudes in a pro-Republican direction. Using data on Sinclair's acquisition of local TV stations between 2008 and 2018, I show that living in an area with a Sinclair-owned TV station lowers viewers' approval of President Obama during his tenure in office, and makes viewers less likely to vote for the Democratic nominee for president. This has important implications for our understanding of the effects of local TV news, as well as for media trust, as I discuss in the conclusion.


KEYWORDS

Local TV news; partisan bias; media effects

Can local television news change viewers' attitudes about national political topics? While local television news remains among the most-watched, and most-trusted, news sources in America (Greico and Miller 2019), the expectation from the extant literature is that its effects on national political attitudes should be relatively muted. Local TV news outlets traditionally cover local, rather than national, topics (things like sports, traffic, and weather), and when they do cover national politics, they typically do so from a nonpartisan perspective (Roberts & Dickson, 1984). While these programs certainly have attitudinal effects, it is typically on more locally-focused topics like crime (Romer et al., 2006, Gillam and Iyengar 2000).

But the growth of Sinclair Broadcasting calls this expectation of minimal effects into question. The news on Sinclair-owned TV stations both focuses more on national topics, especially politics, and it does so from a decidedly right-wing point of view (Martin & McCrain, 2019; Tryon, 2020). Indeed, Sinclair embraces the "cable newsification" of local news (Hedding et al., 2018), where local news comes to look more like the partisan outlets on cable studied in a number of recent works (e.g., Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2011). Sinclair has also grown rapidly in recent years, and while it failed in its 2017 bid to buy Tribune Media¹ – which would have given it access to 71% of U.S. households (Snider,

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2018) – it is still the second-largest owner of TV stations, with 193 stations spread across the country reaching roughly 40% of Americans. So not only is Sinclair’s news distinct, it is also widely available throughout the country, raising the possibility that it may have a significant effect on viewers’ attitudes.

I use Sinclair’s purchasing of local stations between 2008 and 2018 to examine whether Sinclair-owned stations can shape viewers’ attitudes. I show that when Sinclair buys a local TV station, there is no effect on viewers’ underlying predispositions, such as their partisanship or their liberal-conservative self-identification. But their approval of President Obama decreases, and they become less likely to vote for Democratic presidential candidates as well. These effects are consistent with Sinclair persuading roughly 6% of its audience to disapprove of the President and become less likely to vote for Democrats, and these effects are robust to a wide variety of different modeling assumptions. Such effects have important implications for political information, the future of local news, and trust in media more generally.

Does Local TV News Change Attitudes about National Politics?

Can local news change attitudes about national politics? The classic answer from political communications scholars was that any such effects that existed would have operated not through persuasion, but more subtle processes like agenda setting and priming (i.e., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Local TV newscasts focused on local topics: traffic, (local) sports, weather, and so forth. To the extent that they did cover politics, they typically did so from a nonpartisan fashion without evincing much evidence of bias (Roberts & Dickson, 1984). Not surprisingly, then, few works even examine the possibility that these outlets would shape attitudes toward national political figures, focusing instead on their effects on local issues, such as crime (Romer et al., 2006, Gillam and Iyengar 2000).

But the rise of Sinclair Broadcasting – now the nation’s second largest owner of television stations – raises the possibility that local news might shape national political attitudes. The news on Sinclair-owned stations differs from traditional newscasts in at least two key ways. First, the news is highly nationalized rather than localized: Sinclair’s broadcasts include approximately 25% more national news coverage than other similar stations (Martin & McCrain, 2019), focusing on national politics and terrorism at the expense of more localized topics like crime or transportation (Hedding et al., 2018). Second, this news coverage comes with a decidedly right-wing tilt, with Sinclair-owned stations presenting the news from a more partisan perspective in terms of both the language used and the sources cited (Hedding et al., 2018; Martin & McCrain, 2019; Tryon, 2020). Further, Sinclair’s coverage is also more anti-elite, suggesting that powerful forces are conspiring against ordinary voters, paralleling the rhetoric from some Republican officials such as President Trump (Tryon, 2020). Indeed, as Hedding et al. (2018) note, Sinclair’s newscasts represent a sort of “cable newsification” of local news, with a move away from straightforward reporting toward a blending of news and editorializing (especially on these more nationally-focused topics).²

Sinclair’s “must run” segments, which (as the name implies) local stations must air, exemplify both of these trends. These segments focus on national political topics such as terrorism or media bias, and often feature commentary from right-wing pundits such as Sebastian Gorka, Mark Hyman, or Boris Epshteyn (Matthews, 2018; Tryon, 2020). While journalists at many Sinclair-owned stations claim that such segments violate their

journalistic ethics, they are nonetheless required to air them (Battaglio & Pearce, 2018). In perhaps the most famous of these segments, in March 2018, Sinclair required local newscasters to read an identical script criticizing the media for spreading fake news and displaying partisan bias (Fortin & Bromwich, 2018). Such claims of media bias are nothing new, and they fit within a long-standing Republican narrative about the press (Watts et al., 1999). But having them broadcast by local TV anchors in a coordinated efforts does represent a meaningful change.

