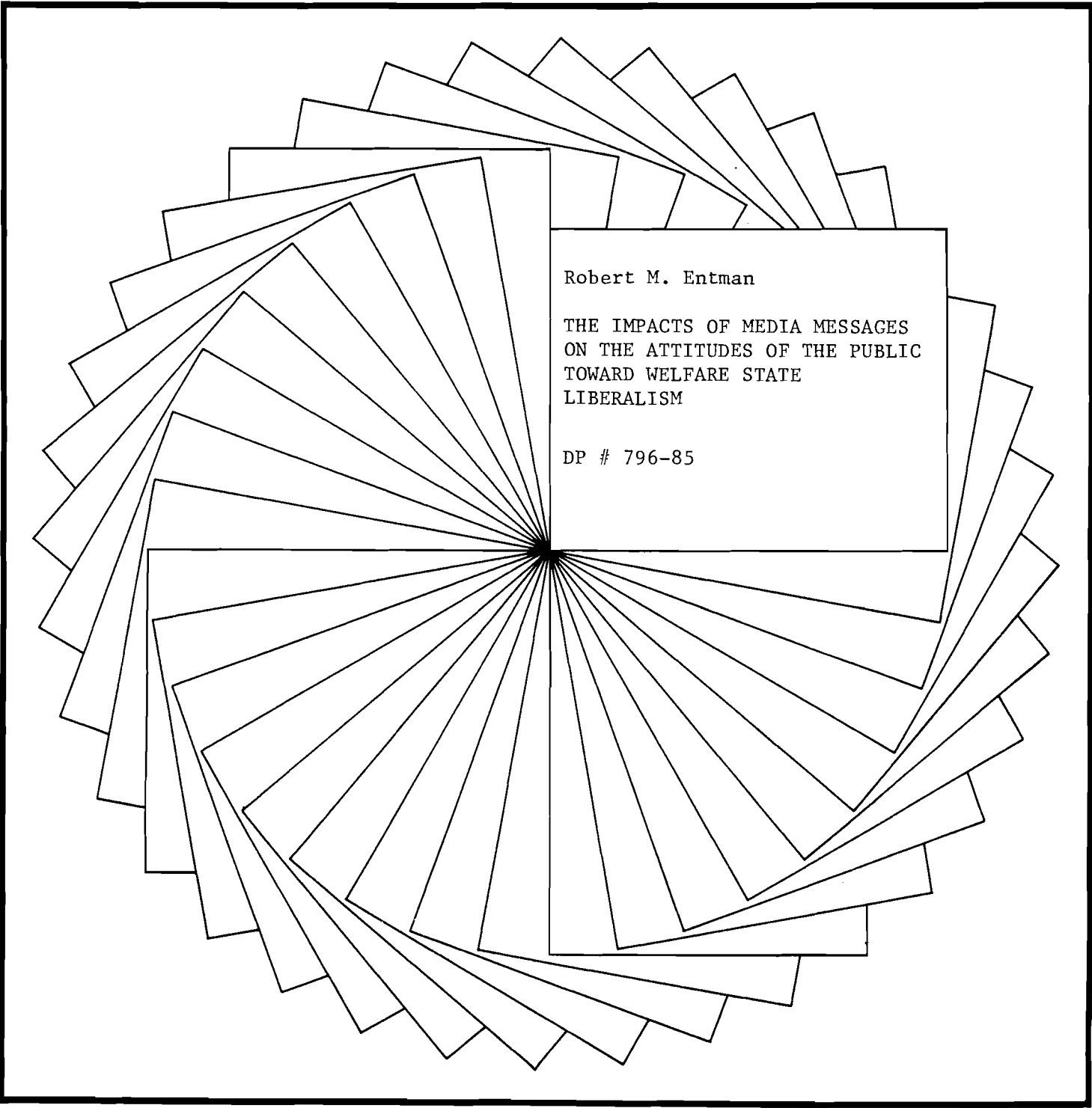

IRP Discussion Papers



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THE IMPACTS OF MEDIA MESSAGES
ON THE ATTITUDES OF THE PUBLIC
TOWARD WELFARE STATE
LIBERALISM

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The Impacts of Media Messages on the Attitudes of the
Public toward Welfare State Liberalism

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Abstract

A dominant strain in theoretical discussion of media impacts on politics emphasizes that audience members exert selectivity in responding to media messages: they screen out or reinterpret information that violates their established beliefs. As a result, according to this view, media impacts on public opinion and political behavior are limited.

This paper assesses the selectivity assumption using a unique set of data. Opinion data come from a national survey conducted in 1974 and 1976 by the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies. Data from an extensive content analysis of 92 newspapers read by sample members are matched to the survey results.

Two measures of newspaper content, editorial liberalism and news diversity, prove to have significant associations with feelings towards groups and officials that have distinct positions on the liberal-conservative continuum. In addition, these measures show positive associations with vote for Ford or Carter in 1976. Separate regressions for conservatives, liberals, Democrats, and Republicans, reveal statistical impacts of newspaper content even among groups where selectivity would be predicted to prevent them. The paper briefly assesses implications of the analysis and findings for our understanding of media impacts on public policy.

The Impacts of Media Messages on the Attitudes of the Public toward Welfare State Liberalism

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the mass media on the political attitudes and actions of the citizenry has been a matter of debate for years. Some have argued that media information has "minimal consequences" (see Klapper, 1960), some that it has substantial effects (e.g., Paletz and Entman, 1981; Patterson, 1980; Nimmo and Coombs, 1983; Graber, 1980). Others assert that media affect issue agendas more than opinions (see MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; Shaw and McCombs, 1977; Miller, Erbring, and Goldenberg, 1979). This paper explores the impacts of newspaper content on political thinking and behavior. The paper concentrates particularly upon attitudes toward policies and actors associated with welfare state liberalism and the liberal-conservative continuum, broadly defined.

