

**Public Perceptions of Bias in the News Media:
Taking A Closer Look at the Hostile Media Phenomenon**

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Introduction

By virtually all accounts, the mass media play a vital role in American politics. For most citizens, the news media -- particularly television and the press -- are the chief purveyors of political information. Increasingly, however, the public has become disenchanted with its news source. A variety of studies document plummeting ratings of the media as a "fair," "trustworthy," and impartial source of political information (e.g., Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997). To many journalists, the growing tendency of the public to discount the news as biased and inaccurate is one of the more unsettling criticisms of their profession. After all, good journalism in the U.S. is often equated with accurate, balanced and unbiased coverage of important issues (Entman 1989). Yet, a variety of groups -- from Accuracy in the Media (a conservative media watchdog group) to Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (a liberal group) -- routinely accuse the news media of biased coverage on a range of political issues. And while many Americans do not perceive bias in the media (Schneider and Lewis 1985; Beck 1991; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998), a growing number do.¹ In the midst of the Lewinsky scandal (October 1998), for example, only a little more than a third of the public felt the media could be trusted to report the news fairly "most of the time" or "just about always."²

To be sure, distrust of the media has important political consequences. As a number of media scholars have argued, although some degree of skepticism is certainly healthy in a democracy, a deep-seated distrust of the media and a tendency to discount all news as somehow tainted is likely to reinforce a growing cynicism and disaffection from politics (Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997, Fallows 1996). Distrust of the media also seriously undercuts the potential for the news to inform public opinion. In a recent experimental study, Miller and Krosnick (2000) found that even two of the more presumably "mindless" media effects identified in recent years -- "priming" and agenda setting -- were greatly diminished among people who distrust the media. While "priming" and agenda setting have been assumed to result from mere exposure to the news, Miller and Krosnick (312) concluded that priming is more aptly viewed as a form of "persuasion, whereby some citizens choose to use the information they glean from media coverage *as long as they trust its source*" (emphasis added).

If perceptions of media bias have important political consequences, the question arises: How does the public arrive at such negative judgments of the media in the first place? Our study takes a close look at one popular explanation of how people form perceptions of news bias, called the "hostile media phenomenon," which holds that partisans on an issue tend to judge news coverage as being biased against their own side. Both experimental and survey studies suggest that one reason the press receives such widespread criticism is that issue partisans often see an objective and balanced press as leaning toward the other side of the issue.

Our study seeks to provide a more direct test of this proposition -- that issue partisans tend to see bias even when the news is balanced -- by relying on a survey experiment that manipulates the content of a news article that respondents are asked to read. By systematically varying both the degree and the direction of the balance or slant in the news articles, we are able to shed new light on an important question: What types of news coverage prompt what types of citizens to perceive a news story as biased? In brief, while we do find evidence for the hostile media phenomenon, it is

¹ For example, the percentage of Americans who think the "stories and reports of news organizations" are "often" or "almost always inaccurate" increased from 34% in 1985 to 56% in 1997 and 58% in 1999; and the percentage of the public who feel that "news organizations generally" are "politically biased in their reporting" rose from 45% (1985) to 47% (1987) and 56% (1999) (The Pew Center for People and the Press, <http://www.people-press.org/feb99mor.htm>).

² Source: the 1998 National Election Survey.

more circumscribed and operates differently than suggested by prior studies. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for studies of media effects and public opinion. In brief, we find support for the hostile media effect, but a hostile media effect that is very much conditioned by both the content of the news story and by the reader.

The Hostile Media Phenomenon

How are people likely to form judgments of media bias? Although investigations of the content of actual news bias abound,³ there are relatively few studies in political science that examine people's *perceptions* of news bias. An important exception is a recent survey study by Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998), where the authors investigated voters' perceptions of bias in newspaper coverage of the 1992 presidential election (see also Beck 1991). The authors found a surprising lack of correspondence between respondents' *perceptions* of which presidential candidate their daily newspapers favored in the campaign and the *actual slant* of their paper's coverage (as measured by content analysis). Much more important than news content in shaping perceptions of news bias were voters' personal characteristics, particularly partisanship. "People with strong attachments to the Republican Party were more likely to see their paper as leaning toward Clinton, independent of the paper's actual coverage. Similarly, people with strong Democratic identifications were more likely to see their newspaper as leaning toward Bush" (p. 120).

This tendency for partisans to see news coverage as biased against their own side, the authors argued, is consistent with the more general "hostile media phenomenon" documented in laboratory studies (see below), where "people on opposing sides of an issue often judge the same news story as being biased against their views. This holds even when individuals were judging the same newspaper." One important implication of their findings, according to Dalton, et al (p. 121), is that this hostile media effect may help to explain "why the press receive such widespread criticism. Whether on the Left or the Right, partisans see the balanced and objective press as leaning toward their opponent."

Before political scientists embrace the hostile media effect as an important foundation for negative evaluations of the press, however, the original laboratory evidence for this hypothesis deserves a closer look. The "hostile media phenomenon" was first identified by Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985, 579), who had pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students observe an identical news broadcast in which the responsibility of Israeli troops for the 1982 massacre of civilians in Lebanese refugee camps was hotly debated. Vallone and his colleagues found that both groups of partisans thought the taped broadcast was biased in favor of the opposing side. Two cognitive mechanisms were found to underlie the hostile media effect. First, pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students differed in their perceptions or recollections of the program's content; they essentially "saw" a different program slanted against their views. And second, even if partisans found the program to be perfectly balanced in its presentation of facts and arguments, they considered such coverage to be inappropriate and unfairly biased toward the opposition because they believed their side's claims in the controversy were more [valid] than the other side's. This hostile media phenomenon was replicated and refined in similar studies by Perloff (1989) and Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994).

A closer examination of the experimental studies, however, raises important questions about the degree to which the laboratory evidence can be generalized to average citizens' perceptions of ordinary news stories. As the authors of these studies acknowledge, the news reports, the topics covered and the participants in the experiments were selected, in part, to ensure that passions would be activated by engaged partisans. In the studies by Vallone et al and Perloff, for example, members of pro-Arab and pro-Israeli student associations were specifically recruited to augment the basic

³ For a recent review of the political science literature in this area, see Gilens and Hertzman (2000).

sample of students from introductory psychology classes.⁴ In addition, the news broadcasts viewed by the participants were lengthy (e.g., 11 to 36 minutes long) compilations of major network news stories designed to stoke the emotions of partisans on both sides of a controversial issue. Despite the measures taken, however, a robust hostile media effect failed to materialize in several instances (e.g., Vallone et al's 1980 presidential election study and Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken's experiment involving the abortion issue), prompting the researchers to speculate that the participants in the experiments may not have been *sufficiently* partisan or the stimulus materials may not have been *sufficiently* evocative to bring about the expected effect.

Such inconsistencies raise several questions about the generalizability of the hostile media effect. How applicable is the phenomenon to the general population versus engaged activists, partisans and college students? And even more important, what types of *everyday* news stories are capable of triggering hostile media reactions? Vallone et al and Dalton et al suggest that perfectly balanced news stories are capable of promoting a hostile media effect among partisans. The implication is that the prior beliefs of partisans on an issue are so strong that no matter how balanced and objective the news, partisans are likely to see bias where none exists. In other words, even if the coverage is even-handed, partisans are likely to cry, "foul."

