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The Decline of Local News and its Effect on Polarization

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Introduction

Being from Las Vegas, Nevada, I enjoy a wide variety of unique activities and opportunities. The obvious and most famous of these are driving down Las Vegas Boulevard and looking at the neon world that is my home, losing money in casinos searching for riches that are never promised, and the occasional run-in with Elvis Presley. In addition to the exciting entertainment that exists within Sin City, I also enjoy something that one probably would not think of when imagining this desert city: a variety of local, healthy news outlets.

In Southern Nevada, three newspapers are headquartered in Las Vegas. We have the center-left Las Vegas Sun, the center-right Las Vegas Review Journal, and the non-partisan, but often credited with being left-leaning, The Nevada Independent. All these newspapers provide news coverage on issues that range from county-specific events to occurrences on the national and international stage. This may not seem like a significant fact, and many would probably expect many different sources of information, yet that is not the case in many places.

In many places around the country, there is little to no local news coverage. In the 1900s, local newspapers were among the most vital sources of information, and local news outlets provided citizens in their areas with the lowdown of weather, current events, and political information. As time went on, however, local news has dwindled to historic lows.

Simultaneously, the political tension in the United States has steadily increased to historic highs not seen since the Civil War. The tension can be felt on the street and on social media, leading to divisions among the public. The recent 2020 protests around the topic of police brutality and the extreme discourse around the results of the 2020 presidential election that led to the January 6th insurrection at the United States Capitol Building are just two instances where the ideological schism in our country can be observed.

In addition to the public's perception of division, we have also seen increased polarization with political elites. The partisanship in Washington D.C. has increased steadily from the middle of the 20th century to a point where bipartisanship is nearly impossible. Ideological camps in both the Democratic and Republican parties have begun waging cultural and philosophic war. This has led to a decrease in efficient governing and a loss of trust in the political system by many Americans.

In this article, I will analyze the interaction that local news and polarization have on one another. I argue that the country's discourse has profound implications on politics, and the most popular way that discourse reaches the public affects political views. I will argue that as local news declines, polarization will increase. In the following sections, I will discuss some of the root causes of polarization and the decline of local news. I will then conduct a data analysis to determine if these phenomena are related to one another.

Polarization

Issues that come onto the radar for lawmakers in the U.S. are captured by the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, where policy preferences are created and peddled. Problems arise when both the constituents and the lawmakers themselves create opinions and form proposals along strict party lines. This has occurred in the American political system, leading to high political polarization that is collapsing the ideological center.

Political polarization constitutes a threat to the health of the political system. It forces voters and legislators to align themselves together in opposition to legislation across all issues and severely diminishes the likelihood of bipartisan compromises being made. This, in turn, crystallizes interests into opposing factions (Baldassarri, Gelman 2008), further compounding the issue of gridlock that is inherent in democratic institutions such as those built into the framework of the Constitution. Polarization in the U.S. is characterized by adherence to radical ideology at both ends of the political spectrum.

Ideological Sorting

Americans have never agreed on political matters, and as far back as the nation's founding, these disagreements have been hashed out in ideological battles. As our political system reached maturity, the two-party system became dominant and allowed individuals to understand how elected officials and candidates would make decisions partially. Differing from today, the two parties were much more like one another for a long time, with both including liberal and conservative outlooks on policy preferences. In the 1960s, Clinton Rossiter, a political scientist, and historian claimed that "[T]here is and can be no real difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, because the unwritten laws of American politics demand that the parties overlap substantially in principle, policy, character, appeal, and purpose—or cease to be parties with any hope of winning a national election," (Fiorina 2016).

This began to change as parties started forming policy attitudes that directly countered one another. The Democratic Party grew into the party of liberalism and the Republican Party into the party of conservatism. From the last few decades in the twentieth century to today, the political parties have become better sorted on moral and cultural issues (Fiorina, Abrams 2008). Voters have since seen these parties as vectors of political change that can stand on one side or the other of their views, effectively solidifying them in their support of their chosen side. This has been called ideological sorting and occurs when voters move to parties that share similar outlooks, making them more entrenched in their preferences and less likely to deviate from adherence to their party.

