

# Changes in Perceptions of Media Bias<sup>\*</sup>

Kirby Goidel<sup>†</sup>

Spencer Goidel<sup>‡</sup>

Nicholas T. Davis<sup>#</sup>

## Abstract

In this paper, we utilize a module from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study to explore whether individual-level perceptions of media bias shifted over the course of the 2016 campaign. While theories of motivating reasoning predict that such attitudes would polarize cleanly upon the existing partisan divide, we find that perceptions of media bias are more nuanced. First, although fewer voters believed the media were “fair and balanced” by the end of the 2016 election, there is enormous asymmetry in the extent to which Republicans and Democrats perceive bias. Second, regarding *changes* in bias from the pre- to post-election periods, we find two groups exhibited exaggerated perceptions of bias: strong Democrats, who believed the media were biased against Clinton (and in favor of Trump), and leaning-Republicans, who believed the media were biased against Trump. While the changes were not large, perceptions of media bias were even more polarized after the 2016 presidential election. We conclude with a discussion regarding these effects and the implications they have for confidence in the media.

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<sup>†</sup> Professor, Department of Communication, Texas A&M University

<sup>‡</sup> PhD Student, Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University

<sup>#</sup> Assistant Research Scientist, Public Policy Research Institute, Texas A&M University

*“Reporters of the New York Times, they’re not journalists, they’re corporate lobbyists for Carlos Slim and for Hillary Clinton.”*

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Donald Trump<sup>1</sup>

*“None of Donald Trump’s scandals...generated the kind of sustained, campaign-defining coverage that my emails did.”*

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Hillary Clinton<sup>2</sup>

The mass media functions as an important conduit for the dissemination of information to ordinary citizens. As such, how individuals view the media constitutes an important barometer of the integrity of the news and the legitimacy of unfolding political events. In theory, when citizens perceive the news as unbiased, attendant information should be viewed as reliable and accurate. When the news is perceived as biased, citizens may question not just the integrity of the news but the fairness of political processes and outcomes (Lelkes, 2016; Levendusky, 2013).

The 2016 presidential election was a particularly severe stress test of the news media’s capacity to transmit information. In addition to concern regarding whether foreign states were manipulating news flows,<sup>3</sup> allegations of media bias were made by Democratic and Republican candidates alike. While considerable research has investigated the causes and consequences of such bias (D’Alessio, 2003; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Morris, 2007), less attention has been paid to how elections shape individual perceptions of media bias. While theories of motivating reasoning predict attitudes should polarize along existing partisan divides, our investigation of a unique CCES module finds that changes in perceptions of bias are more nuanced. First, although fewer voters believed the media were “fair and balanced” by the end of the 2016 election, there is enormous asymmetry in the extent to which Republicans and Democrats perceived bias. Second, two groups exhibited increases in perceived bias: strong Democrats who increasingly believed the media were biased against Clinton (and in favor of Trump) and leaning-Republicans who believed the media were biased against Trump.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/301075-trump-blasts-mexican-billionaire-for-interfering-in-the>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/hillary-clinton-thinks-the-news-media-was-unfair-to-her-shes-right/2017/10/08/da9807ba-a9d3-11e7-b3aa-c0e2e1d41e38\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4d222540a139](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/hillary-clinton-thinks-the-news-media-was-unfair-to-her-shes-right/2017/10/08/da9807ba-a9d3-11e7-b3aa-c0e2e1d41e38_story.html?utm_term=.4d222540a139)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/16/us/politics/russia-propaganda-election-2016.html>

## Perceptions of Media Bias

The folk theory of news media operates under the epistemological assumption that, “at least in principle, the news report is factual, disinterested, impersonal, and objective” (White 2000, pg. 379). Most media scholars recognize, however, that the news is generally value laden and ideological, reflecting news gathering norms and routines, ownership structures, and audience pressures (Cook, 1998; Schudson, 2002; Dunaway, 2008; 2013; Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015). For its part, the public is generally sensitive to this argument: questions of objectivity and bias underscore almost every contemporary political conversation or policy debate.

