

**Local Newspapers and Voter Turnout in Michigan: An Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

News media have a significant role to play in educating the public about current events. This study discusses the impacts of local news organizations versus state-wide or national news outlets, specifically in the context of political participation through voting in local elections. With the decline of local news outlets and the emergence of news deserts in recent decades, citizens who live in areas with less access to local newspapers may have less ability to learn about events impacting their local communities and must turn to larger outlets that may be more nationalized and have less nuanced local reporting. By examining a dataset of information on the amount of newspapers and voter turnouts in national and local elections for 14 counties throughout the state of Michigan, this study looks to see if a correlation exists between the availability, or lack thereof, of local news and the the amount of people who choose to vote in the presidential versus county-wide positions during presidential election years. While strong evidence for this correlation is not found, it provides information about the importance of contested versus uncontested local elections in regards to voter turnout and potential implications for future research in this area.

### **Introduction**

Obtaining news and acquiring up-to-date information is an important part of many individuals' everyday lives. For populations to understand the current and previous events of the world and communities that surround them, they must have access to sources that provide accurate, timely and well-researched information. In the digital age, the act of newsgathering and the dissemination of news has drastically changed. Decades ago, individuals heavily relied on

print newspapers to stay in-the-know; in today's online world, people now have access to a variety of news sites, websites and social media pages in addition to traditional forms of news such as print and television to obtain information. Getting the news has become faster and more accessible — though sometimes less reliable and accurate — than it has ever been before.

When individuals make decisions regarding which sources they receive news and information from, they may consider the source's degree of locality. News organizations exist on national, regional, state and local levels, and while their content may overlap, each type often provides different types of information. For example, a national news organization will most often publish overarching news that pertains to topics such as national politics and issues that affect a vast majority of individuals in the country they cover. On the other hand, more local news organizations that exist at the county or town level will frequently publish news that pertains to the local population they service, like stories on happenings in the vicinity of the publication as well as local government news. A person may choose to look at reporting from a local or national news outlet depending on what types of news and information they wish to obtain, and it is important for news organizations at all degrees of locality to exist to cover stories from all levels.

Though both national and local outlets hold importance, a somewhat recent phenomenon of local news disappearance is leaving many places without a source of local news. The decline of local news and growing presence of news deserts in many counties across the United States is due to a number of factors, including a lack of funding, overall disinterest in local outlets and mergers becoming more common. Replacing the information gap that results when local news becomes few and far between proves difficult — individuals lose access to information centers that keep them informed on their surrounding community when local newspapers are lost, and

state and national outlets that produce more general coverage are often unable to provide localized stories with the nuance and knowledge of local sources.

Local elections are one entity that are potentially affected by the closure of local news outlets. County- or city-wide elected positions are much less likely to be covered by more state- or national-reaching outlets, and without a presence of local news, individuals may not be able to obtain information about local candidates and their platforms as easily and objectively.

This study examines how the prevalence of local news in a county may impact political participation at the local level through voter turnout in elections. By looking at a sample of counties throughout the state of Michigan, this study will consider the amount of local news outlets each county has while comparing the voter turnout for national versus county-wide positions to see whether a correlation exists between these factors. It is expected that, when less local news is available, individuals will be less likely to vote in local elections as opposed to national elections due to a lack of localized information.

Looking at the potential impact of local news prevalence on political participation may provide a new perspective on how much individuals use community news outlets as a source of information. With this knowledge, it can be better understood how much of a role local news does and continues to play in participation in local politics and elections.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Loss of Local News**

The phenomenon of local news disappearance has been occurring for a significant amount of time and has most notably seen an increase in the last 15 years. Across the United States, almost 50% of counties only have one local news outlet, while more than 6% of counties have no local newspaper covering their community at all; since 2004, more than 25% of local

news outlets in the United States have shut down (Ardia et al., 2020). The number of journalists employed by regional outlets has been cut in half since 2004 due to their papers shutting down, and these closures are most often in vulnerable areas of the country that serve poor, isolated populations with low levels of education (Abernathy, 2018).

