Media Consolidation's Relationship to Voter Turnout In Elections

Marissa Mazzetta

Submitted under the supervision of Adam Saffer to the University Honors Program at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, *summa cum laude* in journalism.

12/12/2022

Abstract

Media consolidation is on the rise especially when it comes to local news. This study aims to find if media consolidation affects citizens' civic engagement, specifically voter turnout in non-presidential and presidential elections. Understanding what factors lead to higher voter turnout can be helpful in creating a more civically engaged country leading to progress that reflects the needs and wants of a more accurate majority. Consumption of local news has been tied to better civic engagement in the past. While media consolidation has been known to diminish the local news environment it has taken control over. Due to these two notions, it could be expected that there would be a connection between media consolidation and voter turnout. Through data analysis of voter turnout data of 24 Texas counties from the years 1990 to 2020 it was found through ANOVA tests that there were no significant changes in voter turnout between elections. These results lead to the belief that media consolidation alone does not have a significant impact on voter turnout. This opens up further understanding into the relationship between journalism and election turnout, and the reasons for fluctuation in voter turnout between elections.

Media Consolidation's Relationship to Voter Turnout In Elections

In 2017, Former President Donald Trump appointed a new chair of the FCC, Ajit Pai, whose main goal was to rid the broadcasting industry of "stale regulations" (Ali, 2020). This included "allowing newspapers and television stations to combine in the same market, loosening the evaluation criteria for broadcast mergers, and eliminating the requirement that stations maintain hard copies of their programming logs for public inspection" (FCC, 2017, as cited in Gulyas & Baines, 2020). Most notably, these changes eliminated the Main Studio Rule, which required a broadcaster to be located within the community of license. This was a severe blow to the FCC's goal of localism, which is defined by the FCC as the belief that local over-the-air broadcasters – radio and television – should serve their communities of license. It also means communicating with the community, being present in the community, using and promoting local talent, and being located in the community (FCC, 2008).

The Main Studio Rule's elimination is part of a drawback of regulations that are allowing for increased media consolidation in America (Doctor, 2017). The regulatory changes have raised important questions for media scholars. For instance, some scholars have looked at the changes in coverage of local stories before and after media consolidation takes place (Blankenship & Vargo, 2021). Additionally, media scholars have studied the effects of news deserts (Abernathy, 2018 & 2020) and the nationalization of politics in news media (Darr, et al., 2018 & 2021). Others who overlap with political science have specifically suggested this might influence political engagement (Rubado & Jennings, 2020; Shaker, 2014).

The topic of this study is examining the potential relationship between election turnout and media consolidation in America. I will be studying media consolidation and exploring

whether there is a relationship with voter turnout during multiple elections. This research will use a journalistic lens to better understand media consolidation and its possible effects.

The term media consolidation can be defined as the concentration of ownership in the media (Kosut & Vargas, 2012). Media consolidation on local news has evolved to a point where some markets are covering the same stories across all channels and ownership is rarely local to the area that is being covered. A report from the Washington Post states that a "number of large holding companies are taking over local TV stations, often more than one in the same market" (Farhi, et.al, 2018). This consolidation of news station ownership that once competed against each other has been done to cut costs (Abernathy, 2020). However, this allows the owner of these stations to have a monopolistic hold over shaping the news agenda (Farhi, et. al, 2018).

With increased media consolidation local news outlets are decreasing, leading to a less informed public (Ardia et al., 2020). My question for this study will focus on if there is a relationship between media consolidation and election turnout, due to the fact that in markets with less local news citizens may be less informed about issues that could lead them to the polls. Studies have shown that a decline in local journalism is tied to a less civilly engaged public (Castillo, 2022). This leads my research to the question of is the decline in local journalism, specifically local broadcast stations brought on by media consolidation, associated with changes in voter turnout?

Preview of Literature Review

Based on the problem described above, this thesis will be drawing on literature from the fields of political communication, media economics, and politics. More specifically, the literature on political communication considering news consumption and political engagement will inform how this study approaches changes in local news coverage and the political engagement seen in

those places. To properly consider changes in local news, it is necessary to address the issue of media consolidations, thus I will be drawing from work in media economics to understand this more fully. Finally, some work from political science, particularly studies looking at civic engagement and news consumption will further inform my research question. The question that I will be focusing on is if there is a relationship between a county's media environment (i.e. consolidation of media ownership, newspapers, etc.) and its connections, if any, to voter turnout.

Media consolidation is becoming more common in the United States (Matsa, 2020). Such consolidation has led to the power of entire markets falling into the hands of very few or even one owner (Martin, 2018). When an entire market is in the hands of one owner, one singular agenda can be set for a market of viewers (Blankenship & Vargo, 2021). With the rise of media consolidation, one conglomerate that has made headlines is Sinclair Broadcast Group. The media giant's website states that they own 185 television stations, are found on 620 channels, and reach 86 markets in the United States. With Sinclair's large reach, scholars have documented how some markets are not getting much if any local coverage from these stations (Hedding, et al., 2019). It was found that when comparing the stories reported by Sinclair-owned stations versus non-Sinclair-owned stations, the Sinclair stations in this study were more likely than non-Sinclair stations to use national sources and commentary, a tendency to sensationalize coverage, or have a national political focus rather than a local focus (Hedding, et al., 2019, p.490). Moreover, this study noted Sinclair's use of must-run stories that allow the company to push forward their agenda to their wide reach of markets. Sinclair is just one example of media consolidation encouraging the nationalization of politics that is being seen in the United States.

This example of Sinclair Broadcast Group ties into the larger issue of media consolidation leading to the nationalization of politics. In the gubernatorial race in Florida, it was

noted by The New York Times that candidate Ron Desantis was able to pull ahead of his opponent based on Donald Trump's endorsement and multiple appearances on Fox News weighing in on national issues rather than local issues (Martin, 2018). With a decline in local issues being covered, less knowledge about local issues is available to the public. Importantly, knowledge about local issues has been found to increase the likelihood that a person will vote in elections (Barthel, et al., 2016). Therefore, it is purpose this thesis to explore whether in Sinclair markets there is any notable change in the voter turnout.

Hypothesis

My research goal will be to study if media consolidation has led to a change in voter turnout for presidential and non-presidential elections. If there is an association between media consolidation and election turnout, these findings could be used to better understand the impacts of changes in policies like the elimination of the Main Studio Rule on civic engagement. According to the Pew Research Center "those who say they always vote in local elections (27% of U.S. adults) display strikingly stronger local news habits than those who do not regularly vote in local elections" (Barthel et.al, 2016, p. 5). This same study explains that 52% of those who regularly consume local news always vote in local elections. To work towards a more active democracy and therefore communities that see more opportunities for progress, local news consumption is thought to be a key aspect.

Current Landscape/Methodology

As of now, the current body of knowledge demonstrates that those with consistent local news consumption are more likely to vote in non-presidential elections, however, I intend to further engage with this topic to fill the gap of what happens to democratic functions when local news, particularly local broadcast stations, are consolidated or taken away completely. In order

to collect data for this study, I will compare voter turnouts for non-presidential and presidential elections over several years in different counties with varying broadcast and local news attributes. The counties will be chosen based on their current local news landscape. For example, it will be necessary to find counties that are in Sinclair's market, in news deserts, or have a strong local news presence to conduct a comparison of voter turnout. The voter turnout in non-presidential and presidential elections across the years before and after media consolidation or news deserts took over will be used.

Impact

The impact of this study will be to add to the already existing body of knowledge with new insight that can be used to work towards more politically informed and active communities. I have chosen to study this topic due to the fact that civic engagement is incredibly important in regard to representing the will of citizens in the United States. Engaged citizens create change so it is of the utmost importance that journalists continue to create an informed public. Overall, I hope to identify patterns that can serve as a guide for the future to allow for appropriate changes in civic engagement.

Literature Review

Information on media consolidation, specifically in local news markets is well-researched (Matsa, 2020; LeBrun, et al., 2022). However, the effects of media consolidation continue to be studied. This study is situated within the context of media consolidation in America and explores whether there is an impact on media consolidation and citizens' civic engagement. I will aim to answer the question: is there a relationship between media consolidation and a change in voter turnout for midterm and presidential elections? More specifically, this study will examine the topics of media consolidation and civic engagement, the decline of local news outlets and the

increase in news deserts, and the nationalization of politics in the United States. To further expand upon my knowledge of media consolidation I will also examine the case of Sinclair Broadcast Group, a prominent media conglomerate. When referring to local news in this study, the Sinclair ownership of a local broadcast station will be considered local news. These topics will be studied as a part of the fields of journalism and political science.