Fox News has, in particular, carefully cultivated a narrative that media bias is ingrained into the “mainstream media” (Collins, 2004; Morris, 2007). Its branding as a “Fair and Balanced” alternative positions Fox as a counterweight to its more liberal competitors (ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN).<sup>4</sup> Republican elites have likewise used claims of media bias strategically to influence news coverage of conservative causes and candidates (Domke et al., 1999; Watts et al., 1999). The larger literature attempting to document bias in actual news coverage, in contrast, has yielded mixed results. While some studies report bias as reflected in which think tanks are quoted in news stories (Groseclose, 2011; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005), research based on content analysis indicates coverage is relatively balanced or that imbalances are explained by context, audience characteristics, or structural biases (Niven, 1999; D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Niven, 2001; Niven, 2002; Niven, 2003; Budak, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Puglisi & Snyder Jr, 2015).

Nevertheless, the public perceives media bias as disadvantaging Republican causes and candidates (Domke et al., 1999; Watts et al., 1999). These perceptions likewise influence news consumption as individuals attend to news coverage that confirms rather than challenges preexisting beliefs (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010), though it is unclear whether selective exposure causes partisan polarization (Prior, 2013; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013).

Donald Trump played to these perceptions throughout the 2016 presidential election by regularly claiming the system was rigged against his candidacy (Goidel et al., 2017). These claims were often explicitly tied to negative coverage of his campaign. Studies of news coverage indicate Trump did receive more negative coverage during the general election but also offer a number of caveats. First, Trump received more coverage, generally, yet the proportion of negative coverage compared to Clinton was relatively equal. This “false balancing” has been attributed to the failure of the news media to take the Trump candidacy seriously (Lawrence, Boydston, and Van Aelst 2017). Second, Hillary Clinton received *more net* negative coverage over the full duration of the campaign (Patterson 2016). Third, Trump “benefited” from social media where his followers were more likely to forward fake news stories favorable to his candidates (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017).<sup>5</sup>

While definitions of media bias that include multiple substantive dimensions – visibility bias (salience of candidates), evaluation bias (tone of coverage) and agenda bias (issue salience) – could

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps ironically, Fox News has a substantial political effect on voting behavior, significantly increasing the Republican share of the vote (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Although the net effect of such articles on choice or turnout is a matter of debate (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018).

generate different evaluations of the role of media bias in the 2016 campaign (Eberl, Boomgaarden, & Wagner, 2017; Eberl, Wagner, & Boomgaarden, 2016), the distribution of bias is less important to our present concern than how *allegations* of bias were used. Discussions of media bias—facilitated by Fox News and other conservative media establishments—focused almost exclusively on anti-Trump bias (Druckman, Levendusky, & McClain, 2018). Concurrently, Trump tapped into structural media biases by providing the media with news content that attracted news audiences and by engaging in regular conflict via twitter (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017; Wells et al., 2016). Lawrence and Boydston (2017) caution that we do not know if the overall pattern of coverage helped or hurt Trump politically but even a very superficial glance at the available evidence suggest public perceptions of anti-Trump media bias do not hold up particularly well. While much of his coverage was negative, Trump succeeded in setting the overarching agenda of the campaign (Faris et al., 2017).

Our focus here is not to (re)litigate questions of actual bias. Rather, we explore how *perceptions* of bias changed over the course of the campaign. As noted previously, perceptions of bias are not tied to actual media coverage. Partisan Republicans do not typically spend much time reading the New York Times, nor do partisan Democrats watch Fox & Friends (Kaye & Johnson, 2016). Instead, perceptions of bias are rooted in political identities, partisan cues, and conversations with likeminded partisans (D'Alessio, 2003; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gunther, 1992; Lee, 2005). Indeed, the news media are largely seen in terms of whether they align with in-group or out-group identities (Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014). Often, the end result is that individuals perceive the media as hostile to their side (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chih-Yun Chia, 2001; Vallone et al., 1985; D'Alessio, 2003; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