Local papers are shut down for a variety of reasons, but closures are most often due to a lack of funding. It is often difficult to find ways to fund local papers, but many outlets have turned to turning on paywalls where readers must first pay to read an article from the outlet. Multiple strategies of implementing paywalls exist; the brake strategy is utilized when the newspaper targets its current audience to encourage them to subscribe, while the acceleration strategy focuses on improving a newspaper's services through considering data and analytics from its readership (Olsen & Solvoll, 2018). Local newspapers most often use a balance of the brake and acceleration strategy to help raise funds (Olsen & Solvoll, 2018). While paywalls could provide a potential solution for funding local news organizations, individuals who utilize their product are often reluctant to pay for their news (Goyanes, 2015). A study from Goyanes (2015) examined multiple characteristics to see if certain groups were more or less likely to pay for online local news and found that though certain groups — such as older users, women and those who had particular interest in news — were more willing to pay to obtain news, a vast majority of individuals were turned away by paywalls and sought out other forms of free media to obtain their news.

Though the amount of local news has been on the decline, research has found that local outlets that remain open still have an audience. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that a vast majority of adults pay close attention to their local news outlets, utilizing a variety of both traditional and print sources to obtain information (Miller et al., 2012). As

important centers of community happenings, local newspapers have been found to be primarily consumed by citizens when they seek out information that is relevant or interesting to them as well as when they want to stay engaged within their local community (Eilenberg, Gulyas, & O'Hara, 2019).

Additionally, local news outlets provide crucial information to the populations they serve and provide cohesion and avenues for political debate throughout communities (Bergström & Wadbring, 2017). Especially in areas where no local news exists — often called news deserts — Mathews (2020) found that the closures of local outlets frequently results in a decreased sense of community since individuals have fewer ways to avenues to learn about the events going on around them. A similar effect was observed in a study from Davidson and Cotter (1997), who found that those who reported having a stronger sense of community were more interested in obtaining news about local, state and national topics and more frequently read multiple sections of their local newspaper.

When these regional outlets are lost, it becomes much more difficult for communities to be covered in a more detailed and comprehensive manner that provides insight and trustworthy information for the individuals who reside in them (Ford, Nechushtai, & Wenzel, 2020). This effect has been clearly demonstrated through the coronavirus pandemic — with the economic shutdown that ensued at the beginning of the pandemic, many more local outlets were lost, which provide valuable insight on what Covid-19 looked like throughout regional communities as opposed to the country as a whole (Abernathy, 2020). The issue of losing nuanced reporting is incredibly hard to address. Finneman, Heckman and Walck's (2022) study on student journalists operating digital news startups in designated news deserts may have found a potential solution; these journalists focused on providing journalism that served service and altruistic roles for the

communities they covered as opposed to the watchdog role and also discussed current issues such as racial inequalities in their coverage. While student journalists may certainly be able to help in solving problems resulting from news deserts, they are not able to address all issues — there may not be colleges or universities that exist in news deserts, and student journalists do not have the capacity to cover all issues affecting a community.

Some previous studies have found that the newspaper crisis is not specific to local or national news organizations but that general readership of news across the board is decreasing, especially as younger generations tend to abandon newspapers in both print and digital forms (Bergström & Wadbring, 2017). With a major shift from print to online journalism, many people, especially those in younger generations, tend to obtain their news at both the local and national levels from social media sites, which can often result in the spread of misinformation; it is difficult to find a solution to halt the spread of false narratives through social media (Ardia et al., 2020).

### **Political Participation**

It is of interest to examine the ways in which the loss of local news may impact how individuals participate politically, especially through voting in local elections. News organizations play a significant role in educating the public on candidates running in elections; it has been found that though television news broadcasts tend to cover political campaigns at a higher frequency than physical local newspapers, both forms do not differ in their content (Druckman, 2005). The same study found that newspapers play a significant, but potentially limited, role in informing voters about their elections (Druckman, 2005). A weakened news environment has been found to generally decrease political engagement among citizens — when people are exposed to less content pertaining to political races, they tend to be less able to

accurately evaluate and have opinions on their state and local representatives and less likely to vote in elections (Hays & Lawless, 2015). Individuals tend to utilize broadcast news through watching television to learn about national and international events but tend to turn to newspapers to learn more about their state or community news (Reader & Riffe, 2007).

