

# From Couch to Poll: Media Content and The Value of Local Information

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DRAFT COMING SOON

We study the impact of media content on the political engagement of citizens and politicians. The Canadian media landscape evolved as a dual system of public and private broadcasters, where content systematically varied across broadcaster type. Until 1958, policy prioritized expanding coverage to the largest number of Canadians by inhibiting competition in television markets – Canadians received public or private television, but never both, allowing us to separate the impact of public vs. private content within the same media type. Using newly digitized data on the timing and location of television transmitter installations, we map the public-private rollout of television onto electoral districts. We use these data to explore the impact of television content on two aspects of the political landscape: voters and politicians. For identification, we construct a novel measure of expected treatment from a set of randomized television networks, conditioning each network on the correct number of transmitters in a given year and their sampling probability. Our estimates rely on plausibly exogenous variation in signal strength above or below expected signal strength. We find that television’s introduction reduced voter turnout, but this effect is driven exclusively by content in public television markets. We then show that private broadcasters produce more local informational content than public broadcasters, with no discernible difference in entertainment content across broadcaster type. The results suggest that the substitution away from other media focused on local informational content has no impact in private television markets, given the local relevance of private television content. To substantiate the impact of local news, we leverage 4-million parliamentary speeches from elected politicians in the House of Commons to construct various measures of speech localness. We find that politicians in private television districts speak more often and more intensively about the local communities they represent than politicians in public districts. We also find that politicians are more willing to vote against party lines on behalf of their constituents in private television districts, suggesting that politicians are held accountable by locally relevant news in terms of their rhetoric and actions in parliament.

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