Small Screen, Big Echo? Estimating the political persuasion of local television news bias using Sinclair Broadcast Group as a natural experiment

Antonela MIHO

Abstract :
This paper investigates the heterogeneous effect of biased local TV news on political outcomes and opinions. I exploit the quasi-random staggered expansion of Sinclair Broadcast Group, the now largest local TV broadcasting company in the U.S., which reached over 40% of U.S. markets in 2020. Though Sinclair has owned local TV stations since 1971, its conservative slant emerges in the run-up to the 2004 election and operates through the supply-side filtering of available news stories. Using an event study methodology, I estimate that exposure to Sinclair bias since 2004 corresponds to a 2.5%-point increase in the presidential Republican vote share during the 2008/2012 election, an effect that doubles during the 2016/2020 elections. Estimates imply that Sinclair convinced 4.6% - 13.6% of its potential audience to vote Republican, depending on the election year. While there is a null or negative trend for counties later exposed, interactions reveal a common trend across groups: the effect is concentrated among "isolated" counties (proxied by population change and the share of minorities and the college-educated), in contrast to economic and historical shocks. Individual-level survey data corroborate county-level evidence, across treatment groups and election types. Little evidence exists that Sinclair's bias increases support for traditionally Republican policy positions or populist rhetoric. Instead, I find a 10% differential change in sentiments towards the 2016 Republican candidate, depending on the respondent's level of education. Congruently, discriminatory attitudes towards minorities and immigrants increased. The totality of the results suggests that political persuasion is a dynamic and affective process, sensitive to environmental and personal characteristics.