Within this context, we expect perceptions of media bias should reflect partisan identities and that these perceptions should grow stronger over the course of the campaign. For Republicans, this should be rooted in the persistent claims of bias made by the Trump campaign. Because Republicans typically believe the media are biased against conservatives, these shifts should occur among less partisan and less politically interested Republicans. For Democrats, changes in perceptions of media bias should be rooted in the surprise election loss. Past research on electoral “losers” indicates that their explanations of losses are often rationalized in terms of motivated reasoning – manifesting in perceptions that the election was unfair (Hollander, 2014) and conspiratorial thinking (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2016). As such, strong Democrats’ perceptions of bias should be magnified in the post-election period.

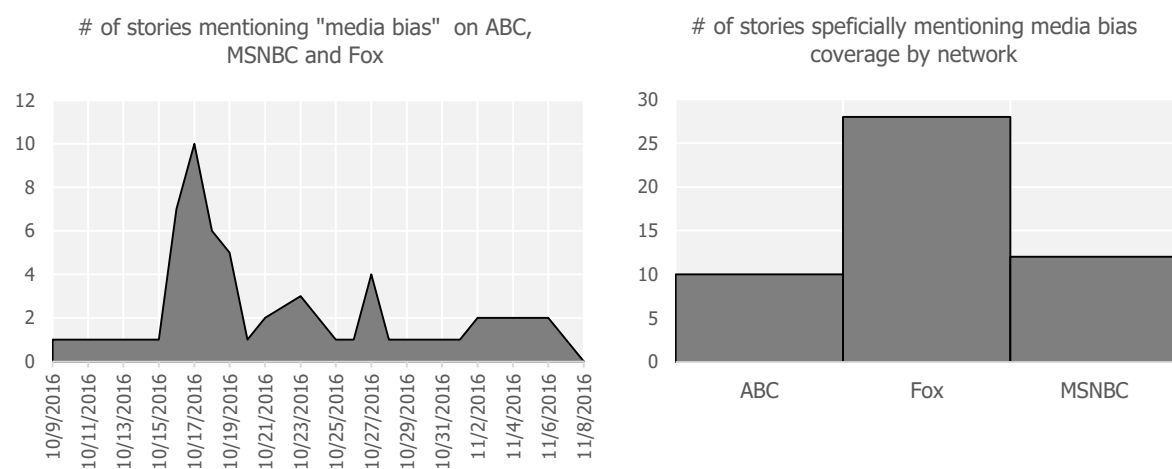
## Data and Methods

We first present a content analysis of MSNBC, FOX, and ABC News stories conducted from September 6 – November 8 to contextualize the presence of “media bias” allegations. Here, we identified programs that included the specific terms “voter fraud,” “media bias,” “rigged elections,” or “rigged system” using Lexis-Nexis, as well as a more general search for the term “rigged” within five words of “election” or “system.” Those search criteria yielded 155 results from 125 unique television programs. For this paper, we focus

only on the 53 articles identified as addressing claims of media bias from October 1 to November 8 (Kappa=.85).<sup>6</sup>

The data, presented in Figures 1 & 2, show the consistent theme of media bias in the news in the month immediately preceding the election. They also reveal the tendency of Fox News to repeat these claims more frequently than MSNBC or ABC. Within the context of the 2016, claims of media bias were repeated most frequently by conservative media and, subsequently, were heard most frequently by conservative viewers

Figure 1. Media Bias Claims in the 2016 Election



Notes: Data were collected during period Sept. 6, 2016 to November 8, 2016 by authors.

