

News as a Casualty: District Polarization and Media Coverage of U.S. House Campaigns

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Polarization and the Media: Flipping the Focus

- Much work has focused on whether the media environment leads to mass polarization
 - Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Jacobson 2014; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Levendusky 2013; Stroud 2011 (gratuitous panel cites!)
- But we know little about how district polarization affects media coverage
 - Potential consequences for citizen knowledge and participation

How Polarization Could Affect Media Coverage of House Campaigns

- There will be less campaign coverage in lopsided districts than in more evenly split districts
 - District partisanship influences candidate emergence, campaign intensity, and competitiveness

A Tale of Two 2nds: AZ and NC



A Tale of Two 2nds: AZ and NC



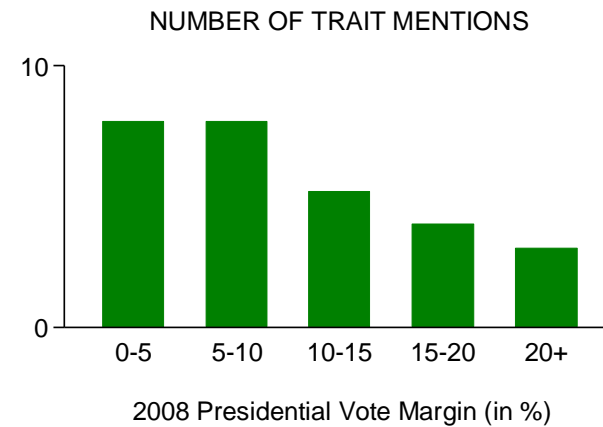
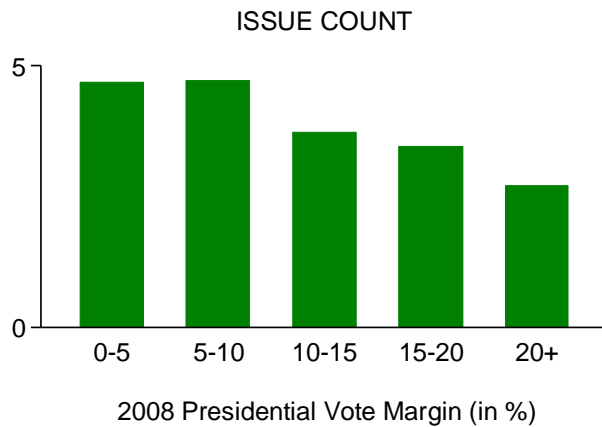
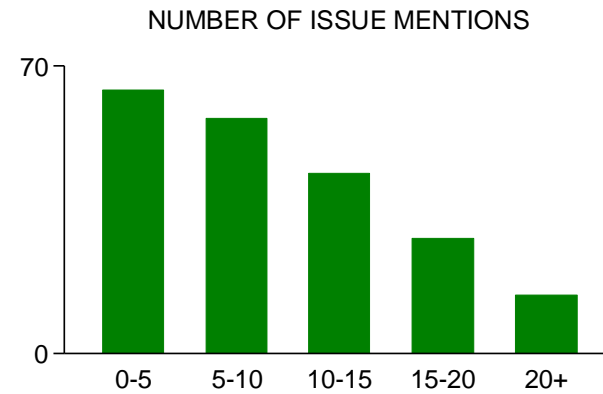
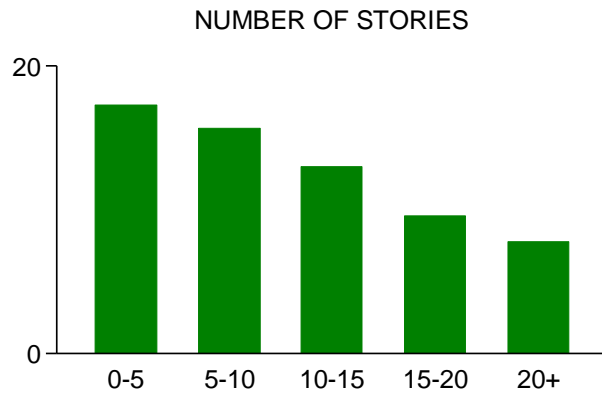
How Polarization Could Affect Media Coverage of House Campaigns

- There will be less campaign coverage in lopsided districts than in more evenly split districts
 - District partisanship influences candidate emergence, campaign intensity, and competitiveness
 - Those factors shape the newsworthiness of an election, which determines the amount of media coverage
- Coverage in lopsided districts will reflect a different set of candidate issue priorities than in more evenly split districts
 - Candidates in lopsided districts can avoid talking about “tough” issues
 - Citizens in lopsided districts will hear a different campaign than will citizens in more evenly split districts

