

The Media, Voter Fraud, and the 2012 Elections

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ABSTRACT

Debate over the existence and impact of voter fraud continues unabated in American politics. Despite minimal evidence of fraud cases and non-existent effects on election outcomes, Americans continue to believe voter fraud is rampant. In this paper, we examine a potential source of this disconnect – the U.S. news media. How the media cover voter fraud likely affects citizens' beliefs and opinions on the subject. However, little research exists exploring voter fraud coverage. In this paper, we examine the patterns and themes of voter fraud coverage in local newspapers for each of the 50 states during the 2012 elections. Amongst the results, we show that 'voter photo identification' was a dominant topic in coverage. Further, presidential campaign spending and states that recently passed restrictive voting laws affected the language and which topics related to voter fraud received the most attention. Finally, we find that the number of fraud cases was unrelated to voter fraud news coverage. From an agenda setting standpoint, our results suggest Republicans may have been successful in making voter identification a salient issue during the 2012 elections.

Introduction

Debate over the existence and impact of voter fraud has continued unabated over the past several election cycles. Proponents of restrictive laws to limit voter fraud contend that even one case of fraud impacts US electoral integrity (Von Spakovsky, 2014). Their key policy offering is instituting increasingly strict voter identification laws and registration procedures. Though controversial, they argue voter identification solutions should not be too onerous for citizens since photo identifications are ubiquitous in contemporary America (e.g., drivers' licences). Opponents of laws targeting voter fraud argue that the number of fraud cases is so miniscule to ever have an effect on an election outcome (Bump, 2014). And thus, photo ID laws are equivalent to passing 'leash laws for unicorns' (Stewart, 2012) – that is, passing laws for non-existent problems. However, the (un)intended consequence of photo ID laws may be to limit access to voting for poor and minority citizens (Barreto, Nuno, & Sanchez, 2009). Opponents have argued that this consequence effectively equates to a poll tax (Walsh, 2014).

We are less interested in demonstrating the existence or impact of voter fraud and related laws than why Americans continue to believe at high rates that fraud is rampant. Previous work has determined that partisanship, race, and views on immigration help explain some of these beliefs (self-citation; Wilson & Brewer, 2013). However, little has been done examining how voter fraud information flows to Americans. Surely, political elites substantially drive the agenda, but few Americans hear directly from elites. Instead, we argue the messages are filtered through the media.

In this paper, we examine the patterns and themes of voter fraud coverage in local newspapers for each of the 50 states during the 2012 elections. Amongst the results, we show that 'voter photo identification' dominated news coverage on voter fraud. Further, presidential campaign spending and states that recently passed restrictive voting laws affected which topics related to voter fraud received the most attention. From an agenda setting standpoint, our results suggest Republicans may have been successful in making voter identification a salient issue during the 2012 elections. Republicans connected a problem (alleged voter fraud) to a simply solution (photo ID) that is commonly used in other security situations. By the media focusing on photo ID laws, the GOP essentially attained free messaging during the 2012 elections.

Voter Fraud Research

Earlier periods of American history feature significant cases of election fraud (Bensel, 2004; Kousser, 1974; Campbell, 2006). However, in contemporary American elections voter fraud is infrequent despite increased detection efforts. Documented cases of voter fraud (Kahn and Carson, 2012; Christensen & Schultz, 2014), and voter impersonation in particular (Levitt, 2014; Ahlquist, Mayer, & Jackman, 2014), are extremely rare. Election fraud cases comprise less than one-tenth of one percent of federal criminal prosecutions and state level evidence indicates that the vast majority of voter fraud investigations reveal no criminal violations (Minnite, 2010).

Nevertheless, conservative politicians and allied interest groups continue to support voting and registration restrictions in order to prevent voter fraud (Minnite, 2010; Hasen, 2012). For example, recently Republican state officials in Colorado, Florida, and Iowa each alleged in advance of a major election that thousands of non-citizens were illegal voters in their states. In each case, subsequent investigation revealed a much smaller number of non-citizens were illegally registered to vote (self-citation). Even so, in the past decade, more than half of the states have proposed new voting restrictions (Bentele & O'Brien, 2013).

Although actual voter fraud cases are nearly non-existent, Americans continue to believe that voter fraud is a common problem and damages electoral integrity (Ansolabehere & Persily, 2008; Wilson & Brewer, 2013; Dreier & Martin, 2010). In a 2012 *Washington Post* poll, 48 percent of respondents answered that voter fraud was a major problem and 33 percent answered it was a minor problem. Polling during the 2014 elections showed that substantial percentages of Americans continue to believe voter fraud was a problem (Trujillo, 2014). Research has demonstrated that Americans believe that photo identification laws prevent fraud (Atkeson, Alvarez, Hall, & Sinclair, 2014), yet public concerns about election fraud are not necessarily alleviated by the passage of such laws (Ansolabehere & Persily, 2008; Bowler, Brunell, Donovan, & Gronke, 2015). Republican state governments have used such concerns to pass voter-identification (i.e., photo identification) laws in the face of actual facts (Rocha & Matsubayashi, 2014).

As expected, Americans are not uniform in their beliefs about voter fraud. Beliefs and attitudes vary by partisanship, race, and attitudes towards immigration (self-citation; Wilson, Brewer,

& Rosenbluth, 2014). For instance, Wilson et al. (2014) demonstrate that support for voter ID laws is contingent on race and racial cues. And while Republicans are generally more supportive of voter ID laws than Democrats, pluralities on both sides tend to ascribe to voter fraud explanations when their preferred candidate or party loses (Beaulieu, 2014; Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

Campaigning & Agenda Setting

Amongst explanations for this disconnect between actual voter fraud and Americans' beliefs about voter fraud are the roles of the media and political elites. There is much evidence of the agenda-setting impact of the news media (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kinder & Iyengar, 1989). Despite falling circulation and viewership, the news media remain an important source of public information about politics. Furthermore, there is evidence that news coverage and elite rhetoric are correlated with public expressions of government conspiracies, including election fraud (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Most Americans have no direct experience with voter fraud and thus what people believe about voter fraud is likely to come from other sources, particularly the news media.