To address whether patterns of coverage affected perceptions of bias, we utilize a module of 2016 Congressional Cooperative Election Survey (CCES) fielded prior to and directly proceeding the election. The pre-election sample included 1,000 respondents interviewed from October 4, 2016 to November 6, 2016; 815 respondents were re-interviewed from November 9, 2016 to December 12, 2016. The data analyzed below only include those respondents interviewed during both waves.<sup>7</sup>

*Perceptions of bias* are operationalized via the following question: “Thinking now about news coverage of the candidates over the course of the campaign, would you say that, on balance, news coverage has been biased in favor of Hillary Clinton, fair and balanced, or biased in favor of Donald Trump?”<sup>8</sup> Respondents were asked to place their responses on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (biased in

<sup>6</sup> The details of this data collection and coding process can be found in [blinded].

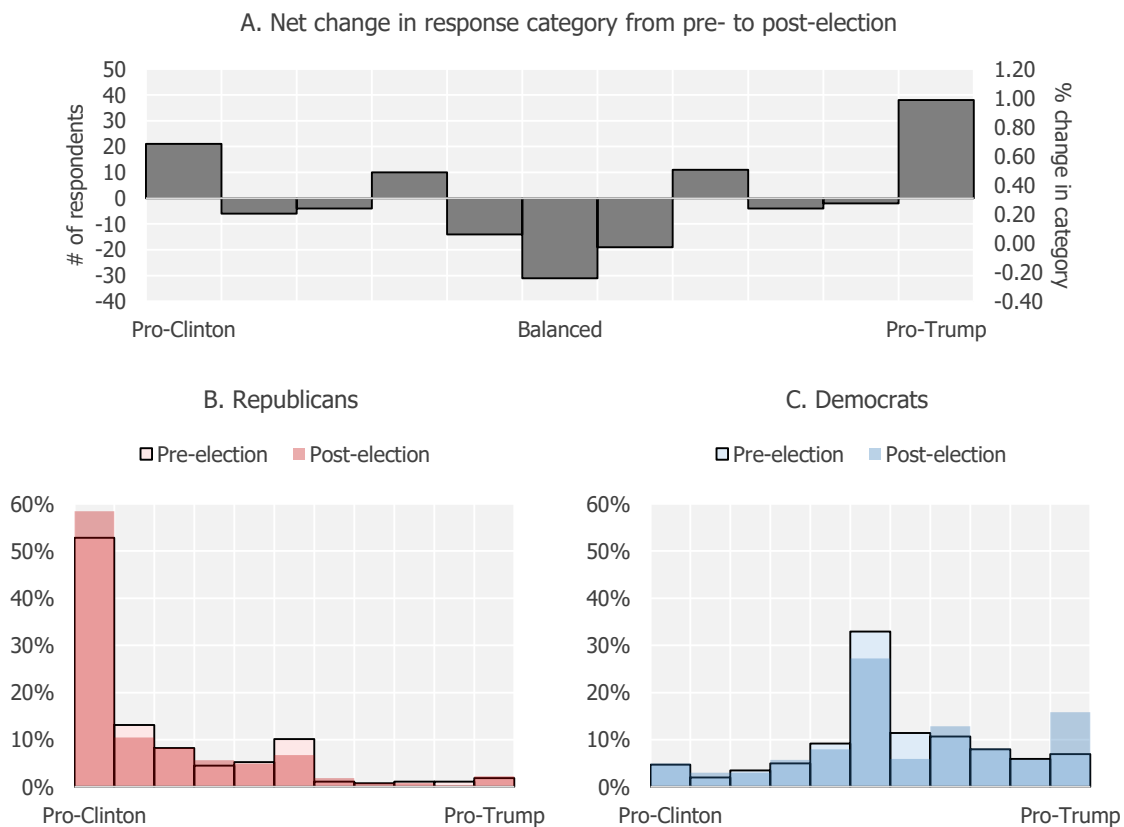
<sup>7</sup> Across a range of covariates, we observed no significant differences between the attrition sample and the remaining individuals re-interviewed at wave 2.