Both of these factors – nationalization and partisan slant – shape viewers’ attitudes about national political topics. Overall, the media have become increasingly nationalized over time, with the decline of local newspapers and the rise of broadband Internet (Hopkins, 2018), and this shift polarizes voting behavior and attitudes (Darr et al. 2019, Moskowitz, 2021; Trussler, *Forthcoming*). Likewise, we know that the partisan slant of the news shapes attitudes as well. When an outlet favors a given candidate or position, viewers are more likely to support it. For example, the slant of newspapers (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002, Ladd and Lenz 2009), talk radio programs (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), and cable TV news shows (Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2011) change which candidates viewers’ are likely to support, and these shifts also change their attitudes more generally (Djourelouva, 2020). That said, while this influence is real, it is typically subtle: as Dalton et al. (1998) put it, such effects are “modest” (124), consistent with the reality that viewers consume multiple outlets (which may have differing positions) and media effects are simply one factor that shapes viewers’ attitudes.

Given this, I predict that watching a Sinclair-owned TV channel will push viewers’ political attitudes and vote choice in a pro-Republican direction. Such effects should be especially likely in the case of Sinclair because local news is both a leading source of news for Americans, and is also among the most trusted news sources across the political spectrum (Grieco & Mitchell, 2019). Subjects who might never listen to talk radio, watch a cable news program, or read partisan websites might sit down and watch their local news broadcast and be persuaded by the content. Indeed, Sinclair matters in part because as local newspapers die, local TV news remains one of the only resources for locally focused content, and so if Sinclair-owned stations shift away from it, this further heightens the nationalization of news. Because Sinclair is the second-largest owner of news stations in the U.S. – and their newscasts can be seen by almost 40% of Americans – they have considerable power to potentially change their viewers’ attitudes. This makes searching for a Sinclair effect on attitudes especially valuable.

To test this hypothesis, I gathered data on Sinclair’s ownership of local TV stations from 2008 through 2018, and then paired that with data on viewers’ preferences. To gather data on TV station ownership, I used Warren’s Factbook, Nielsen (via S&P Global), the FCC, and where there was any ambiguity, by directly contacting the stations themselves. Given my focus on the effects of local news, I restrict my analysis to those channels that actually broadcast a local news program. More details on determining ownership are provided in the supplemental appendix, as is descriptive data on Sinclair’s growth over this period.

To capture the potential audience for each station, I use zip-code level availability from Nielsen (again, via S&P Global). The Nielsen data records which networks (both cable and local TV channels) are available through each cable and satellite provider operating in each zip code.³ Here, I count a station as being available in a zip code if the largest provider (in terms of number of subscribers) in that zip code carries that station, following the rule from

Martin and Yurukoglu (2017).⁴ This is a slightly different rule than the one used in much previous research, which assumes that only viewers within the station’s media market can actually watch a local TV station (e.g., Huber & Arceneaux, 2007). Media markets are a proprietary division of the country produced by Nielsen for marketing purposes, which capture most of those who receive a given TV channel. According to Nielsen, a media market (or as they term it, a designated market area) is a “group of counties that form an exclusive geographic area in which the home market television stations hold a dominance of total hours viewed” (Nielsen, 2019). But this need not be everyone who can receive a particular television station. Local TV broadcast availability is determined by the reach of broadcast transmission towers, and there are areas outside of a station’s home media market where residents can receive that channel using a TV antenna (see the discussion in Llaudet, 2018). The FCC requires cable and satellite providers in these areas to include these channels in their packages as well, as the FCC details in its “must carry” rules (Federal Communications Commission (FCC), 2015). For example, while WJAC TV is in the Johnstown-Altoona-State College media market, many residents of Westmoreland county – part of the Pittsburgh media market – receive the channel either via a TV antenna or as part of their cable or satellite package. The same phenomenon occurs along the boundaries of other media markets as well, so assuming that the audience for a local TV station is only those within its media market is incorrect.⁵ However, as I show in the supplemental appendix, using this traditional measure of media market-based availability produces substantively similar results to those reported here.

To measure the effects on viewers’ attitudes, I use the Gallup micro-data, which is an aggregation of every interview conducted by Gallup during the 2008–2018 period (Gallup, 2019). The great strength of this data is its enormous sample size, with over 3.6 million interviews spread across the country over this 11-year period. The limitation is that the dataset includes a very small number of political items included on all surveys: respondents’ partisanship, their liberal-conservative self-identification, their retrospective economic evaluation (whether they think the economy is getting better, getting worse, or staying about the same), and their presidential approval. But because of the difficulty of getting enough data to detect the likely modest effects of TV news, the Gallup data are invaluable.