THE THEORETICAL ISSUES

The major focus of recent media research has been on personal issue agendas. A number of studies reveal that, under certain conditions, variations in media attention to issues correlate with whether their audiences mention those same issues as "important problems" in response to survey questions (see the studies cited above). The conclusion of this body of research is generally that media can affect "what people think about" but not "what people think" (i.e., their beliefs and preferences).

Perhaps the major basis for skepticism about media effects on preferences is the selectivity assumption. It asserts that individuals selectively attend to, understand, or recall media messages, screening out those that disagree with their preconceptions. Since most persons engage in selectivity, according to this reasoning, the major media impact must lie in elevating objects to the attention of the public, rather than in affecting evaluations of them.¹

Yet there may be some objections to treating agendas alone, or to assuming that selectivity tends to eliminate direct media impacts on political evaluations:

1. All individuals may not be equally selective. Some persons are less dogmatic or inflexible, more curious and open to new information than others.

2. All attitudes are probably not equally protected by selectivity. Some opinions are less central than others to the core of the belief system or self-concept; these are presumably less well-defended. Moreover, the structure of belief systems probably varies between persons. Party or ideological orientation might be a central and deeply held value for some and not for others; this makes generalizations about selectivity hazardous.

3. Many citizens seem not to have strongly held and coherent political ideologies.² As a result, messages that would appear logically or objectively to threaten a belief system may not do so. The messages may therefore penetrate and alter opinions successfully without causing subjective dissonance. Selectivity implies a self-consciousness about having and maintaining a consistent philosophical stance that may not hold for many citizens.

4. Selectivity ought to be diminished substantially in formation of attitudes where none existed before. Even where tangential attitudes did exist, selectivity might be attenuated. For example, media coverage probably influences evaluations of a new, unknown candidate even among those who identify with that person's party (Patterson, 1980).

5. Agendas can set favorable or unfavorable contexts for candidates or policies. When the Russian threat ranks high on the public agenda, there is a different environment for the formation of opinions about policy and candidates than when détente is paramount. Agenda effects might thus be reflected in substantive attitudes and preferences. Indeed, if variation in agendas is not linked to differences in candidate or policy preferences one might question the relevance of agendas to political behavior.

These observations suggest that direct media impacts on political opinions and behavior deserve as much attention as agenda effects.

MEDIA AND SUPPORT OF LIBERALISM

Media impacts upon attitudes related very broadly to welfare state liberalism provide the focus for this study. Welfare state liberalism is interventionist government policy that redistributes political and economic resources from the upper toward the lower strata of the socioeconomic hierarchy. The attitude variables are construed broadly in order to illuminate a range of possible media effects. Such a test allows an important theoretical conclusion: media effects vary substantially across the component beliefs of liberalism/conservatism.³ Some components may be closer to the core of many individuals' belief systems

than others, and certain dimensions of media information may be more readily comprehended than others.

By attitudes related to welfare state liberalism I mean opinions toward groups, politicians, and policies widely accepted as having distinctive positions on, or implications for, government activism versus reliance upon market outcomes and solutions. To measure these attitudes I employ "feeling thermometers" toward various groups and political actors and responses to seven-point Likert scale questions asking for positions on policy issues.

I do not mean to imply that individuals' positions on all these scales are tightly woven together, so that all respondents can be characterized as clearly liberal, moderate, or conservative. Rather, the use of a broad range of opinion responses is necessitated by that very lack of high intercorrelation, for media impacts on one opinion may not be replicated in effects on other, apparently logically related, beliefs. In addition, testing for effects on a broad range of dependent variables helps to provide multiple verification for the overall hypothesis of significant media impacts.

In the surveys conducted for the American National Election Series of 1972-74-76, the University of Michigan team included their traditional feeling thermometer questions. These items tap warm or cold feelings toward a wide variety of actors and groups associated with distinct positions on liberalism. Feeling thermometer responses range from 0, the coldest, to 100, the warmest. Indices formed from several responses should resemble interval variables closely enough to render them suitable for linear regression analysis. Five indices, constructed via factor

analysis, were created.⁴ These were labeled LiberalFT, RadicalFT, RepublicanFT, BusinessFT, and PoorFT.

LiberalFT emerged from ratings of Edward Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, liberals, Democrats, and unions. RadicalFT consisted of thermometer ratings of radical students, black militants, civil rights leaders, and policemen. RepublicanFT was created from ratings of Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and Republicans. BusinessFT rated big business, the military, and conservatives. PoorFT tapped thermometers of poor people, blacks, and George Wallace.⁵

The Michigan survey also asked respondents for their stands on a series of policy questions, including government-guaranteed jobs; dealing with urban unrest by solving the problems of unemployment and poverty; protecting legal rights of those accused of crimes; busing to achieve racial balance; the Equal Rights Amendment; integration of schools; government aid to minorities; and self-placement on the liberal-conservative spectrum.⁶ Coincidentally or not, all these questions are closely related to the goals of welfare state liberalism. Responses were factor analyzed. One factor emerged on which all but one of the responses (to ERA) loaded over .40 without rotation. The six items that did load were added together to form the policy preference index, running from 6, the most liberal stand, to 42, the most conservative. Again this index was treated as an interval variable.

In addition, two dependent variables that take advantage of the panel component of the 1972-74-76 election studies were also analyzed. A sample of respondents who participated in surveys during both 1974 and 1976 is available. The 1976 responses provide an opportunity to check

for media impacts on two key variables: attitude about a previously unknown presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter, toward whom selectivity could not have operated in exposure to newspapers in 1974;⁷ and voting for president in 1976.⁸ In order to analyze the impacts of 1974 newspaper content for this sample, only those who in 1976 said they had lived in the same community for at least two years were included.

The focus upon attitudes related very broadly to welfare state liberalism was chosen for a number of reasons. First, it has been widely alleged that public opinion since the early 1970s has shifted significantly to the right on these issues, with profound consequences for election outcomes and public policy.⁹ At the same time, interestingly enough, the media have been excoriated for showing systematic biases toward the left.¹⁰ The database is rich in information relevant to these assertions.

