

# Fair? Balanced? A Study Finds It Does Not Matter

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Published: August 18, 2005

The share of Americans who believe that news organizations are "politically biased in their reporting" increased to 60 percent in 2005, up from 45 percent in 1985, according to polls by the Pew Research Center.

Many people also believe that biased reporting influences who wins or loses elections. A new study by Stefano DellaVigna of the University of California, Berkeley, and Ethan Kaplan of the Institute for International Economic Studies at Stockholm University, however, casts doubt on this view. Specifically, the economists ask whether the advent of the Fox News Channel, Rupert Murdoch's cable television network, affected voter behavior. They found that Fox had no detectable effect on which party people voted for, or whether they voted at all.

An appealing feature of their study is that it does not matter if Fox News represents the political center and the rest of the media the liberal wing, or Fox represents the extreme right and the rest of the media the middle. Fox's political orientation is clearly to the right of the rest of the media. Research has found, for example, that Fox News is much more likely than other news shows to cite conservative think tanks and less likely to cite liberal ones.

Fox surely injected a new partisan perspective into political coverage on television. Did it matter?

The Fox News Channel started operating on Oct. 7, 1996, in a small number of cable markets. Professors DellaVigna and Kaplan painstakingly collected information on which towns offered Fox as part of their basic or extended cable service as of November 2000, and then linked this information to voting records for the towns. Their sample consists of 8,630 towns and cities from 24 states. (Because many states do not report vote tallies at the town level, they could not be included in the sample.)

Local cable companies adopted Fox in a somewhat idiosyncratic way. In November 2000, a third of the towns served by [AT&T](#) Broadband offered Fox while only 6 percent of those served by [Adelphia Communications](#) offered it. Fox spread more quickly in areas that leaned more to Republican candidates, but the imbalance was only slight. Furthermore, looking within Congressional districts, the likelihood that a town's cable provider offered Fox in 2000 was unrelated to the share of people who voted for Bob Dole, the Republican candidate for president in 1996, or the residents' educational attainment, racial makeup or unemployment rate.

Because Fox News started just before the presidential election in 1996 and was hardly available at the time of that election, a major question is whether the introduction of Fox in a community raised the likelihood that residents voted for George W. Bush over Al Gore in the 2000 election, as compared with the share who voted for Bob Dole over Bill Clinton in the (pre-Fox) 1996 election.

Disregarding third-party candidates, Professors DellaVigna and Kaplan found that towns that offered Fox by 2000 increased their vote share for the Republican presidential candidate by 6 percentage points (to 54 percent, from 48 percent) from 1996 to 2000, while those that did not offer Fox increased theirs by an even larger 7 percentage points (to 54 percent, from 47 percent).

When they made statistical adjustments to hold constant differences in demographic characteristics and unemployment, and looked at differences in voting behavior between towns that introduced and did not introduce Fox within the same Congressional district, the availability of Fox had a small and statistically insignificant effect on the increase in the share of votes for the Republican candidate. Thus, the introduction of Fox news did not appear to have increased the percentage of people voting for the Republican presidential candidate. A similar finding emerged for Congressional and senatorial elections. Voter turnout also did not noticeably change within towns that offered Fox by 2000 compared with those that did not.

By the summer of 2000, 17 percent of Americans said they regularly watched the Fox Cable Channel, and another 28 percent said they watched it sometimes. These numbers approached the viewership of the Cable News Network at the time.

Certainly many Democratic sympathizers feared that Fox gave Republican candidates an advantage. Al Franken, for example, called Fox "a veritable all-news Death Star" in Rupert Murdoch's media empire.

Why was Fox inconsequential to voter behavior?

One possibility is that people search for television shows with a political orientation that matches their own. In this scenario, Fox would have been preaching to the converted. This, however, was not the case: Fox's viewers were about equally likely to identify themselves as Democrats as Republicans, according to a poll by the Pew in 2000.

Professors DellaVigna and Kaplan offer two more promising explanations. First, watching Fox could have confirmed both Democratic and Republican viewers' inclinations, an effect known as confirmatory bias in psychology. (Borrowing from Simon and Garfunkel, confirmatory bias is a tendency to hear what we want to hear and disregard the rest.) When Yankee and Red Sox fans watch replays of the same disputed umpire's ruling, for example, they both come away more convinced that their team was in the right. One might expect Fox viewers to have increased their likelihood of voting, however, if Fox energized both sides' bases.

The professors' preferred explanation is that the public manages to "filter" biased media reports. Fox's format, for example, might alert the audience to take the views expressed with more than the usual grain of salt. Audiences may also filter biases from other networks' shows.

The tendency for people to regard television news and political commentary as entertainment probably makes filtering easier. Fox's influence might also have been diluted because there were already many other ways to get political information.