Previous research has found that the decline of local news organizations has tended to create more nationalization of American politics as opposed to localization (Darr, Dunaway, & Hitt, 2018). This means that, as the number of local papers decrease, individuals are forced to rely on national news outlets that provide more generalized information or more partisan sources that may contain biases to make decisions on who to vote for (Dar, Dunaway, & Hitt, 2018). This may potentially be due to local papers covering less political news — a content analysis of stories on U.S. House campaigns from local newspapers conducted by Hayes and Lawless (2018) found that local newspapers tended to publish less substantive political news stories. Hayes and Lawless (2018) also argue that, with this decline of local politics coverage, individuals in these communities tended to show lower amounts of political knowledge and a lesser desire to politically participate.

In addition to the generic loss of political participation with the decline of local papers, when individuals do choose to participate, the loss of local news outlets in a community has also been found to increase polarization among voters. Taylor (2019) discovered that the amount of polarization in ideology that existed within the U.S. House and Senate increased as the number of local newspapers in circulation decreased. Additionally, in a study from Dar, Dunaway, and Hitt (2018), split-ticket voting in presidential and senatorial elections decreased by almost 2% when a newspaper had recently closed in a community. When partisan information becomes available to voters, their opinions on candidates are often significantly influenced, and voters

frequently vote not based on a specific candidate but for the party with which they most closely identify (Smith & Squire, 1988).

### **Methods**

This study utilizes a data collection consisting of data from 14 counties throughout the state of Michigan and analyzes voter turnout data from each presidential election year from 2000 to 2020. To obtain information on the amount of newspapers in each county, data from The Expanding News Desert project from Penelope Muse Abernathy is utilized. This dataset includes information for every county in the United States and indicates variables such as the amount of daily and weekly newspapers each county has, how many daily and weekly newspapers have shut down or experienced a merger in each county since 2004 and what organization owns each local paper, among other county characteristics such as population and average income. This study uses the amount of local newspapers in total each county had for each election year studied as well as how many papers experienced a merger or shut down in the four year gap between each election.

In addition to the news desert database, this study also utilizes information from each county's election records for the presidential elections from 2000 to 2020. For each county, data on the number of individuals who voted for a presidential candidate, a county prosecuting attorney candidate, a county clerk candidate and a county treasurer candidate is included. Information on the margin by which each county candidate won their election by as well as if the candidate was uncontested is also accounted for.

Once all data was collected, each county race was categorized by if their margin of winning was considered a close contest (if the candidate won with up to a 10 percent margin), a big lead (if the candidate won with a margin of more than 10 percent) or uncontested. After this

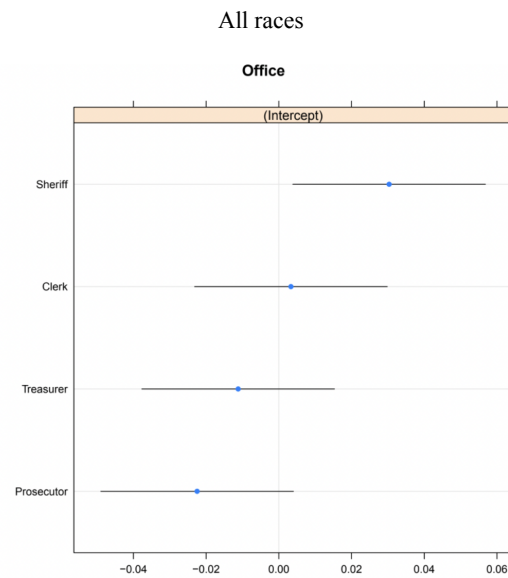
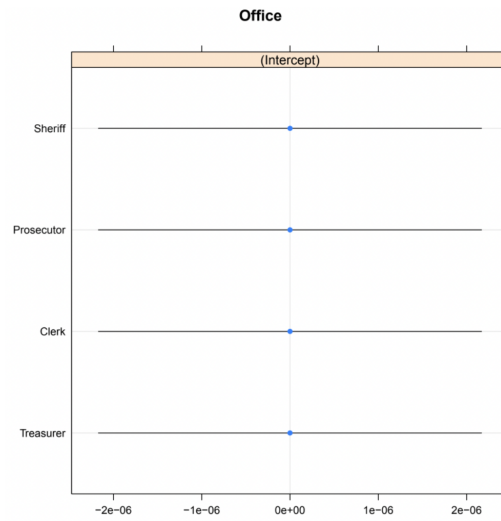
categorization, 33 county races were considered close contests, 82 races were considered big leads and 161 races were considered uncontested.