In addition, whether or not such an ideological shift in the "public mood" has occurred,¹¹ the division of issues and groups along liberal and conservative lines tends to correlate somewhat with class, racial, regional, and partisan affiliations. Therefore, if selectivity is a major force in diminishing media impacts, it ought to be operating significantly in the data analyzed here. Attitudes toward political objects less familiar, less linked to partisan and other attachments, might be less vulnerable to selectivity and more prone to media impact than liberal-conservative beliefs. The substantive focus provides for a stringent test of media influence.

It might be argued on the other hand that miscomprehension of media messages is less likely when the attitude objects are familiar, hence

that the test has a bias toward showing media effects. This observation has some merit. If taken too far, though, this point would lead us to study media impacts on only the most trivial or esoteric matters. That hardly makes sense.

A third major reason for the focus on the broadly defined issues of welfare state liberalism is precisely that these are among the most compelling public policy questions government faces. Demonstrating a media impact on public attitudes toward them helps to illuminate the ways the mass media may affect at least one significant aspect of the public policy process.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The Data

This paper employs a unique dataset containing detailed information on the content of 92 newspapers¹² read by a representative national sample of Americans, as well as on a wide range of their political attitudes and behavior.

First it should be noted that the sample is limited to newspaper readers. The approximately one-fourth of the Michigan sample that denied regularly reading a daily newspaper is excluded, because a prime interest was in measuring impacts of media content, not exposure, and newspaper content measures were available.¹³ The weighted "N" for the 1974 sample is 1292. A measure of amount of reading of political news in newspapers was included as a control variable.¹⁴

The 1974 Michigan Content Analysis Study provides extensive coding information on the front-page news and editorial-page content of 92 newspapers throughout the country. More than 18,000 stories and other items were coded.

The database has limitations. Data were collected for only 10 days of publication, and the study was conducted in October and November during the unusual, post-Watergate election year of 1974. As a result, for example, there was a great deal more negative news of Republicans, and less of Democrats, than one might normally expect. For a definitive probe of the impacts of the newspapers citizens read, one would certainly prefer content data for a range of months or years. Substantial error may be introduced by the assumption that measures based on ten days worth of content accurately reflect the typical stance of the paper.

However, the disadvantages of the short time period may be balanced in part by the sheer volume of material coded. Moreover, a check of face validity is reassuring. For example, among the 92 newspapers, the Washington Post scores 75 percent higher in editorial liberalism than the (defunct) Washington Star; the New York Daily News scores significantly to the right of the Times; and so forth. In general, the newspapers with national reputations that appear in the sample seem to rank about as one would expect on the measure of editorial stance. In any case, this data-set appears to be by far the most comprehensive collection of media content information available that can be matched to survey responses. It is our best source at present.

Media Content Variables

In testing the impact of news coverage one immediately confronts a constraint. Newspapers usually operate under norms of objectivity. The news columns are not supposed to make persuasive arguments; any biases are illegitimate. Where biases exist, they are often subtle and subjective. The dataset does not provide sufficient information to explore news bias empirically.

Editorial bias is another matter. Under journalistic norms, the editorial page is allowed and assumed to exhibit bias, i.e., a consistent partisan and ideological line. Editorials, columns, and letters exist precisely to persuade. The data provide a measure of ideological bias or slant. Each editorial item was coded for zero, one, or two assertions favoring or opposing liberal and conservative policy stands. The editorial liberalism index was formed by establishing the percentage of editorial coding opportunities (twice the number of editorial items) in which a liberal position was endorsed or conservative position opposed, then subtracting those which favored conservative and derogated liberal stands.¹⁵ The higher the score, the more liberal the editorial page, the lower, the more conservative. The editorial stance of a newspaper might well affect the biases, if any, on its news pages, so this measure might also indirectly tap news content.

The working hypothesis is that editorial liberalism will be associated with more liberal attitudes and voting behavior among all readers. Selectivity will not prevent these messages from affecting Republicans as well as Democrats, conservatives as well as liberals.

A second measure of newspaper content, this one employing data on the diversity of front-page news, was also constructed.¹⁶ Diversity and its absence are less widely identified than editorial bias as sources of media political effects. Nonetheless, there are two important reasons for employing diversity. First, the concept is crucial to debates of communications policy and First Amendment principles.¹⁷ It is worth seeing whether diversity has demonstrable effects on the public. Second, diverse news does not appear on its surface to attempt to persuade. Selectivity should therefore be less operative than for editorial liberalism. News diversity may thus be even more influential than editorial stands. The diversity measure provides for a test of the impact of front-page news to accompany the measure of editorial page impact.

The data provide information on the diversity of ideas contained in front-page items of each newspaper. The front-page news items were coded for mention of one or two problems. For each problem, coders noted whether two different actors overtly disagreed with each other on the problem. Thus each news item was coded as having zero, one, or two instances of two actors taking differing stands. The more such instances, the more diverse the perspectives in the coverage and the more clearly delineated they were. The news diversity index is the percentage of coding opportunities (twice the number of stories) in which two actors expressed different positions.

The source of links between news diversity and stances on the liberal-conservative continuum may not be immediately obvious. One tentative suggestion would start from the premise that most local newspapers appear to be Republican or conservative in overall outlook. The normal

editorial and perhaps news context would not be strongly favorable to liberalism. All else equal, those papers with higher diversity might provide more information that challenges the prevailing environment.¹⁸ More diverse papers might therefore stimulate more liberal stands among their readers. In addition, the mere presence of conflicting views in the news may convey an awareness of the diversity of the country, including that of different races, economic classes, and viewpoints. Such awareness may promote tolerance, even empathy for positions that may challenge one's own initial beliefs.

The working hypothesis is that news diversity is associated with more liberal attitudes and voting behavior.