Goals of Study: Local News and Voter Turnout

Media consolidation in this context will refer to the phenomenon of local news outlets being bought up by a small group of large media conglomerates (Kosut & Vargas, 2012). Media consolidation will be examined in terms of the consequences of the declining diversity of voices in the news. In terms of civic engagement, this study will focus on the involvement of citizens in local politics. I will examine if there is a relationship between the decline in local news outlets and election turnout in order to add to the already existing body of knowledge which will be further discussed in my literature review. This study will aim to examine if there are consequences in voter turnout in communities when their local news landscape declines in size and when the nationalization of politics affects the content produced by local news outlets. As media consolidation takes place in communities the literature will serve to examine the question of what changes occur to content in terms of the nationalization of politics after media consolidation takes place. This study will look further into the possibilities of a correlation between changes in local news content and voter turnout for local and state elections.

Civic Engagement and Media Consolidation

The issue at hand is explained in an American City and County article which states "Between 2008 and 2020, the number of local journalists reporting from America's town halls and regional courtrooms fell by more than half" (Castillo, 2022, p.2). With a loss of local

coverage, it was found that scholars directly linked newspaper closures in Seattle and Denver with a decline in civic engagement (Shaker, 2014). Research has shown that local newspapers play an integral role for citizens to learn about local issues and events and engage in community activities (McLeod, et al., 1999; Thompson, 2021).

Correlations between voter turnout in mayoral elections and the number of newsroom employees in an area have been documented. It appears that regardless of whether mayoral races coincide with higher-level races, newspaper staffing levels have roughly the same positive impact on voter turnout (Rubado & Jennings, 2019, p. 1345). This leads to the belief that a stronger local news environment has a relationship to more civic engagement in an area. As local news declines and the proven effect of that decline is less civic engagement, there is reason to believe that election turnout would be negatively impacted by less coverage of local news.

Due to local news outlets declining, media consolidation and news deserts have filled the openings (Abernathy, 2020). When new mediums were introduced, such as TV, radio, and online publications, print publications were no longer a monopoly in providing information to consumers. Due to this financial pressure on traditional media, consolidations and corporate mergers took place. These acquisitions also brought profits to shareholders but decreased the diversity of voices in the media (Hollis, 2018). According to the Pew Research Center, "As of 2016, these five companies owned an estimated 37% of all full-power local TV stations in the country" (Matsa, para. 4, 2017). In addition to the TV news industry being in the hands of very few, the newspaper business is also facing severe media consolidation. In Abernathy's (2018) report, it was found that:

> The top 25 companies that own the most newspapers–control the fate of nearly one-third of all papers, up from 20 percent in 2004. This included two-thirds of all dailies – 812 –

> and almost a fourth of all weeklies –1,376. The largest company, New Media/GateHouse, owns 451 newspapers in 34 states. (p. 30)

This type of media conglomeration has put the power of distributing stories to households across America in the hands of very few (Van Gent, 2019).

The alternative option for when locally owned news outlets close is the area becoming a news desert. A news desert is defined as "a community, either rural or urban, where residents have very limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feed democracy at the grassroots level" (Abernathy, 2020, p. 18). Both of these options lead to less truly local coverage for the people in that specific community. This means fewer stories about local issues, candidates, and elections which leads to voters turning to national rhetoric in order to make decisions on local issues (Darr et al., 2018).

Some studies have examined other factors for a decrease in voter turnout such as a higher educational background increasing the likelihood a United States citizen would vote (Dassonneville et al., 2017). Other factors that have been noted to have an effect on voter turnout include demographics such as race, gender and education levels (Igielnik, 2020) and what issues are most affected by the results of the election such as the economy or abortion (Schaffer & Van Green, 2022). These alternative factors mentioned in the already existing body of knowledge do not negate the hypothesis of this study. There is not simply one factor that has led to lower voter turnout in local and state elections, which is why this study will work to fill in the gap in this field of research by determining if news, specifically the consolidation of broadcast stations, does have a relationship with voter turnout in presidential and midterm elections.

Sinclair Broadcast Group

Local stories are often ignored by the station's national owners in favor of more national content (Ali, 2017). As mentioned in a New York Times article a paper that had been local and independent was bought by Sinclair Broadcasting. Pressing local stories like a water line breaking caused residents to boil their water and it was no longer covered. When local happenings were covered it was not by a local journalist that knew the community, it was by a journalist from out of state. These articles also had another major difference compared to life before the Sinclair Broadcasting Group acquisition: there was a right-wing slant to many of the stories (Alba & Nicas, 2020, p. 7). This trend has been noted in a study of six Sinclair TV station websites which shows how resources have been stripped from Sinclair newsrooms. Decreased resources prove to be detrimental to the newsgathering process, as data shows that when Sinclair bought these specific news stations, the overall story output on their websites declined significantly" (Blankenship et al, 2021, p. 11).

In another article, research shows that Sinclair-owned TV news stations had 25% more national news coverage including national politics and terrorism than other stations (Levendusky, 2022). This national news coverage not only polarizes the nation even more in a political sense but also takes air time away from local stories. Additionally, Sinclair's sources and language used are proof of a right-wing slant to these "local stations" which were originally supposed to serve as non-political agents giving information to the public. This study's findings show that while this slant is unlikely to completely change a person's political party identification, there was evidence that indicated this slanted coverage could change if they support or approve of a specific candidate based on the coverage they are seeing of them. Trends show that less educated and poorer voters are more likely to watch local news, meaning these are the groups that need

more locally owned news and are likely from other research to be the ones living in news deserts and therefore likely to "get saved" by Sinclair. It was found that there is no effect on down-ballot votes from Sinclair-owned areas—this is due to the fact that Sinclair is not covering these politicians, they cannot possibly run "must-run" segments on every politician, meaning that once again they have more of a national hold on people's opinions (Hedding, 2019). Studies have examined the fact that Sinclair includes more national-level stories than other local stations (Tryon, 2020).

Nationalization of Politics

With local news declining, politics have become nationalized, which means citizens take their partisan preference for the president and form their opinions for all other offices (Moskowitz, 2020). In an academic paper, the loss of local coverage is examined. This study looks into how due to a lack of local coverage, national politics and issues are at the forefront of most news coverage. This has led to a polarizing effect on how people view politics, a sentiment that they take with them to the local polls as well. Research has shown that without local coverage voters will just vote along with their preferred party, going off of national rhetoric rather than the local issues and politicians they are actually voting on. There are two trends occurring that encourage partisan voting: First, less available information about their local politicians and community, leading to reliance on cheaper forms of information such as party cues, and second, a media choice set with a higher proportion of partisan and contentious national options. The researchers found that there was a correlation between the loss of local news outlets in a community and more polarized split-ticket voting (Darr, et. al, 2018). This once again adds to the question of what is the effect on elections when they can only look at national news. Darr (2021) conducted a different study on the same issue but in this case, changed the

opinion section in one newspaper to focus on local issues and kept a different paper as a control group that touched on national issues. The results, while not extreme, did show that polarization between political parties was slowed in the area with the local issues in their paper (Darr, et al., 2021).

Additionally, in a study comparing Sinclair-owned stations compared to non-Sinclair-owned stations, it was found that Sinclair-owned stations have an increase in national politics of 25% relative to the average level in the sample (Martin & McCrain, 2019). There was also a noted decrease in local political coverage in this study which proves that local political coverage is not only getting cut by media conglomerates but it is being cut to make room for more national political coverage. This shift in focus to national political issues on the news is manifesting in how state and local politicians campaign. Florida Governor Ron Desantis gained considerable traction against his opponent in the race for governor after getting endorsed by Donald Trump. Desantis used this endorsement in the majority of his campaigns and focused on big-ticket national issues rather than state-level issues (Martin, 2018). Martin (2018) stated:

> Mr. DeSantis's rise also reflects the broader nationalization of conservative politics, in which a willingness to hurl rhetorical lightning bolts at the left, the media and special counsel Robert S. Mueller can override local credentials, local endorsements, and preparedness for a state-based job. (p. 1)

On a similar note elections in recent decades have shown a trend of nationalization for positions such as governor and senator. In a study conducted by American Politics Research, it was found that the party of the current president has an impact on which candidates win. The nationalization of politics is further proven by the discovery that "greater correspondence between election outcomes has diminished the importance of candidate-specific factors, which in

this case is captured through a measure of incumbency" (Sievert & McKee, 2018, p. 1073). This research strengthens the claim that national politics are becoming more powerful in the outcomes of presidential and midterm elections and politics become more nationalized.