Although certainly plausible, such a conclusion is not warranted by either the existing experimental or survey evidence. While the news broadcasts of laboratory studies may have been balanced, the kind of lengthy and engrossing news footage used in these studies is a rarity in the world of 7-second "sound-bites" and *USA Today* "news nuggets." Everyday news coverage may be incapable of precipitating a hostile media reaction among ordinary citizens.

Moreover, the correlational evidence for the hostile media phenomenon uncovered in survey studies (e.g., Dalton et al; Beck 1991) cannot speak to the process by which people form perceptions of bias. One of the obvious strengths of such studies is their impressive external validity -- not only in terms of sampling of respondents and news stories but also in terms of the natural setting in which respondents are asked about existing news coverage of a particular election. On the other hand, one shortcoming of such studies is that there is no way of knowing whether respondents actually read (a sampling of) the news stories that are content analyzed.⁵ Whereas psychologists evaluate individuals' reactions to specific news stories in a controlled setting, survey analysts assess people's retrospective evaluations of news coverage over an entire political campaign. Such global assessments of bias may be more susceptible to voters' political predispositions (e.g., partisanship) and less reflective of their actual assessments of individual news stories.

Our design seeks to overcome the limitations of prior studies by embedding a news story experiment into a nonprobability survey. By systematically manipulating the degree of balance or slant in a news story, we can determine whether and how different news content affects perceptions of media bias. Specifically, it should be possible to assess whether the hostile media effect arises when partisans are exposed to balanced as well as slanted news stories. And in contrast to experimental studies, our news treatments more closely resemble those encountered in everyday life. As well, our respondents are selected from the general population instead of extreme partisan groups. To rephrase our central research question, then, we ask, What types of everyday news content prompts what types of ordinary people to perceive journalistic bias?

⁴ In the third study by Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994), partisan and neutral college students were recruited based on their responses to a pretest.

⁵ Dalton et al (1998) present indirect evidence on this score by asking people in their post-election study how much attention they paid to various types of news coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign. Interestingly, they find that partisans who paid more attention to news about the campaign were *less* likely to see the news as biased against their views.

One of the advantages of our design is that we are in a strong position to detect various *asymmetries* in the way that liberals and conservatives react to similar types of news content. The hostile media hypothesis predicts that people with more extreme liberal and conservative positions on an issue are just as likely to see bias in coverage that runs counter to their views. But one group (either liberals or conservatives) may be more susceptible to the phenomenon if they feel more strongly about the issue or find the coverage more offensive. Our experimental design gives us some leverage in detecting such asymmetries.

In the next section of the paper we present the theoretical model and offer our main hypotheses. Afterward, we turn to a description of the study design and the measurement of key variables. In the last two sections we present the results and provide some concluding remarks.

THEORY

Theories of social cognition in cognitive psychology provide a strong theoretical foundation for the hostile media phenomenon. Social cognition theory assumes that the limits of human cognition require people to use various “shortcuts” as a means of managing the torrent of information they receive on a daily basis (Hastie 1986; Fiske and Taylor 1984). One such shortcut is the tendency to rely on old knowledge (e.g., stereotypes, schemas, scripts, and other beliefs and predispositions) to process new information (e.g., media messages) quickly and efficiently. The social cognition literature uses the term *theory-driven* processing to refer to this strategy whereby cognitive misers rely on their prior preconceptions (or theories) to direct their attention to information that is consistent with the theory; information that is inconsistent, on the other hand, may tend to be ignored, discounted, or somehow interpreted so that it becomes confirmatory of the initial impression.

In the Vallone et al (1985) study, for example, two confirmatory biases were found to contribute to the hostile media effect. First, issue partisans (i.e., pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students) differed in their perceptions or recollections of the program’s content; they essentially “saw” or remembered a different program slanted against their views. And second, even if partisans found the program to be perfectly balanced in its presentation of facts and arguments, they considered such coverage to be unfairly biased against their side’s more valid claims in the controversy. Thus, their prior views led partisans to “perceive a hostile media bias, even in news coverage that most nonpartisans would find even-handed and objective” (578).

While cognitive misers generally prefer theory-driven strategies, they are not prisoners to their prior expectancies. Rather, recent research finds that, under a variety of circumstances, individuals are sensitive to the information at hand, even when it runs counter to their prior preconceptions.⁶ Thus, social cognition researchers have assembled a veritable grab-bag of contextual and individual difference variables that affect the relative balance between theory (i.e., prior beliefs) and data in affecting social judgments (e.g., Rahn 1993). The important point for our purposes is that the confirmatory biases that lead to perceptions of a hostile media can be assumed to operate conditionally, depending on the type of news story (content) being evaluated and the type of individual doing the evaluating.

News Content. Although a variety of different types of news content may enhance or inhibit the hostile media effect, we focus on the degree to which news balance or slant affects perceptions of news bias. Prior research (e.g., Vallone et al and Dalton et al) suggests that even balanced articles that portray controversial groups and issues in an even-handed way are capable of producing perceptions of news bias. Accordingly, issue partisans should tend to “see” bias in objectively

⁶ *Continuum or dual process* models, for example, focus on the conditions under which individuals engage in *either* theory-driven or data-driven modes of processing information (e.g., Fiske and Pavelchak 1986; Fiske and Neuberg 1990).

balanced news articles. They are likely to object to balanced coverage that portrays the other side in a favorable light or their own side in an unfavorable light. Following prior research, then, our first hypothesis is consistent with the traditional notions of a hostile media effect: issue partisans will perceive bias in news stories that are balanced.

More fertile grounds for the hostile media effect, in our view, are “slanted” news stories in which one party in a conflict is portrayed more favorably than the other. Although it may be difficult, if not impossible, for ordinary citizens to evaluate the veracity of the news story, imbalance is likely to be interpreted (by issue partisans) as news “bias.” Thus, our second hypothesis states that slanted news portrayals are more likely to engender perceptions of news bias than balanced ones.

Individual Differences. A variety of political predispositions should also shape judgments of news bias, including issue partisanship, political awareness and prior beliefs in media bias. Following prior research, we expect “issue partisans”—individuals with more extreme views on the contentious issue that is the subject of a news story—to be more likely to perceive a hostile media bias. In addition, *political awareness* should moderate the relationship between issue partisanship and perceived bias. In Vallone et al’s study, for example, more knowledge tended to intensify the hostile media effect among partisans, as more knowledgeable pro-Arab and pro-Israeli viewers were much more polarized in their assessment of media bias than those with less knowledge. In a similar vein, more knowledgeable or politically aware individuals are often found to resist political messages that are inconsistent with their political predispositions (e.g., Zaller 1992, Petty and Cacciopo 1996).

