Media Slant and Public Policy Views[†]

By Milena Djourelova, Ruben Durante,
Elliot Motte, and Eleonora Patacchini*

In the United States, views on many public policy issues, spanning from climate change to immigration and gun control, have diverged along partisan lines over the last two decades (Newport 2023). Drawing on a literature on the influence of partisan cable news on electoral outcomes (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017), this paper examines the potential contribution of cable news to the increasing polarization on these issues.

First, we document the slant of Fox News and MSNBC coverage with respect to four policy issues—climate change, immigration, gun control, and abortion—utilizing the Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (GPT) large language model to annotate cable news transcripts. Second, we link views on these issues expressed in a large electoral survey—the Cooperative Election Study (CES)—to local viewership of the two channels. To establish causality, we build on an approach proposed by Martin and Yurukoglu (2017), exploiting channel positions in local cable systems as a source of exogenous variation in their viewership. In both OLS and instrumental variable specifications, we document that the effects of viewership on specific public policy views tend to follow the direction of slant in the coverage of these issues. Furthermore, we show that these effects remain significant after including controls for individual ideology and party affiliation.

This work contributes to a literature on the political effects of mass media (Strömberg 2004; Snyder and Strömberg 2010; Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011) and of cable news in particular. Prior literature has linked cable news exposure to outcomes ranging from the electoral success of Republican versus Democratic candidates (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Ash et al. 2022)[1] to judicial decisions (Ash and Poyker 2023) and local fiscal policy (Ash and Galletta 2023). On the issue of climate change beliefs, our results relate to recent work by Djourelova et al. (2024) and Ash et al. (2023). Using a unified framework, this paper shows that similar effects are found for individual views on a spectrum of specific, policy-relevant questions. Additionally, these effects seem to operate even conditional on individual ideology and party affiliation.

Data.—Our analysis combines three sources of data: (i) cable news coverage of public policy issues from the GDELT Television API; (ii) survey data on policy views from the CES; and (iii) cable news ratings and channel positions from Nielsen.

We collect the text of TV segments related to the four policy topics of interest and aired on Fox News or MSNBC between 2010 and 2022.[2] We use the GDELT 2.0 Television API to find all snippets containing a keyword relevant to one of the four topics. The keywords are "climate change/global warming," "immigrants/immigration," "gun rights/gun regulation/gun laws/gun control," and "abortion/reproductive rights." Because GDELT snippets are very short (38.4 words on average), we look up the 500 characters before and 500 characters after of the keyword of interest. This procedure yields

*Djourelova: Cornell University and CESifo (email: mnd43@cornell.edu); Durante: National University of Singapore, BSE, CESifo, IZA, and CEPR (email: rubendurante@gmail.com); Motte: Universitat Pompeu Fabra (email: elliot.motte@upf.edu); Patacchini: Cornell University, CEPR, EIEF, and IZA (email: ep454@cornell.edu).

[1] Broockman and Kalla (2023) provide detailed descriptive evidence on cable news consumption that supports the premise of this literature: cable news audiences are large (about 14 percent of Americans consume over 8 hours of partisan TV per month), persuadable, and largely isolated from crosscutting content.
[2] We focus on segments broadcasted during local prime-time hours (7 PM–11 PM).

57,914 unique segments that are 180.4 words long on average. Online Appendix Table A1 presents breakdowns of the counts of segments by channel and by topic.

Data on policy views on the four topics are from the CES. The CES is a nationally representative repeated cross-section conducted around congressional elections with a sample size of up to 60,000 respondents per year and smaller waves in nonelection years. We use the harmonized policy preferences file compiled by Dagonel (2021), which pools all survey waves from 2006 up to 2021. We focus on the two policy questions asked most often for each of the four issues and recode outcomes such that higher values always denote a more left-leaning position. The eight questions are:

- *Some people think it is important to protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living. Other people think that protecting the environment is not as important as maintaining jobs and our standard of living. Which is closer to the way you feel?* [5-point scale from 1 = Jobs much more important to 5 = Environment much more important]
- *From what you know about global climate change or global warming, which one of the following statements comes closest to your opinion?* [5 point scale from 1 = Climate change is not occurring to 5 = Immediate action is necessary]