The newsmaking process lends itself to an outsized influence of elites on the news agenda (Cook, 1998; Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978). Reporters first turn to officials and elites for information, and thus elites can set the indexing of opinions in the news (Bennett, 1990). During campaigns, particularly presidential campaigns, elites may have even more power than at other times. Reporters covering presidential elections typically need to produce stories every single day. In these cases, there is more demand for news than supply. This gap provides a strategic advantage to candidates, campaigns, and outside groups to affect the news agenda.

Evidence suggests that Republicans and ideologically-aligned groups worked to make voter fraud a pertinent issue before the 2012 elections (Hasen, 2012; Dreier & Martin, 2010). They identified a problem (alleged voter fraud) and offered a simple solution (photo ID laws). Eleven states passed new voter ID laws between 2011 and 2013 (Brennan Center for Justice, 2013). Some of the laws were designed to take effect after the 2012 elections, and some of the new laws were delayed due to state and federal court challenges by voting rights groups. Additionally, campaign materials

discussed the prevalence of voter fraud and strategically placed advertising about the legal consequences of committing fraud (e.g., billboards in a heavily black area of Cleveland, Ohio).

Commentators have suggested two potential goals of such campaigning. First, voter fraud rhetoric was aimed at increasing Republican turn-out (Hasen, 2012; Levitt, 2007). The appeal was to persuade white conservatives to turn-out in order to counter-act vote fraud from illegal immigrants and ‘non-traditional’ groups. Second, and less vocally, Republicans wanted to reduce Democratic turn-out. It has been established that voter-ID requirements disproportionately affect minorities and the poor – two groups that typically voter overwhelmingly in favor of Democrats (Wang, 2012; Barreto et al., 2009; Schultz, 2008).

In sum, one hypothesis is that Republicans and outside groups strategically used voter fraud to attempt to effect turn-out in 2012 by playing to Americans’ beliefs on voter fraud despite the lack of evidence. While some campaigning is directly received by voters, most information on campaigns is filtered through the news media. As stated, we examine how the news media covered voter fraud to help understand the disconnect between public opinion and actual cases of voter fraud. Next, we offer a media theory based on a model of supply and demand, and costs and benefits of the newsmaking process to explain coverage variation throughout the U.S.

The News Media & Voter Fraud

At its core, the news is a business and outlets need to be concerned with profitability (Hamilton, 2004). There are fixed costs to consider – buildings, bureaus, equipment, salaries – as well as variable costs – location reporting costs, opportunity costs. In weighing costs, outlets also consider revenue, namely readership/viewership and advertising. Generally, the larger the audience, the more outlets can charge for advertising space. Therefore, in deciding whether and how to report on some issue or event, news outlets balance the potential reach and impact of stories with the costs of producing the stories. This is a modified version of supply and demand. Issues and events where the supply of information is cheap, accessible, and reliable are more likely to be covered contingent upon audience demand. When the supply of information on events and issues is expensive and difficult to attain likely coverage will sag, again contingent on audience demand.

Election coverage has been well-established as having high demand particularly for competition framed news such as horse-race coverage (Mutz, 1995; Zaller, 1999). In close races, audience demand for campaign coverage likely will be high, and with campaigns placing enormous resources into the races, we should expect expanded coverage. In races where there is no true competition, such as one-party dominated House seats or non-battleground states, the audience will lack interest in election news (Zaller, 1999). Therefore, even though the supply of information is cheap, there is little demand, and thus we should expect to observe minimal election coverage.

Campaigns are not interested in simply increasing attention, but also are concerned with agenda setting, priming, and framing issues (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1994). Audiences also have particular interests that they demand to be covered. Thus, what facets of an issue are covered is likely a combination of audience preferences and campaigning. The news that is produced provides a window into how these two elements are balanced in the newsmaking process. For example, we may expect minorities to be concerned with specific aspects of voter fraud laws like voter suppression. Likewise, we know that Republican campaigns focused on electoral integrity regarding fraud and thus likely pushed concerns of voter registration and voter rolls. If we find that media markets with large percentages of minorities saw no increased focus on voter suppression, but campaign spending increased voter identification news, then we may conclude that the supply and influence of certain information overrode particular audience demands.

Data

We examine media coverage of voter fraud in the largest and/or a significant newspaper in each of the 50 states from August 1, 2012 through January 31, 2013.¹ This time frame incorporates the heart of the traditional campaign season and allows us to examine coverage not just before the election, but also after the election when actual vote fraud challenges are likely to occur. Using *Lexis-Nexis* and *Newsbank*, we used the search term ‘voter fraud’ and collected all relevant stories, including editorials and readers’ letters. Across the 50 states, we found a total of 639 news articles pertaining to voter

¹ See Table A for the 50 newspapers used in the analysis. Due to limited electronic access for some papers we had to choose the largest paper in each state we had access to and not necessarily the largest in the state.

fraud during the 2012 elections with 74% of articles coming before Election Day. This finding squares with arguments that voter fraud and voter suppression allegations are strongly used as a mobilization tool by parties during significant elections (Hasen, 2012; Levitt, 2007). Though the majority of voter fraud coverage came before Election Day, the most common types of election and voter fraud – involving absentee ballots or election and campaign officials (Kahn & Carson, 2012) – are typically unearthed after the election. This simple fact provides an initial suggestion that voter fraud coverage is not necessarily determined by actual cases.

Descriptive Analysis

Topic Modelling

Our first examination of voter fraud coverage in the 2012 elections uses the automated text analysis method of topic modelling. Topic models have been increasingly used by social scientists seeking to uncover themes or topics within a large collection of text (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Instead of using humans to code texts, which is expensive, lengthy, and susceptible to errors, automated text analysis allows researchers to analyse large sets of news stories and provide easy replicability; however, the trade-off with not using human coders is that the gathered information is often at a much coarser level.