There is conflicting research that discusses the rhetoric used by politicians citing that mayors are still more likely to discuss local issues and not use as much nationalized rhetoric (Das, et al., 2022). However, this study will focus on the limitations of the study focused on politician's rhetoric and focus more on what issues the media is presenting to the public and the effect this has on citizens' likelihood to show up to the polls to vote in local and state elections.

News Deserts

Furthermore, outside of just media consolidations, local newspaper outlets still close, creating news deserts that may have similar effects of continuing the nationalization of politics. As more cities see closures in their local news outlets, citizens will have no choice but to consume national news, and not even know what is going on in their own backyard. One instance of local stories not getting their proper attention was not due to Sinclair's lack of local roots but due to the lack of local news outlets in a small town. Ahmaud Arbury, a Black man who was murdered while out on a run, was not talked about in national news until two months after his murder due to the fact that his town was on the verge of becoming a news desert where local stories like his go mostly ignored (Abernathy, 2020, p.25). If a story as large as that one dealing with police brutality would not be known to the surrounding areas until two months after it happened, there is a high likelihood that more stories will be missed and important topics will be left to the national news to uncover. In the case of this specific paper, future stories that get overlooked could be about non-presidential elections, which will most likely not make it to the

national news. This means that the people that it affects will not have any way to find out, since they live in a news desert.

While journalists are working to fill the voids left by closing newspapers many smaller and poorer markets are left in the dust. It was found that "Roughly 400 local news sites have been started in communities that lost a newspaper over the past decade and a half. However, only two of the outlets are in the 171 counties in the U.S. that have no newspaper" (Abernathy, 2018, p.43). These counties that have no local coverage that focuses completely on their community are more likely to be the most vulnerable and in need of comprehensive and truly local news coverage to serve a watchdog function over the government. Without the necessary resources, local coverage has difficulty providing the level of investigative reporting that local newspapers traditionally supply to citizens (Dunaway & Graber, 2022; Karaim, 2018).

Less Local Coverage

Local coverage has been on a steady decline, as explained by Abernathy from 2005 to 2020 over a ¼ of the country's newspapers have disappeared (Abernathy, 2020, p. 8). This drop in content means that local stories are also getting overlooked. Local news outlets are facing these declines in production for numerous reasons starting after the 2008 recession. It has been stated that, "In the years immediately following the 2008 recession, the decline (of newspapers) has been relentless, and it appears to have been accelerating in the years leading up to 2020" (Abernathy, 2020, p. 8). Reasons for this decline have been exacerbated by new digital ways to get news (Nielsen, 2015; Shaker, 2014) and a lack of advertising dollars going into traditional news outlets like local newspapers. As technology continues to converge new mediums will arise to get the news which will likely continue the drop in advertising dollars for local news outlets. Abernathy explains that funding is a major reason for the lack of local coverage which leads to

the conclusion that with fewer advertising dollars coming to newspapers many communities will lack local coverage (Abernathy, 2020). Research has found that even in communities with local news outlets they are still seeing a lack of local or original stories across the country (Napoli, et al., 2018).

One aspect of local coverage that is suffering from this trend is coverage of local politics. In a report from the Pew Research center, it was found that from 2003 to 2014 there was 35% less coverage of state legislatures in newspapers (Matsa, et.al, 2014). In another study on local coverage of politics in newspapers it was found that "In 2014, the typical House race saw 2.5 fewer stories in the month leading up to Election Day than in 2010" (Lawless & Hayes 2018, p. 334).

Through research, it can be concluded that there is a correlation between strong local news landscapes and more civically engaged citizens. This research however does not give information on whether or not decreasing local news has a relationship to declining voter turnout in midterms specifically. Due to the fact that those who are more likely to vote are more engaged with local news and areas with more journalists have been noted to have higher voter turnouts there is reason to believe that less local news coverage could be a causal factor in lower voter turnout in midterm elections. If less local coverage is a cause of lower voter turnout there would be a direct link to media consolidation as the existing body of knowledge points to the fact that media consolidation leads to an increase in national stories and issues rather than local stories and issues.

Overall, the coverage of local politics and elections is on a decline, this opens up the question of is this trend caused by media consolidation. If a relationship can be found, is there a direct effect on election turnout based on media consolidation in the United States? This research

question will be examined through data analysis of the non-presidential and presidential election turnouts in several different counties in Texas all with varying degrees of local news environments. The elections that will be examined will be from several years starting in 2000 and ending with the most recent data.

Methods

In order to answer my research question of if Sinclair ownership and lack of local news have a relationship with voter turnout in elections I have collected data on voter turnout in specific areas in Texas. My overarching hypothesis is that media consolidation, specifically ownership of Sinclair broadcast stations, will affect the voter turnout for non-presidential elections compared to counties that have more local news and local stations not owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group. This is based on the previous literature which presents findings that more consumption of local news leads to citizens being more civically engaged and that Sinclair-owned stations see a decline in local story coverage (Levendusky, 2021; McLeod, et al., 1999; Thompson, 2021; Tryon, 2020) however no known study has specifically looked at the variation of voter turnout in Sinclair markets, those with a strong local news presence, and those in news deserts. For this reason, the use of secondary data to compare turnout was seen as the most appropriate form of research. A similar study that looked into voter turnout in six countries and if education plays a role in the gap in participation, uses a similar method of quantitative data analysis rather than interviews (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017). Due to the similarity in the nature of the aforementioned study and my own, I felt confident in the appropriateness of using data analysis to study voter turnout and compare that turnout among different categorized groups.

Design

The data that I pulled from for my research comes from the Texas Secretary of State website (2022). I used this data set of voter turnout records from the Secretary of State's website to find data which includes: the number of voters registered for that election year, the number of votes that were actually cast in the election, and finally the percentage of registered voters that actually voted. This data was taken from every general election in Texas from 1990 to 2020, these elections occurred every two years. The percentage of voter turnout for each county was used as the dependent variable.

Choosing Counties

To determine which counties I would examine the voting histories of, I decided on four county categories: Sinclair and news desert, no Sinclair and news desert, no Sinclair and local news, and Sinclair and local news. These categories were created to explore not only the effects of Sinclair owned stations but also if news deserts played a role in voter turnout as well. Having these four categories allowed for clear organization for data analysis while also allowing for a wider variety of counties to be analyzed. Overall, these categories were used as a way to clearly determine the news landscape of the specific county when analyzing data. The reason that I chose Texas to focus on in this study was due to a high number of news desert counties in the state along with multiple Sinclair owned stations which made it an ideal state for this study rather than other states. To find counties in Texas that fall into these specific categories I used several sources in order to determine the number of newspapers in the county, the broadcast stations in each county, and what Texas stations are owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group.

Identifying News Deserts and Number of Newspapers

The source that I used to determine the number of newspapers in a county comes from a journalistic researcher, Penelope Abernathy, a website that she created entitled "The Expanding News Desert" (Abernathy, 2022). This website is a tool that is based on Abernathy's research that allows the user to explore all 50 states' counties to find out if that specific county is a news desert meaning there are no local newspapers that cover the happenings of that county specifically.

Broadcast Station Data

The next source I used to choose the counties I studied was a website entitled tvstationsnearme.com (2022). This source was useful for my research as a way for me to determine which broadcast stations reached certain counties. From there I would use the information found on RabbitEars.info (2022) which allowed me to find which stations are owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group and when this ownership started. These sources were beneficial to finding which counties I would be studying as they helped me determine where the Sinclair-owned stations were being broadcast to. My process in selecting counties began with finding counties that were considered news deserts, meaning the county had zero local papers, and which counties had a presence of a variety of local news environments which I measured as five or more local papers. From there I entered a zip code from that county into the website Tvstationsnearme.com to find what broadcast stations are in that county. Next, I used RabbitEars.info to determine if any of those broadcast stations were owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group. I used my four categories mentioned before and found six counties per category and then studied the voter turnout data for all 24 counties.