Do you support or oppose the following proposals:

- *Increase the number of border patrols on the US Mexican border.* [= 1 if support]
- *Grant legal status to all illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least 3 years, and not been convicted of any felony crimes.* [= 1 if support]
- *Ban assault rifles.* [= 1 if support]
- *Make it easier for people to obtain concealed-carry permit.* [= 1 if oppose]
- *Ban abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy.* [= 1 if oppose]
- *Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice.* [= 1 if support]

Finally, we obtain data on the lineups of local cable systems and channel ratings from the audience-measurement company Nielsen. Specifically, we use Nielsen's 2012 Focus Report, which provides information on the channel lineups of local cable companies, as well as their geographic scope, that is, the set of zip codes in which each company is active. We take the average ordinal positions of Fox News and MSNBC across companies active in each zip code and aggregate this data up to the county level weighted by zip code population. We combine this dataset with Fox News and MSNBC total-audience ratings for the year 2012, reported by Nielsen at the county level, and merge this data to the CES using information on respondents' county of residence.

Measuring Media Slant Using GPT.—To measure cable news slant on the four policy issues of interest, we apply GPT4 in a two-step annotation procedure. First, we filter out segments in the keyword-based corpus that are not related to the topic of interest. We do so using the question, "*Is the segment about* [*climate change or global warming/immigration/gun control/abortion*]?" This step filters out between 11 percent and 57 percent of segments depending on the topic.

Second, we determine each segment's policy stance with the question, "*Broadly speaking, is the segment for or against stronger* [*climate change policy/immigration restrictions/gun control/abortion rights*]?" with answer choices "*For*," "*Against*" and "*Not sure/Not clear.*" We consider the share of segments that take a left-leaning policy stance—*for* stronger climate change policy, gun control, and abortion rights and *against* stronger immigration restrictions.[3]

Figure 1 presents the share of segments on Fox News and MSNBC that hold a left-leaning stance on each topic. We find large and significant differences between the two channels, with consistently higher shares of left-leaning segments on MSNBC than on Fox News across all four policy topics. The magnitude of the difference between the two channels ranges from 37 to 54 percentage points depending on the topic.

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[3] The residual share of segments encompasses those that are against stronger climate change policy, gun control, and abortion rights, for stronger immigration restrictions, and segments that are categorized as "Not sure/Not clear."
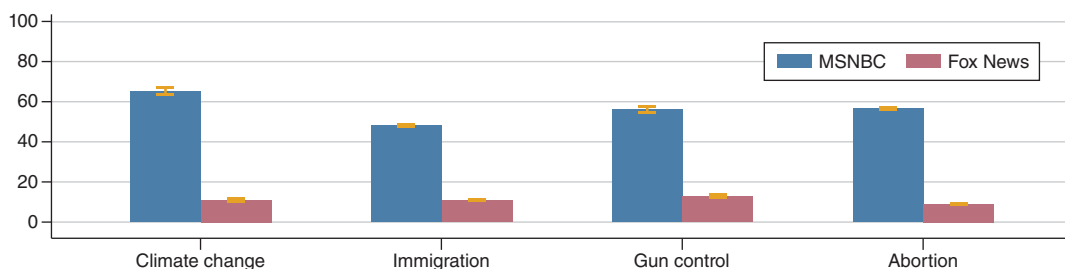
FIGURE 1. POLICY STANCES IN FOX NEWS AND MSNBC COVERAGE

Note: Share of segments with a left-leaning policy stance

Cable TV Viewership and Policy Views: OLS Estimates.—To understand the impact of exposure to slanted cable news coverage on policy views, we start by estimating respondent-level regressions of the CES survey measures described above on channel ratings in the respondent's county. We control for respondents' age, gender, income, and education; a set of indicators for respondents' self-reported ideology and party affiliation; and state-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