Here, the unstructured text from each newspaper article was organized within a vector-space model (VSM). In the VSM, each element of the vector indicates the occurrence of a word within the document. A collection of documents results in a collection of vectors, and there were 639 in this study. Once the raw text from each newspaper article was input into a relational database, the Porter Stemmer was applied in order to reduce the words to their root form. The text also underwent a typical exclusion process in order to remove words with little semantic value such as pronouns and conjunctions. Finally, in order to make the topic analysis stable, we excluded rare words with a frequency of less than 3% across the entire corpus, and also those occurring in less than 3% of the 639 documents.

Past research has indicated that press attention to voter fraud significantly varies between battleground and non-battleground states, and between states that recently passed restrictive voting

laws and those that did not (self-citation). To attain a better understanding of the coverage, we split the text before the analysis between battleground and non-battleground states, and states with new restrictive laws and those without. Following *Politico*, *CNN*, and the *New York Times*, we identify 8 battleground states in the 2012 election. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, 19 states passed restrictive voting laws in 2012.

The method used to extract thematic topics from the documents was factor analysis (Rummel, 1970).² All words with a factor loading higher than 0.30 were retrieved as part of an extracted topic.³ Based on the size of the corpus, we limited the number of topics returned per analysis to five, after (in some cases) deleting a topic if the returned topic seemed unimportant.⁴ In Table 1, the five estimated topics with the top five words are presented.

[Table 1 here]

Comparing battleground and non-battleground states, and restrictive laws and non-restrictive laws states, we actually find similar estimated topics and words; the fact that all the articles contained the phrase ‘voter fraud’ likely is the cause of this similarity. We find that three topics seemed to be most prominent – Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, Voter/Photo ID, and the Supreme Court. The Obama-Romney topic was expected due to the presidential race, but the other two topics indicate the news media focused on voter identification laws and whether the laws would be upheld in the federal courts, particularly the Supreme Court. Prior to the 2012 election photo ID laws in at least five states (Mississippi, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin) were being challenged in court or in the federal preclearance process for states that were subject to section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. Interestingly, other aspects of voter fraud such as voter suppression did not seem to occupy the same the relevance as voter identification laws.

For visual analysis and impact, once the topic modelling was complete, co-occurrence analysis on the five extracted topics was also conducted (Figures 1-4), with the Jaccard’s coefficient

² Modelling done in WordStat 6.0.

³ Note that topic modeling using factor analysis (as opposed to hierarchical cluster analysis, for example) allows words to be associated with more than one factor. This is often more realistic of the way in which, particularly polysemous words, are used.

⁴ Specifically, a couple of estimated topics were filler from newspaper articles such as ‘copyright’ and newspaper titles.

being the index used.⁵ These figures merely give an idea of the strength of the relationship of the thematic topics across the newspaper articles; a high coefficient tells us that the two topics frequently were discussed together, while a low coefficient indicates that the topics were not as often discussed together within the newspaper articles.

[Figures 1-4 here]

As with the estimated topics and words, the co-occurrence analysis demonstrates a similarity between newspapers. The topics with the strongest relationships appear to be voter identification laws and Election Day, and voter identification laws and the Supreme Court. Perhaps the most interesting result is the strong relationship between voter identification materials and the Supreme Court for states that recently passed restrictive voting laws (Figure 3). The Jaccard's coefficient between these two topics is .742, much higher than any other coefficients, strongly suggesting that newspapers in these states frequently discussed voter identification laws along with court rulings to uphold or delay enforcement of voter ID laws.

KWIC

Frequency analysis revealed the most common keywords and phrases utilized across the documents. Focusing on 36 of them, a keyword-in-context (KWIC) analysis was then done on each particular keyword and phrase in order to understand how they were being used (i.e., in what context) in the documents. KWIC is useful for assessing the general usage of a word or phrase in a document, whether it is used in a consistent manner or not (i.e., always negatively, or always positively).

A KWIC algorithm retrieves from a selected document (or set of documents) all of the occurrences of a particular word or phrase, and then allows the user to view the text surrounding that phrase or keyword. For this project the KWIC analysis was done by sentence length (meaning the entire sentence around the given keyword or phrase was retrieved) and all of the accumulated sentences for a particular phrase or keyword were later used in determining sentiment.

⁵ The Jaccard's coefficient is computed as $\frac{a}{(a+b+c)}$, where a represents documents where both thematic topics occur, and b and c represent documents where one thematic topic, but not the other, is found.

In Table 2, we list the most common voter fraud-related terms and phrases in the coverage along with the state/newspaper where it was used the most.

[Table 2 here]

As suggested by the topic models, the most common phrases dealt with voter IDs, ID laws, and voter registration. We find that 35.1 percent of the articles in our data included reference to ‘Voter ID’, 21.1 percent included reference to ‘ID Law’, and 28 percent to ‘Voter Registration.’ Interestingly, the first phrase dealing with negative consequences of the voter ID laws is ‘Civil Rights’ with 11.7 percent of articles mentioning it, making it only the twenty-fourth most mentioned phrase. You have to go further down the list in Table 2 to locate a more specific negative term – ‘Voter Suppression’ was included in only 8.9 percent of articles. Clearly, concerns over voter registration and voter ID dominated the news agenda with apparently less attention to the potentially harmful aspects of the laws. The results confirm that photo ID laws were the dominant policy discussed for combatting voter fraud around 2012.

Sentiment

We also considered the sentiment/tone of common terms and phrases in voter fraud coverage. We were interested in assessing whether certain phrases were treated more negatively or positively by the news media. We used the automated text analysis dictionary *Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary* (LSD) to analyse the sentiment of 33 common and exemplar phrases (Daku, Soroka, & Young, 2011; Young and Soroka, 2012a, 2012b).⁶ As a form of KWIC, we gathered the sentence surrounding each phrase and analysed it for the degree of positive and negative words. All the words for each phrase were then compiled into a measure of net tone using the formula: (number of positive words – number of negative words)/(total words – total excluded words) (Young & Soroka, 2012b).

