**The Impact of Local News Media through the Lens of Voter Fraud and Gerrymandering**

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**Abstract**

There is a fierce argument in the United States surrounding the role, importance, and trustworthiness of the media. Ironically, this argument is fueled mostly by pundits, polarized individuals who want to see all media reflect their views. This argument is also fueled in large part by the increasing polarization in the United States, leading to the issue of selective exposure. This is the idea people will flock to media that parrots their ideas. This in turn causes media outlets to hire more pundits to attract a wider audience. The trend presented here has led to an overall distrust of the national media. However, this is all happening on the national scale. There is very little research concerning local media and how it is impacted by this polarization at all. Using survey questions sent out across the United States, I examine the citizens’ views toward local media through the lens of their attitudes toward two particular issues: voter fraud and gerrymandering. These issues share a couple several similar traits, such as they are both concern voting and they are both highly politicized. By examining this—and by using several control variables, such as the respondents’ race or ideology—I found that there is no relationship between peoples’ attitudes toward these issues and their attitude toward their local media coverage of them. These results go against what was expected, especially from people who classified themselves as “liberal.”  
  
Keywords: attitudes, gerrymandering, local media, media coverage, photo ID, polarization, redistricting reform, trustworthiness, voter fraud

**Introduction:**

All it takes to get a negative view about the state of the news media in the United States is to turn on the television and hear every major syndicated network talk about how their ratings rivals are untrustworthy and dangerous (or to hear the nation’s highest leader throw around the term “fake news” everyday). When looking at the national news media, it is easy to understand why it is that an increasing large percentage of the public is becoming disenfranchised with the institution and turning toward only the sources that they want to hear. According to a recent Gallup Poll, only 32 percent of Americans express a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in mass media outlets[[1]](#footnote-1). And it is because of this discontent with the news on the national scale that local outlets are the last possible refuge for trusted media sources. It may sound dramatic, but local news has the potential to be the last hope for unbiased and informative reporting. Unfortunately, the outlook is grim. In a research sense, not a lot is known about local media at all. Previous research has all but neglected local media sources, placing the focus largely on the national level. Based on the existing literature regarding media—which will be discussed further in my literature review—it is undeniable there is a strong connection on the national level between what people feel about issues and how they feel the media covers it. In many ways, how national media outlets are beginning to cover different issues is very much in a way that caters to their core audience. This paper intends to focus on the local media in a more expansive way by examining this question: do attitudes on issues impact attitudes towards local media coverage? This is addressed by examining two “case studies”: voter fraud and gerrymandering. By looking at these two specific areas concerning legislators picking their constituents, we can begin to uncover the relationship between attitudes on issues and attitudes toward media coverage.

This research was conducted by sending out a survey across the nation (the survey questions, and the reasoning behind them, will be discussed further in the research design). With the respondents’ answers to the questions, which were centered around the perception of media coverage of voter fraud and gerrymandering, as well as ideological questions concerning the issues, I ran a number of regression tests to determine whether or not my null hypothesis could be disproven. After doing this, I found that the null could not be rejected, meaning that a relationship between someone’s attitudes toward the issues mentioned above and their attitudes toward their local media coverage of these issues could not be established. These results defied what the expectations going into this research were, and ultimately reshaped how I thought of the impact of local media.

**The Literature:**

The factors that influence the relationship between how voters feel about a certain issue and what kind of media they ingest are varied and extensive, and will be discussed further in the literature review. It is crucial to the understanding of democracy that these reasons are studied: for academics, the understanding helps figure out what is still unknown; for those in the political sphere, the understanding helps craft policy; for voters, the understanding provides critical reflection as to what values they hold. While there is an already-existing spread of literature regarding the influence and impact of the media, the list is ever-growing. National media can have a huge impact on influencing voters. There are many different factors that can play into media coverage. These include race, party polarization, partisanship in general, and mass media influence on other issues. To help clearly see how all the puzzle pieces fit together, it is best to group together topics that are similar and that address similar ideas. Looking at how public perception of issues influences mass media can help explain how partisanship is defined. Understanding how minorities can be—and often are—those that are affected by stricter voting laws can help shed light on a form of oppression not always discussed. This can also be tied into how gerrymandering can disproportionally affect minorities.

