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Does the US Media Have a Liberal Bias

Abstract

In *Left Turn: How Liberal Bias Distorts The American Mind*, Tim Groseclose argues that media effects play a crucial role in American politics. His case rests on three arguments: (1) that journalists tend overwhelmingly to be liberal rather than conservative; (2) that their innate political bias slants their views in empirically measurable ways; and (3) that this bias fundamentally shapes American politics, by bringing US citizens further to the left than they would naturally be. According to Groseclose, in a world where media bias did not exist, American citizens would on average hold views close to those of Ben Stein or Bill O'Reilly. In such a world, John McCain would have defeated Barack Obama by a popular vote margin of 56%—42% in the 2008 presidential election.

In making these claims, Groseclose draws on his own research, and on recent media scholarship by both political scientists and economists, making the broader claim that peer-reviewed social science—which seeks to deal with problems such as endogeneity and selection bias—should be the starting point for public arguments about the role of the media. His book, then, is clearly an effort to bring social scientific arguments into mainstream debates. Groseclose makes no secret of his conservative political leanings—but recent books from left-leaning political scientists such as Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson are equally unapologetic. It is at least plausible that political scientists' typical unwillingness to engage directly in political arguments has weakened the discipline's capacity for public engagement.

In this symposium a diverse group of contributors have been invited to engage with Groseclose's arguments in ways that bring together specific empirical and/or theoretical points and arguments aimed at the broader “political science public sphere” that *Perspectives on Politics* seeks to nurture. Contributors were asked to consider these five questions: (1): How do we best measure media effects? (2): If media bias exists, what are its plausible sources? (3): Can one use work on media effects to determine what people's views would be in the absence of such bias? (4): Do you agree that American politics is insufficiently representative, and if so what do you consider the primary sources of this problem? (5): What kinds of political and/or media institutions or practices might enhance democratic discourse?—Henry Farrell, Associate Editor

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In many ways the challenge for those studying media bias is similar to that confronting political reporters. In order to satisfy the demands of professions that aspire to dispassionate inquiry, one must sidestep the confirmation bias. With this insidious human tendency comes the likelihood that we will see the media as tilted against our own ideology, the “hostile media effect,”¹ a phenomenon whose hold on us increases with our level of involvement with the topic.² Ironically, if Professor Groseclose’s scholarship on media bias succeeds at bypassing his own biases, that feat opens the possibility that similarly motivated reporters could also sequester their liberal or conservative leanings. Alternatively, if, despite the luxury of months or years rather than minutes to mull content, a dedicated scholar cannot bolt the door on his biases, then what hope can we have for deadline-driven reporters?

Because Groseclose’s conclusions about media coverage of the debate over the Partial Birth Abortion Act of 2003 differ from those published by Joseph Cappella’s and myself in *Echo Chamber* (2008), I will focus on the chapter of *Left Turn* that is devoted to the topic: “The Language of Journalists and the Special Case of Partial-Birth Abortion.” Our disagreement is sharp. Where Groseclose argues that liberals won “the battle over the language about abortion” (p. 161), we contend that “The naturalized use of this label [partial birth abortion] constitutes a rhetorical victory for those opposing the method this term so graphically represents”³ After noting that our conclusions follow from differently focused research questions, I will argue both that the operation of journalistic norms could account for some of the language patterns Groseclose sees as evidence of liberal bias and suggest that, had his search for evidence been more comprehensive, he might have softened his indictment of the Associated Press’s reporting on the passage of the Partial Birth Abortion Act.

Because Groseclose believes that an impartial reporter would call the procedure “partial birth abortion,” he assessed media bias by asking whether reporters used those specific words alone or betrayed their liberal stripes by adding phrases such as “what opponents call partial-birth abortion.” By contrast, we divided the linguistic uses into any variant of “partial birth abortion” and any version of “dilation and extraction,” the descriptor found in medical textbooks and preferred by those opposing the bill. From his analysis of the first story on the Senate bill in 21 outlets, Groseclose concludes that “the media overwhelm-

ingly adopted the language of the (minority) opponents of the bill—not that of the (majority) proponents” (p. 165). But as the Senate floor debate on October 21, 2003 indicates, to the extent that they could do so, those opposing the bill avoided the words “partial birth abortion” except to argue, as Senator Barbara Boxer did, that “it is a made-up term to inflame passions”⁴ and instead employed the medical terminology “D and X” or “intact D and X.” So if one wants to know whether the media adopted the language of opponents or proponents, it might be wise to ask not simply about variants of “partial birth abortion” but about whether reporters also employed the “D and X” language and, if so, how.