[Table 3 here]

In Table 3, we include the average net tone for all 33 phrases analysed, along with a few exemplar cases, split between battleground and non-battleground states and states that recently passed

⁶ We supplemented the most common phrases with longer phrases that *a priori* are related to voter fraud such as ‘Evidence of Voter Fraud’ and ‘Allegations of Voter Fraud’.

restrictive voting laws and those that had not. We find that newspapers in battleground and restrictive law states used more negative words, on average, in their voter fraud coverage than newspapers in non-battleground and non-restrictive law states. While we were not able to sort out the sources of each use of a phrase, it appears that campaigns may have pushed more negative rhetoric about alleged voter fraud into campaign coverage.

From the four exemplar cases in Table 3 we see that battleground states and states that recently passed restrictive voting laws had much more negative tone surrounding discussion of ‘Allegations of Voter Fraud’ and ‘Illegal Voters’. Interestingly, we find that restrictive law states treated ‘Disenfranchisement’ more positively than states that did not pass restrictive laws. One’s expectation is likely the reverse – restrictive voting laws might create disenfranchisement which one would expect to be treated negatively in the press. Lastly, we find that restrictive law states discussed ‘Evidence of Voter Fraud’ considerably more negatively than states that had not passed a restrictive law. These laws are designed to prevent voter fraud and were passed with the pretext of evidence. Thus, it may be that the press in these states referred to the negative aspects of voter fraud, while papers in other states simply treated the evidence in a more neutral manner.

Multivariate Analysis

Variables

We consider a number of predictor variables to explain press coverage on voter fraud. We group the variables into supply-side and demand-side influences on whether or not the state and local media cover voter fraud. Supply-side influences reflect the supply of newsworthy opportunities to cover voter fraud based on the frequency of official investigations or elite debates about the issue. On the supply-side, we include total campaign spending on television advertising by media market for the 2012 presidential elections, whether a state passed a restrictive voter law in 2012, the number of alleged voter fraud cases in 2012, and the percentage of state legislators per state who are members of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).⁷ Demand-side influences reflect characteristics

⁷ We also tried analyses including total number of alleged voter fraud cases since 2000, whether a state had a Republican Secretary of State (the individual often in charge of pursuing fraud cases), and whether a state had

of consumers who may demand more press attention to certain aspects of voter fraud. On the demand-side, we consider political partisanship and race characteristics of each paper's media market.⁸ We also include newspaper circulation as a control for newspapers' resources.

Instead of simply using a dummy variable for battleground states, we use the total spending on television advertising by media market for both presidential candidates and on behalf of the candidates in the 2012 elections. The logic is that presidential campaigns really only spend money in battleground states and thus spending is a more precise measure of campaigns' efforts at messaging and agenda setting.⁹ Further, with so much at stake, individuals and groups alleging voter fraud are likely to target these states in an attempt to mobilize their base (Hasen, 2012). Conversely, not only do non-battleground states lack the influx of resources and attention found in battleground states, the winner of the presidential contest in those states is a foregone conclusion. When the outcome of an election is already decided, the media have less incentive to report on voter fraud or the potential impact on the election result (Fogarty, 2013; Zaller, 1999). We use data and information from Kantar Media/CMAG and the *Washington Post* for the media market television ad spending measure. Our measure combines all spending and is scaled by millions in the analysis.¹⁰

Many state legislatures have passed restrictive voter laws over the past decade (Brennan Center for Justice, 2013). For media covering state politics, state legislatures passing restrictive voter laws supplies information and events that make it easier for journalists to cover these issues. Therefore, we expect that newspapers in states where restrictive voting laws have recently been passed will be concerned with more and different aspects of voter fraud than other states. For example, coverage in these states may focus on the legality of the laws and whether or not they will prevent fraud. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, 19 states passed restrictive voting laws in 2012. We include a dummy variable for these states (1 = passed a law).

Republican control of the legislator and governorship. None of the variables were statistically significant predictors of press coverage of voter fraud.

⁸ We use media market-level data for the demand-side predictors as it more accurately reflects audience pressures on news outlets. Except for campaign spending, we leave the supply-side predictors at the state-level as it is difficult if not impossible to disaggregate some of the measures to the media-market level.

⁹ Spending and a battleground state dummy are correlated at .80.

¹⁰ We broke out Republican and Democratic spending and the results are nearly identical to overall spending. Further, all three spending measures were highly correlated (>.90).

Another supply-side variable is whether any alleged voter fraud cases existed during the election year. In the context of event-driven news, alleged voter fraud cases that emerge surely will gain the media's attention (Bennett & Livingston, 2003). Using data from News21 (Kahn & Carson, 2012), we include a variable measuring the number of alleged voter fraud cases in each state during 2012.¹¹ A majority of the states had 0 cases during 2012 with the most activity in Wisconsin (6 cases) and New Mexico (9 cases).

ALEC is a non-profit organization that advances limited government and devolution. ALEC directly affects policy by providing 'model bills' that state legislators can simply introduce to their legislatures that advance ALEC's and its members' interests (Pilkington & Goldenberg, 2013). Many of the restrictive laws recently passed in the states, particularly voter identification laws, came from ALEC's model bills (Brennan Center for Justice, 2013; Center for Media and Democracy, 2013). We include the percentage of state legislators per state who are members of ALEC (Center for Media and Democracy, 2013) as a measure of outside influence on states regarding voter fraud. The median was 15.5% of state legislators in ALEC per state, with a minimum of 1.4% of New York state legislators in ALEC and a maximum of 37.8% of Arizona state legislators in ALEC. We expect that newspapers in states with higher percentages of state legislators in ALEC will have more coverage of voter identification laws and threats to electoral integrity.

In creating the news, the media also must consider demand-side factors or, more specifically, the audience. Simply put, the audience wants news that is of interest and importance to them in their daily lives (Zaller, 1999). With regards to voter fraud coverage, demographics and the political interests of an audience should help dictate the issues covered and the content therein.

The first demand-side variable we include in the analysis is the presidential vote percent difference in each media market for 2012. As conservative elites have driven much of the discussion and legislation surrounding voter fraud (Dreier & Martin, 2010), we expect media markets that voted more Republican will have increased news attention of certain aspects of voter fraud, and vice-versa.