To verify the robustness of these results, I use the pooled Cooperative Congressional Election Study data (2008–2018) as a robustness check (Kuriwaki, 2018). The CCES Data provides me with everything from the Gallup data, but also includes vote choice for President, Senate, and House of Representatives (as well as senatorial and House member approval). This allows me not only to replicate the main findings from Gallup, but also to examine whether they extend to down-ballot (but still highly nationalized) offices.

To estimate the effects of the availability of a Sinclair-owned station on viewers’ attitudes, I estimate the following model:

$$a_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Sinclair}_{z(i),t} + \gamma_{z(i)} + \eta_{m(t)} + \rho_{d(t)} + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

, where a_{it} is respondent i ’s attitude recorded in an interview conducted on day t , $\text{Sinclair}_{z(i),t}$ is an indicator for whether Sinclair owns any TV stations that broadcast in 3-digit zip code z (where respondent i lives) on day t , $\gamma_{z(i)}$ is a set of 3-digit zip code fixed effects, η_t is a set of month fixed effects (to account for differences over time as political conditions change), $\rho_{d(t)}$ are a set of day-of-the-week fixed effects (to account for the fact that different types of

people might answer a Gallup survey during the week versus on a weekend), and ϵ is an error term. Because Sinclair availability is measured at the 3-digit zip code level (rather than the individual level), I cluster my standard errors at the 3-digit zip code level to account for this dependence in the data.

Two components of the model deserve a brief elaboration. First, I work here at the 3-digit zip code level, sometimes also known as a zip code prefix level. This is one level higher of aggregation from a standard 5-digit zip code, and is roughly equivalent to a metro area. The reason to use 3-digit zip codes is that even with the tremendous sample size of the Gallup data, there are a number of 5-digit zip codes with only a handful of respondents in a given year, but this is much less of an issue when using 3-digit zip codes. Re-running the model using the 5-digit zip code yields substantively very similar results (see the supplemental appendix). Second, here I include fixed effects for month in the specification above, but the substantive results are similar if I use other levels of aggregation (i.e., day or year fixed effects). While it is important to account for temporal dynamics in some way, the exact form is not particularly consequential.

The key parameter of interest is β_1 , which measures the effect of living in 3-digit zip code where Sinclair owns a local TV station. The analytical leverage here comes from the fact that Sinclair acquires 89 local TV stations during this 10-year window through buying up independent stations and smaller operators (see the supplemental appendix). Given the setup of equation (1) with time and zip code fixed effects, β_1 indicates what happens to viewers in zip codes where Sinclair buys a local TV station (so the zip code goes from not having a Sinclair-owned station to having one).

But because no dataset records whether a respondent actually watches a given TV station, there is no way of knowing which (if any) Gallup respondents actually watch a Sinclair-owned station. Instead, all I know is whether someone lives in an area where they *could* watch a Sinclair station's TV news broadcast, so these estimates are intent-to-treat effects – this is the effect of being able to watch these shows, not watching them per se. While this is a limitation, because media self-reports are notoriously unreliable (Prior, 2009), I focus here on this measure of availability and leave measuring actual viewership for future work.

Before turning to the model, it is helpful to see the data graphically to better understand the over-time dynamics. To do this, I aggregate the Gallup responses for each of the four dependent variables (partisanship, liberal-conservative self-identification, presidential approval, and retrospective economic evaluations) by month from 2010 to 2016, and plot them separately for three groups of individuals: (1) those who live in an area that always had a Sinclair-owned station (but did not acquire any more over this period), (2) those who live in areas without any Sinclair-owned stations, and (3) those who live in an area where Sinclair purchases a station during this period. We can view group #2 as the “control” and group #3 as the “treatment,” since the model is estimating what happens to viewers when Sinclair purchases one of their local TV stations (group #1 is pre-treated, and serves more as a baseline). If Sinclair has an effect on viewers' attitudes, then when Sinclair buys a station, viewers in that area should become more Republican, more conservative, have more negative views of the economy during Obama's tenure, and be more likely to disapprove of President Obama. I examine this in [Figure 1](#) by examining the patterns for stations Sinclair purchases in 2013, when it buys 43 stations (fully 48% of all stations it acquires over this 10-year period, see the supplemental appendix), as this is the largest yearly shift in the