Because of our dissimilar frames, what Groseclose saw as liberal media bias (i.e., “what opponents call . . .”), we interpreted as its opposite. For us, reportorial use of the evocative words “partial birth abortion,” however qualified, even in the presence of the alternative terminology, advantaged proponents of the bill. Put simply, we assumed that adding a qualifier such as “what critics call” would not neutralize the phrase’s power to evoke a visceral response favorable to the bill.

Our conclusions differ for a second reason. While Groseclose analyzed “the first story that the outlet reported about the Senate bill” (p. 164), we examined the accounts of its passage. While he finds no use of the unadorned “partial birth abortion” language on the *Today Show* or on CBS (p. 164), we found CBS’s Charles Osgood observing, “Doctors call it dilation and extraction, more commonly known as partial birth abortion” (Oct 22, 2003); Katie Couric on NBC’s *Today Show* stating that “the same day the Senate passes a bill banning partial birth abortions” (October 22, 2003); and “after earlier tagging the phrase with ‘as they say partial birth,’ on the same show, Tim Russert not-[ing], ‘Of all of the debates the Republicans could have on this issue of abortion this is the one they want to have because most Americans agree that they should—they should ban late term or partial birth abortions.’”⁵ Since Groseclose found no uses of “the plain language term” in the first story on the subject in these outlets, it would seem that conservatives gained linguistic ground in these outlets by the time the bill passed.

Whether our framing better captures the way humans process language or not, it does not explain why journalists appended phrases such as “what critics call” to “partial birth abortion.” Groseclose’s explanation is liberal media bias. Mine is the existence of professional “objectivity” norms that dictate that in technical matters reporters use language within the relevant field, in this case medicine, and, when confronted with the need to adopt a contested label or one with an unstable history, attribute it to its users.

To make this case, let me posit that it would be reasonable in the fall of 2003 for journalists to assume that “partial birth abortion” was both a contested term and not

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accepted medical language. Groseclose acknowledges this possibility when he writes that “one reason they [journalists] might not have called the procedure ‘partial birth abortion’ is that, as . . . opponents of the act noted, ‘there is no such term in medicine as ‘partial-birth abortion (163).’” Au contraire, says *Left Turn*. “[P]artial-birth abortion’ is used, at least occasionally, as a medical term (163).” A footnote directs one to a single source: <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/partial+birth+abortion> (p. 272). There one finds: “Partial birth abortion, medically known as intact dilation and extraction (IDX), is a method of late-term abortion that ends a pregnancy and results in the death and intact removal of a fetus from the uterus.” In short, a sentence that supports Senator Boxer’s view. Nor did the jurist who wrote the majority opinion upholding the Act’s constitutionality prefer the label “partial birth abortion.” Instead in *Gonzales v. Carhart* 550 U.S. 124 (2007), Justice Anthony Kennedy identifies “the abortion procedure that was the impetus for the numerous bans on ‘partial-birth abortion,’ ” including the Act as “a variation of this standard D&E” and concludes that “for discussion purposes this D&E variation will be referred to as intact D&E.” In the process he is embracing the same norm that I see guiding journalists toward medical terminology wherever practical.

The possibility noted earlier that, in at least some extemporaneous broadcast media reports, there was an across-time shift toward what Groseclose calls “the plain-language term” (p. 164) has implications for both my norm-based alternative and for his hypothesis about intransigent liberal bias. My hypothesis would forecast that after contested non-medical language is legitimized by law and the law’s constitutionality upheld, journalists would begin to drop the qualifiers.

The fact that at the time of the debate the language in question had an unstable history-in-use was another norm-based reason for attributing it to its champions rather than permitting it to stand on its own. Indeed a goal of the legislation was circumscribing the definition of the procedure to overcome the Supreme Court’s *Stenberg v. Carhart*, 530 U.S. 914 (2000) concern that the earlier Nebraska act’s definition failed to let doctors clearly know what it banned and permitted. In other words, the definition bodied in the 2003 legislation differed from that in the Nebraska act. So where Groseclose sees liberal bias, I see journalists following norms that guided them to qualify non-medical language whose referent had been in flux. (In passing, let me note that since “partial birth abortion” was coined by pro-life conservatives seeking to outlaw the procedure, crediting the words to “opponents of the procedure” also could be read as a nod to its ancestry.)