Data: 2010 Midterm Election Coverage

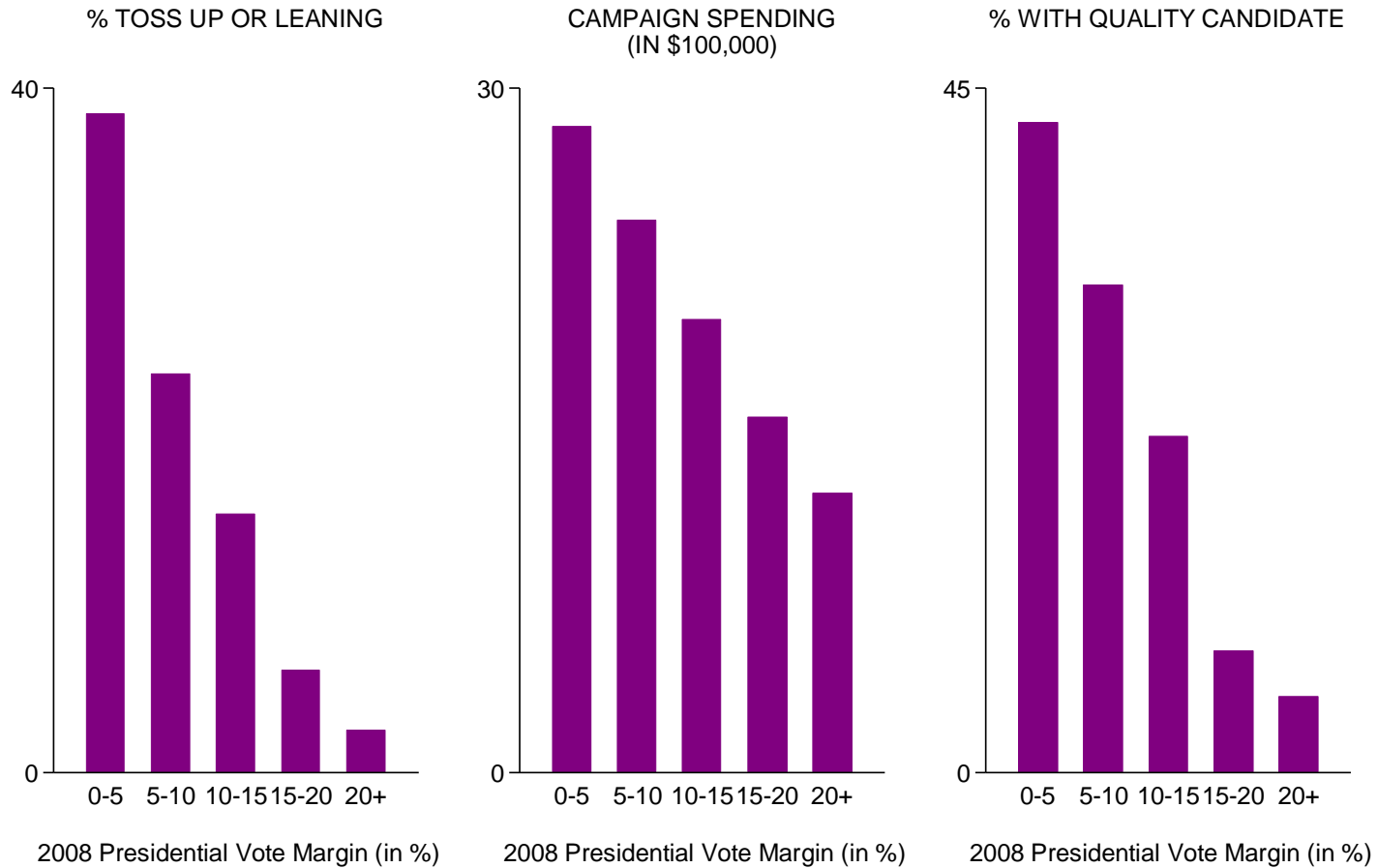
- Content analysis of local House campaign newspaper coverage
 - Largest-circulating newspaper in all 435 CDs
 - Coded every story from October 2nd – November 2nd
 - Analyzed a total of 6,004 stories
- Key measures of coverage
 - Number of stories
 - Number of issue mentions
 - Number of different issues mentioned
 - Number of candidate traits mentioned
 - Issue emphases of Democratic and Republican candidates
- Contextual data
 - District partisanship (2008 presidential vote margin)
 - Competitiveness of race (*Cook Report* rating)
 - Campaign spending
 - Quality candidate

District Polarization and Campaign News Coverage



Note: Data are from a content analysis of 6,004 campaign stories in local newspapers during the 2010 midterms.