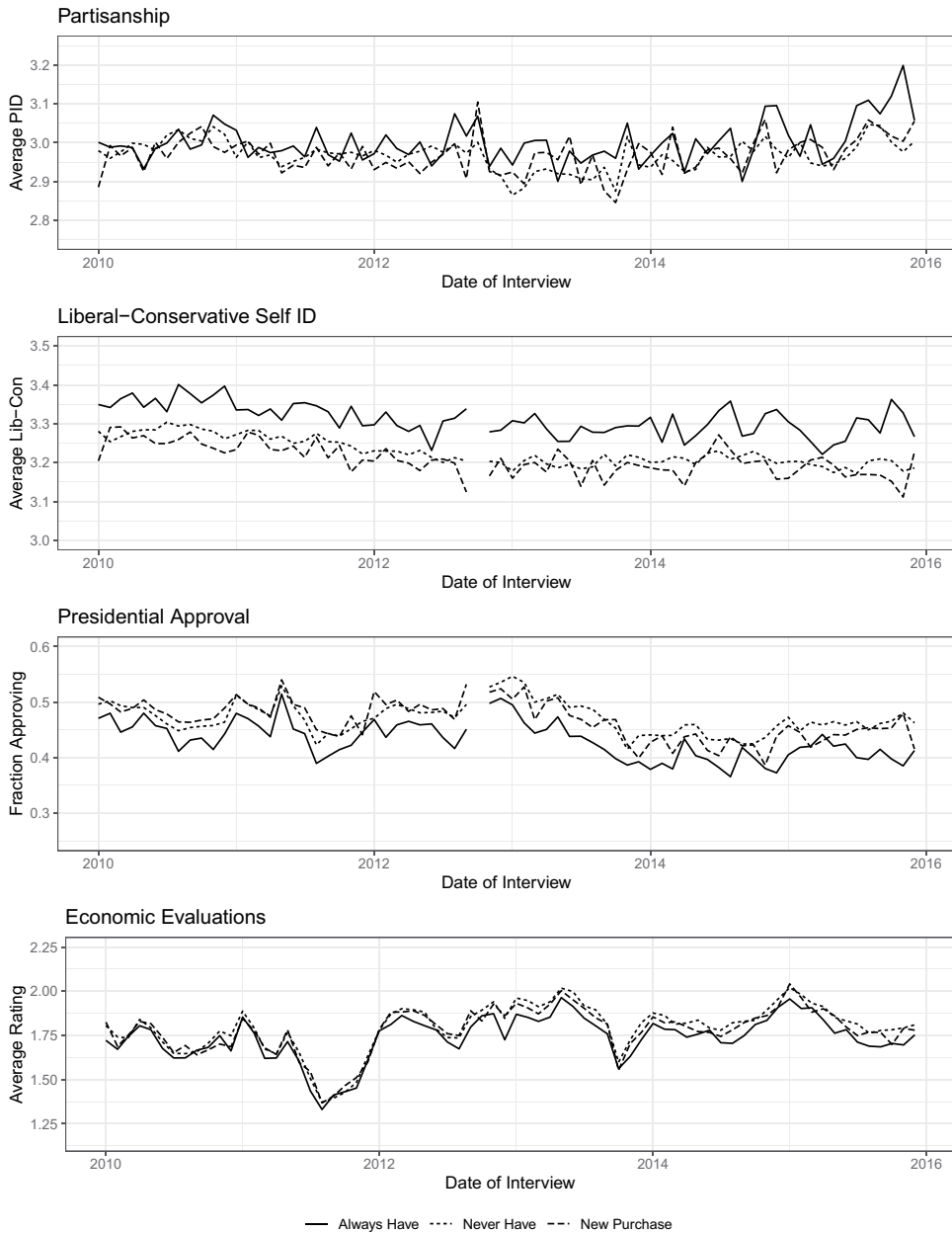


Figure 1. Over-time patterns of partisanship, liberal-conservative self-identification, presidential approval, and economic evaluations by sinclair-owned network availability.

data (and one that provides much of the analytical leverage for the estimation of equation (1) above).⁶

Begin with the top panel, which shows partisanship over this period. We see no clear pattern of results, with all three groups bouncing around in a tight band, consistent with findings about the over-time stability of partisanship (Green et al., 2002). Likewise, in the

bottom panel, we see no real pattern on views of the economy, with all three areas moving in parallel, with the shifts driven more by macroeconomic changes than any media effects. I observe somewhat clearer patterns for liberal-conservative self-identification and Presidential approval. Respondents living in areas that always have Sinclair-owned stations (the solid line) are somewhat more conservative and also less likely to approve of President Obama, which would be consistent with the claim that Sinclair has typically bought stations in smaller, more rural areas (see the supplemental appendix for more on the demographics of areas where Sinclair owns and purchases stations during this period).⁷ But note that there seems to be a clear trend before and after 2013. Before 2013, those living in areas where Sinclair acquires a station in 2013 (the long-dashed line) are more liberal, and more likely to approve of President Obama, relative to those in areas where Sinclair never owns a station (the short dashed line). But this pattern flips in 2013 when Sinclair purchases a local station: those living in the area with a Sinclair-owned station become more conservative and less likely to approve of President Obama. This is initial evidence that Sinclair can shape respondents' attitudes.