There are two major functions the media has in influencing public opinion: the first is as agenda-setters, and the second is as framers This essentially means that the media chooses what the public talks about and also how they talk about it. This is exemplified in ACORN controversy of 2008. ACORN stands for Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, and during the 2008 election, John McCain’s campaign tried to prove that ACORN was committing widespread voter fraud, and then tried to tie Barack Obama to the organization. This is a prime example of how the media directs the conversation, especially on a national level. They turned the story into a disingenuous controversy by focusing on the more scandalous accusations against the group and Obama’s ties to it and less on the actual organizing work performed by America’s lower working class. This could be—and likely is at least partially caused by—the fact that of all the national news organizations, only two have a full-time labor reporter on the payroll. This lack of expertise creates a heavy reliance on outside sources, many of which are highly opinionated—these sources are called opinion entrepreneurs—and are not necessarily verified sources[[2]](#footnote-2).

This heavy reliance on opinion in what should be objective news stories very likely can be drawn with a relatively straight line to the data that points out that there has been a national increase in selective exposure—the idea that people will make an effort to absorb information and news that conforms to and confirm their already-established beliefs and will therefore avoid any source of information that presents a challenge to those beliefs—in recent years. America is becoming an increasingly polarized nation, and so people will seek out news that validates them. In fact, partisan voters are at their most informed when they consume news that conforms to their ideology, and if there is an absence of partisan news sources, partisan voters will never be convinced to alter their votes and will therefore ultimately vote uninformed[[3]](#footnote-3). Therefore, to help keep their audience happy, news organizations are giving them these types of stories (many of which simply cannot be both objective and be appealing to a polarized audience, which leads to an increase in subjective journalism).

For further discussion of the role the media plays in American life, look to the idea that when there are no specific influencers, such as the likability of a candidate or a candidate’s stance on a specific issue, people who have a higher distrust in the media will rely more on party identification while voting. This means that the opposite is also likely true—when people have no reason to distrust the media, they will not necessarily fall back on their party identification. Another possible outcome of media distrust is that people who have a negative view of the media will rely less on “mainstream” sources[[4]](#footnote-4). As it is plain to see in today’s political climate, “alternative” news sources are often far more biased, such as the increasingly prevalent InfoWars on the right or even something like Young Turks on the left. This is another example of the national news diverging from the middle and saying what their audience wants to hear, often at the expense of maintaining a news-educated public and instead cultivating a culture of fear, paranoia, and polarization. We have those on the right worried the left wants to break down” true American lifestyles, and the left is worried the right wants to deport anyone that isn’t white. This may sound glib, but it is truly not that great an exaggeration of our society, a society that is being fueled by selective exposure. While the impact mass media has on public opinion depends on a number of variables—variables such as what is being written or reported on, what mass media is being studied, et cetera—in cases where the issue is one highly politicized by one or both major parties, mass media does have more influence[[5]](#footnote-5).

This means that the highly contentious issues that dominate the national dialogue—abortion, immigration, and yes, voter fraud—are being influenced by sources that writing their news to match the ideologies of their polarized audience. If it seems as though I am driving this point unnecessarily hard into the ground, it is only because I am attempting to highlight the scope of the problem with national media, and why local media needs to matter. Local media doesn’t have the problem of selective exposure. No matter what local channel you are watching or paper you are reading, it will all be covering essentially the same stories, many of which obviously are much more local in scope.