<sup>8</sup> A reader might question our use of a media bias question with “news coverage” so vaguely defined. While this may not be ideal, it reflects Republican claims of bias during the election.

favor of Hillary Clinton) to 10 (biased in favor of Donald Trump). The change in perceptions of media bias was measured as the difference between post-election and pre-election responses ( $t_2-t_1$ ). The mean response from the pre-election wave was 3.60 (s.e. = 0.14) indicating that the average respondent perceived that Hillary Clinton received more favorable coverage. This shifted only slightly after the election ( $\bar{x} = 3.74$ , s.e. = 0.15). However, although the difference between pre- and post-election perceptions of bias were stable in the aggregate, approximately 60 percent of respondents' perceptions of bias shifted from pre- to post-election (Panel A in Figure 2).

Among partisans the story is more nuanced (Panels B and C, Figure 2). Republicans reliably graded the media as pro-Clinton with little change across waves ( $\bar{x} = -0.19$ ; s.e. = 0.12) while Democrats shifted significantly toward the pro-Trump pole after the election ( $\bar{x} = 0.41$ , s.e. = 0.12). Unlike the difference in grand means across waves, these partisan difference were statistically significant ( $\bar{x} = 0.60$ ; s.e. = 0.20).

Figure 2. Perceptions of media bias among partisans



Source: 2016 CCES Module

Notes: In Panels A and B, y-axis represents unweighted proportion of respondents in a given category. Panel C conveys movement in response categories from pre- to post-election period. Panel D illustrates what those changes actually look like. Responses at "0" convey no change.

To model perceptions of media bias, we employ a cross-lagged panel model (c.f. Finkel 1995). By controlling for bias at time 1, we can ascertain how different covariates shaped perceptions of bias at time 2. Our models depict bias as a function of partisan affiliation and political interest, along with a series of demographics including education, sex, age, and race. Because we expect that the effects of partisanship may be nonlinear – i.e. weak Republicans might shift their views toward pro-Clinton bias; strong, invested Democrats perceive greater pro-Trump bias – we break *partisanship* into a series of dichotomous variables with “pure” Independent as the unobserved category. *Political interest* is measured on a 4-point scale reflecting how closely respondents paid attention to what is going on in government and public affairs ranging from 0, respondents “hardly paid any attention at all to news” to 3, respondents “pay attention most of the time” ( $\bar{x} = 1.76$ ; s.e. = 0.04). A majority of respondents (56.4 percent) said they paid attention to the campaign most of the time, 27.6 percent said they followed politics some of the time, 10.4 percent only now and then, and 5.7 percent hardly at all.