Table 1 tests these effects more rigorously by estimating equation (1) for each of these four dependent variables.

Table 1 shows that the availability of a Sinclair-owned station has no effect on political predispositions such as partisanship and liberal-conservative self-identification, nor on economic assessments, whether or not I include individual-level covariates in the model. So while it seemed like there was an effect on liberal-conservative self-identification in Figure 1, the difference was not statistically significant. But there is an effect on President Obama's approval: those living in zip codes where Sinclair buys a local TV station become between 1.1% (no controls) and 0.9% (with controls) less likely to approve of President Obama (for additional details on the stability of this coefficient estimate under different alternative specifications, see the supplemental appendix). While I can estimate this quantity for President Obama (for whom I observe the entire 8-year span of his presidency), for

Table 1. Effects of sinclair-owned TV station availability on respondent attitudes, Gallup data.

	Party ID (1)	Party ID (2)	Lib-Con Self ID (1)	Lib-Con Self ID (2)	Obama Approval (1)	Obama Approval (2)	Economic Evaluation (1)	Economic Evaluation (2)
Sinclair Availability	0.008 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.008)	-0.000 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.011*** (0.003)	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.007 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.010)
Party ID				0.325*** (0.002)		-0.190*** (0.001)		-0.084*** (0.001)
African-American		-0.880*** (0.026)		0.178*** (0.007)		0.118*** (0.004)		0.018*** (0.006)
White		0.584*** (0.018)		-0.091*** (0.007)		-0.083*** (0.002)		-0.022*** (0.004)
Female		-0.333*** (0.004)		-0.085*** (0.002)		0.019*** (0.001)		-0.111*** (0.002)
College Graduate		-0.154*** (0.007)		-0.151*** (0.004)		0.048*** (0.001)		0.088*** (0.002)
Age		-0.000 (0.000)		0.006*** (0.000)		-0.001*** (0.000)		-0.002*** (0.000)
R2	0.060	0.132	0.058	0.338	0.078	0.524	0.068	0.109
Adj. R2	0.059	0.132	0.057	0.337	0.078	0.523	0.068	0.108

Note: Cell entries are OLS parameter estimates for equation (1) in the paper with associated standard errors (clustered at the zip code level) in parentheses. All models include zip code and day of interview fixed effects. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

President Trump, where I only observe a 2-year window (2017–2018), I cannot estimate the effect, as there is not enough information in the model to do so. Digging deeper into the effects of Sinclair-owned outlets during President Trump’s tenure will require a new design with different data.

The fact that the availability of a Sinclair-owned station shapes Obama approval – but not partisanship or liberal-conservative self-identification – reaffirms the findings in prior work that the effects of outlet slant are more modest than massive. Earlier studies largely found effects on outcomes like candidate favorability and vote choice, not fundamental predispositions like partisanship. This pattern of results also makes sense given the content of local news broadcasts. If Sinclair broadcasts national political segments that lean to the right, then during this period, they would be likely to emphasize news critical of President Obama, so viewers have a more straightforward connection between the content and the attitude. Approval is also likely to be more malleable than those other concepts, making it easier to shift in response to news content.

What do these effects imply about the persuasive power of Sinclair’s programming? Della Vigna and Gentzkow (2010) show how to calculate the persuasion rate, which is the fraction of the audience that is persuaded to change its behavior by the communication – so here, the fraction of the public that disapproves of President Obama as a result of watching a Sinclair-owned TV news broadcast. To calculate this, I need to know three quantities: (1) the effect of Sinclair availability on approval, (2) the fraction of the public with access to a Sinclair-owned station, and (3) Obama’s approval in areas without access to a Sinclair-owned affiliate. All of these quantities can be estimated from the data used to estimate Table 1: the effect of access to a Sinclair-owned station is 0.9%, 28% of Gallup respondents have access to a Sinclair-owned station (averaged across time), and Obama’s approval (averaged across his term) in areas without access to a Sinclair-owned station is 50%. Using formula 1 from Della Vigna and Gentzkow (2010, p. 645), that suggests that the persuasion rate is 6%, a persuasion rate similar to other types of media communications, such as the effect of newspaper endorsements (Chiang and Knight 2011), and is approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ the effect of Fox News availability (Della Vigna & Kaplan, 2007; on other estimates of the persuasive effects of media, see Table 1 in Della Vigna & Gentzkow, 2010). This effect is also quite likely to be an under-estimate of Sinclair’s true effects, given that I do not know who actually views these outlets. But nevertheless, the effects of local TV news are considerable, and Sinclair owned stations do seem to have reduced Obama’s approval by a non-trivial amount.⁸

While I cannot measure which viewers watch local news, I do know which *types* of viewers watch it – they are older, less well-educated, and poorer. In particular, those 50 and older, with a high school degree or less, and who make under 30,000 USD are the most likely to watch TV news (Pew Research Center, 2017). If my argument is correct, then I should find that voters in these groups are especially likely to have been persuaded by Sinclair. Table 2 tests for these heterogeneous effects.