A third set of predispositions that should affect judgments of news bias are *prior beliefs in a hostile media bias*, or the degree to which individuals believe news coverage is biased against particular groups. As Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) have argued, prior beliefs in media bias, as well as issue partisanship per se, may lead people to evaluate the news as biased. For even if issue partisans are oblivious to the actual content of the news, they may use their prior beliefs as a judgmental heuristic to assess the degree of bias in specific news stories. Partisans may reason that if the news tends to be biased against their views, any given news story is likely to be slanted, as well. In assessing the hostile media effect, then, it is important to measure prior beliefs of media bias as well as contemporaneous judgments of bias in a given news story. Our third hypothesis states that perceptions of news bias are likely to be shaped by at least three individual difference variables: issue partisanship and its interaction with political awareness and prior beliefs in a media bias.

Although our primary objective is to study perceptions of bias in a specific news story, we also examine the antecedents of prior beliefs in media bias to shed some light on the nature and sources of these beliefs. Where might prior beliefs about media bias come from? It is certainly possible that issue partisans arrive at these beliefs by independently appraising bias in mainstream reporting. With a constant sampling of news coverage, citizens may continually update their beliefs about media bias. However, cognitive misers are unlikely to maintain a continuous accounting of the ideological orientation of vast amounts of news coverage (Watts, et al 1999). A more likely scenario is that people form such beliefs by relying on an important shortcut strategy—*elite cueing*, whereby individuals base their judgments, in part, on cues and pronouncements made by trusted elites. Politicians, media monitoring groups, and leaders of social movements regularly assert that the news is politically biased against their views (Watts et al 1999). More politically aware issue partisans are likely to be exposed to such claims and incorporate them into their views of the news media. Thus, our fourth hypothesis states that: Important antecedents of prior beliefs about a hostile media are likely to be issue partisanship, political awareness, and the interaction between the two.

A final goal of our study is to determine whether liberal or conservative partisans on an issue are more susceptible to the hostile media bias—both in their evaluations of a specific news article and in their prior beliefs of media bias. On the one hand, experimental research on the hostile media bias has not uncovered evidence of such ideological asymmetry; issue partisans on the left and the right appear equally likely to perceive news bias. On the other hand, recent research provides several reasons for expecting conservatives to be more likely to perceive media bias than liberals. First, charges of a liberal bias by conservative elites are much more prevalent than charges of conservative bias by liberal elites, despite the fact that several media scholars have failed to find evidence of lopsided political biases in news content analyses across a variety of contexts (Watts et al 1999). And second, in their time series analysis of public perceptions of media bias in presidential elections in recent years, Watts et al (1999) found evidence of a causal link between increased claims of liberal bias by conservative elites and a rise in the public’s belief in a liberal bias. Thus, our fifth hypothesis is that conservative issue partisans, more so than their liberal counterparts, will tend to perceive bias in a specific news article and to subscribe to a prior belief in media bias.

METHODS, DATA, AND ESTIMATION

To investigate perceptions of news bias, a news story experiment was embedded into a nonprobability survey of 564 non-student adults interviewed by trained college students in the fall of 1999. Table 1 displays sample demographics relative to those in Lexington, Kentucky (i.e., Fayette County), where 85% of the interviews took place, and a national sample. Clearly, our nonprobability sample is diverse and comes close to approximating the distribution of important demographic characteristics found both in Lexington and a national sample. The limitations of the nonprobability sample are discussed in the conclusions.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

After responding to a variety of questions on political and social issues (e.g., abortion), respondents were randomly assigned to read one of four different versions of a fictitious newspaper article about a “peace-summit” attended by pro-life and pro-choice groups (see the Appendix I for the articles). They were then asked several questions about the article as well as various background questions.

The abortion issue seemed a natural topic for our news articles. Not only is a story on the conflict between pro-life and pro-choice groups likely to generate interest among readers, but the issue is one on which many people have strong feelings (Cook, Jelen and Wilcox 1992), making it fertile ground for the hostile media effect. In addition, both pro-life and pro-choice groups claim that media coverage on the abortion issue tends to be biased against their views.⁷

Experimental Manipulations

For the experimental treatment, we systematically varied the nature and degree of balance or slant in the four articles. In two of the stories the portrayal of the (pro-life and pro-choice) groups was *balanced*; in the other two versions of the story, the portrayal was *slanted*, with one of the groups depicted more negatively than the other. Thus, in the *Positive Balance* condition, the news story emphasized the efforts of both pro-choice and pro-life groups to achieve reconciliation. The *Negative Balance* condition emphasized the disruptive attempts by both groups to undermine the reconciliation. In the *Slanted Against Pro-Choice* version of the story, the pro-choice group was

⁷ For charges of media bias in news coverage of the abortion issue, see the web-site materials of the liberal Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (<http://www.fair.org/extra/best-of-extra/abortion-coverage.html>) and the conservative Media Research Center (<http://www.mediaresearch.org/>).

portrayed as being more disruptive than the pro-life group, while a similar logic underlies the *Slanted Against Pro-Life* version of the news story.⁸

Perceptions of News Bias

Manipulating the content of the news stories in this way allows us to investigate our several hypotheses concerning the impact of news treatments and individual characteristics on perceptions of news bias. Accordingly, the following equation was estimated (using OLS regression procedures) for each of the four news “treatment” conditions:

$$\text{Perceived Bias} = \text{Abortion Views} + \text{Political Awareness} + \text{Abortion Views} * \text{Awareness} + \text{Prior Belief in Media Bias} + \text{Ideology} + \text{Party Identification} + \text{Demographic Variables}$$

where the variables of interest are measured as follows (see the Appendix for the wording of the survey items).

Perceived Bias. After reading one of the four news articles, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they thought the journalist who wrote the article was biased. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate how “fair-minded” the journalist was on a seven-point scale ranging from “Very Fair” (1) to “Very Unfair” (7).

Abortion Views. Following Vallone et al, views on abortion should heavily color people’s perceptions of news bias, even for articles that are relatively balanced. A respondent’s *Abortion Views* were measured by adding responses to two scales. The first is the standard NES item that asks respondents to select one of four positions on a scale that ranges from strong pro-life views at point 1 to strong pro-choice views at point 4. The second item asks respondents whether they approve of a law banning late-term or partial-birth abortions on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly approve (1) to strongly disapprove (7). The initial 11-point index (ranging from strong pro-life views [1] to strong pro-choice views [11]) was then “centered” by subtracting the scale mean from individual scores.⁹

⁸ We use the term “slant” rather than “bias” to characterize the imbalance in the portrayal of the two groups in the news stories. As several scholars have noted, “bias” implies a departure from objective reality, which is rarely known. Slant, on the other hand, is meant to imply that one side of an issue receives more favorable coverage than the other. It should be emphasized that the imbalance in the two slanted versions of the news story was subtle and slight, rather than heavy-handed, to enhance the verisimilitude of the news articles. Thus, even though one group was portrayed less favorably than the other, much of the descriptive content of the two slanted articles was similar.

⁹ Both Abortion Views and Political Awareness were centered (subtracting the mean score) prior to forming the interaction, Abortion * Awareness, to aid in the interpretation of the two “main effects” variables. Centering the main effects variables serves two functions (see Jaccard, Turrisi, and Wan 1990). First, it reduces problems of multicollinearity in estimating interactions. Second, the coefficients of the “main effects” are more easily interpreted as the usual average effect of the variable that would be obtained without the multiplicative terms in the model. This is because the main effects coefficients (of the centered variables) give the effect of the variable at the mean value of the variable(s) with which it interacts.