Process

The process of gathering the manifest data relied on the author of this thesis. No other coders were used to gather this data since the data were manifest rather than latent. This process follows the best practices outlined by Riffe and colleagues (Riffe et al., 2019). To outline this process with an example from my research I will walk through the steps of gathering my data for the county of Hartley. I found the county of Hartley on the website "The Expanding News Desert" where it is stated this county is a news desert with no local weekly or daily newspapers. From there I entered a zip code within the county of Hartley into Tvstationsnearme.com to find what local broadcast stations the citizens of Hartley have access to. This search yielded the results of several stations, all of which I checked on RabbitEars.info to see if any were owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group. One station, KVII, is owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group and has been since 2013.

Descriptive Results

After collecting data for 24 counties from 1990-2020 I was able to document the percentages of voter turnout from the number of citizens registered to vote in that county for that specific election. The data examined in this section will take the average percentage of voter turnout for the election years for non-presidential and presidential elections before and after the Sinclair acquisition of KABB in 1997 in McMullen and LaSalle counties, the Sinclair acquisition of KETK in 1998 in Hunt and Leon counties, the Sinclair acquisitions of WOAI and KEYE in 2012 in McMullen, LaSalle, Williamson, Travis, and Bell counties, and the Sinclair acquisitions of KVIH and KGBT in 2013 in Cochran and Hidalgo counties. These averages will come from the averages of four categories of counties: Sinclair and news desert, no Sinclair and news desert, no Sinclair and local news, and Sinclair and local news.

Figures 1 and 2 show the trends for voter turnout across elections from the years 1990 to 2020 for the four classifications of Sinclair and news desert, no Sinclair and news desert, no Sinclair and local news, and Sinclair and local news. Figure 1 outlines the presidential election trends and figure 2 outlines the non-presidential election trends.

Figure 1. County Presidential Election Turnout Percentages '92–'20 by Classification

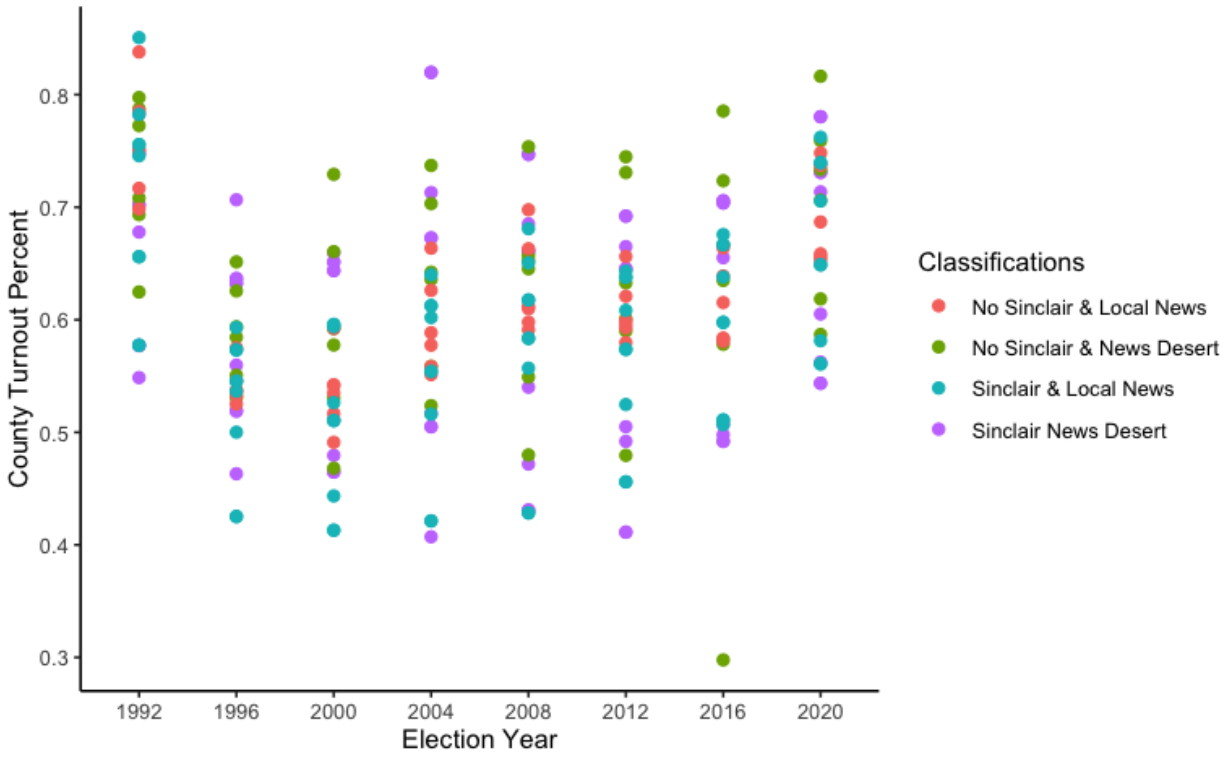
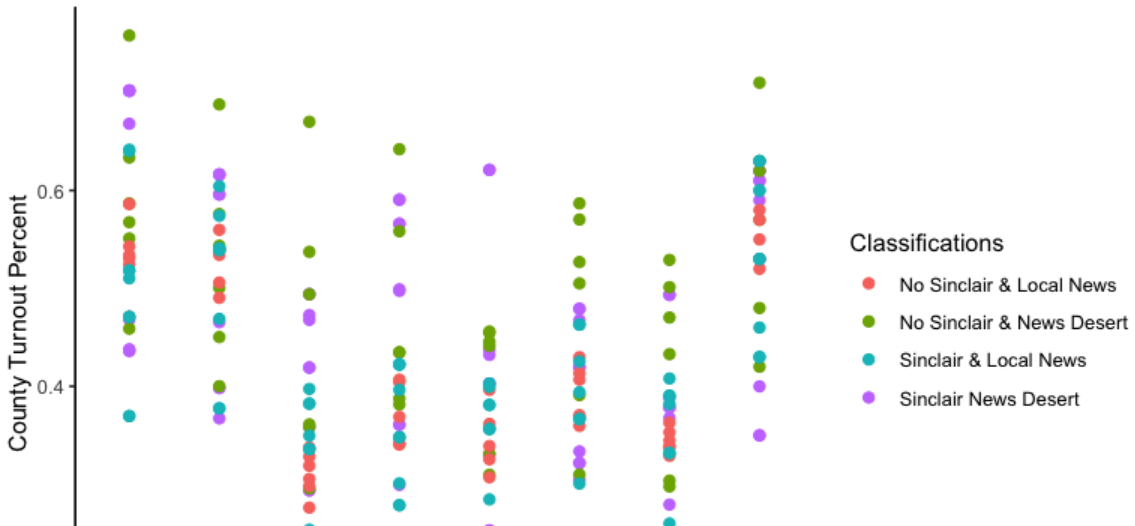


Figure 2. County Non-Presidential Election Turnout Percentages '90–'18 by Classification



Average Percentage of Voter Turnout Before and After 1997 Acquisition

To begin with I will describe the average percentage of voter turnout of midterm elections (non-presidential) and presidential elections for the years before and after Sinclair Broadcast Group started their ownership in McMullen and La Salle counties, which was in 1997 (Table 1).

Election Turnout Pre and Post the 1997 Acquisitions

The average voter turnout for non-presidential elections in Sinclair and news desert counties in the election before 1997 was 51.89%, for no Sinclair and news desert the average was 52.64%, for no Sinclair and local news the average was 52.81%, and for Sinclair and local news the average was 51.75%. The average voter turnout for the 1996 presidential election for Sinclair and news desert was 58.62%, the average for no Sinclair and news desert was 58.95%, the average for no Sinclair and local news was 54.21%, and the average for Sinclair and local news was 52.90%. Then after Sinclair took ownership of KABB the average voter turnout of the non-presidential election in the year 1998 was as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 41.77% (-10.12% change from 1994), no Sinclair and news desert was 45.28% (-7.36% change from 1994), no Sinclair and local news was 31.08% (-21.73% change from 1994), and Sinclair and local news was 32.22% (-19.53% change from 1994). After the 1997 acquisition of KABB the average voter turnout for the four categories in the 2000 presidential elections were as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 56.83% (-1.79% change from 1996), no Sinclair and news desert was 59.30% (6.66% change from 1996), no Sinclair and local news was 53.65% (-0.56% change from 1996), and Sinclair and local news was 51.38% (-1.52% change from 1996).