This is the proper place to enter some caveats about analysis of media impacts. First, the decoding of media messages by audiences may not parallel the researcher's coding scheme. Second, content analysis at the level of generality employed here is bound to exhibit measurement error. For example, newspapers could vary quite widely in the substantive concerns of their editorials and still earn similar scores on the editorial liberalism index. One paper might have focused on government waste numerous times and ignored the Russian threat and abortion, while another paper devoted a bit of space to each. They might receive similar liberalism scores but would not truly be issuing identical messages. More refined content analytical indices tapping a number of specific policy topics might have shown different patterns of influence. On the other hand, analyzing enough items to come up with meaningful indices would be a daunting task indeed.

Moreover, the structure of respondents' belief systems might also cause variation in media effects. An individual may consider the Russian

threat the key issue. He or she may be uninterested in other editorial and news messages. A paper that has a low score on editorial liberalism because of its numerous denouncements of welfare and unions might take an occasional dovish stance on negotiating with the U.S.S.R. and actually have a liberal influence on our hypothetical reader. In sum, measurement problems and the complexity of the interaction between media messages and belief systems render any study of media effects on political opinions a difficult one.

On the other hand, the dataset employed here is unique in providing detailed information on attitudes and behavior of a national sample, matched with content data on the newspapers they read. Most tests of media influence are either limited to laboratory experimentation or only employ measures of media exposure, a poor substitute for data on media messages. These data offer the opportunity for an unusually broad exploration of media influence.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Data will be analyzed via linear and logistic regression analysis. An important task is to include independent variables that allow us to control for nonmedia forces that may help to explain variation in liberal-conservative opinions and voting. Another is to devise models that can reveal whether selectivity is operating.

The following variables were included in regression equations to control for forces that might contribute to liberal-conservative public opinion: urban-rural place of residence; age; years of education; family income; sex; race; region; and party identification.¹⁹ The latter is

treated as an interval variable ranging from 0, strong Democrat, through 3, independent, to 6, strong Republican.²⁰ Although subjective identification cannot be a truly continuous variable, the results of the regressions indicate that it is helpful to treat party identification in this fashion, and no harm is done to inference.

Selectivity poses two major problems for drawing inferences about media impacts. First, selectivity can render causal conclusions spurious. Statistical associations that indicate media influence on an individual's opinion may actually reveal that individual's opinions shaping his or her choice of media. Second, selectivity can work unevenly to eliminate media influence among certain audience members but not others. Patterns of resistance to influence will vary with audience predispositions, so analysis must take them into account. But one's measures of predispositions may be closely related to the attitudes upon which media effects are hypothesized.²¹

There are two basic forms of selectivity relevant to the analysis, selective exposure and selective perception. Selective exposure involves reading only material that agrees with your predispositions and refusing to read contrary information. If selective exposure operates, citizens with pre-existing liberal opinions would read the more liberal newspapers, and that would explain any statistical association between editorial liberalism and opinions, not media influence on the attitudes.

One force that reduces the opportunity for selective exposure is economic: most communities have only one newspaper publisher who puts out one or two local papers with one basic editorial slant. There is little opportunity to engage in selective exposure.²² Another is that many

citizens probably do not have the sophistication to measure a newspaper's ideological bias and match it correctly with their own predilections.

Selective perception can operate even if selective exposure does not. In this case, citizens do not select a newspaper on ideological grounds, but interpret its content selectively. They recognize and comprehend information that reinforces their previous beliefs, and derogate, misunderstand, or fail entirely to notice data that might challenge their views.

If selective perception is operating, the impact of editorial liberalism would differ depending on the beliefs of the audience. For liberals, there should be an association of editorial liberalism and opinions; the stands of this group would be reinforced by the media messages. Conservatives would ignore or disbelieve the liberal assertions in editorials; editorial liberalism would have no effect on them. Those who decline to identify with right or left, the moderates, should in theory be free of selective perception. Editorial liberalism should therefore affect their views, all else equal. This reasoning will be assessed empirically below.

One practical reason to employ a measure of news diversity and not to limit the analysis to editorial liberalism is to reduce the selectivity problem. While selectivity may temper or complicate the relationship between editorial liberalism and public opinion, news diversity is not an overt quality of newspapers. It stretches credulity to believe that many readers can even define news diversity let alone conduct an accurate content analysis measuring diversity and then decide which newspaper to read. Thus selective exposure should not be a factor in assessing the

effects of diversity. Selective perception might be: some readers might disregard any components of diverse news that challenge their established beliefs. This possibility is investigated empirically below.

Two other means of compensating for selectivity are employed here. First, a measure of ideological self-identification somewhat related but not identical to those forming the dependent variables is included as an independent variable. This measure is based on responses to a question asking respondents to rate themselves on the liberal-conservative scale, with 1 being most liberal, 4 in the middle, and 7 most conservative. With this measure included, the regression coefficients of newspaper content reflect a control for one aspect of personal ideology particularly important to selectivity. Whatever citizens' actual attitudes may be, how they define themselves should be crucial to their employment of selective exposure. Citizens perceiving themselves as liberal would be more likely to expose themselves selectively to liberal media than those who had liberal beliefs but considered themselves conservatives.

The second strategy is to run regressions separately for each group of ideological and partisan identifiers. If a relationship between editorial liberalism and more liberal attitudes or behavior among self-identified conservatives or Republicans appears, it indicates members of these groups do not screen out messages that reinforce liberalism.

Neither of the two techniques eliminates the simultaneity in the relationship between content and attitudes. But they should provide some margin of confidence that newspaper content may actually shape attitudes, that selectivity is not the only explanation of the statistical impacts revealed in the regressions.

FINDINGS

Impact on Attitudes of the Entire Sample

Table 1 displays results of regression of the five feeling thermometer indices and the policy preference index. The thermometers are coded so that higher scores are more favorable. The higher the policy preference score, the more conservative the responses.

Consider first the initial nine independent variables, which include the standard demographic controls, party identification (where 0 is strong Democrat, 6 strong Republican), and frequency of newspaper reading (included to control for variation in amount of exposure to the newspaper). Unstandardized regression coefficients and associated "t" scores for the independent variables are arrayed from left to right for separate regressions on each of the six dependent variables. The "t" scores are significant at $p \leq .05$ if they exceed 1.96. Each pair of columns represents one regression equation, with the total adjusted R^2 and significance of the regression F score at the bottom.