This sorting of parties has had many effects. We have seen the distance between parties and their ideology, but also less difference within them (Hetherington 2009). This has led to the prevalence of party-line votes, where a majority of one party opposes a majority from the other, in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Since the 1970s, there has been a 30% increase in the party unity score, and in 2015 was sitting at 90% (Dancey, Sheagley 2017). This demonstrates how ideological sorting has polarized the parties' elites, leading to the next major driver of polarization.

Negative Partisanship & Top-Down Polarization

As mentioned above, the parties have become more ideologically homogenous. This has led elites within the parties to move to more extreme ideological poles. There were points where both the Republicans and Democrats had overlapping preferences, but today there is little to no preference overlap between them (Banda, Cluverius 2018). This can be seen with the increased prominence of strict party-line voting, which has increased in recent decades.

The polarization of the elites is partly due to the negative partisanship that has become a norm in governance. Negative partisanship occurs when political preferences are formed not in favor of a particular political group or policy outlook but in opposition to another group. Today, larger swaths of Republicans and Democrats hold strongly negative views of the opposing party than in the past (Abramowitz, Webster 2015). These negative views make their way into the legislative process, and we have seen an increase in strict party-line voting that highlights how negative partisanship can affect bipartisan legislating.

Due to the increased polarization among political elites, the American electorate has also become more polarized. This is a top-down process, where the polarization occurs strongest among the high-ranking politicians who receive mass media attention nationwide. Today, partisan media sources allow citizens to match their news consumption to fit their ideological preferences (Levendusky 2013). Partisan media amplifies the messages disseminated from both political poles and puts the opinions and actions of political elites on display. With the focus on hyper-polarized elites, Americans are flooded with arguments from the polarized political elite.

Because these politicians appear on the air at no extra cost, they have effectively become part of the journalistic machine used to draw in audiences and act as sources for information (Ben-Porath 2007). Elite polarization amplifies partisan-motivated reasoning (Robinson, Mullinix 2016), which explains why even in everyday life, the effects of political polarization can be felt.

The Decline of Local News

Local news has long been the medium of information that connected people with their neighbors and important events in their areas. In addition to providing information about developments in their communities, local news plays a vital role in driving civic engagement and allowing citizens to hold their elected officials accountable (Martin, McCrain 2019). According to Penelope Abernathy and the UNC's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, between 2004 and 2014, 664 of the 8,591 local newspapers had vanished (2016). With the prominence of local news at its lowest levels in U.S. history, this has had implications for the knowledge citizens have surrounding politics, shaping their ideological and engagement in the political world.

The Internet's Role

The prominence of the internet has led to a decline in the news and journalism industry. As more readers migrated from traditional means of news consumption toward new online news outlets, advertisers and investors moved away from these seemingly antiquated forms of dissemination. The migration to online outlets has led to a decline in one of the main sources of income for newspapers: ad revenue. Between 2008 and 2018, there was a 68% drop in ad revenue across the newspaper industry (Hendrickson 2019).

The preference for online news sources is partly due to the ease with which the general public can access the internet at home and on the go. According to Pew Research's Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet, as of 2019, 90% of adults in the United States use the internet, with 73% of them having broadband internet services in their homes (2019). Because many of the news sources on the internet are free of cost, consumers become accustomed to using the internet to obtain information without a subscription price (Payne 2011). The increased access to the internet, coupled with free access to information, has allowed online-based news outlets to thrive. In contrast, local news outlets that have typically been the medium of choice have declined severely.

Media Concentration

In the United States, media ownership has slowly been amassed by a small number of corporations. From 1984 to 2005, the mass media industry held by the top 10 media firms went from 17.7% to 35.5% (Vizcarrondo 2013). The 2000s was a period where local news outlets struggled to gain a footing in the changing environment. Many of these outlets were purchased by investment groups, and today, seven of the largest 25 newspaper owners are investment groups (Abernathy 2016). As large media conglomerates take over smaller news outlets, we see two main patterns emerge.

First, the news shown has less to do with the occurrences in the local area and more to do with national news. This problem has implications for many aspects of daily life, but it has specific effects on political knowledge. Most of the information put forward to the public about political candidates comes from local print newspapers (Hayes, Lawless 2018). When this medium is focused on increasingly national news due to media conglomerations dictating the topics, local populations receive less information about politics in their area.