¹¹ We considered that voter fraud cases could be endogenous, as press coverage of fraud allegations could prompt an official investigation. However, removing the fraud cases variable from our analyses does not change the results reported below.

Our measure simply is the percentage voting for Obama minus the percentage voting for Romney for each media market.

We also consider the percentage of black and Hispanic residents per media market (Nielsen, 2014a, 2014b) as some claim that voter fraud charges and restrictive voting laws are intended to discourage voter participation by racial and ethnic minorities (Wang, 2012; Schultz, 2008). Those most affected by new voting laws should have heightened interest in news on the laws. However, many individuals often are unaware of changes in voting laws (Wilson & Brewer, 2013). In these circumstances, journalists might provide pertinent information to voters concerning changes in laws and ways to make sure their vote will be counted. With these two considerations, we expect that newspapers in media markets with higher percentages of black and Hispanic residents will have higher coverage of certain aspects of voter fraud.¹²

Analysis

In Table 5, we model overall coverage of voter fraud and the number of mentions of eight exemplar phrases in the press. We concern ourselves with mentions of phrases, instead of percentage article use, since the repeating of phrases is a common campaign strategy to affect the news agenda. As our outcome variables are counts, we use Poisson, Negative Binomial, and Poisson Inverse Gaussian regression to explain coverage (Cameron & Trivedi, 2013; Hilbe, 2014).¹³

[Table 5 Here]

First, consistent with recent research (self-citation), we find that states with increased presidential television ad spending and states that recently passed a restrictive voting law had significantly more coverage of voter fraud. Particularly, restrictive law states are expected to have 10 to 20 more articles on voter fraud compared to non-restrictive law states as campaign spending increases.¹⁴

¹² Table 4 includes descriptive information about the variables.

¹³ Model selection for each outcome variable was dictated by likelihood-ratio tests of the overdispersion parameter alpha and comparisons of AIC and BIC.

¹⁴ All interpretations were done in Stata 13.0 using SPOST9 (Long & Freese, 2006).

Our more compelling interest is whether any predictors affected mentions of certain aspects of voter fraud. Looking across the eight issues, we see that only presidential spending and restrictive law states had a consistent statistically significant effect on mentions in the press. The demand-side predictors did not appear to have a consistent significant effect on press coverage. Interestingly, we find that the number of voter fraud cases did not have a significant effect on coverage. This suggests that voter fraud coverage is not related to empirical evidence of fraud.

Spending had a positive and significant effect on mentions of ‘Voter Registration’ and ‘Voter Rolls’, while the restrictive law dummy had a positive significant effect on mentions of ‘ID Law’, ‘Voter Registration’, ‘Voter ID’, ‘Voter Suppression’, and ‘Electoral Misconduct’. As suggested by the co-occurrence and KWIC analyses, newspaper coverage in states with new restrictive voting laws focused more on the laws and voter registration.

Interestingly, states with restrictive laws are expected to have 8 more mentions of voter suppression than other states.¹⁵ As discussed previously, the negative consequences of some of the restrictive voting laws did not appear as prominent in the descriptive analysis of the news than the laws themselves and how they would limit fraud. This result suggests that the media did concern themselves with how the new laws may suppress turnout during the election. However, this did not appear contingent on audience demographics.

Additionally, the predicted mentions for voter registration stand-out: we find that at the maximum spending amount, around \$60 million, newspapers in states with new restrictive laws are expected to have around 55 mentions of voter registration, while states without new laws are expected to have only 17 mentions. As noted above, campaigns traditionally focus on increasing turnout of their side, of which voter registration is the first step. However, states with restrictive voting laws appear to have added a new wrinkle to turnout strategies.

Conclusion

Understanding the disconnect between the public’s beliefs and the evidence of voter fraud is not just important for this issue, but also for other political and societal belief-evidence gaps (e.g.,

¹⁵ Interactions between spending and restrictive laws were not statistically significant.

Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). We seek to understand the gap by examining how the news media cover voter fraud in the U.S. Like many political issues, citizens probably have no direct experience with voter fraud and thus their beliefs and opinions must come through elite cues and media coverage.

In this paper, we demonstrate several important aspects of voter fraud coverage in the U.S. media. First, we find that the topics and phrases most prominent in coverage involved voter identification laws and the Supreme Court. Second, newspapers in states that recently passed a restrictive voting law covered voter fraud substantially different than papers in other states. These papers heavily discussed voter identification laws in connection with the courts, used more negative language, and covered particular aspects of voter fraud more than elsewhere. The regression analysis showed papers in recently passed restrictive law states, unlike other papers, also discussed voter suppression in conjunction with voter identification laws and fraud. Third, states where presidential campaigns spend the most money, generally battleground states, had more press attention to voter fraud and voter registration in particular. Finally, we find that the number of fraud cases in a state is not related to the amount or types of media coverage.

In sum, our results suggest that media coverage of voter fraud is based on actions by political elites and less by facts on the ground. The prominence of ‘voter identification’ in voter fraud-related coverage during the 2012 elections is a GOP free media messaging success story. By state legislatures passing new restrictive voting laws, Republican could be seen as taking action and solving problems, and not standing by allowing ‘tainted’ elections. The media appear to have carried this messaging to their readers. Additionally, our findings indicate that newspapers did not considering audience preferences concerning voter fraud, thus potentially allowing even stronger agenda setting effects by elites.