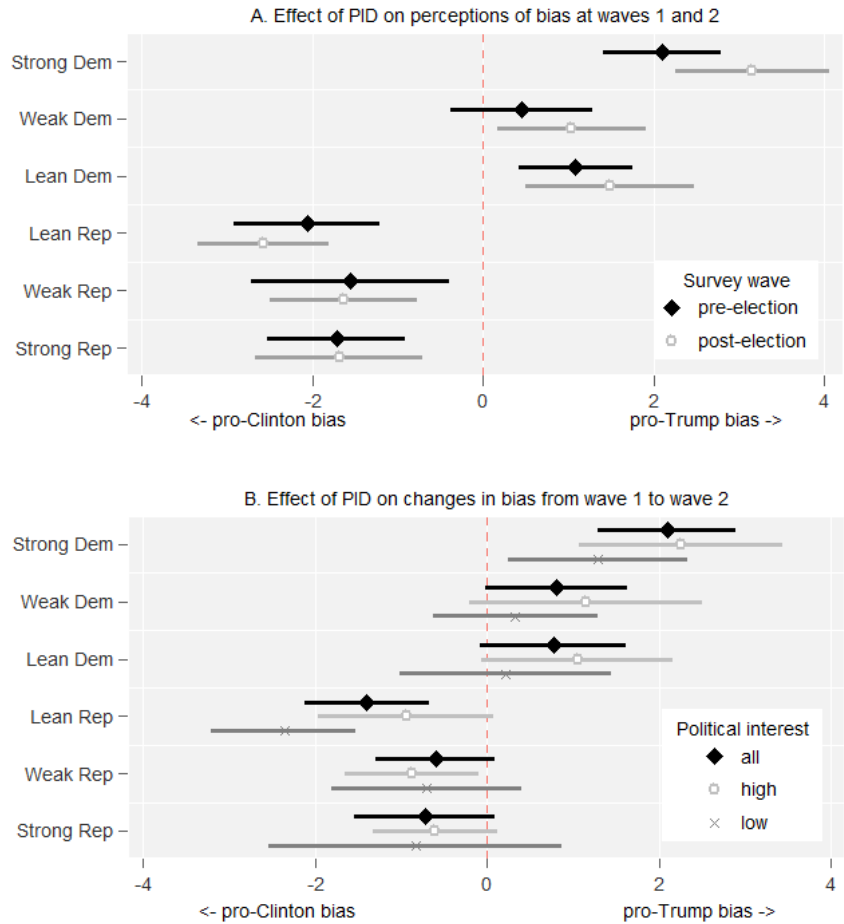
## Results

Rather than present tables of regression output (available in the Appendix), we portray the effects of partisanship on perceptions of bias graphically, focusing primarily on the effects of partisan identity and perceptions of media bias. In Figure 3, point estimates convey the marginal effect of partisan identity, bracketed by 95 percent confidence interval bands. As can be seen in Panel A, there is relative stability between partisanship and bias across waves, although the variance for Democratic perceptions of bias does shift for individuals who profess stronger partisan attachments. These patterns are broadly consistent with the hostile media phenomenon.

Next, we pivot to the question of whether partisan attachments *caused* shifts in perceptions of bias. Panel B portrays the effect of pre-election partisanship on post-election perceptions of bias controlling for a variety of confounds (including perceptions of bias at wave 1). We break these point estimates out by political interest. Among Democrats, the effect of partisanship on bias is limited to strong Democratic identifiers, irrespective of interest. These are individuals who likely reevaluated their views of the media in light of the surprising election outcome. In contrast, among Republicans, “leaners” were not only more likely to perceive pro-Clinton bias after the election but these effects are moderated by political interest. These are individuals likely responding to Donald Trump’s consistent claims of media bias. Weak and strong Republican partisan identifiers, presumably, already believed these media bias claims.

On balance, perceptions of media bias sorted over the course of the campaign with both Republicans and Democrats moving toward believing the media were biased against their side. Even so, there is remarkable stability in these attitudes ( $r=0.70$ ). In this respect, perceptions of bias seem to function as an expressive form of group identity. While they shift, they are less variable to outcomes than one might expect.

Figure 3. Perceptions of bias by partisanship and interest



Notes: Originating regressions available in Appendix. Point estimates convey the marginal effect of particular partisan category. Solid bands convey 95% confidence intervals.

## Conclusions

Past research has explored perceptions of bias primarily using cross-sectional data or aggregated data over time. The panel data utilized here offers greater leverage regarding how electoral outcomes shift such perceptions and, if so, whether political interest moderates the effect of partisanship on perceptions of media bias. We find that the perceptions of strong Democrats and independent-leaning Republicans were most likely to shift as a result of the 2016 presidential campaign. We contend this occurred for different motivational reasons – whereas strong Democrats were likely bitter at the electoral outcome, independent-leaning Republicans were likely influenced by elite partisan cues (especially from Trump) proclaiming media bias. This group would be the most susceptible to such shifts given that strong Republicans already perceived maximal levels of bias.



These shifts notwithstanding, it seems that individuals who entered into the election with preformed beliefs about media bias largely retained those beliefs *after* the election. This stability conveys that these attitudes may be durable – and that is not encouraging. At worst, a citizenry that does not trust its media to report the news fairly and accurately may also question the integrity of political outcomes. It remains unclear whether what we have observed in the 2016 election is an aberration or reflects the ongoing decline in trust in the mainstream news (Ladd, 2011). Regardless, the results from this particularly contentious election do suggest that perceptions of media bias may be polarized as partisans on both sides become more inclined to say their candidate was treated unfairly in the aftermath of an election. While these changes are small, they are nevertheless important insofar as it may be difficult for the news media (broadly defined) to regain public trust in their ability to report the news fairly and accurately.

