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American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 2009, 1, 2, 35–52
<http://www.aeaweb.org/articles.php?doi=10.1257/app.1.2.35>

Does the Media Matter? A Field Experiment Measuring the Effect of Newspapers on Voting Behavior and Political Opinions¹

By ALAN S. GERBER, DEAN KARLAN, AND DANIEL BERGAN²

We conducted a field experiment to measure the effect of exposure to newspapers on political behavior and opinion. Before the 2005 Virginia gubernatorial election, we randomly assigned individuals to a Washington Post free subscription treatment, a Washington Times free subscription treatment, or a control treatment. We find no effect of either paper on political knowledge, stated opinions, or turnout in post-election survey and voter data. However, receiving either paper led to more support for the Democratic candidate, suggesting that media slant mattered less in this case than media exposure. Some evidence from voting records also suggests that receiving either paper led to increased 2006 voter turnout. (JEL D72, L82)

Citizens learn about politics and government from the news they watch on television and read in newspapers. Recent work has examined how the media shapes the public's political knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Timothy J. Besley and Robin Burgess 2002, Alexander Dyck and Luigi Zingales 2002, and James T. Hamilton 2003). Media sources may influence the public not only through the slant of a particular report (Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan 2007) but also by choosing what to cover (Lisa M. George and Joel Waldfogel 2006).

This paper reports the results of a natural field experiment³ to measure the effect of political news content on political behavior and opinions. The Washington, DC area is served by two major newspapers, the conservative *Washington Times* and the more liberal *Washington Post* (Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milroy 2005). The presence of a liberal and conservative paper serving the same region creates an outstanding opportunity to study the effect of media slant in a naturalistic setting within a single population.⁴ Approximately one month prior to the Virginia gubernatorial election in

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² To comment on this article in the online discussion forum, visit the article page at: <http://www.aeaweb.org/articles.php?doi=10.1257/app.1.2.35>.

³ As per the taxonomy per Keith in Glenn W. Harrison and John A. List (2006).

⁴ The *Washington Post* is also a more nationally prominent newspaper than the *Washington Times*. Thus, readers may perceive a difference in quality and trustworthiness, not just slant, between these two newspapers.

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December 01, 2009