The true issue, though, is not only that selective exposure exits; instead, the big problem becomes that this cycle is self-perpetuating. When people expose themselves to only a very specific kind of media, they will continue to believe more and more strongly that this is the only media that is “good.” Therefore, when they become inadvertently exposed to other media—media that does not necessarily support the viewpoints they have become increasingly entrenched in—people will react even more violently to it, rejecting it as “fake” or hurtful immediately. This in turns plays into the polarized nature the US is currently engaged in. And because so many of these highly partisan nationally syndicated news organizations rely on pundits and commentators more than actual journalists or news anchors, people will begin, and already have begun, to believe that the news they consume must conform to their beliefs to be legitimate. The whole process can be summed up with Figure 1-1.

**FIGURE 1-1:**

When someone has decided to cast a vote based on the party they support before the campaigns even start, they tend to respond more negatively to media coverage, causing their distrust in the media rises. This idea is called the “Hostile Media Effect.” This is when people who have decided on partisan voting before the campaigns even fully begin view media exposure on different issues as attacking their beliefs. This is especially prominent when it comes to highly contentious issues that are already divided amongst party lines. Voter fraud and gerrymandering are great examples of this. If someone who is voting Republican is watching CNN and hears the argument that voter fraud is not a real issue, that there are not enough cases for it to be considered a threat, that viewer will then associate everything that CNN says as fake or damaging to their beliefs (beliefs that they have become absolutely convinced are correct, because the ideologically biased media they expose themselves to agree with them). Essentially, people are letting their partisan beliefs dictate what they will and will not believe.

As it could be seen by reading almost any article or watching any news piece on voter fraud—and by extent, voter identification laws—it is nearly impossible to talk about this topic without at the very least touching on race and voting. It is a virtually undisputed fact that in many cases, voter ID laws tend to repress or unfairly target minorities[[6]](#footnote-6). And since we know that voter ID laws are permanently intertwined with voter fraud and voter fraud is an issue that is divided by party lines, the media coverage of the issue will be impacted by that. But the discussion of race and voting extends beyond just voter ID laws; according to different research, there is an institutional bias against minorities when it comes to voting. This has been shown in a number of different ways, but one of the most memorable is the “Willie Horton” ad run by George H.W. Bush’s campaign against Michael Dukakis. In the ad, a narrator highlights a convict named Willie Horton that Michael Dukakis freed while governor of Massachusetts. It is an add that is an example of subtle priming, in which there is the use of racial stereotypes to spread a political message[[7]](#footnote-7). For example, black people are violent criminals and if this man becomes your president, he will let them free to mingle among “civilized” society. Ads such as that, which were run on the East Coast, a primarily liberal area that ended up going redder after the ad, are examples of using media and race to impact how people vote. Even back in the 80s, when the add was run, there was a political divide on race, and using national media was a effective way to spread a message that played into the fears many people were having.

As with almost every topic within the political sphere, it is impossible to talk about voting issues and the public attitudes toward these issues without talking about the party polarization that has become such a prevalent part of American politics. As discussed, voter fraud is one issue that is becoming more and more polarized by party lines[[8]](#footnote-8). This means when then public does turn to the media to hear about the issue, it is not to get the facts; it is to hear someone in a position of power with a wide influence say what they already believe, thus validating them and further making them believe the other side of the argument is fundamentally wrong. And as the issue becomes more polarized, it is expected that people who identify as Republican will argue the necessity of voter ID laws while those who identify as Democrat will argue that they are suppressive[[9]](#footnote-9). They likely argue the necessity of voter ID laws as a remedy for a perceived widespread of voter fraud. At their most fundamental level, parties often act as a sort of “decision-maker” for voters. What I mean by this is that oftentimes, people will vote a certain way on a certain issue solely based on what the consensus within the party they identify with is and if they do turn to media, it is to hear solely what they want to hear; they will want their source of choice to parrot their views on photo ID laws.

Another issue that has been shaped by extreme polarization is partisans gerrymandering. have been many difficulties the Supreme Court has faced in proving a partisan nature in gerrymandering, since to empirically prove a map meets the minimum threshold of partisan gerrymandering set by previous SCOTUS cases would be difficult[[10]](#footnote-10). This has been the struggle the Supreme Court has faced so far, and so any cases involving gerrymandering today are focused on establishing that minimum threshold.