District Polarization and Campaign Context



The Effect of Campaign Context on Media Coverage

	Number of Stories	Number of Issue Mentions
2008 Presidential Vote Margin	-0.25* (0.06)	
Competitiveness	---	
Campaign Spending	---	
Quality Candidate	---	
N	435	
R ²	0.09	

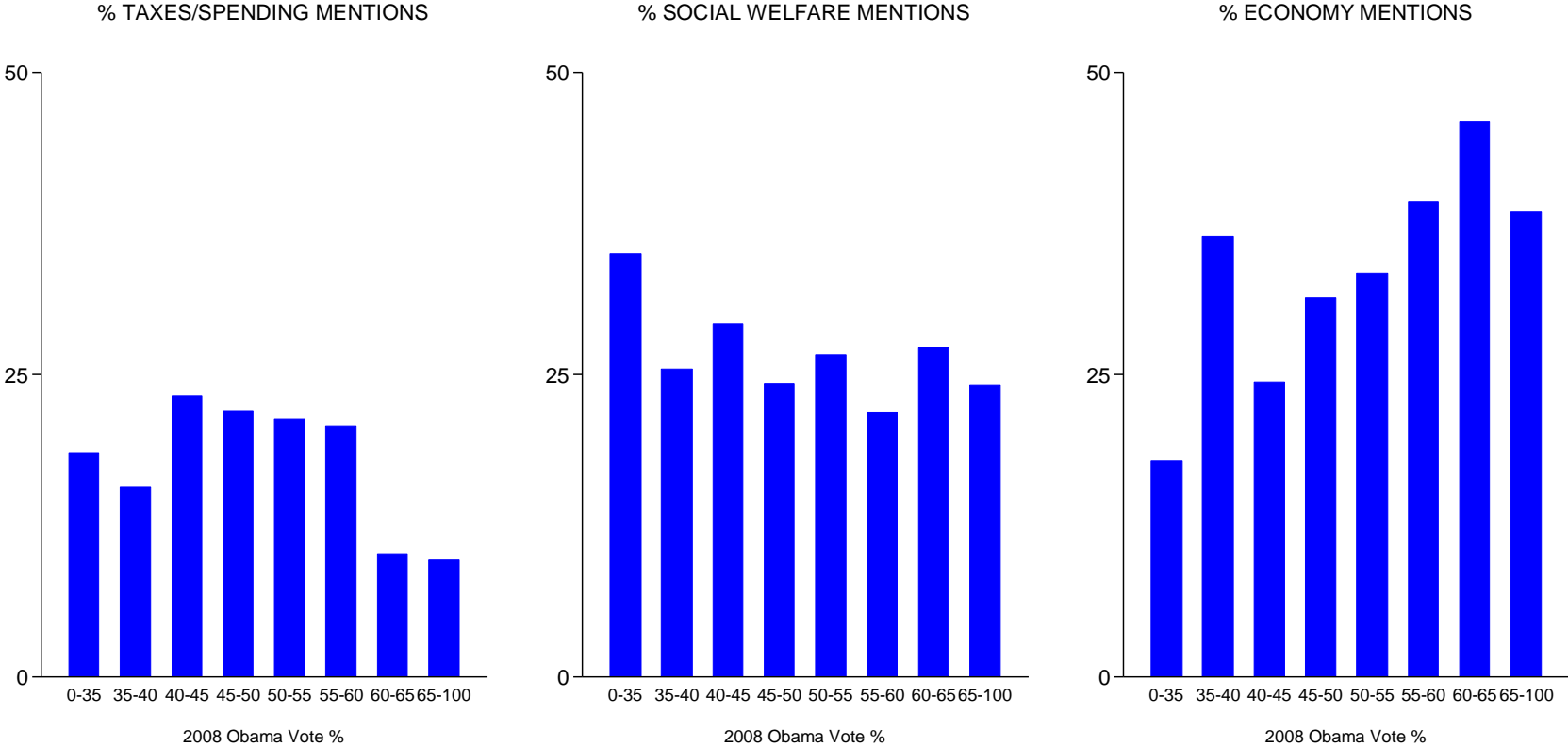
Notes: Entries are OLS coefficients. Robust standard errors clustered on newspaper are in parentheses. Equations controls for open seat, uncontested, district demographics, and media market-district overlap. Levels of significance: * $p < .05$.