Table 1 presents the results. For all four policy issues and the majority of specific questions within each category, we find a negative correlation between left-leaning policy positions and viewership of Fox News coupled with a positive correlation with MSNBC viewership. For example, one standard deviation higher Fox News viewership is associated with 0.6 percentage points lower likelihood of supporting amnesty for undocumented immigrants, conditional on respondent ideology and party affiliation. Conversely, one standard deviation higher MSNBC viewership is associated with a 0.4 percentage points higher likelihood of supporting immigration amnesty.[4]

Cable TV Viewership and Policy Views: IV Estimates.—The challenge in interpreting the above results lies in the tendency of media consumers to select information sources that confirm their preexisting views (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010). In other words, even conditional

on ideology and party affiliation, the correlation between viewership and public opinion may be biased due to reverse causality. To overcome this challenge, we apply a strategy proposed by Martin and Yurukoglu (2017)—using the channel positions of Fox News and MSNBC as a source of exogenous variation in their viewership. The two channels entered cable markets in the late 1990s, and their positions in local lineups were determined largely by capacity constraints at the time. Indeed, in online Appendix Table A2, we confirm that channel positions are uncorrelated with local political predispositions before the channel's entry, proxied by the Republican vote share in the 1996 presidential election.

Channel positions do however have a significant first stage effect on viewership. Because viewers tend to start their search of channels from the top of the lineup (where most popular nonnews channels are located), a lower ordinal position (and a higher ordinal position of competing channels) induces some marginal viewers to encounter and watch the channel more often. Online Appendix Table A3 presents this first-stage relationship. We estimate that a Fox News position lower by one standard deviation is linked to approximately 0.08 standard deviations higher Fox News viewership. Similarly, a MSNBC position lower by one standard deviation is associated with 0.06 to 0.08 standard deviations higher MSNBC viewership.

The upper panel of Table 2 presents the reduced form effect of the positions of Fox News and MSNBC in a respondent's county on their views on the four policy issues, controlling for individual socioeconomic characteristics, ideology, and party affiliation and conditional on state-year fixed effects. For seven out of the eight policy issues

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[4] The magnitudes of these correlations are substantially larger——1.8 percentage points for Fox News and +1.5 percentage points for MSNBC—if the controls for individual ideology and party affiliation are omitted.

TABLE 1—EFFECT OF CABLE NEWS EXPOSURE ON POLICY VIEWS: OLS ESTIMATES

	Environment versus jobs (1)	Climate change concerns (2)	Increase border security ($\times -1$) (3)	Legalize immigrants (4)	Ban assault weapons (5)	Ease concealed-carry permits (6)	Ban abortions after 20th week ($\times -1$) (7)	Always allow abortions (8)
Fox News rating	−0.0026	−0.0129	−0.0036	−0.0056	−0.0097	−0.0065	−0.0030	−0.0043
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
MSNBC rating	0.0005	0.0034	0.0027	0.0041	0.0085	0.0069	0.0051	0.0090
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Respondent controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State × Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	153,461	124,599	289,794	289,810	228,591	228,745	216,741	216,889
Number of counties	2,880	2,808	2,924	2,924	2,874	2,874	2,867	2,866
R^2	0.27	0.44	0.19	0.22	0.25	0.19	0.17	0.28
Mean dep. var.	3.03	3.59	0.44	0.54	0.67	0.64	0.38	0.61

Notes: OLS regressions of individual policy views on cable news ratings in the respondent's county. Respondent controls include age, gender, education, income, indicators for ideology, and party affiliation (both measured on a three-point scale). Standard errors clustered by county.