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Table 1. Top Five Keywords Per Topic Between States

<i>Battleground</i>	“VOTER ID”	“VOTER/ELEC”	“OBAM/ROM”	“REGISTER”	“APPLIED”
	ID	ELEC	OBAMA	ALLI	APPLI
	LAW	BALLOT	PRESID	CONSULT	NOTE
	PHOTO	REGISTR	BARACK	FORM	MEDIA
	REQUIR	VOTER	ROMNEY	FLORIDA	SERVICE
	JUDG	CAST	MITT	PUBLICATION	DOE
<i>Non-Battleground</i>	“ROM/OBAM”	“SUPREME COURT”	“PHOTO ID”	“ELEC/VOTER”	“STRATEG ALLI”
	ROMNEY	COURT	DRIVER	BALLOT	STRATEG
	MITT	LAW	LICENS	NEWSPAP	ALLI
	OBAMA	SIMPSON	CARD	PUBLICATION	CONSULT
	PRESID	SUPREM	CERTIF	TYPE	PALM
	TURZAI	RUL	BIRTH	ELEC	BEACH
<i>Restrictive Law</i>	“VOTER ID”	“SUPREME COURT”	“ROM/OBAM”	“CONSULT”	“APPLI”
	LICENS	COURT	ROMNEY	ALLI	ITEM
	DRIVER	LAW	OBAMA	CONSULT	NOTIC
	CARD	SIMPSON	-	PALM	NOTE
	BIRTH	SUPREM	-	BEACH	APPLI
	REQUIR	JUDG	-	FORM	MEDIA
<i>Non-Restrictive Law</i>	“BALLOT”	“VOTER ID”	“OBAM/ROM”	“SUPRME COURT”	“STRATEG ALLI”
	BALLOT	ID	OBAMA	COURT	STRATEG
	ELEC	PHOTO	ROMNEY	RUL	ALLI
	CAST	REQUIR	PRESID	SUPREM	CONSULT
	ABSENTE	LICENS	MITT	TEXA	FORM
	VOT	DRIVER	BARACK	LAW	REGISTR

Note: Entries are top five keywords for five estimated topics using factor analysis topic modelling for newspaper coverage of voter fraud. All words shown have a factor loading of at least >.30.

Table 2. Top 25 Voter Fraud-Related Keywords & Phrases in News

Keywords & Phrases	Total Use	Percentage of Articles	State Most Used In
Voter ID	672	35.10%	Illinois
Photo ID	407	23.00%	Idaho & Utah
Voter Registration	391	28.00%	South Dakota
ID Law	330	21.10%	Pennsylvania
ID Laws	238	18.90%	Illinois
Early Voting	209	11.10%	Connecticut
Voter ID Law	206	16.10%	South Carolina
Registered Voters	190	16.40%	Ohio
Absentee Ballots	180	10.20%	Kentucky
Voter ID Laws	168	14.20%	Illinois
Voting Rights	160	16.70%	Arizona
Fraud In	121	16.10%	Nebraska
Civil Rights	118	11.70%	Washington
Provisional Ballots	117	7.80%	Ohio
Photo Identification	102	10.30%	New Hampshire
Registration Forms	101	6.70%	South Dakota
Absentee Ballot	90	8.10%	Nebraska
Registered to Vote	89	9.10%	Nebraska
Voter Identification	89	11.00%	Illinois & Utah
Cast Ballots	88	10.20%	Nevada & Utah
Voter Rolls	87	8.90%	Oklahoma
Photo IDs	86	9.50%	Idaho
Election Fraud	73	8.30%	Georgia
Voter Suppression	71	8.90%	Illinois
Voting Rights Act	67	6.90%	Arizona

Note: Keywords and phrases identified using KWIC.

Table 3. Sentiment Voter Fraud-Related Keywords & Phrases in News

Keywords & Phrases	Battleground	Non-Battleground	Restrictive Law	Non-Restrictive Law
Allegations of Voter Fraud	-0.1232	-0.0242	-0.0658	-0.0283
Disenfranchisement	-0.0769	-0.0192	-0.0148	-0.0402
Evidence of Voter Fraud	-0.0915	-0.0906	-0.1443	0.0000
Illegal Voters	-0.1111	-0.0476	-0.0952	-0.0729
Overall Average	-0.0594	-0.0555	-0.0608	-0.0429

Note: Cells are overall sentiment – positive or negative – for the included phrases and overall average all phrases. Calculation was performed using the *Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary* in WordStat 6.0.

Table 4. Summary Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Standard Deviation
<i>Outcome Variables</i>				
Number of Articles	0	48	11	10.61
Photo ID	0	68	4	13.82
ID Law	0	100	1	16.78
Voter Registration	0	60	3	11.36
Voting Rights	0	15	2	3.55
Voter ID	0	109	7	21.30
Voter Suppression	0	9	1	1.84
Voter Rolls	0	11	1	2.49
Election Fraud	0	12	1	2.47
<i>Predictor Variables</i>				
Spending	0	59	.001	15.88
Restrictive Voting Law	0	1	-	-
Number of Fraud Cases	0	9	0	1.76
% ALEC	1.41	37.78	16.37	9.41
Pres Vote Difference	-50	31	3.5	22.65
% Black	.680	30.43	8.81	9.12
% Hispanic	.766	38.45	6.71	8.14
Newspaper Circulation	12	657.47	142.90	132.13

Note: For outcome variables, cells are counts of articles and phrases. All outcome variables are at the newspaper level. For predictor variables, spending is the 2012 total presidential television advertising spending in millions and presidential vote difference is Obama vote – Romney vote. Spending, presidential vote difference, percent black, and percent Hispanic are at the media market level. Restrictive voting law, number of fraud cases, and percent ALEC are at the state level. Newspaper circulation is in the thousands.