Table 1 Election Turnout Pre and Post 1997 Acquisition

Classifications	NP 1994 $\bar{x}$	P 1996 $\bar{x}$	NP 1998 $\bar{x}$	P 2000 $\bar{x}$	NP % Δ	P % Δ
Sinclair & News Desert	51.89%	58.62%	41.77%	56.83%	-10.12%	-1.79%
No Sinclair & News Desert	52.64%	58.95%	45.28%	59.30%	-7.36%	6.66%
No Sinclair & Local News	52.81%	54.21%	31.08%	53.65%	-21.73%	-0.56%
Sinclair & Local News	51.75%	52.90%	32.22%	51.38%	-19.53%	-1.52%

Note: NP = Non-Presidential Election, P = Presidential Election

Tests of Significance Differences Among Classifications Pre and Post 1997 Acquisitions

The above descriptive statistics show that there was a change in the average voter turnout percentages for the four classifications over multiple election cycles. Before it could be tested whether those changes across elections were significant, it was necessary to determine if there were significant differences among the four classifications. To test whether the counties' voter turnout percentages varied by the classification, a series of ANOVAs were conducted. For clarity, the comparisons were made using the four classifications (each county was in one of the four classifications) with the voter turnout percentage as the dependent variable.

The first one-way ANOVA returned no significant differences among the classifications' election turnout percentages. However, a one-way ANOVA for the 1998 non-Presidential election (post 1997 acquisitions) found statistically significant differences among the four classifications and percentage of voter turnout ($F(3, 25) = 4.416$, $p = 0.01$). Tukey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons found that the mean value of voter turnout percentages was 37.20% was significantly different between "No Sinclair and News Deserts" and "No Sinclair and Local News" ($p = 0.04$, 95% C.I. = [.002, 0.281]) as well as between "Sinclair and Local News" and

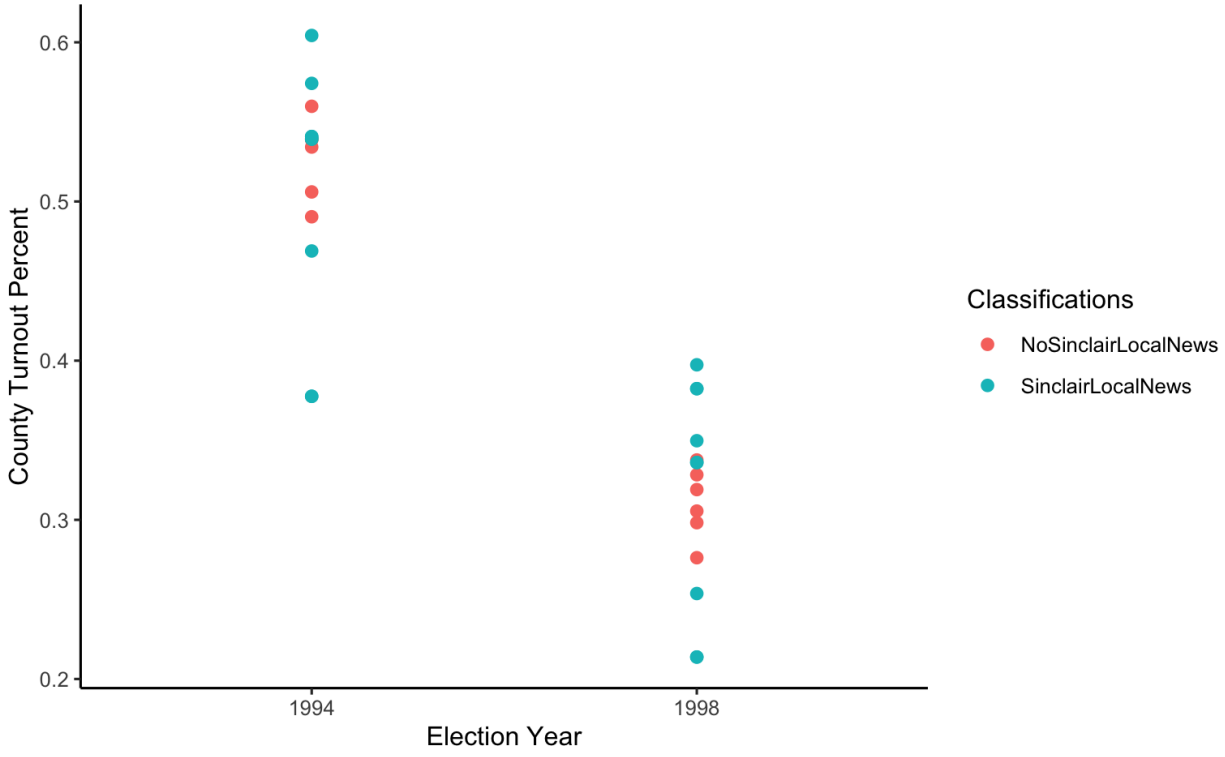
"No Sinclair and News Deserts" ($p = 0.03$, 95% C.I. = [-0.262, -0.007]). Surprisingly, the counties' in "No Sinclair and News Deserts" voter turnout percentages were statistically significantly different from counties classified as "Sinclair and Local News" or "No Sinclair and Local News". There was no statistically significant difference between Sinclair News Deserts and the other groups and the number of newspapers in each county had no impact.

Tests of Significance Differences Between Elections Pre and Post 1997 Acquisitions

The primary research question guiding this thesis considers whether there was a change in the turnout after Sinclair began their broadcast. Two counties in the "Sinclair News Desert" classification experienced Sinclair acquisitions in 1997. The two-way ANOVA where the independent variables were the classifications and the election year reported significant between the 1994 and 1998 election turnout percentages ($F(1, 52) = 42.29$, $p < 0.001$). Tukey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons found was significantly different election turnout percentages between 1994 and 1998 for counties classified as "Sinclair and Local News" ($p < 0.001$, 95% C.I. = [-0.318, -0.058]) and "No Sinclair and Local News" ($p < 0.001$, 95% C.I. = [-0.376, -0.058]). Figure 3. illustrates the variations in voter turnout for the counties in the two classifications for both elections. Given that significant voter turnout percentages were found between elections for both these classifications the acquisition of Sinclair broadcast stations alone does appear to explain the decrease in voter turnout.

Figure 3.

1994 and 1998 County Election Turnout Percentages by Classifications



Note: Only significant differences within classifications are displayed.

Average Percentage of Voter Turnout Before and After 1998 Acquisition

Next I will detail the average percentage of voter turnout for the same categorized counties for the non-presidential and presidential elections before and after the year 1998 (Table 2). The average percentages of voter turnout for the 1994 non-presidential election across the four categories are as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 51.00%, no Sinclair and news desert was 52.64%, no Sinclair and local news was 52.81%, and Sinclair and local news was 51.75%. The average percentages of voter turnout for the 1996 presidential election across the four categories are as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 58.62%, no Sinclair and news desert was 58.95%, no Sinclair and local news was 54.21%, and Sinclair and local news was 52.90%. After the 1998 Sinclair acquisition of KETK in the counties of Hunt and Leon the average percentage of voter turnout across the four categories in the non-presidential election of 2002 was as

follows: Sinclair and news desert was 46.89% (-4.11% change from 1994), no Sinclair and news desert was 47.32% (-5.32% change from 1994), no Sinclair and local news was 36.83% (-15.98% change from 1994), and Sinclair and local news was 36.15% (-15.60% change from 1994). Lastly, the average percentage of voter turnout for the presidential election of 2000 was as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 56.83% (-1.79% change from 1996), no Sinclair and news desert was 59.30% (0.35% change from 1996), no Sinclair and local news was 53.65% (-0.56% change from 1996), and Sinclair and local news was 51.38% (-1.52% change from 1996).

Table 2 Election Turnout Pre and Post 1998 Acquisition

Classifications	**NP 1994 $\bar{x}$**	**P 1996 $\bar{x}$**	**NP 2002 $\bar{x}$**	**P 2000 $\bar{x}$**	**NP % Δ**	**P % Δ**
Sinclair and News Desert	51.00%	58.62%	46.89%	56.83%	-4.11%	-1.79%
No Sinclair and News Desert	52.64%	58.95%	47.32%	59.30%	-5.32%	0.35%
No Sinclair and Local News	52.81%	54.21%	36.83%	53.65%	-15.98%	-0.56%
Sinclair and Local News	51.75%	52.90%	36.15%	51.38%	-15.60%	-1.52%

Note: NP = Non-Presidential Election, P = Presidential Election

Tests of Significance Differences: 2002

Again, before testing whether the changes in voter turnout percentages across elections were significant, a one-way ANOVA for the 2002 non-Presidential election returned a statistically significant difference among the four classifications and percentage of voter turnout ($F(3, 25) = 4.462$, $p = 0.01$). Tukey's HSD Test for multiple comparisons found that the mean value of voter turnout percentages was 41.99% was significantly different between "Sinclair

News Desert" and "Sinclair Local News" ($p = 0.02$, 95% C.I. = [.010, 0.236]). The counties' in "Sinclair News Desert" had higher percentages of voter turnout than counties classified as "Sinclair and Local News" or "No Sinclair and Local News." There were no other statistically significant differences found nor were the number of newspapers in each county significant on the turnout percentages.