The impacts of the demographic variables, as well as party identification, are generally as expected. For example, Republican identification (the party i.d. variable is coded so that higher scores signify Republican identifiers) is strongly associated with cooler thermometer ratings on LiberalFT, RadicalFT and PoorFT, and warmer ratings on RepublicanFT and BusinessFT. Republican i.d. is also associated with more conservative responses on the policy preferences index. Urban residents are significantly more liberal on several indices, as are Northerners, whereas wealth is associated with conservatism. These

Table 1

Regressions of 1974 Feeling Thermometer and Policy Preference Indices
Entire Sample

Independent Variables	LiberalFT		RadicalFT		RepubFT		BusinessFT		PoorFT		Policypref	
	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>
Frequency of News- paper Reading	10.2	3.1	3.1	1.1	1.2	.51	-2.5	-1.1	7.8	3.9	-.44	1.4
Party I.D.	-17.6	-18.1	-3.6	-4.5	9.0	12.4	3.3	5.0	-2.4	-4.2	.41	4.4
Urbanized	6.2	1.3	12.3	3.2	-7.2	-2.1	-5.6	-1.8	-1.4	-.52	-.89	-2.0
Nonsouth-South	24.9	5.0	13.0	3.2	-11.9	-3.2	-12.3	-3.7	17.2	5.9	-1.2	-2.5
Male Sex	-11.5	-2.8	-4.4	-1.3	-9.5	-3.1	-5.7	-2.1	-7.6	-3.2	1.5	3.9
White Race	-36.9	-5.8	-75.0	-14.3	14.6	3.1	-19.7	-4.5	-45.0	-11.9	5.2	8.5
Age	-.09	-.73	-.69	-6.7	.18	1.9	.61	7.1	-.11	-1.4	.06	4.8
Income	-2.8	-5.6	-3.9	-9.5	.10	.28	2.0	6.0	-.70	-2.4	.26	5.4
Education	-2.0	-2.4	6.4	9.1	.13	.21	-3.0	5.2	.78	1.5	-.43	-5.4
Editorial Liberalism	2.2	3.4	.46	.85	.18	.37	-.23	.51	.39	1.0	-.08	-1.2
News Diversity	.09	.26	.84	3.1	-1.2	-4.8	-.72	-3.2	.24	1.2	-.08	-2.5
Ideological Self-I.D.	-3.8	-4.0	-3.9	-4.9	1.7	2.4	5.8	8.9	-2.0	-3.6	2.6	17.6
Adjusted R ²	.37		.37		.19		.24		.21		.53	
F Significance (N = 954)	<.0001		<.0001		<.0001		<.0001		<.0001		<.0001 (N = 776)	

Explanation of coding of variables:

Frequency of Newspaper Reading: 1 = least; 15 = most.

Party I.D.: Seven-point scale, 0 = strong Democrat; 3 = Independent; 6 = Strong Republican.

Urbanized: 1 = urban, suburban; 0 = rural.

Nonsouth-South: 1 = North; 0 = South.

Male Sex: 1 = male; 0 = female.

White Race: 1 = white; 0 = nonwhite.

Age: In years.

Income: In thousands (see note 19 in text).

Education: In years.

Editorial Liberalism: See text.

News Diversity: See text.

Ideological Self-I.D.: 1 = most liberal; 7 = most conservative.

Policy Preference Index: 6 = most liberal; 42 = most conservative.

expectable relationships bolster confidence in the validity of the feeling thermometer and policy preferences indices.

Turning now to editorial liberalism, the more editorially liberal a citizen's paper, the more likely he or she was to respond favorably on the LiberalFT index. The relationship, significant at .0004, indicates that editorial stands influenced feelings in 1974 toward some of the chief leaders and groups associated with the welfare state: Hubert Humphrey, Edward Kennedy, Democrats, unions, and liberals. If this was so, we might expect significant impacts on voting for Democrats, an expectation that will be confirmed shortly. For the sample as a whole, editorial liberalism affects no other attitude index significantly.

The impacts of news diversity are more significant, and consistently in the liberal direction. The more diversity in front-page news, the more likely readers were to be warmer toward radicals and cooler toward Republicans and business; and the less conservative their policy preferences. The mechanism by which diverse news may encourage more liberal attitudes remains to be specified precisely. Nevertheless, the findings support the significance which communications policy makers tend to attribute to diversity: it does affect public opinion, at least as operationalized here.

The inclusion of ideological self-identification as an independent variable in the regressions was intended to act as a control for selectivity. That the two measures of newspaper messages showed significant associations with attitudes even holding self-identification constant provides one indication that selectivity does not explain those relationships.²³

Impacts on Self-Identified Liberals, Moderates, and Conservatives

More evidence on selectivity can be obtained by repeating the regressions separately for each of the three groups of ideological identifiers. In order to focus on the variables of specific interest and eliminate clutter, Table 2 displays only the newspaper content coefficients. The results indicate that editorial liberalism affects some opinions of both self-labeled liberals and conservatives, but not of middle-of-the-roaders. This is somewhat surprising, since one might expect those respondents to be least likely to indulge in selectivity. One explanation may be that citizens who call themselves moderates do not respond to ideological cues, either because of failure to comprehend them or distaste. As a result, strangely enough, moderates may be the most "selective" of the three groups in the sense that they are resistant to influence.

For those occupying the left side of the spectrum, editorial liberalism is associated with more favorable attitudes toward radicals and with less conservative policy preferences. For those on the right, editorial liberalism increases warmth on the LiberalFT index. That conservatives are affected by editorial liberalism is useful evidence that selective exposure or perception does not necessarily block out media influence. In addition, the absence of significant negative relationships between editorial liberalism and the beliefs of conservatives indicates that a "boomerang" effect (i.e., strengthening of conservatism) is not occurring.