Table 5. Regression Analysis of Voter Fraud Coverage

<i>Variables</i>	Number of Articles	Photo ID	ID Law	Voter Registration	Voting Rights	Voter ID	Voter Suppression	Voter Rolls	Election Fraud
Spending	.016** (.007)	.009 (.018)	.005 (.003)	.052** (.018)	.001 (.016)	-.006 (.020)	-.010 (.017)	.031** (.015)	-.001 (.017)
Restrictive Voting Law	.690** (.236)	.646 (.556)	1.35** (.642)	1.32** (.533)	.373 (.387)	1.15** (.430)	1.46** (.501)	.699 (.500)	1.03** (.498)
Number of Fraud Cases	-.080 (.101)	-.040 (.287)	.069 (.281)	-.070 (.313)	-.047 (.228)	-.031 (.145)	-.221 (.236)	-.073 (.284)	-.040 (.296)
% ALEC	-.005 (.017)	-.020 (.050)	-.023 (.051)	-.067* (.047)	-.028 (.031)	-.023 (.029)	.007 (.031)	-.009 (.039)	-.022 (.044)
Presidential Vote Diff	-.001 (.008)	-.011 (.019)	.005 (.023)	-.016 (.019)	-.015 (.013)	.002 (.013)	-.012 (.013)	.005 (.016)	-.018 (.019)
% Black	.012 (.013)	.032 (.032)	.037 (.038)	-.008 (.035)	.016 (.021)	.045** (.023)	-.025 (.019)	-.001 (.028)	.034 (.031)
% Hispanic	.001 (.022)	-.070 (.054)	-.040 (.061)	-.010 (.062)	-.044 (.057)	-.011 (.042)	-.085 (.062)	.025 (.060)	-.063 (.063)
Newspaper Circulation	.001 (.001)	.003 (.003)	-.001 (.003)	.001 (.004)	.003 (.003)	-.001 (.002)	.007** (.003)	.001 (.003)	.001 (.003)
Constant	1.94 (.286)	1.58 (.787)	1.30 (.877)	2.11 (.876)	1.11 (.496)	2.15 (.552)	-.767 (.649)	-.347 (.768)	-.045 (.810)
Alpha	.316	1.64	4.39	3.41	.798	2.03	-	.719	.682
Log-likelihood	-160.65	-137.64	-116.27	-131.03	-104.31	-159.31	-66.93	-75.85	-69.40
AIC	341.29	295.29	252.54	282.06	228.62	338.63	151.85	171.70	158.80
N	48	47	47	47	47	47	47	47	47

Notes: For the Voter Suppression column, the cell entries are Poisson coefficients with bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses. For the number of articles, Photo ID, Voting Rights, Voter Rolls, & Election Fraud columns, the cell entries are negative binomial coefficients with bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses. For the Voter ID, ID Law & Voter Registration columns, the cell entries are Poisson inverse Gaussian regression with bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses. All the bootstrapped standard errors are estimated with 1000 replications. Two states are missing because of missing values on predictors. Analyses of phrases had one less observation because one state had 0 articles.

Figure 1. Co-Occurrence Analysis on Topics Associated with Battleground States

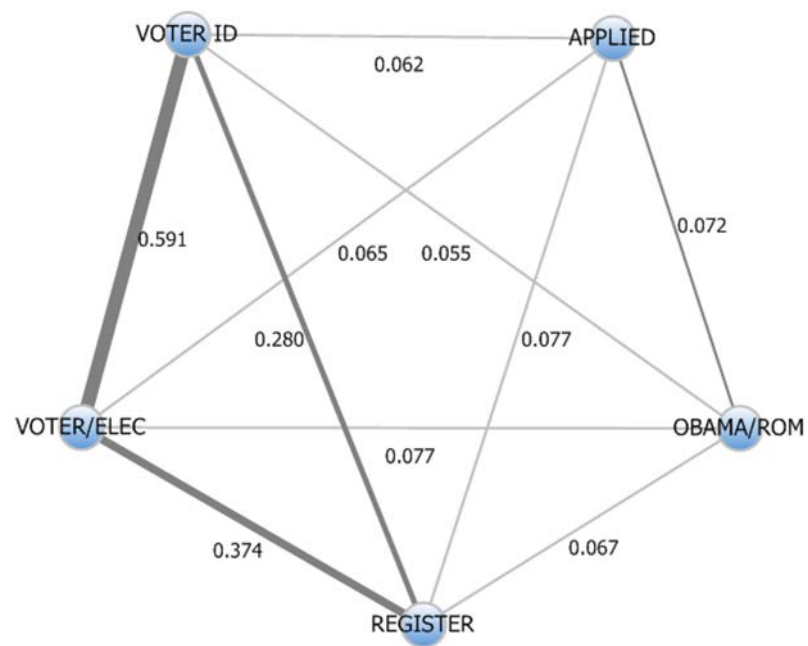


Figure 2. Co-Occurrence Analysis on Topics Associated with Non- Battleground States

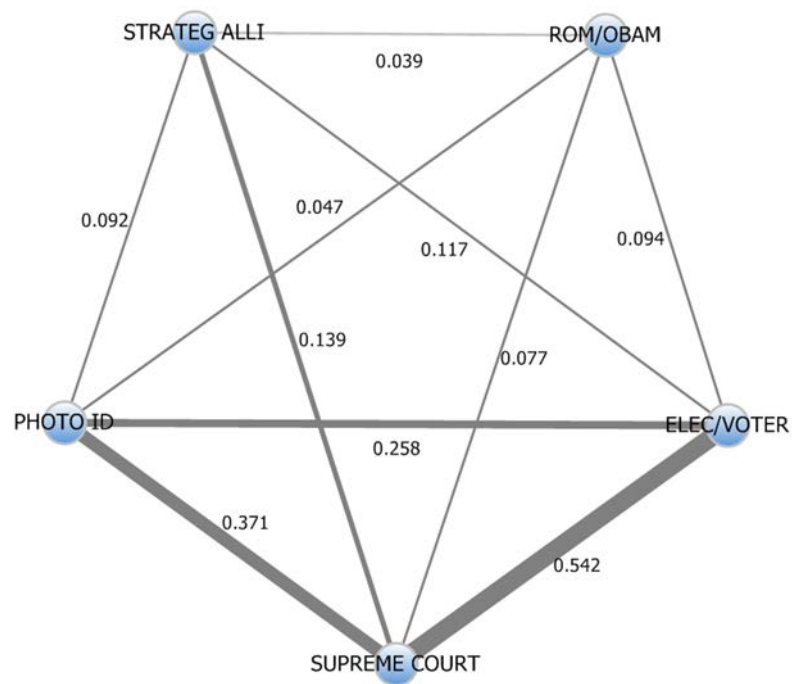


Figure 3. Co-Occurrence Analysis on Topics Associated with States with Restrictive Laws