Average Percentage of Voter Turnout Before and After 2012 Acquisitions

The next data set will be in reference to the 2012 Sinclair acquisition of WOAI in McMullen and LaSalle counties and KEYE in Williamson, Travis, and Bell counties (Table 3). The non-presidential election before this acquisition was the midterm election of 2010, the average percentage for voter turnout for this election year across the four categories was as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 38.78%, no Sinclair and news desert was 48.17%, no Sinclair and local news was 39.16%, and Sinclair and local news was 36.61%. The presidential election before the 2012 acquisition was the 2008 presidential election, the average percentage of voter turnout was as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 58.93%, no Sinclair and news desert was 62.30%, no Sinclair and local news was 62.86%, and Sinclair and local news was 58.63%. After the Sinclair acquisitions of WOAI and KEYE in 2012, the average percentages of voter turnout for the following non-presidential election were as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 35.3% (-3.48% change from 2010), no Sinclair and news desert was 42.25% (-5.92% change from 2010), no Sinclair and local news was 34.44% (-4.72% change from 2010), and Sinclair and local news was 33.74% (-2.87% change from 2010). Lastly, the presidential election average percentages of voter turnout in 2016 were the following: Sinclair and news desert was 59.36% (0.43% change from 2008), no Sinclair and news desert was 61.44%(-0.86% change from 2008),

no Sinclair and local news was 61.1% (-1.76% change from 2008), and Sinclair and local news was 59.93% (1.32% change from 2008).

Table 3 Election Turnout Pre and Post 2012 Acquisition

Classifications	NP 2010 $\bar{x}$	P 2008 $\bar{x}$	NP 2014 $\bar{x}$	P 2016 $\bar{x}$	NP % Δ	P % Δ
Sinclair and News Desert	38.78%	58.93%	35.3%	59.36%	-3.48%	0.43%
No Sinclair and News Desert	48.17%	62.30%	42.25%	61.44%	-5.92%	-0.86%
No Sinclair and Local News	39.16%	62.86%	34.44%	61.1%	-4.72%	-1.76%
Sinclair and Local News	36.61%	58.63%	33.74%	59.93%	-2.87%	1.32%

Note: NP = Non-Presidential Election, P = Presidential Election

Average Percentage of Voter Turnout Before and After 2013 Acquisitions

The next acquisition detailed in this section will be the 2013 Sinclair acquisitions of KVIH and KGBT in Cochran and Hidalgo (Table 4). To begin with, the 2010 non-presidential election before the Sinclair acquisitions have the average percentages for voter turnout as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 38.78%, no Sinclair and news desert was 48.17%, no Sinclair and local news was 39.16%, and Sinclair and local news was 36.61%. The 2012 presidential election preceding the 2013 Sinclair acquisitions had the average percentages of voter turnout as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 56.85%, no Sinclair and news desert was 62.98%, no Sinclair and local news was 60.76%, and Sinclair and local news was 57.39%. The first non-presidential election after the 2013 acquisitions was the 2014 midterms, which yielded the average percentages of voter turnout as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 35.30%

(-3.48% change from 2010), no Sinclair and news desert was 42.25% (-5.92% change from 2010), no Sinclair and local news was 34.44% (-4.72% change from 2010), and Sinclair and local news was 33.74% (-2.87% change from 2010). Lastly, the 2016 presidential election yielded the average percentages of voter turnout as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 59.36% (2.51% change from 2012), no Sinclair and news desert was 61.54% (-1.44% change from 2012), no Sinclair and local news was 61.10% (0.34% change from 2012), and Sinclair and local news was 59.93% (2.54% change from 2012).

Table 4 Election Turnout Pre and Post 2013 Acquisition

Classifications	**NP 2010 $\bar{x}$**	**P 2012 $\bar{x}$**	**NP 2014 $\bar{x}$**	**P 2016 $\bar{x}$**	**NP % Δ**	**P % Δ**
Sinclair and News Desert	38.78%	56.85%	35.30%	59.36%	-3.48%	2.51%
No Sinclair and News Desert	48.17%	62.98%	42.25%	61.54%	-5.92%	-1.44%
No Sinclair and Local News	39.16%	60.76%	34.44%	61.10%	-4.72%	0.34%
Sinclair and Local News	36.61%	57.39%	33.74%	59.93%	-2.87%	2.54%

Note: NP = Non-Presidential Election, P = Presidential Election

Average Percentage of Voter Turnout Before and After 2016 Acquisitions

The next acquisition of a local station by Sinclair Broadcast Group was KSCC in 2016. KSCC is broadcast to Duval county which is also a news desert (Table 5). To begin with, the 2014 non-presidential election yielded voter turnout averages in the studied categories as follows: Sinclair and news desert was 35.3%, no Sinclair and news desert was 42.25%, no

Sinclair and local news was 34.44%, and Sinclair and local news was 33.74%. The presidential election before the acquisition yielded the voter turnout average percentages of the following: Sinclair and news desert was 59.36%, no Sinclair and news desert was 61.44%, no Sinclair and local news was 61.10%, and Sinclair and local news was 59.90%. After the acquisition of KSCC in 2016 the following voter turnout averages were found in the 2018 non-presidential election: Sinclair and news desert was 52% (16.7% change from 2014), no Sinclair and news desert was 57% (14.75% change from 2014), no Sinclair and local news was 34.44% (21.56% change from 2014), and Sinclair and local news was 33.74% (21.26% change from 2014). In the 2020 presidential after the 2016 Sinclair acquisition of KSCC the following voter turnout averages were found: Sinclair and news desert was 65.60% (-6.24% change from 2012), no Sinclair and news desert was70.34% (8.90% change from 2012), no Sinclair and local news was 69.00% (7.9% change from 2012), and Sinclair and local news was 66.64% (6.74% change from 2012).

Table 5 Election Turnout Pre and Post 2016 Acquisition

Classifications	**NP 2014 $\bar{x}$**	**P 2012 $\bar{x}$**	**NP 2018 $\bar{x}$**	**P 2020 $\bar{x}$**	**NP % Δ**	**P % Δ**
Sinclair and News Desert	35.3%	59.36%	52%	65.60%	16.7%	6.24%
No Sinclair and News Desert	42.25%	61.44%	57%	70.34%	14.75%	8.9%
No Sinclair and Local News	34.44%	61.10%	56%	69.00%	21.56%	7.9%
Sinclair and Local News	33.74%	59.9%	55%	66.64%	21.26%	6.74%

Note: NP = Non-Presidential Election, P = Presidential Election

Average Percentage of Voter Turnout Before and After 2017 Acquisitions

The last data set that will be examined in this section is the elections before and after the Sinclair acquisitions of KTXS and KTES in Kent county in 2017. To begin with, the 2014 non-presidential election yielded an average voter turnout percentage of the following categories: Sinclair and news desert was 35.30%, no Sinclair and news desert was 42.25%, no Sinclair and local news was 34.44%, and Sinclair and local news was 33.74%. The 2016 presidential election before the 2017 Sinclair acquisition yielded an average voter percentage of the following: Sinclair and news desert was 59.36%, no Sinclair and news desert was 61.44%, no Sinclair and local news was 61.10%, and Sinclair and local news was 59.93%. Following the 2017 Sinclair acquisition, the following voter turnout averages were found in the 2018 non-presidential election: Sinclair and news desert was 52% (16.70% change from 2014), no Sinclair and news desert was 57% (14.75% change from 2014), no Sinclair and local news was 56% (21.56% change from 2014), and Sinclair and local news was 55% (21.26% change from 2014). Lastly, the presidential election of 2020 following the 2017 Sinclair acquisition yielded the following average voter turnout percentages: Sinclair and news desert was 65.60% (6.24% change from 2016), no Sinclair and news desert was 70.34% (8.90% change from 2016), no Sinclair and local news was 69.00% (7.90% change from 2016), and Sinclair and local news was 66.64% (6.71% change from 2016).