As can be expected, race plays a factor in gerrymandering, also. On average, whites tend to receive policy preference over African-Americans[[11]](#footnote-11). This means that oftentimes, minorities, who tend to vote Democrat, are likely against voter identification laws, but they are still passed in areas that are sometimes predominantly minority. The passing of the Voting Rights Act led to the creation of “majority-minority districts”—districts that were made up predominantly of minorities—to try and increase the election of minority leaders[[12]](#footnote-12). Unfortunately, this came back to ultimately benefits Republicans, since minorities almost exclusively vote Democrat and if they are all restricted to one area, a Republican can still win the overall majority while losing in certain areas.

The biggest reason I decided to use the cases studies of voter fraud and gerrymandering is because of their similarities. They both concern voting; they both have ideological, partisan, and racial divides; and most importantly, they are both incredibly difficult to have a meaningful national discourse one. The reasons for this are varied, and most of them can be traced back to the highly polarized and contentious nature of the issues. It is hard to talk about gerrymandering with someone who disagrees with one’s view because everything one chooses to watch or listen to is chosen because it backs up their view. As it is discussed above, gerrymandering is not technically illegal. It is, however, a definitively partisan issue. While there is evidence that both parties participate in gerrymandering, it is often the Republicans are the worst perpetrators (this could be, perhaps, because Republicans are just better at it that Democrats). Because of this, Democrats often frame the debate as whether it should even be allowed. They usually contest that it should not. Republicans, on the other hand, frame the debate as who should be allowed to draw the lines. Should it be who has control of the senate? Should it be up to the states? Republicans will not argue that it should not exist, only that they are the ones who should be doing it. This split in perspective leads to a deep-seated divide on the issue as a whole, and it causes people to choose the side of whatever party they associate with. This then leads to them looking for sources that will back them up, and if they cannot find these, they will write off media altogether.

How does this all fit together? For people who think photo ID laws are good—meaning that voter fraud is a real issue—would theoretically want to see more coverage of the issue in their local media. These people would include, for example, Republicans, conservatives, or white citizens (who often are Republican or vote conservatively). On the flip side that think voter fraud is not an issue, therefore rendering photo ID laws unnecessary, would want to see less coverage. This demographic would be more likely to include Democrats, liberals, or minorities. The same is true for gerrymandering; those that think redistricting reform should be handled by an independent commission would like to see more coverage, and those that think state legislators should handle it would like to see less. The demographics of the former would be akin to those that do not support photo ID laws, whereas those that think gerrymandering is a nonissue would consider photo ID laws necessary.

**Conclusion:**

Looking at voter fraud and gerrymandering proves to be a rather involved endeavor. To fully understand these issues—and more specifically, how attitudes toward these issues impacts attitudes toward local media outlets—it is necessary to look at voter identification laws, the party polarization of the American public, race, and other factors that influence how people vote. The fundamental truth is that we do not know enough about local media. We do not know the impact it has, the degree to which it is trusted, even how much it is used. This lack of information creates a crippling blind spot in the analysis on the impact of media in contemporary America. The research that exists on gerrymandering is focused much more heavily on the legality of it—the supreme court cases, what the Constitution says, et cetera—than the specifics of how it impacts the society in which we live. For both voter fraud and gerrymandering, there is very little research available that shows how voter attitudes regarding these issues impacts their attitudes on their local media. What I hope to do with this paper is to craft a coherent narrative that connects these two issues, which are currently only connected through the fact that they both involve people voting for elected officials, through the lens of voter attitude towards local media. By synthesizing all these different factors together and fully understanding how intertwined they truly are, we will have fit another piece into the puzzle of American opinion and voting.