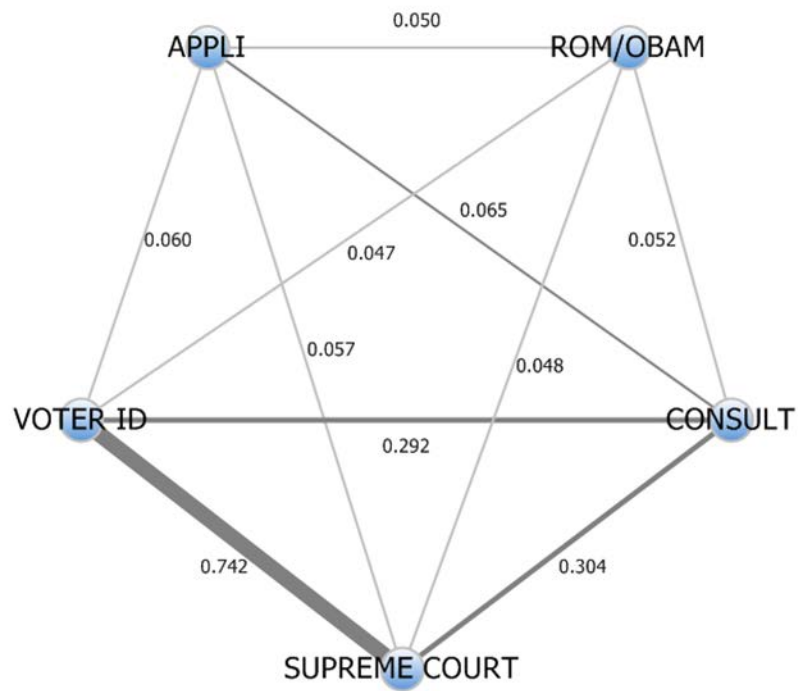


Figure 4. Co-Occurrence Analysis on Topics Associated with States without Restrictive Laws

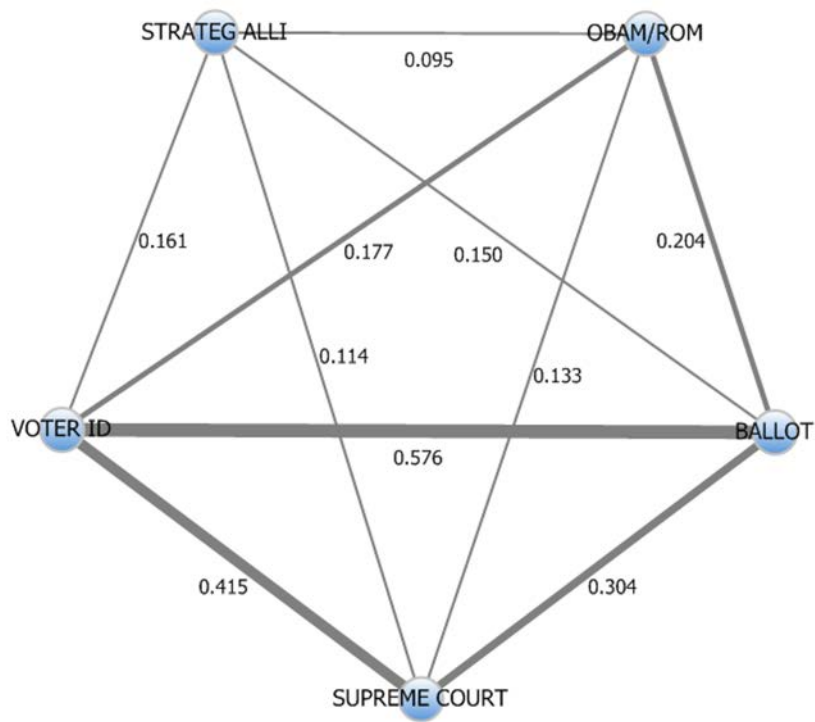


Table A. State Newspapers

State	Newspaper	State	Newspaper
Alabama	<i>Birmingham News</i>	Montana	<i>Billings Gazette</i>
Alaska	<i>Anchorage Daily News</i>	Nebraska	<i>Omaha World-Record</i>
Arizona	<i>Arizona Republic</i>	Nevada	<i>Las-Vegas Review-Journal</i>
Arkansas	<i>Arkansas Democrat Gazette</i>	New Hampshire	<i>Union-Leader</i>
California	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	New Jersey	<i>Star Ledger</i>
Colorado	<i>Denver Post</i>	New Mexico	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>
Connecticut	<i>Hartford Courant</i>	New York	<i>Daily News</i>
Delaware	<i>Delaware State News</i>	North Carolina	<i>Charlotte Observer</i>
Florida	<i>Tampa Bay Times</i>	North Dakota	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>
Georgia	<i>Atlanta Journal & Const</i>	Ohio	<i>Plain Dealer</i>
Hawaii	<i>Honolulu Star-Bulletin</i>	Oklahoma	<i>Daily Oklahoman</i>
Idaho	<i>Idaho Statesmen</i>	Oregon	<i>Oregonian</i>
Illinois	<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	Pennsylvania	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>
Indiana	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	Rhode Island	<i>Providence Journal</i>
Iowa	<i>Quad-City Times</i>	South Carolina	<i>Post and Courier</i>
Kansas	<i>Wichita Eagle</i>	South Dakota	<i>Aberdeen American News</i>
Kentucky	<i>Lexington Herald-Leader</i>	Tennessee	<i>Knoxville News Sentinel</i>
Louisiana	<i>Times-Picayune</i>	Texas	<i>Dallas Morning News</i>
Maine	<i>Bangor Daily News</i>	Utah	<i>Salt Lake Tribune</i>
Maryland	<i>Baltimore Sun</i>	Vermont	<i>Rutland Herald</i>
Massachusetts	<i>Boston Herald</i>	Virginia	<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>
Michigan	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Washington	<i>Seattle Post-Intelligencer</i>
Minnesota	<i>Star Tribune</i>	West Virginia	<i>Charleston Gazette</i>
Mississippi	<i>Sun Herald</i>	Wisconsin	<i>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</i>
Missouri	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	Wyoming	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i>