It should be noted that the distribution of opinion on the two abortion items in our nonprobability sample is similar to that of the 1998 ANES. The mean and standard deviation of the four-point self-placement item in our sample are 2.83 and 1.05, respectively, versus 2.88 and 1.27 for the 1998 national survey. Although the format of the item on banning late-term abortions is different in the two surveys (a 7-point scale in our survey versus a 4-point scale in the national

Political Awareness. Prior research also suggests that more politically aware respondents are more likely to use their predispositions (abortion views, ideology, etc.) to evaluate bias. More aware individuals should be more vigilant in rejecting news stories that are inconsistent with their own beliefs (Vallone et al 1985, Zaller 1992). *Political Awareness* is an additive index indicating the number of correct answers to six standard questions measuring respondents' knowledge of political figures and the political system. The initial scale ranged from 0 to 6 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$) and was then centered by subtracting the scale mean from individual scores. The interactive term, *Abortion Views * Awareness*, was formed by simply multiplying Abortion Views by Political Awareness.

Prior Beliefs in a Hostile Media. Another important set of predispositions that may shape perceptions of bias of a given article are prior beliefs in a hostile media. Accordingly, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they believe the news media is biased against pro-life and pro-choice groups. *Prior Media Bias* is an additive index constructed by summing responses to two questions asking respondents to rate the extent to which they felt the news media is biased for or against both "pro-life groups" and "pro-choice groups" on seven-point scales ranging from "Very Biased in Favor" (1) to "Very Biased Against" (7). The correlation between responses to the two items is $-.38$, indicating a strong tendency for people to believe media bias runs in opposite directions for pro-choice and pro-life groups. After reflecting the ratings of pro-choice groups, the resulting Prior Media Bias index ranges from 2 (the belief that the news media is very biased in favor of pro-life/against pro-choice) to 14 (very biased against pro-life/in favor of pro-choice).

Political Ideology and Party ID ranges from 1 (strong conservative/Republican) to 7 (strong liberal/Democrat).

Demographic variables were also included as controls. These include Gender (1 = male), Age (in increasing years), Race (1 = white; 0 = non-white), Education (a seven-point scale), and Income (a seven-point scale).

RESULTS

Before turning to the regression results, we first examine respondents' perceptions of bias across the different news articles to determine whether the experimental manipulations "worked" in the sense that judgments of bias vary in predictable ways across the treatments. As indicated by the entries in Table 2, respondents who read the two balanced articles were significantly *less* likely to rate the journalist who wrote the article as "unfair" than respondents who read the two slanted articles. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for Perceived Bias showed a significant difference in cell means across the balanced and slanted articles.¹⁰ The entries in Table 2 also indicate that in terms of overall ratings, perceptions of bias for the two balanced articles did not differ significantly.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Confident that the experimental manipulations had their intended effect in the aggregate, we turn to a more detailed analysis of the variation in judgments of bias for the different articles. A separate regression model was estimated for each of the four experimental conditions. Table 3 displays the regression results for each of the four articles.

Balanced Articles

Focusing first on the results for the two balanced articles, the most noteworthy finding to emphasize in Table 3.A is the complete *lack* of evidence for the hostile media effect for either of the

survey), the percentage of respondents favoring a ban is similar, with 63% favoring a ban in our study (scoring 1 to 3 on the 7-point scale) versus 58% favoring a ban in the national survey.

¹⁰ Also, consistent with our intention to create slanted articles that were not overwhelmingly slanted, not everyone rated the journalist who authored the slanted articles as biased (i.e., "unfair").

two balanced articles. Virtually none of the coefficients are statistically significant predictors of perceived bias. Regardless of whether both (pro-choice and pro-life) groups in the news article are portrayed in an equally positive light or an equally negative light (Table 3.A), prior abortion views (and virtually every other variable in the models) tend to be small and insignificant predictors of news bias. Thus, the hypothesis suggested by Vallone, et al [1985] and Dalton et al [1998]) that *balanced* news portrayals are capable of engendering a hostile media reaction finds no support in our findings.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Further probing failed to uncover significant effects. Even among respondents who fall at the extremes of the abortion views scale (i.e., "partisans" on the abortion issue), there is no systematic tendency to rate the journalist as biased. The simple correlations between Abortion Views and Perceived Bias for respondents scoring in the top and bottom thirds of the Abortion Views scale are not significant for either of the balanced versions of the news story ($r = .01$ for Positive Balance, $-.09$ for Negative Balance). In addition, the interaction between abortion views and political awareness was not significant for either of the balanced articles. Clearly, even ordinary citizens who are partisans in the abortion debate do not tend to "see bias" in objectively balanced articles in which the opposing side is portrayed positively (Positive Balance) or their own side is portrayed negatively (Negative Balance).¹¹

Slanted Articles

We also hypothesized that subtly slanted news articles should be more hospitable to the hostile media effect. The regression results for the two slanted articles are presented in Table 3.B. For the article slanted against "choice" groups (the first column of coefficients), Abortion Views (along with gender and education) is one of the more important predictors of perceived journalistic bias. Consistent with the hostile media hypothesis, people with stronger pro-choice views are more likely to view the journalist who wrote the article as being unfair toward "choice" groups. In addition, as indicated by the significant coefficient for Abortion*Awareness, the impact of abortion views is stronger for more knowledgeable respondents. Such findings are consistent with the general tendency for more knowledgeable or politically aware individuals to resist political messages that are inconsistent with their political predispositions (e.g., Zaller 1992, Petty and Cacciopo 1996). Finally, women and more educated respondents are significantly more likely to judge the journalist as being biased ("unfair") when the article is slanted against "choice" groups.¹²

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Turning to the third column of coefficients in Table 3.B, we see that when the article is slanted against "life" groups, people with stronger pro-life views are now more likely to view the

¹¹ We experimented with a number of different specifications, but none were successful in uncovering a significant effect of Abortion Views on perceived bias for the balanced articles. In one model, for example, we included a squared abortion views variable to estimate curvilinear effects of prior abortion views, reasoning that individuals with more extreme pro-life *or* pro-choice views might perceive more bias. In another model, we included an *abortion views extremity* scale by essentially "folding" the four-point abortion views scale at the mid-point so that more extreme pro-life or pro-choice positions on the scale were given higher scores, while less extreme positions were given lower scores. Neither specification proved to be significant, however.

