

# What Drives Media Slant?

Evidence from U.S. Daily Newspapers

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# Motivation: Policy

- Central principles
- Diversity is good
  - “One of the **most vital of all general interests** [is] the dissemination of news from as many different sources, and with as many different facets and colors as is possible. That interest...presupposes that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative selection” (**U.S. Supreme Court** 1945)
- Ownership consolidation threatens diversity
  - “[The FCC] has traditionally assumed that there is a positive correlation between viewpoints expressed and ownership of an outlet. The Commission has sought, therefore, to diffuse ownership of media outlets among multiple firms in order to diversify the viewpoints available to the public” (**FCC** 2003)

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  - Groseclose and Milyo (2005): 6 newspapers
  - FCC: “A larger number of independent owners will tend to generate a wider array of viewpoints in the media than would a comparatively smaller number of owners. We believe this proposition, **even without the benefit of conclusive empirical evidence.**”

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## Measuring Slant

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  - Congress: "personal account" (48 D vs 184 R); "private account" (542 D vs 5 R)
  - Frequency of these phrases is a good predictor of a politician's ideology

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# Identify Partisan Phrases

- Use 2005 Congressional Record
- For each 2 & 3 word phrase, count uses by party
- Select 1000 phrases that are most related to party of speaker



# Top Phrases

<b>Republicans: 2-word</b>	<b>Republicans: 3-word</b>	<b>Democrats: 2-word</b>	<b>Democrats: 3-word</b>
stem cell	embryonic stem cell	private accounts	veterans health care
natural gas	hate crimes legislation	trade agreement	congressional black caucus
death tax	adult stem cells	american people	va health care
illegal aliens	oil for food program	tax breaks	billion in tax cuts
class action	personal retirement accounts	trade deficit	credit card companies
war on terror	energy and natural resources	oil companies	security trust fund
embryonic stem	global war on terror	credit card	social security trust
tax relief	hate crimes law	nuclear option	privatize social security
illegal immigration	change hearts and minds	war in iraq	american free trade
date the time	global war on terrorism	middle class	central american free
boy scouts	class action fairness	african american	national wildlife refuge
hate crimes	committee on foreign relations	budget cuts	dependence on foreign oil
oil for food	deficit reduction bill	nuclear weapons	tax cuts for the wealthy
global war	boy scouts of america	checks and balances	vice president cheney
medical liability	repeal of the death tax	civil rights	arctic national wildlife
highway bill	highway trust fund	veterans health	bring our troops home
adult stem	action fairness act	cut medicaid	social security privatization
democratic leader	committee on commerce science	foreign oil	billion trade deficit
federal spending	cord blood stem	president plan	asian pacific american
tax increase	medical liability reform	gun violence	president bush took office

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Other R: **personal accounts; social security reform; social security system**

Other D: **privatization plan; security trust; security trust fund; social security trust; privatize social security; social security privatization; privatization of social security; cut social security**

# Top Phrases: Foreign Policy

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Other R: **saddam hussein, war on terrorism, iraqi people**

Other D: **funding for veterans health; war in iraq and afghanistan; improvised explosive device**

# Top Phrases: Fiscal Policy

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Other R: **raise taxes; percent growth; increase taxes; growth rate; government spending; raising taxes; death tax repeal; million jobs created; percent growth rate**

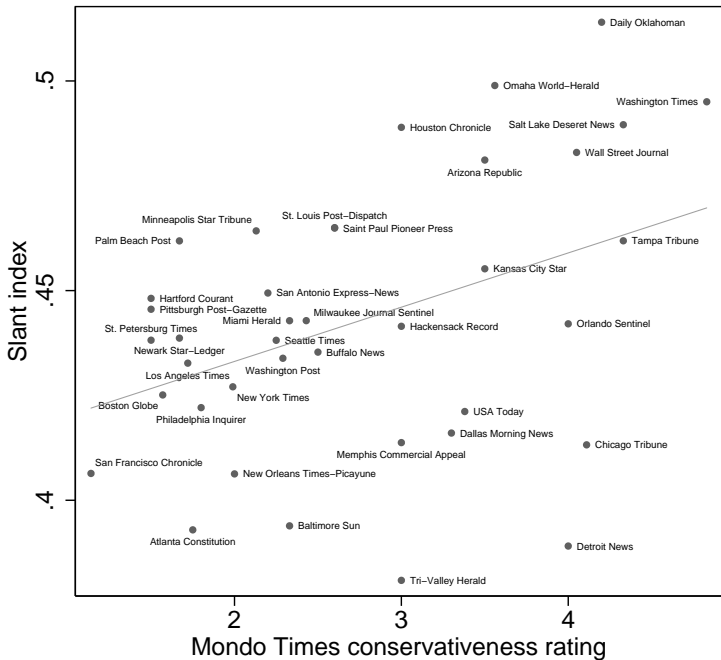
Other D: **estate tax; budget deficit; bill cuts; medicaid cuts; cut funding; spending cuts; pay for tax cuts; cut student loans; cut food stamps; cut social security; billion in tax breaks**

# Map Phrases to Ideology

- Measure ideology of members of House/Senate
  - Ideology of constituency
  - Voting record
- Relate speech to ideology

## Step 3: Apply to Newspapers

- Search 433 newspapers in online textual databases
- (70+% of daily circulation in US)
- Obtain phrase counts for 2005
- Ignore editorials, opinion, AP stories, etc. (within limits of database)
- Estimate ideology from language: If newspaper were in Congress, how Republican would it be?