Second, with large takeovers by corporations, the news that acquired outlets report becomes partisan. One such example comes by analyzing the stations acquired by the Sinclair Broadcast Group that owns over 290 stations. As Sinclair has bought these outlets, there has been a rightward partisan shift in content that can be expected to have consequences for election outcomes and polarization (Martin, McCrain 2019). This ideological shift in news coverage reflects the political views of Sinclair, which can alter the narratives presented in the media. The decline in local media due to media concentration has led the news in circulation to be partisan, making it less effective at informing the public.

Methods

Hypothesis.

With the current trends of increased polarization and the decline of local news, it appears that they are linked in some way. I hypothesize that as local news declines, polarization increases.

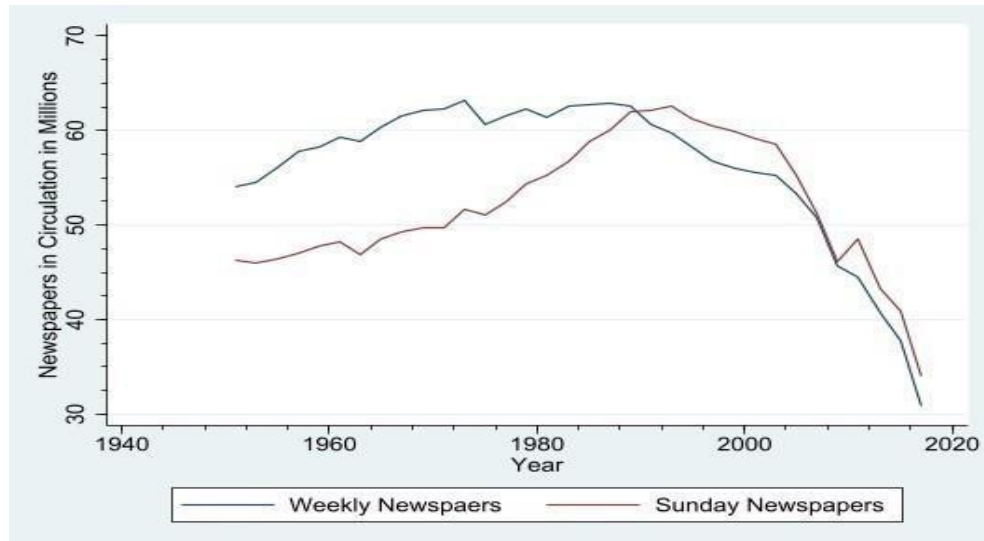
Methods Overview

In order to complete this study, Pew Research Center's *Newspaper Fact Sheet* (July 9, 2019) was utilized. Pew compiled data on the state of newspapers in the United States from 1940 to 2018 that includes: unique visitors of newspaper websites, visit duration of newspaper websites, estimated advertising, circulation revenue of the newspaper industry, the share of newspaper advertising revenue coming from digital advertising, employment in newspaper newsrooms and total estimated circulation of U.S. daily newspapers. For this research, the total estimated circulation of U.S. newspapers was used as a proxy for the prevalence of local news organizations over time. Pew collected this information from the News Media Alliance (NMA), a trade association representing newspapers in the United States and Canada. NWA represents large daily newspapers as well as hyperlocal news sources (News Media Alliance). Their calculations of estimated circulation include print and digital, including both weekly newspapers and Sunday-specific newspapers. The data I used in this research includes the number of weekly and Sunday newspapers in circulation from 1951 to 2017. In the data, the number of weekly newspapers in circulation is coded as (weekly_million) and the and Sunday papers as (sunday_million), which are the independent variables. These millions of newspapers are used to measure both variables.

Throughout the 66 years observed, the data shows a decline in the number of newspapers in circulation. This begins at the end of the 1980s and continues to decline further as time goes on. The most weekly newspapers in circulation of any year were in 1973, when 63.15 million were circulated. The year with the least number of weekly newspapers in circulation was in 2017, when 30.95 million were circulated. The average number of weekly newspapers in circulation during the elapsed time was 56.20 million.