¹² One possible reason why the effects of education (as well as the interaction between abortion views and political knowledge) are more important for the article slanted against pro-choice groups is that news slant against pro-choice groups may be more difficult for average citizens to detect. If pro-life groups are more vocal in decrying a liberal bias against their views, slant against pro-life groups may be more easily recognized, regardless of one's level of education or political awareness.

journalist as being biased, again consistent with the hostile media effect.¹³ In an effort to display in summary fashion how abortion views affect perceptions of bias differently for the two slanted articles, we present in Figure 1 the predicted level of perceived bias across the abortion attitudes scale.¹⁴ Consistent with our expectations, individuals with stronger pro-life and pro-choice views on abortion diverge more in rating the bias of the two slanted articles than individuals with more moderate abortion views (in the middle of the scale). The figure also highlights an interesting pattern: more extreme partisans not only rate articles slanted against their views as less fair, but also rate articles slanted against the opposition as being relatively “fair.” Thus, people with more extreme views on abortion tend to evaluate slanted news articles as being fair, but only when the opposing side is being gored.

Are conservatives more susceptible to the hostile media bias than liberals? The evidence in Figure 1 and Table 3 appears mixed on this score. The coefficients for abortion views across the two equations in Table 3 are roughly equal. And while in Figure 1, we see a slight asymmetry in the tendency for individuals with strong pro-life views to diverge more in their ratings of the slanted articles than those with strong pro-choice views, these differences are not statistically significant. Thus, with respect to the impact of issue partisanship on perceptions of news bias, we find little support for our hypothesis that conservatives are more susceptible to the hostile media bias than liberals.

However, the results in Table 3.B reveal an interesting asymmetry in the effects of prior beliefs in a hostile media (Prior Media Bias) on the dependent variable. While these beliefs had no discernible impact when respondents read the article slanted against “choice” groups (the left-hand side of Table 3.B), they do appear to shape perceived bias when the article is slanted against “life” groups (the right-hand side of the table). As one might expect, respondents who were already convinced that the media is biased against pro-life groups are much more likely to judge the journalist as biased. But the more interesting question is why prior beliefs in a hostile media (Prior Media Bias) have a greater impact when the article is slanted against “life” groups. As we shall see, the answer lies in the following analysis of the antecedents of Prior Media Bias, where we discover a variety of asymmetries in the sources of these beliefs.

Explaining Prior Beliefs in a Hostile Media

To investigate the antecedents of prior beliefs in a hostile media, we regressed Prior Media Bias on many of the same variables used to explain judgments of news bias earlier. Our primary interest is in the extent to which prior beliefs are shaped by political predispositions, such as views

¹³ The coefficients for the Abortion Views variable are significantly different from one another at the .05 level or less across the balanced versus slanted news treatments (Table 2 versus Table 3) and between the two slanted articles (column 1 versus 2 in Table 3). In addition, the impact of Abortion * Awareness and Prior Media Bias differs significantly across the two slanted news treatments.

Significance tests were conducted by pooling the data for all four experimental conditions and including appropriate interaction terms representing the predictor (e.g., Abortion Views) times a dummy variable representing balance versus slant and a dummy variable representing the two types of slant. We report the separate regressions (instead of the interactive models estimated with pooled data) in Tables 2 and 3 because they are more informative and allow the effects for all the variables to vary across experimental conditions (not just the predictors of interest, such as Abortion Views).

¹⁴ Expected values were generated using the Clarify program developed by King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (2000). Clarify uses Monte Carlo simulation to generate asymptotic distributions to estimate the expected values of the dependent variable while varying the values of the predictors. For a full discussion see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (2000) and Tomz, Wittenberg, and King (1998).

on abortion and ideology. As indicated by the first row of coefficients in Table 4, prior beliefs about media bias are strongly associated with Abortion Views. Individuals with more extreme pro-life leanings tend to believe the news media is biased in favor of “choice” groups and against “life” groups. Along the same lines, Ideology also contributes to prior beliefs about media bias, with conservatives tending to believe that the media is biased against “life” groups. Clearly, Prior Beliefs in a Hostile Media are heavily politicized and closely resemble the spirit of the hostile media effect in that ideologues and issue partisans believe the media is biased against groups who support their views.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Finally, political awareness is also significantly associated with beliefs about prior media bias. Controlling for the effects of other political predispositions, more knowledgeable respondents tend to believe that pro-choice groups receive more favorable news coverage than pro-life groups.¹⁵ Even more important for our purposes is the finding—revealed by the third row of coefficients in the table—that the impact of abortion views is not invariant, but differs significantly across levels of political awareness.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2, which presents the expected values for Prior Media Bias across abortion views for different levels of political knowledge, displays these conditional effects more clearly. From the figure we see that strong pro-life individuals (who fall at the most extreme pro-life quarter of the abortion views scale) stand apart from the rest of the sample in their tendency to believe the news media is biased against pro-life groups. Virtually every other group along the abortion views scale, including strong pro-choice individuals, tends to believe, on average, that the media are relatively even-handed in the way they portray pro-life and pro-choice groups, rating media bias at about the mid-point (at point 8) of the Prior Media Bias scale. In fact, among pro-choice groups, greater political awareness is not associated with a tendency to believe the media is biased against pro-choice groups, which is contrary to the hypothesized effects of political awareness. Among extreme *pro-life* individuals, however, greater awareness is strongly associated with the conviction that the news media is biased against their views. Thus, prior beliefs in a hostile media appear to be asymmetric in the sense that such beliefs tend to be concentrated among pro-life individuals, particularly those with greater political awareness.

Conclusions

Both experimental and survey studies have converged on a common explanation for citizens’ perceptions of media bias. The “hostile media phenomenon” maintains that citizens often view the news as being biased against their views, irrespective of the actual content of the news. Thus, even when the news is balanced and objective, issue partisans are expected to view the news media as being hostile to (or biased against) their side of the issue.

We have argued that the hostile media phenomenon deserves a closer look, at least in part because of the limitations of prior studies. On the one hand, the generalizability of experimental studies is restricted by the tendency to use extreme issue partisans as participants who are asked to view lengthy and controversial news broadcasts. On the other hand, survey studies tend to suffer from problems of internal validity, for we have no way of knowing whether respondents actually read the news stories that are content analyzed. Our design attempts to overcome the limitations of

¹⁵ To anticipate our findings below, the impact of political awareness on perceived bias owes much of its strength to the strong tendency for politically aware pro-life individuals to believe the media is biased against pro-life groups (see Figure 2). If we remove the quarter of the sample with the most extreme pro-life views, the relationship between political awareness and prior media bias becomes statistically insignificant.

prior studies by embedding a news experiment into a nonprobability survey. Respondents were thus randomly assigned to read one of four different news articles in which the portrayal of pro-life and pro-choice groups was either balanced (with both groups portrayed either favorably or unfavorably) or slanted (with one group portrayed more favorably than the other).

Our results indicate that support for the hostile media hypothesis is more circumscribed than prior studies suggest. Most importantly, when respondents in our survey experiments read articles that were balanced, we found little evidence of the phenomenon. Holding more extreme views on the abortion issue did not prompt people tend to "see bias" in objectively balanced articles, regardless of whether the opposing side was portrayed positively (Positive Balance) or their own side was portrayed negatively (Negative Balance). Thus, the suggestion (made by Vallone, et al [1985] and Dalton et al [1998]) that *balanced* news portrayals are capable of engendering a hostile media reaction finds little support in our study. Even on an emotional issue like abortion, strict balance in news presentations effectively neutralized any hostile media effect.