# Demand



# Data

- Circulation by zipcode for a large fraction of US daily newspapers
- FEC donation data as a proxy for zipcode ideology

# Key Hypothesis

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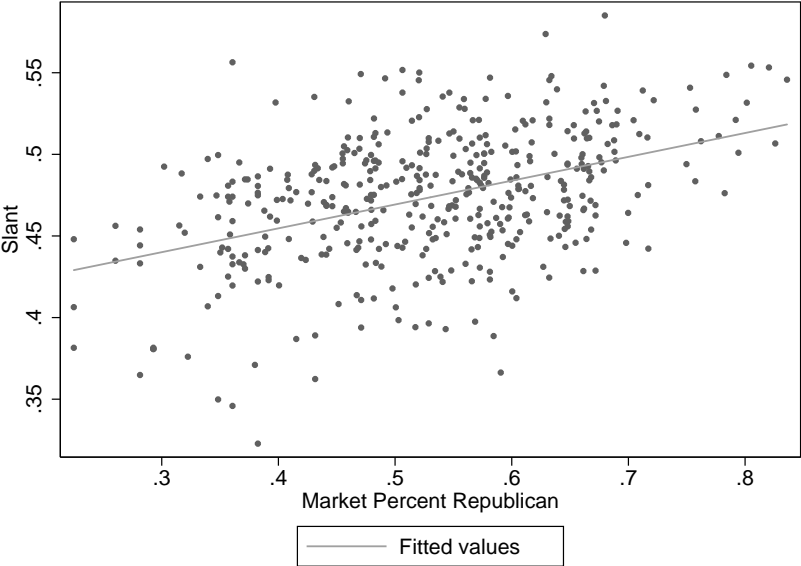
- Consumer demand greater for newspapers with slant similar to consumer ideology
- More Republican newspapers circulate more in more Republican zipcodes
- Find support for both of these in the data

Supply

# Consumer Preferences

- Hypothesis: Newspapers in more conservative markets have more conservative language
- Strong support for this hypothesis

# Consumer Preferences

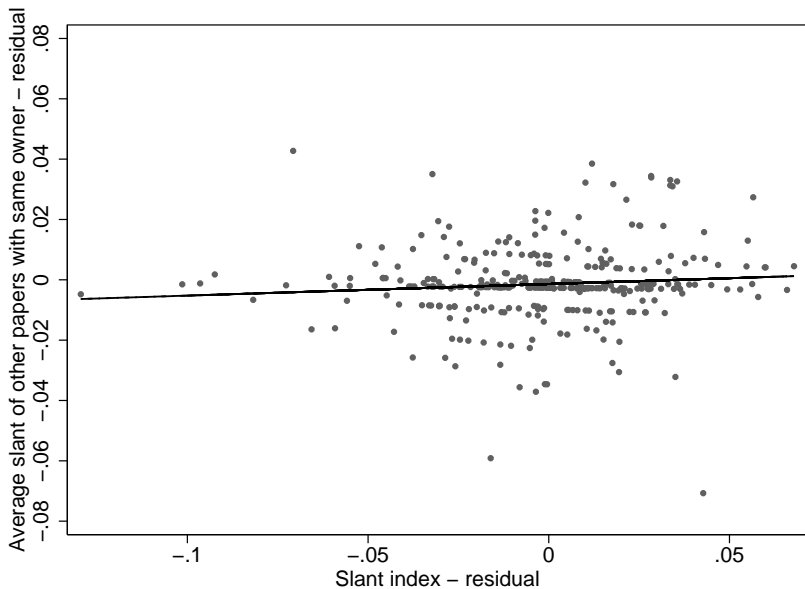


# Ownership

- Hypothesis: Two newspapers with same owner have more similar slant than two newspapers with different owners
- Little support for this hypothesis



# Ownership and Slant



# Incumbent Politicians

- Hypothesis: Republican governor/Representative pushes newspaper to the right
- No support for this hypothesis

# Conclusions

- New measure of slant
- Significant demand for slant
- Firms respond strongly to consumer preferences
- Little evidence that owner identity matters
- Little evidence that party affiliation of incumbent politicians matters