News diversity also shows several significant relationships, in all cases promoting more liberal beliefs. Among both liberals and

Table 2

Impact of Newspaper Content, Controlling for Ideological Self-Identification*

Newspaper Content	LiberalFT		RadicalFT		RepubFT		BusinessFT		PoorFT		Policypref	
	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>
1. Liberal Identifiers												
Editorial Liberalism	1.34	1.0	4.1	3.3	-1.5	-1.4	-.33	-.32	-.93	-1.0	-.41	-2.6
News Diversity	-.13	-.22	.38	.69	-1.0	-2.1	-1.3	-2.9	-.06	-.16	-.01	-.10
2. Moderate Identifiers												
Editorial Liberalism	-.78	-.65	-.41	-.39	-.35	.38	.62	.78	.54	.76	.11	1.0
News Diversity	.96	1.6	.74	1.4	-.81	-1.7	-.08	-.19	.24	.68	-.17	-3.2
3. Conservative Identifiers												
Editorial Liberalism	3.5	2.8	.14	.16	.49	.56	.01	.01	1.2	1.6	-.05	-.53
News Diversity	-.65	-1.1	.93	2.2	-1.2	-3.0	-.86	-2.4	.29	.82	.04	.81

*All other independent variables same as in Table 1.

conservatives, diversity led to lower esteem of Republicans and business. Here again is evidence that selectivity does not necessarily prevent media impacts on attitudes toward ideologically charged attitude objects. The relationship between diverse news and cooler feelings on Republican and BusinessFT even among self-styled conservatives is further indication that selectivity does not universally screen out media influence. Indeed, news diversity influences the two dimensions of welfare state liberalism (of the five measured here) toward which conservatives' feelings should be most positive.

Variation in newspaper effects across the different dimensions of what I have called welfare state liberalism indicates that selectivity diminishes or eliminates media influence on some aspects of belief systems but not others. In addition, the perceptual screen may be more or less permeable among different groups of citizens. Therefore, in order to develop a general theory of media impacts on public opinion, one would have to probe a complex matrix of groups and attitudes. Until such a project is completed, results of research that denies media impacts based on study of only a single attitudinal dimension or narrow subgroup of the population must be interpreted cautiously.

Impacts on Party Identifiers

Regressions of the six attitude measures were performed for Democrats, independents, and Republicans separately. Table 3 presents the results. Editorial liberalism and news diversity appear to affect Democrats the most, Republicans the least, with moderates in the middle. These findings may indicate that selective perception is operating, as Republican identifiers screen out most messages that might disturb their

Table 3
Impact of Newspaper Content, Controlling for Party Identification*

Newspaper Content	LiberalFT		RadicalFT		RepubFT		BusinessFT		PoorFT		Policypref	
	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>
1. Democrats												
Editorial												
Liberalism	3.27	3.7	1.8	2.2	-.10	-.13	-.11	-.17	.96	1.7	-.09	-.99
News Diversity	.14	.32	1.1	2.7	-1.0	-2.6	-1.1	-3.4	.16	.59	-.13	-3.0
2. Independents												
Editorial												
Liberalism	.55	.21	-3.5	-1.9	1.1	.66	-.02	-.01	-2.1	-1.6	-.31	-1.5
News Diversity	1.7	1.3	2.0	2.1	-2.5	-2.9	.13	.16	-1.4	-2.1	-.09	-.82
3. Republicans												
Editorial												
Liberalism	1.19	.97	-.78	-.91	.62	.77	.13	.20	.58	.85	.07	.75
News Diversity	-.12	-.20	.42	.95	-1.1	-2.5	.07	.20	.90	2.6	-.01	-.24

*All other variables same as in Table 1.

previous beliefs. News diversity does affect even Republicans, though, making them less positive on RepublicanFT and more positive on PoorFT.

The results raise the possibility that selectivity toward editorial stands is shaped less by ideological self-identification than partisanship. On the other hand, the positive impact of editorial liberalism on Republicans' evaluations of Jimmy Carter, reported below, suggests Republicans do not screen out all conflicting editorial messages. More research on this point is needed.

Impacts on Evaluation of Carter and on Voting Behavior

The 1974-76 panel contained a feeling thermometer rating for Jimmy Carter and also presidential voting in 1976. This section offers a logistic regression analysis of the Carter vote and a linear regression probe of Carter's rating. These analyses provide an opportunity for further validation of the media impact findings.

Table 4 displays results of a regression using largely the same independent variables employed in Table 1. One additional variable, rating of economic performance and prospects, is included because of the likelihood of its affecting candidate evaluations and voting behavior.²⁴ Rather than employing ideological self-identification as an explanatory variable, the policy preferences index (previously a dependent variable) is used. The assumption is that actual policy preferences are more likely to affect evaluations of candidates than ideological self-labeling. The first dependent variable, Carter feeling thermometer, runs from 0 to 97 (ratings of 98, 99, and 100 are coded at 97). Since the test is of impacts of 1974 content on 1976 attitude, the assumption is that individuals have been exposed to similar messages over the two years:

Table 4
Regression of Carter Feeling Thermometer Rating in 1976

Independent Variables	Full Sample		Democrats		Republicans	
	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>
Frequency of Newspaper Reading	.78	.48	1.3	-.58	1.3	.40
Party I.D.	-3.5	-7.3	--	--	--	--
Urbanized	-1.4	-.64	-2.6	-.88	-1.4	-.35
Nonsouth-South	-2.8	-1.1	-8.3	-2.5	9.6	1.8
Male Sex	-.20	-.10	.91	.34	3.9	.99
White Race	-2.1	-.58	1.2	.29	-11.9	-.79
Age	-.08	-1.2	-.10	-1.1	-.04	-.29
Income	-.28	-1.0	-2.0	-3.6	-.02	-.04
Education	-1.7	-4.1	-.48	-1.3	-1.9	-2.4
Editorial Liberalism	1.2	3.5	.82	1.8	1.9	2.99
News Diversity	-.29	-1.7	-.16	-.74	-.29	-.90
Policy Preferences Index	-.71	-4.2	-.68	-3.4	-1.3	-3.4
Rating of Economic Performance and Prospects	-1.6	-2.8	-.35	-.47	-1.4	-1.2
Adjusted R ²	.26		.09		.14	
F Significance	<.0001		<.001		<.0001	

Explanation of coding of additional variables:

Rating of Economic Performance and Prospects: 1 = least optimistic; 4 = most optimistic.