**Research Design**

To test my hypothesis, I utilized an online survey administered through the online survey platform Qualtrics. The 57 question survey included questions designed to tap into political attitudes and behaviors with each question being provided by a different student in an undergraduate research methods course. The sample was recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing program. Mechanical Turk, in spite of being a more recent tool for recruiting survey respondents, is inexpensive and documented to produce reliable data (Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011; Mason and Suri 2012; Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2010; Levay, Freese, and Druckman 2016). While the convenience sample limits the ability to draw conclusions regarding the full American public, it provides sufficient leverage to test my hypothesis.

The survey, available for one week during the fall of 2017, recruited respondents by paying them $0.50 upon completion of the survey. The survey had a total population of 702 respondents. The average time of completion for respondents was 12 minutes and 13 seconds. This translated to an effective average hourly rate of $2.45.

For the survey, I crafted two questions focused around my independent variable. To help avoid confusion, I will repeat my independent variable: it is the respondent’s attitudes toward the issues of voter fraud and gerrymandering. The first question focused on gerrymandering and reads as follows: “Americans have differing attitudes toward redistricting reform as some believe it should be addressed by the state legislature while others believe it should be handled by an independent commission. Which comes closer to your view?” The respondents had two choices: “the state legislature” or “an independent commission.” The question for voter fraud followed a similar format. It reads: “Americans have different attitudes toward voter ID laws. Those in favor of voter ID laws argue they are necessary to keep people who aren’t eligible to vote from voting and prevent people from voting multiple times. Those opposed to voter ID laws argue they are unnecessary because voter fraud is very rare and can prevent people who are eligible from voting. Which comes closer to your view?” The respondents were given two choices to answer from, which were “voter ID laws are necessary” and “voter ID laws are unnecessary.”

I formulated two questions specific to my dependent variable, as well, while also taking data found from the respondents’ answers to other questions. My research question focuses on if voter attitudes towards particular issues impacts their perception of their local media’s coverage of these issuse. The first survey question proposed reads as follows: “When it comes to local media coverage of the issue of voter fraud during the last election cycle, do you feel that your local media outlets covered voter fraud:”, and then offers a five-point Likert Scale for the respondents to give their answer. The five answer choices are: far too little, too little, about the right amount, too much, and far too much. The final question reads: “When it comes to local media coverage of the issue of gerrymandering during the last election cycle, do you feel that your local media outlets covered gerrymandering:” and then offered a five-point Likert Scale for the respondents to record their answer. The five choices on the scale are: far too little, too little, about the right amount, too much, and far too much.

When formulating my survey questions, there were different considerations and challenges I had to take into account, and this is also true when considering how to code my results. I decided to operationalize the answers for both the dependent variable questions into two groups. When creating questions for local media coverage of both voter fraud and gerrymandering, I followed the same process and operationalizing. The questions were worded to help measure attitudes toward media coverage of these issues. The responses were combined into the groups “too little” and “too much.” The first two options on the five-point Lickert scale (“far too little” and “too little”) were combined into the group “too little.” The last two options on the scale (“too much” and “far too much”) were combined into the “too much” group. Respondents who answered “about the right amount” were disregarded.

There are a number of control variables that come into play within this research. One control variable was partisanship. Voter fraud is an issue that is becoming increasingly polarized along party lines[[13]](#footnote-13). When there are not other factors to focus on—such as the likeability of a candidate—voters will tend to return to party lines when voting[[14]](#footnote-14). Partisanship is addressed in a question which asks the respondent about what party they feel they belong. This variable was then operationalized into two groups, Democrat and Republican; any respondents who answered choices other than those two were dropped. There is also a question regarding political ideology, in which the respondent is asked about how they feel their political ideology is defined when given a liberal-conservative continuum on which to place themselves. The answers were then operationalized into the groups liberal or conservative. Another control variable was race. In general, all policy generally tends to favor whites over African-Americans[[15]](#footnote-15). This affects African-Americans’ political ideologies, which affects what type of media they will pay attention to or seek out. Race is addressed in a general demographic question in which the respondent is asked to identify their race. They were given a series of options, such as white, black, Hispanic, et cetera, and then the answers were operationalized into two groups: white and nonwhite. Finally, the region—urban, rural, or suburban—in which a respondent lives is a control variable. Whether they live in a more conservative or liberal region will inherently have a role in the media they are exposed to. Regionality is addressed in the question of how best to describe the place in which they live. The answers were operationalized into urban and nonurban, the latter of which included both suburban and rural.