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Table A1: OLS Regressions of Change in Media Bias on Partisan Affiliation, Media Exposure, and Political Interest

	All Respondents (N=801)		High Interest (N=431)		Low Interest (N=370)	
	Media Bias (Post- Election)	Bias Change (t2-t1)	Media Bias (Post- Election)	Bias Change (t2-t1)	Media Bias (Post-Election)	Bias Change (t2-t1)
Media Bias t1	0.53 (0.06)**		0.61 (0.08)**		0.36 (0.07)**	
Strong Democrat	2.10 (0.41)**	1.01 (0.34)**	2.25 (0.60)**	0.94 (0.39)*	1.29 (0.53)*	0.71 (0.60)
Weak Democrat	0.81 (0.42)	0.51 (0.52)	1.15 (0.69)	0.14 (0.71)	0.33 (0.49)	0.75 (0.70)
Leans Democrat	0.77 (0.43)	0.05 (0.42)	1.05 (0.57)	-0.18 (0.49)	0.21 (0.63)	0.22 (0.67)
Leans Republican	-1.40 (0.37)**	-0.40 (0.44)	-0.94 (0.52)	-0.38 (0.60)	-2.36 (0.43)**	-0.67 (0.55)
Weak Republican	-0.60 (0.35)	0.22 (0.38)	-0.87 (0.40)*	-0.43 (0.44)	-0.70 (0.56)	0.75 (0.59)
Strong Republican	-0.72 (0.42)	0.04 (0.45)	-0.60 (0.37)	-0.19 (0.33)	-0.84 (0.87)	0.16 (1.12)
Political Interest	-0.14 (0.17)	0.03 (0.19)				
Constant	1.79 (0.47)**	-0.22 (0.48)	1.03 (0.32)**	0.11 (0.28)	2.53 (0.45)**	-0.35 (0.36)
R-squared	0.54	0.03	0.68	0.05	0.29	0.02

Notes: Sample comprises those persons who supplied a response to both pre- and post-election surveys. Additional controls include ideology, gender, race, education, and age; see Appendix for full models. Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table A2: OLS Regressions Predicting Perceptions in Pre-Election and Post-Election Media Bias

	All Respondents (N=801)		High Political Interest (N=431)		Low Political Interest (N=370)	
	Media Bias (Pre-Election)	Media Bias (Post-Election)	Media Bias (Pre-Election)	Media Bias (Post-Election)	Media Bias (Pre-Election)	Media Bias (Post-Election)
Strong Democrat	2.33** (0.41)	3.28** (0.46)	3.38** (0.62)	4.24** (0.67)	0.92* (0.44)	1.61** (0.55)
Weak Democrat	0.65 (0.51)	1.15** (0.44)	2.62** (0.82)	2.76** (0.80)	-0.64 (0.58)	0.10 (0.47)
Leans Democrat	1.55** (0.42)	1.60** (0.51)	3.18** (0.63)	3.01** (0.65)	0.01 (0.47)	0.21 (0.67)
Leans Republican	-2.13** (0.45)	-2.54** (0.38)	-1.45* (0.66)	-1.83** (0.59)	-2.61* (0.53)	-3.30** (0.37)
Weak Republican	-1.73** (0.42)	-1.52** (0.43)	-1.15 (0.62)	-1.58** (0.57)	-2.24** (0.56)	-1.51* (0.63)
Strong Republican	-1.63** (0.45)	-1.60** (0.49)	-1.08 (0.58)	-1.27* (0.61)	-1.54 (0.85)	-1.45 (0.86)
Political Interest	-0.36* (0.14)	-0.34* (0.17)				
Constant	4.30** (0.39)	4.10** (0.38)	2.39** (0.48)	2.50** (0.50)	4.46** (0.31)	4.13** (0.27)
R-squared	0.31	0.37	0.41	0.49	0.19	0.21