Policy Preferences Index: 6 = least conservative, 42 = most.

they have not changed newspapers, and the paper has not changed its news or editorial practices.

Looking first at the regression for the full sample, editorial liberalism significantly boosts the Carter rating. The association is quite strong. News diversity does not significantly affect the Carter rating. Separate regressions for Democrats and Republicans indicate that GOP identifiers are the ones whose feelings toward Carter are most influenced by editorial liberalism. The regression coefficient of 1.9 means that for every percentage point of editorial liberalism, Republicans' ratings of Carter moved 1.9 degrees warmer. This relationship again indicates that the walls of selectivity can be breached, for Republicans might have been expected to be impervious to messages that enhance feelings toward the opponent of an incumbent GOP president.

Table 5 displays results of logistic regression of reported vote in 1976 (Carter = 1, Ford = 0). Not surprisingly, for the sample as a whole, the strongest impact is that of party identification. Rating of the economy is also significant; respondents with positive predictions for the economy tended less to vote for Carter.

Most important, editorial liberalism was related significantly to voting for Carter. Note that editorial liberalism was in fact more strongly related to the Carter vote than urbanization, age, education, income, sex, race, and region of residence--all classic demographic indicators. Looking at Republicans and Democrats separately,²⁵ editorial liberalism significantly increased the probability of voting for Carter among Democrats, but not Republicans.²⁶ News diversity did not significantly affect voting.

Table 5

Presidential Vote Choice in 1976
Logistic Regression

	Entire Sample		Democrats		Republicans	
	Reg. Coeff.	Coeff./S.E.	Reg. Coeff.	Coeff./S.E.	Reg. Coeff.	Coeff./S.E.
Frequency of Newspaper Reading	-.44	-2.8	-.70	-2.5	-.15	-.44
Party I.D.	-.32	-6.4	-.30	-1.97	-.72	-7.0
Urbanized	-.11	-.58	-.21	-.79	.54	1.05
Nonsouth-South	-.12	-.54	-.13	-.40	-.15	-.25
Male Sex	.37	2.1	.70	2.8	-.70	-1.5
White Race	-.30	-.78	-.20	-.45	.00	.00
Age	-.00	-.31	.00	.06	-.00	-.18
Income	-.03	-1.2	-.06	-1.65	-.03	-.50
Education	-.03	-.99	-.03	-.48	-.03	-.29
Editorial Liberalism	.06	2.2	.09	2.2	.11	1.4
News Diversity	-.00	-.32	.01	.57	-.06	-1.4
Policy Preferences Index	-.04	-2.8	-.04	-1.93	-.01	-.26
Rating of Economic Performance and Prospects	-.15	-3.3	-.19	-2.7	-.26	-2.1

Explanation of coding of additional variable:

Presidential Vote: 1 = Carter; 0 = Ford.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The results indicate that newspaper messages have significant impacts on political attitudes relevant to welfare state liberalism. In a choice between candidates representing standard Republican conservatism and moderate Democratic liberalism, newspaper messages also increased voting for Carter. Although causality cannot be definitively established, there is reason for confidence that the findings are not traceable to citizens selectively reading only papers that agree with their predispositions. In fact, evidence for the existence of selectivity in audience processing of newspaper messages was not strong.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that most editorial pages languish unread, the findings indicate that editorial messages have significant impacts. Those who do read them may be heavily influenced, and even occasional readers may find clarifying facts and analytical reasoning that are often missing on the formulaic "objective" news pages. In addition, editorial judgments may be translated into subtle news biases (e.g., in story placement and repetition). News diversity also seems to have a significant influence on many readers. In all cases, diversity was conducive to more liberal attitudes.

The opinion and voting impacts demonstrated here indicate that newspaper content affects election outcomes and thus the direction of public policy. Conservative or liberal newspapers, and papers that feature more or less diversity in their news coverage, may well be able to sway public opinion and voting behavior.

On the basis of this study, it is impossible to offer a general conclusion about the role media play in shaping policy outcomes in issues

involving government activism, redistribution, and other aspects of the liberal-conservative debate. One would need to collect data on newspaper reporting across a wide range of issues and demonstrate the opinion and behavior impacts more definitively and comprehensively than was possible here. But the results of this study certainly support the conclusion that research toward that end would illuminate an important, and still poorly understood, force in shaping public policy.

Notes

¹The other major explanation for low media impacts is miscomprehension. See MacKuen (1984). Many in the audience are alleged not to grasp the meaning of messages, because of lack of intelligence, concentration, interest, background information, and the like. The miscomprehension assumption is beyond the scope of this paper. In demonstrating significant media impacts, however, the findings of this paper indicate that miscomprehension does not eliminate media influence. Further, analysis not shown here reveals no systematic differences in strength of media impacts, e.g., on those of high and low educational attainment.

²See Converse and Markus (1979). This assertion is the subject of a long-running controversy in the political science literature.

³Perhaps this should not be surprising, given the substantial differences between the way liberals appear to conceptualize liberalism and conservatives, conservatism. Adherents in the mass public may not be arrayed on different ends of one continuum but on at least two distinct dimensions, according to Conover and Feldman (1981).

⁴The surveys are described in University of Michigan (1979). The data used in this study were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, after being collected by the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies. Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Consortium bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

In forming the attitude indices all feeling thermometer items were first classified on their face as being relevant or not to welfare state

liberalism. Those chosen as relevant were subject to varimax factor analysis. Five factors emerged. Simple additive attitude indices were created by adding together scores on all feeling thermometer responses loading above .40 on a factor. In two cases, responses loaded by over .40 on two factors. Items were included with the factor indices on which they loaded the highest.

⁵Policemen and Wallace loaded negatively on their respective factors and were subtracted from the sum of the other items in forming the indices.