Strong hostile media reactions to balanced news thus appear limited to the kinds of unusually evocative news stories, issues, and activist populations examined in experimental studies. On the one hand, these results might be viewed with some reassurance by journalists who wonder whether it is impossible to present controversial material without being accused of biased. Strictly balanced portrayals successfully neutralize a hostile media effect.

On the other hand, relatively modest departures from strict balance were capable of prompting a hostile media reaction from partisans on the abortion issue. When the articles were subtly slanted to portray one group (either pro-choice or pro-life) more favorably than the other, people with stronger views on abortion were much more likely to judge the journalist who wrote the article as being biased or unfair. Thus, even a small degree of imbalance in the portrayal of conflicting groups in a news story is likely to prompt many readers to judge the news as biased in favor of the opposing side of an issue.

In addition, we uncovered another source of hostile media perceptions in our study. We found that when the article was slanted against pro-life groups, people's judgments about news bias were shaped not only by their views on abortion but also by their prior belief in a hostile media. People who believe the media is biased against pro-choice groups are much more likely to judge the news article as biased as well. This is an important finding, for it suggests, first, that many people have already made up their mind about whether the news media are hostile toward particular groups, and second, that these prejudgments heavily influence their perceptions of news bias in a specific instance.

Our analysis of the sources of prior beliefs in a hostile media was also revealing. We found that such beliefs tend to be heavily politicized. They are based, in large part, on individuals' ideology and their views on abortion, with conservatives and pro-life advocates being convinced that the media is biased against pro-life groups. Thus, prior beliefs about media bias in this case appear to fit well with the hostile media phenomenon in that such beliefs reflect the tendency for people to assume the media is biased against one's own views.

We also discovered some important asymmetries with respect to the tendency for different types of news slant to activate individuals' prior beliefs in a hostile media. As noted, such beliefs were significant predictors of perceived bias only when the article was slanted against pro-life groups. Closer inspection of the antecedents of prior hostile media beliefs revealed two important asymmetries. First, the association between abortion views and a belief in a hostile media was found to exist mostly among pro-life individuals, who are much more likely than individuals with pro-choice views to believe their group is treated unfairly by the news media. Second, a belief in a hostile media is particularly concentrated among *politically aware* pro-life individuals (Figure 2). Thus, it is not surprising that prior beliefs in a hostile media only affected judgments of news bias

when the article was slanted against “life” groups. When presented with an article where pro-life groups were portrayed unfavorably, supporters were quick to judge the article as an instance of a more general bias against their views. These findings are consistent with work that has shown that claims of media bias come primarily from conservative elites who have proclaimed a liberal bias (Watts et al 1999).

The fact that prior beliefs in a hostile media are concentrated among more politically aware pro-lifers suggests that these beliefs are formed, at least in part, by political persuasion. We know, for example, that conservatives tend to be much more vocal in accusing the media of bias than liberal groups (Entman 1989). Prominent conservatives, from Vice President Spiro Agnew in 1969, through Jesse Helms’ (R-NC) campaign to “buy CBS and become Dan Rather’s boss” in the 1980’s and Rush Limbaugh in the 1990’s, made a crusade of the charge that the news media has a liberal bias. Because politically aware opponents of abortion are likely to be exposed to, and receptive toward, such messages, it comes as no surprise that they are more likely to subscribe to a belief in a hostile media. The intensity of pro-life accusations of media bias is suggested not only by their greater acceptance of hostile media beliefs, but also by the fact that more politically aware individuals, regardless of their ideology or views on abortion, are more likely to believe that the media is biased against pro-life groups.

An alternative explanation for these asymmetries is that the media is indeed biased against pro-life groups and more politically aware citizens are more likely to see this bias. While our data do not allow us to choose decisively between these two accounts, this alternative explanation runs into problems when we consider that past research has failed to uncover clear, systematic evidence of political bias in the mainstream press (e.g., Entman 1989, Graber 1993, Gans 1979, but see also Lichter and Rothman 1986). And while news coverage of the abortion issue has received less systematic study, at least one recent investigation failed to find clear evidence of any obvious political bias in the way reporters cover pro-life and pro-choice groups (Terkildsen and Schnell 1997). However, the authors did uncover an important feature of news coverage that may have fed the impression that the media is biased against pro-life groups. Pro-life organizations were much more successful than pro-choice groups in gaining media attention. “Their tactics—highly sensational, sometimes violent, and always dramatic—guaranteed media access” (p. 59). But these same tactics doubtless created negative imagery of pro-life organizations, which pro-life groups were quick to use as evidence that the media is biased against their views.

Caveats

Several caveats about our findings are in order. In the first place, while our experimental design offers a useful balance between internal and external validity, it is by no means perfect. Although our nonprobability sample is certainly more diverse than the subject populations used in most laboratory studies, because our sample was not selected randomly we lack the benefit of being able to generalize our findings to a known population. In addition, while respondents were asked to read the news story as they would any newspaper article, respondents may have paid more attention to the story than they would in a more natural setting. It may be that in a low attention setting, hostile media effects would be even weaker than those observed in our study. On the other hand, the news articles used as stimulus materials in our study come closer to approximating everyday news stories than the lengthy and evocative news stories used in laboratory studies (e.g. Vallone et al 1985). Moreover, in contrast with existing survey studies, we have more confidence that our respondents actually read the news stories in our survey experiment.

Of course, one could always argue that the balanced articles our respondents read were not sufficiently engaging or inflammatory to provoke a hostile media reaction. Or it may be that if activists in the abortion debate had read the balanced news stories instead of our sample of ordinary citizens, the results would have been more in keeping with the hostile media hypothesis. But that is

just our point: seemingly commonplace, balanced news articles read by ordinary people do not seem to be fertile grounds for the hostile media phenomenon.

At the same time, we would not want to over-generalize from our study. Another important caveat is that we examine the hostile media effect for only one issue, in a single context, and in a single (print) medium. It is possible, for example, that balanced coverage on other issues besides abortion would be more successful in a hostile media effect. Moreover, different news frames may affect the degree to which people perceive bias in the news. In our defense, however, we selected both the issue and the content of the story to be hospitable to the hostile media effect. It is difficult to imagine a more controversial issue in American politics than abortion. And we framed our story as a conflict between the two principals in the controversy (i.e., pro-choice and pro-life), which ought to produce a reaction from issue partisans. Thus, we contend that our study provides a realistic test of the hostile media hypothesis.

One limitation of our study that we readily concede is that our results may not apply to all media. Our respondents read a news magazine article instead of watching a news broadcast. And broadcast news may have a unique ability to evoke emotional reactions that encourage perceptions of news bias (e.g., Hall-Jamieson 1992). At the same time, however, studies suggest that broadcast news tends to be more evenly balanced than print news and the public tends to trust broadcast news more than newspapers. We look forward to future studies that vary the content as well as the medium of news stories.

APPENDIX

I. News Treatments

A. Positive Balanced Article

A Dialogue in New Mexico

Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Groups Reach Out at Forum

SANTA FE, Nm., Oct. 22— Billed as a historic event by its organizers, hundreds of delegates from national pro-life and pro-choice organizations met in a weekend retreat to “build a bridge of mutual respect” between the two groups. While angry exchanges took place early in the meetings, organizers are still calling it a significant coming together of traditional foes to “promote dialogue and discussion.”