**Results:**

Based on existing literature concerning voter fraud and gerrymandering, the expectations surrounding this research were that people with more conservative attitudes toward these issues would have a certain attitude toward their local media, with the vice versa of people with more democratic attitudes toward these issues having a certain attitude toward their local media also being true. As mentioned in the above methodology, the dependent variable was condensed into two groups—those that believed their local media covered the aforementioned issues too much and those that believed their local media covered these issues too little. The same methodology was used for the independent variable, with the two groups being those who believed voter ID laws are good—that is to say, necessary and helpful--and those that believed they are bad—necessary and unhelpful—for the issue of voter fraud and those that believed it was up to the state legislators to deal with gerrymandering and those that believed an independent commission was necessary to address the problem for the issue of gerrymandering. What I found defied the expectations of the study, which means not that I necessarily disproved my hypothesis, but only that I can’t prove it.

There are two dependent variables in this study, both of which are similar and containing small but important differences. The first of these is the respondent’s attitude regarding their local media coverage toward voter fraud. This is measured by whether the respondent believes their local media covered voter fraud with too little frequency or too much frequency. The second dependent variable is the respondent’s attitude regarding their local media coverage toward gerrymandering. This is measured by whether the respondent believes their local media covered gerrymandering with too little frequency or too much frequency. I will include a regression graph after the verbal explanations of the tests ran is finished in order to provide a visual to accompany the textual content.

I will take the survey results of each dependent variable one by one, starting with voter fraud. Of the 367 usable responses—after the stipulations of whether the respondent answered they believed voter fraud was covered in just the right amount of intensity are taken out—225 respondents said they believed their local media had done too little coverage of voter fraud, while 142 believed the media had done too much coverage. This means about 61% of respondents said they believed their local media coverage of voter fraud was insufficient.

Of the 439 usable responses regarding respondent’s views on their local media coverage of gerrymandering—after the stipulations of whether the respondent answered they believed gerrymandering was covered in just the right amount of intensity are taken out—364 respondents said they believed their local media had done too little coverage of gerrymandering, while 75 believed the media had done too much coverage. This signifies that about 83% of respondents believed their local media’s coverage of the issue was insufficient.

A note should be made here that there two graphs that can be found in the appendix. One graph shows a regression analysis for the independent variable of views on photo ID laws, and the other shows a regression analysis for the independent variable of views on redistricting reform. Speaking in terms of a regression, views of voter ID laws have a coefficient of 0.048047. This means that as a respondent moves from the belief that voter ID laws are bad to the belief that voter ID laws are good, the graph would follow a positive correlation pattern, inclining by about five percent with each unit. This dependent variable has a p-value of 0.467. In statistics, a p-value of 0.05 or less means you can reject the null hypothesis. Obviously, the p-value found for this dependent variable is significantly greater than that; therefore, the null hypothesis—in this case, that there is no relation between the public’s attitudes towards specific issues and their attitudes toward their local media coverage of these issues—cannot be rejected. Ultimately, this means the value is not statistically significant.

In regards to views about gerrymandering, the coefficient was 0.014318. As the respondent moves from the belief that an independent commission should handle redistricting reform to the belief that this should be the job of the state legislature, the graph follows a positive correlation pattern, inclining by about one-point-four percent with each unit. This dependent variable has a p-value of 0.740. Like the voter fraud dependent variable, this is significantly greater than 0.05, meaning that 1.) the null hypothesis—the same as the one mentioned above—cannot be rejected, and 2.) the value is not statistically significant.