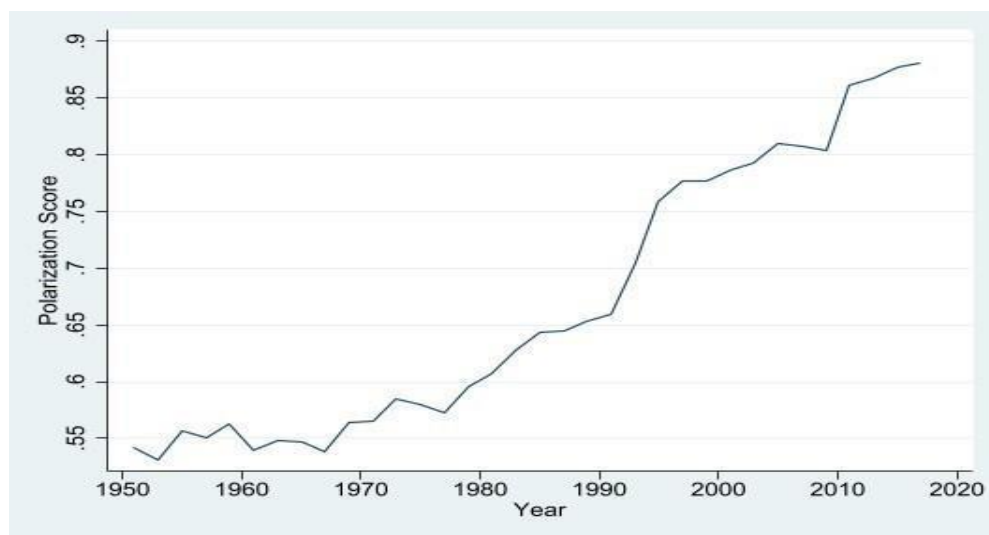
A similar trend is occurring for the Sunday newspapers, but the decline begins in the early 1990s. The most Sunday newspapers in circulation were in the year 1993, when 62.57 million were in circulation. The year with the least amount of Sunday papers was in 2017 with 33.97 million in circulation. The average number of observed Sunday newspapers in circulation is 52.10 million.

Graph 1. Newspaper circulation over time.



To measure polarization, I used Voteview's NOMINATE scores were used. Voteview is a project that was created in the late 1980s and early 1990s by political scientists Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal at Carnegie-Mellon University to follow every congressional roll call vote in American History (Voteview). The project tracks votes in both the House of Representatives and the Senate through time, analyzes them, and assigns each congress a polarization score.

Graph 2. Polarization score over time



Data from the 82nd Congress of 1951 to the 115th Congress of 2017 illustrates polarization in the United States. The closer the score is to 1, the more polarized the congress is, and the closer to -1 the number is, the closer the congress is to being void of polarization completely. These scores are given to each congress that was measured, and it follows that these scores were given every two years at the conclusion of the congress.

Although data for both the House and Senate were available, the House was chosen as the House is made up of more members, reflecting more accurately the preferences of the American people. In my data, the polarization score is coded as (polar_score) and is the dependent variable.

During 1951 - 2017, there is an increase in polarization in the House of Representatives. The House was least polarized during the 83rd Congress of 1953 with a polarization score of .53. It was most polarized during the most recent 115th Congress of 2017, with a polarization score of .88. The average polarization score over the measured period is .67.

In addition to the polarization score, I inputted the President's political party for each year that has a score. This was done to see if the President's political affiliation affected the polarization score of the congresses. This is a binary control variable that I have added, and it is coded as (party). A Democratic President is represented as a 1, and a Republican President is represented as a 0.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable Name	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Weekly Newspapers in Circulation (IV)	34	56.20	7.83	30.95	63.15
Sunday Newspapers in Circulation (IV)	34	52.10	6.90	33.97	62.60
Polarization Score (DV)	34	0.67	0.12	0.53	0.88
Party of the President (Control)	34	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Results

To test my hypothesis, I ran two linear regressions; one for the effect that weekly newspapers have on polarization scores and one for the effect that Sunday newspapers have on polarization. I included the President's political party in office during each congress that was measured in both models.

Table 2.

	Polariz	Score
ation		
Weekly	-0.011*** (0.001)	
Party	-0.001 (0.023)	
Constant	1.309*** (0.111)	
Observat	34	
ions		

All models estimated using regression. Standard errors in parentheses.

Table 3.