Table 6 Election Turnout Pre and Post 2017 Acquisition

Classifications	**NP 2014 $\bar{x}$**	**P 2016 $\bar{x}$**	**NP 2018 $\bar{x}$**	**P 2020 $\bar{x}$**	**NP % Δ**	**P % Δ**
Sinclair and News Desert	35.30%	59.36%	52%	65.60%	16.7%	6.24%

No Sinclair and News Desert	42.25%	61.44%	57%	70.34%	14.75%	8.90%
No Sinclair and Local News	34.44%	61.10%	56%	69.00%	21.56%	7.90%
Sinclair and Local News	33.74%	59.93%	55%	66.64%	21.26%	6.71%

Note: NP = Non-Presidential Election, P = Presidential Election

Discussion

Through running analysis on the data set it was concluded that there were no significant changes in voter turnout percentages for the classifications between elections. From these tests and the differences noted before and after the Sinclair acquisitions this study does not show that there is proof that media consolidation has a significant impact on voter turnout in non-presidential elections. This study aimed to explore the possible effects that media consolidation has on voter turnout, specifically in non-presidential elections. If a relationship was found the impact would allow for steps to be taken in the future from a journalistic approach to increase civic engagement. An increase in civic engagement would ultimately create a more representative government in the United States allowing the will of the people to be carried out in a more accurate way. Overall this study asked the question: Does media consolidation have an effect on non-presidential election turnout? Through data analysis, it can be determined that media consolidation does not have any direct effects on voter turnout in non-presidential elections.

While there is evidence from other literature that higher local news consumption is tied to higher civic engagement (McLeod, et al., 1999; Thompson, 2021), there were no results from this study that would lead to the conclusion or offer support to the premise that media

consolidation such as that of Sinclair Broadcast Group has any impact on voter turnout in midterm elections. More research will need to be conducted into the effects that the elimination of the Main Studio Rule in 2017 has had (FCC, 2017). Since this change in the policy is relatively new in regards to election cycles more data will have to be collected in the future to see if this change to the local news landscape has brought any significant changes.

Although the data set of this study does not confirm predictions on media consolidation effects on voter turnout, it does lead to new questions to be asked surrounding the topic due to the discovery of some unpredicted findings. One major finding is that in future research specific time periods rather than broadcast ownership should be an independent variable that would allow factors like demographics and specific issues of the time to be studied.

Discussion of Time Periods

Initially in this study, prior research led to the belief that media consolidation could negatively affect voter turnout in non-presidential elections. This is due to a decrease in local stories after media consolidation takes place by the conglomerate Sinclair (Martin & McCrain, 2019) and the fact that less local news coverage has been documented to coincide with less civic engagement (Shaker, 2014). The concept of local news consumption correlating to voter turnout was further proved by a Pew research study which found that those who consistently vote have stronger local news habits (Barthel, et al., 2016). Since Sinclair-owned stations had been found to have lower story output and increased focus on national issues (Hedding, et al., 2019) and news deserts are becoming more common leading to local stories being overlooked (Abernathy, 2020) it was expected that news deserts and Sinclair counties would demonstrate lower voter turnout. Local news landscape was not the only potential factor that had been studied in previous research regarding the impact on voter turnout. The existing literature also points to other factors

playing a role in voter turnout beyond the local news environment such as the demographics of the area being studied and the specific issues that are being focused on in the election (Igielnik, 2020; Schaffer, Van Green, 2022). Even though this previous research led to the belief that Sinclair-owned stations would in fact have a negative effect on voter turnout, those results were not documented in this study. Sinclair's ownership and the media consolidation that comes from that ownership were not noted to have any significant effect on the voter turnout in the studied counties.

Due to the fact that there was no significant change between elections before and after the Sinclair acquisition this data was contrary to the proposed hypothesis that media consolidation has an effect on voter turnout. However, in the data sets for the Sinclair acquisitions for the years 1997 and 1998 the classification "no Sinclair and local news" had the largest negative change in voter turnout compared to the other county classifications. Then in the data sets for the Sinclair acquisitions in 2016 and 2017, it was found that the classification "no Sinclair and local news" had the highest positive change in voter turnout. This leads to questions over which factors are influencing voter turnout since these significant differences both happen within a one-year span. Using time frames as a new guide to classify contributing factors in future research could lead to studying factors such as current political climates during those election cycles, which political party was in power at the time, and what current events were receiving the most coverage.

The concept of what stories are being covered the most at the time especially should be further explored since Sinclair-owned stations have been proven to increase coverage of national issues (Levendusky, 2022). Further research should examine whether or not these national stories are then tied back to local politicians' viewpoints. In future research, these national topic stories should be explored further in terms of content to see if they are in fact a catalyst in voter turnout

depending on how they are presented. This finding could lead to scholarly discussions of whether the political climate of a time period has an impact on voter turnout. With more understanding of the reasons behind higher or lower voter turnouts, journalists will have a better understanding of how to increase civic engagement in our country.

Limitations

This study was limited in several ways due to resources and time restraints. One major limitation is the data set only focuses on Texas. With more time the study could have focused on several different states with Sinclair stations and states with no Sinclair stations at all. Additionally, only six counties were studied for each classification, in future research with more allotted time more counties could be studied in each classification to expand the data set. Moreover, with more time the specific details of each county could have been documented and studied such as how demographics changed throughout the years studied.

Beyond the limitation of only focusing on one state this study also only focuses on one media conglomerate. To expand on the understanding of media consolidation it would have been ideal to have data for counties that get broadcasts from other big conglomerates as well to see how they stacked up against Sinclair.

In the discussion of news deserts, the data was pulled from Penelope Abernathy's research on news deserts which only provides up-to-date data. With more time the classifications may have been different depending on when each news desert actually became a news desert. For example, the county of Hartley is classified as a news desert in this study, however, that is only from the most recent data set. Before that data was collected Hartley could have had multiple newspapers in the years covered in this study, after all since 2004 1,800 daily and weekly newspapers have gone out of business (Karaim, 2018). A better understanding of how

long these counties were actually news deserts could have been done with more time by looking into each county's history to determine the exact time they became news deserts. A more thorough understanding of the local news climate during each election could help to better understand the effects of local news in regard to election turnout.

Lastly, a major limitation is the understanding of Sinclair's reach to the households in the counties studied. If allotted more time a proper study of the ratings of Sinclair-owned stations could have given a clearer understanding of if each county should even be classified as a Sinclair county in regards to the impact they have in the specific local news landscape not just their existence. A content analysis of these Sinclair-owned stations is another contributing factor that was not examined in this particular study due to time restraints. Through a content analysis, a better understanding of the potential impact of Sinclair could be determined as their content across different stations would be varied and could produce different effects.

Future Research

Going forward, future research should focus on taking into consideration more factors when determining the contributing factors of voter turnout in non-presidential elections. There are many factors that can affect voter turnout that were not studied through this research that could open up new discussions on the topic. Other contributing factors could be the political state of the nation, divisions across party lines, or if demographics had shifted throughout the study (Igielnik, 2020; Schaffer, Van Green, 2022). The existing literature as previously mentioned demonstrates that demographics like race, education levels, and gender impact voter turnout meaning that in future research these factors should be given attention when looking for patterns and significant shifts in voter turnout. Additionally, a content analysis of the issues that are most important to both parties is a logical next step as Schaffer and Van Green have found the

motivation to vote is partially impacted by what issues are on the ballot and how strongly voters feel about said issues.

Future research should also study the specific content that media conglomerates produce to see if certain rhetoric, sources, or formats have any impact on voter turnout. While this study disproves that the presence of a media conglomerate does not appear to have an effect on voter turnout, future studies could focus on if the specific content produced by different media conglomerates aligns with any significant changes in voter turnout. Content could also be further studied in terms of the ratio between opinion programming and more objective reporting. This content analysis could be beneficial in future research due to the study which demonstrates how Sinclair stations have begun to seamlessly weave commentary/opinion sections into their local news broadcasts (Hedding, et al., 2019). Future research could focus on if this type of rhetoric leads to any changes in voter turnout as it would be station specific and could present new patterns not found in this study.