As explained above, there are a number of control variables that are necessary to consider when examining this research. As a review, these four control variables are: ideology, race, the regionality of where someone lives, and partisanship. As I did with the dependent variables, I will take these variables ones by one, starting with ideology. The ideology variable was operationalized into two groups: liberal and conservative, with anyone answering other than those two options being disregarded. The coefficient for ideology and voter ID attitudes is 0.1415781, meaning that as people move from conservative to liberal, they tend to support voter ID laws by about 14 percent more. The p-value for this variable was 0.251, which means the null hypothesis could not be rejected, and the statistic is not significant. When it comes to ideology and the independent variable concerning gerrymandering, the trend is similar: there was a coefficient of 0.03604, which is a somewhat smaller percentage than the coefficient for ideology and voter ID laws, but the p-value here is 0.675, rendering me unable to reject the null hypothesis. This idea will be discussed more in the “Discussion” segment of the paper, but this was one of the pieces of data that stood out as being different than what the expected trend was.

The story for the control variable of race yields similar results to that of political ideology. The variable was operationalized into two groups: white and nonwhite. The reason for this decision was fairly straightforward: the percentage of respondents that was not white, even when put together, was not large enough to merit breaking to many different groups. Also, because every other variable—dependent, independent, and control—was broken into two groups, it worked well with the regression model. Regarding voter fraud as the independent variable, the race control variable had a coefficient of -0.0877234. While this is not the only negative coefficient (this will appear again in the political party control variable), it is the first the results yielded. This combination of variables had a p-value of 0.318, making it incapable of rejecting the null hypothesis and also not statistically significant. The results yielded by the combination of the race control variable and the independent variable regarding gerrymandering—to restate: whether the respondent believes redistricting reform should be handled by an independent commission or the state legislature—were statistically similar to those yielded by race and the independent variable regarding voter fraud. The coefficient found is 0.0540696, meaning that as people move from nonwhite to white, they are more likely to support the state legislature dealing with redistricting reform by about five percent with each unit. The p-value of this variable combination is 0.318, making it statistically insignificant and failing to establish a connection between issue attitudes and local media attitudes.

The control variable of regionality was a little bit more difficult to deal with. As mentioned above, there was a question included in the survey about the regionality of where the respondent lives. The respondent was provided with three ways to answer this question: rural, suburban, and urban. To help match the format of the other variables, the choices were operationalized to just to: urban and nonurban (the latter of which including both suburban and rural). However, this operationalization was done after the regression was already ran, which means that when looking at the coefficient—for this variable and the independent variable regarding voter fraud, it is 0.044648—for every one unit the graph moves, the coefficient must be added twice. When people move from nonurban to rural and from the belief voter ID laws are bad to the idea that voter ID laws are good, the graph actually follows a positive correlation pattern and increases by about nine percent with each unit. This combination of variables has a p-value of 0.322, so like for all the other variables so far discussed, a connection between the attitudes people hold toward issues and the attitudes they hold regarding their local media’s coverage of these issues cannot be proven. The story told regarding the control variable of regionality and independent variable regarding gerrymandering follows a similar path. The coefficient is 0.0103799—which has to be multiplied by two—so when people move from nonurban to urban and from to the belief that is should be the state legislature that handles redistricting reform as opposed to an independent commission, the graph increases by about two percent. The p-value for this combination of variables 0.725, and a relation between attitudes toward issues and attitudes toward local media coverage could not be proven.