The Effect of Campaign Context on Media Coverage

	Issue Count	Number of Trait Mentions
2008 Presidential Vote Margin	-0.05* (0.02)	
Competitiveness	---	
Campaign Spending	---	
Quality Candidate	---	
N	435	
R ²	0.17	

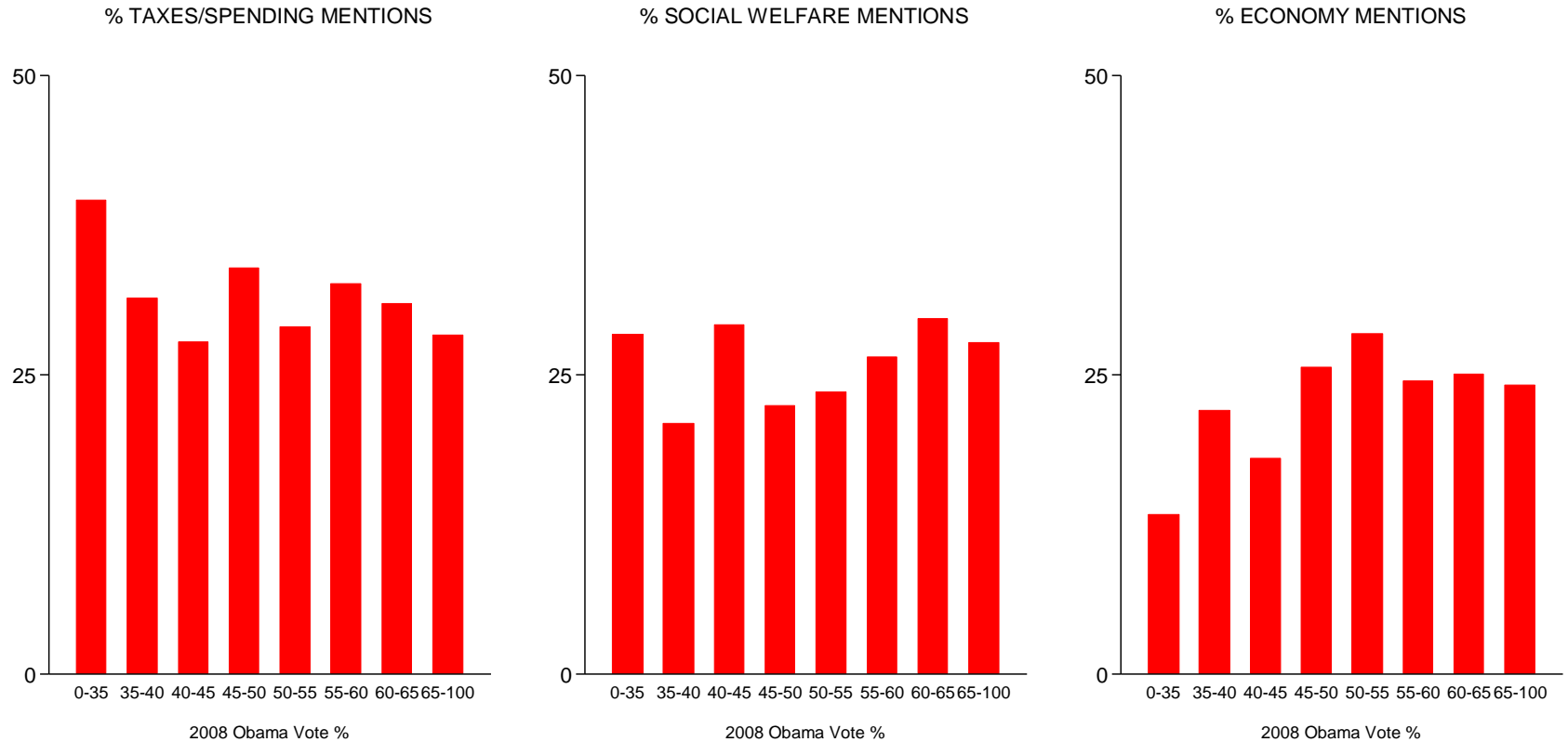
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Democratic Issue Agendas and District Polarization



Note: Data are from a content analysis of 6,004 campaign stories in local newspapers during the 2010 midterms.

Republican Issue Agendas and District Polarization



Note: Data are from a content analysis of 6,004 campaign stories in local newspapers during the 2010 midterms.

Conclusion

- By shaping the competitive context of districts, polarization influences the information environment during House campaigns
 - Lopsided districts get less, and less substantive, coverage
 - It does not, however, produce dramatically different issue agendas in the news (the campaign reflects a national conversation)
- As a result, district polarization may widen gaps in political knowledge and participation
 - This is especially consequential as the sources of local political news continue to diminish
- Is polarization a fundamental barrier to the renaissance of local political coverage?