	Polariz	Score
ation		
Sunday	0.000 (0.003)	
Party	0.035 (0.043)	
Constant	0.634 (0.167)	
Observat	34	
ions		

All models estimated using regression. Standard errors in parentheses.

The circulation of weekly newspapers is very statically impactful. The effect of weekly newspapers on the polarization score is negative, meaning as the number of weekly newspapers in circulation decreases, the polarization score increases. The effect of weekly newspaper circulation is significant at the 0.05 level. As the number of weekly newspapers in circulation declines by 1 million, there is a 0.011 increase in the polarization score.

When I tested the effect of the circulation of Sunday newspapers, there was a much less impactful outcome. The circulation of Sunday newspapers was positive, meaning that as the number of Sunday newspapers decreases, there is a decrease in the polarization score. However, this figure is insignificant as it has a P value of 0.911, placing it out of the 0.05 significance level.

The difference in the effects of the weekly and Sunday newspapers in circulation makes sense and was expected. The number of weekly newspapers in circulation has remained much higher than that of the Sunday papers, showing that they have been less prominent. It follows that it has less of an impact on polarization.

The political party of the President in office during the congresses that were measured was included as a control variable in the regression in Table 1 for weekly newspaper circulation as well as in the regression in Table 2 for Sunday newspaper circulation. In both regressions, the political party of the President had no statistical significance. For weekly newspapers, the control had a P value of 0.979, making it statistically insignificant at the 0.05 level. When ran with the Sunday newspapers, the P-value of the control was 0.420, again deeming it statistically insignificant at the 0.05 level.

My analysis of the regressions supports my hypothesis; as local media declines, polarization increases. This can be seen with the data provided in Table 1 and discussed earlier. As the number of weekly newspapers in circulation decreases, polarization increases.

Sunday newspapers have no statistical significance, as mentioned above, but they are not the most common method of newspaper distribution and therefore have more negligible effect on the polarization score. Because the control variable was insignificant in both regressions, it shows that it does not matter which party is in power at the executive level. Polarization increased during both Republican and Democrat-led governments.

Conclusion

In this article, I aimed to analyze how the decline of local news affected polarization in the United States. The results of the statistical analysis provide evidence in favor of my hypothesis that as the decline of local news increased, so has polarization.

In the U.S., there has been a significant decline in the number of newspapers in circulation, a proxy that I used to estimate the health of local news outlets. The data collected from Pew Research showcased how the circulation of both weekly and Sunday newspapers has been in decline for several decades. Simultaneously, the Voteview's polarization score used to measure the change in polarization among Congress over time also increased. At first glance, it looked as if these two were correlated. My analysis of the data later confirmed this.

The decline of local news had a casual effect on the polarization scores that were given. I added in the control variable of the President's political party during each Congress that was given a polarization score to see if there was any connection between which party held control over the federal government and the amount of polarization. There was no connection, showing that it was irrelevant which party held power.

This research is important because it is imperative to look at the relationship between our media systems and our political system. Today there is a high level of polarization that does not seem to be going anywhere, and the decline of local news is a crucial factor in further polarization. If the United States wants to combat this issue, an in-depth understanding of how our information distribution system works must be attained. This article is only a portion of the overall research that needs to be conducted to achieve that goal.

My research is limited in a couple of ways. There are more variables that I believe contribute to the polarization of the congress that should be analyzed. My control variable was needed to observe how control over the executive branch affects polarization. However, the government is more intricately connected, and it may be helpful to collect and analyze data on which party held the majority in each of the congresses measured. In addition, although the data used to represent the decline of local news was relatively representative, there are better data sets that could be used to measure the connection. One such dataset is the one included in the UNC's Center for Innovation & Sustainability in Local Media's *The Rise of a New Media Baron and the Emerging Threat of News Deserts*. This dataset might showcase a more accurate decline of local news. I attempted to attain the metadata for my research but was unable to gain access to it.

With the continued decline of local news, more research must be done on how this will affect our democracy in the future. Future research should investigate how the decline of local news has accelerated in recent years and how to combat that issue. Also, it is imperative that research examines how polarized democracies create policy and what effect polarization has on trust in government. As polarization steadily increases, the country runs many risks, one of which I believe could be a legitimacy crisis that would further hinder the ability to govern the population effectively.

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