⁶Variables 2265, 2273, 2281, 2288, 2296, 2302, and 2305 in the 1974 National Election Series Codebook.

⁷In addition, the use of panel data on a previously obscure candidate allows a relatively pure test of the impact of issues attitude and party identification on candidate evaluations. As has been pointed out by many others, any correlation between the former two and the latter may be caused by modification of one's issue opinions to suit one's candidate desires. This phenomenon means inferences of issue or partisan voting based on single year, cross-sectional surveys may be misleading. The ideology and party i.d. indices employed here are from 1974, the candidate evaluation from 1976.

⁸The Carter feeling thermometer was variable 3298; the presidential vote, variable 3665.

⁹Note that analysts of public opinion and voting behavior have not, in the main, found much evidence to back up the notion of a conservative shift or conservative mood. See Entman and Paletz (1980); cf. Kelley (1983).

¹⁰For example, see Lichter and Rothman (1981).

¹¹For a discussion of why the very notion of "public mood" is probably a distortion, see Entman and Paletz (1980). A related discussion of how policy "mandates" are difficult to infer from election results can be found in Kelley (1983).

¹²The study is described in University of Michigan (1978).

¹³Also excluded from analysis here are those who read newspapers that were not included in the content analysis sample. The demographics of the final reader subsample closely parallel those of the 1974 national cross section as a whole. Not surprisingly, the reader sample is more highly educated. Otherwise there are no significant differences; see Entman (1984).

Regression analyses similar to those reported in Tables 1 and 2 were conducted using the entire weighted 1974 cross-section survey (N = 2523) and substituting the value 0 for the newspaper content indices for nonreaders and the mean scores on these two indices for readers of papers not sampled. The results generally parallel those reported in the text; in no case would any substantive conclusion change.

¹⁴The index was formed from answers to variables 2050, 2051, and 2056. These were questions about frequency of reading news of national politics, state and local politics, and editorials and opinion columns. The Cronbach's alpha measure for this scale indicated high reliability.

¹⁵In order to conserve space I do not provide details on index formation. The index was constructed using Variables 21 and 28. See University of Michigan (1978).

¹⁶This measure was constructed from Variables 27 and 34. See University of Michigan (1978).

¹⁷E.g., over deregulation of broadcast television and eliminating the Fairness Doctrine: Rowan (1984).

¹⁸There is in fact a slight correlation between the index of diversity and the measures of editorial liberalism: .14.

¹⁹Urban-rural was a dummy variable scored 1 if urban/suburban, 0 if rural; sex was scored 1 if male, 0 if female; region 0 if South, 1 otherwise; race 1 if white, 0 if nonwhite. Age and education were interval variables measured in number of years. Income (Variable 2549) was coded in 18 categories. For the first 13 categories, each unit of 1 represents \$1000. After that, category size varies. At the upper end of the income distribution some measurement error is likely, but not enough to merit turning the measure into a series of dummy variables, in my view.

²⁰The measure is Variable 2204.

²¹Party identification is a case in point. It might be argued that party orientations partly determine which newspapers citizens read or believe. Simultaneously, media messages help to shape party identification. Certainly if media affect policy and candidate preferences and attitudes toward key groups and interests, one would expect an impact on partisanship. This point highlights the complexity of media-opinion interrelationships. A comprehensive model would probably have to be nonrecursive and include multiple, intricate paths of influence and feedback. Such a model is beyond the scope of this paper. Including partisanship as a control variable should not bias the results toward confirming of the hypothesis that media have significant effects on

liberal-conservative opinions. If anything, the bias would be the opposite, since the media influence on partisanship is unmeasured. In addition, regression results are presented for each party separately.

²²In monopoly newspaper communities, the only ways to engage in selective exposure would be to read a nationally or regionally distributed paper, or to refuse to read a paper at all. In a separate analysis not shown, there is little evidence of such selectivity. Regressions were run for those members of the sample living in communities served by monopoly newspapers and for residents of cities with newspaper competition. If selective exposure (or perception) were occurring, we would expect relationships between newspaper content and attitudes to be stronger in areas with competitive papers to choose from. In fact, the strength of the relationships did not vary according to the competitiveness of the newspaper market.

²³Only 1013 of the 1292 respondents placed themselves on the left-right continuum. Fully 216 said they had not thought much about where they stood, and 45 said they did not know; 18 were coded as "not ascertained." Of course these respondents are excluded from the regressions in Table 1. By eliminating the self-identification variable from the regressions, a less politically sophisticated but larger sample of respondents is created. Below I show the regression coefficients for editorial liberalism and news diversity resulting from regressions of the five feeling thermometer indices on the same set of independent variables as in Table 1, except for ideological self-placement. The weighted "N's" run around 1100 for this series of regressions.

Dependent Variable	Editorial Liberalism		News Diversity	
	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t</u>
LiberalFT	2.4	3.5	.10	.31
RadicalFT	.59	1.1	.86	3.10
RepublicanFT	.12	.24	-1.2	-4.86
BusinessFT	-.43	-.91	-.75	-3.21
PoorFT	.46	1.17	.25	1.25

As can be seen, the results are essentially the same as shown in Table 1.

²⁴The variable is an additive index of responses to variables 3137-3140, asking respondents in 1976 whether they personally are better or worse off now than a year ago and whether they expect to be better or worse off a year hence; and similar ratings of business conditions in the country as a whole. Studies documenting the way ratings of the economy strongly influence voting behavior are legion. See, e.g., Kinder and Kiewit (1979).

²⁵There was an insufficient number of independents to provide valid logistic regression results.

²⁶A standard linear regression with the same dummy dependent variable of Carter vote revealed very similar results. For the sample as a whole, editorial liberalism showed a regression coefficient of .021; and a t score of 3.77, significant at .0002. For Democrats, the coefficient was .028 and a t of 3.29, significant at .0012. For Republicans, the linear regression, unlike the logistic regression, yielded a significant coefficient for editorial liberalism: .019, a t of 2.3, significant at .0227.

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