Having offered a norm-based alternative explanation, let me ask whether Groseclose’s attack on two October 22, 2003 Associated Press articles about passage of the act fairly reflects that wire service’s work on that day. “Note

that instead of the simple phrase ‘partial-birth abortion’ the AP writers used the more unwieldy ‘what critics call partial birth abortion,’” says Groseclose of the two stories. “Even when journalists don’t have an alternative phrase, they still won’t deign to use the language of conservatives” (p. 162). By quoting a statement by FOX’s Brit Hume, Groseclose suggests the kind of reporting he’d like to see:

From some of the wording in news accounts of yesterday’s Senate vote on abortion, you might not have known it was about banning a procedure in which a live fetus is partially pulled from the womb before its skull is punctured and brains sucked out. This is commonly referred to as “partial birth abortion” (p. 162).

Hence, I would assume that Groseclose would applaud the headline “Partial Birth Abortion Ban Heads to President, Certain Legal Challenge” and cheer the statement within the article bearing that title that read:

The new bill defines partial birth abortion as delivery of a fetus “until, in the case of a headfirst presentation, the entire fetal head is outside the body of the mother, or, in the case of the breech presentation, any part of the fetal trunk past the navel is outside the body of the mother for the purpose of performing an overt act that the person knows will kill the partially delivered living fetus.”

As a Nexis Lexis search confirms, the AP published this article the same day as the two Groseclose critiques (Abrams, Jim. 2003. “Partial Birth Abortion Ban Heads to President, Certain Legal Challenge.” Associated Press, October 22: BC cycle). In my judgment, his case would have been strengthened had he acknowledged the existence of the third article and explained why its headline and descriptive detail do not constitute an exception to his AP-based conclusion that “even when journalists don’t have an alternative phrase, they still won’t deign to use the language of conservatives (p. 162).”

None of this means that I reject the case for the existence of ideological bias in press accounts of the 2003 act. After all, in *Echo Chamber* Cappella and I argued that:

Fox and the mainstream differed in the evocative detail they used in describing the procedure and in the language carrying the description. . . . Fox News correspondent Major Garrett . . . reported . . . : “Partial birth abortion . . . occurs in the second or third trimester. A physician pulls a fetus from the womb by its feet, punctures the base of the skull and inserts a tube into the wound. The brains are then sucked out and the skull collapses”. . . . [I]n the Fox account . . . a *physician* pulls from the womb, punctures, inserts a tube. [By contrast] in the ABC description by reporter Linda Douglas (October 21, 2003) *there is no agent* in the sentence. “The laws would ban a procedure used after the third month of pregnancy that involves partially delivering a fetus and puncturing its skull” (emphasis added). . . . Whereas the Fox *reporter’s* news account contained a high level of descriptive detail, the news accounts of CBS’s *Evening News*, NBC *Evening News*, and the *Today Show* employed a *partisan* characterizing the process. . . . (emphasis added)

Even the mainstream network with the most graphic content did not include the amount of detail offered by Fox’s reporter. And,

interestingly, and consistent with the notion that the networks tilt to the left, in the battle over which side's sound bite was the most graphic, on NBC the advantage went to the Democrats . . . A fragment was included of a statement by Republican Senator Rick Santorum: 'They place a vacuum hose.' By contrast, Senator Barbara Boxer was shown indicting the absence in the bill of an exemption for the health of the mother. 'She could have blood clots, an embolism, a stroke, damage to nearby organs, or paralysis if this particular procedure is not available to her.'⁶

Earlier in *Left Turn*, Professor Groseclose quotes my observation that "another explanation would hold that norms of journalism, including 'objectivity' and 'balance' blunt whatever biases exist" (p. 151). I chose the word "blunt" to mean "weaken" or "reduce the force of," not to mean "eliminate." As Cappella and I suggested in *Echo Chamber*, the biases of both the left and right do still seep through news. I just don't think they did so in some of the places and ways or to the extent that Professor Groseclose claims in the sections of the chapter on which I have focused here.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Vallone, Ross and Lepper 1985; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Gunther and Schmitt, 2004.
- 2 Hansen and Kim 2011.
- 3 Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 180–1.
- 4 Sen. Barbara Boxer, Senate. Congressional Record, October 21, 2003, S12916.
- 5 Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 181.
- 6 Ibid., 181–2.

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