Overall, future research should focus less on the mere presence of media consolidation in journalism and focus more on other contributing factors to how citizens feel about the importance of an election. This study was able to disprove that the mere presence of a media conglomerate has an effect on voter turnout; however, further research must be conducted with a deeper dive into the multitude of factors that influence citizens' opinions towards the necessity of voting. This could be conducted first through surveys determining what makes voting important to citizens and then taking those factors into consideration when studying voter turnout throughout the years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, media consolidation was not proven to have a significant role in voter turnout. Media consolidation has been a concern however evidence is still unfolding and this study did not yield any evidence that media consolidation has an effect on voter turnout. The issue of increasing civic engagement is multifaceted and will continue to be studied as such. As research is continued this study can serve as a starting point to prove that more than just media consolidation plays a role in voter turnout. Looking forward, this insight should be used to expand the existing literature surrounding civic engagement, the impact of Sinclair Broadcast Group, and the role local news plays in politics.

References

Abernathy, P. M. (2018). *Expanding news deserts - UNC center for innovation & sustainability in local media*. The Expanding News Desert. https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/

Abernathy, P. (2020, June 22). *News deserts and ghost newspapers: Will Local News Survive?* -. The Expanding News Desert. https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/

Abernathy, P. (2022). *Explore your state - do you live in a News Desert?* The Expanding News Desert. https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/states-main/

Alba, D., & Nicas, J. (2020, October 18). *As local news dies, a pay-for-play network rises in its place*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/technology/timpone-local-news-metric-media.html

Ali, C. (2020). The death of broadcast localism in the United States. *The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism*, 83–92. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351239943-10

Ardia , D., Ringel, E., Ekstrand, V. S., & Fox, A. (2020, December 22). *Local News, platforms, & Mis/Disinformation*. Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP). https://citap.unc.edu/local-news-platforms-mis-disinformation/

Barthel, M., Holcomb, J., Mahone, J., & Mitchell, A. (2016, November 1). *Civic engagement strongly tied to local news habits*. Pew Research Center's Journalism Project., from

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/11/03/civic-engagement-strongly-tied-to-local-news-habits/

Blankenship, J. C., & Vargo, C. J. (2021). The effect of corporate media ownership on the depth of local coverage and issue agendas: A computational case study of six Sinclair TV station websites. *Electronic News*, *15*(3-4), 139–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/19312431211043483

Castillo , A. (2022, May 9). *Looking to increase civic engagement? support the local press*. American City and County. https://www.americancityandcounty.com/2022/05/09/looking-to-increase-civic-engagement-support-the-local-press/

Celebrating local free TV. TV Stations Near Me. (2022). https://tvstationsnearme.com/

Darr, J. P., Hitt, M. P., & Dunaway, J. L. (2018). Newspaper closures polarize voting behavior. *Journal of Communication*, *68*(6), 1007–1028. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy051

Darr, J. P., Hitt, M. P., & Dunaway, J. L. (2021). Home style opinion. *Cambridge University Press*. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108950930

Das, S., Sinclair, B., Webster, S. W., & Yan, H. (2022, March 18). *All (mayoral) politics is local? | The Journal of Politics: Vol 84, no 2*. The University of Chicago Press Journals. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/716945

Dassonneville, R., & Hooghe, M. (2016). Voter turnout decline and stratification: Quasi-experimental and comparative evidence of a growing educational gap. *Politics*, *37*(2), 184–200. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716674370

Doctor, K. (2017, October 27). *The FCC may shift media consolidation into High Gear*. TheStreet. https://www.thestreet.com/markets/regulation/media-consolidation-may-just-be-getting-started-14325635

Dunaway, J., & Graber, D. A. (2022). *Mass media and American politics*. Cq Press.

Election Results Archive. Texas Secretary of State. (2022). https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/elections-results-archive.shtml

Farhi, P., Gillum , J., & Alacantara, C. (2018, June 14). *In this town, you can flip the channel all you want - the news is often the same*. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/lifestyle/sinclair-broadcasting/

FCC. (2008, March 6) Report on Broadcast Localism and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. www.fcc.gov.

FCC. (2018, October 24). *FCC eliminates Main Studio Rule*. Federal Communications Commission. https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-eliminates-main-studio-rule

Gulyas, A., & Baines, D. (Eds.). (2020). The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi-org.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/10.4324/9781351239943

Hedding, K. J., Miller, K. C., Abdenour, J., & Blankenship, J. C. (2019). The Sinclair effect: Comparing ownership influences on bias in local TV news content. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *63*(3), 474–493. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2019.1653103

Hollis, D. W. (2018). The American Media Experience. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, *30*(1), 29–47. https://doi.org/10.5840/jis2018301/23

Igielnik, R. (2020, September 2). *Men and women in the U.S. continue to differ in voter turnout rate, party identification*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/18/men-and-women-in-the-u-s-continue-to-differ-in-voter-turnout-rate-party-identification/

Karaim, R. (2018, December 14). Local News Under Stress. CQ Researcher, Vol. 28, Number 44, 1041-1064.

Kosut, M., & Vargas , V. (2012). Media Consolidation. In *Encyclopedia of gender in media* (pp. 206–208). essay, SAGE Reference.

Lawless, J. L., & Hayes, D. (2018, January 1). *The decline of local news and its effects: New evidence from Longitudinal Data: The Journal of Politics: Vol 80, no 1*. The Journal of Politics. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/694105

LeBrun, B., Todd, K., & Piper, A. (2022). Buying the news: A quantitative study of the effects of corporate acquisition on local news. New Media & Society, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221079030

Levendusky, M. S. (2021). How does local TV news change viewers' attitudes? the case of Sinclair broadcasting. *Political Communication*, *39*(1), 23–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1901807

Martin, G. J., & McCrain, J. (2019). Local news and national politics. *American Political Science Review*, *113*(2), 372–384. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055418000965

Martin, J. (2018, Jul 31). At State Level, Just One Issue Counts: Trump: [National Desk]. *New York Times* http://login.ezproxy.lib.umn.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/at-state-level-just-one-issue-counts-trump/docview/2079657194/se-2

Matsa, K. E. (2020, May 30). *Buying spree brings more local TV stations to fewer big companies*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/11/buying-spree-brings-more-local-tv-stations-to-fewer-big-companies/

McLeod, J. M., Scheufele, D. A., & Moy, P. (1999). Community, communication, and participation: The role of mass media and interpersonal discussion in local political participation. *Political Communication*, *16*(3), 315–336. https://doi.org/10.1080/105846099198659

Moskowitz, Daniel(2020). Local News, information, and the nationalization of U.S. elections. *American Political Science Review*, *115*(1), 114–129. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055420000829

Napoli, P. M., Weber, M., McCollough, K., & Wang, Q. (2018). Assessing local journalism. *New Measures Research Project. Available at: https://dewitt. sanford. duke. edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Assessing-Local-Journalism_100-Communities. Pdf*.

Nielsen, R. K. (Ed.). (2015). *Local journalism: The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Rabbit Ears. Rabbitears.info. (2022). https://rabbitears.info/

Riffe, D., Lacy, S., Watson, B., Fico, F., & Taylor & Francis. (2019). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research* (Fourth ed., Routledge communication series). New York, NY: Routledge.

Rubado, M. E., & Jennings, J. T. (2019). Political consequences of the endangered local watchdog: Newspaper decline and mayoral elections in the United States. *Urban Affairs Review*, *56*(5), 1327–1356. https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419838058

Schaeffer, K., & Van Green, T. (2022, November 3). *Key facts about U.S. voter priorities ahead of the 2022 midterm elections*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/11/03/key-facts-about-u-s-voter-priorities-ahead-of-the-2022-midterm-elections/

Shaker, L. (2014). Dead newspapers and citizens' civic engagement. *Political Communication*, *31*(1), 131–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.762817

Sievert, J., & McKee, S. C. (2018). Nationalization in U.S. senate and gubernatorial elections. *American Politics Research*, *47*(5), 1055–1080. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x18792694

Thompson, J. (2021). Watching Together: Local Media and Rural Civic Engagement*. *Rural Sociology*, *86*(4), 938–967. https://doi-org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/10.1111/ruso.12383

Tryon, C. (2020). Sinclair broadcasting as mini-media empire: media regulation, disinfomercials, and the rise of Trumpism. *Media, Culture & Society*, *42*(7–8), 1377–1391. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720939425

Van Gent, D. (2019). The federal communications commission and its deregulation of media: encouraging innovation or inhibiting democracy. *Drake Law Review, 67(4),* 1037-1058.