Table 2 shows that living in a zip code where Sinclair owns a TV station has a larger effect for these groups of individuals. While there are no heterogeneous effects by age, I do find stronger effects for less educated and poorer voters, consistent with the argument that these voters are more likely to watch local news.

Of course, one concern with an analysis such as this one is that these effects might reflect a type of selection effect: perhaps it is not that the availability of a Sinclair-owned station that changes attitudes, but instead that Sinclair buys TV stations in more conservative areas,

Table 2. Heterogeneous effects of sinclair-owned TV station availability, gallup data.

	Age	Education	Income
Sinclair Availability	−0.010*** (0.003)	−0.004 (0.003)	−0.005* (0.002)
Party ID	−0.190*** (0.001)	−0.190*** (0.001)	−0.190*** (0.001)
African-American	0.116*** (0.004)	0.115*** (0.004)	0.118*** (0.004)
White	−0.087*** (0.002)	−0.082*** (0.002)	−0.083*** (0.002)
Female	0.018*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.001)
College Graduate	0.048*** (0.001)		0.049*** (0.001)
Age		−0.001*** (0.000)	−0.001*** (0.000)
Low-Income			0.008*** (0.001)
Sinclair*Low Income			−0.014*** (0.002)
Older Respondent	−0.029*** (0.001)		
Low Education		−0.030*** (0.001)	
Sinclair*Older	0.001 (0.002)		
Sinclair*Low Education		−0.017*** (0.003)	
R2	0.523	0.523	0.524
Adj.R2	0.523	0.522	0.523

Note: Cell entries are OLS parameter estimates for equation (1) in the paper with associated standard errors (clustered at the zip code level) in parentheses. All models include zip code and day of interview fixed effects. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

giving the appearance of an effect where there is none (i.e., there is a violation of the parallel trends assumption such that areas where Sinclair purchases a station were *ex ante* different). One way to guard against this possibility is to re-specify equation (1) including the leads and lags of treatment – that is, predict Obama approval in year t as a function of Sinclair availability in years $t-2$, $t-1$, t , $t+1$, and $t+2$ (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). In particular, I should not see any effects of lagged availability on approval, as that would suggest that there are preexisting differences between places where Sinclair buys stations and where it does not. Table 3 presents these results.

Table 3 shows that there are no effects of lagged or leading Sinclair availability, suggesting that there is no systematic difference between respondents in the places where Sinclair chooses to buy stations and those where it does not.⁹ The effects in Tables 1 and 2 above do not simply reflect selection effects, but rather instead reflect at least some persuasive effects of Sinclair-owned media.

To ensure that these findings are not simply a product of this one dataset, I re-estimated equation (1) using the data from the CCES data from 2008 to 2018.¹⁰ In the CCES data, I have both the four outcomes from Gallup (partisanship, liberal-conservative self-identification, presidential approval, and economic evaluations), as well as presidential vote choice. Table 4 presents these results.

The results here replicate the analysis from the Gallup data presented above in Table 1: there is no effect on partisanship, liberal-conservative self-identification, or economic

Table 3. Effects of lead and lags of sinclair ownership, gallup data.

	Lead-Lag
Sinclair Availability, t-2	0.003 (0.003)
Sinclair Availability, t-1	-0.003 (0.003)
Sinclair Availability, t	-0.006* (0.003)
Sinclair Availability, t + 1	-0.003 (0.003)
Sinclair Availability, t + 2	-0.000 (0.003)
Party ID	-0.191*** (0.001)
African-American	0.122*** (0.004)
White	-0.086*** (0.002)
Female	0.017*** (0.001)
College Graduate	0.052*** (0.001)
Age	-0.001*** (0.000)
R2	0.527
Adj.R2	0.527

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: Cell entries are OLS parameter estimates for equation (1) in the paper with associated standard errors (clustered at the zip code level) in parentheses. All models include zip code and day of interview fixed effects. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

evaluations, but there is a modest effect on Obama approval (again, there is not enough information to estimate the effect for Trump). With the CCES data, however, I also find a small but significant effect on individual-level Presidential vote choice: respondents who live in a zip code where Sinclair purchases a local TV station become 1% less likely to vote for the Democratic candidate, implying a persuasion rate of 7%, nearly identical to the effect on presidential approval. Once again, Sinclair has a modest but real effect on viewers' attitudes.