### **Results**

This analysis found insignificant evidence of the prevalence of local newspapers impacting voter turnout. On their own, the presence of a newspaper was not found to significantly influence the decision of citizens to vote in local elections.

Some noteworthy differences between voter turnouts in counties with access to local news versus a low amount or no local newspapers was at first detected, but these findings were unstable and insignificant once closeness in races were accounted for. No significant difference between races with big leads versus close contests was determined, and the only time local newspapers were very loosely determined to impact the number of individuals voting in a race was when the individual had a small lead in the race. Those living in counties with local newspapers tended to be more likely to vote in close contest races than those in counties with few or no local newspapers. Contests with big leads that had lost newspapers tended to show a more sizable dropoff compared to close contests, but the dropoffs did not appear to be of different sizes if a county lost a newspaper.

When accounting for close contests, it appears that the county position in question — sheriff, prosecutor, clerk or treasurer — was not as important as if the race was contested or uncontested; however, when only looking at races that were uncontested or had big leads, citizens more often voted in sheriff races followed by clerk races, and treasurer and prosecutor races were less likely to be voted in.



#### Excluding close contests

For this set of data, it seems that a more important factor to consider in county-level races is whether or not the race is contested rather than how accessible local news is to the county. There is significant evidence that there are lower voter turnout rates with significant dropoff when a race is uncontested as opposed to a contested race. This may be due to individuals wanting to vote in contested races due to their competitive nature — since uncontested

candidates are almost guaranteed their position, citizens voting in local elections may feel more inclined to cast a ballot in races in which two or more individuals are competing.

### **Limitations and Discussion**

While this research found little evidence of the impact of local newspapers on voter turnout, there are multiple limitations of this study that should be taken into consideration. Due to time constraints, only a select number of Michigan counties were used as data sources; having a larger sample size may have produced different results and found more significant correlations. Data was unavailable for many earlier races that may have impacted the findings.

There may be multiple reasons as to why this study did not produce significant results. No content analysis was conducted on the newspapers considered in each county, and there is potential for the newspapers to be acting in a heterogeneous way, especially with the frequency with which mergers occur. Many newspapers are owned by the same media company, which may mean that most counties are receiving very similar if not the same stories through their local newspapers. Newspaper mergers that still claim to cover local areas may be covering communities in less detail than a traditional local newspaper since the media company is responsible for covering many different counties throughout the state or country. It also may be the case that newspapers enhance contested local races as opposed to uncontested races — if newspapers are covering local elections in which multiple candidates are running for a single position more than they are covering uncontested races, more citizens may know about the contested races and be more likely to cast their ballots in them.

Additionally, since local elections are on a much smaller scale than national elections, it may actually be easier for citizens to learn about their candidates as those running for office are easily able to reach out to voters themselves. When voters are able to interact with candidates in

this manner, they may be able to better learn about the candidates' platforms and ideas in a way that newspapers may not always be able to provide.

Though the competitiveness of each county-level race was taken into consideration, it did not look into how the partisanship of races may potentially impact an individual's decision to vote for a county position; it may also be of interest to examine if there are differences in turnout between counties that lean Democrat versus Republican. Additionally, looking at even more localized elected positions, such as city elections, and comparing them to county and national elections may be of interest. County elections have the potential to be more variable, so it is important to see if any other level of races, both smaller and larger than the county positions, are impacted by the existence of local newspapers.

There are plenty of opportunities for further research on the impact of local news prevalence on political participation through voting in elections. As previously discussed, the scope of this study is incredibly small. Future research may consider a much larger sample of counties in all states to examine whether or not a relationship exists between their local news and voter turnout. The opportunity to consider many other variables that may have a moderating or mediating effect on voter turnout also exists; looking at variables such as county population, the frequency with which the local newspaper publishes, county average income and which way the county tends to lean politically may produce new results that add to existing literature.

### **Conclusion**

Though this study did not produce results that determined a correlation between the availability of local news with local election turnout, it is vital for the state of local newspapers to be continually monitored and researched. News outlets provide an archive of events and record important information that is not always documented in other places. With declining local

news outlets, significant events within small communities may become forgotten. Both local and national outlets hold significance, and it is important for all types of papers to continue to tell the stories of communities far and wide.

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