

From Couch to Poll: Media Content and The Value of Local Information[†]

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We document the importance of local information for political engagement, and link the engagement of citizens to the accountability of politicians. Local news content varies by media type, yet much of what is known about the role of media content comes from across-type comparisons—e.g., comparing television viewers to newspaper readers. Canadian television provides a unique opportunity to study the effect of content in a more ideal setting: until 1958, policy prioritized expanding network coverage by inhibiting competition in television markets—Canadians received public or private television, but never both, allowing us to separate the impact of public v. private media content from the impact of media type. We find that television reduces voter turnout, but the effect is exclusive to public television districts, where informational content is national in scope. We argue that the relative engagement of voters in private television districts results from the local relevance of media content, and this engagement improves the selection of politicians and the incentives they face in office. We support this argument with evidence that an engaged electorate select politicians who speak more often about their constituents in Parliament and vote against the party line. These findings suggest that politicians are held accountable by locally relevant news in terms of their words and actions in Parliament.

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