But there is another advantage to using the CCES data: I can explore the effects of Sinclair on down-ballot offices. In Table 5, I show the effects of Sinclair availability of House, Senate, and gubernatorial vote choice, as well as on House member approval. Table 5 presents these results.

Here, we see no effects of Sinclair availability on approval (for either Democratic or Republican House members), nor do we see any effects on vote choice – while Sinclair changes attitudes toward the president, it has no effects on other federal or state-level offices. This, perhaps, should not be surprising, since television news almost never cover these offices (Snyder & David, 2010; Vinson, 2003). Sinclair could easily produce “must run” segments about the president, but even doing that for every Senator or governor – let alone member of the House – is functionally not possible. Indeed, it is unlikely that most of these individuals even get mentioned with any frequency in these local newscasts. In a 30-min broadcast, there simply isn't time to cover these individuals in enough detail to really change viewers' attitudes.

Table 4. Effects of Sinclair-owned TV station availability on respondents national-level attitudes, CCES data.

	Party ID (1)	Party ID (2)	Lib-Con Self ID (1)	Lib-Con Self ID (2)	Obama Approval (1)	Obama Approval (2)	Presidential Vote (1)	Presidential Vote (2)	Economic Evaluation (1)	Economic Evaluation (2)
Sinclair Availability	-0.011 (0.022)	-0.007 (0.022)	-0.004 (0.011)	0.001 (0.008)	-0.029* (0.016)	-0.033** (0.016)	-0.008 (0.009)	-0.010* (0.005)	0.007 (0.014)	0.013 (0.014)
Female		-0.429*** (0.011)		-0.089*** (0.004)		0.064*** (0.005)		0.029*** (0.002)		-0.111*** (0.005)
College Graduate		-0.291*** (0.013)		-0.138*** (0.005)		0.092*** (0.005)		0.042*** (0.002)		0.176*** (0.005)
African-American		-1.733*** (0.044)		0.297*** (0.009)		0.494*** (0.010)		0.091*** (0.005)		0.187*** (0.009)
High Income		0.218*** (0.014)		0.018*** (0.004)		0.012** (0.006)		0.004 (0.003)		0.139*** (0.006)
Party ID				0.344*** (0.002)		-0.296*** (0.001)		-0.166*** (0.001)		-0.190*** (0.001)
R2	0.062	0.133	0.059	0.466	0.072	0.407	0.076	0.653	0.175	0.333
Adj. R2	0.060	0.131	0.057	0.465	0.070	0.405	0.068	0.650	0.173	0.331

Note: Cell entries are OLS parameter estimates for equation (1) in the paper with associated standard errors (clustered at the zip code level) in parentheses. All models include zip code and year interview fixed effects. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 5. Effects of sinclair-owned TV station availability on respondents subnational-level attitudes, CCEs data.

	House Vote (1)	House Vote (2)	Approval, Dem MC	Approval, Rep MC	Senate Vote (1)	Senate Vote (2)	Governor Vote (1)	Governor Vote (2)
Sinclair Availability	-0.007 (0.008)	-0.004 (0.006)	0.004 (0.018)	0.007 (0.022)	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.000 (0.010)	-0.001 (0.008)
Female		0.024*** (0.002)	0.097*** (0.007)	0.027*** (0.006)		0.029*** (0.002)		0.022*** (0.002)
College Graduate		0.028*** (0.002)	0.058*** (0.007)	-0.071*** (0.007)		0.025*** (0.002)		0.030*** (0.002)
African-American		0.070*** (0.004)	0.070*** (0.016)	0.181*** (0.022)		0.073*** (0.004)		0.068*** (0.004)
High Income		-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.011 (0.007)		-0.008*** (0.002)		-0.013*** (0.003)
Party ID		-0.159*** (0.001)	-0.200*** (0.005)	0.199*** (0.006)		-0.161*** (0.001)		-0.163*** (0.001)
R2	0.098	0.614	0.244	0.220	0.078	0.613	0.072	0.614
Adj. R2	0.094	0.612	0.239	0.216	0.072	0.611	0.065	0.611

Note: Cell entries are OLS parameter estimates for equation (1) in the paper with associated standard errors (clustered at the zip code level) in parentheses. All models include zip code and year interview fixed effects. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Overall, these findings as a group suggest that Sinclair's effects depend on both their nationalization and partisan tilt of the news. It is not simply that Sinclair slants the news in a pro-Republican direction: if that were the case, then there should be effects on partisanship, liberal-conservative self-identification, and down-ballot vote choice and approval. Instead, its effects are concentrated at the presidential level, suggesting that is both slant and nationalization that drive these effects – it is focusing on the president from a particular partisan point of view that changes viewers' attitudes.