In a high school gym, longtime abortion opponent Rev. Joseph Niece today said he wanted to “contribute to an end of the hate and violence between the two groups. We're not here to argue, we're here to reach some kind of understanding. My ultimate goal, I'll make no bones about it, is to stop abortion, which is taking the lives of thousands of unborn children every year. But to be able to talk to your opponents, you have to turn down the rhetoric some.” Other pro-life members were not as cordial. Some held such signs as “Stop the Genocide,” but the general tone was one of cooperation.

A conciliatory tone was also struck by Rachael Hall, a member of the pro-choice delegation. “I hope the world will see that we are open-minded, even though we don't agree with the stand the other side takes. We need to preserve a woman's right to choose, but we also need to stop the violence and hateful speech between the two groups.” Some pro-choice members were heard shouting, “Stop the Bombing,” in reference to the bombing of abortion clinics by anti-abortion activists, but most of the shouting died as the meeting got underway.

By the end of the day, some bad feelings remained among some participants who refused to eat at the same banquet table together. But the organizers of the meeting remained hopeful that a dialogue of healing had begun.

B. Negative Balanced Article

Morality Wars Continue

Verbal Scuffle Breaks Out Between Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Groups

Santa Fe, NM, Oct. 22—A verbal scuffle broke out between pro-life and pro-choice protesters yesterday. Delegates from national pro-life and pro-choice organizations met here over the weekend to “build a bridge of mutual respect.” Instead of “promoting dialogue and discussion,” as organizers had hoped, the first day of the meeting quickly turned into an angry confrontation between activists from both groups who began noisy protests. Members of both groups began noisy protests, aimed at disrupting the conference shortly after it began.

Rev. Joseph Niece, a pro-life activist, leapt onstage to condemn the “anti-life” position as premeditated murder. “Abortion is the premeditated killing of babies! There can be no discussion with these murderers!” shouted Rev. Niece to some 200 pro-life supporters. Though organizers tried to restore order, a demonstration by pro-life supporters in the audience took up the loud chant, “Stop abortion now!” drowning out the public address system.

At the same time, members of the pro-choice delegation began their own noisy demonstration. Taking control of the microphone, Rachael Hall, a leader of the pro-choice delegation screamed, “The murderers here are [pro-life] hypocrites who bomb clinics and kill doctors! We can start talking when you stop bombing!” Among the 200 or so pro-choice supporters in the audience, many shouted “It's our right, keep up the fight!” Some held ready-made signs such as “Stop the Bombing,” in reference to the bombing of abortion clinics by anti-abortion activists.

After nearly an hour of demonstrations, meeting organizers were able to quiet the assembly. While moderators were able to begin a dialogue later in the day, bad feelings remained as some participants refused to eat at the same banquet table that evening. At the end of the first day of a meeting designed to promote peace between feuding groups, the gulf between them seemed as wide as ever.

Appendix I (continued)

C. Slant Against Pro-Choice Article

Morality Wars Continue

Verbal Scuffle Breaks Out Between Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Groups

Santa Fe, NM, Oct. 22—A verbal scuffle broke out between pro-life and pro-choice supporters yesterday. Delegates from national organizations representing the two groups met here over the weekend to “build a bridge of mutual respect” between traditional foes. Instead of “promoting dialogue and discussion,” as organizers had hoped, the first day of the meeting quickly turned into an angry confrontation as pro-abortion protesters disrupted the conference.

Within minutes after convening the conference, Rachael Hall, a leader of the pro-choice delegation, leapt onstage to scream into the microphone, “We can start talking when you pro-life hypocrites stop bombing clinics and killing doctors!” Though organizers tried to restore order, a demonstration by pro-abortion supporters in the audience took up the loud chant, “It’s our right, keep up the fight!” drowning out the public address system.

While some pro-life activists were involved in the shouting, a different tone was struck by longtime pro-life activist Rev. Joseph Niece, who said he wanted to “contribute to an end of the hate and violence between the two groups. We’re not here to argue, we’re here to reach some kind of understanding. My ultimate goal, I’ll make no bones about it, is to stop abortion, which is taking the lives of thousands of unborn children every year. But to be able to talk to your opponents, you have to turn down the rhetoric some.”

After nearly an hour of demonstrations, meeting organizers were able to quiet the assembly. While moderators were able to begin a dialogue later in the day, bad feelings remained as some participants refused to eat at the same banquet table that evening. At the end of the first day of a meeting designed to promote peace between feuding groups, the gulf between them seemed as wide as ever.

D. Slant Against Pro-Life Article

Morality Wars Continue

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Santa Fe, NM, Oct. 22—A verbal scuffle broke out between pro-life and pro-choice supporters yesterday. Delegates from national organizations representing the two groups met here over the weekend to “build a bridge of mutual respect” between traditional foes. Instead of “promoting dialogue and discussion,” as organizers had hoped, the first day of the meeting quickly turned into an angry confrontation as anti-abortion protesters disrupted the meeting.

Within minutes after the conference got underway, a prominent pro-life activist, Rev. Joseph Niece, leapt onstage to condemn the “pro-choice” position. “Abortion is the premeditated killing of babies! There can be no discussion with these murderers!” shouted Rev. Niece to some 100 pro-life supporters. Though organizers tried to restore order, a demonstration by anti-abortion supporters in the audience took up the loud chant, “Stop abortion now!” drowning out the public address system.

While some pro-choice activists were involved in the shouting, a different tone was struck by Rachael Hall, a leader of the pro-choice delegation. “I hope the world will see that we are open-minded, even though we don’t agree with the stand the other side takes. We need to preserve a woman’s right to choose, but we also need to stop the violence and hateful speech between the two groups.”

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Appendix II. Survey Items

- A. *Perceived Bias*: How fair-minded would you rate the journalist who wrote this article? Very Unfair (1) to Very Fair (7).
- B. *Abortion Views*: ($r = .27$)
1. “Which one of the opinions on abortion below best agrees with your view?”
1= By law abortion should never be permitted; 2= The law should permit abortion ONLY in the case of rape, incest, or when the mother’s life is in danger; 3= The law should permit abortion for reasons OTHER THAN rape, incepts, or the woman’s life, if the need for an abortion ahs been clearly established; 4= By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.
 2. How strongly do you favor or oppose a proposed law to ban certain types of late-term abortions, sometimes called partial birth abortions? (1=Strongly Favor, 7=Strongly Oppose)
- C. *Prior Media Bias*: [To what extent] do you feel the news media is biased for or against different groups and people? ($r = .38$)
1. Pro-Life Groups (groups who oppose abortion)? Very Biased In Favor (1) to Very Biased Against (7).
 2. Pro-Choice Groups (groups who defend abortion)? Reflected.
- E. *Political Knowledge* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .71$)
1. Do you know the political office held by Trent Lott?
 2. Which branch of government declares laws unconstitutional?
 3. Which network employs Tom Brokaw?
 4. How much of a majority is required in Congress to override a presidential veto?
 5. Which party controls the House of Representatives?
 6. What job does Alan Greenspan hold?