What makes the control variable of party very interesting to look at is the fact that the combination of that and the independent variable regarding gerrymandering is the only one that is statistically significant. But more on that in a minute. The party variable was operationalized into two groups: Democrat and Republican, with any response that said a third-party option being dropped. The coefficient for this control variable and the independent variable regarding voter fraud—to reiterate, whether the respondent believes voter ID laws are good or not—was -0.0585733. This means that as people move from Republican to Democrat, the tend to be less inclined to believe that voter ID laws are good—by about eight percent less with each unit moved. However, the p-value for this combination of variables was 0.638, meaning the statistic was still not significant and the connection between issue attitudes and views toward local media coverage could still not be verified. And now the control variable of political party and the independent variable concerning gerrymandering. This combination yielded a coefficient of -0.2432457, so like it was with party and voter fraud, there graph will have a downward slope. As people move from Republican to Democrat, they tend to be less likely to support the state legislator handling redistricting reform. The p-value for this combination of variables is 0.06, making it statistically significant and establishing a verifiable connection between the attitudes people have toward the issue and their attitude regarding their local media coverage of the issue. What this means will be analyzed further in the “Discussion” section of the paper.

**Conclusion:**

The results found from this research is especially interesting for a couple of different reasons. The first of these is that before this, there was no existing research regarding how attitudes toward local media were affected by attitudes toward different issues. There is very little existing research regarding local media at all, and the fact I got dive in to a specific topic and idea is very exciting. The second reason—and the more compelling one, in my opinion—for the interest surrounding this research is because the results did not follow what was expected at all. The expectation was that people who identified as liberal were more likely to be against voter ID laws and would want an independent commission to deal with redistricting reform, but neither of these trends turned out to be true. The one exception here was the combination of the control variable of party and the independent variable concerning redistricting reform. While having one piece of data that is statistically significant does not verify my null hypothesis, it does prove an idea that is often talked about: party over ideology. Whether someone regards themselves as liberal or conservative seems not to matter if the party they subscribe to says something different. This is an idea that has also shown up in research regarding national media influence, such as Ladd’s research in 2010 regarding the Hostile Media Effect. The results found in my research present a new and tantalizing puzzle: why aren’t liberals against voter ID laws, and why aren’t they for an independent commission? But these results also present a deeply disconcerting idea. Perhaps local media is not safe; perhaps it is just as partisan as everything else. Maybe our last line of defense is not as strong as we thought, and the partisan black hole that has consumed our national medias has already made its way down to the local level. Of course, that is not necessarily the case. It is a small, but crucial, distinction to make that the data did not prove my hypothesis, but it also did not prove it wrong.

There are a few things that should be changed if the research were to be conducted again. The first would be to use a random sample as opposed to a convenient sample. That could yield different results and bring a wider crowd of perspectives. Regression models would be continued to be used, because they tell how, how strongly, and under what conditions the independent and dependent variables are related, if at all. They are the most comprehensive test that can be run to get at the causality of data results. While there are a number of speculations that can be as to why the results defied expectations like they did—perhaps liberals are more scared of voter fraud now due to the increased focused on Russian hacking recently, for example—these cannot be proved. If I were to conduct the research again, I would hope to include questions in the survey that would address these possibilities to help form a more well-rounded picture. I would also like to research local media in general. There is a strong body of existing literature in which the impact of the national media is studied, but this level of research does not really exist on the local media level. While my research conducted for this paper begins to tackle this issue, I would like to further explore the role local media plays in the America landscape.

Appendix

**FIGURE 1-2:**

Dependent Variable

(As people become more liberal, Democrat, etc.)

Independent Variable (Photo ID laws are bad 🡪 Photo ID laws are good)

**FIGURE 1-3:**

Independent Variable (Independent Commission 🡪 State Legislator

Dependent Variable

(As people become more liberal, Democrat, etc.)

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1. This was found in a Gallup Poll conducted in September of 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This was studied by Drier et. al in 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was studied by Chan et. al in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This was studied by Ladd in 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This was studied by Green-Pendersen et. al in 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This was studied by Herron et. al in 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This was studied by Gordon et. al in 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This was studied by Stewart et. al in 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This was studied by Gronke et. al. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This was studied by Engstrom in 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This was studied by Griffin et. al in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This was studied by Engstrom in 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This was studied by Stewart et. al in 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This was studied by Ladd et. al in 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This was studied by Griffin et. al in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)