In the supplemental appendix, I include two other robustness checks to help bolster my arguments here. First, one concern is that by pooling across an entire decade, when Sinclair bought up a large number of TV stations, I have introduced a good deal of heterogeneity into my effects. To test this, I focus on a subset of results, using only Sinclair's 2013 acquisitions, which – as I noted above in the discussion of [Figure 1](#) – represent nearly ½ of its total purchases over this period. Looking just at these acquisitions – with their more limited geographic and temporal reach – helps to homogenize the sample. Looking at just these purchases, I see very similar effects (if anything, the effects become a bit larger). Second, to address concerns that all of this data is simply self-reported survey data, I examined the relationship between Sinclair availability and aggregate presidential vote share (both measured at the county level). In the supplemental appendix, I show that there is indeed a robust effect: when Sinclair buys a TV station in a county, the 2-party Democratic vote share in subsequent presidential elections falls by approximately 0.3% (one-sixth of the within-county standard deviation of vote share over the 2008–2016 period). So not only can I find a Sinclair effect on survey data, I can also find it using aggregate vote shares. To be clear, none of the methods I use here is perfect, but together, they all come together to tell a consistent story about the ways in which Sinclair-owned TV news shapes viewers' attitudes.

Conclusions

Can local TV news affect viewers' national political attitudes and behaviors? Sinclair Broadcasting – which focuses its TV news broadcasts on national, rather than local, topics with a right-wing tilt – provides an excellent test case for evaluating this hypothesis. Using data from the 2008–2018 period, I show that Sinclair owned TV stations change respondents' evaluations of President Obama: those who live in areas where Sinclair owns a TV station are less likely to approve of President Obama, and they are also less likely to vote for him (or for Secretary Clinton in 2016) for president. The size of the effects suggest that Sinclair manages to persuade approximately 6% of its audience, comparable to other media effects in the literature.

This has important broader implications for both research in political communication, as well for trust in the media. It is not simply the case that only outlets like Fox News or MSNBC persuade viewers – so can local news, at least with certain types of content. This, in turn, has several broader consequences. First, who owns local stations matters, because it not only shifts the framing of particular issues (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000), and the quality of coverage (Dunaway, 2008), but also because it shapes what stories that station covers, and how they do so. The effects of local news depend on what local news chooses to cover, and how it does that. Second, while I cannot directly measure knowledge of local topics here, the fact that Sinclair prioritizes national topics over local ones likely lowers political knowledge of local topics, with important consequences for local political accountability, especially as local newspapers decline as well.¹¹ Finally, viewers are increasingly skeptical that any news is unbiased, and local news remains one of the last sources trusted by a significant fraction of the public. To the extent that a pronounced partisan tilt on these stations undermines that, trust in the media will fall further, with damaging consequences for our politics more generally.

Notes

1. In 2020, Sinclair agreed to pay a \$48 million dollar fine to the FCC for allegedly making misstatements to the agency during its attempt to buy Tribune Media (McKinnon, 2020).
2. Previous literature notes that media slant is more demand driven than supply driven – that is, producers slant their news to accommodate their audience's preferences, not their own (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). This does not seem to hold in the case of Sinclair Broadcasting, however: when Sinclair purchases a channel (and slants the news to the right), their audience share actually *declines*, all else equal (Martin & McCrain, 2019).
3. Nielsen provides data on 24,901 zip codes of the 29,795 general zip codes in the U.S. (84%).
4. This rule covers the vast majority of cable and satellite subscribers: nearly a third of zip codes have only one cable or satellite provider, and in the modal zip code, 80% of subscribers use the largest provider. As I explain below, because of FCC rules regarding local TV provision, if a station is carried by the largest cable provider, then it is also available on other carriers, as well as through a TV antenna.
5. While everyone in a media market can see TV stations from that media market, there are viewers outside that market who can see it as well. So the traditional media market-based definition undercounts the audience of a TV station.
6. For a full-color version of Figure 1, please see the author's website.
7. For both liberal-conservative self-identification and Presidential approval, note that there is a gap in the graph in late 2012 when those items were not asked by Gallup.

8. The account here focuses on Sinclair's ability to persuade all viewers, but there is another possibility: perhaps Sinclair polarizes viewers, so that conservative/Republican viewers move right, and liberal/Democratic viewers move left. In the supplemental appendix, I test for this possibility and find only a small amount of evidence for it.
9. In the supplemental appendix, I present another analysis showing that political factors (swings in presidential vote share in the area) do not predict where Sinclair purchases stations over this period.
10. The only difference here is that I use year of interview fixed effects, rather than month fixed effects (because the CCES interviews over a much narrower time window around the election).
11. Indeed, as many local newspapers die, outlets that are thinly disguised public relations websites have begun springing up in their place (Alba & Nicas, 2020).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U>.

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data are openly accessible at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U>.

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