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Table 1. Comparison of Demographic Characteristics among Survey Respondents, Census Estimates, and a National Sample

	Survey Respondents	Fayette County, 1999 Census Estimates	1998 NES, National Sample
Male	49.2%	47.7%	44.9%
Nonwhite	12.1%	16.5%	14.2%
Age (Median)	33	31	44
% High School Graduates, over 25	50%	46.8%	47.3%
% College Graduates, over 25	25.2%	17.8%	18.3%
Family Income (Mean)	\$30k-\$50k	\$39, 295	\$25k-\$29k
<i>N</i>	564		1281

Source: 1999 Kentucky News Survey, 1999 Census Estimates, and 1998 National Election Study

Table2. Effect of News Articles on Perceptions of News Bias

	Balanced Positive	Balanced Negative	Slanted Against Pro-Choice	Slanted Against Pro-Life
Mean Rating (1-7)	3.19 _a	3.07 _a	3.56 _b	3.81 _c
Percent “unfair”(5-7)	16%	11%	27%	30%
Number of cases	143	142	144	139

Source: 1999 Kentucky News Survey

Note: Ratings range from 1 (“very fair”) to 7 (“very unfair”). All analyses were performed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Subscripts indicate means that are statistically different from one another ($p < .05$) using ANOVA contrast analysis. That is, across the four news articles the null hypothesis cannot be rejected at the .05 level for means with the same subscript. Those with different subscripts are statistically different at the .05 level or below.

Table 3. Predicting Perceived Bias Across News Treatments

Table 3.A. Perceived Bias for Balanced Articles

Independent Variables	<i>Positive Balanced</i>		<i>Negative Balanced</i>	
	B	se	b	se
Abortion Views	-.06	(.06)	-.03	.04
Pol. Awareness	.01	(.09)	.06	.08
Abortion*Awareness	.01	(.03)	.04	.02
Prior Media Bias	-.001	(.07)	-.05	.05
Ideology	.02	(.13)	-.06	.11
Party ID	-.01	(.11)	.13	.09
Gender	-.18	(.28)	.02	.23
Education	.01	(.14)	-.23	.13
Age	.002	(.01)	.01	.01
Race	.03	(.48)	.54	.36
Constant	-.142	(18.76)	-17.5	17.4
R2	.02		.12	
Adj R2	-.07		.03	
N	133		119	

Table 3.B. Perceived Bias for Slanted Articles

Independent Variables	<i>Slanted Against Pro-Choice</i>		<i>Slanted Against Pro-Life</i>	
	b	se	b	se
Abortion Views	.14*	.06	-.12*	.05
Pol. Awareness	-.003	.09	.15	.09
Abortion*Awareness	-.06*	.03	.03	.03
Prior Media Bias	.02	.06	.16**	.06
Ideology	.10	.12	.30*	.14
Party ID	-.06	.11	-.18	.11
Gender (0=female)	-.58*	.27	-.26	.30
Education	.47**	.13	.03	.15
Age	.002	.01	-.001	.009
Race	-.37	.40	.53	.44
Constant	-4.59	17.33	4.48	19.60
R2	.22		.20	
Adj R2	.16		.13	
N	130		124	

Source: 1999 Kentucky News Survey

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Higher values on the above variables indicate: greater perceived bias, stronger pro-choice views on abortion, greater political knowledge, the belief that the news media is biased against pro-life groups, more liberal, Democratic, male, more educated, older, and white.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two-tailed test

Table 4. Predicting Prior Beliefs about Media Bias

Independent Variables	B	se
Abortion Views	-.09**	.04
Pol. Awareness	.25**	.06
Abortion*Awareness	-.06**	.02
Ideology	.18*	.09
Party ID	.06	.08
Gender	-.36	.19
Education	.03	.10
Age	-.01	.01
Race	.52	.30
Constant	22.08	12.96
R2	.13	
Adj R2	.11	
N	504	

Source: 1999 Kentucky News Survey

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Higher values on the above variables indicate: the belief that the news media is biased against pro-life groups, stronger pro-choice views on abortion, greater political knowledge, more liberal, Democratic, male, educated, older, and white.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two-tailed test

Figure 1. Predicted Bias across Abortion Views for Slanted Articles

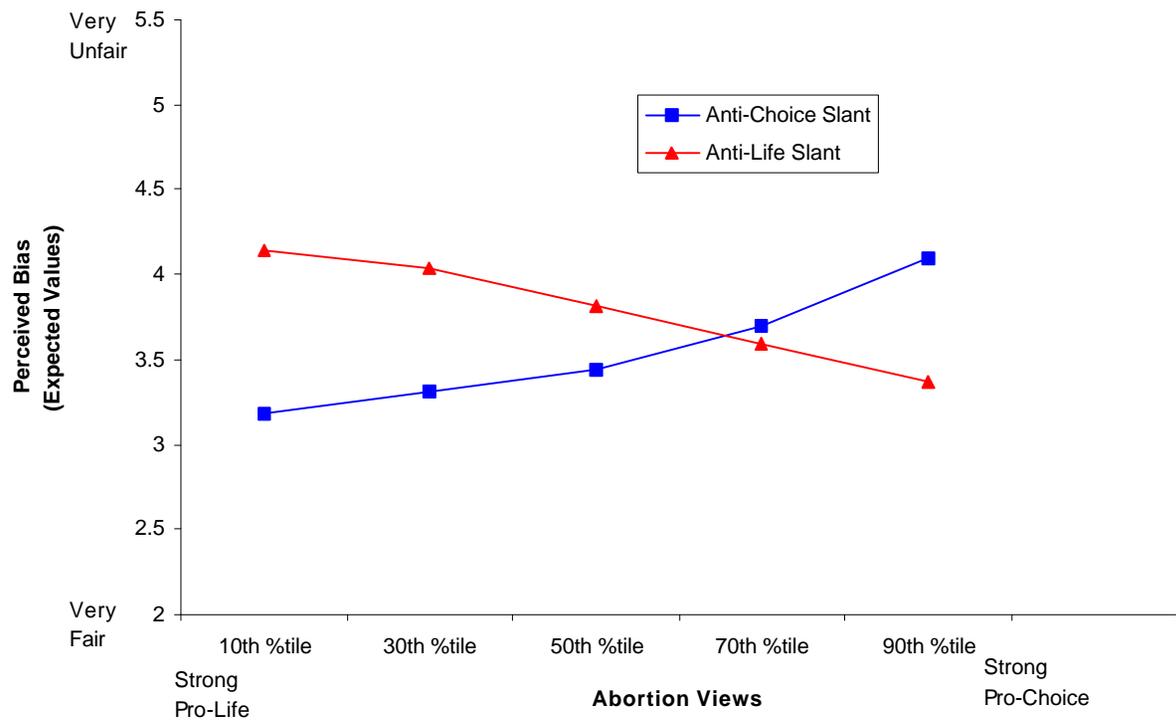


Figure 2. Predicted Prior Media Bias across Abortion Views for Different Levels of Political Awareness