TABLE 2—EFFECTS OF CABLE NEWS EXPOSURE ON POLICY VIEWS: IV ESTIMATES

	Environment versus jobs (1)	Climate change concerns (2)	Increase border security ($\times -1$) (3)	Legalize immigrants (4)	Ban assault weapons (5)	Ease concealed-carry permits (6)	Ban abortions after 20th week ($\times -1$) (7)	Always allow abortions (8)
Panel A. Reduced form								
Fox News position	0.0265	0.0341	0.0026	0.0065	0.0146	0.0101	0.0081	0.0158
	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
MSNBC position	−0.0159	−0.0262	0.0001	−0.0042	−0.0052	−0.0043	−0.0039	−0.0046
	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Respondent controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State × Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	158,426	128,782	299,999	300,019	236,742	236,900	224,488	224,638
Number of counties	2,885	2,819	2,926	2,926	2,879	2,879	2,874	2,873
R^2	0.26	0.44	0.19	0.22	0.25	0.19	0.17	0.28
Mean dep. var.	3.03	3.59	0.44	0.54	0.67	0.64	0.38	0.61
Panel B. 2SLS								
Fox News rating	−0.1334	−0.1717	−0.0132	−0.0284	−0.0668	−0.0489	−0.0400	−0.0724
	(0.059)	(0.054)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.021)
MSNBC position	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Respondent controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State × Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
First stage *F*-stat	13.39	12.15	14.77	14.79	16.42	16.40	16.20	16.24
Observations	153,177	124,400	289,375	289,391	228,284	228,438	216,454	216,601
Number of counties	2,817	2,750	2,856	2,856	2,812	2,812	2,807	2,806
R^2	0.23	0.41	0.18	0.18	0.22	0.18	0.15	0.24
Mean dep. var.	3.03	3.59	0.44	0.54	0.67	0.64	0.38	0.61

Notes: Panel A: Reduced-form regressions of individual policy views on the positions of Fox News and MSNBC in cable lineups in the respondent's county. Panel B: 2SLS regressions of individual policy views on Fox News ratings in the respondent's county, instrumented by the channel's position in cable lineups. Respondent controls include age, gender, education, income, indicators for ideology, and party affiliation (both measured on a three-point scale).

(with the exception of views on border security), we find a significant positive relationship between the channel position of Fox News and the likelihood of holding left-leaning policy views. For example, a Fox News position lower by one standard deviation is associated with 0.65 percentage point lower likelihood of supporting immigration amnesty. We find an inverse relationship, though less robust (statistically significant for three out of the eight policy issues) for MSNBC.

In the lower panel of Table 2, we scale these magnitudes in terms of viewership employing a two-stage least squares (2SLS) specification. We use the position of Fox News as an instrument for its local rating, controlling for MSNBC's position.[5] This analysis confirms that for almost all policy questions, Fox News viewership has a negative effect on the likelihood of holding left-leaning policy views. For example, the 2SLS coefficient implies that one standard deviation higher Fox News viewership leads to 2.8 percentage points lower support for immigration amnesty. The magnitudes are larger than those implied by the OLS estimates, consistent with the fact that the 2SLS strategy identifies a local average treatment effect for consumers whose choice among partisan channels is significantly affected by channel positioning. Such marginal consumers are likely to have weaker political priors and be subject to larger persuasion effects than the average consumer.

Conclusion.—Focusing on the US cable TV market, we study how ideologically opposing news channels cover policy-relevant issues and how they influence viewers' policy stances. We document large qualitative differences in the way Fox News and MSNBC report on climate change, immigration, abortion, and gun rights. We also find that exposure to these channels can have significant effects on policy views, even when we control for political ideology and party affiliation. This evidence suggests that the increased popularity of partisan news sources—such as Fox News and MSNBC—may have contributed to the rise of polarization on these issues over the past two decades (Newport 2023).

Due to the cross-sectional nature of our analysis, our findings reflect the effect of exposure to different coverage of policy issues over a prolonged period of time. Yet partisan media are also likely to shape the way individuals interpret new information that becomes available around prominent events. This is the case, for example, for the conflicting narratives about climate change that emerge in the aftermath of natural disasters (Djourelova et al. 2024). Understanding whether similar processes apply to other issues and under what circumstances are promising avenues for future research.

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[5] We focus on the 2SLS estimates for Fox News and not for MSNBC because MSNBC's position has much lower power in the respondent-level first stage. In other words, the results are less conclusive about the causal effect of MSNBC viewership.

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