Notes: Sample comprises those persons who supplied a response to both pre- and post-election surveys. Additional controls include ideology, gender, race, education, and age; see Appendix for full models. Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table A3. Full model output

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	pre- election	post- election	pre- election	post- election	post- election	change	post- election high- interest	post- election low- interest	change high- interest	change low- interest
mbias1	----	----	----	----	0.54 (0.05)**	----	0.62 (0.07)**	0.34 (0.07)**	----	----
sdem	1.78** (0.35)	3.00** (0.45)	2.10** (0.35)	3.16** (0.46)	1.98 (0.39)**	1.04 (0.36)**	2.18 (0.53)**	1.26 (0.53)*	0.86 (0.36)*	0.66 (0.62)
wdem	0.39 (0.42)	1.06* (0.44)	0.46 (0.42)	1.03* (0.44)	0.75 (0.42)	0.59 (0.53)	1.15 (0.67)	0.21 (0.54)	0.16 (0.67)	0.62 (0.71)
ldem	0.94** (0.33)	1.43** (0.47)	1.08** (0.34)	1.49** (0.50)	0.69 (0.44)	0.12 (0.45)	1.12 (0.55)*	0.25 (0.64)	-0.02 (0.50)	0.13 (0.71)
lrep	-2.14** (0.44)	-2.59** (0.38)	-2.06** (0.44)	-2.58** (0.39)	-1.39 (0.36)**	-0.39 (0.45)	-0.91 (0.51)	-2.09 (0.47)**	-0.31 (0.58)	-0.66 (0.62)
wrep	-1.60** (0.54)	-1.65** (0.43)	-1.55** (0.59)	-1.63** (0.44)	-0.56 (0.36)	0.37 (0.38)	-0.70 (0.42)	-0.67 (0.54)	-0.17 (0.45)	0.78 (0.60)
srep	-1.97** (0.38)	-1.86** (0.44)	-1.72** (0.41)	-1.69** (0.50)	-0.70 (0.41)	0.13 (0.43)	-0.46 (0.38)	-0.97 (0.86)	-0.01 (0.34)	0.06 (1.08)
media	----	----	-0.03 (0.07)	0.15* (0.08)	0.17 (0.06)**		0.20 (0.06)**	0.03 (0.10)	0.19 (0.06)**	0.11 (0.11)
polint	----	----	-0.33* (0.17)	-0.51* (0.23)	-0.31 (0.20)	-0.03 (0.21)	----	----	----	----
educ4	----	----	0.16 (0.15)	0.11 (0.18)	0.04 (0.13)	0.00 (0.13)	-0.08 (0.16)	0.04 (0.22)	-0.10 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.26)
race2	----	----	0.37 (0.32)	0.18 (0.36)	-0.21 (0.27)	-0.44 (0.29)	-0.28 (0.33)	-0.41 (0.39)	-0.78 (0.31)*	-0.32 (0.48)
gender2	----	----	0.21 (0.27)	0.10 (0.27)	-0.04 (0.22)	-0.24 (0.26)	-0.45 (0.24)	0.72 (0.39)	-0.47 (0.27)	0.24 (0.47)
age	----	----	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.02

			(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
_cons	3.87**	3.48**	4.23**	3.30**	1.30	-0.18	0.81	1.89	0.24	-1.03
	(0.23)	(0.28)	(0.70)	(0.75)	(0.64)*	(0.65)	(0.90)	(0.97)	(0.67)	(0.96)
R-										
squared	0.24	0.36	0.26	0.38	0.55	0.04	0.70	0.31	0.11	0.04

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Notes: Sample comprises those persons who supplied a response to both pre- and post-election surveys. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$